

Testimony before the House of Commons' Special Committee on Canada-China Relations

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Chairman Regan, Vice-Chairs and distinguished Members of the Special Committee, it's an honor to be here. Thank you for the generous invitation to testify before the Committee today for a second time.

Conceptual Issue

Given the topic of foreign interference that poses threats to national security, I would like to start with some definitional issues. What constitutes "foreign interference"? How do we differentiate "foreign influence" from "foreign interference"? A country can exert influence on a foreign country through the use of "carrots" (such as, financial aid and concessional loans), "sticks" (such as, economic sanctions) and persuasion (such as, propaganda or disinformation campaign). Democracies have a more open pluralistic society and are more tolerant of foreign influence, and conversely, autocracies are less tolerant, because policy contestation tend to take place between factions of the ruling elites, rather than in the public realm.¹

When does "foreign influence" become "foreign interference"? Foreign interference refers to the "grey zone" of domestic security. The terms that have been used to describe it range from what are "covert and deceptive",² to "malicious", and "manipulative".³ The scope of what foreign interference laws cover also differ among countries.⁴ Thus, the distinction between legitimate foreign influence, as every country aims to pursue with its public diplomacy, and foreign interference is *not* clear-cut. It should be recognized that they exist along a continuum rather than in binary terms.

¹ Katherine Mansted, "The Domestic Security Grey Zone: Navigating the Space Between Foreign Influence and Foreign Interference", ANU *National Security College Occasional Paper*, February 2021.

² Such as in Australia's [National Security Legislation Amendment \(Espionage and Foreign Interference\) Act 2018](#). Also, see the definitions of "countering foreign interference" [here](#).

³ There is a lack of consensus among European Union countries as to what constitutes "[foreign interference](#)".

⁴ The [FBI](#) describes "malign foreign influence" as those used to "spread disinformation, sow discord ...to undermine confidence in our democratic institutions and values." The US [Department of Homeland Security](#) defines it as "malign actions ... designed to sow discord, manipulate public discourse, discredit the electoral system, bias the development of policy, or disrupt markets for the purpose of undermining the interests of the US and its allies." The Australian Act is narrower in scope, which is intended to prevent erosion of "public confidence in political and government institutions" and pernicious effects on "national security and economic prosperity".

United Front Work

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s United Front strategy is premised on the idea of "uniting with lesser enemies to defeat greater ones". The strategy proved highly successful in the civil war that brought the CCP to power in 1949, by enabling it to recruit non-communist power holders, business leaders and local communities to undermine the Kuomintang government (1928-49).⁵ While much of the United Front Work was inward facing in the past, its prominence has been reinvigorated and scope expanded since 2015. In the same year as the term limits for the President was abolished, the government departments in charge of ethnic affairs, religion and Overseas Chinese affairs were subsumed within the Party's United Front Work Department (UFWD).⁶ Since then, the UFWD's foreign facing operations are carried out by overseas Chinese, with the Party's co-optation of ethnic Chinese individuals and communities living outside China, and Chinese organizations based overseas.⁷

The key United Front groups include peak organizations such as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that brings together non-CCP social elites domestically, the Chinese Overseas Friendship Association, the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, Chinese students and scholars associations, and numerous overseas friendship and hometown associations.⁸ By co-opting these organizations under the umbrella of the UFW, the Party seeks to shape the narrative and extend its influence overseas. This begs the question of whether activities of these organizations are instances of "foreign influence", such as attempts to project China's "soft power" overseas, or they amount to "foreign interference". Due to the covert nature of some of these activities, it makes more challenging for a fair and impartial assessment.

There is a lack of rigorous studies on the subject of the UFW. Being part of the United Front networks does *not* automatically imply that individuals or organizations are the CCP's local agents to carry out "foreign interference". It is important to recognize that the diasporas are not passive or apolitical agents of their home governments; they have agency and incentives of their own.⁹ In Canada's context, it is also crucial to recognize that the Chinese diasporas is far from being a homogenous community and their allegiance to the Chinese government or the CCP should not be automatically assumed.

