

**United Front Work and Beyond: How the
Chinese Communist Party Penetrates
the United States and Western Societies**

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Executive Summary

Growing concerns exist in the US and other Western countries that there are systematic efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to undermine their societies. This concern has arisen from the developing observation and analysis of more offensive-based CCP activities outside of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

These offensive activities have become far more apparent during the tenure of CCP Secretary Xi Jinping (from 2012), and seem to be part of efforts to move from a defensive to an offensive posture in a variety of areas. This can be characterized as a "Strategy of Sowing Discord," a Chinese proverb that refers to efforts to make internal disputes amongst the enemy so deep that they become distracted from the conflict. By taking offensive influencing measures against US and other Western societies, the CCP aims to distract foreign attention from repression within China's borders and also to pressure the increasingly broad diaspora of dissidents from the Mainland, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, as well as Taiwanese separatists. In addition, this offensive posture is part of efforts to promote a more positive perspective of the PRC around the world, which may resonate with potential partner countries in the "Global South," used here to refer generally to low or middle income states across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The FBI and Britain's MI5 have made clear statements regarding the threat to their societies from malevolent PRC government agencies. Their concerns relate to actions against Chinese dissidents outside the PRC, influencing the Chinese diaspora to support the CCP, the coerced return of fugitives to the PRC, the covert theft of trade secrets, the acquisition of intellectual property by the purchase of specialized companies, the exploitation of academic research for military uses, the use of cyber-attacks, and interference in US and Western political systems through "United Front" work and other methods.

The PRC government's more assertive attempts to influence foreign societies are often related to United Front efforts, which have developed since 1921 from being a means of co-opting political and social groups in China to support (or at least tacitly accept) the dominance of the CCP, to become a key tool of the CCP to engage with Chinese people in politically peripheral areas (Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan) and the global diaspora, as well as gain support from non-Chinese people in business, education, and other sectors. "United Front" work represents a broad strategy that not only involves the spread of influence, but also exists as an espionage tool for PRC government agencies such as the Ministry of State Security (MSS).

Either by design or by default, the extent of PRC-government offensive activities in the US and Western countries is so significant that it is perceived to be undermining societies within those states. This undermining of US and Western societies is not as systematic or effective as Russian political subversion, but the PRC may learn more effective execution if it sees a benefit in using a “Strategy of Sowing Discord” to pressure the US government.

Introduction—“The Strategy of Sowing Discord”

Undermine your enemy’s ability to fight by secretly causing discord between him and his friends, allies, advisors, family, commanders, soldiers, and population. While he is preoccupied settling internal disputes his ability to attack or defend, is compromised.
(From the Book of Stratagems)

“The Strategy of Sowing Discord” is a proverb from the “36 Stratagems,” often attributed to Sun Tzu but believed by scholars to have been compiled by numerous Chinese writers. “The Strategy of Sowing Discord” refers to efforts to make internal disputes amongst the enemy so deep that they become distracted from the conflict. The weak spot of the US, and what its citizens hold dear, is its open domestic sphere (politically, socially, and culturally), which have been shown to be susceptible to the malign foreign influences.

The stratagems of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are an increasing point of discussion in the US and among its Western allies, driven by increasing suspicions that there is a malevolent aspect that may involve undermining our governing systems and societies. Orville Schell and Larry Diamond have stated that they “believe that the sum total of the PRC’s influence seeking activities in the United States and other societies... represents an ambitious new project to control the narrative about China and to shape the policies and thinking of other societies toward China, and that a worrisome portion of these efforts involves illegitimate methods.”¹

The possible reasons for this have been well reported, based on the intensification of economic competition between the PRC and the US and the conflicting values that underlie our two systems. The PRC is a single party autocracy; the USA is a multi-party liberal democracy. The CCP increasingly uses coercion of its population to ensure regime survival. As China has become more open internationally through the recent period of globalization, it has sought to justify its authoritarian form of government, hailing it as superior to Western liberal democracy.

The growing competition between governing systems has led to a prolonged battle of ideas, as the PRC and the US have sought to show the superiority of their respective governing models. There is increasing concern that in doing so, the PRC—and the ruling CCP—is resorting to efforts to undermine US and other Western societies so that their autocratic model of governance appears stronger, more stable, less crime-ridden, and with more efficient political, social, and economic development.

