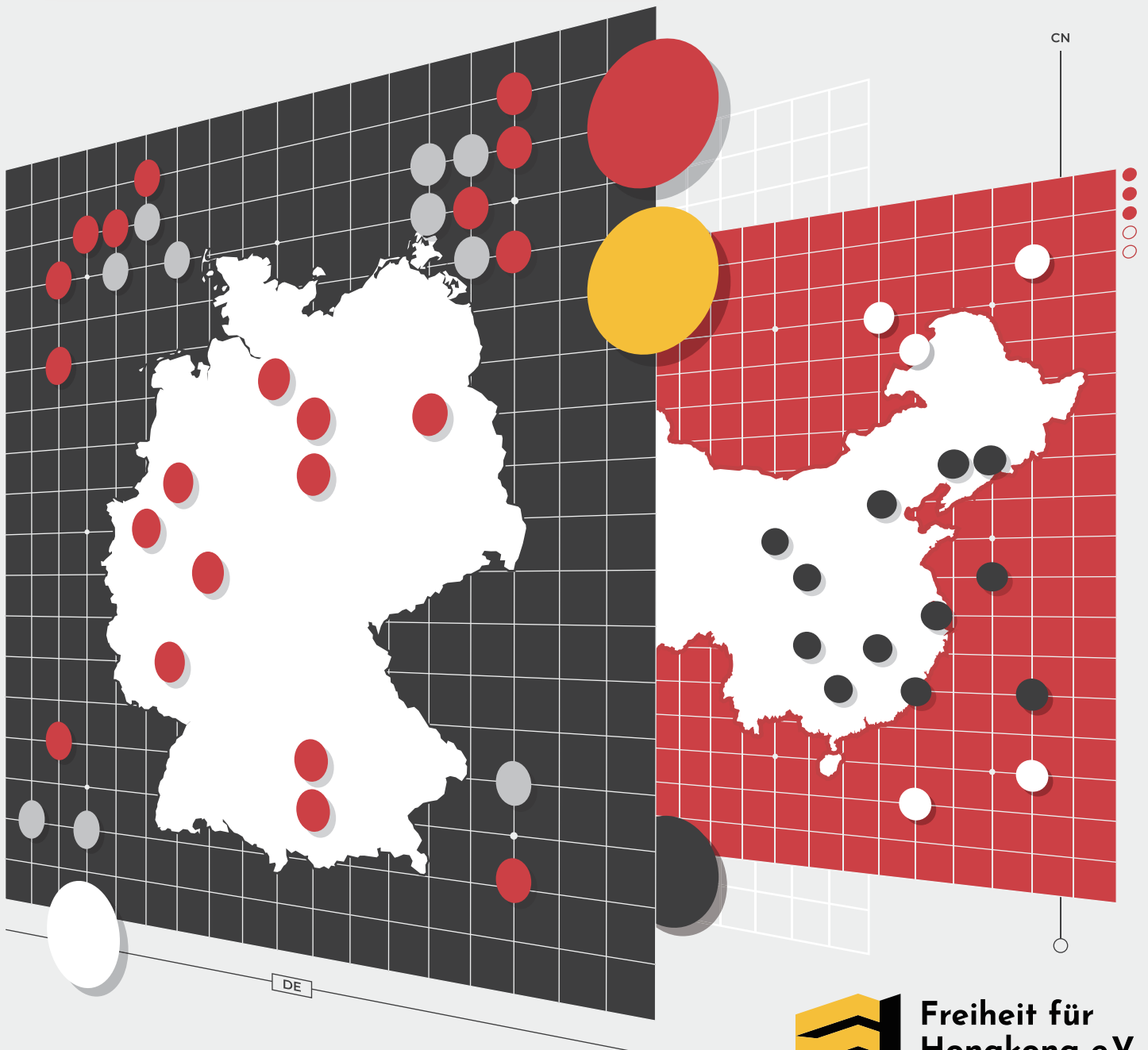


DE-RISKING ON THE SURFACE, RE-RISKING UNDERNEATH

WHY THE CURRENT FRAMEWORK FOR
TOWN AND REGIONAL TWINNING POSES
STRATEGIC THREATS TO GERMANY



Freiheit für
Hongkong e.V.

De-Risking on the Surface, Re-Risking Underneath

*Why the current framework for town and regional twinning
poses strategic threats to Germany*



**Freiheit für
Hongkong e.V.**

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Executive Summary

Context

- In July 2023, the German Federal Government published its inaugural China Strategy, emphasising the overarching principle of **'de-risking'**. However, systemic and at times wilful naivety is still noticeable upon examination, particularly within section 3.2 of the Strategy (addressing parliamentary and civil society engagement with China), where the German government articulates its continued support for town and regional twinning initiatives with Chinese cities.
- Municipal partnerships have flourished under Germany's post-Cold War foreign policy doctrine of "Wandel durch Handel" (as translated in English: change through trade). Today, **more than 115 German municipalities** have a partnership with Chinese counterparts.
- Historically, cities have played a pivotal role in advancing civil and human rights. However, **city diplomacy is in practice often limited by the focus on trade and economic opportunities**. This aspect has historically driven municipal partnerships between Germany and China, with the PRC using German towns as a conduit for advancing its grand project, the Belt and Road Initiative.

Main Arguments

- Within the current framework, pursuing town twinning initiatives with Chinese cities stands in contradiction to the strategy of de-risking. Subnational partnerships with Chinese towns pose strategic risks for Germany.
 - The German approach to subnational diplomacy is marked by **decentralization** and autonomous decision-making, while Chinese's approach follows a highly controlled and coordinated **top-down approach**, aligning it with its broader national interests. This means that local governments at all levels adhere strictly to national government policies. When foreign entities engage with Chinese cities, they are effectively dealing with **extensions of the Chinese party-state apparatus** with all its resources.
 - Under the guise of fostering international cooperation, the Chinese United Front adeptly advanced Beijing's foreign policy and economic objectives, embedding its influence deeply within the fabric of German municipal politics and industry.
- The PRC's strategic use of town twinning programs seems to be **ignored by most German authorities** at different levels. Such an oversight, this report argues, will have a negative impact on the overall implementation of the China strategy.
- Emphasis on economic interests must not preclude towns from **standing up for civic values and human rights** when engaging with Chinese towns.

Key Findings

- Town twinings are widely recognized to be tools for facilitating economic cooperation, but they tend to come as **'package deals'** when dealing with the PRC.
- Duisburg's deep involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative underscores a problematic entanglement of economic dependency and strategic partnership that overlooks significant human rights and academic freedom concerns, revealing **a concerning prioritization of economic gain over ethical considerations**.
- Duisburg's deep-rooted engagement with China exemplifies a complete embodiment of China's strategic global outreach. This relationship has woven a dense fabric of dependencies, encapsulating a strategy that spans economic, political, and academic spheres.
- The Confucius Institutes in Germany, funded and influenced by the Chinese government, exemplify a strategic push to sway academic perspectives and **suppress criticism of the CCP** under the guise of cultural exchange. Moreover, student exchanges with China **import restrictions** on individual freedoms and **pose a threat to dissidents** and those who speak up against China.
- COSCO's strategic acquisition in Hamburg Port spotlights a critical misstep, marrying Hamburg's economic ambitions with China's geopolitical maneuvers, raising stark concerns over compromised national security and the surreptitious expansion of Chinese political influence through economic footholds.
- The town twinning between Wolfsburg, Ingolstadt, and Chinese cities, closely linked with Volkswagen and Audi's significant market interests in China, reveals a problematic blend of corporate influence and municipal diplomacy. This arrangement not only reflects the automotive industry's reliance on China but also exposes how Beijing exploits such ties to extend its influence into German local politics and industry, raising concerns over the manipulation of economic partnerships to serve China's broader geopolitical goals.
- China leverages football diplomacy as part of its sub-national engagement strategy to assert its influence, blend politics with sports, and promote its political and economic interests at the local level.

Policy Recommendations

At the federal level:

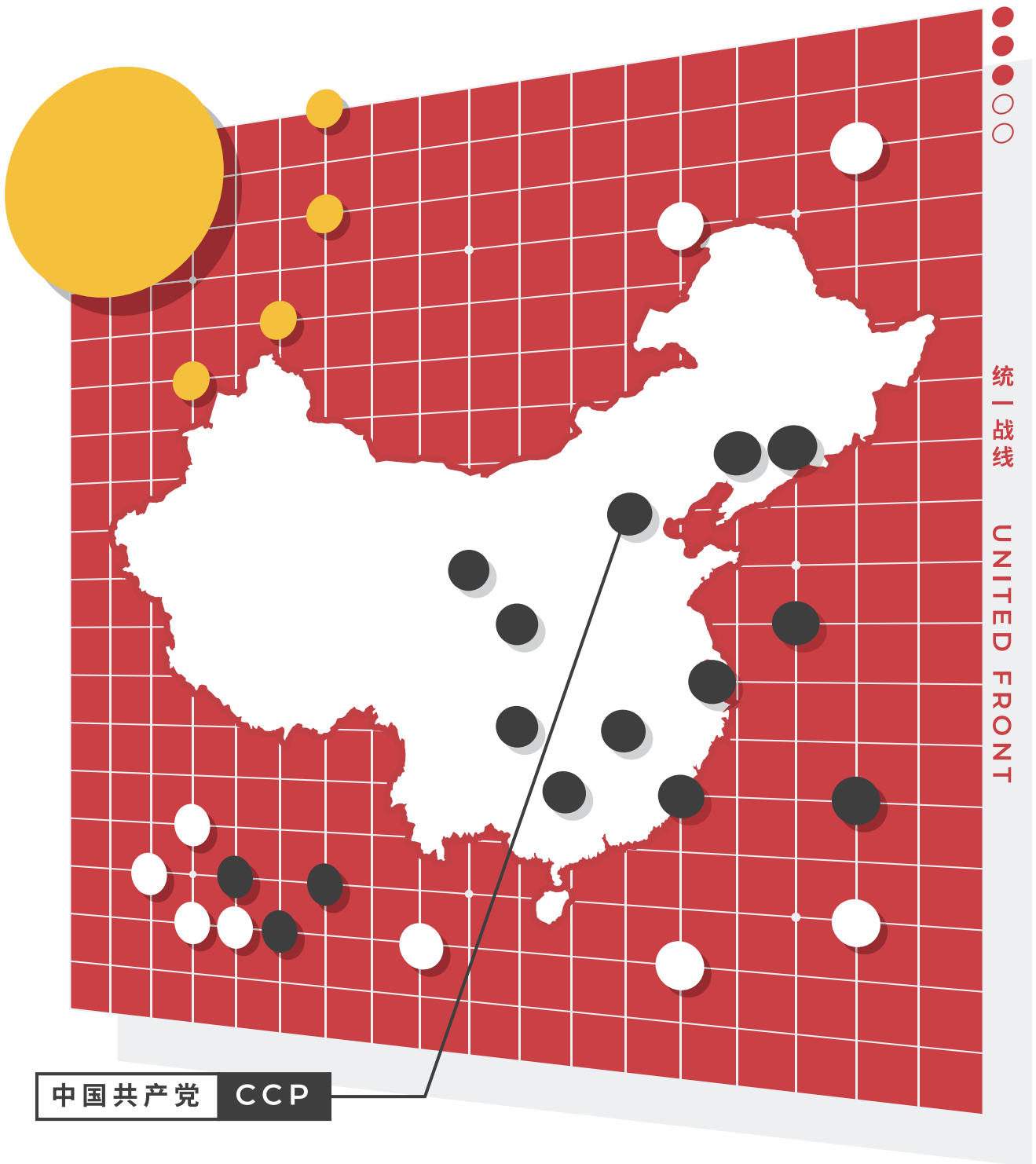
- **Legislation:** Introduce legislation in the Bundestag enabling the Federal Government to regulate and coordinate subnational diplomacy effectively.
- **Increase Funding:** Tailor financial support for city and municipal governments to engage in subnational diplomacy, reducing vulnerability to China's united front efforts.
- **Enhance Local Authorities' Competence on China:** Bolster the understanding and capabilities of local authorities regarding China, fostering informed engagement.
- **Promote Values in International Engagements:** Encourage subnational authorities to champion values such as human rights and participatory democracy in their international dealings.
- **Raise Awareness on Human Rights:** Amplify the focus on human rights issues within the context of subnational diplomacy.

