

Georgia, Mired in Election Disputes, Fosters Cozy Ties With China

As the presidential election results in Georgia face challenges from voter fraud claims, the state has also come under the spotlight for its business ties with China.

Most recently, Georgia Democrat Richard Ossoff, a media executive who is running for U.S. senator, received complaints (pdf) from the Georgia GOP for allegedly hiding his connections to a Hong Kong media firm linked to the Chinese government.

China has been Georgia's largest trading partner for the past five years, making up 15 percent to one-fifth of the state's total international trade volume between 2015 to 2019, according to Georgia's commerce data (pdf). Records from both the state's official website and Chinese media reports reveal close ties that extend beyond trade and span across party affiliation. Aside from investments from nearly 50 Chinese businesses into the state, the two have developed sister city agreements and academic partnership programs that have come under growing scrutiny under the Donald Trump administration.

Attracting Chinese Investment

Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD), the state's marketing agency, uses a website with a Chinese domain to promote business opportunities in China, Mexico, and Peru. By contrast, sites for other countries use a U.S. domain (georgia.org). The domain name, www.georgiabusiness.cn, is registered under a Chinese computer software developer called Beijing Demeng Sunny Technology Development, according to records compiled by U.S. web hosting company GoDaddy.



The screenshot shows the GoDaddy website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for Domains, Websites, Hosting, WordPress, Website Security, and Email & Office. Below the menu is a search bar with the text "Search the WHOIS Database" and a search input field containing "georgiabusiness.cn". The search results are displayed in a white box with a grey border. The title is "WHOIS search results". The text below reads: "Domain Name: georgiabusiness.cn ROID: 20180930s10001s06203098-cn Domain Status: ok Registrant: 北京德盟阳光科技发展有限公司 Registrant Contact Email: lidan@menhoo.com Sponsoring Registrar: 阿里云技术有限公司 (万网) Name Server: dan.ns.cloudflare.com Name Server: carol.ns.cloudflare.com Registration Time: 2018-09-30 18:13:59 Expiration Time: 2021-09-30 18:13:59 DNSSEC: unsigned".

explain whether the state has any business partnership with the Chinese firm.

Gordon said it was a "technical oversight" for the Peru and Mexico sites to be registered under the Chinese domain name. As of Dec. 9 morning, the department has changed the domain names for the two sites to the U.S. domain.

Georgia's marketing website for Peru was registered with a Chinese domain as of Dec. 8, 2020. (Screenshot)

Political Influence

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has recently warned U.S. policymakers from state to municipal level to be vigilant about Beijing's "influence and espionage activities," cautioning that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) considers them "weak links" to exploit for advancing its interests.

In a speech given to the National Governors Association in February, Pompeo also highlighted a Chinese state-backed think tank report that analyzed attitudes of all 50 U.S. governors toward China, labeling each as "friendly," "hardline," or "ambiguous."

"[W]hether you are viewed by the CCP as friendly or hardline, know that it's working you, know that it's working the team around you," he told the governors, warning that the

Records showing that Georgia's Chinese-language marketing website is registered with the Beijing-based company Demeng Sunny Technology Development, on the U.S. web hosting company GoDaddy. (Screenshot) "For a webpage to be visible in the Chinese market, it must be hosted in China," said Marie Hodge Gordon, director of communications at GDEcD when reached by The Epoch Times about the Chinese domain name. She did not



The screenshot shows the Georgia USA website for Peru. The URL in the browser is "georgiabusiness.cn/es-per/negocios-internacionales-peru". The page features the Georgia USA logo at the top left. The main heading is "State of Georgia - Perú". Below the heading, there is a paragraph of text: "Georgia es un estado verdaderamente internacional con más de 3000 plantas extranjeras que representan". Below this text is a circular profile picture of Eduardo García-Zapatero, with his name "EDUARDO GARCÍA-ZAPATERO" written next to it. To the right of the profile picture is a button that says "Iniciar la conversación ahora".

En el cruce de las Américas, Georgia le ofrece el aeropuerto de pasajeros más eficiente y activo del mundo profundas, y la red de transporte más extensa del país. El año pasado, pasaron \$37,200 millones en exportaciones y en importaciones a través de estos puertos, lo que posiciona a Georgia en el puesto 12 de los estados grandes y en el puesto 7 de los estados importadores en los EE. UU.

¿Cómo podemos ayudarle?

Las oficinas internacionales de Georgia ofrecen servicios confidenciales sin coste a empresas extranjeras y subsidiaria en los Estados Unidos. Proporcionamos asistencia personalizada en todas las áreas del proceso para satisfacer las necesidades específicas de su empresa.

Georgia posee una extraña combinación de activos, recursos y personas que se reúnen para crear un entorno de éxito.

