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Overview

For decades, a broad range of entities in China have forged ties with government and business leaders at the state and local levels of the United States, often yielding benefits for both sides. However, as tensions between Beijing and Washington have grown, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under President Xi Jinping has increasingly sought to exploit these China-U.S. subnational relationships to influence U.S. policies and advance PRC geopolitical interests.[1] [2]

In confronting this challenge, it is important that U.S. state and local leaders not cast blanket suspicion on all outreach from China, given that the threat of exploitation emanates from the PRC government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), not the people of China generally and not Chinese Americans, who themselves are often victimized by PRC aggression.[3] In partnering with any foreign entity, U.S. state and local leaders should exercise vigilance, conduct due diligence, and ensure transparency, integrity, and accountability are built into the partnership to guard against potential foreign government exploitation.

Threat

Some of the goals of PRC influence operations in the United States are to expand support for PRC interests among state and local leaders and to use these relationships to pressure Washington for policies friendlier to Beijing.[4] The PRC understands U.S. state and local leaders enjoy a degree of independence from Washington and may seek to use them as proxies to advocate for national U.S. policies Beijing desires,[5] [6] including improved U.S. economic cooperation with China, and reduced U.S. criticism of China's policies towards Taiwan, Tibetans, Uyghurs, pro-democracy activists, and others.

The PRC and CCP continue to seek to influence Washington directly, with the U.S. President in May 2022 calling out the CCP for lobbying against the Bipartisan Innovation Act in U.S. Congress.[7] Yet the PRC has also stepped up its efforts to cultivate U.S. state and local leaders in a strategy some have described as "using the local to surround the central."[8] For the PRC and CCP, targeting state and local entities can be an effective way to pursue agendas that might be more challenging at the national level.[9]

Risk

Leaders at the U.S. state, local, tribal, and territorial levels risk being manipulated to support hidden PRC agendas.[10] PRC influence operations can be deceptive and coercive, with seemingly benign business opportunities or people-to-people exchanges sometimes masking PRC political agendas. Financial incentives[11] may be used to hook U.S. state and local leaders, given their focus on local economic issues. In some cases, the PRC or its proxies may press state and local leaders to take actions that align with their local needs, but also advance PRC agendas, sometimes over national U.S. interests.[12] [13] By their nature, these efforts can have a corrosive effect on targeted societies.[14] They can also threaten the integrity of the U.S. policy-making process[15] and interfere in how U.S. civil, economic, and political life functions.[16]

PRC Influence Actors

The CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) plays a leading role in foreign influence efforts, aided by PRC government agencies. The UFWD coordinates and conducts influence operations globally through various front organizations[17] and it also manages and expands the "united front," which is a coalition of entities working towards CCP goals.[18]

- In January 2022, the United Kingdom's (UK) domestic intelligence agency MI5 issued a security notice to members of UK parliament warning that a well-known lawyer in the UK who publicly advocated for the U.K.-Chinese community also worked covertly with the UFWD to interfere in UK politics and promote CCP agendas by facilitating financial donations from China to UK political parties, legislators, and aspiring politicians from across the political spectrum.[19] [20]

Among the PRC government agencies involved in foreign influence operations are China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of State Security, and Ministry of Education.[21] In the United States, China's Embassy and Consulate offices play an active role in such efforts. There are also many quasi-official entities or proxies involved in united front work and foreign influence operations whose ties to the CCP or PRC government may be hidden or not readily apparent.[22] [23]

- For instance, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) describes itself as a "national people's organization engaged in people-to-people diplomacy of the People's Republic of China."[24] The U.S. Department of State has called CPAFFC "a Beijing-based organization tasked with co-opting subnational governments" that "has sought to directly and malignly influence state and local leaders to promote the PRC's global agenda."[25] Others have called CPAFFC "the coordinating force behind China's most prominent mechanisms of state and local influence" in the United States[26] and "part of China's united front bureaucratic structure."[27]
    - CPAFFC is entrusted by the PRC government with overseeing and developing "sister" relationships between China and localities in the United States and other nations.[28] In the United States, CPAFFC has been a sponsor of conferences connecting PRC officials and others with U.S. governors, mayors, and state and local legislators. Since 2011, CFPACC has been a sponsor of the China-U.S. Governors Forum, whose 2019 forum in Kentucky was billed as an "exclusive deal making opportunity"[29] for investors, industry, and government leaders of both nations. In 2020, the U.S. Department of State withdrew the United States from the formal agreement supporting the China-U.S. Governors Forum, noting "CPAFFC's actions have undermined the Governors Forum's original well-intentioned purpose."[30]
- Another organization, the National Association for China's Peaceful Unification (NACPU), has described itself as a "non-profit organization" in Washington, D.C. seeking to promote friendship between the United States and China.[31] At the same time, it has advocated positions in line with PRC policies on Taiwan and Tibet in letters to U.S. Congress and other fora.[32] In October 2020, the U.S. Department of State designated NACPU as a foreign mission of the PRC under the U.S. Foreign Missions Act, calling it a front organization controlled by the UFWD.[33]

PRC Toolkit

The PRC uses a range of techniques to influence leaders at the U.S. state and local level. PRC foreign influence activities can be overt, such as public diplomacy where the role of the PRC government is open and unobscured. They can also be covert, where the PRC government's role is hidden, as well as coercive or even criminal in nature. Below are some of the more concerning PRC approaches.

