

Friends and Enemies: A Framework for Understanding Chinese Political Interference in Democratic Countries

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Introduction

“For our friends, we produce fine wine. Jackals, we welcome with shotguns.”

- Ambassador Gui Congyou, 2019¹

This was how a Chinese ambassador warned Sweden of potential consequences after Stockholm decided to honor a Swedish citizen imprisoned in China with a human rights prize. Ambassador Gui Congyou’s turn of phrase has a long history; it is the final line of a famous 1950s propaganda anthem written to eulogize China’s bloody contest with the United States on the Korean Peninsula.² Gui’s statement would be easy to dismiss as the words of a single ambassador, but his statement is consistent with two patterns in the Chinese Communist Party’s interactions with the outside world.³

The first is China’s growing global assertiveness under Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping. Prior to Xi’s ascent there were signs that China’s leadership had concluded it was time to put aside Deng Xiaoping’s mantra that China should “hide its brilliance and bide its time.”⁴ But since Xi came to power in late 2012, party officials have more frequently noted that China is a large, powerful country, and that smaller, less powerful countries oppose its interests at their own risk.⁵ The second and more enduring theme is the party’s tendency to divide the world into friends and enemies. Inside China, the party’s friends are those who “uphold the leadership of the [Communist Party] and the socialist cause” through support for its policy agenda.⁶ Outside China, the party’s friends are “foreigners of influence and/or power who assist China’s interests.”⁷ The party’s enemies are those who publicly question how it chooses to exercise power.

The party has operationalized this mindset by developing a sophisticated set of tools and a well-defined body of doctrine to attempt to maintain unchallenged power by “uniting friends” and “isolating enemies.”⁸ This divide-and-conquer strategy is predicated not only on rewarding friends for their support, but also on coercing the party’s enemies. Within China, coercive tactics include: extralegal detention, limits on public and private speech by individual citizens, control of all forms of

media and key sectors of the economy, and cooption of elites by establishing personal and professional costs for opposing the party.

This report describes how the party has increasingly employed many of these domestic tools to unite foreign friends and isolate foreign enemies.⁹ Ambassador Gui's remarks are but one example in an expanding universe of cases. The threat of losing business in China means that foreign corporations are routinely pressed to censor themselves and their employees to avoid topics the party considers sensitive. Meanwhile, Chinese companies have built and sold the party's tools of digital authoritarianism in South America, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere. Chinese diplomats have also tried to rally other countries in support of greater governmental control over the flow of digital information inside national borders. In Southeast Asia, party-state linked actors have sought to covertly alter the outcome of elections throughout Southeast Asia, combining cyberespionage prowess with the financial firepower of the PRC's enormous policy banks.¹⁰ And the party has used the same vision of triumphant ethnic solidarity it pushes on its own population to justify its attempts to threaten, censor, and co-opt the Chinese diaspora. In so doing, the party hopes to influence democratic politicians and politics by controlling the external narrative presented of China.

These interference activities are all in service of the party's singular goal –protecting and expanding its power. As the PRC has grown economically and gained an increasing global footprint, its external activities have expanded. Analyst Liza Tobin provides an assessment of the party's expanding global objectives, asserting that Beijing hopes that its “global network of partnerships centered on China would replace the U.S. system of treaty alliances, the international community would regard Beijing's authoritarian governance model as a superior alternative to Western electoral democracy, and the world would credit the Communist Party of China for developing a new path to peace, prosperity, and modernity that other countries can follow.”¹¹ Although Tobin's analysis focuses on the consequences for U.S. national security, her conclusions highlight the urgent need for all democratic countries to comprehend the full scope and scale of China's interference abroad. In particular, foreign leaders need to understand why interference occurs and establish general principles in the search for solutions.

This report is an initial attempt to advance understanding of these tactics, building on a growing body of work on the party's global influence. Although the degree of success the party has enjoyed in building global influence is debatable—and there are certainly examples of failure—party leaders appear to be increasingly confident in this toolkit.¹² Understanding the roots of this confidence requires careful assessment of the many ways the party influences and interferes in other countries and which actions the party deems to have been successful. This report identifies five components, which often interact with one another, that together characterize China's political interference in industrialized democracies:

1. *Weaponizing China's economy*: Party leaders generate political compliance in foreign societies by communicating the benefits of cooperation, alongside the costs that Beijing can impose upon countries, companies, or individuals who step out of line.
2. *Asserting narrative dominance*: In the global conversation on China, the party manipulates and controls information to downplay and crowd out adversarial narratives and advance those that serve its interests.
3. *Relying on elite intermediaries*: The party relies on intermediaries abroad to shape foreign perceptions of China, often adopting many of the same ambiguous, opaque, and misleading methods that it utilizes to co-opt elites at home.
4. *Instrumentalizing the Chinese diaspora*: The party identifies valuable diaspora members and groups in an effort to penetrate and co-opt Chinese diaspora communities.
5. *Embedding authoritarian control*: The party's way of doing business, and its efforts to demonstrate a viable alternative to liberal democracy, both strengthen authoritarian norms beyond China's borders.

These characteristics of the party's foreign interference have deep roots in how the party governs China. They are not accidental, and they did not first appear after Xi Jinping's assumption of power. Rather, they grew out of the strategies, structures, and political warfare doctrines the party has used to address the many internal and external threats it perceives

to its primacy within China. These components are the result of purposeful choices with deep roots in the party's "us versus them" approach to power. This report is therefore also an attempt to look at the party's expanding global footprint through its own eyes. The following sections explain the doctrine behind these components and provide examples of their use.

One implication of this analysis is that—because the party attributes some of its growing power and success to its ability to interfere in other countries—Chinese interference will pose an enduring challenge. Leaders of democratic countries will have to build cooperation, capability, and resilience to respond. Cooperation is necessary because the party seeks to prevent a united opposition by inhibiting the formation of coalitions and counter narratives. Capability is required because many countries lack the expertise and competence to address aspects of the challenge. Resilience is needed to preserve foreign governments' ability to resist pressure and to protect the rights of citizens and organizations to express their views on the growing list of issues the party considers sensitive. Together, these efforts can help to protect against the growing challenge of the Chinese Communist Party's foreign interference.

Weaponizing China's Economy

China's economy is now the world's second largest, with global reach and increasing sophistication.¹³ The Chinese Communist Party tries to use this economic heft to incentivize—and coerce—political, diplomatic, business, cultural, scientific, academic, athletic, and other elites to support the party's interests. The threat of economic coercion is designed to create an incentive structure in which it is easier and less costly to comply with, rather than resist, the party's political demands. Coercion is thus integral to the party's weaponization of its economy, with the aim of making active coercion unnecessary because foreign counterparts know and abide by the party's expectations for “correct” political behavior.¹⁴ This section begins by explaining how doctrine and policy have shaped this aspect of the party's political interference abroad and then describes recent examples of Chinese economic coercion.

Roots of Economic Coercion

Since Deng Xiaoping's initiation of Reform and Opening Up in 1978, economic development and modernization have stood at the center of the party's approach to governance, and its hold on power. As China's economy has grown from 2 percent to 15 percent of global production, the party has used economic incentives and punishments to maintain domestic rule. As China's economy has grown larger and more interconnected with the rest of the world the party's perception of the international balance of power has changed. As this has occurred, Beijing has increasingly applied its economically driven approach to its governance to other countries, using inducements and punishments to encourage international political acquiescence.

The party's use of economic tools to engineer consent at home and abroad derives from its influence and political control over key economic actors—including senior executives of both private and state-owned companies. The party views state control of the most important parts of the economy—finance, heavy industry, infrastructure, telecommunications, media, and the defense industrial complex—as key to its rule, and to China's emergence as a great power. Xi Jinping has been unambiguous in describing the party's leading role in state-owned enterprises, and has been energetic in purging or demoting officials in state-owned enterprises deemed insufficiently loyal or proactive in implementing his agenda. Not surprisingly, 120 state-owned enterprises listed on Hong Kong's stock exchange have in recent years reportedly revised their corporate bylaws to give a greater role to internal Communist Party cells.¹⁵

While state-owned enterprises are the heart of the party's ability to wield economic power, private businesses are not exempted from the need for influence and control. The party understands the importance of markets to economic and technological dynamism. It has thus allowed private business to grow and flourish since 1978. At the same time, however, it has gone to great lengths to ensure that those parts of the economy not directly controlled by the state can function as vehicles for its will. This “guidance” of private businesses occurs through legal and regulatory channels, as well as through party channels. This includes the direct establishment of party cells inside private companies and an opaque, elaborate system of consultative mechanisms known as the United Front.

