

Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 737
OCTOBER 2024

Chinese Global Media Strategies and Their Footprints in South Asia

DCS Mayal

Disruptive communication technologies are helping reshape global dynamics by empowering marginalised populations and prioritising public opinion over traditional military hard power. At the same time, however, these technologies are also creating opportunities for groups to clandestinely and remotely influence public sentiment and monitor, control, and assert their preferred narratives. This brief discusses the case of China, which has been working since the beginning of the 21st century to leverage new and emerging technologies in its quest for global supremacy.

“In today’s global information age, victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins.”

- John Arquilla, American political scientist¹

China has departed from Deng Xiaoping’s “hide your strength, bide your time” (韬光养晦; tāoguāngyǎnghuì) approach² and is adopting assertive media policies to project itself domestically and to the world. This change was prompted by events like the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak in 2003.³ In 2021, President Xi Jinping urged Chinese state media to strengthen their propaganda efforts and tailor precise communication methods to influence foreign audiences.⁴

China’s state-owned media outlets include print, digital, and social media properties in at least 12 languages and have a global reach.^a Chinese investments in foreign media also include cultural and human investment in the form of language specialists, support for researchers to conduct fieldwork, and staffing its embassies not only with the typical foreign service personnel but also Communist Party of China (CCP) officials and scholars whose tasks include media work.⁵

Chinese tools to expand global influence include the expansion of state-owned media; the direct purchase of, or occasional content-sharing agreements with, foreign media;^b increased diplomatic engagement; the promotion of media partnerships; sponsoring influencers; and misrepresenting official commentary.⁶ These are aimed at cultivating and upholding incentives that encourage foreign governments, the political elites, journalists, opinion makers, and civil society to accept preferred narratives and avoid criticising China’s conduct. China employs a carrot-and-stick approach to co-opt influential individual political elites, sub-national groups, and journalists for the amplification of pro-China narratives by incentivising them with funded trainings, financial rewards, prestigious positions, and credentials from reputable Chinese institutions.⁷

a Beijing’s highest profile outlets for foreign audiences are China Central Television (CGTN), China Daily, China Radio International (CRI), Xinhua, and China News Service (CNS). Xinhua, the Chinese official state news agency, launched 40 new foreign bureaus between 2009 and 2011, reaching a total of 162 in 2017; as of August 2021, it maintained 181 bureaus in 142 countries and regions. The CCP’s International Liaison Department (ILD) focuses on engaging ruling party members globally to promote Beijing’s governance and economic strategies. Globally, ILD has ties with more than 600 political entities in over 160 countries. See: <https://www.state.gov/how-the-peoples-republic-of-china-seeks-to-reshape-the-global-information-environment/>

b Chinese propaganda outlets have made payments to countries’ newspapers to publish inserts that are designed to look like real news articles but often contain a pro-Beijing spin on contemporary news events. See: <https://www.state.gov/how-the-peoples-republic-of-china-seeks-to-reshape-the-global-information-environment/>

China's use of the media fraternity for espionage and influence operations is highlighted in two separate incidents in September 2019, in New Delhi^c and Brussels.^{d,8}

At the same time, China discourages adverse reporting through warnings, legal threats, visa denials, deportations, arrests, and transnational repression—to target CCP dissenters, China labels individuals as “economic fugitives”⁹ and works with the Interpol,¹⁰ overseas Chinese police stations,¹¹ and Overseas Chinese Assistance Centres¹² to ensure their repatriation on charges of corruption. Chinese transnational repression extends to surveilling Uyghurs abroad. In 2021, the Uyghur Human Rights Project, an advocacy group based in Washington, had counted 395 cases of Uyghurs being sent to China since 1997.^{e,13}

China also sponsors student activism abroad and employs intelligence operatives for intimidation.¹⁴ Additionally, Chinese diplomats actively pressure media practitioners and academic institutions in their host countries to adhere to desired narratives. A China Scholar Research Experience Survey (CSRES) in 2018 of 562 scholars revealed that nine percent of respondents had been cautioned or interviewed by Chinese authorities, 26 percent faced restrictions on their archival research, and 5 percent encountered visa issues.¹⁵ CPC also targets international reporters and detains foreign journalists working in China.¹⁶ Domestically, reporters providing unfavourable content to foreign media face harassment, detention, or imprisonment.

c The arrest of journalist Rajeev Sharma for espionage on behalf of China.

d The ongoing investigation of Fraser Cameron, Head of Brussels-based EU Asia Centre, for leaking information to China.

e Between 1997 and 2022, Beijing's cyberspace authorities initiated cyberattacks and threatened the families of more than 5,500 overseas Uyghurs. In addition, out of 1,150 Uyghurs detained by Asian and African countries from 1997 to January 2022, 424 Uyghurs were repatriated to China. See: Bradley Jardine, “Great Wall of Steel: China's Global Campaign to Suppress the Uyghurs,” WoodrowWilson Center, Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, March 2022.

