

Chinese Influence Networks in Finland: A Preliminary Case Study

Matti Puranen

ASIA PAPER
August 2022



Institute for Security &
Development Policy

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V. Finnbodavägen 2, Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden

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Printed in Lithuania

ISBN: 978-91-88551-33-7

Distributed in Europe by:

Institute for Security and Development Policy

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Summary

This paper studies recent Chinese attempts to establish networks of influence and intelligence in Finland. The networks under survey in this report have been established by local actors, who are not necessarily directly connected to the Chinese party-state structure. Their activities, however, are supervised and guided by top level Communist Party (CCP) organizations, mainly the United Front Work Department and the International Liaison Department, while the Chinese embassy in Helsinki acts as an important intermediary between both.

The paper argues that although Chinese activity in Finland has remained rather mild compared to many other countries, the situation could change rapidly following deterioration of diplomatic ties, as recent developments in Sweden and Lithuania among others have shown. Would such an escalation occur, the established networks could potentially be mobilized for conducting campaigns of a more hostile nature

The paper suggests that although the influence networks in question aim to utilize certain weaknesses within liberal democracies, the same weaknesses also form the strongest defenses of democratic societies. The paper therefore calls for the strengthening of “democratic deterrence”, as a robust democratic infrastructure forms a strong and adaptive deterrent against such “sub-threshold” threats.

1. Introduction¹

China's activities influencing opinion in the Nordic region have recently gained increasing attention among both scholars and journalists. Although Finland has remained on the sidelines, domestic discussion on China's activities in Finland has also gained ground, especially after the spring of 2020, when various Finnish media reported on, among other things, the activities of Chinese united front groups in Finland.² Preliminary findings suggest that although China's influence activities in Finland seem rather mild compared to many other countries, their methods and techniques largely fit global patterns.

This case study reviews Chinese activities in Finland by focusing on the recent attempts to establish networks of influence and intelligence in various socio-political domains. Such networks have been able to maintain low or next to invisible profile within the Finnish society, yet have achieved relative success in their corresponding domains of activity. The networks under survey in this paper have been established by local actors who are not necessarily directly connected to the Chinese party-state structure. Their activities, however, are supervised and guided by top level Communist Party (CCP) organizations, mainly the United Front Work Department and the International Liaison Department, while the Chinese embassy in Helsinki acts as an important intermediary.³

1 The author would like to thank Jagannath Panda, Hanna Smith, Jukka Aukia, Ari-Joonas Pitkänen, Frank Jüris and Jichang Lulu for helpful comments along the way. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and his alone.

2 See Matti Puranen, "Kiinan vaikutusoperaatioiden 'taika-ase' toimii myös Suomessa," *The Ulkopolitist*, February 23, 2020; Päivi Koskinen and Kirsi Skön, "Kiinan 'taika-ase' tähtää Suomeenkin," *Yle*, March 15, 2020; Jarno Liski and Salla Vuorikoski, "Perussuomalaisten kansanedustajat salasivat osakkuutensa Kiinan valtioon kytkeytyvässä teknologiayhtiössä," *Suomen Kuvalehti*, January 16, 2020.

3 Although not a focus of this article, Chinese intelligence agencies are probably involved in the

The use of such non-state actors in influence operations is not new, nor is it a phenomenon unique to China.⁴ However, Chinese networks are notable in their high level of organization and discipline. Similar networks with almost identical peer organizations have been observed in various other countries.⁵ The case study draws from the conceptual model developed by The Hybrid Center of Excellence in Helsinki and suggests that the establishment and grooming of such networks represent an important example of “priming phase hybrid activities”. During the priming phase, the hostile actor attempts to subtly, and with strategic patience, establish influencing capabilities, which can be operationalized later if or when the need arises. Priming activities, such as the establishment of covert networks, are hard to detect and precisely designed to hang on the threshold of detectability, but form the basis for later escalation towards the phases of *destabilization* and *coercion*.⁶

This paper begins by explaining Chinese strategic interests and the main drivers of China’s foreign policy on a global scale, as well as the position of Finland and the role of hybrid operations in this strategy. It then briefly discusses the theoretical framework of “hybrid threats”, loosely applied in the study, and moves into the empirically driven subchapters, which describe the activities of networks associated with the United Front Work Department and the International Liaison Department of the CCP.

activities of these networks since their connections with similar operations have been documented elsewhere. See Alex Joske, “[The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s united front system](#),” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020: 15–16; Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: Exposing How The Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping The World* (London: Oneworld, 2020), 139–163.

- 4 Magnus Normark, “How states use non-state actors: A modus operandi for covert state subversion and malign networks,” *Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis 15*, 2019; Jukka Aukia, *China as a hybrid influencer: Non-state actors as state proxies*. Hybrid CoE Research Report 1, 2021.
- 5 For Switzerland, see Ralph Weber, “[Unified message, rhizomatic delivery: A preliminary analysis of PRC/CCP influence and the united front in Switzerland](#),” *Sinopsis*, December 18, 2020. For Sweden, see Pär Nyren, “[The CCP’s United Front Network in Sweden](#),” *Jamestown China Brief* 20, no. 16, 2020.
- 6 G. Giannopoulos, H. Smith, and M. Theocharidou, *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model* (European Commission: Ispra, 2020), 28–32.

On methodology, the study is primarily based on open source analysis of original sources (news, articles, blog posts, websites) produced by the actors themselves. Such source material on the activities of the actors is freely and comparatively easily available online. Original source analysis is supplanted with media reports.⁷

1.1. Chinese Strategic Aims

China's foreign policy is influenced by two, seemingly contradicting, major factors: The ruling party's almost paranoid concerns over regime security, and a growing urge for increasing China's global influence. Many authors suggest that even though the rhetoric of the Chinese leadership has become increasingly assertive, domestically China remains relatively 'fragile' as socio-political tensions abound, and the ruling party's grip on power remains contested.⁸ However, the assertive foreign policy conduct, especially as seen during the reign of the CCP party secretary Xi Jinping (2012–) seems to be motivated by a genuine will to establish China's seat at the tables of power, to make China's voice and vision to be heard, and to reach the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' by the mid-century at the latest.⁹

Although seemingly contradictory, regime security concerns and an expansive strategy aiming for superpower status do not rule each other out. To the contrary, the Communist Party leadership seeks to expand its

7 The work of such journalists as Kirsi Skön, Päivi Koskinen, Jarno Liski and Ville Similä has been especially important for the understanding of Chinese influencing activities in Finland, and consequently also for this article.

8 See Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail Its Peaceful Rise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Robert Sutter, *Chinese foreign relations: Power and policy of an emerging global force* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020); Steve Tsang, "Party-state Realism: A Framework for Understanding China's Approach to Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 122, (2020): 304–318.

9 Although 'The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (中华民族伟大复兴) is the major strategic aim of the CCP, the concept is ambiguously and loosely defined. According to Xi Jinping, by the 2050s China will become a "great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful", See Xi Jinping, "决胜全面建成小康社会夺取新时代中国特色社会主义中国特色社会主义伟大胜利," Report at the 19th CPC National Congress, 2017.

global influence for shielding itself from various threats emerging within the international environment, and thus for reinforcing its legitimacy back home. A central element of this strategy is to push forward the reform of the 'liberal international order' towards a China-centered order, which would be more suitable to China's own interests. Jessica Weiss and Jeremy Wallace suggest that the domestic security of the party is an essential variable in China's relation with the international order, and that China is investing strategically "in reshaping or rejecting international arrangements in issue areas that are central to its domestic rule."¹⁰

The reform of the international order according to Chinese principles has been openly and loudly declared through the vision of the 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind' (CSFM, 人类命运共同体). The concept has rapidly emerged as the main foreign policy concept of the Xi era, providing a rough blueprint of the international order tailored with CCP's interests in mind. The Community, to describe it shortly, would be institutionally much like the 'liberal international order' of today, but it would be mostly stripped of its liberal values. Within the Community, so the official rhetoric goes, member-states would enjoy full sovereignty and independence as their cultural traditions or political ideologies would not be evaluated using 'Western values' as a benchmark. Military hegemonies and unilateral interventions would become a thing of the past as security challenges would be managed through the United Nations Security Council, and as military alliances – remnants of 'cold war thinking' – would wither away, making way for 'partnerships' established on principles of win-win cooperation.¹¹

10 Jessica Weiss and Jeremy Wallace, "Domestic Politics, China's Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 657. See also Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracy? China's Rise and the Future of Global Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2019.

