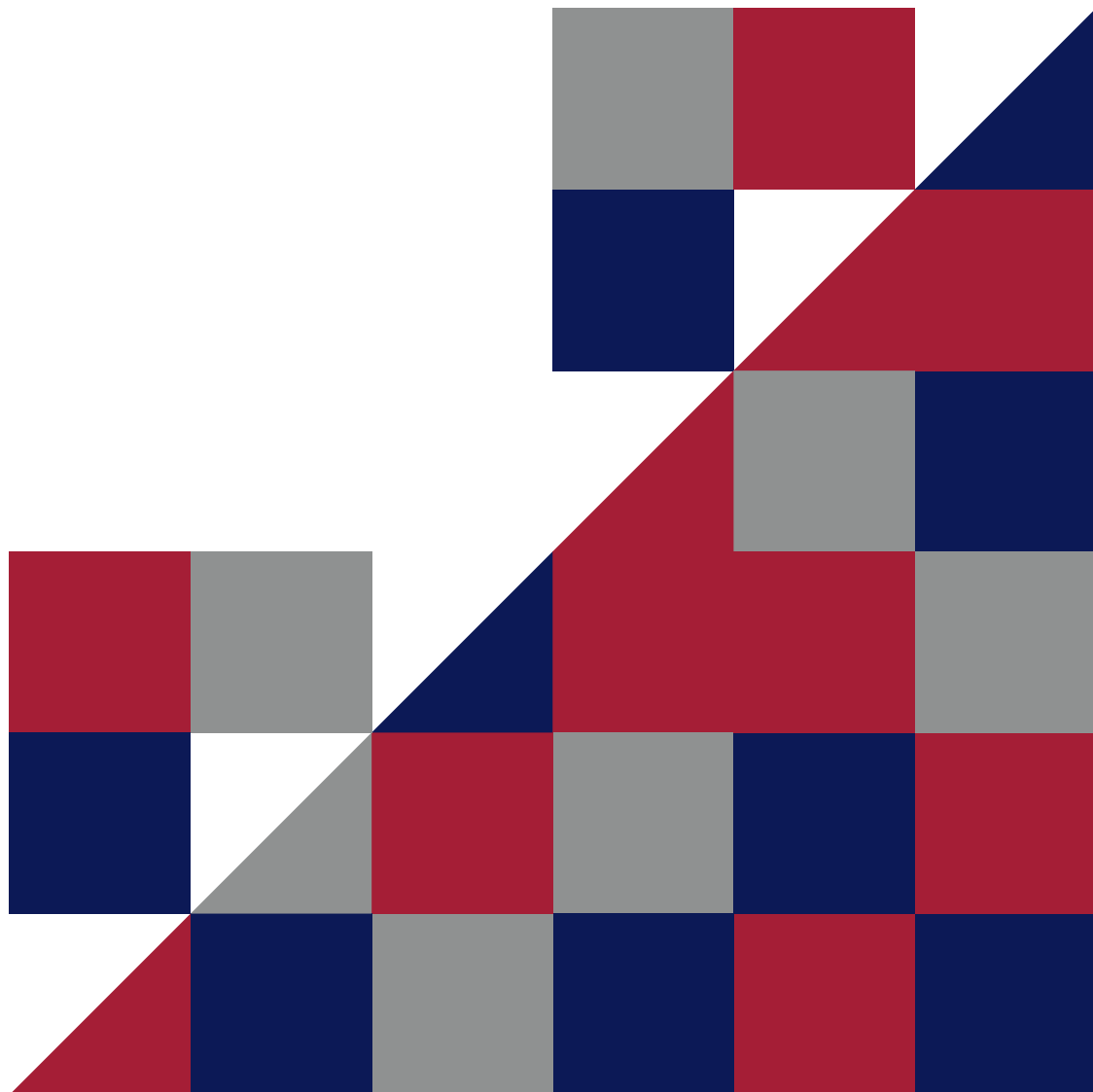




Countering China's Information Manipulation: A Toolkit for Understanding and Action



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About the CFAI Initiative

Over the past five years, IRI has developed and implemented a framework to build resiliency against growing foreign authoritarian influence and interference through its Countering Foreign Authoritarian Influence (CFAI) practice. IRI deploys three-pronged approach to mitigate the impact of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authoritarian influence on developing democracies:

1. Sharing research on how the PRC undermines democratic processes and governance institutions with IRI's global network of partners;
2. Empowering local stakeholders with the means to conduct similar research independently, the skills to execute advocacy campaigns to hold leaders accountable, and the tools and resources to devise and advance policy solutions to bolster their countries resilience to external influence; and
3. Catalyzing the development and adoption of locally appropriate policy solutions that mitigate PRC authoritarian influence.

By engaging stakeholders across sectors – including government officials, political parties, media, private enterprise, and civil society activists – IRI's work promotes broad awareness of authoritarian tactics and the keys to shoring up vulnerable democratic institutions. The research presented in this report is part of a growing compendium of case studies documenting the CCP's varied authoritarian influence tactics across countries and the elements of effective democratic resilience, which directly informs CFAI programming.

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WHY THIS TOOLKIT EXISTS, AND HOW TO USE IT

In our work around the world, from Africa to Latin America to Southeast Asia, IRI has heard repeatedly from partners in civil society, academia, and governments that China's impact on their countries is growing. In particular, our partners have expressed concern that growing PRC influence over media, universities, and social media could negatively affect their countries' democratic institutions, in large part because China's ruling party – the Communist Party of China (CCP) – does not support fundamental democratic practices like media pluralism, academic freedom, or independent journalism.

Our partners have also noted to us that it can be difficult to address this problem, for two main reasons:

- In many countries, there is a low preexisting level of knowledge about China and about the behaviors and intentions of the CCP.
- There is often even less consensus about what steps should be taken to address it, in part due to this lack of understanding.

We agree with these observations. Through our research and advocacy around the world to build democratic resilience, we have noted that even among experts, the CCP's approach to shaping perceptions in other countries is poorly understood, particularly how and why Beijing's approach differs from that of democratic countries.'

That is why we created this toolkit. Our goal was to collect in one place the most essential information on how the PRC influences other countries' information environments, why this influence can be bad for democratic institutions, what research tools you can use to understand this influence, and the most useful policy responses.

To that end, the toolkit is divided into three major sections:

1. The major channels through which Beijing influences international perceptions.
2. Tools that can be used to research and understand Beijing's information manipulation efforts.
3. Policy solutions to address PRC information manipulation.

We have designed the toolkit so that each section can be used by itself, and you can focus on the part most relevant to your work. For some people, it may be most important to understand the channels through which the PRC shapes perceptions. Others may want to skip straight to policy solutions or research tools.

IRI's Countering Foreign Authoritarian Influence team hopes that this toolkit is useful for you, whether your work is in journalism, academia, civil society, or government. Thank you for reading, and if you have any questions or feedback, please do not hesitate to be in touch with us at cscott@iri.org or mschrader@iri.org.

WHY “INFORMATION MANIPULATION,” AND WHY THE PRC?

For as long as humans have had organized government, every state has tried to shape the perceptions of people outside its borders. In today’s world, every country – from liberal democracies to hard dictatorships – tries to shape the international information environment, such that whole industries have emerged around words like “public diplomacy” and “strategic communication.”

If every country has always tried to influence every other country, why is it worth singling out China? This toolkit argues that China’s most powerful tools for shaping international perceptions are not normal public diplomacy or state-to-state communication, but forms of “information manipulation.”

A few things separate information manipulation from normal state-to-state communication.

1. Lack of transparency: Every government keeps secrets. But far more than democratic governments, the CCP functions on secrecy. This commitment to secrecy extends to its manipulation of other countries’ information environment; Beijing’s most powerful and important tactics by and large rely on getting others to speak for it, in ways that disguise its influence and intentions.
2. Lack of honesty: Power and complete honesty rarely coexist. Beijing takes this principle to extremes, seeking not only to deny but to erase information that contradicts its version of reality, while using terms like “democracy,” “freedom,” and “human rights” in ways that betray their fundamental meaning.¹
3. Willingness to coerce: Although every government uses force and coercion to communicate, the Party’s view of coercion is different from democratic governments. Beijing believes that force is the *only* appropriate way to handle stubborn political opponents and accepts legal or normative limits on its coercive power only when it has no other choice.

We also describe Beijing’s behavior as “information manipulation” because its goal is not to foster debate or to communicate, but to control, through any means necessary and to the greatest degree possible, what is said, written, and even thought about China. In this way, the CCP’s behavior abroad mirrors its behavior at home. Within China, the CCP censors every major form of communication – from newspapers and television to social media and academic journals. The goal of this censorship is to ensure that only one version of reality exists: the Party’s version. In this version of reality, the Party is always right, and the wisdom of its decisions is beyond question. Organized challenges to Party-approved narratives are not permitted.

The reader may well wonder why again: Why does any of this make China unique, since one of the most important hallmarks of authoritarianism *everywhere* is intolerance of criticism? This toolkit argues that China’s approach is worth special study not because the Party’s attitude is unique, but because the way the CCP pursues its goal is uniquely effective among major authoritarian countries. Beijing’s tools for influencing international perception are more numerous, more sophisticated, and more powerful than peers like Russia, North Korea, or Iran.

1 “Freedom of Speech – The CCP Dictionary.” China Media Project. May 7, 2021 https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/freedom-of-speech/.

Beijing recognizes that their resources can shape other countries' public conversations not just by attacking enemies, but by winning powerful allies. The size of China's economy – by some measures the largest in the world – the lure of its market, and its technological and financial firepower all give Beijing enormous power to “make friends” (the Party's term for winning allies), who can help shape perception and policy in other countries. Although coercion is an integral part of the Party's approach to shaping perceptions, it recognizes that the most effective way to get “friends” to speak on its behalf often is not threatening them but giving them something to lose.²

Beijing's ability to shape perceptions internationally – and its tendency to do so in ways that are deceptive, or difficult to observe and recognize – make it especially important for journalists, activists, and government officials to understand the channels through which PRC information manipulation functions. The first and most important is Beijing's use of business and trade ties.

2. “Ohlberg, Mareike, Niva Yau et. al. “Countering China's Information Manipulation in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan: A Framework for Understanding and Action”. International Republican Institute. June 27, 2023. <https://www.iri.org/resources/countering-chinas-information-manipulation-in-the-indo-pacific-and-kazakhstan/>.

IDENTIFYING PRC INFORMATION MANIPULATION IN YOUR LOCAL CONTEXT

CHANNEL #1: BUSINESS AND TRADE TIES

What is the problem?

Business and trade ties are one of the most important ways the PRC influences other countries' information environments. This channel is effective for two reasons: 1) large businesses often have significant power to shape perceptions and foreign policy in their home countries, and 2) Beijing does not hesitate to use its tight control of China's market to threaten foreign businesses.

Beijing targets foreign businesses because it knows that there are many ways business elites can influence perceptions in their home countries³, including direct control of media outlets, donations to think tanks or university programs, direct lobbying of politicians, or through the "revolving door". Beijing uses the lure of its market – and the threat of its loss – to encourage foreign businesses to spread narratives favorable to the PRC, while using their influence to isolate critics.

More than some other channels, this channel blurs the line between influence in the information space and pure political influence. People propagating Beijing's preferred views may not be doing so consciously, or because they agree with Beijing's line. They may even do so because they feel like Beijing's ability to damage their business leaves them little choice.

These blurred boundaries reflect the CCP's distinct approach to politics, that emphasizes using all facets of party-state power – including its power over China's economy -- to "unite people's hearts" behind the Party's leadership.⁴ Examples of this form of influence can be quite blatant (such as in the case of WantWant Times, covered in greater detail below), but can also be subtle, ambiguous, or difficult to detect.

What are the most important tactics Beijing uses in this sector?

- **Influence through media ownership:** Beijing can exert indirect influence on foreign media through foreign entrepreneurs with large business interests in China. Entrepreneurs with large business interests in China often also own newspapers, TV stations, or social media properties in their home countries, and can have an interest in slanting their media properties' coverage of China in ways that play up pro-Beijing narratives or play down information Beijing dislikes. Entrepreneurs who are not necessarily "pro-China" may still influence coverage in their media properties because of the potential for PRC retaliation against other parts of their business.
- **Funding of pro-China think tanks or academic programs:** In many countries, entrepreneurs and private businesses are an important source of funding for think tanks and academic programs. PRC-friendly entrepreneurs may use a portion of their funds to endow think tank and academic programs meant to promote bilateral cooperation with China, while downplaying or looking past potential sources of bilateral tension. This can be an effective way to indirectly influence perceptions on China, since think tank and academic experts are often called upon to advise policymakers or provide comment to media outlets.

3 Jin, Canrong "外企在中国需拿出真本事了 Waiqi Zai Zhongguo Xuyao Na Chu Zhen Benshi Le." 环球网 Huanqiuwang. May 14, 2021. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230725142715/https://m.huanqiu.com/article/437qiiWGuE6> (archived).

4 Hornby, Lucy, James Kynge, and Jamil Anderlini. "Inside China's Secret 'Magic Weapon' for Worldwide Influence." Financial Times. October 26, 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/fb2b3934-b004-11e7-beba-5521c713abf4>.

- **Direct lobbying of politicians or policymakers:** Businesses are important conduits for influencing politicians' perceptions and preferences on policies towards China, through one-on-one lobbying, or through industry bodies such as chambers of commerce. Beijing views increased trade and business ties as a key vector of political influence, and routinely encourages foreign businesses to lobby their home governments on behalf of "smooth," "cooperative" ties to facilitate growth in the economic relationship.⁵ This can result in businesses or business associations encouraging governments to view China in a cooperative light, while avoiding actions that might anger Beijing.
- **Revolving door:** Providing business or consultancy contracts to friendly retired senior officials (the so-called "revolving door"⁶) is a well-established way for authoritarian regimes – including Beijing -- to influence the perceptions and behavior of serving politicians and policymakers, including the famous example of former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's lobbying on behalf of Russia.⁷ Knowing that "friendly" or "cooperative" policies may result in financial rewards can shape officials' behavior and beliefs while in office, while the former official's knowledge and networks can be called upon to advance the authoritarian state's interests after leaving office.
- **Threat of retaliation:** At the highest level, China provides incentives for foreign businesses to pressure governments for more "cooperative" relationships by punishing a country's business community when its government takes actions that anger Beijing. This is meant to incentivize foreign businesses to lobby their governments (and the general public) to minimize political frictions with China. Issues of concern can be traditional PRC "red lines" like human rights or Taiwan but can also extend into individual countries' security and defense policy, or even – as happened in the case of Australia – laws meant to prevent foreign electoral interference.

How can this hurt other countries?

In many countries, businesses and entrepreneurs are powerful political actors. At the most basic level, therefore, the PRC's use of foreign businesses to manipulate other countries' information environment can undermine countries' sovereign right to make security, electoral, and regulatory decisions without concealed external influence. More practically, it can also reinforce preexisting difficulties in reporting on corruption in government and politics, undermine the efforts of advocates for transparency and good government, and make it more difficult for countries to work together to uphold international human rights commitments. It can also deprive voting publics of important information on PRC activities and intentions, which may be relevant to their evaluation of their leaders' foreign policy decisions.

