

***Beijing's Global Media Offensive: China's Uneven Campaign to Influence Asia and the World.* By Joshua Kurlantzick. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Softcover: 534pp.**

In February 2023, China announced plans to train 5,000 security personnel from developing countries over the next five years to help them address global security challenges such as counter terrorism, cyber security, biosecurity and emerging technologies. Given the nature of security cooperation, some China watchers perceived this undertaking as an instrument for Beijing to further cultivate relationships with developing nations to counterbalance the influence of the West.

This particular initiative exemplifies the core arguments presented by Joshua Kurlantzick in his new book, *Beijing's Global Media Offensive*. Kurlantzick's thesis, which builds on his 2007 book *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Changing the World*, explains Beijing's efforts to enhance its global influence by utilizing its state-controlled media. The author succeeds in presenting a comprehensive summary of China's media strategy, which often involves investing heavily in local media outlets in neighbouring countries to compete with other global media outlets and leveraging them to promote pro-Chinese Communist Party views while suppressing critics of the regime. The book highlights the critical role played by the China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Xinhua in Beijing's efforts to revitalize and modernize its soft power while also learning from its limitations. Kurlantzick's explanation of how China takes advantages of emerging media technologies to develop technology-enabled authoritarianism is a particularly fascinating aspect of the book.

The author presents a series of case studies examining China's media inroads into countries like Australia, Taiwan and New Zealand, as well as regions such as Southeast Asia, showcasing how these initiatives have been used to promote China's interests and influence the local media discourse. In addition, the book explores China's attempts to extend its media outreach on a global scale, through, for example, the Belt and Road Initiative and the Confucius Institutes. Here, Kurlantzick identifies three different approaches that Beijing employs while explaining how China's charm offensive era contributed to the development of these strategies: the soft power approach (diplomacy and culture); the hard power

approach (economics and military); and the sharp power approach. Within this framework, Kurlantzick borrowed Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig's characterization of sharp power as a concealed and unethical tactic designed to penetrate and exert influence upon targeted partner countries and institutions, while subverting competing nations through the monopolization and management of narratives and political environment.

According to Kurlantzick, China's use of sharp power is distinct from its soft power approach, as it is intended to achieve specific strategic objectives. By covertly manipulating and distracting other countries, often with the aim of undermining Beijing's rivals such as the United States, China positions itself as sympathetic towards developing nations. Kurlantzick provides examples of China's sharp power approach, which often complements its soft power approach. These include the use of its state-run media to skew perspectives and sow propaganda and disinformation to influence allies and public opinion at the domestic level while censoring negative coverage of China.

China's combined use of soft and sharp power not only aims to enhance its diplomatic relationships, but also project a positive image of China and mould public opinion in its favour. In support of this assertion, Kurlantzick cites China's response to the 2019 Hong Kong protests as a prime example of how the country endeavoured to downplay the impact of the protests and portray the demonstrators as disruptive and violent Western pawns, while underscoring its role in restoring stability and order. The author asserts that China was able to achieve this by utilizing methods such as censorship, propaganda and disinformation to manipulate the narrative and sway public opinion. Kurlantzick presents evidence of China's censorship of information on social media platforms, dissemination of disinformation and propaganda through state-run media outlets, discrediting critics and exerting pressure on foreign media outlets to adopt China's viewpoint.

Kurlantzick notes that China's attempts to enhance its global appeal and bolster Xi's popularity via soft and sharp power have yielded mixed results. This is partly due to the declining authenticity of China's messages, as seen in its unsuccessful COVID-19 disinformation campaigns which sought to present China's pandemic management in a positive light. Beijing's inability to manage the pandemic domestically was largely responsible for this failure. Moreover, the implementation of China's sharp power approach

has been met with criticism due to its aggressive tactics, such as its use of disinformation and propaganda, which have resulted in a loss of trust and credibility in China's messaging. China's rapid loss of popularity is compounded by its tacit support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Resistance from foreign governments, civil society and the media can challenge China's narratives and expose its insidious activities. Lastly, China's exertion of influence through sharp power can provoke a backlash, particularly if it is perceived as interfering with other nations' internal affairs or undermining their democratic values and institutions.

One potential challenge to Kurlantzick's analysis is his interpretation of the interplay between China's soft and sharp power strategies and the local political climate of the countries it seeks to influence. Kurlantzick provides an example of Beijing's influence strategy, where it targets developing nations in need of assistance to ensure their security, while advancing its own economic and strategic interests in Southeast Asia. The author cites the alleged manipulation of Malaysia's 14th General Elections in 2018 to exemplify China's sharp power approach, where it purportedly attempted to sway voters in favour of the incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak. This instance highlights China's attempts to utilize its soft power approach to gain political leverage and promote its interests in foreign countries. Kurlantzick posits that China sought to secure a favourable outcome in Malaysia that would advance its economic and strategic interests in the region. Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider that the impact of this interference on the Malaysian population may have been less significant than what the author assumes, given the complexity of various domestic socio-political factors, especially since Najib and his coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), lost the election. Although China's political manoeuvring showcases its capacity for influence and achieving desired outcomes, it is crucial to recognize the intricate and multifaceted nature of local politics and the limits of external powers in shaping their trajectory. Kurlantzick deserves recognition for acknowledging China's failure to influence Malaysian Chinese, particularly in the face of a growing public backlash arising from the 1MDB corruption scandal. The author correctly observes that Beijing made the misguided assumption that the Malaysian Chinese would prioritize loyalty to China over Malaysia.

Overall, *Beijing's Global Media Offensive* presents a compelling analysis of China's international engagement. The author emphasizes

Beijing's strategic motives rather than its economic interests as the driving force, especially in its interactions with Southeast Asian nations. Kurlantzick delivers a thorough and well-researched overview of China's media strategy, spanning from its early propaganda broadcasts during the Cold War to its current endeavours to enhance its global media presence. Written eloquently, the book is of great interest to those seeking to understand China's media strategy and its impact on global politics, as well as policymakers in search of policy recommendations to counter information and influence campaigns. It is an indispensable resource for those studying influence operations and disinformation, as well as those seeking to understand China's increasing global reach through its state-controlled media.

MUNIRA MUSTAFFA is the Founder and Executive Director of Chasseur Group. Email: contact@chasseur.group