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# GUARDING THE G7

Countering Beijing's interference operations



**MIGS** Montreal Institute for Global Security



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for Global Security

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## List of acronyms

<b>AI</b>	Artificial Intelligence
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>CCPPNR</b>	China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification
<b>CI/CIs</b>	Confucius Institute(s)
<b>COFA</b>	China Overseas Friendship Association
<b>CPAFFC</b>	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
<b>CPPRC</b>	Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China
<b>CSSA/CSSAs</b>	Chinese Students and Scholars Association(s)
<b>CSIS</b>	Canadian Security Intelligence Service
<b>CUSEF</b>	China–United States Exchange Foundation
<b>IPAC</b>	Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China
<b>IRI</b>	International Republican Institute
<b>IRSEM</b>	Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire
<b>G7</b>	Group of Seven
<b>M.I.C.E.</b>	Money, Ideology, Compromise, Ego (intelligence recruitment framework)
<b>NACPU</b>	National Association for China's Peaceful Unification
<b>NSICOP</b>	National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (Canada)
<b>PIFI</b>	Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>RCMP</b>	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
<b>UFWD</b>	United Front Work Department
<b>USCC</b>	U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission

## Executive summary

**Foreign interference** has emerged as a central national security challenge for G7 democracies, testing the resilience of open political systems, institutions, and societies. As strategic competition intensifies, authoritarian states are increasingly leveraging covert, coercive, and non-transparent tools to shape decision-making abroad, often operating below the threshold of traditional security responses.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leverages a broad ecosystem of affiliated organizations, intermediaries, and informal networks that span political, economic, academic, and societal domains to influence and interfere in G7 countries. These actors often operate under the guise of legitimate exchange, enabling influence to be exercised in ways that are difficult to detect, attribute, or regulate.

This report examines how the CCP conducts foreign interference operations across G7 countries through its United Front Work Department (UFWD), a central instrument of political influence. Drawing on open-source research and expert interviews, it finds that these activities are systemic, adaptive, and embedded within the openness of democratic societies rather than operating solely through covert or illegal means.

The G7 country case studies show how these tactics are tailored to local contexts but follow consistent patterns and mechanisms, which the report highlights. While many individual activities remain legal, their cumulative effect can distort democratic processes, constrain public debate, and privilege narratives aligned with Beijing's strategic interests.

The report underscores that foreign interference operates along a continuum with legitimate influence, complicating policy responses. To address this

challenge, the report argues for a more coordinated G7-wide response. Key priorities include strengthening transparency and foreign agent registries, enhancing intelligence sharing, protecting research and critical infrastructure, supporting independent media ecosystems, and building resilience within diaspora communities. Safeguarding national sovereignty and democratic values requires both national-level reforms and sustained multilateral cooperation to counter a shared and evolving threat. 🌐

# 1.

## Introduction

The Group of Seven (G7), comprising Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, represents some of the world's most advanced democracies and largest economies. As central pillars of the rules-based international order, G7 members are also prime targets for foreign interference.

Over the past decade, mounting evidence has highlighted the role of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) United Front Work Department (UFWD) as a key instrument of influence across G7 countries. United front work is not simply a set of formal organizations, but a method of influence that operates through political, economic, academic, and societal channels. While many activities occur under the banner of legitimate exchange and cooperation, investigations, intelligence disclosures, and parliamentary inquiries have revealed patterns consistent with covert influence, elite capture, and transnational repression.

Canada is a significant target, with reported activities ranging from electoral interference and influence in academia to the presence of undeclared overseas police stations. However, similar concerns have been raised across all G7 members, revealing shared operational patterns adapted to different national contexts.

Recognizing the systemic nature of foreign interference, the G7 has set up mechanisms, frameworks, and issued collective statements affirming the need to protect democratic institutions, electoral integrity, and open societies from covert and coercive influence.<sup>1</sup> There is an increasing shared commitment to coordinated countermeasures against malign foreign

interference and the issue is increasingly framed not simply as a structural challenge to democratic governance and sovereignty. However, current measures remain insufficient to address the scale of the challenge.

This report examines how the CCP's united front system operates across G7 countries, highlighting common tactics, national vulnerabilities, and the need for a more coordinated response. By situating national experiences within a shared G7 strategic framework, the report argues that collective action is not only necessary to safeguard domestic institutions but also vital to sustaining the credibility and resilience of democratic governance worldwide.

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## 1.1 Methodology

This report is based on open-source research in multiple languages, as well as interviews with experts, journalists, and former officials across G7 countries.

The Canadian government defines foreign interference as “any covert, deceptive or coercive activity by a foreign government, or by those acting on their behalf, that is directed at Canada, Canadians or Canadian interests, and is contrary to Canada’s national security.”<sup>2</sup> While legitimate influence includes transparent and attributable activities such as diplomacy, public outreach, and disclosed lobbying, interference refers to more covert, coercive, or deceptive efforts aimed at shaping political outcomes, public opinion, or institutional behavior, even in the most subtle ways. This can include undisclosed funding, disinformation campaigns, or political manipulation intended to undermine democratic processes and national sovereignty.

One key factor of difference is transparency: openly conducted persuasion differs from secretive so-called “active measures” designed to distort decision-making or public opinion.<sup>3</sup> The line is often blurry and this paper approaches influence and interference as part of a continuum.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, academic partnerships and cultural exchanges are normal but one needs to investigate the ultimate purpose when it is linked to the united front work system.

Rather than focusing solely on clearly identifiable united front–affiliated organizations, this report also examines broader networks of individuals, institutions, and relationships through which influence is exercised to understand the more consequential dimension of influence. Particular attention is given to patterns of co-optation, narrative shaping, and indirect pressure that may operate within legal or semi-legal boundaries but cumulatively affect democratic processes.

This distinction matters for policymaking because it allows governments to respond in a targeted and proportionate way: influence can be managed through transparency measures, while interference requires stronger legal and security responses.<sup>5</sup> Without this clarity, states risk either overregulating legitimate activities and harming openness or failing to adequately address real threats.

## 2.

# The United Front Work Department

### 2.1 Mandate and ideological foundations

The UFWD has been a core instrument of the CCP strategy since the 1930s and is regarded by the Party as one of its “magic weapons.”<sup>6</sup> Historically used to co-opt non-Party actors and neutralize opposition, it has evolved into a sophisticated system for managing domestic constituencies and shaping the international environment in ways favorable to CCP rule, ideology, and global vision. Xi has repeatedly framed the United Front as indispensable to maintaining Party rule and achieving the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>7</sup>

Under Xi Jinping, united front work has been significantly expanded, institutionalized, and integrated into China’s broader national security framework. A major 2015 reform strengthened the UFWD by absorbing state functions and increasing its authority over religious affairs, ethnic policy, overseas Chinese affairs, and engagement with non-Party elites.<sup>8</sup> Coordination with propaganda organs and security agencies also intensified and there has been a sharp rise in grassroots and cultural engagement abroad linked to PRC-affiliated actors.<sup>9</sup> By 2019, according to Canada’s National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) the CCP was spending more than USD 2.6 billion annually on united front–related work, exceeding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ budget, with a substantial share targeting foreigners and overseas Chinese communities.<sup>10</sup>

Ideologically, united front work aligns closely with the CCP’s broader framework of political warfare. In *Chinese Influence Operations: A*

*Machiavellian Moment*, Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer describe the CCP’s “Three Warfares” doctrine extensively. Introduced in 2003, the doctrine combines psychological, public opinion, and legal warfare as tools to advance the CCP’s political and strategic goals. Public opinion warfare aims to shape global narratives, psychological warfare influences perceptions and behavior, and legal warfare leverages law as a strategic tool.<sup>11</sup>

Under Xi, regime security encompasses narrative control, elite influence, and management of overseas Chinese communities as the distinction between domestic and foreign arenas is blurred.<sup>12</sup> As Xi stated at the 30th collective study session of the Politburo that “China needs to form an international discourse power that matches its comprehensive national strength and international status and that creates a favorable external public opinion environment for China’s reform, development and stability, and to make positive contributions to promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.”<sup>13</sup>

By 2019, ... the CCP was spending more than USD 2.6 billion annually on united front–related work ... with a substantial share targeting foreigners and overseas Chinese communities.

## 2.2 Organizational structure

The UFWD functions as a coordinating hub within a broad ecosystem of Party bodies, affiliated organizations, and semi-formal networks operating domestically and internationally. United front work relies on a layered system which includes think tanks, business associations, student groups, media outlets, and diaspora organizations, many of which are not formally labeled as UFWD entities.<sup>14</sup> This blurred relationship is a defining feature of the system, allowing influence to be exercised through actors that appear non-governmental and locally embedded in a seemingly benign way.

Key organizations linked to the united front ecosystem include among others, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureaus, the China Overseas Friendship Association (COFA), the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR), Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs), and various hometown, trade, cultural, and professional associations.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, hundreds of organizations operate across G7 countries alone, spanning identity-based associations, professional networks, and community groups. In “Harnessing the People”, Cheryl Yu highlights more than 2,000 united front-linked organizations operate across Canada, the U.S., the UK, and Germany, ranging from identity-based associations and business networks to student groups and media outlets.<sup>16</sup> The effectiveness of united front work lies in its flexibility: influence is often exercised through individuals and institutions that do not formally identify with the CCP but maintain close relationships with Party-linked actors. A key feature of this approach is its ability to mimic civil society.<sup>17</sup> While embassies and consulates frequently serve as subtle coordinating points organizations, actors, and initiatives are presented as grassroots, cultural, or apolitical, allowing them to integrate into democratic environments and benefit from institutional openness.

## 3.

### Methods of Foreign Interference

United front–linked interference operates through a combination of political, social, and economic channels that exploit the openness of democratic systems. While individual activities often remain legal or ambiguous, their cumulative effect can shape political outcomes, constrain public debate, and privilege narratives aligned with the CCP. Rather than relying primarily on overt coercion, united front efforts emphasize long-term engagement, incentives, and access. As Jukka Aukkia, Researcher at the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, explains, “Chinese proxy NASs (non-state actors) are capable of manipulating the threshold of detectability and enhancing the problem of attribution and response activation for democratic states...Through co-opting NSAs, the CCP is able to exploit existing power hierarchies and seams in democratic societies.”<sup>18</sup>

Across G7 countries, four recurring mechanisms emerge: elite co-optation, diaspora mobilization and repression, media influence, and engagement with business, academic, and civil society networks. These methods are adaptive, locally embedded, and often difficult to attribute directly to the state.

#### 3.1 Political Influence and elite co-optation

A central objective of united front activity is to shape decision-making by cultivating relationships with political, economic, and academic elites. Rather than targeting institutions directly, efforts focus on individuals who influence policy and public discourse. Alex Joske describes this as “repurposing democracy”, leveraging legitimate mechanisms such as

lobbying, fundraising, networking, and public consultation to advance CCP interests.<sup>19</sup>

Subnational levels of government are particularly vulnerable due to lower scrutiny, lack of awareness, and greater emphasis on economic partnerships and local development that is attractive to local governments. Engagement is framed as mutually beneficial cooperation, through trade opportunities, cultural exchanges, or investment, while creating incentives for political alignment or restraint on sensitive issues.<sup>20</sup>

United front-linked actors cultivate long-term relationships through sponsored travel, honorary positions, fundraising, cultural exchanges, and academic research, encouraging subtle forms of reciprocity and self-restraint.<sup>21</sup> This is a longstanding tactic also known as M.I.C.E. (Money, Ideology, Compromise, Ego), wherein ego, prestige, financial gain, and ideological affinity create durable avenues for influence.<sup>22</sup> The result is the gradual normalization of positions that align with Beijing's interests.

### 3.2 Diaspora targeting and transnational repression

Diaspora communities represent a key point of influence. Through community organizations, student groups, and informal networks, united front efforts seek both to mobilize support for CCP-aligned positions and to marginalize dissenting voices.

This engagement can include the promotion of pro-Beijing narratives, the organization of pro-Beijing demonstrations, and the elevation of acceptable community representatives as interlocutors with host governments or businesses. CSSAs also on university campuses work as important intermediaries, sometimes coordinating with consulates.

At the same time, there is documented pressure and intimidation targeting members of the diaspora and individuals critical of the CCP, including threats affecting family members abroad. Cherie Wong, a Hongkonger-Canadian who testified to the Special Committee on the Canada–People's Republic of China Relationship in 2023, offered a concrete example of how coercion linked to the UFDW works through the mobilization of the diaspora, whether they like it or not.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, she noted that many

individuals are actually pressured into attending pro-Beijing rallies under threat of retaliation: they are told their families could face consequences if they do not participate; in others, they risk losing scholarships or other forms of support. The activities can restrict freedom of expression within diaspora communities and distort their representation in democratic processes.

In terms of overt transnational repression, Safeguard Defenders' 2022 report *110 Overseas: Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild* exposed so-called overseas police stations operating under the guise of administrative service centers.<sup>24</sup> In reality, they are undeclared, illicit outposts established by Chinese public security bureaus that are used to monitor, harass, and coerce Chinese citizens back home to face “persuade to return” operations.

### 3.3 Media influence

Media influence operates through direct and indirect channels. Caitlin Dearing Scott, Deputy Director of Strategy, Development, and Operations in IRI's Center for Global Impact, told the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission that “CCP has capitalized on control over the Chinese-language news space in developing countries and the growing reach of PRC state media with nearly exclusive control of news on China routed to prominent newspapers, government agencies, and community networks.”<sup>25</sup>

State-affiliated outlets, content-sharing agreements, and partnerships with local media allow CCP narratives to circulate widely, often without clear attribution. Within diaspora communities, control or influence over Chinese-language media and digital platforms creates information environments where alternative perspectives are limited or absent altogether. The coverage is selective, and the narrative aligns with PRC positions.

