POLICY MEMO

The Chinese Communist Party’s Campaign on University Campuses

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Executive Summary
The People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s influence activities at American universities have received considerable scrutiny from the US government, Congress, and media over the past several years. Many of them operate under the auspices of its united front, a loose network of entities for which there is no American equivalent.¹ The united front is a Leninist concept the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted from the Soviet Union in the earliest phase of the party’s development. United front activities “control, mobilize, and otherwise make use of individuals outside the party to achieve its objectives . . . domestically and internationally.”² In recent years, General Secretary Xi Jinping has reinvigorated the united front, drawn it more tightly under his control, and directed it to serve an ambitious agenda to project Chinese power globally and undermine liberal democratic norms.

China’s influence activities are part of the country’s subnational united front agenda, which targets not only universities but also state and local governments, private businesses, and civic organizations, in line with Mao Zedong’s directive to “target local entities in order to weaken the national core.” Some of China’s united front efforts, including Confucius Institutes and Chinese Student and Scholar Associations, have experienced declines and exposure. This is not as significant as it might seem. The CCP has a record of responding to united front failures by regrouping and doubling down. US intelligence agencies have warned that China is intensifying influence efforts at the subnational level.

Several factors complicate America’s ability to respond effectively to China’s united front activities at American universities. Under America’s federal system, states, cities, and educational and civic institutions have no responsibility for and
little experience in defending against national security threats. For much of its relationship with the PRC, the US minimized the fundamental differences between the US democratic and Chinese communist political systems. American leaders encouraged not only trade and investment but also participation in activities that served the PRC’s political, ideological, and other agendas. Furthermore, Washington largely accepted the CCP’s conflation of itself with China and the Chinese people, enabling it to cast its critics—including those in the US and elsewhere in the West—as “anti-China,” xenophobic, or racist.

The Trump administration began countering united front activities, including by educating the American public, state and local officials, and university administrators about the threat they pose. Despite the bipartisan consensus on China that has emerged in recent years, the Biden administration has not maintained the same priority on countering united front efforts.

**Recommendations**

The Biden administration should match the high priority China places on its united front activities with efforts to counter their influence. The administration should speak clearly to the American public about the concept, strategy, and operations of the united front. In particular, the administration should rebut the CCP’s self-serving conflation of itself with China and the Chinese people.

The Biden administration should impose a moratorium on Chinese diplomatic travel to American institutions of higher learning until the US State Department reports to Congress on the regulation of such travel and on whether current practices prevent Chinese diplomats from advancing China’s united front agenda.

Congress should adopt the necessary legislation to require disclosure of all university agreements and cooperation with Chinese government entities.

University endowments should divest from Chinese companies linked to domestic or external repression. University alumni and donors have an important role to play in expressing concerns about ethical and reputational issues caused by investments in China that enable its surveillance, coercion, and repressive apparatuses.

Former university and college administrators who are familiar with the political pressures and inducements that China’s united front activities have created on campus should forge a set of principles to protect all students, including Chinese nationals, from its effects. This could include consultation and cooperation with institutions of higher education in US-allied countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada, that face the same concerns.

**Introduction:**

In December 2021, Mitch Daniels, then president of Purdue University, condemned Chinese-government-directed harassment of a Chinese graduate student who posted an online article praising the victims of the June 4, 1989, massacre of democracy protesters by People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops. According to ProPublica, other Chinese students on campus harassed the graduate student, calling him a CIA agent. Agents of China’s Ministry of State Security visited the student’s parents in China, who called the student in tears to relay the government’s warning that he should not speak out in public. The pressure was so intense that the student withdrew from an event at which he had been invited to speak.

President Daniels called the PRC-directed harassment on Purdue’s campus “unacceptable and unwelcome” and pledged disciplinary action “against any student found to have reported another student to any foreign entity for exercising their freedom of speech or belief.” Daniels also lamented the “atmosphere of intimidation . . . [that] surrounds this specific sort of speech,” noting that he learned of the incident...
from national media rather than from his own faculty or administrators.

Daniels’s forthright response is unusual among American university administrators who face PRC-directed malign influence activities on their campuses. These range from seemingly benign activities like exchanges and language and culture programming to intimidation and threats such as this one, which China frequently uses in its growing “transnational repression” in the US and other democracies.\(^5\)

China’s influence activities advance the Chinese Communist Party’s positions on key issues; erode democratic norms, especially free speech and association; cultivate and co-opt current and future leaders; and seek to acquire the technology necessary for its military ambitions.\(^6\) The party conducts them under the auspices of the united front, a loose network of Chinese government entities. Such work dates to the earliest days of the CCP and remains central to the PRC’s domestic governance and global ambitions today.

University presidents, deans, and faculty need to guard against PRC efforts while making the vital distinction between the Chinese Communist Party and its citizens. “A common, almost universal, mistake among US academic administrators is to accept the CPC as the authentic voice” of China, according to Perry Link, an eminent scholar of China and the Chinese language. “This acceptance puts the power interests of a one-party dictatorship in a place where universal pursuit of truth should be.”\(^7\) Among the consequences of the party’s conflation of itself with China and Chinese people is that administrators and faculty believe, or fear, that standing up to influence activities on campus is or will be perceived as racism, xenophobia, or McCarthyism—a view that Chinese officials do their best to stoke.