At local levels:

- **Emphasize Universal Values:** Emphasize human rights, participatory democracy, and other universal values in international engagements.
- **Develop Guidelines for International Engagements:** Craft comprehensive guidelines to direct the conduct of international relations, emphasizing ethical considerations and values.
- **Formulate a China Strategy:** Establish a strategic framework for partnerships with Chinese cities, explicitly addressing human rights and civic values to guide these international relationships responsibly.
- **Improve Transparency:** Enhance transparency regarding the processes and outcomes of international engagements and partnerships, ensuring public access to information about the objectives, activities, and achievements of these relations.

Glossary

ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
ASTA	Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss
BDI	Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung
BRI	Belt Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands
CI	Confucius Institute
CIEF	Chinese International Education Foundation
CIFCA	China International Friendship Cities Association
CLEC	Center for Language Education and Cooperation
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
CSC	China Scholarship Council
CSIPDHR	Committee on Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy
DFB	Deutscher Fußball Bund
DST	Deutscher Städtetag
DStGB	Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund
DUP	Düsseldorf University Press
EU	European Union
FAO	Foreign Affairs Office
FAW	First Automotive Works
FDCA	Forum for a Democratic China and Asia
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
FRL	Foreign Relations Law of the People's Republic of China
FU	Freie Universität (Berlin)
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IMK	Innenministerkonferenz
IN-EAST	Institute of East Asian Studies
MERICS	Mercator Institute for China Studies
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRW	Nordrhein-Westfalen
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SKEW	Servicestelle Kommunen in der Einen Welt
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
TU	Technical University (Berlin)
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UDE	Universität Duisburg-Essen
UN	United Nations
VW	Volkswagen



1. Introduction

In the ancient strategy board game *Go* (popular across East Asia), victory is achieved by capturing more territory than the opponent. This is achieved by strategically encircling territory and suppressing the opponent's 'liberties'. The German Federal Government's choice to feature *Go* on the cover of its inaugural China Strategy¹ (hereinafter referred to as 'the Strategy'), published in July 2023, is likely more than a mere coincidence. It suggests the German Government recognises the strategic nature of its engagement with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The 'Strategy' pronounces a pivotal shift in Germany's China policy, moving from the infamous doctrine 'Wandel durch Handel' (in English: change through trade) to a focus on 'de-risking'. This shift was intended to symbolise the end of an era marked by naivety.

Yet, despite ostensible efforts to formulate a more realistic approach to China, traces of this previous lingering naivety are still noticeable upon closer examination. In particular, within section 3.2 of the Strategy (addressing parliamentary and civil society engagement with China), where the German government articulates its continued support for town and regional twinning initiatives² with Chinese cities.

*"Town and regional twinning is an important pillar of our relations and makes a concrete contribution to our bilateral cooperation. Furthermore, it improves mutual understanding and promotes exchange between civil societies in Germany and China. The Federal Government welcomes these partnerships and will coordinate their efforts closely with the Länder on this topic."*³

Establishing a diplomatic relationship between municipalities to the unsuspecting eye appears low-risk, provided the other party is broadly similar in what

it wants and how it goes about getting it. However, this assumption does not hold true in the context of German-Sino subnational diplomacy.

This report argues that, within the current framework, pursuing town twinning initiatives with Chinese cities stands in contradiction to the strategy of de-risking. Subnational partnerships with Chinese towns pose strategic risks for Germany.

Despite having to align with the federal government's foreign and development policies⁴, the decentralized framework of subnational diplomacy in Germany allows states, cities, and municipalities considerable autonomy in their international engagements. In contrast, the PRC adopts a centralized approach, with subnational diplomatic relations predominantly orchestrated by agents and agencies with direct ties to the central one party state. Chapter 3 of the report highlights how these different understandings and practice of subnational diplomacy present strategic risks for Germany.

Drawing again on the board game *Go*, the PRC is expanding its influence through town and regional twinning programs, a strategy reminiscent of encircling more territory and targeting the 'liberties' of the opponent.

Sadly, the PRC's strategic use of town twinning programs seems to be ignored by most German authorities. Such an oversight, this report argues, will have a negative impact on the overall implementation of the China strategy.

1.1 City air sets one free

Historically, cities have played a pivotal role in advancing civil and human rights. The medieval adage "Stadtluft macht frei" epitomises the liberty people found in urban spaces.⁵ Today, cities continue to play a significant role in safeguarding rights and freedoms.

Subnational partnerships with Chinese towns pose strategic risks for Germany.

1 Federal Foreign Office, "Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany" (Federal Foreign Office, July 13, 2023), 1, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussepolitik/asien/china-strategie/2607934>.

2 The term town twinning refers to a bilateral relationship between two communities in two countries. The term sister city is sometimes used to refer to the same type of bilateral relationship. In Germany, this type of subnational relationship is known as Städte-, Landes- und Gemeindepартnerschaften (town and regional twinning).

3 Federal Foreign Office, "Strategy on China", 23.

4 "Beschluss des Bund-Länder-Ausschuss Entwicklungszusammenarbeit zur Umsetzung des Beschlusses der Ministerpräsidenten der Länder vom 24. Oktober 2008 zur Kommunalen Entwicklungspolitik" (Berlin, June 7, 2010), https://ez-der-laender.de/sites/default/files/2019-01/beschluss_bla_ez_kepol_110526.pdf.

5 Christian Sepp, "Die Geschichte der Stadt: Urbanes Leben als Motor der Gesellschaft," dossier, Bayerischer Rundfunk, December 10, 2018, <https://www.br.de/radio/bayern2/sendungen/radiowissen/soziale-politische-bildung/stadtgeschichte-urbanisierung-100.html>.

In the 2019 report *Local Government and Human Rights*, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stresses the critical role local governments play in protecting and promoting human rights. The Commissioner recommends that ‘local laws, policies and programmes should be based on human rights norms and standards.’⁶

The European Committee of the Regions in 2009 discussed the concept of *city diplomacy*⁷, underscoring the need for dialogue, cooperation, and coordination at all levels to achieve peace, democracy, and respect for human rights. This perspective situates city diplomacy at the forefront of modern governance, addressing global challenges through local actions.⁸

The emphasis on human rights in towns’ international cooperation is also evident in the establishment of the *Committee on Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy and Human Rights* (CSIPDHR) of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). UCLG stands as the foremost international organisation for cities, local and regional governments. The Committee’s key thematic focus is human rights.⁹

The rising global movement of Human Rights Cities reflects the growing awareness of the role of human rights in local level politics. The Campaign Statement of “10, 100, 1000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030”, launched by CSIPDHR in 2022, encapsulates this ethos. The statement affirms that ‘every city and territory is critical for and actively contributes to human rights protection; promotion; and advancement globally.’¹⁰

Such an emphasis on human rights within the context of city partnership is seen domestically in Germany as well.¹¹ For example, in a document published shortly after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the German Association of Towns and Municipalities (Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, DStGB) asserted that “the spectrum of possible responses to a city partnership can include [...] openly advocating for peace, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. And to position oneself clearly and without any doubt against a totalitarian and aggressive ruler.”¹²

Nevertheless, subnational diplomacy is in practice often limited by the focus on trade and economic opportunities.¹³ This aspect has historically driven town partnerships between Germany and China, will be extensively explored in Chapter 4 of the report which examines the multifaceted collaborations between German and Chinese towns in business, smart cities, education, sports and more. It reveals how China effectively utilises town twinning programs as a conduit for advancing its grand project, the Belt and Road Initiative.

The report argues that this emphasis on economic interests must not preclude towns from standing up for civic values and human rights when engaging with Chinese towns. Chapter 5 presents a case study of two German cities, Berlin and Cologne, that have established partnerships with Beijing. The chapter illustrates that human rights considerations can and indeed should be a fundamental component of town twinning programs.

6 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Council, “Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,” Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General (United Nations, July 2, 2019), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/report-local-government-and-human-rights>.

7 Rogier van der Pluijm, *City Diplomacy: The Expanding Role of Cities in International Politics* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2007), 6, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/city-diplomacy-expanding-role-cities-international-politics>.

8 “Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of City Diplomacy” (Brussels: European Committee of the Region, May 28, 2009), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:120:0001:0005:EN:PDF>.

9 UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, “About the Committee,” United Cities and Local Governments, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://www.uclg-cisdg.org/en/about-committee#who-we-are-41>.

10 UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, “10, 100, 1000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030: Building Universality through Local Diversity,” 2022, https://www.uclg-cisdg.org/sites/default/files/ENG_Global_Campaign_Note_.pdf.

11 See: Deutscher Städtetag, “Internationale Städtediplomatie einbeziehen und stärken,” Deutscher Städtetag, accessed March 1, 2024, <https://www.staedtetag.de/positionen/internationale-staedtediplomatie-einbeziehen-und-staerken>.

12 Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, “Städtepartnerschaften sind wichtige Basis zur Aufrechterhaltung von Dialog und Austausch,” Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, March 5, 2022, <https://www.dstgb.de/themen/sicherheit/ukraine/staedtepartnerschaften-sind-wichtige-basis-zur-aufrechterhaltung-von-dialog-und-austausch/>.

13 Benjamin Leffel, “Principles of Modern City Diplomacy and the Expanding Role of Cities in Foreign Policy,” *Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 1 (2021): 179–200.

2. Centralised vs Decentralised: Why Germany's current framework for subnational diplomacy is no match for China's

The idea of subnational diplomacy originally gained prominence at the end of the Second World War. Town twinning emerged as a crucial tool for reconstruction and reconciliation,¹⁴ a role it continues to fulfil in modern times.

The most recent example of the role of town twinning is evident in the context of Russia's unlawful war against Ukraine. Since Russia's invasion, Kyiv has formed numerous twinings with European cities. These partnerships have become a lifeline, as Kyiv's partnered cities have helped the capital's reconstruction projects and provided humanitarian aid for its residents amidst the ongoing war.¹⁵

Aside from war and reconstruction, subnational diplomacy has grown in both democratic and non-democratic countries alike. Although there remains a gulf between how authoritarian centralised actors like the PRC approach subnational diplomacy, compared to federalised democracies like Germany.

The chapter suggests that engaging Chinese officials at the subnational level should be considered as an engagement with the extension of the Chinese Communist Party.

