

# China's Shaping of Global Information Environment and Winning Without Fighting

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## Abstract

*With the revolution in the field of communication technologies, the relevance of public diplomacy has exponentially increased due to the introduction of infinite, invisible, and empowered stakeholders willing to operate from a place and time of their choosing. The growing relevance of public opinion has resulted in the prominence of soft power over hard power. The availability of surplus capital and the largest human resources (citizens and influential diasporas) coupled with capacity and capability development by China to meet the global demand for cheap surveillance applications and communication gadgets has considerably facilitated China innocuously establishing its footprints through information diplomacy. With phenomenal investment in the establishment of its footprints at critical chokepoints of the world, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative and technology theft from developed countries, China has not only emerged as a leader in future technology in a short timeframe, but has also placed itself in an unassailable position to monitor, scan, control, investigate, and govern global trade, traffic and communication without drawing global attention. The Chinese dominance in the information domain has considerably augmented its potential to reshape the global information environment for promoting its propaganda, disinformation, and censorship and win future wars without even fighting.*

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## Introduction

The evolution in information technologies has reshaped the landscape of future battlefields, emphasising the prominence of soft power over hard power. John Arquilla, while explaining the growing relevance of soft power said “In today’s global information age, victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins”. With the introduction of infinite invisible, empowered and participative stakeholders in today’s networked world, public opinion has emerged as a prominent consideration for all future conflicts. Consequently, shaping of information domain to influence public opinion has emerged as a paramount aspect in the strategy for future conflicts.

To overcome its loss of *mianzi* (face) from a ‘Century of Humiliation’ and restore its lost stature amongst the global community, the Chinese despite possessing the largest conventional armed forces have strictly adhered to Sun Tzu’s aphorism, “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting”. With the availability of deep pockets and surplus capital, the Chinese have subtly integrated emerging technologies with its largest human resources, both within the country and abroad to favourably shape its global image. Beijing has evolved to become the world’s first ‘Digital Authoritarian State’. Its 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 challenge the world’s rules-based international order.<sup>1</sup> With the fast changing face of the fourth estate due to the introduction of new stakeholders, the Chinese have inextricably infiltrated the global economy, infrastructure, health care, communication, and technological value chain to reshape the global information environment for promoting its propaganda, disinformation, and censorship. The success of the Chinese information warfare can be measured from the private saying of the Asian Foreign Minister that “The US has been fighting but not winning in the Middle East for 20 years, while China has been winning but not fighting for 20 years”.<sup>2</sup>

China, even with the availability of the largest human assets, population and influential diaspora, has generally been reticent towards information diplomacy till the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The

experience of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations (1989), and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (2003), played a crucial role in the transformation of the Chinese approach from inward to outward. With the realisation of information domain relevance, the Chinese from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century extensively started using it, particularly after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games for their image management.

### **Chinese Informational Diplomacy**

China's informational diplomacy is a broad-based communication activity to increase awareness and sympathy for China's policies, priorities, and values among the global population. After the ascension of Xi Jinping, as President in 2013, Beijing's expenditure on information diplomacy increased exponentially to tell their version of the story to the world and even erased the anti-China script for reshaping an existing international narrative that views China's emergence as hostile. China's informational diplomacy aims to solicit support for its policy positions on Tibet, Uyghurs, Taiwan, Dalai Lama, Hong Kong, Macao, Falun Gong, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and minimise the negative reporting on allegations of human rights, corruption, opacity, and debt-trap diplomacy. Chinese tactics include expansion of state-owned media, direct purchase of foreign media outlets, publication of Chinese-made content in foreign media, enhancing Chinese elites/diplomatic media interactions, media partnership network, sponsorship of online influencers, and misrepresenting official commentary.<sup>3</sup> The People's Republic of China's (PRC) approach features: leveraging propaganda, misinformation and censorship, promoting digital authoritarianism, exploiting international organisations and bilateral partnerships, pairing co-optation and pressure, and exercising control of Chinese-language media. Together, these mutually reinforcing elements enable Beijing to exert control over the narratives in the global information space by advancing false or biased pro-PRC content and suppressing critical voices.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, China directed its effort to subtly magnetise foreign audiences and the Chinese diaspora towards their values, beliefs, and positions and thereafter focused towards ensuring adoption, co-option, and even collaborations at multi-dimensional levels to influence and control their perceptions, preferences, and actions. Besides attraction and persuasion, China has even resorted to

