



# Evaluating the Logic and Methods of China's United Front Work

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*Abstract: The West has emerged as a major battleground in the People's Republic of China's quest for global influence. Chinese agents of influence have waged political warfare to refashion the West's narratives, perceptions, and policies in ways that favor Beijing. China's worldwide campaign, in turn, has undermined the sovereignty of Western nations and the integrity of free societies. This article contends that a deeper understanding of Chinese political warfare, as Beijing's leaders understand it, will improve the West's ability to diagnose the challenge and to devise counterstrategies. Drawing from the Chinese Communist Party's own writings, this study illustrates the rationales and modalities of Chinese political warfare, assesses the factors propelling the globalization of China's influence operations, and explains why political warfare will serve as a permanent instrument of Chinese statecraft. It concludes that the West must prepare for a long and arduous political struggle against China.*

In recent years, successive U.S. policy documents have singled out Chinese political warfare as a strategic challenge to the United States, its allies, and the U.S.-led liberal international order. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy, which identified the People's Republic of China—along with the Russian Federation—as the principal rival, warns that America's adversaries are “using information tools in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of democracies” and to “shake our commitment to our values, undermine our system of government, or divide our Nation.”<sup>1</sup> The 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy asserts that “political and information subversion” has enabled great power competitors to reach directly into the American homeland. According to the strategy's framers, China is pursuing “an all-of-nation long-term strategy” that involves “military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics” to shape the external environment in ways that favors its interests.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. Defense Department's 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy identifies political warfare, disinformation, and subversion as instruments of China's “campaign of low-

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<sup>1</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Dec. 2017, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> The Department of Defense, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Jan. 2018, p. 2.

level coercion” that takes “a steady progression of incremental steps in the ‘gray zone’ between peaceful relations and overt hostilities to secure its aims.”<sup>3</sup> The Defense Intelligence Agency confirms that the Chinese military engages in political warfare and intelligence gathering through “an interlocking directorate that operates at the nexus of politics, finance, military operations, and intelligence.”<sup>4</sup> Political warfare has clearly made a comeback, with China powering its resurgence.

### Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics

Political warfare is an implement of statecraft. The term traces its origins to the early Cold War when George Kennan, the State Department’s first Director of Policy Planning, attempted to describe and assess the dark arts of Soviet subversion. Political warfare uses all instruments of national power, without resort to clash of arms, against rival governments and societies to realize political ends. It employs clandestine and overt methods, including the non-violent use of military tools, to manipulate perceptions and to influence behaviors of opponents. It induces adversaries to do one’s will, short of war, through persuasion, subversion, intimidation, and coercion.

In the twenty-first century context, Chinese political warfare advances China’s revisionist geopolitical goals by rendering the external environment more amenable to authoritarian rule at home and expansion abroad. To do so, it seeks to deflect hostile narratives abroad, stifle international dissent against Beijing’s domestic and foreign policies, encourage overseas support to China’s positions, sow divisions within the political systems of competitors in order to weaken them or tie them down, and minimize blowback against Chinese assertiveness, revanchism, and aggression. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Party) has waged a comprehensive political warfare campaign against Western liberal democracies by: extending influence through civic organizations, private entities, universities, think tanks, and media outlets; coopting diaspora communities and other social groups; cultivating ties with business and political elites; breeding economic and financial dependencies; corrupting policymaking and legislative processes; and interfering in democratic elections.<sup>5</sup>

Beijing’s sophisticated operations have had a discernible impact on the United States and its democratic allies in the West, including Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Chinese political warfare has persuaded or compelled Western universities, think tanks, media outlets, private companies, and even politicians to engage in self-censorship on sensitive issues that Beijing deems off limits, acquiesce to China’s problematic and controversial policies and positions, and even openly support Chinese initiatives and ambitions. It is a testament to the subtlety

<sup>3</sup> The Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, Jan. 2019, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> The Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, Jan. 2019, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> While this article focuses on the interactions between Chinese political warfare and Western liberal democracies, it is worth noting that Chinese political warfare is a global phenomenon, taking place across many non-Western countries.

of Chinese influence that the West has only recently awakened to the pernicious effects of the CCP's political warfare campaign on the global stage.

To better understand and to thwart this form of Chinese statecraft, Western policymakers and strategists must examine political warfare on the CCP's own terms, including its worldview, institutions, policies, strategies, tactics, and even vocabulary. Only by seeing the world through the Party's eyes can Western governments appreciate the nature and character of Chinese political warfare and develop effective strategies to combat Beijing's influence operations. To discern how the Chinese Communist Party views political warfare as an instrument of statecraft, this article draws on Party publications to examine the motives, goals, and methods of Chinese political warfare in the CCP's own words. In doing so, it furnishes insights into the Party's values, priorities, perceptions, and thinking, a deeper knowledge of which is essential to U.S. and allied countermeasures.

### **A Primer on the “United Front”**

The Chinese party-state inhabits its own universe of assumptions, beliefs, precedents, and terminologies about political warfare that defies simple analogies in the West. It is incumbent on outside observers to study this phenomenon as the Chinese Communist Party understands it. The CCP, for example, does not use the term “political warfare.” Rather, the Party frames its understanding and execution of influence operations under the rubric of “united front,” an all-important phrase in the CCP's lexicon. Significantly, united front carries various meanings and connotations in different contexts. Yet, Western analysts frequently use the term loosely, leading to imprecision and confusion. It is thus necessary to unpack the term in all its definitional variations.