Since Deng Xiaoping became paramount leader in the late 1970s, the PRC's leadership has assumed that US military strength so outclassed the PRC's own that confrontation was not desirable, hence Deng's strategic guideline of "hide one's capabilities and bide one's time." This outlook was influenced by the trauma that the CCP leaders experienced with the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the decisive US victory in the Gulf War in 1990-91, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.²

Since Deng's time, it has been apparent to the leaders of the PRC that they cannot prevail in a military conflict with the US due to the relative backwardness of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the US military's technological superiority. To overcome this, the situation required a slow buildup of power to enable the PRC to challenge the US. To do so, the PLA also needed to develop asymmetric strategies that (as defined by RAND) "attack vulnerabilities not appreciated by the target or capitalize on the victim's limited preparation against the threat."³

The response of the PRC under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping was a policy of "keep a low profile" (韬光养晦, *tao guang yang hu*) in the context of diplomacy. This was done in order to allow the PRC to focus on internal development, enabling the country to reach a stronger position without provoking a confrontation with the US.⁴ This approach changed after Xi Jinping acceded to the position of PRC President in March 2013, indicated by the release of three documents which collectively highlighted a new strategy of "striving for achievement" (奋发有为, *fenfa youwei*). The three included then minister of foreign affairs Wang Yi's speech at the Second World Peace Forum in July 2013, then state councilor Yang Jiechi's article in *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth) in August, and Xi's speech on diplomacy toward surrounding countries in October 2013.⁵

Xi Jinping outlined how the PRC's diplomatic policy should be driven by national rejuvenation in his 2013 speech, emphasizing that: "To achieve these strategic aims, we must create and cement friendly relations and deepen mutual cooperation with neighboring countries, maintain and make the best use of the strategic opportunities we now enjoy, and safeguard China's state sovereignty, national security, and development interests."⁶ Success in such an approach to foreign relations requires trust as well as

effective soft power, neither of which the PRC has been particularly successful in engendering among many of its neighbors.

The CCP cannot win a war of ideas, as liberal democracy has demonstrated itself to be a highly creative system that motivates people to contribute to society and develop their system. Conversely, single-party communist rule tends to suppress ideas and creativity. Western liberal democracy has an inherent strength which the PRC must undermine in order to be able to compete.

Given that the US is too strong economically and militarily to attack directly, China must then utilize a more intelligent means of undermining it. This means finding and capitalizing on American domestic weaknesses, attacking what is most valuable, and seeking a gradual weakening of US society.

The PRC government feels surrounded in Asia, with the “First Island Chain” (Japan, Taiwan, portions of the Philippines, and Indonesia) a geographically limiting factor, reinforced by significant US military forces with bases across the region. Defeat of the US military in Asia in any conflict appears unlikely, and would risk the CCP’s rule if such a military operation was attempted. Thus, fighting asymmetrically by sowing discord is a far more attractive strategy for the PRC.

Surpassing—The Chinese Communist Threat to US and Western Societies

In order to distract political attention away from the PRC, the CCP pursues the asymmetric strategy of undermining US and Western society, causing them to refocus their attention inwards. This is not merely conjecture of what the CCP might intend, but is—according to US and UK intelligence agencies—the nature of what is happening right now. The PRC is currently acting through political influencing (notably United Front efforts), economic espionage, and counterintelligence.

MI5 and the FBI have made clear statements regarding the current threat to the societies of both countries from the PRC. The FBI states that “[t]he Chinese government is undermining our democracy and threatening our individual freedoms... [t]he government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is trying to surpass the US as a global superpower and influence the world with a value system shaped by undemocratic, authoritarian ideals and actions.”⁷ As the FBI points out, the PRC exploits free and open Western societies for their own financial, technological, educational, and diplomatic gain.

The extent of PRC economic espionage is illustrated by the FBI case load, which was over 1,000 ongoing cases in 2020 “into China’s actual and attempted theft of American

technology,” according to Director Chris Wray. This represents an increase of 1,300 percent in such cases over the past decade.⁸ The PRC agencies engaged in economic espionage make use of overseas scientists to bring knowledge to China, which according to the FBI often involves stealing proprietary information or violating export controls and conflict-of-interest rules.

Concerns regarding PRC state espionage have been reiterated by the “Thousand Talents Program.” According to David Zweig, the “Thousand Talents Program” was created by the CCP in 2008 to overcome massive brain drain, as the majority of Chinese scholars studying overseas did not return to China after completing their studies.⁹ Although the program may not have been originally conceived as a means of industrial espionage, it effectively became so as the PRC introduced a part-time option that allowed scholars and researchers to have simultaneous appointments in China as well as overseas. This caused concerns among US officials that the “Thousand Talents Program” was a conduit through which the PRC was transferring intellectual property from the US to China. In addition, the PRC has developed the “Foreign Thousand Talents Program,” which involves recruiting international researchers and compensating them well to effectively transfer their knowledge to China. Perhaps the most egregious example of this was the private recruitment of former military jet fighter pilots from the UK and several other Western countries to train the PLA air force, a news story that broke in 2022.¹⁰

This offensive activity by the PRC government in the US includes the monitoring and harassment of groups that threaten the single-party narrative of the CCP, such as Taiwanese nationals, exiled Tibetans, Uyghurs (from Xinjiang Province), Falun Gong members, Hong Kong pro-democracy activists, and other Chinese dissidents.