⁵ Lyman P Van Slyke. (1967). *Enemies and friends: the united front in Chinese communist history*, Stanford University Press.

⁶ <https://jamestown.org/program/the-rise-and-rise-of-the-united-front-work-department-under-xi/>

⁷ Sapio, F. (2019). "The United Front Principle", *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 18(2), 133-164. Anne Marie Brady. (2018). "China in Xi's 'New Era': New Zealand and the CCP's 'Magic Weapons.'" *Journal of Democracy* 29(2). 68-75.

⁸ <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you>

⁹ Alexander Betts and Will Jones. (2017). *Mobilising the Diaspora: How Refugees Challenge Authoritarianism*, Cambridge University Press.

Buying Access and False Positive

In 2018, the Australian Parliament passed the Espionage and Foreign Interference Act after a series of claims of PRC-linked political donors buying access in Australian politics, Australian universities and media being co-opted as propaganda machines for the Party. The most significant controversy centered on a Labor Party senator and fundraiser who remarked to the Chinese media a position on the South China Sea that contravened the official Labor Party's position. It was alleged that the Labor senator, who later surrendered his Senate seat, acted on request from a wealthy Chinese national who has link to the UFWD.¹⁰

However, there are also false positive cases. In 2019, a self-proclaimed "spy" of the CCP, Wang Liqiang sought political asylum in Australia. He recounted alarming tales of espionage in Australia, Hong Kong and Taiwan in an interview with an Australian media. His claims were taken rather seriously by the Australian community initially. But, subsequent investigations suggested that he was a convicted fraudster who left mainland China for Hong Kong on bogus travel documents.¹¹ This case appears to support the claim that "China paranoia" is unhelpful, and that it might have unintended deleterious consequences on what the law intends to protect in the first place.

Risks to Attempts to "Protect National Security"

In protecting Canada's national security against espionage and foreign interference, it is important to bear in mind other important considerations. A hype-up of the "China threat" can create an environment where freedom of speech is being stifled in that any dissenting voice is deemed as "pro-CCP" or "unpatriotic". Such an environment can also result in detrimental effects on academic freedom and the rule of law. Evidence-based open dialogues should be held up as the cornerstone of a robust democracy. The journalist, Mara Hvistendahl's book, ["The Scientist and the Spy"](#), tells the true story of a Chinese scientist being accused by the FBI of industrial espionage largely because of his ethnicity. A number of Chinese scientists have also been charged by the FBI for espionage because their links with the Chinese government's Thousand Talents Program, and many of them have denied such allegations.

These threats to the rule of law and the health of our democracy can be exacerbated by the current intense geopolitical rivalry between the US and China. In light of the anti-Asian hate crimes that have skyrocketed since the onset of the pandemic,¹² we should also take every step to guard against racial profiling in the name of protecting national security.

¹⁰ John Garnaut. (2018). "How China Interferes in Australia: And How Democracies Can Push Back", *Foreign Affairs*, March 9, 2018; John Fitzgerald. (2018). "China's in Xi's 'New Era': Overstepping Down Under", *Journal of Democracy*, 29 (2).

¹¹ The accuracy of some of these fraud claims was disputed, but Australian intelligence officials later reached a consensus that he might have been involved in "very low-level (spying) work" that made his claims of espionage in Australia "highly dubious". See reports by the [Daily Telegraph](#), [BBC](#), and [South China Morning Post](#).

¹² There was a 717 percent increase in such reported cases in Vancouver. See Global News [report](#).

Recommendations:

- Boost our “immunity” by educating relevant government agencies of the risks of foreign interference and espionage, but also make aware of the potential pitfalls;
- Official discussion on espionage and foreign interference should adopt a country-agnostic language;
- Increase funding of Chinese language media and outreach programs to grassroots Chinese communities to reduce their reliance on foreign media sources for news and information;
- Recognize the enormous diversity of the Asian or Chinese community in Canada, and their allegiance to the Chinese government or the Chinese Communist Party should not be presumed.