The securitization of 'Chinese influence' in Australia

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Abstract: This article traces the emergence of 'Chinese influence' as a conceptual touchstone of Australia's public policy discourse in 2017-2018. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) efforts to influence politics abroad have been well documented since the 2000s, and cannot explain the timing of their securitization from mid-2017. It took the formation of a coalition of intelligence officials, politicians and journalists to overcome significant economic and societal disincentives to the public presentation of the PRC as a source of existential danger to Australia's political system. As the coalition expanded from security agencies to politicians, and then the media, the scope of threat expanded from an initial concern with PRC state intelligence activity to securitization of a much wider array of state and non-state activities under the ambiguous label 'Chinese influence.'

Introduction

On December 5, 2017, amid a crucial by-election campaign, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced the biggest shakeup of the country's national security laws since the Cold War in order to protect 'our way of life' and 'our democracy.'[1] 'Foreign powers are making unprecedented and increasingly sophisticated attempts to influence the political process,' Turnbull said, before telling the assembled press that his government was taking 'disturbing reports about Chinese influence' very seriously. In a separate speech to parliament two days later, however, Turnbull told the parliament that the threat was, in fact, neither Chinese nor influence. The source of the threat was foreign states, not Chinese nationals, migrants or culture; and foreign influence was in fact acceptable, provided it was not 'coercive, covert or corrupt.' But Turnbull's reference to 'Chinese influence' reflected the public policy discourse that preceded the national security bills, paving the way for a radical expansion in the scope of national security in Australia.[2]

This article investigates how and why the idea of 'Chinese influence' emerged as a threat to Australia's national security in 2017-2018. It proceeds in three steps. First, it introduces the securitization framework and advocacy coalitions in public policy that help explain when significant public policy changes occur. Second, it outlines the PRC's overseas political activities, which have since the 1990s sought to suppress dissent and cultivate views and policies favorable to the party-state. The third section traces the sequential development of a securitizing coalition in Australia, from intelligence officials to the political executive, and from the executive to parliamentarians and the media. As the coalition expanded, the threat became vaguer, yet more pervasive, and the term 'Chinese influence' became the dominant shorthand for PRC overseas political activities in Australian media discourse. A final section assesses the consequences of the securitization of 'Chinese influence,' which enabled the passage of new laws significantly expanding the scope of national security in Australia, stimulated racialized suspicions directed at ethnic Chinese Australians in

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[1] 'Transcript of Joint Press Conference,' Parliament of Australia, December 5, 2017, accessed August 7, 2021,
https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/5676717/upload_binary/5676717.pdf
[2] The laws expanded the official definition of national security, from defence and intelligence, to include any matter affecting Australia's 'political, economic or military relations' with other countries. Lawyers and civil society groups strongly resisted, and the Labor opposition opposed the laws as initially drafted. By June 2018, however, the bills were passed into law with bipartisan support.

public life, including in the parliament, and has fed a surge in racism and xenophobia in society at large. The case stands as a cautionary example of the power and pitfalls of ambiguous language in security policy discourse.

Securitization: actors, sectors and referents

In *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Buzan, Waever and de Wilde argued that rather than assuming a direct correlation between threats and threat perceptions, it can be equally or more productive for analysts to focus on the social processes by which particular issues come to be understood as existential threats.[3] From this perspective, security threats are problems that are understood to constitute a clear and present danger to survival, and therefore necessitate urgent countermeasures outside the realm of normal politics. Despite adopting an avowedly social constructivist approach, Buzan et al. are agnostic rather than atheistic regarding the objective existence of threats.[4] As this article will show, deploying the securitization framework does not imply denial of an array of problematic PRC political activities in Australia.[5] It rather focuses on describing and explaining variation in the treatment of those activities as an existential threat in public discourse.

In Buzan et al.'s framework, the process of securitization begins with a 'securitizing move' — speech acts declaring an existential threat to the valued referent object. Where the existential threat is accepted sufficiently broadly to enable emergency actions outside the normal rules of democratic politics, such as the use of force, covert government action, surveillance of citizens or other reductions in civil liberties, the securitizing move has been successful. Securitized issues, then, are 'staged as existential threats to a referent object by a securitizing actor who thereby generates endorsement of emergency measures beyond rules that would otherwise bind.'[6]

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[3] Barry Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 1998), Chapter 2.
[4] Despite disavowing 'objectivist' views of security threats, many examples of objectivist language can be found in Buzan et al.'s text: e.g. 'will a threat to that survival . . . actually arise' (p. 22); 'minor violations of sovereignty' (p. 150); 'if it has to violate sovereignty (self-determination) on the way' and 'different degrees of vulnerability to political threat' (p. 152); 'states that are vulnerable' (p. 158).
[5] For a study of these activities, see Andrew Chubb, *PRC Overseas Political Activities: Risk, Reaction and the Case of Australia* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2021), Chapter II.
[6] Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 5.

A central feature in Buzan et al.'s framework is importance of different 'sectors.' Both the 'securitizing actors' and 'referent objects' that the securitizer asserts is in need of protection can vary significantly across different 'sectors' of international politics, such as military affairs, economic, social identity and the environment.[7] As this article will show, the securitization of 'Chinese influence' began in Australia in the political sector, where the referent object is typically the state's sovereignty. As the coalition of securitizers expanded, however, the threat construction process spilled over into the societal sector, with politicians, commentators and pundits increasingly presenting 'Chinese influence' as threatening Australian national identity — 'our way of life,' as Turnbull termed it.

Buzan et al. make passing mention of three general conditions for attempts at securitization to be successful.[8] One is the securitizers' adept deployment of the language and grammar of security in the given sector, which increases the likelihood of audiences accepting the existence and urgent nature of the threat. In Australia's case, securitizers sought extraordinary measures to protect state sovereignty (political security) in part by invoking a language of national identity (societal security), resulting in a spillover of threat perceptions from the political to the societal sector. The second determinant of success is the securitizing actor's social capital including their authority over the subject at hand. In the case of Australia, an expanding coalition of intelligence agencies, politicians, journalists and pundits lent diverse social capital to construction of 'Chinese influence' as a cross-sectoral security threat. The third is social conventions of threat perception: how well the touted security threat fits with audiences' pre-existing notions of what security threats are like. In the case at hand, the idea of amorphous 'Chinese influence' as a threat to Australian sovereignty resonated with powerful local currents of ethnonationalism and racialized fears of invasion from the north.

The securitization framework illuminates the basic process of security threat construction in the case of 'Chinese influence' in Australia, and helpfully draws attention to the distinction between security in the political sector (sovereignty) compared with the societal sector (identity). However, beyond the three broad conditions mentioned above — use of appropriate sectoral security grammar,

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[7] Buzan et al.. *Security*, Chapters 3-7.
[8] Buzan et al., *Security*, pp. 32-33.

leveraging of authority, and consonance with audience preconceptions — the framework offers little basis upon which to understand the causes of such securitization. Why do issues or potential threat referents become securitized at certain times and not others? Within Buzan et al.'s framework, the causal chain extends back only as far as the individual choices of those who initiate 'securitizing moves.' For a more complete account of why securitizing moves occur, and the conditions for their success, it is helpful to draw on theories of public policy change.

