

Statement before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China
“Stand with Taiwan: Countering the PRC’s Political Warfare and Transnational
Repression”

China’s Political Influence Tactics and Transnational Repression Activities Against Taiwan

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Senator Sullivan, Congressman Smith, Honorable Members of the Commission, thank you for the invitation to testify today.

In my remarks today, I'd like to highlight three main points:

- Transnational repression (TNR) against the Taiwanese diaspora and supporters of Taiwan is the tip of the spear of broader PRC political influence efforts in the United States and other free societies. Such activities are driven by the United Front Work Department, a CCP organ that seeks to co-opt allies and silence enemies domestically and abroad. In the context of Taiwan, that means suppressing supporters of Taiwanese democracy and independence, and pushing the CCP's sovereignty claims over Taiwan.
- TNR activities consist of multi-pronged community and political mobilization to (i) engage in direct surveillance and harassment of Taiwan supporters on U.S. soil; (ii) rally portions of the overseas Chinese and Chinese-American communities to engage in public and highly visible displays of support for Beijing's position on Taiwan, including protests against Taiwanese leaders transiting through the United States; and (iii) over the longer term, shift broader political and public discourse on Taiwan through the positioning of pro-Beijing individuals as political aides and by operating as a political machine to get pro-Beijing candidates elected into office.
- Beijing also seeks to co-opt Western voices and form alliances with domestic interest groups, such as far-left anti-imperialist movements in the United States. The Chinese government sees this as further legitimizing its narratives and a strategic way to reframe the Taiwan issue as about U.S. imperialism versus global peace.

Transnational Repression and Political Influence: Actors and Tactics

Influence activities through the United Front involve a mix of official, quasi-official, and grassroots organizations. The Council for Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China is a United Front organization with multiple branches in the United States and globally, with the explicit and overarching goal of asserting Beijing's sovereignty claims over Taiwan. They regularly engage in activities such as issuing statements and organizing conferences on the topic.

But TNR and influence activities relating to Taiwan and other issues also involve co-optation and mobilization of a broader array of overseas Chinese hometown associations and other grassroots organizations. Chinese writings on the United Front explicitly call for "societal organizations" (*shehuan*) and overseas Chinese community leaders and elites (*jingying*) to play a role in promoting Beijing's interests. These groups are often rallied, often in tandem with the Chinese consulate, for public demonstrations and protests, particularly surrounding events such as a Taiwanese president's transit through the United States or former Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. Reports suggest that the Chinese government pays overseas Chinese to participate in these protests, although protest leaders have vigorously denied this, portraying such activities as a groundswell of patriotic sentiment.

Pro-Beijing protests around Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen's transit through New York and Los Angeles in late March and early April 2023 provides an illuminating example of United Front dynamics and tactics. Over a hundred overseas Chinese organizations, claiming to speak for the overseas Chinese community, took out advertisements in major Chinese-language media outlets in the United States. Through open-source research examining online videos and photos of these

events, I identified close to 30 groups involved in on-the-ground demonstrations. One protest leader claimed that 105 community associations were represented in these demonstrations. They would gather outside the hotel where President Tsai was staying, or in LA outside the Reagan Presidential Library where Tsai met then Speaker McCarthy, waving Chinese and American flags, shouting slogans such as “Tsai Ing-wen is a traitor,” and holding banners proclaiming Taiwan as part of China.

Tactical Alignments with Domestic Groups

Additionally, each of these protests featured American participants from far-left anti-imperialist movements. In New York, a group called the Center for Political Innovation (in an interview with the *China Daily*, a PRC state media outlet) decried Tsai for “selling war” and expressed support for “one China.” In Los Angeles, U.S. anti-war and anti-imperialist groups such as CODEPINK – which has close links to a media mogul financing CCP propaganda globally – the ANSWER Coalition, and Pivot to Peace, protested alongside Chinese groups outside the Reagan Library. When former Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in 2022, some of these same left-wing groups also participated in protests alongside United Front-linked groups such as the San Francisco US-China Peoples Friendship Association, the Council for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China, and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.

In general, such messaging frames U.S. support for Taiwan as part of U.S. imperialism and warmongering, reframes China’s position as one of preserving peace and the status quo, and by extension implicitly recognizes Beijing’s sovereignty claims over Taiwan. These groups are not likely directly controlled by the CCP, but the Chinese government certainly is happy to capitalize on apparent ideological alliances of convenience and encourage Western voices to spread pro-Beijing narratives. In Beijing’s view, this helps to legitimize its position to a broader audience within the United States and globally.

Longer-Term Strategy: Reshaping the American Political Landscape

Perhaps even more worryingly, United Front actors are also actively reshaping the political landscape in the United States in favor of pro-Beijing actors while suppressing supporters of Taiwan. My own research and other reporting has examined how CCP-linked groups and individuals are not only seeking to serve as political aides and power brokers, but also successfully acting as a political machine to get pro-Beijing individuals into elected office.

Patronage politics make fertile ground for foreign influence. Especially in areas with large ethnic Chinese populations, politicians seeking election are eager to tap on Chinatown networks to secure votes. This leads to a reliance on political fixers and community liaisons, who by nature of their position as a community leader also often have close ties to the Chinese government. In some cases, politicians may know relatively little—or exercise willful ignorance—about the role of the United Front in local politics. They may then be more willing to echo pro-Beijing policy positions.