Through this sophisticated combination of overlapping governance structures, the party provides private businesses with a mix of inducements and punishments. This allows the party to convey the overall message that business opportunities arise from compliance with the party's political vision, and that non-compliance can result in the loss of opportunities. In describing the political dynamic for private businesses in the Xi Jinping era, Wang Xiaochuan, the head of an important Chinese internet company (and a member of the country's most important United Front consultative body) said: “If you see the situation clearly and are able to move in sync with the state, you will get great support. But if it's in your nature to say, ‘I want freedom, I want to sing a tune different from the state's, then you might suffer, more so than in the past.’”¹⁶

This pattern of behavior is also apparent in the party's engagement with foreign countries and companies. The party has long appreciated the diplomatic utility of economic growth, and has used the opportunities presented by that growth to incentivize tacit foreign consent for its program of national rejuvenation. Deng Xiaoping expressly linked China's economic openness to its ability to access foreign science and technological, saying, “China's a big market. Any number of countries want to work out some cooperation with us, do a little business, and we need to make good use of this. It's a strategic question.”¹⁷ Framing growing trade ties with China as an economic and political opportunity for foreign elites has been the

most important tool of China's economic diplomacy since Deng came to power.¹⁸

Under Xi Jinping, however, the coercive elements of the toolkit have become more apparent. Chinese foreign policy thinkers and advisors now note that the use of economic sanctions forms a natural part of the toolkit of any big country, drawing an implicit comparison with the United States' use of sanctions. Song Guoyou—deputy director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University and an advisor to China's Ministry of Finance—has called economic punishments an important policy option.¹⁹ He describes a range of options to be deployed against countries on China's periphery under "special circumstances," including "limiting exports of key strategic resources, reducing imports of important products into China, establishing barriers to investment, and placing limitations on a country's key financial institutions."²⁰ The vast range of tools available to the party to direct the flow of economic resources inside China include control of government ministries and the judiciary, control of large state-owned enterprises, and significant coercive power over private enterprises, which depend on proximity to the party for access to financing and regulatory permits.

In keeping with other experts, Song describes the goal of punishments as changing a country's "provocative" behavior, while not seeking to interfere in its internal politics.²¹ This language closely mirrors the language of domestic united front work, which frames the application of coercive measures to recalcitrant citizens as a form of education, meant to inculcate within the subject an appreciation for the necessity (and irresistibility) of party leadership. Foreign affairs commentators such as Song evince a clear awareness that coupling punishment with inducements can shape the thinking of the target country, making the benefits of cooperation with China seem that much more "precious."²² The *Global Times* has stated the link between political compliance and economic benefits clearly, saying "foreign companies need to realize that their long-term ability to generate profits in the [Chinese] market hinges on their home countries' political relations with China."²³ This attitude explicitly links companies' economic fortune with their country's politics, and implicitly calls upon foreign companies to take action to rectify "provocative" or "anti-China" policies at home.

Examples of Economic Coercion

Using economic power to pursue political outcomes—as China and other states do frequently—is not in and of itself objectionable. However, the degree of state economic control in China is unique among economies of its size. Analysts have noted the party's growing willingness to sanction foreign businesses to express displeasure with foreign political stances, as a way of incentivizing the target entity to behave "correctly," or to send a message to observer countries.²⁴ Unlike sanctions levied by the United States and other democracies, Chinese coercive economic actions are not confined by a transparent legal regime and are not typically acknowledged by the Chinese government. Both characteristics increase ambiguity about the means and ends of sanctions. Also, whereas many foreign sanctions are meant to deter malign and destabilizing behavior, Chinese economic coercion is often intended to silence public speech.

The party's willingness to engage in coercion may have increased after the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis, when Chinese elites grew more confident in China's relative power. After the crisis, many Chinese elites contrasted their economy's resilience with those of Europe and the United States.²⁵ One of the most blatant examples of interference in foreign political speech occurred soon afterwards, when the Chinese government imposed costly sanctions on Norway in 2010. Party leaders were angered because the Norwegian Nobel Committee—which is appointed by the Norwegian parliament—awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, a longtime advocate for constitutional government in China.²⁶

Coercive economic statecraft can damage China's image, but the party appears to view it as a cost worth bearing, because of how it can influence other states' foreign policy decision-making calculus. In September 2019, for example, the Australian government refrained from publicly attributing the source of a cyberattack against its Parliament.²⁷ While there are numerous considerations in making public attributions, the government's internal investigation of the incident reportedly recommended against public disclosure out of concern that it would upset trade ties with China. Such concerns were likely reinforced by China's restrictions on Australian coal imports after Australia passed laws designed to inoculate its political system against covert foreign influence.²⁸

Norway and Australia are not the only countries that have been subject to this kind of blunt economic coercion. Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines have all seen their trade with China interrupted after displeasing elements of the party.²⁹ In early 2019, Canada's trade with China was also disrupted after Canadian authorities detained

Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou for possible extradition to the United States.³⁰ Since Meng's detention, China has bluntly warned that other countries' businesses could encounter difficulties in China if their governments decide to cut Huawei or ZTE out of their 5G networks.

In the most notable such instance, China's ambassador to Germany Wu Ken appeared to threaten consequences for German car makers if Berlin excludes Huawei from its 5G network. Since Volkswagen and Daimler AG are among Germany's most powerful companies and each sells more cars in China than anywhere else, this threat provided substantial leverage against the German government.³¹ Beijing also pressed prominent German foundations and companies with business in China to contribute financially to establish a pro-China media outlet in Germany.³²

This type of undisguised economic coercion is blunt, but the party has more subtle ways of using its economy as a political weapon. In most cases, Chinese government agencies have not carried out punishments. Instead, the de facto commercial arms of the state—large state-owned enterprises—have imposed costly import or export decisions. The party also uses more persistent, low-profile ways to generate compliance among foreign business and political leaders. Countries with significant bilateral trade and businesses with a large presence in China are subject to pressures similar to those the party imposes on its own citizens. One danger is the unstated threat of lost business or investment opportunities for actions opposed by the party.³³ This form of pressure is pervasive, hard to detect, and arguably more effective than outright economic sanctions. To guard against this, since China's economic opening in 1978, foreign businesses have been advised to proactively demonstrate how their business inside China will advance the party's policy agenda.³⁴

China's economic importance increases the pressure on companies to refrain from criticizing the party's policies. In July 2019, 22 countries signed a letter to the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights criticizing China for its detention of a million or more Uighur minorities in so-called "re-education camps."³⁵ The United States, Canada, Japan, and a number of European countries signed, but the Baltic states were the only Central or Eastern European signatories.³⁶ While the reason for others' reluctance is unclear, this could indicate that China is seeing dividends from its 17+1 diplomatic grouping with Central and Eastern European countries. Days after the initial letter, Chinese diplomats organized a counter-letter praising the country's human rights record. The letter was signed by 37 countries, more than half of which were Muslim majority states.³⁷ Among the signatories of the second letter were countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines, which have hosted showcase Belt and Road projects or won significant Chinese investment promises.³⁸

The party has punished businesses that fail to demonstrate support for its agenda, most frequently through denial of market access. One high-profile example is the large number of entertainers who have been barred from performing inside China due to support for Tibet or Taiwan (in some cases as minor as a single tweet). Bands and singers barred include Lady Gaga, Guns N' Roses, Bjork, Maroon 5, Bon Jovi, Linkin Park, Selena Gomez, and Katy Perry.³⁹ Brad Pitt and Harrison Ford were also barred from entering China to promote their films after expressing support for Tibet.⁴⁰ Ford's ban still stands, but Pitt was recently permitted admission to China, after years of silence on Tibet.⁴¹

The mix of incentives and disincentives described above has demonstrated that countries, groups, and individuals that align with the party's interests will be rewarded, while those that do not will be punished. The impacts go far beyond purely economic activities, threatening the exercise of free speech by officials, businesses, and individuals not just in China, but abroad as well.

