

CHINA'S APPROACH TO INFLUENCING ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PROCESSES TO ITS STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE



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This report is a collaboration between the International Republican Institute's Countering Foreign Authoritarian Influence (CFAI) Team and TextOre. The report was written by TextOre Analysts Johan van den Ven, Christopher Magiera, and Benjamin Weber under the editorship of IRI Senior Advisor J. Michael Cole. We are grateful to the National Endowment for Democracy for its ongoing sponsorship of this initiative.

Although Mr. Weber was formerly employed by the State Department, his opinions and characterizations in this piece are his own and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. government.

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. Under its Building Resiliency for Interconnected Democracies in Global Environments (BRIDGE) initiative, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), IRI deploys three-pronged approach to mitigate the impact of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authoritarian influence on developing democracies:

1. Sharing research on how CCP influence impacts democratic processes with IRI's global network of partners;
2. Equipping local stakeholders with the means to conduct similar research independently, the skills to craft and message targeted advocacy campaigns based on research findings, and the tools and resources to devise and advocate for locally appropriate policy solutions to bolster democratic resilience and counter PRC authoritarian influence;
3. Catalyzing the development and adoption of policy solutions through productive dialogue with stakeholders and policymakers and targeted advocacy campaigns.

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 BRIDGE programming.

About TextOre

TextOre (textore.net) is an open-source intelligence (OSINT) solutions provider with deep expertise in international security and geopolitics, media monitoring and analysis, influence and interference operations, leadership and organization tracking, and geospatial and network analysis. TextOre's work for clients spans multiple areas and languages across the globe, with extensive depth and experience in the China/East Asia and Russia/Eurasia regions.

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INTRODUCTION

Potential interference by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in elections is a perennial concern. Seemingly unwilling to recognize how much its ham-fisted efforts have advantaged its "enemies" and harmed its "friends," Beijing has consistently pressured the people of Taiwan, for example, to elect governments that support or are more inclined toward eventual unification, which most Taiwanese oppose. In other words, more overt pressure by Beijing can often backfire and yield electoral results that are diametrically opposed to what it was seeking to begin with. While there are documented cases of Beijing trying to shape elections in other countries, most of its efforts are not at this level of intensity and they do not constitute direct and overt interference. Beijing generally tries to create environments in which parties across the spectrum, if not outright embracing Chinese preferences, at least are not at odds with those interests. This work is constant, aimed at maintaining a political status quo conducive to PRC and CCP interests rather than at yielding a certain election result.

China also seems to understand that being caught attempting to influence elections can be harmful: The National Intelligence Council's (NIC)'s March 2021 report on "Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections" noted that concern regarding detection was a key factor in the PRC's apparent decision not to interfere:

China sought stability in its relationship with the United States, did not view either election outcome as being advantageous enough for China to risk getting caught meddling, and assessed its traditional influence tools – primarily targeted economic measures and lobbying— would be sufficient to meet its goal of shaping US China policy regardless of the winner.¹

In December 2020, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Wang Wenbin [汪文斌] said that "China is committed to the principle of non-interference. Claims about China influencing U.S. presidential elections are completely fabricated."²

Canada is currently investigating reported attempts by PRC emissaries, particularly the Consulates General in Toronto and Vancouver, to influence the 2021 federal election.³ Thus far, the Canadian government's position is that the election was not materially impacted by interference. Five senior public servants working under Canada's Critical Election Incident Public Protocol "determined that the government of Canada did not detect foreign interference that threatened Canada's ability to have free and fair elections."⁴ They also noted that the Security and Intelligence Threats to Election (SITE) Task Force "saw no evidence to indicate that foreign state actors were specifically targeting Elections Canada (EC) or Canadian electoral systems and networks."⁵ The report noted that Canadian security agencies told Parliament that they "saw attempts at foreign interference, but not enough to have met the threshold of impacting electoral integrity."⁶

Nevertheless, the report also acknowledged that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) "expressed concerns that China notably tried to target elected officials to promote their national interests and encouraged individuals to act as proxies on their behalf."⁷ Toronto's *Globe and Mail* newspaper went further, quoting leaked CSIS documents reportedly stating that the PRC had tried "to ensure that a minority Liberal government was returned in 2021, and that certain Conservative candidates identified by China were defeated."⁸

According to the *Globe and Mail*, "The documents say the Chinese Communist Party leadership in Beijing was 'pressuring its consulates to create strategies to leverage politically [active] Chinese community members and associations within Canadian society.'⁹ The newspaper also reported that China had companies hire students from the PRC and sent them to volunteer on political campaigns and engineered off-the-books campaign contributions. Some donors claimed a tax

rebate for their donation, after which the campaign would refund the difference between the original donation and the amount the donor received in rebate.¹⁰ The PRC allegedly instructed some members of the news media to portray the Conservatives as “too critical” of China.¹¹

Former PRC Vancouver Consul General Tong Xiaoling [佟曉玲] apparently boasted that she helped defeat two Conservative Party candidates. “CSIS noted that Ms. Tong, who returned to China in July 2022, and former consul Wang Jin [whom the Globe and Mail said was identified by CSIS as directly linked to the CCP’s United Front Work Department] made ‘discreet and subtle efforts’ to encourage members of Chinese-Canadian organizations to rally votes for the Liberals and defeat Conservative candidates.”¹² In response, in March 2023 Prime Minister Trudeau announced that an eminent Canadian would serve as an independent special rapporteur to study Canadian election processes and make recommendations to improve them.¹³ He also announced that the cross-party National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, which draws from both Houses of Parliament and is comprised of members with security clearances, would examine allegations of interference.¹⁴

Australia is another democratic country that PRC public messaging has treated as hostile, leading to fears that the PRC could attempt to directly interfere with electoral processes. However, Australia’s Board of the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce reported that “Taskforce agencies did not identify any foreign interference, or any other interference, that compromised the delivery of the 2022 federal election.”¹⁵ The risk of the PRC attempting to influence elections is clearly real and warrants continued vigilance, but it is also clear that Beijing knows that interference entails risks. Beijing might try to exert influence by nefarious means when it believes doing so will advance its interests, but where the stakes do not justify those risks, it reverts to the strategies described by the NIC.

This study, which draws on evidence from Kenya, Italy, and the Philippines, documents how the PRC relies on traditional, low-risk strategies. The PRC and CCP want to promote favorable political relationships and, to that end, try to influence elections and political processes. These strategies can be divided into active measures, such as using official media to indicate preferred candidates; and reactive measures, such as diplomatic engagements aimed at winning over hostile candidates. China’s key actors include PRC and CCP officials, official media organizations, friendly or coopted host-country media organizations, and individuals and organizations associated with the UFWD.

One type of CCP activity centers on foreign political parties. This strategy puts a premium on developing long-term relationships with a variety of influential politicians from both governing and opposition political parties. For instance, PRC officials have developed close relationships with a Kenyan Cabinet Secretary. They have also developed strong ties with various parties and hosted multilateral forums that aim to consolidate its network of friendly political parties.¹⁶ It uses similar gatherings to reach out to more traditional Marxist political parties, such as the CCP and World Marxist Political Parties Summit in 2022.¹⁷ United Front-linked organizations also play an important role in building relationships, particularly in the Philippines, where they maintain ties with influential politicians, including former presidents.¹⁸

Building and maintaining ties with host-country media is another important part of this strategy. This includes organizing media forums, which benefit PRC and CCP interests by providing opportunities for networking and agenda-setting.¹⁹ The PRC builds other relationships through academic and journalism exchanges and by offering training in China. The PRC also offers awards at events such as the World Media Summit Global Awards or the Association for Philippines-China Understanding. Such awards are a way for China to signal its preferences and encourage local journalists to embrace its positions.^{20,21} Lastly, instead of ratcheting up its activity during election cycles, PRC official media and friendly host-country media regularly publish pro-China coverage. Content-sharing agreements can play a role, albeit with considerable variation in effectiveness.²²

Two less prominent aspects of political influence activities include employing United Front-linked organizations to cultivate candidates and nurturing ties with the business community.²³ Such engagement, however, may achieve limited results: in the Philippines, businesspeople have pushed for economic and trade opportunities with China while simultaneously being strongly supportive of national sovereignty in the disputed South China Sea. The extent to which business are willing to work at cross-purposes with the national interest varies from one country to another.

The PRC engages during the election process when it wants to and believes it is safe to do so. Generally, Chinese officials and official Chinese media seek to moderate “anti-PRC” positions taken by candidates. For example, PRC government officials met with candidates who expressed China-skeptic viewpoints.²⁴ Chinese official media and friendly host-country media also worked to defuse tensions, demonstrating the importance of relationship-building with host-country media environments.²⁵ United Front-linked actors also work to reduce election-related tensions. This, ostensibly, is meant to ensure that China, and the issue of the “China threat,” do not become major issues during elections.²⁶

A less common tactic involves using local United Front-related organizations to endorse candidates and run “get out the vote” efforts. In Italy, the PRC reportedly used these tools to boost support for Giuseppe Sala during the Milan mayoral elections in 2016.²⁷ The PRC may also use official media to indicate its preferred candidates. During the 2022 Australian election, an op-ed in the officially controlled Global Times observed that “in comparison to [incumbent Prime Minister Scott Morrison], [Anthony Albanese] positively shines, such is the abysmal state of Australian politics.”²⁸ The Global Times portrayed one Philippine presidential candidate as pragmatic and able to achieve “win-win” outcomes with China, while the other was cast as a candidate supported by the United States who sought confrontation with Beijing.²⁹

SOURCING AND SCOPE

The study focuses on the period leading up to and following the 2022 elections in Kenya, Italy, and the Philippines. Sections related to developments in PRC policy draw primarily from the period since the 19th Party Congress (2017). The information underpinning this study is sourced from traditional and social media including, but not limited to, sources from Kenya, Italy, the Philippines, and the PRC. It also draws on the websites of relevant government bodies, political organizations, civil society organizations, and companies. All sources examined in the research are available on an open-source basis, and thus do not cover alleged covert election interference activities, such as China’s alleged support for candidates in Canada³⁰ or harassment and coordinated campaigns via social media.³¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2021, the U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) released a declassified report on foreign threats to the 2020 U.S. federal elections. The report found that, while Russia and Iran had launched influence activities during the elections, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had not, likely because Beijing “assessed [that] its traditional influence tools—primarily targeted economic measures and lobbying—would be sufficient to meet its goal of shaping U.S. China policy regardless of the winner.”³²

This study, which focuses on elections in Italy, the Philippines, and Kenya in 2022, reaches a similar conclusion: while the PRC has developed a sophisticated toolkit to influence politics in certain targeted countries, there is little evidence that China used its tools to alter the outcome of those elections. The three cases demonstrate that the PRC’s traditional approach, an overt campaign focused on elections and politics, aims to protect China’s interests. PRC and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) actors therefore did not feel the need to resort to riskier covert means.