PRC information influence through foreign businesses is inherently difficult to address, regardless of countries' institutional context, since it often operates through some of a society's most powerful actors. In countries with strong institutions, such influence often exists in a legal grey zone, one where the businesses concerned have strong influence over rulemaking. In countries with weaker institutions, relevant regulations may be missing entirely, or ignored where they do exist.

5 Martina, Michael. "EXCLUSIVE Chinese Embassy Lobbies U.S. Business to Oppose China Bills - Sources." Reuters. November 15, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/business/exclusive-chinese-embassy-lobbies-us-business-oppose-china-bills-sources-2021-11-12/?utm_campaign=&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Eloqua&utm_content=B2B%20211118%20NEWS%20GLOB%20REUTERS%20BEST%20AWARE%20NWSLTR%20WEEKLY.

6 Welle, Deutsche. "Self-Serving Public Service." Deutsche Welle. January 9, 2014. <https://www.dw.com/en/revolving-door-makes-public-service-self-serving/a-17348688>.

7 Bennhold, Katrin. "The Former Chancellor Who Became Putin's Man in Germany." The New York Times April 23, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/world/europe/schroder-germany-russia-gas-ukraine-war-energy.html>.

Using legal means to address such influence in a democratic society can also raise a variety of issues with regards to freedom of information, censorship, and who should have the power to decide what constitutes “foreign interference” or “disinformation.” If mishandled, efforts to combat business-led information manipulation can undermine the principles of an open society by depriving citizens of legitimate democratic rights of speech and association and play into the PRC’s strategy of conquest through division by eroding the trust necessary for democracies to function cohesively.

What are some signs this may be happening in your country?

- Large exposure by important businesses to the China market, either through trade, sales, or investment.
- Significant expressed desire by important businesses to grow market share in China, or to attract investment by China.
- Ownership of important media properties by entrepreneurs or businesses that have large exposure to China.
- Employment of former senior officials by large PRC-based companies.
- Previous retaliation against your country’s business community by the PRC.
- China-focused think tank or academic programs funded by businesses with large interests in China.
- Membership by prominent entrepreneurs in PRC-organized bilateral “friendship societies” or chambers of commerce.
- Frequent attendance by senior business leaders at forums or events held in the PRC.
- Sudden shifts in a media or conglomerate’s editorial line in favor of the PRC’s policy goals.

Case Study

Senior officials in Beijing recognize that robust trade and business relationships can translate easily into influence over perceptions. In this view, trade is useful not only because it helps Beijing meet its citizens’ needs, but because it can increase the perception of dependence on China and reduce other countries’ willingness to disagree with or oppose Beijing. Brazil’s growing reliance on agricultural exports to China provides a unique illustration of how this dynamic can work.

From 2000 to 2016, Brazilian agribusiness exports to China increased by almost 2,000 percent.⁸ Investment from China helped expand production in Brazil, as PRC diplomats worked with the Brazilian agribusiness industry to promote a perception of mutual benefit, and dependence, on the PRC market.⁹ Soy and cotton producers in Brazil’s agricultural areas often report a belief that there is no alternative to China’s market, giving them little practical incentive to diversify from what is regarded as a guaranteed market for their products.¹⁰ In order to maintain strong commercial ties,

8 Adami, Andreia. “Agribusiness Exports to China: Prices Vs. Exchange Rate [Exportações do Agronegócio à China: Preços X Câmbio].” Universidade de São Paulo, 25 November 2016, Accessed at: <https://www.cepea.esalq.usp.br/br/opiniao-cepea/exportacoes-doagronegocio-a-china-precos-x-cambio.aspx>

9 See, for example: Marshall, Euan. “Brazil more dependent on China than ever.” The Brazil Report. 14 November 2018, <https://brazilian.report/business/2018/11/14/brazil-trade-china-commodities>.

10 Dearing Scott, Caitlin and Matt Schrader (eds.), “Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP’s Quest for Global Influence.”

Brazil's powerful farm and mineral lobbies have been vocal advocates of protecting the political relationship with China,¹¹ including in Brazil's Congress, where members of the strongly pro-PRC Agribusiness Caucus comprise 48 percent of both the upper and lower houses.

The removal of President Jair Bolsonaro's anti-PRC foreign minister Ernesto Araújo in early 2021 provided a vivid demonstration of China's ability to mobilize allies in Brazil. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro's political opponents had already criticized Araújo for his poor management of ties with Beijing, as well as his generous praise of then-U.S. president Donald Trump, and apparently purposeful snub of Joe Biden's inauguration.¹² Brazil's difficulty in securing COVID vaccine supplies from China and the U.S. in early 2021 gave Bolsonaro's opponents an opening to demand Araújo's resignation. PRC Ambassador to Brazil Yang Wanming reportedly mirrored this demand, saying that Araújo's removal would help open the door for China to provide Brazil with sorely-needed vaccines.¹³ Araújo resigned in March 2021, a month after Bolsonaro's administration agreed to allow Huawei to bid on the construction of Brazil's 5G network in an apparent effort to repair ties with China.¹⁴

Additional Resources

["Countering China's Information Manipulation in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan: A Framework for Understanding and Action"](#) – an IRI report analyzing PRC information manipulation in the Indo-Pacific, with a regional study, as well as case studies for several Indo-Pacific countries. The companion volume to this toolkit.

["Friends and Enemies: A Framework for Understanding Chinese Political Interference in Democratic Countries"](#) – a 2020 German Marshall Fund report that goes into more detail on the use of business and trade to influence other country's politics.

["China's Vision of a New World Order"](#) – a 2020 report by the National Bureau for Asian research that explains – using a number of primary sources -- Beijing's desire for a greater international "voice," and implications of that goal.

11 Trinkunas, Harold. "Testing the limits of China and Brazil's partnership." The Brookings Institution. 20 July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/testing-the-limits-of-china-and-brazils-partnership/>.

12 Phillips, Tom. 2021. "Brazil's Foreign Minister, Who Bashed China and Praised Trump, Resigns." The Guardian. March 29, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/29/brazil-foreign-minister-ernesto-araujo-resigns>.

13 Dearing Scott, Caitlin and Matt Schrader (eds.), "Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP's Quest for Global Influence."

14 Dearing Scott, Caitlin and Matt Schrader (eds.), "Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP's Quest for Global Influence."

CHANNEL #2: TRADITIONAL MEDIA

What is the problem?

Despite the rise of social media, traditional media outlets like newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio stations remain powerful in shaping conversation on foreign policy. Beijing recognizes this and has spent significant resources attempting to bend legacy media outlets globally in its favor -- at least \$6.6 billion according to the PRC government.¹⁵ This push has taken advantage of traditional media outlets' declining profitability: newsrooms around the world often lack the resources to do investigative journalism, cover foreign policy, properly pay journalists, or provide career development opportunities. In such an environment, financial support from Beijing can find willing recipients.

All powerful countries try to influence other countries, including through official and non-official media. The United States, EU, and Japan all run state-funded media outlets and fund reporting by third parties. Beijing's tactics differ in two important respects: 1) the CCP as an entity is fundamentally hostile to independent reporting and media pluralism,¹⁶ and, as a result, 2) Beijing is much less hesitant than other major powers to intimidate or threaten recipients of its financial support, so as to discourage negative coverage of China and encourage what it views as "correct" transmission of its positive messages.

The CCP uses a wide variety of tactics in its push, including paid content distribution agreements, paid inserts in local media outlets, and directly employing local journalists through PRC state media outlets. (The next section offers more details on Beijing's tactics.) Broadly speaking, however, Beijing uses a vivid Chinese phrase to describe its most effective tactics: "borrowing a boat to go to sea." This means finding ways to retransmit pro-PRC messages through third-party channels that are not obviously associated with Beijing.¹⁷ One researcher at a state research institution in China explained that third-party channels are "seen as neutral, as more trustworthy, relatively speaking," and added that "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."¹⁸

What are the most important tactics Beijing uses in this sector?

- **Content distribution agreements:** PRC state-run media organizations such as Xinhua or China News frequently sign agreements with media outlets in other countries to republish stories, videos, or other media content provided by the PRC side. While the details vary, these agreements are typically free and can supplement or replace costly agreements with wire services like AP or Reuters. Signatories receive positive, controversy-free stories on China to run as needed, but also receive basic news material such as regional coverage – which can often be quite neutral in tone – or even weather. PRC state-run outlets have signed agreements in countries as diverse as Australia, Italy, India, Nigeria, and Thailand.¹⁹ For an industry as financially insecure as media, this sorely needed free content is a form of in-kind

15 SCMP Reporter. "Beijing in 45b Yuan Global Media Drive." South China Morning Post. January 12, 2009. <https://www.scmp.com/article/666847/beijing-45b-yuan-global-media-drive>.

16 For example, China has for many years jailed more reporters than any other country. In 2022, it held 110 in prison. See: Jazeera, Al. 2022. "Number of Journalists Imprisoned Worldwide Hits New Record: RSF." Al Jazeera. December 14, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/14/number-of-journalists-imprisoned-worldwide-hits-new-record-rsf>.

17 Geall, Sam and Rober Soutar. "Chinese Media and Latin America: 'Borrowing a Boat' to Set Sail." 2018. Jamestown China Brief. July 10, 2018. <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-media-and-latin-america-borrowing-a-boat-to-set-sail/>.

18 Zhang Lihong. "面向世界传播中国话语 Mianxiang Shijie Chuanbo Zhongguo Huayu," 面向世界传播中国话语-新华网 (xinhuanet.com) August 30, 2016

19 Feng, Emily. 2018. "China and the World: How Beijing Spreads the Message." Financial Times. July 12, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/f5d00a86-3296-11e8-b5bf-23cb17fd1498>.

financial support that can create the potential for conflicts of interest. At the same time, in some countries the content is not properly labeled, thus passing off PRC state propaganda as genuine news.

- **Paid inserts:** Like content sharing agreements, this tactic involves Party-funded media organizations sharing text or audiovisual materials, but instead offering to pay to have it published. For cash-strapped media organizations everywhere, this can be an enticing offer. Paid inserts vary in scale and format: In Kyrgyzstan, the CCP paid a Kyrgyz state-backed media station \$220,000 for daily broadcasts of a the propaganda film called “China Journey,” while in 2020 the PRC reported that it had paid USD\$12 million to major US outlets such as The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal over the course of four years.²⁰ The risks for such inserts – potential conflicts of interest, and improperly labeled PRC state propaganda -- are similar to content sharing agreements, but magnified by the presence of direct financial support.
- **Spread of PRC state-media:** Beyond “borrowing a boat” tactics such as content partnerships with local media outlets, Beijing has also sunk significant resources into spreading the direct reach of PRC state-controlled media outlets. These organizations include China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Central Television (CCTV), China Daily, People’s Daily, China Radio International (CRI), and news agencies Xinhua and China News Service. Xinhua, for example, currently has 170 foreign bureaus, while serving as a *de facto* arm of the PRC’s overseas intelligence gathering.²¹ CGTN broadcasts TV programs in 14 countries, and CRI broadcasts in over 65 languages. PRC state media outlets also hire local journalists in other countries, securing the service of top reporters by paying salaries that local outlets cannot match, as has happened in Kenya. These organizations present themselves as credible practitioners of genuine journalism -- and they may in fact employ talented journalists, or report neutrally on issues not of great concern to Beijing. However, their direct control by the PRC state means they are not a reliable source on issues that are important to Beijing, since they are obligated to offer only the Party’s official perspective and spin any negative information about China in a positive light, a practice that Xi Jinping has called “spreading positive energy”.²²
- **Private PRC media companies:** In Africa, privately-owned PRC-based media companies have become important players in many countries. The most important example is StarTimes, a satellite TV provider that has become extremely popular in countries like Nigeria and Ghana due to its low-cost TV subscription services. Although StarTimes is not state-owned, the fact that it is headquartered in the PRC means that the company’s senior leadership could be imprisoned, stripped of personal or corporate assets, or otherwise coerced if they refuse to comply with Party instructions. StarTimes’ content in Africa is largely local, but it has served as a vector for spreading PRC state media propaganda, since CGTN is the default news channel in its lowest-cost TV package, which are among its most popular offerings. (More expensive packages offer news sources such as BBC and CNN.)²³

20 Yu, Mo. 2020. “US Spending Report Sheds Light on China’s Global Propaganda Campaign.” Voice of America. June 27, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-voa-news-china-us-spending-report-sheds-light-chinas-global-propaganda-campaign/6191830.html>.

21 Mattis, Peter. “A Guide to Chinese Intelligence Operations” War on the Rocks. August 18, 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/08/a-guide-to-chinese-intelligence-operations/>.

22 Bandurski, David. “The CCP’s ‘Positive Energy’ Obsession – China Media Project.” China Media Project. December 15, 2015. <https://chinamediaproject.org/2015/12/15/chinas-obsession-with-positive-energy/>.

23 Olander, Eric. “Pay-TV Giant StarTimes Increasingly Becomes Vehicle for Official Chinese Propaganda.” The China Global South Project. February 1, 2021. <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2021/02/01/pay-tv-giant-startimes-increasingly-becomes-vehicle-for-official-chinese-propaganda/>.

- **Intimidation, harassment, and suppression:** Inside China, the CCP routinely uses harassment and intimidation to control the press and suppress criticism. Now, it is doing the same thing in other countries – sometimes directly, sometimes through proxies. This can take many forms, including cyberattacks and hacking, threatening a journalist’s job, or even threats to a reporter’s physical safety. In 2018, for example, a South African journalist had their regular column canceled one day after publishing an article on the inability of African leaders to stand up to China on the issue of Xinjiang. Afterwards, the journalist pointed out that the rapid cancellation likely had everything to do with the fact that PRC state-linked companies held a 20 percent ownership stake in the newspaper’s publisher.²⁴ In another case that has not been reported on publicly but is familiar to IRI, a newspaper journalist in Africa was fired by their employer in 2022 after groundbreaking investigative reporting on an important PRC-linked infrastructure project in their home country.
- **Training and exchange programs:** Like other large countries, China operates a wide range of training and exchange programs for journalists from other countries, bringing them to China for short- and long-term opportunities. Just like other countries, the hope is that greater familiarity with China will help yield more positive coverage in the future. However, these programs are different from countries in North America and Europe in the sense that they are meant to open the door to a wide variety of other tactics – including those documented above – that *suppress* critical coverage of China. They are therefore not meant to provide a more complete picture of China or to strengthen genuine journalism, but to create another channel for Beijing to control information and promote an incomplete, one-sided view of its actions.

How can this hurt other countries?

The Party’s deep-rooted hostility to journalism is reflected in the fact that China has been in the bottom 5% of Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index every year since the Index’s creation in 2002.²⁵ So at the most fundamental level, Beijing can hurt other countries by making their media sector look more like China’s: closely controlled, dependent on the state, and hostile to independent reporting and analysis. In countries where media is already tightly controlled, China’s involvement can make existing problems worse, by providing other governments with new tools to monitor and control the media, or by sharing authoritarian “best practices.”