The Information Support Force (ISF), established in April 2024 after the Strategic Support Force was disbanded, is based on Xi's 'wǎngluòxìnxīxìtǒng' [网络信息体系] which, loosely translated, refers to 'internet information system'.¹⁷ Although there is no concrete definition of this term, non-Chinese analysts suggest that it means that the forces need to be modernised and informationalised to fight the wars of the modern era, with due recognition to cyberspace as a separate domain of modern warfighting, where cyber forces no longer operate as a support arm.¹⁸ Chinese state media has billed the ISF a pillar of a modern military service and an important step in expediting the modernisation of national defence capabilities.¹⁹

In contrast to the United States (US)-led view of open and interconnected cyberspace, China emphasises cyber sovereignty, wherein nations have the right to shape their internet systems to establish authoritarian digital norms. To achieve this objective, China has increasingly pushed the agenda of standards-setting organisations, such as the International Organization for Standardization, the International Electrotechnical Commission, and the International Telecommunication Union, to influence standards related to information technology.²⁰ China also uses high-level summits and agreements to reinforce its narratives.²¹

China's media strategy aims to solicit support for its policy positions on various issues such as Tibetan autonomy, the Uyghurs, the Taiwan question, the Dalai Lama, Hong Kong, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and minimise negative reporting on allegations of human rights, corruption, opaque loan conditions, and debt traps.²² The Chinese approach has five primary elements: leveraging propaganda, misinformation and censorship; promoting digital authoritarianism; using international organisations and bilateral partnerships; pairing co-optation and pressure; and exercising control of Chinese-language media.²³ These factors collectively empower Beijing to shape the global information landscape and promote misleading or biased narratives while stifling critical perspectives.

Specific Media Strategies

Augmenting China's media capabilities is the *qingbao*^f approach²⁴ of data collection from the open domain by using sophisticated techniques of library science.²⁵ Recent advancements in Big Data and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology have empowered China to harness the information domain. Through tech giants like Huawei and ZTE, China engages in both overt and covert digital data collection and management, shaping data processing and generating new narratives. By using media convergence, AI, and immersive technologies—such as e-commerce, virtual reality, and gaming apps—China influences how individuals perceive reality and interact with information. With its vast databases and digitalisation tools, China manipulates historical records and directs global audiences towards its curated data. This trend is corroborated by instances like the Cambridge University Press and Springer Nature withholding content in 2017 in compliance with China's requests for censorship.²⁶

China also uses manipulative tactics such as bots, content farming, and trolls on social media platforms to amplify pro-China content and suppress anti-China voices. China has also complicated online navigation by flooding search engine results and hashtag searches.²⁷ In 2020, Twitter shut down more than 170,000 accounts that were linked to the Chinese government.²⁸ China also uses online and real-world intimidation tactics to silence dissent, encourage self-censorship, and blur the boundary between domestic and foreign information control.^{g,29}

China's 'three warfares strategy', which combines psychological, media, and legal warfare,³⁰ can be linked to its cartographic aggression through the manipulation of maps to support its territorial claims. China has been known to use psychological tricks, media sway, and legal justifications to support its territorial claims, and these techniques are frequently depicted on maps.³¹ For example, China is renaming disputed areas like the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Arunachal Pradesh (India) to reinforce its territorial claims and provide evidence in potential sovereignty disputes. China has also coerced

f The word *qingbao* in Chinese means both 'intelligence' and 'information', and it neatly encapsulates the unique nature and breadth of China's vast spying system, which combines formal and informal techniques, both overt and covert, to obtain new intelligence. There is often a fine line between theft and the voluntary transfer of know-how, and China has been pushing the latter to its limit. Over the years, the CCP has built a comprehensive system for spotting and acquiring foreign technologies by multiple means.

g In comparing Chinese and Russian digital threats, Christopher Krebs said, "When we think about Russia, they're trying to disrupt the system, and China is trying to manipulate the system, so that requires us to take different approaches." See: <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2019/03/china-may-be-biggest-hacking-social-media-threat-to-u-s/>

multinational corporations^h to align with its geopolitical goals of depicting disputed areas as Chinese territory, making examples of companies that did not align with their preferred narratives.³² China's influence extends to sports^{i,33} and Hollywood,^{j,34} where stakeholders conform to unwritten Chinese dictates and avoid actions that may upset China.

