

Chinese Human Intelligence (HUMINT) Through Public Diplomacy in South Asia

A Critical Assessment

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China's Human Intelligence (HUMINT) collection through public diplomacy has been instrumental in overcoming its 'century of humiliation' and emergence as a global economic and military power for pursuing her 'Middle Kingdom Dream' without raising major alarms. With deep pockets and surplus construction capabilities, China has placed its citizens and proxies at strategic chokepoints of the world by using innocuous-looking 'thousand grains of sand, mosaic approach, human wave, or citizen spying' methods for HUMINT collection. The trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative has further facilitated China's economic growth and global expansion through HUMINT operations. As China shifts its focus to the South Asian region in the 21st century to support its growth engine, it inevitably affects India's strategic interests. India, with comparable public diplomacy assets, must implement a comprehensive policy to enhance its HUMINT capabilities. Learning from China's approach is crucial for India to counter China's expanding influence and protect its strategic interests.

Keywords: *Human Intelligence (HUMINT), Public Diplomacy, South Asia, Cultural Diplomacy, Informational Diplomacy, Financial Diplomacy, Elite-To-Elite (E2E) Diplomacy, Exchange Diplomacy*

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Intelligence has always been crucial for strategic planning. Human intelligence (HUMINT), often described as the world's second-oldest profession, is an original form of intelligence collection and has traditionally been the backbone of all intelligence acquisition activities. As per the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "HUMINT is intelligence gathered by means of interpersonal contact, a category of intelligence derived from information collected and provided by human sources." HUMINT is a complex business, wherein various types of special agents are employed for the collection of intelligence, manipulation of information, deception by feeding false information, sowing confusion, and even counterintelligence for finding out the agents of the enemy. "The heart of intelligence, however, is human espionage. At its most elemental, spying is about understanding and influencing the scope of behaviour, from evil to exalted, and manoeuvring through this emotional labyrinth in pursuit of valuable information otherwise unavailable."¹ HUMINT can be collected either through covert or overt means by specialised intelligence agencies/personnel. A specially trained person is involved in HUMINT operations to carry out multifarious tasks either overtly/covertly or actively/passively through interpersonal relations.

With the introduction of disruptive technologies, the HUMINT collection was replaced by new forms of intelligence collection. Post-Cold War, most of the developed countries have given precedence to a new form of intelligence over HUMINT due to inherent advantages of cost, risk, coverage and time. The technological revolution has introduced infinite empowered participative stakeholders in the conflict zone, which invariably has resulted in the emergence of public diplomacy as an essential element of conflict. The emergence of empowered stakeholders armed with affordable, versatile gadgets has shifted global attention from hard to soft power. This inclusive approach in public diplomacy has liberated it from strict governmental oversight and elevated its significance over traditional power dynamics by incorporating a diverse array of stakeholders beyond governmental restrictions. Besides government intelligence and non-intelligence agencies, the range of Chinese HUMINT collectors includes the military, state-owned enterprises, private companies, individuals and educational institutions, all contributing to mass HUMINT collection. The inability of emerging technologies to decode the complexities of the human mind has inevitably led to the resurgence of HUMINT as a vital component in strategic planning. Furthermore, these technologies remain highly susceptible to manipulation and deception while demanding extensive infrastructure.

The value of HUMINT was starkly highlighted by two major US intelligence failures, i.e., 9/11 terrorist attack and the alleged Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) in Iraq. Moreover, the successful operations against Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan, Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi in Syria, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq reaffirmed the indispensable role of HUMINT in countering evolving non-traditional threats. HUMINT is employed by most of the countries, but the scale and magnitude of its use by China are unmatched. With access to the world's largest controlled population and influential diasporas coupled with a renewed political will fuelled by surplus capital, and technological advancements, China is phenomenally expanding its global HUMINT footprint through public diplomacy while carefully avoiding international backlash.

Initially reluctant to utilise its public diplomacy strengths, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recognised its importance in the 21st century for gaining HUMINT and realisation of its 'Middle Kingdom Dream'.² According to the Lowy Institute's report of 2024, China now has the most expansive diplomatic network in the world.³ The swift expansion of Chinese intelligence capabilities, driven by extensive HUMINT efforts masked as public diplomacy, has exponentially increased their global influence. The effectiveness of China's HUMINT collection methods in the US is evident from the FBI Director's statement that 'FBI is opening a new China-related counterintelligence case roughly every 10 hours'.⁴

Following its success against advanced countries, China redirected its HUMINT efforts towards developing and underdeveloped nations. To sustain its growth, China targets the volatile South Asian region due to its unique geography, economy and demographic significance. Apart from Pakistan, Chinese involvement in South Asia was limited until the late 20th century. Positioned strategically on China's western periphery, South Asia offers global connectivity by sea and land, aiding China's westward expansion and addressing the Malacca dilemma. This region also provides opportunities to absorb surplus Chinese capital and construction capabilities, and access a youthful population of South Asia to counter the effects of the 'One Child Policy'. With the US withdrawing from South Asia and smaller countries seeking to balance India's dominance, China has used public diplomacy to establish itself in South Asia. Evidence of Chinese HUMINT activities through public diplomacy is evident on India, which holds 68 per cent of the region's landmass, 75 per cent of its population, and 79 per cent of its economic output.

