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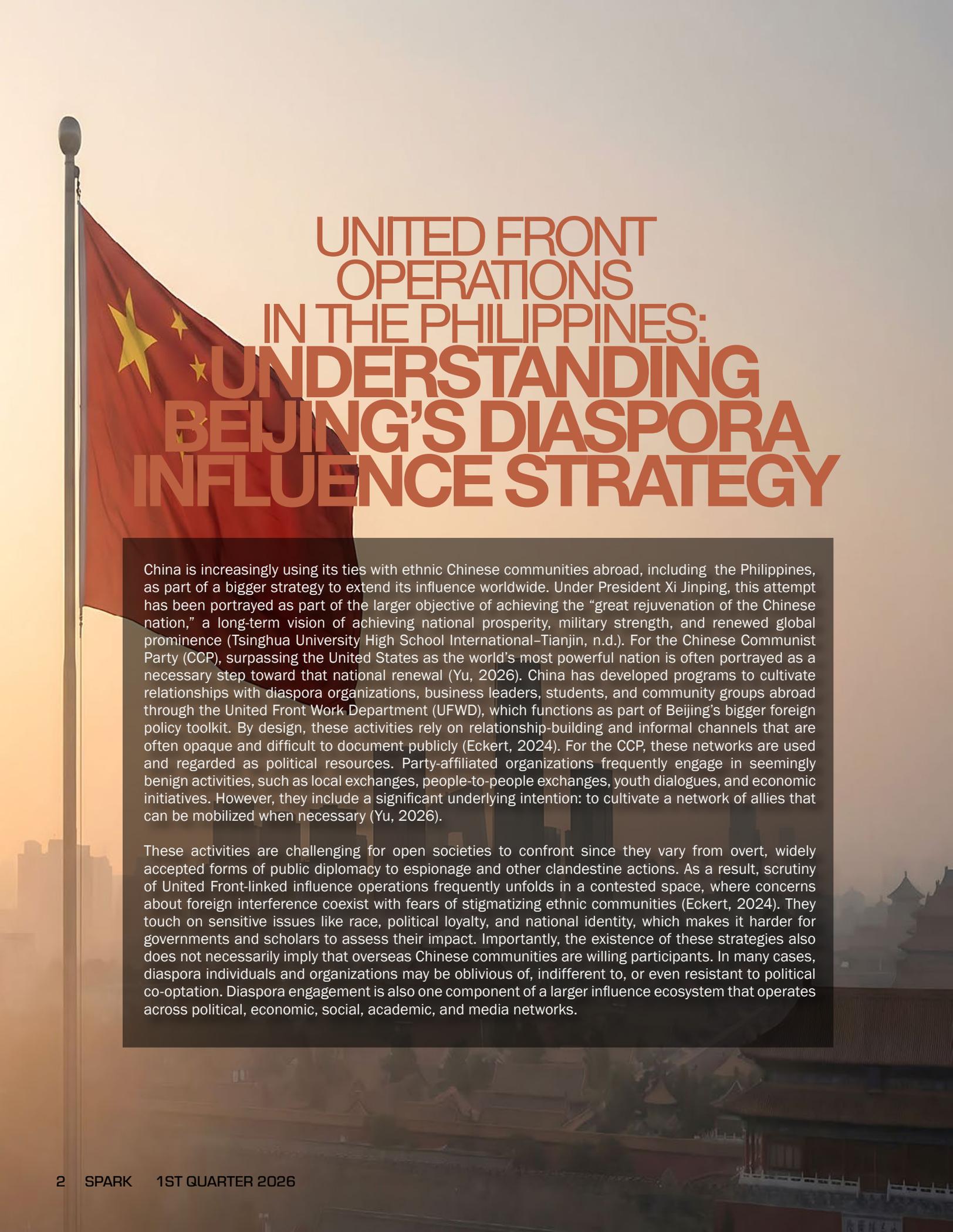
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UNITED FRONT OPERATIONS IN THE PHILIPPINES: UNDERSTANDING BEIJING'S DIASPORA INFLUENCE STRATEGY