Public policy change

Australia has constructed its national security policy around its alliance with the United States from the signing of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951. After Nixon's visit to China and the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972, Canberra has also sought economically beneficial trading relations with the PRC. Based on major complementarities, notably Australia's abundant reserves of iron ore and China's four-decade construction boom, bilateral trade ties expanded rapidly. By 2015, Australia's trade with China was worth US$150 billion annually, more than double the value of trade with its next-largest trade partner, the US. With powerful business interests firmly supporting the prioritization of trade ties, and polls showing the Australian public overwhelmingly viewed the PRC as an economic partner rather than a security threat, there appeared to be little political incentive for securitization of China-related threats. Yet as we will see, from mid-2017 onwards, Australian politicians and bureaucrats began making strong securitizing statements about a range of PRC overseas political activities that had been ongoing for some time. What explains this evident policy shift? Theories of public policy change open the door to a fuller explanation of the securitization of Chinese influence.

Public policy problems do not automatically prompt policy responses. Kingdon's classic account of the policy process emphasizes that change is only likely where three 'streams' of effort come together: problems, policies and politics.[9] Kingdon's theory highlights that problems are continually being identified; solutions are consistently proffered; and decisionmakers are constantly making political choices about which issues to address and how. This often occurs on the basis of multiple

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[9] John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies (Second Edition)* (Harlow: Pearson, 2011).

factors including their ideological beliefs and their reading of domestic politics and public opinion.[10] However, due to the very limited time of political decisionmakers relative to the maelstrom of issues competing for attention, these streams usually remain separate on any given issue. Thus, it falls to 'policy entrepreneurs' to create and seize fleeting windows of opportunity to bring together the three streams of activity. In part, this is a question of access: policy entrepreneurs are often located within governments themselves, interacting regularly with political leaders.[11] In Australia, as we will see, policy entrepreneurs in the security bureaucracy overcame relative policy stasis in relation to their longstanding political security concerns: PRC espionage, large political donations from CCP-aligned business figures and co-optation of local elites. The rolling together of these and various other issues into a composite societal threat of 'Chinese influence,' however, needs to be understood in terms of the force-multiplying effects — and side-effects — of the bringing together multiple streams of policy activity.

Sabatier's 'advocacy coalition framework' emphasizes the importance of coalitions encompassing bureaucrats, politicians, media, academics and wider society in producing policy change.[12] An increase in coordination, authority, or access by one coalition can be decisive in overcoming the opposition of another. This expansion of cooperation among a coalition of securitizers, first in the intelligence services and political leaders, then other political elites, and finally the media and academia, was clearly central in Australia's policy shift. Less studied, however, are the side-effects that the expansion of an advocacy coalition can have, particularly on public discourse. Such impacts would seem to be quite likely, as actors from different sectors of society can be expected make distinctive contributions to a larger push for policy action. In Australia's case, the expansion of the coalition advocating action to counter problematic PRC political activities — from security officials to politicians to the media and pundits — rendered the threat increasingly pervasive, amorphous and identity-based.

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[10] Paul Cairney and Michael Jones, 'Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach,' *Policy Studies Journal,* 44(1), (2016), pp. 39-40.
[11] Charles Hermann, 'Changing Course,' *International Studies Quarterly*, 34(1), (1990), pp. 11-12.
[12] Paul Sabatier, 'An Advocacy Coalition Framework oof Policy Change and the Role of Policy-Oriented Learning Therein,' *Policy Sciences*, 21(2), (1988), pp. 129-168.

Public policy analysts have examined how choices of language influence both the qualitative nature of a problem, the causes that give rise to it, the broader associations that audiences will draw and, ultimately, the design of public policy solutions.[13] In the case examined here, as the early securitizing actors — Australia's national security agencies, and then the Prime Minister — coordinated to mobilize other political and public support for extraordinary measures, the nature of the proffered threat changed. Whereas intelligence agencies worried about relatively discrete issues of foreign state espionage, lobbying by former ministers, and political donations by PRC state-connected individuals the key media presentations they inspired conveyed a pervasive 'Chinese' campaign of infiltration throughout Australian society.

Analyses of foreign policy change have similarly emphasized the need to understand the factors weighing against change.[14] Key impediments to change include bureaucratic inertia and standard operating procedures, as well as psychological biases towards prior beliefs.[15] Yet there appear to be other stabilizing factors that could inhibit change. As Medeiros has pointed out, in the US-China relationship prior to the Trump Administration, political leadership, economic interests, common challenges, nuclear weapons, and public opinion all helped prevent any rapid deterioration of bilateral relations.[16] As shown below, economic interests were a key source of stability behind Australia's policy of prioritizing trade relations with the PRC before 2017. Key members of the advocacy coalition that securitized 'Chinese influence' in Australia had held concerns about PRC overseas political activities for many years. They had not, however, joined up their efforts into the force-multiplying push that suddenly overcame the impediments to securitization.

PRC overseas political activities

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[13] David Rochefort and Roger Cobb, 'Problem Definition: An Emerging Perspective', in *The Politics of Problem Definition* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), pp. 1-31, accessed August 7, 2021, https://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/students/envs_5720/rochefort_1994.pdf

[14] Kjell Goldmann, *Change and Stability in Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[15] Hermann, 'Changing Course,' p. 8; David Welch, *Painful Choices: A Theory of Foreign Policy Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[16] Evan Medeiros, 'The Changing Fundamentals of US-China Relations,' *Washington Quarterly,* 42(3), (2019), pp. 108-112.

The People's Republic of China operates one of the world's most expansive political control apparatuses. From the 1980s, as the movement of people between China and the outside world accelerated, the PRC's interest in political developments beyond its borders, and in turn its activities to advance those interests, has increased correspondingly.[17] PRC party-state agencies have targeted overseas Chinese communities, both to appeal for their expertise and capital for the purposes of economic development, and to counter the flow of liberal ideas, and dissent more broadly, back into China.[18] Following the Beijing Massacre of June 1989, the ranks of the overseas Chinese pro-democracy movement swelled as large numbers of dissenters sought safety abroad. In Australia, then-Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced blanket permission for all Chinese students in Australia to remain permanently. The PRC responded by stepping up its efforts to infiltrate and divide dissident groups, and to monitor and intimidate would-be dissenters in Chinese communities more broadly, including through threats to members of their family still based in China.[19]

The 2008 Olympic torch relay in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics briefly brought the challenges of the PRC's overseas political activities to the forefront of media attention. For exile groups ranging from political dissidents to Tibetan independence activists and members of Falun Gong, the torch relay was an opportunity to raise attention and demonstrate opposition to the PRC regime. Anticipating such opposition, Beijing sent security agents to escort the torch in several countries, and mobilized overseas students and CCP-friendly business and community groups to stage counter-demonstrations, in some cases designed to drown out the dissenters. Dramatic scenes ensued in Canberra, where pro- and anti-PRC demonstrators clashed repeatedly throughout the day as the torch relay passed. This generated sensational media reports denouncing the actions of 'Chinese mobs.'[20]

Between 2009 and 2015, Australian media reported on a range of other problematic PRC political activities inside the country. These included the then-Defence Minister