manipulative, deceptive, dissuasive, compulsive and coercive tools of information diplomacy to compel global audiences to follow their preferred narrative in letter and spirit. The PRC commands a massive state media ecosystem which includes official messaging, diplomatic communications, messaging guidance to state-owned enterprises, and less overt proxies such as new media 'Influencers'. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and United Front Work Department (UFW) oversee much of this messaging under the guidance of leading small groups. UFW is responsible for propaganda, targeting Chinese diaspora communities, and coordinating and overseeing strategic acquisition and investment in overseas media. The China Media Group, which consists of PRC state media enterprises China Central Television, China National Radio, China Radio International, and China Global Television Network, is under the supervision of the CPD.<sup>5</sup> State Council Information Office is the 'Nerve Centre' of China's information diplomacy apparatus and plays a watchdog role in overseeing and monitoring media in China and abroad including internet censorship.

### **Chinese Informational Diplomacy and BRI**

The BRI, announced in 2013, by President Xi Jinping, has emerged as a spinal cord for Chinese information diplomacy particularly against underdeveloped and developing countries. The integration of the Digital Silk Route (DSR) and the Space Information Corridor (SIC) with BRI has placed China in an unassailable position to scan, monitor, govern, investigate, and even disrupt/manipulate communication globally in general and the BRI countries in particular. Nadege Rolland said, "It is important to pay attention to the intangible components of the DSR, such as Beijing promoting its version of internet governance norms. The cyber espionage of China has phenomenally increased particularly in countries that are linked to BRI. Chinese cyber espionage linked to the BRI is increasing and Beijing is using the huge infrastructure project to spy on companies and countries as well as to damp down dissent. China is alleged to have targeted Belarus, Maldives, Cambodia, European foreign ministries, and non-governmental organisations".<sup>6</sup>

The availability and global demand for cheap surveillance apps and communication gadgets have further facilitated China in attaining an enviable position to manipulate global information

space and enforce digital authoritarianism. The promotion of the latest cheap domestic surveillance technology and censorship has also ensured the voluntary acceptance of these technologies as a new normal amongst the global community. As of 2019, PRC information controls had diffused to 102 countries, helping legitimise the PRC's domestic governance practices and lock in the CCP's control over information.<sup>7</sup> Beijing's initiatives in cyberspace governance largely focus on influencing standard-setting bodies to ensure international technical norms are favourable to Beijing's preferences. PRC messaging uses the term 'Community of common destiny in cyberspace', which is intended to elevate Beijing's desired policies in the development of future international cyber norms to legitimise repressive practices.<sup>8</sup> The use of Chinese BeiDou (Navigation Satellite System) for military and civil purposes by Pakistan (2020) and, the installation of the world's highest terrestrial 5G base station on Mt Everest by Huawei to allow internet access to mountaineers and researchers are some of the innocuous Chinese informational activities in the South Asian region which has phenomenally leveraged its capability to snoop in the region including India.

### **Platforms for Propagating Chinese Informational Diplomacy**

China has extensively leveraged international organisations for information diplomacy either by placing its citizens or its proxies in the top post for achieving its 'Middle Kingdom Dream'. Beijing's efforts to use the information space in multilateral organisations in support of its policy objectives include retroactively altering the historical documents of international organisations and a failed attempt to rewrite data entry procedures for global logistics. Working through multilateral organisations, the PRC seeks to restructure digital governance in ways conducive to censorship and surveillance. Simultaneously, Beijing promotes norms in United Nations (UN) governing documents that reinforce its signature foreign policy initiatives, domestic practices, and CCP ideology. Beijing pushes back in multilateral fora against narratives that run counter to its foreign policy objectives. PRC's efforts to limit Taiwan's role in international organisations are a prime example. The PRC sought to prohibit the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from releasing a report in Aug 2022, documenting its abuses in Xinjiang. The PRC nationals at the UN have sought to conflate the BRI and the Global Development Initiative with larger

multilateral objectives such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>9</sup>

China has extensively utilised ubiquitous social media platforms for global dissemination. Beijing uses manipulative social media tactics such as bots and trolls to increase pro-PRC content and muzzle anti-Chinese voices. It also technically increases the degree of difficulty for online users by manipulating search engine results and hashtag searches through flooding.

