

China's Malign Influence at Home and Abroad: Recommendations for Policymakers

Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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Senator Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The current global system is rules-based. Beijing is promoting an alternative vision in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) determines—at a global level, not only in China—whose interests prevail. Some of the tactics Beijing deploys to push this vision constitute legitimate diplomacy. Beijing also deploys “malign” influence tactics, which are not legitimate. Australia has defined those tactics as “foreign influence activities that are in any way covert, coercive or corrupt.”¹ Unlike legitimate diplomacy, malign influence tactics aim to subvert nation-state sovereignty, distort public information, and undermine the function of key political systems, particularly democratic systems. To prevail in the global competition with China, the United States must fight effectively on both fronts: advancing our interests and maximizing our own attractive power through smart diplomacy; taking targeted action to directly counter Beijing’s malign influence activities.

My testimony will cover five main points:

1. We are engaged in a global governance competition that will define which system prevails—ours, or Beijing’s. Step one is showing up. We cannot vacate key diplomatic battlefields.
2. When combatting malign influence, transparency is our superpower and Beijing’s kryptonite.
3. The global information space is an active battlefield that impacts every arena of U.S.-China competition. If the U.S. stands on the sidelines, we cede that field—and the upper hand in other arenas—to China.
4. The United States must directly—and robustly—counter PRC economic coercion.
5. Congress should empower the State Department for full-spectrum competition.

(1) The United States has the upper hand in global governance competition – to prevail, we must compete at full strength.

The United States and China are promoting alternative global visions. The U.S. vision is rooted in democracy. It is based on individual rights, freedoms, and a separation of powers. It is a vision in which all nations and individuals have a voice in determining their own fate. Beijing's vision is rooted in autocracy. It is a vision in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decides which interests prevail. It does not support individual rights or freedoms, or any limits on what the CCP can do to pursue its own interests. It does not respect nation-state sovereignty when another nation's sovereign decision conflicts with CCP desires.

Beijing is battling to advance its global vision on two fronts: legitimate global governance competition and malign influence. The United States must fight effectively on *both* fronts for the U.S. model to prevail. Between these two systems, the U.S. version—the democratic version—provides better outcomes for a larger majority. In contrast, the Beijing model depends on information control to hide the costs many individuals pay as the powerful pursue their own interests. That gives the United States the upper hand in global governance competition. Step one is showing up to advocate for that vision diplomatically. When the United States does not show up—for example, when we disengage from international institutions—we cede the playing field to China despite our comparative advantages. For example:

- **Engaging diplomatically in international organizations.** Nations that provide funding to international organizations, promote their own nationals to key staff and leadership positions, push a positive agenda, and engage partners ahead of key votes to advocate for that agenda shape global rules.² Beijing is maximizing every one of these levers on issues ranging from human rights to setting global technology standards to shaping how the international community views Taiwan. If we cede that field to Beijing, every element of competition will become an uphill battle.
- **Providing commercial incentives to help companies and standards compete for global market share.** The United States and China are in a global battle to determine which companies, technologies, and standards shape global infrastructure. The Development Finance corporation (DFC), the U.S. Export-Import Bank, and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency decrease the cost of choosing to partner with U.S. companies over PRC competitors. Trade deals create a similar pull, as they lower the cost of doing business with covered partners. Beijing deploys its own banks and trade policy to lower the cost of doing business with Chinese companies and make it harder for U.S. and other foreign companies to compete.

- **Using educational diplomacy to attract top global talent.** The United States is competing with China and other nations for top global talent, particularly STEM talent. Nations with a global talent strategy and education policies (including streamlined visa programs) to attract top talent outperform others at doing so. The United States is currently lagging behind other OECD nations on this front.

When the United States competes in these arenas at full strength, we generally prevail. For example, the United Nations International Telecom Union (ITU) sets global telecom standards. PRC national (and former PRC telecom ministry official) ZHAO Houlin served as ITU Secretary-General from 2015 to 2022, giving Beijing an avenue to shape global telecom standards in ways that favored Huawei and ZTE over non-PRC firms. The Biden administration made ITU leadership a priority from day one. The State Department identified and ran a compelling candidate, Dorreen Boden-Martin, in the leadership election, and launched a whole-of-Department effort to support her candidacy. In September 2022, she won the member State vote for ITU Secretary-General, defeating Russia's (and China's) attempt to put a former Russian telecom ministry official and Huawei executive in that position.

