



Statement before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission)
On Responding to China's Infiltration and Coercion in Europe

China's Multi-Faceted Influence Tactics in Europe

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Representative Ellzey, Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Wilson, and honorable members of the Helsinki Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I'll take the next five minutes to outline five key takeaways about China's influence in Europe.

1. What are **China's strategic goals** in Europe?

First, **bolster friends and silence critics of the Chinese Communist Party and its policies**, especially on politically sensitive issues such as human rights, abuses of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, ongoing territorial disputes, and Taiwan's political status. Minimize opposition to Chinese claims over Taiwan.

Second, **undermine transatlantic cooperation and European unity through a divide and conquer strategy**. Even just a few dissenters can disrupt the formation of a durable anti-China coalition. Alienating signals from Washington about its relationship with Europe makes countries even more susceptible to Chinese influence attempts.

2. **China adopts a multi-faceted, multi-layered approach to exerting influence.**

It uses both *coercion and inducements*: while imposing sanctions on critics and engaging in transnational repression of dissidents, Beijing continues to tout promises of economic benefits.

It employs a mix of *subversive and legitimate* approaches: China often seeks to buy support through corrupt investments, bribery, and other covert influence tactics; but it also readily uses elite cooptation, building relationships with a variety of stakeholders and interest groups to persuade them of the validity of China's interests and policies.

It attempts to influence a *wide array of targets*: nationally-elected officials and EU parliamentarians but also those at the local levels; business leaders eager to access the Chinese market; civil society, academia, and the public.

China can be opportunistic at forging *alliances of convenience* – there have been cases of both far-right and far-left parties and parliamentarians echoing China's talking points, whether for transactional or ideological reasons.

3. **China's economic statecraft may be imperfect but it works well enough.**

What China has done best is **drive wedges within Europe as well as between Europe and the United States**. For example, Hungary—the recipient of 44 percent of Chinese foreign direct investment in the EU in 2023—has vetoed EU statements critical of China, endorsed Beijing's peace plan for Ukraine, and established a security partnership with China. China likes to deal directly with individual countries, who also fear targeted economic retaliation from Beijing. This limits progress when the European Commission seeks to introduce more stringent regulations, which require approval by European capitals.

Beijing's economic relationships do not amount to a Chinese-led bloc. Europe by and large still sees the United States as a desired ally, and there is plenty of scrutiny and pushback against poorly conceived Chinese projects and other forms of illicit influence, thanks to the relative strength of institutions in many European countries. But the lure of its market and capital could be enough to

buy silence on issues that China cares about, such as territorial disputes or human rights violations in Xinjiang, or even to dampen responses to an invasion of Taiwan.

Furthermore, **the strategic alternating use of economic inducements buffers Beijing's periodic use of economic coercion.** Renormalizing trade and investment flows, offering diplomatic reassurances, and dangling further promises keeps governments (and companies) coming back rather than diversifying away from China. Even after China's recent escalation in its use of rare earth export controls, hitting multiple critical sectors that left corporations worldwide scrambling to minimize supply chain disruptions, many European leaders led major delegations to China in the last several months.

Using a combination of economic carrots and sticks thus helps to minimize opposition to China's domestic and foreign policies, stymie broader coalition-building against China, and inhibit close coordination with the United States – ultimately **creating more strategic space for Beijing to pursue its interests** with relative impunity.

4. First-mover advantage: relatively low public literacy on China allows Beijing to fill the information gap, dominate narratives, and shape perceptions. The same logic applies when CCP-linked actors reach out to local and subnational officials, who are more likely to be concerned with economic development than geopolitical issues. In addition, China often combines assertive propaganda messaging and public diplomacy to amplify, claim credit, and sometimes **exaggerate China's economic importance.** For example, a Chinese-constructed bridge in Croatia was actually funded primarily by the EU, which provided \$424 million, little known to the public. This contributes to widespread elite and public perceptions of China's indispensability and inevitability as an economic partner.

5. Democratic backsliding, corruption, and patronage politics provide weak entry points for Chinese influence. The lack of transparency and oversight, including fewer checks and balances from civil society and opposition parties, makes it easier for strongmen politicians to accept corrupt investment deals in exchange for falling in line with Beijing's policies. These activities also perpetuate a **vicious cycle of autocratization**, entrenching illiberal leaders and undermining good governance. China often blurs the line between open lobbying and illicit influence, as seen with the Huawei bribery scandal involving several members of the European Parliament.

At the same time, the **CCP is quite adept at exploiting the openness of democratic societies** to forge sometimes opaque links with multiple stakeholders. Many of the CCP's influence activities are managed under the umbrella of the "United Front," a diffuse and amorphous global network of official, quasi-official, and grassroots organizations tasked with mobilizing friends, suppressing enemies, and promoting Beijing's interests.

CCP foreign influence tactics have included: using political fixers and power brokers to gain access to government officials and business elites; tasking political aides to acquire sensitive information and spy on behalf of China; and even tapping on pro-China individuals to seek elected office.

Overseas Chinese community organizations also play a significant role, including hometown associations, friendship associations, trade associations, and student associations. Responding to PRC influence activities is even more challenging because many of these organizations and leaders wear dual hats – they serve legitimate functions of providing public and social services to overseas Chinese

communities, but at the same time they maintain close links with the CCP (and sometimes hold affiliations with Chinese government entities) and serve as latent capacity to be mobilized by Beijing to “tell China’s story well” and defend CCP interests.

Conclusion

While the extent of China’s actual influence should not be overstated, the scale of resources the CCP is able and willing to allocate to its foreign policy goals means that it can make a dizzying multitude of influence attempts and play a waiting game to see which ones pay off. Beijing’s economic and political activities are concerning not just because of their national security threats but also because they corrode the legitimate functioning of free and open societies.