Numerous studies have independently explored Chinese HUMINT operations, public diplomacy and China's presence in South Asia. There is extensive literature on how powerful nations use intelligence to shape public diplomacy, however there is a notable gap in understanding the reverse process, i.e., using public diplomacy to enhance intelligence. This article seeks to underscore evidence of China's discreet HUMINT activities in South Asia and India under the guise of public diplomacy. It aims to alert national leaders, military commanders, civil bureaucracy, intelligence agencies and think tanks to the emerging threat posed by China in South Asia. The article is structured into three parts: first, discussing the methods of Chinese global HUMINT operations through public diplomacy; second, identifying subtle Chinese HUMINT activities in advanced countries and South Asia; and finally, offering an assessment and recommendations to mitigate the expanding Chinese HUMINT influence in South Asia.

MODUS OPERANDI:

CHINESE HUMINT OPERATIONS THROUGH PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Chinese HUMINT operations are the first in modern times to leverage the entire society as a foundation for intelligence collection purposes.⁵ Contrary to traditional tradecraft of HUMINT collection by few specialised agents, the Chinese use a policy of 'thousand grains of sand or mosaic approach or human wave or citizen spying',⁶ wherein they employ countless amateur ethnic Han people and diaspora settled abroad to vacuum up all possible data. This distinctive Chinese approach of aggregation of small amounts of information from a wide array of sources has been described by Paul Moore, 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 US 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.⁷

In an innocuous-looking, low-risk Chinese mass HUMINT operation model, a high volume of low-grade information is collected by countless intelligence amateurs, who are subject experts in respective fields. The entire operation is backed by synchronised public diplomacy and information

revolution, enabling China to expand its global HUMINT network by mobilising its vast population and diaspora through principles like 'Guanxi, Face, and Shame'. Chinese intelligence operations prefer recruiting ethnic Chinese, wherein a nationalistic/personal sentiment of helping China is leveraged to cultivate them. Chinese HUMINT operations are relationship-centric, wherein obligations, roles and relationships are central issues used by Chinese intelligence agencies.⁸ In contrast to other countries that may recruit agents with 'bad people to do bad things', China employs a strategy of 'good people to do bad things'. Rob Joyce, while comparing the range of activities in Chinese and Russian HUMINT models illustrated, 'I kind of look at Russia as the hurricane. It comes in fast and hard. Chinese, on the other hand, is climate change: long, slow, pervasive.'⁹

In the Chinese model, HUMINT collection through public diplomacy is conducted by multiple traditional and non-traditional agencies. The traditional Chinese intelligence agencies include the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB) and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). The prominent non-traditional agencies for collection of HUMINT include United Front Work Department (UFWD), the China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC), the Commission of Science Technology and Industry for National Defence, the Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of China (ISTIC), think tanks like the Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) and the Chinese Institute for International and Strategic Studies (CIISS) and New China News Agency, or 'Xinhua'. The various instruments of public diplomacy used by China for implementation of its mass HUMINT operations are Cultural Diplomacy, Informational Diplomacy, Financial Diplomacy, Elite-To-Elite (E2E) Diplomacy and Exchange Diplomacy.¹⁰

CHINESE HUMINT: INSTRUMENTS OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Chinese HUMINT Operations and Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy entails the 'exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding.'¹¹ Former Chinese President Hu Jintao said, '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.'¹² Initially, Chinese cultural activities were directed towards its largest diasporas settled globally. Subsequently, it was expanded to include a foreign audience.

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.¹³ Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) under UFWD is the largest official organisation for overseas Chinese students/scholars abroad. CSSA under the cloak of spreading Chinese culture plays a crucial role in monitoring the thoughts and behaviour of Chinese students in foreign universities, limiting academic freedom, prescribing correct speech, harassing anti-Chinese speakers and ensuring Chinese students remain patriotic and supportive of CCP rule.¹⁴ Confucius Institutes (CIs)/Confucius Classrooms (CCs), opened in 2004 are flagship non-profit global educational programmes to teach Chinese language, culture and history in partnership with a foreign university for the projection of soft power.¹⁵ Within 15 years (2004–18), the global footprint has exponentially expanded to approx. 540 CI and approx. 1200 CC. Several CIs/CCs were closed in the recent past due to a lack of transparency and disregard for academic freedom, censorship, propaganda and espionage activities.¹⁶ To regain control of the narrative, China renamed CC as the Chinese International Education Foundation and its headquarters (Hanban) as the Centre for Education and Cooperation.¹⁷ China has opened 153 CI and 149 CC in 54 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries including 15 CI and 13 CC in South Asian Countries. The first CI in India was established at Mumbai University in 2013. China has opened seven CIs and CCs in India.¹⁸ Indian intelligence agencies also reported shifting trends among the Chinese diaspora in India, noting that relatives of Chinese origin in the City of Joy (Kolkata) are now increasingly mingling with the local population.¹⁹ In July 2020, the Indian government decided to review the setting up of local chapters of the CI after security alerts on the growing Chinese influence in higher education. The Indian government also plans to review 54 MoUs signed between prestigious educational institutions in India and China.

