

Chinese Global Human Intelligence Operations through Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

Intelligence acquisition has played a decisive role in the emergence of China as the second most powerful nation in the world after the United States. The rich cultural heritage coupled with the largest population and influential diasporas has phenomenally contributed towards providing launchpads for Chinese innocuous human intelligence operations through their unique 'policy of thousand grains of sand or mosaic approach or human wave or citizen spying'. A phenomenal expansion in terms of overseas centres/offices was observed for uniting Chinese diasporas and citizens/students studying abroad. Several cultural institutes were also closed in advanced countries due to their involvement in spreading propaganda, limiting academic freedom and stealing vital academic research. Like China, India too has equivalent cultural diplomacy resources in terms of cultural heritage and human resources, both within the country and abroad which can be tapped for augmenting its intelligence capabilities.

Introduction

Human Intelligence (HUMINT) is a process of gathering intelligence by specially trained personnel through interpersonal contact and engagement. Public diplomacy or people's diplomacy, in its new avatar, has incredibly augmented the number of

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stakeholders from a few government officials to individuals/groups ranging from civil society, pressure groups, political parties, media, academics, diasporas, policymaking elites, think tanks, etc. Cultural diplomacy is a type of public diplomacy that entails the 'exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding'.¹

Former Chinese President Hu Jintao, while emphasising the relevance of Chinese culture said that "Cultural dominance was critical not only to maintain strong domestic cohesion but also to expand China's soft power influence abroad and win against the competition".² China has tried to project its image globally by increasing its visibility and familiarity through cultural diplomacy. Initially, these activities were directed towards its largest and most influential 60 mn global diasporas (2014 estimates) settled in more than 150 countries. Subsequently, it was expanded to include a foreign audience. Post Deng Xiaoping reforms; a paradigm shift in China's attitude towards overseas Chinese was observed wherein the prism of suspicion was replaced by the contributor of China's growth/development. The tech revolution coupled with the free global movement of people for study, research, business, and tourism has further facilitated China in establishing communication with diasporas and increasing their global human footprints.

While relating the mind-set of Indian and Chinese leaders with respective strategy games i.e., Chess and Go, Raghu Raman (founder of National Intelligence Grid) said "Strategists learn about adversaries by observing their actions and statements, interpreting their behaviour, and studying their leaders. But the more astute understand the enemy's mindset by studying their culture. Leaders and tactics may change, but strategies and doctrines are embedded in the culture and mindset of a nation and are, therefore, far better predictors of their actions".³

Chinese Global HUMINT Operations through Cultural Diplomacy

Post-1979, the Chinese intelligence focus shifted from inward to outward. Despite accessibility to economical and less risky means of technological intelligence, China has subtly achieved phenomenal success in HUMINT collection through cultural diplomacy.

Contrary to traditional HUMINT collection by a few specialised agents, the Chinese intelligence agencies use a policy of thousand grains of sand or mosaic approach or human wave or citizen spying⁴, wherein they employ several amateur ethnic Han people/diasporas settled abroad. Chinese HUMINT operations are the first in modern times to use the whole of society as a foundation. The Chinese approach does not require a bad person with negative vulnerabilities for espionage but requires a good person or an immature intelligencer, and subject experts. This unique Chinese method has also been able to convince the world regarding the non-involvement of the state. Paul Moore, while explaining the difference said that if a beach were a target, the Russians would discreetly send in a submarine and frogmen to collect several buckets of sand during the night. The United States (US) would use satellites to produce reams of data. The Chinese would send in a thousand tourists to the beach on holiday and in return they would be asked to shake out their towels.⁵

The Chinese intelligence operations prefer ethnic Chinese over others wherein a nationalistic/personal sentiment of helping China become the country they would want to be is leveraged to cultivate potential agents. The Chinese HUMINT operations are relationship-centric, wherein obligations, roles, and relationships are central issues used by Chinese intelligence agencies. While interacting with the Han people three important concepts are observable in essentially every Chinese human collection operation targeting Han. They are *guanxi* (social network), face, and shame.⁶ The Chinese spying and attempts to steal American technology are growing so fast that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is opening a new China-related counterintelligence case roughly every 10 hours.⁷ The Chinese are also using overseas students in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for spying purposes through student associations. The association allegedly has 42 local organisations and 2,20,000 members.⁸

Chinese HUMINT Operations and Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy has facilitated China in the settlement of sizable Chinese citizens abroad and re-establishing connections with its diaspora. The Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Public Security, and the Intelligence Bureau are primarily responsible for Chinese HUMINT operations. However, the HUMINT operations through

cultural diplomacy are carried out under the cloak of Chinese cultural organisations.

