Countering China’s Influence Activities
Lessons from Australia

AUTHOR
Amy Searight

A Report of the CSIS Southeast Asia Program

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Countering China’s Influence Activities

Lessons from Australia

AUTHOR
Amy Searight

A Report of the CSIS Southeast Asia Program
About CSIS

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a bipartisan, nonprofit policy research organization dedicated to advancing practical ideas to address the world’s greatest challenges.

Thomas J. Pritzker was named chairman of the CSIS Board of Trustees in 2015, succeeding former U.S. senator Sam Nunn (D-GA). Founded in 1962, CSIS is led by John J. Hamre, who has served as president and chief executive officer since 2000.

CSIS’s purpose is to define the future of national security. We are guided by a distinct set of values—nonpartisanship, independent thought, innovative thinking, cross-disciplinary scholarship, integrity and professionalism, and talent development. CSIS’s values work in concert toward the goal of making real-world impact.

CSIS scholars bring their policy expertise, judgment, and robust networks to their research, analysis, and recommendations. We organize conferences, publish, lecture, and make media appearances that aim to increase the knowledge, awareness, and salience of policy issues with relevant stakeholders and the interested public.

CSIS has impact when our research helps to inform the decisionmaking of key policymakers and the thinking of key influencers. We work toward a vision of a safer and more prosperous world.

CSIS is ranked the number one think tank in the United States as well as the defense and national security center of excellence for 2016-2018 by the University of Pennsylvania’s “Global Go To Think Tank Index.”

CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views expressed herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2020 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved
Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Andreyka Natalegawa for his invaluable research assistance on this project and the more than 20 experts, journalists, and former and current government officials that were incredibly generous with their time and insights during our field research in Australia in February 2020.

This publication was made possible by the Global Engagement Center at the U.S. Department of State, through the Information Access Fund (IAF) administered by the DT Institute. The opinions, conclusions, or recommendations contained herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the view of the U.S. government or the IAF.
Contents

Introduction ........................................... 1
The Nature of China’s Influence Activities ....... 3
The Chinese Playbook in Australia ............. 5
Pandemic Politics: China Sharpens Its Power .... 24
Why Did China Target Australia? Australia’s Strategic Value and Domestic Vulnerabilities .... 31
Australia’s Response .................................. 34
Lessons from the Australia Case ................. 39
About the Author ...................................... 41
Introduction

Although China’s rise is felt all across the globe, perhaps no country has been as roiled politically by China’s growing influence and political ambitions as Australia has over the past several years. Australia is a mid-sized, open, and multicultural democracy and a long-standing treaty ally of the United States. Australians, who have enjoyed three decades of uninterrupted prosperity, have good reason to welcome China’s economic rise, which has come with a voracious appetite for Australia’s exports of iron ore, coal, and other minerals. China now buys about one-third of everything that Australia sells to the world, and China also sends millions of students and tourists to Australia.

The question of whether and how Australia can continue to balance its diverging economic and security partnerships—its growing economic dependence on China and its long-standing alliance with the United States—has been a topic of scholarly debate in Australia for quite some time. However, the question of how Australia should manage its relationship with China took on new urgency when stories came to light about Beijing’s attempts to influence Australian politics and interfere with civil society debate. First came revelations about large political donations from ethnic Chinese linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that were being used to try to alter the China policy of major Australian political parties. One popular politician was drummed out of parliament after it was revealed that he pandered to Chinese-language media on South China Sea policy and warned his CCP-linked political patron about government surveillance. Then came questions about China’s growing influence in Australian universities and about CCP-linked efforts to coopt Chinese-language media and civic groups in the Chinese-Australian community.

These scandals and revelations ignited a firestorm in Australian politics. Prominent current and former politicians, leading commentators, business and university leaders, scholars, and voices in the Chinese-Australian community lined up on different sides of a national debate over how serious a challenge China’s influence activities posed to Australian democracy. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull spearheaded legislation to crack down on foreign interference, which passed in the Australian parliament with strong bipartisan support, and the government subsequently announced a ban on Huawei.

---

and ZTE from Australia’s 5G network. Beijing responded with a diplomatic freeze and slowdown on wine and coal imports from Australia.

The revelations have turned Australia into a “canary in the coalmine,” a cautionary tale about the ways in which China seeks to covertly influence and interfere with the political process in advanced democracies. It has also thrust Australia into a leading position as a country willing to take active steps to counter China’s political interference and stand up to Chinese coercion. Beijing has sharpened its approach to Australia in response, while Canberra has hardened its resistance to coercion.
The Nature of China’s Influence Activities

The Australia case illustrates how China’s efforts to influence and shape public discourse and political outcomes within targeted countries go well beyond the kinds of legitimate public diplomacy in which all governments engage. Public diplomacy typically entails government-led efforts to communicate with foreign publics in order to boost the country’s image and build foreign public support for the government’s strategic objectives. These are transparent, above-board efforts to enhance soft power or persuade foreign publics on a particular issue by bringing forth information and new perspectives.

However, when a foreign power seeks to influence a country’s internal public debate and political system through unofficial channels in ways that are opaque, deceptive, or manipulative, we have left the realm of legitimate public diplomacy. Prime Minister Turnbull defined behavior that is “covert, coercive, or corrupting” as “the line that separates legitimate influence from unacceptable interference.” The “3 C’s” framework is useful for capturing what is distinctive and problematic with methods used by the CCP party-state system in pursuit of its strategic objectives. In Australia, these methods have included monetary inducements to politicians to change their stance on key issues; sinecures to former politicians and financial support for research institutes that carry a pro-Beijing line; threats to mobilize Chinese-Australian voters to punish political parties who do not support Beijing’s policy preferences; “astroturfing” local grassroots organizations to give the appearance of broad support for Beijing and its policies within the Chinese-Australian community; coopting Chinese-language media and local civic organizations to promote narratives and individuals who are friendly to Beijing; and a variety of efforts to drown out or silence critics. These efforts are designed to remain hidden from public view, often arranged indirectly through proxies, in order to create a layer of plausible deniability that makes it more difficult to nail down precisely the degree of interference and the scope of the problem.

The wave of influence activities in Australia has also thrown a spotlight on a once little-known department within the CCP, the United Front Work Department (UFWD). Xi Jinping echoes Mao in calling United Front work a “magic weapon” for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people, and under Xi the role of the UFWD has been dramatically expanded and elevated within the party. As described by Laura Rosenberger and John Garnaut, “the UFWD guides and controls an elaborate network of proxies and front organizations” that are used to reward, intimidate, surveil, and coopt the overseas Chinese community—its civic and business associations, student groups, and Chinese-language media—as well as academic institutions, politicians, and others with influence. The goal is to “win hearts and minds” of overseas Chinese and other influential targets and unite them in support of the CCP and its goals while quelling dissent and taming debate on China.


The Chinese Playbook in Australia

The Chinese party-state appears to have placed an unusual degree of effort into penetrating and influencing Australian politics and society, with some ongoing lines of effort stretching back decades while other activities have taken root more recently. Unlike Russia, which tends to be more opportunistic and tactical in its attempts to disrupt and delegitimize democratic processes, China has been playing a long game in Australia that seeks to embed positive, pro-Beijing sentiment and interests while limiting the space in the body politic for interrogating Beijing's policies, motives, and conduct. Beijing certainly wants closer ties with Australia—on Beijing's terms—but it also appears to be seeking broader influence over the narrative space in which any discussion about China takes place.

The barrage of reports and revelations that have emerged since 2016 show consistent, patient, and strategic efforts to cultivate networks of influence, develop long-term dependencies, and shape discourse on China across many facets of politics, business, academia, and society. Beijing's toolkit is shaped by the vulnerabilities and opportunities it can exploit in these different arenas.

**Buying Political Influence**

The initial focus on China's efforts to interfere in Australian politics arose from revelations about the extent of CCP-linked money flowing to the major political parties and individual politicians. Australian intelligence services, which had grown increasingly concerned about the growth of covert CCP “influence networks” in Australia, launched investigations into ties between the CCP and several wealthy businessmen of Chinese descent who were major donors to political parties, universities, and philanthropic organizations in Australia. In 2015, Director of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) Duncan Lewis personally warned the organizational heads of the three major political

---

parties about the risk of accepting contributions from these donors, since they might come “with strings attached” that could pose a risk to national security. The two donors he named were Huang Xiangmo and Chau Chak Wing, both billionaire property developers who had each given millions in political donations to both the Labor and Liberal Parties.7

Dr. Chau Chak Wing is an Australian citizen who gave generously to both the Liberal (AU$2.9 million) and Labor (AU$1.7 million) Parties.8 He also donated AU$20 million to the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) to build a Frank Gehry-designed business school and AU$15 million to University of Sydney for a new museum. Over the years, Chau cultivated a network of powerful Australian politicians, including former prime ministers John Howard, Kevin Rudd, and Bob Hawke, all of whom visited his palatial estate in Guangzhou, China, where he mostly resides. Chau was clearly well connected in Beijing, given that he helped broker several big deals between China and Australian business, including an AU$25 billion liquefied natural gas export deal between Western Australia and China in 2002 that was heralded as Australia’s largest export deal ever. Chau’s ownership of a newspaper published in China and his membership in a provincial-level People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a United Front patriotic organization, also suggest that he is viewed quite favorably by the CCP. As John Garnaut and his colleagues at the Sydney Morning Herald put it, “private citizens, let alone Australian passport holders, aren’t meant to be involved in running Chinese newspapers - the domain of the Communist Party’s propaganda departments.”9

Likewise, Sinologist Gerry Groot explains that all those selected to take part in the consultative conferences are “assumed to have considerable influence and prestige” and are “carefully screened by the UFWD for their political reliability and willingness to accept party leadership and its positions.”10

Huang Xiangmo was a relative newcomer on the scene, having arrived in Australia in 2011 under somewhat mysterious circumstances, apparently making a “hurried” exit from China after his close associates and political patrons in his home, the city of Jieyang, were caught up in a major corruption scandal.11 Huang quickly gained permanent residency and political clout in Australia. He was a major political donor to both the Labor and Liberal Parties, donating more than AU$1 million to each party between 2012 and 2015. He also gave generously to Australian universities, including an AU$1.8 million donation to the University of Technology Sydney in 2014 to set up a new research center, the Australian-China Relations Institute (ACRI), which was led by former foreign minister Bob Carr.