The *China News Service* maintains 21 overseas branches, including in Canada, Europe, Japan, and the United States.<sup>26</sup> According to Freedom House's *Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022*, Beijing-backed content placements appeared in more than 130 news outlets across 30 countries and State-produced content is often distributed through partnerships and

content-sharing agreements, a strategy described as “borrowing the boat to reach the sea.”<sup>27</sup> In a fracturing and resource-poor media environment, local media outlets in G7 may find collaborations financially attractive in order to remain active.

Digital platforms amplify narrative influence. Within diaspora communities, dominance over Chinese-language media and platforms such as WeChat allows CCP-aligned narratives to circulate widely while dissenting views are marginalized.<sup>28</sup>

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### 3.4 Business, academic, and civil society networks

United front work extends into economic and academic/think tank ecosystems, a strategy that integrates political influence with commercial and institutional engagement.

The CCP has long regarded overseas Chinese entrepreneurs as valuable resources for attracting trade, capital and expertise knowledge as part of the “dominant aspect of international struggle.”<sup>29</sup> The Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) plays a key role at the subnational level where actors can engage business leaders, industry associations, overseas Chinese elites, and think-tank or policy intermediaries who can shape debate and decision-making in target countries. Yet business associations and commercial partnerships can create economic dependencies that incentivize alignment with CCP preferences and make companies feel pressured to avoid positions perceived as hostile to Beijing.<sup>30</sup>

Universities and think tanks are attractive targets because they shape elites, knowledge production, public debate, and advanced research. As university programs are often underfunded, Chinese tuition fees, joint research funding, and institutional partnerships are alluring but create financial dependence that can then be used as a powerful lever of influence and interference.<sup>31</sup> It can generate institutional vulnerabilities as they may influence research agendas, limit discussion of sensitive topics, or facilitate the transfer of knowledge in strategic sectors. Universities with a large cohort of Chinese students can also lead to surveillance and intimidation on campus, including through CSSAs. Additionally, Confucius Institutes (CI), which are often based at or linked to universities, have been identified as operating within the broader united front ecosystem.<sup>32</sup>

Civil society and cultural exchanges similarly provide avenues for influence. Activities framed as people-to-people engagement can serve to build networks, shape narratives, and align organizations with broader CCP objectives. The array of associations is quite large, from theater and museum associations to friendship associations in various fields.<sup>33</sup>

## 4. Canada

Canada has been identified in public intelligence assessments, parliamentary studies, and independent research as a significant target of foreign interference activities linked to the PRC. Doublethink Lab's *China Index 2024* ranks Canada relatively high (19 out of 101) in exposure to PRC influence and notes a marked increase in reported channels since 2022.<sup>34</sup> Media and academia are key domains, but influence has expanded into domestic politics, society, and law enforcement.

NSICOP's 2024 report describes Canada as a “permissive environment” for foreign interference, citing structural factors such as limited transparency mechanisms, legal thresholds for prosecution, constraints on intelligence sharing, fragmented institutional responses, a large diaspora community, and the openness of Canada's democratic and multicultural system.<sup>35</sup>

The Canadian case therefore provides a wide array of foreign interference activities across diaspora engagement and mobilization, elite cooptation, election interference, academic penetration, media ecosystems, and transnational repression.

### Political interference and electoral influence

Allegations of PRC-linked electoral interference gained prominence following the 2019 and 2021 federal elections. Evidence presented to the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference (PIFI) suggests that activities included coordinated narrative shaping, digital misinformation campaigns, and informal mobilization of community networks

around candidates perceived as aligned with or opposed to Beijing's policy preferences.<sup>36</sup>

NSICOP reporting described patterns in which PRC-linked networks assessed parliamentarians according to their perceived stance toward Beijing.<sup>37</sup> For example, during the 2021 federal election campaign, Chinese-language platforms circulated narratives portraying then Member of Parliament (Conservative) Kenny Chiu, who is of Chinese origin, as hostile to China, particularly in relation to his support for a foreign influence transparency registry.<sup>38</sup> Testimony before the PIFI showed that similar messaging appeared across local media and online ecosystems. While attribution remains complex, CSIS noted that the framing closely mirrored PRC state narratives.<sup>39</sup>

In a similar case, Conservative Member of Parliament Michael Chong was targeted after sponsoring a motion on Uyghur human rights.<sup>40</sup> Global Affairs Canada's Rapid Response Mechanism also noted disinformation efforts on WeChat, "which shared and amplified a large volume of false or misleading narratives about Mr. Chong's identity, background, political stances and family heritage."<sup>41</sup> CSIS also reported efforts to gather information on his family abroad and that this was part of an effort to "make an example" of him and deter similar positions among other parliamentarians.<sup>42</sup>

There is a clear pattern: rather than overt manipulation of elections, interference often operates through subtle targeted messaging, reputational pressure, and strategic use of diaspora networks, exploiting the difficulty of attribution and the legal boundaries of democratic politics. Investigations into these electoral dynamics have underscored the complexity of foreign interference and the fine line between what is legal and what is not.

#### 4.1 Diaspora engagement and community organization networks

A central dimension of united front activity in Canada is diaspora engagement. Based on Canada's 2021 census, the Chinese population reached 1.7 million people that year, with 47.8% born in China.<sup>43</sup> In her book, *China Unbound*, Joanna Chiu shows that united front influence

activities are particularly visible in Canada because of its large Chinese diaspora and historically open political environment combined with a failure of the state to protect its own citizens.<sup>44</sup>

Research by the Jamestown Foundation mapping united front-linked or aligned organizations in Canada identifies hundreds of associations operating across identity-based, business, educational, media, student, and professional categories that may serve legitimate community functions while simultaneously facilitating political messaging aligned with PRC narratives.<sup>45</sup>

Reports by NSICOP and CSIS, as well as parliamentary testimony indicate that certain community organizations, business networks, and student groups have been cultivated to align with Beijing's political narratives. While these documents emphasize that the vast majority of Chinese Canadian communities are not implicated in such activities, examples cited include organized responses to Hong Kong protests, public endorsements of Beijing's policy positions, and coordinated political demonstrations.<sup>46</sup>

Joanna Chiu recounts examples showing how organizations aligned with Beijing can emerge to counter independent Chinese Canadian advocacy groups. One case she discusses involves the Chinese Canadian National Council, which criticized Beijing after the Tiananmen Square massacre. According to activists she interviewed, a rival organization, the National Congress of Chinese Canadians began promoting positions aligned with Beijing, such as opposing compensation for the Chinese head tax.<sup>47</sup> The phenomenon of "astroturfing", manufacturing the appearance of grassroots consensus, is a widespread tactic, particularly around sensitive issues such as human rights motions.<sup>48</sup>

## 4.2 Information ecosystem influence

Chinese-language media and digital platforms are a critical domain of influence as some outlets reproduce or align closely with PRC state narratives, particularly on sensitive issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and human rights.

Testifying before the PIFI, journalist Victor Ho described pressures affecting editorial independence, with some outlets avoiding politically sensitive topics and promoting pro-Beijing perspectives.<sup>49</sup> Recognizing the tactic as “cognitive warfare”, he argued that these outlets often promote pro-PRC narratives and avoid sensitive issues such as Taiwan, the Hong Kong protests, and human rights.

State-linked content dissemination also occurs through partnerships and advertising. For example, CSIS reported coordinated pro-Beijing messaging in Canadian media during the 2019 Hong Kong protests, supported by diaspora organizations linked to united front networks.<sup>50</sup>

Digital platforms such as WeChat and TikTok amplify these dynamics by enabling rapid dissemination of aligned narratives within transnational information ecosystems. Since WeChat and TikTok are owned by Chinese companies, algorithms and platform moderation practices may reinforce narratives aligned with PRC perspectives while discouraging discussion of politically sensitive subjects.<sup>51</sup> CSIS cited coordinated messaging patterns during election cycles, though definitive attribution remains difficult.<sup>52</sup>

In response to testimonies before the PIFI, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission pledged closer scrutiny of foreign interference concerns related to ethnic-language media but also regulators acknowledge facing the challenge of balancing freedom of expression with concerns regarding covert narrative shaping.<sup>53</sup>

### 4.3 Education as a permissive environment

Canadian universities are key sites of concern due to their role in knowledge production and technological innovation. CSIS has highlighted risks related to talent recruitment programs such as the Thousand Talents Plan, as well as research partnerships in sensitive sectors including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology.<sup>54</sup> While such programs may be framed as legitimate academic exchange, CSIS as well as experts such as Janis Sarts, Director at the NATO’s Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia, warned that undisclosed affiliations could facilitate technology transfer in sensitive sectors.<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Fung, who was

interviewed for this report, emphasized that influence in academia often operates through structural incentives. Funding dependencies, access to research collaboration, and institutional partnerships can then shape behavior, including through self-censorship on politically sensitive topics.

Canada's strengths in AI, cybersecurity, and bioinformatics make its universities attractive partners for Chinese institutions and companies. Industry actors such as Huawei Canada have developed relationships with and funded research in Canadian universities, including after new restrictions were put in place by the government and despite the fact that China held two Canadians hostage over the arrest of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver in 2018.<sup>56</sup> Although awareness of research security has increased among Canadian academics, concerns therefore remain about sensitive research areas and dual-use technologies.

Student organizations such as CSSAs have also been identified in parliamentary testimonies as maintaining relationships with PRC consulates and, in some cases, mobilizing responses to campus events perceived as critical of Beijing.<sup>57</sup> Fung said Quebec-based Chinese student associations have maintained relationships with PRC consular officials, who have co-organized campus events with these groups. This is an established pattern. Fung also explained that CSSAs play a role in talent recruitment, facilitating connections for high-performing Chinese Canadian students who intend to return to China after graduation, which aligns with PRC strategies that seek to identify and attract overseas expertise in strategic sectors.

Confucius Institutes (CI/CIs) are another challenge in Canada. Identified by NSICOP and CSIS as part of a broader ecosystem of influence and "grey zone" activity, in 2020, CSIS identified 13 CIs operating in Canada and described them as functioning as extensions or "satellite offices" of the UFWD.<sup>58</sup>

Several Canadian institutions have terminated partnerships following such concerns. In 2014, the Toronto District School Board voted overwhelmingly to terminate a planned partnership with a CI after trustees raised concerns about transparency, governance, and potential impacts on educational autonomy.<sup>59</sup> The 2012 agreement drew criticism from parents, educators,

and community members who argued that a program funded and overseen by a Chinese government body, could introduce political influence into the school system.

The presence of CI can get embedded provincial policy decisions. Indeed, in New Brunswick, then education minister Dominic Cardy moved to end the province's CI program over concerns about curriculum influence and institutional autonomy.<sup>60</sup> He disclosed encountering both internal resistance and external diplomatic pressure, including implicit references to potential economic consequences.<sup>61</sup> Cardy, who was interviewed for this report, said that a key moment involved a meeting between him and a Chinese vice consul, which did not follow standard provincial protocol procedures. The discussion alternated between reassurance, cultural framing, and references to economic consequences. Cardy recounted comments linking educational policy decisions to the potential impact on New Brunswick's lobster exports to China, an implicit warning of trade repercussions.

Cardy suggested that long-standing economic and political relationships facilitated influence-building within the province, including with former Premier, Shawn Graham. Following his political career, Graham owned G&R Holdings, a consulting business that worked to increase trade between China and the East Coast.<sup>62</sup> Whether there was elite cultivation or not is unknown, but it certainly shows a lack of knowledge among policymakers at the sub-national level as well as an institutional gap between federal intelligence assessments and provincial actors.

#### 4.4 Transnational repression

Canada has also been identified as a significant site of transnational repression. In *China Unbound*, Joanna Chiu provides multiple examples of Chinese officials and affiliated actors attempting to monitor and pressure diaspora communities, sometimes intimidating people who criticize Beijing. For example, Chiu recounts how a Chinese student in Canada was contacted by his father after Chinese security officials asked about the student's online posts criticizing the Chinese government.<sup>63</sup>

Reports by Safeguard Defenders, including *110 Overseas and Patrol and Persuade*, document the presence of PRC-linked overseas “police service stations” operating through diaspora networks.<sup>64</sup> These entities are alleged to facilitate “persuasion to return” operations, involving surveillance, intimidation, and pressure on individuals and their families. Such practices bypass formal legal mechanisms and raise concerns about sovereignty and the protection of Canadian residents.

Canada was also a central stage of the CCP’s transnational repression operations “Operation Fox Hunt” and “Sky Net.” Safeguard Defenders provides documented evidence that Canada served as an operational environment for extraterritorial enforcement activities conducted by, or on behalf of, Chinese state actors.<sup>65</sup> While “Operation Fox Hunt” was publicly framed as an anti-corruption campaign, the program was used to target and silence critics of the regime. One case described in the report took place in Vancouver in 2014 where PRC public security personnel engaged in a persuasion to return operation targeting an individual who had obtained Canadian citizenship. Rather than relying on formal extradition channels, authorities opted for ideological pressure and coercion within diplomatic premises, leveraging the suspect’s legal vulnerability.