In 2020, China held four of the fifteen leadership roles across the U.N. specialized agencies. Today, Beijing is down to one (the Food and Agricultural Organization, or FAO). In addition to the ITU election, the State Department successfully supported U.S. candidates at the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

When the United States does not compete at full strength—or does not show up—we cede these playing fields to Beijing. For example, for decades, Washington did not prioritize supporting U.S. companies to win global infrastructure projects in the developing world. Beijing stepped into that void with the Belt and Road Initiative, which provided state-backed loans and other incentives to support Chinese infrastructure bids. The result: Beijing gained a dominant position in global port and telecommunications infrastructure. Today, the United States is once again showing up. Washington is deploying the DFC and other U.S. government levers to help U.S. and allied companies compete for global infrastructure projects.³ That progress is slowly pushing the global system back toward U.S. and allied standards.⁴

(2) When combatting malign influence, transparency is our superpower and Beijing's kryptonite.

Beijing knows the China model is deeply flawed. Economically, growth has stagnated and youth unemployment is soaring. The party maintains significant control over various

sectors of society and government—when the party issues an order, all must obey. That is not something other nations and peoples would opt into if given free choice. Thus, Beijing resorts to coercion—malign influence tactics—to undermine free choice. The difference between legitimate diplomatic competition and malign influence is that the latter is by design “covert, coercive, and corrupt.” It forces acquiescence through coercion instead of inducing it through attraction.

Examples of Beijing’s malign influence tactics include:

- **Elite capture:** influencing political decisions through graft. In Malaysia, Chinese officials offered to undermine a graft investigation into former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak (including by deploying China’s security services to find out who was leaking his activities to journalists) in exchange for preferential access to infrastructure contracts.⁵ The U.S. Department of Justice has uncovered evidence of PRC corruption campaigns compromising U.S. government officials, including an IRS agent and a high-ranking New York state government employee.⁶
- **Using open academic systems to steal intellectual property:** the U.S. Department of Justice has publicized cases of People’s Liberation Army officers entering the United States and enrolling in U.S. universities as “students” to gain access to U.S. academics and proprietary academic information.⁷
- **Lawfare:** Chinese companies hire U.S. law firms to attack U.S. China-watchers.⁸ These lawsuits appear intended to deter U.S. researchers from publishing negative information about PRC companies and their ties to Beijing. For example, Chinese auto company BYD hired U.S. libel attorney Charles Harder to file suit against the Alliance for American Manufacturing (AAM) and individual AAM staffers, accusing them of “libel” for publicizing information about BYD’s CCP ties.⁹
- **Economic coercion:** Beijing uses its commercial ties with other nations to force them to abide by its political edits. Many cases are never made public. Beijing threatens to take these measures, and countries comply to avoid economic damage.
- **Disinformation and election interference:** China seeks to sow discord and undermine faith in democratic elections—including our own. The Atlantic Council’s DFRLab uncovered a network of pro-PRC accounts, known as “Spamouflage,” that engaged in opportunistic amplification of disinformation on the day of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. One campaign featured a deepfake video that first appeared in Russian networks of then FBI Director Christopher Wray claiming the U.S. system was “overrun” with thousands of fake ballots. Other campaigns focused on swaying

the results of down ballot races, targeting voters with disinformation and false claims of financial fraud against PRC-skeptical congressional candidates.

Boosting transparency should always be step one when combatting malign influence. These tactics are *covert* by design. Exposure often neutralizes them. For example, when corrupt officials are exposed, Beijing loses that avenue to exert influence (as it did in Malaysia and in the U.S. IRS case). When visa officers and universities know a “student” applicant is a PLA officer, they have the information needed to decline admittance. When the public knows information is coming from the CCP they are more likely to distrust the message.

In some cases, active defense measures are also required to prevent Beijing from using our open systems and society against us. For example, transparency is not enough to protect the U.S. electoral system; the United States is also strengthening cyber security protocols to make it harder for Beijing to intervene. Targeted visa restrictions are key to protecting certain U.S. academic sectors from covert PRC intrusion. Active defense is also required for disinformation and economic coercion, as will be discussed in the following sections.

