JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

April 2018, Volume 29, Number 2 $14.00

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NEW ZEALAND AND THE CCP'S "MAGIC WEAPONS"

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New Zealand is the target of a concerted foreign-influence campaign by the People's Republic of China (PRC). The campaign aims to further the political and economic agendas of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by coopting local elites, securing access to strategic information and resources, and manipulating public discourse. These CCP political-influence activities, which in China fall under the rubric of "united front work," have also frequently been a means of facilitating espionage. China's efforts not only threaten New Zealand's sovereignty, but also are undermining the integrity of the New Zealand political system and the rights of ethnic-Chinese New Zealanders to the freedoms of speech, association, and religion.[1]

The PRC is seeking change in the international order. During the 1960s, Mao Zedong's China promoted itself as the center of world revolution. By contrast, Beijing under current CCP general secretary Xi Jinping aims to lead "Globalization 2.0" by building a China-centered economic order based upon a new economic and strategic bloc known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, sometimes also called One Belt, One Road). Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy includes the expansion of united front work, on which the Party is now placing greater importance than at any time since its seizure of power in 1949.[2] In September 2014, Xi borrowed a term from Mao to describe this work as one of the CCP's "magic weapons"—a designation also applied to the high-profile domains of Party-building and military activities.[3] In May 2015, he presided over the first national conference on united front work in

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nine years.[4]

One of the key goals of this work is to influence the decision making of foreign governments and societies in China's favor. Today's influence activities draw heavily on the policies formulated by Xi's predecessors, from Mao through Hu Jintao (2002–12), but their aims are more expansive than ever before. This reflects the growing confidence of Xi's government, as well as its high-stakes strategy for holding on to power by boosting economic growth and tightening control over information. The main categories of influence activities under Xi include, first, increased efforts to exert control over overseas-Chinese communities; second, a renewed emphasis on people-to-people, party-to-party, and enterprise-to-enterprise relations geared toward coopting foreigners into promoting the CCP's goals; third, a global, multiplatform communications strategy; and finally, the formation of a China-centered bloc through the BRI.

By stressing information control, Xi is following in Mao's footsteps. In today's environment, however, this means not only controlling China's public sphere, but also shaping how the international media and international academia comment on matters relating to China. Thus state broadcaster CCTV's international arm CGTN (China Global Network) transmits the CCP line to the outside world, emphasizing business over politics, via 24-hour satellite broadcasts and social media. China Radio International (CRI) and the Xinhua News Agency have used mergers and partnerships to claim niches in foreign markets for radio, television, and online content. *China Daily,* the CCP's English-language newspaper, publishes supplements in major papers around the world. China has announced media-cooperation agreements with nations including Russia, Turkey, and the sixteen Central and East European states that, together with China, make up the so-called 16+1. Finally, Chinese universities and university presses have set up partnerships with their foreign counterparts, thanks to which Chinese censorship is steadily creeping into these domains.

New Zealand appears to have been a test zone for many of China's recent united front efforts. The CCP leadership views its relationship with Wellington as a model to be replicated elsewhere,[5] and particularly aspires to set an example for Australia, the small island nations in the South Pacific, and other Western states. The PRC's political-influence activities in New Zealand have now reached a critical level.

There are a variety of factors behind China's interest in New Zealand. Geopolitically, the prospect of diluting New Zealand's ties to its traditional Anglophone partners likely holds an appeal. New Zealand is a party to the longstanding UKUSA intelligence-cooperation agreement, whose members—also including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States—are informally called the "Five Eyes"; it also belongs to the unofficial ABCA military grouping that encom-

passes the same five countries. In addition, it is a member of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (which links New Zealand with Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom) and a NATO partner state. Extricating New Zealand from these associations, or at least getting Wellington to agree to stop spying on China for the Five Eyes, would be a major coup for the Xi government. In the meantime, New Zealand is valuable to China as a soft underbelly through which to access Five Eyes intelligence.

China also stands to gain direct advantages from increasing its influence. Given that New Zealand holds responsibility for the defense and foreign affairs of three territories in the South Pacific—the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau—the government in Wellington can supply four potential votes for China at some international forums. New Zealand has unexplored oil and gas resources, and China is expanding its offshore fossil-fuel exploration. New Zealand has cheaply available arable land, and China is seeking to increase its food security. Together with the three abovementioned South Pacific territories, New Zealand—which has acquired a reputation as a hotspot for global money laundering since the 2011 passage of legislation to encourage investment by offshore funds—also represents a potential route for illicit monies.