United front is conceptual, instrumental, and institutional. As a concept, it harkens back to its Leninist origins. United front, in this context, is a partial theory of victory for revolutionaries. The theory calls on the communist protagonist to weaken its ideological opponent from within by driving wedges between social groups and social classes of the enemy. It further requires the communist movement to forge alliances of convenience with various factions inside the enemy state as well as external supporters to further undermine the antagonist's legitimacy and power. Conceptually, then, united front is a path to seizing political power by way of dividing the opponent and of aligning with temporary partners to gather strength.

Distinct from its conceptual origins, “united front work” encompasses a wide range of political activities designed to support and defend the Party's larger aims at home and abroad. United front work taps the CCP's entire party-state-military apparatus and all of Chinese society to “influence, indoctrinate, and mobilize non-CCP persons and organizations to serve the Party's objectives.”<sup>6</sup> It involves discernible, concrete lines of political operations that connects the CCP's policy objectives to the

<sup>6</sup> Russell Hsiao, “A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Japan,” *China Brief*, vol. 19, no. 12 (June 2019), p. 2.

Party's various instruments and agents of influence. To put it in Clausewitzian terms, united front work is the use of influence campaigns for the purpose of political war. Akin to military strategy, it represents the nexus between the CCP's policy aims and its means.

United front work is oriented inward and outward. Domestically, it applies tactics to coopt and control citizens that are not Party members; members of non-communist parties; intelligentsia outside of the CCP; ethnic minorities; religious groups; people working outside of state-owned enterprises; and members of the "new social strata," including those in private industry, foreign companies, and the "new media" sector. Externally, united front work targets "compatriots" living in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan; overseas Chinese students; the vast Chinese diaspora around the world; and foreigners of all stripes in their private and official capacities.

Anne-Marie Brady, a leading authority on Chinese political warfare, categorizes the outward-facing component of united front work into four main areas. *First*, united front work seeks to assert control over ethnic Chinese communities abroad, using them as agents of CCP influence and stymieing their opposition to the Party's policies. *Second*, it coopts foreigners, enticing them to defend and advance the Chinese Communist Party's positions abroad and to furnish valuable intelligence and know-how. *Third*, it wages a sophisticated and complex global strategic communications campaign via a vast network of print and online media to promote the CCP's foreign policies and to deflect or delegitimize international criticism of the Party. *Finally*, it mobilizes global support to China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive project that aims to connect China to the rest of Eurasia through economic, infrastructure, and communication networks.

Notably, the internal and external dimensions of Chinese political warfare have become mutually reinforcing. The Chinese party-state employs united front work to generate moral and material support for the Belt and Road Initiative from its citizens and foreigners alike. Coopted foreign proxies who speak on behalf of the Party lend legitimacy and prestige to the CCP at home, shoring up its monopoly on political power. Conversely, the Party's growing control over China's private sector via united front work induces or compels foreign investors and businesses to adhere to the CCP's prerogatives. As Brady observes, "The boundaries between domestic united front work and internationally-oriented united front work are no longer distinct."<sup>7</sup>

United front work can also be understood in defensive and offensive terms. It is strategically defensive to the extent that the Party seeks to preserve its rule. It is strategically offensive in the sense that CCP political warfare obtains positive aims on the world stage, including inroads into the Western body politic in order to make the West more compliant with the Party's priorities. While the strategic goals may be both offensive and defensive, the means are almost always offensive in character. United front tactics involve infiltration, subversion, manipulation, and attack. They are designed to change the hearts and minds of the Party's targets—ranging from individuals and social groups at home and abroad to foreign political parties and

<sup>7</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, "On the Correct Use of Terms," *China Brief*, vol. 19, no. 9 (May 2019), p. 4.

policymaking processes at the highest levels of government—in ways that encourage or compel those targets to conform to the CCP's designs.

United front work, in turn, is supported and implemented by a constellation of institutions that comprise the modern Chinese party-state. According to two experts, “From the Party’s Politburo Standing Committee down to its grassroots committees, united front work involves thousands of members, social organizations, and fronts. Wherever the Party is found, be it a government ministry or a Party committee in a joint venture, the united front system is likely to be operating.”<sup>8</sup> This vast influence bureaucracy includes such CCP organs as the Propaganda Department, the United Front Work Department, the International Liaison Department, and the various united front actors within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>9</sup> Each body plays dedicated and complementary roles in an overlapping influence network. For example, the International Liaison Department is charged with influencing foreigners in their private and official capacities, whereas the Chinese military engages in parallel political activities directed against its foreign military counterparts.

To illustrate the conceptual, instrumental, and institutional intersection of united front work, the following provides a profile of the United Front Work Department (UFWD or Department), one among many specialized agencies within the sprawling influence bureaucracy. The Department should not be conflated with united front work, a mistake that casual Western observers frequently commit. The UFWD is a distinctive institution, while united front work involves a panoply of influence operations, of which the Department is a part, in the service of the CCP’s objectives. The institutional summary below draws extensively from the UFWD’s own writings to illustrate the logic, the rationale, and the methods of united front work.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Peter Mattis and Alex Joske, “The Third Magic Weapon: Reforming China’s United Front,” *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, “Appendix 1: Chinese Influence Operations Bureaucracy,” in Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds, *China’s Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, Nov. 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Many of the Chinese-language sources cited in this article are guidebooks and manuals intended to educate the Party cadre and public alike. Some have been reviewed and vetted by members of the United Front Work Department. These writings represent the most authoritative public statements by the Chinese Communist Party and are the closest approximation to doctrine, defined simply as guiding principles, procedures, and best practices associated with united front work. This literature, which has remained underexamined, not only opens a window onto the Party’s thinking, but it also demonstrates what publicly available open sources can (or cannot) tell Western policymakers about Beijing’s intentions and strategy.

