

# China's 'Soft' War Against America

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**By Lee Edwards**

ALEXANDRIA, Va.—The facts are indisputable: Communist China is waging a sophisticated "soft" war against America with a twofold goal: to challenge the United States as the world's leading superpower and to supplant its dominant position in China's neighborhood. Communist China's strategy touches every aspect of our society: economic, technological, educational, political, even cultural.

## **Determined to again be Middle Kingdom**

With a GDP of \$14 trillion, a population of 1.4 billion brimming with confidence and nationalist fervor, and an assertive Communist Party commanding a modern military, China is determined to again become the Middle Kingdom and to erase the humiliation of Western dominance of China over much of the last two centuries.

China's calculated use of "hard power"—its offensive-weapons buildup, its draconian suppression of free speech and assembly in Hong Kong, the constant military maneuvers and warnings aimed at Taiwan and the "colonization" of the South China Sea—are troubling enough. But we should also focus on China's use of "soft power," especially through its United Front Work Department (UFW). Although benign-sounding, the UFW "aims to influence the policies of foreign states toward Chinese ends, through means that may be legal, illegal, or exploit gray areas," June Teufel Dreyer writes in a 2018 Foreign Policy Research Institute report. Target No. 1 of China's global offensive is the United States.

## **Entering aspects of democracy**

With an annual budget of an estimated \$2.6 billion, the United Front Work Department has influenced American universities, academic presses, think tanks, schools and school boards, corporations, movie companies and political lobbying. The UFW is exploiting America's open democratic ways to advance its authoritarian aims and influence U.S. policy. In the words of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the Chinese government has "decided to exploit our freedoms to gain advantage over us at the federal level, the state level and the local level."

The public face of the UFW is the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), which routinely approaches American officials in various states, offering trips to China and discussing possible invest-

ments in technological industries affecting U.S. national security. The association is well prepared for its discussions; a Beijing think tank has assessed the attitudes of all 50 U.S. governors toward China, grading them as “friendly,” “hard-line,” or “ambiguous.”

### **Apply pressure**

CPAFFC does not hesitate to apply pressure once a relationship has been established. In one case, Secretary Pompeo revealed, a Chinese official threatened to cancel a Chinese investment if a certain governor traveled to Taiwan whose democratically elected president is deemed by Beijing to be too independent. No one is unimportant in CPAFFC’s calculations; its people cultivate county school boards and local politicians through so-called sister-city programs.

But China’s idea of “brotherly love” is far removed from the American concept. Last year, the association pressured a Chicago high school that uses its Chinese-language materials to cancel its invitation to a Taiwan expert to participate in a climate-change panel.

For Beijing, political warfare is waged everywhere. While direct federal campaign contributions by foreign nationals and companies are illegal, indirect contributions through U.S. subsidiaries are legal. The CPP takes advantage of our federalist system; many states do not prohibit foreign contributions in local races. Also legal is the hiring of former senior government officials by foreign companies. One former U.S. representative lobbies for the U.S.-China Transpacific Foundation, a Beijing-backed organization that brings delegations of U.S. congressmen to China to “enhance” their understanding of economic and other developments in the mainland.

### **Lobbying and espionage**

The CCP knows that in Washington, D.C., lobbying is a must. Chinese companies acknowledge spending \$3.8 million on federal lobbying in 2017, and a total of \$20.2 million since 2000. For example, Wanhua Chemical, a Chinese state-owned company, joined the American Chemistry Council (ACC), which, according to *The Intercept* publication, is “unusually aggressive in intervening in American politics.” The significance of Wanhua contributing “dark money” to the ACC was spelled out in an *Intercept* series of articles about foreign influence on U.S. elections. The publication reported that a Chinese-owned real-estate company had directly donated to the super PAC supporting Jeb Bush’s unsuccessful presidential campaign.

And there is the more recent case of Hunter Biden, who, when his father was vice president, joined the board of BHR Partners, a new Chinese private-equity fund backed by China’s largest state banks (and therefore the CCP). A Hunter Biden spokesman said that Biden did not acquire his 10 percent financial stake in BHR until after Vice President Joe Biden had left office. In April 2020, Hunter resigned from the BHR board but retained his 10 percent stake. The president-elect’s son has admitted that his taxes are under federal investigation.

After years of overlooking China's aggressive lobbying and technology theft, the United States has taken the offensive in its soft war with China. Last summer, the State Department closed down the Chinese consulate in Houston because China was using it "for highly aggressive espionage efforts against U.S. intellectual property and American citizens of Chinese ancestry."

Among the espionage priorities of Chinese agents was the penetration of "defense and tech sectors in Houston and in the so-called Silicon Hills area of Austin." The consulate also tracked and harassed Chinese Americans, who the CCP believes should be loyal to the Xi Jinping regime.