China has long-term strategic interests in Antarctica, where New Zealand is a claimant state and an established player. New Zealand is useful as a launching site and source of expertise for near-space research, an important new field of weapons research for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). It is also a potential strategic site for PLA naval facilities or a future ground station for China's BeiDou-2 satellite-navigation system.[6] Finally, New Zealand has expertise useful to China in multilateral trade negotiations, Pacific affairs, Antarctic science, and horticultural science.

United Front Efforts in New Zealand

Against this backdrop, the PRC has used a range of political, financial, and cultural channels to pursue influence. These include, first, targeted efforts to coopt New Zealand business, political, and intellectual elites—using business opportunities, investments, honors, political hospitality, scholarships, party-to-party links, and vanity projects—and to induce them to advocate China's interests. Of particular note, an array of former New Zealand politicians have assumed high-level positions in entities that are Chinese funded or have interests in China. They include former prime ministers Dame Jenny Shipley and John Key, who have taken up positions as, respectively, chair of the China Construction Bank of New Zealand and adviser to Comcast on its business activities in China.

Second, ethnic-Chinese business figures with strong links to the CCP have made targeted donations in the tens or even hundreds of thousands

of dollars to New Zealand political parties. A number of these donors have held formal leadership positions in economic or political associations with connections to the United Front Work Department.

Third, Beijing has engaged in massive efforts to bring New Zealand's Chinese-language media, Chinese community groups, and ethnic-Chinese politicians under CCP control. Among the fruits of these efforts have been near-ubiquitous arrangements between PRC institutions and the Chinese-language media outlets of New Zealand. A number of once-independent organizations now partner with or source content from PRC state-media organs such as Xinhua and CRI. On the political front, media reports in late 2017 revealed that National Party MP Jian Yang—a key figure both in the National government's China policy and in its engagement with New Zealand's Chinese community—had taught and studied at PLA-affiliated educational institutions, including one under the purview of military intelligence, before leaving China in 1994.[7]

Finally, PRC institutions have used mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships with New Zealand companies, universities, and research centers to take on a local face, enhance their sway, and potentially gain access to military technology, commercial secrets, and other strategic information. For instance, Huawei Technologies, a company that has been linked to the PRC Ministry of State Security and banned from sensitive contracts in Australia and the United States, has formed partnerships with New Zealand universities and plans to construct a New Zealand–based cloud data center. It has also set up 3G and 4G networks for New Zealand's major phone carriers.[8]

Some of these activities endanger New Zealand's national security directly, while others have a more long-term corrosive effect. The impact on New Zealand democracy has been profound. It includes a curtailing of the freedoms of speech, religion, and association for the ethnic-Chinese community; a silencing of debates on China in the wider public sphere; and a corrupting influence on the political system through the blurring of personal, political, and economic interests. Small states such as New Zealand (population 4.7 million) are very vulnerable to foreign interference. The media have limited resources and lack competition, while the tertiary-education sector is small and—despite the laws on academic freedom—easily intimidated or coopted. But foreign interference can thrive only if public opinion in the state being influenced tolerates it.

China has not had to pressure New Zealand to accept Beijing's soft-power activities and political influence: Successive New Zealand governments have actively courted them. Ever since New Zealand–PRC diplomatic relations were established in 1972, New Zealand governments have sought Beijing's favor by offering high-profile support for China's economic agendas. The two countries have since developed extensive ties, and declared a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in

2014. China is New Zealand's second-largest overall trading partner and its largest market for tourism and milk products—New Zealand's top two economic sectors.[9] Meanwhile, successive U.S. administrations have refused to sign a free-trade agreement with Wellington, many believe in punishment for New Zealand's 1987 declaration of a nuclear-free zone. Washington recently declined to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, which New Zealand helped to set up.

New Zealand is now expanding relations with China to such areas as finance, telecommunications, forestry, food safety and security, education, science and technology, tourism, climate change, Antarctic cooperation, and even military cooperation. Wellington has also encouraged China to be active in the neighborhood, from the South Pacific to Antarctica—initially as a counterbalance to Soviet influence, then as an aid donor and scientific partner, and since 2014 as part of the "diversification" of New Zealand's military links away from Five Eyes partnerships.[10] Recently, New Zealand became the first Western nation to sign an agreement to cooperate with China on the BRI.[11]

The Politics of Foreign Influence

With regard to China, the New Zealand National Party government (2008–17) adhered to two main principles. The first, the "no surprises" policy,[12] appeared to entail avoiding saying or doing anything that might offend the PRC government; this inevitably had a chilling effect on normal policy discussions. The second involved the policy known as "getting the political relationship right," which came to mean developing close political links with a range of CCP leaders, as well as their representatives and affiliates in New Zealand.[13] These approaches fed and encouraged China's political-influence activities.