China through its embassies employs a carrot-and-stick policy to pressure foreign media, eminent contributors and academic institutions to follow its preferred narratives and refrain from providing platforms to anti-Chinese voices. In democratic countries, Chinese individuals and organisations have filed defamation suits or taken legal action against academics and journalists, or threatened to, in Canada, Australia, Czechia, and Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> China has also been engaging prominent personalities of the information domain for global dissemination through financial favours, granting recognition/important appointments and qualifications from recognised Chinese universities. The prominent personalities of the information domain include elites of political parties, mass leaders, businessmen, academicians and famous media personalities. China also engages foreigners through exchange programmes of political parties, academicians and sister city arrangements.

A special focus of CCP is directed towards cultivating a global media community, to shape the international environment favourably. To dissuade the media community from adverse reporting, China undertakes numerous measures ranging from warnings, legal threats, denial of visas, refusal to renew visas, deportation, arrest and transnational repression. According to a survey published in 2019, Over the previous decade, 9 per cent reported having been warned or interviewed by PRC authorities about their research, 26 per cent reported being denied access to archival research, and 5 per cent reported problems obtaining visas. The PRC has intimidated and expelled international reporters to target specific outlets and even arrested foreign journalists working for PRC media. For those journalists still able to access the PRC, Beijing may grant them shortened residence permits and refuse to renew their press cards, giving them only provisional reporting rights.<sup>11</sup>

Within China, reporters who supply unfavourable content to foreign media sources also face harassment, detention, or even imprisonment. Since 2016, the Chinese foreign ministry has hosted several journalists from leading news networks including The Indian Express, Jansatta, and the Indo-Asian News Service of India.<sup>12</sup> Under the garb of legitimate journalism activities Chinese are using journalists for intelligence-gathering purposes abroad. On 19 Sep 2020, Delhi Police arrested a veteran freelance Indian journalist Rajeev Sharma, for passing sensitive information about India's border strategy to China. In 2020, two episodes, in New Delhi and Brussels, highlight, how Chinese intelligence services are increasingly using the country's state-controlled media and personnel for espionage and influence operations.<sup>13</sup>

China has purchased or acquired stakes or secured content-sharing agreements with reputed international newspapers for global dissemination of its preferred narrative and to suppress anti-Chinese content. Beijing has purchased the top newspaper which also includes Alibaba buying South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's top English language newspaper in 2015. China also gives heavy payments to the top newspapers of the world. CCP-controlled 'China Daily' has paid more than USD 4.6 mn to 'The Washington Post' and nearly USD 6 mn to 'The Wall Street Journal' since Nov 2016. China has also paid USD 240,000 to Foreign Policy, USD 50,000 to the 'New York Times', USD 34,600 to 'The Des Moines Register' and USD 76,000 to 'CQ-Roll Call' in the past four years.<sup>14</sup> It has also made huge investments in the top three news aggregators/applications in India, which include ByteDance, Dailyhunt, and NewsDog.<sup>15</sup> China produces linguistic articles in local media attributed to authors not related to the CCP under false names to hide its role, falsely represent the actual sentiments of locals and promote pro-China narratives.

The PRC controls the information consumed by global Chinese readers. Beijing shapes overseas Chinese-language content to amplify its preferred narratives while limiting the reach of critical voices. Beijing furnishes low-cost or free content, leverages international fora, and exploits WeChat, an application used by many Chinese-speaking communities outside the PRC. Collectively, these mechanisms create a global Chinese-language ecosystem in which Beijing's messaging resonates and disinformation gains traction.<sup>16</sup>

China has used aggressive measures abroad to tighten its control over its diasporas. It undertakes transnational repression through Operation Fox Hunt or by using international organisations like Interpol or through Chinese overseas organisations like Overseas Police Station and Overseas Chinese Assistance Centres, to intimidate or ensure repatriation of dissidents by accusing targeted individuals as economic fugitives requiring repatriation to face charges of corruption.