Asserting Narrative Dominance

The Chinese Communist Party's quest to dominate thought and narrative has always been central to its pursuit of power. To this end, every supreme party leader since Mao has reaffirmed the strategic and national security importance of the party's control of media, culture, and narrative, and publicly described propaganda in positive terms. In their view, it is a tool designed not to coerce, but to win the consent of those whom it reaches, while actively denying public platforms to information or narratives the party considers adversarial. Christopher Walker and Jennifer Ludwig have described the application of this approach in foreign countries as "sharp power," which is often conducted through initiatives in the spheres of media, culture, think tanks, and academia.⁴²

Roots of Narrative Dominance

The party's use of economic coercion to constrain elite voice and action is inseparable from what the party-state calls *huayuquan* (话语权), which is typically translated as "discourse power." One scholar has defined *huayuquan* as "national capability to influence global values, governance, and even day-to-day discussions on the world stage, which Beijing believes should be commensurate with its economic and military might."⁴³ The party's focus on *huayuquan* emerges from its Marxist-Leninist approach to power, which emphasizes control of the means through which thought and narrative are transmitted and created. Among other objectives, *huayuquan* describes the party's desire to drive convergence between its own narratives about China and those of external parties.⁴⁴

Huayuquan generally seeks to erase or downplay information that could cast the party in an unflattering light, while putting forth an image of China as a benign partner engaged in mutually beneficial international cooperation.⁴⁵ This approach has two components. First, the party aims to convince foreign audiences to internalize and reproduce its positive narratives about China. Second, if those efforts fail, the party seeks to deny space, airtime, or resources to individuals, institutions, or platforms advancing compelling adversarial narratives.⁴⁶ Key to the second component is communicating the costs of spreading such narratives

The emergence of discourse power has coincided with a shift in the party's description of its external propaganda work. The party's propaganda was once largely defensive, designed to insulate China from foreign ideological "pollution" and create breathing room for continuing modernization. Today, however, the party has adopted a more confident, offensive stance intended to generate consensus around China's growing role in global affairs. These efforts seek to use intelligently constructed propaganda to align foreign discourse, norms, and rules with those of the party. Xi Jinping calls this process "bringing together foreign and Chinese," and cites it as key to building a "discourse system" for external propaganda. He explains:

Bringing together Chinese and foreign is more than just simply catering [to the tastes] of foreigners. Rather, it is improving our ability to disseminate the Chinese way [of doing things], to disseminate the Chinese system, Chinese concepts, and Chinese culture in ways such that foreign audiences will be happy to accept it, in language that is easy for them to understand, so that Chinese concepts become a global lingua franca, and an international consensus.⁴⁷

Xi specifically links external propaganda with the global competition to define generally accepted norms and values. Instances in which China has successfully employed external propaganda to shift the global conversation include redefining human rights to include a "right to development" and – along with Russia – propagating the concept of "cyber sovereignty."⁴⁸ Chen Guangzhao, deputy director of the People's Liberation Army News Broadcast Center, describes "international opinion struggle" more plainly than Xi. He says it seeks to "set the agenda cleverly: to make the topics that ought to be hot, hot, and make the topics that ought to be cold, cold; to get the things that ought to be said, said in the right place, and to guide the formation of international opinion, rather than getting led around by the nose."⁴⁹

All parts of the party-state participate in the generation of discourse power, but state media outlets and regulators play the leading role. In 2016, the foreign-language components of state broadcaster China Central Television were rebranded as China Global Television Network to increase their effectiveness in overseas markets. Liu Yunshan, then the party's top

official for propaganda and ideology, described the network's job as transmitting the thoughts and strategies of Xi Jinping and the party as it told the "incredible story" of China's development.⁵⁰ A year later Liu Qibao, then the head of the party's Propaganda Department, went a step further. He called state media's overseas arms the "front line of external propaganda" and said it was their job to "bolster the international influence of China's discourse power" and "to win an acknowledged place (for China) in global public opinion competition."⁵¹

Despite state media's leading role, the party recognizes that there are limits to the effectiveness of official voices. Writing in 2016, Yang Na, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, stated "[w]here Western audiences are concerned, anything from an official source is most likely biased. Not only will they not accept it, they'll reject it outright."⁵² The party's communication with foreign parties therefore relies heavily on third parties, since third-party information is often "seen as neutral, as more trustworthy, relatively speaking. In international communication—especially when it comes to political discourse—modern China should actively construct third-party channels, including think tanks and media, to gradually develop [content] that is less obviously political."⁵³ Yang focuses particularly on think tanks and non-Chinese media, saying they are "both extremely important sources of national wisdom, for the process of guiding public opinion."⁵⁴ This description is consistently echoed by other officials.⁵⁵ Efforts to cooperate with or co-opt foreign media outlets have become common enough that the phrase "borrowing a boat to go to sea" is now used to describe the practice.⁵⁶

These efforts can take many forms, including paid content-publishing agreements, inviting foreign media to all expenses-paid conferences, outright acquisition of foreign media outlets, or establishment of covertly supported media fronts. One analysis by the *Financial Times* found more than 200 content-sharing agreements between Chinese state media and Chinese-language publications, with the bulk concentrated in the United States, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Japan.⁵⁷ Reporting on these partnerships indicates that they sometimes use coercive tactics, including threats to advertisers and blocking undesirable columnists or columns from publication. The goal in most cases appears to be co-opting parties who are perceived as neutral or disinterested, so that party messages are reproduced through credible non-party interlocutors.

China's managed online discourse also makes ordinary internet users in China a valuable voice for the party. Curated online outrage at perceived political infractions by foreign companies, companies, and individuals allows the party to apply its domestic efforts to "guide" speech to international audiences.⁵⁸ In one incident, Chinese internet users challenged what they perceived as biased Western reporting on unrest in Tibet.⁵⁹ In another, party-state entities engaged in and threatened punitive actions against the National Basketball Association—including cancellation of partnerships, sponsorships, and game broadcasts—after a team executive expressed support for protestors in Hong Kong.⁶⁰ The party management of online discourse—suppressing undesirable narratives while allowing acceptable ones to flourish—has enabled ordinary Chinese users to emerge as a powerful force for managing overseas discourse.

There are also signs that the party may be embracing covert computational information operations—reminiscent of Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election—as it tries to shape events in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Such a shift would not be out of step with the party's historical approach to information and political warfare, which emphasizes the struggle of ideas as a key component of the China's global ideological struggle.⁶¹ Military theorists have outlined a theory of "cognitive domain operations" meant to win "mind superiority" that includes disinformation and social media operations in peacetime.⁶² Although such operations grew from studies of U.S. doctrine and practice in wartime, Chinese writers have "identified four tactics to win 'mind superiority' in the peacetime cognitive space: 1) 'perception manipulation' through propaganda narratives; 2) 'cutting off historical memory' so that targets will be open to new values; 3) 'changing the paradigm of thinking' by targeting elites to change their ideology; and 4) 'deconstructing symbols' to challenge national identity."⁶³

Examples of Narrative Dominance

The party's tools to shape information exist along a spectrum, ranging from entities under its direct control to intermediaries subject to coercive pressure. A full accounting of the actors involved is beyond the scope of this report, but some of the most important elements include Chinese Communist Party organs such as the Ministry of Propaganda, the People's Liberation Army, the Ministry of State Security, and the United Front Work Department. Other important groups are those described above—state media outlets, state-owned enterprises, think tanks, universities, Confucius Institutes, corporations

and businesspeople based in China, overseas Chinese businesspeople, and select foreign actors and groups. Some of these actors are part of the party-state and are thus under its direct control. Others have more complex relationships with the party that may be characterized by a degree of independence. Yet most businesses inside China are still constrained by the party's command over the state and the supervision committees it controls within their management structures. Still other groups—such as foreign actors—are not subject to direct party control or direction, but aid in shaping narratives in ways that benefit the Communist Party. Each is discussed in more detail below.