Paradoxically, the failure of the CCP to suppress dissent in the PRC has led to the broadening of the dissident movement in the US and other Western countries. The suppression of protests in Hong Kong and the enactment of the National Security Law by the PRC government in 2020 created a global Hong Kong diaspora and dissident movement, which did not exist in any tangible form previously. This has developed to join other dissident diasporas as “through their organizing efforts, a self-conscious Hong Kong diaspora community emerged and joined the ranks of Chinese dissidents, Falun Gong members, Taiwanese, Tibetans, and Uyghurs in their global campaign against China’s deepening authoritarian rule, both domestically and beyond its borders.”¹¹

Starting from 2014, CCP’s crackdown against Uyghurs in Xinjiang intensified, involving mass incarceration of large parts of the population—eventually leading to the global recognition of the plight of the Uyghurs. The crackdown on the Falun Gong in the PRC began in 1999, which resulted in the globalization of the group as an opposition movement

to the CCP. The international movement of Chinese pro-democracy activists developed after the suppression of protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 (which occurred both in Beijing as well as other major cities in the PRC).

The CCP's inability to fully suppress its own citizens has created a growing global diaspora of Chinese dissidents who harbor permanent grievances against the regime. The disparate parts of the Chinese diaspora have sought refuge in the US and other Western societies, and are now being pursued by the CCP as it seeks to have its own narratives dominate the Chinese-language sphere.

In order to control the Chinese diaspora, the CCP takes an offensive approach to them in the US. The PRC's government agencies engaged in targeting dissident Chinese groups—such as the Ministry of State Security (MSS) and the United Front Work Department (UFD)—make use of the freedoms in the US and other Western societies to influence, threaten, and intimidate dissenters. As the FBI points out, “[t]he Chinese government no longer limits repression just to people in its own borders.”¹²

The actions taken against Chinese dissidents and fugitives in the US have been notable. In October 2022, the US Department of Justice charged 13 individuals, including members of the PRC security and intelligence apparatus and their agents, for alleged efforts to unlawfully exert influence in the United States for the benefit of the government of the PRC.¹³ The culprits were allegedly planning to force the repatriation of a Chinese national to the PRC after engaging in a campaign of surveillance and coercion. Three of those charged were alleged to be officers of the MSS.

FBI Director Christopher Wray said that “[t]hese indictments of PRC intelligence officers and government officials—for trying to obstruct a U.S. trial of a Chinese company, masquerading as university professors to steal sensitive information, and trying to strong-arm a victim into returning to China—again expose the PRC's outrageous behavior within our own borders.”¹⁴

These activities by PRC government agents are often related to efforts to force the return of fugitives from justice or dissidents. During Xi Jinping's tenure (2012-present), the Ministry of Public Security launched what it termed a “Fox Hunt” (猎狐, *lie hu*) for Chinese fugitives wanted for corruption. The impetus for the “Fox Hunt” operations was the huge number of fugitive officials facing corruption charges as a result of Xi's anti-corruption campaign. From 2012-2014, around 18,000 officials reportedly fled overseas taking over 800 billion yuan (\$125 billion) with them, largely to Asia Pacific countries with large Chinese communities.¹⁵

Similarly, in 2018 the National Supervisory Commission led an effort by multiple agencies (in particular, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI)) to pursue fugitives and stolen goods. The Ministry of Public Security carried out the “Fox Hunting” special operation to track down officials hiding abroad. The People’s Bank of China, together with the Ministry of Public Security, worked to target offshore companies and underground banks that transfer illicit money overseas. Finally, the Supreme People’s Court and the Supreme People’s Procuratorate undertook judicial action against those apprehended for crimes.¹⁶

Since the PRC is unlikely to have its requests for extradition of such suspects approved—and maintains few extradition treaties with Western governments—it instead circumvents international law by relying on offensive efforts and covert activities around the globe to locate, engage, and repatriate fugitives. The covert actions conducted by the MSS and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) in the West inevitably breach local law and therefore undermine the rule of law. This was highlighted by Safeguard Defenders, an NGO that specializes in human rights, in an investigation performed in late 2022. Safeguard Defenders reported that PRC authorities had established a network of 54 “overseas police service centers.”¹⁷ These centers were first stood up by the Public Security Bureau (PSB) in partnership with overseas hometown associations in early 2022 inside Fuzhou City, Fujian Province. These hometown associations are a key target of United Front activities aimed at influencing and controlling the Chinese diaspora. There are reports of at least four PSB service centres in the US: the Nantong PSB operates one at an unknown location; the Wenzhou PSB operates contact points in Los Angeles and New York; and the Fuzhou PSB has one in New York City.¹⁸

The assessment of offensive PRC government activities in other countries has been backed up by British government agencies. In July 2022, Director General Ken McCallum of MI5 (the Security Service) and FBI Director Chris Wray gave a joint address outlining the challenge from the PRC. MI5 outlined areas of offensive PRC activity that includes covert theft of trade secrets, the acquisition of Intellectual Property by purchasing specialist companies, exploiting academic research for military uses, and cyber-attacks attributed to the MSS.¹⁹

In addition to the forced repatriation of fugitives and technology theft, the PRC government also, according to MI5 and the FBI, seeks to interfere in US and other Western societies. In January 2022, MI5 issued an “interference alert” warning that a PRC agent was interfering in UK politics. The MI5 alert alleged that Ms. Christine Ching Kui Lee had “established links” on behalf of the CCP with current and aspiring Members of the British Parliament, and also gave donations to politicians with funds from foreign nationals in China and Hong Kong.²⁰ MI5 also alleged that Ms. Lee’s activities “had been

undertaken in covert coordination with the United Front Work Department, with funding provided by foreign nationals located in China and Hong Kong."²¹

According to MI5, the PRC's leaders are "[s]eeking to bend our economy, our society, our attitudes to suit the Chinese Communist Party's interests. To set standards and norms that would enable it to dominate the international order."²² The PRC is not an open society, but the US is and the CCP makes use of democratic, media and legal systems for the purpose of influencing through deception, often as part of United Front work. United Front efforts are so central to the maintenance of communist rule and the coercion of the Chinese diaspora that it requires greater understanding.

