

Introduction

Across partisan and other familiar dividing lines on foreign policy in the United States, there is growing recognition that rapid accumulation and projection of power on the world stage by the People's Republic of China (PRC) constitutes the most serious of all current challenges to US national security. Beyond the breathtaking pace of modernization and enlargement of all branches of the People's Liberation Army, and China's increasingly aggressive and expansionist deployment of military power in the South China Sea and throughout the Indo-Pacific region (and beyond), there is the more subtle—but by no means benign—expansion of China's "sharp power." This is not the "hard" military power or economic coercion that leads to war and conquest. Neither is it the soft power that wins friends and influences societies transparently, through the diffusion of ideas, symbols, values, and cultural achievements. Rather, sharp power burrows deeply and deceptively into the soft tissues of democracies, seeking to subvert and sway them through methods that are, in the now paradigmatic words of the former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull, "covert, coercive, or corrupting."

In the 2018 Report of the Hoover Institution–Asia Society Working Group on Chinese Influence Activities in the United States, *China's Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance*, Orville Schell and I—along with a stellar team of China and foreign policy specialists that included an author of this current report, Glenn Tiffert—documented a number of ways that China's Communist party-state has

been working to penetrate, pressure, and compromise the integrity of American institutions. These include universities, think tanks, mass media, corporations, state and local governments, and the Chinese American community. A chapter of that report also sketched the myriad ways that the PRC has been trying to penetrate sensitive dimensions of the research enterprise in the United States—in part to misappropriate for economic benefit many of our most precious breakthroughs in science, medicine, computer science, and engineering, but in large measure to plow the fruits of this espionage and intellectual property theft into the modernization of its military. No dimension of our report was more troubling, and more directly threatening to US national security, than this relentless, audaciously conceived, decades-long, and multilayered campaign of technology theft, a subject that had earlier been systematically exposed in a groundbreaking 2018 study by Michael Brown and Pavneet Singh for the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx), *China's Technology Transfer Strategy*.

Neither of the above reports, however, was able to delve sufficiently deeply into a particular vulnerability of our scientific research enterprise: the engagement of our universities and research laboratories with foreign scholars from countries that are (or could well be) adversaries of the United States—and worse, foreign scholars from military-linked universities and research centers, or to be specific, the “Seven Sons of National Defense” in China. And still worse for national security are PRC scholars who in at least some instances (documented here) have deliberately tried to obfuscate their connections to military projects and affiliated institutions. This raises the absurd possibility that some United States–based scientists and engineers are collaborating with counterparts from the PRC on scientific papers whose findings are then being exploited to modernize a military that the United States may someday have to face in armed conflict—or at least deter from conflict. And even more incredibly, some of these research collaborations appear to benefit, directly or indirectly, from US federal government funding.

To say that American institutions have been naïve about, and ill-prepared to confront and contain the risk from, the PRC's wide-ranging efforts at technology misappropriation is—I believe the reader of this

report will conclude—an understatement. But these aims remain only one dimension of the PRC’s larger effort to project its sharp power around the world, and to control the global narrative specifically about China and generally about freedom, so that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) might make the world safe for autocracy. This is more than a national security threat: It is an existential challenge to the entire global liberal order that has enabled political freedom and human rights to expand and thrive to an unprecedented extent in recent decades. If freedom is to be defended globally and the current deepening democratic recession is to be reversed, government leaders, politicians, journalists, and civil society activists must understand how China’s Communist party-state operates in the shadows to shape and control information flows, bully governments and corporations, infiltrate and corrupt political systems, and disrupt and debase civic institutions.

Going forward, this larger mission of research and public education will be the work of our new Hoover Institution Project on China’s Global Sharp Power. Over the coming year, we will build a clearinghouse of news, policy briefs, reports, and analysis on the PRC’s disinformation and sharp power activities around the world, what we term a “China Influence Tracker.” We will take a focused look at the history and practice of the United Front, the vast web of front organizations and proxies that are tasked with cultivating human relationships, dangling material inducements, and preying on emotional, financial, or ideological vulnerabilities in order to cajole and co-opt non-CCP partners into serving the CCP’s interests, often unwittingly. We will advance policy options for exposing and countering these surreptitious influence activities. In that vein, we will endeavor to train journalists and civil society leaders around the world in how the PRC works to establish and disguise its inappropriate influence. We will seek to illuminate its efforts to reshape global institutions and norms, examining the PRC’s participation in international organizations and multilateral forums, its influence efforts in regional organizations, its quest for dominance over the rules and tools of artificial intelligence, and its diffusion of digital technologies of surveillance and control. We will research more deeply into PRC sharp power projection in specific sectors of American society.

In doing all of this, we do not seek to foment hostility toward China—and we reject the language and imagery of an impending “new cold war” between the United States and China, or an inevitable military showdown between the two superpowers. We continue to warn explicitly at every opportunity of the dangers of ethnic profiling in the United States. We favor engagement with China—including in education and research—and we encourage diverse partnerships and exchanges. But as we urged in our 2018 report, engagement with China can only serve our national interest if it is based on three principles: transparency in all of these relationships, which in the context of this report must include full and truthful disclosure of researchers’ ties to China’s military-industrial complex and its state; reciprocity in access—for researchers, journalists, and partners of all kinds; and robust efforts to defend the integrity of our democratic institutions. The first line of defense is always knowledge. We hope this report will contribute to the foundation of knowledge necessary to structure international research engagements that will both advance the horizons of scientific discovery and protect the national interest.

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