

2021-22 WILSON CHINA FELLOWSHIP

The Diaspora and China's Foreign Influence Activities

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Abstract

Amidst growing concern over authoritarian foreign influence operations, Chinese diaspora communities are often perceived by host countries as potential unfriendly agents, but also viewed by Beijing as a tool to further its political and security interests. The Chinese government has traditionally been concerned about forestalling threats to its domestic rule, but more recent diaspora management policies have increasingly emphasized using overseas Chinese as a tool to promote China's interests and increase its global influence. Beijing uses a mix of material incentives and coercion, as well as ideational strategies through information control and targeted propaganda. By scraping WeChat accounts, we find that government propaganda uses wedge narratives—such as framing racism and violence as targeted at the diaspora—to divide diaspora communities from host countries. Diaspora influence in host countries can take the form of agenda setting, discourse framing, or political brokering. From a foreign policy perspective, the informality and plausible deniability of diaspora statecraft makes it harder to assess and forestall. China's illiberal extraterritorial reach also threatens to adversely affect the healthy functioning of democratic political systems while further undermining the liberties of heterogenous diaspora communities. Paradoxically, active diaspora mobilization tends to raise the hackles of host countries. In many cases, the Chinese government attempts to homogenize its diaspora while wielding it as a foreign policy tool have sparked significant longer-term blowback.

Implications and Key Takeaways

- China's success at diaspora mobilization remains largely limited, and rhetoric about a 'whole-of-society' threat is not just alarmist and distracting—it is counterproductive.
- Policies to prevent Beijing's targeting of the Chinese diaspora should avoid sowing further ethnic divisions between diaspora and host countries, which feeds into Chinese Communist Party narratives and messaging strategies.

- Policymakers and politicians should view Chinese-Americans as assets in reaching out to diaspora communities and addressing issues of concern. Building a robust civil society and political grassroots networks, along with support for a diverse Chinese-language information environment, will facilitate host country integration and counter Chinese government narratives of diaspora marginalization.

Introduction

In January 2022, UK intelligence services issued a security warning about a high-profile British-Chinese lawyer with close links to the Chinese Community Party who had made several political donations and was previously lauded by a former British prime minister. In 2018, the FBI director publicly described China as posing “not just a whole-of-government threat, but a whole-of-society threat” to the United States. By his account, ethnically Chinese students, professors, and scientists were infiltrating U.S. society and collecting intelligence on behalf of the Chinese government. The Department of Justice’s anti-espionage China Initiative has been criticized for targeting many scientists of Chinese descent. In one prominent case, a professor of mechanical engineering at MIT, Gang Chen, was arrested in January 2021 and charged with hiding links to Chinese government institutions, before the case was dropped a year later.

Amidst growing concern over authoritarian foreign influence operations, there has been renewed debate over how such governments are attempting to coopt certain groups and individuals to act on behalf of foreign interests. Unsurprisingly, diaspora communities of geopolitical rivals are often perceived by host countries as potential unfriendly agents, but also viewed by home governments as a natural resource to pursue its political and security interests. Understanding the role of diaspora statecraft has important implications not just for geopolitical competition, but also the healthy functioning of democratic systems and multicultural societies.

What a diaspora constitutes can be a contested subject; it is also a concept that is politically and socially constructed by home countries, host countries, and within diaspora communities themselves. In this paper, I use diaspora to refer broadly to emigrant communities, that is, people who have origins from a nation-state different from where they reside. This can include those who hold home state citizenship but live abroad, those who are citizens of host country but born in the home state and have cultural and linguistic linkages there, or those who are descendants of emigrants from the home state but were born in the host country. There is almost certainly variation within the diaspora on their affinity to the homeland, assimilation into the host country, and their political and social identities. Individual-level human agency can affect the ability of states to use the diaspora as tools of foreign policy. Additionally,

not all diaspora activity should be assumed to be 'weaponized' by states; in fact, as will be discussed later, an overt approach to diaspora mobilization may well backfire for the home state.

China's Diasporas & International Politics: Why Governments Should Care

In order to understand the policy environment surrounding China's attempted mobilization of its diaspora around the world, it is necessary to consider China's diaspora in comparative context. While diaspora politics is not a new field of study in international relations, most scholarship has focused on the political and economic influence of diaspora communities back in their home states. For example, the diaspora—who tend to be foreign-educated or have overseas business experience—are often major sources of remittances, foreign direct investment, and skilled capital, particularly for developing countries.¹ Additionally, diaspora movements can help to consolidate state formation and nation-building processes.²

Diaspora communities also matter for home country politics. In fact, a powerful diasporic lobby can even alter homeland policies through their economic clout and overseas political voice, as in the case of the Armenian diaspora pushing Armenian foreign policy toward a more militant anti-Turkish stance. Political parties in democratic home countries also reach out to diaspora communities to gain electoral advantages, by targeting them with political propaganda and mobilizing them (or their in-country family networks) to vote.³

Non-democratic states may thus be wary of diaspora activity for these very reasons, seeking to control overseas populations so as to maintain regime stability and prevent dissension. Diaspora can transmit information back home about different political or social norms, including democratic values, that can threaten the home government's rule.⁴ Exposure to foreign ideas, for example through educational or business interactions, can counter homeland propaganda and induce anti-regime activities among the diaspora. As a consequence, many authoritarian governments, such as in Morocco and Tunisia, have actively surveilled diaspora communities abroad and punished identified offenders.⁵

But diaspora engagement can also be driven by explicit foreign policy goals—seeking to use the diaspora to improve the home state’s reputation, promote its geopolitical interests, or influence host country politics. Overseas citizens can serve as cultural or educational ambassadors, helping to inform and change public perceptions at the grassroots level. This often ties into broader public diplomacy and ‘soft power’ efforts, but in authoritarian contexts can veer into what is sometimes called ‘sharp power,’ in which the diaspora is mobilized in more coercive and subversive ways.