Uniting—United Front Activities of the Chinese Communist Party

The "United Front" approach is an integral part of not only how the CCP perpetuates one-party rule, but also how the Party and its agencies influence thinking in other countries. To understand how and why the CCP is influencing US society, we have to understand the United Front. Since its formation in 1921, the CCP learned from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) how to survive; it must utilise not only the *hard power* of the state (i.e. the security agencies) but also *soft power* to bring diverse factions of society into a "United Front"—dominated by the communist party, of course. Gerry Groot has described the CCP's United Front work as, at its most basic level: "Rallying all those who can be rallied; uniting with all those who can be united (and isolating our enemies)."²³

Although United Front work is commonly associated with the United Front Work Department of the CCP, Alex Joske has pointed out there are a multitude of PRC agencies engaged in United Front activities, to include:²⁴

- Education—The Ministry of Education; Party Committees in universities.
- Foreign affairs—National People's Congress Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee; the Chinese People's Consultative Committee (CPPCC) Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and Overseas Chinese Committee; the China Zhi Gong Party; the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Intelligence—Ministry of State Security (MSS); People's Liberation Army (PLA) Political Work Department Liaison Bureau.

At its founding, United Front work in China was a means of co-opting political and social groups in the country to support (or at least tacitly accept) the dominance of the CCP. It has further developed into a key tool that the CCP uses to engage with Chinese people in politically peripheral areas (Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan) as well as the global diaspora. United Front efforts also include attempts to gain support from non-Chinese

people in business, education, and other sectors. In order to understand the threat that United Front activities pose, it is essential to understand the origin and history of the “United Front.”

History of United Front Activities of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

The concept of a “United Front” was formulated in the Soviet Union by the Executive Committee of the Communist International (Comintern) in December 1921, which called for the “greatest possible unity of all workers’ organisations in every practical action against the united capitalists.”²⁵ Lenin identified two categories of allies: The first comprised sympathetic forces that could be united, and the second involved exploiting conflicts within the enemy. United Front work involves both collaborating with people and organisations that can be cultivated as well as sowing division among domestic and international opponents.

The CCP was formed in Shanghai on July 23, 1921, with a meeting of the First National Congress. The “anti-imperialist United Front” was introduced to China by the Comintern in January 1922, when representatives from the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) attended a congress on colonial liberation. Pressure from the Soviet Union led to the first United Front between the CCP and the KMT from 1923 until 1927.²⁶ This involved CCP members joining the KMT as well as serving together with non-communists at the Whampoa Military Academy, partially enabling the CCP to expand its membership and influence. In 1926, the leader of the KMT, Chiang Kai-shek, ended cooperation with the Comintern; in 1927, he violently purged the CCP from the government.

The second United Front between the CCP and the KMT lasted from 1937 until 1941, and was intended for cooperation against the invading Japanese. In this uneasy peace, the CCP and the KMT remained independent political parties, with the KMT ceasing military action against the CCP, and the CCP promising to halt armed uprisings and radical land policies.²⁷ The United Front with the KMT allowed the CCP to survive and build support across China, growing from around 8,000 survivors of the Long March in 1935 to several million active supporters by 1946, when the second United Front came to an end.

In 1939, Mao Tse Tung wrote that the United Front, armed struggle, and party building were the CCP’s three magic weapons. Just as Mao and his comrades did in 1939, the CCP’s leadership in the 21st century constantly see enemies of the revolution, and feel that they are eternally struggling to ensure the CCP’s survival. United Front work understood as critical to this goal.

The Structure, Role, and Status of United Front Activities

In the Cold War, Western intelligence agencies recognized the nature of the United Front. In 1957, the CIA reported that:

“The CCP is seeking not only to protect itself from the non-Communist masses but also to mobilize the energies of these masses in support of its foreign and domestic policies. For this reason it has organized a vast and complex network of unofficial (non-Party, non-government) organs. The name given to this network is the united front.”²⁸

Since 1949, the United Front’s core forum has been the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). According to the Chinese government, the CPPCC consists of representatives of the CCP, other political parties that are allowed by the CCP, “democrats” with no party affiliations, various people’s organizations, ethnic groups from across the PRC, representatives from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and returned overseas Chinese, as well as specially invited individuals.²⁹ The CPPCC essentially represents the CCP and those collaborators who accept the CCP’s single-party rule of China.