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[17] See author's OUP edited book chapter; Chubb, *PRC Overseas Political Activities*, pp. 29-53.
[18] James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: Extra-territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).
[19] Jie Chen, *The Overseas Chinese Democracy Movement* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019)*, pp. 58-64; Nicholas Eftimiades, *Chinese Intelligence Operations* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1994), pp. 38-39.
[20] Pal Nyiri, Juan Zhang and Merriden Varrall, 'China's Cosmopolitan Nationalists: 'Heroes' and 'Traitors' of the 2008 Olympics,' *The China Journal*, 63, (2010), pp. 25-55.

accepting paid travel to China; donations to both political parties from pro-CCP real estate and media tycoons; efforts by PRC diplomats and pro-PRC nationalists to disrupt the Melbourne Film Festival for including Uighur activist Rebiya Kadeer; and revelations of informants at Australian universities passing information on staff and students' political activities to PRC authorities. A succession of controversies came to the forefront of the media agenda in 2016: the political sanitization of Chinese-language media; content-sharing deals between Australian media and PRC propaganda organs; activities of Australian-based pro-PRC students and community organizations; donations to political parties by PRC businessman Huang Xiangmo; and the first wave of scandals surrounding Labor Senator Sam Dastyari, who was forced to step down from the shadow ministry in September 2016 over undeclared payments from several PRC businessmen.[21]

Despite this steady accumulation of issues in the public domain, neither political elites nor the media had attempted to link this array of issues together into an overarching security threat requiring extraordinary measures. Indeed, they had actively sought to avoid doing so, as this would inevitably place other values at risk, primary among them business interests and the country's economic wellbeing. As Turnbull noted in his memoirs, 'An Australian prime minister who ends up in conflict with China cannot expect any support or solidarity form the Australian business community.'[22] But business interests were not — or should not have been — the only reason to proceed cautiously. As the subsequent events would show, liberal democratic principles and social cohesion were also at stake. The next section traces the emergence of the advocacy coalition that brought together multiple streams of effort, resulting in a significant change not only to Australia's China policy, but to the nature of the threat referent being responded to.

The securitizing coalition

Australian intelligence officials held increasing concerns about PRC overseas political activities from the mid-2000s, escalating their official threat assessments several

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[21] For a succinct summary see Stephen FitzGerald, 'China's Deepening Engagement in Australian Society: Is it a Concern?' China Matters Discussion Paper, September 2016, accessed August 7, 2021, https://chinamatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Session-III-Discussion-Paper-1.pdf
[22] Turnbull, *A Bigger Picture (ebook version)* (London: Hardy Grant, 2020) pp. 973-974.

times. However, this produced little political effect until 2015, when Malcolm Turnbull took office as Prime Minister, and received his initial security briefings. Once convinced of the threat and the need for extraordinary measures to counter PRC threats to state sovereignty, Turnbull became a key securitizing actor, directing political staff to collate information that would underpin a publicity campaign supporting rapid emergency legislative measures, and enlisting other politicians and the media to help ensure acceptance among the public. As this process unfolded, the nature of the threat referent changed from a set of specific PRC government practices that intelligence agencies believed were undermining the integrity of the political system, to an ambiguous and much broader idea of pervasive 'Chinese influence' threatening both sovereignty and Australian identity — 'our way of life,' as Turnbull described it.

Security agencies

Unclassified official materials, political memoirs and other inside accounts delivered to journalists all make clear that Australian security officials sought to elevate the salience of PRC-connected political donations, lobbying and interference in diaspora communities as security threats from as early as 2005. However, with China's economy booming and Australia's key ally the United States pursuing a policy oriented toward engagement, these warnings had little impact on political discourse towards China. As detailed below, over the following decade Canberra's main domestic security agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), offered a series of escalations in its public assessments of the threat of 'foreign interference.' When the agency framed the issue as a matter of *sovereignty*, bringing the issue into the 'political sector' described by Buzan et al., it began to successfully enlist political leaders and the media into an advocacy coalition capable of overturning the policy stasis. Yet, as subsequent sections will show, as politicians and journalists became involved, the threat quickly spilled over into the societal sector, becoming a matter of Australian national *identity*.

ASIO's explicit counter-interference mission dates back to 1979, when an offence of 'active measures of foreign intervention' was introduced as part of a sweeping overhaul of the organization. Amidst the Cold War, the *ASIO Act 1979* defined 'active measures' as 'clandestine or deceptive action taken by or on behalf of a foreign power to promote the interests of that power.' This concept was recognized as ambiguous and overly broad, and was replaced in 1986 with 'foreign interference.' The new concept outlawed clandestine or deceptive acts by or on behalf of foreign states that were for either intelligence purposes, detrimental to Australia, or 'for the purpose of affecting political or governmental processes,' as well as coercion, whether secret or overt. Since that time, ASIO's annual reports to parliament have featured assessments of 'foreign interference' in Australia. However, the focus was firmly on foreign interference as a problem carried out by foreign state officials.[23]

The assessments of foreign interference in Australia in ASIO's annual reports were virtually identical between the late 1990s and 2005, indicating a relatively static threat assessment. From 2006, however, the reports' language on both the level and nature of the threat from foreign interference began to change. The first sign of increased focus was an unusual paragraph in the 2005-2006 report describing ASIO's interviews with Chen Yonglin and Hao Fengjun, two PRC officials who had defected to Australia in 2005: 'ASIO interviewed Chen and Hao and looked closely at their claims of monitoring and harassment of members of Chinese dissident groups in Australia.' A new 'Foreign Interference and Espionage Division' was created that year, and the next two reports contained successively more detailed sections describing extraterritorial coercion of dissidents and members of their families in the home country, likely reflecting the institution's absorption of Chen and Hao's information. Although still overshadowed by the ongoing post-9/11 focus on counter-terrorism, ASIO's assessments of the threat of PRC overseas political activity clearly had begun to escalate.

The next elevation in ASIO's assessment of the threat of foreign interference is evident from 2008, when the organization's report to parliament began linking

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[23] 'Significant Events in ASIO's History,' Australian Security Intelligence Organization, undated, accessed August 7, 2021,
https://web.archive.org/web/20071013120930/http://asio.gov.au/About/Content/History.aspx

interference against overseas dissidents with the threat of espionage. The report's section on foreign interference stated:

> 'Foreign diplomats and officials are known to collect information on – and sometimes actively target – individuals in Australia whom they consider to be dissident, disloyal or otherwise of interest. Some of this activity is conducted overtly in the course of regular consular or community liaison by foreign officials.

> 'Measures taken by foreign powers can involve individuals being detained, threatened or coerced when they travel from Australia to other countries, particularly their country-of-origin. *ASIO is also aware of instances where threats have been made against associates and relatives in attempts to coerce Australians to cooperate with police or intelligence services*' (emphasis added).[24]

The section on espionage on the same page conspicuously reiterated this new linkage between individual political rights with espionage threats:

> 'Some espionage can arise from foreign interference activity, where a country's foreign intelligence service finds opportunity to cajole or coerce into cooperation one of its former nationals with access to sensitive Australian information. The original purpose of their targeting may not have been directed at espionage, but intelligence services are opportunistic and will often try to turn such opportunities to their advantage.'