Huang was also chair of the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (ACPPRC), which is the Australian chapter of the United Front’s central organ, the CPPRC. Although the ACPPRC claims to be an independent civic organization, its leadership selection and activities are closely guided by the Chinese embassy in Canberra and local consulates. Huang’s status as “leader of Australia’s Chinese business community” was on display when he was there as guest of the ambassador to greet Xi Jinping on Xi’s first official visit to Australia as president in 2014. Huang also presided over the farewell and greeting events for Chinese ambassadors.12

THE DASTYARI AFFAIR

The scandal that broke the issue of the role of CCP-linked money and influence in Australian politics into public view involved Huang Xiangmo’s ties to Senator Sam Dastyari, a rising politician in the Labor Party. In June 2016, Dastyari held a pre-election press conference organized by Huang and the ACPPRC to which only Chinese-language media were invited. China’s behavior in the South China Sea had become a pointed foreign policy question as the parties were heading into a federal election on July 2, 2016. The previous day, Shadow Defence Minister of the Labor Party Stephen Conroy had criticized the Turnbull government for being too timid in confronting China over its “absurd” island building and declared that the Labor Party would support conducting freedom of navigation operations, at a time when U.S. freedom of navigation operations were provoking strong criticism from China.13 Dastyari, however, took a very different line at his press event the next day. Standing next to Huang Xiangmo, Dastyari told the assembled Chinese-language media that “the South China Sea is China’s own affair” and that the Labor Party, “as a supporter of China, and as a friend of China,” would help maintain the relationship by “knowing when it is and isn’t our place to be involved.” He added, “Australia should remain neutral and respect China’s decision.”

12. Wen and Macken, “Chinese ‘King of the Mountain.’”
Dastyari denied making these remarks when asked by Australian reporters several weeks later, although audio released in late 2017 confirmed that he had. However, the fact that he held a press conference flanked by Huang, who had controversially paid the senator $5,000 to help settle his legal bills, along with a news report that another ethnic Chinese donor had helped cover a travel bill, created a political outcry in Canberra that forced Dastyari to apologize and step down from his frontbench party position.\textsuperscript{14} Accepting political donations from Chinese donors was not illegal, since foreign donations were allowed under federal Australian campaign laws, and Dastyari had properly recorded the donations. But it had the “whiff of corruption,” in the words of a Liberal Party senator.\textsuperscript{15}

The Dastyari affair launched a period of growing media investigations into the linkages between CCP-linked money and politicians. In June 2017, the Australian Broadcast Corporation (ABC) aired a joint investigation by Four Corners, its current affairs program, and Fairfax Media newspapers that included a number of explosive allegations that galvanized public attention. Among the revelations was a report that the major political parties had received security briefings by the ASIO chief about Huang Xiangmo and Chau

---


Chak Wing, who were suspected of being Beijing’s agents of influence. It also revealed that Huang Xiangmo had threatened to cancel a promised AU$400,000 donation to the Labor Party if the party did not soften its stance on the South China Sea. The threat was made in response to Conroy’s June 2016 statement supporting freedom of navigation operations, a threat which was rebuffed by Conroy and other Labor leaders, but it threw Dastyari’s reported remarks in support of China in an even more troubling light. Finally, the Four Corners/Fairfax broadcast reported that Sam Dastyari’s office had made four approaches to the immigration office on behalf of Huang’s citizenship application, including two phone calls by Dastyari himself.16

The final blow to Senator Dastyari came in late November 2017, when it was revealed that he had warned Huang that his cell phone was likely being tapped by Australian and U.S. intelligence services.17 Just hours later, the full audio of his remarks at the June 17 press event were leaked to the media, confirming that he had indeed delivered the talking points on the South China Sea that sounded as though they had been scripted in Beijing.18

The revelations came at an opportune time for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who was set to introduce a sweeping package of legislative reforms to counter foreign interference and espionage, including a ban on foreign political donations. After announcing the new laws on December 4, 2017, Turnbull told parliament that “Senator Dastyari sold Australia out.”19 A few days later, he called Dastyari a “very clear case” of someone who took money linked to the Chinese government and in return “delivered essentially Chinese policy statements.”20

Dastyari resigned from parliament a few days later. In December 2018, the Australian government denied Huang Xiangmo’s citizenship application and stripped him of his permanent residency while he was travelling overseas, effectively barring him from reentry.21

**Elite Capture: Cultivating Friends of Beijing**

As it has in many countries around the world, Beijing has sought to cultivate a cohort of wealthy, powerful, and influential individuals in Australia who can help shape public

---


debate on China in a positive direction. Australia is not unique in this regard—Beijing has pursued this tactic in many places around the world with varying degrees of success, offering high-level access and business opportunities to corporate titans and other elites who in turn become a voice of moderation in debates over China at home.\(^\text{22}\)

Yet Australia has proved to be particularly fertile ground for Beijing’s cultivation of economic and opinion elites for several reasons. On the business front, Australia’s heavy export reliance on China creates especially strong incentives for corporate leaders to advocate closer ties to China, especially those involved in the energy and mining industries, which are heavily concentrated in Western Australia, such as billionaires Andrew “Twiggy” Forrest and Kerry Stokes. A similar dynamic is at play with the leadership of some Australian universities that have become increasingly reliant on revenue from overseas Chinese students for their financial health (as discussed in more detail below). The University of Sydney is estimated to have the highest dependence on Chinese student revenue among the major Australian universities, so it is perhaps not surprising that its vice chancellor, Michael Spence, is one of the most outspoken critics of government efforts to address Chinese malign interference.\(^\text{23}\)

There is nothing necessarily covert, corrupting, or coercive underlying these constituencies of support for Australia-China ties—they are a reflection of economic interests, which is a classic driver in the pluralistic interest group politics that characterize all democracies. Whether Beijing cultivates them, and in what ways, is almost beside the point—they would likely be staunchly pro-cooperation with Beijing regardless of Beijing treatment, given the importance of the trade and investment relationship with China to their bottom line, which is easy to perceive as generalizable to the whole country.

What perhaps is more unusual in the case of Australia is the strikingly large number of former political leaders and senior government officials who have become exceedingly friendly to Beijing and have become fixtures in the public debate, seeking to reassure Australians about China’s intentions or lecture them on the need to accept and embrace China’s inevitable rise.

These friendly voices have included former prime minister Bob Hawke, who was one of the leading voices in favor of the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement; former prime minister Paul Keating, who frequently voices the view that “irrational” fears of China pushed by the media and security agencies are preventing Canberra from taking a “strategic” approach on China and bemoans Australia’s “slavish devotion” to the United States; and Geoff Raby, a former Australian ambassador to China who blames Canberra for allowing relations to fall to “the lowest ebb” by taking “an idealist approach to relations focused on values, rather than a more pragmatic approach” focused on economic ties.\(^\text{24}\)

---

24. SCMP Asia Desk, “Australian ‘phobia’ of China’s rise has left it vulnerable, former PM Paul Keating warns,” South Chi-
All three have enjoyed lucrative financial rewards from being “friends of China”: Hawke made tens of millions of dollars in facilitating business deals with Chinese firms in the years after he left office; Keating chaired the International Advisory Council of the China Development Bank; and Raby runs a Beijing-based consulting firm.

However, there may be another motivational dynamic at work as well, one based on status and respect. John Garnaut has suggested that the CCP is highly adept at exploiting vulnerabilities, which in Australia includes a highly egalitarian culture, even for former prime ministers and other dignitaries. As Clive Hamilton puts it, “former Prime Ministers can wander through an airport without anyone paying them too much attention. But spare a thought for those ex-prime ministers who move among their former constituents uttering a silent but desperate cry for the attention that was once heaped upon them.” This “relevance deprivation syndrome,” as coined by Gareth Evans, may make these elder statesmen highly susceptible to being “feted and fawned over” when they travel to Beijing.

Financial inducements should not be dismissed, however. Many Australians were outraged to learn that longtime Liberal MP and former trade minister Andrew Robb, who led the negotiations for the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement, was given a lucrative consulting contract the day he left office by Landbridge Group, the Chinese company that won a 99-year lease to operate the Port of Darwin. Robb’s deal was essentially a part-time job paying AU$880,000 a year. Robb is just one of many influential public figures who have been offered well-paid positions to serve on the boards of Chinese companies with close ties to the CCP. John Brusby, the former premier of Victoria and current Chancellor of La Trobe University, served on the board of Huawei, alongside former foreign minister Alexander Downer and retired navy rear admiral John Lord.