The CPPCC provides structure for the United Front in China by representing other political parties, including a breakaway wing of the KMT (whose leaders fled to Taiwan in 1949 when the CCP won the civil war). The CPPCC is the United Front platform for CCP collaboration with aligned political parties, as well as political consultation with social sectors under the leadership and control of the CCP.

The CPPCC is the key platform for United Front work in China, meant to ensure the stability of single-party rule. The CCP’s leadership have learned throughout their brutal history that they cannot survive by confrontation with opposition from all parts of the society. The CCP uses hard power to retain control of China, based on the pervasive reach of the security services—in particular the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of State Security. However, to maintain power, the CCP needs the soft power United Front efforts offer to expand and maintain its support, both among the people of China and those outside its borders.

Hard and soft power also converge with the United Front, as it has always been a key part of the CCP’s intelligence and espionage activities. As previously stated, a key target of United Front work has been the Chinese diaspora. This occurred largely after 1949, in order to counter KMT sympathy and win over overseas Chinese peoples’ support for the CCP. However, the CCP has also used United Front efforts abroad as a front for

intelligence gathering, often through the New China News Agency, (Xinhua) which for decades was a major front organisation for intelligence operations. Members of the Chinese diaspora are hence not only potential allies for the CCP, but also a possible source of intelligence regarding the KMT and foreign countries more broadly.

United Front Activities Before and After Xi Jinping's Tenure as Party Secretary

The United Front Work Department (UFWD) is also responsible for the Party Schools of the CCP and is a key part of ensuring that cadres adhere to pre-determined Marxist-Leninist ideology. The Party Schools deliver key training to CCP cadres in Marxist-Leninist ideology, organisational control, administration, management, and leadership.³⁰ In this regard, the UFWD's scope of responsibility extends to training and guidance in management and ideology for all CCP cadres.

Although the UFWD has historically been the focal point of United Front work, since Xi Jinping's rise to power, the work has become part of "all-party operations" to be carried out by all CCP cadres and organisations. In addition, United Front work has adapted to the modern day, targeting leaders in cyberspace, entrepreneurs who could influence non-state media, people who had studied overseas, and younger people who have found success in business.³¹

During Xi's tenure of CCP General Secretary from 2012, he has pushed the creation of the "Great United Front," which involves a stronger United Front strategy, increased leadership and coordination, and greater involvement from the entire party to help realise the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation.³² United Front operations have been given greater importance as a means of upholding the leadership and rule of the communist party, and Xi Jinping has spoken openly about the role of United Front work:

"To improve the work of the United Front in the current era, we must be good at befriending prominent non-CPC [CCP] individuals. This is an important part of such work. Party and government leaders, and officials of the United Front work should master this approach. We conduct the United Front work not for window dressing or good name, but for pragmatic reasons, because it plays a role, a big role, and an indispensable role. In the final analysis, the job of the United Front is to win over more people; we use the United Front to strengthen the forces for the common goal."³³

From 2018, the UFWD role was strengthened as part of wider institutional reform of the CCP.³⁴ The UFWD was given command of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the State Administration of Religious Affairs, and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the

State Council.³⁵ This expanded the scope of the UFWD to lead policy relating to ethnic minorities, religious affairs, and engagement with overseas Chinese people. This broad scope of responsibility also seems to provide more influence over the Confucius Institutes, which have been under the control of the Chinese Language Council International, colloquially abbreviated as “Hanban,” through the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council.

This indicates key areas of concern for the CCP leadership, which include Christian and Islamic influence on their society, instability in Tibet and Xinjiang, and the influence of the Chinese diaspora on domestic affairs. The United Front failed to achieve popular support in Hong Kong and Taiwan or stifle unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. This, then, may have been a key factor in Xi Jinping’s decision to reform the United Front and increase central leadership over United Front programs.

In January 2021, the CCP announced that the Central Committee had published a revised set of regulations on United Front work, which according to the UFWD “are of great importance as they bring together the will and strength of the people to fully build a modern socialist country and realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.”³⁶ The announcement highlighted the criticality of United Front work in maintaining the Party’s grip on power.

Ensuring CCP rule increasingly requires the projection of power and influence through United Front efforts outside China. As already discussed, this has historically been aimed at influencing the Chinese diaspora, as well as suppressing domestic opposition within China by propagating narratives abroad to counter voices of dissent from Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang. The CCP party line communicated internationally is distributed via Chinese state-owned news media as well as patriotic councils and societies.