2.1 Germany's decentralised approach to subnational diplomacy

Town partnerships are an effective mechanism to bridge communities from different countries, primarily through people-to-people exchanges fostered by these alliances.¹⁶

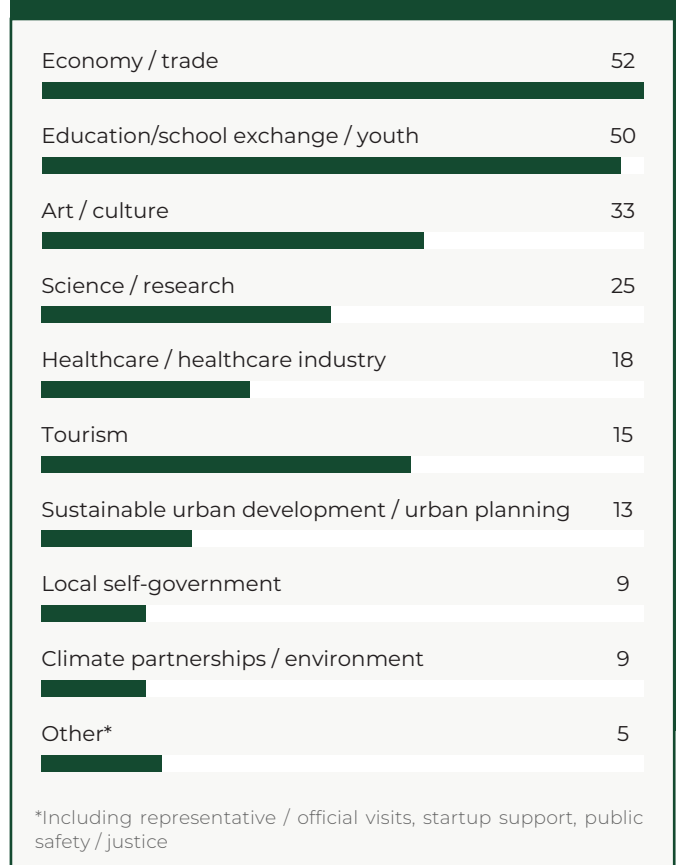
Influenced by Western Europe's general theme of détente, and as China gradually opened up under Deng Xiaoping's *Reform and Opening Up* policy, Germany established diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1972. This was followed in 1982 by the first establishments of town twinning between Duisburg and Wuhan.

Since then, German-China relations have intensified considerably with eleven German-Chinese town-twinings formed from 1982 to 1989. Overcoming their political and ideological differences, both nations focused on pragmatic cooperation driven by mutual economic in-

terests and benefits. This pragmatic orientation became a hallmark of the evolving Sino-German relationship.

Municipal partnerships have flourished under Germany's post-Cold War doctrine of "Wandel durch Handel". Today, more than 115 German municipalities have partnerships with Chinese counterparts.¹⁷

FIGURE 1. Focus of Municipal Cooperation



2.1.1 Legal framework regarding subnational diplomacy

Neither the German Basic Law (Grundgesetz) nor the constitutions of states (Landesverfassungen) explicitly grant towns and municipalities the power to engage in international relations. As per Article 28 (2) Sentence 1 of the Basic Law and the states' municipal laws, municipalities are confined to handling local matters. Nonetheless, both the federal and state governments

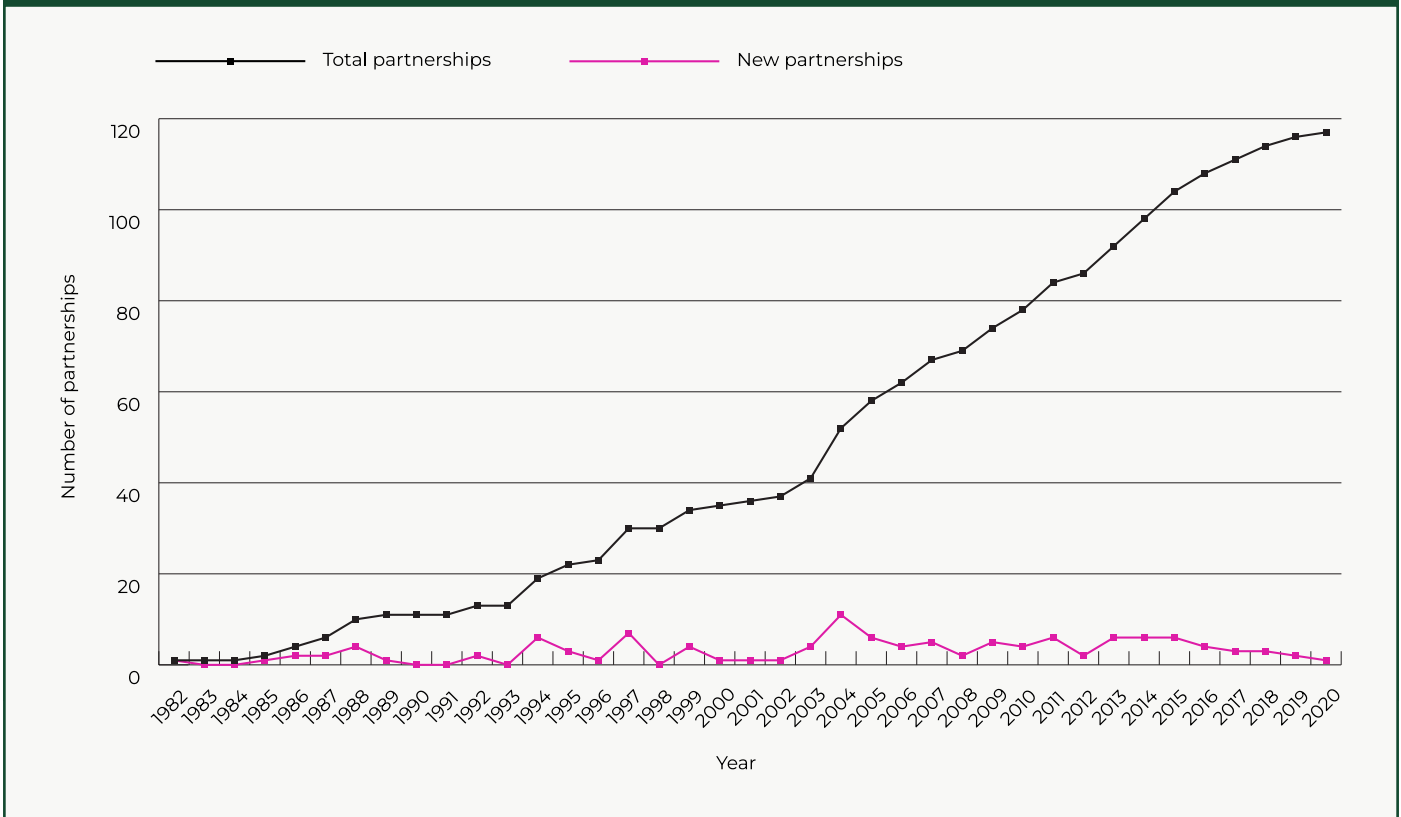
14 Christoph Laucht and Tom Allbeson, "Twinning Cities: Reconciliation and Reconstruction in Europe after 1945 – an Introduction," *Urban History*, 2023, 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926823000469>.

15 VisitUkraine.Today, "Sister Cities of Kyiv: What Does Such Cooperation and the Essence of Twinning during the War Give," January 12, 2023, <https://visitukraine.today/blog/1399/sister-cities-of-kyiv-what-does-such-cooperation-and-the-essence-of-twinning-during-the-war-give>.

16 Kai Pfundheller, "Städtepartnerschaften," [bpb.de](https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/handwoerterbuch-politisches-system/202141/staedtepartnerschaften/), accessed 27 February 2024, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/handwoerterbuch-politisches-system/202141/staedtepartnerschaften/>.

17 Roderick Kefferpütz, "Stadt, Land, Fluss im Blick Beijings: Chinas subnationale Diplomatie in Deutschland" (Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies, November 18, 2021), <https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/MERICS-China-Monitor-74-Subnational-Diplomacy-DE-final3.pdf>.

FIGURE 2. Formal Intermunicipal Relations by Year of Establishment (1982-2020)



view municipal engagement in international activities as acceptable and even beneficial, provided certain criteria are met.¹⁸

In a 1985 resolution, the *Standing Conference of Interior Ministers and Senators of the States* (IMK) made a few rules regarding municipality's foreign cooperation:

- The basic prerequisite for authorised municipal foreign activities is that activities must occur at the local level, involving municipalities or comparable institutions abroad as partners.
- Municipal foreign activities must relate to issues that are considered municipal matters according to German law.
- The execution of these activities may be subject to limitations imposed by the national foreign and development policy agenda of the government of the day.

The federal government's objectives in these areas take precedence over municipal activities.¹⁹

In the absence of regulations governing third-party financial contributions to twinning projects, municipalities have considerable flexibility in financing their international initiatives.²⁰

Additionally, the administrative structure for town twinning in Germany varies significantly from town to town. Responsibilities for twinning often fall under different departments, from the Office for International Affairs to the economic development department or the mayor's office.²¹ This decentralized system, while promoting independence, complicates the coordination, transparency, and tracking of town twinning activities across Germany.

The autonomy of municipalities, combined with the lack of a formal coordination mechanism between municipalities and states, leads to state governments often knowing very little of the municipal partnerships and activities within their states.

For example, in a recent response from the Bavarian Government to a written inquiry submitted by the Green Party, the state government revealed it had no knowledge about the objectives and activities of municipal partnerships with Chinese counterparts.²²

Similarly, the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) has stated that their municipal partnerships are managed independently by the

18 Innenministerkonferenz der Länder. "Beschluss vom 3. und 4. Oktober 1985." Unterausschuss "Kommunale Finanzen," 1985.

19 "Beschluss zur Umsetzung."

20 Detuscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, "Städtepartnerschaften: Instrument der 'kommunalen Außenpolitik' der Städte und Gemeinden" (Berlin: Detuscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, July 2011), 21, <https://www.dstgb.de/publikationen/dokumentationen/nr-104-staedtepartnerschaften-instrument-der-kommunalen-aussenpolitik-der-staedte-und-gemeinden/doku104.pdf?cid=6ht>.

21 Anja Goette and Qianlan Gao, *Deutsch-Chinesische Kommunalbeziehungen*, Studie von Anja Goette und Qianlan Gao, Heft 19, Dialog Global – Schriftenreihe Der Servicestelle Kommunen in Der Einen Welt (SKEW) (Servicestelle Kommunen in der Einen Welt (SKEW), 2018), 42-43, <https://skew.engagement-global.de/aktuelle-mitteilung/neue-studie-zu-den-deutsch-chinesischen-kommunalbeziehungen.html>.

22 Bayerischer Landtag, "Schriftliche Anfrage des Abgeordneten Florian Siekmann BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN vom 22.04.2022," 18. Wahlperiode (München: Bayerischer Landtag, August 12, 2022), https://www.bayern.landtag.de/www/ElanTextAblage_WP18/Drucksachen/Schriftliche%20Anfragen/18_0023139.pdf.

municipalities themselves. The state government only gets involved per request, and it will examine support on a case-by-case basis.²³

2.1.2 Institutions involved in local affairs and subnational diplomacy

In Germany, there are **three key organisations** managing municipal affairs:

1. **The German Association of Towns and Municipalities (Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, DStGB)**, represents the interests of German towns and municipalities, provides a platform for these entities to collaborate, exchange best practices, and advocate for policies that consider the unique needs of towns and municipalities. The DStGB works to influence federal and state legislation, ensuring that the perspectives and interests of its members are considered in the legislative process. Cities and municipalities can join the DStGB voluntarily.²⁴
2. **The Association of German Cities (Deutscher Städtetag, DST)**, represents larger cities in Germany. It focuses on issues of urban development, economic policy, social policy, culture and many other areas related to urban life. Like the DStGB, DST also engages in dialogue with the Federal Government and EU institutions. Cities can join DST voluntarily.²⁵
3. **Service Agency Communities in One World (Servicestelle Kommunen in der Einen Welt, SKEW)**, is a funded initiative by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, BMZ). The initiative is aimed at supporting and promoting sustainable development and international cooperation at the local level.²⁶

Except the SKEW, these entities function as representatives of cities and municipalities separate from the Federal Government. The decision to join these institutions lies within the competence of the local authorities, further illustrating the decentralised approach inherent in German local politics. The organisational structure and operational mechanisms of the DStGB and DST are fundamentally bottom-up. They operate independently of the federal government and do not advance its agenda. The Foreign Ministry only assumes a supportive role, cooperating with these organisations without exerting control.

