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The many faces of the Chinese Communist Party's outreach in Europe

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Abstract

One influential actor that has been largely overlooked in European debates on China as a ‘systemic rival’ is the Chinese Communist Party’s International Department (CCP-ID). Building on a comprehensive dataset that allows us to trace China’s international party cooperation since the early 2000s, we not only investigate the CCP-ID’s networking activities across Europe but also zoom in on the CCP-ID’s engagement in the Czech Republic, Germany, and the UK. The main purpose of the CCP-ID is to foster elite networks and to build personal relationships. By identifying and mobilising individuals who will ‘speak in favour of China’ in domestic political debates within Europe or who publicly endorse China’s positions in Chinese media, the CCP-ID seeks to provide the CCP with external legitimacy. It is the great flexibility in the CCP’s strategies and instruments and the many faces of its activities that make it a potent player in Sino-European relations to which policymakers and academics alike should pay more attention.

Introduction

Europe’s relations with China have long been shaped by the assumption that closer transcontinental ties would foster convergence and, thereby, ultimately contribute towards a market economy and broader societal change in China. However, the gradual closing of political spaces in China during Xi Jinping’s presidency, China’s approach in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, and the intensified geostrategic competition since Russia’s invasion in Ukraine have made clear that this strategy has not yielded the expected results. Instead, European policymakers now describe China

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not only as a cooperation partner but also as a ‘systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance’ (European Commission and HR/VP 2019: 1). European policymakers and academics increasingly sense that European societies and institutions have become the target of attempts by China to influence them. Whereas China’s outreach has for a long time been interpreted as public diplomacy with the aim of projecting soft power, more recent research on China’s foreign relations argues that China’s leadership also employs more subversive tactics such as nudging China-friendly positions in European politics through ‘united front work’ and ‘sharp power’ (Benner et al. 2018; Brandt and Taussig 2019).

One key actor largely overlooked in Sino-European relations, and particularly within the current debate on China’s influence on domestic politics and policies within Europe, is the Chinese Communist Party’s International Department (CCP-ID). As Xi Jinping has re-centralised foreign policy decision-making within the party (Cabestan 2020), the CCP-ID has become a more relevant actor in China’s international outreach (Benabdallah 2020; Eisenmann and Shinn 2018; Hackenesch and Bader 2020; Wen 2021). Building on an intense travel diplomacy, the CCP-ID established a broad network for maintaining contact with hundreds of political parties all over the globe. It regularly meets with foreign counterparts, provides training and study tours for foreign cadres, and reaches out to key individuals and groups (Shambaugh 2007). Previous work on the CCP-ID’s global activities shows how China uses party relations to promote foreign policy interests as well as authoritarian learning (Hackenesch and Bader 2020). Research on the CCP-ID’s engagement in Asia demonstrates how, in authoritarian regimes, the party channel allows for the promotion of foreign policy interests as well as authoritarian diffusion, whereas in democracies the CCP-ID mainly serves as a tool for Track II diplomacy (Bader and Hackenesch 2020; Chow 2017; Wen 2023). Scholarship on China’s party diplomacy in Africa finds that China’s power and influence have both grown and expanded through party-to-party exchanges (Benabdallah 2020; Eisenman 2009; Eisenmann 2023).

Europe is the second most important region for the CCP-ID’s outreach, after Asia (Hackenesch and Bader 2020). Recent debates about China’s united front work and sharp power highlight the importance of party organs in China’s engagement in Europe (Walker 2018; Benner et al. 2018). Research on Sino-European relations beyond the government level has analysed the role of city-to-city cooperation, Confucius institutes, media partnerships, and funding for academia (Yang 2020; Kefferpütz 2021). Both strands of work point to the importance of elite networks in China’s outreach in Europe, but largely overlook the role of the CCP-ID.

China’s party diplomacy in Europe is not only empirically a blind spot in research on China’s foreign policy. Established foreign policy concepts also have difficulties grasping the multifaceted objectives, strategies, and purposes of the CCP’s party diplomacy. Yet, in order to assess the CCP-ID’s activities and adequately respond to them, nothing is more necessary than gaining nuanced and differentiated understanding (Chubb 2021). Relying on public statements of the CCP-ID about its

international activities, this article analyses the CCP-ID's outreach across Europe.¹ We focus on general cross-continental trends as well as country-specific approaches in the CCP's strategies and instruments to illustrate the variety in terms of instruments and actors who are approached. The main purpose of the CCP-ID is to foster elite networks and to build personal relationships. By identifying and mobilising individuals who will 'speak in favour of China' in domestic political debates within Europe or who publicly endorse China's positions in Chinese media, the CCP-ID seeks to provide the CCP with external legitimacy. It is this great flexibility in the CCP's strategies and instruments and the many faces of its activities that make it a potent player in Sino-European relations to which policymakers and academics alike should pay more attention.

The paper starts by situating the CCP-ID in conceptual debates on China's foreign policy. In the second part, we identify key patterns in the CCP-ID's activities across Europe since the early 2000s and discuss the main motives of China's party diplomacy. The third part zooms in on the CCP-ID's relations with Germany, the UK, and the Czech Republic to identify general trends and idiosyncrasies in the CCP-ID's engagement at country level. We conclude by discussing implications for future research and policymaking.

