

Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 585
OCTOBER 2022



China's Sharp Power: Blunting the World's Edge or a Moment of Global Awakening?

Kalpita A Mankikar

Abstract

Sharp power—a state's attempt to alter the behaviour of other countries through the manipulation of culture, education systems, and the media to further its interests—is a key tool of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Issues related to regime legitimacy and the CCP's development priorities have shaped China's sharp power approach. In the Xi Jinping era, there is some anxiety in the party ranks that external conditions are turning against China, and so it must further its own narrative globally. This brief assesses China's sharp power strategy and the resultant pushback from foreign nations.

Since its inception, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been fixated on solidifying its legitimacy at home and abroad. Initially, the CCP manipulated the message to a global audience through ideologically-committed sympathisers. Since Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012, a notion has emerged within the CCP ranks that China's story must become the world's story.¹ However, there is also a perception within the party that the external environment that aided China's rise since the late 1970s is now turning against it. This is evidenced by repeated mentions of the term 'anti-China' in the state media.

Xi's ascent has also meant that China has shed Deng Xiaoping's counsel of *tao guang yang hui* (keeping a low profile) for a more proactive posture of *fanfa youwei* (striving for achievement). To this end, China is using sharp power—understood as the ability of a state to alter the behaviour of other states through the manipulation of culture, education systems, and the media to further its interests—to curtail free expression, spread confusion, and distort the political environment within democracies around the world. Moreover, with China's GDP reaching US\$18 trillion in 2021, the CCP has gained the confidence and market muscle to pose a threat to other countries.

The concept of sharp power emerged alongside the rise of Communist parties. During the 1917 Russian Revolution, Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin propounded the 'united front' framework, which proposed that the Communist movement needed to make tactical compromises with stronger forces to wrest power.² For example, Lenin operationalised this concept by accepting assistance from Germany even though it was at war with Imperial Russia.³ Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the united front concept was deployed to tackle the CCP's internal and external enemies, and ensure that the external narrative on China conforms to the party's interests.⁴ As a result, the CCP leadership had to 'manage the message' by controlling the flow of information at home and elsewhere through sharp power.

Sharp power can be understood as an instrument by which authoritarian regimes "manipulate and co-opt culture, education systems, and the media".⁵ An increase in China's power—stemming from being the world's most populous country and having the second-largest economy—has resulted in the ability to alter the behaviour of other states.⁶ During the Cold War, when the US and the

Soviet Union were vying to spread their influence in other nations, political scientist Joseph Nye opined that the US had an edge due to its political system (democracy) and the attractiveness of its cultural products (such as Hollywood and fast food).⁷ However, amid ongoing tensions between the US and China, some experts believe that China's cultural products are not attractive to many other parts of the world.⁸ As a result, China is using sharp power to cover up this deficit in global influence. The application of sharp power can result in the censorship or manipulation of independent institutions, and it can curtail free expression and distort the political climate in other countries.⁹

“China is using sharp power—understood as the ability of a state to alter the behaviour of other states through the manipulation of culture, education systems, and the media to further its interests—to curtail free expression, spread confusion, and distort the political environment within democracies around the world.”

Tracing the Evolution of Chinese Sharp Power

Issues related to the CCP's legitimacy, its development priorities, and other domestic challenges have shaped China's use of sharp power. For instance, during the Chinese civil war (the 1930s and 1940s), Mao Zedong won over foreign journalists like Edgar Snow, Anna Louise Strong, and Agnes Smedley^a to spread the party's message globally. By organising choreographed trips for these and other foreign writers, the CCP was able to tide over the demonisation of the party by its rivals, the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek.¹⁰

In his book *Red Star Over China*, Snow was able to project Mao in the likeness of former US President Abraham Lincoln through a series of interviews.¹¹ In keeping with American sensitivities, Mao was even billed as having a "belief in human rights".¹² In this way, the CCP was able to manipulate the message shared with a global audience by using foreigners. But, more importantly, it was able to create an amiable impression of Mao at a time when relations between the US and China were not good, and the CCP regime was still unrecognised by the former.

In the Deng Xiaoping era (late 1970s, after relations between China and the US moved towards normalisation following the recognition of the CCP as the legitimate regime), the sharp power strategy evolved to focus on meeting China's technology deficit through the ancient concept of *wu wei*, which Michael Pillsbury, Director of the Center on Chinese Strategy at the Hudson Institute, describes as getting others do your work.¹³ Deng termed technology the most important ingredient that would drive economic growth, necessitating China acquiring American know-how.¹⁴ At that time, there were constraints on the US's export of sophisticated technology to China, and few exchanges between the two countries' scientific communities. Deng impressed upon a delegation of the US Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China^b that reviving cooperation in the academic sphere would break the deadlock between the two nations, a view embraced by the Jimmy Carter administration in the US that wanted to cement Sino-American cooperation after the normalisation of bilateral ties.¹⁵ Deng pushed for Chinese students

a Edgar Snow, an American journalist, crossed over to territory controlled by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1930s to report on the fledgling movement. Anna Louise Strong and Agnes Smedley were American journalists who travelled to China in the 1920s to chronicle the Chinese civil war. The three journalists were known to be close to the party leadership.

b The Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China (jointly sponsored by the US National Academy of Sciences, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Social Science Research Council) was established in 1966 to arrange exchange visits by scholars from the US and China, organising the exchange of publications.