Mandarin is the highest-paid language in India today. Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are also promoting Mandarin. China has 35 China Study Centers (CSCs) in Nepal along the Indo-Nepal border for intelligence collection and propaganda. 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. CAIFC performs dual roles of intelligence collection and conducting propaganda and perception management campaigns.²⁰ 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.²¹ CAIFC's influence extends to India, Pakistan and Nepal. Chinese intelligence think tanks (CICIR and CIISS), known for their linkages with the Chinese deep state/establishment host foreign visitors, send scholars on delegations abroad, and place analysts on visiting fellowships overseas to foster direct person-to-person interactions and enhance open-source collection. Consequent to the intensive drive to attract its students back, a phenomenal surge in the return of students was witnessed. As per a 2017 report, 79 per cent of Chinese students 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. Despite this trend amongst Chinese students studying abroad, the impact on the Chinese diaspora or overseas Chinese communities has been minimal, suggesting that those who establish long-term careers or roots abroad are less influenced by Chinese drive.²²

Atheist China, with the largest Buddhist population, has invested millions in Buddhist BRI countries to position itself as Buddhism's cradle for strengthening ties and securing projects. This strategy will eventually create a transnational circuit for Buddhist pilgrims and will naturally integrate Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan in South Asia.²³ China has converted its economic influence into spiritual power by involving private companies in building Buddhist trails and hosting the World Buddhist Forum to attract foreign monks and scholars. It also plans to develop Lingshan County as a global Buddhist hub.²⁴ China allocates US\$ 2 billion annually to the Vatican for silencing criticism of its religious repression²⁵ and the Vatican has renewed the deal in June 2024 despite human rights concerns.²⁶ China has launched a campaign in Tibet to identify exiled Tibetans by forcing residents to register and provide details about relatives abroad. Pro-China Tibetans have also infiltrated the Tibetan government in exile for intelligence. China has also started employing Tibetans in their armed forces, similar to India's VIKAS battalion.

Operation Fox Hunt is a covert operation started by President Xi in 2014 with the aim to target Chinese fugitives accused of economic crimes who have fled abroad, with the goal of repatriating them and recovering illicit assets. Focusing on corrupt officials and financial criminals, China often seeks assistance from foreign governments through formal channels such as extradition treaties and law enforcement cooperation. However, in countries without extradition agreements, China has been accused of circumventing legal procedures by using informal tactics, including contacting family members or deploying covert agents. It is also believed

to leverage its diaspora networks to locate and persuade fugitives to return. The FBI Director said, 'Fox Hunt is a sweeping bid by Xi to target Chinese nationals whom he sees as threats and who live outside of China, across the world.'²⁷ China has reportedly established 54 Overseas Police Stations in five continents to track and harass dissidents. Between April 2021 and July 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.²⁸ Bangladesh is the only South Asian nation to have hosted Overseas Chinese Police Stations. China has reportedly closed its Overseas Police Stations in the Netherlands²⁹ and Czechlovakia³⁰ in 2022. The Overseas Chinese Assistance Centres (OCAC) 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 OCAC 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 Uighurs in Dubai. BBC's *Newsnight* has also identified multiple cases of targeting exiled Uighurs 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 Uighurs sent to China since 1997.

Chinese HUMINT Operations and Informational Diplomacy

China has cultivated relationships with journalists and media houses to promote pro-China coverage and suppress criticism.³¹ Prominent personalities in the information domain receive financial favours, recognition and appointments from China for the global dissemination of favourable views. China deters negative reporting with warnings, legal threats, visa denials, deportations, arrests and transnational repression. Journalists also face harassment or imprisonment for unfavourable content and fearing economic retaliation, many foreign media outlets have started self-censoring. China uses public diplomacy to spread surveillance and collect vast data through smart city projects, the Digital Silk Route (DSR) and key business centres. China leverages its economic power to coerce MNCs³² and the film industry also.³³ Chinese espionage relies heavily on the 'Qingbao' approach of intelligence collection through Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT). Unlike advanced countries, China staffs its OSINT organisations with top-line career personnel.³⁴ As per the ISTIC director, 'With the 'Qingbao' approach, China has reduced the costs of research by 40-50% and time by 60-70%.³⁵ With advanced digital technologies, China manipulates data

to rewrite history, creating an appealing yet edited database to direct its audience. Research establishments of leading academic journals in China are practicing deliberate censorship aimed at rewriting history to suit the current party line.³⁶

Recent arrests in New Delhi (Rajeev Sharma) and Brussels (Fraser Cameron) reveal growing use of foreign media personnel by China for espionage and influence operations.³⁷ The CCP is reportedly recruiting spies to create fake business profiles on the professional networking platform. A Shenzhen-based company having direct links with CCP is reportedly monitoring over 10,000 eminent Indian individuals/organisations.³⁸ A leak of data on 1.95 million CCP cadres reveals their employment in various countries' embassies in Shanghai, including India.³⁹ Several Chinese citizens are involved in cyber fraud through cheap and popular apps.⁴⁰ The Enforcement Directorate has filed a complaint in Hyderabad based on an ongoing investigation into a Chinese loan app scam.⁴¹ On 10 May 2022, the Border Security Forces (BSF) arrested a Chinese spy along the India–Bangladesh international border who had taken around 1,300 Indian SIMs to China.⁴² China's information domain activities include creating volatile situations abroad to deter companies from relocating outside China. For example, a labour protest disrupted Apple's plans to manufacture iPhones in Karnataka, India. Similarly, China's interference halted operations at Sterlite Copper. These actions are facilitated by money laundering, with China being the largest global money launderer, laundering an estimated US\$ 1 trillion from 2010 to 2020.⁴³