When engaging to shore up systemic defenses, it is critical to avoid measures that reduce the benefits the U.S. gains from our open democracy and society, or that undermine U.S. efforts in other battlegrounds (such as promoting our system over China’s or attracting global STEM talent). In education, for example, the now-shuttered DOJ “China Initiative” fostered fear throughout the Chinese American scientific community that U.S. national academics could be targeted based on their race or country of origin, and that they could face civil rights abuses. Those fears triggered an exodus of scientific talent.¹⁰

(3) The global information space is an active battlefield that impacts every arena of U.S.-China competition. If the U.S. stands on the sidelines, we cede that field—and the upper hand in other arenas—to China.

Beijing engages in political warfare. In the Chinese system, every security institution answers to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and its primary mandate is to keep the party in power. In the early days of the CCP, that warfare was primarily about protecting the Party from domestic challenges. Today, Beijing is taking that fight global: it engages in political warfare in the international arena to advance PRC objectives at U.S. expense.¹¹ The United States tends to view warfare in simplistic military terms: one military engaging in kinetic action against another. China’s military is weaker than ours, so Beijing moves that battle to fields where it holds an advantage. The information space is one such battlefield. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has a “three warfare” concept that applies both at

home and abroad: public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.¹² At home, if the Party can keep its own people under control through public opinion and psychological means, it can stay in power without having to resort to kinetic force and paying the costs that come with that (such as scaring foreign firms and capital out of the China market). The same applies globally. In a Taiwan contingency, for example, if the PRC can use public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare to scare the global community into staying on the sidelines in a future Taiwan crisis, Beijing can likely take Taiwan.¹³ Within Taiwan, Beijing could deploy these same methods (as it is already doing in Hong Kong) to create enough pro-China sentiment and political instability to justify its takeover, effectively neutralizing the Taiwanese resistance.

Washington tends to assume private-sector media are enough to expose Beijing's actions around the world and convince other nations to support our objectives rather than China's. The problem is that no U.S. media company has the resources to stand up against the entire CCP war machine. Furthermore, their interests are profit-driven: independent media outlets do not take on national security objectives.

In the economic space, we now recognize that expecting individual U.S. companies to compete against a whole-of-government CCP effort is a losing battle. Thus, the United States and many other nations are deploying government tools to level the playing field. The same applies in the information space. The United States has world-class independent media organizations, including both traditional and social media. But those organizations cannot compete with the massive CCP info-war machine. Just as it is doing in the economic realm, the U.S. government must deploy state tools to level the playing field.

The now-shuttered State Department Global Engagement Center (GEC) was the primary U.S. government mechanism for public diplomacy and combatting China's information warfare. When it was active, GEC enabled the U.S. government to broadcast its own messages to the broader global public. The aim of that messaging was to convince people around the world to pursue the same outcomes the U.S. was pursuing. The State Department also engages in government-to-government diplomacy to push messaging with partner governments; public diplomacy aims to do the same with their publics, creating an environment in which entire nations are rowing with us.¹⁴ Critically, GEC was not simply a government megaphone. GEC provided grants to third-party research institutions in the United States and abroad, empowering them to do their own due diligence on China's actions and expose that information to inform their own publics. That third-party voice was critical. Local publics view their own local think tanks, academics, and NGOs as more credible than the U.S. government. When local organizations conduct their own China due

diligence and share that information in their own voice, that resonates in a way U.S. government messaging cannot. It also exposes PRC actions the U.S. government—and U.S.-based researchers—cannot, because local researchers have unique access to their own officials, institutions, and local PRC actors. Third-party grants (with appropriate safeguards in line with the Smith-Mundt Act) were a huge force-multiplier for U.S. counter-malign-influence efforts.

The former GEC office also directly investigated and exposed PRC disinformation to expose malign influence tactics at critical moments in U.S.-China competition. For example, the former GEC team tracked and publicly exposed how Beijing repeated Russian propaganda regarding its invasion into Ukraine.¹⁵ That public exposure—which tied specific PRC statements to specific Kremlin talking points—helped demonstrate to European audiences, in particular, the degree to which China was complicit in the invasion.

