

If there is a new example to establish that nothing is permanent, then it is the relationship between the Nordic countries and China. The rise of China's economic and technical power, rather than political ideologies, has brought it closer to the Nordic countries, primarily Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and Iceland. Now the relationship has soured. Beijing is no more attractive to these smaller but richer countries.

The Nordic model of the economy is pushed by competitive capitalism. At the same time, even the public sector is thriving. In contrast, the People's Republic of China is an authoritarian political system that is led by a single party—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Despite these differences, the Nordic countries, like many Western countries, shook hands with Beijing willingly. Until the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the world, the Nordic-Beijing relationship was going swimmingly.

China, with all its resources, is strategically invested economically in the Nordic countries. It has also allowed the Nordic countries to establish their businesses in select cities in China.

Each of these countries handled the opportunities created by Beijing differently. Of course, the Nordic countries share common geography as well as history, though their political systems differ. The five countries face distinct challenges when dealing with Beijing. a couple of years ago, there were no ego clashes between the two sides. But not anymore.

China, which is becoming increasingly isolated in the aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemics, is no longer trusted by any country except probably Pakistan, to a lesser extent Russia, and economically weaker countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, among others. Except for Russia, the rest of the countries are in the debt trap laid out by China.



The European Union, in its 2019 report, has explicitly stated its apprehensions about China's growing footprint across the globe. While appreciating China for its investments in other countries, the EU said it is committed to supporting effective multilateralism through the UN. Even China has the responsibility to support all three pillars of the UN - Human Rights, Peace & Security, and Development. The UN said in the bilateral relationship, China has to engage effectively in respecting human rights. While acknowledging China's progress in economic and social rights, it emphatically said the human rights situation in China is deteriorating, notably in Xinjiang. It said the human rights of the EU and other foreign citizens in China must be protected. It also said the high degree of autonomy enshrined in the Hong Kong Basic Law needs to be respected.

It did not stop at that. "Frequent neglect of socioeconomic and financial sustainability may result in high-level indebtedness and the transfer of control over strategic assets and resources," it said. Though this can't be said as a precursor to China's falling out of Nordic countries' relations, it no doubt reflects largely the sentiment of many countries which do not appreciate Beijing for all its growth. It took at least six years for the development to take place.

In the case of Sweden, the tension with China has been witnessed since 2018. The

triggering point was that some Chinese tourists were removed from a Stockholm hotel with the help of police. The tourists arrived at the hotel much before the check-in time. A video was circulated showing the Chinese man shrieking that this was nothing but killing. In China, Sweden was criticized. In turn, Sweden's media hit back, cracking jokes on Chinese people, saying they eat dogs and defecate in public. Some videos surfaced alleging the Chinese were racist, while Sweden is open to all irrespective of their race and gender.

The war of words and retaliation went on for a long time. The gap only widened at the diplomatic level. The root of the gulf between the countries, according to analysts, lies in the captivating writer and book publisher, Gui Minhai, China. He is a Hong Kong-based Swedish citizen. His books on Chinese communist political leaders did not go down well with Beijing. He was treated like a criminal by China. In 2015, he suddenly went missing in Thailand. In 2016, the Chinese media reported that he was held for illegal business operations. After being in and out of detention, in February 2020 he was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment because he was illegally providing intelligence overseas. This has left Sweden upset with China.

The visit of exiled Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama to Denmark in 2009 sparked tensions between China and Denmark. Beijing openly condemned Denmark as having ruined the relationship. The tension further built up when Denmark invited the Taiwan President in 2021 to a "democracy summit." China officially stated that this is against the 'one-China' principle and that "interference is China's internal affairs."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a newspaper published a satirical cartoon showing the Chinese flag with the coronavirus symbol. Adding to the fuel, the Danish government in 2020 defended the erection of a statue outside the parliament in Copenhagen depicting Hong Kong protesters. This was to commemorate victims of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. The Chinese embassy failed in its attempt to make Denmark remove the statue. While China said the statue misread the political situation in Hong Kong besides offending the Chinese, Denmark and the US said both countries value freedom of speech.



Image representation/cNet

In 2019, not just the Nordic countries, even the US, were cut up by China's telecommunications company Huawei. It has been billed as the world's leader in 5G technology and smartphones. The US and other countries have alleged that Huawei could spy on behalf of the Chinese government, which has considerable control over private companies. The West feels that under President Xi Jinping's regime, the private sector has become submissive to the government. The mass detention camps for 're-education through labor' of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang have enraged countries that believe in human rights. The Uyghurs, mostly Muslims, are a Turkic ethnic minority in China's north-western province of Xinjiang. China has dismissed the charges and argued that it had taken only anti-terrorism measures.

Certain documents accessed by the international media in 2022 have shed light on how China organised mass detentions of Muslims.

All these developments in less than a decade show that China is losing the trust of the

Nordic countries, which earlier tried their best to shake hands with the leaders of the CCP. The Nordic countries have lost trust in China. They are apprehensive of compromising national security by having trade tie-ups. The Danish government had expressed its reservation against China by keeping Huawei from participating in the telecom sector's development. This is mainly done on national security grounds.

In addition, the very imposing nature of China is seen as a threat to freedom of expression and culture. Under the banner of the bilateral relationship, the Nordic countries don't want to compromise on the constitutional rights they enjoy. The Nordic countries have gone to the extent of doubting the intention of China, which has established Confucius Institutes to teach the Chinese language and culture. Finland, like Sweden and Denmark, recently closed its Confucius Institute in Helsinki. The reason is that the institutes are seen as tools to push the agenda of the Chinese government.

China is known as a quarrelsome, domineering country. It is trying to consolidate its geopolitical position by threatening and controlling Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Even the Baltic partners of the Nordic governments have condemned the punishment meted out to the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities by China. Undeterred, China, through its embassies in the Nordic countries, has been trying to silence those governments whenever the policies and actions of Beijing are questioned.

The disruptive technologies of China are indeed disturbing China's relationship with many countries. However, it is not easy for any country in the world to take China head-on or sever ties because of its mind-blowing growth in every sector. The dependence on China in trade, business, and technology is so high that even the US is not in a position to close doors to China.



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