

Understanding The Controversy And Legality Of ‘Overseas Police Stations’



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The centers have highlighted China’s growing influence, as well as the increasing legal complexity of managing citizens and dual citizens in Chinese diaspora communities.

The [apprehension of two men](#) in New York on April 16, 2023, marked the first known U.S. arrests in connection with Chinese overseas police stations. Both men were working in a building in Manhattan’s Chinatown rented by the [America ChangLe Association](#), a charity that had its tax-exempt status revoked in May 2022. [More Chinese police stations](#) are believed to be operating across the U.S.—though, like in other countries, not all their locations are known.

While foreign intelligence agencies conduct extensive espionage operations in other countries, domestic law enforcement agencies are also occasionally active abroad. The FBI trained many Latin American [police units throughout the Cold War](#) and has [been covertly active](#) in the region for decades. In 2020, Russia also [offered to send a police force](#) to Belarus during mass protests against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who [blamed the West](#) for trying to foment a color revolution.

However, the scale of China’s international program and the scope of its responsibilities is notable. Run primarily by ethnic Chinese residents, the main concern of these stations appears to be managing the more than [10.5 million Chinese citizens](#) living overseas, and to a lesser extent the 35 to 60 million people in the Chinese diaspora. The considerable size of Chinese overseas communities has allowed Beijing to field an extensive global presence through these stations.

China’s first known use of these stations [occurred in 2004](#) with the establishment of the Community and Police Cooperation Center in Johannesburg, following

several attacks on Chinese citizens and businesses. The center opened with the blessing of the South African government, and more than a dozen have since opened in the country. As in other countries, they help Chinese citizens obtain documents, assist in criminal matters, integrate into the country, as well as offer “[security, fire, and ambulance teams](#).” The Chinese government maintains that they are not police stations but instead function as “[service centers](#).”

[Two reports](#), released in September and December 2022 by the human rights organization Safeguard Defenders, indicated that there are now more than 100 overseas Chinese stations active in more than 50 countries. Managed by [China’s Ministry of Public Security](#), the stations are operated by police agencies from [three Chinese provinces](#) (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian) [and are divided into](#) centers, which are greater in scale, and liaisons, which have a lower profile but are more numerous.

Though the stations had previously drawn little attention, the reports have made Western countries far more wary of them in the context of intensifying geopolitical tensions with China over the last few years. [There are also fears](#) that the stations act as part of China’s [United Front](#) system to build political, economic, and cultural connections to influence other countries.

The stations have also brought increased Western attention due to their role in convincing Chinese citizens to return to China to face legal charges. Now known as [Operation Fox Hunt](#), Safeguard Defenders estimates that from April 2021 to July 2022, [230,000 Chinese citizens](#) were persuaded or coerced into returning to China, with China’s Ministry of Public Security itself stating that [210,000 citizens](#) returned in 2021. Western officials [had already criticized](#) China for abusing Interpol’s Red Notice system to arrest and extradite citizens abroad for political purposes, while Operation Fox Hunt has allowed Chinese officials to bypass Interpol and deal directly with its own citizens.

Interrupting the ability of China to carry out this program is increasingly becoming a domestic security priority for the U.S. But the two men who were arrested in New York appear to be both [U.S.](#) and [Chinese](#) citizens, and the incident has become the latest attempt by Chinese and Western authorities to exert authority over each other’s citizens, as well as dual citizens.

Several dual Chinese/U.S. citizens were prevented from leaving China [in 2017](#)

and [2018](#) in an apparent effort to convince their family members living in the U.S. to return to China. Meanwhile in 2018, Meng Wanzhou, a Chinese national and CFO of Huawei, was placed under house arrest in Canada to await extradition to the U.S. for fraud. In response, two Canadian businessmen in China were also detained and prevented from leaving, based on espionage allegations. [All were released in 2021](#), with Chinese and U.S. authorities denying any connection between them.

The U.S. does not have an extradition treaty with China, while the [few European countries that do](#) have taken steps to reduce China's ability to [enforce it in recent months](#). While Chinese officials have demonstrated their willingness to detain dual citizens in China, the overseas stations allow Chinese officers to locate and contact citizens living abroad directly. Through harassment, intimidation, and coercion, Beijing has bypassed formal extradition methods and quietly convinced hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens to return home.

Beijing's approach to dealing with wanted citizens abroad contrasts with techniques employed by other countries. Many, including the [U.S.](#), [Russia](#), and [Iran](#), have used military, intelligence, or organized crime assets to assassinate citizens opposed to the governments. Iran is also known to have [resorted to kidnapping](#) to bring citizens back to the country, though this has also [generated significant attention](#).

The role of these stations in advancing Chinese interests and extraditing Chinese citizens has naturally caused concern in the West. Yet until the 2022 Safeguard Defenders reports, the Western response had been somewhat slow. Only after the scale of the stations became public knowledge did Western officials take substantial steps to clamp down on them. FBI director Christopher Wray stated in September 2022 that he was "[looking into the legal parameters](#)" of the stations, and the Manhattan station was [raided by the agency in October](#).

More than a dozen other countries have [also launched probes](#) against the stations in recent months, and other countries have significantly scaled back their cooperation with them. The [growth in the number of Chinese tourists](#) traveling abroad previously incentivized many governments to facilitate cooperation with Chinese police forces, for example, and Chinese police officers were [formerly permitted](#) to assist Chinese tourists visiting Italian cities. But this decision was [reversed in December 2022](#), while Croatia is under similar pressure to restrict

[Chinese tourist assistance police patrols in its cities](#). Other restrictive measures in the U.S. and Europe are likely to be introduced.

Western officials, however, have so far refrained from bringing too much attention to the centers. Allegations of McCarthyism and racial profiling could cause social unrest and provide Beijing with evidence of hostile Western intent toward overseas Chinese communities. Additionally, acknowledging the existence of covert Chinese officials operating across the West would publicly undermine the sanctity of Western sovereignty and reinforce perceptions of China's growing power in international affairs.

The stations, nonetheless, are destined to remain a sticking point in the Western-Chinese relationship. Operation Fox Hunt reveals that not even the U.S. has been able to protect dual citizens or those seeking asylum on its own soil. Though Chinese officials will likely have to act even more discreetly for some of their overseas operations, U.S. officials have yet to locate where all these stations are. And even if they are found, the Chinese government has traditionally [cultivated close ties](#) with overseas Chinese communities and has additional avenues to project influence.

Despite Western countries' increasing concern with the stations, other countries which host them appear unperturbed and will continue to cooperate with China for a variety of reasons. [In 2019](#), Chinese police officers began patrolling several Serbian cities alongside Serbian police forces to assist Chinese tourists. Additionally, Chinese police officers have worked out of an office in Cambodia's national police headquarters [since 2019](#) to manage Chinese citizens suspected of being involved in crime. Chinese police and security forces have also drastically increased their cooperation with their Latin American counterparts [over the last decade](#) to "speed up the signing process of treaties concerning judicial assistance in criminal matters, and expand cooperation in such areas as fighting crimes, fugitive repatriation and asset recovery," [according to the Chinese government](#).

[In February 2023](#), China also unveiled its Global Security Initiative to enhance training and cooperation with developing countries' security forces. And because Chinese stations [do act as legitimate centers aimed to help Chinese citizens abroad](#), countries with good relations with China and existing and growing Chinese immigrant and worker communities will likely allow further expansion for Chinese overseas stations.

The stations will continue to evolve to suit the environment of their host countries. Their ongoing operations show the increasingly sophisticated ways China aims to aid its citizens abroad, convince others to return home, and extend its cooperation agreements and influence activities around the world.

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