The three cases examined in this report suggest that Beijing employs more traditional strategies and tools to shape the political environment in other countries to maintain its influence and blunt anti-China rhetoric. China's influence efforts are largely overt and rely on three main messengers: diplomatic personnel under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), officers from the CCP's International Liaison Department (ILD), and official media organizations such as the China Daily. The CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) and friendly host-country media organizations participate in these activities on a smaller scale. These political influence efforts take place constantly and aim to cultivate relationships and signal policy preferences. The message is clear: whichever party or candidate wins, the government should implement policies that align with PRC interests. The PRC aims to build a multifaceted foundation of support, rather than relying on close ties with any single actor or party. This does not mean that the PRC ignores specific elections. On occasion, the PRC indicates that it has preferred candidates, although it does so through official media coverage or editorials rather than by direct statements from MFA diplomats or CCP officials. A less common tactic involves using local United Front-related organizations to endorse candidates and run "get out the vote" efforts.

In measuring and monitoring influence activity, which in most cases appears to avoid going beyond traditional public diplomacy or involve trespassing on local election rules, some key factors are relevant. First, the decision to employ the methods discussed in this report are a low-risk choice for Beijing—cultivate new friends, make no enemies, risk no scandals. Beijing can be expected to use these methods while also resorting to less visible activities. Second, independent observers and the media play a significant role in exposing the PRC's official entities and its United Front Work proxies as they cultivate candidates, parties, and news organizations. Those targeted by Beijing may not be fully aware of the CCP's links with "nongovernmental" or "independent" organizations. Third, the PRC relies on public diplomacy, political parties, and media organizations to advance its agenda. It does this by offering them resources, access, and training.

The case in Kenya shows that PRC influence work has not squashed significant China-skeptic rhetoric during election campaigns. Still, Beijing's approach demonstrates the benefits of the PRC's holistic approach to political influence. Chinese and local media have mitigated China-skeptic sentiment during campaigning. After the election, China worked with the administration and made sure that campaign rhetoric did not metastasize into policy measures that may have been detrimental to the PRC's interests. The PRC's engagement in Kenya highlights a political influence strategy that, rather than focusing on a single party or candidate, relies on multiple ways to safeguard Chinese interests, regardless of changes in administration or host-country political dynamics.

In Italy, despite a broad-based effort, PRC and CCP influence activities have not prevented the formation of a government comprised of numerous politicians who voiced critical views of China. Content-sharing agreements with several Italian media organizations have not yielded a media environment that is friendlier to Chinese interests, while diplomatic outreach to politicians has mainly served to generate controversy about that outreach. Still, following a meeting with Xi Jinping, there are signs that the Meloni administration is prepared to engage Beijing despite the party's criticism of China during the election campaign. This suggests that Beijing's ideological flexibility remains effective, although the agenda of the current government in Rome might not be entirely to Beijing's liking.

Lastly, in the Philippines, PRC and CCP political influence activities have been more effective, generating a stable bilateral relationship despite deep disputes between the two countries (and others) regarding maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea. Political influence efforts in the previous two cases

demonstrated the PRC's ability to manage hostile counterparts, even when some influence channels fail. Chinese activity in the Philippines is a good example of various efforts that combine to steady what might otherwise be a tumultuous bilateral relationship. The PRC's willingness to engage with Marcos's requests for debt relief showed a pragmatic willingness to compromise in order to protect political relationships and PRC interests. Successful political

influence activities include maintaining relationships with influential political actors, including with the current President Marcos and former President Arroyo. While the local media accepts some stories from PRC- and CCP-supported media and publishes pro-China editorials by Filipino journalists, it also publishes reporting and opinion critical of the PRC. The business community has proven pragmatic about the value of PRC-Philippines relations on economic and trade opportunities but is as willing as the media to stand up to Beijing on sovereignty issues.

PRC STRATEGIES FOR ELECTION AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE: POLICIES AND MULTILATERAL APPROACHES

Due to the controversial and risky nature of attempting to influence the election process of a sovereign country, information explicitly identifying preferred PRC outcomes in specific elections is not generally available in open-source content. However, statements on related subjects provide some insight into the PRC's motivations for attempting to influence election outcomes. Those motivations range from securing support from foreign political actors on key issues to promoting an international environment conducive to PRC objectives. The method, "carrying out propaganda through foreign friends," also occurs in forums and training programs where diplomats and cadres engage with mainstream political organizations, the media, youth leaders, and leftist groups.

POLICY STATEMENTS

The PRC laid out its blueprint for foreign political influence activities in a September 2022 joint press conference. Vice Minister³³ of the CCP International Liaison Department [国际联络部] (ILD) Guo Yezhou [郭业洲] and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Ma Zhaoxu [马朝旭] described foreign propaganda work as persuading foreign political parties, NGOs, and influential people to agree with China's positions, especially on issues such as Beijing's "One China" principle, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, the South China Sea, and human rights. Guo referred to a "holy trinity" of political, public, and people-to-people diplomacy.³⁴ Ma said the CCP supports top-level exchanges with socialist and Marxist political parties and other leftist groups. However, Guo and Ma also stated that the CCP and MFA "strengthen exchanges with ruling and opposition parties in various countries to maintain and promote the healthy and stable development of state-to-state relations," which shows that pragmatic objectives trump ideological affinities.

Once a party or candidate wins an election, a senior PRC official will often engage the victorious party regardless of their campaign rhetoric. The official will stress that inter-party relations are an important part of the PRC's bilateral relations, that the Chinese side values friendly relations, and that the PRC wishes to carry out (or continue) exchanges on party and national governance. This phrasing, which was used at the CCP-World Political Parties Conference in 2021,³⁵ has been quoted in readouts of meetings with various African ambassadors to the PRC,³⁶ in op-eds by PRC ambassador to Vietnam,³⁷ in meetings with the New Azerbaijan Party,³⁸ Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna,³⁹ Indonesia's Gerindra Party,⁴⁰ Mexico's PRI,⁴¹ the Cambodian People's Party,⁴² the U.K.'s Conservative Party,⁴³ and Costa Rica's National Liberation Party.⁴⁴ In some cases, the PRC will seek balance with outreach to parties in the opposition, such as Brazil's Democratic Labour Party⁴⁵ or Malta's Nationalist Party.⁴⁶

ENGAGING MEDIA: “CARRYING OUT PROPAGANDA THROUGH FOREIGN FRIENDS”

In addition to developing relationships with influential political personalities and parties, the PRC cultivates ties with host-country media. In August 2016, Chinese President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping [习近平] made a speech at a CCP News and Public Opinion Work Conference [新闻舆论工作座谈会] in which he called for the creation of a foreign propaganda platform with international influence. Observing that columnists in Western media are more influential once their columns become popular, Xi concluded that the PRC should send senior journalists abroad to develop personal columns to explain China's views on high-profile issues. Xi also called for “carrying out propaganda through foreign friends” by inviting international “celebrities” to write articles for Chinese newspapers.⁴⁷ In a January 2019 Politburo [政治部] study session on Integrated Media Development, Xi continued this theme, saying that “now, more and more people in the world view China rationally and objectively, and more and more people praise China. We are following the right path and walking on the right path. This is a historical opportunity for the mainstream media. We must strengthen our confidence, build up our morale, and persevere in telling Chinese stories well, to form an international voice that is compatible with our country's comprehensive national strength.”⁴⁸ These themes were repeated at another Politburo study session in June 2021, which also touched on the importance of people-to-people exchanges.⁴⁹

BUSINESS COMMUNITY: WARNING THEY CANNOT “MAKE MONEY QUIETLY”

The overseas business community, with its interest in stable relations conducive to trade and investment, is seen as a key audience. In Beijing's view, overseas Chinese are expected to play a bridging role between China and their countries of residence and foreign-born businesspeople are expected to remember where their companies earn profits. Speaking to the first China Overseas Chinese Entrepreneurs Investment Conference in Fujian in September 2021, All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese [中华全国归国华侨联合会]⁵⁰ Chairperson Wan Lijun [万立骏] called on overseas Chinese businesspeople to “actively use their broad personal networks and experience in cross-cultural exchange to carry out friendly exchanges on many levels, in many venues, and via many avenues; to carry China's voice and to tell China's story well; to show a true, three-dimensional, and comprehensive China; and participate in developing an international environment conducive to the development of our country.”⁵¹

Outreach to foreign non-Chinese is more blunt and direct: Speaking to U.S. business, state, and local leaders in late November 2021, Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng praised the business community's role in providing an “objective” view of the situation in China and urged them to “encourage the U.S. administration to follow a sensible and pragmatic China policy and to stop waging trade war, industrial war or technology war and stop creating confrontation or conflict over values, ideology or geopolitics.” “When bilateral relations deteriorate, business communities can't expect to be unaffected and make money quietly,” he warned.⁵² In one example, Reuters reported in November 2021 that the PRC Embassy had reached out to U.S. business leaders through letters and meetings, asking them to oppose legislation the PRC deemed inimical to its interests. Reuters quoted sources “concerned that they could be seen as violating the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) if they lobbied lawmakers on similar issues in the future.”⁵³ Such efforts led the U.S. National Counterintelligence and Security Center to warn business leaders that Beijing likely views them “as an especially important vector to influence local, state, and national leaders, given that companies are key constituents of and often contributors to politicians at all levels.”⁵⁴

MIXED APPROACH TO TRUST AND DISTRUST IN THE ELECTION PROCESS

This issue of trust and distrust in electoral processes spans both strategic-and tactical-level efforts. On the strategic level, there are many examples of PRC official media commenting on the concept of democratic decline, in a pattern

that dates to at least 2013.⁵⁵ Chinese official media associate democratic decline mainly with Western countries. For instance, a *Global Times* op-ed contended that “Democracy in itself is a good thing. It is one of the universal core values and principles for all human beings. But the democracy of the UK and the US is a bad thing. Their democratic practice is a mess, resulting in democracy being marred beyond recognition.”⁵⁶ To bolster the credibility of this narrative, official media organizations often amplify relevant commentary from foreign scholars and think tanks.⁵⁷

At the tactical level, when a candidate favored by China wins an election, PRC officials sometimes seek to reinforce the authority of the election process by lauding its efficiency, fairness, and transparency. After Adama Barrow won the 2021 Gambian presidential election, MFA spokesperson Wang Wenbin [汪文斌] said, “We have noticed that The Gambia’s Independent Election Commission has announced the results of the presidential election. Relevant African observer groups have also recognized the process of the election.”⁵⁸ Likewise, following the 2020 Burmese election, won by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, MFA spokesman Zhao Lijian said that “As a friendly neighbor, China has always supported the Myanmar people to independently choose a development path that suits their own national conditions, and supports the smooth holding of the Myanmar general election. We have noticed that the Union Election Commission of Myanmar successfully completed the election counting and announced the final result.”⁵⁹

However, when election outcomes do not favor its interests, the PRC sometimes amplifies concerns about election integrity. During the 2022 Republic of Korea presidential election, the *Global Times* reported that South Korean voters were facing long waits, received ballots that had already been marked, and that ballots were transported in insecure containers.⁶⁰ After the Italian parliamentary elections in 2022 positioned China-skeptic Giorgia Meloni as the presumptive future prime minister, the *Global Times* asserted that “Italian politics has been hijacked to follow the US against the national interest.”⁶¹ As will be discussed below, the PRC nevertheless sought to cultivate a constructive relationship with Meloni once she took office.

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS IN MULTILATERAL FORUMS

Parties, Young Leaders, and Fellow Socialists

In addition to bilateral engagements, the PRC also uses multilateral events to build relationships with political actors and media organizations. The CCP, through the ILD, also engages political parties through events like global summits. For instance, in July 2021, the ILD organized the CCP and World Political Parties Summit.⁶² These events showcase the PRC’s convening power. They also present the PRC’s approach to governance as an alternative to Western democracy. Both the Italian Communist Party and Kenya’s Jubilee Party signed on to the “Joint Statement of World Political Parties, Social Organizations, and Think Tanks on Making Independent Efforts to Explore the Path toward Democracy and Working Together to Promote Common Development,” an effort that was orchestrated by the ILD.

