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Hackenesch, C.; Bader, J.

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The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach

CHRISTINE HACKENESCH

German Development Institute/Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

AND

JULIA BADER

University of Amsterdam

This paper addresses a largely overlooked actor in China's foreign relations, the International Department of the Communist Party of China (ID-CPC). Using publicly available documentation, we systematically analyze the patterns of the CPC's external relations since the early 2000s. Building on an intense travel diplomacy, the ID-CPC maintains a widely stretched network to political elites across the globe. The ID-CPC's engagement is not new; but since Xi Jinping took office, the CPC has bolstered its efforts to reach out to other parties. We find that party relations not only serve as an additional channel to advance China's foreign policy interests. Since President Xi has come to power, party relations also emerged as a key instrument to promote China's vision for reforming the global order. Moreover, China increasingly uses the party channel as a vehicle of authoritarian learning by sharing experiences of its economic modernization and authoritarian one-party regime. The cross-regional analysis of the CPC's engagement with other parties helps us to better understand the role of the CPC in Chinese foreign policy-making, pointing to a new research agenda at the intersection of China's foreign relations, authoritarian diffusion, and transnational relations.

"The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse, at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq>."

Introduction

Leaving behind Deng Xiaoping's famous "hide and bide" directive, President Xi Jinping recently opened a "new era" of China's global rise with a more self-confident projection of power and a strategic vision for the global order. During the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, he also announced that China is now willing to share its experiences of one-party rule with other countries and to advocate China's political model. These changes in strategy have been looming on the horizon since President Xi took office in 2012. In recent years, China has become more assertive in promoting its political and economic interests, for instance in the South China Sea and through major financial investments in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, or other endeavors. China now also heavily engages in promoting Chinese views about the global order and advocating China's political model by investing in the media, Confucius Institutes, and thousands of exchange programs.

One key actor that has been instrumental in promoting China's global rise in the "new era" is the International Department of the Communist Party of China (ID-CPC). The ID-CPC runs a large visiting program that cultivates regular

encounters with party officials from around the world. Its engagement is not new; party-to-party relations have been a key part of China's foreign diplomacy since the 1950s (Shambaugh 2007; Shinn and Eisenman 2012). Yet, since the early 2000s, the ID-CPC has substantially intensified its global outreach. In parallel to the (re-)centralization of power within the CPC, the ID-CPC has increased its contact with foreign parties—largely outside the view of academic and diplomatic observers.

Building on an intense travel diplomacy, the ID-CPC has built a broad global network to maintain contact with more than 400 parties in over 160 countries. The ID-CPC holds regular meetings with its foreign counterparts, provides training for foreign cadres, and sponsors party schools abroad. Through the party channel, the CPC promotes China's political and economic interests, projects a positive image of China, shares experiences of China's party-based regime and economic modernization process, and collects intelligence. The CPC itself argues that these instances of inter-party contact form "an important component in the country's general diplomacy, have unique advantages and play an irreplaceable role" (Zhong 2007). Indeed, the party channel has comparative advantages over government-to-government contact. It not only provides access to high-level decision-makers in formal government functions, but it also allows for engagement with influential political actors outside the realm of regular foreign affairs diplomacy, such as power-brokers operating behind the scenes or future political leaders.

Interestingly, despite the importance of the CPC's role in China's foreign policy-making and the intensification of the ID-CPC's global outreach in recent years, we know very little of the CPC's engagement with other parties and organizations or the drivers and effects of its activities (for exceptions, see Shambaugh 2007; Eisenman 2009; Niu 2014;

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Zeng 2015; Gitter and Bowie 2016; Eisenman and Shinn 2018; Hackenesch 2018; Bader and Hackenesch 2020). Academic literature on China's foreign policy has largely neglected the CPC's relations with foreign political parties. Instead, research on China's global rise since the early 2000s has mostly centered on the role of Chinese state actors and government-to-government relations. Recent debates about China's "sharp power" (Walker 2018), its "authoritarian advance" (Benner et al. 2018), and its domestic interference in OECD democracies (Brady 2018; Walker 2018) highlight the importance of non-governmental actors and united front work within the diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC). These studies acknowledge the relevance of the ID-CPC as a key tool for influencing political elites across the globe, but they focus on the activities of the CPC United Front Department and other non-governmental agencies.

This paper analyzes the CPC's party-to-party relations as a unique tool of China's diplomacy and provides new empirical data to shed light on this blind spot in the analysis of China's foreign policy. We systematically exploit publicly available documentation of the ID-CPC's activities and examine the CPC's high-level meetings with foreign partners from all world regions since the early 2000s. Investigating the patterns and motives of the CPC travel diplomacy helps us gain a better understanding of the party's role and the relationship between the party, the state, and the military in advancing China's global rise.

Our cross-regional analysis reveals that the ID-CPC is most active in Asia, followed by Europe and Africa. The most intense relationships are maintained with: prevalent single-party Communist regimes in Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, and Cuba; entrenched dominant party regimes, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa; and a few select parties from countries of the OECD, notably Japan, Germany, and Australia. The ID-CPC partners with parties in government and in opposition, but the former receive much more attention, and the latter are engaged mostly in democracies. Despite attempts to broaden its relations with parties of all kinds, left-leaning parties remain the ID-CPC's dominant partners. Our quantitative content analysis suggests that party relations allow for the promotion of China's foreign policy interests and the CPC's party-specific interests, such as enabling organizational learning or reinforcing external and internal legitimacy by showing Chinese citizens and foreign partners that the CPC has longstanding friends. Moreover, since Xi Jinping has come to power, the party channel increasingly serves as an instrument to advance China's ideas for reforming the international system and as a tool of authoritarian learning and diffusion.

We proceed as follows. We start with a brief introduction to the ID-CPC's external relations before we provide detailed insights into the empirical patterns of its relations with parties across the globe. To gain a better understanding of the ID-CPC's motives for engaging with foreign partners, we conduct a quantitative content analysis of the ID-CPC's documentation of its meetings. We conclude by discussing avenues for future research for the debate on China's foreign policy and authoritarianism.

The CPC's International Department and its External Relations

The CPC is a well-institutionalized party with a strong grip on the state and society. The Chinese political system is organized around three pillars—the party, the government, and the military. Despite reforms during the 1990s that

strengthened the government's and the military's independence vis-à-vis the CPC, both remain subordinate to the party (Shambaugh 2008, 165). The CPC's leading bodies (in particular the General Secretary and the Politburo Standing Committee) maintain a major influence on the strategic direction of China's external relations (Zhang 2016, 441; Shambaugh 2008).