Beijing also employs domestic influencers, particularly from ethnic minorities, to produce YouTube content aimed at obscuring human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet. These influencers are managed by Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs), which were initiated in 2018; by 2020, these had grown in number to about 28,000 registered MCNs aimed at disseminating Beijing's narratives.³⁵

Beijing has also increased control over Chinese-language media globally, which provide cheap or free content in Chinese-language spaces.³⁶ China adopts multiple mechanisms to make Chinese-language content available abroad and amplify positive messaging around Beijing and ensure that disinformation remains unchallenged.³⁷ China also employs harassment as a tactic to suppress criticism in overseas Chinese-language media by targeting family members or staff in China and undertaking economic retaliation for negative narratives.³⁸ In addition, the popularity of WeChat and Weixin among Chinese speakers globally has enabled China to easily censor overseas discussions.

Recent Legislation

China has enacted a number of laws and regulations to bolster the legal framework for information campaigns and media strategies both domestically and internationally. These measures aim to secure cooperation from Chinese

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- h Examples include US clothes retailer Gap which faced uproar in social media and had to apologise after it sold T-shirts in Canada that depicted China without Taiwan as integral to it. French luxury brand Dior, had to extend its apology to China when a video appeared on China's Weibo platform showing an employee in front of a map of China that did not include Taiwan. Hotel chain Marriott, for its part, was the subject of anger on Chinese social media after conducting a customer survey that treated Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong as countries distinct from China. Since 2017, communication campaigns of companies that include Audi, Delta Airlines, Dolce & Gabbana, Lotte, MAC, Medtronic, Skoda, and Zara have been publicly criticised by China—often also sanctioned—even when the campaigns were not targeted at the Chinese market. Most of the companies had no choice but to apologise so as not to jeopardise their market position in China.
- i A tweet by Houston Rockets GM Daryl Morey in support of pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong unleashed retaliation from China that put the team and the entire NBA on notice. See: <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/09/768373843/analysis-the-long-arm-of-china-and-free-speech>
- j In several Hollywood films, references to Tibet, Taiwan, or Japan and negative scenes involving Chinese people have been removed. See: <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3023568/nine-films-show-how-china-influences-hollywood-iron-man-3>). The 2019 film Abominable also included a scene showing the “nine-dash line”, subtly endorsing Beijing's South China Sea claims. See: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/15/asia/vietnam-abominable-south-china-sea-intl-hnk/index.html>

citizens in the mainland, Chinese diasporic communities, foreign entities, and organisations. Recent laws include the Data Security Law (2021), Personal Information Protection Law (2021), Cyber Security Law (2017), and Copyright Law (2021). The extended extraterritorial reach of these laws poses hurdles to freedom of expression globally. The broad and ambiguous China National Security Law in Hong Kong criminalises dissent against both Chinese and Hong Kong authorities, endangering individuals even in transit or in extradition-bound nations.³⁹ The United Front Work Department (UFW) and the Ministry of State Security (MSS) have been observed to be collaborating at various levels both within China and abroad to suppress and threaten Chinese critics.⁴⁰

BRI Networks and Information Manipulation

The inauguration of the BRI in 2013 marked a pivotal moment in China's media strategy. Beijing seeks to monitor and potentially disrupt overseas criticism via infrastructure, mobile phones, and other network devices installed or produced by China. The integration of the Digital Silk Road (DSR) and the Space Information Corridor (SIC) with the BRI enabled China to harness vast streams of big data, supporting next-generation AI technologies. This integration also puts China in a position to monitor, govern, and potentially manipulate global communication, especially within BRI nations. As part of BRI infrastructure projects, Chinese tech giants are engaged in intelligence gathering, interference, and influence operations in the digital space.⁴¹ In 2018, the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA) held the Belt and Road Journalists Forum, which drew participants from almost 50 nations. In April 2019, China launched the Belt and Road News Network to disseminate favourable content, host fully funded workshops, and serve as an information hub for the BRI.⁴² Xinhua has also established cooperative arrangements with counterpart agencies of BRI countries, and MNCs are required to join the BRI or the China International Import Exhibition.⁴³ Beijing leverages the international forum to merge the BRI and the Global Development Initiative (GDI) with broader multilateral goals, including the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁴⁴

China aims to globalise its information environment through the distribution of cheap surveillance and censorship technologies^k as part of the BRI and

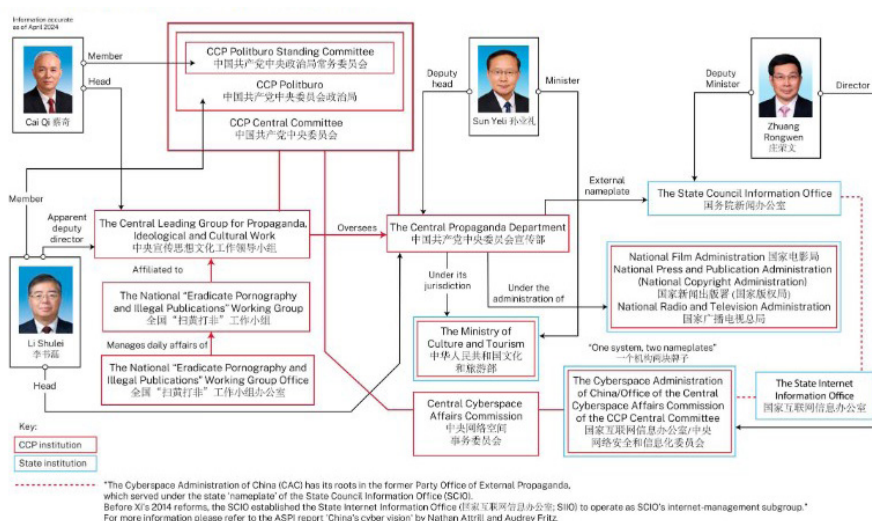
k Some Chinese devices contain inbuilt censorship capabilities for users outside China. Lithuania's National Cyber Security Centre found that Xiaomi phones had default censorship in place for over 449 phrases, including "Free Tibet" and "Taiwan independence". Interestingly, this feature is inactive in Xiaomi phones supplied to Europe but can be remotely activated. See: <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/lithuania-says-throw-away-chinese-phones-due-censorship-concerns-2021-09-21/>

smart/safe cities initiatives. In parallel, China advances international norms that align with the information control technologies that it exports, as other countries' use of these technologies serves to normalise Chinese policies.⁴⁵

The Chinese Propaganda Organisation

China's propaganda system comprises multiple agencies from both the CCP and the state. The Central Leading Group for Propaganda, Ideological and Cultural Work is the CCP authority that oversees all propaganda work. Figure 1 depicts the key organisations responsible for propaganda work.

Figure 1: The Chinese Propaganda Organisation



Source: ASPI⁴⁶

A strategically positioned South Asia on the western periphery of China that holds almost a quarter of the world population in just 3.5 percent of the global landmass provides an ideal opportunity for China's westward expansion. The volatile, complex, and underdeveloped contexts of South Asia—which, despite having the largest youth population, is also affected by high levels of corruption and illiteracy—also provides China with the perfect opportunity through the BRI to propel its future growth and establish control over the region.

Chinese Media in South Asia

In South Asian countries, China's media campaigns have been propagated mainly through traditional Chinese state-owned media, i.e., radio, television, and print.⁴⁷ The presence of Chinese state-owned media is evident in all South Asian countries, with the exception of the Maldives. China has established a number of media houses and employed journalists for undertaking their propaganda campaigns through cultural and linguistic trainings and free China tours. The China Foreign Ministry's Chinese Public Diplomacy Association (CPDA), an organisation set up in 2012, offers journalism fellowships for practitioners from India, Pakistan, and Nepal; Indian news media such as the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS), Jansatta, and the Indian Express participated in the inaugural programme in 2016.⁴⁸

Xinhua has content-sharing agreements with outlets in Bangladesh and India, among others. The pressing needs of South Asia, coupled with the vast opportunities that China provides for utilising cheap and advanced technologies via the BRI, have prompted a shift in China's media strategies, resulting in country-specific Chinese dual-use media cooperation and influence in countries of South Asia.

