

Be Proactive: How Democracies Can Deal With China's Political Influence Activities

By Anne-Marie Brady

Even more than his predecessors, Chinese president Xi Jinping has led a massive expansion of efforts to shape foreign public opinion in order to influence the decision-making of foreign governments and societies. A key concept in these efforts is the linking of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and state organizations through a strategic alliance tactic originally developed by Vladimir Lenin called the “united front.” During a [September 2014 speech](#) on the importance of united front work, Xi repeated Mao Zedong’s description of the united front as one of the CCP’s “magic weapons.” With many such activities overseen by a secretive [United Front Work Department](#), this approach can be used in shaping both domestic and foreign policy.

The Chinese government’s united front work activities have gone into high gear under [Xi Jinping](#), building on efforts that began under [Hu Jintao](#). In the Hu era, the Chinese government [adopted](#) Joseph Nye’s term “soft power” to describe united front efforts—although [Nye](#) objects to China’s interpretation of his concept because of the CCP’s assumption that the government—and not civil society—should be the main instrument for disseminating soft power. The CCP’s united front work activities incorporate the co-optation of elites, information management, persuasion, and accessing strategic information and resources. It has also frequently been a means of facilitating espionage. One of the main tasks of united front work is to influence the decision-making of foreign governments and societies in China’s favour.

New Zealand appears to have been a [test zone](#) for many of the CCP’s united front efforts in recent years. The CCP leadership regards New Zealand as an [exemplar](#) of how it would like relations to be with other states. The Chinese government’s political influence activities in New Zealand follow a [recognizable pattern](#), common in other states:

- Targeted efforts to co-opt the New Zealand business, political, and intellectual elite in order to get them to advocate for Beijing’s interests in New Zealand and internationally. The means used are business opportunities and investments, and honours such as board member or special advisor positions, political hospitality, scholarships, party-to-party links and vanity projects.
- Targeted political donations via ethnic Chinese business figures with strong links to the CCP.
- Massive efforts to bring the New Zealand ethnic Chinese language media, Chinese community groups, and New Zealand’s ethnic Chinese politicians under CCP control and to influence their voting preferences.
- The use of mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships with New Zealand companies, universities, and research centers to acquire local identities that enhance influence activities and facilitate access to military technology, commercial secrets, and other strategic information.

Some of these activities endanger New Zealand’s national security directly, while others will have a more long-term corrosive effect. The impact of Beijing’s political influence activities on New Zealand democracy has been profound: a curtailing of

freedom of speech, religion, and association for the ethnic Chinese community, a silencing of debates on China in the wider public sphere, and the corrupting influence on the political system through the blurring of personal, political, and economic interests. Small states such as New Zealand are particularly vulnerable to foreign interference. The media has limited resources and lacks competition, the tertiary education sector is small and—despite laws protecting academic freedom—easily intimidated or co-opted. But foreign interference (by any state) can only thrive if public opinion tolerates or condones it.

New Zealand, along with other democratic governments around the world, must now develop internally-focused resilience strategies that will protect the integrity of democratic processes and institutions. Governments can take measures to update current legislation on matters such as electoral financing, protocols around conflicts of interest for past and former members of central and local government, and sales of strategic infrastructure. Governments in the many nations experiencing China's influence activities must establish a genuine and positive relationship with the ethnic Chinese community, independent of the united front organizations authorized by the CCP that are aimed at controlling the ethnic Chinese population and controlling Chinese language discourse. Our ethnic Chinese populations are entitled to the same rights to freedom of speech, association and religion as any other permanent resident or citizen.

The Turnbull government's recent brave statements speaking up against China's political influence activities in Australia have broken the global silence on this serious issue. Now its new initiative to pass legislation to help deal with the problem has set a path for other nations to follow. Countries like New Zealand will greatly benefit from working with Australia to address the challenge posed by China's foreign influence activities. Like-minded democratic nations should now be in discussion with one another on the implications of China's One Belt, One Road policies and other aspects of Xi's new foreign policy on global politics, economic independence, and the control of strategic assets.

It is time for nations such as Australia and New Zealand to face up to the impact CCP political interference activities on our democracies, and make a re-adjustment in the relationship so that our own societies' interests come first. The key Xi-era diplomatic phrase is that China must be "[proactive](#)" in its foreign policy. Small states like New Zealand are unlikely to directly confront China about its influence activities. But New Zealand—along with other democracies—can follow Australia's actions by being "proactive" and take the legislative and administrative steps which will protect its democracy, its security, and its sovereignty.

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