Financial Diplomacy

Since launching the BRI in 2013, China has become the world's largest creditor, surpassing the US in overseas spending and more than doubling its development finance from 2000–2013 to 2013–2017.⁴⁴ China has improved its global image through financial diplomacy by offering aid and debt forgiveness. This has led to debt colonialism, transforming China from an economic partner to a master. Beijing fosters dependency via opaque contracts, inflated projects, predatory loans and corrupt deals, undermining sovereignty. Circular lending ensures that loans from Chinese banks go to Chinese firms employing Chinese labour, keeping the money within China.⁴⁵ Globally, China is the worst offender of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and has been using the same to extend its political and territorial aims.⁴⁶ Chinese strategic financial practices have also positioned its citizens at key global chokepoints to strengthen their HUMINT capabilities.

The BRI has integrated various public diplomacy tools, including the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), Maritime Silk Route (MSR), Digital Silk Route (DSR), Space Information Corridor (SIC), Health Silk Route (HSR) and Polar Silk Route (PSR). This integration enables China to harness big data for AI technologies, giving it a dominant position in monitoring global communications, especially in BRI countries. The BRI's dual-use nature adds a military dimension without raising red flags. Xi's concept of 'wǎngluòxìnxìtǒng', loosely translating into 'internet information system' is crucial for modern warfare, and the Information Support Force (raised after disbanding the Strategic Support Force) has been billed by China as a key pillar of a modern military service.⁴⁷ Out of six BRI sub-projects, four sub-projects are located in South Asia. All these projects run close to the Indian territorial/maritime border and considerably affect its security interests. China has already established its base in Gwadar and Hambantota through debt trap and is in the process of extending it to Colombo and the Maldives.

Post-COVID, the progress of BRI projects was seriously affected. There are reports that the lending under the BRI has come down from US\$ 75bn in 2016 to just US\$ 3bn in 2020.⁴⁸ China is in the midst of a profound economic crisis. Growth rates are flagging as an unsustainable mountain of debt piles up and China's debt-to-GDP ratio reached a record 288 per cent in 2023.⁴⁹ With an increasing debt to GDP ratio, a serial debt trapper China appears to have been caught in its own debt trap. Chinese lenders are now reluctant to fund BRI.⁵⁰ China has become an emergency rescue lender to struggling debtor countries, with its support rising from less than 5 per cent of its overseas lending portfolio in 2010 to 60 per cent in 2022.⁵¹

In India, China has made huge investments in the top three news aggregators/apps. Xiaomi has questioned India's territorial integrity by not showing Arunachal Pradesh as a part of India.⁵² Another unchecked aspect of Chinese influence is the audit of their company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, where funds are used to foster a pro-Chinese environment in India.⁵³ After the Galwan provocation, India blocked 321 Chinese apps.⁵⁴ However, many other Chinese apps still operate in India, posing security risks. China's venture investments in Indian start-ups have deeply embedded it in the online ecosystem, creating a virtual corridor despite India's avoidance of the BRI's physical corridor.⁵⁵ Even small Chinese tech investments have a disproportionate impact due to their access to critical Indian population databases. Additionally, it has been reported that CCP operatives have infiltrated two leading defence companies, whose subsidiaries are active in the Indian defence manufacturing sector.⁵⁶ India has

recently identified a couple of major Chinese companies operating in India with connections to the People's Liberation Army (PLA).⁵⁷ The Chinese firms have emerged as the lowest bidders in many infrastructure projects in Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Haryana. The Chinese companies are also targeting Indian strategic locations near INS Kadamba and Wheeler Island.⁵⁸ In Kolkata, ISRO's Regional Remote Sensing Centre (RRSC) is located near the controversial Chinese company Dongfang Electric.⁵⁹ Bollywood's success in China now raises concerns of dependence and susceptibility (akin to Hollywood) to China's influence and may potentially force Indian filmmakers to conform to Chinese censorship.⁶⁰

Elite-to-Elite (E2E) Diplomacy

E2E diplomacy involves cultivating influential foreigners, including political, civil, military and business leaders, and placing proxies in key positions of international organisations. Chinese intelligence targets future foreign leaders for HUMINT operations. In Australia, Senator Sam Dastyari's resignation (2017) and MP Shaoquett Moselmane's suspension from the party (2020) due to Chinese ties underscore the successful cultivation of political elites. Anne-Marie Brady's research documented widespread Chinese political influence and UFWD ties in New Zealand, linking Parliament member Jian Yang with Chinese intelligence. A *Financial Times* report claims UFWD's success in placing preferred candidates in Canadian elections.⁶¹ In Nepal, the Chinese ambassador played a significant role in preserving the government according to a media report in July 2020. Subsequently, the Nepal government raised several emotional, but non-existing issues including the constitutional adoption of a controversial map, Lord Ram's birthplace, and the Indian coronavirus. Chinese infiltration among Indian political elites is evident and exemplified by the MoU between the Indian National Congress and the CCP in 2008,⁶² the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation receiving donations from China (2005–06),⁶³ and celebration of the CCP centenary by the DMK (July 2021).⁶⁴