### **Economic sanctions**

In addition, significant targeted economic sanctions against Chinese companies were put in place by the Trump administration, a policy supported by Republicans and Democrats in Congress that might continue during a Biden administration, given China's blatant use of privately developed technology for the aggressive and repressive political ends of the state. Last December, the Commerce Department added a major Chinese semi-conductor and drone manufacturer to an export blacklist. The sanctions followed evidence of activity between the Chinese company and China's military industrial complex. "We will not allow advanced U.S. technology to help build the military of an increasingly belligerent adversary," said Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross. The department explained it was adding the drone maker for enabling high-tech surveillance in China, a clear abuse of human rights.

Also added to the blacklist were several Beijing universities for acquiring or attempting to acquire "U.S.-origin items in support of programs for the People's Liberation Army." The blacklist now includes more than 300 Chinese companies or entities, reflecting a U.S. resolve to protect itself against theft of American technology.

### **Confucius Institute at schools**

China's central weapon on the American campus is the Confucius Institute, which offers language classes and hosts seemingly harmless events such as Chinese New Year celebrations, cooking classes and speakers. Three years ago, according to the National Association of Scholars, there were 103 Confucius Institutes in the United States. In August 2020, an alarmed Trump administration designated the Confucius Institute as "a foreign mission of the Chinese Communist Party" supporting "Beijing's propaganda and influence operations" inside the United States. The number of institutes plummeted from over 100 to 67, and the College Board announced that it would sever its financial ties with the Confucius Institute's headquarters.

Not every American university, however, is ready to cut off the bountiful flow of Chinese yuan. Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), a leading Washington public-affairs institute and graduate school, receives funds from the China-United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF), a Hong Kong-based nonprofit organization registered with the Department of Justice as a foreign agent.

Chinese Student and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) are a more direct vector of Chinese Communist Party influence on American campuses. According to a Hoover Institution report and confirmed by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the CCP directly “manages” CSSAs, which are funded by Chinese embassies and consulates.

“American universities that host events deemed politically offensive by the Chinese Communist Party and government,” say Hoover Institution scholars Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, “have been subject to increasing pressure.” For example, student members of the University of Maryland’s CSSA were praised by Chinese-embassy officials for having sharply rebuked a Chinese student who favorably contrasted American democracy with the Chinese authoritarian alternative in a commencement speech.

In addition to the college-level Institutes, the Chinese government has promoted, funded and supplied teachers for Confucius Classrooms, tailored for students from kindergarten through 12th grade. As of February 2020, there were over 400 Confucius Classrooms in American elementary, middle and high schools. The goal of the Institutes and the Classrooms is to increase China’s global soft power by presenting the most favorable portrait of the nation and its culture, while avoiding any discussion of China’s systemized denial of basic human rights.

### **Art of disinformation**

The Chinese Communist Party and its satellite organizations are expert in the art of disinformation. According to National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien, Chinese propaganda persuaded so many Americans that a U.S. soldier had brought the coronavirus to Wuhan—as opposed to the truth that Wuhan had given the virus to the rest of the world—that the soldier and her family needed a personal security detail to protect them from death threats.

The party brooks no deviation from the party line: Last December, a Chinese court sentenced a former lawyer who reported on the early stage of the coronavirus outbreak to four years in prison. Her alleged crime was “picking fights and provoking trouble.” Her real but unacknowledged crime was telling the truth about China’s essential role in the spread of the virus.

Nothing escapes the all-seeing eyes of Communist China’s propaganda managers. At China’s insistence, Taiwanese flags were dropped from Tom Cruise’s flight jacket in the forthcoming *Top Gun* sequel *Maverick*. At Beijing’s “suggestion,” MGM changed the identities of the invading military from China to North Korea in the *Red Dawn* remake. When the general manager of the Houston Rockets professional basketball team tweeted his support for the peaceful Hong Kong demonstrators, the CCP announced that the team’s games would not be shown on Chinese TV. The general manager quickly apologized.

China has launched a blitzkrieg that, in Attorney General William Barr’s words, is calculated “to seize the commanding heights of the global economy and to surpass the United States as the world’s preeminent technological superpower.” A primary Chinese weapon in this global conflict is the afore-

mentioned United Front Work Department. The UFWD takes its lead from Lenin, Stalin, Mao and other dictators, for whom, says Australian government official John Garnaut, "words are not vehicles of reason and persuasion. They are bullets . . . for defining, isolating and destroying opponents."

### **Not a harmless competitor**

America's response must be many-tiered. For one thing, we must understand that China is not a harmless competitor, as we once imagined, but a determined opponent that will stop at nothing to achieve its goals. We must also employ every necessary weapon such as: imposing tighter targeted economic sanctions on companies and individuals involved in human rights abuses; establishing reciprocity in travel and media access; barring U.S. investment in PLA-controlled companies, particularly in technology; closing down all Confucius Institutes and Classrooms; and challenging China in every international forum from the United Nations to the World Health Organization.

We have the resources, the talented people and the entrepreneurial spirit to defeat Communist China in this soft war. It remains only for us to adopt a strategy of victory over a very determined opponent.