## A Profile of the United Front Work Department

Over the past few years, a number of Western analysts and media outlets have drawn attention to the United Front Work Department.<sup>11</sup> Described as “secretive,” “obscure,” and “low-profile,” the UFWD is a powerful Party apparatus that seeks to secure control over Chinese citizens, social classes, and entities at home; Chinese nationals overseas; compatriots in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau; and the vast diaspora communities around the world. The Department oversees various bureaus, each assigned to a specific social group, such as ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, the people of different religious faiths, and the populations residing in Greater China.

Once limited largely to the mainland, the UFWD’s activities have extended most prominently to the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, raising concerns about Beijing’s ability to exert unwelcome influence upon Western governments and societies. Beyond intelligence gathering and seemingly innocuous liaison work, the Department has made its presence felt in host nations through influence operations designed to shape opinions and even coerce actions in ways that favor China’s image and interests.

In keeping with General Secretary Xi Jinping’s ambitions and with the nature of united front work, the Department supports the Chinese Communist Party’s internal and external political objectives. *First and foremost*, the UFWD seeks to keep the Party in power. Its prime directive is to guarantee the Party’s dominance and to ensure that the CCP’s monopoly on political power remains unrivaled. *Second*, it helps to fulfill China’s long-term development and strategic success, including Xi’s “China Dream,” a mid-century project that would vault China to the front ranks of the great powers in socioeconomic and military terms. *Third*, it is tasked to defend China’s territorial integrity and unity, including the enforcement and promotion of the “one country, two systems” model with Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. *Finally*, the Department is responsible for shaping a favorable international environment conducive to China’s foreign policy initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>12</sup>

In May 2015, Xi Jinping convened the Central United Front Work Conference that launched major reforms to reenergize the united front system and to strengthen the UFWD. After the conference, Xi established the Leading Small Group on United Front Work charged with coordinating policy under his command. The high-level gathering also produced a set of regulations that authorities made public in September

<sup>11</sup> James Kynge, Lucy Hornby, and Jamil Anderlini, “Inside China’s secret ‘magic weapon’ for worldwide influence,” *Financial Times*, Oct. 16, 2017; Megan Palin, “China’s secretive lobbying agency ‘stepping up its operations in Australia,’” *news.com.au*, Nov. 30, 2017; Marcel Angliviel de la Beaumelle, “The United Front Work Department: ‘Magic Weapon’ at Home and Abroad,” *China Brief*, July 6, 2017; Jerry Groot, “United Front Work after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress,” *China Brief*, Dec. 22, 2017; Charlotte Gao, “The 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress: A Rare Glimpse of the United Front Work Department,” *The Diplomat*, Oct. 24, 2017; and June Teufel Dreyer, “A Weapon Without War: China’s United Front Strategy,” *FPRI E-Note*, Feb. 6, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> 中共中央统战部 编著 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, ed.], 党政干部统一战线 知识读本 [Party and Government Cadre United Front: Knowledge Reader] (Beijing: People’s Press, 2016), pp. 34-38.

2015.<sup>13</sup> The document, described as “the Party’s first rule,” serves as official guidance on united front work.<sup>14</sup> As a key element of the reform process, Xi elevated the Department’s institutional importance to the Party. In March 2018, for example, the UFWD acquired significant bureaucratic clout by absorbing the State Administration for Religious Affairs, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, and the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs, agencies that previously belonged to the State Council.<sup>15</sup> In October that year, the Department established new bureaus to reflect its organizational expansion.<sup>16</sup>

The United Front Work Department’s purpose is to befriend, entice, influence, monitor, infiltrate, coopt, and control various elements of Chinese society that do not belong to the Party. As one UFWD book notes, “The fundamental mission of the united front is to win over the people and gather strength while the work of the united front is to unite the people and to strive after the people.”<sup>17</sup> It goes on to assert, “The bottom line of the united front is to increase as many people that support us and reduce as many people that oppose us.”<sup>18</sup> By winning the hearts and minds of non-CCP constituents and by bringing them under the Party’s control, the Department seeks to stifle dissent and enhance social cohesion.

The UFWD’s writings are clear about what the Party wishes to obtain from targets residing outside the mainland. The united front work directed at Taiwan, for example, seeks to promote the “One China” policy and to undercut the pro-independence movement on the island. In Hong Kong and Macau, the Party aims to advertise the virtues of the “one China, two systems” model, cultivate patriotism, and foster “Chinese national consciousness.” United front work encourages overseas Chinese to “love the motherland,” “love the traditions of their native land,” oppose separatism, and support the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Ominously, one guidebook lists “protecting the legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese” as a key mission.<sup>19</sup> All Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese, wherever they may reside, fall within the scope of united front work.

United front work employs various tools and methods to acquire cooperation and acquiescence from its targets in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and elsewhere overseas. CCP-directed bodies operating in host communities enjoy access to local

<sup>13</sup> See 中共中央统战部 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China], 中国共产党统一战线条例 [The Guidelines of the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front], (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> “China publishes regulation on CPC’s united front work,” *Xinhua*, Sept. 23, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> See, Gerry Groot, “The Rise and Rise of the United Front Work Department under Xi,” *China Brief*, vol. 18, no. 7 (April 24, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> See, Alex Joske, “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work,” *China Brief*, vol. 19, no. 9 (May 2019).

<sup>17</sup> 中共中央统战部 编著 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, ed.], 巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线 [*Consolidate and Develop the Most Extensive Patriotic United Front*] (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2016), p. 175.

