

UK Launches Foreign Influence Register as Critics Question China Exemption

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— Categories: Defense & Security



From today, individuals acting on behalf of foreign governments in the United Kingdom must register their activities with UK authorities or face criminal charges under new national security laws. The Foreign Influence Registration Scheme, part of the wider National Security Act 2023, is designed to improve transparency and deter covert influence by foreign powers. Those who fail to comply with the rules could face up to two

years in prison, with harsher penalties of up to five years for agents working on behalf of countries deemed to pose the most serious threat to national interests.

The scheme introduces a two-tier system. The “primary tier” requires individuals or entities conducting political influence for any foreign power to register their activity within 28 days. A second “enhanced tier” applies to states considered high-risk and demands quicker, broader disclosures. So far, only Russia and Iran have been placed in this top category. Activities such as lobbying, disinformation campaigns, and other forms of covert persuasion must be declared or risk violating the law.

While officials have described the system as a vital step toward protecting UK democracy, the government is facing criticism over its decision not to include China in the enhanced category. Security experts and senior MPs have raised concerns that excluding China may reflect a reluctance to jeopardize economic ties. They argue that Beijing’s record of alleged cyberattacks, political interference, and industrial espionage suggests it warrants similar scrutiny to Russia and Iran.

Security Minister Dan Jarvis defended the rollout, stating that the policy aims to expose hidden influence without undermining legitimate international relationships. He stressed that transparency is key to upholding democratic values and that the law targets covert manipulation rather than open diplomacy or lawful foreign engagement.

Despite these assurances, opposition voices remain vocal. Former Conservative leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith and members of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China have expressed disappointment, saying the government is not being firm enough. They warn that without placing

China under tighter restrictions, the UK may leave itself exposed to ongoing influence efforts.

As the scheme takes effect, attention now turns to its implementation. The government hopes the registry will serve as both a deterrent and an accountability mechanism. However, the decision not to categorize China alongside Russia and Iran has sparked debate about whether economic considerations are influencing security policy. How the government navigates this balance will likely shape the future of its foreign policy and domestic resilience efforts.