The example that is held up by Australian critics as the most egregious case of elite capture is Bob Carr, who served as foreign minister in the last Labor government and was previously the premier of New South Wales. Clive Hamilton notes that Carr was once critical of the “pro-China lobby” when he was foreign minister, and years earlier he had denounced CCP ideology as a “ludicrously outdated notion.” In a scathing critique of Carr, Sinologist John Fitzgerald writes that once he became ensconced as director of an influential university research center, Carr came to “personify the lobby he once attacked, lauding the

---

26. Ibid.
achievements of Xi Jinping and condemning his critics.” The research center in question is the Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) at the University of Technology in Sydney (UTS), which was established in 2014 by the generous donation of Huang Xiangmo. Huang was given a large role in ACRI’s affairs that is unusual for a donor. He was granted the title “Professor” and allowed to chair the ACRI board. Huang also bragged that he “personally appointed” Bob Carr to lead ACRI, telling a journalist that “someone recommended an even more influential figure from politics to me but I decided to invite Bob Carr because I consider him to be a very good academic.”

Carr, who had never been an academic, now had a public platform of prestige and influence that he had not had since his brief time as foreign minister, which he used to unfailingly support stronger Australia-China ties and counter Beijing’s critics. Carr described ACRI as promoting an “unabashedly positive and optimistic view of the Australia-China relationship.”

Much of the focus on Carr has been on his role in defending Beijing in the Australian public debate and harshly criticizing the Turnbull government for taking up foreign interference legislation. In Fitzgerald’s view, this partially misses the point, since the real value to Beijing lies in having former dignitaries as “friends of China” who are willing to speak highly of Xi Jinping and the CCP and speak out against their own government when...


it takes a less-than-friendly approach to Beijing. These statements of support for Xi and the Chinese party-state were even more valuable when made during visits to China, which Carr frequently did. As Fitzgerald told us in an interview, “Bob Carr became a sycophant, and specifically, what he was saying in China to Chinese audiences about Australia and misrepresenting Australia’s position and doing us a disservice . . . I think that was his primary function.”

**Cultivating and Coopting the Diaspora**

Australia has a large and diverse community of ethnic Chinese-Australian residents, which has been a natural target for United Front activity. Many of the 1.2 million people in Australia who identify as Chinese have been there for generations, and a large proportion have come from Southeast Asia and democratic Taiwan. Others left Hong Kong or mainland China to escape repression, including a number of Chinese students who were granted citizenship in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre. However, immigration from mainland China has been rising rapidly in recent years and now makes up a substantial portion of the diaspora. According to the 2016 census, 41 percent of ethnic Chinese in Australia were born in China, with a majority (60 percent) having arrived after 2006. Nearly half of all Chinese Australians speak Mandarin at home, while an additional 22 percent speak Cantonese at home. Chinese-Australian citizens make up about 5 percent of the population in Australia, but the voting weight of this group is augmented by the fact that a proportionally higher number live in several key battleground electoral districts in the cities and suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney, where Chinese Australians represent over 16 percent of the voting base.

It is in these Chinese-Australian communities where the CCP and its United Front arm have worked for decades to cultivate close ties with Beijing, and in recent years their efforts appear to be paying off. The long-standing efforts have focused on coopting and manipulating local community organizations and taking control of Chinese-language media while filtering out voices that are not reflexively pro-Beijing. The ultimate goal is to persuade Australians of Chinese descent, regardless of their country of origin or their current citizenship, that they are “the sons and daughters of China,” unified in patriotism and loyalty to the CCP.

The United Front has been able to coopt or extend control over a large portion of Chinese-Australian community organizations. Some, such as the ACPPRC, were set up with direct ties to the CCP and United Front, whereas many existing community civic, business, and professional associations have been coopted over time through financial rewards or intimidation. “The result,” writes John Lee, “is that many of these organizations now parrot Communist Party views on sensitive issues such as the South China Sea and Taiwan.”

---

Journalist Primrose Riordan described Huang Xiangmo as “the man who is arguably the reigning emperor of the Chinese community in Australia,” in large because of his role as the chairman of the ACPPRC, which is at the apex of a large network of community organizations. When Riordan asked Huang about the purported ties between the ACPPRC and the Chinese government, Huang claimed that the ACPPRC was primarily a charity organization funded by its members, which included 90 percent of Chinese organizations in Australia, and noted that “in the past two years the [Chinese] community have been more harmonious than before.” The “harmonious” community Huang describes is precisely the goal of the United Front—to build a large constituency of ethnic Chinese who feel loyal to the Chinese party-state and can be reliably counted on to advance Beijing’s narratives while neutralizing critics and stifling dissent.

Community organizations are used to provide supportive and often lucrative networks for people sympathetic to the Chinese party-state to rise to local prominence. In an interview, Clive Hamilton explained the success of the United Front strategy based on indirect leveraging of these financial rewards:

If you think about what motivates the people who set up or become office bearers in United Front organizations in Australia, not many of them are actually motivated by patriotism—it’s self-interest, it’s getting the backing of the Chinese consulate, it’s belonging to Party-linked organizations back in China—most of which is about facilitating business contacts and business activities. So, if you are someone “on the make,” you want status, you want guānxi (connections), you want opportunities for investment and business links, and all of that depends heavily on everybody knowing about your links and your connections. It’s really important for those people you want to deal with to know that you’ve got the imprimatur of the Party. If you’re shaking hands with the director of the [United Front] Work Department or the Overseas Chinese Exchange Association, that’s fantastic. You’re in, you’re trusted by the party. So, that means people will deal with you, will trust you, will do business deals with you.

Richard McGregor, a journalist and China specialist at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, suggested that the system works because the goals of the CCP become so internalized and the incentive structure is so clear that little if any direction is needed from Beijing. For someone like Huang Xiangmo, “the links [to the CCP] are all there, but the beauty of the system is they don’t need to direct them. These people go out and do stuff for the Motherland anyway.” The system is “amorphous, it just spreads. ‘Thank you so much for your help for the Motherland.' I think [the CCP] doesn’t need to do much more than that.”

Professor Feng Chongyi, a Chinese-born academic at UTS who has been a long-standing critic of the Chinese government and was detained for 10 days in China in 2017, described

37. Riordan, “China’s local emperor Huang Xiangmo says politics just like sport.”
the other side of the equation—what happens to those Chinese Australians who do not line up in support of the CCP:

When the Chinese began to dominate economically [in Australia], those who are criticizing the communist regime—who do not side with the regime—are marginalized, or even destroyed. If you look at the overseas Chinese democracy movement leaders, they all end up unemployed, or taxi drivers. They lose all the connections or resources needed to make money, to sustain their family.40

United Front work has also focused on “political astroturfing” events to make it seem as if there is overwhelming grassroots support in the ethnic Chinese community for Beijing and its policies while also drowning out critics. One such event, organized by the ACPPRC in Melbourne in July 2016, drew 3,000 people from 169 community associations and 15 media outlets to protest against the Arbitral Tribunal ruling in favor of the Philippines against Chinese claims in the South China Sea.41

CHINESE-LANGUAGE MEDIA

The CCP has largely succeeded in exerting messaging control over local Chinese-language media within Australia through acquisitions, commercial pressure, and rewards. A number of formerly independent newspapers have been bought out or bought into by entities that are closely connected to the CCP. Those outlets seeking to retain editorial independence and publish news items less favorable to Beijing’s party line find that their advertisers, typically Chinese-owned firms or Australian companies that rely on doing business in China, are pressured by consulate officials to pull their advertisements, starving them of revenue.42 One independent publisher detailed that pressure tactics on their advertisers ranged from “tea chats” at local Chinese consulates to threatening Chinese companies based in China to pressure their Australian counterparts to drop advertisements. Likewise, investors or owners of independent media can be shut out from official Chinese government events and media conferences if they report on sensitive topics not in line with the CCP narrative.43 Meanwhile, friendly media is rewarded with income from Chinese state-owned publications that pay to place editorial inserts produced in China inside local papers. As a result of this intimidation and cooptation, less than a handful of independent media outlets remain in Australia.44

Chinese-language radio in Australia has also been largely taken over by the CCP through a secret deal for state-owned China Radio International (CRI), which John Fitzgerald

---

40. Interview with Feng Chongyi, Sydney, February 2020.
43. Communication with anonymous source.
calls “the international propaganda arm of the CCP,” to acquire majority ownership of a Melbourne-based community radio station, CAMG. CAMG operates a network of Chinese-language radio stations and also provides Beijing-friendly content to other stations.\(^{45}\)

**CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA**

The problem of Chinese-language media control by Beijing is greatly exacerbated by the heavy reliance of Chinese speakers in Australia on Chinese social media platforms for their daily news. A 2018 survey of 522 Mandarin speakers in Australia found that 60 percent of respondents used WeChat as their main source of news and information, a number that is growing over time.\(^{46}\) Because WeChat and Weibo are heavily monitored and censored, Beijing can extend its censorship into the Chinese-speaking Australian community, with a disproportionate impact on recent migrants and students from mainland China. Legacy Australian news outlets such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), and The Australian also use these social media platforms to reach their Chinese-speaking audience, but as Peter Cai points out, “their posts and articles get censored and deleted all the time.”\(^{47}\)

