

China Research Group explainer: United Front

Overview

- *The United Front is the strategy by which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to strengthen its hold on power, by isolating rivals, neutralising parties in the middle, and maximising its number of allies.*
- *There is a continued need for attention towards the CCP's United Front operations in the UK because they pose a systemic challenge to Britain's open, democratic institutions.*
- *Attentive framing of the challenge posed by the United Front is needed to form policies that protect British democratic values and norms.*

Earlier this year, MI5 [warned](#) that Christine Lee has “acted covertly in coordination with the United Front Work Department and is judged to be involved in political interference activities in the UK”.

This rare MI5 warning shone a light on CCP-linked attempts to influence British politics. But Lee represents only one small part of the CCP's broader United Front strategy, which seeks to co-opt key actors outside of the party to advance the CCP's objectives across civil society, business and politics, both at home and abroad.

Understanding the United Front is crucial to understanding how the CCP seeks to influence the United Kingdom. This explainer will outline the ideological roots of the United Front, how the strategy is applied in Western countries - and the implications for policymakers in foreign policy and security.

What does the United Front seek to achieve?

Despite the significant liberalisation of Chinese society since Deng Xiaoping, the core of the CCP's political system remains [Leninist](#). This means that the CCP's primary focus is remaining in power, which entails exerting tight control over “enemies” - parts of society which may threaten its power.

The [United Front](#) is a key strategy to achieving this aim, by [seeking](#) to *isolate* its principal rival, *neutralise* parties in the middle, and *maximise* its number of allies. It is an interface through which the CCP interacts with important actors outside the party.

The United Front strategy is flexible and broad as the party seeks to form as many partnerships with useful actors in all relevant parts of society, domestic and international, to defeat its greater enemies. Mao referred to the United Front as the third [‘magic weapon’](#), after military struggle and party-building, which contributed to the CCP's success in establishing and solidifying its rule.

As part of his reassertion of the importance of ideology in Party governance, Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasised the role of the United Front.

Overseas, the United Front is a critical component of the Party's drive for external propaganda (*dawaixuan*) and its longstanding tradition of ‘using civil actors to promote political ends’. And as China's international footprint grows, United Front activity is likely to expand.

In a [speech](#) in July, President Xi said: “We must strengthen the building of overseas patriotic forces, cultivate and expand the strength of those who know China and are willing to befriend China, and promote exchanges and mutual learning of Chinese and foreign cultures and civilisations”.

An uptick in United Front activity means that we need to rethink the boundaries of interaction between CCP-affiliated actors and civil society in democratic countries.

How does the United Front operate?

It is useful to draw a distinction between the system of institutions that conducts United Front work and the strategy of the United Front itself. This is because the United Front as a strategy transcends the bureaucratic structure which directly coordinates United Front work.

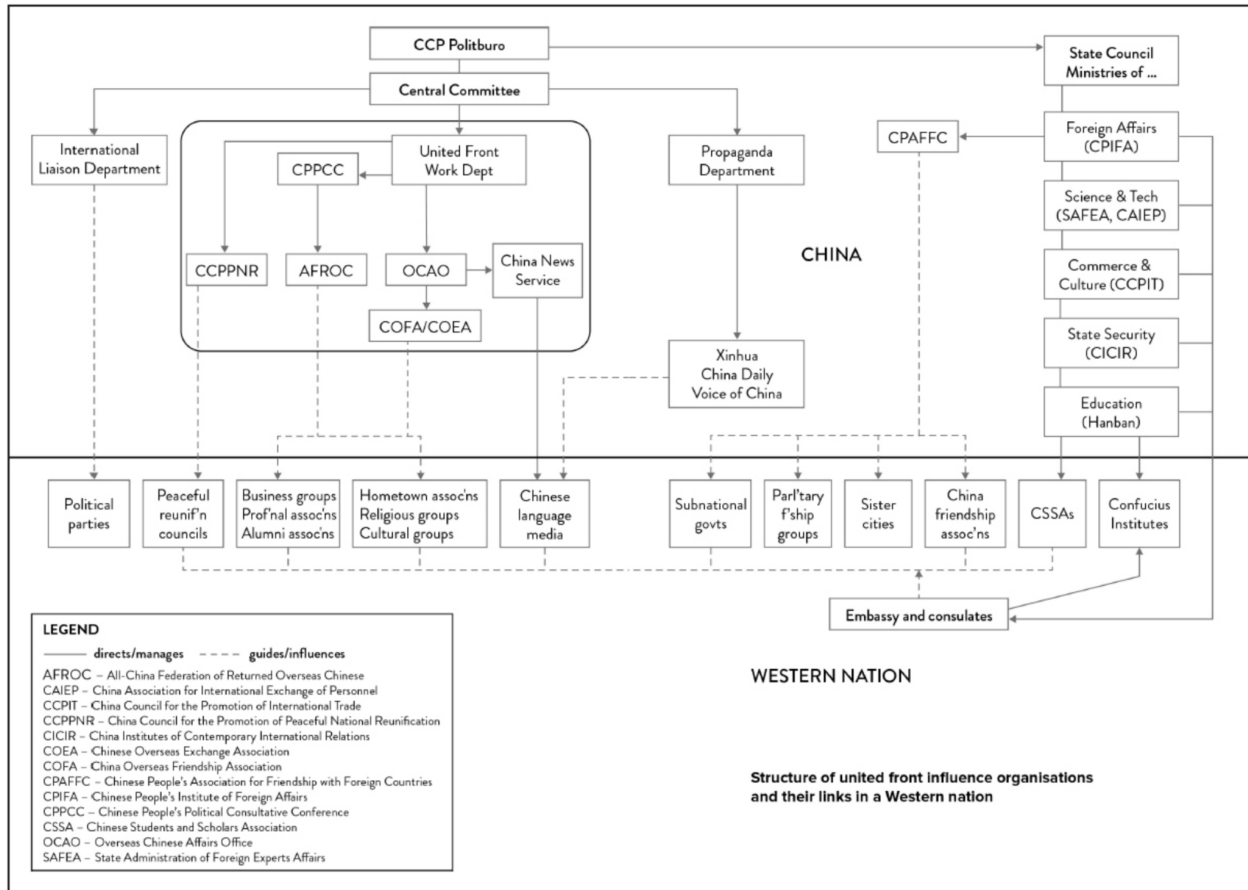
[Institutionally](#), United Front work is coordinated by the United Front Work Department (UFWD), a CCP department. There are agencies subordinate to the UFWD (e.g. the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO)), but agencies in other parts of the party-state hierarchy (e.g. Ministry of Education) also conduct United Front work under UFWD coordination, making United Front a highly flexible and potent vehicle of influence.