For its part, China’s government has no compunctions about using its overseas students as instruments of its agenda. China targets American universities because of the role they play in American society. They educate future generations of citizens and influence their wider communities through events, exhibits, performances, and educational programs. Universities are centers for technological innovation that China seeks. They also have links to state, civic, and business leaders, whom broader “subnational” influence agenda targets. A US intelligence agency has briefed state and local leaders that these efforts are intensifying.\(^8\)

The US government bears some responsibility for the state of affairs on US campuses. Over several decades, Washington encouraged participation in united front activities despite their long roots in Chinese communist ideology and role in the CCP’s domestic and foreign agendas. The Obama administration increased the priority of “people-to-people” diplomacy and exchanges and signed memoranda of understanding with Beijing supporting interactions between US governors and state legislatures and their ostensible counterparts in China. The Trump administration and Congress reversed course and informed universities, as well as state and local leaders, about the PRC’s subnational influence strategy.\(^9\)

These efforts, in addition to extensive reporting by journalists and researchers, have had an impact. But China has countered by repackaging and rebranding some efforts with the cooperation of university administrators. Historically, the PRC has responded to setbacks in its united front agenda not by abandoning them but by doubling down. According to the Biden administration’s 2022 National Security Strategy, the PRC “is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.” Yet the Biden administration has not placed the same emphasis on countering Chinese united front activities as the Trump administration did. Worse than that, it appears to be rolling back some measures taken by its predecessor to counter China’s united front efforts inside the US and tacitly approving others.
China’s Influence Activities: Maoist Tactics Meet US Engagement Policy

Most governments try to build a positive image in other countries through tourism, trade, and investment, as well as cultural, language, educational, and exchange programs. The CCP’s influence activities are qualitatively and quantitatively different. They do not fall into the category of “soft power,” which refers to activities that attract or persuade without coercion or force. As Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig have argued, CCP efforts are more properly understood as “sharp power” — “in the sense that they pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries . . . [and] manipulate their target audiences by distorting the information that reaches them . . . stoking and amplifying existing divisions.”10

China’s influence activities are sui generis, standing out for their origins, ideological underpinnings, ambitions, and tactics. They target not only national governments and international organizations but also state and local governments, private businesses, and civic organizations.11 The CCP has honed this subnational focus since Mao instructed cadres to “target local entities in order to weaken the national core,” an approach also known as “the countryside encircling the city.”12 Although its influence efforts — conducted under the auspices of its united front — originated in the earliest days of the CCP, they remain central to the party’s pursuit of its goals today and reflect its enduring Marxist-Leninist approach to the world. Anne-Marie Brady notes that “Xi Jinping used that very phrase in his watershed speech at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, calling it the ‘correct revolutionary path.’”13

Attempts to explain China’s united front efforts typically rely on terms like political influence, interference, or warfare, but as Brady writes, these activities “do not neatly fit standard political science definitions of foreign policy, nor the foreign affairs approaches followed by most other governments.”14

While to an American the term united front implies a common cause in a shared enterprise,15 in the communist lexicon the term refers to a smokescreen of cooperation behind which the party advances its goals. It is a Leninist tactic the CCP adopted from the Bolsheviks that relies on “skillfully making use . . . of even the smallest ‘rift’ among enemies, of every antagonism of interest among the bourgeoisie of the various countries.”16

Other terms, such as patriotism, foreigner, and even friendship, also carry distinctive meanings in the party’s usage that differ from standard English language definitions. The CCP, write Laura Rosenberger and John Garnaut, “patiently works to collapse the categories of ‘Chinese Communist Party,’ ‘China,’ and ‘the Chinese people’ into a single organic whole.”17 In this way, the party makes it possible to caricature and attack critics of its activities, including foreigners, as anti-Chinese or anti-China. In a free society, friendship takes place in a private sphere separate from the state. However, for the party, writes Brady, “friendship has the meaning of a strategic relationship; it does not have the meaning of good or intimate personal relations.”18

For the PRC, Brady writes in her book Making the Foreign Serve China, the concept of foreign affairs goes beyond state-to-state relations to encompass “all matters related to foreigners and foreign things in China and abroad.”19 The CCP’s view of foreigners and its pursuit of foreign relations remains, even today, suffused with bitterness about China’s experience with Western powers during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, “people’s diplomacy” does not mean ordinary Chinese citizens can become diplomats, let alone promote relations and civic ties outside the party’s control, “rather that the government makes use of a wide range of officially non-official contacts with other countries to expand its influence.”20 China’s united front efforts are particularly effective in, and designed to exploit, open, democratic societies that welcome interactions and exchanges with foreign countries.
The CCP first applied the concept of the united front to temporary alliances that it made with its Nationalist rivals before the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The United Front Work Department (UFWD) and a loose network of other organizations, often linked to ministries of education and foreign affairs, conduct united front work to carry out its mission. Successive party leaders have declared it an “all of party” activity. In 2017, the Financial Times obtained a copy of China United Front Course Book, a manual that directed cadres to “unite all forces that can be united” around the world, to build an “iron Great Wall” to keep out “enemy forces abroad.” The manual tells cadres, “Enemy forces abroad do not want to see China rise and many of them see our country as a potential threat and rival, so they use a thousand ploys and a hundred strategies to frustrate and repress us.”

Xi Jinping’s extraordinary assertion of control over the party-state includes reinvigorating the united front and drawing it under his control. Like Mao and other Chinese leaders before him, Xi has stressed the united front as one of three magic weapons—along with “party building and armed struggle.” However, he has elevated and prioritized these efforts in unprecedented ways. In 2015, Xi delivered a speech at the first conference devoted to united front work in nine years. He stressed the centrality of these efforts to China’s ambitions and identified “students studying abroad” as “a valuable and new focus of united front work.” Xi has also intensified Marxist-Leninism and “Xi Jinping thought” on China’s own campuses, deeming them “strongholds of the Party’s leadership,” and tightened restrictions on foreign-university-sponsored programs in China.

According to Peter Mattis and Alex Joske, Xi’s renewed emphasis on united front efforts stems in part from a recognition of past failures, including in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In Taiwan, despite its efforts, the party has seen public opinion steadily embrace a Taiwanese national identity deeply connected to the achievement of democracy. In Hong Kong, united front efforts targeting both business elites and the grass roots failed to prevent waves of massive, peaceful demonstrations that supported Hong Kong’s autonomy, rule of law, and fully elected legislature and chief executive. The party’s current approach to influencing American university campuses also stemmed from an earlier setback discussed below.