23 Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen, "Antwort der Landesregierung auf die kleine Anfrage 3742 vom 27. Mai 2020 der Abgeordneten Johannes Remmel, Berivan Aymaz und Stefan Engstfeld BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN," 17. Wahlperiode (Düsseldorf: Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen, June 25, 2020), <https://gruene-fraktion-nrw.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Antwort-17-9953-Kommunalbeziehungen-NRW-China.pdf>

24 Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, "Über uns," accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.dstgb.de/ueber-uns/>.

25 Deutscher Städtetag, "Deutscher Städtetag: Unsere Aufgaben," accessed February 24, 2024, <https://www.staedtetag.de/ueber-uns/aufgaben>.

26 Engagement Global, "Service Agency," Engagement Global, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://skew.engagement-global.de/service-agency.html>.

2.2 China's centralised approach to subnational diplomacy

After some decentralisation in China's post-1978 reform era, it has reverted towards a more overtly centralised framework again in recent years.

Recentralisation

Between 1978 and 1993, the development of the Chinese political system was characterised by some decentralisation.²⁷ This period saw the central government conferring greater autonomy upon local governments to manage their own affairs, including diplomatic relations.

This shift was a departure from the Mao-era, when the Chinese Communist Party and the central government strictly controlled and supervised all international activities - adhering to the key doctrines of "external affairs are no small matter" (外事無小事) and "Party's leadership over diplomacy" (黨管外交).²⁸ Under the trend of decentralisation of diplomatic relations, local governments have been given more flexibility and a higher degree of autonomy.²⁹

Xi Jinping in his role as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has started to re-centralise the political system since he took over at the helm of the PRC on 15 November 2012. The relationship between the central one-party state and local government has been reconfigured, moving back to a more top-down and centralised approach.³⁰

The role of the CCP in foreign affairs has been significantly elevated in recent years. This is evident in the establishment of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission in March 2018, the highest decision-making body in the party-state system.³¹ This elevation of the CCP in China's diplomatic apparatus reflects the first core principle of PRC's current diplomatic doctrine - namely Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy:

"Upholding the authority of the CCP Central Committee as the overarching principle and strengthening the Party's centralised, unified leadership over external work."³²

The Foreign Relations Law of the People's Republic of China (FRL), which came into effect in July 2023, officially enshrines Xi's central ideas on diplomacy into law. Article 5 explicitly states that the PRC's foreign relations

27 Jun Yang and Shuyang Sheng, "Why China's Re-Centralisation Emerges in the Age of Globalisation?," China Report 57, no. 1 (February 1, 2021): 40–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445520984764>.

28 Kejin Zhao, "Daguo Waijiao de Quanwei Jichu — Zhongguo Gongchandang de Waijiao Lingdaoli Yanjiu [The Foundation of Authority of Great Power Diplomacy: The Study of the CCP's Leadership Strength in Diplomatic Work]," Northeast Asia Forum, no. 19 (2021): 3–18.

29 Kejin Zhao, "Zhongguo chengshi waijiao de ruogan lilun wenti [Theoretical Explanation of China's City Diplomacy]," Guoji Zhanwang 8, no. 1 (February 2, 2016): 59.

30 Jun Yang and Shuyang Sheng, "Why China's Re-Centralisation Emerges in the Age of Globalisation?," China Report 57, no. 1 (February 1, 2021): 40–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445520984764>.

31 Helena Legarda, "In Xi's China, the Center Takes Control of Foreign Affairs | Merics," Mercator Institute for China Studies, August 1, 2018, <https://merics.org/en/comment/xis-china-center-takes-control-foreign-affairs>.

32 CPC Central Committee Bimonthly, "Ten Core Principles of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy," Qiushi, July 16, 2016, http://en.gs-theory.cn/2021-07/16/c_643502.htm.

shall be conducted “under the centralised and overall leadership of the Communist Party of China”.³³

Re-vitalisation of “united front”

Apart from centralisation of China's foreign relations, the “united front” strategy has taken on a global scale under Xi Jinping,³⁴ who has called it multiple times one of the CCP's “magic weapons”.³⁵ United front activities can take various forms, but they all serve the same purposes, namely to advance the CCP's interests and to neutralise potential enemies by co-opting key individuals and groups. According to Anne-Marie Brady, a political scientist at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, the united front activities overseas in the Xi-era can be categorised into the following:

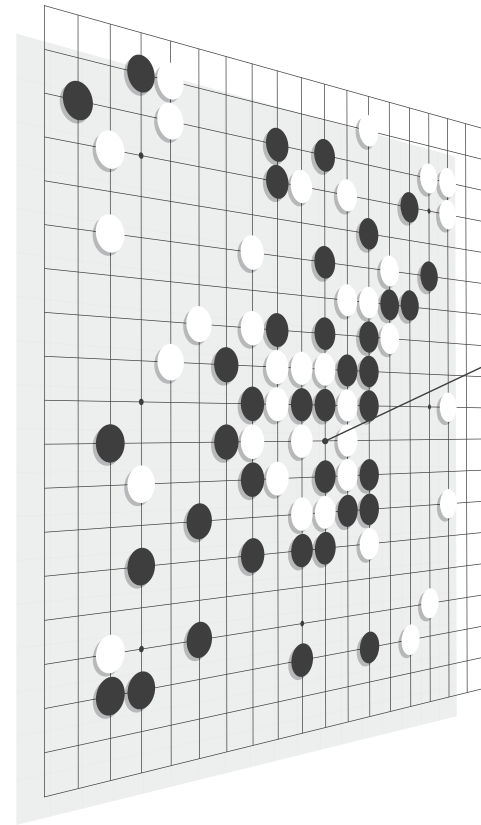
1. A strengthening of efforts to manage and guide overseas Chinese communities and utilize them as agents of Chinese foreign policy.
2. A re-emphasis on people-to-people, party-to-party, plus PRC enterprise-to-foreign enterprise relations with the aim of coopting foreigners to support and promote the CCP's foreign policy goals.”
3. The roll-out of a global, multi-platform, strategic communication strategy.
4. The formation of a China-centred economic and strategic bloc.³⁶

One of the key strategies for achieving the above activities to increase China's global influence is to “use the local to surround the center” (以地方包圍中央).³⁷ This strategy involves cultivating support at subnational levels (地方, local) so that these co-optees or sympathisers advocate or pressurise national governments (中央, center) to adopt policies favourable to China.³⁸

This approach, combined with the Mao's policy of “using civil actors to promote political ends” (以民促政),³⁹ represents a deliberate use of subnational diplomacy and so-called “people-to-people connections” (民心相通)⁴⁰ by the CCP. These elements are strategically mobilised to advance China's foreign policy objectives, il-

lustrating a methodical integration of interpersonal and subnational relations into the broader ambit of diplomatic manoeuvring.

Although Brady attributes the strategy of “using the local to surround the center” to primarily achieve “making the foreign serve China” (second objective), they also serve in “bringing the hearts and powers of the overseas Chinese together” (first objective) and the “Belt and Road Initiative” (fourth objective).⁴¹



以地方包圍中央

33 Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China, “The Law on Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China” (2023), http://en.moj.gov.cn/2023-06/29/c_898506.htm.

34 Martin Hála, “United Front Work by Other Means: China's ‘Economic Diplomacy’ in Central and Eastern Europe - Jamestown,” China Brief, May 9, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/united-front-work-by-other-means-chinas-economic-diplomacy-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

35 Xinhua, “Xi Jinping Chuxi Zhongyang Tongzhan Gongzuo Huiyi Bing Fabiao Zhongyao Jianghua [Xi Jinping Attended the Central United Front Work Conference and Delivered an Important Speech],” July 30, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-07/30/content_5703635.htm.

36 These four categories are copied from: Ann-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping” (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, September 18, 2017), 7, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>.

37 “Magic Weapons”, 9.

38 Allen-Ebrahimian Bethany, “Between the Lines on Chinese Strategy: ‘Use the Local to Surround the Center,’” Axios, February 12, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/2020/02/12/china-strategy-local-government-between-lines>.

39 “Magic Weapons”, 3.

40 Wang Chao, “People-to-people diplomacy key to tell China's story - Chinadaily.com.cn,” chinadaily.com.cn, December 31, 2019, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201912/31/WS5e0a8451a310cf3e3558193d.html>.

2.2.1 Legal framework for subnational diplomacy in China

Similar to Germany, Chinese subnational entities are allowed to conduct international engagements and cooperation within the scope authorised by the central authorities, as stated in the Article 16 of the Foreign Relations Law of the People's Republic of China (FRL).⁴²

The central government of the PRC explicitly supports people-to-people exchanges and cooperation with foreign countries. In addition, the PRC regularly honours and awards “those who make outstanding contributions to international exchanges and cooperation.”⁴³

In contrast to democratic countries like Germany, China's central Government has outlined specific responsibilities and obligations in Article 6 of FRL, empha-

41 “Magic Weapons”, 9.

42 Ministry of Justice, “Foreign Relations Law”.

43 Ministry of Justice, “Foreign Relations Law”. Article 7.

sizing the need to protect national sovereignty, security, dignity, honor, and interests during international exchanges and cooperation.

This provision is important in understanding one of the key differences between Germany and China's legal framework for subnational diplomacy. The Chinese law requires adherence to and active promotion of the policies set by the central government, implying a positive obligation on Chinese individuals, organisations, and subnational authorities engaged in subnational diplomacy to proactively support these objectives. By contrast, the relevant German law, as noted above, imposes a *negative* obligation on its subnational authorities, essentially requiring them not to undertake projects or activities that would contravene the nation's foreign policy.

This distinction highlights a fundamental difference in the nature of subnational diplomatic obligations between the two countries: Chinese entities are expected to actively contribute to the national agenda, whereas German entities are primarily obligated to avoid actions that would violate national foreign policy directives.

2.2.2 Institutional framework for Friendship Cities

The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries

China's subnational diplomacy is predominantly coordinated by the *Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries* (CPAFFC). This organisation, which presents itself as a "people's organisation" (人民團體), serves as the principal conduit for promoting the policies of the CCP at the subnational level, targeting state and local governments, political figures, think-tanks, and NGOs. The CPAFFC is overseen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).⁴⁴

In a 2020 statement by the US Department of State, it noted the CPAFFC is considered to be working in concert with the United Front Work Department, with the aim of "seeking to spread Beijing's malign influence in the United States."⁴⁵

The CPAFFC manages all town twinning programs (so-called 友好城市, friendship cities) on behalf of the PRC, as specified in Article 5 of the *Regulations on the Management of Friendship City Work* (友好城市工作管理規定).⁴⁶ The Regulations outline the codes and procedures necessary for conducting town-twinning programs.