Obtenga más información sobre la inversión de nuestro estado, y las iniciativas de comercio y turismo.

Chinese government has been “methodical” in assessing U.S. vulnerabilities to “gain advantage over us at the federal level, the state level, and the local level.”



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaks with Dr. Angel Cabrera, President of the Georgia Institute of Technology, on “China challenge to US national security and academic freedom,” in Atlanta, Ga., on Dec. 9, 2020. (Tami Chappell/AFP via Getty Images)

While the Chinese tank tank report rated Georgia governor Brian Kemp, a Republican, as supportive of Trump’s trade policies and thus being tough on China, it also noted that Kemp’s stance overall “has not shown a tendency to be tough” and appears “not clearly influenced by the parties.”

Kemp, who previously served as the Secretary of State of Georgia, has maintained friendly ties with Chinese dignitaries since taking office in January 2019. In April last year, Li Qiangmin, then Chinese consul-general in Houston, was invited to an event hosted by Kemp, where Li praised the governor for “proactively pushing for cooperation with China,” according to a press release by China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In July 2019, when Li was due to return to China after a five-year stint, **Li met with Kemp again and invited him to visit China, “stressing the importance of building friendly China-U.S. relationship.”** according to China Tribune, a pro-Beijing Chinese outlet based in Atlanta. After the meeting, Kemp gifted Li a book titled “Inspired Georgia,” with a handwritten note expressing appreciation for Li’s “great service and for your friendship to the state of Georgia,” according to the news report. The article has since been taken down. **One month later, Kemp, who is also a director at the American Soybean Association, said during a conference call hosted by the U.S. Soybean Export Council that “we have made several trips to Washington, D.C., and continue to lobby our legislators to do what they can do to make the tariff situation go away,”** according to a Nikkei report.



Georgia Governor Brian Kemp speaks to the media during a press conference at the Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta, Ga., on April 27, 2020. (Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images)

The United States’ punitive tariffs on Chinese goods, enacted in 2018 as part of the Trump administration’s efforts to penalize Beijing for unfair trade practices, prompted China’s retaliatory tariffs on a slew of U.S. agricultural goods, including soybeans. The GDEcD’s Chinese website in 2019 also reposted a report by Chinese media about a speech by Li’s successor Cai Weitao to mark the 70th anniversary of the CCP takeover of China. Cai’s speech, touting the regime’s leadership, was described as “deeply moving.” Stella Xu, GDEcD’s China initiative director, expressed “high hopes” for furthering trade relations with China, noting that the state had hosted over a dozen Chinese government and business groups in the past year alone. Kemp, in a meeting with Cai in late September, “warmly welcomed” Cai in his new role, saying he would like to see more investment and **Chinese students coming into Georgia,** according to the report. **Kemp did not respond to a request for comment.**

Academic Collaboration

Georgia has **three sister city agreements with China and two friendship city agreements,** according to the latest data from GDEcD. **The University System of Georgia, comprising 26 public colleges and universities in Georgia, offers 39 study abroad programs in China. The state’s universities also house six of the 63 Confucius Institutes (CI) currently operating in the United States.** The Beijing-funded CIs, along with Confucius Classrooms, have come under fire for perpetuating Chinese propaganda on college campuses. The State Department in August designated the center that promotes these institutes as a foreign mission. GDEcD officials have repeatedly shown support for local CIs’ events.

- In February 2015, Xu, the China initiative director, made a speech at the CI of Georgia State University to **promote education and travel exchanges with China.**
- In September 2018, the same CI **co-hosted a business forum themed around Beijing's Belt and Road initiative (BRI, also known as One Belt, One Road)**, a controversial global infrastructure project that has been criticized for trapping developing countries under heavy debt. GDEcD and the Atlanta-based Coca Cola are among 19 organizations that sent representatives to the forum.

Past Connections

Georgia's ties with China go back as early as June 2004, when the state opened its first China office in Beijing. Then-governor Sonny Perdue, who is currently the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, said at the time that they **were looking forward "to a long and fruitful business relationship between our state and China's business leaders."** A press release issued by the GDEcD at the time especially touted that major Georgia-based businesses have financial stakes in the Chinese market, such as UPS, GE Energy, and Delta Air Lines. Georgia officials were also "actively pursuing the establishment of a new consulate in Atlanta," the release stated. **Chinese media picked up on the trend and described it as a new "China fever" from Georgia.** **Perdue did not return an Epoch Times inquiry for comment.**

In July 2018, after the Trump administration launched the trade war, Chinese state media Xinhua ran an article proclaiming **that trade conflicts didn't "dampen Georgia's hopes for economic collaboration with China."** Later in the year, the GDEcD boasted a "new record" in global trade performance, noting that China continues to be the state's largest trading partner.

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