11 See Matti Puranen, *Warring states and harmonized nations: Tianxia theory as a world political argument*. Doctoral dissertation (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2020), 148–176.

Beyond the alluring and non-hegemonic rhetoric of the Chinese leaders, many scholars observe the emergence of a more ominous community, in which China plans to establish a central and dominant position from which to silence all critical discussion on its self-described 'core interests'.¹² According to Zhang Dehua, the Community of Shared Future provides a rhetorical cover under which China is expanding its influence through bilateral 'partnerships' and deepening economic dependencies, particularly within the developing world.¹³ Although the partnership structure of the Community is described as being benevolently based on 'non-confrontation' and 'win-win cooperation', deeper levels of interaction with China have been noticed to lead to coercion when the partner state fails to comply with China's core interests. Partnerships with China, therefore, can lead to self-regulation and self-censorship, in which the smaller partner abides by China's policy rules, while it secures its independence together with considerable economic benefits.¹⁴

Economic interdependences established through trade, loans and investments (or the promises of them) serve as the visible backbone of China's influence. Economic connections are not important only on the state-to-state level but are, as Charlie Parton points out, established at different levels of society: newspapers short on cash might accept political ads designed by the CCP propaganda offices, universities might sign lucrative cooperation agreements with Chinese counterparts, and in both cases, be susceptible to sensitivity or even self-censorship on Chinese

12 China defines the 'core interests' (核心利益) vaguely. The concept has originally referred to China's sovereignty issues in Tibet, Xinjiang or Taiwan, but the scope of issues that can be interpreted as 'core interests' is in flux and according to some, broadening. See Jinghao Zhou, "China's Core Interests and Dilemma in Foreign Policy Practice," *Pacific Focus* 34, no. 1 (2019): 31–54.

13 Dehua Zhang, "The concept of 'Community of common destiny' in China's diplomacy: Meaning, motives and implications," *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 196–207.

14 See Liza Tobin, "Xi's vision for transforming global governance: A strategic challenge for Washington and its allies," *The Strategist* 2, no. 1; Nadège Rolland, "China's vision for a new world order," *The National Bureau of Asian Research report #83*, 2020.

defined hot-spot issues.¹⁵ Economic interdependence is supplanted by 'grey zone' activities, which include intrusions into the information sphere of the target country, elite co-option schemes and especially united front work, in which the Chinese diasporas of the target country are mobilized for intelligence and influence operations.

Taking all this together, Chinese grand strategy aims to mold the international order towards a China-centered community, in which the client states would enjoy independence in their domestic issues, but would in no way stand against China's 'core interests' or form any kind of threat to the legitimate position of the CCP. In other words, China wants to establish a "world safe for autocracy", or as a recent report by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service described it in slightly stronger terms: "a silenced world dominated by Beijing".¹⁶

Since the beginning of the second term of Xi Jinping, starting in late 2017, Chinese foreign policy has taken a new turn towards assertiveness. Following this turn, coercive 'wolf warrior' diplomacy and all sorts of influence operations have increased everywhere, whereas within the region, military provocations around Taiwan and the border regions with India have become increasingly commonplace. The global coronavirus pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine have served as catalysts, intensifying China's assertive line even further. While the true rationale behind this "Machiavellian turn" in foreign policy remains unknown, Chinese leaders – according to one definition – seem to have decided that it is perhaps better to be feared than loved, and that the process of establishing the Community of Shared Future needs to be accelerated.¹⁷

15 Charles Parton, "China – UK Relations: Where to Draw the Border Between Influence and Interference?" RUSI Occasional Paper (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2019).

16 Jessica Weiss Chen, "A World Safe for Autocracy?" Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service. *International Security and Estonia 2021*: 69

17 Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, "Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment", Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM), 2021.

1.2. Finland Along the Silken Road

China is developing its relations with Finland and the Nordic region with this general framework in mind, though the region is not at the forefront of China's foreign policy priorities. According to Jerker Hellström, Chinese foreign policy in the region is guided by three central motives: First, the Nordic region is seen as a "door opener" for activities within the rest of Europe, as the Nordics are generally thought to be politically stable and predictable, and thus easier to manage; second, the Nordic countries are seen as an important source of technology; and third, the region is seen as an arena for the promotion of Chinese core interests.¹⁸

These general interests apply to Finland too, but in addition to seeing Finland as a door opener to the rest of the Europe, China also views Finland as a possible gateway for expanding its Arctic interests.¹⁹ In Finland, China is interested in the technological innovation potential, which partly explains the relatively high level of investments in the country.²⁰ On securing core interests, China wants to maintain the long-standing favorable condition, in which Finland has remained careful and moderate in its criticism of Beijing. Relations between China and Finland have developed smoothly throughout the 70 years of diplomatic connections. No major conflicts have emerged, and relations remain practical and functional as neither side is willing to rock the well-sailing boat or to destabilize the increasingly important economic ties.²¹ In a striking contrast to Sweden, in which

18 Jerker Hellström, "China's Political Priorities in the Nordic Countries: from technology to core interests," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs Policy Brief 12/2016. See also Julian Tucker and Johannes Nordin, "China and the Nordics: Tracing Trends in Relations," Asia Paper, October (Stockholm-Nacka: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2021).

19 Timo Koivurova, et al., *China in the Arctic and the Opportunities and Challenges for Chinese-Finnish Arctic Co-operation*, Publication series of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities 8/2019. See also Sanna Kopra and Matti Puranen, "China's Arctic Ambitions Face Increasing Headwinds in Finland," *The Diplomat*, March 18, 2021.

20 Agatha Kratz, et al. *Chinese FDI in Europe: 2020 Update*. Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2021.

21 China is the fourth biggest importing (7.5% of imports) and sixth biggest exporting country (5.4%) for Finland. See Statistics Finland [trade statistics for the year 2019](#). On China-Finland relations, see Sari Arho Havrén, "Meillä ei ole ikuisia ystäviä eikä ikuisia vihollisia. Ikuisia ovat meidän omat etumme": Suomen suhteet Kiinan kansantasavaltaan 1949–1989 (Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto, 2009); Jyrki Kallio,

the local Chinese embassy is known of intervening even in the writings of Swedish news media, the Chinese embassy in Finland almost never openly comments on Finland's domestic developments in any way.²² On the contrary, the embassy maintains a passive and low profile and remains next to invisible for the general population.²³

Finland, in exchange for its moderate posture, has arguably gained some leeway with China, as Finnish journalists and academics, for example, are not similarly harassed as their colleagues in many other countries. For China, on the other hand, pragmatically functioning relations between the two countries can be promoted as a model relationship between a massive authoritarian state and an advanced liberal democracy, cooperating in harmony despite their differences and disagreements.

The mutual goodwill in bilateral relations may have peaked, however. Coinciding with the assertive turn in China's foreign policy after the second term of Xi Jinping, Chinese influence activities have increased also in Finland. Beginning from around 2018 Finnish media have reported extensively on such activities. Discussions on the potential risks involved in deeper cooperation with China have followed, while Finnish government and security officials – usually laconic when pinpointing the nature of foreign threats – have increasingly pointed towards China related security concerns.²⁴

While the general neutral-to-positive undercurrent of the Sino-Finnish relation still remains in place, official Finnish foreign policy statements have started to increasingly emphasize Finland's status as a member of

"Suomen ja Kiinan suhteet 70 vuotta: Suurvaltapolitiikan paluu varjostaa tulevaisuutta," FIIA Briefing Paper 296 (Helsinki: Ulkopoliittinen instituutti, 2020).

