

# Issue

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# Brief

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# Chinese Global Exchange Diplomacy and Influence Operations: An Overview

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## **Abstract**

Since the onset of the twenty-first century, China has employed various instruments of exchange diplomacy to overcome its historical ‘century of humiliation’ and realise its ‘Middle Kingdom’ dream. Riding on the platform of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has leveraged its strong economy and large human resources through tourism, education, and sister-city arrangements to strengthen people-to-people contact between its citizens, diaspora, and foreigners. This brief assesses China’s efforts to influence the global public opinion in its favour.

In the era of technological advancements, conflicts have extended beyond the traditional military realm and have attracted a wide array of non-military participants. In today's society, soft power is gaining prominence over hard power. The emergence of cutting-edge communication technologies and the widespread accessibility of affordable handheld devices have disrupted traditional conflict zones by introducing numerous empowered and participatory stakeholders, infinite in number and invisible in nature. Consequently, the scope of public diplomacy has evolved from government control to various people/organisations, including civil society, pressure groups, political leaders, journalists, media hubs, academicians, diaspora, and think tanks.

Despite its significant population size and having an influential diaspora (approximately 60 million people in more than 150 countries<sup>1,2</sup>) China had long been reticent towards public diplomacy. However, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a shift in the Chinese approach towards public diplomacy, aimed to overcome its historical 'century of humiliation'<sup>a</sup> and realise its 'Middle Kingdom' dream.<sup>b</sup> The Chinese were the first to use the whole of society as a foundation for influence operations in modern times. Influence operations can be understood as "the coordinated, integrated, and synchronised application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post conflict to foster attitudes, behaviours, or decisions by foreign target audiences" to further a state's interests and objectives.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to the traditional tradecraft of intelligence collection by a specialised agent, Chinese agencies use the policy of "thousand grains of sand or mosaic approach or human wave or citizen spying,"<sup>4</sup> wherein they employ numerous Han people and their diaspora settled abroad. Beijing's creativity and ability to combine all the elements of 'societal power,' including espionage, information control, industrial policy, political and economic coercion, foreign policy, the threat of military force, and technological strength, pose a challenge to the rules-based international order.<sup>5</sup> The unique Chinese approach of using the whole of society innocuously for espionage purposes does not require a 'bad person' with negative vulnerabilities for espionage. Instead, it recruits a 'good person' or an immature intelligencer. Such influence operations have ensured faster intelligence collection without highlighting the state's involvement.

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a The term 'century of humiliation' refers to the period of Chinese history from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, during which China faced numerous foreign invasions, military defeats, and territorial losses. This era, marked by the Opium Wars, foreign occupation, and internal strife, deeply impacted China's national pride and sovereignty.

b The 'Middle Kingdom' dream refers to China's aspiration to regain its historical status as a central and influential global power. This vision involves economic prosperity, technological leadership, and diplomatic influence, reflecting China's desire to play a pivotal role on the world stage in the twenty-first century.

Paul Moore, a former China analyst for the US's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), explains the distinctive Chinese approach to using society for its influence operations as: "If a beach were a target, the Russians would send in a sub, frogmen would steal ashore in the dark of night and collect several buckets of sand and take them back to Moscow. The U.S. would send over satellites and produce reams of data. The Chinese would send in a thousand tourists, each assigned to collect a single grain of sand. When they returned, they would be asked to shake out their towels. And they would end up knowing more about the sand than anyone else."<sup>6</sup>

The advancement of communication technologies has dramatically increased the significance of public diplomacy, given the emergence of an extensive, unseen, and empowered network of stakeholders capable of operating flexibly.<sup>c</sup> The introduction of disruptive technologies and the availability of versatile cheap handheld devices has significantly increased their awareness of and participation in national and international affairs. Amid this empowerment of the common people, exchange diplomacy has started gaining traction to ensure sound public support. Exchange diplomacy entails the covert mobilisation of Chinese citizens and pro-Chinese foreigners abroad to carry out influence operations through political parties, education, tourism, and sister-city arrangements. In recent decades, China has aggressively pursued exchange diplomacy to promote ties between its people and foreign populations to shape the global narrative in its favour. These exchange programmes aim to create personal relationships "to build trust and grow a cadre of willing interpreters and receivers that adopt China's norms and values in the political, social, economic, or foreign policy spheres."<sup>7</sup>