Next to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce, and other state ministries, several departments and agencies within the CPC Central Committee are engaged in implementing China's foreign relations. One prominent example is the ID-CPC, which is tasked with maintaining relations with political parties around the globe.¹ The ID-CPC gathers information about political developments in other countries and gives advice to the Secretariat of the Central Committee and the Politburo Standing Committee (Cabestan 2009, 68). It organizes visits abroad not only for its own director, but also for ministers of other departments of the Central Committee and for members of the Politburo Standing Committee who are responsible for foreign affairs (and rank substantially higher in the party hierarchy than the Minister of Foreign Affairs). It receives party delegations in China and trains third-country party officials interested in learning from China's experience. Some material assistance is also provided, for instance support for training or party schools.² However, without publicly available documentation, it is unclear how substantial such support really is (Shinn and Eisenman 2012). In 2005, the ID-CPC had about 300 staff members, some of whom are posted to Chinese embassies to collect information on foreign parties and maintain contact with partner parties (Shambaugh 2007). It has its own intelligence branch, the so-called research office.

The ID-CPC has a long history of engaging with political parties of the global South. Contact with Asian and African parties was strengthened in the 1950s and 1960s. After the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, competition with the Soviet Communist Party became a key concern for the ID-CPC's relations with other socialist parties. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), activities of the ID-CPC were reduced considerably (Shambaugh 2007; Shinn and Eisenman 2012). Only with China's reform and opening-up policy of 1978 did the ID-CPC begin to expand its relations with non-communist parties and start to establish relations with social-democratic and other parties across the world. At the same time, the ID-CPC lowered its profile, and responsibilities for China's diplomacy shifted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and China was isolated after the crackdown on Tiananmen Square, the ID-CPC strengthened its level of contact with non-communist parties.

With the turn of the century, the CPC's external relations regained prominence (Shambaugh 2007; Shinn and Eisenman 2012). China's accession to the WTO and the "going global" of its companies under President Hu Jintao were accompanied by substantive investments in public diplomacy and soft power to shape a positive image of China, fend off criticism, and appease concerns about the "China threat" (Kurlantzick 2007; Zhao 2015). In addition to supporting Confucius Institutes and a media charm offensive, the CPC also revitalized its party-to-party engagement as a public diplomacy tool. When Xi Jinping took office in

¹The ID-CPC is primarily an implementing agency. See Diamond and Schell (2018) for a discussion of the architecture of the Chinese foreign policy apparatus.

²The CPC also covers the costs for many of its partners to travel to China, particularly for parties from developing countries.

2012, he opened a new phase in China's global rise in which China proactively began aiming to shape global norms and institutions. To prepare China's bureaucracy for this new role, Xi introduced institutional reforms in foreign policy decision-making and further centralized power within the party (Wang 2017; Economy 2019). Whereas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs lost influence (Sun 2017), various departments and agencies within the CPC gained prominence in China's foreign relations. Xi Jinping's 2017 announcement to bring another 15,000 party members from around the world to China within 5 years underlines the prominent role assigned to the ID-CPC.³

Empirical Trends in the CPC's External Engagement

Unlike most other departments of the Central Committee, the ID-CPC has a well-maintained homepage, on which it reports extensively about its international high-level activities from 2002 onwards.⁴ The CPC's documentation usually reveals with whom the CPC interacts, where and when. In some cases, the ID-CPC also gives short descriptions of the topics discussed. It generally reports meetings that involve high-level officials, such as the minister or deputy ministers of the ID-CPC, the heads, and deputy heads of other departments of the Central Committee, or high-level provincial party officials. In total, we downloaded 5,080 (English-language) news items containing announcements and descriptions of party-to-party visits or engagements with other foreign representatives as well as written expressions of empathy such as congratulations or condolences. The CPC's meticulous reporting about its activities aligns with strategic changes in China's foreign policy. The ID-CPC developed its website in the early 2000s when the Chinese government launched its public diplomacy program and encouraged various actors to report on their activities (Zhao 2015, 189). Public reporting of who is meeting with the CPC aims to credit legitimacy to the CPC's rule and show domestic and international audiences that the CPC has many friends.

Before further analysis, some reflections on the data are in order. Being a product of the ID-CPC itself, the data contain what the ID-CPC wants us to read. To better understand potential biases of the reporting, we triangulated the data with other sources. We interviewed 16 participants of party-to-party exchanges from Africa, Europe, and China to identify potential underreporting.⁵ We also triangulated information obtained from news items with local newspapers in those countries in Africa and Asia where we would be most suspicious of underreporting. We focused particularly on countries where relations are controversial, and therefore underreporting might be expected, for example in countries that have tense relations with China or maintain relations with Taiwan. As far as we can judge from the interviews and the local press analysis, the visiting patterns, as documented on the website, appear to be a reliable proxy indicating the frequency of high-level contact between the CPC and its foreign partners.

We count a total of 3,658 delegation contacts with direct interaction between the ID-CPC and foreign represen-

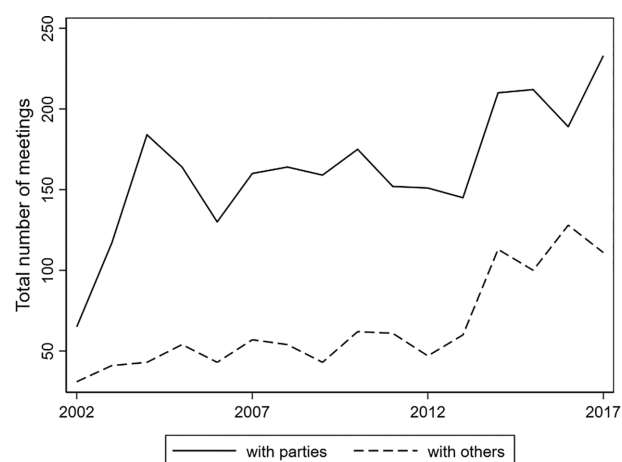


Figure 1. Number of contacts of the ID-CPC with party and non-party representatives.

tatives between 2002 and 2017. Of these, 2,610 contacts take place between the ID-CPC and foreign parties. In another 1,048 cases, the interaction partners are representatives of the state or state institutions without reported affiliation to a party (such as kings or diplomats), research institutions, or business actors. We count each party-to-party interaction only once even if one and the same party delegation's visit is described in several news items. When a news item describes several meetings with partners from different parties during a single ID-CPC delegation's visit in a foreign country, we consider each party having one interaction with the ID-CPC.

