China 201

China's United Front Work

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For CCP leaders, influencing how the outside world views and engages with China is a matter of regime survival and a means of advancing national interests. The Party-state recognizes that the success of certain objectives—such as the CCP's unquestioned rule over China, the absence of criticism regarding CCP policies, the Party's unequivocal claim to speak for the Chinese diaspora in a way the outside world acknowledges, and the unification of Taiwan with the Mainland—depends partly on the behavior of foreign leaders and publics. In the same vein, CCP leaders understand that foreign parties' reactions to their efforts may impact the effectiveness of China's signature foreign policy initiatives, foreign investment, and technology transfer as well as the attractiveness of its global image.

Under Xi's rule, China's overseas influence activities are now more prevalent, institutionalized, technologically sophisticated, and aggressive than under his predecessors. China's overseas influence activities involve many actors within the Party-state and can be found in countries around the world, regardless of their form of government or level of development.

Defining China's Overseas Influence Activities and a Theory of Harm

This document defines "overseas influence activities" as the wide range of actions the CCP leadership undertakes to shape other countries' perceptions and their policy choices in ways that advance Chinese national interests. Furthermore, the document restricts its focus to only those influence activities that plausibly cause *harm* to the targeted country.[*] Harm to a country can be construed in a variety of overlapping ways:

- *Compromising political processes and institutions:* This includes corrupting the integrity of political deliberation and its associated processes as well as manipulating political or social activity to disguise actions that advance China's interests as the efforts of domestic constituencies.[1]

- *Manipulating the information environment:* This includes undermining the ability of media or other

[*] Minor modifications may have been made for readability or to provide clarity as to the date information in the excerpt is current. 201 products are not updated, so information is only current as of the "cut-off" date of the Annual Report publication(s) from which the 201 is excerpted. 201 products are focused on "evergreen" issues for which the lack of currency will not affect the core analysis.

[*] In contrast to activities that could be understood as beneficial and purely intended to build "soft power," which refers to the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004.

civil society actors to hold domestic and foreign actors accountable for choices contrary to the public interest; it also includes restricting the availability of knowledge that domestic policymakers require as the basis for sound decision-making.[2]

- *Encroaching on civil liberties:* This includes preventing citizens in democratic countries from exercising the freedoms to which they are entitled (such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press) and may take the form of state-sponsored transnational repression schemes carried out by China's security services.[3]

- *Undermining the commercial environment:* This may involve elite capture and other forms of corruption to create commercial conditions that advance Chinese objectives, including awarding contracts to Chinese firms, deepening dependence on China, and achieving preferential access to resources or export markets. Dependence on China as an export market or as a supplier of critical goods and technology can then be leveraged for coercive purposes.[4]

Some of China's harmful overseas influence activities may be illegal in the targeted country, but others may be entirely legal or occupy a legal gray zone that makes them difficult to mitigate effectively. Some of these activities may exploit differences between federal, state, and local regulations.[5] In some cases, a discrete instance of the influence activity may not be problematic, but the cumulative impact of China's activities may cause harm to the targeted society.

Making Friends and Isolating Enemies: China's United Front Work

United front work is a way of managing relationships with important groups and individuals outside of the CCP that is based on Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin's concept of forming a "united front," or a temporary alliance with one's friends and lesser enemies,[*] to defeat greater enemies.[6] Contemporary united front work encapsulates the various activities of CCP organs, Chinese government agencies, and their affiliates to coopt or coerce groups outside of the CCP—including but certainly not limited to foreigners—into comporting with the Party's demands and advancing Chinese national interests as the CCP defines them.[7] Chinese leaders from Mao Zedong onward have affirmed the importance of united front work, describing it as a "magic weapon" for defeating the CCP's enemies.[8]

Shortly after ascending to power, General Secretary Xi reemphasized the role of united front work as an increasingly important tool and reiterated the "magic weapon"[†] framing for achieving China's national interests in a dangerous and dynamic world.[9] In a speech at the Central United Front Work Conference[‡] in July 2022, Xi observed that the international

[*] The CCP has long divided the world into "friends" and "enemies." Friends are those inside of China who uphold the Patry's rule and policy agenda and those outside of China who use their power and influence to advance China's interests. The CCP's enemies are defined as those who use their power and influence to advance China's interests. The CCP's enemies are defined as those who question its legitimacy or exercise of power. Mareike Ohlberg, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on China's Global Influence and Interference Activities*, March 23, 2023, 6; Matt Schrader, "Friends and Enemies: A Framework for Understanding Chinee Political Interference in Democratic Countries," *German Marshall Fund*, April 22, 2022, 1-2.