Chinese influence in policy-making international bodies through placing nationals/proxies in key positions or funding agendas has shaped pro-China views on global issues like the Wuhan virus, Taiwan, Uighurs, Dalai Lama, Hong Kong, Falun Gong, BRI and South China Sea (SCS). Clusters of China-linked agencies headed by the Chinese also advance domestic agendas such as BRI and Make in China 2025.⁶⁵ Chinese presence in key positions ensures that national champions like Huawei become embedded through organisations like the United Nations Industrial Development Organization

(UNIDO) and excludes Taiwan from air navigation discussions via the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). In 2020, China joined the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Consultative Group despite controversies. Chinese diplomats are accused of blocking critical activists from human rights forums and suppressing dissent by seeking names of individuals accredited by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).⁶⁶

China has successfully cultivated relationships with global elites/leaders by offering unconditional support, rapidly executing projects and adhering to a policy of non-interference in domestic affairs.⁶⁷ The BRI has emerged as a spinal cord for Chinese E2E diplomacy. Examples of successful Chinese E2E diplomacy include twice as many African Presidents attending China's Africa summit than the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (2018) and a report (2019) on Huawei assisting African dictators in spying on the opposition. The efficacy of financial diplomacy is evident from the significant international support China receives on issues such as Hong Kong (53 countries backing China's crackdown in July 2020), Xinjiang policies at the UNHRC (46 countries supporting in July 2020), and Taiwan⁶⁸ (only 12 countries recognise the Taipei government as in January 2024). Additionally, the self-censorship among top Islamic leaders, such as Pakistan's then-PM Imran Khan (January 2020) admitting that discussions on Uighurs are private due to China's friendship, underscores the influence of Chinese E2E diplomacy. China has strategically placed proxies to set agendas and influence decisions. Notable examples include Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, then Director General, World Health Organization, and the actions taken during the COVID-19 pandemic investigation.⁶⁹ The suspension of the Ease of Doing Business index (2021) after alleged manipulation by bank officials under China's direction,⁷⁰ misuse of Interpol to target minorities and dissidents,⁷¹ and the World Health Assembly's rejection of Taiwan-related proposals for the eighth consecutive year (May 2024), are a few other examples.⁷² China regularly deploys Government Organized Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs) in Geneva during human rights reviews. These GONGOs, staffed by officials and sympathisers, counter human rights abuse accusations. Of the 47 Chinese NGOs participating in UNHRC meetings, 34 are GONGOs overseen by government or CCP bodies. Since the UNHRC's formation in 2006, no resolutions have been brought against China, unlike the UN Commission on Human Rights, which saw 11 resolutions from 1990 to 2005, all blocked by Beijing except one in 1995.⁷³

Several seemingly harmless organisations actively bolster Chinese E2E diplomacy. The Liaison Department (LD) of the General Political Department connects with global elites to shape policies and behaviour through propaganda, influence campaigns and perception management, with personnel often sent to Chinese embassies to further these aims.⁷⁴ The CAIFC, under the LD, handles elite interactions and visits. Presented as a social organisation for international exchanges, it hides its intelligence ties. Established in 1984 for economic development, a 2018 report revealed its dual role in intelligence gathering and propaganda.⁷⁵ Another report indicates that friendship groups abroad, composed of political and business elites, strengthen bilateral ties with China. These groups are viewed as fronts, co-opting European elites to lead and fill their memberships.⁷⁶ The UFDW gathers intelligence via E2E diplomacy, with officials and agents in diplomatic roles building relationships with foreign politicians and influential overseas Chinese to influence policies, undermine opposition and promote CCP interests globally.⁷⁷ A December 2020 data leak exposed nearly two million CCP members infiltrating major global companies, banks, media, universities and government agencies, including consulates in Shanghai, via a state-run recruitment agency.⁷⁸ An Australian investigation also found CCP members working in consulates of India, Australia, the US, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, New Zealand, Italy and South Africa.⁷⁹ BGY/G (Blue-Gold-Yellow-Green) is a covert Chinese intelligence strategy exploiting global elites' vulnerabilities to coerce loyalty to the CCP. It uses blue for cyber operations, gold for financial inducements, yellow for sex, gambling, drugs, and green for health services. The potential targets include influential figures in politics, business, media, entertainment, academia and internet celebrities.⁸⁰

Since 2007, the PLA has sponsored 2,500 military scientists abroad to enhance global research ties, employing the strategy of 'Picking flowers in foreign lands to make honey in China' to advance military technology.⁸¹ China has enlisted numerous ex-British military pilots to train its armed forces in countering Western aircraft and helicopters.⁸² Beyond Gwadar and Hambantota ports, China's military diplomacy presence in Asia is evident in several strategic locations to include Afghanistan (mountain brigade setting,⁸³ Afghan soldiers training, Wakhan corridor,⁸⁴ and unconfirmed report at Bagram airbase),⁸⁵ Bangladesh (submarine base in Cox's Bazar⁸⁶ and submarine training in Bay of Bengal),⁸⁷ Pakistan (Tharparkar, Sindh⁸⁸ and Gilgit-Baltistan)⁸⁹ and Maldives (lease of Island)⁹⁰. With plans to produce fighter jets, navigation systems and other military hardware jointly in SEZ under China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China is trying to

convert the connectivity BRI project into military ambition. With Pakistan, China has a 'one-window operation' wherein being its largest arms supplier, China leverages its economic and military ties with Pakistan. The Pakistan civilian government generally treads carefully to avoid upsetting both Beijing and its influential military by balancing economic and military relations.⁹¹

