

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 8, 2020

President Greg Fischer
U.S. Conference of Mayors
1620 I Street, Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear President Fischer,

We write to express our concerns regarding sister-city partnerships between the United States and China. As you know, China maintains 157 sister-city partnerships with American communities, ostensibly to promote cultural exchange and economic development.¹ The recent actions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), however, suggest that sister-city partnerships may be China's newest political weapon.

For the CCP, sister-city partnerships are instrumental to achieving China's geostrategic objectives. Li Xiaolin, president of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, characterizes sister-city partnerships as critical to cooperation "under the framework of the [Belt and Road Initiative]" (BRI).² The CCP revealed its political motivations in the Czech Republic, where the BRI's promise of economic opportunity lured Prague into a sister-city agreement with Shanghai. But Shanghai terminated the agreement in January 2020 – along with its myriad economic benefits – when Prague's mayor refused to commit to the CCP's "One China" policy.³ Clearly, the CCP hides behind the veil of soft diplomacy and mutual benefit until their foreign partners exhibit ideological nonconformity.

The CCP also uses sister-city partnerships in South Asia to encourage economic and cultural compliance, a practice which has become increasingly exploitative amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In May of this year, the CCP offered public health assistance to Bangladesh on the conditions that the country establish six sister-city partnerships and support the CCP's COVID-19 disinformation campaign.⁴ The CCP maliciously exploited Bangladesh's vulnerabilities – namely, its small economy and struggling health infrastructure. A virtual lack of alternatives led Bangladesh to acquiesce to the CCP's conditions, and China thus gained a foothold to infiltrate local institutions, steal intellectual property, and pressure officials into ideological conformity.

¹ "Where We Are (U.S. Partnerships Worldwide)," *Sister Cities International* (August 2020), <https://sistercities.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-SCI-maps-Where-We-Are-U.S.-Partnerships-Worldwide.pdf>.

² Li Jing, "Sister city relations promote cooperation," *China Daily* (April 26, 2019), http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/global/2019-04/26/content_37462677.htm.

³ Matej Šimalčík and Adam Kalivoda, "Sister-City Relations and Identity Politics: The Case of Prague, Beijing, Taipei, and Shanghai," *The Diplomat* (February 25, 2020), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/sister-city-relations-and-identity-politics-the-case-of-prague-beijing-taipei-and-shanghai/>.

⁴ Jianli Yang, "The Red Alert: China's sister-city alliances are more politically-motivated than it appears," *News Mobile* (July 26, 2020), <http://newsmobile.in/articles/2020/07/26/the-red-alert-chinas-sister-city-alliances-are-more-politically-motivated-than-it-appears-heres-the-reality/>.

Sister-city partnerships may leave American communities vulnerable to Chinese espionage and economic coercion. With that, we urge you to heed the CCP's strategic intentions and attempts to exploit our freedoms at the Federal and local levels.

Given the national security interests involved with the CCP's use of sister-city partnerships, we respectfully ask that you provide our offices with responses to the following questions:

- How do your governments ensure transparency regarding sister-city partnerships' contracts and activities?
- Through what mechanisms do your governments safeguard freedom of expression within these partnerships?
- What oversight practices do your governments implement to mitigate the risks of foreign espionage and economic coercion within these partnerships?
- What precautions do your governments take to protect against foreign nationals' potentially inappropriate use of visa programs to participate in activities relating to these partnerships?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Marsha Blackburn
United States Senator



Josh Hawley
United States Senator