

# Chinese Communist Party Influence Operations

From benign to malign influence and considerations for competition in the information environment

by Maj Timothy A. Ornelas

In early January 2022, Britain's domestic intelligence agency alerted legislators that Christine Lee, a lawyer with law offices in China and the United Kingdom, was attempting to "covertly interfere" in Britain's political process on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The British intelligence agency accused Ms. Lee of working in concert with the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) to facilitate political donations on "behalf of foreign nationals" with the intent of influencing political outcomes.<sup>1</sup> This incident is yet another data point in the growing body of reporting detailing CCP United Front work efforts. These efforts attempt to subvert, shape, or sabotage domestic agendas within foreign countries to further the CCP's interests. This body of reporting has fueled a growing concern that the CCP is exploiting the free and open nature of democratic societies, attempting to revise the current international order by manipulating the political processes of sovereign states through covert, coercive, and corrupt actions.

The opaque nature of United Front work, limited literature on the CCP's operational approach toward influence activities, and evolving United Front work tactics have confounded those seeking to explain and understand United Front work activities. Confusion and uncertainty surrounding United Front work have led some practitioners to inadvertently support CCP narratives, misalign

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**Figure 1. China Research Group Logo**  
(Figure provided by author.)

resources to confront malign influence, and overinflate the relative threat presented by United Front work activities.

This article is intended to reduce uncertainty and improve understanding concerning the CCP's United Front work effort. The first section will provide a baseline understanding of the United Front work's history, its ideological origin, and the CCP's renewed emphasis on the United Front work. The following section will examine the CCP's operational strategy for employing influence activities, which will tie the Party's strategic goals to tactical level influence-

seeking activities. The final section will cover considerations for U.S. forces and is intended to foster a threat-informed discussion on what U.S. forces can do to effectively compete against CCP influence operations within the information environment.

## Background: United Front Work

The UFWD is the department within the CCP that is responsible for the coordination of influence operations around the world.<sup>2</sup> United Front work is rooted in classical communist thought and was adapted for tactical employment by Lenin in the early part of the 20th century. In essence, the Leninist concept of United Front work seeks to co-opt influential non-communist figures, forming temporary alliances of convenience, to work toward objectives that ultimately serve the strategic ends of a communist revolutionary movement.<sup>3</sup> For the CCP, they found their earliest opportunity for employment of United Front work during their formative years as they formed anti-Japanese alliances with the Kuomintang, which simultaneously helped ensure their survival in the early years and also postured them to effectively challenge the Kuomintang

during the last phase of the Chinese Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Since then, United Front work has maintained varying degrees of focus within the Party, with Mao Zedong referring to United Front work as one of the Party’s three “magic weapons” that would lead to the ultimate victory of the communist revolutionaries.<sup>5</sup> While the emphasis on United Front work has waxed and waned over the years, in 2014 CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping began his renewed emphasis on United Front work by making major overhauls in the UFWD.<sup>6</sup>

UFWD organizational changes began at the Party level and cascaded down to departmental and provincial levels, shaping the way United Front work is currently employed by the CCP. Perhaps the most significant change to the UFWD organization made at the party level was the creation of mechanisms (i.e., leading small groups) to improve the centralization, planning, and direction of United Front work across the party.<sup>7</sup> The improved planning and direction efforts were intended to increase engagement in United Front work from

across the party, reaching beyond overt and traditional United Front-affiliated departments within the party toward a broader systems-based approach. Extending from the Party-level change, departmental changes followed, increasing the size and scope of the UFWD.

The emphasis on United Front work is most evident from an organizational perspective in the rapid expansion of the UFWD since 2015, with six of the twelve bureaus which currently comprise the UFWD being formed after 2015.<sup>8</sup> Many of these changes were consolidations and reorganizations of existing Party structure to align United Front work efforts under the centralized control and direction.<sup>9</sup>

The increasing interconnectedness brought on by recent waves of globalization has resulted in additional channels of influence that support the Party’s systems-based approach toward United Front work. Chinese diaspora holding public office in foreign countries, Western businesses seeking to do business with Chinese-based international companies, and academia all offer growing

opportunities for the CCP to exercise varying degrees of influence in Western societies. This is not to imply that all CCP-directed influence is malign. In fact, a considerable amount of CCP-directed influence is overt and takes the form of what some would classify as public diplomacy; however, the CCP’s teachings and approach to United Front work advocates for “using the legal to mask the illegal” and “integrating the legal and illegal” when conducting United Front work.<sup>10</sup> Mixing legitimate public diplomacy efforts with covert, coercive, or corrupt influence-seeking activities creates a range of United Front work operations that span a spectrum from influence to interference.<sup>11</sup> The tactic of mixing covert and overt influence activities creates concern, but this tactic requires additional context. When considered in the context of a broader strategy, constructing a measured and balanced assessment of the efficacy and implications of United Front work tactics is possible.

