



Chinese Government Influence over Foreign and Chinese Diaspora Media

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. This testimony focuses on how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and related actors influence media, news, and information flows around the world, as well as the state of local response and resilience, addressing topics including:

- Key trends since 2019
- Tactics of media influence used by CCP-linked actors and who those actors are
- Influence efforts specifically targeting the Chinese diaspora and the role of the WeChat social media application
- Important sources of resilience and examples of global pushback
- Ongoing vulnerabilities and the impact of Beijing's media influence efforts
- Recommendations to the Commission, Congress, and broader US government

This testimony draws on and expands upon a recent report published by Freedom House in September 2022, titled *Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and Power of Democratic Resilience*.¹ I ask that this testimony be admitted into the record.

I. Introduction

The starting point for any discussion of Beijing's global influence **begins within China**, where the Chinese Communist Party exerts tight political and social control. Over the past decade, repression has intensified against a widening set of targets from an already high level.² This change has also been reflected in the regime's more aggressive activities abroad, including a global campaign of transnational repression.³ Today, the world is facing the unprecedented situation of the second largest economy being ruled by one of the world's most authoritarian regimes.

It is in this context that Freedom House embarked on the Beijing's Global Media Influence (BGMI) project, the most comprehensive assessment to date examining actions taken by Chinese officials to influence news and information flows abroad, as well as the democratic response in 30 countries around the world. I will be drawing on that report, focused on the period of 2019 to 2021, as well as more recent developments in my testimony.

Research methodology

The BGMI project was global in scope, focused on 30 countries across six regions, where at least 25 languages are spoken in total.⁴ To gain a better understanding not only of Beijing's actions but also of responses in relatively democratic societies, all 30 countries assessed are designated as Free or Partly Free in *Freedom in the World*, Freedom House's annual assessment of political rights and civil liberties. The project was a collaborative effort between Freedom House staff and over 40 analysts, advisers, and reviewers, including at least one local researcher from each country examined.

Each country assessment includes both a scoring component, as well as an in-depth country narrative report that addresses more qualitative and analytical dimensions. These include whether Beijing's influence efforts have increased or decreased since 2019, key avenues for content dissemination, sources of resilience, vulnerabilities, impact and public opinion, and future trajectory. The country reports are available on Freedom House's website.⁵ These country assessments informed our global findings.

In consultation with external experts, Freedom House created a new index methodology that includes a numerical score and status for each of the countries, appraising the scale and scope of CCP media influence efforts and a separate score assessing the strength of the local response and underlying media resilience. Based on the intersection between these dimensions, countries were classified as either Resilient or Vulnerable.⁶

Four key findings

Freedom House's research yielded several key findings—all notably global—some of which are explored in more detail below:

1. **The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is accelerating a multibillion dollar global campaign to shape public opinion** and secure both its hold on power in China and its policy priorities abroad.
2. **Beijing's media influence efforts are becoming more sophisticated, covert, and coercive.**
3. **Local journalists, civil society activists, governments, and news consumers are pushing back** against these efforts. In addition to China- or incident-specific responses, underlying media regulations are also helping to fend off negative impacts.
4. **Resilience is uneven.** Only half of the 30 countries assessed were found to be Resilient and the other half Vulnerable, with countries from both the Global North and South falling into both categories. Even in countries with strong responses, however, vulnerabilities remain.

II. Increasing influence efforts, globally

From analysis of events that occurred from 2019 to 2021, compared to prior years, Freedom House found that **18 of the 30 countries faced increased media influence efforts** from Beijing during the coverage period. Several of the countries where influence efforts stabilized followed a period of already intensified Chinese government efforts from 2015 to 2018.

Among the factors driving this expansion is the fact that Chinese diplomats and state media are seeking to offset damage to the CCP's international reputation created by its own policies in regions like Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea, as well as the initial cover up related to COVID-19 in Wuhan. These dynamics build upon longer standing goals of CCP leaders to promote preferred narratives about China, its regime, or its foreign policy priorities—and to marginalize or suppress news, political commentary, or investigative journalism that presents the Chinese government and its leaders in a negative light.

A relatively recent development has been the adoption by Chinese state-affiliated actors of more strident anti-American or anti-Western messaging, including to rebuff local concerns about Chinese state-linked activities, as well as increased amplification of Kremlin messaging regarding the war in Ukraine. In a small number of countries—such as Taiwan and the United States, disinformation campaigns or other social media manipulation efforts point to an attempt to undermine faith in the local government or to amplify divisive hashtags, misinformation, or conspiracy theories that have nothing to do with China.

Setting aside a comparison to earlier years, using the new BGMI methodology, Freedom House assessed that in **16 of the 30 countries studied**, the intensity of CCP media influence efforts was High or Very High; the efforts were Notable in 10 countries, and only 4 countries faced a Low level of influence efforts. *[See Figure 1 in Appendix for all 30 countries' scores and status]*

- **Taiwan**, the **United States**, and the **United Kingdom** experienced the most intense influence efforts.
- But strong campaigns were also documented in **Nigeria**, **Spain**, **Kenya**, the **Philippines**, and **Argentina**, highlighting the global scope of Beijing's ambitions.
- Even in countries with relatively low scores, like **Ghana** and **Israel**, core dimensions of the media influence toolbox were present: state media content inserts and co-productions, censorship pressures from Chinese diplomats, and an infrastructural presence for China-based companies with close CCP ties.

