

Chinese Influence Operations Bureaucracy

While recent months have brought increased attention to the United Front Work Department, or “United Front activities,” it is important to emphasize that this is but one of many institutions within the Chinese party-state involved in influence operations. As the accompanying graphic illustrates, the bureaucracy involved in extending China’s global influence is large, complex, and specialized in function. Generally speaking, there are three types of bureaucratic organizations included in the chart: (1) policy coordination; (2) policy formulation and implementation; and (3) organizations with specialized functions.

As a Leninist party-state, CCP organizations have higher political status than government institutions. This has become even more pronounced under the Party’s general secretary Xi Jinping and following the bureaucratic reorganization announced after the March 2018 meeting of the National People’s Congress. Generally speaking, Party organs make policies, which are then implemented by state bureaucracies. There is *no* single organization overseeing the entirety of the country’s influence operations abroad. The most important CCP organizations in the diagram are the Foreign Affairs Commission, the External Propaganda Leading Group/State Council Information Office, the CCP Propaganda Department, the CCP United Front Work Department, the CCP International Liaison Department, and United Front departments inside the People’s Liberation Army. Critical policies related to foreign affairs are formulated in these bodies. The same organizations are also involved in coordinating the implementation of these policies.

The Policy-Making Process in the Chinese Party-State

The process is driven both by top leadership and functional bureaucracies. Policy formulation, which involves the generation of ideas and proposals, typically takes place in functional bureaucracies and specialized departments within these bureaucracies. In the process of policy formulation, one bureaucracy specializing in the functional or issue area (for example, propaganda) may take charge, but it

also consults with other bureaucracies that may have a stake in the issue. The draft policy proposals are then forwarded to the Leading Small Groups (领导小组), which deliberate, vet, and sign off on the policy proposals before sending them to the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee for a final decision. These leading small groups, which range in size from five to a dozen members, are normally chaired by a Politburo member and include a range of ministerial-level officials relevant to that functional policy area. Some meet at regular intervals (biweekly), whereas most convene on an ad hoc basis when necessary. In this formal, ministry- or department-initiated process, the ultimate decision-making authority lies with the Politburo Standing Committee.

At this level of policy formulation, of particular relevance to China's international influence activities are the External Propaganda Leading Group (对外宣传领导小组), which has a dual bureaucratic identity as the State Council Information Office (国务新闻办公室); the Central Committee Propaganda Department (中共中央宣传部); the Central Committee United Front Work Department (中共中央统战部); the Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission (中共外事委员会);¹ and the Central Committee Education Leading Small Group (教育部). Although bureaucratically ranked slightly lower, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Education, the newly created Voice of China, and the Xinhua News Agency all exercise policy formulation and oversight roles in their functional domains.

There is also a parallel top-down policy process initiated by one of the top leaders on the Politburo Standing Committee. As a rule, Xi Jinping, the CCP general secretary, has broad authority and may issue a brief directive on a matter he believes should receive extra attention or priority. (Typically, such directives are short comments he writes on reports that come across his desk.) Otherwise, only a Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member overseeing a particular portfolio can issue such directives on matters that fall into his area of responsibility. Such comments are then related to the functional bureaucracies and can lead to the formulation of a new policy, the modification of an existing policy, or other actions.

On the Politburo and its seven-member PBSC, several members have direct responsibility for external affairs. As the chair of the Foreign Affairs Commission, Xi has overall authority on all aspects of China's foreign relations. Wang Huning, the Standing Committee member responsible for Party affairs, ideology, and propaganda,

is the top official with oversight of China's overseas propaganda (外宣) efforts, while Politburo member and director of the CCP Propaganda Department Huang Kunming oversees all media organs and has day-to-day oversight of the entire propaganda system. Wang Yang, another PBSC member and the chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), has overall responsibility for the United Front portfolio, although Sun Chunlan (the only female member of the twenty-five-man Politburo and former director of the United Front Work Department from 2014 to 2017) may also continue to have some residual responsibilities as well, since her current portfolio includes education and culture. Additionally, You Quan, a member of the Politburo Secretariat, is now the new head of the UFWD, and he is in charge of the day-to-day work of the department. These leaders' views on particular issues carry a great deal of weight and can often result in significant policy initiatives or modifications.