CSIS has also reported on the PRC’s use of undercover state security officials and “trusted agents” or proxies inside Canada to target members of the Chinese diaspora community.<sup>66</sup> These activities include harassment, intimidation, and threats as well as coercive leverage against their relatives in China. Former CSIS Director David Vigneault has characterized this global campaign of intimidation as a threat to Canada’s sovereignty and safety of its citizens.<sup>67</sup>

Following Safeguard Defenders’ report on overseas police stations, the RCMP launched investigations in Canada, which led to the shutdown of some of the “illegal police activities.”<sup>68</sup> Quebec’s RCMP investigation was dropped in 2025, following a \$4.9-million defamation lawsuit by the Chinese Family Services of Greater Montreal, the Centre Sino-Québec de la Rive-Sud and their executive director.<sup>69</sup>

## 4.5 Quebec–China economic relations: early indicators of influence networks

Within Canada, Quebec developed a distinctive approach rooted in its tradition of “paradiplomacy” since the 1970s. Quebec policymakers, business leaders, and academic intermediaries viewed engagement with China as a strategic avenue for trade, investment, and technological cooperation.

Jean-François Lépine, Québec’s former Representative in China, explains in *Les angoisses de ma prof de chinois* that this optimism intensified as China integrated into the global economy. The province established its own diplomatic and economic presence in China, expanding from two to five representations between 2015 and 2020.<sup>70</sup> These institutions facilitated exchanges in sectors such as aeronautics, artificial intelligence, agri-food, and education, reinforcing expectations of privileged access to the Chinese market.

At the same time, some early interactions revealed dynamics that resemble tactics now associated with the united front system: the cultivation of influential intermediaries, the mobilization of diaspora networks, and the strategic use of economic partnerships to access foreign expertise.

One case involves Paul Lin, an influential figure within Montreal’s Chinese community who played a key role in facilitating early Canada–China engagement.<sup>71</sup> He helped organize the first Canadian business delegation to China in 1978 and developed networks linking Canadian political and business elites with senior officials in Beijing. Through these connections, companies such as Power Corporation gained access to high-level CCP contacts. Lin’s role shows how diaspora intermediaries could function as bridges between Western actors and Chinese political networks. While these relationships supported legitimate economic exchange, they also aligned with broader CCP strategies of engaging overseas Chinese communities and cultivating elite networks abroad.

Economic partnerships also show how Chinese companies benefited from cultivating special relationships with Quebec firms through local Chinese actors. Quebec-based multinational Bombardier pursued extensive

cooperation with Chinese partners in the railway sector, including a 1998 joint venture with China's Sifang Locomotive and Rolling Stock Company. These agreements involved significant technology transfers in exchange for market access.<sup>72</sup>

A central figure in this relationship was Zhang Jianwei, a Chinese national who studied at HEC Montréal and rose to become President of the aerospace company Bombardier China.<sup>73</sup> Zhang facilitated close ties between the company and Chinese partners. While these partnerships generated short-term commercial gains for Bombardier, they also contributed to the rapid development of China's domestic rail industry, with disappointing consequences for the Quebec company.<sup>74</sup> Chinese engineers trained through these collaborations acquired technical expertise that later enabled the emergence of globally competitive firms such as CRRC. This is a pattern often seen in Western engagement with China: economic cooperation ultimately frequently supported China's long-term strategic objectives and industrial success, ultimately disadvantaging Western companies.

Lépine cautions that these relationships are complex and should be understood as part of a broader strategy of international engagement but from today's perspective, Quebec–China relations provide early examples of mechanisms now associated with the cultivation of elite networks, the use of diaspora intermediaries, and the strategic leveraging of commercial partnerships.

#### 4.6 Vulnerabilities

Canada faces a range of structural vulnerabilities when it comes to foreign interference. NSICOP identifies gaps in transparency mechanisms, intelligence sharing, and legal thresholds for action. Political processes, particularly nomination contests and community-based mobilization, present opportunities for indirect influence.<sup>75</sup> Until recently, Canada lacked a foreign agent transparency registry comparable to those in the United States or Australia. For years, intelligence agencies faced statutory limitations on publicly disclosing classified information, which can impede timely warning and political accountability. Political parties' reliance on

community networks for voter mobilization, fundraising, and nomination contests, also creates opportunities for foreign actors to cultivate influence through proxies or aligned community leaders.<sup>76</sup>

In response to these vulnerabilities, Canada has begun implementing institutional reforms, including heightened research security protocols, expanded awareness programs for universities and political actors, and the establishment of a public inquiry into foreign interference. Legislative developments aimed at improving transparency and accountability signal an evolving policy response.

In 2023, the Canadian government tightened rules on research partnerships with foreign states, especially China, as part of a broader effort to protect national security and safeguard sensitive intellectual property.<sup>77</sup> In 2024, the government also established a list of more than 100 institutions in China, Russia and Iran which represent the highest risk to Canada's national security.<sup>78</sup>

Yet China is quick to adapt to new environments and realities. Benjamin Fung said efforts have been adapted to resonate with Canadian values and discourse with messaging framed in terms of dialogue, anti-discrimination, or geopolitical complexity, while subtly advancing perspectives aligned with the strategic interests of the CCP. Regarding Taiwan, for example, rather than attempting to persuade Canadians to endorse Beijing's claim over Taiwan, Fung said narratives tend to encourage neutrality with the situation being portrayed as complex and best left without firm positions. Fung argues that, in this way, influence efforts focus less on winning overt support and more on cultivating ambiguity or passivity in ways that could align with CCP objectives over the longer term.

## 5. United States

The United States hosts the largest ecosystem of organizations linked formally or informally to the united front system. Cheryl Yu identified 967 organizations not registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act connected to the broader network, spanning diaspora associations, student groups, business organizations, media outlets, and political advocacy groups tied to Beijing’s “peaceful reunification” agenda.<sup>79</sup> This extensive network reflects both the size of the Chinese diaspora in the United States and its global political and economic influence on the global stage.

Yaqiu Wang, a Fellow at the Forum for Free Inquiry and Expression at the University of Chicago who was interviewed for this report, asserts that the U.S. differs from some European contexts in that overt association with Chinese influence can carry significant political cost at the national level due to tensions and competition between the Washington and Beijing. Yet vulnerability persists in more low-key channels, especially in local politics, elite networks and universities.

### 5.1 Political influence and elite engagement

In the United States, influence efforts have focused heavily on cultivating relationships with political elites, business leaders, and subnational actors at the state and municipal levels. Congressional reports and intelligence assessments have pointed to patterns of engagement involving lobbying, political donations, and advisory roles.

Explicitly political united front structures also operate on U.S. soil. Its national-level organization, the National Association for China's Peaceful Unification (NACPU), was formally designated in 2020 by the U.S. State Department as a foreign mission of the People's Republic of China, reflecting Washington's assessment that it is effectively controlled by the CCP's UFWD.<sup>80</sup>

A notable illustration is a case in New York, which has drawn attention to the role of individuals acting as intermediaries between U.S. political institutions and PRC-linked networks, leveraging positions within local government or political circles to advance Beijing-aligned interests.<sup>81</sup>

In 2024, Linda Sun, a Chinese-American former senior New York state official who served as deputy chief of staff to Governor Kathy Hochul and earlier under Governor Andrew Cuomo, was federally charged with acting as an undisclosed agent of the government of the PRC and the CCP while holding high-level state government positions.<sup>82</sup> According to the Justice Department's indictment, Sun engaged in political activities that benefitted the Chinese government, such as blocking Taiwanese representatives from access to state officials, arranging meetings for visiting Chinese delegations, and facilitating official communications that aligned with Beijing's priorities.<sup>83</sup> Prosecutors also allege that, in return for these actions, Sun and her husband Hu received substantial economic benefits, including assistance with business deals and luxury purchases, which they then laundered into high-value assets like real estate and luxury vehicles.<sup>84</sup> This case underscores how influence can operate through personal networks and trusted intermediaries rather than formal diplomatic channels.

## 5.2 Diaspora mobilization and associations

One of the clearest channels of united front-linked influence lies in diaspora community organizations. In cities with large Chinese diaspora populations, such as New York and San Francisco, patriotic associations and hometown groups of various nature, who often play crucial social and cultural roles within Chinese American communities, can influence public discourse and voter mobilization around local candidates,

according to Yaqiu Wang. A report by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC) documents cases of coordinated counter-protests, including during the 2008 Olympic torch relay in San Francisco, where former officials alleged Chinese security direction of organized student blocs.<sup>85</sup>

Actors linked to China Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China (CPPRC), which maintains at least 36 chapters across multiple states and territories, have been embedded with mainstream local political parties.<sup>86</sup> For example, a formerly prominent U.S. political fundraiser named Cindy Yang, who was active in Republican Party fundraising and connected socially to U.S. political elites, served as a vice-chair of a Florida CPPRC chapter that later dissolved in March 2019.<sup>87</sup> In another case, in 2019, a Chicago-area CPPRC held a meeting praising Xi Jinping’s Taiwan speech as bolstering confidence in China’s “peaceful reunification” agenda, an event attended by the PRC Consul General that underscored official Chinese government involvement or endorsement.<sup>88</sup>

In cities with large Chinese diaspora populations, patriotic associations and hometown groups ... can influence public discourse and voter mobilization around local candidates.

### 5.3 Universities research and think tanks

As in other G7 countries, higher education is a risky domain for united front activities. Areas of concern include talent recruitment programs, research partnerships, and funding relationships that could facilitate technology transfer in strategic sectors. An *AP News* investigation in 2020 reported that U.S. universities had “massively” underreported foreign gifts and contracts, including from China, Qatar, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>89</sup> This has led to federal attention to foreign funding as Section 117 of the Higher Education Act requires reporting of large foreign gifts, but

compliance and enforcement have historically been uneven.<sup>90</sup> Universities that rely on federal research grants have faced pressure to limit or sever certain collaborations. In 2025, the Trump administration issued an executive order strengthening transparency requirements, and Congress has considered restrictions on certain research collaborations with Chinese institutions.<sup>91</sup>

Think tank engagement with China is a long-standing feature in the U.S. In his book *Spies and Lies*, Alex Joske notes that a central driver of China's influence operations in academia and think tanks is the extent to which interlocutors were predisposed to be misled. Many of them embraced the assumption that China's economic liberalization would produce political liberalization.<sup>92</sup> The RAND Corporation maintained long-standing conference exchanges with Chinese interlocutors associated with Party-state structures in the 1990s and 2000s. Internal warnings were allegedly ignored by senior leadership and exchanges continued.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, in 2015, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace opened an office in Beijing in partnership with the Forum for Reform and Opening, gaining access to elite Chinese policy circles.<sup>94</sup> Joske argues that the relationship may have exposed the institution to influence by actors connected to China's Ministry of State Security. By carefully curating Chinese institutions with which Western actors engaged and by elevating "liberal" or "reformist" voices, Beijing presented a version of China that aligned with Western hopes about the country while also gaining access.

The USCC has also documented engagement by the China–United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF), led by senior CPPCC figure Tung Cheehwa, with major American institutions including Johns Hopkins SAIS, Brookings, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Atlantic Council, and the Carnegie Endowment.<sup>95</sup> The CUSEF has now been registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as funding, endowed positions or sponsoring exchanges are regarded as cultivating "friendly voices" within policy debates without overtly directing outcomes.<sup>96</sup>

Student organizations form another substantial component of this ecosystem, according to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, which documented at least 142 CSSA chapters across U.S.

campuses.<sup>97</sup> Some CSSAs, including at George Washington University and Harvard University Medical School, have publicly acknowledged guidance or coordination with Chinese embassies and consulates. Activities have included student mobilization for visits by senior Chinese leaders, counter-protests during politically sensitive events, and public statements aligned with Beijing's interests. For example, the University of Tennessee chapter requires "members from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan must "support [China's] national reunification" and "recognize the 'One China' principle."<sup>98</sup>

Therein lies the dilemma, says Yaqiu Wang: Chinese students and researchers are some of the most talented contributors in cutting-edge scientific fields, and universities seek the best global talent to maintain research excellence. At the same time, security agencies, as well as national politicians, fear that the same talent may be subject to state influence or coercion. Managing this tension remains a central challenge.

#### 5.4 U.S. Policy responses

Beginning in 2019, the Office on Foreign Missions, expanded use of the Foreign Missions Act to designate Chinese state media and united front-linked entities such as the NACPU as foreign missions.<sup>99</sup> Additional travel notification requirements and event reporting rules were imposed on Chinese mission personnel. One of the consequences was the closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston in 2020 amid espionage allegations, prompting reciprocal closures by Beijing.<sup>100</sup>

These measures reflect a shift from piecemeal responses to a broader structural approach that includes increased transparency, tightening reciprocity, and expanding regulatory scrutiny. At the federal level, overt association with Beijing-linked actors has become politically toxic due to US-China tensions, said Yaqiu Wang, but gaps remain as congressional oversight of Foreign Missions Act enforcement has been limited.

## 6.

### United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is a key country of concern regarding PRC-linked foreign interference, particularly at the intersection of political access, economic engagement, and institutional partnerships. London is a major united front work target, with financial services and academia perceived as a more effective leverage point than local governance.

Parliamentary reports, intelligence assessments, and media investigations have identified patterns consistent with united front strategies, operating through both formal diplomatic channels and locally embedded networks. Sheryl Yu at the Jamestown Foundation identified 405 united front-linked organizations in the United Kingdom, placing it third among the four countries surveyed, while the UK-China Transparency Project documents influence efforts across sectors, with an emphasis on business-driven political shaping rather than direct party penetration.<sup>101</sup>

According to Luke de Pulford, the Executive Director of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) who was interviewed for the report, legacy policy choices from the UK-China “Golden Era” under former Prime Minister David Cameron and former First Secretary of State George Osborne have encouraged exposure and complacency. In must be noted that a shift has occurred since as the UK government’s 2023 *Integrated Review Refresh* explicitly identified China as an “epoch-defining challenge,” reflecting a shift in official thinking.<sup>102</sup>

However, a series of high-profile cases has brought increased political attention to the scope and implications of CCP and united-front work influence in the UK

## 6.1 Politics: political associations, elite cooptation, and espionage.

Political influence in the UK has often focused on access to decision-making circles, including parliamentarians, political advisers, and party networks.