Unlike Germany, where municipalities have the autonomy to decide whether to establish a municipal partnership, the process in China is subject to exam-

ination by three different organs within the party-state system, namely the provincial or regional People's government, the CPAFFC, and the MFA.⁴⁷

Twinning activities are under stringent oversight and management by the CPAFFC and the MFA. For instance, local governments are required to notify the CPAFFC and obtain approval from the MFA before joining any conferences or events organised by international organisations or partnered cities.⁴⁸ Furthermore, as stipulated in Article 31 of the Regulations, municipal partnerships shall "implement the State's foreign policy and planning, effectively comply with and actively cooperate with the overall needs of China's diplomatic work."⁴⁹

When local governments encounter sensitive political topics, such as human rights, freedom of religion or belief, the rule of law, and Tibet, they are required to immediately report these encounters to higher-level authorities.⁵⁰

In terms of Taiwan, the Regulations in Article 34 provide specific directives on how local governments should proceed. For instance: cities which have a partnership with Taiwan cities must recognise China's controversial "One China Principle" - which goes beyond the more widely accepted "One China Policy" - in order to have a partnership with Chinese cities. Moreover, Chinese officials are required to ensure that the foreign local government officials with whom they have established city partnerships do not use their official identities to visit Taiwan.⁵¹

Thus, Chinese cities and provinces are closely integrated into the structures of the central government and are another instrument for the central government to pursue foreign policy goals. Local governments, under the supervision and management of the CPAFFC and MFA, have little or no autonomy in their international affairs, making them effectively an extension of the one party-state.

2.3 Coordination Imbalance

Foreign entities that engage with Chinese towns and provinces are effectively dealing with extensions of the Chinese party-state apparatus with all its resources. These are large, often overwhelming the foreign counterpart, creating fundamental capacity mismatch, too.

This was exemplified by a meeting in 2021 between a German and a Chinese municipality to discuss further cooperation,⁵² the Chinese side overwhelmed the single German representative with seven attendees: two representatives from local foreign affairs offices in China, the vice-mayor, and the municipal deputy secretary general. The event was organised by a former German official, who attended with three of the employees from his consulting firm.

44 See: Jichang Lulu, "Repurposing Democracy: The European Parliament China Friendship Cluster" (Synopsis, November 26, 2019).

45 United States Department of State, "Designation of the National Association for China's Peaceful Unification (NACPU) as a Foreign Mission of the PRC," October 28, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/designation-of-the-national-association-for-chinas-peaceful-unification-nacpu-as-a-foreign-mission-of-the-prc/>.

46 The same document could be found in multiple local governments' websites. Apparently the document was drafted and distributed by the CPAFFC. Fuzhou People's Government, "Regulations on the Management of Friendship City Work [Youhao Chengshi Gongzuo Guanli Guiding - Bumen Guifanxing Wenjian]", August 10, 2022, https://www.fuzhou.gov.cn/zwgk/zxwj/bmwj_1/202212/t20221208_4483633.htm.

47 "Regulations on Friendship City Work", Article 12.

48 "Regulations on Friendship City Work", Article 21.

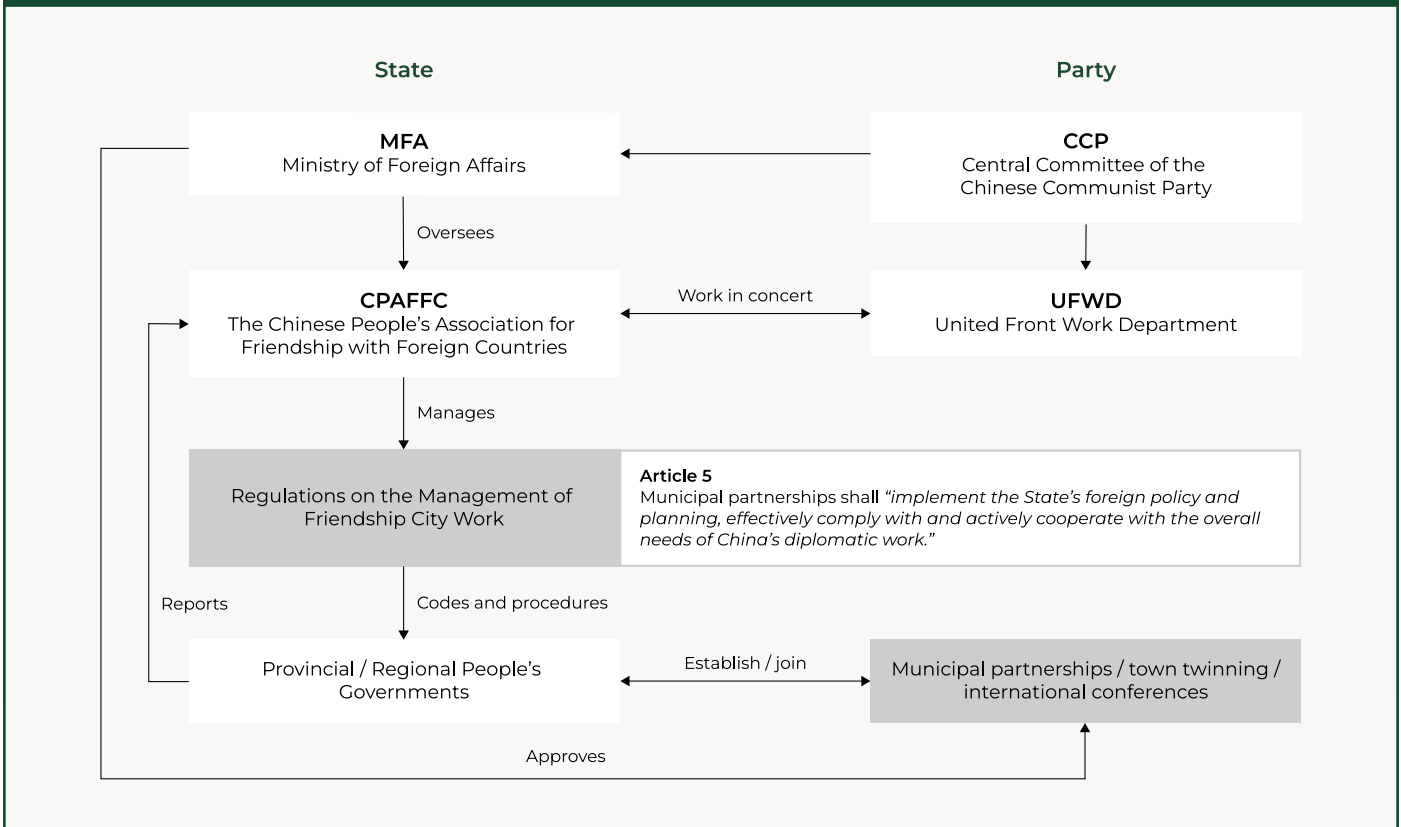
49 "Regulations on Friendship City Work", Article 31.

50 "Regulations on Friendship City Work", Article 33.

51 "Regulations on Friendship City Work", Article 34.

52 The meeting note was obtained and read by FfHK. To protect the source, information that may reveal the identity of the whistleblower is hidden and altered.

FIGURE 3. Institutional Framework for Friendship Cities



The absence of a cohesive organizational structure among German municipalities, coupled with a relative scarcity of resources, renders the German approach less equipped to match the streamlined and unified efforts of their Chinese counterparts in town-twinning initiatives.

German cities, through selecting their own administrative methods for handling international relationships, have inadvertently created a complex and fragmented national landscape in terms of coordination and tracking of town-twinning activities.

This decentralization, while offering flexibility at the local level, significantly hampers the ability to formulate and execute a unified national strategy in international engagement. As a consequence, German municipalities operating independently in their diplomatic endeavours, face challenges in aligning their activities with a coherent country-wide approach, in stark contrast to the more centrally directed and harmonized Chinese model of subnational diplomacy.

2.4 People-to-people (with CCP's characteristics) connections?

During the Cold War in 1956, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower advocated for "citizen diplomacy" through a people-to-people program, urging citizens to bypass governments if necessary to foster mutual understanding. This initiative aimed to empower individuals to contribute directly to international peace and understanding, promoting cultural exchange, education and direct communication between citizens to reduce Cold War tensions. This grassroots approach prioritised the reduction of governmental barriers to international relations and emphasised the humanising aspect of global engagement.⁵³

A similar concept of "people-to-people" connections (民心相通) has been prominently adopted in China's rhetoric regarding friendship cities and the Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁴ However, the meaning and purpose of these "people-to-people" engagements under the US and China's frameworks are very different.

China's emphasis on "people-to-people" connections aligns closely with CCP's broader united front strategy, mainly "using civil actors to promote political ends" (以民促政). This approach is not merely about fostering mutual understanding for its own sake, but is instead a calculated effort to advance the state's foreign policy goals. Through carefully managed economic, cul-

⁵³ Cremer & Dupuis, 2001, 380.

⁵⁴ For example: Yajun Wang, "People-to-People Bonds Provide a Solid Foundation for the Belt and Road Initiative [Minxin xiang-tong wei 'Yidai yilu' guben qiangji]," [cpcnews.cn](http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0416/c40531-31032103.html), April 16, 2019, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0416/c40531-31032103.html>.

tural, educational, and governmental exchanges, China aims to cultivate a favourable international environment that supports its geopolitical and economic interests, as will be explored further in the next chapter.

A 2018 study by SKEW highlights the differences in stakeholder composition within German and Chinese municipal relations. While business was dominant in both, a notable disparity existed in the involvement of civil society. **German municipal partnerships include civil society organizations and non-municipal institutions in city-to-city exchanges, while the participation of Chinese civil society organizations in these municipal partnerships is nearly non-existent.**⁵⁵

This observation is further corroborated by the Stiftung Asienhaus, which has organized EU-China civil society exchanges for several years, and found minimal involvement of NGOs in municipal exchanges between Germany and China.⁵⁶

Thus, it becomes evident that beneath the guise of “people-to-people” connections, authentic interpersonal exchanges between Germans and Chinese are rare. Instead, what often transpires are interactions between Germans and CCP officials. This distinction highlights a significant deviation from the original intent of fostering direct cultural and civilian ties.

55 Anja Goette and Qianlan Gao, ‘Deutsch-Chinesische Kommunalbeziehungen’. 42

56 Stiftung Asienhaus, “Die Deutsche China-Strategie: Eine Zivilgesellschaftliche Perspektive,” August 17, 2023, <https://www.asienhaus.de/aktuelles/die-deutsche-chinastategie-eine-zivilgesellschaftliche-perspektive-teil-1>.

3. Town Twinning or Political Pawning? Behind the Façade of Sino-German City Links

Over decades, China has carefully positioned itself along the critical junctures of the German multi-level system. Understanding that dealing with any Chinese official entity means dealing with the CCP is crucial to developing adequate tools to protect our liberal democracy. China has recognized the weaknesses and exploited the naivety of the democratic world, gaining a substantial foothold across various sectors.

Both the enormous potential of the Chinese market and the prospects of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has served to often blind local decision-makers when deciding on whether to engage with China and the extent of that engagement. Now that the PRC is beginning to show its hand, the degree to which China is capable and willing to exert its power has come to the surface.

3.1 (A) Political Bargaining Chip?

Despite its façade of wanting to establish people-to-people connections (民心相通), town twinning was used by China as a political tool early on. After the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, China was internationally shunned and sanctioned.⁵⁷ In response, the CCP encouraged cities to go abroad under the guise of the *zhoubian* (周邊)⁵⁸ strategy and take advantage of city diplomacy's civil nature to help the central government overcome its negative international image.⁵⁹

The strategy worked. Between 1992 and 2008, one to five town twinings were established between Germany and China annually⁶⁰ and bilateral relations normalized, guided by the long-standing German credo *Wandel durch Handel*.

When Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, he made clear that not only China but also the International Order was going to change. To secure legitimacy for its one-party authoritarian system, China began actively engaging in “ideological competition with the West”

under the banner of “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色大国外交).⁶¹

From the PRC's perspective on the current “international order”, Taiwan is considered an integral part of China, leaving minimal room for dissent on this matter. When Shanghai's sister city Prague wanted to renegotiate the twinning agreement's clause on the “One-China-Principle”, citing the apolitical target status of town twinings, China retaliated by cancelling numerous cultural events. As a result of China's perseverance, the Prague City Council passed a resolution to cancel the agreement. The resolution was not implemented in the end as Shanghai ended the twinning on its own accord, citing Prague's twinning with Taiwan.⁶²

FIGURE 4. Relations between German and Taiwanese Municipalities

German municipality	Taiwanese municipality	Relations established in
Starberg	Taipei	1985
Marktheidfeld	Taitung	1985
Annaberg	Kaohsiung	1993
Ostvorpommern	Nantou	1997
Parchim	Yunlin	1999
Erzgebirgskreis	Kaohsiung	2003

Town twinings are widely recognized to be tools for facilitating economic cooperation, but they tend to come as ‘package deals’ when dealing with the PRC. As the Chinese market remains tightly controlled by the CCP, it is difficult for German companies to do business there without political support. Beyond access to institutions and localized knowledge, chronically underfinanced municipalities have little to offer to the Chi-

57 Zhao Quansheng, ‘Domestic Factors of Chinese Foreign Policy: From Vertical to Horizontal Authoritarianism’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 519 (1992): 158–75.

58 “Zhoubian” literally translates to “circumference” and is interpreted as a “good neighbor policy”. It was first applied to the countries on China's fringes, and expanded to other parts of the world from 1993 onwards, with a significant increase in efforts following the rejection of its bid for the Olympic Games in the fall of the same year.

59 James C. Hsiung, ‘China's Omni-Directional Diplomacy: Realignment to Cope with Monopolar U.S. Power’, *Asian Survey* 35, no. 6 (1 June 1995): 573–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645710>.

60 Held and Merkle, “Deutsch-chinesische Kommunalbeziehungen: Motivationen, Strukturen, Aktionsfelder.”

61 Stephen N. Smith, ‘China's “Major Country Diplomacy”: Legitimation and Foreign Policy Change’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 2 (1 April 2021): orab002, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab002>.

62 “Matej šimalčík and Adam Kalivoda, ‘Sister-City Relations and Identity Politics: The Case of Prague, Beijing, Taipei, and Shanghai’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/sister-city-relations-and-identity-politics-the-case-of-prague-beijing-taipei-and-shanghai/>.



PICTURE 1. Xi Jinping in Duisburg, 2014

nese - but because they are interested in getting their business, town twinnings become a political bargaining chip that the CCP happily accepts.

3.2 Duisburg - the 'China-City'

Package deals are the whole idea behind the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by the PRC in 2013. The BRI's declared aim is to "facilitate policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties, by orienting towards "hard connectivity" in infrastructure, bolstering "soft connectivity" through harmonized rules and standards, and strengthening people-to-people bonds."⁶³

Former CPAFFC President Li Xiaolin said that "friendship city relations have become one of the important channels to implement the BRI. Subnational relations play an important role in boosting cooperation and exchanges among Chinese and foreign cities under the framework of the BRI." It is telling that by 2019, more than 700 sister-city partnerships were established in over 60 countries along the BRI.⁶⁴

Despite Germany's non-participation in the project, the once self-declared "China city of Germany" Duisburg became one of the BRI's node points.⁶⁵ Duisburg's ties with the PRC run long and deep. When Duisburg and Wuhan formed the first-ever town twinning between Germany and China in 1982, Duisburg was dealing with

rampant unemployment rates, and Wuhan was in dire need of modernization. Wuhan needed know-how, and Duisburg's industry needed large-scale orders⁶⁶ - the partnership came about after Duisburg-based companies Mannesmann, Krupp & Thyssen were commissioned with a steel-rolling mill in 1978.⁶⁷

In 2014, Duisburg found itself in circumstances reminiscent of 1982, grappling with the challenges posed by the structural transformation of the Ruhr area. The city faced an unemployment rate of 12.8%⁶⁸ and was burdened with public debts amounting to approximately four billion Euros⁶⁹, putting significant pressure on its economic stability.

So, it seemed like a blessing when "decision-makers in China selected the world's largest inland port [Duisburg, ed.] as a start and destination point" for the BRI.⁷⁰ Duisburg's significance for China was underpinned in 2014 when President Xi visited Duisburg with a sizable business delegation.⁷¹

Given the structural problems of Duisburg, it was a calculated move by decision-makers to double down

63 Xinhua, "Full Text: The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future," State Council Information Office, October 10, 2023, http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2023-10/10/content_116735061_5.htm.

64 Jing Li, "Sister City Relations Promote Cooperation," China Daily, April 26, 2019, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/global/2019-04/26/content_37462677.htm.

65 Philip Oltermann, "Germany's 'China City': How Duisburg Became Xi Jinping's Gateway to Europe", The Guardian, 1 August 2018, sec. Cities, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/01/germany-china-city-duisburg-became-xi-jinping-gateway-europe>.

66 Dirk Kurbjuweit, "Ge Lixi Aus Dem Kohlenpott," Zeit Online, May 24, 1985, <https://www.zeit.de/1985/22/ge-lix-i-aus-dem-kohlenpott>.

67 "40 Jahre Städtepartnerschaft Duisburg - Wuhan", Stadt Duisburg, accessed 1 April 2024, <http://www.duisburg.de/rathaus/rathausundpolitik/intbeziehungen/partnerschaften/jahre-duisburg-wuhan.php>.

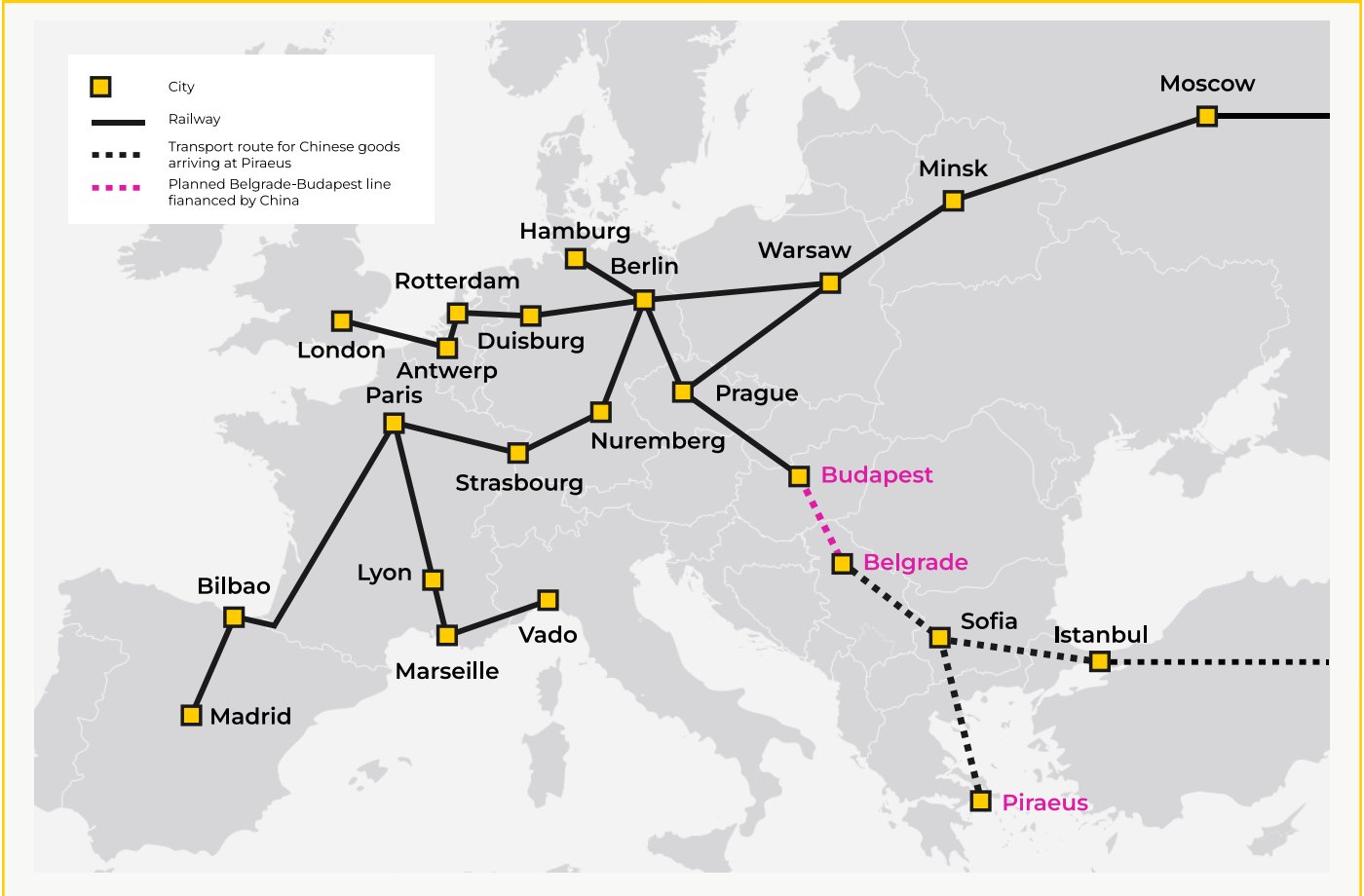
68 "Arbeitslosenquote in Duisburg bis 2022", Statista, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1120746/umfrage/entwicklung-der-arbeitslosenquote-in-duisburg/>.

69 "Integrierte Schulden der Gemeinden und Gemeindeverbände - Tabellenband: anteilige Modellrechnung für den interkommunalen Vergleich," accessed April 1, 2024, https://www.statistischebibliothek.de/mir/receive/DESeries_mods_00007595.

70 Duisport, "Without Boundaries. Local. Regional. Global." (Duisburg, 2019).

71 "Chinas Präsident Xi besucht Düsseldorf und Duisburg," Die Welt, March 29, 2014, https://www.welt.de/newsticker/dpa_nt/infonline/brennpunkte_nt/article126343364-Chinas-Praesident-Xi-besucht-Duesseldorf-und-Duisburg.html.

FIGURE 5. China's European Railway Routes under BRI



on the port's significance for the local economy - nowadays, 40,000 jobs in Duisburg are dependent on the inland port whose main business is China trade.⁷² To further cement China's engagement in the city, Chinese logistics giant COSCO was initially permitted to buy a 30% share of a new gateway terminal in Duisburg's port. The underlying agreement was cancelled in 2022, reportedly by the German side.⁷³

The Duisburg port is jointly owned, with one-third of it held by the city of Duisburg and two-thirds by the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.⁷⁴ As a result, key decisions regarding the port require political approval. In 2013, nearly all members of the supervisory board that held political positions (13 out of 19) affiliated with the SPD or were part of ministries led by the SPD, with only one exception.⁷⁵

Cooperation with the PRC continues to be intensely pushed by the city's mayor Sören Link who said in 2018

72 Tim Hildebrandt, "Duisburg: From a Dirty Old Town to Germany's China City?," CHOICE, November 2, 2022, <https://chinaobservers.eu/duisburg-from-a-dirty-old-town-to-germanys-china-city/>.

73 Loveday Morris, Kate Brady, and Emily Rauhala, "German Officials Rethink Duisburg's Trade Relationship with China," The Washington Post, May 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/22/germany-china-city-duisburg/>.

74 Tim Köksalan, "Cosco gibt Anteile im Duisburger Hafen auf," October 26, 2022, <https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/landespolitik/hafen-duisburg-china-terminal-100.html>.

