

**China's Influence Operations (IO):  
Blurring the Distinction Between Soft and Sharp Power**

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The debate on influence operations has gained currency in the last ten years, as an instrument of foreign policy to shape a favourable political climate and public opinion in other countries, especially those with which relations have been troublesome. There is little work available in the academic realm to establish the how the use of soft power has transformed into what is now termed as “influence operations”, which denotes a more aggressive intent by the influencer to shape public opinion and foreign policy of other countries. In this regard, China’s soft power measures, have come under increased scrutiny from foreign governments, academics and strategic analysts as a vehicle of IO. Almost a decade ago, 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...”.<sup>1</sup> A 2010 study in Australia described IO as a measure to “exert power via the use of soft techniques such a strategic communications, diplomacy and public relations [by] minimising the use of hard techniques such as military force and economic sanctions”.<sup>2</sup> Some previous works have also established a correlation between attitude and behaviour which are central to the concept of IO, but nonetheless very challenging to balance.<sup>3</sup>

As China expands its global outreach utilising its economic, diplomatic and military clout, IO are raising concerns in many countries. Over the years China has offered billions of dollars in grants and aid to educational institutions which it hopes to exploit to shape a positive academic and public opinion of its Belt and Road Initiative, and smother dissenting narratives of its global rise. It has used its news agencies, radio and television networks, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, diplomats, cultural tropes, scholars, students and scholars (both Chinese and foreign) at educational institutions in the US and other places to stifle criticism.

US hosts over 3.8 million people of Chinese ancestry and over 100 Confucius institutes. The Chinese Peoples’ Political Consultative Conference and the CCP’s United Front Work Department work together to push IO abroad. The Hong Kong based United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF), affiliated with the CCP has funded programmes at the Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced Studies and the Brookings Institution. Recently, the University of Texas President Gregory Fenves rejected funding for the China Public Policy Centre at UT from CUSEF, based on a long investigation and intervention by Senator Ted

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<sup>1</sup> Eric V. Larson, Richard E. Darilek, Daniel Gibran, Brian Nichiporuk, Amy Richardson, Lowell H. Schwartz, Cathryn Quantic Thurston. (2009). Foundations of Effective Influence Operations A Framework for Enhancing Army Capabilities. RAND Arroyo Center. At [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND\\_MG654.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG654.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> William Hutchinson. 2010. “Influence Operations: Action and Attitude”. Paper presented at the Australian Information Warfare and Security conference. At <http://ro.ecu.au/isw/33>.

<sup>3</sup> P. Erwin. (2001). Attitudes and Persuasion. Hove: Contemporary books. Also see D.J. O’Keefe. (2002). Persuasion: Theory and Research. Thousand Oaks: Sage publications.

Cruz, fearing that the funds would compromise academic integrity. It is alleged that Chinese students are also under pressure from the CCP to refrain from criticising China, and who are now even challenging academics' criticism of China.

Earlier in 2009, the advisory body of the US Congress, the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (est. 2000) held a hearing on the Chinese propaganda and IO and its impact on national security. The Commission made the following observations:

1. PRC is trying to “buy friends” by cultivating influential figures in developing countries.
2. The state-controlled media is spreading propaganda as the “life blood of the Party”.
3. China is trying to “influence writings of the US opinion-makers such as academics and think-tank based researchers”.
4. The Chinese government is “denying visas to academics and writers who are critical of China”.
5. CCP publications are being employed as “public relations weapons to cultivate prominent people” in the academia and media abroad.<sup>4</sup>

In another hearing in November 2017, the Commission said, “Xinhua services some of the functions of an intelligence agency by gathering information and producing classified reports for Chinese leadership on domestic and international events”.<sup>5</sup> The Commission has recommended strengthening the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) making it mandatory for all Chinese state-run media staff to register as “foreign agents”.<sup>6</sup> The CT was passed in 1938 to counter foreign influence in the US.