The same report also introduced new language tying the threat of 'Espionage and Foreign Interference' with the goal of undermining of Australia's alliance with the United States.[25] But ASIO's attempts to raise awareness of the PRC's overseas political activities as a threat to state security did not initially gain political traction.

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[24] *ASIO Report to Parliament 2008-09* (Canberra: Australian Security Intelligence Organization, 2009), p. 6.
[25] *ASIO Report to Parliament 2008-09*, p.3.

Beginning in 2011, the threat was described as 'ongoing and pervasive,' and in 2014 ASIO reported the situation was 'worse than previously thought.' That year's annual report emphasized:

> 'Foreign interference in Australia is pervasive and ongoing; it spans community groups, business and social associations, academic institutions and many other areas of civil society and is directed against all levels of government.'[26]

In 2016, the assessment was upgraded further to 'extensive, unrelenting and increasingly sophisticated.' More significant, however, was ASIO's introduction of the rhetoric of *sovereignty* in relation to the foreign interference threat.[27] This move positioned the PRC's activities as a matter of political security, whereupon it quickly began to gain political traction.

Following the first Sam Dastyari donations scandal in 2016, anonymous media briefings from Australian intelligence officials on the topic expressed concern about a wide range of PRC-related political activities, which were characterized in media reporting as 'Chinese Government influence here.'

> 'An ABC investigation of public declarations and company information [on PRC political donor companies] shows some have strong ties with state organisations in China. '
>
> It helps explain why Australian defence and intelligence agencies are increasingly uneasy about the level of Chinese Government influence here.

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[26] *ASIO Report to Parliament 2013-14* (Canberra: Australian Security Intelligence Organization, 2014), p. 6.
[27] See *ASIO Report to Parliament 2014-15* (Canberra: Australian Security Intelligence Organization, 2015), p. vii; *ASIO Report to Parliament 2015-16* (Canberra: Australian Security Intelligence Organization, 2016), p. 25.

> That concern stretches from influence-buying in politics, through investment in critical infrastructure to control over local Chinese-language newspapers, radio stations and community associations.[28]

From mid-2017, security sources began offering even more vivid public assessments. On May 25, 2017, Australia's Director-General of Security, Duncan Lewis, told parliament that espionage and foreign interference was occurring 'on an unprecedented scale.' Lewis declared that this could 'cause serious harm to the nation's sovereignty, the integrity of our political system, our national security capabilities, our economy and other interests.' A week later, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation named the PRC as the source of the threat:

> 'The defence and intelligence community believes that attempts by the Chinese Communist Party to exert its influence in Australia pose a direct threat to our nation's liberties and its sovereignty.'[29]

The above examples show the Australian security officials' clear deployment of the language and grammar of political security as the turning point, after which the matter began to gain political attention. But as Buzan et al.'s framework emphasizes, other key determinants of whether securitizing moves will be successful or not include authority over the subject at hand, and alignment with audiences' preconceived notions of what security threats look like in the given sector. Once they adopted the rhetoric of political security — primarily the idea of threats to the state's sovereignty — security officials evidently possessed sufficient authority to persuade prominent journalists to relay their threat assessments to the public with extra color and detail. In the hands of the media, as later sections will show, the idea of China as a source of existential threat resonated with both vestigial fears of communism in the political sector, and identity-based ethnonationalist fears of being 'swamped' by more

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[28] Chris Uhlmann, 'Australian Businesses With Close Ties to China donated $5.5m to Political Parties, Investigation Shows', ABC News, August 21, 2016, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-21/australian-groups-strong-ties-china-political-donations/7768012

[29] Nick McKenzie, Chris Uhlmann, Richard Baker and Sashka Koloff, 'Australian sovereignty under threat from influence of China's Communist Party', ABC News, June 6, 2017, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-04/australian-sovereignty-under-threat-from-chinese-influence/8583832

populous Asian others. The single most important audience for the security agencies' invocation of existential threats, however, was the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Political elites

Turnbull recognized the authority of the security agencies to define sovereignty threats, and in turn, became a key securitizing actor himself. In his memoirs, he recalls that in his early intelligence briefings from Director-General Lewis, the agency's primary concern was with espionage — mostly of the cyber variety, and conducted 'on an industrial scale.' Turnbull's briefings also convinced him that

> the United Front Work Department (UFWD), a wing of the Communist Party of China (CPC), worked to advance support for China's objectives in the Australian community generally and in the Australian Chinese community in particular. A number of prominent Chinese businessmen were working closely with the UFWD and their agenda included coopting Australian politicians and opinion leaders. The road to doing this was, of course, money: political donations for both major parties and commercial opportunities as well.[30]

Turnbull thereafter became the central figure in the expansion of the advocacy coalition that successfully defined the PRC's political activities as an existential threat requiring emergency measures. In his December 5, 2017 press conference cited at the beginning of this article Turnbull expanded the threat from the political sector (sovereignty) into the societal sector (identity) by describing the referent object of protection to include both 'our democracy' and 'our way of life.'

The decisionmakers who acted upon ASIO's advice, according to Turnbull, were himself and Attorney-General George Brandis.

> As I discussed all these issues with Duncan and with senior ministers, including George Brandis, it became obvious that Australian governments had simply not been paying attention to the changing circumstances around them. .

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[30] Turnbull, *A Bigger Picture*, pp. 761-762.

. . I asked Duncan to brief the leaders of the major political parties as well as ministers about the risks of foreign interference in their own political affairs. And I also asked George Brandis to come back to cabinet with a report on foreign interference in Australia and how we could counter it both with new espionage laws and a transparency regime. At the same time, China scholar John Garnaut, who'd been working in my office as a policy adviser, took time out to prepare within my department a detailed report on China's influence operations in Australia.[31]

Leaks from the latter work would later feature in media reports that paved the way for a raft of extraordinary legislative measures to pass the parliament.[32] With the Prime Minister converted from an audience to securitizer, the advocacy coalition expanded quickly.

Andrew Hastie, a 33-year-old former SAS captain, was elected to parliament in 2015 and appointed Chairman of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security the following year. At a critical moment, in early 2018, Hastie underwent a China 'awakening' when Turnbull's advisor sent him a speech on the CCP's ideology under Xi Jinping. According to a sympathetic journalist's account, the speech 'struck [Hastie] like a thunderclap.'[33] At the time, the committee Hastie chaired was preparing to hear evidence on the sweeping package of national security legislation that the government argued was aimed at countering CCP activities. Several weeks later, as the legislation encountered stiff opposition from legal experts and civil society organizations, Hastie made an extraordinary political intervention that helped secure the passage of the new security laws.

On May 24, 2018, under parliamentary privilege, Hastie denounced pervasive CCP interference in Australian politics, media and education and society, naming Chau Chak-Wing as a 'Chinese-Australian citizen' suspected of involvement in a UN bribery case. Hastie's speech presented the case as an illustrative example of threats

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[31] Turnbull, *A Bigger Picture,* pp. 762-763.

