

China expels three Wall Street Journal journalists

By Ben McGrath
26 February 2020

On February 19, China announced that it was revoking the press credentials of three journalists from the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) and expelling them in retaliation for the newspaper's coverage of the Covid-19 coronavirus outbreak. The expulsions, the largest of journalists in more than 30 years, follows tough new measures imposed on Chinese media outlets in the United States.

Beijing stated the opinion piece published in the WSJ on February 3, "smears the efforts of the Chinese government" fighting the spread of Covid-19. Furthermore, Beijing has accused the newspaper of racism stemming from the title of the article, "China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia." Some 53 reporters covering China at the WSJ have called on the paper to issue an apology, though it has stated it does not intend to.

The day before Beijing's announcement of the expulsions, the US designated five Chinese media outlets as foreign diplomatic missions. These include China's official news agency, Xinhua, China Radio International, China Global Television Network, and China Daily Distribution Corporation and Hai Tian Development USA, which prints and distributes the newspapers *China Daily* and *People's Daily* respectively.

The five media outlets are now subjected to greater monitoring by the US government. All employees are required to register with the State Department, declare property holdings and seek approval prior to acquiring new property.

In justifying the decision, a senior state department official said that "each and every one of these entities does work for the Chinese government" and that they "take their orders directly from the top." Beijing's Foreign Ministry denounced the move, saying the US

was "wantonly restricting and thwarting Chinese media outlets' normal operations."

The three journalists expelled are deputy bureau chief Josh Chin and Chao Deng, both Americans, and Philip Wen, an Australian citizen. None were involved in the writing of the opinion piece, but have written on Beijing's policies towards the Uighurs in Xinjiang Province. Chin and Wen have both left China, but Deng is in Wuhan where she has been reporting from the epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak.

The US media has exploited the outbreak of the Covid-19 to ramp up the campaign to vilify China as Washington mounts an across-the-board confrontation with Beijing by diplomatic, economic and military means. Articles and commentary including in the WSJ and New York Times have criticized Beijing's political system claiming it represents a danger to the rest of the world due its lack of transparency in addressing the initial outbreak.

After the journalists' expulsion, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo weighed in, declaring: "Mature, responsible countries understand that a free press reports facts and expresses opinions. The correct response is to present counter arguments, not restrict speech."

The remarks are utterly cynical. While the Chinese regime certainly imposes tough restrictions on the media, the so-called free press in the United States increasingly functions as a propaganda arm of government, exploiting or ignoring issues depending on the economic and strategic interests of US imperialism.

Washington has for instance seized on the anti-democratic measures used by Beijing against the Uyghurs in its province of Xinjiang to blacken China's name while turning a blind eye to the anti-democratic methods of US allies in the Middle East and elsewhere.

It is attempting to do the same with the corona virus outbreak.

Moreover, both Pompeo and President Donald Trump regularly attack the media, calling reporters the “enemies of the people” and incite violence towards journalists. The Daily Beast reported on February 4 that the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) was issuing a “safety kit” to reporters covering the presidential election, the first time in its four-decade history it has done so for US-based reporters. The CPJ website stated that a kit “provides journalists and newsrooms with basic safety information on physical, digital and psychological safety resources and tools.”

CPJ’s Emergency Director Maria Salazar-Ferro told the Daily Beast, “We’ve been speaking to journalists who have been to recent rallies, and the rhetoric is coming from people who are participating in the rallies, and there was a lot of aggression around ‘fake news’ and ‘the press is the enemy.’ And it’s reverberating beyond the actual political event as well as online.”

Washington is also demanding the extradition of journalist Julian Assange from the United Kingdom for publishing information exposing US war crimes and other offences. Assange was forced to spend seven years isolated in the Ecuadorian embassy in London seeking political asylum as Washington sought his arrest on bogus espionage charges. When Ecuador revoked Assange’s asylum last year, UK authorities locked him in Belmarsh prison where he has suffered psychological torture.

This is setting a dangerous precedent for attacking free speech and press freedoms. Washington is using the torture of Assange, as well as that of jailed whistleblower Chelsea Manning, to intimidate would-be publishers and others seeking to expose the truth of US crimes.

The attack on free speech is by no means limited to the Trump administration or the Republican Party. The vindictive attacks on Assange and Manning began under the Barack Obama government, which prosecuted more whistleblowers than all previous presidents combined. Furthermore, the Democratic Party has persecuted the torture of Assange and Manning, claiming, with no evidence whatsoever, that WikiLeaks was part of a “Russian conspiracy” to install Donald Trump in the White House and spread division in the country. The Democrats and their allies

in the media have demanded the censorship of social media and search engines like Google.

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