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Opinion

Why criticism of a third term for China's Xi Jinping is rich coming from the US



- Despite its clandestine interventions in China and elsewhere, America remains convinced of its exceptionalism and blind to how others perceive it
- In a similar vein, Western commentary on Xi's reappointment can sound foolish, given that America set term limits for presidents not that long ago

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Maybe the lady intel officer who sought to recruit me for a CIA operation involving Chinese espionage on the US West Coast didn't look the part – though, then again, perhaps she did. Modest in dress, controlled in comportment, she sat with me in the back of a large steak restaurant in Los Angeles without once raising her voice.

She told me she was proud to be “working for the President of the United States, that's what we do”, and I believed her. She paid for everything (as she had for two prior dinners) with cash, not credit card, leaving no written record behind. But I left her visibly disappointed – mission unaccomplished: I just couldn't go CIA-ing while remaining a proper American journalist and that was what I wound up telling her.

This rendezvous took place a half-dozen years ago but popped into mind while I was drinking in *Agents of Subversion*, an urgently needed book by Yonsei University professor John Delury.

Just as it unintentionally reminded me of how I could have added the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) to my resume, the book also added to my annoyance with those fellow Americans who hold that we don't do dirty to China, as sometimes the Chinese (not to mention the Russians) do to us. DeLury will have none of that.

His book is about the CIA's covert war in China. Did American undercover agents and forces try to influence the Chinese civil war? Yes. Did the US have assets working within Hong Kong after the 1997 handover that helped stir the anti-China hotpot? You bet. Even today? Please, let's not be naive.

The security services of China are scarcely covert. Their assets and agents are all over the place. In fact, in the late 1990s, a report by the Select Committee on US National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China made extraordinary claims about Chinese espionage, especially systemic technology theft, that the American media replayed to Americans with abandon.

Lost in the anti-Communist frenzy and paranoia was the commonsensical notion that almost all nations execute deep dives into the dirty pool of espionage – and sometimes much worse. Contextualisation, rather than demonisation, is what even our enemies deserve if we are to understand them properly.

Over time, demonisation leads to fragmentation of the possibility of a global community – of a better global order to cope with global challenges.

Delury offers another key dimension that echoes the spirit of Plato's philosophical legacy of the unity of ethics: a city or – by extension any integrated entity – cannot be half virtuous. A contemporary example of this notion can be found in America's Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977, for example.

It holds that a US corporation operating overseas that's bribing foreign officials must be brought to account by the headquarters in the States. It cannot look the other way, ignoring the illegality, just because it's an ocean away. To its credit, the US Department of Justice has enforced the act against American companies abroad.

Delury takes this principle further and shows how a nation's civic norms can be corroded domestically when it practises clandestine and illicit intervention in the internal affairs of others. "The pathologies of secrecy, like the violence of war, could not be contained overseas forever," he concludes in the book.

In America, the blowback into the backyard of domestic politics can come with hurricane force. Clandestine anti-China crusades lead to poisonous politics such as McCarthyism. Hans Morgenthau, a legendary proponent of hard-nosed realism in foreign policy, famously characterised the infection of domestic norms with overseas malfeasance as a kind of "surreptitious totalitarianism".

Despite the continuing cascade of clandestine interventions abroad, America remains convinced of its comparative ethical exceptionalism in international relations, especially compared to China. Such self-deception is a narcotic. It prevents one from feeling others' pain and blinds us to how others see us; for the American public, it eases the pain of recognition.

Foolishly self-regarding Western commentary on [Xi Jinping's](#) spectacular appointment to a third term as party general secretary makes the point. In America, term limits are relatively recent – and limited – efforts to bracket power. In 1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt entered his fourth four-year term (which led, of course, to the Twenty-second Amendment to limit presidents to two terms).

In reality, American politicians could be seen to make Xi look like a freshman. Obscured in the fog of the spotty term-limit law is the fact that US Congress itself has no term limits (and US Supreme Court justices get lifetime appointments).

Near-eternal incumbent US legislators include Vermont's Patrick Leahy, first elected in 1974, more than 47 years ago; Iowa's Chuck Grassley, since 1981; Kentucky's Mitch McConnell, since 1985. Also note that in 1987, back in the heyday of China's Deng Xiaoping, California's Nancy Pelosi was first elected to the House. Today she is House Speaker, at 82.

By contrast, the comparatively sprightly Xi, at 69, faces a long march before matching the runs of McConnell and Pelosi. Perhaps America might offer the world a long overdue diminishment of pretensions.

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