Besides issuing brief policy directives via their comments on documents (known as 批示), top leaders can also communicate their ideas or orders in conversations or meetings with the ministers in charge of functional bureaucracies. Such ideas or orders can lead to actions at the implementation level or to the formulation of a new policy or the modifications of an existing policy.

Policy Coordination

The Foreign Affairs Commission, which used to be called the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (est. 1956), is by far the most important. The role of the Commission is similar to that of the interagency "principals committees" in the US system. Its chairman is Xi Jinping, while Premier Li Keqiang and Vice President Wang Qishan serve as vice chairmen. Other PBSC members Wang Huning and Han Zheng are members. Le Yucheng, a vice minister of Foreign Affairs, is deputy director. Other members of the Commission include the most senior leaders of the Chinese government: Yang Jiechi, and the ministers of Foreign Affairs, State Security, Defense, Public Security, Commerce, the CCP's International Liaison Department, Taiwan Affairs Office, Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, Propaganda Department, External Propaganda Office, and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.

The Commission also has an attached "office," known as the Central Foreign Affairs Office (中央外办), which has a dedicated staff of approximately fifty (many of whom are seconded from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Liaison Department of the

CCP, other ministries, and the military). The director of this office is currently Yang Jiechi—a Politburo member, former state councilor, and veteran diplomat. This body is the central coordinating body for China’s foreign affairs—across all bureaucracies—on a daily basis.

While the Foreign Affairs Commission is the principal organization in the making and coordination of China’s overall foreign policy, the United Front Leading Small Group and the External Propaganda Leading Small Group also have important—but somewhat lower—status in the Chinese hierarchy. They are led, respectively, by the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of ideology and propaganda and the head of the United Front Work Department. The Leading Small Group for United Front Work is located inside the CCP’s United Front Work Department and draws on UFWD personnel for staff work. The Leading Small Group for External Propaganda is subordinate to the CCP Leading Small Group for Propaganda and Ideology and is required to seek guidance from the Foreign Affairs Commission, and it draws on the State Council Information Office (with which it has a dual role) for staff work. Both groups play an important role in the formulation of policy and coordination of implementation in their respective sectors.

Conferences

Another important instrument in the coordination of policy is the Central or National Conferences that are convened to formulate and announce new policy objectives and mobilize the bureaucracy to implement these policies. Some of these conferences are convened more frequently and are more important than others. Four central or national conferences are held to coordinate foreign policy and external influence operations: the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, the External Propaganda Work Conference, the Central United Front Work Conference, and the National Overseas Chinese Work Conference. These are large gatherings that last two to three days and are attended by key central, provincial, and local leaders, as well as various ministries and the Chinese military. These conferences serve to provide overall policy direction to cadres working in that bureaucratic system (系统) as well as to issue very specific annual plans for the coming year’s activities.²

One measure of the importance of these conferences can be gauged by who gives the keynote speech. For example, Xi Jinping gave the keynote speeches at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference (2014 and 2018), the Central United Front Work

Conference (2015), and the National Propaganda Work Conference (2013 and 2018). When Xi does not give the keynote speech, the Politburo member in charge of that domain gives it. By contrast, the keynote speech at the National Overseas Chinese Conference in 2017 was given by Yang Jiechi, who was at that time a state councilor responsible for foreign affairs.

- The Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference is held at irregular intervals (2006, 2014, and 2018) to review Chinese foreign policy and announce new initiatives and objectives. It is attended by key ministers, ambassadors, senior military officers, and local officials responsible for foreign affairs.
- The Central United Front Work Conference, which used to be called the National United Front Work Conference, is also convened at irregular intervals (2000, 2006, and 2015). Both national and local officials responsible for religious, ethnic, and overseas Chinese affairs participate.
- Prior to 2013, the External Propaganda Work Conference was convened annually. But starting after that year, this conference has become part of the annual National Propaganda Work Conference. Officials in the propaganda sector from all over China attend these conferences.
- The National Overseas Chinese Work Conference was held roughly every six years (2005, 2011, and 2017). Only national and local officials responsible for overseas Chinese affairs participate.