Censorship on WeChat or Weibo may not always involve a direct ban or removal of politically sensitive information; it is just as likely to involve subtler and more insidious forms of information control. “Porous censorship,” a term coined by Margaret Roberts, involves flooding a daily news feed with stories that divert attention from politically sensitive topics and distract readers with other news topics and lighter content, such as entertainment or celebrity gossip.\(^{48}\) Although information may be available elsewhere on the internet, the time and effort required to seek it out serves as an effective tax on information rather than an outright ban. Researchers who have analyzed the content posted on WeChat on the public channels of Australian-based Chinese-language media found that stories about Chinese politics and foreign policy were dramatically lower on these platforms, and lifestyle and culture topics considerably higher, as compared to the independent digital platform of Mandarin-language service from SBS.\(^{49}\) In a perfect illustration of this pattern, an ABC report noted that in the days following the explosive reporting of Chinese interference activities in the *Four Corners* broadcast, the three Australian legacy outlets that publish in Mandarin—SBS, ABC, and The Australian—posted extensive coverage of the allegations in Mandarin on their websites, but none of these stories were posted

---

47. Peter Cai, “Beijing’s control over Chinese-language media more pressing than Fairfax China Daily inserts,” Lowy Institute, *The Interpreter*, June 1, 2016, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/beijings-control-over-chinese-language-media-more-pressing-fairfax-china-daily. Wanning Sun reports that Mandarin speakers in Australia are much more likely to access content from legacy media such as the ABC and SBS through their public accounts on WeChat than from the digital sites of ABC and SBS Mandarin. Ibid.
to their respective WeChat accounts. The articles that appeared instead on the ABC Australia WeChat channel included a story about university rankings, tips for learning English, and a recipe for brown rice congee.\(^{50}\)

The other major problem with the use of WeChat and Weibo is the virtual necessity of self-censorship. Individual users in Australia find that their “private” communications are being monitored and censored,\(^{51}\) and online chat groups can be arbitrarily shut down. One of Australia’s most popular Chinese online communities was wiped off the platform, without explanation, even though the moderators had taken great pains to avoid posting on subjects that Beijing would not want discussed.\(^{52}\) The opaque and arbitrary nature of censorship decisions often leads to an abundance of caution and an even higher degree of self-censorship among its users, including news outlets that use WeChat public accounts to disseminate their reporting. Maree Ma, publisher of the independent Australian Chinese-language Vision Times, posted on Twitter in late January 2020 that “everyone is being extra vigilant” about potential censorship of WeChat users outside of China posting on coronavirus. “We are avoiding publishing any news about the virus situation in China on wechat and many others are doing the same. No one wants to risk being shut down,” she wrote.\(^{53}\)

This distortion of the information space for Chinese-speaking Australians has growing implications for political discussion and participation as well. Given the prevalence of WeChat as the primary source of news and political information among Chinese-Australian voters, Australian politicians are increasingly turning to these social media platforms for political outreach to this community. Yet the platform makes it difficult if not impossible to engage on a range of topics that might run afoul of censors in Beijing, from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Australian government efforts to address malign foreign interference and Australia-China trade tensions. Voters will have difficulty asking their representative or candidate about those subjects in such a heavily censored space. Politicians using those platforms are also likely to self-censor, as was likely the case when Labor leader Bill Shorten appeared on a live WeChat forum in March 2019—he was asked a number of questions on Australia’s 5G ban on Huawei, Chinese political interference, Huang Xiangmo, and the CCP, all of which he sidestepped.\(^{54}\)

**Wedge Politics: Playing the “Race Card”**

A central feature of the CCP’s activities in Australia is the use of race and ethnicity as a

---

wedge to divide Australian society, tamp down debate on Chinese government policy and conduct in Australia, and delegitimize any criticism of Beijing. Playing the race card is meant to unite the diaspora and divide the rest of Australia. It plays on racial sensitivities in the country, which has a legacy of virulent racism, including against early Chinese migrants. Australians today, particularly in elite circles, are proud of their pluralistic democratic society and embrace multiculturalism and diversity.

John Lee, a Sydney-based academic who served as senior adviser to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop from 2016 to 2018, describes United Front operations in Australia as the CCP’s effort to “politicize and even weaponize race as a tool of foreign policy and subversion.”55 When Xi Jinping calls the diaspora the “sons and daughters” of China, it “implies that one’s identity and loyalty are not defined by nationality but race or ethnicity.”

John Garnaut helpfully explains the essential move the party makes to define all of its actions in terms of race:

A key to the party’s operations in Australia is collapsing the categories of Chinese Communist Party, China, and the Chinese people into a single organic whole—until the point where the party can be dropped from polite conversation altogether. The conflation means that critics of the party’s activities can be readily caricatured and attacked as anti-China, anti-Chinese, and Sinophobic—labels that polarize and kill productive conversation.56

John Fitzgerald calls it “wedge politics,” writing that the “CCP appears to have settled on race or ethnic identity as its preferred wedge issue. Australian criticisms of China’s policies and activities at home and abroad are routinely met with accusations of racial prejudice.”57

In particular, Beijing’s reaction to the Australian media reporting Chinese interference in late 2017 sought to exploit or even create social cleavage between the diaspora and the rest of Australian society. The spokesperson at the Chinese embassy said that the reports “were made up out of thin air and filled with cold war mentality and ideological bias, reflecting a typical anti-China hysteria and paranoid [sic],” going on to say that the reports “unscrupulously vilified… the Chinese community in Australia with racial prejudice, which in turn has tarnished Australia’s reputation as a multicultural society.”58

Professor Feng Chengyi emphasized in our interview how the tactic of wedging race is part of a larger asymmetric tool kit that Beijing exploits in liberal societies such as Australia:

The Chinese communist regime and its supporters around the world are using the rule of law and freedom of speech to attack democracy, to attack liberals without any concern. They can do this because it’s protected by law. Whereas when liberals

55. Lee, “Australia’s Gladys Liu scandal shows how the Chinese Communist Party is weaponizing race.”
or anyone else want to criticize China and Chinese communist regime, you are regarded as attacking freedom of speech. You are criticizing multiculturalism, you are practicing racism. All those labels have been used. It’s a very good thing that the West has a sense of guilt about past racism and colonialism. But this has been played on and capitalized by the communist regime and its supporters.

The CCP has also sought to weaponize the diaspora community in a more direct way as well. In early 2017, a CCP leader made a brazen threat to mobilize the Australian-Chinese community as a voting bloc as a way to influence the Labor Party. One of Beijing’s top priorities at the time was an extradition treaty with Australia similar to the one which would ignite massive protests in Hong Kong in 2019. The treaty had the backing of the Turnbull government, but Labor leaders were concerned that it might be used to target Chinese dissidents rather than criminals. Visiting Politburo member and security tsar Meng Jianzhu met with Labor leader Bill Shorten and Labor shadow foreign and defence ministers Penny Wong, and Richard Marles to discuss the treaty and told them, “it would be a shame if Chinese government representatives had to tell the Chinese community in Australia that Labor did not support the relationship between Australia and China.”

Labor leaders were shocked at the veiled threat, and it hardened their opposition to the treaty.

As an anonymous source told The Australian, “it spoke to the confidence of the Chinese government in terms of attempting to cultivate the diaspora.”

Campus Controversies: Values, Vested Interests, and Chinese Interference at Australian Universities

The growing presence of Chinese students, money, and influence in Australian universities creates either a virtuous circle or a vicious one, depending on one’s perspective. For some university leaders, growing linkages with Chinese students, donors, and universities have been almost an unmitigated good, giving an overwhelmingly positive boost to the global standing, research output, multiculturalism, and soft-power contribution of Australian universities. For critics, growing Chinese engagement and influence in Australian universities has created under-appreciated risks to the core values of academic freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom of inquiry, as well as financial vulnerability and risks to national security.

The virtuous circle argument begins with the high international regard for Australian universities, which have drawn a growing number of international students. Overseas Chinese students have become by far the largest group of international students, with especially high numbers at many of Australia’s eight leading universities (known as the Group of Eight, or G8). Salvatore Babones, an associate professor at the University of Sydney, estimates that Chinese students comprise over a quarter of all students at the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales (UNSW), and both


universities depend on Chinese tuition for over one-quarter of their total revenue.61 With the exception of the University of Western Australia, the other G8 universities plus the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) have overseas Chinese students comprising between 13 and 19 percent of total enrollments and providing between 11 and 20 percent of their total revenue.

The rapidly rising enrollments of Chinese students paying full tuition has been a financial gift to these leading Australian universities, a “cash cow” that has injected badly needed revenue into university budgets at a time of declining public funding. Peter Varghese, the chancellor of the University of Queensland (UQ), noted that government funding currently is only 38 percent of the operating budget at UQ, compared to two or three decades ago when it was over 90 percent.62 These international student fees in turn subsidize research at leading Australian universities, which is critical to maintaining their high global rankings.

Research at Australian universities is also being advanced by a dramatic rise in collaborative research programs with Chinese universities and research agencies, mostly in the fields of the physical sciences and AI. China has now overtaken the United States as Australia’s leading research partner, as measured by the percentage of coauthors in peer-reviewed journal articles affiliated with Chinese institutions.63 The knowledge creation and technological advances yielded through this collaborative research are good for Australian university global rankings, and they are good for the Australian economy. To top it off, the Chinese students educated in Australian universities go back to China with a better understanding and appreciation of a liberal democracy and goodwill toward Australia.