Collecting information, including PII. To find potential opportunities and targets for influence, the PRC may methodically collect and analyze information, including personally identifiable information (PII), on U.S. state and local leaders and those close to them.

- A 2019 study conducted by a Chinese university and a Chinese think tank affiliated with the CCP's political influence arm analyzed and ranked all 50 U.S. Governors' attitudes toward China as friendly, hardline, or ambiguous, while also including their age, gender, political affiliation, work history, and states by economic size, geographic location, and level of trade with China.[34] [35]

- "In Washington, voices advocating a tough stance on China seem to have become mainstream and have growing momentum," the 2019 study stated. "Therefore, as Washington's attitude towards China toughens, the attitudes of the states are critical."[36] [37]

Targeting officials to exploit later. The PRC may target U.S. state and local leaders early in their careers and seek to use them to advocate for PRC interests should they achieve higher office.[38]

- In January 2022, FBI Director Christopher Wray noted, "The Chinese government understands that politicians in smaller roles today may rise to become more influential over time. So they look to cultivate talent early—often state and local officials—to ensure that politicians at all levels of government will be ready to take a call and advocate on behalf of Beijing's agenda."[39]

Exploiting partnerships. The PRC may also exploit city-to-city partnerships between the United States and China, which are managed on the Chinese side by CPAFFC. Often called "sister" relationships, they can include business, technical, cultural, and educational exchanges between U.S. and Chinese communities. Last year, a PRC diplomat said China had 50 pairs of sister provinces and 231 pairs of sister cities with the United States.[40] While there is nothing inherently nefarious about such partnerships, which have brought benefits to many U.S. communities and are used by various nations to promote international friendship, the PRC may exploit these pacts to press its agendas.

- U.S. localities that participate in these formal agreements may be pressured by the PRC or CPAFFC to sever ties to foreign governments, cities, and people whom the PRC regards as problematic.[41] One such agreement between a Chinese and U.S. city barred the U.S. city's officials from sending delegations to Taiwan, flying the Taiwanese flag, or playing the Taiwanese national anthem, in keeping with PRC's "One China" policy toward Taiwan.[42] [43] When it became public, the pact caused an uproar among the thousands of Taiwanese residents of the U.S. city.

    - City officials in Europe have also been pressured to adhere to PRC mandates in such engagements. In one case, a mayor in Germany was asked to apologize to the PRC Ambassador after Tibet's flag was raised in the town hall.[44] Some cities in the Czech Republic, Sweden, and the Netherlands have ended their city-to-city agreements with China due to such pressures or concerns over the PRC's human rights record.[45]

    - State and local officials in Australia have also experienced such challenges. In 2019, a city council member in Melbourne, which has a long-standing sister city partnership with Tianjin, China, sought to introduce a motion in the city council acknowledging the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, but was dissuaded from doing so after being pressured by the local PRC Consulate.[46]

- Individual U.S. localities may be unaware that their partnerships with cities and states in China are centrally coordinated and managed in China by CPAFFC, which, as previously noted, is

closely tied to the CCP's political influence bureaucracy.[47] [48] [49] The PRC's centralized control over such partnerships underscores the need for U.S. state and local officials to understand the roles and intentions of all those participating on the Chinese side.

Creating dependencies: The PRC may also view a U.S. state or localities' economic or other challenges as a key opportunity to create a dependency, thereby gaining influence.[50] The PRC or its proxies may use financial rewards and punishments, such as promising or withdrawing access to Chinese markets, to cultivate and leverage business and government leaders at the U.S. state and local level.[51]

- Rewards may take the form of investments in U.S. communities or business deals that promise "win-win" or "mutually beneficial" development. Paid trips to China for U.S. state and local leaders or PRC delegation visits to U.S. localities may also serve as enticements.[52] [53]

    - "We welcome all cities and states of the U.S, including [yours] and all sectors of American society to share the vast opportunities of the Chinese market," a PRC Minister told a U.S. state official in 2021. "China is ready to expand exchanges with [your state], further propose the cooperation in agriculture, new energy vehicles, education, and health, and expand mutual benefit," a PRC Minister told another state official in 2021.

- PRC rewards directed at U.S. state and local entities may come with strings attached. State and local leaders may be asked to support measures and policies that align with PRC foreign policy or economic interests. They may also be pressured to oppose measures the PRC is against. [54] [55]

    - In 2020, a PRC Consulate twice contacted a U.S. state senator with a resolution that PRC officials had drafted praising China for its efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, requesting that the senator introduce the resolution for passage in the state legislature.[56]

    - In 2019, the PRC's U.S. Ambassador expressed concerns over Washington's trade policies towards China at the CPAFFC-sponsored China-US. Governors Forum and urged U.S. Governors "to pay serious attention to this, and not let some ill-informed, ill-intentioned people incite a 'new Cold War' at the expense of the people's interests."[57]

- Punishments for U.S. subnational leaders whose views or actions are not favored by the PRC may take the form of withdrawn investments or other actions.