<sup>18</sup> *Consolidate and Develop the Most Extensive Patriotic United Front*, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> *Party and Government Cadre*, p. 338.

networks and intelligence conducive to united front work. They are tasked to engage in strategic communications with their counterparts to voice China's positions and to influence the discourse on topics as wide ranging as Taiwan independence, Tibet, Falun Gong, democracy movements, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Unofficial organizations are assigned to facilitate cultural and social exchanges with local communities at the grassroots level, youth groups, and the professional class.

### United Front's Deep Historical Roots

The Party's historiography retells the essential role of united front work in the Chinese Communist Party's survival, rise, and success. In 1922, less than a year following the CCP's founding, the Party leadership debated and agreed to pursue the united front concept.<sup>20</sup> As noted above, the Leninist idea was to form strategic alliances of convenience with its opponents. By employing such a tactical expedient, the Party sought to penetrate the enemy camp within which the CCP could plot against, weaken, subvert, and ultimately destroy its opponent. Akin to a biological virus, united front work attempted to infect the host and then eat away the host from the inside or hijack the host's major organs.

Against this backdrop, the CCP joined the Nationalists in the abortive First United Front in 1924. Within the alliance, the Party positioned itself to chip away and eventually collapse the ruling regime's institutional integrity before Chiang Kai-shek crushed the conspirators in 1927. Notably, from its earliest days, the Party engaged in united front work to obtain financial and political support as well as new recruits from Chinese living overseas.<sup>21</sup> During the war of resistance against the Japanese, the CCP formed its Second United Front with the Nationalists to fight the external enemy. In the Chinese Civil War when the Nationalists and Communists turned on each other, the Party rallied disparate components of Chinese society to defeat its archrival.

After establishing the People's Republic, Mao Zedong relied on united front tactics to forge partnerships with various social groups to engage in national reconstruction and, later, to implement the disastrous economic experiments and social movements that produced perpetual upheaval from the 1950s to the 1970s. Following Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening, united front work again cultivated ties with new interest groups, including entrepreneurs, to facilitate China's economic rise over the past three decades.<sup>22</sup> The Party also directed its united front operations abroad to draw in external support for China's economic modernization. The CCP was particularly successful in developing a network of relationships with overseas Chinese communities to attract investment and the inflow of scientific and technological knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Western media outlets have highlighted the term "magic weapon [*fabao*]" that Chinese officialdom uses to describe united front work. While the expression is

<sup>20</sup> 中共中央统战部 编著 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, ed.], 中国共产党统一战线史 [*History of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front*] (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2017), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Gerry Groot, "The CCP's Grand United Front Abroad," *Sinopsis*, Sept. 24, 2019, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 65-67.

<sup>23</sup> Groot, "The CCP's Grand United Front Abroad," p. 7.

unusual in Western lexicon, it is a familiar concept to Chinese audiences. Depending on the context, *fabao* can mean powerful instrument, secret ingredient, or trump card. More importantly, the term formally acknowledges Mao Zedong's central role in promoting united front work. In a 1939 speech, Mao credited united front work as one of three magic weapons, alongside armed struggle and Party building, for the CCP's successes.<sup>24</sup> Chinese writings slavishly refer to this speech to underscore the united front's fine lineage and to lend authority to current united front initiatives. The term "magic weapon" and its origins leave little doubt that political warfare is integral to the CCP's strategic traditions.

This brief historical summary strongly suggests that united front work is virtually inseparable from the Party's corporate identity and memory. Through political associations with friends and enemies alike, united front operations have guarded the CCP, much as the PLA guarantees the Party's survival. Political warfare, in other words, is virtually encoded in the CCP's institutional DNA. The influence bureaucracy to which the Department belongs, then, is neither window dressing nor a passing fad. The Chinese Communist Party sees its utility and effectiveness demonstrated time and again in the CCP's nine-decade history. It is a familiar playbook to which Xi Jinping has turned to achieve his ambitions.

### **The Ideological Imperative Behind United Front Work**

The Party's ideological threat perceptions go far to explain the revitalization of united front work under Xi Jinping. The United Front Work Department's writings depict a harsh and unforgiving ideological environment. To the Party, the domestic and international ideological challenges are increasingly difficult to distinguish because they feed on each other. China's relative openness has exposed society to foreign ideological contaminants, while the new social classes that have emerged as a result of China's engagement with the world are potentially more receptive to subversive ideas from abroad.

At the same time, the CCP sees the West as being implacably opposed to its authoritarian nature, and, yet, the West appears to be in relative decline, leaving it more vulnerable to Chinese influence operations. These converging developments have impelled the Party to harden its shell even as it has gone on the offensive in order to keep ideological threats at arm's length and to render the external environment more hospitable to the CCP's interests and existence. The Party's assessment of the trends at home and abroad also helps to explain the seamlessness between internal and external united front work noted above.

According to the Department's literature, China's economic reforms and opening to the world since the late 1970s unleashed new social forces that have deeply unsettled state and society. The beneficiaries of China's rapid rise, including the business elite and the burgeoning middle class, have emerged as influential constituents. As their numbers swelled and as they carried more political clout, they

<sup>24</sup> Selected Works of Mao Zedong, "Introducing *The Communist*," Oct. 4, 1939.

increasingly have clamored for CCP resources and attention. This stratification of society has added greater demands on governance and on the Party to reassert its political control over an increasingly diverse and potentially fractious social order.