The number of CPC contacts with party and non-party representatives substantially increased between 2002 and 2017 (figure 1). Particularly after the takeover by President Xi in 2012, there is a steep increase in the ID-CPC's activities. The CPC mostly engages with other party officials; non-party contacts are much less frequent. In line with the CPC's own documentation, we identify contact with 462 different political parties in 161 countries between 2002 and 2017.⁶ The ID-CPC generally receives visitors in Beijing more than it travels abroad for meetings (figure 2). This is not surprising, given that the ID-CPC needs to invest more resources to travel abroad than it does to receive foreign guests in China.

As can be seen in figure 3, the ID-CPC's level of engagement with parties varies across world regions (the size of each circle indicates the absolute number of contacts with parties in a given country). The ID-CPC activities focus on East and Southeast Asia, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. The BRICS countries also tend to be in frequent contact, even though only parties in Russia and South Africa are among the top 20 cooperation partners (see Table 1). Within Europe, the CPC closely engages with parties in Germany and in Central and Eastern European countries that are part of the BRI.

For a few countries very little or no party-to-party contact has been documented. In the Gulf monarchies, Libya, and the Sultanate of Brunei the CPC maintains ties with representatives of the royal houses, the Gulf Cooperation Council, Consultative Assemblies, or business actors from the petrochemical industry. In Europe, no relations with parties in Switzerland, Belarus, or Iceland have been reported, even though contact has been made with government representatives. Interestingly, contacts with parties in

³http://www.bjreview.com/CHINA_INSIGHT/Special_Edition/201802/t20180212_800117836.html, last access 26 May 2020.

⁴The English website version is available here: <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/index.html>. In most cases, the English website is a direct translation of the Chinese version. We use the English version because it is more easily compatible with quantitative text analysis programs.

⁵We asked our interview partners about the visiting patterns in specific countries and at the regional level. We promised anonymity to all interview partners.

⁶http://www.bjreview.com/CHINA_INSIGHT/Special_Edition/201802/t20180212_800117836.html, last accessed 5 October, 2018.

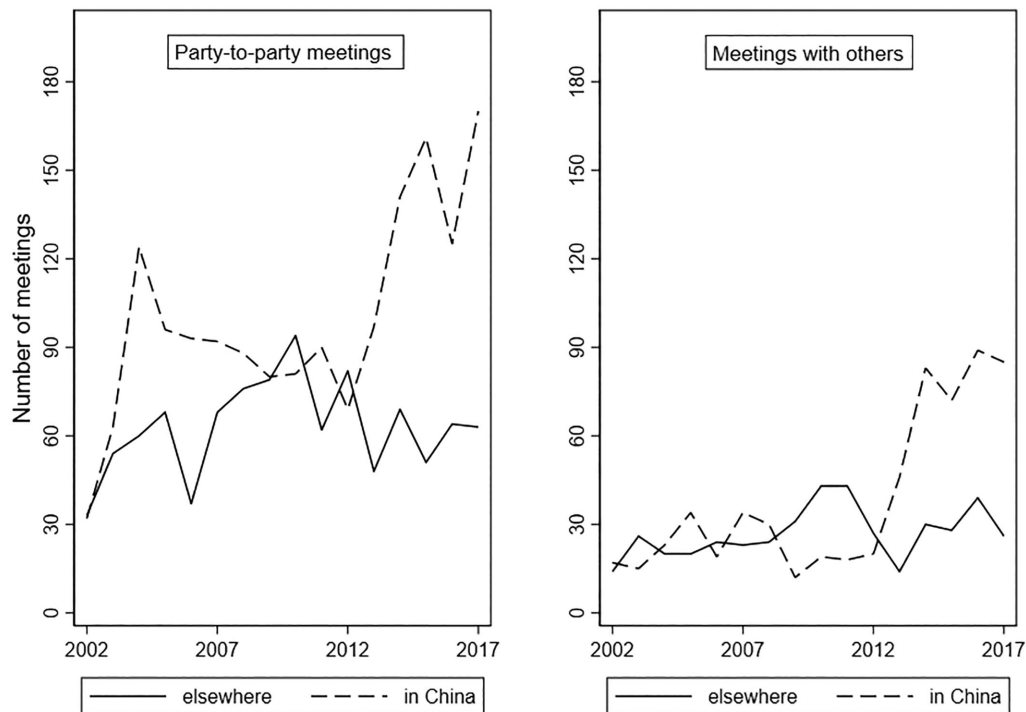


Figure 2. Number of contacts of the ID-CPC with party and non-party representatives in China and abroad.

the United States started only after 2010 and have remained infrequent. This limited engagement is driven by a lack of interest on the American side (Shambaugh 2007). The ID-CPC has sought to compensate for the limited party contact by intensively engaging with US-based think tanks (in particular the American Foreign Policy Council or the East-West Center).

Figure 3 also shows the number of parties that are in contact with the ID-CPC per country through the number of segments in the pie charts (segments are sized proportionally to the number of contacts with a given party). In most countries, the ID-CPC is very selective in its choice of partners. In roughly 70 percent of the countries, we observe engagement with no more than three parties, but in 30 percent of the countries, engagement concentrates on only one party. Several Asian countries stand out for the relatively large number of parties engaged. In most African countries, the CPC has close contact with only one (ruling) party.

Selectivity also becomes apparent in the frequency of the ID-CPC's engagement with individual parties. With some parties, the ID-CPC has very regular engagement, whereas in many cases it meets parties only once or twice. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the total number of contacts with the ID-CPC that we record for each party. With more than 50 percent of the 462 parties the ID-CPC had no more than two instances of contact. The majority of these parties are opposition parties in democratic and hybrid regimes. Roughly one-fourth of the parties met the ID-CPC five or more times between 2002 and 2017. Moreover, it becomes apparent from the data that a small number of parties stand out from the rest, as they have met the ID-CPC more than once each year.

The ID-CPC itself claims that it has relations with parties in government as well as in opposition (Zhong 2007). Indeed, we observe contact with several opposition parties.

However, a systematic analysis reveals that the CPC clearly prioritizes ruling parties. Building on the Database of Political Institutions, which we disaggregate to the party level, we collected information on the power status of the ID-CPC's partners (Cruz, Keefer and Scartascini 2018). We find that more than 70 percent of contacts (1,876 meetings) took place with government parties versus 28 percent with opposition parties (730 meetings).

