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China's Global Influence and Interference Activities

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I would like to thank Chairwoman Bartholomew, Vice Chairman Wong and members of the commission for inviting me to testify before you. I would like to thank Commissioner Wessel and Commissioner Borochoff for chairing this hearing. It is an honour to have this opportunity to testify and a refreshing chance to push forward discussion about this critically important issue of global influence efforts by the People's Republic of China.

I have the particular blessing, or perhaps misfortune, of coming from Australia. Australian experiences with foreign interference show the sustained, covert efforts of the Chinese Communist Party (**CCP**) to manipulate foreign political systems. Exposing these activities ended the careers or tainted the reputations of several federal and state politicians who were implicated in them. Most famously, Senator Sam Dastyari became a key conduit for political donations from CCP-linked billionaire Huang Xiangmo. Among other things, Huang persuaded Dastyari to contradict his own party's opposition to China's island-building and militarization of the South China Sea. Dastyari later testified that Huang, whose Australian residency was later cancelled on national security grounds, may have been an "agent of influence" for China.¹

Australia has indeed been at the forefront of recognising and countering political interference from the CCP. In late 2017, the Australian government introduced legislation designed to tackle the problem.² However, the breadth and suddenness of this recognition in Australia and the world means that countering interference is still a daunting task for policymakers, analysts and officers leading the response. This is an evolving challenge that policy and operational responses have yet to catch up to.

I will take this opportunity to briefly introduce the Chinese Communist Party's "united front system"—focusing on its structure and constituents and why its activities are relevant to governments and individuals around the world. In particular, I would like to focus on the nexus

¹ See John Garnaut, "Australia's China reset", *The Monthly*, August 2018, <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/august/1533045600/john-garnaut/australia-s-china-reset#mtr>. Clive Hamilton's *Silent Invasion* provides an early book-length overview of CCP influence in Australia: Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia*, Hardie Grant Books, 2018.

² Malcolm Turnbull, "Speech introducing the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017", Malcolm Turnbull, 7 December 2017, <https://archive.ph/mXfxl>.

between the united front system and intelligence work. The united front system's overlap with political interference, crime, coercion and espionage is the source of its greatest harms to societies around the world.

What is China's united front system?

The united front system is the network of agencies responsible for managing the CCP's influence over and relationships with key non-Party sectors, groups and individuals.³ These activities aim to consolidate the CCP-led "united front" working towards the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.⁴ Chairman Mao Zedong famously described the united front as one of the Party's three "magic weapons" for defeating its enemies in a 1939 essay.⁵

United front work, in the sense codified in current Party documents, refers to the activities of the united front system's efforts to liaise with and influence these non-Party groups. Its priorities are outlined in leadership speeches and Party regulations. Most importantly for foreign governments, the scope of united front work includes diaspora communities, Chinese students studying abroad, ethnic minorities, religious figures, intellectuals (including scientists), private sector individuals and staff in multinational enterprises.⁶

The United Front Work Department (UFWD) sits at the heart of this system. It is the peak agency for key elements of united front work including diaspora, ethnic and religious affairs (including Tibet and Xinjiang policy). It includes bureaus responsible for each of the aforementioned target groups, including two diaspora work bureaus.

In its work on these target groups, as united front expert Gerry Groot wrote in 2014, "the UFWD attempts to harness them to the aims of the Party and prevent them from becoming a problem in the first place. The Department's work abroad extends beyond reaching out to foreign citizens of Chinese ethnic origin and recent emigrants, to trying to influence foreign

³ Alex Joske, "The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party's united front system", ASPI, 2020, http://web.archive.org/web/20230315231612/https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-06/The%20party%20speaks%20for%20you_0.pdf?gFHuXyYMR0XuDQOs_6JSmrdyk7MralcN=.

⁴ 中共中央 [CCP Central Committee], "中国共产党统一战线工作条例" [CCP United Front Work Regulations], 人民网, 6 January 2021, <https://archive.ph/F2yLl>.