Tracing the Evolution of Chinese Sharp Power

to take academic courses in American universities related to engineering and the physical sciences, and inked formal agreements^c that would ensure the US provided scientific knowledge and technical know-how to Chinese scientists.¹⁶

The Tiananmen Square crackdown on students seeking more democratic reform in 1989 and the subsequent international uproar and sanctions on China led to a change in the CCP's sharp power strategy. During the Cold War, antipathy towards the Soviet Union brought the US and China together, but its demise eliminated the *raison d'être* for Sino-American cooperation.¹⁷ In light of this, China began to promote the narrative that it was a “responsible power” and used economic diplomacy to end its isolation, evidenced by China taking the lead in establishing or reviving diplomatic relations with pro-Western nations in its vicinity, such as Indonesia (1990), Singapore (1990), and South Korea (1992).¹⁸ In the run-up to the West Asia crisis due to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1990), China mounted a diplomatic initiative—with its then foreign minister Qian Qichen meeting the head of major regional powers (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan)—to seek a peaceful resolution.¹⁹ In 1992, Deng embarked on the ‘southern tour’ in China to promote economic reform, which had been in limbo since the 1989 crackdown, and leverage the size of its markets and improvements in living standards to entice foreign investors. In this way, the CCP was able to work on the “gradual desensitisation of outrage” that had followed the Tiananmen crackdown.²⁰

In the 2000s, the CCP sought to boost China's image and influence global narratives following the dismay expressed in some foreign circles about China's growth trajectory. In 2003, CCP theoretician Zheng Bijian put forward the notion of China's ‘peaceful rise’ (*héping juéqǐ*), which provoked more anxiety internationally. In a damage-control exercise, then President Hu Jintao pushed the slogans of ‘harmonious world’ (*héxié shìjiè*) and ‘peaceful development’ (*héping fāzhǎn*). The term ‘soft power’ (*ruǎn shìlì*) entered the party's lexicon in 2007 during Hu's address to the 17th Party Congress.²¹ The campaign to promote Putonghua (Mandarin spoken on the mainland) and Chinese culture by establishing Confucius centres in foreign countries

^c During Deng Xiaoping's 1979 visit to the US, China's State Science and Technology Commission concluded agreements to expedite scientific exchanges. Between 1979 and 1983, as many as 19,000 students got admission into US universities in physics, chemistry, and engineering. China got the US National Academy of Sciences to dispatch scientists to boost cooperation.

Tracing the Evolution of Chinese Sharp Power

in 2004 is an important milestone in the CCP's application of sharp power. While these centres were modelled on the French Alliance Française, the CCP chose to place them at the heart of university education, thereby giving the CCP leverage over the academic establishment. While billed as a soft power tool, the centres are a key part of the CCP's sharp power strategy, with then Politburo member Li Changchun terming them as "an important part of China's overseas propaganda setup".²² Notably, these centres outlaw discussions on Taiwan, Tibet, and the Tiananmen incident, and bar employees from participating in Falun Gong, a spiritual movement founded in 1992 that draws on Chinese qigong (a system of deep-breathing exercises) and that is banned on the mainland.²³ Nevertheless, the establishment of these centres highlight a churn in China's strategic thinking. For long, Mao was idolised by campus revolutionaries and academics alike. But the promotion of the Chinese language and culture under the brand name of Confucius, who the CCP once blamed for the ills plaguing the nation, demonstrates that the party has realised that Communism's attractiveness has eroded.²⁴

In recent years, tensions between China and the US have increased and spilled into the economic and human rights spheres. For example, some of China's largest suppliers in the Xinjiang province have been banned since 2020 from selling to the US over reported human rights abuses of members of the Muslim Uyghur community in the region.²⁵ Indeed, the US and several other Western countries have termed China's treatment of the minority community genocide.²⁶

With its economic and other interests now impacted, the CCP wants to use the 'Edgar Snow' template to portray China from its standpoint. Chinese state media tweeted, "China needs more people like Edgar Snow, who interviewed Chairman Mao and presented communist movement in China to world".²⁷ Echoing its affiliated media, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying also tweeted that "China hopes to see and welcomes more Edgar Snows of this new era among foreign journalists".²⁸

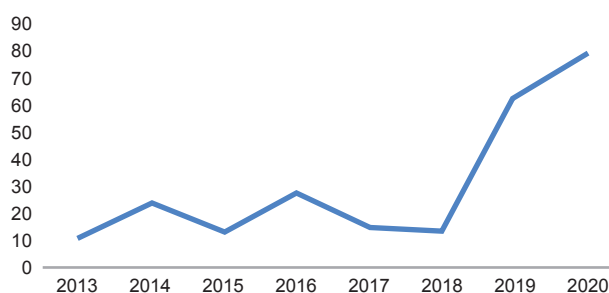
Snow is particularly prized in the eyes of the CCP because, despite being a foreigner, he was relatively uncritical of the party and promoted positive messages about China abroad. Moreover, Snow is seen as a *lao pengyou* (old friend) of China, which is in sync with the CCP's worldview of 'friends' being those who back its interests and 'enemies' those who are adverse to it.²⁹ This view originates from the CCP's belief that it is a one-party dictatorship and must eliminate all internal and external opposition.³⁰