Previous research suggested that in some African one-party-dominated regimes, outreach to the opposition is limited (Eisenman and Shinn 2018, 150). Our worldwide and systematic cross-country analysis shows that whether or not the ID-CPC engages with opposition parties largely depends on the country's political regime (see figure 5). In authoritarian regimes, the CPC typically reaches out to the main ruling party only. Opposition parties are approached almost exclusively in democratic contexts; 65 percent of encounters with opposition parties take place in democracies. We observed that only 10 percent of contacts with opposition parties took place in authoritarian contexts, half of which involved parties in Russia. Our interpretation is that the ID-CPC engages opposition parties primarily when these have been in power in the past or can be expected to attain power in the future, as is the case in democracies.

The category of partially free regimes—where elections coexist with authoritarian elements—merits specific attention. In these regimes roughly 75 percent of meetings with the ID-CPC involve parties in power, and only 25 percent involve opposition parties. In many such regimes, for example in Singapore, Venezuela, Mozambique, and Tanzania, the ID-CPC only engages the ruling party.

About 20 parties stand out for their close engagement with the ID-CPC (Table 1). The CPC's choice of key partners demonstrates its strong interest in engaging with



Figure 3. Frequency of the ID-CPC’s contact with parties across world regions, 2002–2017.

Table 1. The CPC’s most important partners between 2002 and 2017

TOP	Party and country	Total number of contacts
1	Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV)	121
2	Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP)	97
3	Cambodia People’s Party (CPP)	53
4	North Korean Workers Party (NKP)	51
4	Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	51
6	Communist Party of Cuba (CPC)	47
7	National Congress Party of Sudan (NC)	41
7	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	41
9	United Russia	34
10	South African National Congress (ANC)	32
11	Japan’s New Komeito	31
12	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)	31
13	Cambodia’s Funcinpec Party (FP)	29
14	Tanzania’s Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM)	27
14	Zimbabwe’s African National Union—Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)	27
16	Namibia’s South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO)	26
17	Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)	25
18	Democratic Party of Japan (DP)	23
18	Australian Labor Party (LP)	23
20	South African Communist Party (SACP)	22

parties that are either ideologically similar or influential in countries where China has strategic foreign policy interests. Many (but not all) of the top 20 partners have socialist and communist roots and a long history of engaging

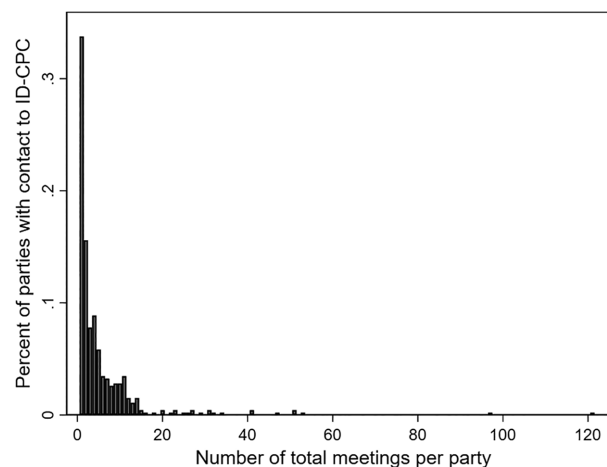


Figure 4. Distribution of the number of total contacts per party with the ID-CPC, 2002–2017.

with the ID-CPC. Examples are the Communist Party of Vietnam, Laos’ LPRP, the North Korean Workers’ Party, and Cuba’s Communist Party (see also Shambaugh 2008; Cheng 2012).

Similarly, the ID-CPC continues to maintain close ties with some of its old comrades in Africa that it supported during their power struggles, at least in places where the party is the political powerhouse. This holds equally for the SWAPO Party of Namibia, Zimbabwe’s Zanu-PF, and Tanzania’s CCM. The South African ANC and SACP are prominent partners, even though these were historically

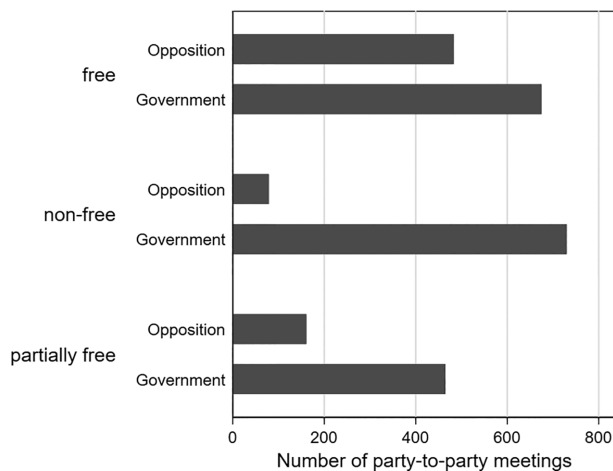


Figure 5. Instances of the ID-CPC's contact with parties in government vs. opposition for different political regimes, classified according to Freedom House Index.

supported by Russia, while China backed one of their rivals, the Pan-African Congress.⁷

Several of the other top 20 partners reflect China's geo-strategic, political, and economic interests. One case in point is Japan, where the CPC closely engages with the ruling LDP, its coalition partner New Komeito, as well as the main opposition, the Democratic Party. Given the tense political relationship between Japan and China, maintaining close ties with several Japanese parties guarantees a communication channel in the event that diplomatic relations are frozen (Bader and Hackenesch 2020). Another example is the German SPD. Relations with the SPD have a long tradition going 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.

Beyond bilateral meetings, the ID-CPC is also active in multilateral party fora and increasingly promotes these fora itself. From the very beginning, in 2000, the CPC has been part of the International Conference of Asian Political Parties. The CPC is a member of the Socialist International and has recently started to organize its own multilateral party fora. Since 2010 the CPC has regularly met with parties from the European Parliament. It sponsors the China-CELAC party forum and regularly meets parties from Central and Eastern Europe within the 17 + 1 framework. From 2014 onwards, it has regularly hosted the large conference "CPC in Dialogue with the World Political Parties." These various multilateral endeavors allow the CPC to engage many parties at the same time in a cost-efficient manner. But, as discussed below, by using the occasions to issue joint statements these multilateral formats are also an attempt to make political elites beyond national governments subscribe to a discourse that endorses and legitimizes China's authoritarian regime.⁸

In sum, we observe that the CPC is highly strategic in selecting its partners. It focuses on parties in power but is sensitive to the political regime in the country. Whereas in Asian countries the CPC often engages with several parties,

⁷ ANC and SACP have a very close relationship; most leading members of the SACP are at the same time ANC members. The ID-CPC reports about meetings that it holds bilaterally with the ANC and with SACP. In some (very few) instances our data shows that the ID-CPC meets jointly with the ANC and SACP. We then count one contact for each party.

