

Exploit Every Rift: United Front Work Goes Global

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As the CCP's united front work aimed at the outside world has consolidated since the 19th Party Congress, there are strong signs that a concerted response to deal with the challenge of the CCP's political interference activities is underway in targeted nations. As united front work is traditionally covert, one might have expected that ever-growing international attention would lead to it changing tactics and going underground—the tactic of a weaker player. Conversely, CCP united front work aimed at the outside world has gone on the offensive, fighting on all fronts, indicating that the CCP leadership believes it is in a position of strength and has no reason to hide its efforts. Targeted governments must develop internally-focused resilience strategies that will protect the integrity of their political processes and institutions at the same time as partnering with like-minded states to form their own “united front against the united front.”

“The more powerful enemy can be vanquished only by exerting the utmost effort, and most thoroughly, carefully, attentively and skilfully making use without fail of every, even the smallest, ‘rift’ among the enemies, of every antagonism of interest among the bourgeoisie of the various countries and among the various groups or types of bourgeoisie within the various countries, and also by taking advantage of every, even the smallest, opportunity of gaining a mass ally, even though this ally be temporary, vacillating, unstable, unreliable and conditional. Those who fail to understand this, fail to understand even a particle of Marxism, or of scientific, modern Socialism in general.”⁷⁸ V. I. Lenin

“Those who correctly apply this policy can muster a mighty revolutionary army of the masses in their millions upon millions to concentrate the attack on the chief enemy and triumph in the revolution” People's Daily, 1 November 1977

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has led a massive expansion of “united front work,” a form of political warfare that the CCP has perfected over many decades. The united front is a

⁷⁸ V.I. Lenin, *“Left-wing” Communism, An Infantile Disorder* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950), 91.

classic Leninist tactic with the goal of forging the broadest possible coalition of interests so as to undermine the “chief enemy.” So when we look at Xi Jinping’s united front strategy, we need to both examine its participants and also work out its targets.

International debate on China’s increased united front work and political interference activities under Xi has so far frequently focused on the CCP’s United Front Work Department. But this is insufficient, and it reflects the lack of attention to studying Party affairs since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

It cannot be emphasized enough: united front work is a task of *all* CCP agencies (some more than others) as well as a basic task of *every* CCP member. Every CCP agency, from the International Liaison Department to the Central Propaganda Department to the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, is tasked with engaging in united front activities, as are PRC government departments and local authorities. As up to seventy-five percent of the CEOs of China’s major companies are now Party members, we also need to examine the work of China’s private corporations in united front work activities.

The PRC is a party-state. Since the 19th Party Congress, Xi has removed any veneer of separation between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese state. So while the United Front Work Department does indeed play an important role in CCP united front work, comprehending China’s modern political warfare tactics requires a deep understanding of all the CCP’s agencies, their policies, their leadership, their methodology, and the way the party-state system works in China.

Like the Bolsheviks, the CCP uses united front work in both domestic and foreign policy. Xi Jinping is running China in crisis mode and the return of direct Party control over key fault lines such as ethnic affairs, especially with regard to Uighurs and Tibetans, religious affairs, and the Overseas Chinese is indicative of this. After the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, three government agencies, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the State Administration for Religious Affairs, and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, were absorbed into the CCP’s United Front Work Department. In March 2018, another significant merger is reported to have occurred: the CCP’s International Liaison Department, in charge of CCP links with foreign parties—which until the Xi era had become an organization looking for a purpose for its existence—was joined with the Office of the Central Leading Group on Foreign Affairs, and it was given extra powers and resources.⁷⁹ This change reveals how the CCP’s revolutionary and transformative foreign policy agenda and methods are now being fused with the Chinese state’s more mainstream foreign policy activities such as trade, investment and top-level

⁷⁹ “China to restructure foreign affairs team in push for greater role on the world stage, source says.” *South China Morning Post*, March 10, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2136651/china-restructure-foreign-affairs-team-push-greater>.

diplomatic meetings. The last time that these two aspects were joined was in the 1940s before the CCP came to power.

It is the foreign aspect of China's contemporary united front work that has hit the international headlines due to a series of revelations about the scale of CCP united front work/political interference activities in Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, and now the USA. The post-1978 policies of the USA and other Western nations to engage with China on all fronts—while normalizing and ultimately downplaying the role of the CCP in Chinese politics—is eroding before our eyes. Suddenly, Pekingology is back in favour, and many analysts are now scrambling to understand CCP policies and institutions.

