BRIEF
NO. 4 2024

SWEDISH NATIONAL CHINA CENTRE

China's foreign election interference: an overview of its global impact

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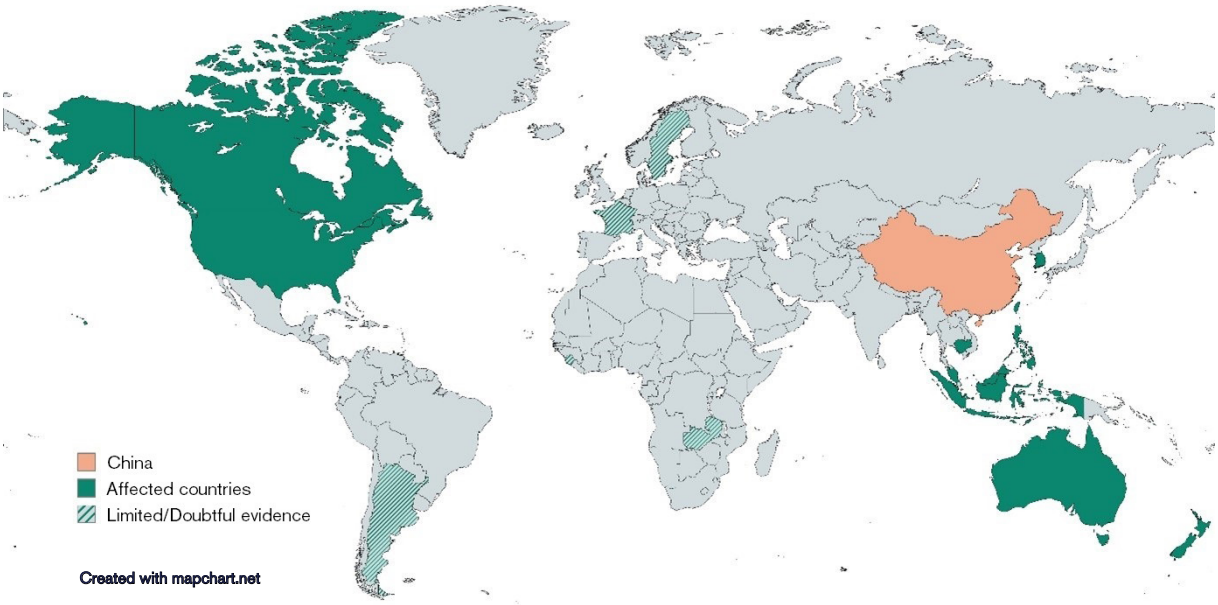
Summary

- China has interfered in many democratic elections around the world in the post-Cold War period. Interventions have varied in terms of their aims and methods. Some have been partisan, aimed at supporting pro-China candidates, while others have had more hostile intent, aimed at discrediting and sabotaging the target country's democratic process.
- Interference methods include political donations, United Front work, threats and intimidation, information and disinformation campaigns online and in traditional media, as well as cyberattacks. Interference is more common in countries with large Chinese diasporas.
- Taiwan is the most important target of Chinese election interference. China has interfered in every election held in Taiwan and applied almost every method at its disposal there. Almost every interference method was used in Taiwan before it was seen in other countries. The Taiwan case also includes methods unseen anywhere else, such as threats of war.
- Canada was subject to Chinese interference in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections. These campaigns were heavily partisan towards the Liberal Party and mostly took the shape of donations to individual candidates, but intimidation against unwanted candidates also occurred.
- The United States experienced a notable case of interference with the 1996 "Chinagate" campaign financing scandal. Since 2022, the main interference method has been online (dis)information campaigns. These are mostly nonpartisan and seem aimed at sabotaging and discrediting the democratic system. Ahead of the 2024 election, however, some campaigns have shifted to a pro-Trump position.
- Australia has experienced several cases of mostly partisan Chinese interference in both local and federal elections. Other countries affected include Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines and South Korea, as well as others where there is limited or disputable evidence. Actual interference could be much more pervasive than the documented evidence indicates, as many cases probably go unnoticed.
- Thus far, there is no evidence of sustained campaigns to influence election outcomes in European countries, but there is a risk that China might focus more on Europe in the future.