Consider, for example, how social media's explosive growth has influenced the Party's assessment of China's societal landscape. Due to their knowledge, mobility, and wide influence, leading online opinion leaders have emerged as a powerful social class. According to the UFWD, more than four million non-Party employees work in the field of "new media," including social media. Among them, the Department estimates that about 50,000 members of this community are considered internet opinion leaders. Notably, there are some 3,000 internet celebrities, each of whom boasts over one million followers.<sup>25</sup> Such people clearly have the power to mobilize large segments of society in ways that could favor or harm the Party's interests with incredible speed. Not surprisingly, the UFWD has formally classified these public figures in cyberspace as a new social group within the intelligentsia class.

At the same time, China's outward-looking economy triggered an explosive growth in the nation's interactions with the outside world. China's integration into the global supply chain increased the flow of labor and capital in and out of the country. Socially, the boundary that separated China from the rest of the international community became ever more permeable, subjecting Chinese citizens to what the Party perceives as ideological toxins that threaten to poison the body politic. United front work seeks, in part, to inoculate the population and Chinese nationals abroad from foreign ideas and influences that challenge Party orthodoxy.

The Party is unambiguous about the ideological threat it perceives from the West. According to a UFWD course book, "Foreign hostile forces do not wish to see China rise. They have successively viewed our nation as a potential threat and competitor and have done everything possible to contain and suppress us." The authors of the tutorial accuse these external enemies of "marketing cultures and values to attack Chinese traditional culture and to dilute the ethnic cultural identities of the Chinese diaspora and overseas Chinese nationals, especially the new generations of ethnic Chinese." These nefarious external forces, they claim, "seriously threaten our national security and core interests."<sup>26</sup>

Another Department guidebook written for Party and government cadres identifies the West as the principal danger to China's political stability. Notably, it depicts the nature of the threat in sharp ideological terms. The authors warn:

In recent years, the United States and other Western countries have sought to fulfill their global strategic interests under the banner of "democracy," "freedom," and "human rights." They have increased the political infiltration of some countries, attempting to subvert those regimes while

<sup>25</sup> 本书编写组 [Editorial Committee, ed.], 统一战线知识手册 [United Front Knowledge Handbook] (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2019), p. 154.

<sup>26</sup> 中共中央统战部 中共中央党校 国家行政学院 中央社会主义学院 编著 [United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Central Party School, Chinese Academy of Governance, and Central Institute of Socialism eds.] 中国统一战线教程 [Course of Study on China's United Front] (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2013), p. 97.

propping up factions that favor Western interests. Hostile international forces have never abandoned the strategic intent of Westernizing and splitting us. They are working hard at infiltrating and disrupting us. These infiltration methods have become more varied by the day while their shapes have become stealthier. They try in vain to overturn the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and our socialist system, severely influencing our nation's political security, economic security, cultural security, and information security.<sup>27</sup>

Consistent with this worldview, the Party sees dark ideological forces conspiring to thwart its aims in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. The authors of a study guide caution, "The circumstances surrounding our efforts to win hearts and minds remain complex, grim, and urgent." They contend:

Long-term residence in capitalist environments has exposed Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and overseas compatriots to Western values. Their values and lifestyles differ sharply from those that prevail on the mainland interior. Western hostile forces have always used Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan as pawns to contain us. These factors have all imposed higher demands on winning the people's hearts.<sup>28</sup>

The CCP views the very free institutions that underpin Western political, social, and economic orders as a mortal menace to China. Indeed, the UFWD writings explicitly reject Western multi-party electoral systems. According to a study guide,

These years some countries in the world blindly "transplanted" or "imported" Western political systems. From the "color revolutions" in countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States to the "Arab Spring" in countries of West Asia and North Africa, all have descended into cycles of unending regime changes and social upheaval, leading to the "turbulence of democracies."<sup>29</sup>

The book further notes that Western democracies themselves have suffered from "decreased effectiveness" and "operational failures" in recent years. This trend, it observes, "daily lays bare the disadvantages and limits of Western political systems."<sup>30</sup> The authors conclude that multi-party collaboration under the united front concept is fundamentally superior to the Western model and better suited to China's historical development and local circumstances.

The Party has also learned from the failures of others. Communism's worldwide collapse reinforces the imperative to stay ideologically alert. To the CCP, the Soviet Union's dissolution is a frightening cautionary tale. One study guide

<sup>27</sup> *Party and Government Cadre*, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 175.

<sup>29</sup> *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 101.

observes that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union grew from strength to strength in membership from about 200,000 during the USSR's early years to 2 million after World War II, culminating in 20 million by 1991. Despite this impressive statistic, the USSR nevertheless disbanded. "The root cause," the study claims, "is the lack of party discipline that led people to lose their hearts. We must learn from this failure." It warns further, "Possessing political authority does not necessarily mean one possesses the people's hearts. And, without the people's hearts, political authority will certainly not last."<sup>31</sup> The Chinese Communist Party must therefore not draw comfort from its sheer size, numbering about 90 million. The CCP must remain vigilant against internal and external social forces that could trigger a crisis of confidence among the people. The lesson for the Party is clear: ideological complacency could be lethal, while Party activism is essential to longevity.

Owing to the nexus of domestic and foreign ideological dangers, the CCP views united front work as a permanent instrument of statecraft and internal security. In the Party's view, as long as social classes exist, the demand for united front work will never cease. The influence bureaucracy must remain perpetually attentive to ideological threats to the Party and to the proliferation of new social groups that require indoctrination and assimilation. As one study avers, "In short, our Party's establishment of the united front is a long-term strategic policy. The policy will not shift owing to the strengthening or weakening of our power. The policy will not change due to varying circumstances or missions."<sup>32</sup> In other words, even as China continues to grow more prosperous and powerful and the international security environment remains relatively benign, the logic of the united front work will stay intact.