Given its surplus capital and substantial spending power, China is now not only projecting its image through outbound movement but also the adoption, co-option, and collaboration of foreigners. With the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has integrated financial prowess with exchange diplomacy. On the one hand, China's financial prowess bolsters its image as an attractive educational and tourist destination. At the same time, the aid provided by China to foreign students and universities dampens criticism of its BRI infrastructure projects.<sup>8</sup>

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c Flexibly entails the capability and capacity to operate incessantly and discreetly engage with an infinitenumber of people simultaneously, at a time and place of one's choosing, from a remote or undisclosed location, without any fear of retaliation.

The Chinese have employed numerous agencies to tap into their influential population/diaspora and foreigners to conduct influence operations. In addition to traditional and renowned intelligence agencies like the Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Public Security, and Intelligence Bureau, China is employing several non-traditional intelligence agencies like the United Front Works Department (UFW), Chinese Student and Scholar Association (CSSA), China Association for International Friendly Contact, and Confucius Institutes/Confucius Classrooms (CIs/CCs) for intelligence collection, interference operations, and to conduct propaganda and perception management campaigns abroad through exchange diplomacy. Research institutions such as the Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and the Chinese Institute for International and Strategic Studies regularly host foreign visitors and send scholar delegations abroad. China's education ministry also keeps tabs on Chinese students and scholars in foreign countries, and helps them through several cultural and friendship associations and overseas academic groups such as the CSSA and CIs/CCs. After the CIs/CCs were said to be involved in curbing academic freedom, censorship, propaganda, and espionage activities, China rebranded these institutions to the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation.<sup>9,10</sup>

China also has many non-traditional participants in influence operations, including politicians, people from various religions, students, businesspersons, researchers/academics, and social media influencers. These individuals carry out many persuasive, dissuasive, and even coercive efforts to ensure that the target population adopts positions that support Chinese-preferred policies within China's territorial boundaries and abroad. Indeed, many overseas Chinese feel that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may be monitoring them, even in countries like the US.<sup>11</sup> The exponential rise in the number of Chinese spy cases identified in the US indicates China's increasing influence operations. Indeed, in 2020, FBI Director Christopher Wray identified China as the US's biggest counterintelligence challenge and said that nearly half of the bureau's active counterintelligence cases related to China.<sup>12</sup>

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China has reportedly established at least 102 ‘overseas police stations’ across 53 countries, including Italy, France, Canada, the UK, and the Netherlands, for global surveillance and control, under the garb of helping the Chinese diaspora and tourists.<sup>13</sup> Between April 2021 and July 2022, Chinese authorities claimed that 230,000 Chinese nationals were successfully “persuaded to return” to China through these police stations to face criminal proceedings for their actions.<sup>14</sup> In addition to their regular activity of assisting the Chinese diaspora, the Overseas Chinese Service Centres are also indulging in espionage activities, curbing dissent, and identifying overseas Chinese who are pro-democracy supporters.<sup>15</sup> As part of its overseas affairs office, China also has an advisory committee comprising prominent people<sup>d</sup> from various countries who indirectly contribute to China’s modernisation through policy recommendations and feedback on its overseas policies.<sup>16</sup>

Many US and European universities enjoy a large influx of Chinese students. If China were to recall its overseas students (22 percent of all foreign students in 2019 with a US\$4 billion spending capacity), it would have a significant impact on the American and European higher education sectors. Notably, China is said to be using these overseas students to encourage a pro-BRI narrative and for citizen diplomacy.<sup>e</sup> Exchange programmes use overseas students for influence operations and to manage the numerous student associations under the UFWD in BRI countries. The UFWD allegedly has 42 local organisations and 220,000 members.<sup>17</sup>

The UFWD coordinated and prioritised the mobilisation of Chinese students overseas, with the education ministry publishing a directive in February 2016 to strengthen patriotic education in line with the CCP’s vision, deploy Chinese students to gather ‘patriotic energy’ overseas and galvanise support for the ‘China Dream’ among foreign nationals. Chinese embassies are directed to support these efforts by facilitating a ‘three-dimensional network’ between Chinese students, their host educational institutions, and the ‘motherland’. China’s efforts to send its students abroad as brand ambassadors have been met with resistance from those who view these approaches as attempts by the CCP to recruit students for espionage and influence operations, bully universities into self-censorship, and influence public discourse on sensitive Chinese issues

<sup>d</sup> Such as political leaders, scientists, and educationists.