Conceptual considerations about the CCP-ID's engagement

The CCP-ID is a high-profile actor that operates directly under and in support of the CCP's Central Committee. It is tasked with maintaining and further developing a broad-based network to political parties worldwide and to other types of political and non-governmental organisations. The CCP-ID is embedded in China's broader foreign affairs system (*waishi*) that includes official state-to-state and unofficial 'people-to-people' diplomacy and 'all matters related to foreigners and foreign things in China and abroad' (Brady 2003: xi). *Waishi* has its roots in the practices of European Communist parties in the early twentieth century and later the Soviet Union but was blended with the cultural norms and traditions of Chinese statecraft, which places a premium on symbolism and tries to build on commonalities and establish mutual obligations in relationships (Brady 2003). The aim of this system is to counter pressures of Westernisation, control the domestic population, and elevate China's international status.

Current literature on China's foreign policy often mentions the CCP-ID in combination with united front work, which has been revitalised under President Xi Jinping. United front work is the task of every party member, and the CCP-ID is described as one of the important actors conducting united front work. Yet, as the United Front Department in the Central Committee is formally responsible for coordinating different united front activities and actors (Chubb 2021), existing research does not further investigate the specific roles and responsibilities of the CCP-ID.

¹ We define Europe geographically, excluding Russia. The CCP's relations with Russian political parties are particularly intense and would require a separate analysis that is beyond the scope of this paper.

How is the CCP-ID itself then defining its work? In his book, Yu et al. (2017:25), a former deputy-minister of the CCP-ID, defines party diplomacy as being conducted by the ruling party of a sovereign state which is directed towards the legitimate political parties and political organisations of other sovereign states or international political party organisations, including legal and registered think tanks, interest groups, and people's organisations. Importantly, it should be understood that in this logic, the government bureaucracy operates as an instrument, and under the leadership of the party, and not the other way around. Delineating government and party diplomacy, the difference between both is according to Yu et al. (2017:42f) that state diplomacy is directed towards state governments and institutions and is bound to diplomatic protocol, whereas parties can target various non-state actors and have more flexibility to engage their counterpart. While the government is the institution that does the operational work, the party is responsible for long-term relation-building at the personal level.

This implies that existing studies on international party or parliamentary relations (Giesen and Malang 2022; Raunio and Wagner 2024) cannot capture the specific case of the CCP-ID's activities well, for two reasons. First, in the logic of being a party-state, the Chinese conception of party diplomacy goes beyond other forms of international party exchanges in that it implies a party's authority to conduct diplomacy, which is derived from its domestic power position in relation to state structures. Second, the CCP-ID does not restrict its outreach to foreign parties alone, but also systematically engages various other actors.

Given the lack of congruence between common understandings of party-to-party relations and the CCP-ID's work, and against the background that the CCP's party diplomacy has substantially intensified (Hackenesch and Bader 2020), we urgently need a systematic and nuanced analysis of the CCP-ID's engagement in Europe.

The CCP-ID's broadening network across Europe: cooperation partners and motives

Unlike most other departments of the Central Committee of the CCP, the CCP-ID has comprehensively documented its international activities. A systematic analysis of the CCP-ID's websites reveals with whom the CCP interacts and where and when a meeting with foreign partners takes place since the early 2000s.² The CCP-ID reporting is limited to high-level contacts that involve, for instance, the minister or vice ministers of the CCP-ID. Yet, despite this limitation, a systematic assessment of the items substantially increases our understanding of existing relations

² For a detailed description of the data, see Hackenesch and Bader (2020). All news items can be downloaded here: <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/>. In order to facilitate the text analysis, our analysis is based on the English version of the website, which is in many cases a direct translation of the Chinese version, though some differences between both versions exist. For reasons of simplicity and readability, we refer to individual news items by date only.

with European partners and the disseminated discourses. As such, our study delivers insights into the relational aspect of China's outreach in Europe.

Main patterns in the CCP's outreach in Europe

For the period between January 2002 and September 2023, for which we have data, we count a total of 1299 different news items that reported on high-level encounters between the CCP-ID and European representatives. Some of these items describe meetings with one party, others with several counterparts at once. We identified 725 references to 153 different European parties, excluding Russia, that interacted one-on-one or in a multiparty setting with the CCP-ID. Because usually not all participants in multiparty settings are listed, the actual numbers of the CCP's encounters with European parties are even higher. The CCP also engages with countless state representatives (prime ministers, diplomats, chairmen of parliament, etc.), representatives of research institutions and business associations without any party affiliation being mentioned.

The CCP-ID's outreach to European actors has intensified considerably since the early 2000s and particularly since 2013 when Xi Jinping came to power (Fig. 1). Not only is the CCP-ID engaging more often with European parties and non-party partners, but since 2013, it has also continually expanded its network. In 2020, meetings were paused for several weeks because of the COVID-19 pandemic, before virtual meetings were introduced. Personal meetings in Beijing were only resumed in 2023, when China opened up again.