Beijing’s approach to media and journalism also means that politicians and citizens in countries with large PRC-backed infrastructure projects may not receive the information they need to make informed decisions. As journalism globally continues to struggle with the impact of the Internet on the bottom line, Beijing’s willingness to offer direct financial support means that even in countries with robust press freedom, citizens and officials may be deprived of important information on China that could affect their views on their country’s foreign policy stances.

What are some signs this may be happening in your country?

- Ownership of important media properties by entrepreneurs or businesses that have large exposure to China.
- Content sharing agreements between local media outlets and PRC state media outlets.
- PRC state media hires large numbers of prominent local journalists.

24 Essa, Azad. “China Is Buying African Media’s Silence.” Foreign Policy. September 14, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/china-is-buying-african-medias-silence/>.

25 “World Press Freedom Index.” Reporters Without Borders. Accessed June 21, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

- PRC-based media company has established large market share in important local media sector.
- “Lawfare” in the form of lawsuits against journalists whose reporting has harmed important PRC interests.
- Attacks (either physical or professional) against journalists whose reporting has harmed important PRC interests.
- Public attacks on journalists or media outlets by local PRC embassy or diplomats
- Appearance of PRC paid inserts in prominent media outlets.
- Frequent trips by media owners, editors, or reporters to the PRC.

Case Study: Want China Times

One of the PRC’s greatest success stories in leveraging economic incentives to manipulate another country’s information environment is that of the Taiwan-based Want China Times media empire. The story begins with the acquisition in 2008 of the China Times Group by Tsai Eng-meng, a Taiwanese billionaire who made his fortune in the PRC selling food products.²⁶ In the years after his acquisition of what had historically been a pro-KMT media, Tsai expanded his media empire to include magazines, TV stations, cable distribution, and other sectors.²⁷

Over time, a substantial number of editors and journalists left the conglomerate as its editorial line on Taiwan and China shifted ever more in favor of Beijing.²⁸ Although Taiwanese law prohibits PRC investment in media, Tsai’s business empire, which by then had expanded to hotels, hospitals, and other sectors in the PRC, benefited from direct subsidies through its registered presence in Hong Kong.²⁹ Thus, while there ostensibly was no direct PRC funding into Mr. Tsai’s media company, the substantial funding by the PRC to other arms of his business empire, added to the need to curry favor with Beijing for continued access to the PRC market, created immense incentives for, and pressure upon, editors and journalists in his media conglomerate to avoid criticism of the CCP and to support its policies with regards to Taiwan and other “core issues.”³⁰

Over the years, outlets under Mr. Tsai’s control were repeatedly fined for spreading disinformation aimed at undermining the opposition (when the more Beijing-friendly KMT was in power) or the Taiwan-centric DPP-led government after 2016.³¹ One of its TV channels, CtiTV, saw its cable broadcasting license suspended by the National Communications Commission (NCC) for repeated violations which were deemed to have been harmful to society.³² Mr. Tsai’s conglomerate has also collaborated with counterparts in the PRC – some with ties to the intelligence apparatus – in the

26 Wang, Lisa. “China Times Group is sold to Want Want.” *Taipei Times*. November 5, 2008. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/biz/archives/2008/11/05/2003427822>.

27 Higgins, Andrew. “Tycoon prods Taiwan closer to China.” *Washington Post*. January 21, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/tycoon-prods-taiwan-closer-to-china/2012/01/20/gIQAhswmFQ_story.html.

28 Shan, Shelley. “Senior editors quit ‘China Times’ to protest attacks.” *Taipei Times*. August 10, 2012. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2012/08/10/2003539928>.

29 Kawase, Kenji. “Chinese subsidies for Foxconn and Want Want spark outcry in Taiwan.” *Nikkei Asia*. April 30, 2019. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Chinese-subsidies-for-Foxconn-and-Want-Want-spark-outcry-in-Taiwan>.

30 Chen, Zheng-wei. 中國時報下架六四相關報導 對外沒有回應. *Central News Agency (Taiwan)*. June 13, 2019. <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/201906120302.aspx>.

31 Shan, Shelley. “NCC fines CtiTV NT\$1.6m for fact-checking failures.” *Taipei Times*. July 25, 2019. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/07/25/2003719299>.

32 “Leading pro-China news channel in Taiwan is taken off air.” *Associated Press*. December 12, 2020. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14013705>

promotion of unification and has been instrumental in the creation of cross–Strait media forums where delegations of senior Taiwanese editors from his media empire and others, and other participants in the creative industries, have received indoctrination and marching orders from senior CCP officials.³³

To this day, Mr. Tsai and senior officials at the Group deny they receive any editorial directives from Beijing, and have occasionally resorted to lawsuits against journalists, academics, and politicians who argue that the media empire is part of what is known as “red” – that is, pro-CCP – media.³⁴

Additional Resources

[“Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022”](#) – 2022 edition of a comprehensive project by Freedom House to monitor PRC influence in traditional and social media around the world. Includes a number of country case studies.

[China Media Project](#) – comprehensive resource with up-to-date news, analysis, and explanations of how the CCP manages media inside China.

[“China’s Media Propaganda in Africa: A Strategic Assessment”](#) – a deep dive into Beijing’s efforts to build inroads into Africa’s media sector. Useful because Africa has served as a laboratory for tactics Beijing has deployed elsewhere.

33 Cole, J. Michael. “More Than 70 Participants from Taiwanese Media Industry Attend 4th Cross–Strait Media Summit in Beijing.” Taiwan Sentinel. May 11, 2019. <https://sentinel.tw/more-than-70-participants-from-taiwanese-media-industry-attend-4th-cross-strait-media-summit-in-beijing>.

34 “Taiwan: Abusive libel suit against Financial Times correspondent.” Reporters Without Borders. July 24, 2019. <https://rsf.org/en/taiwan-abusive-libel-suit-against-financial-times-correspondent>.

CHANNEL #3: ACADEMIA AND THINK TANKS

What is the problem?

In most societies, universities and think tanks are important centers of expertise on politics and international affairs, with significant influence on government foreign policy. Beijing has identified this as a key conduit through which to influence other societies' conversations on China and has committed considerable resources to doing so.

As in traditional media, Beijing's push in this sector often uses the things other societies *lack* as an opening. Universities and think tanks around the world frequently experience shortfalls in money, personnel, and expertise. Offering to close these gaps – especially on a topic as interesting and important as China – is an extremely effective way to affect how these institutions discuss issues that matter to Beijing, not least because the benefits of the partnership may make them hesitate to offend the PRC side. For its part, the PRC uses this channel to seed pro-authoritarian narratives and disinformation, while also pressuring organizations and academics needing access to China to avoid “sensitive” topics, or to outright self-censor.

Addressing inappropriate interference by Beijing in universities and think tanks is extremely difficult, for many reasons. Countries often lack clear laws defining what kind of partnerships universities and think tanks can establish with foreign institutions, while universities and think tanks seldom have clear codes of conduct to guide their engagement with partners in authoritarian countries. Similarly, many countries do not have clear requirements for these institutions to disclose their funding sources. Senior administrators at these institutions also often lack expertise in the risks of academic engagement with the PRC, and may think that universities in the PRC operate according to similar principles as those in institutions in democratic countries. Finally, it can be hard for governments to address the problem with legal tools, since universities and think tanks in democratic societies may rightfully see the use of law enforcement or intelligence agencies as inappropriate interference in free academic discourse.

What are the most important tactics Beijing uses in this sector?

- **Funding:** Like other states, the PRC provides funding to foreign think tanks, research centers, and universities to promote its preferred narratives. Unlike more democratic states, however, the PRC also uses funding flows to stifle criticism or block ideas it dislikes. Limited disclosure requirements in many countries means that donations to think tanks and universities may not be fully reported to the public, or without proper disclosure of ties to the PRC state.

The lack of robust disclosure requirements in most countries means that donations can also be funneled through wealthy PRC-based businesses or individuals, making ties to the PRC state difficult to trace, attribute, or explain. Beijing can also encourage donations by friendly foreign businesses or wealthy individuals to shape the selection of academics and specialists, fund professorships, censor certain subjects, or spread its preferred ideas.³⁵

- **Partnerships:** Many foreign think tanks and universities have significant partnerships with PRC-based counterparts, such as exchange programs, joint symposiums, or overseas campuses. Although these partnerships can provide opportunities for valuable exchanges, even in their least harmful form they can also export the PRC's censorship.³⁶ PRC think tanks

35 Hala, Martin Filip Jirous, and Ondrej Klimes. “Borrowed Boats Capsizing: State Security Ties to CCP Propaganda Laundering Rile Czech Public.” Jamestown China Brief. December 3, 2021. <https://jamestown.org/program/borrowed-boats-capsizing-state-security-ties-to-ccp-propaganda-laundering-rile-czech-public/>.

36 Feng, Emily. “China Tightens Party Control of Foreign University Ventures.” Financial Times. July 2, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/4b885540-7b6d-11e8-8e67-1e1a0846c475>.

and universities view many topics as “sensitive” that would be normal to discuss elsewhere. This can force foreign institutions to choose between continuing the partnership and upholding intellectual freedom, since the PRC side may choose to end a partnership rather than discuss a “sensitive” subject.³⁷

More harmfully, PRC-based institutions may also encourage or force foreign partners into actively promoting CCP-approved narratives on a range of subjects.³⁸ Some PRC-based think tanks such as the Center for China and Globalization have gone one step further, describing themselves as “independent” while laundering CCP intellectual talking points and denying the significance of their obvious ties to the party-state apparatus.³⁹

- **Confucius Institutes (CI):** Confucius Institutes are attractive because they offer free Chinese-language instruction to partner universities abroad, that often do not have the resources to do so themselves. Although they may appear similar to counterparts like Alliance Française, they are different because: 1) they are fully funded and controlled by the PRC state, and 2) they always sit inside partner institutions, rather than operating independently.

The presence of a CI therefore risks compromising a host institution’s commitment to academic freedom, particularly since CIs at many foreign institutions have branched out beyond language instruction, working with their hosts to establishing scholarships, academic programs on bilateral ties with China, or even STEM exchange programs.⁴⁰ In some countries, universities have refused to publish their contracts with CIs, while in others, CIs have attempted to shut down events perceived to be hostile to China at their host university.⁴¹ Mitigating these risks requires an active commitment by the host institution to monitoring and transparency, but host institutes may hesitate to impose these requirements, since doing so could cause the PRC side to terminate the partnership, depriving students of free Chinese language courses.

- **Controlling access:** Academics and researchers who focus on China must navigate one of the CCP’s most subtle but powerful tools for shaping information: controlling access to the country through granting or withholding visas. The Party discourages the study of “sensitive” subjects that challenge its narratives or cast it in a bad light. By controlling access to China and granting it only to researchers who will avoid CCP-defined “red lines,” the Party can shape what is discussed, and in some ways even what is *known* about China.⁴²

Many researchers around the world can and do still work on these sensitive subjects. But academia and think tanks are often “publish or perish” institutions, and many researchers choose instead to focus on less “controversial” topics where there are fewer obstacles to

37 Redden, Elizabeth. “Cornell Ends Partnership with Chinese University over Academic Freedom Concerns.” Inside Higher Ed. October 28, 2018. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/29/cornell-ends-partnership-chinese-university-over-academic-freedom-concerns>.

38 Knox, Liam. “Challenges Compound for U.S. Branch Campuses in China.” Inside Higher Ed. July 6, 2023. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/us-colleges-world/2023/07/06/challenges-compound-us-branch-campuses-china>.

39 Fischer, Sara, and Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian. “Semafors’s China Problem.” Axios. March 7, 2023. <https://www.axios.com/2023/03/07/semafors-china-think-tank>.

40 Rubinsztein-Dunlop, Sean. “The Chinese Government Co-Funded at Least Four University of Queensland Courses,” ABC News. October 14, 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-15/chinese-government-cofunded-four-university-of-queensland-course/11601946>.

41 Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany. “How China Managed to Play Censor at a Conference on U.S. Soil.” Foreign Policy. May 9, 2018. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180509161829/http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/09/how-china-managed-to-play-censor-at-a-conference-on-u-s-soil/> (archived).

42 Wong, Edward. “China Denies Entry to an American Scholar Who Spoke up for a Uighur Colleague,” July 7, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/08/world/asia/us-scholar-who-supported-uighur-colleague-is-denied-entry-to-china.html>.

producing publishable research.⁴³ In the most extreme cases, some researchers may end up co-opted to such a degree that they willingly reproduce CCP propaganda or disinformation.

How can this hurt other countries?

Most fundamentally, the PRC's engagement with foreign academia and think tanks can erode the intellectual freedom that is their foundation. Under Xi Jinping and his predecessors, the CCP has emphasized that the most important job of think tanks and academia is not free intellectual inquiry, but to serve the Party's political leadership.

Although universities and think tanks in China do conduct research -- oftentimes of very high quality -- on non-"sensitive" topics, the CCP forbids them from critical research on sensitive societal issues, or from openly questioning the actions of the country's leaders. Beijing carries this philosophy into its work with universities and think tanks overseas, using other societies' openness to isolate critics, deflect skeptical inquiry, and promote its preferred narratives. In the most extreme cases, the PRC can export to other countries the censorship and intimidation it routinely uses to control intellectuals at home.

Since academia and think tanks are important sources of information and advice for government officials, this engagement can guide other countries' policies in more pro-PRC directions, promoting "mutually beneficial cooperation" while downplaying potential areas of conflict such as trade, labor standards, or human rights. Also, while much of the PRC's work in this space is meant to shape other countries' perceptions of and policies towards China, increasingly it is also meant to promote the PRC's model as preferable to liberal democracy. Adoption of this model can result in less robust scrutiny of public policy by universities and think tanks, and more hesitancy to criticize government overreach and antidemocratic behavior.

What are some signs this may be happening in your country?

- Think tank/academic programs receiving significant funding from institutions in China.
- Think tank/academic programs receiving significant funding for China-related activities from businesses/wealthy individuals with important business ties to China.
- Important professors or think tank officials receiving honorary professorships or fellowship at PRC-based institutions.
- Universities refusing to publish details of agreements with Confucius Institutes.
- Contracts with Confucius Institutes that give the CI control over curriculum.
- Confucius Institute involvement with China-related curriculum beyond language instruction (including international affairs, history, and STEM).

Note: Unlike in areas such as media or business/trade, frequent travel to China by academics or think tank researchers should **not** be considered a risk factor for potential inappropriate interference. Although the PRC routinely denies visas to foreign researchers whose work it dislikes, legitimate and useful scholarly inquiry remain possible within the boundaries set by the Party-state in many fields, especially in humanities disciplines such as art, history, archaeology, and many more.

43 Sharma, Yojana. "Overseas China Scholars Face Self-Censorship Dilemma." University World News. August 24, 2018. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20180824153912431>.