⁸ http://www.bjreview.com.cn/Current_Issue/Editor_Choice/201712/t20171211_800111812.html#.

in Africa it focuses on the main ruling party. The CPC maintains very frequent exchanges with a number of (ruling) parties. At the same time, the CPC invests considerable financial and administrative resources into maintaining superficial contact with parties from across the globe. This diverse outreach strategy suggests that the motives and functions for initiating party contact are very diverse and context-specific. We therefore take a closer look at how the CPC reports in the news items about its engagement with foreign partners. We thereby differentiate between party relations as an instrument to promote foreign policy interests (Section "Party-to-Party Relations: From Foreign Policy Interests to Promoting China's Global Rise") and authoritarian learning and diffusion (Section "The ID-CPC as a Vehicle for Authoritarian Learning and Diffusion").

Party-to-Party Relations: From Foreign Policy Interests to Promoting China's Global Rise

Party relations provide an additional channel through which to promote Chinese foreign policy interests. From the ID-CPC's perspective, "as the governing party, the interests of the CPC are identical with those of the state" (Zhong 2007). In that sense, party relations complement and reinforce government ties: they provide additional means to achieve the same ends. This is also emphasized when the CPC meets its partners. Many times, party relations are described as "a pillar of," or a "channel to promote" bilateral state-to-state relations. Along the same lines, the CPC interprets party relations conducted by any other party in power to "represent the interests of a nation" even though it is also recognized that political parties are often only representative of specific societal subgroups (Zhong 2007).

When it comes to advancing China's foreign policy goals, the CPC's outreach has advantages over government-to-government relations. The party channel is considered to be more flexible, less constrained by diplomatic protocol, and broader in scope. It can be used in cases where diplomatic relations are tense or frozen. Due to its broad global network and intense travel diplomacy, the party channel reaches a large number of foreign political elites within a short period. In addition, party relations provide access to influential political figures without formal government functions as well as to future leaders. As the ID-CPC describes it:

Many state leaders, before they assume office, had already been China's friends. After they assume office, they have made active efforts in advancing friendship with China. Through contacts with young political figures, the CPC has laid foundations for future state-to-state relations. (Zhong 2007)

Since the early 2000s, China's foreign relations have been dominated by a few core interests, such as the international isolation of Taiwan, fending-off criticism against human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjiang and promoting territorial claims in the South China Sea. China's foreign relations have also aimed to shape a positive and conducive environment for China's rise, and—since President Xi came to power—to promote China's own visions for the global order. In the following, we analyze a few specific examples to highlight how the party channel has been instrumental for advancing each of these objectives and how the objectives of party relations have changed over time. Building on a systematic content analysis of the news items in our dataset,

we explore how the CPC itself presents the motives of its party outreach.⁹

The One-China policy has been a core foreign policy issue since the founding of the PRC. According to the CPC itself, its engagement with foreign parties has helped advancing the One-China policy, because the CPC can engage with parties in countries without official relations with China, paving the way for future government-to-government contact (Zhong 2007). During our period of investigation, only a few countries in Central America and the Caribbean still recognized Taiwan. For most countries recognizing Taiwan, no contact with the CPC was reported between 2002 and 2017. Yet, we find some cases, particularly in Latin America, where party officials whose governments did not maintain official relations with Beijing were invited to China. More recently, the CPC has used the China-CELAC party forum to engage with parties in those countries where no formal relations exist.

At the same time, we observe that the CPC “rewards” a country with a higher frequency of party visits as soon as the respective government changes its position and cuts its ties with Taiwan. In the case of Senegal, Malawi, and Panama, the CPC started engaging immediately and regularly after official relations with the PRC were established. An interesting case is Vanuatu, which recognized Taiwan for a short period in 2004. When a new prime minister was elected and Vanuatu fell back in line, it was “rewarded” with regular visits from the ID-CPC. The importance of the One-China policy continues to be strongly emphasized in each meeting with Vanuatu officials (see also Gitter and Bowie 2016).

The One-China policy is not only relevant in the travel patterns of the CPC but also in its rhetorical engagement. Until 2012, the One-China policy was a regular item on most agendas of CPC meetings with foreign partners (figure 6). The CPC routinely requested its partners to reconfirm their adherence to the One-China policy, even for those countries that had broken ties with Taiwan decades ago. Since 2013, when Xi Jinping came to power, this discursive strategy has changed significantly; the One-China policy is hardly mentioned any more. One explanation for this rhetorical shift could be that the isolation of Taiwan is now viewed as a fait accompli. In light of the limited number of countries that maintain relations with Taiwan, the CPC might no longer see a need to remind partners of this core interest.

The CPC also uses party relations to fend off international criticism and generate legitimation, not only for its harder stance on Taiwan but also regarding other critical issues, such as human right violations in Tibet and Xinjiang or the South China Sea dispute. When protests broke out in Tibet around the 2008 Olympic year, the ID-CPC used its contacts to present its own perspective on the situation and to receive rhetorical support for the repression of protests in Tibet. In several news items, Chinese representatives are reported to have “briefed” or “introduced the facts” about the “riot” in Tibet. In one news item that uses extraordinarily vivid language, the Cypriot president “expressed his government’s support to the Chinese government in dealing with the serious criminal act of violence involving beating, destruction of property, looting and arson in Lhasa” (April 2, 2008).¹⁰ Particularly in 2008 and the years thereafter, China’s Tibet policy became a regular topic during the CPC’s meetings with foreign officials (figure 6).

⁹ We rely on R’s Quanteda package for the quantitative text analysis. The text analysis is based on 4,602 news items between 2002 and 2017. It includes all items that we downloaded with the exception of items that describe condolences or congratulations.

¹⁰ All news items can be found online: <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/>.

Compared with Taiwan or Tibet, China’s approach to dealing with protests in Xinjiang is much less prominently discussed. The CPC reached out to its partners after the demonstrations in Xinjiang in 2009 and bomb attacks in 2010 to ask for rhetorical support, but, overall, the issue is much less prominently debated than China’s other core interests (figure 6). This may, however, also reflect the timeframe of our investigation, ending in 2017 before a new level of repression in Xinjiang garnered global attention.

Similarly, the ID-CPC uses the party channel to propagate its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Particularly throughout 2016 when the arbitration tribunal under the auspices of the UN Convention on the Laws of the Sea stated that China had violated Philippines’ sovereignty, the ID-CPC focused on the issue (figure 6). The Chinese side usually “expounds,” “introduces,” or “reiterates” China’s principles and stance on the South China Sea issue, or “appreciates” the (firm) “support” by its counterparts of the Chinese position. However, at least one news item also reports more cautious rhetoric, citing Finland’s former Prime Minister as stating that “Finland does not take sides” (June 13, 2016).