(4) The United States must respond robustly to support target nations in resisting PRC economic coercion.

China's economic might is its biggest lever for global influence. For many nations, China is their largest trading partner and/or largest foreign direct investor. Beijing can exert control over all lanes of commerce, including the companies buying from, selling to, or investing in partner nations. It frequently orders PRC companies to halt those activities to force other nations to abide by Beijing's political edicts. Some of these cases are public. Beijing used economic coercion to target Canada over the potential extradition of Huawei's Meng Wanzhou, Australia over Canberra's call to investigate the COVID-19 pandemic origins, Lithuania over its Taiwan office, South Korea over the THAAD missile defense system, and the Philippines over its actions to assert its rights in the South China Sea. Some cases are never publicized, because the threatened nation backs down in response to Beijing's economic coercion threats.

The State Department is ideally placed to push back – not only after coercion has already occurred, but beforehand, when nations are facing economic coercion threats. During the Biden administration, the Department launched an internal unit to provide support to nations facing Chinese economic coercion.¹⁶ That effort was wildly successful. Over a dozen nations engaged the Department for support, and State Department support enabled those nations to stand firm in the face of PRC coercion.

(5) Congress should empower the State Department for full-spectrum competition. We are battling to determine which system—ours or Beijing's—prevails. The stakes are

astronomical. This is not the time to keep major levers of U.S. national power on the sidelines.

- **Re-authorize the Global Engagement Center (GEC) to empower the United States to engage in effective public diplomacy and information competition.** Due to the recent lack of re-authorization, there is currently no U.S. government entity with both the capability and the credibility to effectively combat PRC disinformation. GEC grants to third-party entities in the United States and other nations were critical for exposing and neutralizing PRC disinformation efforts, which are key to the *covert* nature of PRC malign influence. According to a recent Congressional Research Service report, the State Department inspector general found GEC to be “generally effective” in achieving these objectives.¹⁷ That effectiveness is why the Chinese government referred to GEC as Washington’s “information warfare” unit and the “command center of perception warfare.”¹⁸ Shutting GEC—and keeping these counter-influence warriors off the global battlefield—boosts Beijing at U.S. expense.
- **Provide the funding and personnel resources needed to directly—and rapidly—counter PRC economic coercion.** At present, there is no single FTE or office at the Department with authorization and appropriations to counter Chinese economic coercion. During the Biden administration, the internal counter-coercion unit neared case capacity due to the number of nations coming in seeking assistance. Congress should empower the Department to counter PRC economic coercion by providing dedicated resources and FTE for this effort. In particular, it should fund the Office of the Chief Economist (OCE), which is a critical first step in coercion response. [Note: OCE also plays a key role in mapping PRC sanctions evasion, which is a complementary effort.]
- **Empower U.S. state and local governments to make informed decisions about the PRC.** Across the United States, most State and City governments do not have a single person dedicated to international affairs. (Some larger cities have a single person dedicated to both international affairs—with all countries—and immigration.) State and local governments do not have the capacity to track Beijing’s influence tactics and do full due diligence on what may be involved in economic offers from Chinese companies. The State Department Special Representative for City and State Diplomacy and the Subnational Diplomacy Unit can fill this gap. Instead of seeking to staff all city and state governments across the nation with China experts, the Subnational Diplomacy Unit can serve as their

gateway to existing expertise. During the Biden Administration, the Subnational Diplomacy Unit served that role; it also provided targeted China briefings to governors and mayors offices that requested them. This office enables the Department to efficiently fill Chinese influence analysis and push-back needs across the nation, without requiring every mayor and governor nationwide to hire their own experts.¹⁹ Running these engagements through a single office also enables the Department to track Chinese influence trends and tactics, which it can then use to warn local officials what to expect and watch out for. Congress should strengthen the Subnational Diplomacy Unit to make its counter-China efforts more robust.