There are many examples of countries using diaspora populations as a tool of geopolitical competition. When the U.S. Peace Corps was established in the early 1960s, a core motivation was to defend the ‘free world’ and counter the grassroots-level spread of communist propaganda by the Soviet Union in developing countries. For its part, the Soviet Union used high-skilled Russian bureaucrats and scientists to promote economic development and entrench Communist ideas in countries in the Soviet bloc. Egypt under Nasser sent educators and bureaucrats abroad to other Arab countries to spread ideas of anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism, and an Egypt-led pan-Arabism. Egyptian technical experts and professionals also constituted the face of developmental aid to Yemen and African states. This contributed to intra-Arab rivalry as well as competition with Israel for regional influence.⁶

In fact, diaspora populations are often instrumentalized for broader strategic objectives. Home governments may discourage diaspora repatriation from host countries where the home state is pursuing revisionist claims, in order to continue legitimizing its extraterritorial policies.⁷ For example, Serbia promoted the return and integration of Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina but not Serbs from Kosovo, because of Serbia territorial claims over the latter. India in its early days of independence refused to defend its diaspora’s economic assets because it wanted to underscore the principle of national sovereignty over resources; subsequently it embraced the Indian diaspora to legitimize needed economic reforms amidst globalization.⁸

The priorities and goals of diaspora management can change with a country’s shifting objectives and global position. Whereas diaspora communities might have been predominantly seen as a source of capital and knowledge to drive homeland economic development, a rising power might now see the diaspora as a means to expand the home state’s geopolitical influence and boost

its overseas image.⁹ Much scholarship has tended to examine diaspora politics in the context of a 'weaker' home state,¹⁰ but the case of China sheds new light on how the diaspora can be potentially marshalled by a powerful homeland for broader geopolitical influence, and as a tool of non-military warfare.

China's Policies of Diaspora Engagement and Mobilization

China presents an important case to understand the (attempted) use of diaspora as instruments of foreign policy. First, as a rising power in an era where economic flows, information exchange, and human movement are perhaps more prominent than military force, diaspora mobilization presents a potential tool of expanding geopolitical influence at the intersection of these trends. Second, China has been a source of large-scale historical as well as contemporary overseas migration. Previous waves of emigrants moved for better economic opportunities or fled for political reasons, and may have mixed loyalties to the home regime (many are also from Taiwan or Hong Kong); more recent waves have been driven by economic growth and a new middle class, leading to more businesspeople and students with closer links to the Mainland.

Third, China's strong state capacity and propaganda apparatus provide a good indicator of what extensive diaspora mobilization can entail. Fourth, the authoritarian nature of China's political system sheds light on the export of such illiberal techniques, with implications for understanding the new terrain on which non-military statecraft might be conducted and by what rules. Taken together, these characteristics suggest that the Chinese government has ample motivation (domestic and foreign policy goals), opportunity (relatively receptive diaspora targets), and means (relatively well-developed institutional capacity, transnational authoritarian tools, and reduced dependence on diasporic resources) for diaspora engagement.¹¹

Diaspora engagement, particularly in present day, is deeply intertwined with a broader system of political control—China's United Front. The United Front system consists of a coalition of government organizations, affiliated groups, and individuals that seeks to silence critics and mobilize allies of the Chinese Communist Party. Such activities take place within

China but also well beyond China's geographic borders, from monitoring the activities of political dissidents abroad to courting foreign media and government elites.¹²

Unsurprisingly, Chinese diaspora communities are a major target of United Front work (along with other groups such as entrepreneurs, ethnic minorities, and religious leaders).¹³ From Beijing's perspective, their increased exposure to foreign ideas poses a threat to the CCP's domestic rule and calls for overseas propaganda and control—to rally patriotism and stamp out criticism. Instilling a sense of belonging to the homeland builds diaspora loyalty while constraining anti-CCP or pro-democracy movements that can endanger the regime's grip on power. As with many other countries, diaspora engagement has been viewed in terms of consolidating government rule and internal stability.

This can be seen in the many ways the Chinese government has engaged with the diaspora over time. Overseas Chinese leaders and resources were key in the revolution leading to the fall of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century. In the aftermath of the Chinese civil war, the CCP and the KMT (Kuomintang) competed for diaspora loyalty to legitimize their claims to rule China, using ideological campaigns, economic incentives, and educational assistance. During the PRC's drive for economic modernization from the late 1970s, Chinese diaspora were courted as sources of investment and encouraged to return home. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, Beijing redoubled propaganda efforts to win over diaspora populations and promoted Chinese nationalism as a rallying force.¹⁴

Since the 2010s, however, China's diaspora policies have increasingly shifted from consolidating material support for internal matters—namely economic development and national unification—to managing the diaspora as a political means of expanding China's overseas influence.¹⁵ This geopolitical stance is different from in the past, when Beijing did not actively protect overseas Chinese from discriminatory and nationalistic appropriation policies, and even renounced diaspora citizenship claims, in order to gain strategic allies in Southeast Asia during the Cold War.¹⁶

In 2017, China's top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, called for new diaspora policies to serve China's overseas interests and consolidate China's growing global influence.¹⁷ In the last several years, Chinese president Xi Jinping

made several speeches calling for overseas Chinese students to serve as grassroots ambassadors, promote positive narratives about China, work more closely with embassies and consulates, and operate in line with China's diplomatic goals such as the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁸ Overseas Chinese are exhorted to "tell China's story well."¹⁹ This strategic reorientation has also been reflected in China's diaspora institutions, with more overseas-facing bureaucrats and agencies assuming greater political power.²⁰ Such public rhetoric and policies have contributed to growing fears in host countries of a 'weaponized' Chinese diaspora.

