

China-Watcher Notes No. 2

China-Russia Ties

The Diaspora under Pressure; the Uyghur, Abroad and at Home

Snippets

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The *China-Watcher Notes* is a new series introduced by the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, under the ambit of *ICS Analysis*. Each edition shall cover a set of topics of contemporary relevance pertaining to different aspects of China.

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China-Russia Ties

Behind the lavish protocol and extrovert bonhomie of what some call a Putin-Xi ‘bromance’ lies a deeper reality. In diplomacy, states sometimes for their own reasons, project a stronger, allegedly ‘permanent’ relationship, deeper than what is the reality. We saw this during President Vladimir Putin’s May 2024 Beijing visit as President Xi Jinping’s state guest. It became a demonstration of what these two leaders have called a ‘no limit relationship’.

In our hyper-connected world, image is part of the complex public diplomatic drama, more than in the past. Such manipulative public actions, aim at influencing global and home opinion. Diplomacy then becomes theatre.

An analysis in *The Diplomat* observed:

‘...Beijing’s expectations of cooperation with Moscow mostly revolve around the primary sector. Writing of relations between the two countries, CCTV reduced Russia-China trade to “Russian gas in Chinese households, and Chinese electronics and cars on Russian roads”. A major news piece in the Chinese daily *Global Times* during Putin’s visit was the announcement of Russia’s first major marine terminal in the Far East, for the shipment of liquefied petroleum gas...As Russia’s war against Ukraine continues its isolation in the West, its dependency on China will only deepen.’¹

We know that Russia is especially interested in high technology from China. It is today the weaker economic partner, but has its vast gas and oil reserves, and possesses Siberia, adjoining China’s North-East, as its trump cards. The latter is both an asset and a potential problem area in this relationship (see below).

Foreign Affairs wrote in June 2024 about Xi Jinping's complex vision of Russia, partly inherited from his father's experiences:

‘...in his 2013 talk with the Russian Sinologists, he (Xi) did not mention the dismal state of Sino-Soviet relations at the time of his Russian reading. In 1969, the year he was sent to the countryside, China and the Soviet Union were fighting an undeclared border war, and there were even fears of a Soviet nuclear attack...In a word, Xi knows well the adversarial face of Moscow.’²

The journal adds:

‘Despite these important differences, Chinese and Russian elites do share a conservative, statist worldview. They both see attacks on their history as Western plots to delegitimize their regimes and consider democracy promotion an existential threat.’ It concludes: ‘For the foreseeable future, however, Xi’s model for Chinese-Russian relations will likely prove sturdier than in the past because, perhaps counterintuitively, it avoids the danger of intimacy.’

In July 1971, Nixon, ably assisted by Kissinger, played the China card, and drastically transformed the Two-Power matrix in world affairs. Today we witness a complex interplay between these three powers. Russia, successor to the Soviet Union, is short on economic heft; but it is armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, and as Putin’s subsequent visit to North Korea and Vietnam showed, Moscow continues to view a global role for itself.

Looking deeper, we see three points of potential disharmony. First, China is now the dominant economic power, much ahead of Russia, but Moscow has its cards to play, including its enormous hydrocarbon resources. The two have long been negotiating a new agreement on the supply of gas to China, but have not found a mutually satisfactory compromise between Russia’s price demands and China’s resistance, as the near-monopsonist buyer. The two sides will probably find a realistic compromise, but the long drawn negotiation underlines divergence.

Second, Central Asia remains an arena where the core interest of the two cannot be aligned. As former components of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states are a permanent zone of Russian domination. But China now has the economic muscle, both as an investor in these countries for their hydrocarbons, and the principal market, as well as the provider of long

range capital investments. Russia holds the weaker hand, but it cannot give up on its vital interests.

Third, looking to the future, the Russian Far East is a magnet for Chinese investments, and a logical target for domination, especially owing to its hydrocarbon resources. Russia's weakness: its' demographics, and the reluctance of the Russian heartland population to move to the bleak, frozen environment of the tundra. In contrast, China has the population from its own north-east province that would be relatively comfortable in migrating to this resource rich region. This is a major point of potential or future discord.

In sum, the imperatives of global politics, push Beijing and Moscow closer together, even while each keeps a wary eye on the other.