22 "Swedish media calls for action against attacks from Chinese officials," *The Guardian*. January 30, 2020.

23 To the contrary, the good state of the relations is frequently praised in the Chinese media. See "中国驻芬兰大使陈立：见证两国外交重要时刻," *People's Daily*, December 7, 2020.

24 See Matti Puranen and Jukka Aukia, "Finland's China Shift," *The Diplomat*. February 8, 2022.

the European and Transatlantic security communities, also regarding its relations with China.²⁵

1.3. The Framework of Hybrid Threats

Chinese influence operations and their peculiar methods (especially the usage of non-state actors and networks such as the united front) are often discussed within the expert communities as a distinctively Chinese type of activity.²⁶ Although Chinese activities surely include certain unique features, they can be approached within the larger conceptual rubric of 'hybrid threats', which, according to the definition of the Helsinki Hybrid Center of Excellence, includes many types of "unwelcome interventions of one sort or another to a country's internal space", executed by various state and non-state actors.²⁷

The scope and intensity of hybrid activity can differ greatly, extending within a large spectrum from more legitimate forms of influencing (cultural and diplomatic) to outright 'hybrid warfare' (coercion), in which the element of military power is centrally present.²⁸ Between the two extreme poles, Mikael Wigell has identified the zone of 'hybrid interference', in which the aggressor visibly interferes in the domestic developments of the target country and attempts to 'drive wedges' in its societal weak points by using for example, geo-economic threats, (dis)information operations and clandestine diplomacy.²⁹ At the other extreme end of the spectrum is 'hybrid warfare', whose toolkit China is currently applying merely in Taiwan, and against its opponents within the South and East China Seas.³⁰

25 Ibid.

26 See Jukka Aukia, *China as a hybrid influencer*.

27 Georgios Giannopoulos, et al., "The Landscape of Hybrid Threats," 2.

28 Georgios Giannopoulos, et al., "The Landscape of Hybrid Threats."

29 Mikael Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: A theory of external interference in liberal democracy," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (March 2019).

30 Chinese operations with recognizable aspects of hybrid warfare, so far, have included for instance, disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, election interference, use of criminal gangs and the use

The Hybrid Center defines above-mentioned spectrum of activity as phases of *priming*, *destabilization* and direct *coercion*. The bulk of Chinese influencing (also in Finland) has taken place within the phase of priming, in which the stability of the target country is not yet subverted. Activities happening during the priming phase are often not well understood or even detected, yet, Giannopoulos et al. argue, they prepare the ground for the possible intensification of operations towards destabilization or coercion – as many would argue has been the case recently in Sweden, Australia and Lithuania.³¹ Chinese activities within the priming phase have typically included careful ‘discourse management’, elite co-option and clandestine operations organized through united front networks.

Detecting Chinese hybrid activities already in their priming phases is important since such operations form a central part of Chinese influencing and represent the very nature of operations conducted through united front and related Communist Party organizations. Jichang Lulu has even suggested that the study of Chinese influencing should not be compartmented by “distinctions between ‘influence’ and ‘interference’, ‘benign’ and ‘malign’, or ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’” as “such categories may not be useful in the actors’ Leninist context.”³²

of ‘maritime militias’ (“little blue men”) combined with threats of military escalation. See Michael Cole, “Taiwan and CCP political warfare: A blueprint,” *Sinopsis*. February 27, 2020. In the South China Sea, China’s use of ‘maritime military’ makes an interesting example of Chinese hybrid warfare, see Samir Puri and Greg Austin, “What the Whitsun Reef incident tells us about China’s future operations at sea,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 9, 2021.

31 Georgios Giannopoulos, et al., “The Landscape of Hybrid Threats”. On China’s increasingly coercive line in Sweden, see Jojje Olsson, “China Tries to Put Sweden on Ice,” *The Diplomat*. December 30, 2019; Helen Davidson, “China’s trade halt with Lithuania over Taiwan ties sends warning to Europe,” *The Guardian*. August 26, 2021.

32 Jichang Lulu. “Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster,” *Sinopsis*. November 26, 2019. See also Charles Parton, “China-UK Relations.”

Besides phases, the conceptual model suggests that hybrid activity should be seen as targeting different societal domains (e.g. cultural, political, economic, infrastructure) and as using and combining a large range of tools.³³

This case study focuses on certain Chinese influence networks active especially within the domains of politics, social and intelligence. Such focus represents only a small share of the complete picture, as Chinese influencing in Finland is ongoing in various other domains, applying a variety of tools.³⁴

33 Ibid.

34 Within the domain of economy, for example, one can mention the arguably geo-economically motivated plans of the Chinese funded Helsinki-Tallinn-tunnel and the Kouvola cargo train terminal, or the Oulu-based network centered around John Meewella and Kevin Liu. See Frank Jüris, "The Talsinki Tunnel: Channelling Chinese Interests into the Baltic Sea," *ICDS*. December 3, 2019; Frank Jüris, "Handing over Infrastructure for China's Strategic Objectives: 'Arctic Connect' and the Digital Silk Road in the Arctic," *ICDS*. March 12, 2020; Jukka Aukia, "China Cargo Train Routes Face Backlash in Finland," *The Diplomat*. January 24, 2020; Antti Järvi, "Oppi tulee idästä," *Long Play*, August 31, 2019; Petri Laukka, "Näinkö Kiinan vaikuttaminen toimi ja epäonnistui Oulussa?" *Kaleva*. January 31, 2020.

2. United Front Networks as Hybrid Actors

Perhaps the most peculiar characteristic of China's influence operations is that they are primarily conducted through the so-called united front system, a vast network of party and state agencies responsible for influencing groups outside the Communist Party of China everywhere in the world.³⁵ At the organizational center of the united front system is the United Front Work Department (统一战线工作部, UFWD) of the Communist Party of China, which is under the direction of the Central Committee of the CCP. The main objective of the UFWD is to guide 'united front work' by uniting all elements of the Chinese society to support the policies of the CCP. The history of the organization can be traced back to the Chinese Civil war, but its importance, especially as an arm of China's foreign policy, has increased during the term of President Xi Jinping.³⁶

Outside China, the main targets of united front operations are the overseas Chinese and their associations. Here the objective is to counter threats to the party's dominant position within China, and to mobilize "patriotic" members of the overseas Chinese communities to support party policies in the target country. Threats that need to be monitored and countered include, for example, dissidents, Falun Gong practitioners or Hong Kong and Tibetan activists. "Patriotic" overseas Chinese, as well as foreigners friendly to the CCP's agenda, on the other hand, provide the UFWD with a mechanism for intelligence gathering and hybrid influence operations. In essence, there is no clear distinction

35 Alex Joske, "The party speaks for you"; Jukka Aukia, *China as a hybrid influencer*.

36 See Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping," Wilson Center, September 18, 2017; Gerry Groot, "The CCP's Grand United Front abroad," *Sinopsis*, September 29, 2019.

between domestic and overseas united front operations, and according to Alex Joske, the “key distinction underlying the United Front is not between domestic and overseas groups, but between the CCP and everyone else.”³⁷

According to Anne-Marie Brady and Alex Joske, the united front establishes a foothold in overseas communities by setting up and infiltrating overseas Chinese associations and organizations. Through the associations, the united front is able to monitor the Chinese communities and their activities and establish connections to overseas Chinese elites in important positions. According to Brady, very few overseas Chinese associations – perhaps associations such as Falun Gong that are openly hostile towards the CCP – are able to remain completely outside the reach of the united front system.³⁸

There are various overseas associations in Finland, some of which have obvious connections to the united front system, but how voluntary these connections are is unknown. However, although these associations have connections to the united front system, much of their activity doesn’t necessarily have much to do with the Communist Party and its policy objectives. Furthermore, even the activities that have highly questionable links to the united front system are typically not illegal in Finland. This is the problematic nature of united front operations also in Finland: The networks and their operations are managed through an easily deniable yet constant presence within legitimate associations (or associations with a legitimate appearance). At the same time, the CCP’s lingering presence in the associations casts a harmful and needless suspicion over the vast majority of overseas Chinese who have nothing to do with the party and its influencing activities.