The CCP-ID maintains contact with partners in almost all countries across Europe. Most meetings take place with German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese counterparts. Central and Eastern European countries are engaged through

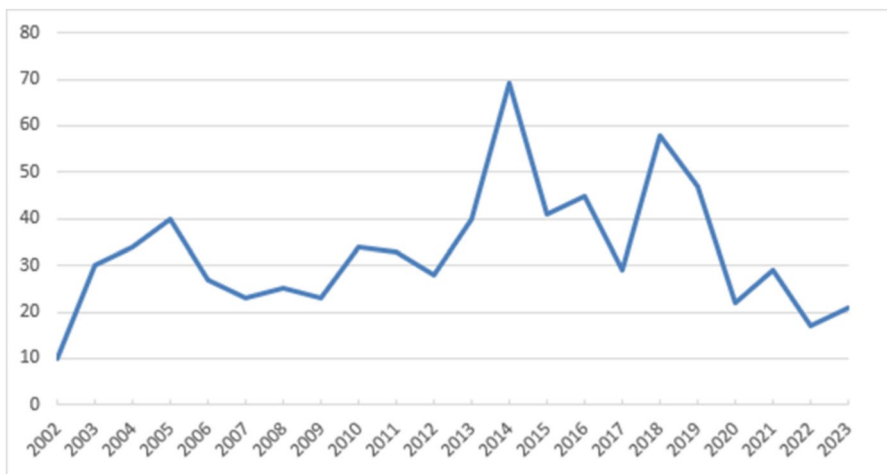


Fig. 1 Number of encounters with European parties, 2002 until September 2023

Table 1 The CCP-ID's top 10 partners in Europe between January 2002 and September 2023

	Party	Number of contacts
1	Social Democratic Party of Germany	59
2	Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (Germany)	26
3	Social Democratic Party of Romania	17
4	Progressive Party of the Working People of Cyprus	16
4	Moldovan Communist Party	16
4	Portuguese Communist Party	16
5	Czech Social Democratic Party	14
5	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Czech Republic)	14
5	Portuguese Socialist Party	14
6	Communist Party of France	13
6	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	13

Source: Authors

the 16+1 format, created in 2012.³ The network has caused controversy among European policymakers, as the format has been perceived as an attempt by China to 'divide and rule' the EU, to leverage smaller member states to prevent joint European positions (on China) and to compete for influence in these countries with the EU (Brandt and Taussig 2019; Jakimow 2019). Several parties from 16+1 countries, such as the Social Democratic Party of Romania, the Czech Social Democratic Party, Greece's New Democracy, and the Czech Communist Party, are among the CCP's top 10 partners in Europe (Table 1). Towards the Nordic and Baltic countries (with the exception of Finland), the CCP-ID's outreach has been very limited.

The intensity of the CCP-ID's engagement with foreign parties is not equally distributed across its counterparts. Some parties stand out for being particularly closely engaged. The two most important partners for the CCP-ID in Europe are Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democrats CDU/CSU. With more than 50 contacts, the SPD exceeds any other European party by far (Table 1) and is also among the CCP-ID's top 10 partners worldwide (Hackenesch and Bader 2020).

The CCP-ID not only puts a strong focus on European government parties but also engages with opposition parties (Table 2). Since the beginning of China's opening up policy in 1978, the CCP-ID has started reaching out to parties from all sides of the political spectrum. However, despite this, a tendency towards left-leaning parties is still visible, even when these parties are not in power. Left-leaning parties make up for more than 60% of all contacts and more than 70% of those with opposition parties (Table 2). The CCP-ID has considerably less contact with centre and right-wing parties, particularly if these are in opposition (Table 2). Moreover, apart from Poland's previously ruling Law and Justice Party and Hungary's ruling Fidesz party, the CCP-ID maintains

³ Membership in the network is not stable. Greece joined in 2019. Since then, Lithuania (2021), Estonia and Latvia (2022) left the network.

Table 2 Counterparts in and out of government by party family. Note: We used ParlGov's (Döring and Manow 2024) party families and aggregated these according to the Database of Political Institutions' (Cruz et al. 2018) coding rules into four categories: Left (Communist/Socialist or Social democratic); Right (Conservative, Christian democratic or Right-wing); Center; and Other (specialised parties or if no information was available). Due to ParlGov's limitation in time and party coverage, we could not identify the power position of all mentioned parties ('unknown')

Party position	Power position			
	Cabinet	Opposition	Unknown	
Left	202	209	40	451 (62.2%)
Right	98	39	24	161 (22.2%)
Center	28	22	2	52 (7.7%)
Other/no information	41	15	5	61 (8.4%)
	369 (50.9%)	285 (39.3%)	71 (9.8%)	725 (100%)

only a few contacts with European populist radical right parties, even though these parties have raised their electoral support across Europe since the early 2000s.⁴