[32] E.g. Chris Uhlmann, 'Top-secret report uncovers high-level Chinese interference in Australian politics,' *9 News*, May 28, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.9news.com.au/national/2018/05/28/17/38/chinese-communist-party-interference-australian-politics

[33] Hartcher, 'Hastie's Awakening.'

to Australia's democracy, press freedom and sovereignty resulting from the CCP's efforts to 'covertly interfere with our media and universities and also to influence our political processes and public debates.'[34] By denouncing Chau as a *Chinese-Australian citizen*, Hastie presented Chau's ethnicity as both a qualification on his citizenship and an embodiment of the existential threat 'our' Australia was facing. With the Labor opposition holding out from supporting the passage of the controversial bills, and civil society strongly critical of the proposed expansion of national security, Hastie's denunciation propelled the issue up the mainstream public agenda. According to sympathetic observers, this was key to building the political pressure necessary to overcome objections from civil society and lobbying from business groups and the PRC party-state.[35]

Hastie's subsequent statements expanded the scope of the referent object under threat beyond Australian politics and society to Western civilization. When US ethnonationalist figure Steve Bannon toured Australia in July 2018, Hastie was among the MPs to line up to publicly endorse his analysis that Australia was situated in a 'fight for the ages' against Chinese control on behalf of 'Western tradition.'[36] Hastie affirmed a 'generational struggle' that would require 'an education system that teaches western civilisation'. Hastie also took the opportunity to locate the existential threat among the Chinese population at large: 'We are dealing with a state that uses the whole of society to advance its national objectives.' [37] Statements such as this significantly expanded the scope of the threat referent, from the PRC government to Chinese people.

Following his 'awakening' to the Chinese ethno-civilizational threat, Hastie became a central figure in the Australian parliament's cross-party caucus of self-described 'wolverines' resisting the PRC. Hastie raised the alarm beyond Australia's borders

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[34] *Hansard (Australian Parliament),* 'Appropriation (Parliamentary Departments) Bill (No. 1) 2018-2019, Second Reading', House of Representatives, May 22, 2018, pp. 110-112.

[35] Peter Hartcher, 'Red Flag: Waking Up to China's Challenge,' *Quarterly Essay*, 76, (2019), p. 67; Diamond and Schell, *Chinese Influence*, pp. 148–50.

[36] Peter Hartcher, 'Australia on the front line of clash with China, says Steve Bannon', *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 8, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/australia-on-the-front-line-of-clash-with-china-says-steve-bannon-20180709-p4zqfi.html

[37] David Wroe, 'Defending democracy a generational struggle, Australian MPs warn', *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 10, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/defending-democracy-a-generational-struggle-australian-mps-warn-20180710-p4zqlj.html

through the establishment of Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), a network of hawkish MPs across democracies. Writing for a British think tank in 2020, Hastie argued:

> 'Authoritarian states have weaponised previously benign activities like diplomacy, media, investment flows, infrastructure development, and foreign asset purchases. University campuses have become the modern battlegrounds of covert influence and interference. These activities complement more aggressive forms of subversive warfare such as intellectual property theft, forced technology transfer, cyber-attacks, and espionage. All these activities advance the efforts of authoritarian regimes to undermine the West.'[38]

Initially a key audience for advocates of security measures to counter PRC government activity, Hastie's role had rapidly switched to that of securitizer of a much larger, and qualitatively different threat. A similar role, expanding the 'referent object' from political sovereignty to Australian identity, was played by the Australian media's reporting.

Media

Journalists were, as noted above, the audience for a series of anonymous briefings from defense and intelligence officials ahead of the Turnbull government's expansive package of national security legislation aimed at countering security threats from the PRC's overseas political activities. However, this does not mean the media were passive conduits in the securitization process.[39] While the security bureaucracies' warnings over increased 'foreign interference' by unnamed foreign states had carried little news value over the preceding decade, from 2017 onwards Australian media presentations, particularly those inspired by government information, frequently conveyed a narrative of pervasive espionage and infiltration by everyday Chinese

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[38] Hastie, 'What Is to be Done?' p. 42.
[39] For a brief review of the Australian media's reporting see Kelsey Munro, 'A Free Press is a Magic Weapon Against China's Influence Peddling', *Lowy Interpreter,* December 18, 2017, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/free-press-magic-weapon-against-china-influence-peddling

people in Australia. Headlines and commentaries presented a wide array of state and non-state political activities as a coordinated 'operation' (often labelled 'Chinese', as discussed below). Not only were spies and propagandists systematically subverting Australia's sovereignty and political system, but Chinese community organizations, businesspeople, academics, and students were also accomplices and agents for these operations.[40]

<FIGURE 1 AND FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE>

An agenda-setting June 2017 television segment aired on the ABC's flagship investigative program offered an illustrative example. The show opened with a dramatic re-enactment of a midnight raid on the home of Roger Uren, an Australian ex-intelligence analyst – married to a politically connected PRC woman, the program emphasised – suspected of illegally removing classified information. It then stitched together issues of espionage, political co-optation, coercion of dissidents, control of Chinese-language media and overseas Chinese students into an elaborate narrative of the PRC government's 'power and influence' in Australia, with everyday Chinese people as its vectors. Shadowy lighting and tension-laden sound effects reinforced the espionage theme throughout the 45-minute program.[41] An extensive accompanying feature published by Fairfax Media was headlined China's Operation Australia, presenting an even wider array of activities as a coordinated state 'operation.'[42]

Like Turnbull and Hastie, influential individual journalists were highly receptive to securitizing moves from officials. Once convinced of the threat, they became active securitizers, driving threat perceptions downward and outward to mass audiences. Chris Uhlmann, one of Australia's leading political journalists, who contributed to and introduced the ABC's *Power and Influence* investigation, explained his

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[40] A catalogue of headlines appears in James Laurenceson, 'Do the Claims Stack up? Australia Talks China', Australia-China Relations Institute, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/do-claims-stack-australia-talks-china

[41] McKenzie, 'Power and influence'; a sequel aired in September 2019 framed a set of China-related issues at universities, ranging from unethical research collaborations that could contribute to repression and genocide in Xinjiang, to duelling student protests over Hong Kong, as the 'infiltration of Australia's universities by the Chinese Communist Party'. Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, 'Red Flags', *Four Corners*, October 14, 2019, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/4corners/red-flags/11601456

[42] Nick McKenzie, Richard Baker, Sasha Koloff and Chris Uhlmann, 'China's Operation Australia: The Party Line', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 6, 2017, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.smh.com.au/interactive/2017/chinas-operation-australia/soft-power.html

motivation in a podcast interview: 'My big concern about what's happening in this country is that essentially already our business class and our academic class have been recruited by money to parrot the lines of Beijing.'[43]

Uhlmann's reporting appeared to consciously seek to contribute to the political effort to secure passage of the national security laws. One important intervention in May 2018 prolonged the 'Chinese influence' issue's prominence on the news agenda. Several days after Hastie's denunciation of 'Chinese-Australian citizen' Chau Chak Wing, Uhlmann's told Channel 9 viewers, 'Andrew Hastie's bombshell allegations are still echoing through politics.' This was followed by a clip of Hastie speaking in the stating in the parliament, 'In Australia it is clear that the Chinese Communist Party is working to covertly interfere with our media, our universities, and also influence our political processes and public debates.' The report went on to state that Chau Chak Wing, and Huang Xiangmo were in fact acting on behalf of the CCP in their donating activities, based on a leak from Turnbull's office.