The United Front has taken a more important role in recent years, with the coordination of United Front work streamlined and centralised under Xi. In 2015, a [new intra-party law](#) elevated the status of and increased resources for United Front work. Xi has also [emphasised](#) that United Front work is the work of the entire party and that all cadres are to participate and be assessed based on their performance in United Front work.

In 2018, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, which originally sat under the State Council, was integrated into the UFWD, as part of a wider trend of the CCP reasserting control over the state. This gave the UFWD [greater control](#) over Confucius Institutes. This trend looks set to continue following a recent [speech](#) by Xi to commemorate the United Front policy, in which he stressed the importance of engaging with Chinese people living overseas using the United Front.

Various central government agencies guide the work of quasi-governmental/civil society groups and influential actors which engage with society directly. These include:

- Regionally affiliated 'hometown' business associations
- Student groups, e.g. Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) and its branches in universities
- Pro-Beijing Chinese community centres and other diasporic groups
- Media outlets
- Think tanks



From Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg's [Hidden Hand](#) (2020), 134-5

A closer look at the United Front in action

To understand how the United Front poses a challenge for democracies, we can look at how the United Front strategy is applied to universities and diaspora communities.

It is important to note that civil society organisations affiliated with the United Front may not directly be under the command of any official United Front agencies. While much guidance of their work is implicit, support from the United Front hierarchy can be in the form of advice, logistical support, or funding.

Opaque links between these groups are occasionally exposed by Chinese-language sources but are difficult to trace as they deliberately use the practice of 'double-hatting', where they conceal a name that may suggest greater links to the CCP in their engagement with the public. These organisations have varying degrees of autonomy and the actors involved may simply be pursuing their own interests, as James To argues in his 2014 book on [Qiaowu](#).

Universities

Under Xi, Chinese students studying abroad have become a focus of United Front work. There are several reasons for this, including but not limited to:

1. Students' greater exposure to Western thought, which is deemed by the CCP to be [destabilising](#);
2. The value of graduates in China's drive for [innovation](#), and;
3. Their role in China's soft power projection abroad and public diplomacy.

Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSA) and [Confucius Institutes](#) in universities are central to student-related United Front work. While CSSA activities centre around cultural exchanges and practical advice for overseas studies, they have also been instrumental in pressuring Chinese students into [informing on the speech and activities](#) of their peers. CSSA branches may also serve to mobilise students for protests and counter-protests that align with PRC's objectives, as noted in the [2019 Foreign Affairs Committee report](#) on the influence of autocracies in academia.

Diaspora relations

Chinese diaspora groups are another important target for United Front work. From the perspective of the CCP, business communities and professionals are key targets as they can serve both as a [driver](#) of China's domestic growth and as a tool for power projection. Meanwhile, those neutral or even hostile to the CCP are targets of neutralisation and [repression](#).