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UNITED FRONT OPERATIONS IN THE PHILIPPINES: UNDERSTANDING BEIJING'S DIASPORA INFLUENCE STRATEGY

China is increasingly using its ties with ethnic Chinese communities abroad, including the Philippines, as part of a bigger strategy to extend its influence worldwide. Under President Xi Jinping, this attempt has been portrayed as part of the larger objective of achieving the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” a long-term vision of achieving national prosperity, military strength, and renewed global prominence (Tsinghua University High School International-Tianjin, n.d.). For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), surpassing the United States as the world’s most powerful nation is often portrayed as a necessary step toward that national renewal (Yu, 2026). China has developed programs to cultivate relationships with diaspora organizations, business leaders, students, and community groups abroad through the United Front Work Department (UFWD), which functions as part of Beijing’s bigger foreign policy toolkit. By design, these activities rely on relationship-building and informal channels that are often opaque and difficult to document publicly (Eckert, 2024). For the CCP, these networks are used and regarded as political resources. Party-affiliated organizations frequently engage in seemingly benign activities, such as local exchanges, people-to-people exchanges, youth dialogues, and economic initiatives. However, they include a significant underlying intention: to cultivate a network of allies that can be mobilized when necessary (Yu, 2026).

These activities are challenging for open societies to confront since they vary from overt, widely accepted forms of public diplomacy to espionage and other clandestine actions. As a result, scrutiny of United Front-linked influence operations frequently unfolds in a contested space, where concerns about foreign interference coexist with fears of stigmatizing ethnic communities (Eckert, 2024). They touch on sensitive issues like race, political loyalty, and national identity, which makes it harder for governments and scholars to assess their impact. Importantly, the existence of these strategies also does not necessarily imply that overseas Chinese communities are willing participants. In many cases, diaspora individuals and organizations may be oblivious of, indifferent to, or even resistant to political co-optation. Diaspora engagement is also one component of a larger influence ecosystem that operates across political, economic, social, academic, and media networks.

A Vulnerable Environment

In the Philippines, analysts believe that the country is vulnerable to CCP's United Front strategy due to deep economic ties with China, a large ethnic Chinese and Filipino-Chinese population and weak legal safeguards against foreign interference (Quijano Jr., 2025). These conditions can make it easier for foreign influence activities to happen through business networks, civic groups, and diaspora groups. There are about 1.2 million to 1.4 million Filipino-Chinese, often known as Tsinoy. This is about 1.2 to 1.8 percent of the population of the Philippines, however many more Filipinos have Chinese heritage (Freedom House, 2022). At the same time, rising geopolitical tensions between Manila and Beijing have complicated perceptions of the Chinese diaspora. Recent domestic controversies, including espionage allegations involving former mayor Alice Guo, have intensified anti-China sentiment in the Philippines. These changes have had real negative effects on people in the Tsinoy community (See, 2025).

Beijing does not necessarily need to deploy propagandists to Manila. Instead, it relies on trusted local brokers who see their interests—commercial, political, or status-driven—as consistent with the Party's stability (Mangosing, 2026). Several recent incidents in the Philippines illustrate how United Front-related players have used community networks, media, and civic groups to cultivate influence. While some cases are reported, there may be operations that are likely to go unnoticed, taking place through informal routes that authorities and researchers find difficult to track.

Case Study: Palawan 5

One of the most widely reported incidents occurred in early 2025, when Philippine authorities arrested five Chinese nationals accused of photographing naval bases in Palawan facing the West Philippine Sea amid ongoing maritime tensions between Manila and Beijing. They were reportedly members of the Philippine China Association of Promotion of Peace and Friendship, founded in 2016, and the Qiaoxing Volunteer Group, created in 2022—both reportedly tied to the CCP-run All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese. According to reporting by Reuters, they had donated funds to Tarlac City and local police and hosted officials at events through 2024 (Reuters, 2025).

They were also reported to have met several times with Senior Col. Li Jianzhong, China's military attaché in Manila at the time, and were photographed with him and the Chinese ambassador at a Lunar New Year embassy event. A website detailing their CCP affiliations was taken down after the issue began receiving attention (Reuters, 2025).