Defining "election interference"

Over the years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has interfered in many democratic elections around the world. This Brief summarizes the countries affected and the methods and objectives of China's election interference activities, and provides examples of important cases. It covers the post-Cold War era and is based on open-source reports, official documents, academic articles etc. It uses a comparatively narrow definition of election interference as activities that are *primarily intended to have an effect on election results in foreign countries*, rather than such effects being an auxiliary result of activities pursued with some other main aim in mind. In reality, it can be difficult to draw a sharp line between such interference and other forms of political manipulation, such as the grooming of political candidates, bribery and propaganda campaigns outside of election contexts. This is especially so in the context of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) United Front work, where aims are often highly non-transparent in specific cases. In practice, the context of the election process becomes the decisive factor. Consequently, this Brief does not discuss the myriad influencing operations aimed at persons who might be elected to office at some point in the future, even though their chances of election could conceivably be affected by such operations. Nor does it discuss the great number of Chinese information campaigns conducted outside of election contexts, even though it is possible that such campaigns might modify public attitudes in such a way as to affect election results.

Map: Countries affected by Chinese election interference during the post-Cold War period.



Objectives and methods of China's election interference

In most cases, the objective of China's interference is to help pro-China candidates and political parties win. Such interventions exhibit preferences among political camps from the standpoint of furthering China's interests, and thus tend to be partisan, although there are examples where candidates from several parties have been supported in the same election. There are also more hostile operations where the objective is to weaken the target society by undermining its democratic process. Operations of the latter kind have mainly been observed in the Taiwanese and US cases. In some cases, both objectives are present in the same interference campaign.

China's election interference methods can be roughly divided into "offline" and "online" activities. Much of the offline operation is conducted in the form of the CCP's United Front work, that is, the systematic cultivation and grooming of actors outside the CCP for the purpose of furthering the party's interests. Such work generally targets the Chinese diaspora. Most instances of direct election interference in this category concern the funding of political parties and candidates (that do not always belong to the diaspora), but threats and intimidation against unwanted candidates also take place. This interference category also includes various inducements and pressures against commercial businesses. Local traditional media outlets (newspapers, television and radio) under CCP influence are also used as a tool of interference.

Online information campaigns, including disinformation, have increased exponentially in importance worldwide in recent years. In the past decade, manipulating information on social media has become a standard method of foreign political interference. In China, such actions are considered a branch of military activity, known variously as "public opinion warfare" (舆论战) "psychological warfare" (心理战) or "cognitive warfare" (认知战). There is evidence implicating various PRC and CCP agencies in these and similar activities, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). The scope of such activities is much broader than, but also includes, election interference. Before the era of online information campaigns, the main digital interference threat was cyberattacks. China mainly uses cyberattacks for sabotage. The Russian tactic of "hack and leak", where sensitive data is stolen and then leaked to the public, has not been part of the Chinese playbook.

Table: Overview of methods and affected countries (countries with only limited evidence are shown in lighter color).

Interference method	Asia-Pacific									Americas			Europe		Africa	
	TW	AU	NZ	ID	PH	MY	KH	KR	SB	US	CA	AR	SE	FR	SL	ZM
United Front work	▪	▪	▪			▪					▪		▪	▪		
Funding of parties/candidates	▪	▪	▪							▪	▪					
Intimidation of candidates										▪	▪					
Pressure against businesses	▪														▪	
Traditional media	▪		▪										▪			
Online (dis)information campaigns	▪				▪			▪	▪	▪						
Cyber attacks	▪			▪			▪			▪						
Diplomatic threats/inducements	▪											▪				▪

Taiwan: the classic case

No other country in the world is affected by Chinese election interference to a degree that even remotely approaches Taiwan. China has actively interfered in every election held in Taiwan, and almost every tool in the Chinese interference repertory has been tried out in Taiwan before being implemented (on a much smaller scale) in other countries. In Taiwan, China's efforts are fiercely partisan. Ever since the 2000 election, the main objective has been to oppose and sabotage the independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

United Front work is central to Chinese political interference in Taiwan. The nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), as the DPP's main domestic opponent, is thus the target of comprehensive United Front work. Even so illustrious a personality as former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has been described as a United Front target. For example, ahead of the 2024 election, it was claimed that China had coordinated the failed attempt at an electoral alliance between the more China-friendly opposition parties KMT and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), in which attempt Ma played a key role.

Receiving political funding from the PRC is a criminal offence in Taiwan. Nonetheless, the practice seems widespread. Ahead of the 2018 local elections, 33 cases of suspected Chinese funding were revealed by the government; and 66 such cases were revealed ahead of the 2020 elections. China has probably also funded marginal parties, such as the New Party, the Red Party and the China Unification Promotion Party, some of which have been investigated and raided by the police linked to questionable sources of funding. Earlier than that, a major case was that of retired military officer Luo Wen-shan (羅文山), who was sentenced to prison in 2019 for accepting political donations from the PRC in the period 2008–2012, for use in Ma Ying-jeou's election campaigns.