Whether for domestic political or foreign policy reasons, the Chinese government's messaging about the diaspora aims to blur the lines between Chinese nationals and those of ethnic Chinese descent.²¹ By pushing a particular conception of an 'overseas Chinese' as having an inevitable affinity and belonging to the homeland (read: the Party) regardless of their individual context, Beijing's policies intentionally homogenize and instrumentalize its diaspora communities.

The changing demographic of overseas Chinese populations—with recent migrants from the Mainland becoming more numerous—has also altered the dynamics of diaspora-homeland interactions. Chinese students have on occasion been vocal protestors and defenders of Beijing's policies, Chinese businesspeople have sometimes been prominent political donors, and diaspora organizations are increasingly dominated by CCP-affiliated individuals.

The CCP has not hesitated to apply coercive tactics toward regime critics—in recent years, Beijing has kidnapped a Swedish-Chinese publisher and detained a Chinese-Australian journalist and a Chinese-Australian writer on charges of espionage. But government policy documents generally outline an approach of influencing diaspora populations through a subtle "guiding hand."²² For example, the Chinese government uses a mix of patriotic propaganda, cultural outreach, state-sponsored programs (e.g. homeland tours in China), state-affiliated grassroots organizations, and the lure of political connections to engage with the diaspora. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Chinese consulates are in frequent contact with the many university-based Chinese Students and Scholars Associations in the United States, from sponsoring Lunar New Year events to distributing care packages.

Tools to Influence the Diaspora

China adopts a range of material and ideational strategies, as well as a mix of sticks and carrots, to shape diaspora behavior. The most obvious form of diaspora control involves repression through a range of intimidation and coercive tactics, as often implemented by authoritarian regimes.²³ This can include surveillance and monitoring of activities, direct threats from government officials, coercion-by-proxy—targeting family members back home, forced return or disappearances, and assassination.

Diaspora engagement can also take the form of positive incentives, seeking to coopt diaspora into acting on behalf of homeland interests. Patronage strategies include providing high-level political connections that can aid career or business opportunities, funding overseas study, or dangling direct financial benefits in exchange for activities such as espionage.²⁴

Home governments have developed both formal and informal institutions for diaspora engagement. China has traditionally managed diaspora affairs through the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, although with shifting geopolitical aims (discussed above) more outward-facing bureaucracies, such as the United Front, have become more important. Embassies and consulates in host countries—as an extension arm of the government—are also an important player in diaspora outreach and mobilization. As often the dominant representative and intermediary for diasporic access to citizen services, they are well-placed to coerce diaspora populations, monitor their activities, provide political backing, or mobilize action.

In many cases, diaspora organizations at the grassroots level are active in coordination and outreach, within the diaspora community and with more official government institutions. They may serve a variety of functions, from connecting diasporic members to their hometowns to organizing community events and facilitating business opportunities. These community organizations may vary in their degree of interactions with the home government, which can be seen as a source of financial and political support; some organizations, on the other hand, disavow official involvement to assert their independence and legitimacy as representatives of the diaspora.

Lines between official and grassroots are sometimes blurred. For instance, the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (FROC) has been acting as a grassroots organization with the responsibility of communicating with the

diaspora, in order to avoid host country suspicions of government interference and espionage.²⁵ Beijing has also set up ostensibly apolitical agencies to operate overseas, such as Friendship Associations and Reunification Promotion Associations, despite their links to the government.

Many Chinese diaspora organizations today are mostly dominated by CCP-affiliated individuals. This imbalance of power grew from a mix of the coercive tools—using threats and repression against dissenting voices—and positive incentives—coopting overseas Chinese eager for economic resources and political connections—described in this section. This trend has also complicated host countries' abilities to identify those who are acting on behalf of the Chinese government, as almost any diasporic individual will have inevitably had contact with CCP-linked representatives and organizations simply as a function of staying plugged into the community.

On the ideational front, sending states can seek to legitimate their position and inculcate patriotic sentiments among diaspora communities. Cultural activities help to foster a sense of belonging with the home country, while government-sponsored trips to the homeland aim to strengthen political and cultural linkages and showcase successes of the home country—and at times push government narratives on politically-controversial issues.²⁶ This is not unique to China—one of the most prominent examples is Israel's free birth-right trips for American Jews.²⁷

With the rise of global communications technology and social media, controlling the information environment of diaspora communities has also become a prominent tactic. China seeks to limit what kinds of information and narratives diaspora populations are exposed to, by taking financial control of diaspora media outlets and harassing those outlets that are critical of the home regime. For example, the Chinese government and CCP-linked business actors own virtually all overseas Chinese media in Australia, by extension perpetuating its domestic propaganda and censorship apparatus and leaving little room for independent reporting.