Tracing the Evolution of Chinese Sharp Power

The CCP believes it should be adept at convincingly conveying its point of view to the international community. The ‘China story’ concept has emerged since Xi’s ascent to power in 2012. The CCP discussed this in its National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference in August 2013 and sought to remedy the global imbalance through its *huayuquan* (discourse power).³¹ There is some grouse among the Chinese elite that the inequity in discourse power aids Western nations and dents China’s interests globally. Reinforcing this notion, Xi exhorted his cadres to strengthen the nation’s capacity to tell the ‘China story’ and create international discourse power commensurate with its comprehensive national power.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent isolation of China has increased the CCP’s desire to push its story aggressively, evidenced from the occurrence of the term *fanhua* (anti-Chinese) in the *People’s Daily*, the CCP’s official newspaper. In 2020 alone, the term was mentioned nearly 80 times, a sharp increase from the preceding years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:
References to the term ‘anti-China’ in the *People’s Daily* between 2013 and 2020



Source: *China Media Project* ³²

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the heightened “negative perception” of China among countries in Asia, Europe, and North America,³³ and the deterioration of ties with the US has led the CCP to perceive an increased threat,^d and it is keen to advance its narrative to overcome the issue.

d China is ruled by the Communist Party, thus the conflation of nation with the party means any threat to the nation is a threat to the political establishment.

The CCP's sharp power strategy uses Chinese students pursuing academics abroad to curb free expression and promote the party's worldview. It also seeks to distort the political climate by infiltrating elites and multilateral organisations.

Party Organs

The CCP's International Liaison Department (ILD) and the United Front Work Department (UFWD) are at the forefront of the sharp power strategy to advance its narrative.

The ILD, which maintains relations between the CCP and foreign political parties, was formed in 1951 and initially only engaged with fraternal parties in Eastern Europe. Following the 1955 Bandung Conference, which aimed to promote greater cooperation among Asian and African countries, the ILD expanded its reach to develop ties with socialist parties in Africa and West Asia.³⁴ The ILD's goal evolved from exporting the revolution to contributing to building a global consensus in favour of China. The ILD's current objective is to allow the CCP to increase its discursive power abroad by building new alliances with foreign political parties.³⁵ This "party diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" is meant to encourage foreign political parties to "understand and respect Chinese values and interests".³⁶ It serves as a vehicle to spread a positive image of the party abroad.³⁷

The UFWD takes its name from the 'united front' concept, which advocates a tactical compromise temporarily in the interests of or while executing a Communist party's agenda.³⁸ Mao established the UFWD to generate an amenable environment abroad to execute the CCP's political agenda, terming the unit as a 'magic weapon'.³⁹

The UFWD's objectives appear to have evolved in recent years due to the migration of Chinese people to other countries. In 2015, the CCP's directive to the UFWD stated that its mission is to guide Chinese living abroad,⁴⁰ mobilise overseas Chinese communities to advocate for the CCP's interests, and marginalise opponents to the regime.⁴¹ The UFWD seeks to win over overseas Chinese by underscoring a sense of kinship and fostering a sense of loyalty to secure political support for the CCP.⁴²

Many Chinese people reside in Western nations that are more open than China and have access to several unfiltered sources of information. In this way, they are constantly exposed to the CCP's criticism and shortcomings, which they could pass on to their kin on the mainland. Therefore, the CCP seeks to control the diaspora so that it does not represent a threat to the regime and mobilise them to serve its interests.

There are several classifications of overseas Chinese—the *Huaqiao*, which include nationals from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan who reside abroad; the *Huaren*, those who have relinquished their Chinese passports and obtained the nationality of their country of residence; and the *Huayi*, who are people of Chinese descent.⁴³ Xi's pitch for the 'nation's rejuvenation for all Chinese' and his vision for 'one big China family' means that the distinctions based on nationality have been become blurred,⁴⁴ as evidenced from a remark by a senior People's Liberation Army general to a Chinese-American serviceman: "Chinese blood runs through you... no matter what flag you wear on your shoulders, you are Chinese first and foremost".⁴⁵

Weaponised Youth

Since 2015, Chinese youth pursuing studies abroad have become a focus of the UFWD, with Xi saying that ideological and political work is pivotal to university education.⁴⁶ The overseas student community has become an unofficial channel to press China's territorial claims abroad. In 2017, a students' group at the University of Sydney, Australia, forced a lecturer to apologise for using a map that favoured India's territorial claims at the India-Bhutan-China trijunction. This incident received widespread coverage in the Chinese media, with one newspaper claiming that China had emerged victorious in its border dispute with India on Australian soil.⁴⁷ That same year, Chinese students at the University of California San Diego campaigned to revoke the institution's invitation to Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama.

Similarly, in 2019, the installation of an artwork by Mark Wallinger at the London School of Economics and Political Science depicting Taiwan as a sovereign nation sparked the ire of Chinese students.⁴⁸ Many of the protesting students noted that the institution was the alma mater of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who they claimed favours Taiwan's independence, and so the

art installation appeared to promote this theme, while others who made a representation to the campus authorities said that they were bound to uphold China's interest. As such, China's overseas student community and the Confucius centres in universities form a pincer movement to push China's narrative.

The apparent success of this strategy has emboldened the Chinese regime via its diplomatic corps to become party to such academic wrangles. For instance, in 2017, the Chinese consulate complained to the University of Newcastle, Australia, after a lecturer listed Hong Kong and Taiwan as countries.⁴⁹ Thus, the CCP, via its students and Confucius centres abroad, manages to convey that the territorial claims of other nations do not matter and exerts pressure on governments to be amenable to its worldview.