Case Study: Network of ASEAN-China Think Tanks (NACT)

Beijing has sought to increase its influence in think tanks in Southeast Asia by creating the Network of ASEAN-China Think Tanks (NACT), launched by PRC Premier Li Keqiang in 2013.⁴⁴ The China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU) in Beijing, under the Foreign Ministry, is the coordinator of NACT China⁴⁵ (CFAU has a number of foreign associate professors on its staff who, like Fabio Massimo Parenti, have willingly parroted the CCP narrative on a variety of issues).⁴⁶

Over the years, the NACT has held regular seminars to promote major PRC infrastructure projects under the BRI.⁴⁷ It, as part of a wider regional network, has also brought the heads of partner think tanks in the targeted ASEAN countries, along with other local intellectuals, on visits to the PRC, where they were given access to senior officials and subjected to the official PRC narrative on a number of issues, from the "China model" to Beijing's position on the territorial dispute in the South China Sea.⁴⁸ Many of the ASEAN think tanks involved in this initiative have carried out research on behalf of the PRC government, while some have received funding and training from the PRC. Such think tanks have occasionally been given "preferred partner" status by PRC missions at regional fora, such as the Jakarta Forum on ASEAN-China Relations in 2021.⁴⁹

To improve its image within ASEAN, the PRC has also relied upon surveys conducted by partner think tanks whose results invariably give a positive image of the PRC.⁵⁰ Through such efforts, it also hopes to deflect criticism on various issues that have undermined the PRC's reputation in recent years, from its assertiveness in the South China Sea to its treatment of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

As with other entities within the PRC, there is no space for purely independent think tanks, which are instead regarded as an extension of the country's diplomacy, with a top-down list of directives to shape international opinion in Beijing's favor.⁵¹ Such institutions, therefore, often are extensions of the PRC external propaganda system. These "think tanks with Chinese characteristics" tend to promote self-selected narratives rather than a true exchange of ideas.

44 Rakhmat, Muhammad Zulfikar. "China's 'Think-Tank Diplomacy' is Gaining Traction in Indonesia." *The Diplomat*. September 2, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/chinas-think-tank-diplomacy-is-gaining-traction-in-indonesia/>.

45 "The 4th Network of ASEAN-China Think Tanks (NACT) Country Coordinators' Meeting and Seminar." Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. October 10, 2017. <https://www.isis.org.my/2017/10/10/the-4th-network-of-asean-china-think-tanks-nact-country-coordinators-meeting-and-seminar/>.

46 For example, see, "Interview: U.S. fabricates Xinjiang-related misinformation to contain China, not to protect human rights -- Italian scholar." *Xinhua News Agency*. August 14, 2021. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2021-08/14/c_1310127207.htm.

47 "ACC Representatives Attended the NACT Group Meeting (2019-04-30)." ASEAN-China Centre. April 30, 2019. http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2019-05/01/c_138026548.htm.

48 Wang, Zheng. "China's Think-Tank Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Idea Exchange or Echo Chamber?" *Fulcrum*. August 10, 2022. <https://fulcrum.sg/chinas-think-tank-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia-idea-exchange-or-echo-chamber/>.

49 Rakhmat, Muhammad Zulfikar. "China's 'Think-Tank Diplomacy' is Gaining Traction in Indonesia." *The Diplomat*. September 2, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/chinas-think-tank-diplomacy-is-gaining-traction-in-indonesia/>.

50 Wang, Zheng. "China's Think-Tank Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Idea Exchange or Echo Chamber?" *Fulcrum*. August 10, 2022. <https://fulcrum.sg/chinas-think-tank-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia-idea-exchange-or-echo-chamber/>.

51 Hongying Wang and Xue Ying Hu. "The New Great Leap Forward Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics." *CIGI Papers No. 142*. September 2017. <https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/documents/Paper%20No.142.pdf>.

Additional Resources

[“Picking Flowers, Making Honey”](#) – report by Australian Strategic Policy Institute detailing exchanges involving foreign universities and PRC military scientists and scholars. Finds that exchanges are often conducted under false premises or without sufficient declaration of intentions from the PRC side.

[“Repressive Experiences among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data”](#) – academic article discussing experiences of self-censorship among scholars who study China, based on a survey of over 500 academics.

[“Institutional Compliance with Section 117 of the Higher Education Act of 1965”](#) – U.S. Department of Education audit of U.S. universities’ compliance with law requiring declaration of foreign sources of funding, found significant gaps in reporting on China and other authoritarian countries.

CHANNEL #4: THE CHINESE DIASPORA

What is the problem?

By some measures, China has the world's largest diaspora. Authoritative estimates put the number of people of Chinese descent globally as high as 65 million.⁵² Since many members of the diaspora are successful in business, academia, and other fields, the CCP views this population as an important potential resource for China. But it also views the diaspora as a threat, since it is potentially a source of independent political movements that challenge the CCP's power, and a source of information on China that the Party cannot directly control. This was made particularly clear in 1989, when diaspora media outlets throughout the world expressed strong support for the Tiananmen Square protest movement.⁵³

Because of this, PRC efforts to manipulate other countries' information environments often target the Chinese diaspora. The CCP aggressively attacks opponents in the diaspora, with two primary goals: 1) limit the ability of anti-CCP members of the diaspora to speak and organize, and 2) enhance the ability of pro-CCP diaspora groups to speak and organize. In doing so, the Party seeks to erase the enormous social and political diversity of the diaspora, and artificially create the impression of a unified "diaspora" perspective for non-Chinese communities on issues that matter to the PRC.

This goal – and the way the CCP pursues it – are hugely problematic for many reasons. Most importantly, it is problematic because the Party does not hesitate to use coercion or even violence against diaspora members who oppose it. It is also problematic because, in many cases, the Party is interfering in the lives of people whose families left China centuries ago and have little or no connection to the current regime. Finally, the Party tries to use the diaspora to manipulate other countries' public conversations on China: members of the diaspora are elected officials in many countries, and diaspora lobbying groups also often play an important role in shaping policymakers' perceptions and actions towards China.

What are the most important tactics Beijing uses in this sector?

- **Front organizations:** The PRC has a large bureaucracy dedicated to creating front organizations that appear independent but are actually under the Party's tight control. It uses this bureaucracy – led by a CCP department called the United Front Work Department (UFWD) – against the diaspora. An important job of PRC embassies and consulates around the world is to work with the UFWD to limit the power of independent diaspora organizations and replace them with front organizations to the greatest extent possible.⁵⁴

To this end, the PRC tries to create front diaspora organizations, co-opt pre-existing organizations, and eliminate those that cannot be co-opted. Bringing diaspora political advocacy under its control gives the CCP many tools to shape other countries' information environments in many ways, including: mobilizing campaigns to elect pro-PRC diaspora candidates, creating the appearance of grassroots support for PRC positions, fundraising for and lobbying non-diaspora politicians, and pressuring Chinese-language media that oppose Party aims.

- **Threats to family and businesses:** As discussed in the introduction, a willingness to threaten and

52 Schäfer, Carsten. "Diaspora Policy under Xi Jinping Content, Limits and Challenges." November 9, 2022. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2022RP10_ChinasDiasporaPolicy.pdf.

53 Wong, Audrye. "The Diaspora and China's Foreign Influence Activities". May 31, 2022. The Wilson Center. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Wong_The%20Diaspora%20and%20China%27s%20Foreign%20Influence%20Activities.pdf

54 Joske, Alex. "The Party Speaks for You: Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System". Australian Strategic Policy Institute. June 9, 2020. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you>

coerce political opponents is one of the key ways the PRC influences the information space. Although the threat of coercion is important in other channels of information manipulation, it is used with the greatest frequency and the least restraint against the diaspora, to prevent the emergence of anti-CCP political movements.

The CCP routinely tries to silence opponents in the diaspora by threatening family members or business partners still inside China.⁵⁵ Diaspora members who openly oppose the CCP are often forced to cut off all such ties, to avoid endangering the people they care about. This also means that they can no longer return to China to visit friends and family. For first-or-second generation immigrants, this alienation from the people and places they care about can be a profound source of psychological trauma.

Even outside China, the Party still has many ways to frighten opponents into silence. Diaspora opponents abroad have been threatened, physically assaulted, had their houses broken into, and their businesses and livelihoods threatened. In some cases, the PRC even appears to have cooperated with organized crime, using overseas Chinese mafia groups to attack opponents.

- **Offering opportunities to allies:** While threatening and attacking opponents, the Party also works hard to provide opportunities to diaspora allies that spread pro-PRC narratives. In China, business success requires good ties with the state. The United Front Work Department facilitates this success for allies in the diaspora, connecting them with key decision makers in central and local government departments. Helping allies make money is useful in several respects: members of the diaspora may bring skills, technologies, or resources that China needs; rewarding them can help cement their loyalty; and helping allies succeed can give them more resources to “speak for” the PRC in other societies.
- **Co-opting social equity language:** Co-opted diaspora groups often adopt the language of social equity movements to defend themselves against legitimate inquiry, painting officials or journalists that question them as “racist” or “anti-Chinese”. This tactic is profoundly cynical, since it devalues democratic societies’ efforts to reckon with racial-driven inequality and violence, using them instead to advance the aims of a state that is deeply ethnocentric and anti-democratic. The PRC state encourages and repeats this rhetoric by frequently labeling its opponents as racist, regardless of their actual actions.

How can this hurt other countries?

The PRC state sees diaspora communities as little more than a puppet to be used to “speak for” China. *This desire to limit the diaspora’s independence – both to advance Party policies and to limit the threat the diaspora poses – and the ways the Party pursues this goal, are perhaps the most corrosive to liberal, multiethnic democracies of all the information shaping tactics discussed in this toolkit.*

First and foremost, they place diaspora communities at extreme risk. Aside from the risk of direct violence by the PRC state, Chinese diaspora communities around the world also struggle with racism and perceptions of “disloyalty.” This frequently results in violence targeting both individuals and the Chinese diaspora as a whole. Even in situations that do not escalate to violence, suspicion of the diaspora can unfairly limit the opportunities available to diaspora members in government, politics, or business. When it tries to use diaspora communities as tools, Beijing can inflame these preexisting divisions, placing members of the diaspora at even greater risk of harm.

⁵⁵ “China: Transnational Repression Origin Country Case Study”. Freedom House. 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/china>.

Beijing's tactics also deprive the diaspora of badly needed political representation. Liberal democracies welcome political engagement and organization by minority communities, to ensure that their needs are properly met. This is an especially important goal for communities that experience or have experienced discrimination historically. Beijing's focus on co-opting diaspora political representation seeks to replace this organic, independent political organizing with organizations managed by an authoritarian foreign state. Not only does this corrupt their purpose, it also risks tainting *all* political activism by Chinese diaspora communities, since distinguishing independent diaspora organizations from those that have been successfully co-opted can be difficult for people without specialized training or deep ties to the diaspora community.

What are some signs this may be happening in your country?

- Diaspora complaints about harassment/intimidation.
 - This is the most important sign of any in this list and should be the first that any government looks for. It is the easiest to use and carries the least risk of backlash against the diaspora. Put simply, it is much easier and less divisive to determine whether someone has been threatened than to determine whether a diaspora organization has been co-opted by Beijing. Threats against the diaspora are an early warning sign. Neglecting them can *cause* the other problems below, which are much more difficult, divisive, and potentially dangerous for the diaspora as a whole.
- Disappearance of independent Chinese-language media outlets.
- Frequent appearances by diaspora community leaders with PRC embassy officials.
- Obviously co-opted groups meeting with local politicians/officials.
- Diaspora political representatives vocally supporting obviously pro-PRC positions.

Case Study

Panama has a relatively large Chinese diaspora population for Latin America – around 200,000 people in a country of 4.3 million. Beijing has targeted this group, in an attempt to shape the conversation about China – and geopolitics more broadly – in a country whose eponymous canal gives it enormous strategic importance.⁵⁶ The PRC has actively sought to cultivate diaspora front groups in Panama; IRI research identified more than 50 diaspora groups co-opted to some degree by the UFWD and the PRC embassy in Panama.⁵⁷ These groups have tried to steer Panamanian opinion in pro-PRC directions in a number of ways, including:

- organizing public events and demonstrations in support of a pro-Beijing political agenda;
- propagating pro-PRC lines in engagements with Panama's policy and business communities;⁵⁸
- acting as formal business lobbies, and;

56 Case study drawn from Shullman, David (ed.). "A World Safe for the Party: China's Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response."

57 For example, at the height of tension during pro-democracy protests and police violence in Hong Kong in 2019, the Panama-China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification (PCCPPR), the Panama chapter of the group that lobbies globally for the PRC's "reunification" with Taiwan, was active in raising support for Beijing in the diaspora community. PCCPPR organized rallies in support of Beijing's position on Hong Kong, where leadership encouraged participants to chant the party's slogans, while stoking animosity toward the United States for its alleged "interference" as the root cause of the protests. See Panama country case study in: Shullman, David (ed.). "A World Safe for the Party: China's Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response."

58 Apart from organizing support for Beijing in Panama among the diaspora community, United Front-linked groups act as formal business lobbies. The Panama Chinese Chamber of Commerce is a Chinese business lobby and plays a valuable role in the mission of various United Front entities. The organization appears to have cultivated broad relationships with high-ranking officials in law enforcement and the Panamanian government. See Panama country case study in: Shullman, David (ed.). "A World Safe for the Party: China's Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response."

- establishing and running Chinese-language media that maintain a strict pro-Beijing line on issues of concern to the PRC, while helping to pressure independent Chinese-language outlets.

As a result, Panama's Chinese-language news is saturated by organizations with direct or indirect United Front links, limiting Chinese-Panamanians ability to express independent views, as well as their ability to organize independently.

Through its ties with those in strategic leadership roles in the Chinese diaspora community, Beijing has managed to get individuals with direct connections to Beijing appointed to key positions advising the Panamanian government on diaspora-related issues. For example, the former Varela administration established the National Council of Ethnic Chinese in 2015 and appointed community leaders to advisory roles to improve the government's responsiveness to the diaspora community. Four of six individuals appointed had ties to the UFWD.

Additional Resources

["Made in China or Born Abroad?: Creating Identity and Belonging in the Chinese Diaspora"](#) – academic article providing a brief but very readable and thorough exploration of the complexity of "Chinese diaspora" identity.

["The Party Speaks for You: Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System"](#) – the best report explaining the purpose, activities, and structure of the CCP's United Front work.

["The Diaspora and China's Foreign Influence Activities"](#) – thorough but succinct report looking at the scope of PRC diaspora influence work, and its detrimental impacts on the diaspora.

CHANNEL #5: ELECTORAL INTERFERENCE

What is the problem?

While most of Beijing's efforts to manipulate perceptions focus on the environment *around* politics, the PRC has also tried to shape other countries' policies by directly interfering in their elections.

In this channel more than others, it can be difficult to separate information manipulation from economic or political manipulation. In most democracies, channeling donations to favored candidates can influence public discourse by shaping the things that politicians do (or do not) say, while voter mobilization campaigns are – by their nature – meant to send signals to politicians and affect what issues receive attention. There is evidence that Beijing has done both of these things, in places like Canada, Australia, and Taiwan.

Beijing appears to regard this form of manipulation as sensitive, and highly secret. For other channels of information manipulation – like business and trade, traditional media, or the diaspora – there is ample public evidence of Beijing's desire to influence other countries' discourse, including remarks by senior PRC leaders, important policy documents, and commentary by prominent PRC researchers. This is not the case for electoral interference.