The Diaspora under Pressure; the Uyghur, Abroad and at Home

Chinese migrants moved into SE Asia around the 13th century, as traders, and often became settlers, drawing in others.³ They now inhabit most countries of the region; the total is estimated at around 40 million. Thailand is unique in that the old diaspora is exceptionally integrated with the Thais; many leading families have some Chinese blood. Today, there is the 'modern' Chinese diaspora that migrated in recent decades; that outflow roughly doubled after 1990; they now number around 10.5 million. Australia has some 1.4 million Chinese of this new diaspora, most of them Australian citizens. (China, like India, does not accept dual nationality). There is a like situation in Canada and the US. Example: more than 70% of the 81,000 US 'investor visas' given between 2010 and 2019 went to the Chinese.⁴ Some 18% of China's nearly 900 dollar-billionaires live abroad, according to the '2023 China Rich List' published by Hurun Research Institute, up from 6% in 2019.⁵ At the other end: one million and more new migrants that have settled in Africa (south of Sahara), and a similar number in Latin America, live in isolation, mostly running general stores, slowly moving up to property ownership. They pride themselves in their ability to endure hardship (*chi ku* 吃苦).⁶

Under President Xi Jinping's policy to tighten controls by the Party and its surveillance machinery, China has intensified monitoring and control of this diaspora. Some of its

standard domestic methods are adapted for foreign environments.⁷ Others are unique, made effective by pressurising the diaspora through families, even friends, back at home. What is the aim?

One, to ‘control’ Chinese students, in North America and in other Western countries, especially when the numbers are large. Special targets are students demanding change in China, i.e. social justice, reform, liberalisation. Against them, surveillance means direct, raw pressure.

Two, media reports in North America and Europe show that undeclared offices are set up in key cities, for oversight and action, almost always with the help of pro-Beijing diaspora elements.⁸ Sometimes, Western domestic intelligence agencies have raided these, closing them. But often the surveillance is informal, with local pro-PRC elements gathering information for report to local Chinese embassies and consulates. The point of pressure is always the relatives of the local targets.

Three, the wealthy Chinese established in foreign countries are typically not politically active, but they are mobilised to support official policy. They provide local political outreach.

Four, the phase of aggressive Chinese diplomacy in Australia and Canada, which had emerged in 2020 following the COVID-19 pandemic, has mostly ended. Those actions included crude commercial pressure against imports from these countries, public threats, and selective arrest of foreign resident students and visitors in China.

The repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang is in a special category, with strong, coercive pressure applied on the activist dissidents living abroad. In September 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released a much-delayed report on China’s treatment of Uyghurs and other minority groups in Xinjiang.⁹ The High Commissioner visited China and met President Xi and others. Around that time, that control policy has undergone evolution. The ‘re-training centres’ established around a decade back, which acted as indoctrination gulags for the Uyghur professionals and others, have been closed down. Those tough domestic actions have evidently worked; we do not now come across many reports about

Uyghur dissidents in Xinjiang. Methods used in Tibet are applied, including sending Uyghur children to residential schools in the ‘Chinese mainland’, to promote their ‘Sinification’.

The current phase has shifted to pressure on Uyghur dissidents living abroad, via their relatives and friends in China, which have been well documented in the Western media. BBC carried reports on this in 2021-23.¹⁰ It appears that Uyghur dissidents living abroad have been coerced into reducing overt dissent actions. Some Western media reports have called this an ‘assimilationist ethnic policy’.¹¹

To sum up: One, China has used unconventional, clandestine methods to block its diaspora from criticising its policy. Two, dissident Uyghurs have been stifled by targeting their relatives and friends with suppressive actions that are illegal in any system of law. Third, Xinjiang is now under a unified system of repression, as has been practiced in Tibet.

It is also evident that the methods practiced in Xinjiang are part of a wider policy of repressing Muslim religious and customary practices, in effect to get them to conform to the standard Chinese mainstream. This is a subject that calls for deeper study. I wonder if any Indian scholars study these developments.

Snippets

In January 2024, Chinese Premier Li Qiang visited Europe, attending the World Economic Forum at Davos, with official visits to Switzerland and Ireland. In mid-June he travelled to Australia, a first by a Chinese Premier since 2017. A small point drew the attention of diplomatic observers: both times he travelled on a chartered Chinese commercial aircraft, and not a state aircraft, as with President Xi Jinping’s May 2024 visit to France, Serbia, and Hungary. Is it that the fleet of state aircraft is now reserved exclusively for President Xi? That could signal personal status within the top leadership.