⁵ Note that this is often mischaracterised as a reference to the UFWD, when it specifically referred to the united front more generally. 毛泽东 [Mao Zedong], "《共产党人》发刊词" [Introducing *The Communist*], Marxists.org, October 1939, <https://archive.ph/PriH9>.

⁶ 中共中央 [CCP Central Committee], "中国共产党统一战线工作条例" [CCP United Front Work Regulations], 人民网, 6 January 2021, <https://archive.ph/F2yLl>.

nationals to accept the Communist Party's point of view on a plethora of topics."⁷ Individuals in China and abroad who operate at the direction or guidance of the united front system are often referred to as "united front figures" (or "united frontlings").⁸

Finally, since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has emphasised united front work and expanded the UFWD. Key to Xi Jinping's rejuvenation of the united front system was his establishment of a peak body overseeing and coordinating the activities of dozens of agencies involved in the system: the Central United Front Work Leading Small Group. A resurrection of the organisation headed by Xi's father in the 1980, this group has led a consolidation and centralisation of united front work to ensure its effectiveness and responsiveness to the Party leadership.⁹

The united front system's covert operations

The united front system's overseas-focused work can involve covert and overt attempts to influence and mobilise CCP-aligned individuals and organisations. Some of the covert aspects of this activity are as follows:

- As China's premier Tibetan affairs agency, the UFWD seeks to maintain clandestine relationships with Tibetan diaspora figures through UFWD officials posted to embassies and consulates around the world. This includes officials serving as diplomats in New York and Washington, DC, as well as my town of Canberra, Australia.
- Much of the united front system's engagement with overseas individuals takes place through front organisations designed to obscure the hand of the Party-state. For example, the UFWD leads and staffs the China Overseas Friendship Association, which has had hundreds of overseas members. UFWD officials will sometimes travel abroad as staff of the association rather than CCP officials.¹⁰ Until recently, China Overseas Friendship Association member Buon Tan was a parliamentarian in the French National Assembly.¹¹

⁷ Gerry Groot, "The United Front in an Age of Shared Destiny" in Geremie R. Barmé, Linda Jaivin, Jeremy Goldkorn (ed.), <https://archive.ph/Ykl7E>.

⁸ Jichang Lulu, "New Zealand: United Frontlings bearing gifts", Sinopsis, 16 November 2018, <http://web.archive.org/web/20190214040318/https://sinopsis.cz/en/new-zealand-united-frontlings-bearing-gifts/>.

⁹ Alex Joske, "The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalising united front work", Sinopsis, July 2019, <http://web.archive.org/web/20191119233529/https://sinopsis.cz/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/joskelsg.pdf>.

¹⁰ Joske, "The party speaks for you".

¹¹ René Bigey, Alex Joske, "The tea leaf prince Chinese Communist Party networks in French politics", Sinopsis, March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220302032502/https://sinopsis.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/buontan0.pdf>.

- United front system officials have directed or encouraged overseas united front figures to establish pro-CCP organisations or carry out political activities aligned with the CCP's objectives. This may include staging demonstrations, issuing public statements, writing opinion articles, lobbying politicians and making political donations. For example, one CCP-backed media outlet in Melbourne organised protests against the 2016 Hague Tribunal ruling on the South China Sea, which rejected China's territorial claims.¹² In 2022, the UK government issued a security warning to parliamentarians, alleging that political donor and self-styled community leader Christine Lee was a covert agent of influence for the UFWD.¹³
- The united front system has covertly supported or established Chinese-language media outlets in several jurisdictions. Through a Hong Kong front company, the UFWD has financial relationships with media proprietors in the United States, Australia, Europe and other regions—including the California-based *China Press*.¹⁴
- Some united front organisations facilitate technology acquisition and talent recruitment efforts by the Chinese government. For example, the Association of Wenzhou PhDs USA received a list of potential members from the united front system. The association then sought to help the Chinese government recruit U.S.-based scientists into PRC talent recruitment programs. One of the founders of the association later admitted to saving Tesla source code to his personal cloud account before joining rival Chinese company Xmotors.¹⁵ A 2020 book chapter I co-authored with China scholar Jeffrey Stoff explored this interface between the united front system and technology transfer.¹⁶

How the CCP nestles intelligence inside the united front

¹² Nick McKenzie, Richard Baker, Sasha Koloff, Chris Uhlmann, "The Chinese Communist Party's power and influence in Australia", ABC News, 4 June 2017, <https://archive.ph/rYkAr>.