Regarding political party-focused organizations in the UK, at least 12 such groups operate in Britain that operate across party lines rather than favoring a single party.<sup>103</sup> Organizations such as the Conservative Friends of the Chinese and Chinese for Labour advocate for PRC policy positions, while supporting politicians perceived as more sympathetic to Beijing and mobilizing voters accordingly.

A UK Parliament Intelligence and Security Committee emphasized that such activities often exploit the openness of the UK political system. Mechanisms such as political donations, lobbying, and advisory roles, which are core features of democratic governance, can be leveraged to build relationships that provide access and influence over time.<sup>104</sup> While these activities may remain legal, concerns arise when they are linked to foreign state interests and lack transparency.

One ongoing case worth focusing on is Peter Mandelson, a senior British Labour figure, former Cabinet minister, and the UK's ambassador to the U.S. in 2025. Mandelson was fired in September 2025 due to various criminal allegations and arrested in February 2026 on suspicion of misconduct in public office.<sup>105</sup>

Mandelson has extensive, controversial business ties to China, primarily linked to his business interests. In 2010, Mandelson co-founded Global Counsel, which has advised Chinese-linked firms such as Shein and TikTok.<sup>106</sup> In 2021, he hosted a Europe-China business dialogue co-organized with the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, an entity tied to the united front system, involving major companies like Airbus and AstraZeneca.<sup>107</sup> Investigations by Sam Cooper suggests that early on, Global Counsel sought clients such as China International Capital Corporation to position itself as a cross-border intermediary.<sup>108</sup>

In June 2023, he met Liu Jianchao, a senior CCP official linked to "Operation Fox Hunt", a 2014 initiative widely criticized for enabling transnational

repression.<sup>109</sup> A statement by the CCP’s International Department framed the meeting as “strategic communication” to strengthen UK–China relations, with Mandelson allegedly emphasizing foreign investment.<sup>110</sup>

Further scrutiny into Mandelson has come from Howard Zhang, who argues that the diplomat’s resignation has revived questions about how China policy has been shaped in Britain. He notes that Global Counsel has reportedly advised companies central to China’s commercial ecosystem, and that Mandelson has consistently advocated a more engagement-focused approach toward China, including in a 2024 article in the *South China Morning Post* in which he advocated for a shift away from a cautious stance toward China toward a more engagement-focused approach, a media read by Chinese officials and businesspeople.<sup>111</sup> Former diplomat Charlie Parton warned that Mandelson’s engagement reflects either a dangerous lack of understanding or deliberate cooperation with united front actors. Others, including Clive Hamilton, have gone further, describing Mandelson as “one of the most valuable influencers for the Chinese Communist Party in Europe.”<sup>112</sup> The Mandelson story is ongoing and has put Prime Minister Starmer in a difficult position for selecting Mandelson as Ambassador in the first place.

A separate controversy, known as the “H6” case, involved Chinese businessman Yang Tengbo, who was barred from the UK in 2023 over national security concerns linked to alleged united front activity. Authorities stated he had cultivated close ties with elite circles, including access to events involving then Prince Andrew, and connections with senior political figures such as David Cameron and Theresa May.<sup>113</sup> This shows how influence efforts can operate through long-term relationship-building, business facilitation, and proximity to political and even royal elites.

Beyond political influence, the UK has also faced controversy over alleged Chinese espionage. The most prominent case is that of Christine Lee, a UK-based immigration lawyer and founder of a successful law firm and well-known figure in the British Chinese community, who cultivated a reputation as a bridge between the diaspora and UK political institutions, participating in high-profile events and receiving a 2019 “Points of Light” award from the Prime Minister’s Office for community work.<sup>114</sup>

In 2022, MI5 issued a public alert alleging that Lee acted as a CCP agent of influence connected to the UFWF, seeking to cultivate political relationships and influence decision-makers.<sup>115</sup> UK authorities pointed to her role in facilitating political donations, legal activities that were nonetheless alleged to form part of a broader influence strategy, including donations linked to Labour MP Barry Gardiner.<sup>116</sup> Lee denied the allegations and pursued legal action, but the UK High Court upheld MI5's alert, making the case a landmark precedent. The case drew attention to how influence can be exercised through proximity, trust, and sustained engagement with political actors at the highest level.

In 2023, parliamentary researcher Christopher Cash and academic Christopher Berry were arrested under the Official Secrets Act on suspicion of passing information to China between 2021 and 2023.<sup>117</sup> In 2025 the government dropped the charges before trial, prompting criticism that the decision may have been influenced by diplomatic and economic considerations.<sup>118</sup> The collapse of the case exposed tensions between national security and economic priorities, and raised concerns about institutional coherence. Eliza Lockhart, research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, argued it reflected broader dysfunction between government, prosecutors, and security services, warning that continued hesitation risks undermining UK credibility.<sup>119</sup>

## 6.2 Diaspora targeting

Two cases investigated by UK Transparency International are worth mentioning to highlight concerns about how united front-linked organisations and media can operate within the UK's political and civic environment without clear disclosure of their affiliations.

In 2023, the organization drew the profile of Huang Ping, a UK-based individual involved in diaspora organisations that maintain links to the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese.<sup>120</sup> The report highlights her role in founding and leading associations aimed at connecting Zhejiang-origin communities in the UK with political, economic, and talent initiatives linked to China. These organisations received encouragement from Chinese diplomatic actors and regularly hosted events involving UK

political figures. This is a prime example of diaspora associations acting as avenues for influence-building, elite networking, and policy-shaping abroad, while presenting themselves publicly as cultural or business groups.

The second case is that of Chen Shirong, a British journalist and media entrepreneur whose company operated Chinese-language media outlets targeting overseas audiences. UK-China Transparency highlights Chen's cooperation with Chinese state media, including publishing content associated with *China News Service*, as well as his participation in Global Chinese Language Media Forums, events organised under united front-linked structures.<sup>121</sup> These forums are designed to align diaspora media narratives with Beijing's political priorities. Relying on third-party research, the document shows that Chen's media platform is part of a broader network of overseas Chinese-language news sites linked to the united front system, and raising concerns about the opaque role of diaspora media in shaping narratives about China and blurring the line between independent journalism and coordinated political influence.

The proposed expansion of the Chinese Embassy ... has generated sustained national security concerns for several years due to its proximity to critical telecommunications infrastructure.

### 6.3 Strategic dependencies and sensitive infrastructure: the “mega embassy” case

The proposed expansion of the Chinese Embassy at Royal Mint Court in London, often referred to as the “mega embassy”, has generated sustained national security concerns for several years due to its proximity to critical telecommunications infrastructure linking the City of London and Canary Wharf.<sup>122</sup> These high-capacity data cables, which are central to the UK's financial system, are considered part of national critical infrastructure.

China purchased the site in 2018, but the project faced repeated setbacks as the Tower Hamlets council rejected the plans in 2022 over safety and

protest concerns. National security objections stalled progress until the UK government assumed control of the decision in 2024.<sup>123</sup> The government ultimately approved the project in January 2026, stating that risks would be “appropriately managed.”<sup>124</sup>

Concerns raised by MI5, parliamentarians, security experts, and the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China focus on the potential for intelligence collection, surveillance, or cyber access from a large PRC-operated diplomatic complex.<sup>125</sup> Diplomatic premises are used as platforms and this risk is considered heightened in China’s case given the documented integration of diplomatic, intelligence, and united front activities abroad. The issue also drew international attention: U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Brian Mast warned in a letter to Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper that the UK should not underestimate the risks posed by China, citing past espionage and cyber incidents.<sup>126</sup>

As noted by IPAC’s Luke de Pulford, the muted response from major financial institutions and the government, despite the site’s proximity to sensitive financial data infrastructure, reflects economic incentives and a reluctance to provoke Beijing. The mega-embassy case shows persistent coordination and understanding gaps between planning authorities, security agencies, and political leadership, as well as the constraining role of economic dependence in shaping UK responses to China-related security risks.

## 6.4 Academia

UK universities are deeply integrated into global research networks and depend significantly on international students, funding partnerships, and collaborative projects.<sup>127</sup> They are global leaders in areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and biomedical research, fields that are also strategic priorities for China.<sup>128</sup>

A 2023 report by the British think tank Civitas found that between 2017 and 2022/23, UK universities received at least £122–£156 million from Chinese sources, including entities linked to China’s military under its “military-civil fusion strategy.”<sup>129</sup> Funding sources included nuclear weapons research facilities and major defence manufacturers, raising concerns that

UK research could indirectly support China's military. The document also highlights that Huawei remained the largest single source of Chinese funding, even after its 2020 ban from UK 5G networks. Such funding risks enabling exploitation of UK research for military purposes.<sup>130</sup>

In 2022, *The Times* found that UK universities had accepted approximately £240 million from Chinese institutions, including those linked to defence sectors, with nearly 200 academics under investigation for potential export-control breaches related to sensitive technologies.<sup>131</sup> A January 2025 investigation further revealed that 42 universities had links to Chinese entities connected to repression, espionage, or weapons research, with 21 institutions, partnering with high-risk, often state-linked actors.<sup>132</sup>

Case studies show the risk posed by tech-sector collaboration. UK-China Transparency highlighted a collaboration between Imperial College London and the Jiangsu Automation Research Institute (JARI), tied to China's military-industrial ecosystem.<sup>133</sup> Led in part by Guo Yike, the partnership involved research on marine drone swarm coordination before being terminated, exposing gaps in awareness around dual-use risks. Similarly, King's College London received a £6 million donation from Lau Ming-wai to support its China Institute, an area particularly vulnerable to foreign influence given its focus on Chinese politics and geopolitics<sup>134</sup>

The UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee Parliament also warned of efforts to pressure Sinologists through inducements or coercion, including visa restrictions. As Chair Julian Lewis noted, China has been "particularly effective" at using financial leverage to shape academic environments.<sup>135</sup> While the UK government maintains that interference will not be tolerated, some academics have issued warnings about risks of foreign influence, and universities have been warned by security officials that collaborations with "hostile states" are a security risk.<sup>136</sup>

The UK is increasingly dependent on Chinese students, especially after Brexit, providing other channels of influence and interference. The UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee noted in 2023 that Chinese students generate nearly £600 million annually for UK universities, creating financial dependence that China can leverage for political influence and narrative control.<sup>137</sup> In 2026, the *Financial Times*

reported that around 105,000 Chinese students were enrolled in UK universities in 2024–25, comprising roughly 42.5% of international students at some institutions.<sup>138</sup>

Confucius Institutes are also deeply embedded in UK universities. In 2022, the UK-based Henry Jackson Society mapped 30 CIs, more than any other G7 countries, and 39 Confucius Classrooms.<sup>139</sup> This includes the London School of Economics, the University of Sheffield, and Oxford Brookes University, embedding many institutes within broader university structures. The report identified at least £33.4 million in funding from Chinese sources to these institutes, though the total may be higher as many universities do not fully disclose CI funding. The lack of transparency in terms of funding, governance and recruitment benefits the united front work system.

## 6.5 Transnational repression

A major case involves alleged transnational repression linked to the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office. Three individuals were arrested under the Act, accused of being paid to surveil, harass, and collect information on Hong Kong and mainland Chinese dissidents, highlighting the lack of operational distinction between different categories of PRC-perceived opponents.<sup>140</sup> The trial, which opened on 2 March this year, underscores how transnational repression works. Evidence presented in court, including phone messages, videos, and communications, show that the activities were linked to a wider network involving officials and individuals connected to Hong Kong institutions.<sup>141</sup>

Other notable incidents of transnational repression include the 2022 assault on a Hong Kong protester inside the Chinese Consulate in Manchester, where the individual was dragged inside and beaten on camera.<sup>142</sup> The UK's response is revealing of fears of retaliation from China: instead of declaring the responsible diplomats *persona non grata*, it permitted China to recall them voluntarily, which failed to send a strong message.<sup>143</sup> The UK has only recently enacted legislation to address transnational repression through the National Security Act 2023 but the law remains untested in courts.<sup>144</sup>

## 7. France

In France, Chinese interference is less visible in electoral processes than in a diffuse, long-term strategy of influence embedded in political, academic, and territorial ecosystems. It relies on cooperation across academia, associations, and political actors, especially at the local level, where economic and scientific partnerships create durable and difficult-to-detect leverage. Former French Senator André Gattolin, who was interviewed for this report and has worked extensively on the matter of foreign interference, described this as a dense, multi-level network spanning national, regional, academic, and economic spheres. Rather than targeting elections directly, China prioritizes economically strategic regions, research hubs, ports, and metropolitan areas to build structural dependencies and ensure comprehensive influence.

### 7.1 Co-opting elites and former politicians

Elite co-optation is a central mechanism, relying on prestige, networks, and post-office influence. Former ministers and senior officials have been offered positions, affiliations, and visibility through Chinese-linked institutions, allowing for circumventing the transparency requirements applicable to sitting elected officials.