Those who view China’s growing influence and interference as a “vicious cycle” see the considerable downside risks in growing university engagement with China. The large number of Chinese students has been accompanied by growing campus interference by Chinese consulate and embassy officials, who often go well beyond the legitimate role of providing consular support to encouraging and sometimes organizing students for displays of patriotic fervor on campus and surveilling and intimidating students who express dissent. Consulate officials have stepped in to seek redress with university administrators after students complained about “offensive” material in class, while university teachers find they are monitored and at times targeted by students in Chinese social media campaigns, leading to concerns about faculty self-censorship and academic freedom.64 The growing financial dependence of universities on Chinese students, collaborative research programs, and generous donations from wealthy CCP-linked patrons such as Chau Chak Wing and

Huang Xiangmo lead universities to seek ever-closer ties with China, to the point where the universities may be willing to subordinate their foundational values to maintain cozy ties. Meanwhile Chinese students who come to study in Australia do not necessarily get to fully immerse in the critical thinking and freedom of expression available to other students, especially if they are monitored and intimidated by fellow students and consular officials, and thus may be relatively immune to Australia’s soft power.

The events at UQ over the past year encapsulate many of these concerns. In July 2019, a rally in support of the Hong Kong protests against the extradition treaty turned violent when about 200 mainland Chinese students turned up and scuffled with the pro-Hong Kong students. The Chinese consul-general in Brisbane, Xu Jie, sparked outrage when he praised the Chinese students for their “spontaneous patriotic behavior” in confronting the “anti-China separatist” protesters and denounced the principle of using campus events to “incite anti-China sentiment.”

This in turn prompted Foreign Minister Marise Payne to rebuke the consul-general and make clear that the government expected diplomatic representatives to respect the right to free speech and peaceful protest, even on contentious issues. “The government would be particularly concerned if a diplomatic mission were to act in ways that could undermine such rights, including by encouraging disruptive or potentially violent behavior,” she said. Canberra’s concern went well beyond what Xu had said in support of students; some officials in law enforcement and intelligence suspected that Chinese diplomats may have had a hand in planning the counter-rally, given that similar things had happened at other university campuses.

In another familiar pattern, the parents of one of the students who had participated in the rally received a visit from state security agents back in China who warned that he should refrain from engaging in “anti-China rhetoric.”

Drew Pavlou, one of the students who organized the pro-Hong Kong rally, began aiming his fire at the UQ leadership for its cozy relations with China. He criticized the vice chancellor, Peter Hoj, after it was revealed that Xu had been quietly appointed to an adjunct professorship a few weeks prior to the protest incident, a move that several Australian academics said was highly unusual.

---


69. John Power, “University of Queensland faces heat for appointing Chinese diplomat,” South China Morning Post, July
senate on a platform calling for the university to close its Confucius Institute, given its ties to Beijing. UQ is one of 13 Australian universities that hosts Confucius Institutes, which focus primarily on Chinese language and culture and are directly funded by the CCP through its agency Hanban. UQ was one of four universities that had signed contracts with Hanban that gave the Beijing agency control over the “assessment of teaching quality.”

Further revelations put UQ in an even more uncomfortable light when it reported that UQ had offered four courses that had been developed with Chinese government funding and that Vice Chancellor Hoj had served as an unpaid consultant to Hanban and received a large university bonus for expanding Chinese student enrollments.

Yet the harshest criticism of UQ came when the university launched disciplinary procedures against Pavlou without having investigated or disciplined any of the Chinese student counter-protesters who had engaged in violent behavior. The misconduct allegations remain confidential, but the action to most observers appears to be geared toward punishing the outspoken undergraduate for bringing uncomfortable scrutiny to UQ and its dealings with China. After Pavlou was suspended in late May 2020, UQ Chancellor Peter Varghese announced a review to revisit the “concerning” suspension, in effect acknowledging that the disciplinary action against Pavlou raised troubling questions.

In assessing the degree of malign Chinese interference activities on Australian campuses, certain things are clearer than others. There have clearly been cases of Chinese students being monitored, surveilled, and intimidated, with their family receiving a midnight “knock on the door” by Beijing’s security agents. Officials at the diplomatic missions are very involved in outreach to Chinese students and at a minimum offer rhetorical and legal support, and likely some organizational support, for activities that involve expressions of patriotic fervor. Some of this patriotic activity has involved recording or reporting university professors who say objectionable things in class, leading to their online harassment, although there are few examples of this leading to disciplinary action.

The role of Confucius Institutes is more debatable and contentious. Critics suspect that these centers play an insidious role in influencing curriculum and campus discussions around China, but there are few clear examples of the centers engaging in more than non-accredited classes on language and culture, which are classic targets of soft power.
UQ Chancellor Peter Varghese said in our interview that he looked “very closely” at the Confucius Institute at UQ and “didn’t find any evidence at least at the University of Queensland that the Confucius Institute had crossed the line in any way, that it was straying from its mandate, that it was seeking to influence curriculum, or that it was going beyond what it was meant to do, so we decided to renew the agreement but to tighten it up in terms of transparency and some other provisions.”75 It is not clear whether there is anything covert, coercive, or corrupting about these cultural centers, as long as universities are vigilantly transparent about their funding and administration.76

The overarching problem for universities when it comes to dealing with undue or malign influence from China is the growing economic dependence of universities on large numbers of Chinese students. It creates vested interests and a natural political constituency for speaking up loudly in national debates in favor of maintaining close cooperative relations with China. Salvatore Babones puts it this way: “universities tend to be exposed far more than any other organizations. That makes them skittish about anything that could be perceived as criticism of China. I personally believe that it has colored universities’ evaluations of the China risk.”77 Likewise, Peter Varghese noted the “points of leverage” that flow from this growing reliance on Chinese students. Does Beijing seek to convert that leverage into political influence or campus interference? Varghese observes, “I think there’s enough evidence around for us to conclude that the Chinese are quite adept at leaving the question hanging in the minds of vice chancellors of universities—it’s a nice business you’ve got here, it would be a shame if something happened to it.”78 Only recently, in the standoff between Australia and China in the wake of Covid-19, has Beijing taken steps to put that threat into action.

---

75. Interview with Peter Varghese, Canberra, February 2020.
77. Interview with Salvatore Babones, Sydney, February 2020.
78. Interview with Peter Varghese, Canberra, February 2020.
Pandemic Politics: China Sharpens Its Power

The coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, and its subsequent spread around the world ushered in a new chapter of Chinese foreign policy. Beijing’s focus during the initial outbreak was on controlling information within China—concealing the initial outbreak in Wuhan for several weeks and suppressing internal criticism of the government’s early missteps. As Beijing got the virus under control internally and the virus spread to Western countries, Beijing sought to capitalize on the global leadership vacuum, especially when the United States fumbled badly in its own initial response to the virus. On the soft-power front, China’s “mask diplomacy” sent medical equipment around the world and teams of doctors across Asia, but Beijing’s “sharp power” was also coming into clearer focus. Chinese officials launched a global information campaign to laud China’s handling of the outbreak and discredit the efforts of leading Western countries to respond to the crisis, with a particular focus on the United States. What was markedly different about this diplomatic offensive was the sudden embrace of English-language social media such as Twitter by a cadre of Chinese diplomats to combatively defend China’s handling of the pandemic, troll the Trump administration, and muddy the waters about the origins of the virus by planting false narratives and spreading conspiracy theories—tactics strikingly similar to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns.79

Dubbed “Wolf Warriors” after a hyper-patriotic blockbuster action film that glorifies the People’s Liberation Army, this new generation of envoys has taken to Twitter to post pugnacious messages and misleading stories from capitolts around the world in what appears to be highly coordinated efforts to spin the pandemic in ways that advantage China.80 One of the leaders of the Wolf Warrior pack is Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs who on March 12 suggested in a tweet that the U.S. army brought the coronavirus to Wuhan. The next day, Zhao shared and asked followers to retweet an article entitled “Further evidence the virus originated in the US,” which was published on a site known for pushing pro-Russian propaganda and conspiracy theories. Verbal warfare between China and the United States escalated after President Trump and other U.S. officials began calling Covid-19 the “Chinese virus” or “Wuhan flu” and began floating the theory that the virus originated in a Wuhan research lab.

**Beijing’s Diplomatic Offensive against Canberra**

As the United States and China grew increasingly confrontational over the origins of the virus, Australia waded into the fray and found itself the target of a barrage of diplomatic fire from Beijing. In mid-April, the Morrison government began calling for an independent inquiry into the origins and handling of the Covid-19 epidemic, stressing the need for transparency from China and all countries to prevent a future similar outbreak. Prime Minister Morrison also proposed reforming the World Health Organization (WHO) by creating a team of independent public health inspectors who would deploy to countries in the event of an epidemic outbreak, similar to authority granted to UN weapons monitors. Beijing reacted with great indignation and a vitriolic attack on Australia. China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it was “gravely concerned” by the “highly irresponsible” proposal, dismissing it as “political maneuvering” designed to “hype up” the situation. Any doubts about China’s transparency was “disrespectful of the tremendous efforts and sacrifices of the Chinese people.”

Global Times editor Hu Xijn provided the most colorful example of Beijing’s disparaging invective, writing on Weibo: “Australia is always there, making trouble. It is a bit like chewing gum stuck on the sole of China’s shoes. Sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off.”

However, the narrative that Beijing was most eager to push was that Australia was acting as a proxy for the United States. The foreign ministry asserted that Australia was “dancing to the tune of a certain country,” while the Chinese embassy in Canberra accused “certain Australian politicians” of “being keen to parrot” American officials.

---

86. “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference April 20, 2020,” Ministry of For-
called Australia a “petty follower” of the Americans that had been “hijacked by US strategic interests” and lacked “independent policy-making.”

When Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton called for greater transparency from China, which would “certainly be demanded from us, if Australia was at the epicenter” of a global pandemic, a Chinese embassy official called it a “political attack” that revealed Australia’s “ignorance and bigotry as well as lack of independence, which is sad.” The official further suggested, “Obviously [Dutton] must have also received some instructions from Washington requiring him to cooperate with the U.S. in its propaganda war against China.”