### **United Front Goes Global**

The CCP increasingly sees social groups residing overseas as important targets of united front work. China's opening to the outside world has not only exposed residents on the mainland to foreign ideas, but it has also led to substantial outflows of Chinese nationals in search of both work and education in the West. At the same time, the Party views the vast networks of Chinese diaspora as conduits of influence within the foreign countries to which they belong and as potential allies to rally around the CCP's policies. Overseas Chinese students and local ethnic Chinese communities abroad have thus emerged as important objects of influence.

Since the reform era began, the volume of outbound and returning overseas students has soared at an astonishing rate. From the late 1970s to the end of 1997, about 300,000 Chinese students studied abroad. Less than 100,000 of them returned to China.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, between the late 1970s and the end of 2014, over 3.5 million Chinese had studied overseas, while nearly 2 million of them have returned to China. In 2014 alone, over 360,000 Chinese came back to their homeland, representing a

<sup>31</sup> *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> *United Front Knowledge Handbook*, p. 153.

thirtyfold increase compared to 2001.<sup>34</sup> While the Party welcomes the knowledge and skills these students bring home, the CCP fears the potential ideological baggage carried by these returnees—exposed as they were to foreign ideas and influence. The Party is thus determined to stamp out thoughts and activities that might contravene its doctrine. Thus, in 2000, the CCP formally designated Chinese students studying abroad and returnees as a distinct social group subject to united front work. A UFWD study guide describes these students as “a new focal point.”<sup>35</sup>

It is not just sheer numbers of returnees that concern the CCP. This constituent represents a weighty part of China's intellectual capital: 84 percent of academics in the national science academies, 75 percent of academics in the national engineering academies, and 80 percent of the chief scientists working for the State High-Tech Development Plan (commonly known as the 863 Program) have studied abroad or worked overseas.<sup>36</sup> These professionals are not only the best and the brightest in China, but they are also the interface between the nation and the outside world. Controlling them is essential to fulfilling China's ambitions and to safeguarding the Party's preeminence.

The Party conducts much of its united front work with the students after they return home. For example, the CCP employs local alumni associations to engage and monitor the returnees. Troublingly, however, some UFWD writings explicitly instruct the cadres to cultivate ties with students while they are abroad. One guidebook calls on united front agents to “understand the basic situation of overseas students, enhance contact and communications with them through various methods, and to pay attention to their achievements in various fields.” It further urges the Party cadre “to encourage overseas students, to the extent that the host nations' laws permit, to undertake cooperative investments, academic exchanges, cooperative research, technical development, consulting services, and many other activities to serve the nation.” The study also calls for united front work to develop and expand the utility of overseas student groups and associations on behalf of the CCP.<sup>37</sup>

Such guidance is almost certainly the basis for united front activities on Western university campuses.<sup>38</sup> In particular, the Party extends its influence through Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs), a network of official academic groups registered on many campuses around the world. The associations operate in virtually every country in Western Europe, including CSSAs based in the United

<sup>34</sup> *Consolidate and Develop*, p. 127.

<sup>35</sup> 本书编写组 [Editorial Committee, ed.], 统一战线知识简明读本 [*Concise Reader on United Front Information*] (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2018), p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> *United Front Knowledge Handbook*, p. 153.

<sup>37</sup> *Party and Government Cadre*, p. 419.

<sup>38</sup> Anastasya Lloyd-Damnjanovic, “A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Sept. 6, 2018, p. 21.

Kingdom (91), Germany (58), France (50), and Spain (21), respectively.<sup>39</sup> Over 140 chapters have been established across the United States.<sup>40</sup> *Foreign Policy* published a 2018 expose that documented the Chinese embassy's direct financial support to the association at Georgetown University.<sup>41</sup> A local chapter at University of California, San Diego made national news when it protested the school's decision to invite the Dalai Lama to deliver the 2017 commencement address and sought to pressure administrators to rescind the offer.

As noted above, the Chinese diaspora has long been an object of united front work since the early years of the CCP's existence. The overseas Chinese communities have provided moral and material support to the communist cause from the revolutionary period through the post-Mao era to the present. The UFWD literature divides these communities into three distinct categories: Chinese nationals living abroad (*huaqiao*); people of Chinese origin who reside overseas and hold foreign citizenship (*huaren*); and new Chinese immigrants who moved out of country since the reform era (*xinyimin*). Troublingly, the Department's depiction of overseas Chinese reveals the Party's sense of ownership over Chinese living abroad. One expert observes that the CCP increasingly feels "entitled, obliged even, to extend a form of extraterritoriality to all overseas Chinese."<sup>42</sup>

According to one guidebook, Chinese authorities "possess the right and the obligation to protect the legitimate rights and interests of *huaqiao*." The same study asserts that *huaren*—despite their legal status as foreign nationals—are still "descendants of the Chinese nation," likening them to "blood relatives." In theory, an American citizen of Chinese descent whose forebears immigrated to the United States generations ago would still fall within the scope of united front operations. The Party understands that *xinyimin* tend to be socioeconomically mobile and politically dynamic. They are more inclined to "energetically take part in local political, economic, and cultural activities." Many join their adopted countries' political parties and "participate in politics through various means." To the CCP, *xinyimin* could emerge as a "new force" to promote the Party's aims of "reunification with the motherland and revitalization of the Chinese nation."<sup>43</sup>

In Australia and New Zealand, the power of *xinyimin* has been on full display. Scholars and journalists there have unearthed evidence that ethnic Chinese politicians and businesspeople have been doing the bidding of the CCP with considerable success. Huang Xiangmo, a real estate mogul and a major political donor with close links to the Party, used his vast wealth to covertly influence and interfere with the decision-making