The surveillance of military bases and other infrastructure has made people in the Philippines more worried about Chinese influence operations, along with other geopolitical issues caused by several espionage cases involving Chinese nationals. However, Philippine authorities have not conclusively determined whether the arrested individuals were acting directly on behalf of the Chinese government. This uncertainty, along with the political sensitivity of investigating diaspora organizations, results in a gray zone in which influence activities are difficult to prove. As a result, such investigations into diaspora-related organizations can quickly become politically charged, raising concerns about discrimination or politicization of ethnic identity.

The episode also illustrates how networks built through civic engagement can make it hard to tell the difference between community outreach and state-aligned influence. Organizations like the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese operate openly as cultural and community groups, making political ties less obvious. Their activities, such as donations to local governments, participation in community events, and cooperation with civic leaders, can foster goodwill and social access without necessarily raising suspicion. Over time, however, such exchanges can develop complex networks of personal and institutional links that may eventually be exploited to promote narratives favorable to Beijing, urge political moderation on sensitive topics like the West Philippine Sea, or nurture friendly local intermediaries. Yet it remains unclear how many diaspora organizations in the Philippines are directly or indirectly linked to the United Front system, further complicating the country's ability to assess and respond to potential influence activities.

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Other Chinese groups in the Philippines, meanwhile, operate in subtler influence activities that have largely flown under the radar, such as promoting the “peaceful reunification” of Taiwan, a self-ruled island claimed by China. The Philippine Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (PCPPRC)—part of the larger China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China with several chapters in 90 countries—organized a large gathering of Chinese nationals living abroad in October 2025 at Manila’s Century Park Hotel to oppose Taiwan’s independence and advocate for “reunification” with the mainland. The event has drawn criticism from analysts who believe it is a part of Beijing’s United Front influence efforts (Mangosing, 2025). Prior to this, however, the group and its operations had received little attention in Philippine media, with the most reporting appearing only in Chinese-language news outlets.

Messaging around the One-China policy and Taiwan are some of the most delicate topics Beijing tries to regulate. Xi reaffirmed his commitment to reunification in his recent New Year’s Eve address, saying, “The reunification of our motherland, a trend of the times, is unstoppable.” Two days of military exercises in Taipei that simulated the capture and blockade of strategic locations preceded that message, which was generally interpreted as a warning against what Beijing refers to as “separatist forces” (Hawkins & Davidson, 2026).

Analysts note that the PCPPRC does not appear to work at the fringes of the Filipino-Chinese community. Some PCPPRC activities, such as officer induction ceremonies, have been presided by Chinese embassy officials, indicating they are far more than a ceremonial presence. During these events, embassy officials have sworn in leaders of groups that claim to be Filipino-Chinese civic groups. This creates perception that these leaders are accountable to both Beijing and the local Filipino-Chinese community (Powell, 2025). Although the relationship is primarily symbolic, it can serve to reinforce the belief among observers that certain diaspora groups serve as extensions of China’s political influence network.

Compared with other chapters abroad, the PCPPRC has so far avoided major public controversies. Its counterparts in Australia publicly protested a 2016 international arbitration ruling that rejected China’s expansive South China Sea claims. The chapter in South Korea organized street protests the same year to protest the deployment of the U.S. THAAD missile defense system (Mangosing, 2026). In the Philippines, activities have largely consisted of normal civic activities, such as forums, making position statements, and publications advocating a pro-Beijing view of cross-strait relations. These actions, however, are still a subtle means of influencing public opinion and framing cross-strait issues in a way that is good for Beijing. Although these actions are not directly coercive, they can gradually normalize particular narratives, especially in the local ethnic Chinese population. They also show how hard it is for governments to tell the difference between harmless cultural outreach and possible foreign influence operations.

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The challenge lies in distinguishing between legitimate cultural and economic engagement and initiatives that are designed to shape political narratives or influence policy outcomes...

