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Foreign Cultural Centers as a Potential Platform for Foreign Intelligence Operations

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INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



Foreign Cultural Centers as a Potential Platform for Foreign Intelligence Operations

Introduction

Foreign cultural centers are present throughout the U.S., hosting a variety of events and services to include the celebration of unique foreign holidays, language classes, cooking classes, musical/dance/arts events, and other forms of cultural exchange. These events and services provide a variety of benefits to the communities they are located in, primarily in the form of cultural education and providing a gathering place for individuals based on their ethnic heritage or country of origin. However, foreign cultural centers also provide a potential platform for foreign intelligence operations, particularly from countries known to target the U.S. with influence and espionage campaigns (to include China and Russia). This paper will examine the potential foreign intelligence threats posed by foreign cultural centers, although it should be noted that the majority of such centers are likely benign in nature and provide valuable cultural outreach.

Potential for Intelligence Operations

As stated in the introduction, foreign cultural centers provide a number of useful services for individuals who share common ethnic heritage or country of origin. However, these centers may have various levels of affiliation with a foreign nation-state government (to include funding/staffing) and could be willing to participate in influence and/or traditional espionage activities. If a center is unwilling to participate, it could potentially be subjected to forms of coercion by a foreign nation-state, to include blackmail or threats against relatives still living in the home country.

Influence Operations

One potential concern surrounding foreign cultural centers is for their ability to serve as a platform for influence operations. Per the FBI, foreign influence operations include “covert actions by foreign governments to influence U.S. political sentiment or public discourse.”¹ Foreign cultural centers could be utilized by foreign nation-states in order to create, spread, or amplify viewpoints favorable to the home country, both in public and/or in private settings.

Influence operations have been carried out recently by U.S. adversaries to include China and Russia. Chinese influence operations in the U.S. have sought to achieve goals such as “[gaining] political influence, [controlling] discussion of sensitive topics, [interfering] in multilateral institutions, [threatening] and [intimidating] human rights defenders, [imposing] censorship on foreign publishers and [influencing] academic institutions.”² Meanwhile, Russia has a long history of utilizing “active measures” in order to affect global events. During the 1980s amidst Cold War tensions, the State Department stated that Soviet “active measures” included efforts such as “written or spoken disinformation; efforts to control media in foreign countries; use of Communist parties and front organizations; clandestine radio broadcasting; blackmail, personal, economic, and political influence operations.”³ Similar efforts emanating from Russia have been observed in recent years, particularly surrounding the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.⁴



Traditional Espionage Operations

Foreign cultural centers could also be used as a platform for traditional espionage operations, to include a potential source of assets for recruitment, a meeting location for the exchange of sensitive or classified information, or as a location to install technical equipment for the collection of signals intelligence. George Friedman (founder of the private intelligence firm Stratfor and noted geopolitical expert) states that intelligence officers assigned to embassies have four primary functions, of which three could be applicable to foreign cultural centers: immersing themselves in the gossip of the nation, collecting valuable unclassified information, and operating technical intelligence-gathering equipment. Finally, he notes that covert operations could be conducted by intelligence officers assigned to embassies, although a number of diplomatic concerns surround this possibility.⁵ Foreign cultural centers could potentially serve as a platform for such espionage operations, while likely attracting less scrutiny than official foreign establishments traditionally suspected of espionage use, such as embassies and consulates.

Case Studies

While publicly available case studies regarding foreign cultural centers and foreign intelligence operations are limited, the two cases below highlight some of the most pressing concerns as described above. China and Russia are noted U.S. adversaries, although it is also possible that similar concerns exist regarding other foreign cultural centers.

Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes are perhaps the most prominent and concerning foreign cultural center in the U.S. today. Confucius Institutes are Chinese government-sponsored educational centers that offer services such as Chinese language classes and are typically located at (or are affiliated with) a higher educational institution. There were more than 100 Confucius Institutes in the U.S., although at least 13 have been closed in the last year by their affiliated institutions in order to preserve funding from the Department of Defense. This situation arose after an amendment was added to the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act based on potential security concerns.⁶

Critics have suggested that Confucius Institutes could be used as a platform for intelligence collection, a notable concern given Chinese efforts targeting U.S. academic institutions. In 2018, FBI director Christopher Wray testified that the Bureau had “concerns” about Confucius Institutes and was taking appropriate monitoring and investigative measures.⁷ While there is currently no public evidence to suggest that Confucius Institutes have been used as a platform for malicious espionage activity, the Institutes are believed to engage in forms of influence operations, to include “[stifling] discussion on sensitive topics like democracy, human rights, Tibet and Taiwan”, and shaping U.S. audiences’ perception of China.⁶

Still, U.S. universities conduct a variety of sensitive and dual-use research which may be of intelligence value to Chinese government entities. Additionally, university faculty/staff members, visiting guests, and students with appealing government/military/intelligence/economic aspirations could potentially be targeted for asset recruitment. Confucius Institutes remain capable of conducting influence operations and could potentially conduct more traditional espionage operations on behalf of China. However, heightened scrutiny by the U.S. government may decrease the potential for such activities.



Russian Cultural Center in D.C.

In 2013, open source media reporting suggested that Yury Zaytsev, the director of a Russian government-sponsored cultural exchange program was involved in espionage. Information was limited due to the nature of the investigation, although the allegations involved Zaytsev targeting Americans involved in the Rossotrudnichestvo cultural exchange program which involved lavish trips to Russia for its participants. The Americans who participated in the program reportedly included “graduate students, business executives, political aides and nonprofit workers” who would likely be of intelligence value to Russian entities. Zaytsev reportedly created files on some participants in the program, although the FBI would not comment on whether he successfully recruited any to serve as intelligence assets.^{8,9}

Zaytsev was also the head of the Russian Center for Science and Culture in Washington, D.C., and had diplomatic immunity due to his role. The center again came under scrutiny in 2018, when the center’s new director Oleg Zhiganov was expelled from the U.S. along with a number of other Russian officials. The mass expulsion was conducted in tandem with several U.S. allies who were retaliating in response to Russia’s alleged poisoning of a former Russian spy. Although Russian officials denied allegations of spying, and Zhiganov was not publicly accused of any specific wrongdoing, it is certainly possible that he fed valuable intelligence to Russian government entities and/or engaged in similar targeting and recruitment operations as what Zaytsev was accused of.⁹

The Russian Center for Science and Culture is located in Washington, D.C., the hub of U.S. government activity, in addition to various defense contractors, non-governmental organizations, and private industry. It is uniquely situated to assist in traditional intelligence operations as described earlier in this paper, although it may also be capable of conducting some influence operations as well. However, much like the Confucius Institutes, U.S. government scrutiny may somewhat impede its ability to conduct such operations.

Outlook

Foreign cultural centers generally provide valuable community services and events, and serve as a unifying societal force promoting cultural exchange. However, U.S. adversaries can also exploit such centers to conduct foreign intelligence operations, to include influence operations as well as traditional espionage operations. These concerns are highlighted by China’s Confucius Institutes as well as the Russian Center for Science and Culture in the cases outlined above, although both have been subject to recent scrutiny. These centers may pursue foreign intelligence objectives despite such scrutiny, and may be able to conduct influence operations without much scrutiny at all. Successful influence operations and traditional espionage operations weaken U.S. national security while strengthening and emboldening our adversaries. Thus, the potential threats emanating from foreign cultural centers should not be discounted.

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