What evidence we do have for this form of manipulation tends to come from journalists and governments in the targeted countries, often working in conjunction with those countries' intelligence or security agencies. Public reporting from Australia and Canada indicates that PRC electoral interference may be coordinated by its intelligence community, including military intelligence agencies.

What are the most important tactics Beijing uses in this sector?

- **Donations through proxies:** In some cases, the PRC has used proxies – typically wealthy businesspeople -- to provide funding to its preferred political parties or candidates. Using proxies allows China to circumvent other countries' campaign finance laws, which often prohibit donations by foreign political parties. These donations may not necessarily be meant to influence a particular election, but to encourage the recipient to advocate pro-PRC policies.
- **Electioneering:** Cornell University defines electioneering as “the process by which political groups convince voters to cast ballots for or against particular candidates, parties, or issues ... [which] can include the display of campaign posters or signs, distribution of campaign materials, or solicitation of votes for or against any person or political party or position.”⁵⁹ PRC diplomats have engaged in electioneering on behalf of preferred candidates in countries such as the Solomon Islands and Kiribati.⁶⁰
- **Mobilization of diaspora voters:** PRC official statements make frequent positive reference to “political participation by Chinese people” in other countries.⁶¹ There are strong indications the PRC has attempted to mobilize Chinese diaspora voters to support pro-PRC candidates

59 “Electioneering.” Legal Information Institute. October 2022. (Accessed July 10, 2023). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/electioneering>.

60 Dearing Scott, Caitlin and Matt Schrader (eds.), “Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP's Quest for Global Influence.” International Republican Institute, September 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/coercion-capture-and-censorship-case-studies-on-the-ccps-quest-for-globalinfluence/>.

61 See, for example, “国侨办副主任谭天星会见澳新参政华人访问团 Guoqiaoban Fuzhuren Tan Tianxing Huijian Aoxin Canzheng Huaren Fangwentuan”. 中国新闻网 Zhongguo Xinwenwang. November 4, 2012. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230726132453/https://www.chinanews.com.cn/zqgj/2012/11-04/4300365.shtml> (archived).

and policies, or to attack politicians seen as “anti-China”.⁶² In some cases voters are mobilized through co-opted diaspora organizations (see “Channel #4: “The Chinese Diaspora”), while in others mobilization occurs through WeChat, a social media platform popular in China, and among recent emigres in of the Chinese diaspora.

How can this hurt other countries?

Beijing’s covert manipulation of foreign electoral processes harms other countries in a number of ways. It subverts the will of voters and substitutes the will of a foreign authoritarian state for the judgement of the people’s elected representatives. Additionally, since politicians are often an important source of information for voters on foreign policy, it can distort a country’s entire conversation about China.

Beijing’s electoral interference also brings with it many of the potential harms describe in the previous section on the Chinese diaspora, since the Party has used diaspora individuals or organizations to influence elections. Members of the diaspora in countries like Canada or Australia have also pointed out that this can unfairly paint their community as a uniquely suspicious source of inappropriate foreign interference, despite the fact that the diaspora is only one of many channels Beijing uses to try to influence other countries’ public conversation on China.

What are some signs this may be happening in your country?

Rather than a list of signs, for this channel we offer a warning: It would be difficult, and perhaps even irresponsible, to list definitive signs that Beijing is interfering in your country’s electoral processes. In contrast to other forms of information manipulation covered in this guide, most evidence suggests that Beijing prefers to interfere in other countries’ elections covertly, rather than openly. By its nature, covert action is hard to identify, and designed to sow suspicion and mistrust in target societies.

To cite one illustrative example, donations from wealthy members of the diaspora, or diaspora political mobilization campaigns should not be automatically interpreted as PRC electoral interference, even if the people in question express pro-PRC positions.

Definitively identifying such behavior as emanating from the PRC requires very strong proof. Because Beijing appears to prefer covert interference in foreign elections, most cases where its interference has been exposed have relied on intelligence collection, with professional investigative journalists working to corroborate disclosures from that country’s intelligence community.

Case Study

Publicly available reporting suggests that the PRC has backed blatant attempts to interfere in Australia’s elections, going back at least to the country’s 2016 federal election. IRI covered one part of this interference in a 2019 report:

The potential for CCP interference to shape Australian politicians’ views and actions is perhaps best illustrated by the case of Sam Dastyari, a former federal senator (2013–2017) and a member of the opposition center-left Australian Labor Party (ALP). While in Parliament, Dastyari developed close ties with Chinese citizen and then-Australian permanent resident Huang Xiangmo, a billionaire property developer and chairman of an organization associated with the United Front Work Department.

⁶² Onishi, Norimitsu. The New York Times. “Canadian Politicians Who Criticize China Become Its Targets,” July 15, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/15/world/americas/canada-china-election-interference.html>.

Huang legally donated more than \$1 million Australian dollars (AU) to the ALP, much of it raised by Dastyari. Dastyari's relationship with Huang appeared to shape his approach to the China policy debate when in 2016, with Huang standing beside him, he publicly opposed both his party and the Australian government's stance on territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Although he initially downplayed his comments when they were revealed by Australian media – saying that he misspoke, mumbled and was naïve – Dastyari's behavior pointed to a likely quid pro quo with Huang. Just one day prior to Dastyari's press conference, Huang had cancelled an AU\$400,000 contribution to the Labor Party after Labor defense spokesman and Senator Stephen Conroy criticized China's behavior in the South China Sea. Dastyari's prepared remarks, which supported China's policies, therefore appeared as an attempt to restore the cancelled donation.

Huang's largesse benefited both Australian political parties, as his contributions exceeded AU\$2 million. However, Dastyari's case is unique for the closeness of his ties with Huang. After Australian media revealed that Huang had also settled Dastyari's AU\$5,000 legal bill, and that Dastyari had warned Huang that his phones were likely tapped by the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO), Dastyari resigned under pressure.⁶³

Subsequent investigations unearthed even more concerning information about Huang's activities, including evidence that he had illegally contributed AU\$100,000 in cash to one of Australia's major political parties,⁶⁴ established a pro-China think tank at one of Australia's top universities⁶⁵, attempted to run his own employees for public office, and may have helped fund his network by running AU\$1.8 billion through the Star Casino in Sydney.⁶⁶ Huang was forced to leave Australia in February 2019 after the Australian government rejected his citizenship application and canceled his permanent residency.⁶⁷

Additional Resources

["Red Zone: China's Challenge and Australia's Future"](#) – book by Australian journalist Peter Hartcher providing a play-by-play recounting of Australia's attempts to come to grips with PRC electoral interference

["Canadian Politicians Who Criticize China Become Its Targets"](#) – excellent New York Times article recounting the experience of a Canadian politician who lost office after what appeared to be a PRC state-driven campaign mobilized against him among Canadian-Chinese voters

63 Shullman, David (ed.). "Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy." International Republican Institute, 2019, <https://www.iri.org/resources/new-report-exposes-chinas-malign-influence-and-corrosion-of-democracy-worldwide/>.

64 Knaus, Christopher. "Former NSW Labor Boss Seen with \$100,000 Cash in Aldi Bag after Meeting Banned Donor, Icac Inquiry Told." The Guardian. August 26, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/aug/26/nsw-labor-got-100000-in-cash-from-chinese-billionaire-icac-inquiry-told>.

65 Leibold, James. "The Australia-China Relations Institute Doesn't Belong at UTS." The Conversation. June 4, 2017. <https://theconversation.com/the-australia-china-relations-institute-doesnt-belong-at-uts-78743>.

66 Wootton, Hannah. "Billionaire Huang Bought \$1.7b in Chips at Star, Inquiry Hears." Australian Financial Review. March 31, 2022. <https://www.afr.com/companies/games-and-wagering/billionaire-huang-bought-1-7b-in-chips-at-star-20220331-p5a9lz>.

67 Remeikis, Amy. "Political Donor Huang Xiangmo Blocked from Returning to Australia." The Guardian. February 6, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/feb/06/political-donor-huang-xiangmo-blocked-from-returning-to-australia>.

CHANNEL #6: DIGITAL DIS- AND MIS-INFORMATION

What is the problem?

Beijing has an impressive number of tools to shape online conversations about China on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter. As in other spaces, the Party's actions online dis- and misinformation is driven by the philosophy that it should control conversations about China to the greatest extent possible. Where it cannot control an online conversation, the Party also seeks to confuse or distort.⁶⁸

The CCP increased the intensity of its online disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁹ But even prior to COVID, the Party viewed cyberspace as a key battleground in the global war for China's image. A PRC military propaganda official put it succinctly in 2018 when he said the Party's goal should be "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."⁷⁰

Although the Party's goals are ambitious, there are limits to what it can accomplish in reality, especially since it does not directly control foreign social media platforms like YouTube or Facebook. While its tools appear to be fairly effective at manipulating conversations about things happening inside China, they may be less effective for things happening *outside* China, such as scandals related to Belt and Road infrastructure projects. (One exception to this rule is Taiwan, which is discussed in more detail in the case study below.)

What are the most important tactics Beijing uses in this sector?

- **Propaganda accounts:** Beijing maintains a variety of propaganda accounts across all major social media platforms. Some of these – like China Daily or Global Times – are obviously connected with the Party. However, Beijing has also begun to deploy "influencers" that repeat pro-PRC propaganda without acknowledging their connection to the Party-state.⁷¹
- **Bot networks:** Like other authoritarian states, Beijing now maintains large networks of fake accounts – or "bots" – on major social media platforms. These networks are usually comprised of many small accounts, that are used to boost the content of larger pro-PRC accounts, or attack opponents online.
- **Coordinated harassment/defamation:** Activists, journalists, and politicians who publicly oppose China often find themselves targeted by PRC propaganda accounts and bot networks. These attacks often spread false rumors about the targets, threaten them or their associates, and in some cases even spread sensitive information, such as the target's home address or real name (so-called "doxing").
- **Control of social media companies:** Most large social media companies are not based in China. One important exception is Bytedance, which owns TikTok. There is no evidence of Bytedance manipulating conversations on TikTok on behalf of Beijing. But the company's

68 King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E Roberts. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107 (2 (May)). <https://gking.harvard.edu/publications/how-Censorship-China-Allows-Government-Criticism-Silences-Collective-Expression>.

69 Kurlantzick, Joshua. "How China Ramped up Disinformation Efforts during the Pandemic." Council on Foreign Relations. September 10, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-china-ramped-disinformation-efforts-during-pandemic>.

70 Chen Guangzhao. "国际舆论斗争议题设置和融媒体矩阵发声 Guoji Yulun Douzheng Yiti Shezhi He Rongmeiti Juzhen Fasheng." 中国军网 Zhongguo Junwang. August 22, 2018. https://web.archive.org/web/20191018053159/http://www.81.cn/jsjz/2018-08/22/content_9260361.htm

71 Aufrichtig, Aliza, and Aaron Krolik, Nailah Morgan, Paul Mozur, and Raymond Zhong. "How Beijing Influences the Influencers." *The New York Times*. December 13, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/13/technology/china-propaganda-youtube-influencers.html>.

headquarters in China means that its senior leadership must obey Party demands and would not be able to refuse if they were required to manipulate online conversations in other countries.⁷²

How can this hurt other countries?

Intense online disinformation and harassment makes it harder for other countries to make good decisions about China. Beijing knows its image online can affect other countries' decisions – especially when it comes to things like cooperation on large infrastructure projects. As a result, its digital propaganda disproportionately focuses on positive stories of successful economic development, while downplaying China's challenges with entrenched poverty, wealth inequality, or government land confiscation. (Xi Jinping has called this strategy "spreading positive energy".⁷³) Countries that buy into this image of successful infrastructure-led development have often found themselves confronting many of the same problems China faces at home.

In addition to making positive information widely available, Beijing's online disinformation campaigns can hurt other countries by making it difficult to find negative information about China's actions. For example, on some occasions, especially amid rising tensions, the CCP and/or its ideological allies will seek to saturate the academic and publishing environment on sensitive topics with mock academic publications, which can make discerning between legitimate academic works and fake ones difficult. This was used to great effect, for example, during the visit to Taiwan by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022, when within a matter of days several dozen e-books about Taiwan, China, and cross-Strait relations were suddenly published on online retail platforms such as [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).⁷⁴ Besides the disinformation and pro-CCP propaganda contained in those fake publications, which came from unknown authors and often used pasted material from other publications, the flooding of the publishing environment with such material made it difficult for people seeking credible information about the crisis to tell the real from the fake.

What are some signs this may be happening in your country?

- Large numbers of pro-PRC influencers appearing online.
- Botnets repeating pro-PRC talking points in your local language.
- Coordinated harassment or defamation of journalists or activists targeted by the PRC.
- Coordinated spread of disinformation on subjects related to China.

Case Study

Since 2016, the CCP has worked with pro-China media in Taiwan to meant to discredit the administration of President Tsai Ing-wen, often working in conjunction with likeminded media outlets in Taiwan that are willing to spread obvious lies or rumors. Such activities tend to increase in the lead-up to elections, with the aim of shaping perceptions against candidates Beijing dislikes. In one example, pro-Beijing disinformation spread widely in the months prior to the 2020 elections, in which President Tsai sought re-election against Han Kuo-yu, Beijing's preferred candidate, with one campaign seeking to tarnish Tsai's reputation among exporters and agricultural producers in southern Taiwan, the base of Tsai's support.

72 Wang, Yaqiu. "The Problem with TikTok's Claim of Independence from Beijing." Human Rights Watch. March 24, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/24/problem-tiktoks-claim-independence-beijing>.

73 Bandurski, David. "The CCP's 'Positive Energy' Obsession - China Media Project." China Media Project. December 15, 2015. <https://chinamediaproject.org/2015/12/15/chinas-obsession-with-positive-energy/>.

74 Chen, Mia Ping-chieh. "Wave of Badly Written Kindle Titles on Pelosi, Taiwan Hits Amazon's Kindle Platform." Radio Free Asia. August 13, 2022. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/taiwan-kindle-08122022142057.html>.

In 2018, prior to another election, fabricated online “news” stories, accompanied by photographic evidence, alleged that tens of thousands of pineapples had been dumped in a dam, with a photo caption stating that *“After the DPP came to power, there is no quality governance. China refused southern Taiwan’s ‘independent fruit and vegetables.’ Poor farmers worked hard for nothing! Very sad!”* The implication of the story was that Beijing often uses agricultural quality standards as pretexts to punish countries it does not like, and that the Tsai administration’s adversarial attitude towards the PRC was giving Beijing an excuse to punish Taiwan’s pineapple producers by refusing to accept their products.⁷⁵

Although rotting pineapples might seem trivial or even comical, they are actually an example of Beijing targeting a small but politically important group with online disinformation, spread on social media platforms such as Facebook. The campaign also had important electoral implications, since it was meant to imply that in a Taiwan run by the pro-China candidate Han Kuo-yu Taiwanese farmers would not experience this kind of retaliation from Beijing.