Beijing’s narrative of Australia as a “lackey,” “running dog,” or “pawn” of the United States is designed to tap into long-standing sensitivities within political and influential circles in Australia about the country’s foreign policy independence. Elder statesmen such as Paul Keating had been taking a similar tack in decrying Canberra’s tougher stance on Chinese interference, declaring that the national security “nutters” who viewed China as a threat were overly influenced by American counterparts. Australia’s role as junior partner in its alliance with the United States, America’s “deputy sheriff” in Asia, creates discomfort at times even for proponents of the alliance, and Beijing-friendly commentators were happy to chime in to support the “lackey” narrative. Beijing’s charges of Australian collusion with the Trump administration are potentially nettlesome because they cannot be completely disproven, since ordinary Australians, and even sophisticated policy watchers, cannot know with certainty what might be going on behind the scenes in high-level communications with the Trump administration or within “Five Eyes” channels. It generates uncertainty, potentially creating suspicion of the Morrison government’s motives and eroding support for the alliance.

However, the effectiveness of this discrediting tactic has been blunted by the broad public and political support for an independent inquiry. The opposition Labor Party has consistently backed the proposal and defended the need for transparency. Moreover, the suggestion that Australia was blindly following the United States was undercut by the fact


that Australian intelligence officials leaked their skepticism about the classified evidence being used by the Trump administration to advance the theory that Covid-19 originated in a Wuhan lab.92

**Economic Coercion: Beijing Hits Australian Beef and Barley, Tourism, and Universities**

Beijing soon escalated the diplomatic fusillade to overt threats of economic retaliation, threatening consumer boycotts on higher education, tourism, and agricultural products. On April 26, China’s ambassador to Australia, Cheng Jingye, told the Australian Financial Review that Australia’s push for an independent probe into Covid-19 would cause tourists to have “second thoughts” and parents to reconsider “whether this is the best place to send their kids,” while ordinary consumers would ask, “Why should we drink Australian wine? Eat Australian beef?”93 A few weeks later, China followed through on its threats by targeting Australian beef and barley exports, which last year were valued at AU$2.6 billion and AU$916 million, respectively.94 Beijing banned beef for “technical reasons” from four Australian slaughterhouses, which account for 35 percent of beef exports to China, and placed 80 percent tariffs on barley from Australia on the basis of an 18-month-long anti-dumping and countervailing duties investigation.95

This kind of indirect economic coercion is not unfamiliar to Australians. When former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull introduced political interference legislation aimed at China in December 2017, Chinese officials began warning of a consumer-led boycott of Australian goods, tourism, and education.96 A few months later, China began applying new customs rules that targeted Australian-made wines, among other Australian goods, causing cases of wine to pile up at Chinese ports.97 In February 2019, when bilateral ties had hit another low point after Australia rescinded Huang Xiangmo’s visa and banned Huawei from its 5G network, Australian iron ore producers found their exports facing prolonged clearing times of over 40 days at Chinese ports.98 Asked if the import slowdown was related to bilateral tensions, China’s foreign ministry spokesman said that

---

the additional customs inspections were “completely normal” actions to “protect the environment” as well as the interests of Chinese producers.

In each of these cases—sanctions on beef and barley in May 2020, and the previous “go slows” on wine and iron ore—China maintained that trade restrictions were based on procedural or technical grounds, even though they emerged in the context of heightened bilateral tensions and Chinese threats of economic retaliation. This “plausible deniability” provides Beijing with the pretense that these actions are all about trade rather than economic bullying. It also provides Beijing with the flexibility to escalate or de-escalate at will.99 The Australian government usually goes along with the pretense that the restrictions are trade matters, perhaps in order to avoid escalation. The Australian government did not publicly acknowledge the wine and iron ore import slowdowns, and it has accepted Beijing’s explanation that it is acting according to regular administrative procedures in the current barley case, although Australian officials have taken issue with the underlying analysis of the investigation and have signaled that Australia may pursue a legal resolution at the World Trade Organization.100

What has changed is both Beijing’s overtness in making economic threats and the Australian political response. In previous episodes, Beijing threatened economic coercion discretely, through quiet official channels, implicit or oblique threats, or using government-aligned think tanks.101 But having the Chinese ambassador deliver not-so-subtle threats of consumer boycotts directly to a leading Australian newspaper was a much more brazen delivery. Beijing’s rapid follow-through with targeted sanctions against beef and barley, two major agricultural products, is also much more direct. In another new twist, China is giving Australia the “silent treatment” on trade, rebuffing attempts by Australian Trade Minister Simon Birmingham to discuss the issues with his counterpart.102

Beijing went even further in early June when it followed through on its threats to Australia’s tourism and education sectors. On June 6, China’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued a travel warning advising the Chinese public not to travel to Australia due to “an alarming increase” in racial discrimination and violence toward Chinese people related to the coronavirus pandemic.103 Notably, the travel warning was issued shortly after Prime Minister Morrison announced new foreign investment rules that will toughen

screening of all investments in sensitive industries regardless of size.104 A few days later, on June 10, the Chinese Ministry of Education warned Chinese students to do a “good risk assessment” and “exercise caution” in choosing to return to Australia for study when universities reopen in July, citing “multiple discriminatory incidents against Asians” in Australia during the coronavirus pandemic.105 The loss of Chinese tourists and students will hit these sectors hard; Chinese tourists spent AU $12.4 billion in Australia in 2019, while a loss of Chinese students through 2021 is estimated to result in about AU$12 billion in lost revenue for Australian universities.106

As China’s exercise of power has grown sharper, the Australian political response has also hardened. Although business leaders such as Andrew “Twiggy” Forrest have strongly called for the government to be “pragmatic” to protect the trade relationship and find a way to accommodate Beijing, the Morrison government has remained steadfast and has been backed by the opposition Labor Party.107 The day after Ambassador Cheng issued economic threats in his interview with the Australian Financial Review, Australia’s trade and tourism minister, Simon Birmingham, stated: “Australia is no more going to change our policy position on a major public health issue because of economic coercion or threats of coercion than we would change our policy position in matters of national security.”108 The same day Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong wrote in an op-ed that “our relationship [with China] has clearly entered a new phase” and criticized China for its “successive disinformation efforts” that have attempted to “obscure the virus’ origin and discredit other countries’ responses.”109 The following day, Labor leader Anthony Albanese said that “Australia wants a positive relationship with China but it’s got to be built on a level of trust and transparency.”110

Prime Minister Morrison has framed the current situation as Australia refusing to sell out its sovereignty and values in the face of China’s economic bullying. At a press conference in mid-May, Morrison said: “What the Australian government is doing is completely unremarkable. We are standing our ground on our values and the things that we know are always important . . . And those things are not to be traded. Ever.”

A month later, following Beijing’s move to curb tourists and students from Australia, Morrison said in a radio interview: “We are an open-trade nation but I am never going to trade our values in response to coercion from wherever it comes.” This framing has been effective, at least to date. Critics have been somewhat muted, including business leaders calling for “pragmatism” who have been criticized for putting money ahead of national interest and national self-respect. And the public is on board. A poll taken by The Australian in early June, amid rising economic tensions with China, showed that 79 percent of voters support Morrison’s position on the Covid-19 investigation.

Beijing appears to have turned a page in its playbook in Australia. Whereas prior to 2018 the focus was on building up soft power and engaging in covert interference and manipulation, the current Covid-19 standoff is marked by sharper, more overt exercise of power through diplomatic and economic muscle flexing. John Lee described the difference this way: “China tried seduction, and that didn’t work, and now its moved on to coercion.”

111. Hartcher, “China can’t bully us into submission.”
Why Did China Target Australia?  
Australia’s Strategic Value and Domestic Vulnerabilities

Australia was an attractive target for CCP operations because of its strategic value as a U.S. ally in an increasingly contested Asia-Pacific region. China’s long-term strategic goal is to marginalize U.S. leadership in the region by peeling away allies and partners, leaving China as the unquestionably dominant regional power able to exercise maximum influence. Even neutralizing an ally such as Australia on an issue like the South China Sea would pay huge dividends, since it would sharply undercut American regional leadership and strengthen China’s hand in pursuing its ambitions in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

How realistic did China believe it would be to separate Australia from the U.S. alliance? Peter Varghese mused that it was “always a fantasy on the part of the Chinese thinking that they could peel Australia away from the U.S. alliance. But I’m sure there were people in the system who thought that was something that could be possible.” Salvatore Babones is a bit more convinced that the “ultimate dream goal” of prying Australia from the U.S. alliance “is considered a realistic reach goal in China—particularly because there is such a large reservoir of anti-Americanism in Australian institutions and among Australia’s professional class.”

China has also targeted more specific strategic and policy objectives at different times. In 2016, China wanted Australia to show deference to the Chinese position in South China Sea at a time when China’s assertive behavior was facing growing pushback from the United States and other countries in the region. In 2017, the extradition treaty was a high-priority objective, leading Beijing to issue a threat to the Labor Party of stirring up retaliation from Chinese-Australian voters. In the recent Covid-19 dust-up, China is looking for deference from Australia on the issues surrounding the coronavirus outbreak. Beijing appears to be increasingly enraged by Australia taking the lead on what it views as hostile initiatives—first by playing a leading role in spotlighting and countering Chinese interference and more recently by calling for a global independent inquiry.