> "9 News has confirmed that the top-secret [Garnaut-ASIO] report found that there has been a decade-long effort by the Chinese Communist Party to compromise both major parties at all levels of government, to gain access and influence over policymaking.
>
> . . .
>
> 'After receiving the report the Prime Minister ordered the then-Attorney General to toughen foreign interference laws.'

The TV news segment's final line concluded, 'The foreign interference laws are *yet* (short pause) to pass parliament.'[44] Within a month, the Labor opposition in the parliament had been overcome. According to a sympathetic insider, Hastie's intervention, combined with the further media coverage it triggered, contributed significantly to the eventual passage of the legislative outcome. This had been

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[43] Louisa Lim, 'Stranger than spy fiction,' *China Channel*, September 27, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://chinachannel.org/2018/09/27/hanopticon/

[44] Uhlmann, 'Top-secret report.'

necessary to 'regain control of the conversation and ensure bipartisan support for the legislation' in the face of opposition, particularly from civil society groups.[45]

<FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE>

Subsequent comments from security officials suggest the intelleigence bureaucracy understood itself to be working in a coalition with the media. Security chief Duncan Lewis reflected with approval on the media's role:

> 'There has been a great deal of coverage recently in the Australian media regarding espionage and foreign interference, ascribing blame and describing vectors of attack and influence. It's not proper for me to dive into the detail of the individual cases and the coverage of these events for very obvious reasons. Suffice it to say I am satisfied that ASIO is following the ball very closely. We have seeded what is now a public consciousness, and an awareness of the matter, and I hope in short order there will come an increased public preparedness to defend our country and its sovereignty.'[46]

Hastie concurs that media reporting on the topic 'protected the Australian national interest by revealing multiple instances of malign foreign interference, setting the political conditions for the passage of EFI and FITS legislation.'[47]

The legislation to which Hastie referred were two significant, deeply controversial new pieces of security legislation. The *Espionage and Foreign Interference* (EFI) legislation expanded the scope of espionage and secrecy offences, introduced new criminal penalties for covert, deceptive or coercive interventions into political processes and, most controversially, expanded the scope of 'national security' from Australia's defense and intelligence interests to include 'the country's political,

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[45] Larry Diamond and Orville Schell (eds.), *Chinese Influence and American Interests* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2018), pp. 149-150.
[46] Duncan Lewis, 'Address to the Lowy Institute,' Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, September 4, 2019, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.asio.gov.au/publications/speeches-and-statements.html
[47] Hastie, 'Challenge to democracy to counter Russia, China,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 10, 2019, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/challenge-to-democracy-to-counter-russia-china-20191204-p53gzj.html

military or economic relations' with any other country.[48] The Law Council of Australia argued such broad definitions undermined the rule of law, which depends on clarity of rules, especially in relation to serious crimes.[49] Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International argued it risked criminalising the revelation of human rights violations or illegal conduct by Australian government agencies.[50] The *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme* (FITS), meanwhile, established a new public registry for policy advocacy on behalf of a broadly defined category of 'foreign principals.'[51] Against such opposition, as Figure 4 indicates, surges in media mentions of 'Chinese influence' closely matched the progression of the legislation through the parliament and eventually into law, completing the successful securitization process.

<FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE>

'Chinese influence' and its effects

The dominant term in Australia's public discussions on PRC political activities was 'Chinese influence.' As Figure 5 indicates, the Australian media's usage of this term consistently outstripped the combined total of several of the most prominent alternatives, including 'CCP interference,' 'PRC interference,' and 'communist party interference.' The effect on public discourse was lasting: the website of Fairfax

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[48] Law Council of Australia, 'Espionage Report a Step in the Right Direction', June 8, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.lawcouncil.asn.au/media/media-releases/espionage-report-a-step-in-the-right-direction

[49] *Hansard (Australian Parliament)*, 'National Security Legislation Amendment' pp. 10-11; see also Human Rights Law Centre, 'Response to Amendments Proposed by the Attorney-General's Department', March 14, 2018, p. 7, accessed August 7, 2021, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/580025f66b8f5b2dabbe4291/t/5aa86b72e2c4839970023836/1520986999078/Human+Rights+Law+Centre+-+Supplementary+Submission+to+the+Inquiry+into+the+National+Security+Legislation+Amendment+%28EFI%29+Bill+2017+-+14+March+2018.pdf

[50] Elaine Pearson, 'Australia's Government Must Guard Against Foreign Interference, But Not By Curbing Our Rights', ABC News, June 14, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-14/australia-government-foreign-interference-espionage-human-rights/9857660; Paul Karp, 'Espionage Bill Could Make Some Protests Criminal Acts, Getup Says', *Guardian*, June 26, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jun/26/espionage-bill-could-make-some-protests-criminal-acts-getup-says

[51] The Law Council of Australia argued that vague language in the legislation would risk a 'chilling of otherwise legitimate and constructive advocacy' Law Council of Australia, 'Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Bill 2017', January 22, 2018, p. 8. See also Evelyn Douek, 'What's in Australia's New Laws on Foreign Interference in Domestic Politics?' *Lawfare*, July 11, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.lawfareblog.com/whats-australias-new-laws-foreign-interference-domestic-politics; and Australian Lawyers for Human Rights, 'Position Statement: Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme', March 2018, pp. 12-13, accessed August 7, 2021, https://alhr.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ALHR-Position-Statement_-Foreign-Influence-Transparency-Scheme-3.pdf

Media, one of the country's largest liberal-leaning media groups, published more than 100 articles in the 'Chinese influence' category in 2019 alone.

The English-speaking world appears to have followed Australia in defining the problems raised by PRC overseas political activities as 'Chinese influence.' Indeed, media mentions of 'Chinese influence' in the US – a far larger media market – lagged behind Australian media mentions of the term, and only overtook it in 2021 (Figure 6). The term quickly became a staple of international think tank reports and media coverage.[52] 'Chinese influence' has since featured prominently in US intelligence advice, British parliamentary documents.[53] In September 2019 the US Senate approved a US\$375 million 'Countering Chinese Influence Fund' directed at 'malign Chinese influence activities.'

<FIGURE 5 AND FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE>

As Rochefort and Cobb point out in their classic work on public policy changes, language influences the definition of problems, which in turn affects the public's views of their causes and potential solutions. In particular, the labelling of issues holds the potential to construct or convey the existence of 'problem populations.'[54] As a threat referent, 'Chinese influence' was more likely to resonate with audiences than 'PRC interference' thanks to abundance of available associations owing to the term's ambiguity and familiarity.[55] The effect has been the projection of ethnic Chinese — and Asians more generally, to the extent that audiences failed to make the distinction — as a problem population.