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Education, Media and Narrative Influence

Other than political messaging, some initiatives linked to the PCPPRC also engage in historical and educational narratives. In 2025, the group partnered with the Philippine Chinese Education Research Center Inc.—another organization with reported ties to United Front networks—to invite Filipino students from Grades 7 to 12 to participate in an essay competition marking the 80th anniversary of the victory in the “World Anti-Fascist War” and the “Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.” The competition, which offered cash prizes, was promoted to students through the Department of Education. Organizers said the goal was to help Filipinos “know more and remember history, cherish peace, and uphold the spirit of solidarity between the peoples of the Philippines and China in resisting invasion.” The competition reflects how historical narratives can become part of bigger geopolitical messaging (Powell, 2026).

The strategies used in Taiwan-related advocacy provide a glimpse of how such influence might operate. The same mechanisms that were employed to mobilize hundreds of delegates to a “Reunification Forum” in October 2025 could be employed to influence Filipino public opinion and government policy on matters that directly impact Philippine sovereignty, such as the West Philippine Sea.

They can mobilize the entire community leadership in the West Philippine Sea if they are able to do so in Taiwan. If Filipino-Chinese business leaders can be encouraged to sign statements opposing Taiwan’s independence, they could also be encouraged to support positions aligned with Beijing on matters such as joint patrols with the U.S. Likewise, coordinated messaging that portrays Taiwan’s reunification as “inevitable” could be mirrored by narratives framing Philippine maritime claims as “provocative.”

Much of the online content about the PCPPRC is in Chinese instead of Filipino or English. This indicates that their primary audience is the local ethnic Chinese population, not the wider Philippine public. Some people who join these groups may see it as a way to engage with the Filipino-Chinese community or show their support for Beijing’s culture and politics, rather than as a conscious effort to change Philippine national policy. Nonetheless, some developments have raised scrutiny of these networks. Chinatown News TV, a Mandarin-language news program in the Philippines that had aired PCPPRC events, removed several of those reports from its platforms after the U.S.-based maritime transparency group SeaLight Foundation highlighted them in late 2025 (Powell, 2025).

Back in 2022, the PCPPRC, along with major overseas Chinese communities in the Philippines such as the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of

Commerce and Industry, condemned the visit of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines, 2022). The statements were featured in a press release posted on the Mandarin version of the Chinese Embassy in the Philippines' website. This illustrates that when these activities are carried out by local actors, they can give the impression that they represent the views of the community. However, in reality, they are amplifying the narratives aligned with the Party's messaging. This could also allow the Party's narrative to circulate in democratic debates as if they were locally generated views.

Evidence of Mobilization: Scope and Limitations

There have been only a few documented instances in which overseas Chinese in the Philippines were mobilized for strategic purposes. Although such cases remain rare or simply underreported due to their documentation only primarily in Mandarin, they demonstrate that this kind of mobilization is nonetheless possible.

In January 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic escalated globally, the Filipino Chinese Shishi Townmate Association reportedly hoarded 140,000 masks in a single day for shipment to China. Similarly, the Yongning Town Overseas Chinese Federation sent 100,000 masks to support their hometown's epidemic response, according to a Chinese-language media report (Fujian Overseas Chinese Network, 2020). At the time, the Philippines was also starting to struggle with its own supplies.

The following month, the World Federation of Fujian Youth in the Philippines donated 375,000 medical masks, along with a substantial quantity of other medical supplies, to Wuhan in Hubei Province as well as to Quanzhou and Shishi in Fujian Province. Notably, this donation came after its president received what was described as a "joint initiative" from the United Front Work Department of Songxi County, the County Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, and the County Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (Chinaqw, 2020).

Recent cases have further intensified scrutiny of such networks. In February 2026, a Chinese national identified as Jingjin Guo was arrested in Panglao, Bohol for posing as Filipino. Authorities said he served as a director of the Overseas Chinese Service Center in Cebu and Bohol, which has links to China's United Front system. According to the National Bureau of Investigation, such networks can mobilize overseas Chinese communities, cultivate local influence, and promote narratives favorable to Beijing while advancing state interests abroad. Authorities warned that these organizations can function as logistical or informational nodes, particularly when led by individuals with long-term residency privileges or concealed identities (Perez, 2026).