Taiwan’s government clarified almost immediately that the photo in question was taken in China – not in Taiwan – and that the alleged dumping of wasted pineapples by Taiwanese farmers had not occurred. Despite the clarification, the disinformation caused a drop in pineapple prices and -- in many farmers’ minds – successfully linked their financial losses with President Tsai’s refusal to give in to Beijing’s demands.

75 Corcoran, Casey, Bo Crowley, and Raina Davis. “Disinformation Threat Watch: The Disinformation Landscape in East Asia and Implications for US Policy.” Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center. May 2019. <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/PAE/DisinfoWatch%20-%20202.pdf>.

The previous sections were meant to outline the problem: how Beijing shapes perceptions in other countries, and how this can be harmful. But just as important as the problem are the solutions. This section is meant to help with that, in two ways.

First, we have collected what we think are the most useful tools for understanding PRC influence, as well as how to best use them. The PRC often struggles to respond when forced to publicly defend its most harmful tactics, so having (and using) the right investigative tools is crucial for democratically-minded stakeholders who want to bring more transparency and accountability to their country's relationship with China.

But even the best tools and investigations mean little if they do not bring about a change in policy. To advance collective efforts toward that end, the second part of this section catalogues proven and tested policy and advocacy pathways for building resilience to PRC information manipulation.

We compiled both sections – tools and policy recommendations – by drawing from our work with civil society, researchers, and officials around the world, extensive research, and expert consultation. By themselves, none of them is a magic bullet, and almost any tool or recommendation will require adaptation to your local context. But they are the results of years of learning and knowledge sharing on the elements of an effective democratic response and hopefully a good starting point for moving from understanding to action.

RESEARCH TOOLS

Uncovering PRC influence in the information space is an intimidating task. A project focusing on information manipulation can easily spill over into economic, military, or technological subjects. Even for professional researchers, it can be hard to know where to start.

The first step is knowing what research tools are available, and how to use them. To that end, we have put together a list of what we think are the most useful resources for investigating various aspects of PRC influence.

Before you start, there are three general suggestions to keep in mind:

1. Archive electronic sources

Archiving is important for any serious researcher, but it is especially important for any research on China. Under Xi Jinping, it has become much harder for people outside China to access information inside the Great Firewall.⁷⁶ Simply citing a webpage hosted inside the PRC can cause it to be deleted. There have also been instances where researchers outside China have been hacked and found their email and data storage corrupted or inaccessible.

Anyone working on China should always make sure they archive their electronic sources. Proper archiving ensures that others can verify your conclusions, even if the sources are deleted or your accounts are compromised.

⁷⁶ The Great Firewall, according to [one definition](#), is "the combination of tools, services and rules that the government of the People's Republic of China uses to block certain internet content from those within China's borders ...The goal of the Great Firewall is to shield Chinese residents from certain information that the People's Republic of China considers to be counter to the best interests of the government and people of China. The firewall blocks entire websites and filters content on sites that are not completely blocked." In addition to preventing users inside China from access banned content outside China, the Great Firewall is also increasingly used to prevent users outside China from accessing content inside the country.

We recommend two simple tools to archive webpages or other electronic sources:

- **Wayback Machine – Archive.org** – The most commonly used archiving tool by the community of investigators researching China, the Wayback Machine, is very useful for archiving individual webpages. Because it is so widely used, it has archived versions of many PRC webpages.

For a user guide, please see: [How to Archive Open Source Materials – Bellingcat](#)

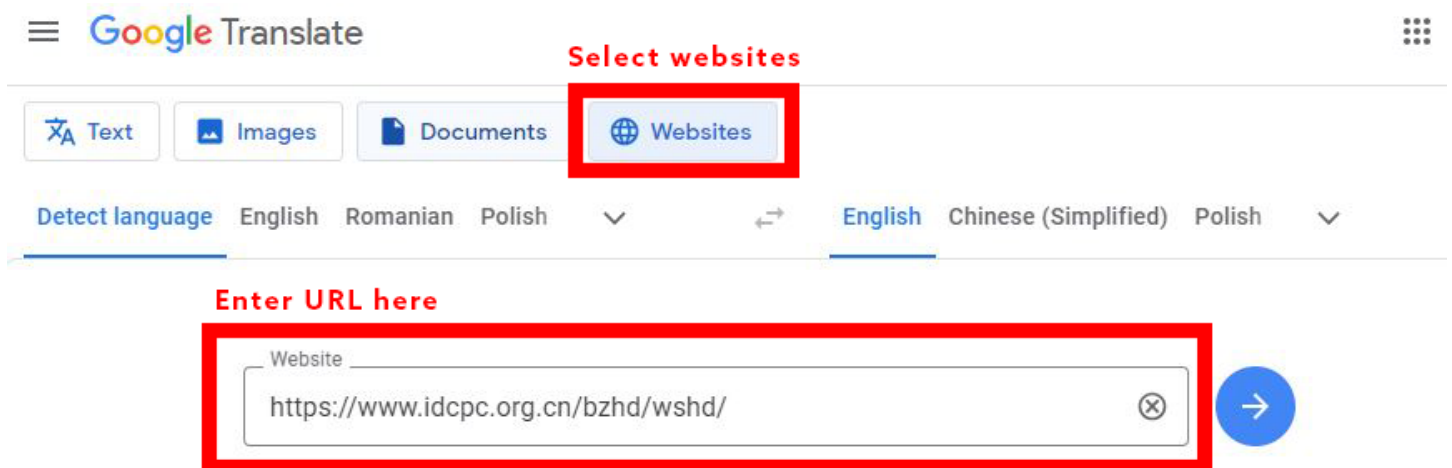
- **WebScrapier.io** – A free and intuitive web scraping tool. Web scraping is useful to generate data sets for further analysis by automatically navigating web sites and copying target data into a spreadsheet. A tutorial on how to use this tool can be found [here](#).

2. The best information is almost always in Chinese

The most useful information on PRC companies, organizations, and individuals is almost always in Chinese. Many important public and private PRC databases are also accessible only to people who can read Chinese, including some of the resources we suggest below.

Ten years ago, this was a serious barrier to researching China. Now, though, high quality machine translation has made it possible for non-Chinese speakers to access this information. Below are our suggestions for the best tools to translate Chinese sources, and some brief tips on how to best use them:

- **DeepL** – DeepL is one of the most accurate machine translation tools, and can translate text and PDF documents. The free version is limited in the number of characters and size of documents that can be translated.
- **Google Translate Extension** – Installing the Google Translate Extension on your preferred browser will allow you to automatically translate websites into your preferred language, making it much easier to browse Chinese-language websites. Alternatively, you can copy and paste the website URL directly into the Google Translate webpage, and Google will provide a portal to navigate that website in your preferred language.



- **Google Sheets** – Google Sheets has an integrated Google Translate function, so that you can automatically translate files in .xlsx or .csv format using the *GoogleTranslate()* function.

Directions:

1. Place source text in Column A, source language in Column B (using two-digit abbreviation. See list of abbreviations or ISO 639-1 codes used by Google [here](#)), target language in Column C. Then enter your function in Column D: “=GoogleTranslate(A1,B1,C1)”
2. When you apply the GoogleTranslate() function to large data sets, it is important to double check the translation for accuracy. For example, GoogleTranslate() can confuse Argentina with Afghanistan. These mistakes are likely to be consistent across the document and can be adjusted with the Replace All function in Excel once the error has been identified.

One note on searching for individuals in Chinese: In a country with 1.4 billion people, many individuals share names. It is not unusual for two or even three prominent individuals to have the same name. Always make sure that the person you are searching is, in fact, the person you are interested in.

3. Consider investing in a VPN

As the PRC under Xi Jinping has tightened access to information, some websites in China have begun to block access by users with foreign IP addresses. In some cases, these restrictions can be bypassed by using Virtual Private Networks (VPN), a piece of software that disguises your internet traffic and geographic location.

Since they disguise your traffic, VPNs can also increase your security and privacy online when conducting sensitive research. And by making it look as if your internet connection is coming from Hong Kong or China, VPNs can sometimes (but not always) bypass restrictions on foreign IP addresses. There are many commercially available VPNs. [ExpressVPN](#) is a popular choice, with the option to choose servers in Hong Kong.

With those suggestions in mind, here are twelve of the most useful resources for researching PRC influence.

General OSINT Toolkits

General OSINT tools are the most broadly usable tools, and can be used by any investigative journalist, policy researcher, or academic, regardless of the project or field of specialty.

[Bellingcat OSINT Toolkit](#)

This is Bellingcat’s online open-source investigation toolkit. Bellingcat is an independent investigative collection of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists. They have used open-source tools to investigate a range of topics from the shooting down of MH17 over eastern Ukraine to illegal wildlife trade in UAE. Bellingcat notes significant challenges to conducting OSINT research on China, however, this toolkit should still be applicable to researching PRC influence in a local context.⁷⁷

[World Map of OSINT Tools](#)

This map of OSINT tools primarily contains links to business records and court filings in countries around the world. Business records and court filings can be useful to investigate the activities of a PRC-based company operating in your country.

⁷⁷ Killing, Alison. “The Challenges of Conducting Open Source Research on China.” Bellingcat, April 18, 2023, <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/2023/04/18/china-challenges-open-source-osint-social-media/>.

[OSINT Chine](#)

This OSINT toolkit provides a number of resources for gathering information on PRC-based companies, government agencies, organizations, and individuals.

Specific Areas of PRC Influence

Economic

[Embassy Trade Guides](#) (In Chinese)

These PRC government-compiled guides are meant to help PRC-based companies do business in every country where China has a diplomatic presence. Although they are meant for PRC companies, they can also be useful resources for researchers, since they compile information that may not be available through other sources, including information on PRC investment, projects under contract, number of PRC national workers, and PRC bank loans.

To make it easier to find the guide for your country, IRI has collected all of the trade guides and made them available in one location [here](#). This database is current as of May 2023.

[Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset - AidData](#)

This uniquely granular dataset captures 13,427 development projects worth \$843 billion financed by more than 300 Chinese government institutions and state-owned entities across 165 countries in every major region of the world from 2000–2017.

PRC Company Stock Filings

Publicly listed companies based in the PRC must file annual and quarterly reports with regulators, and make them publicly available. These reports often contain useful information on company ownership, management, finances, and business activities in other countries.

China has several major stock exchanges, all of which allow for searches of company filings using a company name or stock code.

- [Shanghai Stock Exchange](#) (In Chinese)
- [Shenzhen Stock Exchange](#) (In Chinese)
- [Shanghai STAR Market](#) (In Chinese)
- [Hong Kong Stock Exchange](#)

With the exception of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, searches must be done using a company's Chinese name. The best way to find the Chinese name of large PRC companies is usually through their website or Wikipedia.

Stock filings can also be useful for clarifying corporate structures. On that subject, one complication to be aware of is that large PRC companies often have more than one listed subsidiary; make sure you are searching for the right one.

Social Media

[Hamilton 2.0 – German Marshall Fund](#)

This dashboard provides a convenient, easy-to-use place to track the narratives and topics promoted by Russian, Chinese, and Iranian government state-funded media on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and via official press releases and transcripts. It can be used to track which narratives China is pushing across different social media platforms, as well as identify official PRC social media and state media sources in your country or region.

[IRI Beacon Project's Media Monitoring Handbook](#)

This is a beginners' guide to mapping the narratives circulating on social media or other online discussion platforms, a practice known as media monitoring. Media monitoring harnesses big data tools to let researchers track the spread of narratives online discourse, including how many total times a piece of content is viewed, how often it is shared, and by whom. This IRI-produced guide teaches users how to use publicly available tools to collect and analyze social media data, as well as how to design and implement a rigorous media monitoring project.

Political

[International Liaison Department](#)

The CCP's International Liaison Department's manages the PRC's engagement with ruling and opposition political parties around the world. These meetings are often announced on its Chinese-language website. While individual announcements usually contain relatively little information, when analyzed in bulk they can be used to determine the frequency and topics of engagement between the CCP and political parties in your country.

The two most important areas of the Chinese-language website are:

- [部长活动/外事会见](#) ("Ministerial activities"/"foreign meetings") – This section contains records and readouts of meetings between the head of the International Liaison Department and his foreign counterparts or delegations.
- [联络动态](#) ("Contacts") – This section contains records and readouts of meetings between junior members of the International Liaison Department and their foreign counterparts or delegations.

中共中央对外联络部
International Department, Central Committee of CPC

首页 中联部简介 部长活动 联络动态 发言人表态 机关党建 理论动态 中共之窗

外事会见

部内活动
媒体专访
署名文章

第三届文明交流互鉴对话会暨首届世界汉学家大会
The Third Dialogue on Exchange and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations and The First World Sinologists Conference
北京 2023年7月3日至4日 3-4 July 2023 Beijing

习近平向第三届文明交流互鉴对话会暨首届世界汉学家大会致贺信。
7月3日，中共中央总书记、国家主席习近平向第三届文明交流互鉴对话会暨首届世界汉学家大会致贺信。

习近平出席上海合作组织成员国元首理事会第二十三次会议并发表重要讲话。
新华社北京7月4日电（记者郑明达）国家主席习近平7月4日出席上海合作组织成员国元首理事会第二十三次会议并发表重要讲话。

You can find county-specific information by entering the country's name in Chinese into the search bar halfway down the ILD home page. (See [here](#) for a list of countries with their Chinese names.)

IRI has scraped the *Contacts* section of this website and compiled it into a [dataset](#) which can be accessed and downloaded. The dataset covers all ILD engagements from 2018 to April 2023.

[China Vitae](#)

Tracking the public remarks and careers of senior PRC officials can be a useful guide to PRC policy. China Vitae has biographical information on more than 5,000 senior PRC leaders, and tracks announcements of major personnel appointments. It also tracks the appearances and travel of the 500 most senior officials, which can be searched according to a variety of criteria.

- [Local Leaders Database](#) - Additional Chinese-language resources include the *China Economic Network* database of local leaders which contains biographical data on a wide range of CCP cadres. If the Chinese name of the person in question is known, you can search for them in the website's search function.

Diaspora Outreach

The resources below aggregate news on the PRC state's outreach to Chinese diaspora organizations. Under some circumstances, they can be used to map PRC efforts to influence other countries information spaces by co-opting important diaspora leaders or organizations.

These sources should be used very carefully. The appearance of an individual diaspora member or organization in these sources may be a starting point for research, but it does not, by itself, indicate co-option. Any evidence drawn from these resources must be cross-referenced with other evidence to reliably establish patterns of behavior.

Researchers should also take extra care to archive any pages they cite from these websites, since their content changes often, and stories are frequently altered or deleted.

[China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification](#) (In Chinese)

The Council is one of the most important of the many diaspora front organizations managed by the CCP's United Front Work Department. Although in public statements its members often describe it as an independent, non-governmental organization, it is run by one of the CCP's most senior officials, who oversees a network of local chapters in countries around the world. In many countries, council members frequently meet with PRC embassy officials, and often undertake political activities that appear to coincide with PRC interests.

The most useful part of the Council's website for research purposes is its "[News and Updates](#)" section, which contains information on the activities of local chapters around the world.