Exchange Diplomacy

Since the early 21st century, China has pursued robust exchange diplomacy to cultivate personal relationships and shape global narratives through public support. These grassroots 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.⁹²

Exchange diplomacy covertly mobilises Chinese citizens and pro-Chinese foreigners abroad for intelligence operations via political affiliations, sister-city ties, education and tourism. China deploys substantial financial resources, surplus capital and spending power to project its image globally, leveraging outbound movements to foster foreign cooperation. The BRI integrates financial strength with exchange diplomacy for promoting China as an educational and tourist hub, while using scholarships and aid to manage criticism. Chinese intelligence effectively cultivates students and educators for influence and espionage through educational exchanges and overseas deployments. US intelligence has already warned that China is using student spies to steal secrets.⁹³ Leaked documents from China show how authorities use students in the BRI and for citizen diplomacy. The programme uses overseas students and manages the associations under its UFDW, through the Central Committee.⁹⁴

China initiated Sister Cities, or City Diplomacy, in 1973 to enhance people-to-people contact. Following Xi Jinping's rise and the BRI project's launch, new agreements, especially with BRI countries have surged. Currently, out of around 2,600 sister cities, over 700 are part of the BRI. Under this agreement, commercial, cultural and social ties at the municipal level and with business leaders are strengthened. China also views sister cities as a means to defuse tensions, reverse negative stereotypes and push more favourable views of China.⁹⁵ As of 2018, China has a sister city agreement with 49 cities in South Asia which also includes 13 Indian cities.⁹⁶

With top institutions and robust scholarship schemes, China's inbound and outbound education has surged with international student enrollment increasing by about 420 per cent from 2002 to 2016.⁹⁷ According to the Center

for China and Globalization, over 1.02 million Chinese tertiary students were studying abroad in 2021, solidifying China's status as the world's largest source of overseas students. Throughout the 2022–23 academic year, China continued to lead as the top sender of international students, maintaining a strong presence in the most popular study destinations worldwide.⁹⁸ As the largest exporter of students, China financially supports many European universities. Chinese intelligence agencies exploit both Chinese and foreign students for influence and espionage and the US intelligence have already warned about student spies stealing secrets.⁹⁹ China is also trying to establish close relationship with the educationists to strengthen education diplomacy by organising their trip to China.¹⁰⁰ India's prominence as a higher education destination for South Asian students has been overshadowed by China. Through education, China is building close ties with future leaders of neighbouring countries, offering fellowships to influential young scholars and students within Lutyens and powerful circles.¹⁰¹ China's Thousand Talents Plan (TTP) launched in 2008, recruits high-level scientists and talents from abroad to reverse brain drain and build an innovation-led economy.¹⁰²

In 2018, China emerged as the top source of global travellers. The spending power of the Chinese is approximately four times more than the combined average of other countries.¹⁰³ In 2018, China ranked second globally in travel and tourism GDP contribution and first in employee contribution. By 2028, it is projected to surpass US spending.¹⁰⁴ China controls outbound tourism to target tourism-dependent economies and also uses foreign fascination with China for visa control.

Chinese New Laws

China has enacted laws like the Data Security Law (2021), Personal Information Protection Law (2021) and Cyber Security Law (2017) to bolster public diplomacy and secure cooperation from citizens, diaspora and foreign entities. These laws extend extraterritorially and challenge global freedom of expression.

ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to sharing geographic boundaries, possessing rich cultural heritage, same independence periods, both India and China are fast-growing economies with availability of cheap labour, large populations and significant diaspora. In South Asia, India has an edge over China in public diplomacy due to its strategic location, historical ties, demographic trends,

projected economic growth, cultural affinity and the largest English-speaking population. However, India hasn't fully leveraged its public diplomacy for HUMINT and lags behind China. To counter Chinese influence in South Asia, it is crucial to analyse their growing presence and recommend measures to counter their HUMINT activities, while learning from Chinese best practices to enhance our capabilities. Post COVID-19, China faces falling arms exports, declining foreign investment, protests against nationals/assets in foreign countries and a struggling BRI. Conversely, India sees rising arms exports, positive sentiments and increasing foreign investment. With 3.5 per cent of global GDP, India is now the 5th largest economy and is projected to be the 3rd largest by 2029. A July 2022 Bloomberg survey predicted a zero per cent risk of recession in India.¹⁰⁵ India needs a comprehensive, integrated mechanism to leverage its inherent capabilities and public diplomacy opportunities.