The party-state itself sets the direction and tone of propaganda efforts, controls the flow of resources, and in some cases directly operationalizes China's information control strategy. The party's Ministry of Propaganda, for example, controls the personnel and messaging of state-run media outlets like *People's Daily* and *China Daily*. It also provides instructions to non-state media (including social media platforms) about how sensitive topics should be censored.⁶⁴ State-run media outlets, such as China Global Television Network, *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, *People's Daily*, and *Global Times*, have long been the direct voices through which the party-state speaks to the outside world. They have all—particularly *Xinhua*—been used as *de facto* arms of Chinese intelligence.⁶⁵ All are increasingly seeking new and innovative ways to propagate the party's message globally, while denying space and resources to adversarial narratives. For example, the above outlets are active on foreign social media platforms; five of the six most followed media outlets on Facebook are Chinese state-media outlets.⁶⁶

Chinese state-run media outlets have also signed content sharing agreements with a number of major news outlets.⁶⁷ This has led to Chinese propaganda being published in major newspapers such as *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Telegraph*, and many others. Although such content is typically labeled as being paid for and provided by outlets such as *China Daily* or *Xinhua*, the sections themselves are designed to resemble the papers' other genuine news articles. That the content is provided by entities under the direct control of the Communist Party's Propaganda Department is not made clear.⁶⁸ Such agreements can be lucrative and can create financial dependencies in an era during which many privately-owned news organizations are struggling.⁶⁹ *China Daily*—which is required to disclose such spending in the United States by the Foreign Agents Registration Act—reportedly spent nearly \$16 million on U.S. content sharing agreements in the first ten months of 2017. This made it one of the top ten registrants by spending, and the largest that was not itself a foreign government.⁷⁰

A growing body of evidence suggests that state-directed actors may be conducting sophisticated disinformation efforts on non-Chinese social media platforms. Facebook and Twitter have both announced take downs of inauthentic state-directed accounts spreading misinformation about protests in Hong Kong.⁷¹ This was the first acknowledgment by either platform of party-state disinformation on their platforms.⁷²

Similarly, the government of Taiwan has repeatedly asserted that it observed party-state disinformation on Facebook and LINE aimed at its citizens.⁷³ The alleged attacks are particularly notable for the sophistication of their tactics, including the coordinated use of state-run social media accounts in concert with third-party content farms based in Malaysia, Vietnam, and elsewhere. There have also been signs that Chinese party-state organs are increasingly paying attention to Russia's online disinformation tactics, as well as conducting research into innovative ways to generate and deploy inauthentic artificial intelligence-generated content. For example, the RAND Corporation's Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga has noted that personnel from Base 311—the military's psychological warfare facility that may have directed attacks on Taiwan's 2018 elections—have “called for the [Chinese military] to abandon the use of ‘sockpuppets,’ or false online identities used for deception, in favor of [artificial intelligence]-enabled ‘intelligent public opinion guidance’ software that has the ability to automatically and adaptively generate content and select the optimal time and method for coordinated posts.”⁷⁴

Chinese think tanks and universities also remain under tight ideological control, primarily through the party oversight committees they are required to host.⁷⁵ These institutions serve important domestic functions, but are also increasingly used to ensure the party's voice is heard abroad. Partnerships with foreign counterparts can encourage self-censoring or downplaying criticism of the party to preserve these relationships.⁷⁶ In some cases, obligations to promote elements of the party's worldview are written into partnership agreements. For example, the contract establishing a Confucius Institute at Queensland University in Australia—made public after local media requests—required the university to promote a positive image for the Confucius Institute and gave Beijing authority to evaluate the quality and content of teaching within the institute.⁷⁷ These attempts to encourage self-censorship or to elevate the party's preferred narratives are less obvious than state media or online disinformation campaigns, but have the potential to affect public discourse in subtle but important ways.

Private companies are another vector to shape foreign information spaces. Huawei is one example. Its Chief Executive Officer Ren Zhengfei has said publicly he would shut down his company before he would submit to a demand by the party's General Secretary to provide clients' data.⁷⁸ Despite Ren's denials, it is unlikely that Huawei enjoys substantial independence from the party. As with other major companies in China, Huawei has a number of internal party branches, whose members likely include key senior manager;⁷⁹ Ren himself is a party member.⁸⁰ And the company's obligation to "support, assist and cooperate with state intelligence work" is unambiguously codified in Chinese state law.⁸¹

Another example is ByteDance, which owns and runs TikTok, the world's fastest growing social media platform. ByteDance's chief executive officer has emphasized the importance of abiding by party guidance to the company's business operations. The platform has acknowledged that it censors political content to maintain a focus on entertainment, although it has not disclosed how. In interviews, however, former employees have described a content moderation process strongly influenced by Beijing and reports have documented multiple instances in which content moderation decisions appear designed to downplay subjects Beijing finds sensitive. This has included pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and China's imprisonment of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.⁸²

Online activity by nationalist internet users is another important aspect of the party's global information campaigns. Members of the Chinese diaspora who are critical of the party-state can find themselves harassed by coordinated teams of internet users inside China. In one recent example, a Chinese-national researcher working at an Australian think was doxxed along with her family.⁸³ Hundreds of users on Weibo—a PRC-based Chinese social media platform—threatened physical violence against both her and her family. Teams of online nationalists can also be an effective way to "flood the zone" on foreign social media platforms—many of which are blocked within China—creating the impression of outrage and making criticism of the party-state harder to find. For example, Reddit recently dealt with an influx of pro-Beijing users determined to use the platform's "up vote/down vote" features to drown out criticism of China and the Chinese Communist Party.⁸⁴ Similarly, Houston Rockets' general manager Daryl Morey's account was bombarded with harassment by pro-Beijing users after he tweeted support for Hong Kong protestors.⁸⁵ While the degree of coordination of these efforts by the party is unclear, its efforts to whip up nationalist sentiment internally and the coordinated engagement of accounts on platforms inaccessible without VPNs indicates at minimum tolerance or tacit support for such efforts.⁸⁶

The party also attempts to instrumentalize members of the Chinese diaspora to shape the information environment abroad. Many Chinese-language newspapers overseas have increasingly adopted pro-Beijing stances.⁸⁷ The party has encouraged this shift through preferential treatment of friendly publications, and targeted harassment of neutral or skeptical outlets⁸⁸. Numerous independent Chinese-language media outlets overseas have reported threats to their advertisers by Chinese diplomats, as well as to would-be local partners such as politicians and community organizations.⁸⁹

In other cases, pro-Beijing businesspeople living overseas have successfully built local language media businesses. The most prominent example is StarTimes, which is run by a Chinese national and has built a large, competitive business in Africa. StarTimes now offers digital television subscription packages at low prices to 10 million subscribers in 30 African countries.⁹⁰ The company has received substantial PRC state support for its business, and has been welcomed by many of the countries in which it operates. StarTimes content portrays China in ways that largely align with party-state narratives, while its basic subscription packages offer China Global Television Network as the only news channel alongside Al Jazeera.

The party's information control strategy also seeks to suppress criticism by foreign elites, primarily by selectively threatening those who put forth adversarial narratives. After Daryl Morey's tweeted support for Hong Kong, the party allowed outrage at Morey's tweet to spread on Chinese social media platforms. It then used the backlash to justify damage to the National Basketball Association's business inside China. Games were pulled from state television, Rockets merchandise was removed from e-commerce platforms, and events associated with pre-season games in China were cancelled. The Chinese government also reportedly demanded that the Rockets fire Morey.⁹¹

Although Morey was not fired, the Association's initial statements appeared designed to protect business in China rather than Morey's right to free expression. After significant criticism, including by members of Congress, the league affirmed its support for Morey's right to speak. The episode illustrated the party's willingness to use the size of its market to suppress adversarial narratives outside China. The party is attempting to encourage censorship at both the corporate and individual level by illustrating the cost of propagating narratives it perceives as adversarial. Other prominent targets have included

Apple, gaming company Blizzard Entertainment, and foreign airlines.⁹²

Hollywood is another of the party's targets. In 1997, U.S. studios released three major films that painted the party in an unflattering light: *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Red Corner*, and *Kundun*. Chinese state-owned entertainment companies halted domestic distribution of all three films and communicated that further such films would endanger business in China, including a planned Disney theme park in Shanghai.⁹³ Since then no major American studio films have addressed sensitive subjects such as Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang, or portrayed China in a negative light.