As critical debates on China have been mounting in various European countries (Turcsányi et al. 2021; Summers et al. 2021), the CCP-ID has paid more attention to European parliaments. Even though it is the task of China's National People's Congress to maintain parliamentary exchanges, the CCP-ID has recently deepened relations with parliamentary representatives, presidents, factions, and committees as well as 'China friendship groups' Unlike officially mandated committees and delegations, China friendship groups are not formally accountable (Giesen and Malang 2022). We identified encounters between the CCP-ID and China friendship groups from 22 different European parliaments—far more than in other parts of the world. Most contacts with friendship groups have taken place since Xi Jinping came to power. Friendship groups in Italy, Estonia, and Sweden stand out as being the most actively engaged. For the European Parliament (EP), the CCP-ID only reports meetings with the 'EU-China friendship group' and none with the formal 'Delegation for Relations with the Peoples' Republic of China'. The EP's EU-China friendship group has received much criticism for its uncritical promotion of political and business relations with China and its defence of Chinese human rights violations and was suspended in early 2021 (Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020).⁵

Motives and mechanisms in the CCP's party outreach in Europe

The main objective of the CCP-ID is relation-building. It establishes elite networks to promote trust, gather intelligence, and make 'friends'. In its conversations with foreign partners, the CCP-ID promotes China's foreign policy concepts and seeks

⁴ Apart from Poland and Hungary, the CCP-ID's news items report on one meeting with Norway's Progress Party, one meeting with Slovenia's National Party and three meetings with Italy's Five Star Movement.

⁵ See also <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-china-friendship-group-suspended/> (accessed 2 December 2023).

to spread a favourable narrative on China's global rise and of the role of the CCP therein. It is interested in identifying partners that are willing to help the CCP's domestic and foreign propaganda efforts or to influence their country's China policy in a favourable way.

In recent years, the CCP-ID moved from 'informing' its partners about its foreign policy interests and concepts to more assertively promoting these. For example, whereas in the past the CCP-ID used its party cooperation mostly to defensively 'brief' partners about China's position and to report on partners' support for China's position, in recent years, the CCP-ID has organised dedicated study tours to Xinjiang to demonstrate that criticism of human rights abuses is unjustified. Hence, the CCP-ID is now actively constructing a stage to deflect criticism and to approach foreign parties to fish for compliments and fabricate international recognition of the CCP. Positive foreign reactions during party meetings are subsequently published in Chinese media to legitimise the CCP's rule to a domestic audience.

This strategy was very visible for instance during the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2020, the CCP-ID used its party networks to collect 230 signatures from parties around the globe on an open letter that urged against the politicisation of the virus and the stigmatisation of certain countries and instead called for international cooperation to fight COVID-19 (Wen 2021).⁶ More recently, in March 2023, Xi Jinping used the CCP-ID's network and the World Political Parties High-level Meeting to introduce the Global Civilisation Initiative, which—together with the Global Development and Global Security Initiative—aims to substantiate Xi's call for a 'community of common destiny'. Only a few days later, the CCP-ID—together with the Chinese Association for International Understanding and the Beijing Language and Culture University—co-organised a lecture for 300 foreign students, scholars and sinologists to discuss this new concept. According to the CCP-ID report, 'The sinologists highly praised General Secretary Xi Jinping's proposal of the Global Civilization Initiative. They believe that the Global Civilization Initiative represents the voice of sinologists worldwide' (22.03.2023).

Many European parties, however, do not readily play by this script, and this is reflected in the CCP-ID's approach towards European partners. A systematic analysis of the news items suggests that it has been more difficult for the CCP-ID to get European parties to sign off on joint letters and statements drafted by the CCP, compared to partners from other world regions. Many European governments have been outspoken in their criticism of China's approach towards protests in Hong Kong, and the EU has sanctioned Chinese officials over human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Since 2018, with few positive reactions to report, and in contrast to the CCP-ID's engagement with parties in Asia, Africa, and Arab countries, there has generally been no mention of the situation in Hong Kong or Xinjiang in the CCP-ID's reports on relations with European partners.

⁶ We are not arguing that the CCP-ID is the only Chinese actor trying to solicit positive statements from foreign counterparts. The CCP-ID, however, is unique in its ability to reach out to influential political elites with or without formal government positions.

Yet, even in Europe, the CCP-ID's strategy has been successful to the extent that it managed to solicit support from a few, overwhelmingly leftist, European parties. In the past, the CCP strategically used its relations with left-leaning parties to mitigate international isolation. In the early 1980s, relations to the Italian and French Communist parties were instrumentalized to recover relations to other Western European Communist parties which had been disrupted during the Sino-Soviet split and the Cultural Revolution (Yu et al. 2017). Similarly, after the Tiananmen massacre, the CCP overcame international isolation by activating its ties to various socialist and social democratic parties across Europe, before targeting Western center-right parties which it had identified as the driving force behind joint sanctions against China (Yu et al. 2017).

It is this strategy of approaching sympathetic (left-leaning) parties for support that can be observed in the past few years again. For instance, European signatories to the CCP-ID's open letter on COVID-19—a full list of signatories was never published—were all Communist parties, with the exception of Cyprus's Progressive Party of the Working People and the Serbian Progressive Party (Wen 2021), both of which also received face mask donations from China with much publicity shortly thereafter (16.04.2020; Euractiv.com 2020). Likewise, the only European party that we found to have participated in a Xinjiang study tour was the Socialist Party of Serbia.⁷ All European parties included in Xinhua's 2021 '100 Parties on CPC' publication around the centennial festivities of the CCP, a series of articles featuring foreign parties' reflections and praise for the CCP, were Communist or socialist parties. Many of these parties appeared in 2019 and 2020 for the first time in the online news items, when the CCP-ID initiated joint study groups for Communist parties from Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Germany (Xinhua 2021).