In addition to bringing up specific political interests and countering international criticism, the party channel is a key instrument in implementing Xi Jinping’s strategic shift from the “hide and bide” times to the “new era” of proactively influencing international relations. The party channel has traditionally been a tool for familiarizing foreign political elites with the latest Chinese policy concepts. For instance, Hu Jintao’s “peaceful rise” narrative to counter fears of the “China threat,” and the subsequent white papers on China’s “peaceful development” were advertised during party meetings (figure 7). His ideas of a harmonious society and their extension to the “harmonious world” concept were also diffused through the party channel. In continuation of this, Xi Jinping’s slogan of the “Chinese Dream,” was disseminated through the CPC’s network (figure 7).

However, the modalities of how—and the intensity with which—the party channel is used to spread the CPC’s foreign policy ideas clearly changed under President Xi. Recent efforts to intensify the CPC’s external relations are at least partly driven by the objective of using the party channel to advance China’s concepts for the global order. The ID-CPC appears to be a key instrument for promoting the BRI. Between 2014 and 2017, the BRI has been discussed on an unprecedented scale in more than 390 party meetings (figure 7). In addition to bilateral party relations, the ID-CPC has started to organize a range of international conferences in Beijing to explain the initiative and generate support. In 2015, for instance, it organized a large international conference in Beijing to “help MNCs and foreign diplomats in China better understand the recently released” BRI (April 16, 2015). As criticism of the BRI mounts from Asian countries and the European Union,¹¹ the party channel is gaining further relevance.

Most importantly, however, Xi Jinping not only uses the party channel more, he also uses it differently. At the 2017 CPC in Dialogue with the World Forum, a highly visible event in Chinese media, the CPC made party leaders from more than 120 countries endorse the BRI in the “Beijing Initiative” document that largely contained the vocabulary and vision of the CPC. By doing so, the CPC made decision-makers at the party level subscribe to and thereby legitimize a Chinese vision of domestic and international governance.

¹¹ <https://www.handelsblatt.com/today/politics/china-first-eu-ambassadors-band-together-against-silk-road/23581860.html?ticket=ST-2651478-6Jef6NRXk1qEZ3q2iZkr-ap1>, or: <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/europes-response-belt-and-road-initiative>.

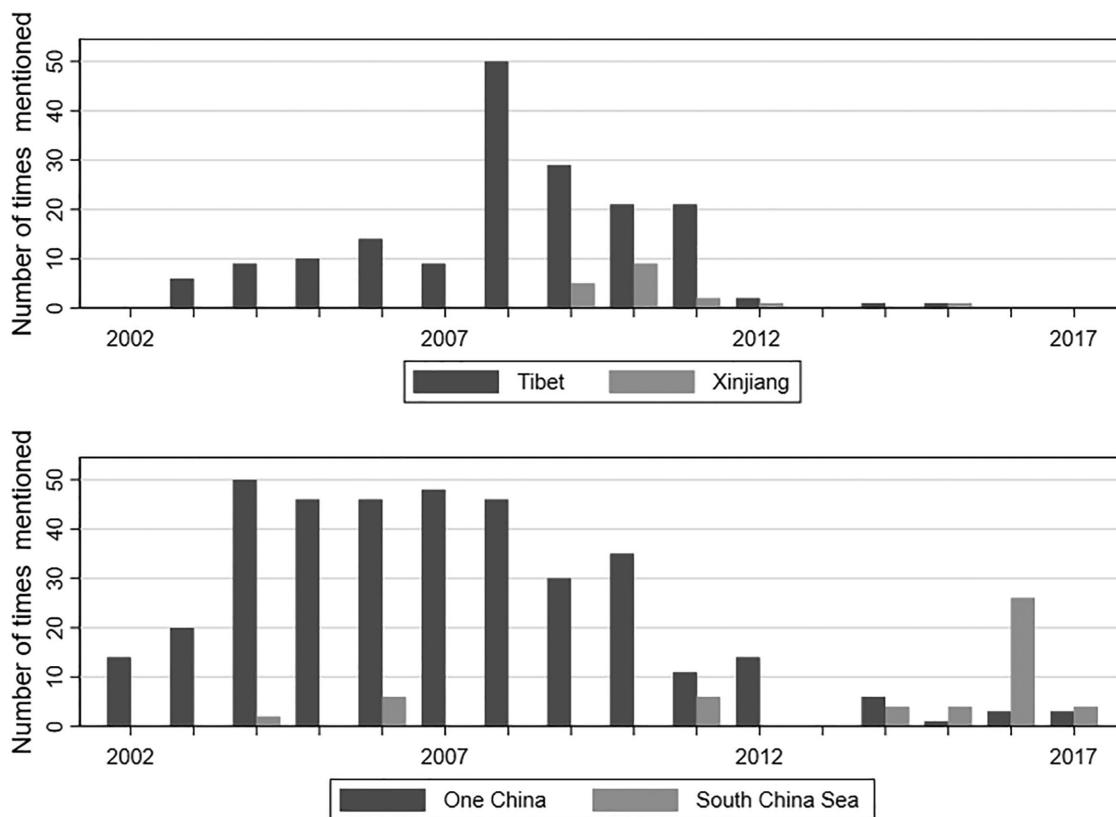


Figure 6. Number of references to Tibet and Xinjiang (above), and the One-China policy and the South China Sea (below).

Finally, economic interests also matter. ID-CPC officials meet with foreign business associations and CEOs from the resources sector, telecommunications sector, and the automobile industry. In advancing economic interests, the ID-CPC is promoting particular sectoral interests and the interests of Chinese provinces and municipalities. Since 2009, Chinese provinces have taken turns hosting a forum for Small and Medium Enterprises for West Asian and North African countries. In 2010, the CPC co-organized a business conference with the city of Yangzhou to enhance cooperation with the Gulf States in the petrochemical industry and helped the Ministry of Agriculture set up networks in Africa by rolling out a large conference on agriculture cooperation with African countries.

In sum, the CPC uses the party channel to advance foreign policy interests, creates a positive image of China, and fends off international criticism. The ID-CPC has been a key actor in promoting China's rise in Xi Jinping's "new era," advocating for the BRI initiative and promoting China's visions for reforming the global order.

The ID-CPC as a Vehicle for Authoritarian Learning and Diffusion

Pragmatic calculations to advance (foreign) policy interests and soft power are not the only consideration for the ID-CPC in fostering ties with foreign parties. Party relations are also a vehicle for policy diffusion and organizational learning among parties. Over time and particularly since 2014, the CPC has become more interested in sharing experiences about China's authoritarian political system. By contrast, the CPC's willingness to learn from others has faded away. As we argue below, this points toward the diffusion of a "China model" at the level of parties.