Taiwan is under intense and constant pressure from multifarious Chinese information operations. Civil society works hard in tandem with government efforts to expose and neutralize such operations. Disinformation increases by about 40 percent around elections. Systematic attempts to manipulate online information in an election context were first observed ahead of the local elections in 2018. Those campaigns were suspected to have been run by Base 311, a PLA unit in Fujian province. Content farms with links to Chinese media have been used to promote the KMT during elections. A massive social media campaign is suspected to have played a decisive role in electing the KMT politician Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) as Mayor of Kaohsiung in 2018. According to a defector and former spy, for this campaign, over 200 000 inauthentic accounts were opened on social media to attack the DPP, and "more than Rmb1.5 bn was given to Taiwanese media as donations or investment". Information campaigns were also prevalent, albeit more subdued, during the 2020 elections, but there was greater preparedness in the Taiwanese government and civil society. The same pattern of information operations largely continued ahead of the 2024 election, but they were also augmented by AI. Cyberattacks have also been used, for example, ahead of the 2012 election, when widespread hacking of DPP officials was observed, probably in order to sabotage the party's campaign.

The use of traditional media outlets as a form of election interference is important in the Taiwanese case. Such interference uses the rich flora of broadly pro-Chinese media in Taiwan – among which the most important actor is probably the Want Want media group (旺旺集團), which gives special coverage to pro-China candidates throughout elections. Here there is evidence of Chinese state involvement in interference. For example, in 2019 it was reported that *China Times* (中國時報), a major Taiwanese newspaper in the Want Want group, received daily instructions from the Chinese Taiwan Affairs Office on the handling of cross-straits news stories.

Another tool of election interference is Taiwanese business, especially Taiwanese companies in China. China expects Taiwanese businesspeople resident in China to have more pro-Chinese views. A much-used tactic is therefore to offer discounted flights to Taiwan around election times or to pay Taiwanese citizens in China to return to Taiwan to vote. Ahead of

the 2024 election, China may have pressured Terry Gou (郭台銘), founder of the Taiwanese electronics giant Foxconn (富士康), to withdraw his presidential candidacy by initiating tax probes against Foxconn's Chinese subsidiaries. His candidacy might otherwise have fragmented the pro-China vote.

The case of Taiwan also highlights interference methods unseen anywhere else in the world. Ahead of the 1996 presidential election, China threatened war if the wrong candidate won, and undertook missile tests and military exercises around Taiwan. Ahead of the 2000 election, China's premier, Zhu Rongji (朱镕基), made a threatening speech to coincide with the publication of an official white paper on Taiwan. These actions caused an obvious backlash against pro-Chinese candidates, however, and similar actions have been used sparingly since as a form of election interference.

Finally, there are long-standing suspicions among the Taiwanese authorities that China uses Taiwanese organized crime to run propaganda campaigns and finance pro-China organizations, including in order to influence elections.

The effectiveness of China's election interference in Taiwan (and thus, *a fortiori*, in other countries) is contested. On the one hand, it has been noted that the more extreme and blatant forms of interference frequently trigger a backlash against China-friendly candidates. Ubiquitous Chinese interference during the past three presidential elections has failed to secure victory for pro-China candidates. On the other hand, it is possible to identify signal successes, such as the election of Han Kuo-yu in 2018, but perhaps more importantly point to the fact that Chinese interference in Taiwan, including around elections, is so pervasive that it has become a constitutive feature of the entire political playing field. Chinese interference has probably contributed to political polarization and reinforced the dynamic where views on cross-straits relations constitute the main political divide. In addition, Chinese interference has shaped the democratic process in important ways – for example, Taiwan's notoriously inaccessible voting system is a precaution against Chinese meddling. Nonetheless, Chinese interference has been unable to prevent mainstream Taiwanese society from moving away from the CPP ideal of eventual unification, and may even have worked against this goal.

Given the great intensity of interference operations against Taiwan, and the fact that interference methods are always used in Taiwan before they spread to other countries, China's election interference elsewhere can perhaps best be viewed as a spillover effect of the Taiwan operations. While interference has occurred in numerous countries, in no other case is it so obviously coordinated and determined, and might be the result less of a central strategy than of low-level opportunistic initiatives.