    - A March 2022 U.S. Justice Department criminal complaint alleged that an individual working on behalf of PRC's intelligence services orchestrated a plot to undermine the U.S. Congressional candidacy of a Chinese American man in Brooklyn who had been a student leader in the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations and later served in the U.S. military.[58] The PRC operative allegedly told a private investigator to physically attack the candidate, noting "violence would be fine…beat him until he cannot run for election."[59]

    - In 2019, a U.S. Governor received a letter from a PRC Consulate threatening to cancel a Chinese investment in the Governor's state if the Governor chose to travel to Taiwan.[60]

Shaping policy via the business community. The PRC may view the U.S. business community 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. The PRC may use market access, investments, or economic dependency as leverage,[61] and overtly press U.S. business leaders, particularly those with commercial interests in China, to lobby Washington for policies Beijing favors.

- A May 2022 civil action by the U.S. Justice Department alleged that a senior PRC official solicited a U.S. businessperson, who maintained a friendship with the former President as well as commercial interests in China, to lobby the then-President and members of the Administration to return to China a PRC national who was seeking political asylum in the United States.[62]

- In 2021, the PRC Embassy in Washington sent letters to select U.S. business leaders urging them to lobby the U.S. Congress to reject bills the PRC opposed, including bills designed to increase U.S. competitiveness vis-à-vis China: "[W]e sincerely hope you will play a positive role in urging members of the Congress to abandon the zero sum mindset and ideological prejudice, stop touting negative China-related bills, delete negative provisions, as to create favorable conditions for bilateral economic and trade cooperation, before it's too late…" [63] [64]

- In 2021, a senior PRC official instructed U.S. business leaders with interests in China to "speak up and speak out, and push the US government to pursue a rational and pragmatic policy towards China, stop conducting wars in trade, industry, and technology…" The PRC official added, "[T]he business community cannot make a fortune in silence." [65]

Mitigation

For many U.S. state and local communities, engaging with counterparts in China may be necessary or even vital. To benefit from these opportunities and guard against exploitation, U.S. communities should ensure these engagements are governed by principles of transparency, honesty, reciprocity, and accountability, and do not conflict with U.S. strategic interests. Understanding the scope and depth of the PRC government's active role in guiding and often exploiting China's subnational relationships overseas is the first step towards mitigating risks. This geopolitical reality has placed state and local officials in the United States and other nations on the front lines of national security.[66] Below are some basic mitigation measures to help state and local leaders navigate these engagements.

- **Exercise vigilance when engaging with foreign entities**. Understand there is no such thing as a "free lunch." While partnerships or engagements with China or other foreign nations can bring economic, academic, and cultural benefits to U.S. state and local communities, there may be strings attached. Beware of those who would ask you to advance a position or lobby on behalf of another nation or group. Do not sign agreements that run counter to or undermine national U.S. policies. Understand that what may seem good for your city, county, state, or business in the short-term could undermine strategic U.S. interests over the long-term.

- **Know your partners and who you are doing business with**. As with any venture with a foreign entity, conduct due diligence to determine who the partner is, where their money comes from, which foreign government entity may have authority over them, and evaluate their motives.[67] Take time to understand the foreign country's political system, laws, and approaches to foreign relations. PRC subnational engagements may involve a variety of entities, ranging from PRC government institutions to companies to cultural groups. None of them are necessarily free of Beijing's control.[68] Consult your local FBI office, other cities and states, or national associations that have had experience dealing with these issues.

- **Insist on transparency in all agreements**. The terms of memoranda of agreement, memoranda of understanding, contracts, and partnership agreements with foreign entities should be transparent, public, and subject to public debate as they would with any other nation.[69] Beware of proposals that appear to run counter to democratic values or conflict with U.S. interests. Do not allow any foreign country to prohibit your interactions with other countries, entities, or

individuals.[70] Set boundaries in the relationship and do not make exceptions simply to placate foreign customs.

- **Share experiences with others to develop best practices.** Many U.S. cities and states may face similar challenges when it comes to engagements and requests from foreign entities. Work with them or with national associations representing U.S. states, counties, and municipalities to pool experiences and develop best practices for interacting with foreign nations in ways that do not undermine U.S. national interests.[71] Consider putting in place state or local coordination and review policies to manage engagements with foreign nations.

- **Maintain enduring connectivity with U.S. authorities.** Communicate regularly with field-based intelligence and information sharing agencies, including your state or regional fusion center, your local FBI office, and U.S. Department of Homeland Security field personnel for the latest threat information. Contact them when questions or doubts arise about a proposal for cooperation or partnership with a foreign entity. Draw on their insights to educate yourself on the goals and methods of foreign influence operations and help educate state and local partners. Develop a mechanism to identify risks associated with subnational engagements and factor those risks into future decision-making.[72]

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