<sup>e</sup> Citizen diplomacy involves individuals, rather than government representatives, actively fostering international understanding and collaboration. Through grassroots efforts, cultural exchange, and direct interactions, ordinary citizens as students play a crucial role in building positive relations and promoting peace between nations, contributing to a more connected and harmonious global community.

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(such as the Dalai Lama, Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Uyghur movement, and Falong Gong).<sup>18</sup> Most Chinese students studying abroad practice self-censorship due to the fear of losing a scholarship, being blacklisted, having their visas denied, being tracked on their return to China, or their families being harassed by the authorities. The US's world-class university system has become a soft target in China's global espionage war. US intelligence has already warned of China's usage of student spies to steal secrets.<sup>19</sup> China also provides free teachers at the college and school levels to teach Mandarin worldwide through the erstwhile CI/CC, thereby covertly involving itself in spreading propaganda, interfering with free speech, and carrying out espionage activities.

After the Deng Xiaoping reforms, China's attitude towards its diaspora changed dramatically. Instead of being viewed suspiciously, the diaspora was seen as people who could aid China's development through their skills and capital. The diaspora is considered a critical enabler of BRI projects for national development. In 2016, authorities began to hold an annual 'business conference' for overseas Chinese involved in the initiative<sup>20</sup> to facilitate and smoothen Chinese engagement with the various BRI countries. China has also seen a surge in the number of students returning to the country after concerted efforts to do so. In 2017, of the 608,000 Chinese students who went overseas, 79 percent (480,900) returned to the country, a substantially higher percentage than in 1987 (5 percent) and 2007 (30.6 percent).<sup>21</sup>

China has extensively leveraged tourism as an economic instrument of public diplomacy by encouraging or restricting its citizens from travelling overseas (notably, it restricts people from travelling to countries whose economies are dependent on tourism), or by restricting visas for China visits. In 2018, China emerged as the top source of global travellers due to rising incomes, favourable exchange rates, and relatively easier visa processes.<sup>22</sup> By 2030, China is expected to account for nearly a quarter of global tourism.<sup>23</sup> Chinese tourists have higher spending capacities than tourists from other countries. For instance, in 2018, Chinese visitors spent an average of over US\$11,500 per person in the US, compared to the combined average of just under US\$2,900 per person from all other countries.<sup>24</sup> The China Outbound Tourism Research Institute has predicted that "overseas trips by the country's residents will increase from 145million (2018) to more than 400million by 2030." "That means that out of the 600 million additional trips in international tourism forecasted by UNWTO [United Nations World Tourism Organisation], bringing the total from US\$1.2 billion in 2017 to US\$1.8 billion by 2030, almost half of them will originate in China."<sup>25</sup>

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China has extensively exploited its tourism prowess to control Taiwan. All countries maintaining formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan have been banned from its Approved Destination Status (ADS) agreements. The ADS agreement is an arrangement between the Chinese government and another country that lets Chinese travellers visit a country in a tour group. Between 2016 and 2019, several countries with tourist-dependent economies (such as Panama, the Dominican Republic, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Grenada, and Dominica) cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan. In 2017, China also restricted outbound travellers to South Korea after the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence opposite the North Korean border, with Chinese tourism to South Korea collapsing from a record high of 8.1 million in 2016 to 4.2 million visitors in 2017.<sup>26</sup> In South Asia, China is aggressively establishing a communication network at Mt Everest to have control over the world's highest peak.