¹³ Gordon Corera, "Why did MI5 name Christine Lee as an 'agent of influence'?", BBC News, July 2022, <https://archive.ph/kIBmD>.

¹⁴ Alex Joske, Lin Li, Alexandra Pascoe, Nathan Attrill, "The influence Environment: A survey of Chinese-language media in Australia", ASPI, December 2020, <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-12/The%20influence%20environment.pdf>; Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Beijing Builds Its Influence in the American Media", *Foreign Policy*, 21 December 2017, <http://web.archive.org/web/20171222040806/https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/21/one-of-americas-biggest-chinese-language-newspapers-toes-beijings-party-line-china-influence-united-front/>.

¹⁵ Alex Cranz, "Tesla settles with ex-engineer accused of stealing Autopilot source code", The Verge, 16 April 2021, <http://web.archive.org/web/20210416155108/https://www.theverge.com/2021/4/16/22383620/tesla-autopilot-settlement-xmotors-self-driving-source-code>; Alex Joske, "Hunting the phoenix", ASPI, August 2020, http://web.archive.org/web/20220302145951/https://ad-aspi.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2020-10/Hunting%20the%20phoenix_v2.pdf.

¹⁶ Alex Joske, Jeffrey Stoff, "The United Front and Technology Transfer," in William Hannas, Didi Kirsten Tatlow (eds.), *China's Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage*, Routledge, 2020.

The united front system's covert work is highly concerning and can be illegal on its own. In addition to this, the united front system can provide cover for professional intelligence and security work. China's intelligence agencies likely view the international networks built through united front work as prime ground for recruiting well-connected individuals, and have established units specifically to take advantage of this.

This relationship between intelligence agencies and the united front system is perhaps unsurprising, and dates to the earliest days of the CCP. In 1939, Party leader Zhou Enlai advocated "nestling intelligence in the united front" and "using the united front to push forth intelligence".¹⁷ As the chief of the CCP's foreign affairs, united front and intelligence systems, Zhou was well placed to issue such a direction with authority.

Today, the Ministry of State Security, the Intelligence Bureau of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Joint Staff Department, the Liaison Bureau of the PLA Political Work Department, and their branches are China's primary human intelligence actors. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, intelligence agencies continued integrating of intelligence and united front work. This is the ongoing focus of my research and my recently published book, *Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Influence Operations Fooled the World*.¹⁸ To give a few examples:

- CCP intelligence agencies have been observed recruiting united front figures as clandestine assets, or otherwise influencing them as part of professional intelligence operations.
- The MSS has covertly held welcoming parties for overseas delegates to China's top united front forum.
- MSS and PLA officers have posed as UFWD officials to facilitate their intelligence operations.
- The MSS and PLA manage several entities that look like united front organisations, but are in fact staffed by undercover officers and used as platforms for intelligence operations.
- Writing in the late 90s, a senior MSS officer recommended drawing on united front networks to help China influence the U.S. Congress.

¹⁷ 薛钰, "周恩来与党的隐蔽战线" [Zhou Enlai and the Party's Covert Battlefront], 人民网 [People's Daily Online], 18 November 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220712160951/zhounenlai.people.cn/n1/2020/1118/c409117-31935463.html>.

¹⁸ Alex Joske, *Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Covert Operations Fooled the World*, Hardie Grant Books, 2022.

Harassment, coercion and corruption perpetrated by united front figures may also be illustrations of this overlap, especially when many of those activities imply involvement by Chinese security or law enforcement agencies such as the Ministry of Public Security.¹⁹

This has several important implications:

- United front work is separate to intelligence work, but the two are deliberately integrated in a way that means they generally cannot be tackled separately.
- Restricting the international reach of the united front system has positive externalities, limiting the operational environment for Chinese intelligence agencies.
- We should be cognizant of the likelihood that seemingly innocuous or low-level united front activities can hide covert and clandestine work upon closer investigation.
- The public-facing activities of the Party, including its united front system, can provide leads for investigating potential covert and clandestine activity.
- China's intelligence agencies, probably the world's largest, may have greater integration with China's broader international engagement than previously appreciated.