37 Alex Joske, “The party speaks for you.”

38 Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons”; Alex Joske, “The party speaks for you.”

2.1. United Front Groups within Education Domains

Of the groups active in Finland, first of all, there are the student, scholar and science associations, which have been explicitly defined as a major target groups of united front work.³⁹ Such emphasis is not surprising for two reasons: First, for the party-state's need to supervise its young, educated elites abroad, and second, due to the potential of scholarly associations for technology transfer campaigns. Scientific and technological innovation was promoted into a "core position within [China's] national security posture" during the CCP's 12th Party Congress⁴⁰, and Chinese attempts to tap into the resources of technologically advanced countries through a full spectrum of means (including espionage and forced technology transfer) are robustly evidenced.⁴¹

The most influential and active Chinese scholarly associations in Finland is **The Chinese Association of Science and Technology in Finland (CASTF, 芬兰华人科技协会)**. The association was established in 2014 and claims to promote "cooperation and development in the fields of science and technology, education, culture, economy and trade between China and Finland".⁴² The association claims to have over 200 members (in 2017).⁴³ Its activities consist of organizing seminars and networking events, and most significantly, maintaining connections with Chinese sister-organizations with similar interests. CASTF is also a member of the Europe wide **Federation of Chinese Professional Associations in Europe (FCPAE, 全**

39 Gerry Groot, "The CCP's Grand United Front abroad."

40 Quoted in Brian Lafferty, "Civil-Military Integration and PLA Reforms," in Phillip C. Saunders, et al. (eds) *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press), 630. The strategic importance of technological innovation is crucial also for the development of the Chinese military forces. Xi has called for the integration of civilian and military technological development through the policy of "civil-military integration" (军民融合), which aims to utilize the potential of the so called 'dual use technologies' to their maximum effect.

41 William Hannas and Huey-Meei Chang, "Chinese technology transfer: An introduction," in William Hannas and Didi Kirsten Tatlow (eds) *China's Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage* (London: Routledge, 2020), 26–39.

42 CASTF website.

43 CASTF website.

欧华人专业协会联合会) – known for its united front associations – and has held a rotary chairmanship in the European umbrella organization.⁴⁴

As an association CASTF is not unique; similar kinds of Chinese ‘cooperation associations’ have been established all around the world. According to a study by the Center for Security and Emerging Technology of Georgetown University, such ‘cooperation associations’ make up an important leg of Chinese technology transfer, although the degree to which these associations identify with the interests of the Chinese state might vary.⁴⁵

The Finnish association seems to have strong links to its Chinese state and party affiliated counterpart institutions as it has hosted various delegations from and to China.⁴⁶ In June 2017, for example, a delegation from the **China Association for Science and Technology** (CAST) – a Beijing based umbrella organization of the local branches – visited CASTF. The delegation was led by the vice-chairman of the party committee of CAST, Shang Yong (尚勇). The meeting was also supervised by the ‘first secretary of technology’ of the Chinese embassy in Helsinki, Yang Zhijun (杨志军). During the meeting, Shang described CAST as an important link between Chinese and diasporic communities, which absorbs overseas talent for the benefit of Chinese economic development. Yang, meanwhile, representing the network in Finland, hoped that CASTF would continue, under the leadership of CAST to support cooperation between Finnish and Chinese scientific communities.⁴⁷

44 On FCPAE, see Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “[Mapping China-in-Germany](#),” *Sinopsis*, October 2, 2019.

45 William Hannas and Huey-meei Chang, “[China’s Access to Foreign AI Technology – An Assessment](#),” Center for Security and Emerging Technology, 2019.

46 For example, various provincial ‘science and technology committees’ have sent their delegations to visit CASTF from Shanghai (see [CASTF website](#)) and Zhejiang (see [CASTF website](#)).

47 [CASTF website](#).

Based on the news available at its website, CASTF has been active in inviting various other top-level delegations to Finland. Perhaps the most notable arrived in October 2019, as CASTF hosted a delegation led by Xu Yousheng (许又声), who is the head of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, as well as the deputy director of the United Front Work Department itself! The delegation, accompanied by a diplomat from the Chinese embassy in Helsinki, visited Aalto University and its Micronova research center, and held informal discussions, in which the representatives of CASTF and Xu's delegation exchanged views on current affairs. Xu thanked CASTF for its efforts, "not forgetting the original intention" (不忘初心), and encouraged the association to maintain its connections with the fatherland as it was facing "international challenges".⁴⁸

CASTF, furthermore, has other links to the mainland and to the united front system, since both the former chairman and the former vice-chairman of the organization, Xu Junhua (徐军华) and Zhang Hongbo (张宏博) respectively, are also members of the **Nordic Zhigong Association** (NZA, 北欧致公协会).⁴⁹ The Nordic Zhigong Association is a Nordic branch office of the **Zhigong Party** – one of China's eight "democratic parties". Outside China the main objective of the Zhigong Party is to establish and maintain connections with highly educated overseas Chinese elites, working especially in the fields of science and technology.⁵⁰

The Nordic association was established in 2017 in Stockholm, following the initiative of Zhigong party member Zhou Bin (周斌). In the words of the chairman of the association Ye Peiqun (叶沛群), the NZA "wants

48 [Chinanews.se](http://chinanews.se) October 19, 2019. (Accessed December 10, 2020). See also [CASTF website](#). In 2010, Xu made a similar visit to a US association, not unlike CASTF, the Association of Chinese Scientists and Engineers, encouraging technology transfer. See Alex Joske and Jeffrey Stoff, "The United Front and Technology Transfer," in William Hannas and Didi Kirsten Tatlow (eds), *China's Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage* (London: Routledge, 2020).

49 See for example [Zhigong Party website](#). Some sources mention the duties of Xu and Zhang within the CASTF differently and their roles have likely changed.

50 Pär Nyren, "The CCP's United Front Network in Sweden," *Jamestown China Brief* 20, no.16 (2020).

to build a bridge for science and technology between the Nordics and China, to introduce the results and research programs to the Fatherland.”⁵¹

The NZA claims to have representatives in all five Nordic states.⁵² Zhang Hongbo is mentioned as the vice-chairman of the NZA and as the person responsible for its operations in Finland.⁵³ The NZA’s most visible activities within Finland have consisted, again, of organizing visits from and to China. The vice-chairwoman of the Zhigong Party, Yan Xiaopei (闫小培) has visited the Nordics including Helsinki in summer 2017.⁵⁴ In 2018, meanwhile, two Nordic delegations visited the Zhigong Party in China: First a delegation from the NZA – including Zhang Hongbo – and later, a more business-oriented delegation, which took part in Belt and Road related discussions.⁵⁵

Associations and individuals with united front connections typically attempt to deny all such connections. In an interview conducted by YLE in spring 2020, Zhang claimed only to know that such an entity as the NZA exists, but he did not mention being a leading member of the association. Zhang furthermore claimed that he had never heard of the United Front Work Department, not even after the name of the organization was presented to him in Chinese characters.⁵⁶ This was despite the fact that he had hosted the deputy director of the UFWD in Helsinki only few months earlier.

At a level below the scholar associations are the Chinese student associations, which are everywhere named **Chinese Students and**

51 Quoted in Pär Nyren, “The CCP’s United Front Network in Sweden.”

52 [NZA Website](#), archived.

53 “芬兰埃博学术大学张宏博教授应邀来我校开展学术交流,” Guangdong Pharmaceutical University website, December 31, 2019.

54 闫小培率致公党中央代表团访问芬兰、冰岛和丹麦,” China Zhigong Party website. July 4, 2017.