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[52] E.g. Diamond and Schell, *Chinese Influence*; The Economist, 'Sharp Power: The New Face of Chinese Influence'; Gordon Corera, 'UK Vulnerable to Chinese Influence, Report Says', BBC News, February 20, 2019; Rob Schmitz, 'Australia and New Zealand are Ground Zero for Chinese Influence', NPR, October 2, 2018, accessed August 7, 2021,
https://www.npr.org/2018/10/02/627249909/australia-and-new-zealand-are-ground-zero-for-chinese-influence?t=1603798632122

[53] E.g. UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 'A Cautious Embrace: Defending Democracy in an Age of Autocracies', HC 109, Second Report of Session 2019, November 4, 2019, pp. 5, 7; United States Department of Homeland Security, 'Overt Chinese Influence Targeting the Homeland', February 20, 2020, accessed August 7, 2021,
https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/7007103-Overt-Chinese-Influence-Targeting-the-Homeland.html

[54] Rochefort and Cobb, 'Problem Definition.'

[55] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, *Judgement Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Thanks to Evan Jones for suggesting the relevance of the availability heuristic.

In Australia as elsewhere, Chinese diaspora communities are diverse, including many migrants from around Southeast Asia and Greater China. Overseas Chinese communities are politically highly diverse as well, including ethnic Chinese from democratic Taiwan and restive Hong Kong, as well as many of the CCP's staunchest dissident opponents in exile from the Mainland.[56] Chinese diaspora communities have in fact had a long and deep affinity with liberal democracy in Australia.[57] However, the notion of 'Chinese influence' as threat to democracy — to political and societal security — affirms the PRC propaganda axiom that ethnic Chinese have a natural affinity for the CCP-led party-state. In Australia, citizens from non-Chinese backgrounds have been subjected to racialized security suspicions on the basis of appearance: Liberal Party councillor Elizabeth Lee, for example, a Korean-Australian, said in September 2020 that she had received online abuse labelling her a 'Chinese spy'.[58]

The root of this definitional problem — as well as its associative power — lies in the ambiguity of the English-language term 'Chinese,' which simultaneously denotes an ethnicity, geography, culture, and state. As a result, securitizers' labelling of problematic PRC overseas political activities as 'Chinese' projected an unwarranted association between Chinese ethnicity and the CCP political activities.[59] Even if securitizers using the term are attuned to these nuances, their audiences — including politicians and the general public — may not be. Cases of Asian-Australian politicians being called 'Chinese spies' by members of the public suggest how use of the label 'Chinese' in public policy debates over PRC political activities can fan identity-based suspicion in the community in ways that the speakers of the security problem likely did not intend. A 2020 survey of Chinese-Australians found nearly

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[56] Jinghua Qian, 'Call out China's meddling, but the yellow-peril alarm at 'Chinese influence' is racist', *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 14, 2019, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.smh.com.au/national/call-out-china-s-meddling-but-the-yellow-peril-alarm-at-chinese-influence-is-racist-20190913-p52r0e.html

[57] An 1878 political pamphlet produced by Chinese migrants in Melbourne illustrates well these deep roots: L. Kong Meng, Cheok Hong Cheong and Louis Ah Mouy, *The Chinese Question in Australia, 1878-1879* (Melbourne: Balliere, 1878), available through Google Books. For a compelling book-length study, see John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007).

[58] Tom Lowrey, 'Liberal and Labor Canberra Politicians Tell of 'Hurtful' Racism on the ACT Election Campaign Trail', ABC News, September 25, 2020, accessed August 7, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-25/act-politicians-face-racism-on-the-campaign-trail/12701918

[59] For an eloquent elaboration of this point, see the following Twitter thread by Paul MacGregor: twitter.com/paulmacgregorCH/status/1058574289903923201

20% reported being 'physically threatened or attacked' over their background in the preceding 12 months.[60]

In a testimony to an Australian Senate inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities in October 2020, former Australian public servant Yun Jiang described a 'toxic environment' facing Chinese-Australians seeking to participate in public life:

> 'many Chinese-Australians are choosing to remain silent and refusing to speak out publicly on Australia's foreign and domestic policies. On the one hand, if they criticise the Chinese government, then their family may face trouble, or they may have difficulties going to China in the future. They may also be accused of being a race traitor by a Chinese nationalist. On the other hand, if they criticise the Australian government, they're suspected of being an agent for foreign interference, having their loyalties questioned or accused of being brainwashed. This is a toxic environment for Chinese-Australians to be in.'[61]

Minutes later the point was underscored when a government senator Eric Abetz challenged Jiang and the two other Chinese-Australian witnesses to unconditionally denounce the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship — a 'loyalty test' that no other witnesses to the inquiry were subjected to.

The ambiguity of 'Chinese influence' as the primary threat referent as politicians and the media joined the securitizing coalition had the effect of directing the public's focus towards Chinese ethnicity. The threat referent also resonated with vestigial political and community attitudes towards threats to Australian national identity from Asia. 'Chinese influence' was particularly well aligned with common understandings of what threats to Australian sovereignty and identity looked like. As noted earlier, securitization theory has recognized this as key condition for successful securitizing moves.[62]

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[60] Natasha Kassam and Jennifer Hsu, *Being Chinese in Australia* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, March 2021).

[61] *Hansard (Australian Parliament)*, 'Issues Facing Diaspora Communities', p. 1.

[62] Buzan et al., *Security*, pp. 32-33.

Conclusion

The issues raised by PRC's overseas political activities in Australia, and their recognition as threats by Australian security agencies, long predate the securitization of 'Chinese influence' in Australia, and cannot explain the timing of the observed changes in public discourse. It was, instead, the overflow of threat perceptions from intelligence services to politicians, to journalists, and ultimately to the public, that overcame the stasis of the political parties' interests in accepting PRC-linked money and the business community's lobbying against policy moves that would risk trade ties.

The expansion of the advocacy coalition from security officials to politicians and the media produced an increasingly ambiguous threat discourse that satisfied the three key conditions for securitization. Precisely because of the ambiguity of 'Chinese influence,' the threat discourse centered around this term successfully hewed to the language and grammar of security in both the political and societal sectors of security concern, leveraging the authority of its members, and according with audiences' pre-existing notions of political and societal threats.

The securitization of 'Chinese influence' has had both intended and unintended effects on Australia's political landscape and society. On one hand, the emergency legislation advocated by the original securitizers became law; on the other hand, the discourse has unleashed divisive social forces and created a 'toxic environment' for Chinese-Australians, especially in public and political life. The securitization process described in this article also dramatically worsened Australia's relations with the PRC, setting the scene for the deterioration into open acrimony following the COVID-19 pandemic. With similar trends apparent in other English-speaking liberal democracies, a key question for both academic study and public policy is whether countervailing moves can be brought about to *de*-securitize 'Chinese influence.'

Figure 1: Headlines from Australian media, 2017-2018.

Figure 2: Scenes from the ABC's *Four Corners* documentary, June 5, 2017.