III. What is Beijing's media influence toolbox and how is it evolving?

The ways in which the CCP and its proxies influence media and information flows in other countries are complex and multi-faceted. They extend **far beyond simple propaganda**. Freedom House identified five categories of tactics that were used to assess each country: propaganda, disinformation, censorship and intimidation, control over content-distribution infrastructure, and trainings for media workers and officials that attempt to export the CCP's model of information control.

The graphic in **Figure 2 in the Appendix** outlines some of the activities and tactics that fall under each category. While activities related to propaganda, disinformation, and censorship are already affecting the media space in many countries, tactics like trainings for officials and infrastructure investment are building up potential avenues for control and influence in the future.

Freedom House's research found that Beijing's media influence efforts extend far beyond what is typical of overt public diplomacy. They involve elements that are covert, coercive, or corrupting, and they are becoming more sophisticated.

The following are three notable ways in which Beijing's media influence efforts are evolving. Each has a dedicated and detailed essay, which includes additional country specific examples, on the Freedom House website.

1. Increased Beijing-backed content in mainstream media⁷

Although Chinese state media outlets have channels for reaching foreign audiences directly, the most significant avenue through which Chinese state-produced content reaches large local audiences around the world is via content-sharing agreements and other partnerships with local mainstream media, a tactic that Chinese officials have referred to in the past as “borrowing the boat to reach the sea.”

This tactic was evident in country after country. In just the 30 countries assessed, Freedom House counted **at least 130 news outlets that had published Chinese state-produced content**, not only in print, but also on television and radio. In **16 countries, at least one new or upgraded agreement was found** during the period of 2019-2021, hence the assessment that this is an expanding area of activity. The Chinese state-linked origins of the content are **often not clearly labeled** and, in some cases, are deliberately obscured. Some content is offered for free, but there are also many cases where payment or other monetary benefit is provided.

2. Covert tactics or disinformation campaigns on social media⁸

Another area of expansion for Chinese diplomats and state outlets has been on social media. Our research found social media accounts in dozens of languages, not only Arabic, French, or Spanish, but also ones spoken in narrower geographic areas like Romanian, Sinhala, or Hebrew. And while much of the content shared on these accounts is light fare on Chinese culture or cuisine or propaganda promoting the Chinese government, in all 30 of the countries studied, Chinese diplomats or state media outlets were found to have also **openly promoted falsehoods** or misleading content to news consumers. Common falsehoods included conspiracy theories about the origins of COVID-19, demonization of prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong, and whitewashing or denial of human rights atrocities in Xinjiang.

Manipulation of social media posts using fake accounts or undisclosed links to the CCP was also found in a growing number of countries. In half of the countries, armies of fake accounts were found to be artificially amplifying posts from Chinese diplomats, including in the United States, United Kingdom, India, and South Africa. Elsewhere, such as Kenya, seemingly unaffiliated accounts were found publishing pro-Beijing content and narratives.

In nine countries, these two tactics were combined and at least one targeted **disinformation campaign** was documented that had used fake social media accounts to spread falsehoods or sow confusion, not only regarding China-related news. Campaigns in the United States, Taiwan, and the Philippines reflected not just attempts to manipulate news and information about in China, but also to meddle in the domestic politics of the target country.

3. Rise in coercive tactics⁹

Chinese officials, other CCP-linked entities, and local actors sympathetic to Beijing engage in various forms of intimidation and censorship to suppress reporting or viewpoints critical of the Chinese government or corporations. In **24 out of the 30 countries assessed, at least one such incident of intimidation or censorship occurred.**

In about half of the countries, **Chinese diplomats** or other government representatives took actions to intimidate, harass, or pressure journalists or commentators in response to their coverage. A newer phenomenon evident during the coverage period was how the Hong Kong authorities and companies with close CCP ties like Huawei also joined the fray, issuing legal threats related to Hong Kong's National Security Law in Israel and the United Kingdom or filing defamation suits against a critical scholar and local television station in France.

In even more countries—17 in total—**local officials or media executives** outside China attempted to suppress critical reporting, either because they received a call from the Chinese embassy or preemptively encouraged self-censorship to protect other business interests from potential reprisals. Such actions can be more impactful than Chinese government threats because of the greater power and authority that a local official or media owner holds over local journalists or news outlets.

Intimidation tactics like **cyberbullying** by pro-CCP trolls have also increased since 2019 and several examples of **cyber attacks** targeting critical outlets or journalists occurred during the coverage period.

See *Figure 3 in the Appendix* for a graphic of countries where incidents of censorship or intimidation occurred and what form it entailed.

Several potentially important avenues of influence—such as the purchase of stakes in foreign news outlets and the export of censorship technologies for use by foreign governments—have not yet been widely exploited by Beijing. Nevertheless, both of those activities did occur in the study's sample—in South Africa and Nigeria, respectively, for example—and they could become more common in the future.

