



How the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries helps Beijing spread its global agenda

Executive summary

The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会) is an organization within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) foreign affairs system which establishes contacts with local politicians and non-governmental entities in countries where China has a strategic interest. Its aim is to push the CCP's political agenda on the subnational level and bypass official diplomatic channels by using foreign "friends of China".

Introduction

The often vaguely described nature of "Chinese influence" can be elucidated by examining the party-state bureaucracy of the CCP and its interactions with various actors in foreign countries. Within the CCP's vast bureaucracy, several systems exist, each entrusted with distinct agendas. While certain units, like the party affairs system, operate exclusively within the People's Republic of China (PRC), many engage with foreign countries, seeking to advance the CCP's objectives globally. This bureaucratic framework comprises numerous organizations, forming a complex cluster that is deliberately designed to be opaque and confusing to those who come into contact with it. Despite their diversity, these systems all share a commonality – they are subordinate to the core of the Party, chiefly through commissions of the Central Committee or ad hoc established "leading small groups".

Among the key operations actively involved overseas are the united front system, the economic system, the propaganda system, and, naturally, the foreign affairs system. In contrast to many other countries, Chinese foreign affairs activities extend beyond the purview of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and transcend official state-to-state diplomacy. The foreign affairs system is overseen by the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, presently led by



its director, Wang Yi, who also serves as the current head of the MoFA. This system consists of various organs and operates under the overarching concept of "total diplomacy". This approach not only encompasses official state-to-state diplomacy conducted by the MoFA but also extends to other forms which are used to bypass official diplomatic channels. This includes party-to-party diplomacy, overseen by the International Liaison Department of the CCP (ILD), or people-to-people diplomacy, which is predominantly managed by CPAFFC.

The association's position and activities

CPAFFC holds official status as a "people's organization" within the PRC, which might mislead some into associating it with civil society groups elsewhere. However, in reality it operates as an organ managed and staffed by the MoFA. Functioning as an unofficial diplomatic channel, CPAFFC actively promotes CCP policy objectives such as the One China Principle and the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly on the subnational level. Its primary objective is to establish contacts with local governments and non-governmental entities, strategically advancing the CCP's agenda within these spheres.

One of CPAFFC's main responsibilities is to handle sister-city agreements, known as "friendship city" agreements in Chinese. These relationships often serve political purposes, as shown in the case of Prague. That city's 2016 sisterhood agreement with Beijing included a clause referencing the PRC's territorial ambitions over Taiwan, a concession portrayed at the time as being conducive to such benefits as enabling the loan of a panda from China to the Prague zoo. When Prague's next administration sought to renegotiate the deal, to remove a clause irrelevant to city-level exchanges, China responded by boycotting exchanges with entities that had 'Prague' in their name, such as the Prague Philharmonic Choir. Prague's sisterhood with Beijing was eventually terminated, followed by negotiations to upgrade Prague's partnership with Taipei.

Other cases show how CPAFFC's work with subnational and non-government entities abroad creates channels for the CCP's political influence. The Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutscher China-Gesellschaften — the main German node of CPAFFC's global network — is known for its links to German politics, notably through former MP Johannes Pflug. In the Czech Republic, CPAFFC's



main counterpart —led by key Czech political and corporate lobbyists who were involved in the country's CCP-friendly policy turn after 2014 — was even appointed to run a "Centre for Belt-and-Road Cooperation" at the Ministry of Trade and Industry at that time.

The role of "friendship"

The word "friendship" (友谊) in CPAFFC's name has a particular importance in the Chinese foreign affairs agenda. In this context, the word best translates into the Russian word *druzhba*, as it is linked to Soviet practices for handling foreigners under the United Front tactics, which the CCP adopted in its own fashion. After the establishment of the PRC, the CCP relied on the principle of "make the foreign serve China" to help establish its position in international relations. Especially within the countries which had no diplomatic relations with the PRC, the CCP — and its organs, such as CPAFFC — sought out individuals who demonstrated friendly attitudes towards China. The CCP then cultivated relationships with these "foreign friends" in hopes that they would help promote the Chinese cause in their home countries. As shown in the case of CPAFFC, this constant search for "friends" to bypass official channels and push China's agenda from "below" is still very present in the CCP's playbook.

Sources and further readings

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