The CCP's united front work aimed at the outside world has consolidated since the 19th Party Congress, carrying on trends established over the previous five years. Xi-era united front work activities focus on four key areas⁸⁰: 1, Stepped-up efforts to manage and guide the Chinese diaspora—both Han Chinese and ethnic minorities such as Uighurs and Tibetans—so as to utilize them as agents of Chinese foreign policy while meting out increasingly harsh treatment do those who do not cooperate; 2, Coopting and cultivating foreign economic and political elites in the nations of the world to support and promote the CCP's global foreign policy goals; 3, A global, multi-platform, strategic communication strategy to promote the CCP's agenda; and 4, The formation of a China-centered economic and strategic bloc—One Belt One Road, or as the CCP prefers to call it in discussions with foreigners: the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Xi government's Belt and Road Initiative is a classic united front activity. It is pitched as “beyond ideology”⁸¹ and designed to create a new global order, which CCP analysts describe as “Globalization 2.0.” The CCP has a longstanding policy of developing relationships with foreign and overseas Chinese personages (the more influential the better) to influence, subvert, and, if necessary, bypass the policies of their governments and promote the interests of the CCP globally.⁸² Through the united front strategy, the CCP has seeded allies and clients throughout the economic and political elite of many countries at the national as well as the local level and is getting them to promote acceptance for the Belt and Road Initiative in their respective countries.

Because Xi is running China in crisis mode, his government also needs to bring the information environment in China under control—and unlike his predecessors he has the power to do so. In

⁸⁰ As discussed in great detail in my paper: Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping,” Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, September 18, 2017. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/magicweaponsanne-mariebradyseptember162017.pdf>

⁸¹ “Peng Guangqian: “One-Belt-One-Road” Strategic Concept Reconstructs the International Order” [彭光谦:“一带一路”战略构想与国际秩序重构] *Xinhua* January 9, 2015. https://web.archive.org/web/20170219183554/http://www.taiwan.cn/xwzx/gj/201501/t20150109_8645599.htm.

⁸² Zhao Pitao, “Summary of Foreign Affairs “ [外事该说], (Shanghai: Science Publishing House, 1995) 167.

order to do this in a porous global information environment, the CCP must try to curb debates related to China's interests outside the country as well as within. This is why the Chinese diaspora as well as the international China Studies community have been the focus of united front activities, from interference in the editorial line of overseas Chinese language media to pressure on leading academic presses and universities to succumb to CCP censorship guidelines.

Unfortunately, decades of post-Cold War complacency, arrogance about the superiority of liberal democracies over communist systems, as well as the cumulative economic impact of market liberalist theories on the public sector has left the foreign targets of China's political interference operations spectacularly unprepared to deal with the challenge they are only now beginning to perceive. Adding to these longstanding problems, since 9/11, Western intelligence agencies have been almost exclusively focused on counter-terrorism, and few have any Chinese-speaking specialists, let alone specialists on the CCP.

In many countries, Chinese-language teaching has been outsourced to the Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, which are guided by CCP censorship requirements, but, astonishingly, subsidized by their foreign hosts. In effect, we have all been paying for the CCP to promote the Party line in Chinese language teaching and China Studies.

Foreign media outlets such as the *Washington Post* and Australia's Fairfax publish inserts from *China Daily*, Voice of America's Chinese language programs take instruction from the CCP on sensitive China-related stories, Hollywood only makes movies which will pass the CCP censors, and Twitter closed down the Twitter feed of the CCP's *bête noire*, high-profile whistleblower Guo Wengui.

Meanwhile, some China academics and analysts rely on PRC student interns to conduct their research—students whose loyalty is supposed to be managed by their government through the Chinese Students and Scholars Association or the Western Returned Scholars Association. They also accept funding from CCP front organizations; and all-expenses-paid trips to China; and they take up generous adjunct positions at Chinese universities. It is no wonder then, that at a time when one would expect the China field to be stepping up to explain the situation to their governments and the public, many of our leading China academics are instead remaining silent or downplaying the risk—sometimes using CCP talking points to do so.

Yet, there are strong signs that a concerted response to deal with the challenge of the CCP's increased political interference activities is underway, both in targeted nations and via joint efforts. In September 2018, Five Eyes partners formed a Counter Foreign Interference group, and the actions of China—and Russia—will be the main focus. The US Congress introduced several new bills in 2018, the Countering Foreign Propaganda Act, the Foreign Influence Transparency Act, and the 2019 Defense Authorization Act, all of which target China and Russia's political

interference activities. The US State Department has been allocated \$40 million to fund analysis of influence operations and develop a counter-strategy. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced a series of laws to curb Chinese influence. And Canada is leading efforts to unite like-minded states via trade agreements.

China's Counter-Strategy

One might have expected that the ever-growing international attention to China's united front work would lead to it changing tactics and going underground. United front work is traditionally covert and is the tactic of a weaker player. There have indeed been some attempts to disguise the origins of various China-related united front organizations in the wake of the growing international interest, and a change in propaganda messaging aimed at the outside world on key topics such as One Belt, One Road and the CCP government's detention of a million or more Uighurs and their children in detention centers and state orphanages.

But overall, despite the continual exposure of CCP methods and activities in the last year, CCP united front work aimed at the outside world has gone on the offensive, fighting on all fronts. This indicates that the CCP leadership believes it is in a position of strength *vis á vis* the US, the EU, and other governments and has no need to hide its efforts.