Bangladesh

China has signed a framework agreement with Bangladesh to fund the development of the country's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure. Two key developments that would benefit from this are the 'Modernization of Telecommunication Network for Digital Connectivity' and the 'Development of ICT Intra-Network for Bangladesh Government Phase-III' (Info Sarker-3 project).⁴⁹

Nepal

Following the India-China clashes in Galwan, Nepal, on Chinese insistence, rekindled a longstanding cartographic dispute with India and released a new political map that marked the Indian territories of Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura as Nepalese territories.⁵⁰ Subsequently, media campaigns were undertaken in which Nepal's FM radio stations close to the border with India initiated 'radio warfare' to endorse Kathmandu's claim; India has already termed these claims as "artificial enlargement" and "untenable".⁵¹ On 3 May 2024, Nepal announced the printing of a new NPR 100 currency note with

a map of Nepal that includes the contested territories.⁵² Chinese company Huawei has set up mobile telephone networks in Nepal, and ZTE has upgraded Nepal Telecom's nationwide mobile phone capacity.⁵³ In September 2023, Huawei, along with Mobile World, installed the world's highest terrestrial 5G bases station on the Tibet side to allow internet access to mountaineers and researchers.⁵⁴

Maldives

In the Maldives, companies such as Ooredoo⁵⁵ and Dhiraagu⁵⁶ have launched 5G networks in which China-based Huawei is the main 5G network equipment supplier. These Chinese-manufactured communication equipment provide the option of a backdoor that would allow unauthorised access to collect data through mobile communication.

Pakistan

Pakistan was the inaugural foreign user of China's BeiDou GPS system, underlining a bilateral agreement to enhance collaboration in satellite navigation systems.⁵⁷ During the Galwan standoff, China solicited Pakistan's support to orchestrate a favourable narrative. A cyber security firm in Kochi uncovered multiple fake Twitter and Telegram accounts originating from Pakistan that were disseminating fabricated news about the Ladakh standoff.⁵⁸ China and Pakistan have introduced initiatives such as the CPEC Rapid Response Information Network and are planning the China-Pakistan Media Corridor (CPMC) to enhance collaboration in countering disinformation.⁵⁹

India

On four different occasions since 2017, China has unilaterally changed the names of 62 locations in Arunachal Pradesh to bolster its claims on the Indian territory.⁶⁰ In 2020, Chinese telecom company Xiaomi showed Arunachal Pradesh as a part of India on Xiaomi Maps.⁶¹ China is also investing time and effort on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funding in India. The ambiguities in the use of CSR funds by Chinese companies have led to concerns in Indian civil society and strategic communities. It is believed that Xiaomi spends its CSR funds on creating a pro-China environment in India, especially in tech cities.⁶² Besides compromising on communication networks, Huawei is also believed to be engaging in covert influence operations in India.⁶³ The

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company has been targeting large investments as part of its CSR activities across sectors. Huawei has also won multiple cases and maintains a large team of lawyers and top advocates in India. On 7 October 2020, China threatened Indian media regarding its coverage of Taiwan National Day (October 10) and the activities of Taiwanese leaders.⁶⁴

Post-fellowship writings by Indian journalists have favoured China, criticising India's decisions to ban Chinese apps and supporting China during the Doklam standoff.⁶⁵ Simultaneously, the security establishment found that the Chinese-owned UC Browser was filtering news on Android handsets in India to shape perceptions and outcomes.⁶⁶ Even YouTube was automatically deleting comments that contained certain Chinese-language phrases related to the criticism of the CCP.⁶⁷ A Tamil broadcast of the China Radio International (CRI) regularly promotes the Chinese viewpoint to India's Tamil-speaking populace and openly critiques the Indian Army's actions along the Line of Actual Control LAC, alleging territorial ambitions conflicting with Indian interests.⁶⁸

Due to the escalating media risks posed by Chinese firms, India has banned 321 apps at the time of writing this brief. However, numerous companies with vague privacy policies that enable unauthorised access to user data persist locally.⁶⁹ In December 2021, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) lodged a complaint in Hyderabad based on ongoing investigations into Chinese loan app frauds, which trapped individuals with high interest rates and data threats.⁷⁰ In May 2022, the Border Security Force (BSF) arrested Junwei Han, a Chinese spy, near the West Bengal border, who admitted to taking 1,300 Indian SIM cards to China for financial fraud.⁷¹ A Shenzhen-based tech firm affiliated with the Chinese government and the CCP monitor over 10,000 influential Indian entities, including those in administration, sports, religion, and those involved in various crimes.⁷² China has also recruited Indian journalists for intelligence gathering.¹ According to reports, the CCP is enlisting spies to fabricate business profiles on LinkedIn, with the aim of identifying and extracting state secrets from targets by enticing former government and private-sector employees with lucrative business prospects.⁷³