[†] The term "magic weapon" was first coined by Mao Zedong but has been used by every Chinese leader since to describe three "weapons" or efforts necessary for the Party's success: united front work, Party building, and the armed struggle (or military activities). Peter Mattis and Alex Joske, "The Third Magic Weapon: Reforming China's United Front," *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2019.

[‡] The Central United Front Work Conference gathers together the country's top leadership to discuss the state of united front work and set future priorities. *Xinhua*, "At the Central United Front Work Conference, Xi Jinping Emphasized Promoting the Unity and Struggle of Chinese Sons and Daughters at Home and Gather Great Power for the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation) 习近平在中央统战工作会议上强调 促进海内外中华儿女团结奋斗 为中华民族伟大复兴汇聚伟力), July 30, 2022. Translation.

environment was in flux and argued that united front work was now more important than before to safeguard China's national sovereignty, security, and development interests.[10] United front work will be crucial to the Party-state's efforts to become a "modern socialist country" and realize "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," Xi argued, calling on officials below him to carry out united front work with "a high sense of mission and responsibility."[11]

The CCP has signaled that united front work is a major priority and has reformed the bureaucratic structures that implement it over the past ten years. Xi has called for strengthening united front work under the banner of his "Great United Front Work" concept.[12] He has also emphasized that all CCP officials must participate in united front work and touted united front work's importance in speeches at the Party congresses and national work conferences on the subject.[13] Current united front work regulations state that the CCP must lead united front work and that Party committees at all levels of government must play a role in united front work.[14] Major bureaucratic changes since Xi came to power include reviving a leading small group to coordinate Party activities on united front work, elevating the status of the Central United Front Work Conference, issuing two sets of regulations for united front work, and reorganizing the United Front Work Department (UFWD).[15]

China's System for United Front Work: A Party-State Wide Endeavor

The "united front system" encompasses dozens of Party bodies, ministries, military organizations, and civic entities that bring different platforms, capabilities, and personnel to bear in China's foreign influence activities.[16] United front work is inherent in many of the Party-state's global activities, from its funding of Chinese-language study centers, to its diplomats' engagement with foreign elites, to its espionage services' collection of intelligence, to its national police forces' perpetration of transnational repression.[17]

United front work is also carried out by a wide range of quasi-official and civil society groups that are based abroad but may nonetheless respond to CCP and ministry guidance, underscoring the fact the China's overseas influence activities frequently involve proxies and benefit from plausible deniability.[18] The involvement of so many actors inside and outside of the Party-state makes the united front system a flexible and effective vehicle of influence.[19] Important actors within the united front work system include but are not limited to the following:

- **The United Front Work Department (UFWD), the CCP Central Committee department that coordinates united front work toward the Chinese diaspora, Taiwan, Hong Kong, ethnic minorities, and religious groups.**[20] According to Alex Joske, a senior risk advisor at McGrathNicol who testified before the Commission, the UFWD contributes significantly to covert overseas operations involving political influence, intelligence collection, and technology transfer.[21] The UFWD does not exist just at the central level of China's political system; rather, there are smaller, identical versions of the UFWD embedded within Party committees down to the local level that carry out united front work inside and outside of China.[22] Provincial or even municipal UFWDs often supervise the quasi-governmental and civil society groups that lobby for Party-state interests overseas.[23] Most Chinese embassies and consulates include UFWD personnel among their staff.[24]

- **The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which is an "advisory" body the Party-state uses to coordinate between itself and important social groups—such as leaders in business, academia, and religious organizations outside of the Party—to carry out united front work.**[*25] CPPCC delegates attend a high-profile annual meeting to receive direction from the CCP regarding the way its policies should be characterized to both domestic and foreign audiences.[26] Delegates to the CPPCC serve as