The United Front is key to understanding why MI5 issued a foreign interference alert for Christine Lee's case. Christine Lee was affiliated with both the China Overseas Friendship Association, a [United Front work coordination body](#), and the British Chinese Project, which seeks to [promote political participation](#) in the British Chinese community.

Christine Lee's activities illustrate the complexities of United Front work in the Chinese diaspora. United Front-affiliated actors have [entangled](#) legitimate causes, such as anti-Asian racism awareness and British Chinese political engagement, with pro-CCP messaging. In the most extreme instances, this entanglement has resulted in clashes in the UK. One [clash took place](#) last year at an anti-racism rally in London's Chinatown, where groups with reported United Front affiliations used the occasion to voice support for CCP policies in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

The complex relationship between the Chinese party-state and diaspora groups has been underexplored in the UK. This can be partially attributed to the size of the [British Chinese](#) diaspora (0.7% of the total British population compared to the [Chinese-Australian](#) community at 5% of the total Australian population). The smaller size of the Chinese community in the UK may limit the extent to which the British Chinese can be politically targeted by the United Front and to which the Chinese diaspora becomes a subject of scrutiny in the media and public discourse.

However, Britain's fast-growing Hong Kong BN(O) community may change this situation. Hongkongers in the UK are likely to be an important target for United Front infiltration. There have already been [reports](#) that United Front-linked entities were recipients of the UK government's funding for initiatives to welcome Hongkongers. These trends make it likely that both diasporic relations and countering United Front activity will become more relevant for British policymakers.

How should we respond to the United Front in the UK?

While the openness of British society is fundamental to this country's strength, sustained and well-resourced United Front operations in the UK mean that we need greater accountability and transparency in interactions with entities affiliated to the CCP.

Prior to formulating policy responses, it is essential to understand the ideological framework that makes the United Front such a unique challenge. The Leninist nature of the United Front strategy, which targets all spheres of society, makes it extremely difficult for democracies to compartmentalise interactions with the Party-state.

This unique Leninist context is why CCP influence researcher [Jichang Lulu](#) cautions against drawing narrow distinctions between 'influence'/'interference', 'benign'/'malign', or 'legal'/'illegal'. Lulu argues that a narrow focus on the hostile neglects the holistic and flexible nature of the strategy and leaves much influence work unaccounted for.

Another crucial point made by analysts is that Chinese United Front actions have not been designed to undermine democratic institutions and public discourse, but to exploit and shape them in their favour. [Andrew Chubb](#) has argued that our response to the United Front should be grounded in a reassertion of liberal-democratic principles and protecting civil liberties in the UK, cautioning against approaching the issue primarily through a national [security](#) lens.

How we formulate the challenge from the United Front shapes our response to it. When mapping out responses, policymakers should bear these two important points in mind:

1. Many pro-Beijing activities technically conform to liberal-democratic norms but are part of a wider, anti-democratic strategy; and
2. Addressing United Front activities should reinforce liberal-democratic values. In defending our institutions, we should avoid undemocratic, heavy-handed responses.

Much coverage of United Front activities in the UK so far has focused on allegations against single cases involving individuals, such as Christine Lee. While individual cases help to illustrate the challenges posed by the United Front, the reality is that most people who conduct business with China or interact with the British Chinese community are likely to have had some contact with United Front actors. The difficulties of substantiating allegations of covert activities and the risks of fuelling racism point to the need for a more systematic approach than one based on individual cases.

Future research and policy work on United Front activities in the UK must address the following questions:

- **What is the liberal-democratic response to the anti-democratic exploitation of Britain's free and open institutions?** The fine balance between national security and individual freedoms is key in any policy response to the activities of the United Front. For example, responding to pro-Beijing student groups requires us to acknowledge both that they can serve as part of a wider CCP-driven strategy, but also that their students have the right to freedom of association and expression to support the CCP. Framing the issue solely through the lens of national security is too narrow.
- **How should policymakers define the boundaries of interaction between foreign state-affiliated entities with our own civil society?** The forthcoming foreign influence register in the National Security Bill will be one of the first major steps in defining those boundaries; its definitions will matter.
- **How does the [2021 Integrated Review](#) approach to integrating both domestic and foreign spheres of policy relate to the threat of the United Front?** The Review emphasises the need for domestic policy to be coordinated with British foreign and defence policy.
- **How can we empower communities in the UK and formulate a strategy to defend our democratic institutions?** An effective strategy to counter the United Front must involve the talent and insight from the Chinese and Hong Kong diaspora communities. Closer dialogue with British Chinese organisations to understand how the government can engage with them and support their work is crucial.
- Relatedly, **how can we address the legitimate concerns of the British Chinese community on Anti-Asian hate and prevent the United Front from [hijacking the issue](#) of discrimination to serve CCP interests?** Addressing such concerns proactively is not only necessary in helping to address the uptick in Anti-Asian hate crimes in recent times, but also key to weakening a core motif of United Front work in the West.