A 2021 report published by the French institute IRSEM highlights former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin as emblematic of united-front work tactics in French elite circles. As president of the *Fondation Prospective et Innovation*, he promoted narratives favorable to China, participated in events with Chinese state-linked actors, and publicly aligned with CCP

discourse.<sup>145</sup> Raffarin appeared on the Chinese news channel *CGTN*, where he praised Chinese leadership and policies, portraying them as visionary and cooperative solutions for global challenges, and praising “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and “the leadership of the Party, which defines the rules of the future.”<sup>146</sup> In 2019, he received the Chinese Medal of Friendship, a high praise.<sup>147</sup>

Raffarin’s relationship with China drew the attention of the *Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure* (DGSI), the agency responsible for counter-espionage and the protection of French economic assets, which summoned him for a meeting in 2018 due to the frequency of his contacts with certain Chinese business figures whom the DGSI considered possibly linked to the Communist Party or its influence networks.<sup>148</sup> Raffarin’s position towards China has also been criticized diplomats and organizations, sometimes in strong words. In a 2022 report by the European Parliament Commission on Foreign Influence, Raffarin is cited as a politician “actively engaged in promoting Chinese interests in France” and an example of China’s “active in the field of elite capture and cooptation.”<sup>149</sup> Despite these facts, Raffarin has recently been given a surprising new position. In 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron assigned the former Prime Minister a new official mission focused on France’s relationship with China.<sup>150</sup>

The case of former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius highlights the role of “parallel diplomacy.” According to Jérémy André, a journalist at the online publication *Intelligence Online*, Fabius has maintained frequent ties with China over the past decade. While serving as president of France’s Constitutional Council (2016-2025), he travelled to China regularly, leveraging his international stature linked to the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.<sup>151</sup> In October 2024, he met with a Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to stress the importance of France-China relations in an uncertain world.<sup>152</sup> He also participated in the World Cultural Forum of Taihu, which was created in 2011 and brings together former foreign leaders alongside senior figures from the Chinese Communist Party’s influence apparatus.<sup>153</sup> Fabius was also the guest of honor at the forum’s opening ceremony, shortly after the high-profile opening of an exhibition of his paintings in Shanghai, which was sponsored by the Chinese conglomerate Fosun.<sup>154</sup>

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of *La France Insoumise*, illustrates a different dynamic, that of ideological alignment. Mélenchon's foreign policy view has long prioritized anti-Americanism and non-alignment to a degree that soft-pedals authoritarian practices by China and, at times, Russia.<sup>155</sup> His public support for the “One China” policy and criticism of U.S. policy toward Taiwan have been welcomed by Chinese officials, reflecting how anti-American narratives can converge with Beijing's positions. In a 2022 blog post following the visit to Taiwan of former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, he wrote: “since 1965 and General [Charles] de Gaulle, as far as the French people are concerned there's only been one China ... We can clearly see that the USA wants to open a new front. ... Whatever the scale and level of criticism that can be addressed to the Chinese government we must refuse to back war on China to satisfy the USA's views on Taiwan.”<sup>156</sup> This criticism of Pelosi gained the approval of the Chinese Embassy in Paris.<sup>157</sup>

In a 2025 interview with *Le Point*, Mélenchon also praised figures such as the former Vice Chairwoman of the National People's Congress Chen Zhili, not acknowledging her past role in propaganda.<sup>158</sup> Melenchon also had secret meetings with former ambassador Lu Shaye, known for inflammatory statements.<sup>159</sup> The content of these impromptu meetings remains unknown, Jeremy André.

## 7.2 Subnational interference

As in other G7 countries, Chinese interference in France has strong territorial and local focus. Strategic regions, industrial hubs, ports, and research centers are targeted through economic partnerships, university cooperation, and infrastructure projects such as 5G. The local level is vulnerable due to lack of geopolitical knowledge and a strong susceptibility to promises of investment. As in other G7 countries, establishing Sister-cities appears to be one of the dynamics. According to Gattolin, there officially are 29 French municipalities twinned with a Chinese city, while China claims to have 46.<sup>160</sup>

Local engagement can sometimes be quite aggressive. Former Chinese Ambassador to France Lu Shaye, whose approach is typical of “wolf warrior”

diplomacy, repeatedly intervened on sensitive issues such as Taiwan and Xinjiang, including with local political leaders and in local politics.<sup>161</sup> According to a 2024 report by the French Senate titled on malicious foreign influence, the ambassador was summoned by the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs for a statement accusing nursing home staff of abandoning their posts in the midst of a health crisis.<sup>162</sup>

The local level is vulnerable due to lack of geopolitical knowledge and a strong susceptibility to promises of investment.

### 7.3 Academic interference

Academic and scientific interference is a central priority of Chinese influence operations in France. The *China Index* notes that “academia remains a target of significant influence activities and has yet to erect adequate safeguards,” creating a difficult environment for critical voices.<sup>163</sup> France’s large Chinese student population (27,123 in 2023–24, third-largest cohort) further increases exposure.<sup>164</sup>

*Libération* found that most French universities maintain ties with Chinese institutions, sometimes involving implicit quid pro quo arrangements, including influence over research content or academic activities, creating structural dependencies.<sup>165</sup> China relies on partnerships with laboratories linked, directly or indirectly, to the military-industrial complex, as well as scholarship pipelines such as the China Scholarship Council in elite institutions such as Sciences Po, Institut Polytechnique, and the ENS.<sup>166</sup>

Some of these partnerships have led to concrete espionage allegations. In 2025, a senior mathematician at the University of Bordeaux, along with colleagues from Compiègne and Haute-Alsace, was investigated by the DGSI for alleged breaches of research protection rules involving a restricted laboratory linked to defence and aerospace sectors.<sup>167</sup> The researcher had authorized partnerships with Chinese institutions,

including Xiamen University, and worked on dual-use projects. Although cooperation had official approval, he was later indicted for facilitating access to restricted zones and transferring sensitive data, highlighting systemic gaps in oversight or lack of knowledge of the risk by administrators.<sup>168</sup>

Pressure on academics working on politically sensitive topics such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan is well documented. A 2021 *Le Point* investigation highlights how influence operates through partnerships, funding, and cultural diplomacy. The case of Christian Mestre is illustrative. After participating in a Chinese government-organized Xinjiang trip in 2019, he publicly endorsed Beijing's narrative on Uyghur detention camps as "vocational training," statements later amplified by Chinese propaganda.<sup>169</sup> These remarks were widely circulated domestically by Chinese propaganda outlets. While Mestre later admitted being "instrumentalized," he defended his actions as part of maintaining dialogue with China.

*Libération* also detailed self-censorship driven by fear of losing visas or institutional partnerships.<sup>170</sup> The consequences for speaking out against China can be dire. One notable case is that of Antoine Bondaz, researcher at the Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, who was described as "small thug," "mad hyena," and "ideological troll" by the Chinese Embassy in Paris.<sup>171</sup> Bondaz has been quite public in his criticism of China, drawing the ire of Chinese Ambassador Lu Shaye, a well-known "wolf warrior." Bondaz has condemned the lack of public debate about China in France, including in academic and think tank circles.

France also hosts 17 Confucius Institutes, sometimes described as "Trojan horses" by French sinologists.<sup>172</sup> Some of them are in medium-sized university towns rather than just in Paris or other cities, which allows them to stay under-the-radar from the metropole. In some locales such as La Rochelle and Alsace/Strasbourg, local authorities and communities have pushed for closer integration of the institute with the university.<sup>173</sup> IRSEM's report notes that host universities receive significant funding, typically \$100,000–\$150,000 annually, creating incentives for cooperation.<sup>174</sup> In cities such as Pau and Angers, CIs attract substantial student and community engagement, with financial support from both local governments and Chinese partners.<sup>175</sup> Results have been more or

less successful. Closures in CI in Lyon and Nanterre followed concerns over curriculum interference and propaganda activities.<sup>176</sup> There were also pressures exerted on institutions hosting events deemed politically sensitive: at the Inalco in 2016, the Chinese Embassy unsuccessfully attempted to block a visit by the Dalai Lama.<sup>177</sup> That same year, however, Sciences Po Paris withdrew an invitation to the Dalai Lama, though Sciences Po denied submitting to Chinese pressures.<sup>178</sup>

France runs a structural trade deficit with China, while exports are concentrated in a few sectors (luxury, aerospace, pharmaceuticals), making policymakers sensitive to Chinese economic leverage.

#### 7.4 France's weaknesses

Despite numerous documented cases, France has shown limited political willingness to address foreign interference. Gattolin notes that parliamentary efforts are often diluted and reluctant to explicitly name Chinese strategies.

Economic dependence is a key vulnerability. France runs a structural trade deficit with China, while exports are concentrated in a few sectors (luxury, aerospace, pharmaceuticals), making policymakers sensitive to Chinese economic leverage. Imports dominate strategic sectors such as electronics and industrial equipment.<sup>179</sup> This asymmetry strengthens China's ability to exert indirect influence. Beijing exploits this through economic diplomacy, offering market access or investment while implicitly threatening restrictions. These pressures are particularly visible at the local and regional levels, where elected officials face immediate challenges related to economic development, employment, and attractiveness. Promises of investment, job creation, or industrial cooperation can significantly influence the public stances of municipal or regional leaders, especially in areas weakened by unemployment or deindustrialization.

In the academic sector, French universities have been slow to recognize the strategic nature of these engagements.<sup>180</sup> Gattolin argued that the united front work practices exploit chronic underfunding of research, a culture of opaque international cooperation, and the limited knowledge of university officials regarding the risks of foreign interference. Furthermore, as noted by Gattolin, unlike Canada and Australia, France does not maintain a list of Chinese universities and research centres whose partnerships would pose national security risks. This lack of transparency helps explain the central role played by investigative journalists and certain members of parliament in exposing cases that the state often prefers to manage without media attention.

Institutionally, France faces coordination and awareness gaps, according to Gattolin. Responses remain fragmented, technocratic, and often discreet, limiting public debate and systemic understanding. Indeed, the French authorities' handling of these cases is characterized by discretion and, which limits the capacity for democratic debate and awareness among politicians and academia alike. Although initiatives such as the 2023 "China Plan" signal growing awareness, France's centralized system and weak inter-institutional coordination continue to hinder a comprehensive response to what is fundamentally a long-term, systemic challenge.<sup>181</sup>

## 8. Germany

Germany occupies a central position in the PRC's approach to Europe due to its economic and political power on the continent. By 2012, deepening bilateral relationship between Germany and China had become a defining factor in Europe's overall China policy, reflecting Germany's economic weight and agenda-setting role within the European Union.<sup>182</sup> From Beijing's perspective, Germany offers access to advanced industrial technologies, particularly in automotive manufacturing and mechanical engineering, as well as a channel to shape EU-level debates, where diverging national interests can fragment collective responses.<sup>183</sup>

Since China's opening in the 1980s, German firms have been among the largest foreign investors, while China has been Germany's largest trading partner since 2015.<sup>184</sup> Under Chancellor Angela Merkel, this economic relationship translated into sustained political engagement. This convergence of economic and political interests has influenced Germany's approach to China-related disputes within the EU.<sup>185</sup>

A rhetorical and policy shift has slowly emerged in the post-Merkel era. In its *2023 China Strategy*, the German government stated that "China is simultaneously a partner, competitor and systemic rival for the Federal Government," while emphasizing that its approach is "firmly rooted in the common policy on China of the EU."<sup>186</sup>

According to former MEP Reinhard Bütikofer, who was interviewed for this report, the greatest weakness across Germany and G7 democracies lies at the subnational level in regions of economic interest. City twinning arrangements, port investments, cultural projects, and symbolic gestures

have provided Beijing with low-cost influence opportunities, particularly in economically stressed regions. Local politicians, municipal authorities, and civil society actors often lack awareness of united front work foreign influence and interference tactics.

Chinese influence efforts in Germany have generally focused on shaping the political environment indirectly.

### 8.1 Politics: from party-to-party relations to espionage

Party-to-party relations are a central channel of Chinese political influence in Germany and a key instrument of the CCP's International Department. Germany's major political parties, particularly the Social Democratic Party and the CDU/CSU, have long been among its closest European partners, with lower-intensity but persistent ties to the Greens and the Free Democratic Party.<sup>187</sup> These exchanges enable engagement with German political elites outside formal diplomatic channels, fostering long-term relationships, and normalizing CCP policy positions.<sup>188</sup>

Chinese influence efforts in Germany have generally focused on shaping the political environment indirectly. An assessment of the 2021 federal elections by Kirsten Tatlow and Dr. András RÁCZ found that China relied on economic leverage, elite recruitment, and targeted engagement. Tools included elite networking, cyber activities linked to advanced persistent threats and expanded media outreach through state-affiliated platforms.<sup>189</sup> They identify Wang Chen, a CCP Politburo member, and Qian Hongshan of the CCP International Department as key interlocutors. Outreach allegedly targeted German and European parliamentarians, highlighting how influence is pursued through discreet, personalized engagement.<sup>190</sup>

Beyond formal party diplomacy, elite networking platforms aligned with Chinese interests form an important avenue of influence. A prominent example is *China-Brücke*, a “dialog platform” established in 2019 by

Bundestag Vice President Hans-Peter Friedrich. Described as a selective and opaque forum, it creates access points for Chinese interests among influential actors in politics, business, and academia. Its structure reflects characteristics associated with united front-linked organizations: only board members are publicly identified, while broader membership remains undisclosed.<sup>191</sup>

Another case involves Lyndon LaRouche and the Bürgerrechtsbewegung Solidarität (BüSo) party, which promoted China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Germany.<sup>192</sup> While direct CCP links remain unclear, IRSEM identifies the LaRouche movement and its think tank, the Schiller Institute, as “accomplice” actors within China's global influence ecosystem.<sup>193</sup> The Institute has endorsed Chinese projects, adopted CCP-aligned narratives, and framed the BRI as a foundation for a new global economic order. IRSEM further documents the integration of the Schiller Institute into Chinese state-linked media and influence networks.<sup>194</sup> Helga Zepp-LaRouche has appeared on Chinese state outlets, and in 2019 the Institute joined the CGTN Think Tank network. LaRouche-affiliated organizations have also engaged political elites, defended China against Western criticism, and attacked critics of the CCP, activities praised in Chinese diplomatic and media circles.