Australia also offered some tantalizing vulnerabilities for Beijing. Among all advanced democracies, Australia is the most economically dependent on China, which creates a natural constituency of support in the business community as well as among university administrators and political leaders at state and local levels. Australia’s relatively large community of ethnic Chinese citizens offers another potential avenue of support and influence for Beijing, and have been natural targets of United Front activity.

In addition, Australia was one of the few advanced democracies in the world that allowed unrestricted donations from foreigners to political parties, creating a wide-open loophole for wealthy Chinese political benefactors with links to the CCP to inject large amounts of money into political campaigns. Peter Varghese points out that the “ground is fertile” for political interference in Australia because “our political system is scarily vulnerable to relatively small amounts of money.” Unlike U.S. electoral campaigns, which can cost billions of dollars, the latest figures from the electoral commission recorded total contributions to the major parties at about AU$150 million. “That is not a lot of money in the scheme of things,” Varghese noted, “so a little bit of money can buy you a lot of influence if you choose the right targets.”

Australia’s legal system offers another point of vulnerability that can be exploited to tamp down on investigations into Beijing’s influence activities. Australia’s notoriously complex and generous defamation laws have by all accounts had a chilling effect on the press, including on media reporting into the murky networks of CCP influence activities. The case brought by Chinese-Australian Chau Chak Wing against journalist John Garnaut and the Sydney Morning Herald stands as cautionary tale. Chau was awarded AU $280,000 (later reduced to about AU $247,000) for defamation in a 2015 article that suggested that Chau had conspired to bribe a former UN president—an allegation repeated by Andrew Hastie in parliament, whose remarks were protected by parliamentary privilege. Chau brought a separate defamation suit against journalist Nick McKenzie for reporting that appeared in the Four Corners/Fairfax Media broadcast which Chau says portrayed him as a spy who “betrayed his country” in order to serve the interests of Beijing and the CCP. That case is still pending.

117. Interview with Peter Varghese, Canberra, February 2020.
Making the World “Safe” for the CCP

An alternative explanation for China’s intensive efforts to penetrate and influence Australian politics and society is that the target is less about Australian policy outputs and more about making Australia into a comfortable space for the Chinese communist regime, a polity that would reflect glowing legitimacy for the party state back in China. In other words, Beijing may view Australia less as a target than as a mirror for CCP legitimacy. As John Fitzgerald explained in our interview, “the Communist Party in China wants to feel safe in foreign environments, as safe as it does in China—that what it says will not be challenged, that what it does will not be questioned.” Fitzgerald used the Dastyari affair to illustrate his point: “Sam Dastyari, the famous case, was called out for saying things to Chinese media that was never said in Australia to Australians. He was the guy that the Chinese government was effectively buying to say the things it wanted the people in China to hear Australian ministers say. Where’s the influence? It’s in China. It’s not here [in Australia].” The CCP has “certain domestic ways of doing things. It wants to translate that into foreign places that it feels comfortable in. It thinks it’s got Cambodia, can maybe get Thailand, and perhaps bring Australia in, too. You know, why not? They’re friendly, they’re dumb, they grow stuff... kangaroos. What’s to be afraid of? I think it was a fairly naïve assumption that Australia will accept that, and that turned out to be wrong.”

This view helps explain why CCP-led efforts place so much emphasis on shaping pro-Beijing narratives, fomenting “red hot patriotism” on campuses, and silencing dissent. It could also help account for why so many of China’s influence activities in Australia have failed or fallen short of their desired effect. In Salvatore Babones’ view, “China’s toolkit is very primitive compared to Russia’s. China shows very little understanding of how public idea formation actually works, while Russia is much more sophisticated.”

In Fitzgerald’s words, “China’s a kind of an Alice in Wonderland world in which you think you’re looking at Chinese influence operations but in fact you have to turn it inside out and see how it’s working, and it’s actually China talking to itself. And we’re just getting caught up in it.”

---

121. Interview with John Fitzgerald, Melbourne, Australia, February 2020.
122. Ibid.
Australia’s Response

The Australian response to the wave of malign China's influence activities that surfaced over the past several years highlights many of the strengths of the Australian political and government system as well as the resilience of Australian society and democratic norms.

First, Australian intelligence services played a critical early role in investigating the links between the CCP and their proxies in the Chinese-Australian community, their expanding political activities, and China's growing influence and interference on university campuses. After becoming sufficiently concerned about the extent of these activities, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) began sounding alarm bells through security briefings to political party officials and leaking information to selected journalists, setting in motion a process that would lead to an intensifying national debate and political response. In August 2016, Prime Minister Turnbull commissioned a year-long intelligence inquiry into Chinese influence activities that drew on the combined resources of the ASIO and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, led by John Garnaut, Turnbull’s former adviser and a former Beijing-based journalist. Although the inquiry was classified, it reportedly showed a decade-long effort by the CCP to compromise the major political parties and influence all levels of Australian politics and led directly to Turnbull's decision to pursue tougher counter-interference legislation.125

The ASIO continued to play an important role in the national debate by laying out in its unclassified reports and to parliament the national security stakes of foreign interference and manipulation.126 ASIO chief Duncan Lewis called the level of foreign interference and espionage “unprecedented” in 2018 and in 2019 called it “an existential threat” to the state, words that carried a lot of weight in Canberra. Although these intel assessments were attacked by respected elder statesman Paul Keating (who called the intel chiefs “nutters”) and many university and business leaders, the standing of the ASIO among politicians and the public gave credibility to its concerns. Thus, the fact that Australia has a highly capable, well-resourced, and well-respected intelligence apparatus, which is strengthened by its information sharing in the “Five Eyes” arrangement, is an important part of the story.

Perhaps the most critical role in shaping the Australian response was played by Australia’s independent and boisterous free press. Journalists from print and televised media launched aggressive investigations into many facets of murky networks of Chinese influence and brought to light many troubling incidents that, taken as a whole, painted a disturbing picture of Beijing’s efforts to create channels of influence to distort and manipulate Australia’s internal debate and foreign policy decisions. John Garnaut’s journalism was early and important in launching this line of inquiry, and journalists such as Peter Hartcher, Primrose Riordan, Nick McKenzie, Chris Uhlmann, Philip Wen, and Kelsey Munro, among others, pushed the story forward with their reporting. Clive Hamilton also played an important role in shaping the debate, both with the release of his book *Silent Invasion* and the story behind the book’s release—the original publisher pulled the book’s publication out of fear of legal action by Beijing, suggesting that a book about Chinese interference in Australia was subject to Chinese interference.

Once these issues were surfaced by the media, a vibrant public debate ensued, with voices emerging on all sides of the issue. Some criticized the media coverage for being overwrought and overblown, while others called for more investigations, transparency, and political action. Some Chinese Australians voiced concerns about being stigmatized, while others expressed relief that Beijing’s heavy-handed tactics within the community were being exposed and countered. Many business titans and university vice-chancellors made the case for prioritizing cooperation over confrontation with China, while many Sinologists and strategists weighed in to elucidate the motivations and ambitions of the CCP. In short, Australia’s free press and free expression worked exactly as intended in a liberal society. Views were expressed, arguments were made, sensitivities and concerns were aired, minds were engaged, and politicians were given plenty of input and electoral feedback from their citizens. Over the course of this debate, public opinion moved decisively against China. A 2019 Lowy Institute poll found that 32 percent of Australians trust China to act responsibly in the world, a 20 point drop from the year before.127 This negative trend appears to be deepening in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic—a new Lowy poll finds that 68 percent of Australians have an unfavorable view of China’s system of government based on how it handled the coronavirus outbreak.128

The government’s swift response is also commendable. Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull spearheaded an expansive set of legislative reforms to counter foreign interference and espionage, which were passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in 2018. Campaign finance legislation closed the loophole that allowed foreigners to donate to political parties at the federal level, while counter-interference laws banned foreign agents from influencing politicians, civil society organizations, and media and ethnic groups and also set up a registry for entities acting on behalf of foreign governments. Whether these new laws go far enough to adequately address the ongoing issues of China’s interference remains a subject of debate in Australia.

Alongside the counter-interference laws, a new coordinating office was created within the Department of Home Affairs with the mandate to formulate a comprehensive strategy and follow up on specific cases of foreign interference that emerge through intelligence or other channels. What is interesting about the National Counter Foreign Interference (NCFI) Coordinator office is that rather than focus only on investigations and enforcement, it sees its mission as one of engagement—with local ethnic communities, businesses, universities, and other “at risk” sectors—to build awareness, offer advice and support for countering interference, and promote multiculturalism and social cohesion. The NCFI gives grants to diverse community groups, for example, and it expanded Australia’s national security hotline so that citizens can report cases of foreign interference. It has also held a domestic summit with states and territories to discuss threats and encourage local engagements with at-risk communities to promote awareness and a sense of inclusiveness. International engagements with like-minded partners are also a priority, and the NCFI has also begun leading discussions with counterparts from democratic countries to share the information, raise awareness about the risks of foreign interference, and share respective national approaches to countering foreign interference.

The NCFI also initiated the Electoral Integrity Assurance Task Force, a multi-agency effort that watches for disinformation and manipulation on social media inside and outside of Australia, including on Chinese social media. The task force was active in the lead-up to the May 2019 federal election campaign and saw no instances of foreign-sourced disinformation posted on social media, which could have impacted the election.