The Legacy of America’s Cold War Approach to the PRC

The legacy of America’s rapprochement with the PRC in the 1970s has complicated efforts to counter united front activities in the United States. At the time, Washington encouraged “people-to-people” exchanges involving academics, students, and scientists. Washington saw Beijing as a counterweight to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. China itself was weak, recovering from the devastation of the Mao era, and outwardly deferential to US leadership in the region while seeking stability to develop economically. Later, Deng Xiaoping’s approach to economic “opening and reform” and his “to get rich is glorious” slogan persuaded many Americans that China was no longer communist. Furthermore, US officials imagined that Chinese leaders were susceptible to American ideals about government, the rule of law, and the role of the individual. As the Chinese middle class grew, the theory went, the CCP’s control would erode. Chinese leaders would see political moderation and integration into the US-led world order as in their interests, as defined by Western ideals.

Moreover, American officials generally overlooked party leaders’ “strategic agency,” writes Daniel Tobin, perhaps as a consequence of “mirror imaging.” This, writes Tobin, overlooked a fundamental difference between the PRC’s political system and America’s, “which is not designed to take the United States in a specific direction. If anything, it was designed to prevent the political whims of the moment from leading to tyranny. For Beijing, by contrast, the purpose of politics is to serve the nationalist project of comprehensively modernizing and developing China.”
While foreign observers have imagined that the PRC’s ideology was waning, Marxist-Leninism remained the basis of party rule and continues to serve as the driving force behind Beijing’s ambition to supplant the US-led world order rooted in democratic values and institutions.

This includes the offer of a so-called China model, or, as Xi put it in his landmark 2017 speech to the Communist Party Congress, “a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence” from democratic values, institutions, and the influence of the US. In established organizations like the United Nations and its agencies, where China is increasingly powerful, and in new ones, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that it helped establish, Beijing hones anti-democratic messages and norms, promoting the equivalence between authoritarianism and democracy and offering economic development as a substitute for individual political and civil rights and the institutions that protect them.

Beijing sees Western values and ideals as an existential threat. An internal paper issued in 2013, Document 9, serves as the CCP’s “foundational text,” write Matt Pottinger, Matthew Johnson, and David Feith. “Systematic and strategic in its vision, [it is] hugely influential on the course of Chinese governance, and deeply hostile toward the West and Western ideas,” including constitutional democracy, civil society, and independent media, as part of a Western plot to “infiltrate, subvert and overthrow” the Chinese Communist Party.

At the same time, the party’s drumbeat of “territorial integrity” and “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” is part and parcel of an assertive approach to the world. Official claims to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang as “core interests” are no longer defensive and insecure rebuffs of “interference in China’s internal affairs.” Instead, with the backing of China’s economic, military, and diplomatic power, they serve as the basis of an ambitious projection of the PRC’s notions of sovereignty, falsified history, and counter-norms abroad. “Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” is a phrase with a long pedigree in Chinese thought that Xi Jinping has harnessed to his agenda along with matters including the 1989 democracy protests and massacre and the party’s “verdict” that the “incident” was counterrevolutionary. The party also presses alternate norms of human rights, such as economic growth, as a substitute for individual rights.

**United Front Work on Campus**

Even before the establishment of the PRC, Chinese leaders viewed its overseas students as important to China’s modernization. Later, as China recovered from the devastation of the Cultural Revolution and earlier ideological campaigns, the CCP sent students abroad in an effort to develop and modernize the country.

The role the party assigns to its overseas students today—to advance China’s narrative and suppress criticism—grew out of the PRC’s efforts to restore influence over Chinese students abroad after the events of June 4, 1989. The limited, brief relaxation in China’s political climate allowed a democracy movement to gain momentum among students, intellectuals, and activists during the 1980s. In the spring of 1989, public mourning for Hu Yaobang, an ousted former premier associated with an earlier period of political moderation in the late 1970s, led to months of unprecedented demonstrations. Students and other sectors of Chinese society—including workers, serving party members, and civil servants—participated. In the US, students supporting the democracy movement broke away from CCP-sponsored student organizations and Communist Party cells.

Alarmed, the PRC “redoubled its effort to control and monitor the Chinese exchange students in the United States,” according to Xu Lin, a diplomat stationed in the PRC’s Washington embassy who defected in May 1990. The embassy interfered in student organization activities and elections and tried to restore or set up Communist
Party cells. When students refused to participate, diplomats organized events and published articles that they attributed to the students. The PRC analyzed the ideological reliability of students, denying privileges, passports, and scholarship funding to those it considered hostile or uncooperative and assigning others to carry out the party’s mission on campuses. Xu testified that Chinese intelligence agents from the Ministry of State Security simultaneously conducted operations to infiltrate and influence Chinese students.

As the PRC’s efforts to advance its narrative and norms have grown more aggressive, so has the brazenness of Chinese Student and Scholar Associations. CSSAs have mobilized students to harass and pressure other Chinese students—and university administrators—to forestall, rebuff, or counter criticisms of PRC actions. Chinese diplomats have provided budgetary support and payment to students for their attendance at Chinese leaders’ visits. Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian’s reporting has revealed ideological requirements for membership in CSSAs, including support for “the One China principle” and “national unification,” “love the motherland,” and a commitment to “protect China’s honor and image.” Students who run afoul of these dictates have faced punitive withdrawal of Chinese government scholarship funding (i.e., greater than the value of the stipend) for “harming the national interest or image.”