In the next hearing in December 2017, the Commission remarked that China conducted its “long arm” IO to “guide, buy or coerce political influence” globally.<sup>7</sup> The Government Accountability Office which provides auditing evaluation and investigative services for the Congress recommended that all contracts with Confucius institutes must be made public and be available for inspection.<sup>8</sup> Springer Nature removed over 1000 articles from the *Journal of Chinese Political Science* and *International Politics* to comply with China's censorship directives and was later “rewarded” for its actions.<sup>9</sup>

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in a report described China's IO as a demonstration of “Sharp power,” which was an attempt to promote authoritarian influence from China and Russia in developing countries.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. (2009). Hearing: China's Propaganda and Influence Operations, its Intelligence Activities that Target the United States, and the Resulting Impacts on U.S. National Security. April 30. At <https://www.uscc.gov/Hearings/hearing-china%E2%80%99s-propaganda-and-influence-operations-its-intelligence-activities-target>.

<sup>5</sup> David Brunnstrom. (2017). “U.S. Congress Urged to Require Chinese Journalists to Register as Agents”. *Reuters*. November 15. At <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-media/u-s-congress-urged-to-require-chinese-journalists-to-register-as-agents-idUSKBN1DF0HU>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher H. Smith. (2017). “The Long Arm of China: Exporting Authoritarianism with Chinese Characteristics”. Congressional-Executive Commission on China. December 13. At <https://www.cecc.gov/sites/chinacommission.house.gov/files/CECC%20Hearing%20-%202013%20Dec%202017%20-%20Long%20Arm%20of%20China%20-%20Cochairman%20Smith.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Josh Rogin. (2017). “China's Foreign Influence Operations are Causing Alarm in Washington”, *Washington Post*. December 10. At <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/chinas-foreign-influencers->

The Endowment also mentioned Australia being rocked by China's IO. In mid-December 2017 Australian Labour Party Senator Sam Dastyari resigned over his dealings with China and linkages with Beijing linked business figures and Sydney based political donors. Dastyari is alleged to have offered a detailed defence of China's policy in South China Sea, contradicting his party's position, and also provided counter-terrorism advice to Sydney based Chinese business Huan Xiangmao, who allegedly picked one of his bills as well.<sup>11</sup> In the wake of the controversy Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has called for a new legislation to ban foreign political donations.

China is also allegedly setting up universities, particularly along the old maritime silk road in Laos, Malaysia (which struck a \$144 billion deal with China in 2016) and Thailand, and 98 joint education programmes overseas, including in Japan. The Chinese Ministry of Education is funding over a dozen science and research centres in partnering countries in the Belt and Road circuit.<sup>12</sup>

Two Confucius institutes have also been set up at the University of Mumbai (2013) and Vellore Institute of Technology (2009) in India, and another proposed at the Amity University. The Jawaharlal Nehru University has rejected a similar request recently. CCP's links with politicians and ideological sympathisers is also well known. According to a declassified report of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) released in 2006, there existed deep connections between the CCP and Communist Party of India in the 1950s and 60s. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war led to a split in the CPI, many dissidents looked to China for ideological direction and inspiration, some of whom were less critical of the Chinese view on the Sino-Indian border dispute. Some extremist CPI leaders even probably received Chinese money via Nepal and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and there was substantial sympathy among them for the more militant Chinese variety of communism.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, a string of Communist leaders from India have also interacted with the Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing at the latter's invitation.<sup>14</sup>

In the India political milieu, ideological affinity with the communist China, and interactions with the Chinese leadership has remained a recurring debate. In the midst of the Sino-Indian standoff in Doklam plateau at the China-Bhutan-India tri-junction, a meeting between the Indian National Congress President Rahul Gandhi with the Chinese Ambassador in New Delhi, and his participation in a Chinese food festival at a local hotel had triggered a controversy in the media and political circles.<sup>15</sup> The state owned Xinhua News Agency also released a scathing

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are-causing-alarm-in-washington/2017/12/10/98227264-dc58-11e7-b859-fb0995360725\_story.html?utm\_term=.9090107be051

<sup>11</sup> Katherine Murphy. (2017). "Sam Dastyari Told to Resign from Senate Positions after China Revelation". *The Guardian*. November 30. At <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/30/sam-dastyari-told-to-resign-from-senate-positions-after-china-revelation>.