As I have written elsewhere, the Chinese government does not hesitate to play identity politics and exploit contentious social and political issues—such as anti-Asian hate, public safety, homeless shelters, or affirmative action and standardized testing—in order to gain currency among overseas Chinese populations and legitimize CCP-linked individuals and organizations as grassroots leaders defending the community’s interests and rights. This goes hand in hand with propaganda messaging of longstanding racial discrimination against ethnic Chinese and Asian Americans (as well as touting

the flaws of democracies). Such mobilization in turn serves as a foundation for Beijing's political machine to field preferred candidates and rally votes to get them elected.

As one example, in New York City, individuals and networks connected to the united front system have helped elect at least three local politicians in south Brooklyn in the last three years. In one example, a Republican candidate endorsed by United Front groups won a tight 2024 State Senate race against Taiwan-born Democrat incumbent Iwen Chu, who had attended a dinner with Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen during her transit through New York in 2023. United Front-linked groups have also participated in the electoral redistricting process to ensure a mobilization advantage for their favored candidate, even though this put them in opposition to other established Asian-American civil society groups.

These political influence tactics, even at state and municipal levels, can have a powerful trickle-up effect, whereby politicians are increasingly aligned with Beijing's interests and beholden to CCP-linked actors. This could eventually influence broader policy discourse on issues such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and human rights in China, in favor of the Chinese government.

Shaping Academic Narratives on Taiwan

It is also worth noting the channels through which the Chinese government attempts or could attempt to shape academic narratives on Taiwan and other politically-sensitive issues. To the extent that scholarly research and writing is seen as objective and fact-based, hidden or overt influence attempts to shift or censor discussions of Taiwan's political status can not only impede freedom of speech, but also affect the education that younger generations are receiving as well as broader public understanding of such issues.

First, stemming directly from United Front influence activities, Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) on university campuses have been recently highlighted by Chinese leader Xi Jinping as an important player in promoting Beijing's interests abroad. There have been several reported instances where CSSAs and Chinese students disrupted campus events featuring speakers critical of the CCP, or called out professors for not adhering to Beijing's claims over Taiwan. There are also concerns over the monitoring of Chinese students and reporting to the Chinese consulate of any anti-regime activities.

A second channel of potential influence over academic narratives is financial dependence on PRC sources, which is a global phenomenon. Many universities in the United States and elsewhere have become reliant on Chinese students for tuition revenue. This has led university administrators to become more concerned about hosting events or allowing free speech that could anger the Chinese student body and potentially endanger much needed revenue. Moreover, research institutes and programs funded by donors with links to the Chinese government or otherwise sympathetic to CCP causes could spark concerns of academic self-censorship.

Taiwan as the Tip of the Spear: Broader Patterns and Policy Implications

The actors and tactics used in these above-mentioned cases are part of a broader pattern of intensifying PRC influence activities. While stamping out Taiwanese "separatism" – as a stated core interest of the Chinese government – certainly remains a foremost goal of United Front work, Beijing is using similar methods to shape narratives and policies on issues from Hong Kong and

Xinjiang to U.S. politics. Several of the groups and individuals protesting Tsai's transit through the United States were also involved in the November 2023 demonstrations during Chinese leader Xi Jinping's visit to San Francisco for the APEC summit, including physical assaults of pro-democracy and anti-CCP activists. The leader of one of these groups, Harry Lu of the American Changle Association, was subsequently arrested for operating an overseas police station in New York. Another individual, John Chan, is seen as a prominent political and community organizer in New York City with close links to several local politicians.

One policy challenge in dealing with United Front influence activities is that many of the overseas Chinese grassroots groups wear dual hats by design – while possibly co-opted as instruments of Beijing's foreign policy, they provide legitimate public goods and social services to ethnic Chinese communities. Consolidating their community leadership role in turn serves as the basis for promulgating CCP narratives and interests.

Additionally, there are multiple complex incentives for individuals to participate in pro-Beijing and anti-Taiwan activities. Members of the overseas Chinese community may sometimes be manipulated or used as geopolitical pawns. Attending an anti-Taiwan protest or waving flags to welcome President Xi's visit to San Francisco does not necessarily mean that person is a CCP acolyte—they may have been paid to come or view it as a social event. Shaking hands with a PRC consul-general may reflect a desire to gain political connections and expand personal business or career opportunities. At the same time, it is hard for overseas Chinese elites to claim complete ignorance of potential CCP leverage given their required familiarity with the political system—there is no free lunch.

To counter China, we should not become like China. While the CCP may aspire to implement a Marxist-Leninist style “whole-of-society” approach in its foreign influence efforts, the US and other governments should not respond with a “whole-of-society” mindset. Overreaction will only add more fuel to the fire, lend credence to Beijing's narratives of Western discrimination, and push the overseas Chinese community into CCP arms.

A sophisticated and effective U.S. policy response would avoid tarring all ethnic Chinese with the same brush, as often they are caught between a rock and a hard place. We need to address the root causes of how the CCP gains affection and legitimacy among these communities, and bolster America's own capabilities to combat authoritarian influence and eliminate such vulnerabilities. Reducing Chinese influence on the ground requires empowering alternative legitimate voices in the form of grassroots organizations and community resources that are responsive to local needs and interests, so that CCP voices are not able to dominate the societal and political landscape or claim to represent the entire Chinese American—and even Asian American—communities. Politicians at the local and national levels should be more proactive in seeking information about the backgrounds of community leaders and organizations and engaging with a broad array of community representatives and viewpoints rather than just taking the easy route and listening to the loudest voice (or the one promising the most votes). US national security is threatened by malign influence, but so are the voices and rights of Chinese Americans and Americans writ large.