Cultural Diplomacy

Mandarin is the highest-paid language in India¹⁰⁶ and Nepal; Pakistan and Sri Lanka are actively promoting it. Indian students should learn Chinese social structures, language, politics and religion, but to avoid CCP influence, Taiwan Education Centres (TECs) should replace CIs/CCs. This approach counters Chinese leadership's aggressiveness, while maintaining respect for Chinese culture. TEC provides an authentic learning experience, as Taiwan has safeguarded its cultural heritage without experiencing upheavals like the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

Several CIs/CCs have been closed globally, due to non-educational activities. In July 2020, India began reviewing local CI chapters for security reasons. It is recommended to control the establishment of new CIs/CCs in India and review existing ones, including MoUs between Indian and Chinese universities. Efforts should focus on the self-reliance of universities and reducing foreign funding with ulterior motives. A Task Force should monitor and control CIs/CCs, CSSA, CAIFC and UFWD activities in universities, MNCs and the film industry. India should create an organisation to coordinate Indian student activities abroad and monitor Chinese activities in foreign universities. While no traces of Operation Fox Hunt, Overseas Police Stations, Overseas Chinese Assistance Centres, or black sites have been found in India, monitoring these in neighbouring countries and enhancing repatriation capabilities is crucial.

India's influential diaspora, unlike China's, maintains strong ties to its heritage. Figures like Rishi Sunak and Kamala Harris exemplify their

global impact. However, India has not fully leveraged these connections for global leadership. To reclaim intellectual prominence, India should enhance cultural diplomacy with global centres showcasing its diverse culture, languages, arts and religious heritage for promoting itself as *Vishwaguru*. Recent successes include the inclusion of Indian epics in Saudi Arabia's curriculum. These centres can highlight ancient Indian achievements and promote Hindi, Sanskrit and yoga. Strengthening ties with South Asian neighbours is vital. An organisation like China's UFWDC can coordinate diaspora activities to bolster India's global presence, counter Chinese influence and strategically settle Indians worldwide. Internally, India should decolonise its education system to instill pride in its history, culture and knowledge systems, aligning with the NEP 2020 vision of fostering Indian values and achieving *Vishwaguru* status.

India's ambitions in foreign policy have surpassed its current capacity and are further compounded by understaffing/declining interest among top UPSC candidates for the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) cadre. India ranks 11th globally in diplomatic networks, behind several smaller nations. To enhance its standing in the Global Diplomacy Index, India should reform the terms and conditions of the IFS cadre to attract top talent and expand its cadre in the future.

A holistic effort by India is crucial to expanding global cultural diplomacy through religion. Strengthening bonds with neighbouring countries via Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain connections can foster religious tourism and showcase India as the cradle of these religions. Initiatives like using Nepalese shaligram stones for idols of Ram and Sita, the Ayodhya to Janakpur railway link, and accepting Janakpur's gift of Shiv Dhanush will bolster ties with Nepal. Renaming Dubai's Al Minhad area to 'Hind City' and opening Abu Dhabi's first Hindu temple are significant strides in Indian cultural diplomacy. India should leverage its Buddhist heritage to project soft power by restoring sites like Nalanda and improving Buddhist circuit infrastructure. Establishing a central university in Ladakh with a Centre for Buddhist Studies, inaugurating Kushinagar International Airport, and launching the new Nalanda University campus counter China's efforts to sinicize Buddhism.

To counter China's suppression of Tibetan culture, India must align with Tibetans globally to promote Tibetan Buddhism under the Dalai Lama and educate Indians about Tibetan culture. This will strengthen India's stance on China and mobilise support against Chinese policies in Tibet. India should expand Tibetology education to the broader populace and international students through nationwide Tibetology institutes. Integrating the VIKAS

battalion with local Buddhist communities along the India–China border via the Vibrant Village Programme will counter China’s ‘Dual Use Village’ strategy. Collaboratively with the Tibetan government in exile, India should gather comprehensive data on Tibetans in Tibet to safeguard the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan administration from Chinese infiltrators seeking intelligence. With global attention on countering China, India should re-evaluate its Tibet policy and leverage the Dalai Lama as a strategic asset.

Informational Diplomacy

India must engage in informational diplomacy by cultivating ties with foreign media and publishers to enhance positive coverage and counteract negative criticism. China has influenced Indian media through funding or payments for pro-China content. Government agencies should maintain a list of media influenced by China and monitor them closely to take necessary action, if needed. Unlike advanced nations, South Asian countries face constraints in information diplomacy due to inadequate communication infrastructure. Meanwhile, Chinese intelligence operations are rapidly expanding in the region. To counter China’s dominance in 5G technology, India must develop affordable 5G and 6G solutions for domestic use and export across South Asia.

India must establish a robust cyber policy to monitor theft, ensure secure data handling, and enforce legal actions. Intelligence agencies must scrutinise Chinese funding of start-ups for potential data risks. Developing offensive and defensive cyber capabilities is crucial for national security. Like China, India should align MNCs and the film industry to promote its narrative and prevent anti-India content. Post-Galwan, banning Chinese apps involved in espionage should continue, with similar measures against other suspect Chinese firms. Indian tech firms should step up to fill these gaps, supported by initiatives like BharOS and integrating NavIC into domestic smartphones to boost local communication tech.