Notably, China has integrated religion (Buddhism) with tourism through the BRI. Chinese human intelligence agencies have infiltrated the Buddhist community through the Buddhist tourist circuit in South Asia to counter the influence of the Dalai Lama in the region.<sup>27</sup>

In the Chinese model, intelligence collection is conducted by diverse traditional and non-traditional agencies. The non-traditional agencies include state-owned enterprises, private companies, individuals, and select universities. Elements of China's military, state, business, and academia have also been interwoven over decades and organised around one goal—stealing secrets from the West. This regime of theft functions with impunity, powering China's economy and high-tech military while robbing the US alone of trillions in value each year. Although there is no country-specific data on trade secret theft, China is the world's principal intellectual property (IP) infringer across all types of IP theft, according to the IP Commission, which estimates the US economy loses about US\$600 billion annually due to these actions.<sup>28</sup> Notably, the FBI has about 1,000 probes involving attempted thefts of US-based technology by China across industries and sectors.<sup>29</sup>

The CCP has sent around 2,500 military scientists from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to different countries to strengthen the PLA's technological capabilities by taking advantage of the knowledge available in foreign and civilian sectors. These military scientists are reportedly working on talent hunt programmes, academic collaborations, and joint research initiatives in various



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countries to rope in talent, particularly for dual use (military and civil use), for the benefit of China, besides carrying out a wide array of espionage activities. This initiative was launched under the aegis of the State Administration of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense and led by the PLA's National University of Defense Technology, with affiliations to at least 61 civilian universities, but these universities have been exposed for indulging in espionage activities for China.<sup>30</sup>

“China’s efforts to send its students abroad as brand ambassadors have met with resistance from those who view this as an attempt by the CCP to recruit students for espionage and influence operations, bully universities into self-censorship, and influence public discourse on sensitive Chinese issues.”

# Chinese Inbound Influence Operations

China has good quality educational institutions and is using these to attract students, public opinion-makers, and future leaders to the country. China has witnessed a substantial jump in the number of international students—from 85,000 in 2002 to 442,000 in 2016 (approximately 420 percent rise).<sup>31</sup> In 2016, 40 percent of all new international students received sponsorships from the Chinese government.<sup>32</sup> The exposure to Chinese cultural values, norms, and policy positions has arguably turned them into advocates for Chinese policies on their return to their native countries, while also helping improve general attitudes and perceptions of foreigners towards China. China has also used the garb of education to cultivate several students for influence operations. In 2018, over 492,000 students worldwide from 196 nations came to China to tour 1,004 universities and colleges, scientific research institutes, and other educational corporations.<sup>33</sup> China has distributed substantial aid to attract foreign students, especially from BRI partners countries—in 2016, two-thirds of international students studying in China hailing from BRI countries, 61 percent of government scholarships in 2016 were awarded to students from BRI countries, and eight of the 10 countries with the most Chinese government scholarship recipients were BRI partners.<sup>34</sup> In May 2018, China opened the first Silk Road School under the BRI, affiliated with the prestigious Renmin University of China at Suzhou City in east China’s Jiangsu Province, to deepen the friendship and connection with BRI countries through students. In terms of inbound South Asian students, China is steadily overtaking India by offering attractive scholarships. In 2016-17, India hosted 24,000 Asian students in tertiary education institutions, whereas China hosted 2,25,000.<sup>35</sup> China has also surpassed India as a higher-education destination among South Asian students.<sup>36</sup> China is also trying to increase awareness, interest, and opportunity among educationists by organising free trips to the country.<sup>37</sup>

In 2008, China launched the Thousand Talents Plan (TTP) to recruit Chinese-origin scientists and talent from foreign countries to reverse the perceived brain drain and build an innovation-led economy. The US National Intelligence Council, which assesses mid- to long-term strategic threats and trends, describes the TTP as a means of facilitating the legal and illicit transfer of US technology, intellectual property, and know-how to China.<sup>38</sup> Between 2008 and 2018, China attracted about 7,000 Chinese scientists, academics, and entrepreneurs living abroad who returned to the country through the TTP.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, China’s ‘roots-seeking’ programme for overseas youth promotes the Chinese language and culture abroad and has ensured the return of the highly skilled Chinese

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diaspora through a variety of employment and scholarship programmes.<sup>40</sup> As such, China has not only succeeded in reversing the brain drain but has also attracted several Chinese citizens and foreigners to facilitate the illegal transfer of technologies.<sup>41</sup> China has also recruited several former British military pilots to teach the Chinese armed forces how to defeat Western warplanes and helicopters in a “threat to UK interests.”<sup>42</sup>