Elite Trojan Horses

The CCP's efforts to make the world believe its story hinges on socialising its elites. In addition to the 'bottom-up approach' elucidated above, China is also trying a 'top-down approach' to create an amenable political climate in foreign countries.⁵⁰ This is done through the two-pronged *huaren canzheng* (Chinese participation in politics overseas) strategy—influencing elites abroad, and encouraging the diaspora to enter public life. For instance, in 2017, Australian politician Sam Dastyari had to quit political office after it emerged that he had accepted money from a Chinese firm with ties to the CCP to support the regime's refusal to abide by international court rulings on the South China Sea.⁵¹ As a result, political lobbyist Huang Xiangmo, who has ties to the CCP, saw his permanent residency in Australia cancelled and his application for Australian nationality turned down.⁵² In another incident in Australia, Bo Zhao, a Liberal Party member, claimed he was offered cash in 2018 by Chinese agents to contest the election to the federal parliament. He was found dead in a Melbourne hotel room in March 2019.⁵³

Given the nature of politics in democracies, where different political parties can come to power or form the opposition, the CCP sees merit in cultivating ties with all sides. In the UK in 2022, a law firm owned by Christine Ching Kui Lee, a British-Chinese national, was said to be funnelling money to the office of Labour Party parliamentarian Barry Gardiner, while his office in

Sharp Power in Action

Westminster—the heart of the British government—hired her son to manage his appointments.⁵⁴ Lee’s firm provided legal counsel to the Chinese embassy in London and also worked for the British government’s Department of International Trade. Lee has been active in British public life for some years, allegedly cultivating the Westminster elite. She received an award from former Prime Minister Theresa May in 2019 for her contribution to China-UK relations, and was also instrumental in organising UK nationals of Chinese descent to be more active in local politics.⁵⁵ Notably, Britain’s counterintelligence service, MI5, warned the political establishment that Lee was acting at the behest of the CCP’s UFWD to reach out to public figures across the political spectrum to interfere in British politics to ensure that the UK political landscape was “favourable to the CCP’s agenda”.⁵⁶

While China has encouraged Chinese overseas to play a more significant role in political life, it is also mindful of those who may dent the ‘China story’. In March 2022, the US Justice Department accused China of using a private detective to falsely implicate a politician of Chinese ethnicity seeking the Democratic nomination to run for a New York seat in the House of Representatives.⁵⁷ The political rise of Yan Xiong, who was involved in the 1989 Tiananmen protests and served in the US military, presents the prospect of an ethnic Chinese calling into question the CCP’s human rights record, making the party nervous.

China’s ‘top-down approach’ is also visible in how the party-state engages with international organisations that shape perceptions. For instance, opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by countries like the US and India has led China to turn to international bodies to push its agenda. In 2016, the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) published a study by a Chinese economist that showed how the BRI could help the UN achieve its Sustainable Development Goals.⁵⁸ Additionally, in an interview with a Chinese state-affiliated media organisation, Wu Hongbo, who was at the helm of DESA at that time, said that a Chinese national working in the international bureaucracy was obligated to defend the country’s interests.⁵⁹ Wu is also said to have used his clout to block the participation of Dolkun Isa, president of the World Uyghur Congress, at UN platforms.⁶⁰

Flexing Economic Might

The CCP repeatedly uses China's position as the world's most populous nation and second-largest economy to push its agenda of blocking out information unfavourable to its interests, and private firms in the country complement these efforts. For instance, in 2019, when Daryl Morey, a senior executive at Houston Rockets (a US professional basketball team), tweeted in support of pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong—a statement he later retracted—the National Basketball Association was at risk of losing a substantial portion of its largest market (China).⁶¹ To control the potential of losing Chinese viewers and avoid a backlash from proponents of free speech, the sporting league stated that while the tweet had hurt people in China, Morey had a right to his views. However, in a post on Sina Weibo (China's equivalent of Twitter), the league said the executive's comment was inappropriate and it was extremely disappointed.⁶² The Chinese Basketball Association and the Chinese consulate in Houston condemned the incident, while private firms backed the criticism.⁶³ Internet giant Tencent stopped streaming the Houston Rockets' games in China, and Chinese sports kit merchandiser Li Ning and commercial bank Shanghai Pudong Development Bank declared that they were putting their partnership with the team on hold.⁶⁴ The incident had a cascading effect on other corporate groups. While the controversy raged on, ESPN, a US sports channel, decreed that the network's coverage should side-step political discussions about China and Hong Kong. The network broadcast a map showing Taiwan as part of China, and a dotted line representing China's disputed claims in the South China Sea.⁶⁵ This demonstrates the efficacy of China's sharp power in changing the behaviour beyond a targeted entity since ESPN chose to advance Chinese propaganda even though its economic interests were not threatened.

The CCP's economic arsenal in the form of its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has few peers. The party owns more than 50,000 firms, which employ around 20 million people, and are collectively valued at about US\$29 trillion.⁶⁶ Under the 'go out' policy, the SOEs were encouraged to invest abroad, and have emerged as important instruments for executing sharp power. As COVID-19 raged on in early 2021, China took the lead in providing vaccines to other countries. However, when doubts were raised over the efficacy of the vaccines, the CCP tried the hard sell. China dispatched early delivery of

Sinovac doses to Singapore in February 2021, even before the vaccines had received regulatory approval in the country.⁶⁷ This seemed like a tactic to exert diplomatic pressure on Singapore to approve the vaccine and boost the credibility of Chinese-made immunisations.

Similarly, Peruvian journalists who accessed the agreement between Chinese SOE Sinopharm and Peru reported that the firm had offered extra doses, which had not been made public, to officials who were tasked with reviewing the safety and efficacy of the medicines.^{68,69} Some of these extra doses were made available to individuals involved in awarding contracts of any approved vaccine for the public. Notably, the offer of extra doses to political and bureaucratic elites occurred within the framework of official negotiations. This was an instrument of leverage that gave Chinese SOEs an advantage when negotiating the purchase of vaccines.