[*] Both the elevation of fourth-ranking Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning to chairman of the CPPCC and reports that Xi has tasked him to develop a "theoretical unification strategy fit for the Xi era" indicate that united front work will likely play a greater role in China's future approach to Taiwan. Katsuji Nakazawa, "Analysis: Xi Puts Top Brain in Charge of Taiwan Unification Strategy," *Nikkei Asia*, January 26, 2023.

proxies for CCP interests by virtue of their participation in this forum, and they frequently act as interlocutors with foreign government officials, businesses, and academic institutions.[27]

- **The International Liaison Department, another CCP Central Committee Department that engages with more than 600 foreign political parties in 160 countries or regions to facilitate united front work.**[*28] This "party-to-party diplomacy" frequently involves conducting political training, promoting China's governance model, reinforcing China's global narratives, and increasing the number of China-friendly figures across the political spectrum in foreign countries.[29]

- **Quasi-official organizations subordinate to the UFWD and related organs, which advocate for Party-state interests while appearing to be nongovernmental entities.**[30] Some of these quasi-official organizations, such as the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR), advocate for the "peaceful reunification" of Taiwan and mainland China.[31] Others, such as the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), advocate for closer bilateral ties with China and oversee major elements of China's subnational diplomacy, such as sister-city partnerships.[32] Still others, such as the Western Returned Scholars Association (WRSA), encourage Chinese students and scholars who have been educated abroad to contribute scientific knowledge and technology to the cause of China's modernization.[33]

- **Overseas Chinese community organizations whose leaders may at times be engaged by UFWD or related organs and who may express the positions of the Party-state as the views of the communities they serve.**[34] Peter Mattis, then director for intelligence at the Special Competitive Studies Project, wrote in testimony before the Commission that the united front system may co-opt the leaders of some ethnic community organizations, such as chambers of commerce, hometown associations, and cultural promotion centers.[35] Notably, ordinary members of these community organizations may be unaware of the leadership's engagement with the united front system, and the organizations themselves may not be directly under the command of any united front-related organ.[36] Community organizations with links to the united front might receive support in the form of funding, logistical support, and advice, and they likely have varying degrees of autonomy.[37]

China Leverages United Front Work for Intelligence Collection, Repression

United front work builds relationships that facilitate intelligence collection and/or repressive activities by China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS).[†] Mr. Joske testified before the Commission that China's intelligence services have recruited united front figures in foreign countries as clandestine assets or even posed as UFWD officials themselves to facilitate intelligence operations.[38]

One recent case illustrates this entanglement between united front work and China's security services. In May 2023, DOJ indicted a Massachusetts man for allegedly acting as an unregistered foreign agent of the Chinese

[*] The CCP engages with ruling, opposition, and fringe parties across the ideological spectrum in its party-to-party diplomacy. Lina Benabdallah, "Ties That Bind: China's Party-to-Patry Diplomacy in Africa," *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, October 2021, 8.

[†] The MSS maintains two front organizations, the China International Cultural Exchange Center (CICEC) and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), that engage with foreign scholars of China and think tank experts to influence foreign policy debates in a manner consistent with united front work. Alex Joske, *Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Covert Operations Fooled the World*, Hardie Grant Books, 2022, 26; Alex Joske, "The Party Speaks for You: Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2020, 15; Peter Mattis and Matthew Brazil, *Chinese Communist Espionage: An Intelligence Primer*, Naval Institute Press, 2019, 56; Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds., "China's Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance," *Hoover Institution*, 2019, 79-80.

government and accused him of providing information about Chinese dissidents and others to China's MPS and UFWD.[39] According to DOJ, Liang Litang allegedly "provided PRC government officials with information regarding members and leaders of Boston-area, Chinese family associations and community organizations with pro-Taiwan leanings."[40] DOJ also alleged that the information Mr. Liang provided to the UFWD and MPS included the identification of an individual he believed had "sabotaged" PRC flags in Boston's Chinatown in October 2018, a video of a dissident attending the "Boston Stands with Hong Kong" march in August 2019, and photographs of anti-PRC dissidents in front of the Boston Public Library in September 2019.[41] The fact pattern described by DOJ demonstrates that the UFWD and China's security services may indeed rely on the same human source to accomplish their varied objectives.

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