The party has made clear that studios wishing to release major movies in China must seek approval for movie plots and in some cases even scripts, as part of the pre-production process.⁹⁴ Movies starring "anti-China" actors such as Richard Gere—who has long advocated for Tibetan causes—face a difficult road to approval.⁹⁵ To avoid the censors' wrath, one major recent release made a Tibetan character British, while other major studio films such as *The Martian*, *Independence Day: Resurgence*, and *Gravity* have positively portrayed the Chinese government or Sino-American cooperation.⁹⁶ By threatening American studios with loss of market access, the party can simultaneously deny visibility to narratives it considers adversarial, while using the global reach of American soft power as a channel for transmitting an image of China as a benign advocate of international cooperation and prosperity.⁹⁷

Relying on Elite Intermediaries

The Chinese Communist Party's approach to maintain one-party rule over 1.3 billion people focuses on cultivating, co-opting, and coercing non-party elites. The party calls the collection of policies, practices, and institutions that enable this approach the "United Front." The basic principle of the modern United Front is to tie economic opportunity to political compliance. The party does so through a sophisticated system of economic governance and political consultation that allows it to employ a well-calibrated mixture of rewards and punishments. As China's global economic integration has grown, the party has increasingly applied the United Front approach to foreign countries, companies, organizations, and individuals.

Roots of Reliance on Intermediaries

Non-party members of Chinese society who consciously acknowledge, abide by, and participate in the party's political leadership through the United Front are often referred to as "friends" or "old friends," speaking for the party while making available to it the organizational and programmatic resources at their disposal. The methods the party employs to co-opt and care for "old friends" are typically patient, positive, and conciliatory. Mao Zedong described these relationships when he said the party must "bring material benefits to those who are led—or at least not damage their interests—while giving them political education."⁹⁸⁹⁹

Nevertheless, the party cannot rely on purely conciliatory measures to head off challenges to its authority. Coercive measures—both real and threatened—are an important part of the party's engagement with elites. Threats can be deployed alongside more conciliatory measures, but this typically only occurs after a purely conciliatory approach has failed. As Deng Xiaoping—one of the fathers of the united front—put it, "the main thing is to bring together all the friends we can. Only after that do we seek to splinter our enemies."¹⁰⁰ Through selective application of coercive measures, the party forces potential "enemies" within target elite groups to reconsider the costs of resistance.

The party sees enemies internally and externally, and views them as inextricably linked. An official United Front training manual states:

Hostile foreign forces do not wish to see China rise. So many of them see our country as a major potential threat and competitor, and do everything they can to contain and suppress us ... Supported by, manipulated by, and under the direction of hostile Western forces ... the activities of internal and external collaborators run rampant, their techniques ever more numerous and more clandestine.¹⁰¹

The party therefore applies many of the same pragmatic strategies both at home and abroad under the umbrella of the United Front. The term used by the party for this quasi-official outreach to intermediaries abroad is "people-to-people diplomacy" or "private diplomacy." Chinese officials describe the United Front's private diplomacy and domestic functions in similar ways, noting that both provide material benefits and apply coercion selectively.¹⁰²

Like the United Front, which was developed to compensate for the party's weakness on the battlefield, private diplomacy also emerged in response to material weakness. In the 1950s, U.S. isolation of China led Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai to create separate channels of exchange with foreign elites.¹⁰³ In Zhou's words, private diplomacy was meant to merge with "official diplomacy" and "semi-official diplomacy" to form a comprehensive whole covering "governments, parliaments, political parties, militaries, economics, culture, education, science and technology, academia, ethnicity, religion, health, sports, environment, cities, and the private sector."¹⁰⁴ The goal of these efforts was to "make friends" and "confront the challenge... [of] countries with malicious intentions that want to be China's enemies."¹⁰⁵

Like the United Front, private diplomacy is meant to be supported and implemented by the entire party-state. A complete accounting of private diplomacy structures is beyond the scope of this report, but its most prominent elements are state-sponsored "friendship societies." These organizations—the most important of which include the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and the China Association for International Friendly Contact—retain direct links to the party-state through their leadership and personnel. Yet such groups also describe their connection with the government in terms of "support" rather than direct management.^{106 107}

The ambiguity of friendship societies' relationship to the party-state aids their effectiveness. Some measure of separation from the Communist Party allows these groups to identify and cultivate networks with individuals and groups that might resist direct engagement with the party. Business and economics are a particularly important component. A former head of one such group expressly linked external propaganda and private economic diplomacy. He described his group's core mission as winning international sympathy for socialism with Chinese characteristics. This requires it to "use the relationships accumulated over the years of friendly work to develop into the economic field and open up effective channels for economic and trade cooperation".^{108 109}

The party's private diplomacy and United Front work share principles and tactics, but are targeted differently. The former is entirely directed towards foreigners, while the latter is directed towards groups the party considers part of the Chinese nation. However, as China has grown increasingly integrated with the rest of the world, United Front target groups have become increasingly present overseas. This overlap makes it increasingly practical and desirable for United Front and private diplomacy work to reinforce one another. A recent organizational restructuring of the United Front Work Department recognized this reality, with greater emphasis given to work on target groups overseas.¹¹⁰

Examples of Reliance on Intermediaries

The information control strategy described above frequently involves entities and individuals whose relationship with the party and the government can be difficult to characterize. This reflects the party's preference for acting through a web of elite intermediaries whose relationship with the party is often ambiguous or opaque. When applied in a foreign context, this use of intermediaries can circumvent loopholes in foreign influence laws, such as the Foreign Agents Registration Act. Just as with organized crime, proving coordination with foreign governments is notoriously difficult, so prosecutors often pursue ancillary charges, such as bribery or tax fraud.

Governments and political parties in democracies also routinely use elite intermediaries to pursue policy objectives, but these relationships are typically subject to disclosure requirements. The party, on the other hand, has developed a different institutional regime, one in which its power is not subject to any meaningful form of oversight. As a result, the party often relies on secrecy, compartmentalization, and deniability in its work with intermediaries.

The party's skillful use of intermediaries abroad suggests that it has learned lessons from application of the same tools at home.¹¹¹ By relying on intermediaries, party leaders maximize flexibility and plausible deniability. This can obscure the party's objectives, amplify the effectiveness of its policies, generate uncertainty about the extent of party influence in target societies, make it difficult to establish proof required for enforcement actions, and even erode social trust in target societies.

The party cultivates intermediaries through several arrangements. The United Front includes leading private corporations, businesspeople, intellectuals, academics, minority groups, Chinese students overseas, and Chinese diaspora groups. Organizations with ties to the United Front have played a role in incidents of interference around the world, including in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. Another important category of intermediaries are those operationalized through private diplomacy. A final group of intermediaries are directly managed by Chinese intelligence agencies.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. Lines of control and cooperation can blur in complex ways between the United Front, private diplomacy, and intelligence work silos. Each can involve personnel and institutions tied to parts of the system not normally associated with influence campaigns. Intermediary networks can reinforce one another, creating connections between seemingly unrelated cases, and maintaining both flexibility and deniability for the party.