Massive Chinese investments have been made in India's top three news aggregators, i.e., Dailyhunt, NewsDog, and UCWeb. These platforms, which are owned by China, pose a threat to India's internal stability and peace due to their extensive focus and reach in local languages, including regional dialects.⁷⁴

¹ In a notable case, on 19 September 2020, Delhi Police apprehended veteran freelance journalist Rajeev Sharma for sharing sensitive details of India's border strategy with Chinese intelligence agencies. See: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/arrested-scribe-rajeev-sharma-was-passing-info-on-border-strategy-to-chinese-intelligence-police/article32648112.ece>

Chinese Media in South Asia

In recent years, China has pursued a strategy of exerting influence in India's biggest film industry, based in Mumbai and called Bollywood, through co-productions. To expedite Chinese involvement in film co-productions, China convened the China-India Film Co-Production Dialogue during the Beijing International Film Festival 2019, inviting prominent figures from the Indian film industry. The CCP has also established a dedicated industry body, led by an Indian lobbyist, to engage with Bollywood. Previously, the CCP, through entities like the China Film Association and the China Federation of Literary and Art Circle, formed groups like the India-China Film Society.⁷⁵ Through these endeavours, China is seeking to shape Bollywood narratives by collaborating closely with stakeholders, endorsing Indian actors, fabricating success data for Indian films in China, and acquiring Indian music and video platforms.

Indeed, Chinese influence operations in films have been systematic yet subtle. In certain instances, prominent individuals in film regulatory bodies have ensured that Chinese interests are well represented in Bollywood.^m In April 2016, Xiaomi led a US\$25-million investment in Hungama Digital Media Entertainment. Chinese firms are also dominating all leading music and video platforms in India; Chinese internet giant Tencent invested over US\$115 million in 2018 in Gaana, the largest Indian commercial music streaming service. China has also begun venturing into the domain of Indian broadcasting.⁷⁶ Relying too heavily on the Chinese market for Bollywood success could subject Indian films to Chinese censorship, compromising freedom of expression.


Chinese media tactics extend to instigating turmoil abroad by using money-laundering tactics to dissuade companies from relocating out of China. Some reported instances include a labour protest in December 2020 led by a local communist leader in response to Apple's plan to manufacture iPhones in Kolar, Karnataka and the closure of India's biggest copper manufacturing factory, Sterlite Copper Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu in 2018, to benefit China.⁷⁷

To be sure, Chinese investment in India remains modest compared to those in other South Asian or BRI nations; its impact, however, is high. Despite India not joining the BRI, China has been able to make inroads into the Indian market through the tech market, investing in startups, and infiltrating the online space through smartphones and apps. Chinese investors have injected around US\$4 billion into Indian startups, with 18 out of India's 30 unicorns being Chinese-funded as of March 2020.⁷⁸ The BRI includes Chinese products and standards, both virtual and physical, and though India may have sidestepped the physical corridor, it appears to have unwittingly signed up for the virtual corridor.

m In one such case, producers of the film *Rockstar* had to blur a flag with "Free Tibet" written on it. See: <https://archive.nytimes.com/india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/16/bollywood-film-rockstar-disappoints-tibetan-youth/>

China has employed various techniques to ensure the co-option of foreign audiences towards their preferred narratives. China appears to have become proficient in integrating technology with public opinion and shaping the global information environment in its favour.

The unchecked manipulation of the information environment by China may lead to digital authoritarianism and create biases and gaps, which could result in nations prioritising Beijing's interests over their own economic and security concerns. The platform provided by BRI for the exponential expansion of Chinese media capabilities, coupled with the extension of Chinese law beyond its territorial boundaries, has further expanded China's footprint globally.

China has visibly increased its dual-use media clout in South Asia to solicit support for its sensitive policy positions and minimise negative reporting. To offset the inimical Chinese media strategy as an extra-regional power in South Asia, there is a need for taking cognisance of growing Chinese presence in the region and initiating timely steps to mitigate the spread of Chinese propaganda. 

Col (Dr) DCS Mayal (Retired) is Senior Fellow, Center for Land Warfare Studies; and Adjunct Faculty, Manipal Academy of Higher Education. Views expressed are personal.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org