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DEMOCRACIES IN THE DRAGONS SHOW

Sunday, 18 February 2018 | Dr Ashutosh Misra



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Since there are only 4,000 people of Chinese ancestry in India, China faces a demographic disadvantage in pushing its influence operations in India, unlike in the US and Australia, which have a large Chinese diaspora and have no history of direct military conflict with the country, making them more susceptible

China's influence operations (IO) have stirred up a global storm, more so in democracies, exploiting their openness to make deep inroads. It is silent, sinister, and deeply disturbing, and has accorded Clausewitz's

concept of "war as a continuation of politics by other means" a new dimension. It is a worrying matter not because democracies have reacted a tad late, but because they lack a robust counter-strategy. Russia's interference in the 2017 US Presidential Elections, and Chinese IO have triggered a debate in democracies over political backlash and free speech, as policymakers scramble to get a grip over them.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, affiliated institutions, corporate houses, news agencies, and associated philanthropists have reportedly penetrated deep into the academia, strategic circles, political parties, and Government establishments to shape conducive political climate and public opinion for China's grand Belt and Road Initiative and expansionist South China Sea policies.

IO have muddied the distinction between 'soft power', which is based on the appeal of culture and values, and what has been termed as 'sharp power' by experts, which denotes a more aggressive and coercive intent to shape opinion and policies in other countries. IO is different from psychological warfare, in which propaganda is backed by hard military action or economic measures to damage the adversaries' morale. A 2009 RAND report defined IO as a "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".

But now scholars see little utility for military strategy in IO to shape public opinion and Government policies during peace times. A 2010 study by William Hutchinson described IO as a measure to "exert power via the use of soft techniques, such as strategic communications, diplomacy and public relations [by] minimising the use of hard techniques, such as military force and economic sanctions". Gary King, Jeniffer Pan, and Margaret E Roberts in an authoritative paper in the *American Political Science Review* (2017) have established "how the Chinese Government fabricates social media posts for strategic direction, not engaged argument".

Others (Phil Irwin, 2002) believe that in IO, balancing the correlation between attitude and behaviour is vital, as behavioural changes of the target under compulsion or inducement may not necessarily change attitudes. Also, the influencer needs to be mindful of its own behaviour. For instance, if troops are strategising to win hearts and minds in a conflict situation, any adverse event, such as inadvertent civilian deaths in military strikes, may render the strategy ineffective. This is the constraint China faces vis-a-vis India. Its territorial and cartographic aggression and ties with Pakistan limit its ability to shape policies and opinion in India.

In an article in the *Foreign Affairs*, Joseph Nye Jr discussed the concept of 'sharp power', a term originally coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig at the National Endowment for Democracy. They concluded that "sharp power pierces, penetrates or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries, as opposed to soft power, which harnesses the allure of culture and values to enhance a country's strengths".

With around 3.8 million people of Chinese ancestry and over 100 Confucius institutes, the US has been rocked by China's IO. The Chinese Peoples' Political Consultative Conference and the CCP's United Front Work

Department push IO abroad through funding agencies, philanthropists, influential businessmen, and corporate houses. The CCP-linked Hong Kong-based China-United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF) has funded programmes at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced Studies and the Brookings Institution. But the University of Texas President Gregory Fenves rejected its funding for the China Public Policy Centre, following a long investigation and intervention by Senator Ted Cruz, fearing threats to academic integrity. The University of West Florida, Pennsylvania State University, and University of Chicago have shut down Confucius Institutes, as the American Association of University Professors urged other universities also to follow suit.

In 2009, the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (established in 2000) which advises the US Congress, in a hearing noted the impact of Chinese IO on national security. The Commission concluded: The PRC is trying to "buy friends" by cultivating influential figures in developing countries; the state-controlled media is spreading propaganda as the "life blood of the Party"; China is trying to "influence writings of the US opinion-makers, academics, and think-tank based researchers"; China is "denying visas to academics and writers who are critical of China"; and CCP publications are "public relations weapons to cultivate prominent people" in the academia and media abroad.

In a hearing last November, the Commission said, "Xinhua services some of the functions of an intelligence agency by gathering information and producing classified reports for the Chinese leadership on domestic and international events", and recommended strengthening the Foreign Agents Registration Act (passed in 1938 to counter IO in the US), necessitating the registration of all Chinese state-run media staff as "foreign agents". The Commission's December 2017 hearing also noted that China was conducting its "long arm IO to guide, buy or coerce political influence globally".

Following the Russian hacking during the last Presidential Elections, as the debate on IO gathers steam in the US, the Government Accountability Office — which undertakes audit, evaluation, and investigation for the Congress — wants all institutional contracts with Confucius Institutes to be made transparent and scrutinised. The Financial Times revealed that Springer Nature removed over 1,000 articles from the *Journal of Chinese Political Science* and *International Politics* under China's censorship directives and was "rewarded" duly.

China's IO have penetrated the United Nations too. An incisive *The Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) report revealed that the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested Chinese businessmen linked to Sherri Yan, wife of a former Assistant Secretary Roger Uren, at the Office of National Assessments in Australia. ONA provides intelligence and policy briefs to the Prime Minister. The businessmen allegedly bribed the President of the UN General Assembly John Ashe with \$200,000, who the US District Attorney said, "sold himself and the institution".

Australia, with 1.2 billion people of Chinese ancestry, is also rocked by China's IO. In mid-December 2017, the Australian Labour Party Senator Sam Dastyari resigned over his dealings with China and Beijing linked billionaire Huan Xiangmo, who reportedly paid Dastyari's legal bill worth \$5,000, and had donated \$1.8 million for the Australia China Relations Institute at the University of Technology, Sydney. Xiangmo also donated around \$500,000 to the New South Wales Labour Party. Dastyari allegedly backed China's South China Sea policy, against the ALP's position, and also provided counter-terrorism advice to Sydney-based Chinese businessmen.