Social Media Blitzkrieg

Global social media platforms have become the CCP's latest arena to spread its influence and dox critics. Social media seems to have come in handy for the CCP in the post-truth world, where facts and empirical evidence have less left in moulding mass opinion than social media narratives that appeal to emotion.

In November 2020, Chinese diplomat Zhao Lijian tweeted an illustration of war crime allegations against Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. According to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, of a sample of over 600 accounts that retweeted Zhao's post, nearly 3 percent had been created either on the day it was first tweeted or the following day.⁷⁰ Within a week, the tweet had received more than 18,000 retweets and 71,000 likes. However, out of the sample of accounts that liked the tweet, over 35 percent had no followers and around 80 percent had less than ten followers.

The CCP is also enlisting private firms to produce content that can be used in influence operations, in what it terms as "public opinion management".⁷¹ While the party uses global social media platforms to spread its propaganda, these are inaccessible to people living in China. In May 2021, a unit of the Shanghai police sought private contractors for 'public opinion management' through the creation of fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms.⁷² These bot-like networks are handy in showing support for the regime's narrative through likes and reposts.

Sharp Power in Action

Social media users critical of the CCP's policies have been in the crosshairs of the bot networks, with women of Chinese ethnicity a notable target. For instance, Vicky Xu, a researcher in Australia, was denounced on social media as a 'race traitor' following her report on detention, incarceration, and forced labour in Xinjiang.⁷³ Similarly, Tzu-I Chuang, the wife of the former US consul general at Chengdu, faced the brunt of an online campaign in July 2020.⁷⁴ Following then US President Donald Trump's decision to shut down the Chinese consulate in Houston, China ordered the closure of the American consulate in Chengdu. Chuang's post on Weibo, likening the evacuation of diplomat families to the exodus of Jews from Germany, was seen as comparing the CCP to the Nazis. As a result, Chuang's family received threats and photographs of the home she had evacuated to in the US were released on social media. Chinese state media fanned the controversy, with at least six social posts and news reports about Chuang's post recorded in the week after the consulate was asked to shut.⁷⁵ This approach highlights China's strategy to challenge the information environment by shaping international political discourse when it is facing flak over issues such as the origins of COVID-19, and its human rights record in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

“Among other things, the CCP's sharp power strategy uses Chinese students in foreign countries, overseas Chinese elites, and social media to promote the party's worldview.”

The International Pushback

China's sharp power strategy has seen some pushback in recent years. In September 2020, for instance, the UK government expanded the scope of vetting international students who wanted to study subjects that had a bearing on national security, such as chemistry, physics, computer science, and artificial intelligence. Researchers and students who seek to pursue these disciplines will now need an Academic Technology Approval Scheme certificate^e before they can study or commence research in the UK in areas where the knowledge obtained could be used to develop advanced conventional military technology, and weapons of mass destruction or their delivery systems.⁷⁶

China's use of its overseas nationals now appears to be hindering the CCP's cause; the perception that all Chinese students are an instrument of sharp power is hurting China. For instance, the US has imposed visa curbs on Chinese students pursuing academic disciplines in science and technology,⁷⁷ and the UK has barred Chinese postgraduate students from pursuing subjects with national security implications.⁷⁸

China's new posture of *fanfa youwei* (striving for achievement) advocates for a greater role for Chinese leadership in world affairs. But the CCP elite will have to reassess this approach if it means that the loyalty of Chinese migrants overseas is constantly questioned or makes them vulnerable to violence or ill-treatment,⁷⁹ thus forcing them to deliberate over what it means to be Chinese.

For instance, the UK is currently considering a legislation on anti-foreign interference, which could create a register of "declared activities that are undertaken for, or on behalf of, a foreign state".⁸⁰ Similarly, in 2021, Australia has expanded the ambit of its foreign interference law to include universities, with new rules necessitating that students be trained to identify and report any meddling by foreign powers.⁸¹

e The Academic Technology Approval Scheme certificate, issued by the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gives students the security clearance to study subject areas where the knowledge obtained may be used in the development or delivery of weapons of mass destruction.


The International Pushback

While there is a vast demand in many countries for Chinese-language coaching, many countries appear to be discovering the corrosive potential of the Confucius centres. In 2020, the US warned educational institutes that the arrangement with Confucius centres gave the CCP a foothold on American soil and imperilled free speech.⁸² Following the 2020 border clashes, India undertook a review of over 50 agreements signed between Indian and Chinese institutions, and in 2022 made it mandatory for any collaboration between Indian educational institutes and the Confucius centres to be approved under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act.⁸³ These instances highlight that China's aggressive sharp power tactics appear to have inadvertently hurt its human capital formation and soft power quotient.

“While China's sharp power strategy may have had some success in the past, many countries, particularly in the West, are now pushing back against it.”

For many years, China deployed its sharp power strategy freely due to a combination of complex historical and geopolitical factors, and the West's optimistic assessment of its political transformation. In the nineteenth century, the US sought to mould China in its likeness, founding top-class educational institutions to improve human capital formation, but these efforts were stifled, and the bilateral relationship deteriorated with the Communist takeover.⁸⁴ In the mid-1970s, when China made overtures to the US, Washington was eager to facilitate Beijing's integration into the Western order and prise it away from the Communist bloc.⁸⁵ The US victory in the Cold War also meant a triumph of human rights and democracy, and so American political leaders felt they could question the CCP's rights record, particularly in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident.⁸⁶ However, following the economic downturn in the 1990s and the consequent pressure from business lobbies (over fears they would lose access to the large China market if the US pressed the rights issue), Washington altered its approach. The US continued to engage with China in the economic, cultural, and educational spheres until the Trump administration.⁸⁷ This was also complimented by the Chinese strategy of pushing the notion of 'peaceful development' and augmenting its soft power. As a result, China became more closely accepted into the global fold, as evidenced by its hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympics, perhaps because it did not seek a global leadership role, nor did it let the global community become wary of its ambition.