55 “闫小培会见北欧致公协会代表团一行,” UFWD website, October 24, 2018; “闫小培会见‘一带一路’沿线国家侨商代表团,” UFWD website, November 30, 2018.

56 Päivi Koskinen and Kirsi Skön, “[Kiinan ‘taika-ase’ tähtää Suomeenkin.](#)” *Yle*, March 15, 2020.

Scholars Associations (学生学者联合会, CSSA). Such association mostly engage in typical student activities and provide useful services for the students, yet are under the surveillance of, and have been infiltrated by the united front system. Student associations are seen as a mechanism for surveying overseas students and their ideological leanings, but they are also used for mobilizing support for China's policies in various ways. CSSA's have been found to report on dissident students, and some Finnish university teachers have also been concerned on suspicious behavior and harassment from Chinese students.⁵⁷

The Finnish CSSA has branch associations in most Finnish universities, e.g. CSSA Jyväskylä, CSSA Helsinki and so on. Similarly named organizations exist in other countries and operate under the supervision and guidance of Chinese embassies.⁵⁸ Only CSSA Tampere currently has a website, on which the association, similarly to other CSSA's worldwide, claims to work in close cooperation and "under the guidance of the Chinese embassy in Finland".⁵⁹ According to an interview by *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading members of the CSSA's Helsinki branch are also members of the Communist Party of China.⁶⁰

Based on the website, the association organizes typical student activities (study sessions, gatherings and parties), but some of the activities have clear political undertones. For example, CSSA Tampere was – among many other Chinese associations – welcoming Xi Jinping during his visit to Finland in 2017⁶¹ and took part in welcoming the warships of the People's Liberation Army Navy to Helsinki in same year.⁶² The association – among other student

57 Mari Manninen, "Professori huolestui: Helsingin yliopiston kurssi voi vaarantaa sitä Kiinasta käsin seuraavien opiskelijoiden turvallisuuden", *Helsingin Sanomat*, October 2, 2020. See also Alex Joske, "The party speaks for you."

58 See Alex Joske, "The party speaks for you."

59 [CSSA-Tampere Website](#).

60 See Ville Similä, "Opinnot Suomessa, sydän Kiinassa," *Helsingin Sanomat*, June 12, 2021.

61 [CSSA-Tampere Website](#), April 13, 2017

62 [CSSA-Tampere Website](#), August 7, 2017

groups – also took part in the mass buying of health equipment in February 2020 during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan (see below).⁶³

In January 2018, the Chinese embassy in Finland organized a symposium, in which Chinese scholars and students gathered to discuss a letter, which President Xi had recently sent for the students of Moscow University, and in which Xi urged the overseas students to “not let down the great trust of the motherland”. Although the CSSA or any other associations are not directly mentioned, the students and scholars who took part in the symposium proclaimed that they “warmly receive the care of the Chinese state for its overseas students” and that they shall “provide contributions for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”.⁶⁴

2.2. Finland Association for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China

Perhaps the most notable association, and the one most explicitly connected to the united front system, is the **Finland Association for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China** (芬兰中国和平统一促进会, FAPPRC). FAPPRC is one of the numerous peaceful reunification associations (or councils) that have been established all around the globe. Peaceful reunification associations could be described as visible branch offices of the united front system. They claim to be “non-governmental and non-profit” independent organizations that support the peaceful reunification of Taiwan and China. However, their connections to the Chinese state and to the united front system are clearly visible, since all of the branch offices (including the Finnish one) are led by an umbrella organization in Beijing, the **China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification** (CCPPNR, 中国和平统一促进会).⁶⁵

63 “在芬学生学者心系祖国 助力抗疫,” Website of the Western Returned Scholars Association, March 3, 2020.

64 See the website of the [Chinese Embassy of Finland](#).

65 John Dotson, “The United Front Work Department Goes Global: The Worldwide Expansion of the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China,” *Jamestown Foundation*, May 9, 2019.

The umbrella organization, meanwhile, is listed as one of the ‘directly subordinate units’ (直属单位) of the United Front Work Department and is currently led by Wang Yang (汪洋), the fourth ranked member of the Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee.⁶⁶ The umbrella organization is in contact with the local branches mainly through local embassies, but the core members of the local branches regularly travel to China to attend conferences and study sessions.

Although the names of the organizations give an impression that ‘national unification’ is the main objective, branch associations support Chinese foreign policy objectives at large. The Finnish branch, for example, defines as its overarching mission to “realize the dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese people”.⁶⁷ The most visible activities of the peaceful unification associations include organizing demonstrations either *for* China’s policies or *against* China’s adversaries. As a base rule: Wherever a demonstration with standardized red banners and Chinese flags is observed, the local peaceful reunification association is hard at work. Peaceful unification councils, to summarize, are among the most important actors in China’s hybrid influence operations around the world, serving as nodes between the United Front organizations in China and the local diasporic networks in the target country.

According to the website of the umbrella organization, the Finnish branch was established already in 2000 by Tan Jingming (覃经明). It was only during around 2016, however, that the activities of the organization really took off as the new chairman Zhu Hailun (朱海伦) began to establish connections with the relevant Chinese associations and individuals in Finland.⁶⁸ In 2017, FAPPRC was registered as an official association in the Finnish Patent and Registration Office and opened its own website.⁶⁹

66 “China’s top political advisor urges efforts for national reunification,” *Xinhua*, October 25, 2018.

67 “芬兰中国和平统一促进会会长到访上海虹口,” *Zhongguo Qiaowang*, June 23, 2017.

68 CCPPNR [website](#).

69 [Finnish Patent and Registration Office Website](#). According to the official registration document, the purpose of the association is to “secure the peaceful unification of China, unite the Chinese living in

According to the FAPPRC website, the WeChat group of the association has over 200 members, but the number of active members might be a small fraction of that.⁷⁰ The activities of the FAPPRC are similar to other reunification associations worldwide. They include networking with local Chinese associations, organizing demonstrations and convening study sessions, in which CCP directives or important speeches by CCP leaders are studied and discussed.

The association has, for example, gathered to discuss the report provided by President Xi Jinping for the 19th CCP National Congress, as well as a speech given by Xi in January 2019 on the situation of Taiwan.⁷¹ FAPPRC also welcomed the PLA Navy to Helsinki in 2017, and President XI during his visit to Finland in April 2017. On its website, FAPPRC curiously boasted how its members drove away a “pro-Tibetan independence hooligan causing unnecessary trouble” by reporting him to the police. According to *Helsingin Sanomat*, the police indeed guided the demonstrator elsewhere, since the location in question – North Esplanadi street – was supposed to be clear of all demonstrating groups. However, the FAPPRC demonstrators remained in the North Esplanadi with their banners.⁷²

In August 2019, a demonstration supporting Hong Kong’s democratic protests was organized in Helsinki. According to an article in *Guangming Daily*, FAPPRC, spearheaded by Zhu Hailun, promptly organized an anti-demonstration to condemn the “provocative gathering”.⁷³

Finland and to promote mutual understanding and multichannel cooperation between the different Chinese nations.”

70 Based on the information available at FAPPRC website, a typical FAPPRC meeting, study session or rally involves around 15 members.

71 See CCPPNR website. [FAPPRC website](#) (now offline).

72 Kaisa Hakkarainen, “Punalippujen ja Kiina-banderollien pelmahdus Espalle yllätti Helsingin poliisin – Tiibetin lipun kantajaa kehoitettiin siirtymään omiensa joukkoon,” *Helsingin Sanomat*, July 4, 2017.

73 “芬兰华人华侨强烈谴责乱港行径,” *Guangming daily*, August 26, 2019.