The latest development in the field of Big Data and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has further enabled China to exploit the information domain. China is collecting colossal data through a surveillance blanket spread under the garb of BRI. China is extensively using its tech giants like Huawei, Zhong Xing Telecommunication Equipment Company Limited, Alibaba and Tencent for intelligence collection, interference, and influence operations through the digital domain to control debate, ideas and clamp down on dissent. A Shenzhen-based technology company with links to the CCP is reportedly monitoring over 10,000 Indian individuals and organisations in its global database of 'Foreign Targets'. The Indian Express, using big-data tools, investigated the metadata from Zhenhua's operations to extract Indian entities from the massive dump of log files that constituted what the company called the Overseas Key Information Database.<sup>17</sup> In Apr 2021, the US blacklisted seven Chinese supercomputing entities citing national security concerns.

The Chinese *qingbao* (information) approach of intelligence collection from the open domain using sophisticated techniques of library science has considerably augmented Chinese influence operations. Christopher Krebs while describing Chinese informational diplomacy said, "When we think about Russia, they are trying to disrupt the system, and China is trying to manipulate the system, so that requires us to take different approaches". With a colossal attractive database and new digitalisation technologies, China is not only manipulating the database by rewriting history but also directing the global audience towards its edited data. Research establishes that leading academic journal databases in China are practising deliberate censorship aimed at rewriting history to suit the current party line. In the past, censors altered history by striking offensive passages, tearing out pages, and seizing or destroying entire texts, all crude methods by today's standards.



Now, they can tinker endlessly with the digital record to achieve their goals without ever leaving their desks, making one non-destructive edit after another, each propagating nearly instantaneously around the globe, leaving behind no discernible trace or loose ends. The same technologies that filter our newsfeeds can be used to tamper with scholarship and memory. In short, Chinese censors are capitalising on the conversion of our libraries from redundant, fault-tolerant repositories of tangible objects into passive links in a centralised distribution chain dominated by a small number of online providers.<sup>18</sup> In 2017, Cambridge University Press and Springer Nature admitted to withholding content at the request of Chinese censors from subscribers visiting their online sites from China. As per the Twitter report of Jun 13, 2020, China was using 1,70,000 accounts for manipulative activities and on CCP's request Apple was accused of censoring the Quran app in Oct 2021. During the Doklam stand-off, the Chinese-owned Universal Control Browser was found filtering certain news on Android handsets in India to shape perceptions and outcomes. YouTube was also automatically deleting comments containing certain Chinese-language phrases related to criticism of the CCP during the Doklam stand-off.

Several Chinese citizens are involved in stealing data and cyber fraud through cheap and popular applications. A major concern amongst security agencies is that the critical personal data stored in Chinese servers is not retrievable. Enforcement Directorate filing a complaint in Hyderabad (Dec 2021), Bureau of Immigration issuing a lookout circular against three Chinese nationals for defrauding (Jul 2022), arrest of Junwei Han from West Bengal (May 2022) for taking 1300 Indian SIM Cards, arrest of Wan Chenghua (Sep 2022) from Chandigarh are some of the reported incidents where Chinese nationals were found directly involved in cyber fraud or intelligence collection in India.

China is undertaking extensive investment in global satellite networks for controlling global information dissemination. The integration of BRI with DSR and the SIC will considerably facilitate China in tapping the mammoth streams of big data, which can directly support the next-generation AI technologies. The ready availability of Big Data and the capability to process the collected data will provide China with a clear military and intelligence edge

over its competitors. Extensive use of the BeiDou by China and other BRI countries will remove the PLA's vulnerability to the US-controlled Global Positioning System and further expand Chinese influence, commercial interests, and standards.

China is extensively using its economic might to gain the support of foreign audiences through Multi-National Corporations (MNC). To align with their geopolitical aim and adopt desired behaviour, China exerts pressure on international companies through public attacks via social media. Considerable pressure on international companies has been witnessed to represent Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Macao as part of China on maps, company websites, etc. Beijing is making specimens of companies not aligning with their preferred narratives and even pressing for public apologies, which can be heard globally.<sup>19</sup> In 2018, the PRC Civil Aviation Administration sent letters to major airlines ordering them to remove from their websites, references to Taiwan, Macau, and Hong Kong as separate countries from the PRC, under penalty of referral to PRC cyberspace authorities. 18 of 44 airlines complied and changed their descriptions of Taiwan within the 30-day time limit. MNCs are even coerced to join Chinese initiatives and activities such as the BRI or the China International Import Exhibition. The footprints of Chinese information activities were witnessed even in the domain of sports. A single tweet by Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey in support of pro-democracy Hong Kong protesters witnessed massive Chinese retaliation and had put the team and the National Basketball Association on notice. Even companies operating beyond China's territorial boundary are not spared. The South Korean supermarket chain Lotte was sanctioned in 2020 after Seoul installed US anti-missile systems on company property.