Financial Diplomacy

In South Asia, China dominates as the largest foreign investor, with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives facing severe financial threats and debt traps. Most economies in the region, including Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh are heavily reliant on Chinese aid and are grappling with economic crises exacerbated by COVID-19 and the Russia–Ukraine conflict. China’s economic downturn has led to challenges in BRI implementation and decreased appeal as an investment destination, prompting high-net-worth-

individuals (HNWIs) and investors to exit. To reduce economic dependence on China, India and like-minded countries can explore alternatives such as the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), Build Back Better World (B3W) and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) initiatives. India should minimise foreign direct investment (FDI) from China due to data security risks, promote 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan', and consider replacing the dollar with the rupee for direct trade. Efforts are needed to retain and attract HNWIs and skilled Indians through favourable policies and measures to bolster India's economic resilience and independence.

Under debt diplomacy, China has strategically positioned itself at crucial South Asian chokepoints and has integrated military dimensions into various projects. Monitoring mechanisms are crucial to track China's future activities in these strategic locations. Increasing Pakistani discontent has resulted in heightened attacks on Chinese nationals/assets, presenting India an opportunity to leverage tensions between locals and Chinese workers on CPEC projects, as well as pro-freedom movements in Balochistan and Sindh. China's dominance in Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Indo-Pacific necessitates India's development and enhancement of Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) to monitor IUU fishing and associated intelligence activities in South Asia.

E2E Diplomacy

China has wielded extensive influence through its E2E diplomacy, cultivating global leaders and occupying key positions in international organisations. The muted response from Islamic nations, including Pakistan and the Taliban, to the plight of Uighur Muslims underscores China's diplomatic success. This strategy involves forging strong ties with both civilian and military leaders worldwide, with a notable presence in all South Asian countries except Bhutan. To counter China's encirclement, India must enhance its own E2E diplomacy by fostering relations with political, military and strategic leaders in South Asia and beyond. Increasing Indian representation in global organisations, expanding diplomatic footprints, sharing intelligence and infrastructure, joint research initiatives, military exports and bolstering the IFS cadre abroad are essential steps to mitigate Chinese influence.

Exchange Diplomacy

With the realisation of public support for its Middle Kingdom Dream, China has aggressively leveraged BRI to pursue exchange diplomacy through

diaspora, education, tourism and sister city arrangements for promoting grassroots ties between the Chinese and foreign populations/diasporas. While India holds an advantage in South Asia, it has yet to fully capitalise on exchange diplomacy. To harness the expertise of overseas Indians and integrate diasporas, India can adopt China's model of overseas expert advisory committees. These committees can also aid in monitoring Chinese intelligence activities through diasporas, students and tourism-related institutions in India and abroad. A policy initiative on formal strategic diaspora protection and rehabilitation, better Doordarshan and All India Radio coverage, easing travel and residency, single-window clearances for diaspora investments and making Aadhaar cards available for the diaspora are some of the measures which can establish identities and strengthen linkages.

India should develop comprehensive educational policies to support talented students domestically and abroad, coordinate educational activities through student organisations, and utilise Indian students as cultural ambassadors. By improving the quality of education and enhancing its Global Innovation Index rankings, India can attract young talent, educators and future leaders globally to advocate for Indian policies and shape positive perceptions of India. These educational initiatives can also counter Chinese influence in Indian universities, which is often facilitated through funding and organisations like UFWDC/CSSA.

China is poised to dominate global tourism by 2030, with Chinese tourists spending significantly above the global average. Using tourism as an economic tool for public diplomacy, China influences nations dependent on tourism by controlling Chinese travel and visa issuance. Chinese HUMINT operations in the Buddhist circuit have helped China to infiltrate Buddhist communities and counter the influence of the Dalai Lama in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. India can emulate China's approach by enhancing tourism infrastructure to support intelligence activities, focusing on circuits like Buddhist, Jain, Ramayana and Sikh, ensuring necessary amenities, interpreters and public awareness. Promoting affordable healthcare for medical tourism can further enhance intelligence capabilities. India has allocated Rs 4,800 crore for the Vibrant Villages Programme to develop northern border villages and HUMINT operations along the border can be planned with tourism, economic growth and territorial assertion. As India's economy expands, outbound tourism will increase; enhancing diplomatic leverage and bolstering HUMINT capabilities through public diplomacy can be planned. Establishing sister-city partnerships can further strengthen international ties and facilitate the monitoring of Chinese activities.

A comprehensive set of new laws, rules and regulations is required to strengthen and synergise the legal basis for India's security activities by seeking cooperation/assistance/obligation from a wide range of people, groups, MNCs, NGOs, organisations, etc., both within India and abroad.

CONCLUSION

China is rapidly advancing towards fulfilling its need for rejuvenating its global image and reclaiming its position on the world stage. Despite possessing the world's largest standing army, China has achieved significant success in expanding its HUMINT footprint globally through effective public diplomacy, without engaging in direct military conflict. In contrast, India, which has comparable or even greater potential for public diplomacy particularly in South Asia, appears to be significantly lagging behind China in this regard. The future challenge posed by China is expected to escalate substantially, necessitating a comprehensive government approach to effectively counter its growing dominance, not only in India but also globally. The current decline in China's influence and the upward trajectory of India in terms of demography, economy and global perception present an opportune window to recalibrate Indian policies. This recalibration should aim to eliminate the expanding Chinese HUMINT presence in India and around the world through systematic and strategic actions.

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