

China's foreign influence operations in Western liberal democracies: An emerging debate

A debate is gaining traction in Western democracies about the nature, extent and the implications of, as well as possible responses to, China's growing efforts to influence Western political elites, academia, think-tanks, and media through what has recently been labelled 'sharp power'. This debate reflects different levels of concern in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and the European Union.

[Academics](#) stress that, although China has [embraced](#) the concept of '[soft power](#)', the term has taken on the distinctive features of China's one-party state ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP commands an extensive [state and party apparatus](#) to wield an authoritarian form of soft power. This goes beyond routine public diplomacy, to include '[unorthodox](#)' means to co-opt political elites, academia, think-tanks and media to support CCP policy goals, and to silence criticism on sensitive topics. The party's [United Front Work Department](#), whose status [President Xi Jinping](#) has further [upgraded](#), [plays](#) a [key role](#) in mobilising overseas Chinese for the CCP's cause. It acts via a [myriad](#) of [overseas associations](#) that serve as proxies, ostensibly unrelated to the CCP, to cultivate allies and neutralise critics.

Australia – pushing back on the legislative front amid a polarised debate

Australia is vulnerable to CCP-led foreign influence operations due to its intense [trade and investment ties](#) with China, and the openness of its pluralist, multicultural society, which hosts a [significant](#) Chinese community. [One in four](#) Australian university students is Chinese. The debate about alleged CCP influence in Australian politics reached a peak in late 2017, when [Australian Security Intelligence Organisation investigation results](#) added to Australian media [reports](#) stressing that, according to Election Commission data, Chinese business were [by far](#) the largest foreign [donors](#) to major Australian parties. A [Labour Party senator](#) resigned after a [recording](#) revealed that he had supported the Chinese government's position on China's maritime claims in the [South China Sea](#), contradicting the Australian government's [position](#) and that of his own party. Reportedly, this was linked to party donations from a Chinese businessman with alleged CCP ties, and to whom the senator appeared to have provided [counter-surveillance advice](#).

As a result, Australia has decided to [push back](#) against foreign influence in Australian politics, [media](#), and [universities](#). Its [response](#) on the legislative front is the most visible course of action, although a broader [debate](#) is ongoing that includes Chinese diaspora participation. The Australian government has [introduced legislative proposals](#) to review Australia's foreign influence legislation, including a [ban](#) on foreign donations to political parties; Canada and the US already have a ban [in place](#), and New Zealand caps donations at NZ\$1 500. The proposals have prompted numerous submissions from [stakeholders](#), including from two academic camps. The debate has become increasingly polarised opposing, inter alia, [critics](#) from the think-tank community and [supporters](#) of a tougher [stance](#). [Opponents](#) of the legislative initiatives have warned that their scope could jeopardise intellectual freedom, and have cautioned against the [adverse](#) impact of what they consider an [alarmist](#) rather than informed debate, that [stigmatises](#) Chinese-Australians. Responding to this criticism, another [group of academics](#) has stressed the need for transparency on the CCP's covert influence activities, which are real and not limited to politics but extend to [media](#) and [education](#), as [described](#) by Australian academics [Fitzgerald](#) and [Hamilton](#).

New Zealand – avoiding an unwanted political debate?

In New Zealand, which has similarly strong [economic ties](#) with China and a big [Chinese diaspora](#), [media reports](#) sparked a [debate](#) in late 2017 about the alleged CCP links of a sitting [National Party MP](#), who was born in mainland China and [taught English](#) to intelligence officers there. Although [briefings](#) from the New Zealand Security Intelligence Services had [raised](#) concerns about 'attempts to unduly influence expatriate communities', the political debate quickly [dried up](#). New Zealand policy-makers have [not expanded](#) on these concerns, as they do [not see](#) evidence of undue influence. Some academics are also not particularly

worried. [Ayson](#) has [argued](#) that allegations of foreign influence activities require a response on a case-by-case basis, judging each situation on its merits. [Brady](#), by contrast, in an [in-depth case study](#) into her country has [raised](#) serious concerns about [CCP-led foreign influence operations](#), also [drawing attention](#) to their potential impact on the [Five Eyes](#) intelligence alliance (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US). However, her policy recommendations and calls for a national resilience strategy do not appear to have [catalysed](#) a wider [political debate](#) so far.

Strengthening US resilience against CCP 'sharp power'

Following the revelations of alleged CCP influence on Australian and New Zealand politics, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) held a [session](#) on 13 December 2017, on the '[Long Arm of China. Exporting Authoritarianism with Chinese Characteristics](#)'. On 21 March 2018, the US Congress Foreign Affairs Committee's Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee, dedicated a [hearing](#) to '[Responses to China's Foreign Influence Operations](#)'. To combat foreign influence operations, US [lawmakers](#) in March 2018 [introduced](#) the [Countering Foreign Propaganda Act](#) and the [Foreign Influence Transparency Act](#), which would require organisations, such as Confucius Institutes, to register under the [Foreign Agents Registration Act](#) (FARA). Confucius Institutes on US campuses have drawn particular criticism, with some being [closed](#) in recent years. A 2017 National Association of Scholars [report](#) raises concern about intellectual freedom and self-censorship, lack of transparency, financial entanglement and soft power issues. The proposed US legislation would, moreover, amend the [Higher Education Act](#) to oblige universities to disclose foreign donations if the amount equals US\$50 000 or higher. As some US policy-makers have [cautioned](#) against cooperation with the China-United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF), given its alleged CCP ties, the University of Texas for example [decided](#) in January 2018, not to accept CUSEF funds for its new China Public Policy Center, to ensure academic freedom. A National Endowment for Democracy (NED) report '[Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence](#)' proposes to use '[sharp power](#)' as a new [term](#) for authoritarian 'soft power', arguing that the latter is not mainly about attraction or persuasion like Western soft power, but about distraction and manipulation. It stresses, inter alia, the asymmetry between the barriers erected by authoritarian regimes like China and Russia to external political and cultural influence, and the openness of democracies, which facilitates the growing scope of [authoritarian influence](#). The NED report analyses the deployment of 'sharp power' instruments in case studies of four young democracies: [Argentina](#), [Peru](#), [Poland](#) and [Slovakia](#), focusing on influence on media, culture, academia, and think-tanks.

A debate for the EU agenda?

As China successfully steers the [debate](#) on China in the EU to issues such as the country's [Silk Road initiatives](#), there is little room for discussion of the [impact](#) of alleged CCP-led foreign influence operations on EU norms and values. A case in point is the front-page articles by China's Ambassador to the UK, published in a UK media outlet in [January 2018](#) before Prime Minister Theresa May's [state visit](#) to China and again in [March 2018](#). Neither a [German intelligence report uncovering Chinese operatives using fake LinkedIn profiles](#) in more than 10 000 emails to German citizens allegedly to recruit informants, nor Chinese pressure on Western publishers to [self-censor](#) products for the Chinese market have triggered a debate. A Mercator Institute for China Studies ([Merics](#)) report '[Authoritarian Advance. Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe](#)' could do so. It identifies actors, motivations, and tools of CCP foreign influence operations, and measures their impact on political elites, media and public opinion, academia and civil society, based on Chinese political-influencing events in the EU from 2015 to 2017 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – China's influence on political elites, media, academia, and civil society