In sum, we find that the CCP-ID has considerably intensified its contact with European counterparts since Xi Jinping came to power and has purposely targeted and instrumentalised socialist parties. The CCP-ID has strengthened multiparty formats for cooperation where several parties are engaged at the same time, and it has intensified its outreach towards parliamentary friendship groups and other parliamentary actors. To what extent this engagement has been successful is debatable because it has also increasingly been scrutinised and criticised and has sometimes been put on hold by the European side.

Diverse, flexible, and strategic: the CCP-ID's engagement with European countries

In the following, we augment these pan-European trends with an analysis of the CCP's cooperation with three countries: Germany, the UK, and the Czech Republic. These countries represent major economic and political partners (Germany, the UK)

⁷ Global Times (2021) 'More foreign politicians see real Xinjiang as they find resonance facing similar stigmatisation by West' *Global Times*, 2021, available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1216358.shtml> (accessed 1 November 2023).

Table 3 Number of contacts with German partners 2002 to September 2023

Party name	Number of meetings
Social Democratic Party	59
Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union	26
The Left	8
Alliance 90/The Greens	3
Free Democratic Party	2
The Communist Party of Germany	1
Meetings not with party members	30

and an important partner in Central and Eastern Europe (Czech Republic), respectively. They are also reflective of the CCP-ID's different strategies and illustrate how flexibly the CCP-ID can exploit the party's network to promote foreign policy concepts and interests, working in parallel or in cooperation with other state and party organs. For our case studies, we contextualise the CCP-ID's self-reported engagement with secondary literature and other primary data about other Chinese foreign policy actors.

The CCP-ID's engagement in Germany: strong focus on party-to-party contact

For a long time, Germany's China policy was characterised by continuation and pragmatism. German governments traditionally prioritised economic relations over values and have not been very outspoken regarding human rights violations. The expectation of the Schröder government (1998–2005) was that economic exchange and increased welfare would be followed by societal and political change in China (Kunandi and Parello-Plesner 2012). Merkel's successive governments (2005–2021) have continued this approach and have focussed on trade relations and on supporting Germany's industrial presence in China (Fulda 2024). Only in the past few years and notably in light of China's positioning during the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have political and public debates about China become more critical and polarised within Germany. The SPD and the CDU/CSU issued position papers identifying China as a strategic rival.⁸ The German government's China strategy (2023) portrays China as a partner, competitor and strategic rival.⁹ On the other hand, when being Vice-President of the Bundestag, Hans-Peter Friedrich (CDU), together with other parliamentarians and business representatives, created a China Friendship Group in 2020 ('China Brücke') with the objectives of promoting a more

⁸ https://www.spdfraktion.de/system/files/documents/positionspapier_china.pdf; <https://www.cduscu.de/sites/default/files/2021-01/Positionspapier%20-%20Das%20transatlantische%20Band%20wieder%20st%C3%A4rken.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2024).

⁹ <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2608578/810fdade376b1467f20bdb697b2acd58/china-strategie-data.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2024).

positive view of China's development and strengthening political and business networks.¹⁰ The China Brücke remains highly opaque in its membership and maintains close ties to Qian Honghan, vice-minister of the CCP-ID responsible for relations with Europe (Tatlow and Rácz 2021).

Germany is an example of a country where the CCP-ID focuses its networking activities mostly on mainstream political parties, maintaining broad-based contact with high-level officials from all parties represented in Parliament, except for the populist radical right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (Table 3). Networking with actors beyond mainstream political parties is limited. Topics of debate in the party meetings include bilateral Sino-German political and economic relations, Sino-European relations, international efforts to fight COVID-19, and other global issues. The tone in the news items is reflective of the generally positive government-to-government relations between China and Germany as it does not reveal major tensions in the partnership, unlike the news items on the CCP-ID's contact with the Czech Republic, for instance.

Germany's social democrats and to a lesser extent the Christian democrats clearly stand out for their close cooperation with the CCP, which both are the CCP-ID's closest European partners. Relations with the SPD have a long tradition that goes back to the opening of a party dialogue in 1984 by Deng Xiaoping and Willy Brandt, then-Chairman of the SPD and the Socialist International. The CCP maintains an institutionalised party dialogue with the SPD, covering foreign and security policy, sustainability, and human rights, supported by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, which is affiliated with the SPD (see, for instance, news item on 01.11.2016). Regular exchanges with the CDU/CSU started in 2002. As in the case of the SPD, various high-level party officials of the CDU/CSU, members of the Bundestag and ministers have regularly met with the CCP-ID.