After scrutiny of CSSAs, the PRC has deleted evidence of Chinese government contact with and support for CSSAs from websites or has substituted new descriptions of the groups that present themselves as independent. However, the PRC also communicates with Chinese students using channels of WeChat, the Chinese messaging app. According to the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, CSSAs operate dedicated channels on the WeChat app that offer “continuous reinforcement of the CCP’s worldview.” Iria Puyosa writes:

In-person liaison efforts serve another united front objective. According to the Athenai Institute, a bipartisan student-founded nonprofit organization, two Columbia University deans attended an event in September 2022 at which acting New York Consul General Jiang Jianjun told the assembled students to “maintain . . . correct judgment on issues involving . . . territorial integrity” and to work for the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” The Columbia deans reportedly pledged to strengthen the university’s cooperation with the consulate. The deans might have been present in order to restore the university to China’s good graces after closing a Confucius Institute in 2021 and to maintain access to China, where Columbia operates a Global Program. However, Chinese consumers of the party’s propaganda online, not to mention the American public, will see leaders of a respected educational institution showing deference to a leading authoritarian regime that is engaged in an assault on liberal democratic values. This helps the party portray American elites as hypocritical, espousing democratic values for themselves but willing to compromise to maintain a relationship with the PRC government. Their uncritical participation in a major united front activity helps to achieve China’s overarching goal of chipping away at the idea of an objective standard of democracy and its superiority to authoritarianism.
By tolerating the activities of CSSAs, universities acquiesce to the PRC-promoted narrative and the intimidation the party uses to advance it. In 2017, Chinese student Yang Shuping contrasted the pollution and oppression she experienced in China to what she found at the University of Maryland. America’s “democracy and freedom are the fresh air that is worth fighting for,” she stated. The backlash from other Chinese students was immediate, directed both at Yang and at her parents in China. The University of Maryland CSSA produced a video castigating Yang and the university, leading Yang to make an apology for her remarks.42

In addition to public opprobrium, fear of financial retribution may inhibit institutions from defending a Chinese student who criticizes the PRC or hosting a speaker, even one of great stature whom the party wishes to isolate and undermine. In 2017, the CSSA at the University of California San Diego protested the university’s invitation to the Dalai Lama to speak at commencement. The CSSA, which received guidance from the local Chinese consulate, accused the Dalai Lama of “carrying out actions to divide the motherland.” This charge is a staple of the CCP’s worldwide campaign to isolate the Tibetan leader, gain deference to its falsification of Tibet’s history, and install a party-selected reincarnation as the next Dalai Lama.43

The CSSA accused the university of helping to “disseminate provocative and extremely politically hostile discourse, in turn affecting the international image of China.” Although the speech went forward, China cut off support to future Chinese students at the university.44 Once an episode like this has taken place, schools have an incentive not only to avoid repeating it but also to make concessions to get back in China’s good graces. This is precisely what happens at the international level. For example, when imprisoned writer Liu Xiaobo, received the Nobel Peace Prize while serving an 11-year sentence for subversion, China cut off trade and diplomatic ties with Norway, where the Peace Prize committee is based. Eventually, Norway’s government broke its long-standing tradition of support for Tibet and the Dalai Lama and made other concessions.45 “We haven’t been able to work with China on international issues for four years,” the prime minister said in announcing that her government would not meet with the Dalai Lama on his 2014 visit to Norway, where he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

How the PRC Advances Its Interests on Campus

Confucius Institutes (CIs), are outposts for the advancement of the PRC’s narrative and positions on campus. Launched globally in 2004, they are named for Confucius, a Chinese philosopher the party has appropriated for his positive association with ethics and morality.

Remarks by top Chinese officials, including those with responsibility for propaganda and the united front, have made clear the CIs’ tactics. Li Changchun, while a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, said in a speech at the Confucius Institutes’ sponsoring agency in 2011, “Using the excuse of teaching Chinese language, everything looks reasonable and logical.” Their contracts—many of which remain confidential—include provisions that commit them to Chinese law, which includes adhering to China’s definition of its national security and its extraterritorial application of its laws abroad.

Even without such provisions, Confucius Institutes were effective at advancing China’s positions on campus. According to Perry Link, “American university administrators understand, without needing to be directly told,” that a long and growing list of prohibited topics—including the Tiananmen Massacre, the Hong Kong democracy movement, Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang—will not be sponsored by Confucius Institutes on American campuses. “Money-induced self-censorship prevents even the suggestion of such topics,” Link told Congress. The result is “American students are presented a roseate cameo of China and are told that it is the whole.”46
The nature of self-censorship guarantees that many, perhaps most, examples of universities shielding their campuses by blocking speech to comply with China’s narrative and preserve relations with the Chinese government rarely come to light. However, when North Carolina State University withdrew an invitation to the Dalai Lama to speak in 2009, a dean admitted the decision took into account matters at the state level. “I don’t want to say we didn’t think about whether there were implications. Of course, you do. China is a major trading partner for North Carolina.”

In addition to Confucius Institutes on university campuses, the PRC operates Confucius Classrooms in elementary, middle, and high schools in the US and other countries. The National Association of Scholars (NAS) estimated that 500 Confucius classrooms have operated in the US, and that many have survived Confucius Institute closures. Confucius Classrooms have received much less attention than Confucius Institutes, but both entities adhere to the CCP narrative and positions on Beijing’s claimed “core interests.” They also strike an equivalence between China’s party-state and democracies like the US.

Confucius Classrooms are generally overseen and funded by a Confucius Institute on a university campus. According to a 2011 conference among representatives of Confucius Classrooms and Institutes, the programs are part of a planned “Chinese language instruction pipeline” throughout the US education system. To achieve this, Chinese entities sought to build support among “parents and local community” while establishing “top-down policy support from the state government, legislative and educational institutions, with a particular emphasis on access to the support from school district superintendents and principals” and creating “an effective communication mechanism with the local teacher unions and the education administrators.”

Scrutiny of Confucius Institutes led to a dramatic decline in their numbers by the summer of 2022. According to the NAS, over a four-year period the number of Confucius Institutes plunged from 118 to 14. But the picture is more complicated and alarming than those numbers suggest. The PRC has regrouped, renamed, and repurposed Confucius Institutes, sometimes with the knowledge and cooperation of university officials. At one level, China has undertaken a simple rebranding exercise, changing the name of the sponsoring agency and attenuating the link to the government by establishing another organization to run the institutes. Some programs and staff have been transferred within the university, sometimes to new centers designated for Chinese studies, while maintaining partnership agreements with the original Chinese institution or creating a new one. Although the NAS acknowledged the lack of complete information in some cases, it said it was unable to document a “full closure.”