Another unchecked area of the growing Chinese information activities is the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. The ambiguities in the use of CSR funds by Chinese companies have led to deep concerns in the Indian civil society and strategic communities. It is believed that Xiaomi spends its CSR funds on creating a pro-Chinese atmosphere in India, especially in tech cities.<sup>20</sup>

As part of the cartographic war in the information domain, China is renaming disputed locations in Asia to bolster its territorial claims and build evidence to support those claims in case of any sovereignty disagreements in the International Court. Beijing has used new names and other map coding to back its claims in the South and East China Sea, and the area along the Indo-China border, including the world's highest peak, Mt Everest.

The activities of the Chinese information domain also entail creating volatile situations abroad to discourage companies from shifting their base away from China. Apple wanted to establish iPhone manufacturing in Kolar, Karnataka. A huge labour protest over a trivial issue of idly was created by bribing local goons to discourage Apple and other MNCs from shifting their bases from China. Similarly, India's biggest copper manufacturing factory, Sterlite Copper, was stopped and benefitted China. All these activities are carried out by China through money laundering. China is the world's biggest money laundering nation. As per conservative estimates, in the last 10 years (2010-2020) USD 1.0 tn has been laundered from China to various countries.<sup>21</sup>

In China, the regulation of films and media was handed over to the Propaganda Department of the CCP in 2018. The US films have made over USD 2.6 bn in China in 2019. With the largest market, China has been successful in ensuring its dictate in Hollywood. To earn maximum profit, through the lucrative Chinese market, Hollywood is consistently following the unwritten dictate and refraining from antagonising the Chinese. Hollywood's access to the Chinese market comes with conditions and stipulations from the long arm of Chinese censorship wherein studios and filmmakers continue to change 'Cast, plot, dialogue and settings' in an 'Effort to avoid antagonising Chinese officials in films'.<sup>22</sup> As per a report published on 20 Aug 2019, "The nine films that show how China influences Hollywood are Top Gun: Maverick (2020), Dr Strange (2016), Captain America: Civil War (2016), (2013), Pixels (2015), World War Z (2013), Skyfall (2012), Looper (2012), Iron Man 3, and Red Dawn (2012).<sup>23</sup> In India, some of the incidents, wherein Chinese involvement in Bollywood was observed are the blurring of the 'Free Tibet' flag in the movie Rockstar and the surprising success of unheard films like 'Secret Superstar' in China. With the stupendous Bollywood success in China, any overdependence on the Chinese market may invite conditions and stipulations from the CCP.

## **Legal Cover to Chinese Informational Diplomacy**

Post ascension of Xi Jinping as President, China has passed several laws and regulations to build a comprehensive national security system, as outlined in 2014, to defend China from perceived threats and strengthen the legal basis for China's security activities. These laws and regulations are aimed at ensuring the cooperation of Chinese citizens, diasporas, foreign citizens, enterprises, and organisations. The extra-territorial application of new Chinese domestic laws has significantly expanded the range and scope of Chinese intelligence agencies. With global access to government-supported companies like Huawei, Xiaomi, etc, the human and technical reach of Chinese companies now gives the intelligence services opportunities to gain direct access to many governments and societies of the world.

## **Conclusion**

With deep pockets for exploiting emerging technologies and the largest available human resources within the country and abroad, China appears to have achieved proficiency in integrating technology with public opinion to exploit the informational domain. The platform provided by BRI for the expansion of Chinese informational capabilities and capacities coupled with the extension of Chinese law beyond its territorial boundaries has further strengthened Chinese footprints globally to propagate its preferred narrative and suppress anti-Chinese activities.

## **Endnotes**

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