The Finnish branch maintains close connections with the Chinese embassy in Finland, as well as with its sister and umbrella organizations. Besides running the operation in Finland, Zhu Hailun is also a board member of the Shanghai Council for Peaceful Reunification, and travels frequently to meet with his Chinese counterparts.⁷⁴ Zhu has, for instance, attended a conference organized by the Shanghai council, in which officials of the Shanghai CCP Party School and Propaganda Department gave lectures.⁷⁵ In 2018, Zhu visited a Beijing gathering of peaceful reunification associations, and in 2018 a FAPPRC delegation attended a global convention of peaceful reunification associations organized in Panama.⁷⁶

FAPPRC also hosts visits from Chinese delegations, including various delegations from the United Front Work Department itself. These delegations have included a delegation from **China Overseas Friendship Association** (中华海外联谊会) led by its secretary Wang Ping (王苹) and a delegation from **Shanghai Overseas Affairs Office**, led by its vice Yao Zhuoyun (姚卓匀).⁷⁷ In November 2018, Shanghai's Jiading district United Front chief Zhang Jinsong (张劲松) also visited.⁷⁸ The 2018 United Front visits were linked to major restructuring within the UFWD, in which various departments and their associated associations were incorporated into the UFWD departments nine and ten.⁷⁹ The meetings arranged with the 2018 delegations discussed these new policies, and besides FAPPRC, included members from other associations active in Finland, such as the CASTF.

FAPPRC has kept a low profile in Finland and only briefly described itself and its mission in Finnish language on its website. On the website

74 [Website of the Shanghai United Front bureau](#), October 26, 2017.

75 [Website of the Shanghai United Front bureau](#), September 28, 2018.

76 [FAPPRC website](#), Archived.

77 [FAPPRC website](#), Archived.

78 Ibid.

79 Alex Joske, "[Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work](#)," *Jonestown Foundation*. May 9, 2019.

of the Beijing umbrella organization, meanwhile, Zhu Hailun pompously claims that the association has considerable influence among overseas Chinese communities in Finland, and that FAPPRC works actively with other Chinese associations for organizing various kinds of networking activities. In addition, Zhu claims, FAPPRC promotes the engagement of overseas Chinese in Finnish politics. Indeed, up until March 2020, the vice-chairman of FAPPRC was a Finnish national, Jenni Chen-ye (陈燕尼), who was also an elected member of the Vantaa city council. Officially Chen-ye was a member of the National Coalition Party – one of the major four political parties of Finland – yet she did not disclose any of her links to the United Front association.

In February-March 2020, Finnish media including the *Ulkopolitist* and the *Finnish Public Broadcasting Company* (YLE) published articles and a full-length documentary, which disclosed the activities of FAPPRC and other groups and individuals related to the united front in Finland.⁸⁰ The FAPPRC website went silent after the media attention and later vanished altogether. Soon after, Jenni Chen-ye was expelled from the National Coalition Party and claims to have also resigned from FAPPRC. In December 2020 she joined the election lists of the Green party, but her membership was terminated promptly after Chen-ye commented on Twitter that Finland should remain neutral on China's human rights violations.⁸¹

Although FAPPRC has toned down its public profile, its activities apparently have not ceased. The website of the umbrella organization in Beijing mentions how FAPPRC has continued to convene to discuss recent developments in China, and to demonstrate its support for various CCP policies. In June 2020, for example, FAPPRC claims to have organized

80 See Matti Puranen, "[Kiinan vaikutusoperaatioiden 'taika-ase' toimii myös Suomessa.](#)" *The Ulkopolitist*, February 23, 2020; Päivi Koskinen, and Kirsi Skön, "[Kiinan 'taika-ase' tähtää Suomeenkin.](#)" *Yle*, March 15, 2020; Yle MOT Documentary, "[Perussuomalainen Kiina-ilmio.](#)"

81 For more on Chen-ye, see "[Kiina-mielinen Twitter-viesti oli liikaa – Jenni Chen-ye jättää vihreiden valtuustoryhmän Vantaalla.](#)" *Yle*, February 7, 2021.

online meetings, in which its members expressed their strong support for the new national security law in Hong Kong and for the Anti-Secession Law, which formalizes the potential use of military force against Taiwan.⁸² In September 2020, furthermore, FAPPRC voiced its strong opposition to Czech senate speaker Milos Vystrcil's visit to Taiwan⁸³ and then in July 2021, Zhu Hailun lauded the 100th anniversary of the CCP.⁸⁴

2.3. Summary: United Front Networks in Finland

In conclusion, various associations with strong links to the united front system are active in Finland, and their activities strongly correspond with peer associations in other countries. Seen from the perspective of the conceptual framework, the networks are active in various domains (social, political, cultural and intelligence) but operate mostly in the priming phase.

The main business of the CASTF-NZA -network and CSSA Finland is to monitor and network with diasporic students and academic talents in Finland. Of these, CASTF is clearly more important and highly valued within the united front system, demonstrated by the intensity of meetings it has organized with Chinese and CCP delegations combined with the presence of Chinese embassy officials in such gatherings.

FAPPRC, meanwhile, serves almost as a branch office of the united front in Finland. It maintains close connections with united front organizations in China, and – although not there yet – aims to establish deep and broad networks of influence within the local diaspora.

82 “海内外统促会组织和代表人士坚决支持建立健全香港特别行政区维护国家安全的法律制度和执行机制（五）,” CCPPNR website, June 2, 2020; “海内外统促会组织坚决支持实施《反分裂国家法》维护祖国统一（二）,” CCPPNR website, June 2, 2020.

83 “海外统促会强烈谴责和坚决反对捷克议会参议院主席率团访台（三）,” CCPPNR website, September 4, 2020.

84 See “综合消息：建党百年铸辉煌成就 不忘初心谱更美篇章——习近平总书记在庆祝中国共产党成立100周年大会上的重要讲话引发海外华侨华人热烈反响,” State Council website, July 2, 2021.

The reach of the united front networks in Finland came to light in the spring of 2020, as the mass buying of health equipment by Chinese diaspora associations was noticed all around the world. In Finland, the FAPPRC was again at the center of the operations, as were its sister organizations in other countries.⁸⁵ Besides the FAPPRC, numerous diaspora associations including the already mentioned CASTF and the Nordic Zhigong Association took part in the buying.⁸⁶

This does not imply that all the diaspora associations involved in the operation would be under the direction of the UFWD, nor that sending health equipment for one's homeland suffering from a deadly pandemic would be in any way improper, *per se*. The operation however demonstrates how effectively the united front networks within a country *can* be mobilized by the united front system if the need arises. Under different circumstances, the same networks could be mobilized for conducting campaigns of a more hostile nature.

85 “同心聚力 携手战‘疫’ 海内外统促会积极支持中国抗击新冠肺炎疫情综述,” CCPPNR website, August 18, 2020.

86 “在芬学生学者心系祖国 助力抗疫,” Website of the Western Returned Scholars Association, March 3, 2020; “周斌: 抗击疫情 致公同行,” Website of Zhigong Party, April 21, 2020; “抗击疫情北欧致公与你同行,” Nordic Zhigong Party Weixin, February 16, 2020. See also “芬兰侨学商抗击疫情, 我们在行动! ,” *Chinanews.se*, January 31, 2020.

3. Parliamentary Networks as Hybrid Actors

Besides using diaspora associations in Finland, Chinese influencing is also ongoing within the Finnish parliament. Although these operations are not distinct from those conducted through the united front system, and are more likely overlapping with them, the main organizational instrument for the activities within the Finnish parliament is the **International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China** (ILD, 中共中央对外联络部), which manages official relations between the CCP and major political parties of other countries, regardless of their ideological standings. According to a study by Hackensch and Bader, the ILD currently maintains connections with over 400 political parties in 160 countries.⁸⁷

Besides its official function, the Liaison Department gathers intelligence on the political scene and foreign policies of target countries, and acts as a political intelligence agency of the CCP: a “‘radar’ for identifying up-and-coming foreign politicians before they attain national prominence and office.”⁸⁸ In the words of Song Tao (宋涛), the former chairman of the ILD: “[through] exchanges and cooperation with foreign political parties [the ILD] can influence the other side’s attitudes and policies toward China, and make the other side understand, respect, and approve our values and policies.”⁸⁹ The ILD, just like the United Front Work Department is an old organization within the CCP’s bureaucratic structure, yet its activities

87 Christine Hackensch and Julia Bader, “The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party’s Global Outreach,” *International Studies Quarterly*, no. 64 (2020): 723–733. The ILD is also sometimes called The International Department of The Communist Party of China. See also Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 51–79.