Furthermore, while there have been structural and other changes to Confucius Institutes in response to concerns over their impact on academic freedom, these organizations serve China’s military ambitions. Craig Singleton of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies writes that the CCP always intended for the Confucius Institutes to “serve as platforms that advance facets of China’s military-civil fusion (MCF), a national strategy aimed at acquiring the world’s cutting edge technologies—including through theft—to achieve Chinese military dominance.” With that purpose in mind, the CCP disproportionately based its Confucius Institutes at America’s top research universities. According to Singleton, “of the 113 CIs active in 2018, 71 (or 63 percent) were at America’s top research universities.” Singleton notes that more than a third of universities known to have closed their Confucius Institutes “chose to maintain, and in some cases expand, their relationships with their Chinese sister universities, many of which support China’s defense industry.” Singleton further notes that at the time of his report, US universities were “under no legal or regulatory obligation to sever ties with Chinese universities supporting China’s military, even when those Chinese universities appear on the Entity List,”
the Department of Commerce’s public source of foreign individuals, government entities, and businesses that require specific licenses to receive exports of controlled technology. Singleton recommends federal and state legislation to require transparency and disclosure of universities’ relationships with Chinese universities and Chinese-government entities.

In some cases, university administrators offered to help China acquire influence beyond their campuses. At least one university stressed its proximity to a state capital in an effort to secure a Confucius Institute for its campus. According to the NAS report *Outsourced to China*, the State University of New York at Albany (University at Albany) pitched its location in the state capital as providing “access to a seat of ‘political importance’ and ‘a hub of high-tech economic activity.’” It described the university as enjoying “influence in both state government and among upstate businesses” and the university administration as being “in continuous contact with the state legislature, the governor’s office, and the departments of the state government.” Such government ties, it hinted, may be of use in China. After “closing” its Confucius Institute, the University at Albany maintained a partnership with its Chinese partner.

University administrators who try to defend speech and inquiry on campus may find themselves without an ally among state officials who are pursuing their interests in China. Without responsibility for national security and foreign affairs, university presidents and other state and local leaders may be genuinely unaware of the strategic purpose of united front activities and the dangers inherent in, for example, sister city projects and exchanges. Some have naively expressed satisfaction that problems in US-China ties at the national level redound to the benefit of states, perfectly illustrating the intended results of united front efforts at the subnational level. At a Brookings Institution discussion in July 2019, Governor Kate Brown of Oregon said, “The good news about what’s happening nationally is it’s an opportunity for the states,” referring to the Trump administration’s trade battles with China.

This message from an elected official serves Beijing’s subnational agenda by presenting state and local interests as distinct from national ones, and suggesting that American citizens may be better served by aligning with the PRC on trade now and perhaps on other issues like Taiwan or even democracy later.

Not coincidentally, early on faculty opposition to the Confucius Institutes came from older, tenured members like Perry Link and the late Marshall Sahlins of the University of Chicago. Sahlins self-published a pamphlet that gathered statements from Chinese leaders about the intentions of Confucius Institutes, examples of university self-censorship, and faculty fears about their impact on academic freedom.

In 2019, Human Rights Watch published the findings of more than one hundred administrators, faculty, graduate students, and students from a survey it conducted over three years in the US and other democratic countries. The group reported that many of those whom it interviewed “modified their remarks inside and outside classrooms because of fears of being denied access to China or to funding sources, of causing problems for students or scholars from China or their family members, or of offending or irking students or scholars from China.” The survey found examples of canceled speaking events, changes to course assignments to avoid the inclusion of “potentially ‘sensitive’ titles,” and questions posed to job applicants “about their views on Confucius Institutes.”

To help universities address the problem, Human Rights Watch published a 12-point model code of conduct for protecting academic freedom from Chinese government influence. The code recommends universities adopt policies and practices to “track and report direct or indirect Chinese government harassment, surveillance, or threats, and report to law enforcement when warranted,” reject Confucius Institutes as “fundamentally incompatible with a robust commitment to academic freedom,” and require financial disclosure of
Chinese government-affiliated or -funded organizations as well as universities’ own financial support or donations from the Chinese government or related entities. Following up with administrators after the publication of the code of conduct, Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch, cited resistance from administrators who “simply—literally—did not see and therefore did not understand the problem. They had no concept of the apparatus of party-state repression, especially overseas, and could not believe it had real consequences for people on their campuses.”

Fear of being perceived as racist, xenophobic, or “anti-China” presents another obstacle to curbing Chinese influence on campus. That is what Anastasya Lloyd-Damjanovic found when she queried faculty about China’s “politically-motivated attempts to infringe on their academic freedom and personal safety.” Several respondents rejected her informal survey as “political, alarmist or racist,” legitimating “anti-China hysteria,” and reflecting “a Cold-War level Manchurian-candidate like panic.” One participant decried a “near hysteria of a new ‘red scare’ reminiscent of McCarthyism,” protesting that his or her experience with students “suggested quite the opposite.” That is, of course, the point—many Chinese students do not wish to carry out the united front agenda but are intimidated from speaking their minds for fear of retribution.

PRC officials seek to reinforce American perceptions that criticism of the PRC is illegitimate, sometimes by invoking American history. PRC leaders have long used the Cold War with the Soviet Union as a straw man to dismiss criticism of their policies and repression. Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the Foreign Ministry’s Twitter feed repeat a similar quote that assails America’s China policy as “fraught with emotions and whims and McCarthyite bigotry,” “suspicion” and “paranoia.” In his 2007 book The China Fantasy, James Mann dismissed the Chinese leaders’ attempt to portray criticisms of PRC repression as the product of a Cold War mentality as “absurd” and “ironic.” In fact, he writes, China was “the principal beneficiary of the Cold War” with the Soviet Union, both at the time and since, as America’s “solicitousness towards the views of the Chinese government” resulted in an “instinctive hesitation that many American officials and scholars display about voicing public criticism of the Chinese government.”