Collectively, these examples underscore the complexity of addressing foreign influence activities that operate through diaspora networks. Many of the groups involved say they are mostly cultural, civic, or business groups, which makes it hard for authorities to tell the difference between real community engagement and actions that may help a foreign government's strategic goals. In this gray area, influence can build up slowly through relationships, communications, and links between institutions. This generally happens without getting a lot of public notice until a security issue brings the networks to light.

The UFWD has enormous resources for propaganda campaigns aimed at the Chinese diaspora. The CCP has substantial influence and monitoring over Chinese-language media in the Philippines, as well as various Filipino-Chinese community organizations, notably through the UFWD. This monitoring is intended to advance Beijing's narratives on key topics such as the South China Sea, Taiwan, and the Belt and Road Initiative (Freedom House, 2022).

One recent example shows how these relationships function in practice. In January 2026, China's ambassador to the Philippines, Jing Quan, invited executives from eight Manila-based Mandarin-language news outlets to the Chinese embassy for a meeting that was later broadcast by Chinatown News TV. During the gathering, the ambassador reportedly encouraged the media executives to "cooperate closely" and support narratives aligned with Beijing's priorities (Powell, 2026).

Some of the outlets involved, such as Chinatown News TV and United Daily News (which is said to be managed by someone connected to United Front networks),



frequently republish or amplify content from Chinese state media on issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea. These publications mostly target Mandarin-speaking readers, therefore their messages tend to stay within diaspora media settings and are not as well known to the general public in the Philippines (Powell, 2026).

The Chinese embassy in Manila, in response, refuted the allegations. It said that Chinese-language media in the Philippines are independently owned and operated by the Filipino-Chinese community and that editorial decisions, including what to report and how to present stories, are made solely by the outlets themselves (Guo, 2026).

Apart from targeting overseas Chinese communities in the Philippines, other channels of influence include engagement with local political elites and business leaders, economic partnerships, media outreach, academic exchanges, and cultural programs. Many of these activities are conducted openly and are not necessarily illicit or covert. The challenge lies in distinguishing between legitimate cultural and economic engagement and initiatives that are designed to shape political narratives or influence policy outcomes.

There is no sure way to tell if a group is part of the United Front structure. However, the following activities may suggest links, according to analyst Alex Joske, author of the paper *The Party Speaks for You* under the Australian Strategic Policy Institute:

- Its executives occupy roles in China-based United Front organizations.

- It promotes the ‘reunification’ of China.
- It often collaborates with the local PRC diplomatic missions.
- It engages in pro-PRC political demonstrations.
- It accommodates visiting officials from the CCP’s Unified Front structure.
- It releases comments or organizes activities in collaboration with recognized United Front organizations.
- Consulting an informed acquaintance within the Chinese community for guidance can prove beneficial (Joske, 2023).

Policy Responses

The study of the United Front system in the Philippines remains limited, posing a continuing challenge. Security experts may recognize isolated instances of illegal activity or espionage, but unless they examine the bigger landscape of open and seemingly benign engagement, such as cultural exchanges, civic associations, and community outreach, they risk overlooking the enabling structures that allow influence operations to take root.

The Philippines does not need to isolate itself from China to safeguard its political system. Instead, it requires better institutional safeguards and a more informed public conversation. The National Security Council has been seeking Congress to prioritize the passage of legislation to update World War II-era anti-espionage laws and create an anti-foreign malign influence and interference act (Yusingco, 2024).

The Philippines has to decide how to deal with these challenges. Ignoring the issue would allow United Front

networks to expand their power in political, economic, and social institutions. However, overreacting may undermine democratic norms and jeopardize connections with legitimate community organizations. A balanced approach is therefore necessary.

Several steps could strengthen resilience while awaiting local laws on foreign interference and espionage.

First, transparency in political and financial relationships should be strengthened. Clear regulations on lobbying, foreign funding, and political donations can ensure that influence endeavors are conducted in an open manner, rather than being conducted in secret. Political actors should also be made aware of or understand how the United Front influence operations work. Educational programs, policy briefings, and training initiatives should therefore be developed to ensure that public officials at national and local levels understand the nature of foreign influence operations and the risks they pose.