Likewise, the PRC also leverages multilateral forums to build ties with young leaders. For instance, in November 2022 the CCP-controlled All-China Youth Federation [中华全国联合会]⁶³ held the first Asia-Europe Young Leaders Campus [亚东青年领导人交流营] in Xi’an.⁶⁴ During the two-day workshop, Chinese and European youth representatives discussed green energy development. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank [亚洲基础设施投资银行] treasurer Domenico Nardelli gave a keynote speech on the bank’s climate finance initiatives.⁶⁵ The Xinhua News Agency’s [新华社] reporting on the event was reposted by media organizations such as Italy’s Agenzia Nova.⁶⁶

The 2022 World Youth Development Forum, also organized by the All-China Youth Federation and sponsored by the PRC government, is another example of the role forums play in the PRC’s relationships with young leaders from around

the world. The forum featured speeches by Xi Jinping, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and World Economic Forum Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab. Over 2,000 youth representatives attended the event, including United Nations Secretary-General Envoy on Youth Jayathma Wickramanayake, First Secretary of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union Alexander Lukyanov, South Africa's African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) National Convenor Nonceba Mhlauli, and General Director of the Kazakhstan Youth Congress Takhkat Bolysov. Such forums are likely intended to legitimize PRC policy initiatives like the Global Development Initiative (GDI), [全球发展倡议] though determining the specific impact of these efforts is difficult. While Wickramanayake's address to the forum called for young leaders to support the GDI, there is no evidence that these were anything other than her own words.

South Africa's Nonceba Mhlauli's story highlights China's efforts to develop ties with young leaders over time. In 2019, she visited China with representatives from other African countries. Following the forum, in December 2022, she met with PRC Ambassador to South Africa Chen Xiaodong, [陈晓东] alongside fellow African National Congress Youth League official Khulekani Skosana.⁶⁷

The PRC also uses forums to build relationships with foreign leftist and socialist parties, one of the priorities outlined by the MFA's Ma Zhaoxu. In July 2022, the ILD hosted the online World Marxist Political Parties Forum. Official media reported that "more than 300 representatives from more than 100 Marxist political parties, left-wing parties and political organizations in over 70 countries" attended.⁶⁸ The PRC also routinely engages with foreign Communist parties. In November 2021, the PRC Embassy in the UK held an online symposium on the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee, attended by representatives of the New Communist Party of Britain, the Communist Party of Britain, and the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist).⁶⁹

Multilateral and Regional Engagement with the Media

Engagement with host-country media also takes place in multilateral formats. Some of these meetings are linked to organizations like ASEAN. Others use the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a backdrop. The PRC has also engaged African media at both government and press events.

In July 2021, China Media Group hosted the ASEAN Media Partners Forum in Beijing. Participants in the forum included Philippines Ambassador to the PRC Jose S.L. Santa Romana and Secretary of the Presidential Communications Operations Office of the Philippines Martin Andanan.⁷⁰ In August 2022, the State Council Information Office [国务院信息办公司] (SCIO), China International Publishing Group [中国国际出版集团] (CIPG), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences National Institute of International Strategy [中国社会科学院国家全球战略智库], and the ASEAN-China Center [中国-东盟中心] hosted the latest session of the China-ASEAN Media Think Tank Forum in Beijing. The forum drew diplomatic representatives, scholars, and media leaders in what the hosts intended to be a shared effort to "tell the story of China-ASEAN cooperation well" [共同讲好中国-东盟发展故事].⁷¹

The multilateral platform that would become the "Belt and Road News Network" ["一带一路"新闻合作联盟] (BRNN) was first proposed in a speech by Xi at the first Belt and Road Forum in 2017.⁷² The BRNN is convened under the auspices of CCP flagship newspaper People's Daily [人民日报], which hosts the organization's secretariat.⁷³ In June 2022, the All-China Federation of Journalists [中华全国新闻工作者协会] and the BRNN hosted the fifth Belt and Road Journalists Forum, with a theme of "Social Responsibility of Media Organizations."⁷⁴ Speakers at the forum echoed the PRC's position that media should contribute to social stability. For instance, Vladimir Solovyov, Chairman of the Russian Federation of Journalists, said that the "Media should play the role of uniting society and jointly responding to the challenges facing the international community," while Nalin Aponso, President of the Sri Lanka-China Journalists Forum, said that

"A constructive mechanism should be used to deal with misleading information [about] the joint construction of the Belt and Road."⁷⁵ Other attendees included the Poland Media Association, Mexico Front Page Club, and Rwanda's Africa-China Review Network [卢旺达非中评论].⁷⁶ In August 2022, Politburo member and Propaganda Department Director Huang Kunming [黄坤明] gave a video address to the Belt and Road Media Cooperation Forum in Xi'an, in which he said that the media has an important role to play in disseminating information, increasing trust, and consolidating common understanding.⁷⁷

The PRC runs programs focused on Africa and also buttresses operational links with personal ties through honors and awards.⁷⁸ In November 2022, China Media Group hosted a seminar for Chinese and African media organizations under the title "China and the World Embarking on a New Journey." Attendees included Thomas Maccandawell, Director of Zambia's 5FM radio station; Madagascar National Television Director Nampa Ranaribelo; African Policy Research Institute Director Peter Kagwanga; Africa-China Review Network founder Gerard Mbanda; and Zambia News Agency reporter Ravenin Sizia, who praised CCTV for contributing to Africa's development.⁷⁹ At the World Media Summit Global Awards for Excellence, in 2014, Kenyan journalists Paul Wafula and Adow Jubat won the Honorable Mention Award for Exemplary News Professionals in Developing Countries and Honorable Mention Innovation Award, respectively.⁸⁰ However, such awards do not always result in a quid pro quo: Wafula went on to publish exposés on alleged discrimination against Kenyans related to the Standard Gauge Railway project.⁸¹

TACTICS: INFLUENCE ELECTIONS

This section of the study covers measures used by the PRC and CCP to influence elections, as opposed to longer-term ongoing activities meant to shape the political environment in Beijing's favor. This includes working with candidates whose campaigns are critical of China and those who support PRC interests. PRC diplomatic staff, the ILD, official media, and "friendly" host-country media are tasked with this work. As Italy demonstrates, United Front-linked organizations can also play a marginal role in election-related activities.

INDICATION OF PREFERENCES BY OFFICIAL MEDIA

On some occasions, the PRC will indicate its preferred candidates. This signaling is done exclusively by PRC officials or officially controlled media in, perhaps, a tacit acknowledgment that this kind of messaging goes beyond diplomats' usual roles. During the South Korean election in 2022, the *Global Times* wrote that "The two candidates hold different stances on ties with North Korea, China, the US, and Japan. Lee, as the candidate of the liberal force, said he has similar policies to the Moon Jae-in administration to be more balanced between China and the US, while Yoon, the conservative candidate, would put the US-South alliance as the core of its diplomacy, according to media reports."⁸² During the same election, *Reference Times* [参考消息] wrote, "According to reports, Yoon Suk-yeol has advocated for abandoning the foreign policy of the Moon Jae-in government that relied on China."⁸³ During the 2022 Australian federal election the *Global Times* wrote, "in comparison to [incumbent Prime Minister Scott Morrison], [Anthony Albanese] positively shines, such is the abysmal state of Australian politics."⁸⁴ However, the *China Daily* later criticized Albanese after he drew comparisons between Taiwan and Ukraine. China's diplomats stayed away from this effort: then-MFA spokesman Zhao Lijian refrained from directly criticizing Albanese.⁸⁵

PRC MANAGEMENT OF "ANTI-CHINA" CANDIDATES

One important aspect of the PRC's tactics is to counter certain candidates' China-skeptical sentiment. In 2022, PRC Ambassador to the Republic of Korea Xing Haiming published an op-ed following China-skeptical, pro-U.S. comments by then-candidate (and now president) Yoon Suk-yeol. Xing wrote, "South Korea has entered the general election season. This is South Korea's internal affairs. The candidates are all our friends. No matter who is elected as the next president, we are willing to conduct friendly exchanges with him and make joint efforts to promote the continuous development of China-ROK relations. I myself and the Chinese Embassy in South Korea are willing to make every effort to this end."⁸⁶ Following media reports that Yoon would authorize further deployment of U.S.-made Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) batteries, Xing met with Yoon, as did National People's Congress Standing Committee Chairman Li Zhanshu, [栗战书] following Yoon's inauguration. Yoon ultimately said the two sides need to communicate closely "to make sure that THAAD does not become an obstacle to South Korea-China relations."^{87, 88}

PRC official media also contribute to efforts to influence efforts. For instance, during the 2022 South Korean election, a Global Times article stated that, "As the democratic elections in South Korea are similar to those in the US, politicians will not be held to account by the public for their statements made during the election campaign, nor will these statements be taken as their future policies if they are elected. What's more important than what they say is what they do once in power."⁸⁹ Likewise, host-country media also assist in managing "anti-China" sentiment: during the 2022 Kenyan general election campaign, Capital FM published an article titled "Is Ruto's War on China a Pre-Election Negotiation Tactic?"⁹⁰ The article was by Adhere Cavince, who has written op-eds for China Daily and given interviews to the state-run Xinhua News Agency.⁹¹ Capital FM appears to have a content-sharing agreement with Xinhua.⁹² Cavince has also written pro-China op-eds for Daily Nation, a Kenyan newspaper, which also seems to share content with Xinhua.⁹³ Long-term PRC assistance to host-country media can also generate commentary during elections that supports PRC views, as will be discussed further in the Kenya case study.

ELECTION ACTIVITIES OF UNITED FRONT-LINKED ORGANIZATIONS

United Front-linked organizations may also run "get out the vote" campaigns, which require effective management of a large overseas Chinese population that seems to be organic, not manipulated. A possible reason for their relative rarity is the risk of promoting particular candidates. As previously noted, instead of trying to generate a specific result, the PRC and CCP generally aim to make sure the outcome of a given election is conducive to Chinese interests while avoiding controversy by seeking to influence elections directly. United Front-linked personnel and organizations also aim to ease election-related tensions. In Italy, the aforementioned Francesco Wu downplayed accusations of anti-immigrant sentiment against Matteo Salvini, the leader of the conservative Lega Nord party.

BUILDING POLITICAL INFLUENCE: CASE STUDIES

As shown by the in-depth examinations of Kenya, Italy, and the Philippines below, the PRC runs its political influence activities constantly, irrespective of election cycles or changes in the domestic politics of target countries. In each of these three cases, China's influence operations rely on four main themes: (a) developing relationships with influential politicians in target countries to ensure access and encourage them to support, or at least not oppose, core PRC interests; (b) building relationships with host-country media, in order to promote pro-PRC narratives; (c) developing

ties with the host-country business community to build a constituency for good relations by emphasizing the benefits of China trade and investment; and (d) cultivating political candidates seen as supportive of the above. Of the three countries in this report, only Kenya received Chinese assistance to develop political parties. PRC and CCP officials, official media, and individuals and organizations associated with the UFWD work to promote these four core interests.