IV. Who are the actors and entities engaging in Beijing's foreign media influence activities?

There is a diverse range of entities and individuals engaging in propaganda, censorship, disinformation, or other activities that influence media and news environments on behalf of the CCP or in ways that serve its purposes. There does not necessarily exist a single unified plan or bureaucratic apparatus, although most relevant actors are responding to guidance from top officials or the CCP's incentive structure, and some propaganda efforts or information operations are clearly coordinated campaigns. Those engaged in the media influence tactics outlined earlier in this testimony include:

- **Chinese state media outlets**—including Xinhua news agency, China Global Television Network, China Radio International, and *China Daily*, among others. These operate under the

supervision of the CCP's Propaganda Department, but are massive entities that display their own variations from country to country and language to language in terms of reach, user engagement, and effectiveness. A wider range of Chinese state entities, such as provincial governments, have also placed paid or exchanged content in foreign news outlets.

- **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs** holds responsibility for PRC diplomatic representatives and their activities abroad as well as for accreditation of foreign media outlets operating within China, including providing or rejecting visas for foreign correspondents and overseeing the hiring of local Chinese nationals in various roles.
- **The Ministries of Public Security and State Security** operate under the party's Political and Legal Affairs Commission and play a role in monitoring and harassing foreign correspondents in China, their sources, and exile or diaspora media, as well as harassing or detaining their family or sources in China.
- The sources of targeted **disinformation campaigns** or **cyberbullying** are harder to detect. Some efforts—such as those targeting Taiwan—are full-fledged operations with likely ties to the People's Liberation Army. In other instances, a PRC state link is evident from posting patterns or other data analytics, but which part of the party-state bureaucracy the campaign originates from is less clear. In the case of cyberbullying, some campaigns may be by unaffiliated netizens responding independently to CCP propaganda and state media calls to action.
- The **Hong Kong government**, as noted above, is an emerging source of extralegal censorship requests and pressures on foreign news outlets and exile journalists and activists.
- **Private companies** and proxy entities with ties to the CCP or state media are also playing a role in propaganda and content manipulation. State outlets have hired private firms, which then run networks of fake accounts or pay social media influencers to promote Chinese state-produced content. Some firms are based in China, while others are public relations firms operating abroad, including the United States. Companies like Huawei and Tencent, whose executives have close CCP ties or that host party branches and have a record of collaborating on surveillance and censorship inside China, and at times abroad, are an increasingly important avenue of influence.
- **Local media owners and political elites:** As noted above, media owners and local government officials in many countries have taken action—either at the direct behest of Chinese officials or for their own pre-emptive business interests—to suppress critical reporting or amplify pro-Beijing propaganda and falsehoods.

V. Variation across regions and countries

In conducting detailed assessments of 30 countries, it was evident that the dynamics of Beijing's media influence efforts and local resilient are unique in each country. Even if the overall toolbox deployed by CCP-linked actors is a common menu, the way these are deployed vary from country to country. That being said, a number of factors shape what efforts are made and how in different countries, such:

- **The nature, stage, and extent of bilateral relations**, including whether relations are generally hostile or friendly, the extent of economic interdependence or dependency, and whether

diplomatic relations are maintained with the PRC or Taiwan. Any anniversary centering on a country establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC—such as 30, 40, 50 years—often garners dedicated propaganda and media partnership initiatives.

- The role and approach of the **local Chinese ambassador** to engaging local media and audiences varies from country to country. In some places, aggressive “Wolf Warrior” type ambassadors correlated to censorship pressures, but also to public backlash. Elsewhere, ambassadors fluent in the local language that communicated diplomatically on social media gained genuine, positive engagement from local users.
- The **attitude of the local government** and its officials, in terms of desire to curry favor with Beijing or have a more cautious attitude. In several countries, a change in government following an election correlated with a shift in attitude towards China and either increased vulnerability or resilience to CCP influence.
- Presence or absence of **exile communities** is also an important factor, given how often Chinese or Hong Kong dissidents, Uyghurs, Tibetans, or Falun Gong practitioners are targets of deliberate smear campaigns or transnational repression incidents. In countries with larger diaspora and exile populations, the impact of CCP influence efforts targeting these communities is more notable.

Alongside interactions and strategies unique to each country, there were some regional or other commonalities that cut across multiple countries. For example, in Latin America, a region where Chinese involvement in the economy and media ecosystem is relatively newer, regional gatherings of media owners and new initiatives cutting across the Spanish speaking world may be an important emerging avenue of influence. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the presence of the China-based company Star Times in the digital television sector created a potential avenue of influence absent in most other countries. In Muslim majority countries, like Indonesia, Chinese state media and other entities engaged in particularly aggressive efforts to muddy public debate about abuses in Xinjiang, including via efforts to influence local Muslim associations or students.

VI. Chinese diaspora

Beijing retains heavy influence over content consumed by Chinese speakers in much of the world, as the CCP considers potential political dissent among the global diaspora to be a key threat to regime security. In 24 of the 30 countries assessed, state-owned or pro-Beijing media played a dominant role shaping news content available to Chinese speakers.

This influence is exercised in various ways and at different stages of the news production and dissemination process. Many outlets have been purchased over the past three decades by tycoons friendly to Beijing, including ones from Hong Kong, Malaysia, or Taiwan. The regime also uses global fora—like an October 2019 World Chinese Media Forum gathering of over 420 media representatives held in Hebei—to bring Chinese-language outlets from around the world into the CCP’s orbit.¹⁰ Xinhua news agency and other sources provide free, discounted, or paid content to news outlets, while individual journalists, media owners, and editors who depart from the Party line risk reprisals from both media bosses or Chinese state security agents. It is also worth noting that the Chinese and Hong Kong government’s crackdown on media in the territory since adoption of the National Security Law in 2020—prompting the closure of prominent outlets liked *Apple*

Daily and *Stand News* and reduced editorial independence of the public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong—has diminished the quality and quantity of investigative or other reporting related to Hong Kong that is available to Chinese speakers, and others, globally.