Hierarchy and Division of Labor

The CCP-affiliated organizations in our diagram that are involved in making policies concerned with Chinese influence activities abroad enjoy higher political status than those that execute these policies. What makes the Chinese system notable is the division of labor, the specialization of its bureaucracies, and the staffing of these bureaucracies with well-trained and experienced professionals. Besides engaging their counterparts overseas, these bureaucracies either oversee or directly conduct influence operations in their areas of specialization. While there exists *no* single organization overseeing the entirety of China's influence activities abroad (although if any one does have such sweeping purview, it is the Foreign Affairs Commission), in the implementation of policies aimed to expand Chinese influence abroad, there

are two types of bureaucracies: (1) general-purpose bureaucracies, and (2) specialized bureaucracies. The following institutional profiles include many of the principal bodies involved in China's overseas influence activities.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a typical general-purpose bureaucracy that serves as China's main interlocutor with foreign governments. But since most of its time is consumed by routine diplomatic activities, the Foreign Ministry itself does not play a significant role in influence operations overseas. The one area where it does is via its Department of Public Diplomacy (外交部公共外交司), which primarily oversees the MFA Spokesman's Office in Beijing, international media outreach, and China's embassy spokesmen abroad; international visitor programs; and "exchange" organizations, such as the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (which bring a range of former officials and international affairs experts to China). Also, the MFA is important insofar as Chinese embassies abroad have representatives of the Ministry of Culture, the Xinhua News Agency, the CCP International Liaison Department, the Ministry of Education, and other bureaucratic bodies, each of which are involved in foreign influence activities.

United Front Work Department

The CCP United Front Work Department is a specialized CCP organization, one of four Central Committee departments.³ Its principal mission is to build support for the CCP and its policies among domestic ethnic groups, religious groups, the eight so-called democratic parties (民主党派), the Chinese diaspora worldwide, and political, economic, and social elites in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. These United Front activities have a long history dating to the CCP's pre-1949 rise to power. The main tasks and objectives of the CCP's United Front activities outside of Greater China are laid out in Article 31 of the CCP Guidelines on United Front Work (中国共产党统一战线工作条例) issued in 2015—they target almost exclusively the Chinese diaspora, who are supposed to be encouraged to "contribute to the modernization and reunification of the motherland, advance the cause of opposing (Taiwanese) independence and promoting reunification, inherit and propagate China's outstanding culture, and promote the friendship between the Chinese people and the peoples of the other countries in the world."

Although the United Front Work Department has attracted much media attention, and the term “United Front” has become a euphemistic one for many analysts writing about China’s influence activities abroad, the scope of the UFWD’s activities in China’s external influence operations is actually limited. Its primary target audience is the Chinese diaspora in general, and its elite members in particular. The mission of engaging and influencing nonethnic Chinese audiences, individuals, and foreign institutions is assigned to other specialized Chinese entities—such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of State Security (e.g., China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations), and other institutions that have well-trained professionals and long-standing ties with their counterparts overseas.

International [Liaison] Department

The CCP’s International [Liaison] Department (中央联络部) is in charge of “party-to-party relations” (党际关系) and has the primary mission of cultivating foreign political parties and politicians around the world. This Party organ has existed since before 1949 and was formerly charged with maintaining China’s fraternal ties with other communist and socialist parties around the world, but in the wake of the Cold War, the CCP/ID drastically broadened its mandate to interact with virtually all political parties abroad (except fascist and racist parties). Today it claims to maintain ties with over 400 political parties in 140 countries, receives about 200 delegations, and dispatches about 100 abroad every year. CCP/ID exchanges have provided an important prism through which the CCP and other organizations in China monitor the outside world and absorb lessons for China’s own modernization. This kind of information gathering goes well beyond traditional intelligence collection (although, to be sure, the ID also engages in this activity).

Through its interactions with political parties all over the world, the CCP/ID serves an important function as a kind of “radar” for identifying up-and-coming foreign politicians before they attain national prominence and office. Having identified such rising stars, the CCP/ID brings them to China (usually on all-expenses-paid visits)—often offering them their first exposure to China and trying to make the best possible impression on them. Another key dimension of this function has been to expose CCP leaders at the provincial and sub-provincial levels to the outside world—often for the first time. Many provincial Party secretaries, governors, mayors and other leading local cadres are taken abroad on ID delegations every year. The CCP/ID has

also played a key diplomatic role in certain instances, such as providing a liaison dialogue channel between the United States and North Korea.