88 Larry Diamond, et al., “[Chinese Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance](#),” (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2018), 139.

89 Quoted in Neil Thomas, “[Proselytizing Power: The Party Wants the World to Learn from Its Experiences](#),” *Macro Polo*. January 22, 2020.

have increased especially during the term of Xi Jinping.⁹⁰

In Finland, the CCP claims to have established connections with all of the major parties, but based on a cursory search concluded for this case study, the efforts of the ILD seem to have focused on the liberal-conservative Centre Party (Suomen Keskusta) – one of the four most important political parties of the country. The ILD has sent various delegations to Finland and attended at least two Centre Party congresses, in 2012 and 2018.⁹¹ The 2018 delegation to the Centre Party's 77th party congress was spearheaded by a high-level representative of the Liaison Department, Qian Hongshan (钱洪山), who was, at the time, serving as vice-chairman of the ILD.⁹² The visit was briefly noticed in the Finnish media, as Qian was photographed giving then leader of the Centre Party and the Prime Minister of Finland, Juha Sipilä, a copy of Xi Jinping's book *The Governance of China*.⁹³

The Centre Party, which also seems to be the only major party in Finland to send its congratulatory greetings for the CCP's National Congresses in both 2012⁹⁴ and 2017⁹⁵, has on its turn, dispatched various party-to-party delegations to China. For instance, in February of 2017, former Prime Minister and then Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament, Matti Vanhanen led a Centre Party delegation to China, most prominently meeting with the chief of the CCP Organization Department, Zhao Leji (赵乐际).⁹⁶ Zhao has since been promoted to the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP, the top governing body of the party and the state.

90 Ibid.

91 "[Keskustalla arvovieraita: Kiinan kommunistinen puolue](#)," *Ilta-Sanomat*, June 8, 2012.

92 "中共代表团出席芬兰中间党党代会," *Xinhua*, June 10, 2018.

93 "Viiniä, pesäpalloa ja yllätyslahja kiinalaisilta kommunisteilta - näin Sipilä rentoutui puoluekokousiltana," *Iltalehti*, June 8, 2018.

94 [Website of the International Liaison Department](#), September 11, 2012.

95 [Website of the International Liaison Department](#), October 18, 2017. During the 19th Party Congress, the tiny Communist Party of Finland (CPF) also sent its congratulatory greetings.

96 "赵乐际会见芬兰中间党代表团," *Gongchandangyuan wang*, February 20, 2017.

In December of the same year, the ILD organized a “world political parties dialogue” in Beijing – a grand scale propaganda event for propagating the successes of China’s political system. Over 600 representatives from 300 political parties around the world attended. The event culminated in a ceremonial issuing of a joint statement, “Beijing Initiative”, in which the “immense efforts and important contribution” of the CCP and Xi Jinping, among other things, were highly praised. CCP propaganda went to great lengths to suggest that all the attendees also signed and endorsed the the document and its message.⁹⁷ Centre Party party secretary, Jouni Ovaska, attended the event and in an interview given to the *China Daily*, described the CCP as “progressive, big and well governed.”⁹⁸

Alongside with the ‘world political parties dialogue’, the ILD also launched an international campaign, in which ‘briefing delegations’ (宣介团) were sent all around the globe to promote China’s political system and its achievements.⁹⁹ One such delegation visited Helsinki in December 2017, some months after the 19th Party Congress of the CCP, to “explain the spirit of the 19th congress” (十九大精神专题宣介会). The event, organized in cooperation with the Chinese embassy in Finland, was chaired by a very high ranking CCP cadre, Li Shulei (李书磊), the Deputy Secretary of the party’s dreaded **Central Commission for Discipline Inspection**. According to the *Xinhua* news agency, the event was attended by over 50 guests ranging from politicians and business leaders to think-tankers.¹⁰⁰

97 Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 52; “Shared future concept embraced,” *China Daily*, December 4, 2017. See also Charlotte Gao, “For the First Time, Chinese Communist Party to Hold a World Political Parties Dialogue,” *The Diplomat*, November 29, 2017.

98 “Global delegates tour Party school,” *China Daily*, December 2, 2017. Besides the Centre Party, the Communist Party of Finland also sent a delegation to the World dialogue. In May 2018, the CPF also sent a delegation to Shenzhen, in which the delegation attended a workshop celebrating the 2000th birthday of Karl Marx. See the [Website of CPF](#).

99 See Neil Thomas, “Proselytizing Power.”

100 *China National Radio website*, December 9, 2017. A video clip of the event is available at the *Xinhua website*.

Besides such direct party-to-party relations, the CCP tries to maintain connections with the whole Finnish Parliament through the **Finnish-Chinese Parliamentary friendship group** (Eduskunnan Kiina-ystävyysryhmä, 芬兰议会芬中友好小组). The Finnish Parliament has many similar ‘unofficial’ friendship groups, which uphold international connections mainly by organizing various seminars and banquets.¹⁰¹

According to a study by Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, China has been using similar friendship groups in other European countries as platforms for co-opting foreign elites favorable to CCP’s policy agendas. The objective, according to Yoshihara and Bianchi, is to make the co-opted elites “parrot the Party’s talking points, deflect narratives harmful to Beijing’s image, host public events that showcase the Party’s virtues, promote trade and investment, encourage technology transfers, and voice support for changes in European policies favorable to China.”¹⁰² Jichang Lulu, building on his study of the European Parliament Friendship Group and the network around it, has argued that the friendship groups are often used as ‘propaganda proxies’, whose members end up endorsing “CCP policies in admiring terms, channeled through PRC propaganda organs”.¹⁰³

There is little, if any, information on the Finnish friendship group in the Finnish media but Chinese language sources, news and embassy blog posts on it are rather abundant. In the Chinese sources, the friendship group and its activities are often presented as a concrete example of the warm and cooperative relations between China and Finland. Visits and delegations from China are also hosted, as in 2017, when the friendship group entertained a CCP delegation from the Tibetan Autonomous Region. In a Facebook post, a Finnish member of the friendship group

101 Website of the Finnish Parliament.

102 Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, “Uncovering China’s Influence in Europe: How Friendship Groups Coopt European Elites,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020.

103 Jichang Lulu, “Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster,” *Sinopsis*, November 26, 2019.

celebrated the visit as a “historical morning in the parliament”.¹⁰⁴ A typical propaganda tactic of the CCP, Lulu claims, is to apply “knowledge asymmetry”, in which the “advocacy of CCP-aligned policies is made possible by a clear lack of basic knowledge about China’s politics, history and foreign relations.”¹⁰⁵

Besides its function as a propaganda proxy for the CCP, the Finnish friendship group is also valued for its ‘elite co-option’ potential. The most visible activities of the Finnish group consist of organizing ‘China Day’ (中国日) -events in cooperation with the Chinese embassy in Finland. The events bring together business and political elites from both countries to network, socialize and discuss possible cooperation schemes.

The friendship group and its China Day event gained notoriety in early 2020, as it was revealed by *Suomen Kuvalehti* magazine that members of Parliament Mika Niikko and Ville Vähämäki (Finns party), had founded a company together with a Chinese businessman, Si Hang (斯航). The company, **Realmax Oy**, established in June 2017, was an independent subsidiary of Realmax group in Shanghai, and its establishment in Finland was supported by a large Chinese state fund, the **State Development & Investment Corporation** (SDIC, 国家发展投资公司).¹⁰⁶ At the time Niikko served as the chairman of the friendship group and would later, in 2019, become the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Parliament. In 2018, Niikko and Si were apparently invited to the Chinese embassy to celebrate the well developing relations between the two countries.¹⁰⁷

104 Facebook post of member of parliament, Antero Laukkanen.

105 Ibid.

106 Jarno Liski, and Salla Vuorikoski, “Perussuomalaisten kansanedustajat salasivat osakkuutensa Kiinan valtioon kytkeytyvässä teknologiyhtiössä,” *Suomen Kuvalehti*, January 16, 2020.