There are differences in the success of China's specific tactics and tools. While the CCP engaged Kenyan political parties through training courses in organizational development as noted above, it did not (or could not) do the same in Italy or the Philippines. Additionally, while PRC outreach to host-country media organizations figured prominently in all three countries, this outreach created closer ties between the PRC and the press in Kenya and the Philippines than in Italy. Lastly, there are stark differences in the amount of United Front work done with local partners in each country. This could be a consequence of the relative sizes of the Chinese diaspora in each country. In the Philippines, groups such as the Association for Philippines-China Understanding work closely with the PRC Embassy. In Italy, the China-Italy Entrepreneurs Union has supported overseas Chinese election candidates. In Kenya, which has a comparatively small Chinese diaspora, United Front activity has focused more on shaping the business environment than on influence projection in the elections examined below.⁹⁴

Besides its consistent efforts to build a pro-, or at least not anti-China climate, another key characteristic of the PRC's approach is that pragmatism trumps ideology. In other words, the PRC's goal is simply to ensure that election winners – whomever they may be – support Chinese interests. While MFA and ILD officials nurture ties to socialist parties and other leftist groups, both organizations (as well as PRC official media) invest vastly greater resources in their relationships with non-communist politicians and their parties. For example, then-PRC Ambassador to Italy Li Junhua met regularly with Beppe Grillo, the intellectual leader of the Five Star Movement, which was part of Italy's government from 2018 to 2022. In contrast, there appeared to be only one example of meetings between the PRC Embassy in Italy and the Italian Communist Party. This pragmatism – together with their political influence activities – means that the PRC and CCP can shape political environments that are conducive to their interests without undertaking particularly intensive activity during the actual election cycle.

In Kenya, the PRC and CCP reached out to both ruling and opposition parties. Kenya's Jubilee Party announced it would send members for training in the CCP Party School system.⁹⁵ Weeks after the party was formally launched in 2016, party members made repeated visits to China for training.⁹⁶ The PRC's close relationship with the Jubilee Party did not preclude the CCP from inviting Edwin Sifuna, secretary-general of the opposition Orange Democratic Movement, for a separate training.⁹⁷ Certain prominent people are useful both in their political role and as quotable sources for PRC official media. In Kenya, the Jubilee Party's Raphael Tuju engages regularly with official PRC media outlets.⁹⁸

Election-related activities also include maintaining ties with friendly candidates, such as the longstanding relationship between PRC officials and newly elected Philippines President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. Official Chinese media signaled a preference for Marcos Jr. over his opponent, albeit through indirect references by nongovernmental "experts." On the other hand, the PRC frequently seeks to manage China-skeptic sentiment expressed during campaigns, such as from Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. To a very limited extent, election-related activity also includes efforts by UFWD-linked local organizations to cultivate election candidates and encourage diaspora members to vote.

KENYA⁹⁹***Developing Relationships with Influential Political Actors***

One of the ways the PRC develops relationships with influential foreign political party members is by inviting them to a broad range of events hosted by PRC or CCP officials and organizations. Kenya's Raphael Tuju has supported China since 2006 when, as foreign minister, he said, "it is in the interests of Kenya to work on strengthening relations with China. Most of the world is doing it and I find it awkward when Western partners take issue with that."¹⁰⁰ Tuju met with PRC Ambassador Li Xuhang [李旭航] on January 10, 2018, reportedly to exchange views on increasing party-to-party exchanges and communication. Li thanked Tuju for attending the CCP in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting [中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会], suggesting Beijing had already noticed him as a contact worth developing.¹⁰¹

Tuju, as Jubilee Party Secretary General and Cabinet Secretary without Portfolio, along with his party colleagues Jubilee Party Executive Director James Waweru, Political Affairs Director Swalesh, and Foreign Relations Director Mutiso,¹⁰² met new PRC Ambassador Wu Peng [吴鹏] on July 3, 2019. Tuju's next recorded meeting came almost two years later, at a senior level: he held a video meeting with ILD Director Song Tao [宋涛] on March 17, 2021. According to a story published by the Chinese weekly magazine *ChinAfrica*, Tuju said the Jubilee Party cherishes its friendly relationship with the CCP, firmly supports China's position on core interests such as Hong Kong, and looks forward to strengthening mutual trust with China. He hoped the two parties could continue their exchanges regarding governance, deepen their cooperation in infrastructure construction and other fields, and work together to promote "multilateralism."¹⁰³

Tuju went on to hold a series of engagements with CCP entities. He attended the July 2021 (virtual) CCP and World Political Parties Summit.¹⁰⁴ In November, he addressed the (virtual) China-Africa Young Leaders Forum and China-Africa Thematic Briefing at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CCP in November 2021.¹⁰⁵ On July 7, 2022, he gave remarks at the PRC Embassy on the CCP's 100th anniversary.¹⁰⁶

In addition to supporting the PRC within Jubilee Party deliberations, Tuju is a prominent "foreign friend" who amplifies Chinese propaganda in interviews with official media. Speaking with *Xinhua* in March 2021, Tuju said the CCP is united by "a certain intellectual and philosophical framework," adding, "We are keenly looking at how the CCP has managed to bring the country together ... It becomes very difficult to eradicate corruption in a country when that discipline is not there, within the context of a party."¹⁰⁷ In August 2022 Tuju, speaking in his capacity as executive director of *Azimio la Umoja* (One Kenya Coalition Party), told the *People's Daily* that then-U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan that month was a "despicable act of provocation against the friendly Chinese people, and the move is irresponsible, outrageous, and reprehensible."¹⁰⁸

However, there are risks to an approach centered on individual relationships. In the run-up to the 2022 Kenyan election, Tuju claimed that presidential candidate William Ruto had accepted bribes to support former President Uhuru Kenyatta in 2013 and urged people not to vote for him because of his character.^{109,110} In August 2022, Tuju was forced to deny claims that he wanted to skew election results in favor of Odinga.¹¹¹ Given his association with the PRC, these controversial remarks could have damaged China in Kenyan public opinion.

Musalia Mudavadi is another Kenyan politician who has repeatedly engaged with his PRC counterparts. Mudavadi was appointed as cabinet secretary by President William Ruto in 2022. Mudavadi's engagements with PRC official media date to the early 2000s, when he said Kenya supported the "one China" policy and called for bilateral cooperation in the broadcasting space.^{112,113} In October 2009, he traveled to Beijing in his role as Deputy Leader of the ODM, where he called for more exchanges with the CCP.¹¹⁴

Party Development Assistance

In 2016, Kenya's Jubilee Party announced it would send personnel for training in China one week after the party was officially launched.¹¹⁵ Forty-seven Jubilee Party county coordinators attended the 2016 training session.¹¹⁶ Before their departure, a spokesman said party members would "train on general organization, mobilization, and capacity building." Jubilee Party Senator Kiraitu Murungi told a press conference that "China is Kenya's leading trade and development partner. We are happy that we are going to sign a new chapter of political cooperation."¹¹⁷ His remarks were echoed by Guangxi Party Secretary Peng Qinghua [彭清华], who said the "CCP is ready to work with the Jubilee Party to realize change and boost experience in governance to promote the China-Kenya partnership."¹¹⁸ In a sign that the training may have included CCP ideology in addition to tradecraft, Guangxi Party School Executive Vice President Hu Jianhua [胡建华] stressed the importance of democratic centralism, while Sichuan Party School Deputy Director Yuan Wei [袁威] said that Kenya could learn from reform and opening, a sentiment shared by Jubilee Party Secretary-General Tuju, who led the Kenyan delegation.¹¹⁹ After the training, Tuju said the "CCP is a model for the Jubilee Party. We should carry out exchange and communication on the installation of a training system, allocation of funds for training, the structuring of a Party School system, and the effective implementation of consultations on strategic decision-making."¹²⁰ The Jubilee Party won the 2017 Kenyan general election, allowing Uhuru Kenyatta to continue to serve as president.¹²¹ A follow-up training took place at the Beijing Party School in July 2019.¹²²

While the CCP's party development work has focused on the Jubilee Party, it has also made limited efforts at diversification. In addition to engaging ODM's Mudavadi, ODM Secretary General Edwin Sifuna received training in China as part of a delegation from the Council of African Political Parties in August 2018.¹²³ With Kenyatta term-limited, Jubilee endorsed Raila Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) in the 2022 election. It appeared therefore that the CCP's efforts were concentrated on one side of the ballot without similar engagement with opposing candidate William Ruto's United Democratic Alliance (UDA), which ultimately won. It is unclear whether the CCP helped the UDA, or whether the CCP made an offer that the UDA did not accept.

Developing Relationships with Host-Country Media

As Xi laid out in his 2016 speech, the PRC and CCP cultivate foreign media to encourage them to support China's views. Senior officials from the CCP Propaganda Department and provincial-level equivalents have visited PRC diplomatic personnel with instructions on how to implement this strategy. In Kenya, Executive Vice Minister of the Jiangxi Propaganda Department [江西省宣传部] Guo Jianhui [郭建晖] met with PRC Embassy chargé d'affaires Li Xuhang in Nairobi in 2018, where the two agreed on the need to "use media to create a better understanding between Chinese and Kenyan peoples."¹²⁴

The foundation for this relationship between China and Kenya was laid even earlier, by the China Media Group [中央广播电视总台]. It has engaged with its Kenyan counterparts since at least 2005, when China Radio International established operations in Nairobi and began broadcasting in Swahili.¹²⁵ In 2012, the CCTV Africa News Production Centre opened in Nairobi. CCTV Vice President Sun Yusheng [孙玉胜], Kenyan Deputy President Kalonzo Musyoka, PRC Ambassador to Kenya Liu Guangyuan [刘光源], and Kenyan Information Minister Samuel Poghiso attended the launch party.¹²⁶ CCTV also signed a cooperation agreement with the Kenyan Broadcasting Company (KBC) and the Kenyan Ministry of Information, Communications, and Technology (later renamed the Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Digital Economy), in which it agreed to exchanges and to provide training and equipment. CCTV also agreed to help develop tourism.¹²⁷

Chinese efforts to develop relationships with Kenyan media were evident in September 2018, when the PRC Ministry of Commerce [商务部] (MOFCOM) and CIPG sponsored a 20-day seminar for Kenyan journalists in China. This group included Macharia Gaitho of Daily Nation, Jemimah Mueni of Capital Group, and George Ambuvi of 360 Media Relations. Speaking to China Daily Africa after the seminar, Mueni said, "My mind has been broadened because I have been equipped with a lot of information and knowledge that will greatly assist me in my line of duty. I have also met new friends and made networks which will assist me in my journalistic work. I got enough background about China and its people; hence I will be able to spice up my stories. I will also be able to give truthful and factual information."¹²⁸

Subsequent examples include a luncheon in 2019 at the Kenyan Editor's Guild Press Club in Nairobi, where then-Ambassador Wu Peng discussed the PRC's position on allegations of debt-trap diplomacy, the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, trade, and the BRI.^{129, 130} Such efforts at agenda-setting are not universally successful. After Wu's speech, Daily Nation (part of the Nation Media Group) continued to publish articles critical of China's involvement in the Standard Gauge Railway.¹³¹