Another point. Within hours of the shooting at the US presidential candidate Donald Trump at the Republican Party’s political rally on 14 July, the digital edition of *Times of India*

reported that within two hours, clothing manufacturers in China had put on sale T-shirts with photo images of that event. They had received over 2000 orders from China and the US.¹² One wonders what to make of this! An excess of commercialisation?

This took me back to the assassination of President John Kennedy in November 1963. With around 25 young fellow diplomats, I was at the Beijing Station rail-platform, leaving for Nanjing, Wuhan and beyond, on a ‘diplomatic tour’ for commercial officers, organised by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce. That’s when we first heard of that terrible event. A day or two later, a small cartoon appeared in the only ‘local’ newspaper which foreigners could access, *The Beijing Daily*.¹³ Just three ideograms appeared under a sketch of Kennedy on the ground; the Chinese characters: *ken* 啃, *ni* 泥, *di* 地. In a malicious play of words, the fallen US President was named with characters that meant: ‘Bite Mud’ — evidently saying: ‘bites the dust’.¹⁴ Even for hostile propaganda, that was a low point.

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- ¹³ Foreigners in Beijing could access just about 6 newspapers, the ‘national’ dailies, led by *Renmin Ribao* 人民日报, *Guangming* 光明日报; we tried to scoop up local dailies when on travel outside Beijing. And the daily *Reference News* (*Cankao Xiaoxi* 参考消息), which carried Chinese translations of highly selective material from the foreign press was especially prohibited – on travel we scooped up a copy in restaurants, occasionally! Now this Chinese publication is openly available everywhere; the English language *Global Times* is now a variation of that.
- ¹⁴ When names of foreigners transliterated into Chinese, it is customary to use ideograms that are neutral in meaning, rather than colour these with offensive – or approbatory – meaning. As foreigners, we took for ourselves names that followed Chinese custom, with heroic or pleasing meaning. Gender is also respected, with standard signals, in the one or two ideograms chosen for the ‘personal name’, besides the single ideogram ‘family name’.

About the Author

Kishan S. Rana has an MA in Economics from St. Stephens College, Delhi. Joining the Indian Foreign Service in 1960, he learnt Chinese at Hong Kong; served at the Indian Embassy in China (1963-65, 1970-72). He also speaks French. After 1975, Ambassador/High Commissioner to Algeria, Czechoslovakia, Kenya, Mauritius and Germany; served on PM Indira Gandhi's staff (1981-82). Professor Emeritus, Diplo Academy, Malta and Geneva; Emeritus Fellow, ICS, Delhi; Archives By-Fellow, Churchill College, Cambridge; Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Centre, Washington DC. Guest faculty, Diplomatic Academy, Vienna (2011-18); Commonwealth Adviser, Namibia Foreign Ministry (2000-01). Authored and edited 14 books (two translated into Chinese); *Inside Diplomacy* (2000); *Asian Diplomacy* (2007); *Diplomacy of the 21st Century* (2011); *Churchill and India: Manipulation or Betrayal?* (2023); *Diplomacy at the Cutting Edge* (2016) (on the internet, free download).

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No. 153 Sept 2023	Media Censorship and "Queerness" in China	Chitra Nair
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No. 151 Jul 2023	Bipartisan Political Brinkmanship Leaves U.S. Debt Crisis on Ventilator for Two Years	Hemant Adlakha
No. 150 Oct 2022	Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei: Implications for the US-China-Taiwan Equation	Anushka Saxena
No:149 Jul 2022	West Asia and North Africa (WANA): China's Enlarging Footprints Impact on The Indo-Pacific Region	Maj Gen Rajiv Narayanan
No:148 Jun 2022	Creating Data by Negotiating: China's Data Barons and Government Control	Arushi Singh
No:147 Mar 2022	AUKUS and the Great Power Rivalry	Ashu Maan
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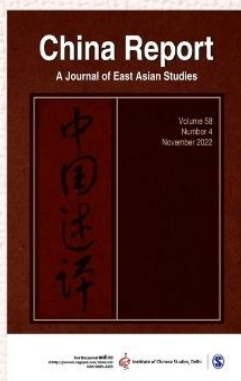


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