



Image: President Donald Trump delivers a press briefing alongside U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi, June 26, 2025

Subtle Infiltration, Waning Vigilance: Chinese Influence in California Amid Trump-Era National Security Rollbacks

Written by
Joseph Leonard

As tensions rise amidst a great-power rivalry between the U.S. and China, and national security policy shifts, California has become a critical frontline. Beijing sees a unique strategic value in the state stemming from its economic and political predominance and its large Chinese diaspora. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's overhaul of counter-influence efforts has eroded America's ability to monitor and respond to such influence operations. This article examines how the People's Republic of China (PRC) embedded itself deeply within California's political, academic, and digital worlds and considers the implications of a potentially self-sabotaging White House.

China's influence playbook is dynamic and all-encompassing, infiltrating politics and diaspora communities, promoting pro-Beijing narratives across digital platforms and the media, and extending censorship and repression far beyond its borders. It operates across almost every aspect of public and private life, including academic research, education, business, and finance. While this report focuses on China's most noteworthy operations within California, it should be mentioned that Chinese influence efforts in the U.S. are likely more frequent and sophisticated than is publicly known.

Tone Change

A bipartisan awareness of the [difficulties](#) of positive collaboration and the zero-sum nature of superpower competition are principal factors behind the recent deterioration of America's relationship with China. Americans' [negative perception](#) of China has aligned the public with the

Sino-skepticism of national policymakers.

Yet, while a nationwide tone change promoted hawkishness toward China, California remains more open to Beijing. Governor Gavin Newsom's actions are a good indicator of this. Newsom was the first—and last—state governor to travel to the country post-pandemic, in a trip some say was stained by his refusal to discuss human rights and democracy.

Additionally, the controversial new "Bay to Bay" initiative between San Francisco and southern China—for which Newsom has voiced his support—demonstrates an openness to economic initiatives that critics say could increase Chinese influence. The combination of its strategic value and relatively sympathetic ear makes California a prime environment for Chinese influence operations. It's therefore unsurprising that California is the only state to which China has a Ministry of State Security (MSS) unit dedicated to intelligence and influence efforts.



Image: Governor Gavin Newsom speaking at a press conference, January 6, 2025

Playing the Long Game

Manipulation of California's unique politics and diaspora has enabled China to advance its influence operations. Wariness of Chinese infiltration of the highest rungs of U.S. national politics necessitated Beijing to focus on less apprehensive local politicians. Consequently, settling on a "long game" approach, characterized by cultivating relationships with local political aspirants in California who may, at best, champion China's cause, and at worst, lend a sympathetic ear. With many future political leaders kicking off their journey in the state, Beijing recognized the potential of this conduit. Another advantage of concentrating on local politicians is that, if the operation is exposed, it's unlikely to trigger the diplomatic meltdown that could result from an operation to subvert national politicians in Washington.

The PRC has been successful at influencing California politics in a number of high-profile cases. One example is Arcadia City Councilmember Eileen Wang, whose ex-fiance was found to be cultivating their relationship to benefit Chinese interests and was charged in 2024 with acting as a foreign agent. Wang, a Chinese-born naturalized U.S. citizen, was not charged but did face calls to resign following questions over whether she was aware of the plot.

Another instance in 2009 saw an intense [Chinese lobbying campaign](#) to prevent a pro-Tibet resolution from passing California's State Assembly. Chinese diplomats made veiled threats to lawmakers and even showed up to the state Capitol building during crucial voting sessions. Some Representatives were warned by the FBI of likely acts of retribution against them, including the compromising of their electronic systems. The ultimate legislative defeat was celebrated in China as a state victory.

Jeff Le, a national security and emerging technology expert who once served as the Deputy Cabinet Secretary for the Governor of California and now runs consultancy 100 Miles Strategies, observed that China has made regular sub-national efforts in the state to promote its "One China" policy. Mr. Le said, "You see tension play out in skirmishes related to resolutions in Sacramento about Taiwan's independence. And then you'll see the Chinese consulate just fly in."