The CCP-ID also maintains contact with the Greens, the Liberals (FDP), and the Left (Die Linke), but much less frequently than with the SPD and the CDU/CSU (Table 3). In 2020 and 2021, the CCP-ID had an exchange with the German Communist Party, a negligible player in German politics. Relations with the liberal FDP touched a low point in July 2019 when FDP Chairman Lindner met with Hong Kong's opposition leaders before travelling to China (12.07.2019). The CCP-ID's Minister apparently expressed Beijing's anger by shouting at Lindner.¹¹ The CCP-ID reported no meetings with the populist radical right AfD between 2002 and September 2023. Alice Weidel paid a visit to Beijing in the summer of 2023—her first visit to China in her function as Chairman of the AfD—but the CCP-ID's news items do not indicate that she met with the CCP-ID leadership.

Overall, in the case of Germany, the CCP-ID clearly focuses on relations with high-level formal party functionaries. There are only very few exceptions, such as Germany's former defence minister Rudolf Scharping, who, long after leaving his formal party office and minister position, still meets regularly with high-level

¹⁰ <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/deutsche-china-politik-kein-wandel-durch-handel-100.html> (accessed 1 November 2024).

¹¹ See <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/eklat-auf-fdp-china-reise-kommunistischer-funktionaer-schreit-christian-lindner-an-li.13662> (accessed 12 December 2023).

Table 4 Number of contacts with British partners, 2002 to September 2023

Party name	Number of meetings
Conservative Party	13
Labour Party	7
Communist Party of Great Britain	5
Liberal Democrats	1
Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist)	1
New Communist Party of Great Britain	1
Meetings not with party members	64

CCP-ID officials. Scharping has been widely criticised not only for using his networks for facilitating business relations but also for speaking positively about the CCP in Chinese media, thereby generating external legitimacy for the CCP (see news item on 28.06.2021; Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020). Moreover, in recent years, the CCP-ID's in-house think tank—the China Center for Contemporary World Studies—has co-organised the Bergedorf Roundtable, a high-level conference, together with the Körber Foundation (27.06.2015; 10.12.2018; 26.03.2021). Compared with the UK, relations with retired politicians, business actors and other non-party elites only play a minor role in Germany.

In terms of frequency of party meetings and the concentration of outreach to other parties, Germany stands out in Europe. Germany's economic and political importance for China within Europe (and vice versa) explains this special position. Both countries' government and non-governmental networks are quite dense and diversified, and there seems to be little need for the CCP-ID to reach out to other actors beyond Germany's mainstream political parties.

The UK: focusing on business elites

Since the early 2000s, the UK's China policy has been marked by an emphasis on economic relations and the objective of promoting political and social change in China (Breslin 2004). Like Germany, the UK is one of China's major economic and political partners in Europe. However, since the mid-2010s, political and public debates on China have become more critical and more polarised, questioning whether there should be a rebalancing in the UK's policy towards China (Summers et al. 2021).

In contrast to Germany, in the UK, the CCP-ID's contacts with elite and business networks appear to be more important than those with political parties (Table 4). The CCP-ID had contact with both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, but particularly since 2015 few meetings have been reported. As in other countries, the CCP-ID meets with party officials who might become leading political figures in the near future. David Cameron and Boris Johnson were both befriended before they became Prime Minister, and Tony Blair remained in the CCP-ID's network after

leaving office. Similar to Germany, contacts with several British Communist parties were reported in recent years (Table 4).

The CCP-ID maintains close relations with the Great Britain-China Centre (GBCC) which was founded in 1974 and organises elite exchanges between China and the UK. It is sponsored by the UK government and aligns with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office but remains independent from the government.¹² It co-organises a regular, high-level dialogue with the CCP-ID, the 'UK-China leadership forum' that is sponsored by British corporates. During these meetings, the CCP-ID meets with UK party members and business elites from both countries. The limited contact with the Labour and Conservative party in the past few years might also be a reflection that most contacts took place through this platform.

In addition, over the past decade, the CCP-ID has increasingly focussed on British pro-Chinese business elites to advance China's economic interests. In 2013, a delegation headed by Chuka Umunna, British Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, was invited by the CCP-ID to visit China to attend an 'Understanding and Cooperation Dialogue' sponsored by the Chinese Association for International Understanding, a united front organisation. In 2014, Yu Hongjun, Vice-Minister of the CCP-ID, met with Ed Davey, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, who facilitated the involvement of the Chinese party-state in the construction of the British Hinkley Point C nuclear power station (ChineseLibDems 2020). The Liberal Democrats' Kingston Borough office in Ed Davey's constituency had earlier received a donation from Christine Lee, a Chinese united front member (Thorley 2021).

Between 2014 and 2017, the CCP-ID also regularly met with Britain's 48 Group Club, a pro-Chinese British elite club that is said to have better access to Chinese top elites than British diplomats or the China-Britain Business Council. The 48 Group Club, also called 'the Icebreakers', was among the first Western actors to establish trade relations with Communist China in the early 1950s. They describe their mission as 'promoting positive Sino-British relations and Club members believe they have a vital role in unfreezing the cultural deficit between China and the world' (The 48 Group Club 2021).