Tencent’s popular WeChat application is a crucial vector of control and influence. Chinese diaspora news outlets or politicians who wish to broadcast posts to Chinese speakers outside China via the platform’s “official account” feature are subject to the same politicized censorship that is applied to accounts inside China, forcing administrators to screen the shared content.¹¹ News outlets and civil society groups critical of the CCP—such as Radio Free Asia, Citizen Power Initiatives for China, or Freedom House for that matter—are excluded from opening such accounts or reaching large audiences on the platform.¹² This bias was evident in content analysis that Freedom House researchers conducted, where in many countries, major sources of news for the Chinese diaspora via WeChat were often dominated by information from state sources or avoided any topics that could be potentially politically sensitive.¹³

Beijing’s influence is not complete, however. **Alternative sources of information** have gained ground among Chinese-language audiences in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil, Indonesia, and Malaysia, while supplying Chinese speakers around the world with online access to independent news and analysis. These include Chinese-language versions of mainstream international outlets, editorially independent public broadcasters, news aggregators, independent outlets founded by members of the Chinese, Tibetan, or Uyghur diaspora, and political commentary by YouTube influencers. Several new media initiatives have also been launched over the past year by Hong Kong journalists who previously worked at *Apple Daily*, *Stand News*, RTHK and others to fill gaps left by the NSL clampdown.¹⁴

VII. Global pushback

Democracies are far from helpless in the face of Beijing’s efforts. Even as the Chinese government’s media influence campaign is ramping up, its impact is being blunted in democracies worldwide. **All 30 of the countries studied demonstrated at least one form of active pushback** that reduced the effects of Beijing’s activities.

Journalists, professional associations, and civil society are at the forefront. Investigative reporting on CCP political or media influence or exposure of disinformation campaigns based on social media forensic analysis has been particularly effective at raising public awareness and galvanizing policy responses. An instance of at least one such exposé was found in 28 of the 30 countries, demonstrating both the spread of CCP influence efforts and the growing prevalence of reporting on it.

Journalists, editors, and media owners are also taking actions daily to ensure diversity of coverage, especially on topics like human rights violations in China. In 27 countries, even outlets that had published Chinese state-produced content were found to have also published information critical of Beijing and its leaders, often using international news wires or other global sources to inform such reporting. Moreover, **in 10 countries, at least one news outlet discontinued a content-sharing agreements** with Chinese state news agencies, a phenomenon that was almost non-

existent five years ago. In countries with sizable exile or dissident communities of Chinese activists, Uyghurs, Tibetans, or Falun Gong practitioners, these individuals have played a role raising public awareness of rights abuses against their counterparts in China and exposing problematic CCP influence locally, including incidents of transnational repression or WeChat censorship.

Evidence of active responses and resilience vis-à-vis Beijing's media influence efforts can be found around the globe—in newsrooms in Kenya, Peru, and the Philippines, in parliaments in Italy, and Kuwait, and in journalistic training programs in Tunisia, South Africa, and Nigeria.

See *Figure 4 in the Appendix* for a graphic of types of pushback and where they were found to have occurred.

The importance of underlying media resilience

Beyond active pushback, broader protections of press freedom and free expression form a vital cornerstone in democratic resilience to foreign influence efforts from Beijing or other authoritarian actors. Freedom House's research found that certain types of laws present in many democracies—such as freedom of information laws, media ownership transparency rules, or investment screening mechanisms—were also activated to enhance transparency or scrutiny surrounding influence activities from CCP-linked entities.

VIII. Vulnerabilities and legal frameworks

As noted above, only half of the countries assessed in our study were found to be Resilient. Even among those, vulnerabilities were evident. One of the most common vulnerabilities identified by local researchers and interviewees is a low level of independent expertise on China in local media, especially regarding domestic Chinese politics and CCP foreign influence.

The **existing legal frameworks in many countries also lack strong safeguards** for press freedom or contain other weaknesses that leave the media ecosystem more vulnerable to the influence campaigns of an economically powerful authoritarian state. These include regulatory gaps in terms of media transparency and ownership rules, cross-ownership regulations or measures that can mitigate media concentration, and a lack of defamation protections. Fewer than half of the 30 countries assessed had laws limiting cross-ownership that would, for instance, prevent content producers and content distributors from being controlled by a single entity. In Senegal, Australia, and the United Kingdom, meanwhile, flawed defamation laws facilitated lawsuits or legal threats against journalists, news outlets, and commentators whose work addressed Chinese investment or political influence.

In general, **government responses were lagging** those of media and civil society, or the potential harm done by Beijing's media influence tactics. A small subset of governments have been actively monitoring this space and attempting a coordinated response, but more common were local government officials, media owners, or other elites taking steps that amplified Beijing's narratives or aided in suppressing coverage.