As a result, some university leaders and faculty have difficulty distinguishing between criticism of the CCP and racism, xenophobia, and McCarthyism. George Washington University President Mark S. Wrighton at first condemned the destruction of posters that protested Chinese repression and Beijing’s hosting of the Olympics in 2022 because he perceived them as racist. Posters by the Chinese-born artist Badiucao represented athletes wearing red uniforms with yellow stars of the PRC flag committing abuses: a biathlete executing a kneeling Uyghur, a hockey player body-slamming a Tibetan monk, a ski-boarder balancing atop a surveillance camera. Another portrayed an Olympic torch bearer as a Chinese policeman. Wrighton said he was “personally offended” by the artwork and vowed to “determine who is responsible.” In response, Badiucao declared that Wrighton’s intervention was a “huge scandal and shame that a president of well known University is so ignorant and not informed,” unable to distinguish between criticism of the party and racist criticism of Chinese people. Badiucao hoped that “in the future, people in America [won’t shy] away from [criticizing] the Chinese government’s crimes against humanity and human rights and [will] be able to tell what is racist and what is not, instead of just remaining silent because they are afraid of being called racist.” Wrighton quickly reversed himself and acknowledged that the posters were a critique of China’s policies and were not racist.

University officials may also fail to address Chinese influence and coercion due to the entrenched culture of grievance and political correctness that exists on many campuses. At Brandeis University in 2020, participants interrupted an
online presentation by Rayhan Asat, a lawyer and human rights activist, about her brother Ekpar’s incarceration in a concentration camp for Uyghurs. Since taking over East Turkistan in the late 1940s, China has engaged in systematic repression of the Uyghurs and transferred ethnic Han to settle in the region. Simple expressions of Uyghur identity or Islamic faith are treated as “terrorism.” Beginning in 2017, document leaks, satellite images, and procurement and construction bids revealed the incarceration of as many as two to three million Uyghurs, torture, forced labor, and sterilization of women.

At the Brandeis event, participants played the PRC national anthem and wrote obscenities across the Zoom screen. Some used a photo of Xi Jinping as their screen image. Event organizers said that in advance of the panel, they received threatening emails from members of Brandeis’s CSSA. Brandeis’s administration did not immediately condemn the incident. When President Ron Liebowitz later regretted the absence of a “swift response,” he explained it was in part due to the burden created by “frequent requests for the University to make statements in response to events and comments that offended various university constituents.” Liebowitz’s response appeared only in an email that the student newspaper reported on, rather than in a public statement to the entire university.

University administrations cannot protect students and faculty from Chinese united front efforts if they do not recognize its origins, goals, and tactics. In the first instance, the victims of the Chinese Communist Party’s malign influence are Chinese students and often their relatives inside China. Furthermore, students who serve as instruments of its united front activities are also targets of party indoctrination, coercion, and repression that follows them overseas. Chinese students are, as Lloyd-Damjanovic puts it, “both perpetrators and victims.” From a young age, the CCP bombards Chinese citizens with propaganda, combined with incentives and punishments for straying from them. University leaders have a duty to ensure free speech and prevent coercion on campus in the best interest of all students—including overseas Chinese. This is much more difficult when administrators and faculty fear campaigns of harassment or denouncement as paranoid, racist, or xenophobic by the Chinese government or their own administration and colleagues.

Finally, although exchange programs may seem benign, offering students and faculty valuable opportunities for travel and exposure to China and its people, from the PRC side, they serve a different agenda. Chinese organizations that conduct exchanges typically misrepresent themselves as nongovernmental when they are in fact instruments of the united front, either directly tied to the UFWD or other ministries and agencies carrying out its mission. So-called people-to-people exchanges carried out by groups like the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) have “always been viewed as a practical political tool by Beijing,” according to a Hoover Institution report, “and all of China’s ‘exchange’ organizations have been assigned political missions.” Groups that promote exchanges on university campuses, as well as with state and local governments, include the CPAFFC and the China-US Exchange Foundation. “No mainland Chinese organization in the United States—corporate, academic, or people-to-people—is free of Beijing’s control, according to the Hoover Institution, “even if it is not formally part of the united front.” Exchanges that China conducted with state legislatures, cities, and former military and government officials were the subject of US-China agreements during the Obama administration.

On a trip through Texas in May and June 2022, Chinese Ambassador to the United States Qin Gang visited Rice University in Houston, where he promoted the resumption of exchanges that the COVID-19 pandemic had interrupted. However, Qin also assailed the heightened awareness of united front programs as “efforts to suppress and undermine the China-US educational and cultural exchanges for political reasons,”
according to a Chinese state media report of Qin’s meeting with Rice President David Leebron. A CGTN article cited the closure of the PRC’s Houston consulate without noting that it was closed for participating in espionage. The consulate was also the site of a 2007 meeting of chairmen of CSSAs, at which they spoke of their role in “serving Chinese students, promoting Chinese history and culture, suppressing hostile forces and promoting Sino-American educational and cultural exchanges and cooperation.” It is unclear what, if any, information the Rice administration shared with the rest of the university about the ambassador’s visit and China’s approach to exchanges.

The Next Phase
A dramatic decline in Chinese student visa applications should reduce the financial incentive to ignore or soft-pedal Chinese influence. However, donations from Chinese sources and university endowments remain potential sources of leverage for China’s influence agenda.

In 2019, a US Senate investigation found that many schools were in violation of a federal law that requires the reporting of donations that went to their Confucius Institutes. The Senate Permanent Committee on Investigations found that “nearly 70% of schools that received more than $250,000” from the Chinese government for Confucius Institutes “failed to properly report” it as required by law. The report also blamed the Department of Education for lax enforcement of Section 117 of the Higher Education Law, which requires most institutions of higher education to make biannual reports to the department of such donations and other “foreign ownership or control.” A subsequent Department of Education investigation into foreign funding reported $6.5 billion in previously undisclosed donations, with influential and highly ranked universities like Yale, the University of Chicago, and Texas A&M accounting for more than half, or $3.6 billion, of the total.