A recent campaign to exert influence by bribing a highly-placed United Nations official illustrates these dynamics. The campaign centered around John Ashe, a diplomat from Antigua and Barbados who served as president of the General Assembly from September 2013 to September 2014. According to U.S. prosecutors, Ashe accepted bribes from three interlocutors tied to various parts of the Chinese party-state apparatus: Ng Lap Seng, Sheri Yan, and Patrick Ho. In some cases, the three appeared to communicate or cooperate with one another as they developed relationships with Ashe. All three were tried and convicted in the United States for bribery of Ashe or other foreign officials. Ashe entered into plea negotiations with prosecutors in May 2016, but died the next month at his home near New York.¹¹²

Ng, Yan, and Ho's overlapping courtship of Ashe took place against the backdrop of China's wide-ranging push to build influence at the United Nations.¹¹³ In 2016, Ashe was charged with having solicited and received \$1.3 million in bribes from Ng Lap Seng, a real estate billionaire from China. In return, Ng won Ashe's support for a United Nations conference center Ng planned to build in Macau.¹¹⁴ Ng is a member of the national Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, an advisory body composed of party-designated elites from all parts of PRC society that former CIA analyst Peter Mattis has described as "the militia of the United Front."^{115 116}

Ng's trial also explored his connections to the party-state through PRC intelligence organs. Prosecutors questioned Ng's relationship with a "Mr. Qin," whom Ng assisted in purchasing a \$10 million home near New York in cash—which Qin reportedly used to host senior PRC Chinese officials—and who appeared to have directed some of Ng's actions.¹¹⁷ During its questioning of Ng, the FBI repeatedly asked whether Qin was a PRC intelligence agent.¹¹⁸ Prosecutors entered into evidence documents claiming that Qin treated Ng as a subordinate, with the latter even calling Qin "big brother"—a term frequently used to denote senior gang officials in China—despite Ng's status as a billionaire. In 2015, Sheri Yan was arrested and accused of directing more than \$800,000 in bribes to Ashe through her non-governmental organization, the Global Sustainability Foundation.¹¹⁹ Yan reportedly began recruiting Ashe at a conference in Hong Kong hosted by Ng.¹²⁰ Yan later provided Ashe with a \$20,000 monthly retainer to serve as an advisor to the Global Sustainability Foundation, concurrent with Ashe's position at the United Nations.¹²¹ Yan also provided Ashe with larger one-off payments to assist with securing citizenship in Antigua and Barbados for a wealthy Chinese businessman and government contracts for Chinese companies.¹²²

Court records also indicate that Ashe may have taken bribes from Patrick Ho.¹²³ Ho was head of China Energy Fund Committee, a think tank attached to a Chinese energy and financial conglomerate. Ho was tried and found guilty of facilitating business deals by attempting to bribe senior officials in Chad and Uganda.¹²⁴ During Ho's trial, prosecutors played an audio clip from a wiretapped call between Ho and Sheri Yan discussing an apparent payment to Ashe.¹²⁵

Although the three actors all had ties to the party and appeared to be pursuing objectives with geopolitical ramifications, the precise nature of their relationship to party leadership is difficult to characterize. This highlights one of the benefits the party sees in using elite intermediaries: the ambiguity inherent in intermediaries allows Chinese leaders to pursue geopolitical aims while maintaining flexibility and deniability.

The party relies not only on individual intermediaries, but also on businesses at home and abroad. And no business more clearly demonstrates the advantages of intermediaries than Huawei. Its ambiguous relationship to the party has undoubtedly helped Huawei build trust in countries that would bar control of telecommunications infrastructure by an authoritarian regime. In less than 20 years, Huawei's annual revenue has grown from \$552 million to \$100 billion.¹²⁶ It is now the world's largest provider of 4G and 5G network backbone equipment, the second largest seller of smartphones, and an active participant in global standards-setting bodies.¹²⁷ This expanding global footprint has made Huawei a useful intermediary to the party.

Reports suggest that Huawei helped democratically elected governments in Ugandan and Zambian leaders disrupt the activities of political opponents by helping to crack political opponents' encrypted communications.¹²⁸ Huawei's assistance occurred alongside Chinese efforts to train African officials in Beijing's approach to cyber-governance. These types of arrangements help both the party and its intermediaries. The party can piggyback on the prowess of companies like Huawei while Huawei demonstrates its usefulness to the party. Meanwhile, both sides can assert Huawei's nominal independence from the party to build trust with external organizations.¹²⁹ Huawei's nominal status as a private company allows it to lobby and advertise in ways that align with party messaging but would be difficult for the party to do itself.

Instrumentalizing the Chinese Diaspora

Since Deng Xiaoping's assumption of leadership in 1978, the Chinese Communist Party has prioritized outreach to members of the Chinese diaspora. In the party's definition, the diaspora includes both recent emigrants and individuals whose ancestors left China centuries ago. Deng said that "overseas Chinese experts are living treasures" and directed that diaspora outreach be the centerpiece of his drive to rebuild China's economic and technological strength.¹³⁰ The most visible actor in diaspora policy used to be the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, which shared personnel and power with the CCP's United Front Work Department. However, the party has reasserted itself under Xi.¹³¹ In 2019, the "partyfication" of diaspora policy advanced to the point that United Front-directed diaspora organizations began to openly announce the establishment of internal party branches.¹³² Thus, although the logic of the party's approach to the diaspora has remained largely consistent, its structures and tactics have evolved.

Roots of Diaspora Instrumentalization

China's diaspora policies demonstrate a racially-based view that evinces little appreciation for preexisting citizenships or national loyalties. Moreover, Beijing has shown little regard for the potential impact of societal cohesion in countries with large Chinese diaspora populations.¹³³ Deng's comment that "mainland compatriots, compatriots from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, and overseas Chinese—all are the children and grandchildren of the Chinese race," remains indicative of mainstream party thinking.¹³⁴ Xi Jinping closely echoed Deng in 2017 when he said, "realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese race requires the shared striving of the sons and daughters of the Chinese race, both at home and overseas."¹³⁵

The party does not promote racial solidarity for solidarity's sake. Instead, the party's aim is to accelerate China's modernization and build overall national strength. Writing in 2004, the deputy head of the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office said "the real point of 'diaspora ties' isn't in the 'ties' themselves, but in the enormous use that can be made of these kind of 'ties' ... The use of [overseas Chinese] lies in the advantages of all of their funds, technology, and human resources. Some are very well connected in their home countries, and have strong commercial networks locally, regionally, and even globally."^{136 137}

This instrumental view has translated into a focus on business, science, and technology in diaspora outreach. China's embassies in industrialized democracies have well-staffed bureaus dedicated to facilitating scientific and technological outreach and exchange. These offices cooperate with the United Front and private diplomacy bureaucracies to cultivate useful individuals and networks.¹³⁸ For example, a 1997 work report from the Chinese consulate in New York said it had "mobilized community organizations with a relatively [high] concentration of overseas ethnic Chinese experts ... and organized in the United States 100 high-level ethnic Chinese scholars in all fields to carry out investigations and research on the future direction of China's [science and technology] development and on related policies ... [out of] their sincere wish to repay their native country."¹³⁹ The report also discussed "an effective model for overseas scholars to serve their [native/ancestral] country."¹⁴⁰

The party has also committed significant resources to co-opting the diaspora, in some cases going so far as to send state media personnel abroad to establish "independent" Chinese-language media outlets.¹⁴¹ A biennial global conference for Chinese-language media outlets "appears to serve as a platform for Beijing to convince critics to modify their tone and to ensure that overseas Chinese-language newspapers follow the party's line," according to the Hoover Institution. Essays released during the conferences praised the censorship of views opposed by the party and stressed the necessity of, in the words of one piece in 2015, 'properly telling China's story' (echoing Xi Jinping's instructions).¹⁴² At the conference in October 2019, more than 600 attendees from around the world were addressed by the United Front Work Department's top officials, along with other senior propaganda officials.¹⁴³

Because diaspora outreach is directed primarily through the United Front Work Department, positive inducements are the primary tool used. The party continues to abide by Deng's statement, "I hope all the people who have gone overseas to study return. No matter what their past political attitudes were, they can all come back."¹⁴⁴ Deng emphasized that returnees must be given special treatment, saying that the party should provide them with housing, scientific equipment, and laboratories.¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, coercion linked with economic, professional, or familial interests remains a hallmark of Beijing's

diaspora policy.¹⁴⁶

Examples of Diaspora Instrumentalization

China's foreign interference often incentivizes diaspora members to penetrate and co-opt groups that the party believes represent Chinese interests abroad. Policy documents reveal that many in the party believe it is entitled to diaspora members' loyalty based on family and racial ties.¹⁴⁷ One member of the U.S. armed forces who is of Chinese descent described a conversation with a People's Liberation Army Air Force general that exemplified this mindset. In proposing a toast, the general commented that "blood is thicker than water. Chinese blood runs through you. You understand us, and know that no matter what flag you wear on your shoulders, you are Chinese first and foremost."¹⁴⁸

This view of ethnicity and nationality undermines individual choice and threatens diaspora communities' integration abroad.¹⁴⁹ If not approached in a thoughtful and transparent manner, efforts to combat targeting of the Chinese diaspora can themselves undermine trust with diaspora communities.¹⁵⁰ Poorly designed or communicated enforcement efforts that appear to unfairly target individuals of Chinese descent can feed into party narratives. By targeting overseas Chinese communities, the party makes it difficult to disentangle its own influence from accusations of racism. This can muddy public discourse by producing divisive debates and distracting attention from the party's foreign influence.¹⁵¹

The party's tactics vary depending on the resilience of a country's institutions. Interference in diaspora populations often involves other hallmarks of its political interference, including the use of economic incentives, intermediaries, and efforts to co-opt the information space. For example, the party targets diaspora communities through censorship of the information they receive. Although Chinese citizens in democratic countries have access to a range of non-censored news, they often rely on WeChat and other platforms based in China.¹⁵² Approximately 100 million WeChat users live outside of China.