<sup>39</sup> Thorsten Benner Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe*, Global Public Policy Institute and Mercator Institute for China Studies, Feb. 2018, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Bowe, *China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Aug. 24, 2018, p. 10

<sup>41</sup> Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Chinese Government Gave Money to Georgetown Chinese Student Group," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 14, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Jerry Groot, "The long reach of China's United Front Work," *The Interpreter*, Nov. 6, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> *United Front Knowledge Handbook*, pp. 252-253.

processes of Australian political institutions.<sup>44</sup> Huang's actions were sufficiently egregious that Canberra stripped the billionaire of his permanent residency and rejected his application to become an Australian citizen. Anne-Marie Brady has made a persuasive case that at least three ethnic Chinese members of New Zealand's Parliament maintain ties to local united front organizations and to the Chinese embassy. One parliamentarian, Yang Jian, is a former CCP member and a former intelligence operative of the Chinese military.<sup>45</sup>

The China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification (China Council or council), which reports directly to the UFWD, perhaps best exemplifies the internal-external and defensive-offensive dualities inherent to united front work. The China Council is responsible for overseeing a global network of CCP-controlled front groups that seeks to persuade and, failing that, coerce overseas Chinese to accept the Party's views on Taiwan and other issues of importance to the CCP. These proxies also mobilize support for the Party's foreign policy priorities, suppress dissent within the diaspora communities, and counter criticism of China's behavior by their host countries.

This ostensibly civic organization boasts more than 200 branches around the world.<sup>46</sup> Each chapter is run by local community leaders with close ties to the Party. Members are drawn almost exclusively from the ethnic Chinese population. Reflecting the Party's sense of entitlement, these branches purport to speak for all Chinese residents in their respective jurisdictions, despite the diversity of the Chinese diaspora. Indeed, they frequently claim to represent all 50 million compatriots around the world.

Such front groups play several messaging roles in their united front work. Their appeals to fall in line with the Party are tailored for multiple audiences, including the diaspora communities, the public at home, and the elites and the citizenry of host countries. *First*, they are called upon to voice their support for the Party's initiatives through media. Their public statements issued in host nations convey collective enthusiasm for China's policies and unanimity behind the Party's purpose. Their pronouncements, which invariably cite leaders of various united front and propaganda organizations around the world, lend an aura of international legitimacy to Beijing's policies.

The councils act as cheerleaders when CCP leaders speak about or act on their unification plans with Taiwan. Following a major speech by Xi Jinping on Taiwan in January 2019, for example, CCP mouthpieces carried English-language news that lauded the general secretary's proposals on peaceful reunification. One article quoted

<sup>44</sup> Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Publishing, 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Sept. 18, 2017, pp. 18-21.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Aug. 24, 2018, pp. 8-9.

China Council leaders around the world, who gushed about Xi's vision.<sup>47</sup> More troubling, these councils have wholeheartedly endorsed Beijing's passage of the 2005 Anti-Secession Law, which codified China's use of force against Taiwan in domestic legislation.

*Second*, chapters of the China Council regularly circulate objections to Western policies that impinge on Beijing's interests. These statements are meant to signal the Party's resolve and to draw redlines. They may be intended to encourage local surrogates to lobby against Western governments that are contemplating unfriendly acts or positions. The councils are instructed to defend China's "one country, two systems" model when it is under threat.

Local branches, for example, issued declarations that toed the party line following the outbreak of anti-government protests in Hong Kong in 2019. They applauded the extradition legislation that had triggered the protests that summer. Parroting CCP talking points, they have blamed "behind-the-scenes black hands"—a shorthand for hostile foreign forces such as the United States—for the unrest. China Council chapters similarly claimed that "Western anti-China forces" were behind Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's reelection in January 2020. After the Permanent Court of Arbitration issued a decisive ruling against Beijing's legal position on the South China Sea in July 2016, councils around the world rejected the court's legitimacy and jurisdiction, mirroring the Party's argument.

*Third*, these local chapters possess the latent capacity to mobilize the ethnic Chinese communities to engage in peaceful and even violent protests on the streets of host nations. These public protests are designed to oppose Western policies harmful to China's interests or image. Some are meant to drown out, silence, and intimidate those who support such values as human rights, democracy, free speech, religious freedom, and so forth. And, by showing that patriotic Chinese are defending the motherland's honor on foreign soil, the Party slakes nationalist outrage and indignation at home.

There is evidence that these united front organizations mobilized counter-protesters against pro-Tibet and pro-Falun Gong demonstrators during the controversial 2008 Olympic torch relay in Australia.<sup>48</sup> Chinese students verbally and physically assaulted people who were exercising their rights to free speech and freedom of assembly. According to a state-run media report, overseas chapters responded to calls to defend the torch relay "under the active direction of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification." The article states, "Some reunification promotion councils directly participated in organizing activities to protect the torch

<sup>47</sup> Yang Yi, "Overseas Chinese say Xi's speech charts course for cross-Strait relations," *Xinhua*, Jan. 1, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Clive Hamilton and Alex Joske, Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, Inquiry into the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017, p. 18. See, also, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian and Zach Dorfman, "China Has Been Running Global Influence Campaigns for Years," *The Atlantic*, May 14, 2019.

relay.”<sup>49</sup> These CCP-led counter protests were an early warning of the party's capacity to mobilize coopted local constituents in foreign countries and to manufacture expressions of outrage for the purpose of defending Beijing's illiberal rule.