Although many universities worked to provide the required reporting retroactively, the investigation appears to have halted. In the summer of 2022, a letter from the American Council of Education to the Department of Education stated that the group is “pleased to learn that [the DOE] plans to close the outstanding Section 117 investigations that remain open.” National Review reported that the value of donations that universities declared to the federal government declined rapidly in the first months of the Biden administration. “Department of Education records showed that universities reported only a bit over $4 million in foreign gifts throughout part of 2021, compared with over $1.5 billion between July 2020 and January 2021.”

University endowments invested in companies linked to China’s repressive apparatus are also receiving heightened scrutiny. In 2019, BuzzFeed reported that leading universities—including Princeton, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Michigan—and Duke University’s retirement pension plans had invested in funds that held stakes in companies responsible for technology that the CCP used for surveillance in its repression of Uyghurs. In early 2022, an internal committee that advises Yale University on divestment issues announced it would determine whether the school’s endowment was invested in any Chinese companies linked to human rights abuses. In response to an inquiry more than one year later, a university spokesman stated that the committee “has been working on other issues brought to it by members of the Yale community and remains open to engagement on investments in China (or anywhere) as specific concerns are raised.”

Several US laws and regulations prohibit investment in Chinese companies on national security or human rights grounds. In addition to legal obligations, the Trump and Biden administrations advised companies of the ethical and financial risks of investing in Xinjiang supply chains and in Hong Kong respectively. Keith Krach, under secretary of state during the Trump administration, urged universities to divest from companies that are on the Entities List or that “contribute to
human rights violations." A letter addressed to the governing boards of American institutions of higher learning and their affiliates urged them to "strongly consider publicly disclosing to your campus communities immediately all PRC companies that your endowment funds are invested in, especially the PRC companies in emerging markets index funds."90

The matter of passive investments is a growing concern for the student-led divestment movement that opposes university endowment holdings in Chinese companies associated with human rights abuses and surveillance technologies, especially those involved in the repression of Uyghurs. The Athenai Institute has provided schools with a list of firms that have "particularly extensive ties to atrocities against Uyghurs and other practices contrary to your university's values." Athenai Institute President John Metz rejects arguments that universities’ reliance on passive investments makes it impossible to act on moral or national security concerns, noting they have done so in the past with regard to fossil fuels. After its student body passed a unanimous resolution calling for divestment from financial holdings linked to the Uyghur genocide, Catholic University launched an audit of its endowment in consultation with a shareholder advisory firm.91

In addition to the moral imperative to act, the Athenai Institute points out the legal and fiduciary exposure for universities that may arise when Chinese firms fail to comply with US accounting and auditing standards. Furthermore, Metz argues, universities and other investors would benefit from divesting before a geopolitical crisis, like an invasion of Taiwan, rather than waiting until the US government forces them to do so at a steep financial loss.92 Rep. Greg Murphy has introduced legislation that aims to "disincentivize" endowment investments. Murphy’s bill would apply a steep and graduated excise tax to large university endowment investments in companies that the US government identifies as responsible for human rights abuses or that present a threat to America’s national security.93

Matching the CCP’s Priority on United Front Influence Activities

The Trump administration answered the PRC’s escalation of united front efforts with extensive outreach to state and city leaders and universities, including speeches by the secretary of state and intelligence briefings. This was a watershed moment in America’s China policy, which for decades minimized or encouraged activities that were part of the PRC’s united front efforts. In October 2020, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo canceled the 2011 memorandum of understanding that established the US-China Governors Forum. Pompeo’s statement cited the malign influence of the CPAFFC, mentioned above, which managed the forum from the Chinese side.94 As part of its efforts to achieve reciprocity in access for American diplomats, journalists, and academics, the administration adopted a requirement of prior approval for Chinese diplomatic travel in the US.95 It isn’t clear whether the Biden administration is implementing this rule or has dispensed with it. In any case, simply requiring approval does not address the problem: lack of knowledge at the state and local levels about the nature and purpose of Chinese united front efforts.

At the outset of the Biden administration, top officials, including Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, appeared to endorse the new bipartisan consensus that recognized the threat China poses to the international rules-based order and liberal democratic norms. However, since then, the Biden administration has failed to maintain the Trump administration’s emphasis on China’s united front efforts in the US.

While serving in the Obama administration, Blinken and then Secretary of State John Kerry, now special envoy for climate, prioritized "people-to-people exchanges," including those targeting America’s governors and state legislatures. Without a stronger signal to governors, mayors, university presidents, and civic organizations, China will be able to regroup, recover lost ground, and advance its united front agenda in the United
States and its allies. Despite the Trump administration’s efforts, which included designating a prominent united front organization as a foreign agent, Flora Yan has reported that subnational exchanges and collaboration have resumed under the Biden administration. Yan cites the resumption of exchanges conducted by US nongovernmental organizations with organizations linked to China’s united front agenda.

Republicans need to push back against PRC united front efforts and conduct oversight of the executive branch without casting the issue as the purview of only one political party. Their goal should be to enlist Democratic colleagues in protecting universities, legislatures, and civic institutions in their states. For their part, Democrats need to avoid reflexively defending the Biden administration at the expense of identifying and rooting out Chinese malign influence efforts. Both need to consistently explain and act on the distinction between Chinese students and diaspora and the Chinese Communist Party.

The Trump administration instituted a rule that required Chinese diplomats to seek prior approval for travel. It was a useful way to draw attention to the freedom Chinese diplomats have to travel within the US, whereas American diplomats, journalists, and scholars are extremely restricted in China. It is not clear whether the Biden administration is enforcing this rule or may have dispensed with it. In either case, by itself, the requirement of preapproval is inadequate to the task of protecting the US from China’s united front agenda.