Critics have pointed to the lack of enforcement of the new counter-interference provisions. More than a year after their enactment, no one has been charged or prosecuted under the new laws, and the requirement to register in the public registry has gone largely unheeded by many entities with clear ties to China and other foreign governments, including all 13 Confucius Institutes at Australian universities. Facing growing criticism about enforcement, the Morrison government launched a new task force in December 2019 aimed at enhancing interagency coordination and more effectively pooling intelligence information and law enforcement capabilities so that cases of foreign interference can be better identified, disrupted, and prosecuted. The new Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce is led by a senior ASIO official and includes investigators from the federal police and a range of security agencies. The AU$88 million package

130. Interview with Cameron Ashe, Deputy Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator, Home Affairs Ministry, Canberra, February 2020.
15624917542c1aa185e8f6f751f7.
announced by the government to set up the task force will also expand the resources of
the NCFI. Peter Hartcher told me in our interview in February that we should expect to
see prosecutions and perhaps deportations in the coming months.\textsuperscript{135}

The first sign of this ramped up enforcement of the new counter-interference laws
came with the dramatic dawn raid of the home of an elected member of the New South
Wales state parliament as part of an investigation into alleged CCP interference into
Australian democratic politics.\textsuperscript{136} On the morning of June 26, officials from ASIO and
the Federal Police searched the suburban Sydney home of Shaoquett Moselmane, a Labor
politician known for his pro-Beijing views. Moselmane had been forced to resign from a
parliamentary leadership role in April after it was revealed that he published an essay on
a Chinese university website that praised President Xi Jinping’s “unswerving leadership”
in handling the coronavirus crisis, and drew a comparison between Xi’s “emphatic” and
“decisive” response and the “the slow, and at times baffling and confused messaging by the
Morrison federal government.”\textsuperscript{137} In 2019, Moselman made a speech calling for a “new
world order” in which China could “reach its potential,” which was being thwarted by the
existing Western-led system. Moselmane had also come under media scrutiny for taking
numerous privately-funded trips to China, with many expenses paid by Chinese officials
and agencies, and for hiring a John Zhang, a Chinese-Australian businessman with ties
to a number of United Front organizations, as a part-time staffer in his office.\textsuperscript{138} Zhang’s
home and business were also searched as part of the investigation, which reportedly has
been ongoing for months.

China’s interference in Australian universities was another area of government action.
In August 2019, the education minister created a task force to examine how to safeguard
academic freedom and manage risks related to foreign engagements. Comprised of senior
government officials from 10 agencies and academic representatives from 36 universities,
the task force developed best practice guidelines on risk assessment, transparency,
due diligence toward research collaboration and staff appointments, cybersecurity, and
awareness among staff about threats to academic freedom and national interest.\textsuperscript{139} The
guidelines, which were completely voluntary, were issued in a November 2019 report.\textsuperscript{140}

Ultimately, Australia’s strong democratic culture, political will, and a healthy shot of
transparency proved to be an antidote to Chinese meddling in Australian domestic

\textsuperscript{135} Interview with Peter Hartcher, Canberra, February 2020.
\textsuperscript{137} Nick McKenzie and Joel Tozer, “NSW MP’s Sydney home raided as ASIO probes China links,” Sydney Morning Herald,
20200626-p556f6.html
\textsuperscript{138} Lisa Visentin, “’You must be a potential leader’: Labor MP’s staffer links to China’s Communist Party,” Sydney Morning
staffer-links-to-china-s-communist-party-20190911-p52q99.html
\textsuperscript{139} Fergus Hunter, “Stronger protections for uni students and research under new foreign interference strategy,”
\textsuperscript{140} University Foreign Interference Taskforce, Guidelines To Counter Foreign Interference In The Australian University
ed19-0222_-_int_-_uft_guidelines_acc.pdf.
politics. Labor Party leaders rebuffed attempts by Huang Xiangmo to bribe them on South China Sea policy as well as the threat by Beijing to mobilize ethnic Chinese voters against them if they did not support the extradition treaty. Australia has not softened its South China Sea policy, and it remains a firm ally of the United States, despite the unpopularity of President Trump in Australia. Subsequent efforts by Beijing to pressure Australia by putting diplomatic relations into a deep freeze, followed by vitriolic verbal attacks and costly economic retaliation in response to Canberra’s call for an independent inquiry into the Covid-19 outbreak, have also failed to dislodge strong public and bipartisan support for the government’s tougher stance on countering foreign influence and demanding transparency. The sharp swing in public opinion against China suggests that Beijing’s attempts to influence Australian policy may have backfired.

However, the Australian public and government should not be lulled into complacency. The Chinese party-state has made long-term investments in relationships and networks that will not be eroded overnight, and it is refining its toolbox through trial and error. The ongoing investigation into potential CCP infiltration into the office of Shaoquett Moselmane also suggests that there may be more revelations to come about covert CCP efforts to influence sitting legislators at the federal or state level. Among many unknowns, it remains unclear the extent to which CCP proxies like Huang Xiangmo are acting organically, responding to broad systematic incentives in the way described by Richard McGregor, or are being closely guided and instructed by Beijing. The Australian government is only in the beginning stages of formulating a comprehensive and effective counterstrategy, and it is helpfully sharing its lessons and current approach to countering malign influence with other democracies.
Lessons from the Australia Case

The concerted efforts by the Chinese party-state to interfere with Australia’s politics and society at large reveals some key features about Beijing’s influence operations. First, the CCP is highly adept at targeting a country’s vulnerabilities. It has made patient, strategic, and long-term investments in the ethnic Chinese community through its United Front activities, which cultivated a very pliant and pro-Beijing voice in Australian society, until perhaps recently. It has also targeted former Australian statesmen who may be rather susceptible to being feted and flattered in Beijing, not to mention to financial largesse. Beijing also has taken a calculating approach to cultivating a sense of economic dependence and thus vulnerability—through trade, inward foreign investments, and growing numbers of tourists and students. Although these flows are in reality heavily market driven, they are also subject to Beijing’s manipulation when it wants to flex its economic muscles. For over a decade the threat of economic retaliation was more theoretical than real, but Beijing has been extremely adept at reminding key constituencies of its leverage. Until recently this messaging was rather indirect, although perhaps not much more subtle than a mob boss—“it’s a nice business you’ve got here, it would be a shame if something happened to it,” as Peter Varghese put it. Nevertheless it has been highly effective in mobilizing business, university, and local government leaders to caution Canberra on the need to put “pragmatism” over principles.

Second, in addition to being patient, Beijing is very consistent in its messaging. Certain core narratives have been repeated endlessly for many years, even decades. These include messages to the Chinese community that to be ethnic Chinese is to be “sons and daughters” of the motherland and a blurring of lines between the CCP, the state, and the Chinese people. To the broader community, Beijing’s message has been that China’s rise to a position of the dominant regional power is inevitable and legitimate; resisting this reality makes one either a racist, an incompetent strategist, or a puppet shilling for American interests. Australia should focus on pragmatic, “win-win” cooperation rather than engaging in ideological battles in a “cold war” mindset. The not-very-subtle subtext is, “the rest of the world has moved on from whinging about communism, human rights and one-party rule, why can’t you?”

Third, despite this strategic, consistent, and often subtle approach, the CCP and its proxies often overplayed their hand and were sometimes ham-fisted in their attempts to leverage their influence. This reveals a lack of sophisticated understanding of the way democratic
polities actually work. Interestingly, although Beijing is often credited with having more effective influence operations compared to Moscow, Russian efforts by and large have been quite sophisticated in targeting social fissures and political sensitivities in particular democratic countries. If this case is representative, it suggests that Beijing’s interference in democracies will be blunted by the CCP’s unfamiliarity with the democratic culture and practices of the societies in which it seeks to operate.

Fourth, China is clearly exploring new tactics and sharpening its approach. The new “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy is more vitriolically chauvinistic and engages in more overt forms of economic bullying. It also borrows from the Russian playbook in its use of social media and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Although disinformation has not factored into the CCP’s Australia operations to date, it certainly points to more aggressive malign influence activities in the post-pandemic era.

Ultimately, the impact of malign activity is shaped and limited by the social and political features of the countries being targeted. Perhaps the primary lesson from Australia is that CCP malign influence can be blunted by political unity, social inclusiveness, strong political leadership, democratic values, and, above all, the transparency that comes with a free press, open debate, and rule of law.

If the United Front work is a “magic weapon” for Mao and Xi in their bid for internal legitimacy and foreign influence, transparency and rule of law are the magic weapons for democracies. Shining light on the shadowy web of inducements, threats, cooptation, and self-censorship that actuates China’s influence and interference is a first step, and a very important one. Democratic governments may also need to strengthen laws, while democratic societies need to strengthen norms that reduce the scope for bribery, corruption, and cooptation. This may entail tackling uncomfortable issues for democratic systems, such as how to identify subtle forms of influence, how to be evidence-based but not overly naïve, and how to avoid unfairly impugning ethnic Chinese communities.

But in contrast to many countries in China’s immediate neighborhood that lack strong institutions and commitment to democratic norms and the rule of law, advanced democracies such as Australia have some advantages to bring to this challenge and should leverage their strengths to combat malign influence.
About the Author

Dr. Amy Searight is senior associate for Asia, she previously served as senior adviser and director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Dr. Searight has a wealth of experience on Asia policy—spanning defense, diplomacy, development, and economics—in both government and academia. Most recently, she served in the Department of Defense (DOD) as deputy assistant secretary of defense for South and Southeast Asia, from 2014 to 2016. Prior to that appointment, she served as principal director for East Asian security at DOD and as senior adviser for Asia in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). She has also served on the policy planning staff and as special adviser for Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in the State Department as a Council on Foreign Relations international affairs fellow.