Since the late 1970s and the start of economic reforms, the CPC has been eager to learn from the successes and failures of other authoritarian regimes to avoid economic development in China being followed by a political regime change. The CPC has investigated the communist regimes of the Soviet Union and Cuba, and one-party rule in Singapore (Shambaugh 2008; Cheng 2012). The news items show that the CPC's own interest in learning from others about party-building, the party's position in power, and ideological orientation was concentrated to long-lasting one-party regimes. In 2003 and 2014, CPC officials highlighted that they wanted to "learn from Cuba's experiences in socialist revolution and construction" (July 7, 2003). In 2012, during a meeting with party officials from Singapore, CPC officials highlighted that "the CPC is keen to study and learn from the experiences of the PAP in the governance of the party and the state" (July 5, 2012). This reference is no coincidence. During China's 2012 power transition, the CPC was particularly interested in learning from the Singapore example; much more so than in the early 2000s or in recent years (Ortmann and Thompson 2018).

In terms of economic and social policies, the CPC has closely studied various OECD countries to identify potential lessons for China. In 2002, for instance, a high-level CPC official stressed that China wanted to "learn from New Zealand's experience in developing its economy" (April 16, 2002). In 2005, Wang Jiarui, then minister of the ID-CPC, said that "China would like to learn from Norway's successful experience in social and economic development when building a harmonious society" (March 29, 2005). In 2014, the CPC explained that China was "willing to learn from the success of Finland and other European countries in implementing reforms and stimulating innovation," thereby referring to the change from export- to consumption-led

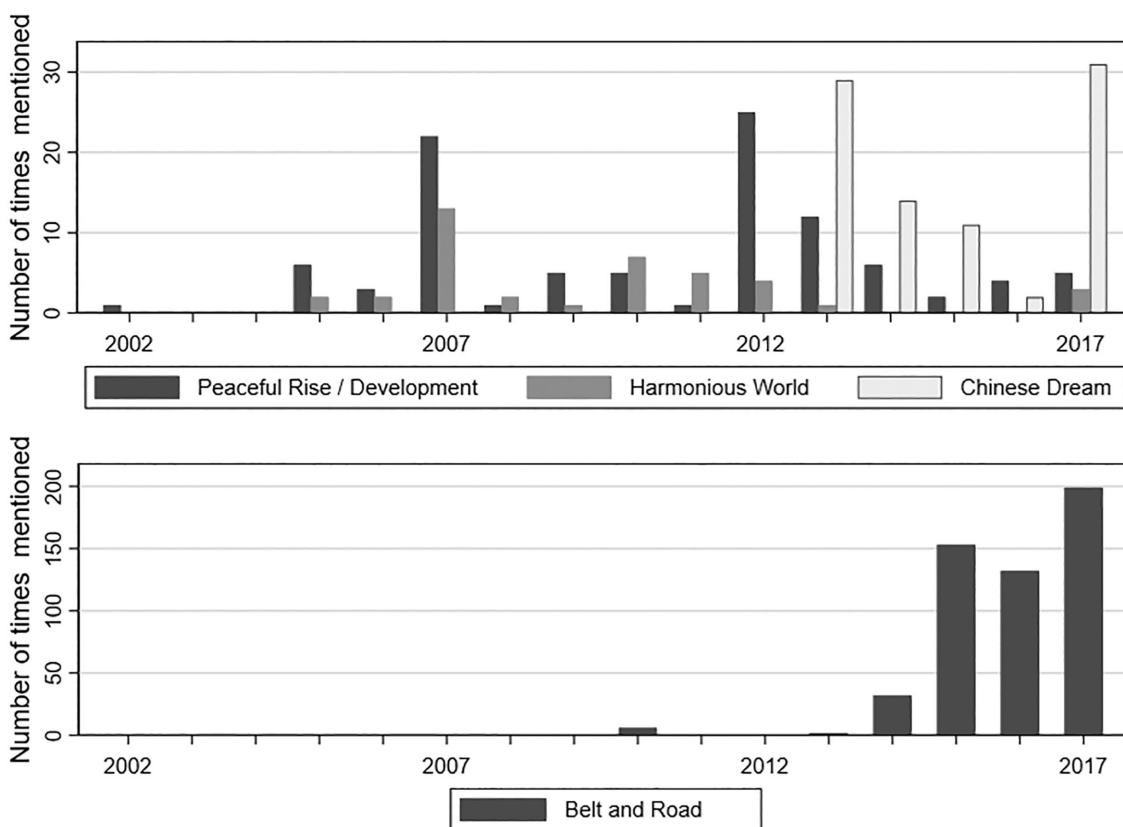


Figure 7. Number of references to Chinese foreign policy concepts and strategies.

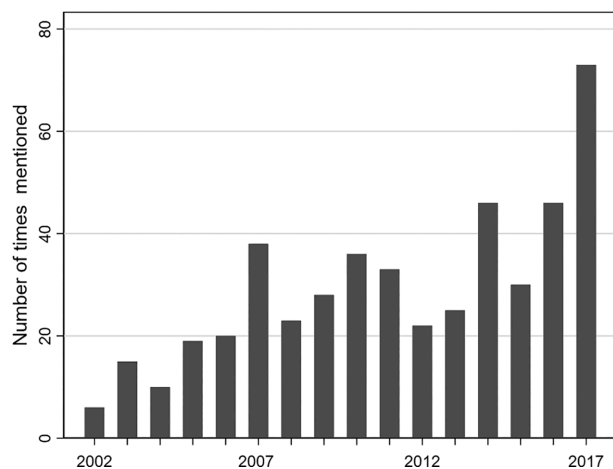


Figure 8. Number of references to “learning”.

economic growth in China (June 15, 2014). In 2014, CPC officials emphasized that they wanted to learn from Germany’s experiences with economic policies and reforms (April 23, 2014).

We find that the overall importance of policy and organizational learning has clearly increased over time (figure 8).¹² Yet, the CPC’s expression of its own interest in learning from others has remained limited to a few specific cases and has entirely faded away since 2014. Instead, what

has increased substantially is the CPC’s eagerness to share its experiences with others.

Initially, in the early 2000s, it was mainly representatives from authoritarian, one-party regimes who were quoted as willing to learn from China. In 2003, for instance, the Ugandan National Resistance Movement pointed out that it was “willing to study and learn from China’s development experience” (July 24, 2003). These references often remained quite general and alluded to China’s economic development more generally.