The SMH exposé on how Chinese businessmen have offered millions of dollars in political donation to major Australian political parties to penetrate the political and foreign policy circles is an eye-opener. Australia is one of the few countries which accepts foreign donations. But now the alarm bells are constantly ringing in the Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which conducted raids at various locations in Australia, including Uren's house, confiscating classified documents he is said to have removed from ONA before leaving his post, making him liable for criminal prosecution. His wife Sherri Yan is deeply connected in the political, business, and foreign policy circles in Australia, the US, and China. Former ASIO Chief Duncan Lewis feels the threat has reached an "unprecedented level" that can potentially subvert the system from within.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Attorney General George Brandis have pushed a law to tackle espionage and foreign interference, and are believed to have authorised the ASIO raids. Former High Commissioner to India and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary, Peter Varghese, considers China's IO "deeply concerning", and the views are shared by strategic experts, including Rory Medcalf, Director, National Security College, and academics, John Fitzgerald and Clive Hamilton.

The widening shadow of Chinese IO is now also imperilling freedom of speech in Australia, as publishers are shutting doors on works deeply critical of China. Clive Hamilton's forthcoming book, *Silent Invasion: How China is Turning Australia into a Puppet State*, in print at Harshe Grant publishers, has triggered a political debate, having been rejected by the Melbourne University Press and Allen & Unwin. The manuscript was discussed at length in the Australian Federal Parliament's National Security Committee, over potential diplomatic backlash and need for safeguarding free speech. The committee eventually gave the nod for publication. Hamilton is reportedly very critical of the former Foreign Minister Bob Carr's and Trade Minister

Andrew Robb's dealings with Chinese billionaires and has documented China's deep penetration into Australia's policymaking circles.

A few weeks ago, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation aired its programme, *Four Corners*, based on a joint media investigation with Fairfax Media, laying bare how the CCP is constantly monitoring Chinese students and intimidating their families back home through warnings and extended interrogation to keep them away from anti-China protests and posting anti-Communist party messages on social media. In a disturbing trend pro and anti-Communist party protesters are facing off each other on the streets, creating a destabilising chasm within the diaspora and with other Australians. Critics of China are being indirectly advised and warned by Government insiders and pro-China lobbyists to shun criticism of China.

As China intensifies its global IO and investments along the old maritime Silk Route and BRI circuit, India is at a relatively advantageous position, unlike the US and Australia, but nonetheless must remain alert to China's growing IO. Two Confucius Institutes (Han Ban) have been set up at the University of Mumbai (2013) and at Vellore Institute of Technology (2009). The Jawaharlal Nehru University signed an agreement for a Confucius Institute in 2006, but is not yet operational. JNU Professor Srikanth Kondapalli says, "Given the experience of other democracies and academic institutions, the Government of India is exercising caution, as the end motive of these institutions stands challenged globally."

In the Indian political milieu, ideological affinity with the Communist China, and non-official engagements with Chinese embassy and leadership has remained a sensitive topic, given the enduring Sino-Indian acrimony since 1962. In the midst of the Doklam standoff, the meeting between the Indian National Congress President Rahul Gandhi and the Chinese Ambassador in New Delhi, and former's participation in a Chinese food festival had triggered a media storm and political controversy.

Given the fact that there are only 4,000 people of Chinese ancestry in India, China faces a demographic disadvantage to push its IO in India, unlike in the US and Australia. The festering territorial disputes between India and China, periodic incursions by the PLA into the Indian territory, cartographic aggression, propaganda by the state-run Xinhua news agency, and "all-weather" ties with Pakistan, render IO ineffective in India. In this respect, countries such as the US and Australia, which have a large Chinese diaspora and have no history of direct military conflict with China, are more susceptible to IO.

The CCP has historically engaged with Indian political parties and ideological sympathisers to shape India's China policy. Declassified documents of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) released in 2006 revealed deep connections between the CCP and the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the 1950s and 60s. After the 1962 Sino-Indian War, following the split in the CPI, many dissidents looked to China for ideological direction and inspiration, many being less critical of China's view on the Sino-Indian border dispute. Some extremist CPI leaders even received Chinese money via Nepal and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and many sympathised with the more militant Chinese variety of communism, the documents recorded. Over the years, the Chinese President Xi Jinping has invited a string of Indian Communist leaders to Beijing in a bid to shape the political discourse in India.

Since the 1980s, the Chinese Public Diplomacy Division has been targeting intellectuals and academics in India to counter anti-China views. As the National Democratic Alliance Government continues to stand up to China's bullying along the border, the CCP may even try to tap the students' protests at Leftist-dominated institutions to malign the Indian Government. The Publicity Department, along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, are at the forefront of China's IO and there is also a potential for many members of the visiting cultural troupes, youth exchange programmes, and students visiting India, under a close CCP watch, trying to shape public debate in India.

In addition, China may also leverage its economic clout and business linkages to shape foreign policy debates and public opinion in India. There are currently 400 Chinese companies, including 100 state enterprises and the rest private small and medium enterprises, operational in India. They engage with the local influential business leaders and business federations, offering cheap Chinese credit, hoping to "buy" allegiance.

The challenge for democracies, therefore, is how to limit the impact of IO. Joseph Nye Jr says that "sharp power", being a deceptive use of information for hostile purposes, is a kind of hard power, while acknowledging that the distinction between "sharp" and "soft" power is difficult to discern, making counter-measures complex. But there is growing unanimity among academics and policymakers that maintaining openness and transparency in all institutional, political, and cultural engagements could be the best antidote to IO. Transparency and openness is a major advantage that democracies have over authoritarianism.