Moreover, in 19 of the 30 countries, **attacks on media**—mostly from government actors—have increased since 2019. Media outlets operating in more politically hostile or physically dangerous environments have less capacity to expose and resist the influence tactics deployed by the CCP and its proxies, especially if local political elites favor close ties with Beijing. In Ghana, Malaysia, Mozambique, Senegal, and Kuwait, local officials used their own political clout or restrictive regulations to suppress critical reporting or override independent oversight related to China.

In 14 countries in the study, Freedom House research found instances of **problematic pushback**, whereby political leaders used legitimate concerns about CCP influence to justify arbitrary restrictions, target critical outlets, or fuel xenophobic sentiment against members of the local Chinese community.

Among the countries in the Freedom House study, **few had laws regulating foreign influence** or transparency mechanisms like the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), although many countries had some limitations on the stake that foreigners can own in local broadcast media. Moreover, foreign influence or ownership laws, in certain political environments, can also be used to crack down on legitimate speech or civil society activity. The level of transparency provided to the public under FARA—especially regarding expenditures and the money trail tying Chinese party-state entities or Beijing aligned individuals with local news outlets and media outreach—is rare, even unique. Despite concerns about the law’s vague and outdated wording or inconsistent application, stronger enforcement with regard to Chinese state news outlets has enhanced transparency on the financing of content placements in mainstream media and social media, within and outside of the United States.

In Australia, the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme has been credited with shedding light on foreign entities’ activities in the country, but it has also been criticized for lacking reporting requirements on foreign-backed expenditures and contributing to an atmosphere of suspicion affecting Chinese Australians. Meanwhile, Taiwan is an example of a democracy facing very high influence efforts from Beijing, which also exhibited a very high degree of resilience and effective responses without having such legislation in place.¹⁵

More common were rules governing **foreign media ownership**, especially in the broadcast sector. In 28 of the 30 countries, laws existed that place limitations on the size of foreign-owned stakes or require regulatory notification and approval before a stake is sold. Such measures help explain the paucity of examples of Chinese state entities owning stakes in foreign media outlets.

Yet these same sorts of laws and regulations can also be applied in ways that undermine free expression, particularly when they contain provisions that criminalize speech, establish politicized enforcement mechanisms, or impose sweeping, vaguely defined restrictions. In the Philippines and Mozambique, laws or proposals governing foreign ownership or content dissemination have been used by political leaders to target independent sources of news that carried criticism of the government.¹⁶ In Poland, the government tried to justify a push to change the US ownership of a private media company by citing the need to protect Polish media from control by foreign powers like China and Russia.¹⁷

From this perspective, legislation that enhances transparency and protects investigative reporting—including robust Freedom of Information Act regulations and enforcement, media ownership databases, and anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) legislation—rather than efforts to restrict licensing or broadcasting opportunities are likely to be effective at enhancing resilience without creating the same potential restrictions or dangers to free expression and media freedom.

IX. What is the impact of Beijing’s media influence?

The answer to this question is mixed. Some of Beijing’s initiatives have run into significant stumbling blocks. Others have been remarkably effective or laid the groundwork for long-term advances.

In 23 out of 30 countries, public opinion toward China or the Chinese government has declined since 2018.

But measurements of public opinion do not tell the full story. Other dimensions of Beijing’s media influence campaign have born fruit, specifically:

- Chinese officials and their proxies have scored **periodic successes at quashing critical news stories**, silencing commentators, having previously published items removed from websites retroactively, and reducing the information available globally about events in China by imposing limitations on foreign correspondents.
- The CCP has been effective in establishing dominance over **Chinese-language media**, including via Tencent’s WeChat platform
- Media influence builds upon other forms of political influence. **Co-optation of elites** to help amplify propaganda and suppress unwanted coverage is very potent, but also hard to detect.
- Even when an individual incident of intimidation fails, it can contribute to an atmosphere of **self-censorship**. Indeed, in 16 of 30 countries journalists or commentators reported self-censoring in some capacity when it came to China.
- Laying a foundation for **future manipulation**. Beijing is gaining influence over crucial parts of many countries’ information infrastructure, as Chinese technology firms with close ties to the CCP build or acquire content-distribution platforms used by tens of millions of foreign news consumers. There have been incidents where this foothold had been seemingly used to amplify or suppress content per Beijing’s preferences. But even where it has not yet been used, it could be activated in the future.

X. Conclusion and Recommendations

The economic, cultural, and technological contributions that China, its companies, and its people have to offer provide real benefits to people in countries around the world. But even as these ties grow, being open-eyed about the regime that rules China is vital and putting in place safeguards against actions that violate democratic norms and local laws—in ways that themselves respect human rights—is essential.

Anyone engaged in the media space should acknowledge the influence exerted by China's authoritarian regime on the news and information circulating in global publications and social media feeds. They need to be prepared for how to respond when pressure to adjust content in Beijing's favor inevitably emerges.

Indeed, Beijing's outreach to media and pressures from diplomats are likely to continue to increase in the coming years. At the recently completed parliamentary meeting in Beijing, a 2023 budget published by China's Ministry of Finance noted a growing dedication of resources for "diplomatic endeavors," which received a 12.2 percent increase compared with 2022.¹⁸ This was the second-highest increase in any category.

