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Weaponization of outbound tourism

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Abstract

This study explores how states weaponize outbound tourism to achieve foreign policy objectives, using both formal and informal mechanisms like travel bans, advisories, and media influence. It highlights China's adept use of tourism statecraft, leveraging its large outbound tourism market to enforce diplomatic goals, such as influencing Taiwan relations and retaliating against perceived security threats. In contrast, democracies face limitations due to societal freedoms and market-driven choices. This analysis underscores the strategic importance of tourism weaponization, particularly for economies reliant on tourism, and its potential to shape geopolitical conflicts in a globalized, interdependent world

Introduction

Outbound tourism: Outbound tourism comprises the activities of a resident visitor outside the country of reference, either as part of an outbound tourism trip or as part of a domestic tourism trip (United Nations World Tourism Organization).

The international tourism industry has seen immense growth over time. It accounted for nearly 4% of the global GDP in 2018 (World Tourism Organization). This growth was more facilitated by several collective events e.g., the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, Rapid globalization with information and commutation technology (ICT) & Fast and affordable transportation (e.g. commercial airplanes). This international growth of tourism increases cultural exchanges, increasing understanding of each other and opening new areas of the market. Tourists spend billions of dollars contributing a fortune to a state's GDP - 2.9% of the US in 2014, 9.2% of Vietnam in 2019, 21% of Aruba in 2017, and 0.6% of India in 2020 (World Tourism Organization). The weaponization of tourism means how states use economic statecraft through tourism to pursue their foreign policy goals. This can be done by increasing or decreasing

the outbound tourism to a target nation to pursue them to act in your interest. For a better analysis, I deliberately limit the time period to 2019 (pre-COVID) as the COVID crisis disrupted the whole world economy including tourism. It makes it hard to analyze the impact of this strategy until tourism reaches pre-Covid levels again. We will see how this weaponization of outbound tourism is done through different formal and informal mechanisms. How does this weaponization differ in capacity and effectiveness when the source state is authoritarian or democratic? This area of study is important and relevant as it is a new non-traditional aspect of security for nations that are highly dependent on tourism for their state economy. We will be discussing the case studies where we see this phenomenon, and if it can be a new area of conflict in the international arena.

State's control of outbound tourism

States generally control their outbound tourist in two ways. (i) Formal: the states formally ban their people from visiting a certain nation by restricting travel. These restrictions are generally imposed on nations engaged in war, civil war, or nations hit with natural calamities to protect their people. However, this can also be done based on deteriorating diplomatic ties. The US implemented a travel ban under the Trading with Enemy Act on Cuba in 1963 banning US citizens from spending any money, effectively restricting travel. In July 2017 it officially announced a travel ban for its citizens visiting North Korea following the death of Otto Warmbier (a US college student) under a special passport restriction mechanism citing safety risk and the inability to assist detained Americans. Even if these bans are formal and legal, they can persuade as an attempt to escalate the tensions. (ii) Informal: states try to avoid the escalations by getting directly involved in the market. They take a different root by adopting different informal means to control their outbound tourist. These include issuing travel advisories, a mechanism like Approved destination status (ADS), giving directives to travel agencies, Using Media for setting narratives.

China as an authoritarian state uses these informal techniques efficiently way as they have better control over all aspects of society in China. The Chinese outbound tourist ranks first with 130 million people spending \$260 billion in 2017 the second rank in the US is less than half of what

China consists of. Chinese middle class is rising with their rising disposable income, tourism become a lucrative leisure activity. Chinese started globalizing during the late 90s and started Approving destination status to states. This is a special mechanism for group tour approval to travel agencies basis of this was diplomatic relations, and easy visa facilities for Chinese citizens by the host nation. The travel agencies can't operate group travels to countries that are not in ADS. However, with ever-increasing numbers in the ADS, the effect of having special leverage over particular nations is reduced. China controls travel agencies as top 3/5. Travel agencies are state-owned and the rest are indirectly state-controlled like Tencent. China signals indirect warnings to these agencies to inform of guidelines and advice to correct their way of business according to Chinese state interest. It uses its media and travel advisories to disseminate information leading to the arousal of nationalism to mold behaviors of people in state interest. President Xi Jinping weaponizes tourism to influence state behaviors as we can see through various case studies Dominican Republic, South Korea, Japan, Palau, Turkey, Australia, and others we will discuss some of the case studies.