- **Provide the authorization and appropriations for the Department to proactively engage partner nation officials and scientists in strategic technology sectors.** At present, the majority of funded science and technology partnerships run through the NSF, NIH, DOE, NASA, or DOD. DOE and DOD bring a national security nexus to that engagement, but DOE is limited by its energy focus and DOD by its warfighting capability focus. Congress should empower the State Department to actively engage partner nations in sectors critical for U.S.-China competition.²⁰ Many of the most critical advancements are occurring in the commercial space, e.g., in quantum, artificial intelligence, cyber security, 6G development, and biotech. There is a need for proactive engagement among U.S. and allied researchers to build trusted research ecosystems that promote collaboration in ways that exclude the PRC. State is well-positioned to do the horizon-scanning engagement needed to promote science and technology collaboration, working with key allies to identify leading-edge researchers among allied nations and bring them together to help the U.S. and its allies compete effectively with China.
- **Support U.S. students to study China and the Mandarin language, developing specific capabilities that fill gaps in needed U.S. government China expertise.** The number of U.S. students studying in China has fallen dramatically in recent years. That is partly due to the growing difficulties of traveling to and studying in China (which include detention risks and an increasingly draconian security environment). The students who still pursue China analysis also recognize that their best job prospects may be with the U.S. government, which will require a security clearance, and many fear China travel will make them ineligible. Congress should provide authorization and appropriations for the Department to launch a China studies fellowship program aimed at building the bench the United States will need for U.S.-

China competition. That program should identify key functional needs (e.g., science and technology or public diplomacy) and offer a three-step program to fill them: one year of funded language study at an approved language/exchange program in China or Taiwan, followed by continuing study at the Foreign Service Institute during the second half of the fellowship; a paid 12-month fellowship during which cleared students work in State Department China programs, which could include DC-based offices (sanctions, export controls, etc.) or field offices (supporting Regional China Officers or U.S. embassies/consulates in China); language testing at the end of the fellowship to provide verified scores for U.S. federal government jobs. This program should run at a post-graduate level and aim to provide federal government on-ramps for rising China experts in their mid-20s. Students participating in this program should receive a waiver for residency requirements that disqualify U.S. government job applicants who have lived in foreign destinations (such as China) prior to submitting their application; other U.S. fellowship recipients (e.g., Boren Fellowships and Critical Language Scholarships) should receive similar waivers.

¹ Malcolm Turnbull, “Speech Introducing the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017,” December 7, 2017, <https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/speech-introducing-the-national-security-legislation-amendment-espionage-an>.

² As one State Department official plainly stated: “[O]ur influence at the UN is greatest when we pay our bills in full and on time.” U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, Michele J. Sison, Testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Renewed American Engagement with International Organizations: Goals, Priorities, and Successes,” February 15, 2022, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearings?ID=5E89A2AC-7A9E-46E0-A0B1-2007FF2E0C5E>.

³ Elizabeth Economy and Melanie Hart, “America’s China Strategy is Incomplete: Putting Beijing on the Back Foot Requires Economic Tools Beyond Tariffs,” January 14, 2025, *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-china-strategy-incomplete>.

⁴ For example, The DFC joined forces with Japan’s development bank to help Australia’s Telstra acquire telecom assets in the Pacific Islands, outbidding a Chinese state-owned enterprise and successfully keeping those networks out of Beijing’s hands. DFC also financed the winning bid that acquired the Elesfsina shipyard in Greece, keeping a strategic port asset out of Beijing’s hands.

⁵ Tom Wright and Bradley Hope, “WSJ Investigation: China Offered to Bail Out Troubled Malaysian Fund in Return for Deals,” January 7, 2019, *Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-flexes-its-political-muscle-to-expand-power-overseas-11546890449>.

⁶ “Two Men Plead Guilty to Acting as Illegal Agents of Chinese Government and Bribery,” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release, July 25, 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-men-plead-guilty-acting-illegal-agents-chinese-government-and-bribery>; “Former High-Ranking New York State Government Employee Charged with Acting as an Undisclosed Agent of the People’s Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party,” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release, September 3, 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/former-high-ranking-new-york-state-government-employee-charged-acting-undisclosed>.

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- ⁹ “Supreme Court Rejects Meritless Libel Lawsuit Filed by Chinese Company BYD Against AAM,” Alliance for American Manufacturing, <https://www.americanmanufacturing.org/press-release/supreme-court-rejects-meritless-libel-lawsuit-filed-by-chinese-company-byd-against-aam/>.
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