The Chinese diaspora in the US and in other Western countries are viewed as important, as the regime wants to ensure that Western values do not undermine the CCP’s position and power. This was illustrated in a 2013 document distributed internally by the Central Committee of the General Office of the CCP: the “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere.” Also known as “Document 9,”³⁷ the Communiqué outlined these “false ideological trends” that threaten the CCP:

- Promoting western constitutional democracy: an attempt to undermine the current leadership and the socialism with Chinese characteristics system of governance;
- Promoting “universal values” in an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party’s leadership;

- Promoting civil society in an attempt to dismantle the ruling party's social foundation;
- Promoting neoliberalism, attempting to change China's basic economic system;
- Promoting the West's idea of journalism, challenging China's principle that the media and publishing system should be subject to Party discipline;
- Promoting historical nihilism, trying to undermine the history of the CCP and of New China; and
- Questioning reform and opening and the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

These "false ideological trends" are largely the basis of Western liberal democracy, and hence countering them is both a defensive and offensive strategy by the CCP, for which United Front work is the primary weapon. The global Chinese diaspora is large, and growing as more students do not return home after studying and more Chinese nationals emigrate overseas, that the CCP has a necessity to use the United Front internationally as an offensive weapon. As "Document 9" illustrates, the CCP fears the contamination of Chinese people with ideas from liberal democracies, and hence it now takes an offensive ideological stance in those countries, most importantly in the USA.

United Front International Activities Outside Greater China

The nature and impact of United Front activities in other countries in recent years offer lessons for the US. In particular, it is worthwhile to review how the CCP has used United Front tactics in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom.

In Australia, the PRC government has aggressively dictated what Australia must do to ensure continued trade with China; trade between the two states had grown strongly due to a free trade agreement signed in 2015. By January 2021, 42.1 percent of Australia's exports were going to China.³⁸ A key trigger for the PRC's offensive approach towards Australia was Prime Minister Scott Morrison's support for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in early 2020. This provoked sanctions, among other things, against a range of Australian products (to include barley, cotton, beef, lamb, seafood, timber, and wine).³⁹

The PRC's approach grew bolder in November 2020, when their embassy in Australia provided a document to several news agencies. This memorandum listed 14 grievances that had to be rectified for a better relationship. The grievances included Australian state funding for "anti-China" research at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, raids on Chinese journalists and academic visa cancellations, "spearheading a crusade" in multilateral forums on China's affairs in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, calling for an

independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19, banning Huawei from the 5G network in 2018, and blocking ten Chinese foreign investment deals across the infrastructure, agriculture, and animal husbandry sectors.⁴⁰ This approach was clearly not United Front work, but public diplomacy seemingly intended to pressure political decision making in favor of PRC interests.

In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that he will appoint an independent special investigator to assess alleged election interference by the PRC on March 6, 2023.⁴¹ This follows revelations by the Canadian news media of extracts from a Canadian Secret Intelligence Service (CSIS) report, which described how the PRC's leadership was "pressuring its consulates to create strategies to leverage politically [active] Chinese community members and associations within Canadian society."⁴²

According to the CSIS, the PRC's Consul General in Vancouver boasted in 2021 about how she had helped to defeat two Conservative Party Members of Parliament. This was reportedly part of a CCP strategy, as it preferred to have a minority Liberal Party government in power to avoid a majority government which could implement policies unfavorable to China. To ensure this, the PRC utilized disinformation campaigns as well as people connected to Chinese-Canadian organizations in Vancouver to voice opposition to the Conservatives and provide support for Prime Minister Trudeau's Liberal Party. The former leader of the Conservative Party has stated that interference by the PRC resulted in the loss of 8 or 9 seats in parliament.⁴³

The CSIS publication allegedly went on to describe how Chinese diplomats conduct foreign interference operations in support of political candidates and elected officials, as well as making undeclared cash donations to political candidates favoured by the PRC. Likewise, PRC representatives were stated to push business owners to hire international Chinese students and "assign them to volunteer in electoral campaigns on a full-time basis."⁴⁴ By March 2023, the CSIS was reportedly describing foreign interference activities by the Chinese government as the "greatest strategic threat to [Canadian] national security," as the CCP continues to deploy a strategy aimed at making "geopolitical gains" on the economic, technological, political, and military fronts.⁴⁵

These activities of the PRC government in Canada are textbook examples of United Front work, intended to induce the large Chinese diaspora living in Canada to be sympathetic to the CCP and its policies. What separates United Front work in Canada from other countries is the size of the Chinese diaspora; by influencing the views of this group, electoral outcomes can be changed.

CCP influence in Canada is not new. In 1997, the CSIS and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) concluded in *Project Sidewinder: Chinese Intelligence Services and Triads Financial Links in Canada* that the PRC was deliberately trying to influence Canada. The Project Sidewinder draft report—a copy of which was leaked—stated that:

Because of its strategic alliance with some important and influential Hong Kong business people, and with organized crime syndicates, the Chinese leadership appears to be today in a position to developing [sic] a potential of influence over the international market and particularly on the Canadian economy and political life of the country... China remains one of the greatest ongoing threats to Canada's national security and Canadian industry. There is no longer any doubt that the ChIS have been able to gain influence on important sectors of the Canadian economy, including education, real estate, high technology, security and many others.⁴⁶

To reiterate, the assessment that “China remains one of the greatest ongoing threats to Canada’s national security” was written in 1997. Over 25 years later, the current government in Canada has initiated an independent investigation into possible CCP meddling in their elections. The report was suppressed as the CSIS disagreed with the findings, whilst the RCMP believed that the threat assessment of the PRC intelligence was credible.⁴⁷