75 "Geschäftsbericht Der Duisport Gruppe 2013 [Annual Report of the Duisport Group 2013]," duiport, accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.duisport.de/presse-meldungen/publikationen/?lang=en>.

that he does not see any dependencies or dangers as long as communication happens at eye level.⁷⁶ In the same year, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) countered the sentiment at the Munich Security Conference: "The initiative for a new Silk Road is not what some people in Germany believe it to be - it is not a sentimental nod to Marco Polo. [...] Rather [it, ed.] stands for an attempt to establish a comprehensive system to shape the world according to China's interests."⁷⁷

Another collaboration that was paused recently was between Duisburg and Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei. In 2018 and 2019, the two signed memorandums, agreeing to cooperate on smart cities, i.e. ICT infrastructure, data, command and research centres.⁷⁸ After the agreement with Huawei ended in 2022, Duisburg is now assessing the possibility of renewing the collaboration, considering guidance from both the Federal Government and the European Union. Despite concerns over Huawei offering access to citizens' private

76 Frederik Rother, "Neue Seidenstraße - China bringt Duisburg mehr als nur Container," Deutschlandfunk, February 8, 2018, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/neue-seidenstrasse-china-bringt-duisburg-mehr-als-nur-100.html>.

77 Nick Miller, "Why Are They Giving Us the Money? Behind China's Plans to 'Rescue' a Decrepit Rail Link," The Sydney Morning Herald, June 20, 2018, sec. Europe, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/why-are-they-giving-us-the-money-behind-china-s-plans-to-rescue-a-decrepit-rail-link-20180606-p4zjwk.html>.

78 Katherine Atha et al., "China's Smart Cities Development," January 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/China_Smart_Cities_Development.pdf.

data to the Chinese state, the city has defended the relationship, highlighting that no technological components from Huawei have been deployed.⁷⁹

Duisburg hosts a closely interconnected network that promotes Chinese investment, creating dependencies that span political, academic, and economic realms. This network has developed over decades, with various sectors supporting one another in a collective effort. The Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST) is central to this network, playing a pivotal role in fostering these comprehensive ties. Since its establishment in 1994,⁸⁰ IN-EAST has formed partnerships with seven Chinese universities.⁸¹ Similarly, the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) currently accommodates over 2000 Chinese students, with a majority enrolled in STEM disciplines.⁸²

Professor Markus Taube is a member of the board of directors at IN-EAST⁸³ and co-founded the Confucius Institute (CI) in Duisburg in 2009,⁸⁴ where he is responsible for economic matters.⁸⁵ Additionally, he co-founded the consulting firm THINK!DESK,⁸⁶ which raises questions regarding his academic impartiality, given his evident business interests.

In the past, Germany has faced significant challenges to academic freedom as a result of Confucius Institutes. For example in 2021, pressure by the Chinese Consul General in Düsseldorf led the Confucius Institute at UDE to cancel an event linked to the book *Xi Jinping - The Most Powerful Man in the World*.⁸⁷ When pressed upon the matter during a BBC radio show, Taube said:

“We have been approached by our partner university with the urgent request, which was not further explained, to discontinue this plan. As we have a lot of cooperation projects - Duisburg is a terminal station of the Belt and Road - so we have very very strong connections to China, and we thought wow, this is a partner with whom we have been working together for many many years, a trustful, friendly relationship and if you receive this request, then you think twice about not complying.”⁸⁸

In light of the public backlash against the decision, Taube argued that dismantling the Confucius Institutes does not advance *our* cause. “We need them as bridges to China,” he stated.⁸⁹ In 2023, the Confucius Institute renewed its agreement with UDE, citing that individuals with expertise on China are needed in Germany, and institutions such as universities and CIs play a key role in providing essential knowledge and qualifications.⁹⁰ While

it holds that China competence is needed in Germany, **the question arises what kind of knowledge is being produced in networks that are as heavily reliant on China, as Duisburg is.**

In 2023, IN-EAST board member⁹¹ and Confucius Institute co-founder and co-director⁹² Thomas Heberer, together with Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, published an opinion piece in *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, where they downplayed the UN-acknowledged⁹³ crimes against humanity in Xinjiang as a “disciplinary regime” and adopted well-known CCP talking points without any critical inquiry.⁹⁴ The same Thomas Heberer, in 2022, when

The question arises what kind of knowledge is being produced in networks that are as heavily reliant on China, as Duisburg is.

79 Michel, M., & Latsch, M. (2022, November 11). Duisburg: Kooperation mit Huawei beendet - Bund prüft Fortsetzung. RP ONLINE. Retrieved February 1, 2024, from https://rp-online.de/nrw/staedte/duisburg/duisburg-kooperation-mit-huawei-beendet-bund-prueft-fortsetzung_aid-79726537

80 “About IN-EAST. Über Das IN-EAST.,” Universität Duisburg-Essen, accessed April 1, 2024, https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/about_in-east/.

81 “Partners. Kooperationspartner,” Universität Duisburg-Essen, accessed April 1, 2024, https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/about_in-east/cooperation_partners.php.

82 “Duisburgs Kontakte in die Welt II – China und Duisburg,” Kultur- und Stadthistorisches Museum Duisburg, January 8, 2024, <https://www.stadtmuseum-duisburg.de/duisburgs-kontakte-in-die-welt-ii-china-und-duisburg/>.

83 “Board and Advisory Council. Vorstand Und Beirat,” accessed April 1, 2024, https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/about_in-east/board.php.

84 “Unser KI – Konfuzius-Institut Metropole Ruhr e.V.,” accessed April 1, 2024, <https://konfuzius-institut-ruhr.de/das-ki/>.

85 “Kontakt & Team – Konfuzius-Institut Metropole Ruhr e.V.,” accessed April 1, 2024, <https://konfuzius-institut-ruhr.de/team/>.

86 “THINK!DESK Team,” THINK!DESK, accessed April 1, 2024, <https://thinkdesk.de/ueber-thinkdesk/thinkdesk-team/>.

87 Kris Cheng, “China Attempts to Block Cultural Events in Germany, Italy,” *Voice of America*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-attempts-to-block-cultural-events-in-germany-italy/6290403.html>.

88 David Missal, “Entlarvendes Interview mit Markus Taube vom Konfuzius-Institut an der @unidue Duisburg-Essen: Das Gespräch zeigt das Mindset vieler deutscher Sinologen: Kooperation mit China um jeden Preis, selbst Zensur ist akzeptabel,” X (blog), October 30, 2021, <https://twitter.com/DavidJRMissal/status/1454440617795366915>.

89 Anna-Lena Scholz, “Einflussnahme aus China: Xi Jinping lächelt nicht,” *Die Zeit*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/2021/44/xi-jinping-biografie-china-einflussnahme-verhinderung-lesungen-konfuzius-institute>.

90 “Meldungen Aus Der UDE,” accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.uni-due.de/2023-06-09-kooperation-mit-kimr-wird-fortgesetzt>.

91 “Board and Advisory Council · Vorstand Und Beirat’.

92 Martin Ahlers, ‘Partnerschaft Duisburg-Wuhan: „Städte führen keine Kriege“’, 1 July 2022, <https://www.waz.de/staedte/duisburg/article235781185/partnerschaft-duisburg-wuhan-staedte-fuehren-keine-kriege.html>.

93 ‘OHCHR Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China’, OHCHR, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ohchr-assessment-human-rights-concerns-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region>.

94 Thomas Heberer and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, ‘Xinjiang: Pekings Kampf Gegen Terrorismus Und Separatismus’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/xinjiang-china-kampf-gegen-terrorismus-und-separatismus-ld.1753509>.

asked about potential strains on the city partnership between Duisburg and Wuhan in light of recent US-China tensions, replied with the memorable and puzzling phrase: “Cities do not fight wars.”⁹⁵

In the case of Duisburg, cities do not engage in human rights discussions either. In July 2021, the city of Duisburg created a department for China affairs, whose head Johannes Grünhage has dismissed local responsibility for addressing human rights issues with China, directing that such discussions are more appropriately handled at federal and European levels,⁹⁶ implying a lack of engagement and responsibility at the municipal level.

When China sanctioned the German think tank Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in 2021, the uproar in German academia was loud, but the board of IN-East remained deafeningly silent. An open letter was signed by over 1,300 academics globally, but 12 out of 13 directors of Confucius Institutes in Germany abstained from signing, including Taube and Heberer.⁹⁷

The stance of Duisburg’s China actors on criticising China is consistent across various sectors. In 2019, the city began to develop a new China strategy to address the decrease in Chinese investments, in which human rights concerns would be sidelined. Mayor Link emphasized that all German and EU regulations would be adhered to in dealings with China. However, he also stated that there is no intention to “elevate themselves above others” by bringing human rights issues to the table.⁹⁸

The collaboration between IN-EAST and political actors extends beyond shared viewpoints to active participation in various projects and roles, highlighting the interconnectivity within these networks. For example, Johannes Pflug, who served as Duisburg’s China Affairs Officer from 2013 to 2021, illustrates this symbiosis. He not only leads IN-EAST’s board of trustees⁹⁹ but also engages in multiple roles that link academic and political spheres, such as chairing the China Business Network Duisburg, being an honorary member of the Confucius Institute, a board member of China-Brücke, and chairman of the Advisory Board of the Alliance of German China Companies (ADCG). These roles come on the heels of his extensive involvement with the

German-Chinese Parliamentary Group in the German Bundestag, which he chaired for 15 years.¹⁰⁰

Building on this foundation of collaboration, in 2021, IN-EAST embarked on a notable project, commissioned by the NRW Ministry of Economic Affairs and the City of Duisburg. This project, aimed at conducting socio-political and economic research to support the Belt and Road Initiative’s (BRI) implementation, is led by Thomas Heberer and Markus Taube, among others. Scheduled for publication in 2024, this endeavour underscores the institute’s integral role in serving its own interests and shaping those of the city and the region.¹⁰¹

In conclusion, Duisburg’s deep-rooted engagement with China exemplifies a complete embodiment of China’s strategic global outreach. This relationship has woven a dense fabric of dependencies, encapsulating a strategy that spans economic, political, and academic spheres. Through decades of collaboration, Duisburg has emerged as a critical node in China’s expansive global network with deep economic ties. The city’s approach,

marked by a notable avoidance of human rights issues in favour of strengthening bilateral connections, and the full impact of China’s town-twinning strategy are laid bare, revealing both the PRC’s strategic success and the dilemmas it poses for local governance.

**“If you make a mistake and do not correct it, this is called a mistake.”
— Confucius**

3.3 「過而不改，是為過矣。」 - 孔子

“If you make a mistake and do not correct it, this is called a mistake.” — Confucius

As seen in the prior section, town twinning lays the groundwork for further cooperation, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CI).¹⁰² Portrayed as a “reactive and responsive instrument through which China wants to offer the world the chance to learn more about China [with, ed.] idealistic goals in relation to international understanding and cultural exchange”¹⁰³ they do in fact “aim not only to improve China’s global image but also to gain influence over the academic study and teaching of Chinese and China Studies in foreign universities.”¹⁰⁴ With 15 Confucius Institutes opened in Germany between 2006 and 2016,¹⁰⁵ China’s foothold in German academia has strengthened significantly.

95 Ahlers, ‘Partnerschaft Duisburg-Wuhan’.

96 ‘Duisburgs Kontakte in die Welt II – China und Duisburg’.

