

Xi Jinping's Civil Diplomacy Initiative: Origins, Purpose, and Challenges

Written by Liye Hong

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LIYE HONG, OCT 29 2023

As China lifted its strict COVID-19 policy in December 2022, observers noted a shift in the course of Sino-US relations. Since early 2023, China and the US have been attempting to resume communications, a process that was compromised during the pandemic. However, the road to recovery in Sino-US relations has not been smooth. U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken planned a visit to China in February, but the trip was canceled following a spy balloon incident in the same month. In response to this situation, the Chinese government deployed a strategy of civil diplomacy, seeking to expand its contacts with non-governmental organizations and ordinary citizens in the US. These signals from China should not be dismissed as mere flamboyant actions to burnish Xi's personal image; they hold historical significance and have the potential to thaw the limitations that local governments and public institutions face in engaging with the U.S.

By the start of 2023, a surge was observed in informal dialogues between local Chinese officials and American bureaucrats, as well as interactions with US business leaders. Highlighting this shift, the Global Times, a prominent Chinese newspaper, underscored the significance of civil diplomacy on June 14. President Xi himself reinforced this perspective during his meeting with the Gates Foundation founders, Bill and Melinda Gates, on June 20, poignantly remarking that "the foundation of Sino-US relations lies with its people."

This commitment to enhancing person-to-person connections manifested in several initiatives throughout the year. Tsinghua University, for instance, spearheaded a youth scholar exchange program with the US, marking a milestone as the first major exchange initiative since 2020. On August 20 and 31, Xi reaffirmed his stance on Sino-US relations by replying to letters written by students from US-China Youth and Student Exchange Association in Washington State and the grandson of Joseph Stilwell, a renowned American military general stationed in China during World War II.

Some news outlets, such as the Voice of America, believe Chinese actions were merely propaganda work for Xi's personal image in front of the Chinese. A better interpretation of these events lies in their historical context. These signals reveal a deep logic in CCP diplomacy: it is the party leaders who grant permission for both the government and the people to engage in diplomatic activities. Due to its structure, the Chinese government is highly centralized and follows a top-down model, an element that is particularly evident in diplomacy. The Chinese Foreign Ministry acts merely as an executor of foreign policies, while the power to formulate foreign policy resides with the "Office of the Foreign Affairs Leading Group of the CPC Central Committee," led by the General Party Secretary.

The nature of Chinese diplomacy not only makes external affairs one of the most sensitive areas within the government but also places the Party Secretary at the center of diplomatic activity. While it is not unusual for the executive branch in many countries to lead foreign policy, few of them have complete control over local government, public organizations, and schools – Almost all Chinese public organizations and schools have a party branch to ensure the execution of the party line. "Xi Jinping Thought," which became the principle for Chinese officials, claimed that Chinese diplomatic moves should be highly centered on Comrade Xi Jinping, and the diplomatic activity on the local level need to make sure to follow the boundary of the party. Thus, the slightest uncertainty on foreign policy will create a solid wall for local officials, and none dared launch student exchanges before the party said yes.

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We can see a similar case decades ago. Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, his appointed successor, Hua Guofeng, assumed power. Hua recognized that the Maoist economy in China was unsustainable, and as the initial architect of Chinese market reforms, he encouraged his officials to venture outside of China to conduct investigations and market research. In the mid-1970s, Chinese officials, still influenced by late Maoist-era beliefs that contact with foreigners was “anti-revolutionary” and “corrupt,” were fearful of such engagement. To alleviate this fear, Hua visited Romania and Yugoslavia in 1978, accompanied by a large delegation for economic investigation (Deng Xiaoping also went to Japan at the same time). His visits sent a clear message encouraging officials to travel to foreign countries and learn from them, resulting in a more than thirty percent increase in the number of Chinese delegations visiting foreign countries in the next year.

Expanding civil connections with the U.S. offers two other advantages beyond sending signals to domestic populations. First, civil connections can bypass bureaucratic processes and are less likely to be impacted by diplomatic incidents. While the Chinese and U.S. governments had to cancel Blinken’s visit in response to the spy balloon incident, business and educational exchanges would not be affected by such events. Michael Pillsbury, one of the leading scholars on China, said in his talk at Peking University on Oct 23, that only five out of fifty communication channels between China and the U.S. remain today. Thus, the reconnection between the two states on multiple fields is crucial to the development of Sino-U.S. relations. Second, facing serious economic challenges post-pandemic, the Chinese government is striving for economic growth. In its pursuit of economic momentum, China recently hosted the One Belt One Road summit, the Conference for International Business Leaders’ Advisory Council in Shanghai on October 14, and is preparing for the China International Import Expo in Shanghai in November. Developing civil connections is thus a more effective and practical approach for the Chinese government at this time, compared to direct engagement with the U.S. government.

However, the Chinese strategy is not without challenges. The most significant challenge, as is the case with all indirect political signaling, is whether the U.S. received and correctly interpreted the message sent by the Chinese government. Months after Xi released this signal, few U.S. media outlets echoed his words, except for a negative interpretation by Voice of America. Therefore, most people in the U.S. remain unaware that the Chinese government is reaching out to them. To bridge this gap, it is imperative for the Chinese side to forge stronger connections with American media, as well as with its own news outlets operating overseas. Without a clear and direct communication strategy to foster civil engagement with the U.S., the efforts of the Chinese government are at risk of being overlooked or misunderstood by the American population. Failure to do so could jeopardize the re-establishment of civil ties between the two nations, ties that were significantly strained during the pandemic.

Second, while civil connections might be a viable option during times of crisis, the fundamental issues within Sino-US relations still constrained its effectiveness. Despite the recent high-level meetings between Chinese and American officials, the two nations continue to accuse each other on a variety of issues, including technology blockades and Taiwan. The nature of the current bilateral relations will cause confusion among people in civil diplomacy about how far they can go on civil connections and exchanges. After the “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy in China and the “Chinese agent hunting” in the US, people who work on Sino-US communications are still profoundly sensitive. A clear commitment from both the Chinese and the US governments is thus important for the further success of Chinese civil diplomacy.

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