Second, the Philippine intelligence community should enhance its capacity to monitor and analyze foreign influence activities. If there is none yet, an important step would be the establishment of a dedicated unit focused on mapping United Front networks and related influence activities. Such a unit could integrate intelligence reporting, open-source research, and interagency collaboration to produce a big picture of influence networks operating within the Philippines. United Front activities are not “invisible” and mostly occurs publicly accessible spaces, including Chinese-language media outlets, academic partnerships, business organizations, and cultural associations. Government agencies

should conduct regular protective security briefings for institutions that may be targeted by influence operations. Universities, research institutes, media organizations, and business associations often serve as key points of engagement for United Front actors. Providing these institutions with guidance on influence tactics and warning indicators can significantly reduce vulnerabilities.

Third, academic institutions and media organizations should remain open to foreign engagement while maintaining institutional independence about foreign partnerships. Disclosure of foreign partnerships and funding sources can help keep credibility and confidence.

Fourth, the Filipino-Chinese community should be treated as a partner in safeguarding national integrity. There is a need for government agencies and civil society organizations to foster civic participation and engage community leaders in dialogue. The likelihood of diaspora communities being exploited by external actors is diminished by a strong sense of belonging. Attempts to reveal foreign influence activities can easily be misinterpreted as antagonism toward diaspora populations, especially when the CCP frames such scrutiny as discrimination against the Chinese people as a whole. Policymakers must therefore make it clear that the goal is not to target ethnic communities, but rather to preserve democratic institutions from covert political interference. Politicians and public officials ought to interact with a broad spectrum of Chinese community organizations instead of depending on a limited number of intermediaries potentially connected to United Front networks.

Fifth, the country must improve its resilience against disinformation. Media literacy programs, independent fact-checking initiatives, and responsible journalism can help citizens critically evaluate geopolitical narratives.

Last, regional cooperation can fortify the Philippines' response. Countries across the Indo-Pacific are confronting similar challenges related to foreign influence and political interference. Sharing experiences and best practices can improve collective resilience. International conferences and policy forums that deal with problems caused by the CCP should also pay more attention to United Front activities. Despite the potential impact on democratic institutions, this subject is frequently given less attention than the economic or military dimensions of global conflict. Increasing the visibility of United Front initiatives will assist policymakers and researchers to better grasp the larger strategic framework in which they operate.

SeaLight's James Carouso and Ray Powell—both of whom served Australia as US officials—argue that Manila could learn from Canberra on dealing with foreign interference. “Australia’s parliament moved in 2018 when a series of interference scandals catalysed public opinion and legislative attention to produce the necessary call to action,” they wrote in an opinion piece recently published by the Australia Strategic Policy Institute. “The threat of foreign interference is not theoretical; it is happening now and the stakes for the Philippines are very high. By learning from Australia’s successes, missteps and corrections, Manila can build a counter-interference regime that is robust, responsive and ready to defend its democracy and its sovereignty” (Carouso & Powell, 2025).

The Philippines could also look to Taiwan on countering such influence efforts. As a main target of Beijing's reunification drive, Taipei has spent years working on policies to monitor foreign influence, strengthen transparency requirements, and build public awareness of disinformation and political pressure tactics.

Foreign influence is not a new phenomenon in Philippine history. Throughout the 20th century, the country navigated the competing interests of major global powers while maintaining its democratic identity.

Today's challenge is to approach the issue with strategic sophistication. Recognizing the existence of influence operations does not mean rejecting engagement with China. At the same time, protecting national sovereignty should never be at the expense of social harmony or respect for minority communities. The Philippines' biggest strength is its democratic institutions, thriving civil society, and diversified people. If these institutions remain transparent, accountable, and inclusive, the country will be well equipped to navigate the challenges of modern geopolitics.

United Front work may be a sophisticated form of influence. The most effective response, however, is a democracy that is confident, resilient, and informed.

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