Wedge narratives in diaspora-targeted propaganda

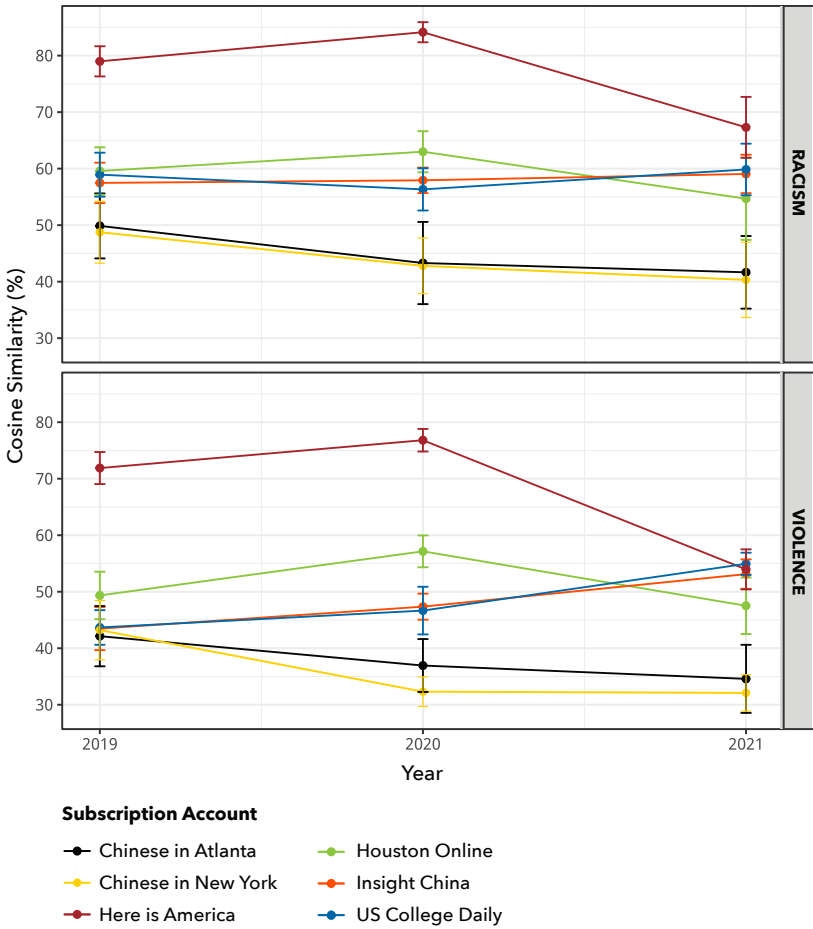
Additionally, the Chinese government actively spreads propaganda that attacks host countries and praises the CCP. While such propaganda is also targeted toward global public audiences, diaspora-targeted propaganda further

aims to drive a wedge between diaspora and host countries.²⁸ Wedge narratives fall in line with Beijing's goals of promoting loyalty to the homeland, which further lays the groundwork for overseas diaspora mobilization. In co-authored research with Patrick Chester at NYU, we show that Chinese government propaganda strategically frames host country issues—such as racial discrimination and violence in the United States—as being targeted specifically at the diaspora. Moreover, the framing of such wedge narratives increases in the run-up to national elections. To examine government propaganda, we scraped the content of prominent WeChat subscription accounts for diaspora based in the United States. WeChat is the overwhelmingly dominant communications platform for both Chinese citizens in China and the Chinese diaspora, who use WeChat to get news, communicate with fellow diaspora, and stay in touch with family and friends back home. To evaluate the extent of wedge narrative framings, we then applied a word embeddings-based methodology²⁹ to measure the degree of co-occurrence between Chinese *diaspora* terms and two sets of dictionary terms relating to *racism* and *violence*—that is, the degree to which they appear in similar contexts.

We found that government-linked accounts adopted wedge narrative framings—highlighting anti-Asian discrimination and hate crimes—at much higher levels than regular accounts; this pattern did not occur with coverage of other ethnic groups. Figure 1 shows the average cosine similarity across terms over time by account.³⁰ Higher cosine similarity reflects a greater association of our chosen attributes—*racism* and *violence*—with the chosen object, the Chinese *diaspora*. The government WeChat account is *Here is America*, run by an entity affiliated with the *Global Times*, a nationalistic state-linked media outlet. The other five private accounts vary in target audience, content and style; they range from general social and cultural news (e.g. *US College Daily*, *Insight China*) to accounts targeted toward major diaspora communities in large cities (e.g. *Chinese in New York*, *Chinese in Atlanta*, *Houston Online*).

We see that posts by the government-linked account *Here is America* exhibit a substantially higher cosine similarity than privately-run subscription accounts. This suggests that government-propagated narratives frame issues of race and violence more explicitly in terms of anti-Asian discrimination. For both the racism and violence framings, *Here is America* shows high similarities with diaspora-related terms—around 70-80 percent—in 2020 and 2019,

FIGURE 1



while declining in the post-election period of 2021. In contrast, other subscription accounts were much less inclined to use diaspora-specific framings, with consistently lower cosine similarity scores of between 40 and 60 percent. Interestingly, the two accounts *Chinese in New York* and *Chinese in Atlanta* tended to have the lowest levels of anti-Asian framings, even though these two cities have been at the epicenter of Asian-related hate crimes, including a violent shooting in Atlanta's case.