In 2018, China ranked second in the world for the contribution of travel and tourism to its GDP (US\$1.5 trillion) and first in the world for the sector’s contribution to employment (79.9 million jobs). That same year, China invested US\$155 billion into its tourism infrastructure, a figure second to that of the US (US\$176.3 billion). Overall, travel and tourism accounted for 11 percent of China’s total GDP in 2018. By 2028, China’s economy is expected to benefit from travel and tourism more than any other country, with a US\$2.7 trillion contribution to the country’s GDP. As the number of foreign visitors to the country continues to increase, China’s investment in domestic tourism is likely to expand. By 2028, China is expected to invest nearly US\$310 billion in travel and tourism, more than doubling what it spent in 2017 and surpassing the projected US spending of US\$303 billion. Additionally, the share of inbound travel and tourism in China’s GDP is expected to increase by 6.5 percent annually Between 2018 and 2028.<sup>43</sup> The CCP is also using foreigners’ fascination with China for visa control as a carrot-and-stick tactic to encourage or restrict foreigners’ movement.

China has also pioneered the concept of ‘sister cities’ (or city diplomacy) to promote and strengthen people-to-people contact between cities in China and other countries. Since the BRI’s launch in 2013, there has been a substantial rise in the number of sister-city agreements in the participating countries, with over 700 of the approximately 2,600 sister cities from the BRI countries.<sup>44</sup> As part of this agreement, commercial, cultural, and social ties are strengthened at the municipal and business leaders’ levels. But under the garb of obligations at the grassroots level, China appears to want to reshape global governance and control international discourse on the country and the channels through which individuals, governments, and businesses can engage with it. Smart cities embody these strategies, allowing the CCP to blur the line between cooperative and coercive forms of control.<sup>45</sup> Sister-city arrangements are often brokered by third-party organisations, such as the China International Friendship Cities Association, which helps pair Chinese cities or provinces with cities and provinces abroad. Globally, many countries now seem aware that, for China, such ‘town

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twinning’ appears as a success story of its efforts to increase its footprint in the region. Notably, in 2020, three Swedish cities ended cooperation with Chinese cities.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, China is also sending medical teams to foreign countries to train and interact with experts. As part of the ‘buddy system’, China’s medical team from certain provinces are sent to the ‘buddy’ African countries. Although China’s federal government provides support, the projects are carried out at the local level in African countries. China appears to be using the ‘province to country’ model to provide aid to one or more sister African countries.<sup>47</sup>

Since Xi Jinping’s ascension as president, China has passed several laws and regulations to build a comprehensive national security system to defend the country from perceived threats and to strengthen the legal basis for its security activities. These include the laws on counter-espionage (2014), national security (2015), counter-terrorism (2015), cybersecurity (2016), and foreign NGO management (2016), as well as the Ninth Amendment to the Criminal Law (2015), the management methods for lawyers and law firms (both 2016), and the draft encryption and standardisation laws.<sup>48</sup> Although these laws and regulations are not directly applicable to foreign countries, they apply to foreign multinationals operating in China or foreigners visiting China for work, education, or even tourism.

“China is leveraging its education and tourism sectors to attract students, opinion-makers, and tourists to the country. It is also using the sister-city arrangement to promote people-to-people ties.”

# Conclusion

**A**mid its exponential economic growth and with the increased exposure of its citizens, China has appeared to realise that future relations between countries cannot be sustained without sound public support. Consequently, from the beginning of the twenty-first century, Beijing has employed various tools of exchange diplomacy to promote ties at the grassroots level between the Chinese and foreign populations to favourably shape the global narrative on China. These include the use of its diaspora, educational and talent programmes, and tourism, and the synchronisation with other instruments of public diplomacy. China has also taken comprehensive steps to entice foreigners through scholarship initiatives to shape public opinion about the country. China's influence operations through exchange diplomacy will likely enable it to shape the global narrative in the future. At the same time, the discernible rise in China's global influence has prompted responses from the US, Western Europe, and other robust democracies to counter China's seemingly benevolent expansionism. Factors such as the COVID-19-related backlash and concerns over debt-trap policies associated with the BRI have, in recent years, had a significant impact on China's public diplomacy efforts. This trend will likely continue in the future, but whether China responds by revamping its exchange diplomacy and influence operations remains to be seen. 

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