Before ending his stint as the PRC’s ambassador to the US, Qin Gang published an op-ed in the Washington Post. Qin’s article recounted his extensive travel throughout the US to 22 states and his encounters with all manner of Americans. Qin’s op-ed and the travels and meetings across the country he recounted are the anodyne version of a more insidious agenda. His Texas swing included calls on the mayors of Dallas and Austin and a speech to the Texas Asia Institute in which he criticized the US for drawing a distinction between democracy and authoritarianism—and sought to marginalize the US from a rules-based order emanating from the UN, where the PRC has amassed extraordinary influence and leads a campaign of counter-norms. Qin and other diplomats have the virtually unrestricted ability to promote such ideas—unrebutted unless informed educators and state and local officials put a stop to it.

Upon taking his post as China’s foreign minister, Qin struck a different tone than the one he used in the offices of American university presidents. Parroting the standard harangue of top Chinese leaders, Qin assailed the US for “hysterical McCarthyism” and encirclement. According to reports, Xie Feng has been tapped as Qin’s successor. Xie was known for spewing the harsh party line in posts in Hong Kong and in interactions with US officials.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Wishful thinking that a CCP-ruled China would abandon communist ideology and integrate into the US-led world order has proven dangerously misguided. Meanwhile, the US failed to recognize and defend against united front efforts, and even encouraged participation in activities that were, for the PRC, entirely political. The united front concept remains central to China’s approach to the world. Moreover, according to American intelligence analyses and Chinese leaders’ statements, united front activities will continue and intensify in the years to come.

United front activities threaten universities’ educational mission as well as the safety and freedom of students and faculty, including those from China. University administrators and faculty often fail to appreciate CCP tactics and struggle to cope with the political pressure and financial inducements that China uses to achieve its goals. Reflexive acceptance of the party’s well-honed message that criticism of Beijing’s policies—including its human rights abuses
and quashing of democracy movements—has had the unfortunate consequence of enlisting American educators in China’s agenda.

At the same time, university leaders have not always been able to depend on support from state officials, who are targeted by China’s subnational strategy and, in the worst case, think that strife at the national level benefits their states. America’s federal system leaves many matters to the states, a feature that the CCP exploits to drive a wedge between subnational and national leaders. Although a high degree of bipartisanship has characterized America’s response to China’s political, economic, and military assertiveness, this likely does not extend to efforts to counter the united front.

The Biden administration should match the priority the PRC gives to united front efforts in the US. Although under America’s federal system states have no responsibility for national security matters, US government officials may and should offer advice and assistance in coping with China’s malign influence activities, many of which may seem benign. To do that effectively, the administration should clearly, publicly, and repeatedly rebut the CCP’s self-serving conflation of itself with China and convey to the American public that decades of “engagement” policy created an inaccurate impression of the nature of the Chinese Communist Party regime.

The Biden administration should impose a moratorium on Chinese diplomatic travel to American university campuses until the US State Department reports to Congress on the regulation of such travel. Such restrictions can be justified under the principle of reciprocity. American diplomats are greatly restricted in their travel inside China. However, an equally important justification is the need to inform the American public about the nature of the Chinese united front activities and the role of Chinese diplomats in providing both covert and overt support to them.

Congress and state legislatures should require universities to disclose all agreements and cooperation with Chinese united front or other government-linked entities.

Universities should investigate their endowments and divest from Chinese companies that are linked to domestic or external repression. University alumni and donors have an important role to play in expressing concerns about ethical and reputational issues for universities created by investments in China that enable its surveillance, coercion, and repressive apparatuses.

Former university and college administrators who are familiar with the political pressures and financial inducements that China exerts on US campuses should produce guidance and a set of principles that administrators follow to protect their students and faculty, including visiting Chinese, from the effects of China’s influence activities. This could include consultation and cooperation with institutions of higher learning in allied countries.
Endnotes

1 Some experts refer to the united front as a system. For expert analyses of the united front, its history, and operations on university campuses, see the work of Anne-Marie Brady, Peter Mattis, Alex Joske, Alexander Bowe Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, Rachelle Peterson, and Craig Singleton.


6 China’s agenda to acquire technology and intellectual property is not a primary focus of this paper.


13 Brady, “Encircling the City,” 185.


15 Merriam-Webster defines it as “a group of people or organizations that join together to achieve a shared goal.”


18 Anne-Marie Brady, Making the Foreign Serve China (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 7.

19 Brady, Making the Foreign Serve China, xi, 2.

20 Brady, Making the Foreign Serve China, 23.


Pottinger et al., “Xi Jinping in His Own Words.”


Xu, “ Alleged Intimidation of Chinese Citizens”; see also Eftimiades.


Allen-Ebrahimian, “China’s Long Arm.”


For example, see Allen-Ebrahimian, “China’s Long Arm,” and Bowe, China’s Overseas United Front Work, 12, note 105.


Puyosa, “WeChat Channels Keep Chinese Students.”


50 Permanent Subcommittee of Investigations, China’s Impact, 61–62.

51 Peterson et al., After Confucius Institutes, 13.

52 Peterson et al., After Confucius Institutes, 26–28.

53 Peterson et al., After Confucius Institutes, 16.


55 Singleton, The Middle Kingdom, 13.

56 Singleton, The Middle Kingdom, 6.

57 Singleton, The Middle Kingdom, 7.

58 Singleton, The Middle Kingdom, 22.


60 Peterson et al., After Confucius Institutes, 183.


64 Human Rights Watch, “China: Government Threats.”


66 Interview with author, January 26, 2023.

67 Lloyd-Damjanovic, A Preliminary Study of PRC Influence, 44–45.


74 Geist, “University President Responds.”

75 Lloyd-Damjanovic, A Preliminary Study of PRC Influence, 3.


77 Working Group on Chinese Influence, China’s Influence and American Interest, 36.

88 Lloyd-Damnjovanic, A Preliminary Study of PRC Influence, 23.


97 Email to the author from Karen Peart, Director, University Media Relations, April 4, 2023.

98 These include the Commerce Department Entity List, the Office of Foreign Assets Control Non-SDN Chinese Military-Industrial Complex Companies (CMIC) List, and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.


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