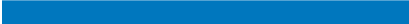


# Distinguish Foreign Influence from Foreign Interference


**Policymakers and the media often conflate very different activities —disciplined distinction is crucial to U.S. national security and the safety of Asian Americans.**

Discourse in policy circles and the media often uses the terms ‘foreign influence’ and ‘foreign interference’ interchangeably. This conflation is confusing and dangerous. Distinguishing the two activities has significant policy implications: for routing out dangerous interference, and for reining in rising hostility towards Asian Americans in general. Language matters when it comes to defining what is and is not a crime.

The primary distinction should be the type of power that is being exercised. Foreign interference entails the exercise of so-called ‘sharp power’ by the home state against a target state. Sharp power is defined by the National Endowment for Democracy as any effort that “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries.” Foreign interference activities are characterized by four ‘c’s— they are covert, corrosive, criminal, or coercive. The exemplar is electoral interference: It directly undermines the most fundamental institutions of democracy.



## Language matters when it comes to defining what is and is not a crime.



Foreign influence, in contrast, is achieved through ‘soft power’. This is the ability of the home country to persuade other countries or foreign actors to behave in its interest. Soft power is exerted through attraction, not coercion. By this definition, activities that individuals in a host country engage in which might make the culture, values, and policies of the home country more attractive are a form of foreign influence. Normally, these activities are transparent and legal; they abide by domestic laws, and they do not contravene international human rights instruments. Influence activities are not fundamentally harmful to the interests of the host nation or to its citizens.

One example of the sort of slippery elisions that are now commonplace is The New York Times’ coverage of the indictment of the Chinese American Linda Sun, a former aide to two Governors of New York. Sun is charged under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) with using her office to advance a foreign government’s interest covertly. One story discussed how the Department of Justice is trying to stop the Chinese government from “wielding its influence secretly.” Subsequent reporting detailed the Chinese government’s “interference efforts” under a headline about influence. Readers could be forgiven for feeling confused.

The term ‘Chinese influence’ is particularly problematic. When used rhetorically by the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party as an argument for banning TikTok or for blocking U.S.-China civil society exchanges, the net can be cast too wide. All too often the phrase ‘Chinese influence’ equates the Chinese government with people of Chinese descent and fails to distinguish between attempts at influence and interference, as Andrew Chubb of the Asia Society has argued.

This linguistic fog can create a real danger of overreach in designing and implementing policy that ought to target illegal activity, not the Chinese diaspora as a whole (see also the Gorski & Toomey memo elsewhere in this collection).

### **BENIGN OR MALIGN?**

All governments engage in some form of foreign influence operations. Some of these are more threatening to national security than others.

Cultural exchanges are often among the more benign influence tools. All-expenses-paid trips are used by both democratic and authoritarian governments to win hearts and minds. For example, Birthright Israel trips enable Jewish youth in the worldwide diaspora to travel to Israel for ten days for free. Funded jointly by private donors and the Israeli government, these opportunities are clearly meant to give participants a positive view of Israel and to develop their Jewish identity. They tend not to be framed by the American media as malign foreign influence activities, because of the close alliance between the two countries.

Another example is language and cultural centers. Alliance Française, for instance, has its roots in 19th century France’s colonial ambitions in North Africa and the Mediterranean, using language as a “tool of empire”. Today, its mission is to spread Francophone culture and language around the world, which is arguably an exercise in soft power.

In contrast, U.S. policymakers considered Confucius Institutes to be part of Beijing's **malign influence operations**. These institutes were **funded by the Chinese government** and set up on American university campuses. **Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa)** called them “fronts for Chinese propaganda” in a warning to 74 American educational institutions and districts to investigate the partnerships. Some of the institutes reportedly taught content that aligned with the Chinese government's views and attempted to influence decision-makers to refrain from hosting speakers deemed to be enemies of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Facing enormous pressure from the U.S. government and the **potential loss of federal funding**, universities chose to end their partnerships with Confucius Institutes.

### **A THREAT SPECTRUM**

Given the complexities of each case, how should policymakers proceed? A useful heuristic is to plot a case along a spectrum of threat to national security, with benign influence at one end and interference at the other. In the middle sit the Confucius Institutes, which many would consider to be malign influence but do not rise to the same level of threat as electoral interference. Plotting cases in this way may help reserve the most punitive measures for foreign interference while recognizing that some forms of foreign propaganda are just that—attempts to wield soft power.

Already, branches of the U.S. government and other governments are refining their definitions. According to a **2023 report** from the Attorney General and the Secretary of Homeland Security, foreign interference in an election is: “any covert, fraudulent, deceptive, or unlawful actions or attempted actions of a foreign government” which are “undertaken with the purpose or effect of influencing, undermining confidence in, or altering the result” of elections or electoral institutions. Such definitions should be applauded and adopted across government agencies.

Likewise, the **Australian government** defines foreign interference as: “activities carried out by, or on behalf of, a foreign actor” that are “deceptive or clandestine, and contrary to Australia's sovereignty, values and national interests.” Australia underscores that foreign influence activities are, by contrast, open and transparent. In Canada, the **Countering Foreign Interference Act** also emphasises the importance of activities being transparent and accountable. It defines a foreign interference offense as “surreptitious or deceptive conduct with the intent to influence a political or governmental process” or otherwise harm Canadian interests.

Critics counter that the term ‘influence’ is so entrenched as a shorthand for malign foreign activities that it is no longer useful to parse different forms of influence, nor to delineate influence and interference. But to stamp out genuine sharp power that is covert, corrosive, criminal, or coercive—without penalizing or demonizing innocent people—distinguish we must.

### **PROTECT AND POLICE**

Casting the net too wide means that far too many innocent people come under suspicion. A new McCarthyism is **on the rise** in the United States,

with Asian Americans increasingly the targets of discrimination in and outside of government (see also the memos by Huang, Kusakawa, Chen, and Johnston & Kim elsewhere in this report).

Instead, policymakers should do more to protect international students, rights activists, and community members from transnational repression by foreign governments (see the Hung memo elsewhere in this report). For instance, Canada's Foreign Interference Commission issued an initial report in May 2024 that "some intelligence indicated" that international students were receiving "veiled threats" from the Chinese consulate to support Beijing-friendly candidates, lest their visa status be jeopardized. Safeguarding the rights and security of diaspora populations requires a human rights and civil liberties framework in addition to a national security approach.

Autocratic regimes blame all domestic problems on vague foreign influence. A robust democracy is one that can find and punish foreign agents while at the same time safeguarding vulnerable minorities. The clear use of consequential terms is essential to both activities.

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#### **FURTHER READING**

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