Nowadays, the party channel is increasingly used to promote China’s experience with one-party rule. Since 2014, partners are not only cited to be interested in learning from China’s economic modernization but also from the CPC’s experience as an authoritarian ruling party, that is, its experience with cadre selection, discipline inspection, and the fight against corruption. In 2015, the secretary general of the ANC pointed out that “the ANC sets great store by the friendly cooperation with the CPC and is willing to learn from the CPC’s 65 years of governance in China” (February 4, 2015). In 2016 and 2017, partners regularly referred to the exemplary experiences of the CPC in “governance and state administration.” The vice-chairman of Myanmar’s USDP, for instance, stressed that “the USDP [...] hopes to deeply learn from the CPC’s experience on party governance and administration, so as to constantly improve its own level of party construction” (September 9, 2016). It is often (authoritarian) dominant parties who are specifically interested in learning from the CPC as a ruling party.

To what extent foreign party officials are genuinely interested in learning from the CPC, or whether they are mainly paying lip service to please their Chinese counterparts would need to be cross-checked with the CPC’s partners.

¹²This includes references in various forms to “learn from each other,” “learn from China,” “learn from the CPC.”

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some party elites might indeed be very keen to study the factors that have kept the CPC in power for so long. Ethiopia's EPRDF, for example, has imitated many aspects of the CPC's set-up (Sun 2016; Hackenesch 2018). In summer 2018, the ANC's secretary general was planning to send ANC cadres to China for training in communication strategies, party discipline, and loyalty as part of his strategy to prepare for South Africa's upcoming parliamentary elections.¹³ In other cases, party cadres might see engagement with the CPC as a means to strengthen economic cooperation with China or advance other foreign policy interests, given the close relations between the state and the party in the Chinese system. In any case, what is clear from the analysis of the news items is that the CPC *itself* increasingly views its relations with other parties as a channel to share its experiences of one-party rule.

This shift is also visible in modifications of the formats and mechanisms of exchange programs that the CPC offers to its foreign partners. The CPC has recently started to further institutionalize its dialogues on party-building, to expand its theory seminars for foreign parties, and to invest more resources in cadre training for other parties. With some parties such as Vietnam's CPV or Laos' LPRP, cadre training has taken place regularly since 2010 and in the framework of a dedicated cooperation plan. Since 2014, cadre training became part of the CPC's relations with a range of other parties in Asia and Africa.¹⁴ Similarly, support for party schools has emerged as a more important aspect of the CPC's foreign relations, particularly in the case of dominant party regimes. Previously, exchanges pertaining to party schools took place mainly with the Cuban Communist Party and North Korea's Workers' Party; now the CPC supports several other parties in developing their cadre training, particularly in Africa (see also Sun 2016). It granted USD 35 million toward the efforts of six southern African parties to build a joint party school in Tanzania.¹⁵

In sum, the CPC uses its party contacts as a vehicle for policy and organizational learning. Sharing China's experiences has been an important agenda item in party-to-party dialogues. Whereas in the early 2000s debates centered on China's economic reforms, in recent years the CPC has become more open to promote China's political model. By contrast, the CPC's interest in learning from others has been limited to a few specific cases and has taken a backseat since Xi Jinping came to power.

Conclusion

Our investigation sheds some light on a blind spot in the research on China's external relations: the role of the ID-CPC. Systematic exploitation of documentation of the CPC's party diplomacy reveals that the ID-CPC has substantially and purposefully intensified its global outreach since the early 2000s. On the one hand, it has carefully maintained and strategically expanded its network, mostly to parties in power in Asian, European, and African countries. On the other hand, the ID-CPC has introduced new modalities for party cooperation such as the organization of large international conferences and multi-party dialogues to widen its reach. In addition, the establishment

of training programs for foreign party cadres is gaining prominence.

This revitalization of the ID-CPC is part of a broader reform process in which Xi Jinping has re-centralized political power within the CPC. As a result of this process, various party agencies have gained influence in foreign policy at the expense of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Sun 2017). Compared with the United Front Department of the CPC Central Committee, which secretly engages in subversive activities to nudge China-friendly positions in third countries (Brady 2018; Walker 2018), the ID-CPC is a more transparent tool of united front work. However, as we show, it is no less relevant for promoting China's foreign policy interests.

The ID-CPC's international activities have several objectives, as we can see from its own description of party meetings and the patterns of party contact. First, party encounters are used to promote core foreign policy interests such as the international isolation of Taiwan, fending off international criticism concerning Tibet and Xinjiang, and promoting territorial claims in the South China Sea. Second, the ID-CPC's network serves as an instrument to legitimize the party's rule in the eyes of domestic and external audience. Third, party meetings are a public diplomacy tool to foster a positive image of China and to promote a conducive international environment for China's global rise. In addition, Xi Jinping has introduced two new objectives for the ID-CPC's activities, namely advancing China's vision for reforming the international system, most visible in its promotion of the BRI, and sharing its experiences of authoritarian party rule.

Party-to-party relations are neither new, nor unique to China. What makes the ID-CPC's activities stand out is the sheer size of its network, the resources invested to maintain it and the objectives pursued. Far from being outdated, the ID-CPC has recently been rediscovered by China's leadership as the natural external extension of domestic one-party rule. Our analysis contributes to a better understanding of the ID-CPC—though many aspects of the ID-CPC's work and the interplay between party and state bureaucracy in China's foreign relations continue to remain opaque and require further analysis.

Beyond the need for understanding organizational aspects on the Chinese side, we need to deepen our knowledge about the content of party-to-party exchanges. What are the concrete lessons the CPC shares with others in party-building or theory seminars and what curriculum does it offer in cadre training and party schools, for example? And, how do foreign parties see their relationship with the ID-CPC? It is conceivable that there is a considerable mismatch between the perceptions and expectations of foreign parties and those of the CPC. Finally, what are the effects of party-to-party relations?

China presents itself as a more self-assured, more authoritarian player with new international ambitions. In the looming strategic competition over political systems, power, and influence at the international level, the ID-CPC's activities are one important pathway to win hearts and minds of elites outside the diplomatic corps. Shifting the unit of analysis from the state to the party level and investigating transnational party collaboration, and the ID-CPC's in particular, will offer new perspectives on international relations and comparative politics alike.

Supplemental Information

Supplemental information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

¹³ <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/sunday-times/20180729/281517931922464>.

¹⁴ See news items on 21.09.2012; 25.08.2016; 11.09.2017

¹⁵ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-07/17/c_137329281.htm.
<https://constructionreviewonline.com/2019/09/construction-of-nyerere-school-of-ideology-in-tanzania-on-track/>, last access 27 May 2020.

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