The United Front Works Department (UFWD) acts as the nerve centre for contacting its citizens/diasporas abroad. After Xi's ascension, the role of UFWD was expanded to strengthen his leadership, spread ideology, and ensure China's national rejuvenation.⁹ UFWD regarded its overseas population as a fertile ground for its operations. Xi referred to "UFWD as an important magic weapon for the party's victory, to co-opt Chinese diaspora communities, build relationships with Western enablers, and make the foreign serve the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its goals".¹⁰ China has also established an Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, which is an Overseas Expert Advisory Committee and contributes to China's modernisation by giving policy recommendations/feedback on its policies towards overseas Chinese.

Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) under UFWD is the largest official organisation for overseas Chinese students/scholars. CSSA is primarily responsible for helping students/scholars abroad and bringing them together. CSSA under the cloak of spreading Chinese culture plays a crucial role in monitoring the thoughts and behaviours of Chinese students in foreign universities, limiting academic freedom, prescribing correct speech and harassing anti-Chinese speakers. CSSA's task also entails ensuring Chinese students remain patriotic and supportive of CCP rule. A demonstration welcoming Chinese PM Li Keqiang in Australia (Apr 2017), protests against a Dalai Lama speech at California University (Jun 2017), and denouncing Chinese student speech at Maryland University (May 2017), are some examples of aggressive CSSA activities.

Confucius Institutes (CIs)/Confucius Classrooms (CCs), opened in 2004 are flagship non-profit global educational programs to teach Chinese language, culture, and history in partnership with a foreign university for the projection of soft power. The CIs/CCs were set up as partner organisations in foreign universities/schools abroad, but the Chinese government retains complete control over them.¹¹ The CI are the velvet glove around the iron fist of their campaigns on their campuses responsible for spreading China's political agenda, suppressing academic debate and stealing vital academic research.¹² Michel-Juneau Katsuya (retired senior

Canadian intelligence officer) has gone to the extent of describing the CI as a Trojan horse, operating as a satellite spy offices in Canada.¹³ Within 15 years (2004 to 2018), their global footprint has exponentially expanded to approximately 540 CI and approximately 1200 CC. Several CIs/CCs were closed in the recent past due to a lack of transparency and disregard for key tenets of academic freedom, censorship, propaganda, and espionage activities.

To regain control of the narrative, the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced two developments in Jun 2020:

- It shifted oversight for the global network of Confucius centres to a new non-governmental organisation (Chinese International Education Foundation); and
- It renamed the former Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban) to the Centre for Education and Cooperation, ending its involvement in Confucius Institute funding.¹⁴

China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC), established in 1984, is a national social organisation devoted to fostering international and regional people-to-people friendly exchanges and enhancing world peace and development. It is administered by both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Civil Affairs to respond to the requirements of reform and opening up of the economy. CAIFC performs the dual roles of intelligence collection and conducting propaganda and perception management campaigns.¹⁵ CAIFC with tentacles in more than 70 countries has established extensive ties with foreign organisations and individuals related to culture, education, think tanks, media, arts, and religion. It has also sponsored a wide variety of cultural centres abroad to establish the image of China as a friendly country, tell stories about China, make Chinese voices heard, bring traditional Chinese culture and contemporary values to the world, and build a bridge for mutual learning between world civilisations.

Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and the Chinese Institute for International and Strategic Studies are some of the Chinese intelligence think tanks which host foreign visitors, regularly send scholars delegations abroad and even post their analysts abroad on visiting fellowships. Such interaction facilitates direct person-to-person interactions and offers another avenue for open-source collection.

Fox Hunt is a covert operation started by President Xi in 2014. The FBI Director said “China describes Fox Hunt as some kind of international anti-corruption campaign. It is not. Instead, Fox Hunt is a sweeping bid by Xi to target Chinese nationals who he sees as threats and who live outside of China, across the world”.¹⁶ China has forced several thousand people back to China and even in the countries like the US, the dissident Chinese are being hunted down by Chinese agents. China has reportedly established 54 overseas police stations on five continents to track and harass dissidents. Between Apr 2021 to Jul 2022, Chinese authorities claimed that 2,30,000 Chinese nationals had been successfully persuaded to return to China to face criminal proceedings for their actions.¹⁷ Bangladesh is the only South Asian nation to have hosted overseas Chinese police stations. China has reportedly closed its overseas police stations in the Netherlands and Czechoslovakia in 2022. The Overseas Chinese Assistance Centres established to assist the Chinese diaspora globally are also indulging in activities of espionage, curbing dissent, and identifying overseas pro-democracy Chinese supporters. Out of 14 Overseas Chinese Assistance Centres in Asia, one is in Sri Lanka. China is also operating a so-called black site or detention jail for dissidents, corruption suspects, or ethnic minorities like the Tibetans or Uyghurs in Dubai. BBC’s Newsnight has also identified multiple cases of targeting exiled Uyghurs by authorities in Muslim-majority countries i.e., Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt, in collaboration with Beijing. The Uyghur Human Rights Project has counted 395 cases of Uyghurs sent to China since 1997. The Vatican is also reportedly receiving USD 2 bn from China for maintaining its silence on the Chinese repression of religious freedom.¹⁸

Consequent to the intensive drive to attract its students back, a phenomenal surge in the return of students was witnessed. As per the Chinese Education Ministry, in 2017, out of 6,08,000 Chinese students who went overseas, 79 per cent returned to China which is comparably much more than the returnee figure of 5 per cent in 1987 and 30.6 per cent in 2007. However, a marginal effect has been noted towards its diasporas or overseas Chinese.