In gaining a foothold within California's Chinese communities, China has tried to influence narratives, as well as encourage a predisposition to the regime. Beijing made it clear that it sees all people of Chinese extraction, no matter their official nationality, as "[overseas compatriots](#)" who have a responsibility to support Chinese interests. Cooperation is therefore not a choice, but an obligation. Community members can be coerced into carrying out surveillance, helping eliminate resistance to the party, and promoting preferred narratives on behalf of the state.

Community infiltration and the cultivation of ethnic Chinese politicians have also provided Beijing with a side door into the local political scene. Notably, Rose Pak, a respected and longstanding San Francisco power broker, was [believed](#) by intelligence officials to have been co-opted by Chinese intelligence, using her influence to advance PRC-aligned interests in municipal politics. More recently, Chinese national Christine Fang targeted promising politicians in the Bay Area, including Rep. Eric Swalwell (D-Calif.). Posing as a student leader, Fang fundraised for Swalwell's 2014 campaign, even placing an intern in his office, while leveraging ties to the Chinese-American community. Officials believe Fang, who had previously targeted several politicians across the country, was gathering intelligence and attempting to sway future national leaders as part of a [major](#) MSS operation.

Transnational Repression and the United Front

China exports its repression throughout the world—including California—ignoring national sovereignty to silence and coerce dissidents.

Seth Stodder, a lawyer, national security commentator, and former Assistant Secretary at the Department of Homeland Security—where he oversaw the department's role on the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States—shared a firsthand account of this behavior. He recounted: "I recall a few years ago I was representing a democracy activist in a political asylum case. And I remember when I would meet with him, he was pretty paranoid, actually, because he was a democracy activist from China. His father was still there. He had been very active in the democracy movement in Hong Kong, and he was living in the San Gabriel Valley—in a sort of hidden away place

—and was trying to avoid as much scrutiny as possible because I think he feared for his life.”

That fear was not unfounded. Chinese authorities created an international registry of Uighur Muslims to monitor the ethnic minority group and pressure relatives in China to give up their personal information. Tibetans and Uighurs abroad have had their phones [hacked](#) in state-backed operations, and faced [intimidation](#) online. There have even been instances of Chinese security officials traveling to the U.S. on tourist visas to harass dissidents.

The 2008 Olympic Torch Run saw Chinese intelligence operatives targeting dissident protestors on the streets of San Francisco, orchestrating surveillance and counter-protests (which frequently devolved into violence). President Xi Jinping’s 2023 visit to the city led to [violence](#) by pro-Beijing groups against protestors, which was incited and organized by individuals with explicit ties to Chinese diplomats.

Contributing to transnational repression and more generally committed to covert influence operations is China’s United Front system. Led by the United Front Work Department (UFWD), it employs non-state actors to advance China’s political interests abroad, obscuring the distinction between Chinese officials and civilians. By combining standard diplomacy with a secret network of party members and overseas Chinese groups, the Front promotes preferred narratives, subverts and harasses dissidents, and coerces Beijing’s critics into [self-censorship](#). Dialogue over the aforementioned “Bay to Bay” initiative, for instance, has involved the president of a key United Front organization. While China has denied the Front’s malign intentions, its allocation of a bigger budget than the Chinese Foreign Ministry suggests otherwise.



Image: San Francisco Free Tibet demonstrators protest China’s Olympic Torch Run, April 9, 2008

Maintaining points of contact with diaspora communities is a key objective of the United Front, whose groups use [benign-sounding names](#) to recruit often unsuspecting ethnic Chinese looking for a sense of community or belonging. Beijing has also placed hundreds of Chinese-Americans in Front operations, including in senior roles, where they are often involved in efforts to disrupt dissident protests and silence critical voices.



Image: Fires started during protests against ICE raids in downtown Los Angeles, June 8, 2025

Chinese Peaceful Reunification Councils—one of the largest and most prominent organizations run by the UFWD—work extensively within the U.S. to [promote](#) the notion that Taiwan is part of China. As of 2019, there were 36 chapters of the council across 10 states, including California.

The website of the Northern California chapter, for instance, boasts not only of its close collaboration with the Chinese embassy in opposing Taiwanese independence, but also its intimate ties to the overseas Chinese community.

Education

China's reach into California's universities—possessing some of the largest Chinese student populations in the country—is another subtle but potent tool of influence. At its core are Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs), receiving sporadic [funding](#) and functioning as an arm of the PRC across more than 150 American college campuses.

