

# Defend National Security without Ethnicizing the Threat

**Framing the competition between the United States and China as a conflict between two peoples benefits no one—success depends upon the involvement of Chinese Americans.**

With the intensification of competition between the United States and China, there have been many troubling signs that political leaders, government officials, and private citizens are ethnicizing the competition as a conflict between two peoples—consciously or unconsciously (see the memos elsewhere in this collection by Chen, Huang, Kusakawa, and Johnston & Kim).

A challenging aspect of this problem that is relatively overlooked is the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is no secret that the CCP seeks to mobilize the support of the “sons and daughters of China” worldwide to advance its geopolitical goals. Beijing has regularly summoned diaspora organizations around the world to conferences connected to the United Front Work Department—an organ of the CCP that coordinates overseas influence and interference work. In one such conference, in August 2022, Xi emphasized the need to “rally all Chinese people both at home and abroad to realize national rejuvenation.” His assumption is that people of Chinese heritage, regardless of citizenship, should serve the goals of the CCP.

It is counterproductive to try to combat anti-Chinese racism while ignoring Beijing's efforts to weaponize the Chinese diaspora—for influence operations, espionage, and transnational repression. A more collaborative and compassionate approach to national security is needed.

### **EXTENSIVE PROGRAM**

The Chinese government has deployed meticulous schemes to turn overseas Chinese individuals into its agents. The charges against former government aide Linda Sun for violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act were widely covered in September (see the memo by Chen elsewhere in this collection). That same month, former CIA **agent Alexander Ma** was sentenced to ten years in jail for selling U.S. national defense secrets to Chinese intelligence officials.

There have also been numerous instances of industrial espionage. In some cases, the Chinese government has cultivated employees of U.S. companies to appropriate specific technologies. For instance, officials of the Chinese State Council recruited former DuPont employee **Walter Liew** (aka Liu Yuanxuan) in the 1990s to set up a company and recruit other ex-employees to steal DuPont's recipe for producing titanium dioxide. This compound has both commercial and military applications. The Chinese government channeled compensation for this theft to Liew's relatives in China.


There are also many student organizations on U.S. campuses that maintain ties with the Chinese government. Some engage in transnational repression, according to [a preliminary report](#) from the Wilson Center. This includes the surveillance of Chinese students and the intimidation of scholars whose views Beijing deems unacceptable. Meanwhile, the fact that **China has had overseas police service stations** in the United States and elsewhere has raised concerns in recent years about the monitoring of Chinese communities.

The weaponization of a diaspora and transnational repression are not uniquely Chinese phenomena. Witness the assassination plots orchestrated by Iran, Russia, and India targeting dissidents in exile. The slaughter of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul is another case in point.


Beijing's campaign of transnational repression may be less deadly, but it has been described by **Freedom House** as "the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive...in the world." This is due to the vast resources of the Chinese government. And it is a function of the fact that socioeconomic integration between the United States and China was deep until the relationship began to deteriorate about a decade ago. During the "**Chimerica**" era, having connections to the Chinese government was seen as an asset for many American executives, scholars, and government officials. Associations with Chinese officials were encouraged, not just tolerated.

### **THREE-POINT PLAN**

To safeguard the United States' democracy, national security, and economic interests against CCP infiltration, it is essential to enlist the support of Chinese Americans in three ways.



## Scrutinizing solely Chinese diaspora communities when investigating Beijing's influence is ineffective.



First, the U.S. government needs to ally with myriad Chinese community organizations to counter and monitor Beijing's efforts to exploit Chinese Americans. These organizations are best placed to explain to members what is at stake and alert them to the dangers and signs of interference operations. What's needed is investment in the kind of outreach programs that connect law enforcement with vulnerable communities. Examples include those used to support religious spaces susceptible to recruitment or attacks, or communities where drug gangs are active.

Second, a grace period should be established for lower-level offenses committed when U.S.-China relations were much more cordial, and the activities now considered problematic were tolerated or encouraged. The U.S. government should consider excusing infractions from this era, such as failures to disclose scientific collaborations with Chinese institutions (see the memo by Gorski & Toomey elsewhere in this collection).

Third, a rigorous methodology must be developed to focus on suspicious activities rather than on individuals of a particular heritage. Law enforcement should investigate whomever is suspected of committing such activities as defined by the U.S. government, regardless of their ethnicity.

Why so? Because Beijing has begun recruiting non-Chinese diaspora individuals for infiltration and transnational repression. In 2011, the Chinese state-owned company Sinovel recruited Dejan Karabasevic. The Serbian was an employee of AMSC, a U.S. company that was a world leader in wind turbine technology. Karabasevic was tasked to steal AMSC's trade secrets, including the source code for its software essential to operating the turbines. This theft contributed to China's dominance in the global wind turbine market. Other cases include: a former U.K. Royal Marine working for the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in London, accused of spying on and harassing exiled Hong Kong activists in the U.K.; three German citizens arrested last year for stealing naval data for the Chinese authorities; and U.K. parliamentary aide Christopher Cash and academic Christopher Berry, last year charged with spying for China.

In short, scrutinizing solely Chinese diaspora communities when investigating Beijing's influence is ineffective. It can both violate the rights of innocent citizens and divert resources away from detecting cases of People's Republic of China infiltration involving other individuals.

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### FURTHER READING

Tsourapas, Gerasimos. "Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics." *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2021): 616-44. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa061>.

Wong, Audrye. "The Diaspora and China's Foreign Influence Activities." In *2021-22 Wilson China Fellowship: Essays on China and U.S. Policy*, edited by Lucas Myers. Wilson Center, 2022. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/diaspora-and-chinas-foreign-influence-activities>.

Wong, Kennedy Chi-Pan. "Sowing Hate, Cultivating Loyalists: Mobilizing Repressive Nationalist Diasporas for Transnational Repression by the People's Republic of China Regime." *American Behavioral Scientist* 68, no. 12 (2024): 1655-78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642241267931>.



**Ho-fung Hung** is the Henry M. and Elizabeth P. Wiesenfeld Professor in Political Economy in the Department of Sociology and the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of *Protest with Chinese Characteristics* (Columbia, 2011), *The China Boom* (Columbia, 2015), *City on the Edge* (Cambridge, 2022), *Clash of Empires* (Cambridge, 2022), and *The China Question* (Cambridge, forthcoming).