The PRC made another attempt at the November 2020 China-Africa Media Cooperation Forum in Nairobi, which was attended by Wu's successor Zhou Pingjian.¹³² Zhou's speech centered on the merits of China-Africa cooperation, which he contrasted with "those countries that intend to discredit China-Africa cooperation." Forum attendees included Nation Media Group Editor and Kenya Union of Journalists Secretary-General Charles Erick Oduor and Media Council of Kenya CEO Susan Karago.¹³³

Oduor was part of a delegation that visited the People's Daily in 2013, where he also met with representatives from the Ministry of Commerce of China, the MFA, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).¹³⁴ Oduor later weighed in when a PRC newsroom was raided by Kenyan police. He wrote in a public letter that "Police should keep off the newsroom.... There is no justification for violence against journalists. The rot is in the Department of Immigration, where the investigation should be carried out on how expatriates acquire the requisite paper to work in Kenya."¹³⁵ Another aspect of the PRC's strategy consists of honoring "friendly" local journalists with awards. Examples from Kenya include a photography competition jointly organized by the PRC Embassy in Kenya and the Kenya Union of Journalists, held in 2019 and 2020.¹³⁶ Employees of friendly host-country media and PRC state media were among the awardees.¹³⁷

In practical terms, PRC official media have established content-sharing agreements with Kenyan media. Kenya Broadcasting Company has republished over 200 articles from CGTN, including content espousing themes such as "China's vision for building a community of shared future."¹³⁸ KBC journalist Eric Biegon, who received training in China, wrote some articles in this vein.¹³⁹ Biegon also published stories in PRC official media.^{140, 141, 142, 143} However, publishing sponsored content sometimes inadvertently highlights the differences between the official PRC line and the views of local journalists. For example, content published by Kenya's Nation Media Group included articles such as "Xi expresses confidence in creating new, greater miracles as key Party congress concludes."¹⁴⁴ The same media group also published an autonomous article titled, "How China's civil society collapsed under Xi Jinping."¹⁴⁵

Developing Ties with the Business Community

As noted above, the PRC's influence work has focused largely on overseas Chinese in the business community, although no open-source information has unearthed attempts to influence elections. Compared with the focus on institutional development in PRC engagement with political parties and the media, engagement with the native Kenyan business community has been more episodic. During his tenure as PRC Ambassador to Kenya, Wu Peng engaged with business leaders on a limited scale. In April 2019, he met with Standard Chartered Bank Kenya CEO Kariuki Ngari and discussed

"strengthening financial cooperation between the bank and Chinese enterprises in Kenya."¹⁴⁶ In October 2019, Wu joined Speaker of Kenya National Assembly Justin B.N. Muturi, Principal Secretary of Kenya Ministry of ICT Jerome Ochieng, and Chairman of China-Africa Fund for Industrial Cooperation Han Hongmei [韩红梅] in attending the first China-Africa Mobile Internet Economy Summit, where he invited Kenyan businesses to attend the second China International Import Expo to "showcase their unique products to increase exports to China."¹⁴⁷

Managing "anti-China" Candidates

PRC efforts to manage the seemingly hostile 2022 William Ruto campaign in Kenya were particularly salient and occurred at senior levels. During the election, Ruto called for a review of Chinese-backed lending to Kenya. After an Afrobarometer poll in November 2021 showed that the Kenyan public was "exceptionally aware of ... debt issues and their connection to China," Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi himself traveled to Nairobi, where he held a press conference to refute claims of debt-trap diplomacy.¹⁴⁸ During the Kenyan general election in 2022, Business Daily Africa, KBC, and Capital FM all published the same op-ed by Ambassador Zhou Pingjian titled "China's Africa debt deals guided by transparency."¹⁴⁹ The op-ed was a response to Ruto's criticism of Chinese lending.

Maintaining Relationships After Elections

Underscoring Beijing's ideology-neutral approach to electoral influence, Special Representative for African Affairs Liu Yuxi [刘豫锡] met with Ruto on September 13, 2022, days after he won the election.¹⁵⁰ In a further sign of Chinese sensitivity to Ruto's call for a review of Kenya's debts to the PRC, Ambassador Zhou announced a revision to loan conditions.¹⁵¹ Zhou met with National Assembly Speaker Moses Wetangula on September 22. Wetangula assured Zhou "that the new administration of President William Ruto has no plans whatsoever to scale down our collaboration with the Republic of China [sic]. We shall continue to pursue robust engagements and exchanges of high-level visits to enhance our relations."¹⁵² China tried to consolidate ties with the Ruto administration on September 26, when Ambassador Zhou met with United Democratic Alliance Secretary-General Veronica Maina. Zhou said that inter-party relations were an important part of Kenya-China relations, that the Chinese side highly valued the development of friendly relations between the two countries and the two parties, and that the PRC wished to carry out exchanges on party and national governance with the UDA.¹⁵³

Impact

The PRC and CCP's influence work in Kenya did not squash significant China-skeptic rhetoric during the 2022 election campaign. However, the campaign and its aftermath demonstrated the benefits of the PRC's holistic approach to political influence. Chinese and local media mitigated China-skeptic sentiment during the campaign. After the election, China worked with the Ruto administration and made sure that campaign rhetoric did not metastasize into policy measures that may have been detrimental to the PRC's interests. The PRC's engagement in Kenya highlights a political influence strategy that, rather than focusing on a single party or candidate, relies on multiple ways to safeguard Chinese interests, regardless of changes in administration or host-country political dynamics.

ITALY

Developing Relationships with Influential Political Actors

In Italy, the PRC's relationship-building efforts have spanned the political spectrum. Beginning in 2013, PRC Ambassador Li Junhua began meeting intermittently with Beppe Grillo, who launched the Five Star Movement (M5S).¹⁵⁴ He also held meetings with former Lega party leader (and subsequently Deputy Prime Minister) Matteo Salvini while the latter was in opposition, Ivan Scalfarotto of the Democratic Party (PD) and subsequently Italia Viva, Former Prime Minister Romano Prodi of the Democratic Party (PD) [Partito Democratico], as well as Former Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, a former figure of the Italian Communist Party [o Comunista Italiano] turned leader of the mainstream PD.¹⁵⁵ One can therefore describe Li's outreach to Italy's political community as extensive, covering both left and right parties. It also extended beyond top party leadership and into regional governments, as demonstrated by Li's meeting in 2019 with Matera Municipal Council Representative Antoni Materdomini and Mayor of Citta dei Sassi Domenico Bernardi,¹⁵⁶ and perhaps more importantly with officials from the Tuscany region. The latter included meeting the region's president Enrico Rossi,¹⁵⁷ who publicized these meetings during the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic and got rewarded with priority deployment of Chinese medical equipment, masks, and doctors in the most deadly months of the 2020 crisis.¹⁵⁸ Tuscany is of particular interest for PRC authorities due to the presence of a large Chinese community, including in the city of Prato which hosts the biggest concentration of Chinese nationals in Europe (and therefore a dedicated underground police station run by the PRC).

ILD Deputy Director Qian Hongshan [钱洪山] has also built relationships with Italian political parties. Speaking with Italian Democratic Party Secretary and International Department Director Emanuele Fiano in August 2020, Qian expressed a desire to deepen party-to-party relations and promote the China-Italy strategic relationship.¹⁵⁹ In June 2022, Qian spoke to the Italian Parliament's multi-party Friends of China Association [Associazione Parlamentare "Amici della Cina"] in a session attended by association president Maria Rizzotti and representatives of Forza Italia, PD, and the M5S. In addition to giving an overview of the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative and the 20th Party Congress, Qian said he wanted to strengthen cooperation with the Friends of China Association and build a strategic partnership between China and Italy and China and Europe.¹⁶⁰

Interactions with Italian politicians and parties were numerous and spanned across practically the full spectrum of the Italian political field (with the notable exception of Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, whose leadership chose early to denounce the warming up of intergovernmental relations between Italy and China).¹⁶¹ However, the quality of the relationship was unequal depending on the parties. It was more cordial on the left than on the right, and it seems to have been extremely fruitful in the case of the Five Star Movement, at least during the time in which it was led by Beppe Grillo. Meetings with the Chinese Embassy were then numerous and often lasted several hours, and the pro-Chinese stance from the movement was sufficiently clear for then-opposition leader Giorgia Meloni to accuse it publicly of being "China's Fifth Column in Italy".¹⁶² The PRC's influence over the Five-Star Movement had consequences in the life of the party, with numerous reports of internal vote manipulation and censorship in the online participative platforms that made much of the Movement's appeal during the 2010s.¹⁶³

Developing Relationships with Host-Country Media

Media cooperation between China and Italy has been slow to take root. One prominent example is a March 2019 China-Italy Media Dialogue organized by China Media Group [中央广播电视总台] and co-sponsored by Economic Daily, Il Sole 24 Ore, and Class Editori. Senior leaders including Vice Minister of the CCP Propaganda Department Jiang Jianguo [蒋建国], Ambassador Li Ruiyu [李瑞宇], Director General of the Chinese Foreign Languages Publishing Administration Du Zhanyuan [杜占元], Vice Undersecretary for Publishing Vito Claudio Crimi, and Vice Minister of Economic Development Michele Geraci attended.¹⁶⁴ At the time of the Five-Star Movement-Lega government in 2018-2019, when the government signed up to the BRI, national broadcaster RAI and national news agency ANSA also signed an agreement with Chinese counterparts China Media Group (CMG) and Xinhua, allowing the Italian outlets to freely use Chinese content,¹⁶⁵ leading to fears that the agreements would be used to promote tailor-made Chinese narratives and make them appear as non-Chinese. Despite documented efforts of Chinese pressure to these media outlets during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, this and other forms of cooperation did not produce significant friendly coverage, partly because starting in 2021, the new Italian government led by Mario Draghi progressively annulled the effects of these agreements, before encouraging outlets to end them altogether. ANSA's cooperation with Xinhua officially ended in August 2022, but much of the agreement had already been emptied of its contents in the previous month. ANSA covered the Meloni government's pullout of the BRI in a neutral manner in 2023, while also noting that "Taiwan will be a fundamental issue for Italy."¹⁶⁶ The same was also true for Italian news agency Adnkronos, despite its relationship with Xinhua.¹⁶⁷ Agenzia Nova and AGI both ran positive coverage of Meloni's statements on Taiwan despite their relationships with Xinhua.¹⁶⁸ Attempts to pressure host-country media proved ineffective, with Il Foglio (among others) promoting Meloni's outreach to Taiwan despite receiving a warning from a PRC Embassy spokesperson to "stop speaking badly of China."¹⁶⁹

Beijing has also tried to garner support from Italy's Chinese-language media. A delegation from China News Service [中国新闻社] visited representatives of the two major overseas Chinese media in Italy.¹⁷⁰ At the meeting, China News Service Deputy Director Xia Chunping [夏春平] recognized the efforts of the two outlets to reach out to local diaspora communities and to "spread the voice of China" [传播中国声音]. Xia pledged additional assistance in providing content and technical assistance in future.¹⁷¹ Bo Yuan [博源], general manager of local overseas Chinese media agencies EuroLink [欧联网] and European Associated Press [欧洲联合通讯社], said that overseas Chinese media should move beyond serving only overseas Chinese communities and should be communicating news to Italians in Italian to influence public opinion.¹⁷²