Yet in New Zealand, unlike Australia, the topic of China's expanded influence activities was not raised publicly, although New Zealand intelligence officials did raise concerns at a Five Eyes meeting in June 2017.[14] In this context, the release a week before the September 2017 national election of "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping," my research paper examining New Zealand as a case study of the CCP's united front tactics, unleashed a national and international media storm. I took the unusual step of publicly releasing what had been a conference paper because the information it uncovered was of public interest, and my earlier efforts to alert relevant New Zealand agencies and senior politicians had received no response.

The issues raised concerned both of New Zealand's major political parties, and the resulting discussion undoubtedly contributed to the popular feeling that a change was needed. After a close election, a coalition government comprising the Labour Party, the Greens, and the small nationalist New Zealand First party took office. The new government

early on demonstrated that it was aware of the challenges facing New Zealand. In an unusual step, it released its national-security briefings to the public, heavily redacted but nonetheless including discussions on hacking attacks and "attempts to unduly influence expatriate communities." The reports also advised granting the public further access to information on security issues.[15]

Foreign Minister Winston Peters, the New Zealand First party chief, has stated that under the coalition government, "New Zealand is no longer for sale."[16] Labour prime minister Jacinda Ardern has stressed New Zealand's reputation as a nation "free from corruption" and said that the country would remain "outward-facing" while still "looking after our interests."[17] While Green leader James Shaw has made no policy statements on the issue, his party is a strong advocate of an independent foreign policy and has previously been critical of the CCP's policies toward Tibet and toward the followers of Falun Gong. So far, however, the new government has avoided making any statements directly acknowledging China's influence activities.

Particularly given New Zealand's extensive trade and other relationships with China, the media attention to these activities has put the government in an awkward position. To tackle this problem, it must do more than just attack the policies of the previous government: It must also clean its own house and deal with the involvement of some of its own senior politicians in united front activities.[18] It must indicate to its allies abroad that it is going to address the issue, but do so in a way that will not offend the CCP, which is watching with a hawk's eye.

As I have emphasized in public statements, facing up to China's influence campaign does not mean that the New Zealand government (or other states) should engage in McCarthyism, displays of xenophobia, or efforts to "head butt" China. Instead, it should work to build a genuine relationship with New Zealand's ethnic-Chinese community, independent of CCP-authorized united front organizations. It should strive to protect this community's rights to freedom of speech, religion, and association, which are under threat from Beijing's attempts at "guiding" the Chinese-language media and ethnic-Chinese community groups. More broadly, New Zealand and other democracies dealing with foreign-influence activities should look to weaknesses in their own political systems—such as shortcomings in transparency, in election-financing regulations, and in the rules governing conflicts of interest for politicians.

New Zealand, like other small states in this changing global order, must work more to partner with like-minded governments and give up the notion that it needs to seek shelter with one or another of the great powers. Like-minded democratic nations should discuss with one another the implications of Xi's new foreign policy, and the BRI in particular, for global politics and for their own economic independence. Strengthening economic partnerships among these nations will help New Zea-

land and other vulnerable small states to boost their resilience. This will lessen the pressure on these states to make political concessions to the PRC in exchange for economic benefits—the Faustian choice made by the 2008–17 New Zealand National Party government.

Every state resists political interference in its affairs by other nations. The PRC frequently berates the United States and other countries for perceived interference in China's domestic politics, and it claims to value noninterference in other states' domestic affairs. China's united front strategy, however, has always gone against that ideal. For a small state such as New Zealand, guarding against foreign political interference poses a major challenge. It will require political will not only from the government, but also from the citizenry. If New Zealand can develop strategies for better managing the country's relationship with the PRC, it may indeed become an example for other Western states. Democracies, too, have their magic weapons: the right to choose our governments; judicial checks on government power; independent regulatory bodies; the freedoms of speech and association; academic freedom; and the "fourth estate," including both traditional and new media. Now is the time for us to use them.

NOTES

1. For additional details and further documentation of the points raised in this article, see "Magic Weapons" at *www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping*.

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