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Global Ambassadors or Agents of Influence? How China's Diaspora Drives Xi Jinping's Geopolitical Ambitions

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SYNOPSIS

China's diaspora strategy under Xi Jinping has emerged as a crucial tool in advancing Beijing's geopolitical ambitions. As China's global influence grows, it has increasingly focused on engaging its vast overseas diaspora, not only for economic purposes but also as a key component of its soft power initiatives. Balancing the benefits of diaspora engagement with the potential backlash will be a critical challenge for Beijing.

COMMENTARY

China's [diaspora strategy](#) under [Xi Jinping](#) has emerged as a crucial tool in advancing Beijing's geopolitical ambitions. As China's global influence grows, it has increasingly focused on engaging its vast overseas diaspora, not only for economic purposes but also as a key component of its [soft power initiatives](#). Members of the [Chinese diaspora](#), previously viewed primarily as sources of financial and intellectual capital, are now being seen as [potential public diplomats](#). By leveraging the diaspora, China aims to, first, build a more [positive image](#) abroad and, to this end, is urging the diaspora to "[tell the Chinese story well](#)." Second, Beijing hopes the diaspora will help to counter negative perceptions associated with China's growing military and economic influence. Beijing's [diaspora mobilisation narratives](#) utilise symbolic resources, such as the "hundred years of humiliation" following the First Opium War and regional bonds, to promote pro-regime solidarity among Chinese living abroad.

The Evolution of China's Diaspora Strategy

China's approach to engaging its diaspora, known as *qiaowu gongzuo* (overseas Chinese work), has evolved significantly over the past few decades. In the early stages of China's reform and opening up in the late 1970s, the focus was primarily on attracting investment and technological know-how from the diaspora to fuel China's

economic growth. By the mid-1990s, the Chinese diaspora was contributing nearly two-thirds of all [foreign direct investment in China](#). This economic focus, however, began to shift in the early 2000s, when China's growing global ambitions required a more comprehensive approach to managing its overseas communities.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the Chinese diaspora has become integral to China's broader [national strategy](#), tied to the goals of the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation. Xi's administration has increasingly emphasised the role of the diaspora in enhancing China's soft power, projecting a favourable image of China abroad, and defending its geopolitical interests. This shift is evident in what [Leo Suryadinata](#) calls the [blurring of distinctions](#) between Chinese citizens overseas (*huaqiao*) and foreign citizens of Chinese descent (*huaren*) as Beijing seeks to strengthen ties with all individuals of Chinese heritage, regardless of their citizenship status.



Confucius Institute located within Lancaster University, United Kingdom. Confucius Institutes are one of the most visible manifestations of China's soft power strategy. *Image from Unsplash.*

Soft Power and the Chinese Diaspora

One of the most significant changes in China's diaspora policy under Xi has been the growing emphasis on public diplomacy. The Chinese government now views the diaspora as "[public diplomats](#)", capable of shaping global perceptions of China and promoting its strategic interests. This view is part of a broader effort to enhance China's soft power, a concept that encompasses cultural, ideological, and diplomatic influence.

[Confucius Institutes](#), which promote the Chinese language and culture, have been one of the most visible manifestations of China's soft power strategy. However, in recent years, Beijing's influence has extended beyond cultural diplomacy to include more [direct political engagement](#). Diaspora communities are increasingly being [mobilised](#) to participate in social movements, lobby for China's interests, and even engage in surveillance activities on behalf of the Chinese state. The integration of the Overseas

Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) into the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) [United Front Work Department \(UFWD\)](#) in 2018 underscored the central role the diaspora now plays in China's global strategy. To be sure, Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese associations have [proactively](#) engaged with China, recognising the benefits of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to establish institutionalised transnational interactions that facilitate cross-border flows of capital, goods, people, and information.

Geopolitical Ambitions and Diaspora Mobilisation

China's diaspora strategy is closely linked to its [geopolitical ambitions](#), particularly in regions where its interests are contested. In the context of Xinjiang, the Chinese diaspora has been mobilised to counter international criticism of Beijing's policies towards Uyghur Muslims. Overseas Chinese associations, often with backing from Chinese diplomatic missions, have been vocal in [defending](#) China's actions in Xinjiang.

The [politicisation of Chinese identity](#), however, has sparked growing concerns in host countries, particularly in the Global South, where China's efforts to engage its diaspora in support of its "China Dream" have led to increased suspicion and debate about the role of overseas Chinese in local politics. In some cases, China's utilisation of diaspora communities has stoked ethnic tensions as these communities are seen as agents of Chinese influence, potentially undermining domestic political stability.

The Risks of Diaspora Engagement

While China's diaspora strategy has been effective in certain areas, it also poses significant risks. Coercive measures to control and mobilise the diaspora have raised concerns about the extraterritorial reach of the Chinese state. High-profile cases include the 2015 kidnapping of Swedish bookseller Gui Minhai from Thailand and the 2019 detention of Chinese Australian writer Yang Hengjun on espionage charges.

In addition to these high-profile cases, there have been reports of [surveillance of Chinese dissidents](#) and [ordinary citizens](#) abroad. Beijing has been [accused](#) of using its influence over diaspora communities to suppress dissent and ensure that overseas Chinese do not engage in activities perceived as threatening to the CCP's authority. This form of control, often carried out through local Chinese associations or diplomatic missions, has raised concerns about the safety of those who speak out against China's policies.

Digital Diplomacy and the Diaspora

China's efforts to engage its diaspora have also extended into the digital realm, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Platforms like WeChat have been used to disseminate pro-China messaging and to [mobilise diaspora communities](#) in support of Beijing's handling of the crisis. Research has shown that the Chinese government used WeChat to strengthen [transnational nation-building efforts](#), encouraging overseas Chinese to promote China's image and counter negative narratives about its pandemic response.

China's digital engagement has been particularly effective in countries with large Chinese populations, where local media and governments have sometimes echoed Beijing's messaging. In Italy, for example, the government's favourable attitude towards China during the pandemic was facilitated by the [influence](#) of Chinese diaspora networks, demonstrating the potential of digital diplomacy in shaping global perceptions of China.

Conclusion: A Strategy Fraught with Tensions

China's diaspora strategy is a key element of its broader geopolitical ambitions, one that is also fraught with tensions and risks. While the diaspora can serve as an asset in promoting China's soft power and advancing its international agenda, the coercive measures used to control and mobilise overseas Chinese have raised significant concerns. As China continues to expand its global influence, its diaspora strategy, which consists of direct intimidation of potential critics, propaganda targeting the diaspora, and self-censorship pressure regarding discussions on Chinese affairs, is likely to play an increasingly important role in its foreign policy. However, balancing the benefits of diaspora engagement with the potential for backlash will be a critical challenge for Beijing.

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