Several espionage cases illustrate the intersection of influence and intelligence collection. A German court sentenced Jian Guo, a former political aide, to more than four years in prison for spying on behalf of China over nearly two decades.<sup>195</sup> He apparently infiltrated pro-democracy networks to monitor dissidents while providing information from European political environments to Chinese intelligence services.

Concerns extended to the European Parliament, where Guo, who served as an assistant to AfD MEP Maximilian Krah, allegedly accessed sensitive information, including documents from committees on trade, human rights, security, and defense.<sup>196</sup> Prosecutors investigated the transmission of more than 500 internal EU documents, some likely apparently to arms and defense.<sup>197</sup> The case illustrates how political fringes and institutional vulnerabilities can be leveraged alongside broader influence efforts.

## 8.2 Trade and economic leverage and influence

As noted, Germany has long been one of China's largest trading partners. Chinese companies, joint ventures, and business associations help advance narratives emphasizing economic opportunity while downplaying strategic dependency. In a context where export interests and industrial partnerships with China are substantial, these actors can exert quiet pressure on policymakers to avoid confrontational approaches to China's global strategy.<sup>198</sup> For decades, German China policy was guided by the principle of *Wandel durch Handel* ("change through trade"), which assumed that economic engagement would encourage political liberalization. While this assumption has proven flawed, the legacy of deep economic exposure continues to shape political behavior in key sectors.

In the business sphere, Cheryl Yu identifies 54 German business associations and trade promotion organizations with links to the CCP's united front system, serving as conduits for economic diplomacy and strategic engagement.<sup>199</sup> Overseas chambers of commerce and business associations regularly facilitate exchanges, organizing visits for German business leaders and local officials while hosting Chinese delegations in Germany.

As an economic powerhouse in Europe, Germany has been the theater of tensions between economic gains and national security risks. Duisburg, a city home to the world's largest inland port, has become a central hub in China–Europe logistics. A long-standing partnership with Wuhan deepened with the expansion of BRI rail links, making Duisburg a primary European terminus.<sup>200</sup> During a 2014 visit, Xi Jinping highlighted the city's importance, while in 2018 Mayor Sören Link stated that "China is a real diamond for Duisburg. We want to continue working on this with verve and commitment."<sup>201</sup> The city has since been branded a "terminal city" or Germany's "China City," though critics argue this overstates economic benefits and creates asymmetric dependencies.<sup>202</sup> These concerns intensified with a 2018 Memorandum of Understanding between Duisburg and Huawei, aimed at modernizing urban systems.<sup>203</sup> As Germany reassessed strategic dependencies, the partnership expired in 2022 and was later removed from official records.<sup>204</sup>

A second controversy occurred in 2024 in Hamburg, when the government approved a 24.9% stake acquisition by COSCO Shipping Ports in the Container Terminal Tollerort.<sup>205</sup> Although non-controlling, the deal sparked debate over foreign involvement in critical infrastructure. Would it put trade flows, supply chains, and security at risk of Chinese influence? The German government was divided over the matter as several ministries warned that even minority stakes could create long-term dependency and grant Beijing leverage over trade flows and supply chains.<sup>206</sup>

German firms, particularly in the automotive, chemicals, and machinery sectors, have also faced pressure linked to sensitive issues such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tiananmen. Companies including Audi, Daimler, and Leica reportedly encountered retaliation or threats, contributing to self-censorship and private lobbying against more confrontational policies, as noted by Jan Weidenfeld.<sup>207</sup> In 2019, China's ambassador warned that excluding Huawei from Germany's 5G network could trigger retaliation against the automotive sector, underscoring the link between economic leverage and political signaling.<sup>208</sup>

As German firms continue to deepen their engagement in China by localizing production and research activities, the balance between economic opportunity and geopolitical risk remains a defining challenge in Germany's China policy.

### 8.3 Academia, education and thinks tanks

Academic cooperation constitutes one of Germany's most significant vulnerabilities. Germany ranks among the most exposed countries globally in the academic domain, according to Doublethink Lab's *China Index*, particularly in research and higher education.<sup>209</sup> Key channels include institutional partnerships, joint research programs, Chinese funding, and talent recruitment initiatives. Doublethink Lab has identified collaborations between German universities and companies such as Huawei and ZTE, although the full scope remains unclear. Concerns have also been raised about partnerships involving researchers affiliated with the People's Liberation Army, as well as projects with potential dual-use applications.<sup>210</sup>

Confucius Institutes are a central point of concern here as well. Germany hosts 19 institutes, most based within universities.<sup>211</sup> The federal government has moved to tighten oversight, and in 2023, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classified them not as neutral cultural actors but as part of China's broader political influence apparatus, warning that they promote a curated and politically sanitized image of China.<sup>212</sup>

Federal Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger has urged universities to reassess partnerships and prioritize academic independence and transparency.<sup>213</sup> Rather than imposing a blanket ban, the government has emphasized risk awareness, stricter scrutiny, and the possibility of terminating agreements that compromise institutional autonomy. Universities including Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Düsseldorf have ended partnerships, while others continue cooperation under revised conditions.<sup>214</sup>

The number of Chinese student organizations is particularly high, according to Cheryl Yu, reflecting efforts to cultivate talent, monitor overseas Chinese populations, and mobilize students around CCP-aligned narratives on campus.<sup>215</sup> At the Technical University of Berlin, the student body AStA faced backlash and death threats after expressing solidarity with pro-democracy students in Hong Kong.<sup>216</sup> The group "Society of Chinese Academics at TU Berlin" demanded an apology, arguing the statement did not represent all students, highlighting divisions within academic communities and the pressures surrounding politically sensitive issues.

Other Chinese educational institutions are also under scrutiny. Cheryl Yu highlights the Bavarian Chinese Language School, founded in 1995 and now one of the largest in southern Germany, with over 900 students.<sup>217</sup> The school has received funding, teaching materials, and institutional support from PRC-linked bodies, including the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the Chinese consulate in Munich. It was designated a "Chinese Education Demonstration School" in 2011, and its leadership has been encouraged by visiting CPPCC delegations to integrate Chinese language instruction more formally into the German education system.

Germany hosts some of Europe's strongest analytical capacity on China. Interviews with former MEP Reinhard Bütikofer highlight the role of

institutions such as MERICS, ECFR, DGAP, SWP, and GPPI, which have developed increasingly critical assessments of China. China imposed sanctions on MERICS following its critical publications demonstrates how pressure can be used to deter unfavorable research and encourage self-censorship.<sup>218</sup>

Germany has gradually shifted toward recognizing China as a “systemic rival.”

#### 8.4 Germany’s response

Germany has gradually shifted toward recognizing China as a “systemic rival,” a framing first articulated by the Federation of German Industries in 2019 and later adopted at the EU level. In its *2023 China Strategy*, the government specifically mentioned foreign interference stating that “We take decisive action to counter all analogue and digital espionage and sabotage activities by Chinese intelligence services and state-controlled groups (...)” and “ensures that Germany’s sovereignty is not violated by acts of transnational repression targeting Chinese citizens who live in our country.”<sup>219</sup> The Strategy specifically mentions the need to build resilience in “Länder, towns and municipalities”, prevent lobbying efforts, and encourage universities “to ensure that CIs and similar Chinese partners meet the requirements of our system of education and research.”<sup>220</sup>

In 2025, the Bundestag established an independent expert commission named “Kommission zu Wirtschaftsbeziehungen mit China eingesetzt” to review economic dependencies on China annually.<sup>221</sup> Initiated by the CDU/CSU and the SPD, the commission was mandated to examine value chains (particularly energy and raw material imports), investment activities of German companies abroad, existing investments and investment opportunities by Chinese investors in Germany’s critical infrastructure and security-relevant industries, and examining research and innovation collaborations.

Nevertheless, Germany's policy response remains cautious. While Berlin supports EU-level initiatives such as the 2023 Anti-Coercion Instrument and the EU Hybrid Toolbox, concrete measures to reduce strategic dependence have been limited in certain areas as the Hamburg Port debate shows.<sup>222</sup> According to Mr. Bütikofer, There remains a lack of resilience at sub-national levels, where municipalities, regional governments, and small and medium-sized enterprises remain exposed to influence risks. China's continued reliance on German industrial expertise, institutionalized bilateral dialogue mechanisms, and a longstanding preference for addressing sensitive political issues privately rather than publicly continue to put Germany at risk.

## 9. Italy

Italy is home to Europe's second-largest Chinese diaspora, making it particularly exposed to potential foreign influence. It ranks 75 in the *China Index*, which notes that "Italy has been permanently exposed to courting and/or pressure from Beijing," with media and academia identified as especially vulnerable.<sup>223</sup>

Under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the government has adopted a more security-conscious posture toward interference, it has avoided open confrontation. Italian journalist Giulia Pompili, who was interviewed for this report, described this approach as being "kind with China, but firm when it is impossible not to be firm." In practice, the "golden power" rule, introduced in 2012 and later strengthened under Mario Draghi and Meloni, has allowed the government to block or condition foreign investments in strategic sectors.<sup>224</sup> Under Meloni, it has been used to curb the role of Huawei and ZTE in telecommunications. In parallel, Italy has maintained high-level diplomatic engagement, including Meloni's July 2024 meeting with Xi Jinping aimed at "relaunch[ing] ties with China."<sup>225</sup>

### 9.1 Politics

Italy is representative of a decentralized model of Chinese foreign influence in politics, in which formal diplomacy is complemented by party-linked and proxy organizations and actors operating across parliamentary, local, media, and economic spheres. Investigative reporting by experts at Sinopsis, project implemented by the non-profit association AcaMedia z.ú, along with expert interviews with Italian journalists Gabriel Carrer and Giulia

Pompili point to a networked ecosystem of influence agencies, including CCP international liaison organs, “friendship” associations, cultural institutes, trade promotion bodies, and state-linked media outlets.<sup>226</sup> These actors have engaged with Italian elites through parliamentary friendship groups, sponsored travel, cultural exchange initiatives, and elite access, often framed as benign cooperation. A central feature is the mainstreaming of CCP-aligned narratives through trusted Italian interlocutors who do not understand the political nature of the engagement.

Parliamentary friendship associations and cross-party delegations have played a particularly important role in the political domain. Members of Parliament and local officials have participated in delegations organized with or facilitated by CCP-linked bodies, including visits that presented curated narratives on sensitive issues such as Tibet or Xinjiang.<sup>227</sup> These experiences are designed to create effective ties, normalize CCP perspectives, and encourage informal advocacy upon return, even when participants do not perceive themselves as acting on behalf of a foreign state.

At the sub-national level, Chinese influence is often less scrutinized. The case of Asti in the Piedmont region studied further in this section, shows how municipal and regional governments have been incorporated into bilateral “friendship city” networks, Belt and Road-themed platforms, and trade or technology initiatives facilitated by intermediaries. Local leaders can easily become key actors in promoting CCP-friendly narratives, supporting surveillance technologies, smart-city cooperation, and endorsing the Belt and Road Initiative even after Italy’s formal withdrawal from the BRI.

## 9.2 Asti and the sister city agreement with Nanyang

The case of Asti, a mid-sized municipality in Piedmont, shows how Chinese influence efforts operate through sub-national channels that escape national scrutiny. Following the acquisition by China’s Cijan Group of the Asti-based automotive company Way-Assauto in 2011, Asti’s municipal leadership developed close political and economic ties with China, culminating in a sister-city agreement with Nanyang in 2023.<sup>228</sup> A surprising move as Nanyang is a city of over one million inhabitants with

a strategic focus on artificial intelligence and advanced industries. Asti, in comparison, is a wine- and tourism-based economy.

The twinning ceremony, attended by Asti's mayor Maurizio Rasero, regional officials, and Chinese delegates, including the Consul-General in Milan and Nanyang's deputy mayor, rebranded longstanding "friendship" ties into an official partnership intended to boost cooperation in economic, cultural, tourism, and social sectors.<sup>229</sup> According to an official note from the municipality, the aim was "to increase ties of friendship and mutual support, establishing relations in economic, cultural, tourist and social spheres between geographically-distant regions" and to develop "models that enable the two communities to improve and expand their opportunities in the commercial sphere."<sup>230</sup> Despite its small size, Asti even appointed an official dedicated to China relations.

The twinning agreement followed frequent exchanges facilitated by business and trade actors and helped build links between local commerce and Chinese markets over time. The Vice-Mayor of Asti travelled to China in 2011, meeting with Nanyang's Mayor Mu Weimin and signing a "Letter of Intent for Establishing Sister-City Relationship between Nanyang of Henan Province in China and Asti of Piedmont in Italy."<sup>231</sup> In 2018, Mayor Rasero went on a mission to China and has since publicly embraced CCP-aligned narratives, praised Chinese surveillance practices, advocated for the renewal of Italy's Belt and Road memorandum even after its termination in 2023, and cultivated close ties with the Chinese consulate in Milan. In April 2023, the city administration also received representatives from China Telecom, a state-owned company, to discuss "future projects in the development of planning strategies to raise awareness of Asti through smart technologies."<sup>232</sup> In doing so, Mayor Rasero and his administration appear to dismiss or ignore the risk of surveillance, as China Telecom Global is part of the CCP's extensive mass surveillance apparatus.<sup>233</sup>

### 9.3 Michele Geraci and Italy's Belt and Road Initiative

The role of Italian politician and economist Michele Geraci in promoting Italy's accession to the Belt and Road Initiative highlights vulnerabilities at the national elite level. Serving as Undersecretary at the Ministry of

Economic Development during the first Conte government, Michele Geraci was the principal architect and public advocate of the 2019 BRI Memorandum of Understanding.<sup>234</sup> While Italy left the Belt and Road Initiative in 2023, it used to be the first and only G7 country taking part in the Initiative.