While the level of cooperation between associations and Chinese officials varies, involved students play a leading role in advancing Beijing's interests on campuses and remain in frequent contact with Chinese diplomatic missions. Student actions include pushing back against critics of China and its policies, alerting diplomatic officials about [sensitive political events](#), surveilling other students, and—as happened with a graduate student with connections to the Berkeley CSSA—assisting [espionage](#) operations. Meanwhile, uncooperative students have sometimes faced repercussions for themselves or their families in China.

In 2017, the CSSA of UC San Diego organized major resistance and liaised with the Chinese consulate in LA following an invitation to the Dalai Lama to speak on campus. When the event went ahead (despite pressure on the university from the consulate), China banned attendees who had funding from the China Scholarship Council from continuing to study at the university.

As shown, the China Scholarship Council (CSC), which provides funding to eligible Chinese students wishing to study abroad at designated universities, is another tool of repression. To qualify, students must first pass party loyalty tests and are frequently [pressured](#) to disclose valuable information to Chinese consulates about university research. An exposé by student reporters at the Stanford Review uncovered a vast operation in which Chinese students funded by the CSC were compelled to infiltrate and spy on the university.

Digital and Media

The scope and efficiency of Chinese digital influence campaigns that disseminate propaganda, harass [critics](#), and sow chaos and division prior to elections have [increased](#) dramatically in recent years. China's so-called flagship 'Spamouflage' operation, which began weak and ineffective, has become remarkably [efficient](#) across social media, leading Meta to describe it as "the largest covert influence operation it's ever disrupted". Most recently, Chinese '[Spamouflage](#)' accounts have posed as Trump supporters and even polled Americans on X about what issues they find most divisive.

To exacerbate national disunity, Chinese actors have subverted current events. For instance, the recent immigration protests in Los Angeles were seized on by such people, seeking to exacerbate divisions and promote anti-democratic narratives around controversial developments such as the [deployment](#) of U.S. marines to Los Angeles.

Chinese-owned online platforms, such as WeChat and TikTok, have also been used as tools of influence. By globally [censoring](#) WeChat [activity](#) from anywhere in the world, China exports censorship. Furthermore, WeChat is a primary Chinese-language news source for diaspora communities, allowing Beijing to easily shape their opinions. Popular articles on the platform often portray the U.S. as favoring southern undocumented migrants while beating down Chinese people. One popular WeChat channel went so far as to baselessly blame the 2019 wildfires in northern California on an undocumented person. TikTok, on the other hand, has promoted [pro-Beijing narratives](#) and suppressed dissenting content, covertly molding perceptions on sensitive issues like Taiwan and Tibet.

Chinese state-affiliated media in the U.S. plays an outsized role in influence operations, with the country spending far more to influence American politics than anywhere else. Much is allocated to Chinese-language media in order to influence diaspora communities and affect their behavior in key voting districts, including in California. This explains instances like a Hong Kong-based group with ties to Beijing attempting to buy two Los Angeles radio stations, likely to broadcast pro-PRC content to L.A.'s dense Chinese population. China's purchasing of space in major American publications is also worrying, placing unmarked "[China Watch](#)" advertorials in respected outlets, including Time Magazine, CNN, and the Los Angeles Times. These inserts, described by critics as "Trojan Horses", blur the line between journalism and propaganda.

Intelligence Rollbacks

Under President Trump, members of the GOP—particularly more conservative voices—have increasingly framed U.S. counter-influence efforts as partisan tools that suppress free speech. This narrative prompted recent sweeping overhauls across agencies tasked with countering foreign malign influence.

Many employees and entire departments fighting foreign interference, as well as disinformation, cyber defense, and attempts to obstruct voting systems, have been purged across the federal government. Key units were gutted or dissolved, including the State Department’s Global Engagement Center (renamed R/FIMI)—the most prominent agency combating Chinese and Russian disinformation propaganda prior to its closure—and the FBI’s Foreign Influence Task Force.