China has adopted a more brazen sharp power strategy in the Xi era because it sees a historic opportunity to alter the world order.⁸⁸ This has also put its behaviour under the global spotlight. China has attempted to showcase its political system as a 'democracy', but this has only highlighted its flaws. For instance, while ordinary Chinese cannot access social media platforms like Twitter at home, the regime has weaponised the medium to spread its narrative. Similarly, while the CCP cracked down on pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong and accused them of having clandestine links with foreign powers, it has used overseas Chinese to penetrate democracies and socialise lawmakers there to its interests.

While the sharp-power approach may have translated in some gains (such as an acknowledgement of its territorial claims in some quarters), the backlash against overseas Chinese students will have a bearing on China's human capital formation, a long-term impact. Additionally, the number of people across countries, particularly in the West, who hold negative views of China appears to be rising.⁸⁹ As such, the CCP regime must introspect and reconsider its aggressive sharp power strategy, which seems to have failed to achieve the goal of mending the party's image globally. 

Kalpita A Mankikar is a Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies programme.

- 1 全国宣传思想工作会议 (National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference), 共产党员网首页 (Communist Party Members Network), August 19, 2013, <http://www.12371.cn/special/qgxcxgzhy/>
- 2 Vladimir Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: An infantile disorder* (Progress Publishers, 1964), pp. 17–118.
- 3 Robert Harvey, *Comrades: The Rise and Fall of World Communism* (London: John Murray, 2003), pp. 48-49.
- 4 Emmanuel Jourda, “The Post-Revolutionary Uses of an Orthodox Canon: The United Front and the Political Revolution of the After-Revolution in China” (PhD thesis, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2012), pp. 17.
- 5 Simon Shen, “The World Is Awakening to China’s Sharp Power,” *The Diplomat*, June 23, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/the-world-is-awakening-to-chinas-sharp-power/>
- 6 Evelyn Goh, *Rising China’s Influence in Developing Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 25.
- 7 G. John Ikenberry, “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,” review of *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004
- 8 David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp 6-12, 309-311.
- 9 Christopher Walker, “What is Sharp Power?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/>
- 10 Marie Ann-Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), pp. 45.
- 11 Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), pp. 90, 124.
- 12 Snow, *Red Star Over China*, pp. 124.
- 13 Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (Macmillan, 2019) [e-book], chap. 3.; Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-Wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.53.
- 14 Deng Xiaoping, “Realize the Four Modernizations and Never Seek Hegemony,” May 7, 1978, <http://dengxiaopingworks.wordpress.com/2013/01/25/realize-the-four-modernizations-and-never-seek-hegemony/>.
- 15 Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* [e-book], chap. 3.

- 16 Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* [e-book], chap. 3.
- 17 Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 152.
- 18 Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, pp. 153-154.
- 19 Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, pp. 154.
- 20 James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998), pp. 246.
- 21 David Shambaugh, *China's Leaders: From Mao to Now* (Polity, 2021), pp. 246-248.
- 22 U.S. Department of State, United States Government, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/confucius-institute-u-s-center-designation-as-a-foreign-mission/index.html>
- 23 Clive Hamilton & Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World* (Oneworld Publications, 2020) [e-book], chap. 12.
- 24 "A message from Confucius," *The Economist*, October 24, 2009, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2009/10/24/a-message-from-confucius>
- 25 U.S. Department of State, United States Government, <https://www.state.gov/xinjiang-supply-chain-business-advisory/>
- 26 U.S. Department of State, U.S. Government. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/determination-of-the-secretary-of-state-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang/index.html>
- 27 People's Daily, China, (@PDChina), Twitter, October 13, 2016, <https://twitter.com/PDChina/status/786383781980610560?s=20&t=o2Am1G6AhBpgF0fybVwzfw>
- 28 Hua Chunying, (@SpokespersonCHN), Twitter, March 7, 2021, <https://twitter.com/SpokespersonCHN/status/1368507146254512129?s=20&t=V0qZ3b2boW0Mc2PiLsEwPQ>
- 29 Matt Schrader, *Friends and Enemies: A framework for Understanding Chinese Political Interference in Democratic Countries*, Washington DC, German Marshall Fund, 2020, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Friends-and-Enemies-A-Framework-for-Understanding-Chinese-Political-Interference-in-Democratic-Countries.pdf>
- 30 Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's influence in Australia* (Richmond: Hardie Grant Books, 2018) [e-book], chap. 13.
- 31 全国宣传思想工作会议 (National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference), 共产党员网首页 (Communist Party Members Network), August 19, 2013, <http://www.12371.cn/special/qgxcsgzhy/>