According to journalist Gabriele Carrer, the agreement was negotiated with minimal inter-ministerial coordination and without meaningful consultation of Italian intelligence services, reflecting a broader absence of strategic assessment within government. Geraci advanced an optimistic narrative centered on export growth and economic opportunity, despite subsequent data showing that Italy's trade imbalance with China worsened rather than improved. In 2018, he published an op-ed on the blog of Five Star Movement leader Beppe Grillo promoting China's economic management, immigration policies, public safety, infrastructure development, cooperation with Russia, African migrants, exports and even pension plans. China is seen as the nation to emulate.<sup>235</sup>

Mr. Geraci's move to a professor position at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China and New York University in Shanghai, coupled with reporting of close relationships with Chinese diplomats and the cultivation of elite access for Italian political figures, reinforced concerns about elite co-option through status, access, and ideological framing, rather than direct financial inducement. An extensive study of Geraci's actions and writing shows that "Mr. Geraci, as a non-official account, has (also) been articulating China's narratives since 2008 and has always been a pioneer and a strong supporter of China and its related initiatives and models."<sup>236</sup>

In China, Geraci is seen as the architect of the Belt and Road Initiative. The *China Global Television Network* even has a website dedicated to the former Undersecretary, who agrees to be described as a contemporary Marco Polo: "It took Marco Polo years to travel to China, but only 10 hours for me."<sup>237</sup> Geraci, who is promoted as a Bridge Builder between China and Europe, believes in "lowering the perception of risk" to "increase the propensity to do things together – and this is the goal."<sup>238</sup>

## 9.4 Media

In 2022, Freedom House categorized Italy as “vulnerable” to Beijing’s media influence efforts.<sup>239</sup> Similarly, DoubleThink Lab’s 2024 *China Index* states that the PRC has provided free content for some channels.<sup>240</sup> Both Carrer and Pompili suggested that implicit coercion whereby maintaining a correspondent in Beijing may depend on favorable editorial treatment.

Indeed, media cooperation agreements signed during and after the 2019 Belt and Road Memorandum between Italy and China expanded Beijing’s ability to embed state-produced content within the Italian information ecosystem. Partnerships between Chinese state media Xinhua and Italian news agencies and broadcasters such as *ANSA*, Italy’s largest news agency, provided free or low-cost content that was overwhelmingly positive and rarely subjected to editorial scrutiny.<sup>241</sup> Following concerns raised by Italian intelligence, *ANSA* later terminated this partnership.<sup>242</sup> Nonetheless, these deals provided Italian outlets with free, ready-to-publish Chinese content, overwhelmingly positive in tone and lacking editorial scrutiny. Journalists searching for China-related content within newswire systems were also often presented primarily with *Xinhua* material, according to Gabriele Carrer.

Once the partnership with *ANSA* floundered, Chinese outlets adapted by shifting cooperation to smaller agencies and mid-level partnerships, maintaining a persistent presence while avoiding political visibility since these outlets were smaller. Today, China still has agreements with the *RAI*, a public television broadcaster, and Mediaset, the largest private broadcaster, owned by the Berlusconi family.<sup>243</sup> Carrer added that *Il Sole 24 Ore*, Italy’s leading financial newspaper, regularly publishes letters and branded content from Chinese diplomatic representatives. Chinese-linked broadcast outlets such as *Radio China FM* expanded reach, broadcasting Beijing-aligned narratives in Italian regions.

## 9.4 Academia

In academia, the issue seems to be about direct influence or interference and more about structural self-censorship for fear of retaliation. The *China Index* states that “there are high profile cases of individuals, some also with

political connections, who provide institutional support for the PRC”.<sup>244</sup> There have been academic sponsorships by Chinese firms, including information and communication technology companies such as ZTE and Huawei.<sup>245</sup> According to Pompili, Chinese funding and partnerships have discouraged Italian universities from engaging in research on politically sensitive topics such as Taiwan, Chinese security policy, or CCP governance. It is therefore difficult to find China experts willing to talk about these topics in Italian academia. Antonio Tripodi, a member of the Academic Board of the University Ca’ Foscari in Venice, seems to confirm this when he accused the university of self-censorship for fear of retaliation and losing funding from China.<sup>246</sup> Furthermore, 12 CIs were still present in Italy by 2021, and, as other countries started to close them down or impose new controls, Italy was looking at expanding.<sup>247</sup>

This fragmentation enables foreign actors to avoid national oversight by targeting sub-national and sector-specific levels, especially where political ambition or local prestige incentives are strong.

## 9.5 Italy’s vulnerabilities

Based on interviews with Carrer and Pompili, Italy’s vulnerability to Chinese influence does not stem from overwhelming economic dependence on China, but from institutional fragmentation, strategic illiteracy, and weak accountability mechanisms.

Italy lacks a coherent national security architecture. It is the only G7 country without a formal National Security Council or an integrated national security strategy.<sup>248</sup> Coordination between central government, regions, municipalities, universities, and state-owned or private media is limited. This fragmentation enables foreign actors to avoid national oversight by targeting sub-national and sector-specific levels, especially where political ambition or local prestige incentives are strong.

Transparency and ethics rules at the local level are poor. According to Pompili, local officials can accept foreign-funded travel, hospitality, and engagement opportunities with little or no disclosure. Furthermore, Italy has no foreign agent registration system, and very limited requirements to declare foreign-sponsored activities. This lack of transparency creates ideal conditions for United Front-style engagement that relies on informality.

Finally, Italy suffers from a deficit of independent China expertise. Surprisingly, there is no permanent China desk within the government, said Giulia Pompili, no institution tasked with integrating economic, technological, and security analysis, and limited investigative journalism focused on Indo-Pacific affairs. Think tanks often operate as consultancies for multiple foreign embassies, undermining the development of long-term strategic assessment. As a result, Italian decision-makers tend to operate with partial information and high uncertainty, which favors foreign influence operations.

## 10. Japan

Japan occupies a distinctive position within the landscape of Chinese foreign influence across the G7. As a major economic power, a key G7 ally in the Indo-Pacific, and a country with historically complex relations with China, Japan is a priority target for influence operations, but it is also a comparatively resilient environment.

As in other G7 countries, united front work Chinese influence activities in Japan operate through a combination of elite engagement, economic networks, diaspora organizations, and digital information strategies. However, unlike in some Western democracies, these efforts face important constraints. Japanese public opinion toward China is consistently negative and mainstream media institutions are relatively resistant to overt propaganda. As a result, Chinese influence operations in Japan tend to be particularly indirect, localized, and embedded within legitimate channels of exchange.

### 10.1 Japan's distinctive exposure and structural vulnerabilities

China's interest in influencing Japan is driven by historical tensions, geopolitical rivalry, and deep economic interdependence. Japan is central to the G7's Indo-Pacific security architecture and plays a key role in debates over Taiwan and the East China Sea. Tokyo's increasingly assertive stance, including signaling possible involvement in a Taiwan contingency alongside the United States, has heightened Beijing's incentive to constrain alignment against it.

At the same time, economic ties remain significant: China is Japan's largest trading partner, accounting for roughly one-fifth of its trade.<sup>249</sup> Influence operations date back to the early Cold War, forming what has been described as a "prototype of economic coercion."<sup>250</sup> Trade and investment are used as political tools, rewarding cooperative actors and restricting others. Dense networks of business exchanges, trade associations, and people-to-people ties create openings for elite-focused influence, including economic leverage and espionage.<sup>251</sup>

China also leverages societal channels. Japan hosts a growing Chinese population, projected to approach one million by the mid-2020s, and large numbers of Chinese students.<sup>252</sup> Student associations, sometimes linked to united front activities, can provide additional avenues for influence.

Japan faces structural challenges in responding. It lacks a comprehensive legal framework such as a foreign agent registration system, limiting transparency around foreign-linked political activities.<sup>253</sup> Akira Igata, a Project Lecturer at the University of Toyo's Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology who was interviewed for this report, notes that Japan's intelligence system is fragmented across ministries, reflecting postwar antimilitarist norms.<sup>254</sup> Despite coordination by the Cabinet Intelligence Research Office, information-sharing remains limited, weakening counterintelligence. Constitutional protections, such as Article 21's safeguards on telecommunications privacy, further constrain surveillance, contributing to Japan's reliance on U.S. intelligence.<sup>255</sup>

In recent years, however, there has been a recognition that changes must be made. The adoption of the 2022 National Security Strategy marked an important step in addressing information warfare and foreign influence.<sup>256</sup> There are now discussions of legal reforms, including the introduction of a foreign agent registration system.<sup>257</sup> According to Igata, these efforts to strengthen research security and improve cooperation with digital platforms signal a broader shift toward a more comprehensive approach to countering influence operations.<sup>258</sup>

Naoki Takeda, a former Visiting Fellow at RUSI's International Security Studies who was interviewed for this report, said that potential policy pathway for Japan would be the adoption of a comprehensive national

security law that builds upon the existing National Security Strategy while establishing a more operational framework for its implementation. Such a law could provide a clear and authoritative basis for defining foreign interference and other forms of malign activity that undermine national interests. On this foundation, more targeted legislative instruments, such as regulatory or sector-specific measures, could then be developed to address risks. However, the effectiveness of any such framework will depend not only on legal clarity but also on enforcement capacity

## 10.2 Friendship associations, elite networks and political influence

Political infiltration is a long-standing feature of Japan–China relations. Since the late 1940s, pro-China parliamentary groups and political actors, often aligned with business interests seeking access to the Chinese market, have helped normalize ties.<sup>259</sup> Over time, these networks have become embedded within Japan’s political system, linking policymakers, trade organizations, and local actors in ways that intertwine political alignment and economic incentives.

A central channel is the Seven Japan–China Friendship Organizations, including the Japan–China Parliamentary Friendship League and the Japan International Trade Promotion Association.<sup>260</sup> These groups promote bilateral ties through political, economic, and cultural exchanges, but their leadership, often associated with pro-China positions, can blur the line between legitimate engagement and political influence.

According to the Jamestown Foundation, key actors also include organizations linked to the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification, a core united front body advancing Beijing’s position on Taiwan.<sup>261</sup> Its Japanese affiliates, the All-Japan Overseas Chinese China Peaceful Reunification Council and the Japan Overseas Chinese Federation, organize conferences and community activities that promote CCP-aligned narratives under the guise of cultural or diaspora engagement.

Other entities, including the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and the China Association for International

Friendly Contact, facilitate elite engagement through exchanges and dialogue forums involving politicians, academics, and business leaders, efforts aimed at cultivating long-term relationships favorable to Chinese policy positions.<sup>262</sup>

The Japan-China Friendship Parliamentarians' Union similarly enables engagement between lawmakers, even during periods of tension.<sup>263</sup> However, these exchanges are asymmetrical: Japanese participants represent diverse political views within a pluralistic system, whereas Chinese counterparts are closely aligned with CCP objectives.

One example of a high-level individual vulnerable to Chinese leverage is that of a former Ambassador to China, Hideo Tarumi, who was later revealed to have maintained a secret family in China, creating potential leverage against him amid tensions between China and Japan.<sup>264</sup> Akira Igata noted that, in addition to formal networks, there have been recurring allegations, often difficult to substantiate due to lack of investigation, of more direct forms of influence, including the cultivation of pro-China politicians or the use of personal leverage against individuals in positions of authority. There are recurring allegations that individuals of Chinese origin working as political staffers or assistants in Japanese political offices could be channels of influence or intelligence gathering. Thus, the key challenge lies in distinguishing legitimate engagement from influence operations in a context where informal networks and personal relationships play a central role.

### 10.3 Economic influence, technology transfer and espionage

Economic engagement represents one of the most significant and complex channels of united front work influence in Japan. China has demonstrated interest in acquiring Japanese technological expertise, especially in sectors such as semiconductors and advanced manufacturing. Beijing's interest is driven by its desire to reduce its dependence on technology from the United States and advancing its own domestic capabilities.<sup>265</sup> Since 2018, Japan has accelerated efforts to reduce economic dependence on China, including banning Huawei, restricting semiconductor exports, and strengthening supply chain resilience.<sup>266</sup> However, despite political tensions, Japan also

remains cautious as it avoids fully endorsing broad limits on China's technological growth due to its proximity and need for regional stability, and Japanese foreign investment in China has therefore continued.<sup>267</sup>

Akira Igata argued that much of China's united front work influence activity in the tech and economic domains occurs through legal and semi-legal mechanisms, including the recruitment of Japanese engineers and researchers by Chinese firms, academic exchanges and joint research projects. Individuals who participate in these activities are motivated by professional opportunities, financial incentives, or a belief in the benefits of international collaboration but these exchanges can also facilitate the transfer of sensitive knowledge, particularly when they involve proprietary technologies or research with dual-use applications. Igata noted that Chinese individuals sometimes invited Japanese researchers or engineers, often those who do not necessarily stand out, to conferences or academic events in China, where they are praised for their work and encouraged their technological knowledge. While talent mobility and research exchange are essential components of innovation, they also create potential vulnerabilities that can be exploited for strategic gain.

There also have been documented instances of more traditional forms of espionage targeting Japan. These include cases involving blackmail, coercion, and the use of personal relationships to gain access to sensitive information. One consequential case includes the suicide of a Japanese diplomat in Shanghai who, according to Japanese authorities, had been targeted by Chinese intelligence in a blackmail attempt.<sup>268</sup> The diplomat was allegedly threatened with exposure of a personal relationship and pressured to provide sensitive information about consular operations but refused and stated he would rather die than betray his country. The incident triggered diplomatic tensions between Japan and China, with Japan protesting a potential violation of international norms while China denied the allegations. It also highlighted the vulnerability of individuals who operate in environments where personal and professional boundaries may be blurred, particularly in diplomatic and business settings. Igata says the incident prompted efforts to strengthen counterintelligence awareness within both government and industry.