Dominican Republic

We see the change in the Dominican Republic's stance on Taiwan after the bilateral meeting between Chinese state councilor and foreign minister Wang Yi and Dominican republic foreign minister Miguel Vargas Maldonado in April 2018 following that in May 2018, the Dominican Republic severed its diplomatic ties with Taiwan to recognize "One China" policy. One of the major reasons located for this was the promise of increasing tourist influx in the Dominican by the Chinese state.

South Korea

South Korea deploys the US anti-missile system known as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). China sees this as a threat to its national security. In response, they used statecraft of economic coercion by pulling out their tourist from South Korea. Specially Jeju Island whose 95% of tourist influx comes from China leaving huge economic and job losses. South Korea lost 7 billion US dollars in this retaliation.

Palau, a small Pacific island was punished by the Chinese state in the form of reducing tourist influx for not changing their stance of recognizing Taiwan. These tourists make up 50% of the total tourists in Palau creating a fragile economy as Palau's main source of GDP comes from its tourism industry.

Turkey

Chinese state kept out turkey of their ADS list in response to their blockade of a USSR ship heading towards China as a prototype model for their aircraft carrier. However, Turkey has expanded outbound tourists. It increased from 98,000 in 2011 to 313,000 in 2015 after they joined the Belt and Road initiative in 2013. This influx dropped to 164,681 in 2016 as the Chinese punished Turkey for their protest over the Chinese treatment of the Uighur minority in the Xinjiang region.

Taiwan

Taiwan saw a see-saw pattern in Chinese tourist in response to their regimes when the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) a pro-independence party came into power the influx reduced while it increased when Kuomintang (KMT) remained in power in 2008.

In democratic regimes, it is hard to control outbound tourism through institutions as there is open dissent from the opposition. Businesses such as tourism are a very individualistic choice and democracies based on individual rights find it hard to directly control the choices. they use advisories and try to create a nationalistic environment to convince people. Democracies are unable to weaponize outbound tourism due to such a loss of control over society. We see defiance of US travel advisories by individuals and travel agencies. Indian case of Maldives has similar consequences where the tourists initially dropped in very few numbers it rapidly gained back and even higher making it hard to use it as leverage for political gains.

The link between the change in the stance of the state in response to this economic coercion is ambiguous in nature as there can be factors of currency fluctuation, global economic recession,

safety conditions due to war, natural disasters, and industrial accidents. The effectiveness of these outbound tourist sanctions has concerned implications as generally, the irritants don't vanish in bilateral relations. These sanctions don't work when the cost of sanctions is less than changing policies or the issues are of top most priority for a state like national security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The nations don't bend on these, no matter what the cost of sanctions they have to bear. However, this is an important factor in shaping target nations' policy in the source state's interest when combined with other political and diplomatic means some states nudged to directions that pleased the source state. States can soften their response but never give up on these issues as we see in the Philippines case where they claim their islands but don't seek immediate enforcement of international arbitration on China. The South Korean government doesn't roll back its deployment of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) but delays its further expansion. Turkey has muted their protest of Uighur in recent years. Smaller states that are heavily dependent on tourism for their economy are more receptive to changing their policies in source states interest instead of bigger states that have diversified economies.

Conclusion

We see how states that are better able to control their society can use outbound tourism as a statecraft of economic coercion. This understanding that authoritarian states like China can better use it as a weapon has some fault in understanding as the Chinese main mechanism of ADS is based on the group and not on the individual. The growing middle-class population and the internet make it hard for even a state like China to control its society on an absolute basis until it intervenes formally. In coming years, we can expect the rise of individual travelers instead of groups from agencies. This will soften up the impact and effectiveness of these sanctions on target nations. Target nations are also seen to diversify their source nation and accept international aid from other nations (like Palau was aided by the US and Taiwan) to reduce the impact of these situations. However, weaponizing outbound tourism results in joblessness indirectly which can create social unrest in the target nations, canalizing regime changes or

influencing states to provide military bases and diplomatic support to international organizations like the UN. This will create new areas of geopolitical conflicts in the international arena.

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