Policy recommendations

The overlap between the united front system and China's intelligence apparatus presents a serious challenge to policymakers. It means that the task of responding to CCP interference does not neatly fit into the scope of a confined set of U.S. government agencies. It means that traditionally separate streams of work can converge through investigations into CCP interference. Investigations into money laundering, harassment and corruption are increasingly turning up leads that point to Chinese government involvement, for example. It also makes it easier for China to level accusations of racism against those implementing countermeasures to united front work.

No single country offers a ready-made model for tackling CCP interference. Australian legislation is valuable and worthy of emulation. Australia's University Foreign Interference Taskforce may be a helpful model for setting best practice across the higher education sector through consultation between government and universities. The United States leads the world

¹⁹ See "Six Individuals Charged with Conspiring to Act as Illegal Agents of the People's Republic of China", US Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, 20 October 2022, <http://web.archive.org/web/20221020183747/https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/six-individuals-charged-conspiring-act-illegal-agents-peoples-republic-china-0>.

in prosecuting PRC state-backed crimes, but relatively few of these prosecutions have targeted united front work or efforts to influence politics. Implementing and updating Australia's Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme, as with America's Foreign Agents Registration Act, remains a work in progress in my opinion.

I would like to suggest the following broad recommendations for the Commission and policymakers generally:

1. *Invest in open-source research, and China research more broadly.* Countering interference requires raising public awareness and publicly responding to interference operations. This is difficult to do without open-source research that can be acted upon and shared within government and with stakeholders. The nature of united front work, and some aspects of CCP intelligence work, also makes it relatively accessible to open-source research.
2. *Make more information available to the public.* Apart from this commission, few bodies are making high-quality research and analysis on CCP interference available to the public. Effective public information-sharing and communication can help raise the costs for CCP agents of influence, and help explain government responses.
3. *Create more dedicated counter foreign interference work streams and analytical units inside government.* The threat of foreign political interference is sufficient to warrant greater specialisation in the government. Although it has extensive overlap with counterintelligence and counterespionage work, countering foreign interference involves very different considerations. For example, it requires more public engagement and can have lower bars for intervention. Furthermore, agencies such as the UFWD have not traditionally been viewed as major intelligence actors, even though they are fundamental to understanding political interference. Many other key CCP interference actors, such as the Ministry of Public Security, remain understudied.
4. *Prosecute strategically.* The United States Government has extensive experience prosecuting PRC-backed crimes, but technology and economic espionage cases account for the lion's share of cases. Until a recent series of transnational repression cases, few prosecutions responded to united front work or covert political influence from China. According to China scholars Peter Mattis and Matt Schrader, for many of those prosecutions that do involve the UFWD, "the FBI and the Department of Justice have not done a good job of either connecting the dots between the cases or explaining

their significance”.²⁰ Carefully considered prosecutions should be used to provide deterrents and public case studies of interference in key areas. In my assessment, governments can do more to demonstrate and highlight the role of the UFWD and Ministry of State Security in local politics, business sectors, diaspora populations more broadly, Tibetan and Uyghur communities and media organisations through criminal prosecutions.

5. *Counter CCP interference globally.* At present, the few governments that are actively prioritising counter interference work are domestically focused. However, this is a global problem for countries like the United States that are heavily invested in alliances and partnerships around the world—all of which will be targets of CCP interference. Governments should prioritise collection on CCP interference around the world, and use this to inform policymaking on international counter foreign interference work.

²⁰ See Peter Mattis, Matt Schrader, “America Can’t Beat Beijing’s Tech Theft With Racial Profiling”, War on the Rocks, 23 July 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190723095516/https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/america-cant-beat-beijings-tech-theft-with-racial-profiling/>.