Developing Relationships with the Business Community

The PRC Embassy in Italy has invested in relationships between its diplomats and the local business community. This suggests that the PRC views the business community as an important constituency that can act as a buffer in domestic politics. Beginning with Ambassador Ding Wei [丁伟] in 2011, successive ambassadors have met with Diana Bracco, President and Managing Director of the Bracco Group, a diagnostic imaging company.¹⁷³ Bracco serves as Vice President of the Italy-China Foundation [Fondazione Italia Cina; 意中基金会] and has helped with the annual China Awards, working in cooperation with Class Editori, the Italian Chamber of Commerce in China, the Italian Foreign Ministry, and the Italy-China Chamber of Commerce.¹⁷⁴ At the 2019 awards ceremony, she declared that "the relationship between Italy and China is ever stronger."¹⁷⁵ Bracco also attended the first edition of the Italy-China Business Forum, jointly organized by Confindustria, the Italian Ministry of Economic Development, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italian Embassy in Beijing, and sponsored by the PRC government.¹⁷⁶

In the summer before the 2022 elections, Ambassador Li met the Italian business community in coordination with the Italy-China Foundation and the Italy-China Chamber of Commerce [Camera di Commercio Italo-Cinese, 意中基金会]. Official embassy readouts do not record him connecting business and trade with the coming elections. Li visited the Piaggio Group on May 27, accompanied by company Chairman Robert Colanino and Congressman Matteo Colanino.¹⁷⁷ On June 14, Li met with Italy-China Foundation President Boselli and members of the Board of Directors of the Italy-China Foundation and the Italy-China Chamber of Commerce to exchange views on the cooperation between the two institutions. The group also discussed working with China, participation in the Shanghai Fair, and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on Italian companies.¹⁷⁸ Li visited Xiaomi [小米], a Chinese electronics and telecom firm working in the Italian market; and CIFA, a cement company owned in part by Chinese company Zoomlion Heavy Industry Science and Technology Co., Ltd. [中联重科股份有限公司].¹⁷⁹

The ILD does similar outreach. In May 2017, ILD Deputy Director Lin Honghong [林红红] met in Beijing with Chiara Fanali, Officer for International Trade of the Italian business association Assolombarda, where they discussed cooperation under the BRI and Silk Road Business Council¹⁸⁰. However, it is unclear whether these discussions led to substantive cooperation.

United Front Organizations' Cultivation of Politicians

United Front-linked organizations use groups like the Committee of Chinese Representatives in Italy [Comitato di Rappresentanza Cinesi in Italia] to reach out to legislators.¹⁸¹ China also appoints influential politicians to leadership positions in United Front-linked bodies: Former Prime Minister of Italy Massimo D'Alema's appointment as Chairperson of the Silk Road Cities Alliance is one such example.¹⁸² The most spectacular example of cultivation of allies was probably economist Michele Geraci, recruited as a university professor in finance for various Chinese universities in 2008. Upon his return to Italy, Geraci became a well-known pundit and an outspoken promoter of co-operation with the PRC. Reputedly close to Matteo Salvini, he entered the Five-Star Movement-Lega government in 2018 as Deputy Minister of Economic Development and was one of the key negotiators of the Memorandum of Understanding that made Italy part of the BRI network.¹⁸³ In subsequent years, Geraci continued to promote a strengthening of economic links with China, and vehemently defended the BRI when the government moved to pull out from during the year 2023¹⁸⁴.

On a limited scale, United Front-linked organizations have recruited politicians to run for various offices. In 2007, Pan Yongchang [潘永长] rallied immigrant groups in support of then-incumbent Democratic Party [Partito Democratico] Rome Mayor Walter Veltroni, while Giada Lin [林红玉] joined Nadia Conti's campaign for mayor and encouraged overseas Chinese to vote in 2012.¹⁸⁵ In 2016, the China-Italy Entrepreneurs Union [Unione Imprenditori Italia-Cina/中意商联] faced allegations of organized voting in favor of Giuseppe Sala during his campaign to be elected mayor of Milan, the industrial heart of Italy; voters with little Italian were provided guidance on for whom to vote.¹⁸⁶ In 2019, the China-Italy Entrepreneurs Union came out again to support the candidacies of Huang Suping [黄素平] and Francesco Wu [吴柏清] in Milan local elections, while Teresa Lin [林诗炫], associated with the Association of Chinese Young Entrepreneurs in Europe [欧洲青年企业家协会], was elected to the Prato city council.¹⁸⁷

PRC-based United Front-linked organizations have also cultivated political relationships, particularly in the case of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) [中国人民对外友好协会]. The CPAFFC cooperated with the Chengdu Municipal People's Government, the Italian Belt and Road Research Institute, and the European Association for Promotion of Relations with China to host the Second China-Italy Local Government Cooperation Dialogue in November 2019. The event was attended by representatives from administrations in Lazio, Rome, Palermo, Chengdu, and Jinan.¹⁸⁸ The CPAFFC also worked with the PRC Embassy in Italy to host the Third China-Italy Friendship Cities Cooperation Dialogue in November 2022, attended by local representatives from Milan and Emilia-Romagna.¹⁸⁹

Indicating Preferences and Managing "anti-China" Candidate

Chinese state media and its local affiliates have signaled their preferences by calling out "anti-China" leaders. They will walk back their critiques if they decide the politician in question is amenable to PRC preferences. In 2019, Xinhua commented on the selection of the Conte-2 cabinet: "Luigi Di Maio, head of the Five Star Movement, was an unusual choice as Minister of Foreign Affairs. The 33-year-old Di Maio -- who was deputy prime minister in the previous Conte government -- never graduated from university, has very limited foreign language skills, and has shown little interest in global issues in his public life." Di Maio, then a Five-Star Movement leader, subsequently adopted clear pro-China positions (although he later adopted an Atlanticist stance, under the Draghi government in 2021-2022), and Xinhua therefore removed this passage (China.org.cn did not, however).¹⁹⁰ In the autumn of 2022, Quotidiano Del Popolo Online (the Italian version of People's Daily Online) published several articles downplaying the prospect of a change of foreign policy under Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni^{191, 192}. Once in government, and despite a good personal relation with Xi Jinping, Meloni and her government would prove much less amenable to Chinese in-roads, whether economic or political. Some of her moves included Italy's pullout of the BRI - although these could be said, indeed, to be in line with the general direction taken by its predecessor the Draghi government starting in January 2021.

Maintaining Relationships After Elections

The PRC engaged quickly with newly inaugurated Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, despite her comments supportive of Taiwan and critical of China. Xi met with Meloni at the G20 meeting in Bali in November 2022, during which Meloni accepted Xi's invitation to visit China. The two leaders reportedly discussed bilateral trade and agreed to the sale of 250 ATR-42 aircraft.¹⁹³ Xi touted further economic benefits if Italy advocated for the PRC within the European Union, telling Meloni of his "hope that two sides can make use of the China-Italy governmental committee to explore cooperation in high-end manufacturing, clean energy, aviation and aerospace.... It is also hoped that Italy can play an important role in promoting the European Union to practice a positive and autonomous policy towards China."¹⁹⁴ The distinctly positive PRC coverage of their discussion omitted Meloni's reminder of the "the importance of resuming all channels of dialogue, including on human rights."¹⁹⁵ During the summer of 2023, when it became increasingly clear that Italy was going to pull out of the BRI, Chinese news outlets generally avoided direct attacks on the Italian government, although they regularly provided arguments for Italy's continued membership, implying an economic cost to be paid in case of a pullout.¹⁹⁶

Impact

Despite a broad-based effort, PRC and CCP influence activities in Italy did not prevent the formation of a government comprised of numerous politicians who voiced critical views of China, or Italy pulling out of the BRI in December 2023. Content-sharing agreements with several Italian media organizations did not yield a media environment that was friendlier to Chinese interests, while diplomatic outreach to politicians mainly served to generate controversy about that outreach, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic changed perceptions about China. Much of this limited impact is due to the action of the governments of Mario Draghi and subsequently of Giorgia Meloni to progressively limit Chinese influence in the country. However, this does not mean that all bridges are cut: following her meetings with Xi, there are signs that Meloni is prepared to engage Beijing despite the pullout from BRI or moves that would have been considered unfriendly a few years ago (such as the actioning of safeguard measures to keep Chinese investors away from critical technologies in national tyremaker Pirelli¹⁹⁷). This suggests (for now) that Beijing's ideological flexibility remains effective, although Meloni's agenda might not be entirely to Beijing's liking.

THE PHILIPPINES

Developing Relationships with Influential Politicians

In the Philippines, PRC actors have taken a long-term approach to relationship management. This is demonstrated by longstanding relationships between Chinese diplomats and members of the Marcos family (including former First Lady Imelda Marcos and current President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr.) as well as with former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. PRC outreach includes the Malacañang Palace and key legislators. Much of this is coordinated by the ILD.

The PRC remained in contact with the Marcos family even when it did not hold the presidency.¹⁹⁸ In February 2018, a delegation led by ILD Vice Minister Guo Yezhou visited the Philippines and attended a reception Marcos Jr. hosted under the auspices of the Nacionalista Party. This reception was also attended by Marcos Jr.’s mother, Imelda Marcos, and his sister, then-Ilocos Norte Governor Imee Marcos.¹⁹⁹ Marcos Jr. has held a moderate view on China since at least 2015, when he criticized the Philippine government’s decision to reject talks with China over the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea). “China has opened the door and we shut it. The Chinese said let’s talk and we snubbed them. It’s like the Philippine government itself is encouraging China to take and maintain an unbending stance on the issue. So, talk, and tell them: we are not happy with what you are doing and we do not agree with what you are doing. But the next thing you say is: How do we fix this? We do not want war. Arbitration is not one that is going to be recognized by the Chinese. So it has to be in negotiations.”²⁰⁰

On the legislative side, ILD Director Song Tao (now head of the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office) attended the First Meeting of the China–Philippines Political Parties Belt and Road Consultation Mechanism with Philippines Senator PDP–Laban representative Koko Pimentel, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives and Nacionalista Party representative Raneo Abu, House Minority Leader Joseph Stephen Paduano, as well as the Nationalist People’s Coalition Foreign Affairs portfolio holder in June 2020.ⁱ Song said the meeting’s goal was to explore how the two countries’ political parties could improve bilateral relations, coordinate their development strategies, promote BRI cooperation, protect regional stability, and provide greater welfare to their people.²⁰¹ In September 2020, Song and Koko Pimentel co-hosted the China–Philippines Governing Party Dialogue in Xiamen and discussed political trust, pandemic response, and exchange and cooperation.²⁰²

The PRC is not solely focused on the Marcos clan and their party; it extends to retired, but still influential, leaders like former presidents and their families. In June 2022, Ambassador Huang met with Vice President Sara Duterte and Davao Mayor Baste Duterte, daughter and son, respectively, of former President Rodrigo Duterte. Huang promised to fund 13 school buildings (valued at USD 2.7 million) in Duterte’s home city of Davao. PRC authorities had earlier offered support to other cities on the island of Mindanao, donating funding for a 150-bed drug rehab center in Sarangani and a similar one in Agusan del Sur.²⁰³

Some ILD engagement occurs through United Front-linked organizations. In August 2022, ILD Director Liu Jianchao [刘建超], himself a former PRC ambassador to the Philippines,²⁰⁴ visited Manila at the invitation of Lakas–CMD National President and Speaker of the House Martin Romualdez, met with the UFWD-linked Philippine Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry [菲律宾中国商会] (PCCCCI) President Hong Jixiang [菲律宾中国商会], and expressed his thanks to the PCCCCI for its contribution to China–Philippines friendship.²⁰⁵ Liu also met with national media to advance his messages on cooperation. Liu expressed his desire for the Chinese and Philippine parties, governments, and media to strengthen exchanges and cooperation. He also expressed his wish for common cause on addressing discrimination, opening a “golden era” of China–Philippine relations, and contributing to regional stability and prosperity.²⁰⁶

ⁱ The Chinese transliteration of the portfolio holder’s surname is 劳甘. However, TextOre was unable to identify the corresponding local-language name of this individual.