The party's efforts to de-platform credible alternative voices—both at home and abroad—lowers the quality of the information these diaspora members receive. U.S. political coverage consumed by Chinese-language WeChat users is often a mix of party-approved misinformation and hyper-local misinformation.¹⁵³ WeChat's dominance in the Chinese-language info-sphere means that politicians with large Chinese constituencies often use WeChat to reach key voting blocs, thus subjecting their messages to party censorship.¹⁵⁴

The diaspora is also used outside of cyberspace. In Cambodia, for example, the Chinese diaspora has helped the party to navigate local politics and extend its influence. In one case, Fu Xianting, a former Chinese military officer won approval for a \$5 billion resort after the individual donated 220 motorcycles to Hun Sen's personal paramilitary force.¹⁵⁵ A financing agreement was culminated with a state-owned Chinese conglomerate after a decade-long campaign to overcome objections from farmers and environmental groups.¹⁵⁶ Present at the signing ceremony was Chen Yuan, a Chinese princeling heading the China Association for International Friendly Contact, an important vehicle for private diplomacy established and overseen by the People's Liberation Army. (Fu Xianting is a member of the organization's board.)¹⁵⁷ ¹⁵⁸More recently, Cambodian officials have signed an agreement with China to renovate a naval base near Sihanoukville.¹⁵⁹ Military facilities there would enable China to project power into the Gulf of Thailand and southward towards the Strait of Malacca, a key choke point through which much of the PRC's foreign trade passes.

Recent events in Australia, where the United Front Work Department's China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (hereinafter referred to as "the Council") has actively targeted diaspora communities, also illustrate the pitfalls of China's approach.¹⁶⁰ Although the organization describe itself as non-governmental, its global head is Wang Yang, China's fourth-ranking official and the head of its United Front work.¹⁶¹ Council members around the world meet frequently with officials from the United Front Work Department and local Chinese consulates. The Council's nominal focus is encouraging the incorporation of Taiwan into the People's Republic of China, but council members have sought to cultivate relationships with political elites in democratic countries besides Australia, including Thailand, the United States, Botswana, South Africa, and Canada.¹⁶² Huang Xiangmo, a real estate billionaire and Chinese national, formerly headed the Australian chapter. He cultivated political influence in Australia through large donations to senior politicians and frequently hosted senior Australian business and political figures. In some cases, Huang's contributions came with conditions attached that reflected party geopolitical priorities. In one instance he reportedly rescinded an AU\$300,000 donation to the Labor Party after a senior Labor official expressed support for Australia joining the United States in freedom of navigation

operations in the disputed South China Sea.¹⁶³ Another Labor politician was forced to resign after opposing such operations in a joint press conference with Huang.¹⁶⁴ It would later emerge that Huang had paid his bills and the politician had sought to influence immigration decisions on Huang's behalf.

In the United States, where the Chinese diaspora is a smaller percentage of the population than in Australia, China appears to have less ability to use diaspora actors to influence politicians. Instead, China's strategy has focused on silencing potential critics and securing access to American technological innovation. The party has used the Thousands Talents Program in an effort to tap the Chinese diaspora inside the United States for science and technology expertise. Chinese companies, universities, and government agencies have a legitimate right to hire outside experts, but in many instances this recruitment has encouraged targets to steal trade secrets and violate federal grant provisions or export control laws.¹⁶⁵ Prosecutions by American law enforcement agencies can generate feelings of mistrust, resentment, or fear in Chinese diaspora communities.¹⁶⁶ The party has also influenced Chinese language media by threatening diaspora members and their families in China.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, the Chinese government has reportedly sought to restrict speech on U.S. campuses through student organizations with ties to Chinese diplomatic posts.¹⁶⁸ In other cases, the party has reportedly incentivized students to participate in pro-Beijing demonstrations inside the United States.¹⁶⁹

These interference efforts demonstrate the political complexities that pluralistic societies face in confronting Chinese efforts to co-opt diaspora communities. For example, when the Australian government proposed laws to combat foreign interference, opponents characterized the proposals as racist or evidence of an "anti-China hysteria."¹⁷⁰ More recently, questions have focused on Gladys Liu, the first Chinese-Australian elected to the Australian House of Representatives. She was previously a member of several organizations affiliated with the United Front, but the leadership of Australia's Liberal party has stood by her. Meanwhile, the Labor Party's Penny Wong—who is herself of Malaysian Chinese descent—has accused Liberal leaders of "hiding behind the entire Chinese-Australian community to avoid saying why [they have] ignored warnings from our national security agencies."¹⁷¹

The Australian debate demonstrates the corrosive nature of China's diaspora policies. The party can insulate itself by influencing politicians, and illegally acquiring science and technology through diaspora intermediaries. Instrumentalizing the Chinese diaspora in this way complicates conversations about race and loyalty, thereby undermining social cohesion.

Embedding Authoritarian Control

Chinese political interference threatens to embed authoritarian norms in democratic societies. In some countries, new forms of “techno-authoritarian” governance are eroding institutions meant to promote elite accountability. Free elections, free press, civil society, and anti-corruption efforts have all come under pressure as a result. This can happen by design, as a result of the Chinese Communist Party propagating rules and norms amenable to its interests. It can also occur through unintended foreign adoption of the party’s mode of doing business, or by reinforcing pre-existing authoritarian tendencies. Regardless of the mechanism, the result is proliferation of norms that favor authoritarianism and thereby threaten democracies.

Roots of Authoritarian Control

China’s tendency to encourage authoritarian norms abroad reflects the party’s commitment to authoritarianism at home. The party rules China through a system of law, but has made clear that the legal system is not a check on the party’s exercise of power.¹⁷² This arrangement is written into China’s constitution, which conditions elections, free speech, public assembly, and religion on the party’s will. As the constitution notes, “the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Communist Party of China. Disruption of the socialist system by any organization or individual is prohibited.”¹⁷³

A defining characteristic of the party’s leadership is its secrecy. The tendency to eschew transparency is an intentional choice, one that gives the party flexibility to shape narratives, cultivate intermediaries, and influence events.¹⁷⁴ In a 1936 essay, one of Mao Zedong’s lieutenants explained the link between the party’s work and secrecy by saying, “[o]nly when secret work is added to open work is the work of the party complete, with secret work occupying the main, guiding position.”¹⁷⁵ The party’s preference for secrecy continues today. Upon joining the party, new members swear an oath to “protect party secrets.”¹⁷⁶ This injunction is powerful; the system used to detain and punish party members is run outside of China’s legal system, and has no right to appeal.¹⁷⁷ The resulting code of silence gives party leaders broad latitude and substantial deniability.