107 Website of the Chinese embassy in Helsinki, August 17, 2018.

The Realmx group specializes in augmented reality (AR) technologies and has a similar, semi-independent branch office in the United States.¹⁰⁸ In addition to the business dealings, *Suomen Kuvalehti* revealed that Niikko had received a donation of 5,000 euros from Si, which he attempted to conceal as an 'election loan'.¹⁰⁹

Although Niikko relinquished his share of Realmx soon after the company was established, he was repeatedly seen together with Si Hang in numerous Realmx and China related conferences, banquets and business events.

Realmx, for instance, had a strong presence in the China Day events of both 2017 and 2018.¹¹⁰ Niikko also accompanied Si in delegations to China. In March 2018, Niikko, Vähämäki and Si visited Beijing Union University, where they were introduced to Professor Li Deyi (李德毅), then Director General of the **Chinese Association for Artificial Intelligence** (中国人工智能学会).¹¹¹ Besides his civilian role, Li is also a Major General of the People's Liberation Army, and, according to one analyst, one of China's leading experts on artificial intelligence and a researcher at the Central Military Commission Equipment Development Department's 61st Research Institute.¹¹² Conscious or unconscious of his military connections,

108 See the [company website](#).

109 Ibid.

110 "芬兰议会'中国日'展示两国企业创新合作," Website of the Chinese State Council, February 13, 2017; "芬兰中资企业协会及会员企业参与'中国日'活动!", Website of the Chinese Enterprise Association Finland, March 27, 2019.

111 Beijing Union University website. "芬兰代表团和塔普公司一行来访," March 9, 2018.

112 Elsa B. Kania, "Strategic Planning in China's Military," *The Diplomat*, June 7, 2017. Bill Geertz further describes Major General Li as "a key figure in the Chinese military's effort to overtake the United States in the emerging field of advanced weapons." See Bill Geertz, "China in race to overtake the US in AI warfare," *Asia Times*, May 30, 2018. Li and his PLA connections are also mentioned in a report prepared on behalf of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, in October 2016. See "China's Industrial and Military Robotics Development".

Niikko, Vähämäki and Si invited Major General Li to visit Finland and also the Finnish Parliament in June 2018.¹¹³

After the media attention brought forth by *Suomen Kuvalehti* and others in the spring of 2020, the website of Realmax Oy has vanished, and the LinkedIn profile of the company (as of 2022) lists Si Hang as the only employee. The whole scheme around Realmax, which was funded by China's SDIC, and which nourished relations with an AI researcher of the People's Liberation Army seem to hint at a well-designed and carefully orchestrated technology transfer operation that happened under the aegis of the parliamentary friendship group and its most active members.

3.1. Summary: Parliament as an Arena of Hybrid Influencing

The networks active within the parliamentary structures, organized primarily by the International Liaison Department of the CCP, make up another example of the priming phase influence network building in Finland. As with the united front networks, the zone of their activity is gray, since it is not illegal and not necessarily even improper to maintain party-to-party relations with the CCP. The ILD-operated influence networks attempt to utilize this haziness for two major objectives.

First, the network is used for propaganda purposes, in which foreign politicians are used – not always with their consent – as ‘propaganda proxies’. Unknowingly or not, they deliver pro-CCP messages or outright party talking points for the consumption of Chinese state-owned media, and by doing so, help to establish an impression of a broad international consensus on the legitimacy and positive value of the CCP regime. Such propaganda, in which foreign leaders praise the achievements of the

113 “中国人工智能学会理事长李德毅院士访问芬兰圆满成功,” Chinese Association for Artificial Intelligence website, June 19, 2018. See also Jarno Liski, “Kansanedustajat Mika Niikko ja Ville Vähämäki toivat kiinalaiskenraalin eduskuntaan,” *Suomen Kuvalehti*, February 10, 2020.

CCP or endorse a CCP-designed “Beijing initiative”, is typically aimed at China’s domestic audience.¹¹⁴

Second, and more importantly, the network is maintaining and deepening connections with major political parties and their most important political talents. Such patient ‘grooming’ and elite co-option work has been done most visibly through Chinese delegations to Finland, or by inviting politicians to China for various ‘seminars’ or for official party-to-party meetings and propaganda events, akin to the CCP “world political parties dialogue” in 2017.

Party-to-party connections, overriding official state-level bureaucracies, serve as excellent venues for, in the words of the ILD chairman Song Tao himself, influencing “the other side’s attitudes and policies toward China, and make the other side understand, respect, and approve our values and policies.”¹¹⁵

The use of such groomed elites for hybrid operations has not yet materialized in Finland in the scale observed in other countries, but the case of Niikko and Vähämäki, especially, implies that similar kinds of ‘elite capture’ attempts are ongoing in the country as well.

114 Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 51–52.

115 Quoted in Neil Thomas, “Proselytizing Power: The Party Wants the World to Learn from Its Experiences,” *Macro Polo*, January 22, 2020.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Chinese influencing activity in Finland overall largely resembles patterns and methods observed in other countries. Although the intensity of activity in Finland has remained in the priming phase, the situation could change rapidly following the deterioration of diplomatic ties, as recent developments in Sweden, Australia and Lithuania have shown. Finland is not immune to such an escalation.

As mentioned in the beginning, Chinese influencing in Finland is ongoing within various domains and is conducted by various actors, and this article has focused only on particular attempts to establish networks of influence by using local diasporas. The networks in Finland are similar to other peer countries, and certain operations, such as the activities of the Nordic Zhigong Association, extend into the whole Nordic region. The 'discourse management' and elite co-opting work ongoing within the parliamentary structures also find international counterparts.

Networks are established and maintained during the priming phase, when their activities are hard to notice, but they can be operationalized later, "when opportunity, necessity or impatience present themselves."¹¹⁶ The use of united front networks for organizing the operations for buying health equipment during the spring of 2020 in Finland as well as elsewhere, is an exemplary case in point and demonstrates the disciplined and well-organized nature of such networks. Crucially, the same networks could be operationalized for much more sinister ends if the need arises.

116 Georgios Giannopoulos, et al., "The Landscape of Hybrid Threats", 32.

Due to the nature of Chinese activity, it is important to emphasize that many or even most of the activities of the associations and individuals described in this paper – e.g. establishing organizations which support the policy objectives of the Communist Party of China – are not illegal in Finland, and the degree to which they can be seen as ‘improper’ also lies in the eye of the beholder. But as Giannopoulos et al. argue, whether illegal and improper or not “when activated with given need or opportunity and combined and used in synchronization [the activities] start to create an effect that harms and undermines the democratic state system, sovereignty and functionality of the target state.”¹¹⁷

Chinese attempts to establish networks of influence utilize and target weaknesses embedded in the open nature of liberal democracies. However, the same weaknesses also form the strongest defense of democratic societies. Mikael Wigell has argued for the development of democratic deterrence, which calls for “strengthening our liberal democratic values and infrastructure: transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and civil society”.¹¹⁸

Seen from the point of view of this case study’s focus on clandestine networks functioning under the threshold of detectability, a vigilant civil society and especially its investigative journalists, scholarly communities and citizen activists forms a strong and adaptive first line of defense. Indeed, as mentioned above, most of the major united front associations took their websites down soon after Finnish media disclosed their activities, and the questionable business activities of Realmax seem to have all but ceased.

117 Georgios Giannopoulos, et al., “The Landscape of Hybrid Threats”, 31.

118 Mikael Wigell, “Democratic Deterrence: How to Dissuade Hybrid Interference,” *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2021): 49–67.

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