Unlike in Germany, the CCP-ID's networking activities in the UK thus concentrate on specific business and political elites, with a view to advancing economic interests on both sides. Contact with British mainstream parties has been maintained in recent years mostly through organisations like the GBCC, rather than bilateral party-to-party contacts.

The Czech Republic: cronyism and the replacement of formal diplomatic relations

After the end of the Cold War, accession to the EU and NATO was a foreign policy priority for the Czech Republic. Cooperation with China did not gain traction before these goals were accomplished. During the past decade or so, the Czech

¹² See <https://www.gbcc.org.uk/about-us> (last accessed 1 November 2024).

government—like other 16+1 governments—has pro-actively turned towards China, mostly in the hope of boosting its trade and investment relations through the Belt and Road Initiative. This shift was prepared under Prime Minister Necas (2010–2013) and then intensified under President Zeeman (2013–2023), and the Sobotka government (2014–2017). Yet, the recent perception among the Czech government and the public is that China has not lived up to its promises. Though trade volumes have increased, the Czech Republic runs a large and widening trade deficit, with its businesses finding it hard to enter the Chinese market and the volume and type of Chinese investments lagging far behind expectations. Moreover, cooperation with China is discussed controversially in Czech politics and the public, with vocal support expressed for Tibet, Taiwan, and the Dalai Lama (Fürst 2018).

The Czech Republic had relatively few reported contacts with the CCP-ID in the early 2000s. The CCP-ID's engagement with Czech actors entirely ceased between 2008 and 2012 in parallel with the freeze of political dialogue between the two governments in reaction to the Czech Republic's support for Tibet and its criticism of the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Fürst 2018:28). Diplomatic relations were eventually brought back to normal with a joint press conference of the Czech and the Chinese Foreign Ministers in late April 2014.

Party-to-party contacts are almost exclusively limited to two left-wing parties, the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM) (Table 5). Interactions with other parties are more opportunistic and are mentioned only once with the Christian-democratic Czechoslovak People's Party and the right-wing conservative Civic Democratic Party, and twice with the centrist ANO (Table 5).

In the case of the Czech Republic, party relations were an important channel for lobbying and helped get diplomatic relations back on track. Former President Zeman (CSSD)—who has been personally invested in the improvement of relations—initiated the normalisation during a meeting with President Xi at the Sochi Olympic Games in February 2014 (04.03.2014). This was followed by a series of encounters between the CCP-ID, the Czech ambassador, and several individual former politicians with access to President Zeman, who had turned to intermediaries for Chinese businesses through friendship and business associations as well as other united front organisations (Hála 2018; Yoshihara and Bianchi 2020). In contrast with the CCP-ID's high intensity of contacts during this period, China's Ministry of Foreign

Table 5 Number of contacts with Czech partners, 2002 to September 2023

Party name	Number of meetings
Czech Social Democratic Party	14
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	14
Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011 Movement	2
Civic Democratic Party	1
Czechoslovak People's Party	1
Meetings not with party members	18

Affairs reported only one diplomatic meeting between the vice-foreign ministers in Beijing, on 20 March 2014. The role of the CCP-ID in facilitating state diplomacy was emphasised by Jan Hamacek, Chair of the Chamber of Deputies, when he observed that the 'rapid development of relations between the Czech Republic and China over the past year owes a lot to the growth of the party-to-party relationship' (20.04.2015).

With diplomatic relations back on track, the CCP-ID kept its doors open for high-level business brokers such as Jaroslav Tvrdík, a former defence minister before becoming a proxy for China's economic interests in the Czech Republic (Kowalski 2022). Tvrdík was involved in the investment activities of China's CEFC Company in the Czech Republic before the company went bankrupt and high-level corruption cases in Uganda, Chad, and the United Nations General Assembly were revealed (Hála 2022).

In addition to party contacts, the CCP-ID's outreach towards non-party actors broadened from 2014 onwards. Party affiliation in and of itself appears to become less relevant to the CCP-ID against the widening range of individual and institutional counterparts beyond political parties. Parliamentary China groups popped up and were engaged, and the CCP-ID is facilitating the outreach of China's public diplomacy and propaganda machine towards academic institutions. The Czech President, Prime Minister, representatives of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, as well as the Czech Ambassador to China, have been met by high-level CCP-ID officials on various occasions. In a meeting with Ludek Podola, an advisor to the Rector of Charles University in Prague, opportunities for cooperation between the Silk Road Think Tank Association and Charles University were discussed (04.09.2017). However, shortly thereafter, Charles University Rector Tomas Zima stepped down and closed the Czech-Chinese centre at the University amidst accusations of secret Chinese payments to faculty members.