To search for your country in the News and Updates section, you can use Google's site search function. The example below is of a search for news on Thailand ("泰国" in Chinese).



country's name
in Chinese

Google search string limiting results
to Council's news and updates page

To search for your country, simply put its name in Chinese into the search string below:

"[Country name in Chinese] site:<http://www.zhongguotongcuhui.org.cn/hnwtchdt/>."

[China Qiaowang](#) (In Chinese)

China Qiaowang is a news aggregation website run by the United Front Work Department, reprinting stories from Beijing-aligned Chinese-language media outlets around the world. It is meant to collect the diaspora-related news Beijing considers important and can be used to map interactions between PRC embassies and the diaspora, as well as meetings by diaspora representatives with officials in China.

Two sections of the site are particularly useful for journalists and researchers:

- [华社动态](#) ("What's New in the Diaspora") – This section aggregates diaspora related news stories from around the world. As with the previous resource, you can use Google to search this part of the site using your country's name in Chinese. The search string to use is "[Country name in Chinese] site: <https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/>".

To further limit the searches to diaspora news involving PRC embassies or consulates, use the following two search strings:

- Embassies
 - "[Country name in Chinese] 大使馆site:<https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/>"
- Consulates
 - "[Country name in Chinese] 领事馆site:<https://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/>"

- [各地侨讯](#) (“The Diaspora Comes Home”) – This section aggregates news about activities held for the diaspora inside China and can be used to track interactions between PRC state officials and diaspora individuals and organizations.

To search this part of the site using your country’s name in Chinese, use the search string “[Country name in Chinese] site:https:// <http://www.chinaqw.com/qwxs/>”

Additional Maps and Trackers

- [Belt and Road Tracker – Council on Foreign Relations](#)
- [China Global Investment Tracker – American Enterprise Institute](#)
- [China Pacific Aid Map – Lowy Institute](#)
- [China-Latin American Finance Database – The Dialogue](#)
- [BRI Monitor – Center for International Private Enterprise](#)
- [Mapping China’s Tech Giants – Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#)
- [China’s Global Energy Finance – Global Development Policy Center](#)
- [The People’s Map of Global China – Made in China Journal](#)

POLICY RESPONSES

Having the right tools to understand the nature of a problem is important. But understanding a problem is not the same thing as solving it. To help take practical action to address the problem of PRC information manipulation, in this section we have pooled the fruits of our research, field experience, and convening – as well as that of our partners – to identify the best ways to push back.⁷⁸

We have grouped the solutions into five different categories:

1. Domestic policy
2. Legal/regulatory
3. Advocacy
4. Research/journalism
5. Coordinated international action

While most of the ideas can be used in any country, they may require changes to fit your local context. Some of them directly address the PRC's influence in the information space, but others do so indirectly by increasing your country's overall resilience. Finally, we have tried to choose solutions that *advance* democratic values, rather than undermining the very institutions, values, and practices that protect against authoritarian influence.

1. Domestic Policy

An actor-agnostic approach: The best prophylactic against external authoritarian influence comes from the continuous strengthening of the political and social ecosystem. In other words, rather than be aimed at a specific exogenous agency, the best response is an actor-agnostic set of measures that harden all areas of society and create the firewalls that insulate institutions against external attempts to undermine the democratic principles of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. Such an approach has the added advantage of deflecting accusations that measures undertaken to protect against malignant authoritarian influence are in fact based on racism aimed at a specific group of people.⁷⁹

Develop human capital: Alongside efforts to deflect accusations of discrimination, state institutions should also deepen their investment in human capital and linguistically appropriate programming⁸⁰ Such communities must be treated as part of the solution and regarded as indispensable resources given their linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, and community networks. Government agencies should also invest in language training (and create the incentives) to expand the number of

78 Over the last five years, IRI has conducted a series of workshops and simulations around the world aimed at building democratic resilience to PRC influence. With partners in media, civil society, research/academia, political parties and government, these workshops and simulations sought to identify and catalogue existing and potential policy and advocacy solutions to addressing PRC influence in a given country context and globally. The responses outlined in this section are the result of those sessions, IRI research, and a literature review of work by leading activists, scholars, and practitioners. Policy responses that don't include specific citations are the result of IRI and partner work throughout the world.

79 "Murky Waters: Beijing's Influence in Canadian Democratic and Electoral Processes." Alliance Canada Hong Kong, May 2023, https://alliancecanadahk.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ACHK_Murky_Waters_Bejings_Influence_in_Canadian_Democratic_and.pdf; Shullman, David (ed.). "A World Safe for the Party: China's Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response." International Republican Institute, February 2021, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/bridge-ii_fullreport-r7-021221.pdf; Dearing Scott, Caitlin and Matt Schrader (eds.), "Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP's Quest for Global Influence."

80 "Murky Waters: Beijing's Influence in Canadian Democratic and Electoral Processes." Alliance Canada Hong Kong, May 2023, https://alliancecanadahk.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ACHK_Murky_Waters_Bejings_Influence_in_Canadian_Democratic_and.pdf

employees who understand the languages used by the principal foreign authoritarian actors (i.e., Chinese, Russian, Farsi)⁸¹

Address conflicts of interest, official co-optation: Senior government officials who are currently in a sensitive position should be banned from being employed by a foreign entity linked to an authoritarian government for a reasonable number of years following retirement. Such measures must be adopted to ensure that officials are not lured by the prospects of lucrative contracts as consultants or agents post-retirement and thereby incentivized to adopt policies, while still in office, that serve the interests of a foreign entity and against those of the country they serve. This clause will also help reduce the prospects that a former government employee will use his or her network of contacts in government to perpetuate undue influence – including on a country’s narrative and outspokenness on authoritarian malfeasance – on behalf of a hostile foreign entity.

Expose and counter state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation: Governments should enact laws and create the appropriate independent bodies to monitor, and where necessary take action against, entities that act as purveyors of or propagators of mis- disinformation which can harm society or the national interest. In doing so, every effort must be taken to distinguish between opinion and freedom of expression on the one hand, and information which clearly is aimed at (1) harming the public interest or (2) serving the interests of a foreign hostile power. Such laws must apply to traditional and non-traditional (“new”) media, including sites that are suspected of serving as “content farms” (also known as “content mills”), which often provide content that is written by local individuals who are paid by a hostile foreign entity to ensure linguistic suitability to the targeted audience.

Where and when appropriate, regulatory bodies – using carefully worded regulations created following consultations with media professionals, legal experts, and other necessary input – should be empowered to take punitive action against entities which have been identified as acting on behalf of a foreign authoritarian power (e.g., “content farms”) or have committed repeat offenses against established laws on mis- disinformation. Punitive measures can range from warnings, fines, and, in extreme cases, the suspension of broadcast licenses or the closure of an outlet. Bans can also apply to foreign social media known to operate as agents of authoritarian governments (e.g, Baidu’s video platform iQIYI and Tencent video).⁸²

Governments must also consult and work in collaboration with the owners of major social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Line, Youtube and others, to establish best practices on how to reduce the uses of such platforms for the spread of harmful content, including mis- disinformation, authoritarian propaganda, as well as activity by “internet armies” including bots, sock puppets, automated accounts and activities which interfere with algorithms. Fan pages which have been identified as platforms for the dissemination of harmful authoritarian content can be shut down, while preventive action can also be taken to ensure that URLs associated with media that have been identified as agents of a hostile foreign authoritarian entity cannot be shared on social media platforms.

81 Joske, Alex. “The party speaks for you.” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 9, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you>; Zhang, Linda. “How to Counter China’s Disinformation Campaigns in Taiwan.” Military Review/Army University Press, September–October 2020, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/September-October-2020/Zhang-Disinformation-Campaign/>.

82 Zhang, Linda. “How to Counter China’s Disinformation Campaigns in Taiwan.” Military Review/Army University Press, September–October 2020, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/September-October-2020/Zhang-Disinformation-Campaign/>.

Such measures can be adopted either on a permanent basis or for specific and particularly sensitive periods, such as the lead-up to elections, referenda, and so on. Rules must also be implemented to regulate the uses of advertorials and other forms of “placement” by authoritarian-owned media entities (e.g., content sharing), and mechanisms must also be in place to counter efforts by authoritarian regimes and linked entities to use advertisement as a means by which to reward complicit media while punishing critics.⁸³

Empower legislatures, national assemblies, and local governments: Government entities and legislatures at the local level must have the power to act as checks on the executive powers of the central government.⁸⁴ Notwithstanding the inherently “messy” nature of democracies and differences of opinion on various issues, political parties should set aside their partisanship when the actions of an external authoritarian power and its local proxies threaten to harm the national interest. Finding common cause in protecting shared values and the good functioning of institutions is an essential component for a country’s ability to mitigate and counter efforts by an external power to undermine institutions and good governance. Such efforts must be aligned with the aforementioned transparency requirements and will only be successful if rigorous laws are implemented which protect against co-optation of officials by foreign authoritarian entities and/or their local proxies. While democracies must ensure that political parties have the freedom to advocate for as wide an array of policies as possible, such freedoms should not be extended to political parties or politicians that are clearly identified as acting on behalf a hostile foreign power or who are receiving funding, direct or indirect, from such a source.

Provide national security training for all levels of government: Government employees at the national and local level should receive appropriate awareness training on the tactics – from the purely illegal to merely unethical, or “grey zone” – and conduits used by foreign authoritarian actors to infiltrate our societies and undermine our institutions. Such programs should aim to demystify the constellation of agencies and actors that are involved in “sharp power” on behalf of foreign authoritarian regimes as well as provide greater awareness of the ideological systems that form the basis of those regimes (e.g., the Chinese Communist Party). This training can be provided either by governments (top down) or trusted academic institutions, think tanks, et cetera. Refresher awareness courses should also be given on a regular basis. Whistleblower mechanisms should also be put in place so that government officials can safely relay information about potential complicity in foreign authoritarian influence to the appropriate authorities.

Suspend subnational diplomacy agreements with authoritarian regimes: Suspending subnational diplomacy initiatives with authoritarian regimes means taking a principled stance on issues like human rights and democracy. It signals dissatisfaction with the policies and actions of authoritarian regimes and conveys disapproval and concern in ways that can serve to publicize the excesses committed by the authoritarian governments. Suspending subnational diplomacy helps protect national interests, while guarding against potential exploitation or interference through such subnational channels by authoritarian entities. When taken in conjunction with deepened subnational-level ties with democracies, the suspension of such relationships with authoritarian states supports allies and partners, and fosters solidarity among nations that share concerns about the corrosive effects of authoritarianism. Additionally, the suspension of subnational partnerships – or the threat thereof

83 Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.” Freedom House, September 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/BGMI_final_digital_090722.pdf

84 Shullman, David (ed.). “A World Safe for the Party: China’s Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response.”; Dearing Scott, Caitlin and Matt Schrader (eds.), “Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP’s Quest for Global Influence.”

– can encourage dialogue and create incentives for change, pushing authoritarian regimes to address raised concerns. It sends a message of consequence, emphasizing that actions have repercussions, and that values and interests are prioritized.

Enact counter-coercion/anti-boycott mechanisms: Mechanisms should be in place to provide financial assistance to businesses or municipalities that are victims of punitive/retaliatory economic action by authoritarian countries (“weaponization of trade”) seeking to use the economy as leverage against a recalcitrant government. This includes boycotts of agricultural products, tourism denial as well as sectorial sanctions. Governments should also seek to reduce economic dependence on authoritarian countries through diversification, supply-chain restructuring, and incentives for closer economic ties with likeminded countries. Governments that stand to face retaliatory trade action by a foreign authoritarian regime must also have contingency plans in place so that they are ready to take quick action and thereby minimize the damage to targeted sectors and entities. When necessary, a government should also be ready to file a complaint with the World Trade Organization in cases where an authoritarian regime’s actions constitute violations of international trade (although while such measures can help draw attention to a case, the drawn-out legal processes involved are such that reparations may only materialize years later, if at all).

2. Legal/Regulatory

Increase transparency around foreign investment, donations, and interference: Governments, in conjunction with media and civil society, must implement rigorous foreign influence transparency schemes that protect institutions at all levels against undue external influence that can lead individuals in positions of power to consciously or otherwise act in ways that are detrimental to the interests of the state and targeted society.⁸⁵ Policies on foreign agents (e.g., FARA-style regulations – see next bullet) and foreign interference must be clearly stated, ensconced in law, evenly applied, and duly enforced, with consequences for wrongdoers commensurate with the nature of the threat to democratic institutions.⁸⁶ Governments and political parties must also implement laws that systematically ban foreign political donations.⁸⁷ Such transparency requirements should also be needed for local businesses that make political donations on behalf of foreign principals. This applies not only to political parties but also foundations and other entities, for- or non-profit, associated with politicians, political parties, and government employees.⁸⁸

Investment commissions must also have the power to investigate investment in sensitive segments of the private sector – high tech, infrastructure, defense, media – by entities with known links to foreign authoritarian governments and/or political parties and have sufficient investigative powers and capabilities to identify cut-outs and front entities that may be used by authoritarian entities to blur the origins of funding.⁸⁹ Some countries may decide to ban foreign investment in media organizations, while others may opt for a more flexible approach by putting a cap on the share which a foreign entity can own in a media outlet.⁹⁰ Disclosure and transparency requirements (including business operations in a hostile authoritarian country) must also apply to all academic institutions and media – traditional, “new,” electronic, as well as PR firms, film studios, et cetera –

85 Joske, Alex. “The Party Speaks for You.”

86 Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han. 2022. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.”

87 Zhang, Linda. “How to Counter China’s Disinformation Campaign in Taiwan.”

88 Joske, Alex.. “The Party Speaks for You.”

89 Shullman, David (ed.). “Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy.”

90 Shullman, David (ed.). “Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy.”

to protect them against undue influence on content, curricula, censorship, and so on.⁹¹ Lastly, law enforcement, intelligence agencies and financial institutions should also be empowered to track and ban illicit funding, via channels such as underground banks or proceeds from co-opted crime syndicates, used by foreign authoritarian actors to further their political interests (e.g., influence elections, fund proxies, et cetera) in a targeted country.

Adopt foreign agent registration laws: Enact legislation that clearly differentiates between foreign-based and foreign-funded organizations and distinguishes between “adversarial states” or “allies/partners” to prevent overly broad application of this law in a way that compromises civil society’s ability to cooperate with democratically-minded organizations abroad.⁹² Under this mechanism, an organization that fails to register and which is determined to be a foreign agent will result in indictment or investigation. Such a scheme aims to promote transparency and accountability in activities carried out by individuals or organizations acting as agents of foreign principals. It requires those acting as agents of foreign governments, political parties, or other entities to register with a country’s justice department or other relevant agency. Registrants must disclose detailed information about their activities, finances, and relationships with foreign principals, and all such data are made available to the public. It also imposes record-keeping and reporting obligations on registered agents, ensuring accurate and up-to-date information is maintained and submitted to the relevant authorities.⁹³ Such a law would provide the relevant authorities with enforcement powers to investigate potential violations, initiate civil and criminal proceedings, and impose penalties for non-compliance. The criteria must be clear and applied evenly to prevent abuse, particularly in countries with weaker democratic institutions.