The devolved powers and autonomy of multiple political entities within democratic political systems leaves many gaps for CCP united front work to exploit, but, as countries from Pakistan to Myanmar have found, authoritarian political systems are not immune to CCP united front work either. Yet, some of the actions of the Trump administration are making it harder for both traditional allies and partners, as well as emerging partners, to stand with the United States—just at the very moment when it has finally labeled China's political warfare as a strategic threat.

China has followed an increasingly assertive foreign policy under Xi Jinping, but even more so since the 19th Party Congress when Xi announced that Chinese politics had entered a “New Era.” International pressure on China in the last year is hardening that stance: from the Trump administration's trade war and the growing international push back on China's militarization of the South China Sea to the formation of a loose global coalition against China's foreign interference activities and increasing international criticism of human rights abuses. On all these matters, Xi will not back down and is in fact going on the offensive.

Since the 19th Congress, in addition to continuing to expand united front work activities aimed at the outside world, China has launched a counter-strategy to combat international criticism of its political interference behavior. There are too many new united front actions across multiple countries to list them all in full, but I will highlight a couple of events and actions which stand out as significant:

- In November 2017, the CCP International Liaison Department hosted a massive conference for political parties around the world, which it called “CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting.” More than 600 delegates representing 300 political parties and political organizations from over 120 nations attended the meeting, including representatives from the US Republican Party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, the Conservative Party of the UK, the Republican Party of France, and the Liberal Party of Canada. Participants at the meeting signed an agreement called the “Beijing Initiative,” which announces the “construction of a community of a shared future for mankind.”⁸³ The CCP International Liaison Department now has such a prominent role in Xi era united front work that some commentators are calling it the “New Comintern.”⁸⁴
- In June 2018, the Chinese government signed a cooperation agreement with Russia on external propaganda. Within China, the government launched a campaign against foreign and Taiwan spies.
- In August 2018, the CCP Central Committee urged “Chinese compatriots”—the 60 million ethnic Chinese living in countries outside China, the majority of them for decades, if not centuries—to “remember the call from the Party and the people, spread China’s voice, support the country’s development, safeguard national interests, promote Chinese culture and make new contributions to fulfilling national rejuvenation and building a community with a shared future for mankind.”⁸⁵ Rather than disguising its efforts to co-opt the Chinese diaspora and to use them as a tool of CCP foreign policy, Xi’s government has over-turned the CCP’s 1955 Bandung strategy of asking the Overseas Chinese community to make a choice as to their citizenship and political allegiance, and it is now openly calling them to its aid.

As Lenin recommends, Xi is exploiting every rift and is fighting on all fronts—at the same time as continuing to seek partners to unite with against the chief enemy: the USA and other Western democracies, whose engagement strategies were designed to undermine the CCP party-state system. For Xi Jinping, the Western democracies represent the “Old Era” of the global order, which the 19th Party Congress has declared is officially over.

⁸³ “Full Text of the Beijing Proposal of the Communist Party of China and World Political Parties High Level Dialogue” [中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会 北京倡议（全文）] *Xinhua*, December 3, 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-12/03/c_1122050731.htm.

⁸⁴ Jichang Lulu and Martin Hála, “A New Comintern for the New Era: The CCP International Department from Bucharest to Reykjavik”, *China Digital Times*, August 16, 2018. <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2018/08/jichang-lulu-and-martin-hala-a-new-comintern-for-the-new-era/>.

⁸⁵ “Top concern: Happiness of Compatriots.” *China Daily*, August 30, 2018. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0830/c90000-9495358.html>.

Forging a United Front against the United Front

Now is the time for governments to take a leaf out of the CCP playbook: to “gather strengths, bide time—and unite with every force that can be united.” In other words, governments must develop internally-focused resilience strategies that will protect the integrity of their political processes and institutions at the same time as partnering with like-minded states to form their own “united front against the united front.”

Governments need to conduct their own in-depth investigations into CCP united front work activities within their countries and then devise a strategy to counteract them. Governments must define China’s meddling in their internal affairs as a national security issue and treat it accordingly. They may need to update legislation on aspects such as electoral financing, protocols around conflicts of interest for serving and retired public servants and politicians, and sales of strategic infrastructure. Governments should establish a genuine and positive relationship with their ethnic Chinese populations and work with these communities to support them to become resilient and autonomous from CCP attempts to control them.

It is time for our governments to face up to the impact of CCP political interference activities on the integrity of our political systems and make a correction in our relations with China so that our own societies’ interests come first. And they should join forces and support other nations who are also experiencing these interference strategies. To paraphrase *People’s Daily*, “those who correctly apply this policy” will be able to muster a powerful bloc of like-minded nations to defend against China’s hostile and undermining attacks on their political systems. And then, rather than a China-centered order, a multi-polar order might bring about a genuine Globalization 2.0.

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