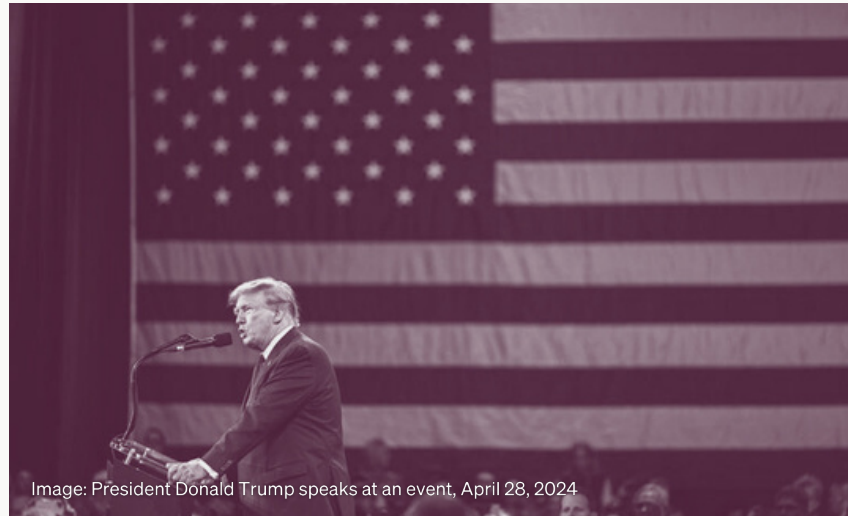


Image: President Donald Trump speaks at an event, April 28, 2024

Officials such as Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Attorney General Pam Bondi justified these moves by claiming the agencies had silenced Americans rather than foreign actors. Cuts were extended to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the National Science Foundation, while the Director of National Security, Tulsi Gabbard, threatened further scrutiny of the Federal Government’s Foreign Malign Influence Center.

Besides weakening U.S. resilience, the cuts represent a drastic misalignment of national security priorities. “Why are we spending \$170 billion and giving that to DHS to equip ICE to go after more gardeners and landscapers,” Mr. Stodder asked, “but we’re cutting CISA and the FBI?”

Critics have argued that the cutbacks were based more on political paranoia than evidence. Many of the targeted agencies intentionally avoided flagging American voices, out of respect for the First Amendment, and employees have insisted their work was strictly non-partisan. Ironically, some foreign influence disclosures—such as Iranian attempts to hurt Trump’s campaign—were politically advantageous to the president. Most importantly, this administration’s overhauls have crippled America’s ability to monitor and counter foreign influence operations. At a time when U.S. adversaries increasingly focus on malign interference, the Trump administration has provided them with a strategic opening.

Furthermore, rollbacks will likely cultivate an environment of self-censorship within the intelligence community. For example, an official at the State Department reported that some staff have been

warned against using the word “[disinformation](#)” in memos. Critics say a culture of censorship created by political pressure is a particularly [dangerous obstacle](#) for intelligence agencies to perform effectively.

Mr. Le stressed the severity of the situation, saying: “Again, we’re talking about electoral integrity. This is a thing that you need to talk about, especially at a time where we’re seeing a disinvestment in election security.” He emphasized that while many in D.C. don’t understand sub-national infiltration, there is an increasingly tense relationship, “between the federal government and the states, and how the interplay comes on homeland security issues for that matter.”

A Precarious Moment

China will continue to exploit a divided and distracted U.S. in pursuit of its strategic ambitions. If American vigilance is not restored, Chinese infiltration will intensify. With the intelligence community’s hands effectively tied, Chinese influence operations within California and the U.S. will certainly become more effective and less visible.

This predicament leaves national security exposed and increases the vulnerability of diaspora communities to coercion and long-arm policing. Prepositioned tools of influence could be weaponized to great effect during times of crisis. China could, for instance, use sympathetic politicians, community activists, and online platforms to slow U.S. intervention in a crisis over Taiwan, which could be a pivotal factor in a successful Chinese military operation.

Arizona’s Secretary of State aptly compared the Trump administration’s cuts to “shutting down the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration before hurricane season.” The storm, it appears, is well underway.



Joseph Leonard is a Junior Fellow at the Pacific Council on International Policy. Born in London and educated between the U.S. and U.K., his interest in security issues was kindled through two years in the British Army’s University Officer Training Corps and a degree in politics and international relations from the University of Kent. He is currently studying Mandarin at the China Institute in NYC in preparation for language study in Taiwan next summer.