Create review committee for international financial agreements (inbound and outbound): Create a legal framework to ensure that a proper screening mechanism is established to oversee any external investment or debt. Every effort must be made to ensure that all stakeholders within society – media, civil society (regional hearings, impact assessments by experts), comptroller – are involved in various phases of the review, with an Internal Commission, comprising all political parties within Congress, set up to evaluate, and ultimately vote upon, foreign investment or debt. The entire legislative review must be open to citizens.

Impose travel disclosure requirements: Government and elected officials should be required to disclose their travel overseas, as well as the source of financing for the said travel. Where possible, such information should be made available to the public to ensure transparency and accountability. Where such information cannot be rendered public (e.g., contact between senior intelligence officers), such details should nevertheless be included in a repository that can be accessed by the media or oversight bodies. There is also a requirement for the media to monitor such travel and sources of financing.

Enforce disclosure of income for religious organizations: Measures must be taken to address the legal and financial “blind spots” on matters pertaining to religious organizations (e.g., non-disclosure of assets, tax-exempt status, et cetera). The special nature of religious organizations often encourages exploitation by foreign authoritarian actors, who use such conduits to influence a targeted society. Scrutiny by relevant agencies, as well as civil society and the media, of money flows, religious exchanges and potential co-optation by religious entities linked to an authoritarian actor or government, is necessary. There should also be requirements for income and asset disclosures for such tax-exempt institutions.

91 Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.”

92 Joske, Alex. “The Party Speaks for You.”

93 Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han.. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.”

Restrict market access for authoritarian state media: State-sponsored media in authoritarian countries often serve as tools for disseminating propaganda, as well as mis- and disinformation and advancing the political agendas of those regimes. Restricting broadcasting rights, or at a minimum limiting or outright banning product placement, advertorials, or content sharing from such outlets, helps prevent the spread of misleading information and guards against undue influence on public opinion. Restricting broadcasting rights to state-sponsored media can protect the interests of independent journalists and media organizations that adhere to journalistic ethics and professional standards. Governments can establish licensing requirements and regulatory frameworks that impose certain conditions (e.g., clear labeling) and restrictions on state broadcasters, and should also insist on reciprocity. This can include criteria related to editorial independence, impartiality, accuracy, and adherence to journalistic ethics.

Update freedom of information laws: Laws and regulations with transparency provisions must be implemented so that journalists can gain access to important details about loans and investments by foreign authoritarian governments or firms linked thereto. Access to information mechanisms should also be in place to handle requests for information by journalists seeking access to classified government information when such access is demonstrably in the public interest, with appropriate supervision for declassification or “sanitization” of sensitive material.⁹⁴

Intelligence and law enforcement agencies that are involved in monitoring activities by authoritarian actors should also more proactively engage in public outreach and, where deemed appropriate, have appropriate guidance on and mechanisms to declassify material in support of public investigations.⁹⁵ Such measures can help address the “trust us” credibility gap that some democratic governments have faced when telling the public that the country faces a threat from a foreign authoritarian regime.

Protect journalists to protect reporting: Countries should adopt anti-SLAPP laws to protect investigative journalists and the outlets which employ them from threatened legal action by a foreign authoritarian entity or a local proxy.⁹⁶ Thresholds for civilian and criminal cases involving torts and slander should be increased to avoid the recourse to frivolous lawsuits that are meant to intimidate or punish investigative journalists as well as to deny authoritarian actors the ability to shop around for jurisdictions in which they can sue (or threaten to sue) journalists who are investigating authoritarian influence.

Entities should be created to provide legal, moral, and financial assistance to journalists who are thus threatened, and authoritarian actors or their proxies who engage in a frivolous lawsuit to coerce, punish, or silence investigative journalists should be compelled to cover the entirety of the defendant’s legal fees.⁹⁷ Governments and civil society should also help raise awareness among help media owners, so they can better understand the challenges posed by authoritarian efforts to compel censorship to ensure that they stand by their reporters rather than engage in risk-avoidance. Similar measures and awareness action should be taken to protect think tanks and other CSOs involved in unearthing and publicizing authoritarian interference.

94 Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.”

95 Dearing Scott, Caitlin and Matt Schrader (eds.), “Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP’s Quest for Global Influence.”

96 “Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.”

97 Joske, Alex. “The Party Speaks for You.”

3. Advocacy

Empower the civil ecosystem, diaspora communities: An independent media, robust civil society and government responsiveness are key ingredients for a society's ability to detect and counter foreign authoritarian influence. Every effort must be made to include diaspora communities in this process, as often those are the individuals with the language skills, cultural affinity, and networks to best understand how a foreign power is seeking to exert influence in a targeted country.⁹⁸ Consequently, governments should strive to counter any form of activity by a foreign authoritarian actor that seeks to exacerbate divisions within diaspora communities or to isolate them from the rest of the country. This includes outreach, protection against interference and transnational repression, the provision of independent media in their language, and the hiring of individuals from those communities to positions within government – including law enforcement and intelligence services.⁹⁹

Increase media literacy: CSOs, along with education ministries and other bodies, must incorporate media literacy in their curricula to encourage young people to think more critically about the information they consume and to cultivate greater awareness about the various platforms and strategies used by authoritarian powers to wage cognitive warfare.¹⁰⁰ Similar outreach must also be made with other segments of the population that are vulnerable to mis- disinformation, such as the elderly. Training by qualified CSOs at community centers has proven effective in this regard.¹⁰¹ Such efforts must also raise awareness about media ownership and how the editorial line of media organizations may be influenced by their relationships with businesses, advertisement revenue, or their owner(s)' interests (e.g., investments, profit-making, preferential access) in a foreign authoritarian country.¹⁰²

Intensify awareness campaigns: Investigative journalists, think tanks, academics and civil society must raise awareness about – and if needed, organize protests against – the detrimental impacts of foreign authoritarian influence in various areas.¹⁰³ This includes: the impact of foreign investments by authoritarian-linked entities on local corruption,¹⁰⁴ the environment, censorship,¹⁰⁵ government transparency and accountability,¹⁰⁶ and electoral integrity. A healthy informational ecosystem, whereby research on such topics can be communicated to large audiences via influential independent media platforms and thereby make them understand why authoritarian influence affects *them*, can have a significant “bottom-up” impact on the willingness of government to respond accordingly to the challenge of foreign authoritarian influence, as well as expose officials who, due to vested interests, stand in the way of such policies. This segment of society must also

98 Shullman, David (ed.). “Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy.”

99 Joske, Alex. “The Party Speaks for You.”

100 Quinn, Joseph. “Turning Defense into Offense.” Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), March 31, 2021. <https://cepa.org/article/turning-defense-into-offense/>.

101 Zhang, Linda. “How to Counter China’s Disinformation Campaign in Taiwan.”

102 Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han. 2022. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.”

103 Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han. 2022. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.”

104 Scott, Caitlin Dearing. “Case Studies on PRC Influence in Africa’s Information Space.” International Republican Institute, April 6, 2022. <https://www.iri.org/resources/global-thought-work-case-studies-on-prc-influence-in-africas-information-space/>.

105 Loubere, Nicholas. “The New Censorship, the New Academic Freedom: Commercial Publishers and the Chinese Market.” *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, vol 1 (2020): 239–252. <https://journals.univie.ac.at/index.php/jeacs/article/view/5955/7836>.

106 Walker, Christopher and Jessica Ludwig. “A Full-Spectrum Response to Sharp Power.” National Endowment for Democracy Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience Series, June 2021. <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/A-Full-Spectrum-Response-to-Sharp-Power-The-Vulnerabilities-and-Strengths-of-Open-Societies-Walker-Ludwig-June-2021.pdf>.

collaborate with legislators who are willing to help raise awareness and pressure the executive branch.¹⁰⁷

4. Research/Journalism

Empower and protect media and academic institutions as watchdogs: Media as well as academic institutions and think tanks must have the wherewithal and independence to scrutinize the activities of foreign authoritarian regimes in their country, as well as those of local business, organizations, or officials that may serve as proxies – consciously or otherwise – for such a regime. Investigations must, in rigorous fashion, demonstrate the conflicts of interest, corruption, backroom deals and other violations of the democratic principles of transparency and accountability which are exploited by foreign authoritarian actors to further their interests in targeted societies. Media and other institutions also have a responsibility to share “horror stories” or testimonies from individual companies to jump start conversations on economic coercion and expose how the self-interest of the business sector can also serve as a conduit for foreign authoritarian influence.¹⁰⁸

Investigations are also essential to shed light on other side effects of corrosive authoritarian influence on the economic wellbeing of the people, the environment, freedom of speech, malign influence on politicians (e.g., co-optation, conflicts of interest, et cetera), and other issues that matter to ordinary citizens. Greater capacity should be available both at the national and sub-national level, the latter being an area where foreign authoritarian activity is often taken place below radar due to lack of scrutiny.¹⁰⁹ Achieving the latter will involve overturning current trends in media centralization and digital migration resulting from an increasingly challenging economic model for media, particularly in the traditional sector (cable TV, radio).

As mentioned in section one, appropriate measures must be taken by the government and CSOs to ensure that journalists, researchers and members of civil society have sufficient protections from retaliation, lawfare, or censorship resulting from their work.¹¹⁰ Governments should also not hesitate to call out foreign officials and representatives from foreign authoritarian countries for any attempt to intimidate journalists or researchers. When necessary, and in instances where owners of a media outlet may be reluctant to publish an investigative report over fears of retaliation, CSOs and journalist associations should have access to alternative platforms to ensure that their investigation can be released to the public.

Funding should also be secured to support, or help the creation of, independent reporting on authoritarian influence by foreign-language outlets (e.g., Chinese, Russian, Farsi) to act as a counter to local media in such languages that serve as channels for the distribution of authoritarian propaganda or mis- disinformation. Policymakers in major democracies should also encourage

107 Shullman, David (ed.). “A World Safe for the Party: China’s Authoritarian Influence and the Democratic Response.”

108 For instance, academic publishers such as Springer Nature, the largest academic publisher in the world, have removed over one thousand articles that are sensitive to CCP interests from the Chinese versions of their websites, in order to maintain their access to the PRC market. See Loubere, Nicholas. 2020. “The New Censorship, the New Academic Freedom: Commercial Publishers and the Chinese Market.” *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, vol 1 (2020): 239-252. <https://journals.univie.ac.at/index.php/jeacs/article/view/5955/7836>.

109 PRC foreign influence at the sub-national level has been well documented in other parts of the world including Central and Eastern Europe – see e.g. Lamond, James and Edward Lucas. “Getting Ahead of the Curve: Chinese Influence in Central and Eastern Europe.” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, September 21, 2022. <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/getting-ahead-of-the-curve-chinese-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

110 Political use of the legal system to harm or threaten journalists is one form of “lawfare.” “Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation,” or SLAPP, is a common method for well-resourced foreign and domestic actors to attempt to silence civil society and journalist criticism. Some countries have passed laws aimed to counter SLAPPs. See for more examples: Cook, Sarah, Datt, Angeli, Young, Ellie, and BC Han. “Beijing’s Global Media Influence.”

greater financial support for institutions such as the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which includes Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia.¹¹¹

Increase networking and skills development initiatives: Create local, national, and regional networks of journalists to more effectively distribute knowledge, stories, and information. Safe online media for sharing information, as well as venues for collaboration, must also be established. With levels of awareness about authoritarian influence and capabilities to conduct research on the subject varying from country to country, efforts should be made to accelerate the learning process and democratize access to necessary information.

This can be accomplished through the establishment of expert lists (e.g., Signal group), resource libraries/databases/mapping, regional ambassadors, and publications such as newsletters. Other areas for cooperation at all levels include narrative development to ensure that the democratic camp is on the same page and does not contradict itself as it seeks to counter authoritarian narratives, security training, and social media training. Similar initiatives should be launched to facilitate information exchanges among CSOs. In addition to providing skills and information sharing, networks of journalists and media are also critical for providing venues for solidarity and cooperation in pushing back against PRC threats.¹¹²

Restrict collaboration with authoritarian regimes: Research institutions and governments in democratic countries need to revamp regulations on research integrity and expand the use of ethical review processes when the research involves collaboration with institutions from authoritarian countries. This includes research on dual-use technology as well as information pertaining to biometric and genetic datasets, which can be used by authoritarian regimes to increase their ability to conduct surveillance. Think tanks, research centers, and academic institutions should also be compelled to make public all sources of funding, grants, and joint programs involving foreign authoritarian governments or entities linked thereto.¹¹³

5. International Action

Strengthen democratic unity: Countries in the democratic camp must strengthen their relationships and implement resilience strategies to firewall the alliance against attempts by autocratic regime to sow divisions. In addition to traditional high-level diplomacy (ministerial, parliamentary) and membership in multilateral fora like NATO, the G7, or other groupings, the democratic alliance should deepen engagement at the subnational level, such as sister-city partnerships and educational exchanges, or quasi-official initiatives like the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) or new initiatives such as a task force on electoral interference modeled on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).¹¹⁴ Global democracy-promotion organizations must also deepen their investment in programming that seeks to consolidate regional networks and thereby facilitate information exchanges, increase solidarity, and bolster a multifaceted “united front” against revisionist authoritarian powers.

111 Recommendations in this paragraph draw in part on the findings of Joske, Alex. “The Party Speaks for You.”

112 See for instance a case in Nepal where CCP threats to independent media triggered a united and strong pushback from independent media organizations. Seventeen editors from different publications joined a Nepalese MP in denouncing those threats. Shullman, David (ed.). “Chinese Malign Influence and the Corrosion of Democracy.”

113 See e.g. Rolland, Nadege “Commanding Ideas: Think Tanks as Platforms for Authoritarian Influence.” National Endowment for Democracy, December 2020, https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Commanding-Ideas-Think-Tanks-as-Platforms-for-Authoritarian-Influence-Rolland-Dec-2020.pdf?utm_source=forum&utm_medium=site&utm_campaign=intellectual%20inquiry.

114 Countries should recognize and rely on their specialized strengths. For example, US higher education is recognized as prestigious and effective worldwide; US efforts to strengthen democratic unity could build on that strength. See Lamond, James and Edward Lucas. “Getting Ahead of the Curve: Chinese Influence in Central and Eastern Europe.”

Countries should establish their own national democracy-promotion agencies, which optimally should be independent entities (albeit with the possibility of state funding) and not subsumed into the state's foreign policy apparatus. Every effort should be made to integrate democracies with a long history of dealing with the authoritarian threat of a large neighbor – Taiwan, the Baltic States, Finland, CEE, et cetera – into global initiatives such as the Summit for Democracy, the Sunnylands Initiative and other programs. Doing so sends a strong signal of solidarity while facilitating the exchange of ideas and best practices among countries that have a lot to offer.¹¹⁵ The democratic camp must also abandon longstanding – and often self-defeating – limits on intelligence sharing with Taiwan and ensure that the latter has timely and sustained access to intelligence from multilateral agencies like Interpol, from which it continues to be excluded due to pressure by Beijing.

115 For example, those countries are experienced and sometimes successful in combatting disinformation. The integration of lessons in combatting disinformation in Taiwan into another country's context may prove applicable. See Zhang, Linda. "How to Counter China's Disinformation Campaigns in Taiwan."

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