A paradigm shift in China’s approach towards diasporas is seen, wherein from key sources of capital and technology, the Overseas Chinese are now seen as critical enablers of ambitious

BRI projects. The officials have started to see the diaspora not only as a key conduit for high-end technology through involvement in Chinese-led multi-national technology development initiatives but also as a way to realise broader geo-economic ambitions. In 2016, authorities began to hold an annual business conference for overseas Chinese involved in the BRI.¹⁹

The concept of sister cities or city diplomacy was started by China in 1973 to promote and strengthen people-to-people contact between cities in China and other countries. After the ascension of Xi Jinping and the launch of the BRI project in 2013, a steep rise in the new agreement particularly in BRI countries was witnessed. Today, out of approximately 2,600 sister cities, more than 700 cities form part of BRI. Under this agreement commercial, cultural, and social ties at a municipal level and with business leaders are strengthened. The PRC also views sister cities as a means to defuse tensions, reverse negative stereotypes and push more favourable views of China. The focus of these agreements may vary, but they often entail a commitment to increasing trade relations, sponsoring cultural festivals and exhibitions, partnerships on issues of mutual interest, as well as knowledge sharing and capacity building at the grassroots level.²⁰

Chinese intelligence agencies have been successful in cultivating several students for influence/espionage activities through educational scholarships either by attracting international students to China or by sending its citizens abroad for studies on scholarship. US intelligence has already warned that China is using student spies to steal secrets.²² To increase awareness, interest, and opportunity amongst educationists, China is trying to establish a close relationship with the educationists by either organising their China trip or providing free teachers at the college/school level to teach Mandarin.

As an integral part of a hub and spokes policy, the BRI has emerged as a keel to its public diplomacy endeavour, through which China aims to attain an enviable position wherein she can monitor and control the world. After the colossal success of cultural diplomacy towards advanced countries, China has shifted its cultural diplomacy focus towards BRI countries through various cultural diplomacy instruments.

Recommendations

Comparatively, India has far more cultural diplomacy resources than China for executing global HUMINT operations. Unfortunately, India appears to be lagging behind China and there is an inescapable requirement of understanding the innocuous means of Chinese intelligence collection through cultural diplomacy for devising means to counter China's growing footprints and learning from their modus operandi. A comprehensive integrated mechanism on the part of India is required to reap the benefits of the inherent cultural diplomacy capabilities available to India. The recommendations are as follows:

- Substitute CIs/CCs (or its substitute organisation Chinese International Education Foundation), with Taiwan Education Centres to promote the Chinese language and customs in India and abroad to counter Chinese leadership without annoying Chinese people.
- Monitor and review the espionage and propaganda activities of UFWD, CIs/CCs, CSSA, and CAIFC through cultural centres, educational institutes, political parties, think tanks, tech giants, and business communities in India and abroad.
- Monitor activities and expansion of Chinese overseas police stations, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, and Overseas Chinese Assistance Centres.
- Improve the Global Diplomacy Index and use Indian cultural centres along with tech giants to strengthen relationships with Indian diasporas and project India's image as *Vishwaguru* (world leader).
- Revival of our own education policy to instil pride amongst citizens in our country and integrate development with culture to promote transnational religious circuits in India.
- Develop quality educational infrastructure to promote emerging foreign leaders as students in Indian universities.
- Monitor the footprints of Operation Foxhunt against Tibetans and Uyghurs. Create capabilities to ensure the return of Indian fugitives abroad.

Conclusion

Chinese with the largest population and diasporas have undoubtedly proved conducive cultural diplomacy can create an enabling environment for innocuous HUMINT operations abroad. The HUMINT acquired through cultural diplomacy has significantly contributed towards China's emergence as the second-largest economic power without raising suspicion of state involvement. Post-2013, BRI has emerged as the veil for global Chinese HUMINT operations and directly affects Indian strategic interest in its backyard.

India despite having inherent potential for cultural diplomacy has not been able to reap the benefits. Fortunately, China is witnessing negative indicators in various instruments of cultural diplomacy i.e., negative population growth, decreasing global popularity, closure of cultural institutions, and rising attacks on the Chinese population. Contrarily, Indian cultural diplomacy instruments are witnessing an upward trend. The present environment creates an ideal window of opportunity for countering Chinese cultural expansion in India's area of interest.

Endnotes

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