Other UFWD-related activity in the Philippines include cultivating former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who serves as Honorary Chairperson of the Association for Philippines-China Understanding (APCU) [菲中了解协会] and the Philippines Silk Road International Chamber of Commerce [菲律宾丝绸之路国际商会]. In the former role, Arroyo defended China's handling of COVID-19, while in the latter she promoted China's "breathtaking" progress.^{207, 208} In a further demonstration of the APCU's efforts to build influence across Philippines politics, it also conferred an award on former President Joseph Estrada in 2022.²⁰⁹

The APCU is a United Front-linked organization that works in close cooperation with the embassy and the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2021, Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi attended the association's inaugural ceremony for its Award for Promoting Philippines-China Understanding (APPCU), alongside former President of the Philippines and APCU Honorary Chairperson Arroyo. In his remarks, Wang discussed bilateral relations regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperating on development, "properly handling the South China Sea issue," and "joining hands to maintain peace and stability in the region."²¹⁰ PRC Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian [黄溪连] attended the inaugural APPCU award ceremony in 2021, and the embassy and the APCU later collaborated to host the January 2022 Manila Forum on China-Philippines Relations, at which Wang gave a video address.^{211, 212} The Philippines Silk Road International Chamber of Commerce also hosted joint events with the Chinese Embassy, including a joint webinar on the Two Sessions [两会], the annual meetings of the National People's Congress [全国人民代表大会] and the National Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference [中国人民政治协商会议全国委员会会议].²¹³

Developing Relationships with Host-Country Media

Shaping public discussion is a key element of PRC engagement, although messaging efforts have faltered over Chinese narratives regarding the South China Sea. The CCP's Propaganda Department and International Liaison Department, State Council Information Office [国务院信息办公室] (SCIO), China International Publishing Group [中国国际出版集团] (CIPG), and the PRC Embassy in the Philippines are involved in media-related outreach and have often involved their Philippine government counterparts. During then-President Duterte's 2016 visit to China, the two sides signed a "Memorandum of Agreement between the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China and the Presidential Communications Operations Office of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines on News, Information Exchange, Training and for other Purposes." The official Joint Statement noted that "Both sides agree to encourage mutual visits of media personnel, exchange of media products, cooperation in facilities, technologies and training between Chinese media and Philippine media including the People's Broadcasting Corporation. The competent media authority of China is willing to enhance exchanges and cooperation with the Presidential Communication Office of the Philippines."²¹⁴

The two sides followed up on this initiative during Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) Martin Andanar's 2017 visit to China for the China-ASEAN Information Ministerial Meeting in Suzhou. The government-run Philippine News Agency reported that Andanar hoped to reach "bilateral communications agreements to boost government media platforms."²¹⁵ In Beijing, Andanar met with Propaganda Department Vice Minister and SCIO Director Jiang Jianguo [蒋建国] about strengthening news and cultural exchanges.²¹⁶ Andanar also met with CIPG and signed a memorandum to increase the exchange of news stories, publications, and translations.²¹⁷ In Shanghai, Andanar met with the media company Eastday [上海东方网股份有限公司] president Xu Shiping [徐世平], Shanghai Media Group [上海文化广播影视集团有限公司] VP Chen Yuren [陈雨人], and Shanghai United Media Group [上海报业集团] General Manager Chen Qiwei [陈启伟].²¹⁸ The Philippines National Press Club (NPC) also signed a partnership agreement with the All-China Journalists Association in 2017 that, in the words of then-NPC President Paul Gutierrez, "'made the NPC a member of the broader Belt and Road Initiative of China."²¹⁹

The government-backed Philippines News Agency (PNA) has published content written by CCP officials, including an op-ed by former Central Party School Vice President Li Junru [李君如], which argued that the “world can learn from China’s unique model of democracy.”²²⁰ PNA has also published pro-China quotes from senior Philippine officials, including then-Secretary of National Defense Delfin Lorenzana, who welcomed the February 2022 donation of military equipment by the PRC (valued at USD 18.5 million) by saying that “this military grant from China speaks volumes on how our two nations can be civil, diplomatic, and friends despite some issues on territorial claims.”²²¹ However, PNA also reports on senior Philippine officials’ critical statements, such as a speech made by Lorenzana regarding the Ayungin Shoal, which is disputed by the Philippines and the PRC.²²²

“Wow China,” a China Radio International program broadcast in collaboration with the Philippine Broadcasting Service (PBS), began airing on Radyo Pilipinas in mid-2018.²²³ The program is co-hosted by a PBS anchor and begins with a call for listeners to “get to know our Chinese brothers for better relations and friendship.”²²⁴ Following a May 2020 uproar on social media and questions from opposition lawmakers about broadcasting Chinese propaganda amid PRC aggression in the South China Sea, PBS General Director Rizal Giovanni Aportadera described the program as “light, informative and entertaining,” and insisted it did not have a political perspective.²²⁵ Casting the issue as one of free speech and free exchange of ideas, the PBS statement noted that the station broadcasts content from many countries, include the U.S.’ Voice of America.²²⁶ Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque also defended the station, saying that citizens had the right “to form their own opinion about that advertisement or program.”²²⁷

Ambassador Huang continued to develop China’s relationship with PBS, meeting with Aportadera in January 2020 in what the PRC Embassy described as a discussion of media cooperation, personnel training, and cultural exchange.²²⁸ The embassy quoted Huang saying that he hoped Philippine media would positively and comprehensively report on bilateral relations and promote understanding and friendship between the two peoples. He said he looked forward to PBS playing a constructive role in this regard.²²⁹ Andanar met with Ambassador Huang in June 2022, when Huang donated broadcasting equipment as a gift from the PRC Embassy.²³⁰

Other media have reprinted and reposted PRC-origin or pro-PRC content, although their editorial lines are not entirely in sync with Beijing. The Manila Times tends to publish pro-China coverage, including an article written by APCU awardee Mauro Gia Samonte titled, “Bongbong can take a lesson from Chinese ambassador.”²³¹ It has also republished at least 3,000 articles from Xinhua. While TextOre was not able to assess the content of these articles, the tranche included pro-China messaging, including one editorial, argued that “decoupling” from China is unrealistic.²³² Furthermore, the sheer scale of republishing indicates Xinhua’s deep presence in the Philippines’ information environment. The Manila Bulletin has republished over 1,000 articles by Xinhua, although it also covered a speech by Marcos in which he said that the Philippines’ ties with the U.S. are “vital” in resolving maritime disputes between China and the Philippines.^{233, 234}

Among overseas Chinese media, Chinese-language newspaper Siong Po [商报] ran a Lunar New Year editorial by the PRC Consul General in Laoag.²³⁵ It has reposted over 4,800 articles from China News Online [中国新闻网] and also reposts infrequently from Xinhua.^{236, 237} With the PRC Embassy and the United Front-linked Philippines Silk Road International Chamber of Commerce, Chinese-language Chinoy TV [菲华电视台] hosted a forum on the implications for the Philippines of the Two Sessions [两会]. Other media organizations present at the event included the Philippines-based, Chinese-language news outlet World News [世界日报], as well as PRC media organizations including China News Online, People’s Daily, The Paper [澎湃], Sina [新浪], and Netease [网易].²³⁸

United Front-linked organizations also cultivate ties with Philippine media. In June 2022, following the presidential election, the APCU held its annual awards ceremony honoring several journalists. The awardees took pro-China stances in their stories, one criticized the allegedly close connection between prominent media outlet Rappler (which sometimes

takes China-skeptic views) and the Philippines Commission on Elections.²³⁹ Honorees included Mauro Gia Samonte, a Manila Times contributor whose columns have been collected into the book *China: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*.²⁴⁰ Samonte's editorials argue that Manila should not get caught between Washington and Beijing, but he also repeats various PRC-created narratives on issues like the South China Sea.²⁴¹ Paul Gutierrez, President of the National Press Club, was another awardee. He reported on the ties between Rappler and the Philippines Commission on Elections.²⁴² Like Samonte, Gutierrez is deeply critical of the United States and sees China as a longtime friend and a bulwark against alleged U.S. and Japanese predation. "Aware of how Western Imperialism and their local cohorts manipulate the Philippine mainstream media, in May 2020 and even as the Covid-19 pandemic rages," he wrote, "I established Pinoy Exposé, primarily as an avenue to counter Western propaganda and help promote the views of China knowing they represent the truth in any issue as well as other articles that promote global peace, common prosperity, and understanding."²⁴³

Philippines media often take a stand on contentious issues like the territorial dispute over the South China Sea or other areas in which Beijing is perceived as bullying. The Philippines Daily Enquirer published an editorial before the May 2022 election that criticized Marcos for "replicating the Sinophile populist" [Duterte], rather than "advocating a proactive and patriotic approach to the West Philippine Sea disputes and our overall relations with superpowers."²⁴⁴ However, it has also published pro-engagement articles, including one on "how President Marcos Jr can sweeten his upcoming state visit to China."²⁴⁵ Following an August 2022 statement by Ambassador Huang condemning U.S. House Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and calling on Manila to abide strictly by Beijing's "one China" principle, the Manila Bulletin quoted Senator Risa Hontiveros' retort that Huang "should not presume to lecture the Philippines as to how we should pursue our foreign policy objectives."^{246, 247} "Huang 'shouldn't pontificate on such policies,' given that China 'stubbornly and steadfastly refuses to recognize a decision rendered by an international arbitral court, and ignores and flouts international law in the West Philippine Sea when it suits her interest."²⁴⁸

Developing Ties with the Business Community

The PRC has been the Philippines' largest trade partner since 2016, with the mainland PRC and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region jointly accounting for more than a quarter of the Philippines' external trade.²⁴⁹ Philippine businesses have participated in the China International Import Expos since their inception in 2018 and was the "country guest of honor" at the 2020 and 2021 China International Fairs for Investment and Trade.²⁵⁰ In terms of influence with the business community, however, the results seem limited to the Chinese diaspora. Ambassador Huang attended the 48th Philippine Business Forum and Expo, which was organized by the Philippines Chamber of Commerce and Industry and hosted by Francis Chua, Founding Chairman of the Silk Road International Chamber of Commerce and Honorary President of the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FFCCCII) [菲律宾商联总会], both of which are linked to the UFWD.²⁵¹ The PRC Embassy's connection with the Philippine Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCII) were sufficiently close that then-PRC Ambassador Zhao Jianhua [赵鉴华] administered the oath of office to its new board at the Chamber's tenth anniversary celebrations in April 2017.²⁵²