We also validated our analysis with qualitative reading of a random sample of WeChat articles. In line with our analysis, *Here is America* employed more diaspora-targeted framings of anti-Asian discrimination and violence, such as how Asians wearing masks would be the targets of harassment, or how a German chef said that his restaurant would not welcome Chinese people during Covid. It featured warnings from the Chinese embassy in the United States of rising anti-Asian discrimination. Government propaganda also frequently referenced deep-rooted legacies of racism in the United States and the West, such as the ethnically-targeted murder of Vincent Chin or the *Wall Street Journal's* headline calling China “Asia’s sick man.” In contrast, coverage by private accounts such as *Chinese in New York* or *US College Daily*, while having moderate coverage of anti-Asian hate crimes, featured a broader range of topics—such as on Covid statistics or more general discussions of race issues and anti-China political issues (e.g. whether Darlie toothpaste, a very popular brand in China, was racist, as well as how foreign brands were disrespecting China’s sovereignty over Taiwan and Hong Kong).

These findings point to how Beijing’s propaganda can be tailored to host country contexts and focus on issues of identity and belonging that are particularly salient for diaspora populations. Dividing the Chinese diaspora from the countries they live in would serve China’s diaspora management goals. Changing the rhetorical framing rather than solely increasing the volume of content may be a more flexible and efficient way of disseminating propaganda and affecting diaspora attitudes. While the full effectiveness of wedge narratives on diaspora behavior has not yet been systematically explored, Chinese government narratives could potentially exacerbate salient political and social cleavages in democracies.

Diasporic Channels of Influence in Host Countries

What are the different ways in which the diaspora can exert political influence in host societies? Conceptualizing diaspora populations as foreign policy requires greater attention to their relative positions as interest groups in domestic politics, whether in the host or home countries. The influence on foreign and security policies, as well as on host-home relations, stems from their ability to exert political voice in both countries.

Broadly, diaspora influence can be broken down into three mechanisms: i). agenda setting—influencing what policy issues and ideas get discussed, in particular those that are salient to the homeland; ii). discourse framing—shaping public and elite discussions in line with the home state's interests and rhetoric; and iii). political brokers—acting as intermediaries, facilitators, and organizers to link homeland interest groups with those in power in the host country. Diaspora populations can be public diplomacy ambassadors, participate politically (whether as voters, elected representatives, or donors), act as lobbying groups, engage in social movements, or sometimes spy on behalf of the home state.

Perhaps most innocuously, diaspora communities can increase the home state's cultural popularity. Making homeland cuisine more mainstream or organizing community festivals showcases the home country's cultural heritage, usually in a positive light. Less political activities can lay the groundwork for more positive public perceptions of the home state, while also further entrenching the diaspora as members of the host society and making them more trustworthy ambassadors. At the same time, as will be discussed later, these cultural events may also be coopted for the home state's political agenda, especially if diaspora organizations are dominated by pro-government agents.

Diaspora who are citizens in democratic host countries can exercise influence by voting, for instance for political candidates who support pro-homeland policies. Politicians running in districts with large concentrations of diaspora populations must court their votes and hence reflect their political preferences. In cases where these diaspora populations are relatively homogenous and aligned with the homeland, it becomes likely that politicians become more receptive to the home government's policy positions and interests.

Relatedly, diasporic individuals can also run for elected office, whether at the local or national levels. These political representatives have a larger platform and position of power with which to promote pro-homeland interests and exert more direct policy influence. Such influence can range from making public statements and introducing legislation that echo home government rhetoric to raising attention to specific issues and consolidating support among other politicians.

Additionally, diaspora can serve as political brokers and advisors to politicians, helping to organize campaign outreach events and providing talking

points on relevant issues. Such brokers can play a particularly influential role if diaspora populations have recently emerged as new constituencies, and political candidates have relatively little knowledge of how to connect with these potential voters and donors, or have relatively limited background on diaspora-related issues.

Another important avenue of political participation is through lobbying. Diaspora groups can act as ethnic lobbies, seeking to persuade political elites and policymakers of the importance of homeland policy interests. Lobbying influence can also come through economic clout, whether as members of the business elite or as donors—groups which often have the ready ear of politicians. Major donors, lobbyists, and business leaders are granted access to top-level leaders through personal meetings, fundraisers, and other political events. This can give them (diasporic or not) disproportionate influence and voice in raising issues to the attention of political elites. Research suggests that ‘social lobbying’—lobbying outside of a formal office, such as in a bar or restaurant—makes elites more receptive to interest group messages.³¹ The cultural context of diaspora statecraft, where lobbying easily takes place at community events or over dinners, could thus facilitate even greater potential influence.

As an example of diaspora political participation, there has been increased concern over the political influence of Chinese diaspora in Australia and New Zealand.³² CCP-linked Chinese businessmen have been significant campaign donors, meeting both national and state-level leaders, placing political advisors for Australian politicians, and shaping public elite statements on controversial issues such as Tibet and the South China Sea. In New Zealand, an ethnic Chinese MP was forced to resign after he was found to be a CCP member and had links to Chinese intelligence. Other evidence suggests that Chinese government lobbying makes U.S. legislators more likely to sponsor legislation favorable to Chinese interests and reduces U.S. media coverage of political tensions and threats from China.³³

Diaspora mobilization can also take more publicly disruptive forms, such as rallies and protests. In the run-up to the 2008 Summer Olympics, Beijing successfully mobilized overseas Chinese to attend Olympic torch relays and wave the national flag, to counter protests around China’s human rights violations. In the last few years, Chinese university students in the United States

and Canada have protested against having the Dalai Lama as commencement speaker, protested against a campus talk given by a Uyghur activist, and repeatedly vandalized a 'Lennon wall' of messages supporting Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters. For such social mobilization tactics, diaspora are more likely to be recently emigrated and maintain stronger personal and political ties with the home country.