The "diplomatic endeavors" category covers not only expenses and personnel for Chinese diplomatic missions but also those for external propaganda—including efforts to strengthen "capacity for international communication" and promote the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁹ As China emerges from the regime's "zero-COVID" policy, the world is likely to see a revival of Beijing-hosted international conferences as well as scholarships and travel opportunities for foreign journalists.

The good news is that momentum is on democracies' side in a way it was not five years ago. Still, as the CCP adapts and expends more human and financial resources to achieve its goals, it will be the individual choices of those in the media, government, civil society, and tech sectors that will determine in each country whether in the coming years Beijing gains more influence or whether press freedom and fact-based reporting win out.

Recommendations

- **Focus on the threats to free expression, electoral integrity, and national sovereignty posed by Beijing's foreign media influence rather than on geopolitical competition between the United States and China:** The threats to free expression, press freedom, electoral integrity, and national sovereignty posed by Beijing's foreign influence efforts have implications far beyond immediate U.S. interests. Many examples of pushback uncovered in Freedom House's research by journalists, researchers, and policymakers were motivated by a desire to protect values like media freedom and journalistic professionalism and consternation at the way CCP-linked individuals were acting to undermine them, independent of any policy preference of the United States. Framing Beijing's actions or the importance of strategic responses solely or primarily in terms of US-China competition ignores this dynamic, belittles local agency, and undermines the collective interest of people around the world in stemming the negative impact on freedom and democracy posed by Beijing's actions.
- **Maintain strong funding for media development generally and for documenting Beijing's foreign media influence activities and strengthening local resilience specifically:** These areas have seen increased and strategic support from various US government funders in recent years, helping to raise awareness and enhance resilience to Beijing's authoritarian influence and other threats to free expression. Congress should ensure continued bureaucratic and funding support for such programming globally. Private philanthropists should expand support

for civil society research, advocacy, training, and media literacy programs that enhance the United States' own resilience in the face of CCP influence efforts, including among Chinese speakers. Private resources for these activities are especially important given the limited availability of public funding.

- **Improve reporting on China through training, networking opportunities, and funding for journalists, while incorporating China-related topics into broader programming.** Given the global role that Chinese state-linked actors are playing in the media and information space, professional training programs for journalists and other media workers should include background material on China and its regime as well as case studies on CCP propaganda and censorship tactics around the world. To counteract the factually incorrect or incomplete information provided to journalists at Beijing-backed junkets and training programs, democratic donors should sponsor journalist travel and networking opportunities, including engagement with Chinese human rights defenders and representatives of ethnic and religious groups that face persecution in China. Programs tailored to improve expertise on China could provide background information on the different Chinese state media outlets and their ties to the CCP, examples of past disinformation campaigns, and China-based apps' track record of surveillance and censorship within China.
- **Include Chinese-language media and speakers in funding opportunities and media literacy programs.** Media literacy initiatives should include components that serve Chinese-language news consumers and equip them to identify problematic content on WeChat and other CCP-influenced information sources. Donors should support investigative journalism initiatives among diaspora and exile media serving Chinese-speaking communities. They should also finance research dedicated to tracking self-censorship and other subtle pressures on media outlets. Any projects focused on supporting Chinese-language media should include those serving diaspora, immigrant, and exile communities, providing dedicated funding for the latter.
- **Impose penalties for transgressions by Chinese officials.** When CCP representatives—including Chinese diplomats in the United States—engage in bullying, intimidation, or other pressure aimed at local journalists and commentators, the US government should respond promptly, for instance by issuing public statements of concern or diplomatic rebukes. In especially serious cases involving threats against journalists and their families, the government should consider declaring the perpetrators persona non grata. US officials—at the highest levels—should publicly condemn assaults on or obstruction of correspondents from US media in China, including the delay or denial of visas, and continue to pursue the matter until a satisfactory resolution is reached.
- **Enhance interagency and multistakeholder coordination.** The federal government should expand recent efforts to improve interagency coordination related to China's foreign media influence and targeted disinformation campaigns, particularly in advance of national and local elections. Congress should ensure that such agencies and activities are sufficiently funded. Civil society, technology firms, and media outlets should be routinely consulted on emerging trends and to coordinate effective responses.

- **Align US government designations of Chinese state media, enhance transparency mechanisms.** The Department of Justice should examine each of the Chinese state media outlets that have been designated as foreign missions by the Department of State since 2020 to determine whether those outlets should also be registered under FARA. For newly registered Chinese state outlets such as China Global Television Network and Xinhua, the Department of Justice should enforce FARA filing requirements, including submission of details on content partnerships with US media and payments to social media influencers, to the extent possible under current law.
- **Increase Chinese-language capacity in federal agencies.** As we have engaged federal agencies over the years, it has become clear that there is a need for Mandarin language skills, including in key offices handling China-related issues. The federal government, with new funding from Congress, if necessary, should employ additional Chinese speakers at key US agencies that deal with CCP media influence.
- **Increase Congressional scrutiny of WeChat censorship and surveillance in the United States.** Tencent's WeChat application and the company's politicized moderation and monitoring actions pose a serious threat to the privacy and free expression of millions of U.S. residents and citizens, particularly Chinese speakers. Yet, information available to the public and to U.S. policymakers about the full extent of this phenomenon is lacking. Congress should hold a hearing to shed greater light on the challenges experienced by users in the United States and include among witnesses Chinese activists and ordinary users who have encountered censorship on the platform in the United States, as well as executives from Tencent. Members of Congress should also write formal letters to Tencent asking explicit questions regarding its data protection, moderation, and official account policies as they relate to users in the United States.
- **When seeking to reduce the vulnerabilities to manipulation and surveillance posed by some apps, blanket bans on specific applications may do more harm than good:** Recognizing both the potential threat posed by PRC-based applications like WeChat or ByteDance's TikTok, but also the disproportionate restriction on freedom of expression that a blanket ban would entail, the US government should first explore other options for addressing the concerns raised by these applications, including: holding hearings, introducing third-party risk assessment audits, restricting usage on government or military devices, and adopting laws that require more transparency on company policies and practices, including their content moderation, recommendation and algorithmic systems, collection and use of personal data, and targeted advertising practices. Congress should also adopt stronger data privacy laws that limit what information can be collected and how it can be stored, used, and shared. In the current absence of a federal data privacy law, regulatory bodies like the Federal Trade Commission should explore what options exist for improving protections for Americans data under existing authority.