Canada

According to the Canadian intelligence agency (CSIS), Canada is a "high-priority target" for Chinese interference. Canada has a large Chinese diaspora (around 4.6 percent of the population), and several authors have documented the existence of large and influential personal networks between China's and Canada's political and economic elites. This creates fertile ground for Chinese interference.

In the past decade, Canada has been the scene of the largest Chinese election interference scandal outside of Taiwan. The CSIS has concluded that China interfered in the two federal elections of 2019 and 2021, a judgment recently echoed by the Foreign Interference

Commission led by Marie-Josee Hogue, who nonetheless stated that Chinese meddling did not "have any impact on which party formed the government". In 2019, China was found to have funded at least 11 candidates (nine Liberals and two Conservatives) in the federal election. In the 2021 election, the CSIS has concluded that China used information campaigns and pro-China organizations to mobilize voters in prominently Chinese-Canadian communities. Particularly noteworthy was the case of the Chinese-Canadian Conservative parliamentarian, Michael Chong, who was targeted with intimidation by the Ministry of State Security (MSS), China's main intelligence agency, for sponsoring a parliamentary motion characterizing Beijing's policies in Xinjiang as genocidal.

There are also earlier instances of meddling. The CSIS stated in 2014 that the Chinese consulate in Vancouver had interfered in elections by instructing residents with Chinese as their only language who to vote for. A vote-buying scheme for local elections in Vancouver, organized through WeChat by a Wenzhou (a city in Zhejiang province) friendship society, was exposed in 2018.

Digital campaigns seem to have played a relatively minor role in Canada. The Media Ecosystem Observatory, a Canadian research institute, writes of Chinese disinformation on social media around the 2021 election that "We judge this to be primarily organic and minimally resourced; however, [we] cannot preclude the possibility of low-level interference efforts".

The interference campaigns in Canada are notable for their obvious partisanship: in both elections, the objective of the interference was to achieve a Liberal Party victory. In the aftermath of the 2021 election, Conservative leader Erin O'Toole publicly blamed foreign interference for the election results, which showcases the potential for such interference to undermine confidence in democratic processes. Information is still emerging about Chinese interference activities in the 2019 and 2021 elections, but the issue has already become an important domestic issue in its own right, including accusations against Justin Trudeau's Liberal government of tardiness in investigating the ongoing interference.

Australia

Australia's large Chinese diaspora (around 5.5 percent of the country's population) makes the country a prime target for Chinese influencing activities. There are many examples of suspected PRC funding of political candidates, some of which have been investigated as breaches of election law. Ahead of an important local election in 2017, the Chinese diaspora was urged to "take down" the ruling right wing Liberal party in social media posts shared by people with ties to a prominent Australian United Front group. In 2019, it was reported that Chinese operatives had allegedly tried to fund Liberal Party member Bo "Nick" Zhao to run for the federal parliament in the elections that year. Zhao had died in mysterious circumstances after revealing the attempts to the Australian intelligence agency (ASIO). Also in 2019, a cyberattack conducted by China targeted political parties and Parliament House. Ahead of the 2022 federal elections, a Beijing-orchestrated attempt to fund Labor Party candidates was revealed by ASIO. According to ASIO, a foreign agent "planned to support candidates who either backed the interests of the foreign government or who were deemed vulnerable to inducements and cultivation". Like Canada, information campaigns are not an important element of election interference in Australia. A 2023 report by the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media found no "identified foreign interference compromising the integrity of the 2022 Australian federal election".

United States

As the world's pre-eminent power, the United States is an obvious and important target of Chinese influence. The scholar James Jiann Hua To has documented that a CCP strategy for developing an overseas Chinese voting bloc in the United States existed already in 2004. Even so, there have been few examples of direct election interference using "offline" methods. The iconic case remains the 1996 campaign financing scandal known as "Chinagate", where China channeled money into Democratic Party election campaigns and six people were implicated. A more recent, and unusually blatant, case was the harassment by an MSS agent of Yan Xiong, a former Tiananmen activist who ran as a candidate for the House of Representatives in New York in the 2022 mid-term elections.

Chinese online interference against US elections is a recent phenomenon. There were scattered reports of attempts to influence voters around the mid-term elections of 2018. However, in 2019 analysts still deemed that China "has not sought to interfere in a national election in the United States". A report by the National Intelligence Community (NIC) on foreign threats to the 2020 presidential election said that China "did not employ interference efforts and considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the U.S. presidential election". It was not until the 2022 mid-term elections that signs of interference through information campaigns could be observed.