- 32 China's Political Discourse in 2020: China Media Project, in Sinocism, <https://sinocism.com/p/chinas-political-discourse-in-2020>. Sinocism. <https://sinocism.com>
- 33 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin And Christine Huang, "Unfavorable views of China reach historic highs in many countries," *Pew Research Center*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>
- 34 David Shambaugh, "China's 'Quiet Diplomacy': The International Department of the Chinese Communist Party," *China: An International Journal*, 5:1 (2007), pp. 35
- 35 P. Charon and JB Jeangène Vilmer, *Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment*, Paris, Institute for Strategic Research, Ministry for the Armed Forces, 2021. <https://www.irsem.fr/report.html>
- 36 Yu Hongjun, 中国特色政党外交 (*Party-to-Party Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics*), (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, Jun. 2017), 36-37
- 37 Jin Xin, "国内外关于中国共产党对外交往的研究综述" ("Overview of Chinese and Foreign Research on Party Diplomacy"), *CPC News*, March 16, 2015, <https://archive.vn/8bf89>.
- 38 Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: An infantile disorder*, pp. 17–118.
- 39 Samir Saran & Akhil Deo, *Pax Sinica: Implications for the Indian Dawn* (Rupa, 2019) [e-book], chap. 7.
- 40 中共中央印发《中国共产党统一战线工作条例（试行）》[Central Committee of Communist Party of China issued regulations on work of the United Front of the Communist Party of China (for trial implementation)], *Xinhua*, September 22, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/22/c_1116645297_5.htm.
- 41 Michael McGowan, "Chinese government exerts influence across Australian society, MPs told," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jan/31/chinese-government-exerts-influence-across-australian-society-mps-told>
- 42 Little Red Podcast, "How To Make Friends And Influence People: Inside the Magic Weapon of the United Front," April 9, 2018. <https://soundcloud.com/user-340830825/how-to-make-friends-and-influence-people-inside-the-magic-weapon-of-the-united-front>; James Kyngé, Lucy Hornby, and Jamil Anderlini,
- 43 James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp.108.
- 44 Laura Grunberg, "Business Moguls and Chinese (Soft) Power: The 'Huaren' of Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat*, May 4, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/business-moguls-and-chinese-soft-power-the-huaren-of-southeast-asia/>
- 45 Eric Chan, "Fifth Column Fears: the Chinese Influence Campaign in the United States," *The Diplomat*, September 24, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/fifth-column-fears-the-chinese-influence-campaign-in-the-united-states/>

- 46 张峰：习近平中央统战工作会议重要讲话的8个创新性亮点 (Highlights of Xi Jinping's speech at Central United Front Work Conference), *People's Daily*, June 6, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0606/c1001-27113670.html>
- 47 Emma Reynolds, "Tensions rise as Chinese government's influence infiltrates Aussie universities," *News.com.au*, September 1, 2017, <https://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/australian-economy/tensions-rise-as-chinese-governments-influence-infiltrates-aussie-universities/news-story/c7768b0bb1f5953a7608884527387372>
- 48 "A cartographic clash between the LSE and its Chinese students," *The Economist*, April 13, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2019/04/13/a-cartographic-clash-between-the-lse-and-its-chinese-students>
- 49 Primrose Riordan & Rowan Callick, "China consulate involved in Newcastle Uni Taiwan row," *The Australian*, August 28, 2017, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/china-consulate-involved-in-newcastle-uni-taiwan-row/news-story/14dceb31c1e72807c9f006936784c601>
- 50 Bonny Lin, "China's Sharp Power: A Conversation with Kevin Sheives and Jessica Ludwig." *China Power*, December 7, 2021, Podcast, 00.39. <https://www.csis.org/node/63270>
- 51 Quentin McDermott, "Sam Dastyari defended China's policy in South China Sea in defiance of Labor policy, secret recording reveals," *ABC News*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-29/sam-dastyari-secret-south-china-sea-recordings/9198044?nw=0&=HtmlFragment>
- 52 Rod McGuirk, "Australia Revokes Residency of High-Profile Chinese Businessman," *The Diplomat*, February 07, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/australia-revokes-residency-of-high-profile-chinese-businessman/>
- 53 Dan Conifer, "How a dead Liberal Party member put a fresh spotlight on Beijing's foreign interference efforts," *ABC News*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-25/chinese-spy-parliament-foreign-interference-in-hong-kong-taiwan/11735176>
- 54 Naomi Canton, "MI5 names Chinese 'agent' linked to Labour MP awarded Padma Shri by India," *The Times of India*, January 14, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/uk/mi5-names-chinese-agent-linked-to-labour-mp-awarded-padma-shri-by-india/articleshow/88885093.cms>
- 55 Nina dos Santos, "Exclusive: UK government promoted firm at center of alleged Chinese influence operation for years," *CNN*, January 20, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/14/uk/uk-parliament-china-firm-gbr-intl/index.html>
- 56 Gordon Corera & Jennifer Scott, "MI5 warning over 'Chinese agent' in Parliament," *BBC*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-59984380>
- 57 Jan Wolfe, "Justice Department accuses China of spying on, intimidating dissidents living in U.S.," *Reuters*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-accuses-chinese-agent-scheme-undermine-congressional-candidate-2022-03-16/>