Appendix: Graphs and Charts

Figure 1:

BEIJING'S INFLUENCE EFFORTS SCORE

85 = Most Influence o = Least Influence

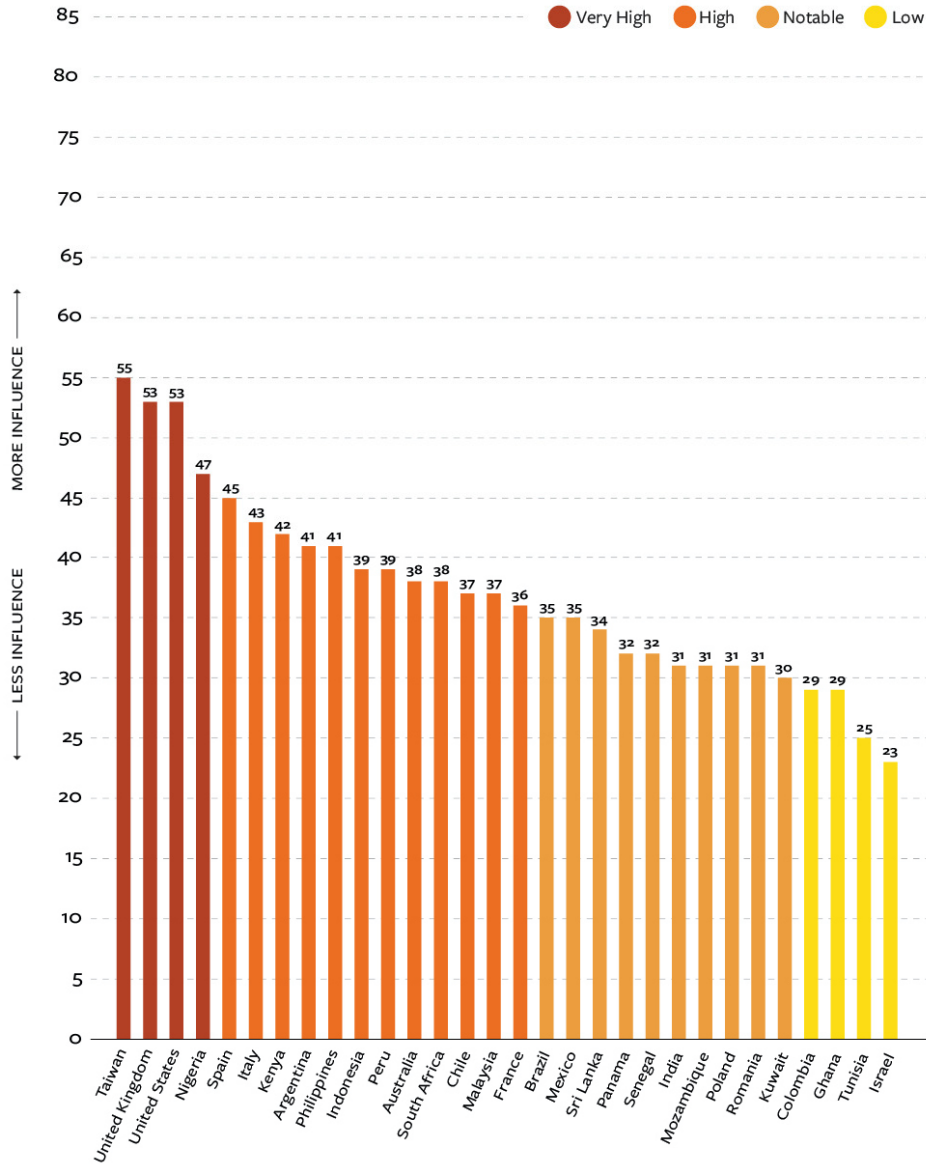


Figure 2:



Figure 3:



The Power of Pushback

In all 30 countries under study, journalists, officials, civil society actors, or the public took steps to push back against or reduce Beijing's media influence efforts between 2019-21. Freedom House identified these five actions as being particularly effective.