One of the most prominent examples of such campaigns is the so-called Spamouflage Dragon, also known as Dragonbridge, which is probably run by the MPS. Active since at least 2017, it was implicated in election interference ahead of the 2022 elections, chiefly through aggressive discrediting of the democratic process through misinformation. Even though this operation is comparatively large, however, it generates low levels of engagement from real users. Thus, the NIC has assessed that China "refrained from authorizing a comprehensive campaign to influence the [2022] midterms in favor of one US political party or to question the legitimacy of election results or processes". Ahead of the 2024 presidential election, the Spamouflage Dragon is still active but has shifted to a more partisan position, which mostly attacks Joe Biden and spreads pro-Trump messaging. According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, "it is unclear whether this is simply because [Biden] is currently in office or if it reflects a preference for the electoral outcome". In addition to information campaigns, there have been some cyber threats to elections. Ahead of the presidential election in 2020, Google reported phishing attempts that originated in China against both the Trump and the Biden campaigns.

On the whole, Chinese interference attempts in the US must be considered relatively modest, considering the PRC's demonstrated capabilities. An important reason for this is likely to be the lack of pro-Chinese candidates to support, especially as the view of China as a national security threat and strategic rival today has broad bipartisan support. Where there is interference, the focus is on disruption and delegitimization of the election process. This is an important distinction from the Canadian and Australian cases, where interference is mostly partisan and does not include online disinformation campaigns.

Other countries

In the Asia-Pacific countries, there is evidence of election interference in the form of cyberattacks, information campaigns and targeted campaign donations. In **New Zealand**, a case studied in detail by the scholar Anne-Marie Brady, donations to both local and central

government politicians occurred ahead of the elections in 2017, as well as attempts to direct voting behavior and disinformation in Chinese-language media outlets. In 2018, the Chinese ambassador to **Malaysia** openly supported the election campaign of the president of the Malaysian Chinese Association (a political party). In 2019, the **Indonesian** election commission said that Chinese and Russian hackers had attempted to "manipulate and modify" the country's electoral roll. Interference has also been reported in the **Philippines**, **Cambodia** and **South Korea**, and at least alleged in **Sierra Leone**, **Zambia** and **Argentina**. Actual interference, especially in Asian countries, could be much more pervasive than this scattered evidence would indicate. Large and influential Chinese diasporas in several of those countries, combined with obvious PRC interest in their political orientation, present both motives and the preconditions for such efforts. A complicating factor is that several of these countries are not mature democracies, which means that scrutiny of election interference is probably less comprehensive, but also that elections might be a less crucial tool for influencing politics in those countries. One of the most recent victims of Chinese meddling could be the **Solomon Islands**, where China may have purposely amplified Russian allegations of a purported USAID-sponsored coup ahead of the 2024 election.

The risk of Chinese election interference in Europe

There is scant evidence of Chinese election interference in Europe. A 2023 study notes that "empirical evidence regarding Chinese election interventions within Europe remains limited in open-source data". What information there is concerns minor and/or ambiguous incidents. For example, United Front organizations were reported to have organized voters during the 2017 presidential election in **France**. In **Sweden**, PRC-loyal diaspora organizations promoted the campaigns of a local politician in both 2014 and 2018. In 2023, a US State Department report cryptically mentioned that in 2021, "Chinese diaspora groups in a Western European country were consulting with the PRC Embassy in the Western European country to identify and approach ethnic Chinese candidates for elected office, to include the PRC Embassy recommending specific prospective candidates by name".

However, the likelihood of Chinese election interference in Europe in the next few years increases as Europe becomes an increasingly important strategic arena for China. The Chinese diasporas in Europe, while significantly smaller than in Australia, Canada and the US, are targeted by the same United Front tactics. China has demonstrated capabilities in the digital domain that it can deploy if it wishes. Some of this may already be occurring. A report on social media by the Taiwanese research organization AI Labs finds that China's state media is actively boosting discussion of topics such as China's cooperation with Europe, the Russia-Ukraine war and energy security ahead of elections to the European Parliament in 2024. This makes exercising vigilance against malicious operations, both online and offline an important task.

It might be true that China has limited capabilities to directly influence election results. Outside of Taiwan, Chinese interference has probably never been decisive in swinging an election in a certain direction. Nonetheless, the mere fact that such interference takes place – as a hostile act by a foreign power – risks delegitimizing the entire democratic process and causing lasting damage to confidence in a country's institutions.

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About the Swedish National China Centre

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