**United Front Work Strategy Overview**

The primary goal of the CCP’s United Front effort is directly tied to the Party’s primary core interest: the survival and rule of the CCP. This core interest dominates all other Party interests and creates internal and global requirements across the instruments of national power (i.e., DIME) to ensure its realization. The Party’s need to ensure their survival and continued rule drives an overwhelming concern with internal stability, which in turn shapes the primary direction of the United Front work inward toward China’s domestic populations, seeking to gain and maintain control over various political, religious, and ethnic groups within China; however, the effects of migration caused by globalization has expanded this focus. Groups that historically were primarily domestic now extend beyond China’s state boundaries. The overseas Chinese diaspora, ethnic minorities living abroad, and China-based businesses conducting business internationally are among some of these groups that CCP influence operations target in support of United Front efforts to “make the world safe” for the CCP.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 2. UFWD Bureaus. (Figure provided by author.)

The operational strategy for connecting the tactical approach of United Front work (intermingling overt and covert influence operations) to broader Party objectives of United Front work efforts align under four closely related lines of effort: 1) propaganda and censorship, 2) using economic ties for future political leverage, 3) developing and maintaining people-to-people relationships, and 4) gathering intelligence from non-intelligence sources.<sup>13</sup>

Propaganda and censorship are some of the most visible aspects of the United Front work operational approach. This line of effort involves promoting censored versions of world events that fit the preferred CCP narrative.<sup>14</sup> The target audience of this line of effort is the global Chinese population, which causes this activity to extend beyond the boundaries of mainland China into the international information space. To address the growing global target audience, state-owned media outlets associated with United Front work efforts have expanded their presence in foreign media outlets, creating strategic partnerships with foreign newspapers, TV, and radio stations to further promote a CCP-authorized narrative of global events.<sup>15</sup> As a result of the extension of propaganda efforts into the international information space, censorship has expanded to international Chinese-speaking audiences in an attempt to control the narrative about the CCP and use overseas target audiences as channels of influence in open and democratic societies. Propaganda and censorship efforts, while subtle, are often overt and deliberate; however, at times, the coercive approach by United Front affiliated organizations can begin to shift the nature of these activities along the spectrum from influence to interference.

Using economic ties for future political leverage is a closely related line of effort to propaganda and censorship, as economic gain from access to Chinese markets can both compel and deter actions by profit-motivated organizations. Like propaganda and censorship, this line of effort is very visible at times. From self-censorship of movies and television by Western media to the deliberate censorship of communications by information technology com-

panies, inferring the coercive nature of economic gain is not difficult; however, while this action does align with a United Front work line of effort, it does not necessarily imply a connection to a United Front work-affiliated organization.<sup>16</sup> The types of activity that most closely align with the economic ties line of effort are layered, complex, and when overt seemingly benign. This makes attribution of these types of activities difficult to nearly impossible to positively identify as interference on behalf of United Front work efforts. Anonymous political donations, United Front-associated sponsorship of studies and research, and political lobbying by United Front-associated groups can all create economic dependencies and channels of influence within open democratic societies. Examples of economic-driven United Front work-connected operations from the United States, Australia, and New Zealand span the spectrum from influence to interference when considering the covert, coercive, or corrupt nature of activity in each region.<sup>17</sup>

Building person-to-person relationships are intended to foster long-term access to influential individuals in target

audience groups.<sup>18</sup> The approach seeks to co-opt the influence of these individuals to support the CCP's preferred narrative. Additionally, by influencing the influencer, distance is created between the messenger and the CCP. The distancing is intended to increase the legitimacy of the message through the frequent and repetitive delivery across multiple vectors.<sup>19</sup> Whether these groups have influence within China or foreign entities (e.g., politicians, academics), the goal remains the same—to ensure the advancement of CCP core interests and shape the global landscape in favor of the CCP.