Figure 3: Screen-grab from Chris Uhlmann's Channel 9 News report, May 28, 2018.
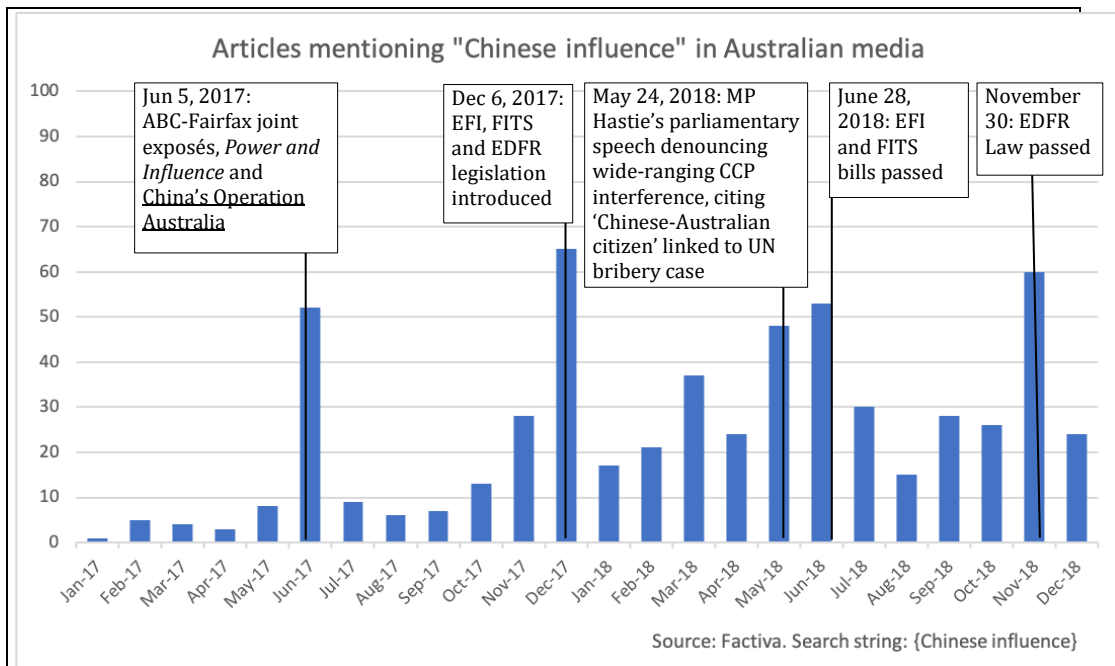

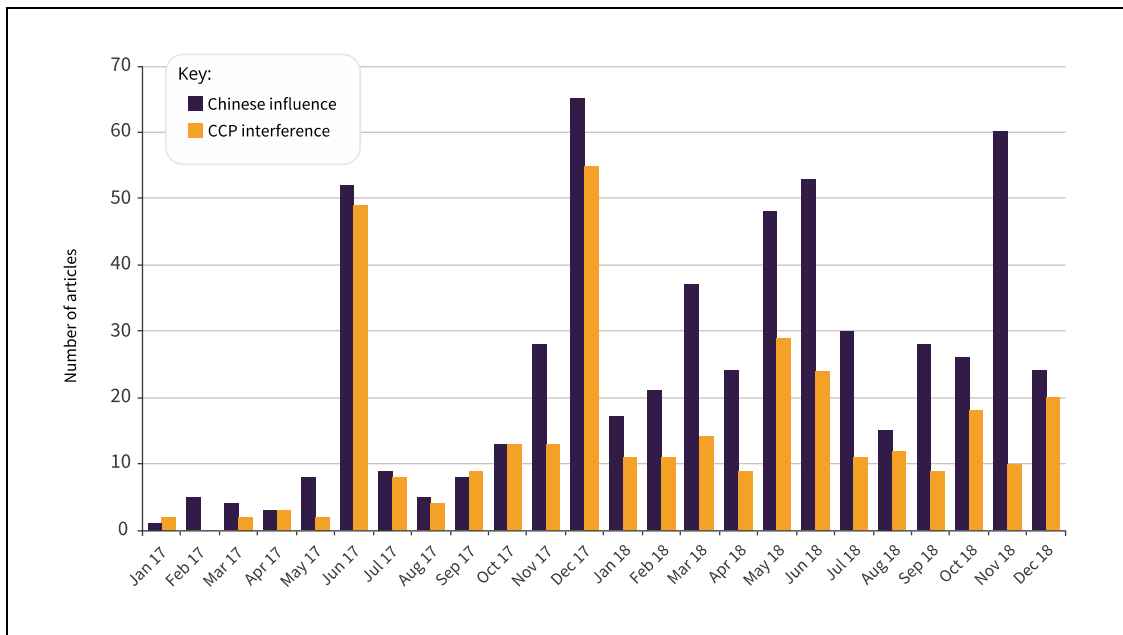Figure 4: Australian media discussion of 'Chinese influence' and progress of Australia's legislative response.

Figure 5: Monthly number of articles mentioning 'Chinese influence' versus 'communist party/CCP/PRC interference' in Australian media, 2017-2018.
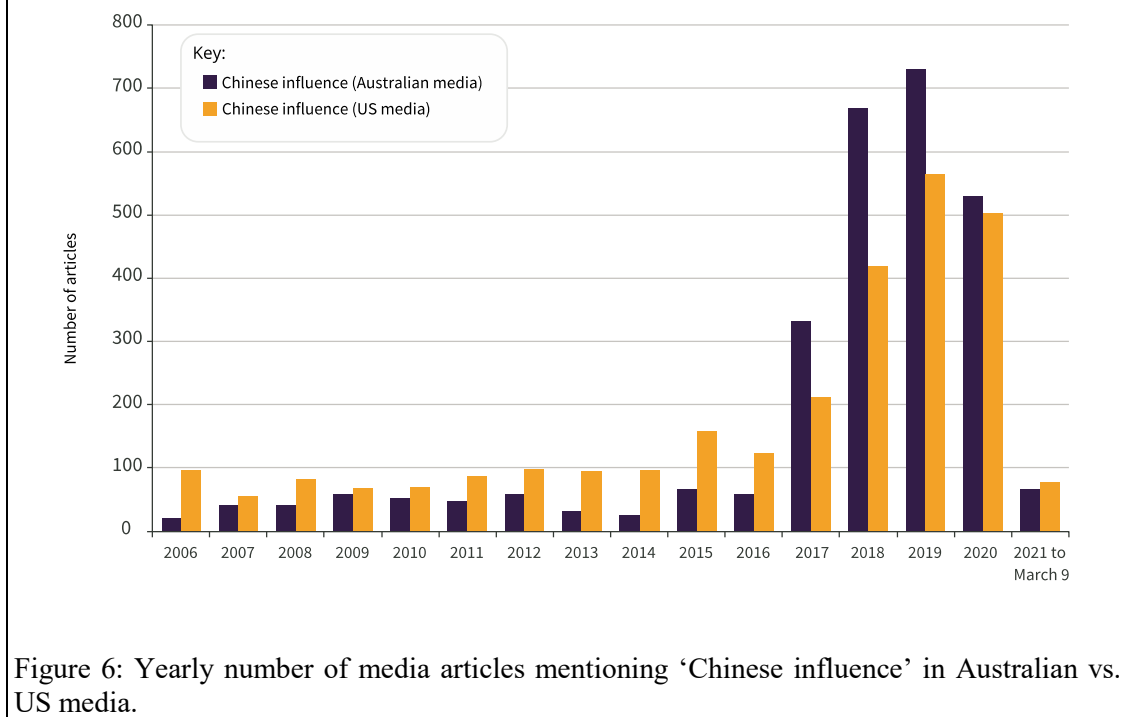

Figure 6: Yearly number of media articles mentioning 'Chinese influence' in Australian vs. US media.