As these vignettes demonstrate, the China Council serves domestic, international, defensive, and offensive aims. It retails messages that seek simultaneously to influence the perceptions and behaviors of audiences at home and abroad. It burnishes the Party's prestige at home, rallies the Chinese diaspora, defends against attacks on the CCP's reputation and policies abroad, dissuades foreign governments and societies from adopting unfriendly positions, and encourages the outside world to acquiesce, if not accept, Beijing's worldview and prerogatives. Such is the multifaceted character of just one small element of the CCP's united front work.

### Implications for Western Governments

As the foregoing analysis shows, united front work is no longer confined to China. It is now a global program that threatens Western interests and values. Chinese political warfare exploits the very openness of Western societies to advance the CCP's aims. It uses the political space that Western civil society affords to establish front organizations, such as the China Council, to wage a strategic communications campaign. These proxies retail storylines that promote China's authoritarian practices while suppressing perspectives critical of China in free societies. These unelected and unaccountable entities claim to speak for foreign citizens of Chinese descent without their consent. Another CCP-led front group, the CSSA, leverages the freedom of speech and academic freedom on Western college campuses to silence those who hold views that are antithetical to the CCP's policies. Most troubling, united front work seeks to corrupt the West's democratic institutions and manipulate Western decision-making processes at the highest levels of government. These activities together represent a major challenge to the sovereignty of Western nations.

United front work against the people of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau is at odds with Western interests. Attempts at manipulating the populations of Hong Kong and Macau violate Chinese pledges and reassurances to the West about the long-term fates of these two territories. Subversion against Taiwan not only destabilizes Taiwan's democratic politics, but it also disturbs the uneasy cross-Strait peace and regional security. Beyond Greater China, united front work is taking place across the Indo-Pacific, undermining the strategic balance that has been so essential to the stability and prosperity of the region.<sup>50</sup> These dangers to liberal democracies' internal politics and international interests warrant an effective response to combat Chinese influence

<sup>49</sup> “A 30-Year Retrospective of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification,” *Hainainet*, Oct. 26, 2018, [https://web.archive.org/web/20191220175639/https://m.hainainet.cn/middle/3541083/2018/1026/content\\_31423175\\_2.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20191220175639/https://m.hainainet.cn/middle/3541083/2018/1026/content_31423175_2.html).

<sup>50</sup> For Chinese influence operations in the South Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, and Indonesia, see, Ross Babbage, *Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West can Prevail*, vol. II: Case Studies (Washington, D.C.: CSBA, July 2019).

operations. Policy deliberations over strategies to counter united front work should be informed by the following considerations.

*First*, the West should forthrightly acknowledge that the CCP sees the world in ideological hues. To the communist regime, the very nature of the West, including its political systems and values, poses a mortal threat. Fears about Western designs to “westernize” and “split” China bespeak a siege mentality. At the same time, the Party attributes substantial—and frequently over exaggerated—weight to the West’s influence behind unsettling global events, including the worldwide spread of democracy. The Chinese Communist Party has thus been unapologetic about describing the West as an existential danger. It sees the United States, in particular, as a dangerous revolutionary power intent on overturning the Party and its socialist system. This high-stakes game determines the value Beijing attaches to united front work, the resources that the CCP is prepared to devote to waging political warfare, and the lengths to which the regime is ready to go to protect itself. Western policymakers should, in turn, recognize that their governments have been in a decades-long political war. The West, too, must accurately depict its relationship with China in ideological terms.

*Second*, the West should recognize the offensive mindedness of Chinese political warfare. The Party believes that the best defense is a good offense. To shield itself from the baleful ideological influences outside China’s borders, the CCP has opened a global front in the struggle over ideas. In doing so, the Chinese Communist Party seeks, at a minimum, to promote friendly feelings and to dampen hostile sentiments toward China. As a maximal goal, it wants the West to come to terms with and accept, if not embrace, the authoritarian nature of the CCP. Short of such an outcome, the Party will continue to shape perceptions and narratives in ways that favor its image and interests. Not surprisingly, the UFWD literature shows that Xi is firmly committed to pouring resources into overseas united front work. It thus behooves Western policymakers to recognize that political warfare is a permanent instrument of the CCP’s foreign policy and to expect influence operations to intensify in the coming years.

*Finally*, the West needs to devise a coherent set of defensive and offensive measures against the UFWD. Steps to harden democratic institutions against undue Chinese influence and to expose disinformation are essential to success in this competition. Western governments must protect loyal citizens of Chinese descent from CCP coercion and push back against false narratives that claim the Party speaks for all overseas Chinese communities. But these defensive measures are not enough. To shift the terms of the competition in its favor, the West must go on offense to impose costs, to put the CCP on the defensive, and to knock the Party off balance. The CCP’s influence bureaucracy labors under constraints, including interagency rivalries, that would be instantly recognizable to Western policymakers. A better understanding of these limits could furnish insights into how the West could complicate Chinese planning, impose costs, and exacerbate the internal frictions of China’s party-state system.

In sum, policymakers must revise, if not abandon, longstanding assumptions about the West’s relationship with the CCP. They must jettison soothing storylines about China’s communist regime. The United Front Work Department publications

make abundantly clear that the Party has not exchanged Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory for unfettered capitalism, as some in the West apparently believe. Nor has the CCP mellowed its views about the West's ideological threat to its survival. Sanguine narratives that Western engagement would unlock liberal forces and change China from within have proved overly optimistic and even naïve. If the West is to stay competitive with China in the struggle over ideas and values, then the post-Cold War triumphalism that presumed liberalism would ultimately prevail must give way to a hard-nosed reassessment of the Party's challenge. A thoroughgoing reevaluation of this kind is already underway, but it must be accompanied by a deeper understanding of united front work.

