

# *Sister City Transparency Act*

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The United States maintains 1,800 sister city partnerships with countries around the world, including 157 partnerships with Chinese communities.<sup>1</sup> These partnerships exist ostensibly to promote cultural exchange and economic development. However, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has begun using these partnerships to achieve geostrategic objectives.

Li Xiaolin, former president of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, characterized sister city partnerships as critical to cooperation “under the framework of the [Belt and Road Initiative]” (BRI).<sup>2</sup> The CCP recently 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.<sup>3</sup>

The CCP hides behind the veil of soft diplomacy and mutual benefit until its foreign partners exhibit political nonconformity. Thus, similar to Confucius Institutes, sister city partnerships may leave American communities vulnerable to foreign espionage and ideological coercion.

There currently exists little information regarding sister city partnerships operating within the U.S – not least because such partnerships generally fail to publicize information regarding their agreements, activities, and employees. The opacity of sister city partnerships impedes proper oversight and could enable malign activity. To make matters worse, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, which has ultimate authority over these partnerships, demonstrates a lack of government engagement with, and critical analysis of, these partnerships.

The **Sister City Transparency Act** would create a GAO report on sister city partnerships operating within the U.S. More specifically, the bill would direct the Comptroller General to conduct a study on such partnerships involving foreign communities in countries with significant public sector corruption – e.g., the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation. The study would:

- Identify the oversight practices that U.S. communities implement to mitigate the risks of foreign espionage and economic coercion within sister city partnerships;
- Assess the extent to which foreign communities could use sister city partnerships to conduct malign activities, including academic and industrial espionage; and
- Review best practices to ensure transparency regarding sister city partnerships’ agreements, activities, and employees.

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<sup>1</sup> “Where We Are (U.S. Partnerships Worldwide),” *Sister Cities International*, 8 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Li Jing, “Sister City Relations Promote Cooperation,” *China Daily*, 26 April 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Matej Šimalčík and Adam Kalivoda, “Sister-City Relations and Identity Politics: The Case of Prague, Beijing, Taipei, and Shanghai,” *The Diplomat*, 25 February 2020.