Finally, diaspora statecraft can involve using the diaspora to acquire classified information and technology i.e. espionage. Home government officials approach and cultivate specific members of the diaspora, capitalizing on their cultural or ideological affinities and offering economic benefits in exchange for the acquisition of internal government information, proprietary technologies, or technologies with military applications. While this is a common concern, it should also be noted that governments do not always have a good track record of identifying such incidents. The United States has seen a number of cases where Chinese Americans or ethnically Chinese individuals have been accused of spying for the Chinese government, despite a lack of evidence.

"Diaspora Statecraft" as a Tool of Foreign Influence

While military force certainly remains an important element of coercive diplomacy, competition for global influence and power has taken on new dimensions and is taking place in new arenas, aided by the spread of new technologies as well as globalized flows of people, information, and capital. By definition, what I have termed in my research "diaspora statecraft" involves a home state's attempts to shape the attitudes and behavior of diasporic individuals in ways that favor the homeland's strategic interests. The diaspora's position in host countries allows them to exert political voice, alter public discourse, or even change the domestic balance of power. To the extent that some members of a diaspora are acting on behalf of the home government's interests, their activities can be seen as part of foreign influence operations.

New technologies have had an interactive effect with the significance of diaspora mobilization. In fact, technology has provided an additional resource for the implementation and perhaps effectiveness of diaspora statecraft. The transnational nature of the internet and social media has radically altered the information landscape, enabling home states to communicate with diaspora

populations more easily (and vice versa). Social media platforms provide new avenues for the home government to disseminate propaganda to a broader audience instead of relying on traditional print media. When needed, diaspora communities can be mobilized quickly by the government or among themselves, for example to gather at a pro-government rally or protest foreign criticism. Digital surveillance and internet monitoring technologies also allow home governments to keep better track of diasporic activity, including anti-regime activity. At the same time, easier access to multiple information sources could limit government monopoly over the flow of ideas and hence complicate efforts to control the diaspora.

The growing emphasis on shaping public and elite perceptions as part of geopolitical competition facilitates the use of diaspora statecraft. For a rising power such as China, non-military tools provide a way of consolidating global and regional influence short of escalating to war. Using what Beijing calls ‘discourse power’³⁴ to rebut criticisms and improve China’s global reputation could help underscore China’s growing military and economic clout. In that context, diaspora statecraft can serve as ‘soft’ and ‘sharp’ tools of influence.

On the soft power dimension, diaspora populations are uniquely poised to amplify China’s voice in other countries, persuade the broader public of China’s benign rise, and lobby elites to better reflect China’s interests. By highlighting the human face of a rising power, diaspora statecraft could reassure other countries of the home state’s intentions and emphasize the economic and cultural benefits of cooperation. This bolsters a legitimization strategy to achieve greater acceptance of the rising power’s newfound geopolitical position.³⁵

On the sharp power dimension, diaspora populations could be weaponized as coercive and subversive tools of influence. The diaspora of illiberal and authoritarian regimes, such as China, are more likely to be vulnerable to such politicization and manipulation. In this reading, diasporic individuals seek to influence political discourse and decision-making processes through more illicit means or without declaring their links to the home state government. Tools of transnational authoritarianism, such as repression and cooptation, serve to keep diaspora populations in line with the home state’s interests.

One major advantage of diaspora mobilization as a tool of foreign policy is its plausible deniability. In many cases, China prefers to portray diaspora

activity as being driven by grassroots sentiment—the will and anger of the Chinese people—as opposed to government direction.

Plausible deniability is advantageous for a number of reasons. First, the apparently non-state nature of diasporic activity makes it less threatening and more subtle. This lowers the chance of immediate escalation. As individuals that live in host society and interact with locals, the diaspora are likely seen as more relatable and trustworthy than a foreign government official. This allows them to act as a bridge between home and host countries, helping to win hearts and minds in the targeted host. Longer-term grassroots engagement through cultural community events (such as food and festivals) also present a positive and non-political dimension that help to improve public image of the home country.

Second, plausible deniability creates uncertainty and makes it harder for host countries to respond appropriately without over-escalating. This has parallels with military gray zone operations, in which the use of apparently civilian or paramilitary forces constrains the target's ability to respond with outright military force. As with Russia's deployment of 'little green men' in Crimea or China's use of Coast Guard and maritime militia to assert its territorial claims, uncertainty over the government's role and the relative lack of equivalent response options allows diaspora statecraft to slip through the cracks more easily. Precisely because not all diasporic activity is necessarily driven by the home state, identifying links to foreign governments is inherently challenging given the often informal nature of diaspora-government interactions. Blunt tools to prevent diasporic influence may not be compatible with host country values, particularly in democratic contexts.

Relatedly, diaspora activities are frequently harder to detect because they are carried out in less conventional domains and communication also takes place more privately. This makes it more difficult to identify actors and government intent. For instance, to impede pro-Tibetan protests during the Chinese president's state visit to France in March 2019, Chinese diaspora leaders apparently tracked down a factory manufacturing Tibetan activist T-shirts and bought out all the apparel at a higher price.³⁶ This was in addition to more visible mobilization actions, such as organizing large crowds to wave Chinese flags on the roadside in support of the president's motorcade.