Effective pushback was found in **30** countries

Number of Countries Which Had:	Action
28	Coverage of Beijing's influence efforts
20	Public pushback against intimidation or propaganda
10	Discontinued news partnerships
9	Independent Chinese-language media
5	Chinese diplomats rebuked for media intimidation

² “China,” *Freedom in the World* 2023, Freedom House, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2023>

⁴ The list of 30 countries assessed in BGMI and links to in-depth country reports can be found here: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/beijing-global-media-influence/2022/authoritarian-expansion-power-democratic-resilience/country-reports>

⁶ The list of questions asked and a full description of the methodology and scoring system can be found here: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/beijing-global-media-influence/2022/authoritarian-expansion-power-democratic-resilience/methodology>

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⁸ Sarah Cook, “Harnessing Social Media: Amplification and Deception on Popular Global Platforms,” *Beijing’s Global Media Influence*, Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/beijing-global-media-influence/2022/authoritarian-expansion-power-democratic-resilience#-span--span--span--span--span-harnessing-social-media--span---span---span---span---span->

⁹ Sarah Cook, “Intimidation and Censorship: The Sharper Edge of Beijing’s Influence,” *Beijing’s Global Media Influence*, Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/beijing-global-media-influence/2022/authoritarian-expansion-power-democratic-resilience#-span--span--span--span--span-intimidation-and-censorship--span---span---span---span---span->

¹⁰ The summit—jointly organized by the State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the Hebei Provincial People’s Government, and state news agency China News Service, with opening speeches by top officials in the CCP’s United Front Work Department—aimed to convene Chinese-language press from around the world and encourage them to use their “advantage” of being integrated in foreign countries “to tell China’s story.” In 21 of the 30 countries assessed in the BGMI project, a local Chinese-language journalist, editor, or media executive attended at least one such Chinese government or CCP-sponsored media gathering during the coverage period.

<https://archive.is/TkhY9#selection-1613.0-2889.9> Xu Yousheng (许又声), “在第十届世界华文传统媒体论坛开幕式上的致辞” [Opening speech of the 10th World Chinese Media Forum], Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, 2019 <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/bqch/208/3166.shtml>.

¹¹ Yang, Fan, Luke Heemsbergen, and P. David Marshall. “Studying WeChat Official Accounts with Novel ‘Backend-in’ and ‘Traceback’ Methods: Walking through Platforms Back-to-Front and Past-to-Present.” *Media International Australia* 184, no. 1 (August 2022): 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X221088052>.

¹² “Citizen Power Initiatives for China and Doe Plaintiffs 1-6 v. Tencent America LLC and Tencent International Service,” lawsuit filed in California, published January 20, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/citizen-power-initiatives-for-china-and-doe-plaintiffs-1-6-v-tencent-america-llc-and-tencent-international-service/c2d26626-af01-4cfa-8fe7-32d709b10dd9/?itid=lk_inline_manual_4

¹³ See for example, the Chinese diaspora sections of the France, Ghana, and Philippines reports from the BGMI project: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/france/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/ghana/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>

¹⁴ “Featured Pushback: New exile and digital Hong Kong media initiatives,” *China Media Bulletin*, Issue 169, Freedom House, March 21, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/china-media-bulletin/2023/two-sessions-takeaways-tibet-clampdown-tiktok-debates-march-2023>.

¹⁵ A Foreign Influence Transparency Act has been drafted and debated in Taiwan’s legislature, but not adopted to date. There are concerns that the draft Foreign Influence Transparency Act, if enacted, could create a chilling effect on the freedom of individuals or media outlets to promote candidates or policies supported by Beijing; limit Taiwanese entrepreneurs’ rights to invest in and operate Taiwanese media organizations; label Taiwanese media owners as CCP collaborators; and stifle freedom of expression. Chien Hui-Ju, Jonathan Chin, “KMT sidelines foreign influence bill,” *Taipei Times*, March 15, 2021,

<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2021/03/15/2003753863>. Angeli Datt and Jaw-Nian Huang, “Taiwan,” *Beijing’s Global Media Influence*, Freedom House, 2022,

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/taiwan/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>

¹⁶ Neil Jerome Morales, Karen Lema, “Philippine regulator revokes news site’s license over ownership rules, media outraged,” *Reuters*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-media-idINKBN1F40TE>; “Press freedom in Mozambique under pressure,” *DW*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/press-freedom-in-mozambique-under-pressure/a-5696...>; see also: “Mozambique wants to ‘control access to information’ with new media laws,” *Zitamar News*, April 8, 2021, <https://zitamar.com/mozambique-wants-to-control-access-to-information-with-new-media-laws>

¹⁷ Maciej Witucki, “Experts React: How Far Will Poland Push Away Its friends?” *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, August 12, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react-how-far-will-poland-push-away-its-friends/>; Anna Włodarczyk-semczuk and Paweł Florkiewicz, “Polish President Vetoes Media Bill, US Welcomes Move,” *Reuters*, December 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/polish-president-says-he-vetoed-media-law-2021-12-27/>

¹⁸ PRC Ministry of Finance, “Report on the Execution of the Central and Local Budgets for 2022 and on the Draft Central and Local Budgets for 2023,” March 5, 2023, republished by NPC Observer, <https://npcobserver.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023-MOF-Report.pdf>

¹⁹ Nector Gan, “China ups diplomatic offensive with drastic increase in budget – and hardened stance on US,” CNN, March 9, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/08/china/china-budget-diplomatic-expenditure-intl-hnk/index.html>