However, outside the local Chinese community, businesses in the Philippines have generally looked out for their own interests. While the Philippine Chamber of Commerce urged the Senate to ratify the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement, a free-trade area strongly (but not exclusively) supported by the PRC, it did so in the name of supporting domestic economic growth.²⁵³ When the U.S. sanctioned the Chinese telecoms giant Huawei and urged its allies to avoid the company, media reported that Globe Telecom general counsel Froilan Castelo had told a Senate panel that the company would look at alternative vendors. He was also reported to have told senators that "80 percent" of Globe's existing equipment was from Huawei and, from a technical standpoint, the Chinese firm offered what

Global viewed as the most advanced 5G capabilities.²⁵⁴ The non-Chinese business community has also stood with the rest of the Philippines on core issues like sovereignty. In a September 2020 statement, the Chamber of Commerce of the Philippine Islands “commended” President Duterte’s declaration at the 75th UN General Assembly that the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s 2016 ruling on South China Seas sovereignty claims is “beyond compromise.”²⁵⁵

Political Actors’ Relationships with United Front organizations

The FFCCCII and PCCCII have long nurtured a relationship with Marcos Jr., who attended FFCCCII events as early as 2016 and addressed the organization in 2020.²⁵⁶ In return, during the 2022 Philippine election campaign, the FFCCCII and the PCCCII both praised him, and one PCCCII leader personally endorsed him, citing his favorable stance toward China.²⁵⁷ The FFCCCII’s relationship with Marcos was aided by the PRC Embassy, which provided the venue for a photo exhibition arranged by the FFCCCII. The exhibit highlighted the role played by Marcos’s mother, Imelda, in improving relationships between the PRC and the Philippines.²⁵⁸ Marcos invited FFCCCII leaders to his inauguration, demonstrating his appreciation for the support he received from the group.²⁵⁹ The FFCCCII and PCCCII gave Marcos’ first 100 days as president a rating of 8.5–9 out of 10. The following month, Marcos met with the FFCCCII to discuss economic topics and COVID-19 relief.²⁶⁰

Indicating Preferences and Managing “anti-China” Candidates

In 2022, Beijing signaled its preference for Marcos Jr. clearly, albeit without a recommendation to voters and without quoting a government official. Instead, the PRC cast Marcos Jr. as a pragmatic leader who would handle China prudently. It portrayed his opponent as a reckless puppet of Washington, who might stir up conflict. Shortly before the 2022 election, the Global Times ran an article quoting Chen Xiangmiao, an assistant research fellow at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, describing Marcos, Jr. as “known for his pragmatic political views,” whereas opponent Leni Robredo “is deemed as a pro-US politician.”²⁶¹ The Global Times also quoted Hernan Tiu Laurel, founder of Philippine-BRICS Strategic Studies and someone who Chinese state media often interviews, saying U.S. media “hyped” Marcos Jr.’s connection to his dictator father.²⁶² Tiu noted that Robredo said she would use the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling on the Philippines-China maritime dispute as a “weapon,” while Marcos said he would support a code of conduct between ASEAN and China.²⁶³ Tiu concluded that Marcos would “definitely continue to engage China in dialogue and negotiations” to arrive at “win-win” solutions.²⁶⁴ The People’s Daily re-posted this article on its English website. Meanwhile, Ambassador Huang was quoted on CNN Philippines saying, “China never interferes in the internal politics of other countries, and the election is an internal politics in the Philippines. We believe that the Philippine people have the wisdom to choose their own leader.”²⁶⁵

Maintaining Relationships After Elections

The 2022 election in the Philippines shows that the PRC maintains relationships with “friendly” candidates. Since winning the election, Marcos Jr. has met with Ambassador Huang twice and, separately, with former PRC Vice President Wang Qishan [王岐山] as well as former Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi. Marcos promised to maintain the “strong relationship” between the Philippines and China and said “I have been in contact with China since I was very young and paid long-term attention to China’s development. I deeply praise the achievements China has made.”^{266, 267} Wang said the two countries would “usher in a ‘golden era.’” Marcos agreed, suggesting the deepening of cultural, educational, and military exchanges.²⁶⁸ The Global Times reported that “Against the backdrop of the US trying hard to push Southeast Asian countries to encircle China, Chinese observers are confident the new Philippines government has the wisdom to know what is best for the country.”²⁶⁹

The Chinese relationship with Marcos also shows that the PRC is willing to work to maintain positive relations. After Marcos called for a renegotiation of Chinese lending to the Philippines, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Wang Wenbin said China will “coordinate seamlessly” with the Philippines on renegotiation. The PRC Embassy issued a similar message that was reported in the *Global Times*.²⁷⁰ In addition to offering support for Marcos, the PRC has also tried to influence the bilateral relationship. After the election, an editorial in *People's Daily* listed priorities for the two countries, including preventing U.S. “interference” in the South China Sea, growing an economic relationship to create “a social foundation for attitudes towards China in the Philippines,” advancing the “high-quality construction” of the BRI, and cooperating on challenges in the Philippines, such as poverty and food security.²⁷¹

Post-election, Philippines media has supported constructive relations but appears united on sovereignty issues. GMA Network, a news and entertainment channel, reported that Marcos called on China to act in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. GMA also ran a story in which Marcos said that ASEAN “wants no violence in the South China Sea.”^{272, 273} Following an incident in which the PRC Coast Guard seized PRC rocket parts that were being towed by a Philippine Navy vessel in waters off a Philippines-occupied island, the Philippines media offered a mix of support for constructive bilateral relations combined with calls for President Marcos Jr. to hold Beijing to account.²⁷⁴ The *Philippines Star* published an editorial on “what China can learn from Western nations,” while other coverage included a report on a speech made by then-PRC Premier Li Keqiang [李克强] on the importance of “cordial relations” and an article on Marcos holding China to account over the alleged seizure of the rocket parts.^{275, 276, 277} ABS-CBN, a news network, published a story on the “need” to address the alleged seizure of the rocket parts, but separately reported on Marcos saying that China is “ready for a ‘golden era’ with the Philippines.”²⁷⁸

Impact

PRC and CCP political influence activities in the Philippines have been effective, generating a stable bilateral relationship despite deep disputes between the two countries (and others) regarding maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea. Political influence efforts in Kenya and Italy demonstrate the PRC and CCP’s ability to manage hostile counterparts, even when some influence channels fail. Chinese activity in the Philippines is a good example of various efforts that combine to steady what might otherwise be a tumultuous bilateral relationship. The PRC’s willingness to engage with Marcos’s requests for debt relief shows a pragmatic willingness to compromise in order to protect political relationships and PRC interests. Successful political influence activities include maintaining relationships with influential political actors, including with the current President Marcos and former President Arroyo. While the local media accepts some stories from PRC- and CCP-supported media and publishes pro-China editorials by Filipino journalists, it also publishes reporting and opinion critical of about the value of PRC-Philippines relations on economic and trade opportunities but is as willing as the media to stand up to Beijing on sovereignty issues.

CONCLUSION

Under CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, China has taken an increasingly assertive posture in its foreign relations and widespread political influence activities. The March 2021 report by U.S. National Intelligence Council after the U.S. presidential election found that Beijing understands the risks of being caught exerting inappropriate influence on elections, and therefore may view traditional influence operations as offering sufficient gains at manageable costs. The findings of this study corroborate that conclusion: across Kenya, Italy, and the Philippines, the PRC and CCP deploy a wide range of influence activities, but the majority of these are overt and constant, rather than occurring solely

during elections. Teams composed mainly of people from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CCP International Liaison Department, and official media organizations construct stable overseas political environments in which China can pursue its interests. Indeed, the relatively limited scale of activity during election cycles suggests that political influence activities have been successful in generating political environments that are conducive to PRC interests, so much so that Beijing often does not need to risk engineering a specific election result.

Three particular elements emerge as the best indicators of the flexibility and pragmatism of this approach. First, a party or candidate's ideology is rarely a reason not to cultivate relations. While PRC and CCP officials cultivate ties with socialist and leftist political actors, the vast majority of engagements take place with either governing or primary opposition parties. Second, the PRC's approach to China-skeptic sentiment focuses on calming tensions and winning over candidates, rather than rebutting criticism. Even if state media has criticized a candidate or party during an election campaign, the PRC is typically ready to ally once they take office. This was the case with President Ruto in Kenya and President Yoon in South Korea. Third, the PRC's multilateral summits serve a dual role, by building support and by raising the stature of the PRC as a convening power and an alternative to the West.

The primary objective of this type of overt PRC and CCP political influence is to build and maintain a large network of relationships. While there are some differences in the methods China uses in Italy, the Philippines, and Kenya, and their respective efficacy, this applies in all three cases. This means that monitoring PRC influence efforts requires persistent attention, rather than episodic focus during election seasons. Countering these efforts requires providing alternatives to the benefits offered by the PRC, such as leadership development and exchanges for political leaders, parties, and training and content-sharing opportunities for local media. Such efforts, moreover, need to be as sustained and long term as the PRC's.

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¹⁸⁶ Some media took the view that the vote was founded on a desire to be a constituency that was heard, rather than suggesting a PRC or CCP role, such as Daniele Brigadoi Cologna, "[CINESITALIANI] Prove Di Partecipazione Politica Attiva. I Cinesi d'Italia e Le Primarie Del Pd," Torino World Affairs Institute [in Italian, translation by Google], 20 March 2016, <https://www.twai.it/articles/cinesitaliani-prove-di-partecipazione-politica-attiva-i-cinesi-ditalia-e-le-primarie-del-pd/>; Wu himself insisted that "Some associations have taken a position by deciding to support Sala, but ours is not an organized vote. The Chinese community is not a monolith. We have raised awareness to go and vote in these primaries which are open, then everyone will choose who wants." Matteo Pucciarelli, "Primarie Milano, i Cinesi Ai Seggi Diventano Un Caso. Le Comunità Straniere: 'Nessun Voto Di Scambio,'" *la Repubblica* [in Italian, translation by Google], 07 February 2016, https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/02/06/news/primarie_milano_cinesi-132855904/.

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²⁴³ *Ibid.* Gutierrez also said, "Even before I became a student activist during the martial law years, I was always drawn to the study of history, especially the history of other countries in the fight against the abuses and rapacity of Western/US Imperialism, of which the most absorbing is the history of China and its struggle for independence from foreign domination. Thus, at an early age (grade 6), I was already reading the works of Chairman Mao Zedong ('On Contradiction,' 'On Practice,' 'People's War,' among others). For me, China and the Philippines are 'brothers' bound by their shared history and their common struggle for national independence and against Western/US Imperialism. I had always noted that long before Western colonialists arrived on Philippine shores, China and the Philippines had always been friends and trading partners. They fought together during the Filipinos' struggle for independence, first

against Spanish Colonialism, US Imperialism, and then against Japanese militarism.”

²⁴⁴ Richard Heydarian, “On China: Marcos Jr. vs Leni,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, February 8, 2022, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/149555/on-china-marcos-jr-vs-leni>.

²⁴⁵ “How President Marcos Jr. Can Sweeten His Upcoming State Visit to China,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 01 December 2022, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/159200/how-president-marcos-jr-can-sweeten-his-upcoming-state-visit-to-china>.

²⁴⁶ Joseph Pedrajas, “Don’t Lecture Ph on Its Foreign Policy, Hontiveros Tells Chinese Envoy,” *Manila Bulletin*, 05 August 2022, <https://mb.com.ph/2022/08/05/dont-lecture-ph-on-its-foreign-policy-hontiveros-tells-chinese-envoy/>.

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