In Hong Kong, decades of CCP attempts to instil greater loyalty to the PRC in the Chinese population have been met with suspicion by the majority of the populace. These misgivings were readily apparent in major protests against the Hong Kong government—as well as proposed national security legislation—in 2003, 2014, and 2019. The root cause of this discontent is that of the 90 percent of Hong Kong that is ethnically Chinese, most are descended from those who fled from the chaos of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Unsurprisingly, this breeds a deep mistrust of the CCP. In Hong Kong, popular discontent and protest have reflected the failure of long-term United Front activities to induce a majority of the population to become loyal to CCP rule.⁴⁸

In Taiwan, the CCP’s efforts to convince people to accept PRC sovereignty under the structure of “One Country, Two Systems” have largely failed. The PRC devised “One Country, Two Systems” to accomplish national reunification. This, of course, meant restoring Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. While United Front efforts in Macau seem to have been successful, they failed to secure the loyalty of the populations of Taiwan and Hong Kong. In Taiwan, there is a substantial generation of people who believe in “independence by nature.” This is to say that, having growing up after the lifting of martial law on the island and holding no memory of Mainland China,

they are used to a democratic system, and see no need to declare Taiwan's independence, as they effectively enjoy this already.⁴⁹ Some of the efforts to counter this problem for the CCP in Taiwan have been offensive. The CCP allegedly utilizes criminal organisations to create inter-ethnic conflict and destabilize society, including through Chang An-lo, known as the "White Wolf." Chang An-lo is a key member of the United Bamboo Union organized crime gang, who heads the Chinese Unity Promotion Party (CUPP).⁵⁰

In the United Kingdom, there is far less reliance upon trade with China, (as compared with Australia) and hence no obvious offensive CCP strategy to threaten such trade. There are, however, long-established business relationships that provide an example of how access to PRC officials and perceived influence that comes with such access is used as a tool of United Front work. Organizations in the UK such as the 48 Group Club—formed by three secret members of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1954—exist to facilitate access by British business people to officials in China.⁵¹ There is a historical trait in China to restrict access of foreign business people to senior officials so that when they do gain an audience, they are led to believe that this is a privilege granted to few people. Business representative organizations may coordinate and lobby for business access to China, and can therefore effectively become apologists for the PRC, calling for a reduction or elimination of criticism against China. The offer of access to officials is a hook used to coerce business leaders into staying silent, one used frequently by the PRC government as a means of exercising influence over foreigners.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the role of Confucius Institutes in the US and other Western countries. In August 2020, the US State Department designated the Confucius Institute US Center, the Washington DC-based de facto headquarters of the Confucius Institute network, as a foreign mission of the People's Republic of China.⁵² The State Department said that "Confucius Institutes (CIs) are organizations primarily located on US colleges and university campuses that push out skewed Chinese language and cultural training for US students as part of Beijing's multifaceted propaganda efforts. The PRC government partially funds these programs, under guidance from the CCP's United Front Work Department."⁵³ The influencing activities of the PRC government in the US education sector are wider than just the Confucius Institutes, and also include engagement with US universities (in particular for technological research) as well as the use of groups such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSA) to influence Chinese students studying in the US.⁵⁴

Undermining—Learning From Russia

The playbook for undermining the societies of rival states was written by the Soviet Union and its successor, the Russian Federation, which have worked to undermine the US and its Western allies for decades. Comparing Russia and the USSR with the PRC, the latter appears to favor a more sophisticated (and at times covert) form of shaping and constraining policy discourse in other countries in order to advance the CCP's interests.⁵⁵

Russia is suspected of having undertaken a wide range of subversive activities against the US and its partners and allies since 2014, including military support for the separatist republics in eastern Ukraine, an attempted coup in Montenegro, and influence campaigns in the American and French presidential elections in 2016 and 2017, respectively.⁵⁶ Usually these activities have been aimed at influencing and undermining the politics of the target country, including support for separatists, backing pro-Russian organizations, and information campaigns that exploit existing divisions in US and Western societies. Undermining activities are a low cost means of foreign policy, but especially important for countries such as Russia, as it has no effective soft power projection.

The most egregious example of Russian efforts to undermine US society were explicated in the Mueller report, which concluded that “[t]he Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion.”⁵⁷ The Special Counsel found that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election principally by conducting a social media campaign favoring then presidential candidate Donald Trump while disparaging his opponent, Hilary Clinton; in the same vein, Russian intelligence services were found to have conducted computer-intrusion operations against the Clinton Campaign.⁵⁸

There is no current evidence showing such systematic, long-term interference in the US political system by the PRC government, but the institutions of the CCP increasingly perpetuate aggressive narratives critical of US democracy. PRC state-controlled news publications make repeated criticisms of the US political system in an attempt to convince other countries that democracy is not a model for the world, evidenced by continual headlines such as “American Democracy is just a Money Talk Sham,”⁵⁹ “The US is no longer a democracy,”⁶⁰ “Many Americans pessimistic about US democracy,”⁶¹ “American democracy long past its shelf life,”⁶² “Experts: US far from being a model for democracy.”⁶³ These headlines and stories create the narrative that US democracy is not functional, but PRC news agencies also create narratives that suggest that the CCP's political system is superior, such as “US - fake democracy, real hegemon,”⁶⁴ “So-called 'democracy versus authoritarianism' narrative not defining feature of today's world, says Xi,”⁶⁵ and “Beijing upholding a democracy that works.”⁶⁶