As such, plausible deniability and uncertainty may be advantageous for the success of diaspora statecraft. Promoting home government interests in the

guise of grassroots mobilization could be more influential in host society politics while reducing effective resistance.

Geopolitical Implications of Diaspora Statecraft

China's illiberal approach to diaspora management can have quite insidious effects. Mobilizing the diaspora for political purposes requires imposing a collective, homogenized narrative of diaspora-homeland relations, while silencing any dissent and criticism of home state policies. Diaspora statecraft may thus disproportionately amplify pro-government positions while drowning out alternative viewpoints. In the China case, this also feeds into broader overseas propaganda campaigns, where the Chinese government seeks to reclaim the upper hand in global narratives, defend its policies, and attack critics. As such, diaspora statecraft works in tandem with other informational tools and even as an extension of state-led propaganda, spreading and reinforcing Beijing's desired narratives.

As a result, host country actors may have the mistaken impression that the apparently dominant narrative is the homeland-propagated one. This distorts not just the representation of interests among the diaspora but also the perceived political incentives surrounding a particular issue, for example that a candidate cannot criticize the Uyghur genocide or support Taiwanese independence for fear of losing votes and donations. Universities may be more reluctant to host dissident speakers or politically-sensitive events, having encountered public opposition and protests from student organizations. Diaspora mobilization pressures could also intensify the home government's perceived coercive clout. This may have serious impact on public and elite discourse in the host country, leading to heightened self-censorship or more pro-homeland policies.

Beyond foreign policy impacts, authoritarian diaspora mobilization also adversely affects the healthy functioning of democratic political systems, including the liberties of diaspora as members of the host country. Those who do not agree with homeland policies are bullied into silence and criticized for their lack of loyalty, even while facing greater suspicion from the host country. Moreover, policies that seek to divide diaspora populations from their host countries exacerbate broader ethnic and social tensions. This extraterritorial

authoritarian reach has implications for the transparency and integrity of democratic processes, as well as individual-level political and social freedoms.

Open democratic systems, being relatively permeable to a range of voices, tend to be more vulnerable to coercive or authoritarian uses of diaspora populations. Because it does not play by the same rules, authoritarian diaspora statecraft not only projects more influence but also undermines the democratic host country's own ability to respond and compete. Such consequences are even more worrying in the context of great power competition, where the loyalties of diaspora groups may be increasingly called (fairly or unfairly) into question. The currently perceived ideological contest between the United States and China, with each country attempting to demonstrate the superiority of its political model, has contributed to the weaponization of the Chinese diaspora. While Beijing sees diaspora statecraft (in tandem with informational campaigns) as key to ensuring internal loyalty and increasing geopolitical influence, Washington views the diaspora as a source of foreign influence and a tool of the Chinese state.

Challenges and Constraints of Diaspora Statecraft

Compared to many other countries, China has considerable advantages in diaspora management—it has the economic resources and institutional apparatus to reach out (and monitor) populations beyond its borders. It also has strong political motivations as an authoritarian rising power—a desire to maintain internal stability as well as an interest in promoting its interests globally. But manipulating diaspora communities as tools of influence is not an easy task. The heterogeneity of goals and actors within the home state as well as diaspora populations point to a complicated picture.³⁷ Effective diaspora mobilization is more likely with unified goals and close intergovernmental coordination. Even in China, lower-level diaspora officials may be more focused on capitalizing on economic resources from overseas Chinese rather than national-level geopolitical goals of expanding China's global influence.³⁸

Importantly, diasporic resistance also matters. Diaspora communities themselves are not passive or monolithic agents. The notion of 'diaspora' is often a political construct defined by the home government's interests and

priorities.³⁹ For instance, Beijing chooses to treat all individuals who are ethnically Chinese, regardless of whether they have active ties to the Mainland, as members of the Chinese diaspora. Naturally, this narrative encounters resistance from diaspora communities who may be from Taiwan or Hong Kong (both places with high levels of political contestation with Beijing), who fled China for political reasons, or who are emigrant descendants who were born and grew up in their host society.

Heterogeneity within diaspora communities means that mobilization efforts are likely to have varied impacts. Propaganda attempts to inculcate a sense of loyalty to the homeland may not always be effective. Individuals who are more integrated into host societies, bring their own political, social, and cultural experiences, or who are of later generations may be less persuaded by home government discourse and more inclined to challenge it.⁴⁰ In that regard, Chinese students or businesspeople who emigrated recently are likely to be more easily mobilized by the Chinese government, while longstanding overseas Chinese communities may feel much less attachment to Beijing. In places where they tend to live and do business within their ethnic communities, Chinese migrants in fact become more nationalistic and identify more with the Chinese state.⁴¹

Additionally, not all diaspora who appear to be agents of the home government are driven by loyalty. The need for economic or political resources from the home country, such as finding employment or maintaining political connections, can drive alignment with the home state and public display of state-driven narratives of homeland identity.⁴² The psychology of status may also come into play: migrants who are courted by the home government now have elevated prominence in their host and home communities, making them feel more important and motivated to promote the homeland's interests. Additionally, diaspora groups may compete for financial and social resources from home governments in order to pursue their own projects.⁴³ Overseas Chinese students often participate in homeland tours for future career benefits or simply because it is a free social opportunity, and many remain largely indifferent to government propaganda efforts.⁴⁴ Finally, diaspora may be coerced, intimidated, or otherwise pressured into conformity by illiberal home governments.