Gathering intelligence from non-intelligence sources is closely connected to building and maintaining person-to-person relationships and spans the spectrum of influence to interference. On the overt end of the spectrum, Ministry of State Security-connected organizations like the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, a think tank, serve as an extension of the CCP intelligence apparatus and have historically had regular interactions with foreign national security professionals.<sup>20</sup> Regular access to national security and political figures offers the

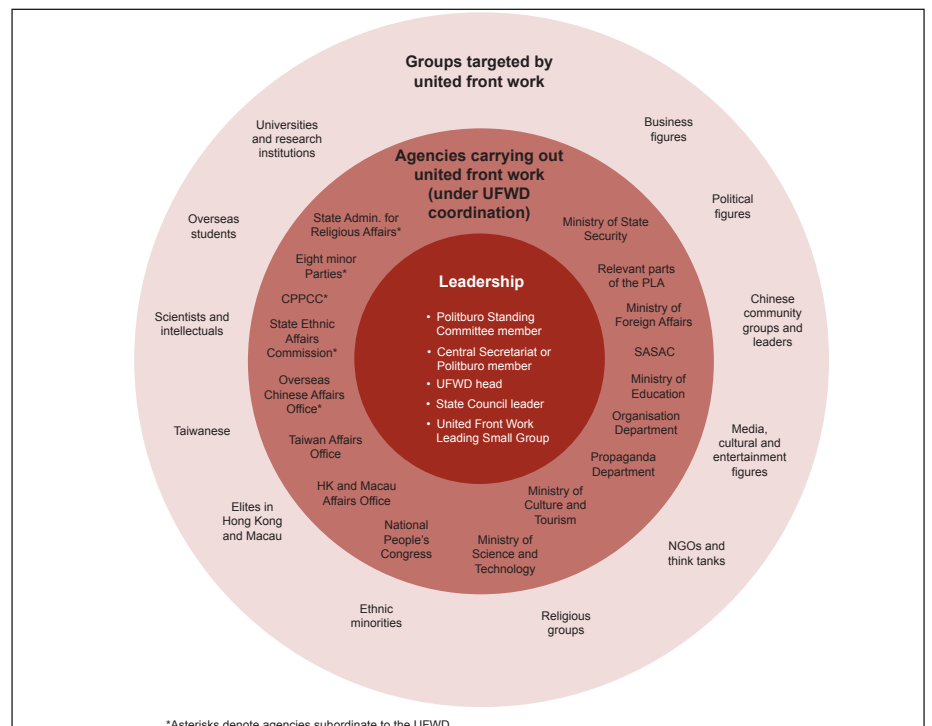


Figure 3. Influence to interference spectrum. (Figure provided by author.)



China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations the placement and access to potentially gather insights into intentions and beliefs of foreign policymakers/influencers that could serve intelligence analysis purposes. On the covert end of the spectrum, attempts to recruit academic support activities ranging from providing reporting on pro-democracy groups operating abroad to industrial espionage.<sup>21</sup>

Elements of, and individuals connected to, the Overseas Liaison Bureau, China Radio International, and the Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China have engaged in some degree of activity connected to United Front work across multiple sectors of Western society.<sup>22</sup> This list includes only a few of the parent organizations associated with United Front work. Attempts to defeat policy mechanisms designed to limit foreign influence (e.g., Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States) and create distance between message delivery and the CCP have blurred the lines between overt and covert influence activities. Subsequently, efforts to mask the source of funding, messaging, and tasking have resulted in a continually growing number of United Front work shell organizations, subsidiaries, and strategic relationships which have compounded the complexity and sophistication of the United Front work system.<sup>23</sup> While these activities have varied based on the regional ambitions and access of the CCP, they have remained consistent with the lines of effort outlined above.

**Considerations for U.S. Forces**

There are a number of considerations for U.S. forces seeking to compete with CCP influence operations in the information domain to approach competition in a balanced and deliberate manner. First, U.S. forces must remain mindful of precision in terms. Precision in terms will help contextualize the type of behavior observed when examining potential CCP influence operations. Terms like influence and interference, proxy and advocate, or China and CCP are not interchangeable. The distinction in terms will allow U.S. forces (and policymakers) to determine the appropriate