While the above examples are all from only one publication, the China Daily, all major news providers in the PRC are either state-owned or operated by the CCP, and are therefore subject to strict censorship and directed reporting requirements. In this manner, the CCP's narratives are replicated across the entire news system. Collectively, they represent a domestic and international propaganda machine (with PRC state-owned news organisations operating around the world, including in the US).

As well as casting doubt on the merits of the US political system via China-controlled news media, the CCP has established a network of think tanks, business lobbying groups, and "friendship" organisations. These activities have been conducted via organisational platforms such as the China-US Exchange Foundation (中美交流基金会, *Zhong-Mei Jiaoliu Jijinhui*) (CUSEF). CUSEF was first registered in Hong Kong in 2008 and became active in the US around the same time.⁶⁷ The CUSEF has maintained contact with at least seven US companies for lobbying and public relations services, often using a public relations firm to manage an imitation think tank publication, which then publishes information that aligns with PRC propaganda narratives.⁶⁸ While this may seem harmless at face value, if the purpose of such activities is "to shape the policies and thinking of other societies toward China" (in the words of Diamond and Schell), then such lobbying can take a malign form, as it attempts to influence voters and US government policies.

In July 2022, the National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) issued a report on PRC influence operations in the US at the state and local level.⁶⁹ The report stated that "[s]ome of the goals of PRC influence operations in the United States are to expand support for PRC interests among state and local leaders and to use these relationships to pressure Washington for policies friendlier to Beijing." The NCSC described the United Front Work Department as a cover for leading foreign influence operations globally through a variety of front organizations.

In September 2022, an advisory to state and local government officials from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reportedly stated that the PRC may be seeking to "hinder candidates perceived to be particularly adversarial to Beijing."⁷⁰ The DHS report assessed that the approach by the government of the PRC had changed since the 2020 election, when no influencing efforts were detected. By 2022, the DHS assessed that PRC government influence was primarily aimed at shaping policy perspectives on the state and local levels, rather than trying to affect the outcome of national elections.

The PRC's government is also attempting to expand its reach further into US social media platforms. In September 2022, Meta Platforms (the parent company of Facebook) stated that it had disrupted a PRC influence operation that maintained fake accounts on Facebook and Instagram that were used to propagate negative messages regarding the

US to other parts of the world. The fake accounts were used to post comments on the posts of public figures including, for instance, a post by Republican Senator Marco Rubio asking him to stop gun violence and using the hashtag #RubioChildrenKiller.⁷¹

Conclusion

The PRC government's extensive offensive activities in the US and Western countries are likely to have an undermining impact on those societies by default, rather than by grand design. The PRC's activities are based on a broad range of interests from dissidents to the Chinese diaspora, and are not as focused as Russia's attempts at subverting the US political system.

It is important to consider that the CCP operates according to its core ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The CCP exists by maintaining single party political rule and therefore feels it must take strong action against any perceived threats to its rule.

The CCP has had a far more focused approach to such threats, due to the 1989 Tiananmen protests, the Gulf War in 1990-91, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As the CCP leaders see such events as life-threatening for the Party, they have reacted by increasing efforts to economically strengthen the PRC (surpassing), to utilise the Chinese diaspora and neutralise opposition (uniting), and propagandize political narratives through state-controlled news media both at home and abroad (undermining).

Domestically and—increasingly—internationally, the CCP uses United Front work to unite disparate groups behind Chinese patriotism and alienate opposition forces. However, the use of soft power by the PRC government remains limited. China has formidable potential soft power potential that it could better utilize to influence international relationships with Chinese food, art, culture, music, movies, and television shows. It is not, however, in the nature of the CCP to take such a sophisticated approach as the core Leninist values of the party are anathema to openness, transparency, and free speech. The expression of soft power is controlled by the United Front structures within the CCP and is hence projected as hard power, which is then perceived as a threat to liberal values.

In totality, the efforts by the PRC's government at economically surpassing the US, uniting the Chinese diaspora in the West, and undermining confidence in Western liberal democracy through propaganda narratives will have a detrimental impact on the US and its allies if not checked. Increasingly, the US and its Western partners are becoming more aware of the threat of Chinese Communist activities that seek to subvert societies, notably through enforcement actions taken by the FBI and the intelligence collaboration with partner agencies such as MI5.

Enforcement action against PRC government agencies engaging in offensive activities will not be enough. The most effective shield that the US and other Western societies possess is their shared democratic values, which are the most effective means of countering any negative influence of CCP activities. We must proactively defend our democracies and prevent them from being undermined, but in order to do so, we must first understand the nature of the threat being posed by the CCP.

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