<sup>12</sup> Coco Liu and Tashny Sukumaran. (2017). "Belt and Road: How China is Exporting Education and Influence to Malaysia and Other Asean Countries". July 30. *South China Morning Post*. At <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2097965/belt-road-and-books-how-chinas-trying-soft-power-outreach>.

<sup>13</sup> Special Report. (1964). "Factionalism Among Chinese Communists". August. Central Intelligence Agency. At <http://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00927A004600010002-1.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Atul Aneja, "Communist Party of India Values Relations with the CPI (M)". (2015). *The Hindu*. October 21. At <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/yechurys-call-on-xi-jinping-signals-strong-cpcpi-m-ties/article7783317.ece>. Also see "CPI (M) Delegation in China". (2018) *Peoples Democracy*. XLII:3. January 21. At <http://peoplesdemocracy.in/content/cpim-delegation-china-0>.

<sup>15</sup> Aurangzeb Naqshbandi. (2017). "After Morning of Denials, Congress Accepts Rahul Gandhi Met Chinese Envoy". *Hindustan Times*. July 11. At <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/amid-sikkim-standoff-rahul-gandhi-met-chinese-envoy-congress-confirms/story-uy38DjacYfBCb6xkVIhyQN.html>. Also see "Omar Backs

video to counter the Indian views on the Doklam standoff. In addition, China Central TV continues to release such propaganda videos from time to time.

Since the 1980s, the Chinese Public Diplomacy Division has been targeting intellectuals and academics in India, to counter anti-China views. The Chinese Defence Attaché allegedly engages with influential people in India to mould public opinion on China's policies, and also provides information to the Ministry of National Defence on defence modernisation in the region. The Propaganda Department, along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Public Diplomacy Division) and the Ministry of Culture are at the forefront of China's IO.

Local sources have revealed that many members of the cultural troupes and youth exchange programmes and students who come to India for research and studies have links with the CCP, and profile China's positive image in India to shape pro-China perceptions. In addition, China also exploits its economic clout and business linkages to shape public opinion in India. There are currently 400 Chinese companies, including 100 state enterprises and the rest private small and medium enterprises which are operational in India. They engage with the local influential business leaders and business federations, and offer cheap Chinese credit to buy their allegiance. It was shared that a prominent section of Mumbai businessmen is deeply opposed to the growing Chinese influence in India. Anil Ambani, of the Reliance Communications, had reportedly taken a \$1.18 billion loan from Chinese banks, and with the venture now incurring heavy losses, he is susceptible to Chinese pressures.

But in the Indian scenario, with only a population of 4,000 people of Chinese ancestry, China's influence has demographic constraints in finding local sympathisers. Instead, it seeks to influence policies, academic discussions and public opinion through engagement with communist and opposition leaders, research institutions and business leaders. Another disadvantage that China faces is a history riddled with war, cartographic aggression and border incursions with India, and "all-weather" friendship with Pakistan. These historical and geopolitical dynamics limit the impact of IO in India. IO have greater impact in countries hosting a larger Chinese diaspora, without any military conflict with China and not directly affected by China's military or territorial aggression.

China's IO have generated a new debate in the policy, strategic and academic circles around the world on what has been termed as "Sharp power" by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig at NED. They maintain 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".<sup>16</sup> Other experts say that "Sharp power" being a deceptive use of information for hostile purposes, is a kind of hard power, although the distinction between "Sharp" and "Soft" power is difficult to discern which makes developing counter-measures harder.<sup>17</sup> In this context democracies are yet to evolve adequate counter-strategies. But by remaining attentive to "Soft power" programmes and upholding openness is the best defence to exposing information warfare under the garb of "Soft power".<sup>18</sup> In this regard, democracies have an advantage over dictatorships.

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Rahul over Attending Chinese Fest. (2017). *The Tribune*. July 17. At <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/omar-backs-rahul-over-attending-chinese-fest/439624.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2018). "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power". *Foreign Affairs*. January 24. At <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/1121771>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.