- 58 “Interview: China’s Belt and Road Initiative conducive to efforts to carry out UN sustainable development agenda,” *Xinhua*, July 20, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/20/c_135525365.htm
- 59 CCTV, “开讲啦 我的时代答卷 · 前联合国副秘书长吴红波：优秀的外交官要有强烈的爱国心和进取精神。” (Former UN Deputy Secretary-General Wu Hongbo: Excellent diplomats must have strong patriotism and enterprising spirit], YouTube video, 44.58 min, December 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmrI2n6d6VU&t=149s>.
- 60 World Uyghur Congress (@UyghurCongress), “In an interview with @CCTV, former UN Under-Secretary-General & head of @UNDESA Wu Hongbo said he represented Chinese national interests in his position as a UN official, saying he ordered that WUC President @Dolkun_Isa be expelled from the 2017 UN Indigenous Forum @UN4Indigenous,” Twitter, April 25, 2019, https://twitter.com/UyghurCongress/status/1121349082457485312?s=20&t=erMUe33P_UC4Ha-Eu68M_g
- 61 Sopan Deb & Marc Stein, “N.B.A. Executive’s Hong Kong Tweet Starts Firestorm in China,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/sports/daryl-morey-rockets-china.html>
- 62 Deb & Stein, “N.B.A. Executive’s Hong Kong Tweet Starts Firestorm in China”
- 63 Deb & Stein, “N.B.A. Executive’s Hong Kong Tweet Starts Firestorm in China”
- 64 Deb & Stein, “N.B.A. Executive’s Hong Kong Tweet Starts Firestorm in China”
- 65 “ESPN faces criticism over its coverage of Hong Kong tweet and the NBA,” *CNN*, October 9, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/09/media/espn-daryl-morey-tweet-china/index.html>
- 66 Hal Hodson, “With the state’s help, Chinese technology is booming,” *The Economist*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/technology-quarterly/2020/01/02/with-the-states-help-chinese-technology-is-booming>
- 67 Dewey Sim, “Is Sinovac’s early shipment to Singapore ‘unusual’ or just part of China’s vaccine diplomacy?,” *SCMP*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3123163/sinovacs-early-shipment-singapore-unusual-or-just-part>
- 68 Rowan Philp, “Insider Access to Chinese Vaccines: A Case Study in Pandemic Corruption from Peru,” *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, August 4, 2021, <https://gijn.org/2021/08/04/insider-access-to-chinese-vaccines-a-case-study-in-pandemic-corruption-from-peru/>
- 69 Lucien Chauvin, “Peruvian COVID-19 vaccine scandal spreads,” *The Lancet* 397, no. 10276 (2021), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00508-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00508-0)
- 70 Albert Zhang, Ariel Bogle and Jake Wallis, “Tweet storm shows China aims to project power through provocation,” *The Strategist*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/tweet-storm-shows-china-aims-to-project-power-through-provocation/>

- 71 Muiyi Xiao, Paul Mozur and Gray Beltran, “Buying Influence: How China Manipulates Facebook and Twitter,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/20/technology/china-facebook-twitter-influence-manipulation.html>
- 72 Xiao, Mozur and Beltran, “Buying Influence: How China Manipulates Facebook and Twitter”
- 73 “‘Bewitched’ Vicky Xu who Fabricates Xinjiang Story Stokes anti-China Sentiment in Australia: Observer,” *Global Times*, April 11, 2021, <https://archive.vn/tca4F>.
- 74 Liza Lin, “A U.S. Diplomat’s Wife Was a Social Media Star—Until Chinese Trolls, Aided by State Media, Came After Her,” *WSJ*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-u-s-diplomats-wife-was-a-social-media-staruntil-chinese-trolls-aided-by-state-media-came-after-her-11617015601>
- 75 Lin, “A U.S. Diplomat’s Wife Was a Social Media Star—Until Chinese Trolls, Aided by State Media, Came After Her”
- 76 Academic Technology Approval Scheme, Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, March 25, 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme#students>
- 77 “US cancels over 1,000 visas for Chinese deemed security risks,” *Nikkei Asia*, September 10, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/US-cancels-over-1-000-visas-for-Chinese-deemed-security-risks>
- 78 Lucy Fisher, “Chinese students face ban amid security fears,” *The Times*, October 1, 2020. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/chinese-students-face-ban-amid-security-fears-nmp7plwch>
- 79 Katerina Ang, “Chinese Australians feel heat from worsening diplomatic friction,” *Nikkei Asia*, December 7, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Chinese-Australians-feel-heat-from-worsening-diplomatic-friction>
- 80 United Kingdom, Home Office, *Consultation document: legislation to counter state threats* (London, Home Office, 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/legislation-to-counter-state-threats/consultation-document-legislation-to-counter-state-threats-accessible-version>.
- 81 John Power, “Update to Australia’s foreign interference guidelines for universities could fuel prejudice against Chinese, academics warn,” *South China Morning Post*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3147148/update-australias-foreign-interference-guidelines-universities>
- 82 U.S. Department of State, United States Government, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/confucius-institute-u-s-center-designation-as-a-foreign-mission/index.html>
- 83 “India makes FCRA clearance mandatory for tie-ups with China’s Confucius Institutes,” *The Indian Express*, April 29, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/india-makes-fcra-clearance-mandatory-for-tie-ups-with-chinas-confucius-institutes-7891399/>

Endnotes

- 84 Samir Saran & Kalpit A Mankikar, “A New Cold War,” Sanjaya Baru & Rahul Sharma, eds (Harper Collins, 2021), pp. 121-124.
- 85 Saran, “A New Cold War”
- 86 Bob Davis & Lingling Wei, *Superpower Showdown* (Harper Business, 2020), pp. 54.
- 87 Davis & Wei, *Superpower Showdown*, pp. 64.
- 88 Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford University Press, 2021) (e-book), introduction.
- 89 Laura Silver, Christine Huang And Laura Clancy, “How Global Public Opinion of China Has Shifted in the Xi Era,” Pew Research Center, September 28, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/09/28/how-global-public-opinion-of-china-has-shifted-in-the-xi-era>



Ideas . Forums . Leadership . Impact

20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org