However, party outreach could not compensate for the general disappointment regarding economic opportunities from cooperation with China as high expectations raised by the Belt and Road initiative did not materialise and criticism on Hong Kong and Xinjiang was increasingly raised in domestic political debates (Qin, Garlick and Liu 2023). Nevertheless, the Czech case illustrates how the party channel works as a multiplier of Chinese standpoints abroad as well as an echo chamber for the domestic Chinese audience. When the Czech intelligence service warned of security risks emanating from Huawei, Vojtěch Filip from the KSCM announced to the Czech public that 'he would travel to China in person to 'iron things out' in the Huawei case' (Lulu 2019). Shortly thereafter, Filip travelled to Beijing and met the CCP-ID's Vice-Minister (15.01.2019). After his return he defended Huawei in Czech media (Lulu 2019). The CCP-ID used a video call with Filip to condemn the official visit to Taiwan of Miloš Vystrčil, President of the Senate and leader of the Civic Democratic Party in 2020. Even though speaking to a loyal follower, the CCP-ID's report of this meeting spells out, at length, China's opposition to the visit by Vystrčil and includes Filip's confirmation that only a non-representative 'handful of people' support Taiwan in the Czech Republic (09.09.2020).

The CCP-ID's engagement in the Czech Republic clearly underlines the flexible nature of the CCP-ID, which provides a responsive entry point for Czech requests

and a facilitator for other Chinese party and non-party actors. The example of the Czech Republic reveals how the CCP-ID can replace official diplomacy, how it can open doors for other Chinese actors in promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, and how it can help facilitate specific business interests on both sides.

Conclusions

The CCP-ID's outreach to European partners has many faces. The CCP-ID has built a broad-based network of political and economic elites across the continent, maintaining close ties not only with political parties but also a broad variety of other actors from think tanks, the media, and business associations. The CCP-ID seeks to promote a positive image of China and channel positive reactions from its European counterparts back into China's domestic propaganda. It also closely cooperates with other united front organisations.

The CCP-ID has intensified its relations with longstanding partners and reached out to parties from the whole political spectrum. Left-leaning and Communist parties remain in the CCP's network, even if they occupy a marginal position in the electoral system. These parties are frequently used to disseminate foreign endorsements of the CCP's ruling capabilities towards the Chinese public. Relations with European conservative, centrist, and right-leaning parties tend to be established only slowly after these parties' rise to power. Engagement with parliamentary actors has also intensified as parliamentary debates in Europe on China have become more critical in the past couple of years.

While the CCP-ID's outreach is systematic, it also flexibly adapts to the national contexts in partner countries. Comparison of the CCP-ID's engagement in Germany, the UK, and the Czech Republic illustrates the multiple roles the CCP-ID plays and the wide spectrum of the CCP-ID's networking strategies. Germany stands out as an example of a country in which the CCP-ID has very intense relations with its direct counterparts—other political parties. The UK is an example of a country in which the CCP-ID partners mostly with business elites and organisations. In the Czech Republic, the CCP-ID partly replaced the diplomatic channel to ease tensions in bilateral relations. As in the UK, it also facilitates private business interests of well-connected individuals. It is this flexibility that makes the CCP-ID difficult to understand for Western societies and that turns it into a useful tool to complement official diplomatic channels.

To what extent the CCP-ID is effective is difficult to assess and can only be done with reference to the CCP-ID's stated goals. With regard to the promotion of China's foreign policy objectives, the results look mixed. In Europe, criticism of China has been mounting since 2017, with political controversy about human rights violations in Xinjiang, China's crackdown on the democratic movement in Hong Kong, the initial covering up of the COVID-19 pandemic, and broader geostrategic rivalry since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In addition to these substantively difficult debates, the increasing perception of European societies of being targeted in subversive or opaque ways has hampered China's engagement in Europe. In some ways, Xi Jinping's strategy of bolstering the party and united front organisations' foreign

outreach has seemed to backfire, creating what Fung et al. (2023) termed inadvertent 'influence externalities'. Co-operation with European parliaments, Confucius institutes, and other higher education institutions is increasingly scrutinised and criticised—whether rightly or wrongly—as untransparent, subversive, and corruptive, and sometimes put on hold. Though others are being scrutinised, the CCP-ID's outreach to European parties has so far remained much under the radar of public (and academic) debates.

While it remains difficult to assess whether the CCP-ID has reached its goals in relation to European partners, it apparently had some success in using its network for domestic propaganda work in China. In its reports, the CCP-ID quotes the positive reactions of its counterparts wherever it can. In particular, the (re-)jinvigoration of contacts with communist parties ahead of the CCP's centenary anniversary or the CCP-ID's handling of the COVID-19 crisis shows how the CCP-ID is strategically targeting counterparts to solicit positive reactions—for reproduction in domestic media.

It matters how European elites, whether powerful or marginal in European politics, engage with the CCP-ID and, more generally, with the CCP. Some foreign counterparts consciously praise the CCP, while others may do so out of courtesy without attaching much importance to it. Yet, for the purposes of domestic propaganda, it does not matter whether talk is cheap. It can be—and is—used to signal a supposed external endorsement of the CCP to ordinary Chinese people. The fact that individual counterparts are marginal in their domestic context and unknown to the Chinese audience is irrelevant—as the CCP compensates with quantity.

This first empirical exploration of the CCP-ID's outreach in Europe provides us with interesting insights about the CCP's own view of party relations. How the CCP's engagement is perceived by its counterparts requires further analysis. The intensification of the CCP-ID's global outreach is part of a broader trend in which agencies from the party play a stronger role in China's foreign relations. How the party channel interacts with other party agencies and government actors in China's relations with European partners needs deeper investigation.

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