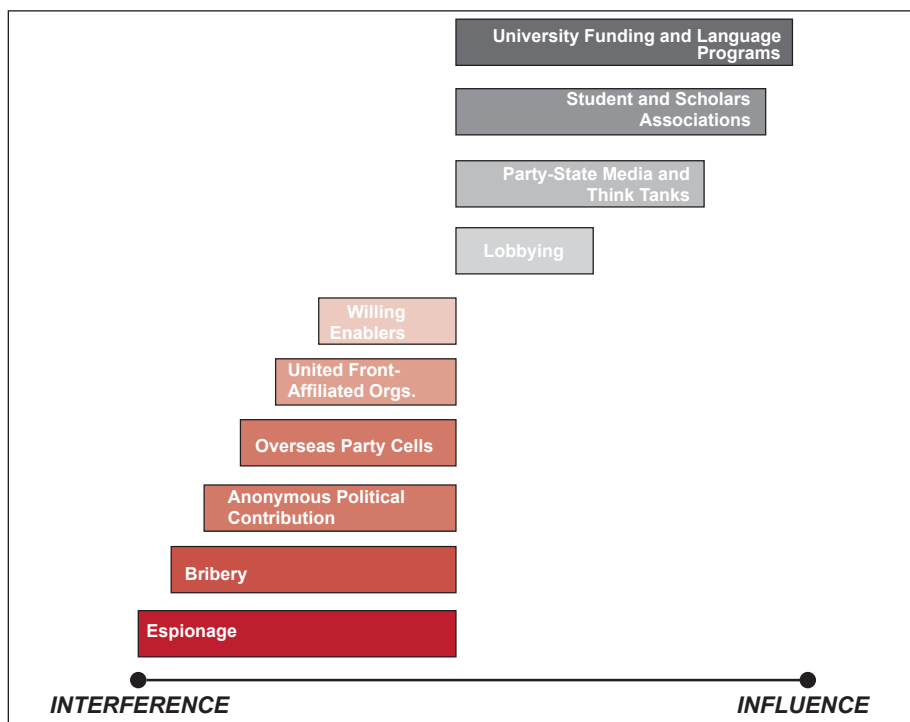


Figure 4. UFW system graphic. (Figure provided by author.)

approach toward competing within the information space with CCP influence operations. While the last example is argued by the CCP to be inseparable, the distinction between terms is important for a couple of reasons. Most importantly, U.S. forces must not fall into a trap of linguistic incompetence brought on by a reductionist mentality. Conflating China or the ethnic Chinese diaspora with the CCP or attributing all United Front work to a broad global Chinese population will actually support the CCP narrative that portrays the West as a racist society that seeks to contain China.<sup>24</sup>

Second, it is important to consider the impact of influence operations, either benign or malign, against mission sets of U.S. forces prior to allocating resources to respond to these actions. For example, as a component of the joint force, the Marine Corps may have the ability to counter malign influence as a global force-in-readiness; however, a global counter-influence effort may not be aligned with stated mission sets of enabling naval operations or setting conditions for follow-on joint forces. In this example, a focused approach to countering malign influence is likely required

while leaving other non-geographically relevant counter-influence operations to adjacent elements of national power or the Joint Force to tie these efforts back to mission requirements and not expend resources against a ubiquitous United Front work system.

Last, U.S. forces should consider that the balance of power in terms of influence still largely favors the West. When examining the directionality of influence over the past four decades, it is clear that Western society has dominated the influence space when considering the impact Western societies have had on the development of contemporary China versus the impact China has had on the development of contemporary Western society.<sup>25</sup> This stems from what Joseph Nye, the creator of the concept of soft power, views as the United States' competitive advantage versus the CCP; a free and open American society that promotes the individual, civil society, and the private sector over a nationalist and authoritarian CCP-centric regime.<sup>26</sup> Exposing malign influence operations, leveraging and remaining consistent with sources of U.S. soft power, can offer a potential deterrence through detection effect while simultaneously preserving

U.S. legitimacy/moral authority when conducting counter-influence operations.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite all of CCP's influence efforts, they have achieved very little in terms of their strategic objectives. According to recent survey research, 89 percent of Americans still hold unfavorable views of China, with a majority of respondents viewing CCP's China as an enemy or competitor.<sup>28</sup> In Japan, even with the potential vulnerability of anti-base sentiment in Okinawa, CCP influence operations and narratives fail to resonate with the broader population and CCP's higher-order strategic objectives remain unrealized.<sup>29</sup> Resistance to CCP influence in Australia, New Zealand, and across the European Union are strong indicators that early influence efforts are quickly being recognized and reversed, shifting the balance of power within the information domain further out of the CCP's favor.

An appropriate response to CCP influence operations requires context. Understanding overarching goals, strategy, and tactics can help frame a suitable response and help determine what role U.S. forces have in that effort. Through a balanced and measured approach, U.S. forces can effectively compete with CCP influence operations within the information environment and counter covert, coercive, and corrupt activities, deterring CCP aggression in the information domain through persistent and proportional responses.

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## Notes

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