The Paradox of Diaspora Mobilization

Finally, there is the additional question of whether diaspora statecraft is effective at achieving geopolitical influence, conditional on successful diaspora mobilization. In other ongoing work, I argue that there is a double-edged sword: diaspora who are more easily mobilized are less likely to be integrated into host society and more likely to be marginalized; by extension, this makes them less politically influential for China's foreign policy purposes.

Relatedly, I suggest that paradoxically, active diaspora outreach and mobilization tends to raise the hackles of host countries, given the sensitive issue of foreign interference undermining national sovereignty. In particular, the Chinese government's attempt to homogenize its diaspora as an extension of China has sparked significant blowback. Diaspora statecraft can empower anti-cosmopolitan and hawkish elements in host country politics, including those skeptical of ethnic diversity. The heightened backlash to Beijing's heavy-handed and sometimes subversive approach bears some parallels with responses to China's economic statecraft.⁴⁵

Difficulties in distinguishing between different elements within diaspora communities facilitate overreactive policies. In the United States, the Justice Department's China Initiative along with previous FBI investigations have often targeted Chinese scientists or those of Chinese descent only to have cases fall apart on the lack of evidence, leading to charges of racial profiling. In Australia, China's perceived foreign influence activities have led to very strong elite and societal reactions, again casting the diaspora in a suspicious light and contributing to a much more hawkish turn in Australia's foreign policy toward China.

As a result, China's ability and desire to engage with its diaspora on a large-scale may have in fact undermined their position in host society and hence any potential influence. This threatens to marginalize diaspora communities economically, socially, and politically, making them victims rather than empowering them as agents of influence. This has happened across a range of host countries. During the Cold War, Indonesian elites tended to see ethnic Chinese as a monolithic group, despite major variations in ideology and socio-economic status. Anti-Communist elites portrayed internal dissent as instigated by Beijing in order to justify domestic purges. Ethnic Chinese continue to be regarded with suspicion and have often been the target of communal violence in Indonesia.⁴⁶

At the same time, host country overreaction, including the singling out of diaspora groups as untrustworthy or outsiders, could plausibly drive previously divided communities to consolidate their diasporic identity and advocate on behalf of their homeland.⁴⁷ For liberal host countries to respond effectively to authoritarian diaspora statecraft, policies to prevent Beijing's targeting of the Chinese diaspora also need to avoid sowing further ethnic divisions and feeding into CCP narratives. Engaging and highlighting the diversity within diaspora communities complicates China's attempts to create a uniform diasporic narrative or utilize overseas Chinese as instruments of foreign policy. Working strategically with diaspora communities also makes host societies more resilient to continued efforts at foreign interference.

Conclusion

Diaspora statecraft is emerging as a non-military tool of geopolitical influence. Its plausible deniability as a government actor has made it less immediately threatening, harder to detect, and harder to respond to with existing tools, thus increasing overall uncertainty in the realm of geopolitical competition. Governments seeking to bolster domestic legitimacy or promote foreign policy interests have a range of material and ideational tools to engage with diaspora communities. Having linkages to both the homeland and host country, diasporic individuals can participate in host political processes, whether through voting, lobbying, or protesting. They can help to set the policy agenda, frame public and elite discourse, and influence policy choices. China's renewed efforts at mobilizing the diaspora demonstrate the potential significance of diaspora statecraft in geopolitical competition. Moreover, the illiberal elements of diaspora statecraft can also undermine the integrity and diversity of democratic host countries, while constricting the freedoms of diasporic individuals. A clear-eyed government policy would need to identify which actors and organizations are in fact acting on behalf of the Chinese government, and which are not.

Additionally, U.S. government policy should emphasize constructive engagement with the Chinese diaspora. Policymakers and politicians should work with established Asian-American civil society and grassroots organizations to reach out to Chinese communities and gain a better understanding

of important social, political, and economic issues. Addressing policy concerns inhibits China's ability to leverage those issues—such as affirmative action or anti-Asian hate crimes—to drive a wedge between the diaspora and host society. Sustained dialogue and policy inputs (and not just around election periods) will also foster host country integration and undermine Beijing's propaganda narratives of diaspora marginalization and democratic dysfunction. Washington along with state governments should invest resources into building robust Chinese-American civil society networks, at the national and local levels, that reflect the diversity of overseas Chinese communities and impede efforts by Beijing-linked actors to dominate the organizational and lobbying landscape.

In tandem, the U.S. government should invest resources into understanding the diaspora informational landscape, such as navigating major Chinese-language media platforms like WeChat and using these platforms for effective diaspora outreach. WeChat can serve as a powerful medium for organizing action and disseminating information. For instance, a few Asian-American grassroots organizations have sought to disseminate alternative viewpoints and counter political disinformation on WeChat. While WeChat faces challenges of censorship and surveillance, it is arguably the most important media platform for the diaspora today. The U.S. government could also explore funding to set up alternative Chinese-language news outlets or support local diaspora media organizations that are often vulnerable to external revenue and advertising pressures.

Similar to how strengthening democracy in the United States is fundamental to countering Beijing's attempts at gaining global legitimacy and its discourse of a failing West, strengthening political and societal resilience by embracing diaspora communities as assets will limit Beijing's ability to peel off political constituencies, weaken the United States internally, and carry out successful foreign influence activities.

The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Government or the Wilson Center.

Notes

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