In addition, the ILD performs a range of other functions:

- Administering “private sector” liaison organizations to facilitate contact with think tanks, NGOs, and individuals worldwide;
- Collecting current intelligence and information on the foreign policies, domestic political scene and political parties, and societies in various nations worldwide;
- Sending special study teams abroad to research important topics related to China’s reforms;
- Contributing to the work of Chinese embassies worldwide (usually monitoring domestic politics and liaising with domestic political parties, movements, and personages);
- Working with other CCP Central Committee departments and State Council ministries to facilitate their work overseas (e.g., assisting the United Front Work Department concerning Taiwan, the External Propaganda Leading Group/State Council Information Office concerning China’s image abroad, or the National People’s Congress on parliamentary exchanges);
- Arranging visits of central-level, provincial-level, municipal-level, and occasionally sub-provincial level CCP officials abroad;
- Hosting foreign leaders, politicians, party officials, ex-officials, as well as a range of foreign policy specialists, on tours of China;
- Hosting biannual World Political Parties High-Level Meeting, and the annual “CCP in Dialogue with the World” meeting.

As such, the ILD performs extremely important roles overseas and is a key—but underappreciated and even unknown—instrument in China’s international influence activities.

The State Council Information Office/External Propaganda Leading Group

The State Council Information Office/External Propaganda Leading Group is the nerve center and leading organ in the sprawling system of China's international propaganda (对外外宣) work. It maps out the entirety of China's overseas "publicity" work, assigns different bureaucratic entities with specific tasks, fixes budgets for entities in this system, and convenes yearly meetings to implement the annual external propaganda plan (对外宣传计划). The SCIO is commonly known in Chinese both as the Guo Xin Ban (国新办) and Wai Xuan Ban (External Propaganda Office, 外宣办). The reason for the two names is because it straddles two bureaucratic systems—the party and the state. It is formally under the State Council, but it is also overseen by the Chinese Communist Party's External Propaganda Leading Group (or EPLG). This bureaucratic duality is what the Chinese describe as "one organ, two signboards" (一个机构两块牌子), a reference to the white placards that hang outside the gates of all Chinese institutions (in this case giving the appearance of two different institutions, but in reality with only one inside). As such, the SCIO is the administrative office for the EPLG, playing a coordinating role in the media area similar to that performed by the Central Foreign Affairs Office (CFAO, 中央外办) for the Foreign Affairs Commission (中央外事委员会).

NOTES

- 1 This body was upgraded from Leading Small Group status in March 2018.
- 2 These plans are normally classified and only circulated within the Chinese bureaucracies, but occasionally they find their way into the public domain. See, for example, State Council Information Office. "Summary of China's External Propaganda Work in 2013" [中国对外宣传工作 2013年综述]. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Journalism Institute (ed.). *China Journalism Yearbook* [中国新闻年鉴 2014]. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe. 2014. 63–66.
- 3 See Bowe, Alexander. "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States." US-China Economic & Security Review Commission. August 24, 2018; Kyngge, James, et al. "Inside China's Secret 'Magic Weapon' for Worldwide Influence." *Financial Times*. 26 Oct. 2017, <http://www.ft.com/content/fb2b3934-b004-11e7-beba-5521c713abf4>; Brady, Anne-Marie. "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping." Wilson Center Kissinger Institute on China and the United States. September 18, 2017. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>.

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List of Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAIFC	China Association for International Friendly Contact
CAIFU	Chinese Association for International Understanding
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCP/ID	Chinese Communist Party International Liaison Department
CCPPNR	China Council for Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification
CFIIS	China Foundation for International Strategic Studies
CGCC	China General Chamber of Commerce
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CICIR	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations
CICWS	China Institute of Contemporary World Studies
CIIS	China Institute of International Studies
CIISS	China Institute of International and Strategic Studies
CIs	Confucius Institutes
CMC	Central Military Commission
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
CPIFA	Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
CPS/NAA	Central Party School/National Administration Academy
CRI	China Radio International
CSCPA	China Strategic Culture Promotion Association
CUSEF	China-US Exchange Foundation
FALSG	Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group
FAO	Foreign Affairs Office
FARA	Foreign Agent Registration Act
LSG	Leading Small Group
MECEA	Mutual Education and Cultural Exchange Act
OCAO	Overseas Chinese Affairs Office
PBSC	Politburo Standing Committee
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAFEA	State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs
SCIO	State Council Information Office
SCS	South China Sea
TTP	Thousand Talents Plan/Program
UFLSG	United Front Leading Small Group
UFWD	United Front Work Department