The party’s emphasis on control and secrecy at home shapes its foreign policy and its approach to global normative competition. The CCP’s desire to shape norms globally the global normative commons is embodied in the “community of common destiny”, one of Xi Jinping’s signature diplomatic initiatives. Analyst Liza Tobin concludes that Beijing aims to transform the international environment “to make it compatible with China’s governance model and emergence as a global leader.”¹⁷⁸ Although the ultimate goals of the community of common destiny are debated among foreign analysts, Tobin concludes that success for the initiative, which has been written into key party governing and policy documents, would mean “the international community would regard Beijing’s authoritarian governance model as a superior alternative to Western electoral democracy, and the world would credit the Communist Party of China for developing a new path to peace, prosperity, and modernity that other countries can follow.”¹⁷⁹

China’s effort to create a community of common destiny is closely tied to its concept of “cyber sovereignty”.¹⁸⁰ While democracies attempt to define norms around state regulation of data flows and online behavior, China has promoted an expansive notion of state sovereignty over the use of the internet. This vision expressly permits online surveillance of users, strict censorship of online expression, and little oversight over how data is governed. This notion of cyber sovereignty was codified in China’s 2017 cybersecurity law.¹⁸¹

Examples of Authoritarian Control

The party’s approach to internet management and pervasive electronic surveillance have found an audience abroad. In an internet freedom survey covering 65 countries, Freedom House found that representatives from 35 had participated in Chinese “trainings and seminars on new media or information management.”¹⁸² The party has also generated support in the United Nations and other in multinational fora for national governments’ right to censor political content online.¹⁸³

Meanwhile, large Chinese technology companies are exporting elements of the party’s marriage of technology and author-

itarian control. In one case, Ecuadorian officials contracted with Chinese-state owned surveillance technology supplier Hikvision to build a countrywide video surveillance system that was used to track and intimidate political opponents.¹⁸⁴ After seeing Ecuador's system—financed with credit provided by Chinese banks—Venezuela and Bolivia requested China's assistance in building their own.¹⁸⁵ Venezuelan officials also reportedly asked ZTE Corporation to build a comprehensive national database of its citizens.¹⁸⁶ Citizens' information was then tied to an electronic identification card used to deny political dissidents access to public services.¹⁸⁷

Beijing has also trained foreign officials on how to implement the “China model” of cyber surveillance and cyber governance. In 2017, Tanzania's Deputy Minister for Works, Transport and Communication said a forum with Chinese officials enabled the government “to learn from Chinese experts on how they succeeded in controlling illegal use of social media.”¹⁸⁸ Less than a year later, Tanzania forced a number of “unregistered” bloggers and social media celebrities to suspend activities or face criminal prosecution under a new law.¹⁸⁹ ¹⁹⁰ Several countries have enacted cyber governance systems modeled on China's.¹⁹¹ In 2018, Vietnam introduced a cybersecurity law that closely mimics China's own shortly after Vietnamese officials returned from China.¹⁹²

Beyond technology, the Belt and Road Initiative has also spread the party's economic development norms, which downplay oversight and transparency. Implementation has reflected the party's preference for secrecy and limited oversight, thereby enabling local corruption. The party seldom allows the terms of these infrastructure deals to be made public, despite local concerns about corruption, financing arrangements, environmental impact, and land use issues.

In one example, in 2016 Chinese leaders reportedly offered to bail out Malaysia's troubled 1MDB sovereign wealth fund in return for massive infrastructure projects with “above market profitability” for Chinese contractors.¹⁹³ The head of China's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission reportedly proposed the infrastructure project with the approval of Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang.¹⁹⁴ In exchange, in subsequent negotiations China agreed to help pay off a portion of 1MDB's debts and a senior Chinese official said Beijing would pressure U.S. authorities to drop investigations into 1MDB.¹⁹⁵ The official added that Chinese intelligence had established “full operational surveillance” of *Wall Street Journal* reporters covering the 1MDB scandal and would share the information so the Malaysian government could identify the *Journal's* sources and “do the necessary.”¹⁹⁶

The party's tactics have also been on display in Hong Kong. Since its 1997 handover, Hong Kong has fallen in global rankings for press freedom and its civil society has come under increasing pressure.¹⁹⁷ Protest leaders have been sentenced to prison terms of varying lengths on charges of questionable legitimacy, calling into question the neutrality of the city's judiciary.¹⁹⁸ Hong Kong's free press, citizen-led protests, and politically neutral civil service have limited China's authoritarian control. Yet, Beijing's strategy for overcoming resistance and “de-liberalizing” Hong Kong has been at least partially effective. It has used economic inducements to cultivate intermediaries, including the city's politically powerful “Big Four” family-owned property development companies, which all have substantial business interests in the mainland. All four companies have representatives on the PRC's Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference; in each case the representative is both a senior company executive and a close family member of the company founder.¹⁹⁹

The party has employed similar tactics in the media industry. A majority of the individuals who own Hong Kong media outlets sit on the or the National People's Congress.²⁰⁰ In 2014, a Hong Kong journalist described how “[h]eadlines were added, complete pages were removed, photos were cancelled, interviews were bought, columnists were sacked... we get calls from senior government officials, we get calls from tycoons, saying ‘we don't want to see this in your paper.’”²⁰¹ The journalist would resign three years later, in 2017, from the *South China Morning Post*, after writing a column detailing mutually beneficial ties between a Hong Kong businessman and one of Xi Jinping's closest advisors.²⁰² *South China Morning Post* was purchased in 2015 by mainland businessman Jack Ma, the owner of China's largest e-commerce firm, and is overseen by Joseph Tsai, one of Ma's deputies.

The party has also used similar tactics on Hong Kong's civil servants and political leaders, offering promotions and incentives to those willing to work cooperatively with Beijing. This includes the city's police.²⁰³ In 2014, former Hong Kong police commissioner Andy Tsang took a hard line against Umbrella Movement protests, prompting complaints over excessive use of force.²⁰⁴ Tsang retired as commissioner soon thereafter, but was later appointed to a senior position within China's Ministry of Public Security, reporting directly to the ministry's head.²⁰⁵

These efforts to embed authoritarian norms abroad have been most successful in China's neighbors and weak democracies. But as Beijing becomes more confident in its approach, such behavior may become an increasing challenge to consolidated democracies far from China's shores.

Conclusion

In his address to the Chinese Communist Party's 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping said the party had entered a “new era.”²⁰⁶ The content of this new era—China's increasingly assertive external posture, focus on shaping global norms, and presentation of an alternate model to liberal democracy—should concern democratic policymakers. For some time, many outside experts believed China could be “managed” by drawing it into the liberal international system.²⁰⁷ The hope was that, along with China's growing economic openness, this might bend China's politics in a more liberal direction. Unfortunately, the party's statements and actions have made clear that it will not allow itself to be managed.

The Communist Party has developed its own approach to political interference abroad, one distinct from that of Russia or other authoritarian countries. Rob Joyce, an American government official, likens Russia's approach to a hurricane—quick, violent, and localized—but compares China's approach to the “long, slow, and pervasive” process of climate change.²⁰⁸ This is a useful lens for thinking about the party's interference efforts. Foreign countries must focus on mitigating the impacts of Chinese interference because reversing these activities is impractical. Successful efforts will require a shared consensus on the nature of the problem and close international coordination encompassing both businesses and civil society. As with climate change, even successful risk mitigation will not bring a return to the status quo ante.²⁰⁹

Even if China's growth were to slow severely, the party's accumulated economic strength and its core political doctrines would likely remain. Indeed, the party has consistently emphasized that commitment to its own ideals is what has sustained it through previous crises, and guided China to a position of international strength.²¹⁰ While many of the party's ideas on economics, technology, and society have changed significantly over the decades, its thinking on how political power is acquired and maintained has remained remarkably consistent. Democratic societies have been slow to appreciate the implications of the party's stated goals, and may therefore underestimate the urgency of the problem. And some party elites now appear to believe that their ability to engineer global political consent for China's rise is now self-sustaining.²¹¹ As a result, the same countries that hoped to manage China are increasingly being managed themselves.

By providing a unified framework for understanding Chinese political interference, this report aims to enable effective responses. Much work remains to be done to understand the doctrines that underlie the Communist Party's political interference, and the structures through which that interference is expressed. But as this work continues, it is urgent that foreign leaders begin building a shared consensus on how it should be addressed. The sooner that democracies begin to address this collaboratively, the better.

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