## 10.4 Academic institutions and research security

Japanese universities have traditionally prioritized openness and international collaboration, making them attractive partners for Chinese institutions but this openness has also raised concerns about research security, particularly in fields involving advanced technologies.

According to Double Think Lab's *China Index*, a 2021 report found that 44 Japanese researchers participated in China's Thousand Talents Plan.<sup>269</sup> In one notable case, a Chinese researcher at Japan's National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, who was a participant in the program, was arrested for leaking research data to a Chinese company.<sup>270</sup> Since China ceased publicly disclosing details of the Thousand Talents Plan in 2022, the current number of Japanese scholars involved is unclear. However, documented cases include Akira Fujishima, professor emeritus at the Tokyo University of Science, who relocated his entire research team to the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology in September 2023.<sup>271</sup>

Confucius Institutes also remain active at roughly twenty universities, mostly in smaller universities in the region, and are generally perceived as benign language and cultural programs, unlike in some Western countries where they have become controversial and have come under scrutiny.<sup>272</sup>

Igata also stated that many Japanese universities initially resisted efforts to impose stricter controls, arguing that such measures could undermine academic freedom and innovation. Over time, however, the government has begun to encourage stronger safeguards, including improved cybersecurity, more rigorous screening of research partners, and greater awareness of potential risks associated with foreign funding and collaboration. There is now a broader recognition that academic institutions play a critical role in the national innovation ecosystem and that their activities can have significant implications for economic and national security.

## 10.5 Information operations and narrative influence

Chinese information operations targeting Japan increasingly focus on narrative shaping rather than outright disinformation. In a relatively

cohesive and skeptical media environment such as Japan, false information has limited impact. Instead, actors selectively use factual content to promote specific interpretations of history and current affairs. Disseminated through state media and online platforms, these efforts have modest immediate effects but contribute to shaping the broader information environment, particularly at the local level.<sup>273</sup>

The digital domain area is a key area of competition and information manipulation. Recent investigations have identified attempts by China-linked actors to use social media and digital tools to shape political discourse, including campaigns targeting specific political figures. These efforts have included the use of coordinated networks of accounts, the amplification of narratives, and attempts to leverage emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence.<sup>274</sup>

Key narratives focus on Japan's wartime history, its security policies, and its role in regional conflicts, often portraying Japan as militaristic or questioning its legitimacy as a security actor. Another major theme challenges Japan's territorial sovereignty, particularly over Okinawa.<sup>275</sup>

Okinawa is a focal point due to its strategic importance and local grievances related to U.S. military bases. Rather than overt propaganda, Chinese efforts emphasize amplifying existing tensions and selectively framing historical narratives.<sup>276</sup> A central tactic is the "Ryukyus card," which questions Japan's sovereignty by highlighting the historical status of the Ryukyu Kingdom and its ties to China.<sup>277</sup> These narratives are periodically revived during geopolitical tensions, aiming not to drive separatism, which remains marginal, but to introduce ambiguity around Japan's territorial legitimacy.<sup>278</sup> The use of historical revisionism and existing grievances is a typical low-cost tactic used in influence and propaganda operations.<sup>279</sup>

Online campaigns have reinforced this approach by promoting pro-independence messaging, circulating misleading historical claims, and simulating grassroots support through coordinated accounts. As noted by researcher Athena Tong, these efforts blend genuine local concerns with externally amplified narratives, making them harder to detect as foreign influence.<sup>280</sup> While the tangible impact of these efforts remains limited due to low local support for independence, Tong and Igata noted that

the tactics demonstrate the sophistication of contemporary united front-aligned influence strategies and their focus on shaping perceptions over the long term.

AI enhances these efforts. A 2026 investigation by OpenAI revealed that a China-linked actor attempted to use generative AI to support a covert campaign targeting Japanese politician Sanae Takaichi, including plans to amplify negative narratives and simulate grassroots opposition.<sup>281</sup> While initial attempts were blocked, similar campaigns appear to have continued using other tools, underscoring the shift toward more targeted, digitally enabled influence operations.

Another controversy surrounding two Japanese VTubers shows how Chinese and Japanese political sensitivities can clash and can shape global digital culture without direct state orchestration from Beijing. In 2020, Kiryu Coco and Akai Haato were suspended by their management company, Cover Corp, after referring to Taiwan as a country during livestreams, based on standard YouTube analytics.<sup>282</sup> The incident led to backlash from Chinese nationalist audiences due to the centrality of the Taiwan issue in CCP narratives. Cover Corp tried to manage competing pressures by issuing different statements for different markets, including reaffirming the “One China” principle on the Chinese online entertainment platform Bilibili.<sup>283</sup> This decision drew criticism from Japanese and international audiences for appearing to concede to political pressure, while failing to quell backlash in China. The company ultimately withdrew from the Chinese market.

While there is no clear evidence of direct state coordination, Akira Igata noted that this is a form of “networked influence”, wherein nationalist sentiment aligns with state priorities and that different forms of indirect forms of influence were at play, including market incentives, audience mobilization, and digital nationalism. Cultural and digital industries are increasingly entangled in geopolitical tensions and are having to navigate political sensitivities around issues like Taiwan. At the same time, strong backlash in Japan underscores the limits of such influence, as public skepticism toward external pressure remains significant.<sup>284</sup>

## 11. Conclusion: A G7 Strategy to Counter Foreign Interference

A clear pattern emerges across G7 countries: foreign interference linked to the CCP's United Front system is not episodic or isolated, but systemic, adaptive, and embedded within the normal functioning of open societies. Rather than relying primarily on overt coercion, these activities operate along a spectrum that blends legitimate engagement with covert, deceptive, or coercive practices. Across national contexts, similar mechanisms recur: elite co-optation, diaspora mobilization and repression, media and information shaping, and the leveraging of business, academic, and civil society networks. These tactics are characterized by their long-term horizon, their reliance on relationships and incentives, and their ability to exploit legal and institutional grey zones, making detection, attribution, and response particularly difficult.

The scale and sophistication of this ecosystem are significant. Through its United Front system, China has cultivated a network of more than 2,000 organizations operating across democratic societies, including over 900 in the United States alone. These entities span business associations, student groups, cultural organizations, and media platforms, many of which operate under the guise of legitimate exchange. While not inherently unlawful, their cumulative effect is to shape policy debates, influence public discourse, and, in some cases, facilitate pathways for strategic advantage, including opposition to policies such as arms transfers to Taiwan or the transfer of sensitive technologies to entities linked to China's military-industrial complex.

A defining feature of this system is its ability to operate within legal and regulatory grey zones. Many of these organizations and affiliated actors remain unregistered under foreign influence transparency regimes such as the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) or equivalent frameworks in other G7 countries. This highlights a critical gap: transparency without enforcement is insufficient. Disclosure mechanisms must be paired with robust oversight, enforcement capacity, and cross-border coordination to ensure that democratic institutions are not exploited by actors operating on behalf of foreign states.

At the same time, the case studies highlight shared structural vulnerabilities across G7 democracies: fragmented institutional responses, gaps in transparency and legal frameworks, uneven awareness, and the inherent openness of democratic systems. While some countries, such as the United States, are better equipped to respond, others face more significant gaps. Beijing's approach is coordinated and global. This is a collective challenge to democratic governance, sovereignty, and the integrity of public debate across the G7.

One of the most underappreciated vulnerabilities lies at the subnational level. Municipal, city, provincial, and state governments have emerged as key targets for foreign interference due to lower levels of awareness, fewer institutional safeguards, and a strong emphasis on economic development and international partnerships. United Front-linked actors have been particularly effective in engaging subnational leaders through investment opportunities, trade relationships, academic partnerships, and cultural exchanges, often shaping local decision-making environments in ways that align with Beijing's strategic interests. These engagements are frequently perceived as benign, yet they can create dependencies, influence political positioning, and open avenues for longer-term strategic leverage.

Foreign interference is no longer confined to national capitals—it is increasingly negotiated in city halls, provincial legislatures, and local economic partnerships, where awareness remains uneven and vulnerabilities are greatest. Addressing this gap requires a fundamental shift in how G7 countries approach the challenge. National-level strategies must be complemented by systematic engagement with subnational actors, including targeted briefings, risk-awareness programs,

and clearer guidance on managing foreign partnerships in sensitive sectors. Intelligence-sharing mechanisms should also be expanded, where appropriate, to ensure that relevant threat information reaches decision-makers at all levels of government.

Isolated national responses are insufficient. The transnational nature of these networks and tactics requires the G7 to move beyond parallel efforts toward more coherent, aligned, and sustained cooperation. While G7 countries have taken important steps—such as strengthening transparency regimes, tightening research security, increasing intelligence sharing, and establishing mechanisms like the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism—these responses remain uneven, largely national in scope, and often reactive rather than anticipatory.

Furthermore, as some G7 countries recalibrate their economic and strategic relationships amid shifting transatlantic dynamics, there is a risk that concerns related to foreign interference and influence operations may be deprioritized in favor of economic engagement. This creates additional openings for Beijing and underscores the need for sustained vigilance and policy coherence across the G7.

Developing common frameworks on transparency, intelligence sharing, research security, and the protection of diaspora communities remains essential to closing existing gaps and preventing the exploitation of policy asymmetries. Safeguarding democratic resilience will depend on the G7's ability to recognize foreign interference as a shared strategic challenge and to advance coordinated solutions that match its scale and sophistication.

Ultimately, strengthening democratic resilience will require a whole-of-government—and increasingly, a whole-of-society—approach. By ensuring that subnational actors are informed, equipped, and integrated into national and G7-wide strategies, democracies can significantly reduce a key vulnerability that has been systematically exploited. In doing so, the G7 can move from reactive responses toward a more anticipatory and coordinated posture capable of defending open societies while preserving the values that underpin them.

Below are a set of strategic policy proposals that are directed at G7 countries in whole and in part.

### 1. Establish a G7 foreign interference coordination mechanism.

- Beyond the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, create a permanent G7 task force on foreign interference, political warfare and subversion.
- Share intelligence on United Front organizations, proxy networks, and influence operations.
- Coordinate responses when foreign interference targets multiple G7 states simultaneously.

### 2. Develop a foreign influence transparency registry and harmonize transparency legislation.

- Create a shared registry of organizations and individuals linked to United Front networks and other foreign influence structures.
- Share information between law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and regulators across G7 countries.
- Align foreign agent transparency laws and lobbying regulations across G7 states to prevent regulatory loopholes.
- Ensure that organizations cannot circumvent disclosure rules by operating in different jurisdictions.

### 3. Coordinate protection of diaspora communities.

- Develop and implement joint frameworks to counter transnational repression targeting diaspora communities.
- Information sharing on intimidation tactics and coercive practices
- Share best practices on protecting activists, journalists, and dissidents from foreign intimidation.

### 4. Protect academic and technological ecosystems.

- Strengthen and coordinate research security frameworks and export controls on sensitive technologies.
- Develop common standards for foreign funding transparency in universities and research institutions.

### 5. Coordinate responses to disinformation campaigns.

- Strengthen cooperation between the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) and national cyber agencies and share data on foreign influence operations on social media platforms.

- Monitor coordinated information operations across digital platforms and sharing analytical capabilities.

## 6. Reduce strategic economic dependencies.

- Coordinate investment screening mechanisms to assess security risks linked to foreign state-backed companies.
- Improve transparency regarding foreign state-linked corporate activity
- Share intelligence on industrial influence campaigns and economic coercion tactics.

## 7. Support democratic resilience.

- Establish a “whole-of-society” approach to foreign interference, integrating civil preparedness with national security, and taking inspiration from Taiwan and Nordic countries.
- Provide support to smaller democracies facing similar interference tactics.
- Raise foreign interference concerns in international forums such as the United Nations, the OECD, Interpol, the OSCE and other multilateral institutions and promote international norms against covert foreign interference.

## 8. Strengthen subnational resilience to foreign interference

- Establish national briefing programs for subnational governments: Develop structured, recurring briefings for municipal, provincial, and state officials on foreign interference tactics, with a focus on United Front activities, economic coercion, and influence operations targeting local decision-making.
- Create dedicated subnational liaison units within national security institutions: Designate points of contact within intelligence and public safety agencies to support subnational governments, enabling timely information-sharing and guidance on risk mitigation.
- Develop standardized risk assessment frameworks for local partnerships: Provide municipalities and regions with practical tools to assess risks associated with foreign investment, academic cooperation, sister-city agreements, and infrastructure projects.

- Integrate subnational actors into national and G7 coordination mechanisms: Ensure that relevant insights from subnational levels are fed into national threat assessments and, where appropriate, shared across G7 partners to identify patterns and emerging risks.
- Build awareness through training and peer networks: Support training programs and exchanges among G7 cities and regions to share best practices in managing foreign interference risks, including lessons from jurisdictions that have faced sustained targeting.

The challenge of foreign interference will define the resilience of democratic societies in the years ahead. As authoritarian states refine their ability to operate within the openness of democratic systems, the costs of inaction will continue to grow—not only for national security, but for the integrity of public debate, institutions, and sovereignty itself. The G7 has both the capacity and responsibility to lead. By moving beyond fragmented responses toward a coordinated, strategic approach—one that integrates national and subnational actors, strengthens transparency and enforcement, and builds long-term societal resilience—the G7 can set a global standard for defending open societies. The task is not to close democratic systems, but to better protect them. 🌐

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