97 Solidarity statement on behalf of scholars sanctioned for their work on China / 学界联署声明：声援因从事中国研究而被制裁之学者。(2021, April 14). Retrieved February 2, 2024, from https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfvfAIpTeAVw45newLwTxaWGEa-ZydE6GPgQ_ZyKh0F8-ZrbsO/closedform

98 Michel, M. (2019, August 30). Duisburg plant neue China-Strategie. RP ONLINE. Retrieved February 1, 2024, from https://rp-online.de/nrw/taedte/duisburg/duisburg-plant-neue-china-strategie_aid-45358749

99 Wolfgang Hirn, “Old China Hand - Johannes Pflug, Mister China in Duisburg,” Chinahirn, July 16, 2023, <https://www.chinahirn.de/2023/07/16/old-china-hand-johannes-pflug-mister-china-in-duisburg/>.

100 ‘Johannes Pflug - China Business Netzwerk Duisburg’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.cbnd.de/ueber-uns/vorstand/johannes-pflug/>.

101 ‘Neue Seidenstraße’, accessed 1 April 2024, https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/research/neue_seidenstrasse.php.

102 Falk Hartig, Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of Confucius Institutes (Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

103 Hartig, Chinese Public Diplomacy., 101.

104 Robin Simcox, ‘A Degree of Influence: The Funding of Strategically Important Subjects in UK Universities’, Henry Jackson Society, 1 March 2009, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/a-degree-of-influence-the-funding-of-strategically-important-subjects-in-uk-universities/>.

105 Hartig, Chinese Public Diplomacy., 142.

After laying the groundwork for the establishment of a CI in the then German Chancellor Angela Merkel's constituency during a state visit in China,¹⁰⁶ in 2016, the Chancellor personally opened a Confucius Institute in Stralsund.¹⁰⁷ The state-government of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has subsequently released accusations that espionage is taking place in this particular CI, stating that "it can be reasonably assumed that all official contacts with Chinese organisations follow the Chinese reason of state and that information is also passed on to Chinese state agencies, including the intelligence services."¹⁰⁸

The Confucius Institute's influence is structural and subtle and leads to self-censorship rather than outright endorsements of the CCP. To exemplify this approach, when Mechthild Leutner, Chairwoman of the Confucius Institute at FU Berlin, gave testimony to the Bundestag's Human Rights Committee, she downplayed the persecution of Uyghurs as mere "vocational training programs."¹⁰⁹ Leutner's CI has been receiving €100,000 in funding from Hanban annually since it was opened in 2006.¹¹⁰

There is a reason why the United States designated the Confucius Institute U.S. Centres as a "foreign mission" of the Chinese government¹¹¹ and the rationale behind self-censorship is simple: Confucius Institutes are directly funded by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC), a subsidiary of the Chinese Ministry of Education and Hanban's successor.¹¹² In August 2015, the Ministry's "Seven Prohibitions" guidelines were leaked, revealing bans on promoting Western democratic ideals, universal values, media independence, civil society, neoliberal economics, and criticism of the Communist Party's historical errors.¹¹³

As the CCP has an interest in incorporating Confucius Institute directly into university structures, they are often incentivised with chair sponsorships, which provide German universities a means to boost their

international profile and access to China.¹¹⁴ This can further lead universities to decrease their own funding for independent Sinology research, which in turn increases the relative importance of Chinese financial support in these academic areas and thereby creates dependencies.¹¹⁵

After the elevation of FU Berlin's relationship with Peking University to a strategic partnership in 2011, collaboration between the two expanded from the humanities and social sciences to natural science, joint research and teaching exchanges. When FU's academic senate passed Hanban's funding of a professorship, questions about academic freedom, potential Chinese influence, and the university's independence arose due to the contract's sudden termination clause and the requirement to adhere to Chinese law.¹¹⁶ In response to these concerns, FU Berlin renegotiated the contract, removing provisions that could compromise academic autonomy.¹¹⁷ The university maintains that Hanban has had no undue influence on appointments or activities, emphasising their ability to terminate the contract if necessary.¹¹⁸ Similar plans by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin to establish a Hanban-funded professorship were abandoned due to the short duration of the agreement and concerns over academic independence.¹¹⁹

There has been an awakening in some parts of German academia regarding Confucius Institutes: Current Education Minister Stark-Watzinger (FDP) has urged independent universities to critically reassess their connections with Confucius Institutes and fulfil their responsibilities.¹²⁰ This call to action aligns with the 2022 Verfassungsschutz report, which highlights the role of Confucius Institutes in spreading a flawless image of China as part of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) influence strategy.¹²¹

The University of Hamburg cited changes in Chinese policy regarding science, including the removal of scientific freedom clauses from the charters of many

106 Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, 'Kooperation von Konfuzius-Instituten mit Geheimdiensten?', FAZ.NET, 4 December 2023, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/kooperation-von-konfuzius-instituten-mit-geheimdiensten-19359747.html>.

107 Hefei University, 'Dreijähriges Jubiläum Der Eröffnung Des Konfuzius-Instituts Stralsund Und Die Glückwünsche von Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.hfuu.edu.cn/lb/5a/c6308a72538/page.htm>.

108 Uwe Reißenweber, 'Land geht von Spionage durch Konfuzius-Institut Stralsund aus | SVZ', [svz.de](https://www.svz.de) (svz.de, 30 November 2023), <https://www.svz.de/deutschland-welt/mecklenburg-vorpommern/artikel/land-geht-von-spionage-durch-konfuzius-institut-stralsund-aus-46021182>.

109 Amory Burchard, 'Anhörung zur Partnerschaft der FU mit Peking: Unter dem Einfluss der KP Chinas?', Der Tagesspiegel Online, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/unter-dem-einfluss-der-kp-chinas-5607748.html>.

110 Jonas Bickelmann, 'Freie Universität Berlin: China finanziert Kulturinstitut mit 100.000 Euro im Jahr', Der Tagesspiegel Online, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/china-finanziert-kulturinstitut-mit-100000-euro-im-jahr-4124338.html>.

111 Cheng, 'China Attempts to Block Cultural Events in Germany, Italy'.

112 Verfassungsschutzbericht des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt für das Jahr 2020. Ministerium für Inneres und Sport des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, 226.

113 'Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation', ChinaFile, 8 November 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

114 Hartig, Chinese Public Diplomacy, 145.

115 Asena Baykal and Thorsten Benner, 'Risky Business: Rethinking Research and Exchange with Non-Democracies', GPPi Global Public Policy Institute, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://gppi.net/2020/10/22/rethinking-research-cooperation-and-exchange-with-non-democracies>.

116 Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, 'Umstrittene Konfuzius-Institute: Senat will von China finanzierte Professur an der FU überprüfen', Der Tagesspiegel Online, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/senat-will-von-china-finanzierte-professur-an-der-fu-ueberpruefen-7050091.html>.

117 Amory Burchard, 'Anhörung zur Partnerschaft der FU mit Peking'.

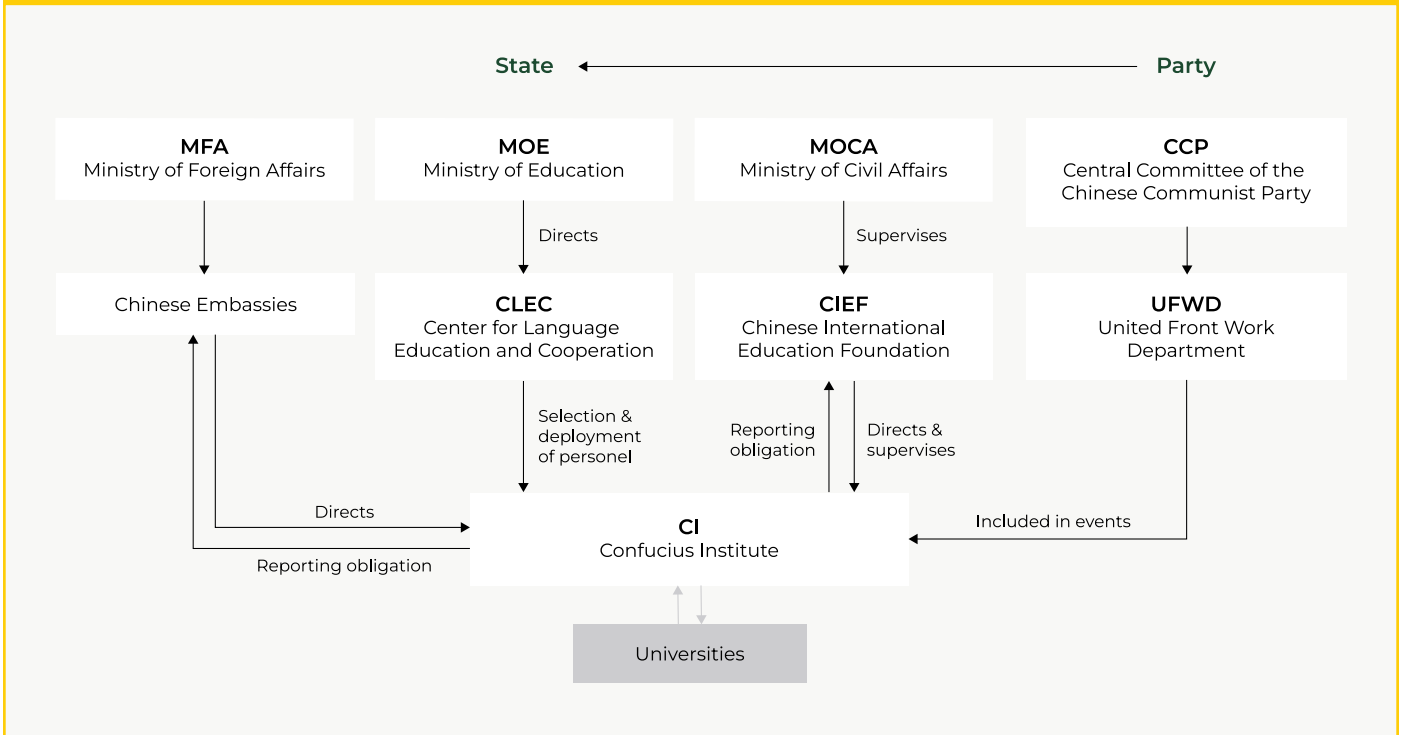
118 'Thema: Stiftungsprofessur und Kooperation mit Hanban', 7 February 2020, <https://www.fu-berlin.de/presse/informationen/fup/fag/china/01.html>.

119 Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, 'Umstrittene Konfuzius-Institute'.

120 dpa, 'Bundesregierung will chinesischen Konfuzius-Instituten Grenzen setzen', Der Spiegel, 29 June 2023, sec. Politik, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/konfuzius-institute-bundesregierung-will-chinesischen-bildungseinrichtungen-grenzen-setzen-a-12c90c21-0621-4800-968b-d30d55d32808>.

121 Verfassungsschutzbericht 2022. (2023). Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 293. https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/DE/verfassungsschutz-berichte/2023-06-20-verfassungsschutzbericht-2022.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=9

FIGURE 6. Institutional Framework behind Confucius Institutes



Chinese universities, as the reason for ending its partnership.¹²² Similarly, the University of Düsseldorf ended its cooperation because the university leadership could not exclude the possibility of Chinese state doctrine influencing the work of the institute.¹²³

In 2021, the University of Trier put a halt to the activities of its Confucius Institute, prompted by China's sanctions against European sinologists, raising concerns over the institute's designation as a "zentrale wissenschaftliche Einrichtung" (central scientific institution), effectively an in-house institute of the university. The matter led to discussions about the future of the Confucius Institute. Subsequently, the University's Senate took a decisive step to revoke this status, underpinning the decision to terminate the contract with the institute.¹²⁴ This action was rooted in the recognition of irreconcilable perspectives on China between Trier's Sinology department and the Confucius Institute, as highlighted by the university's president, Professor Michael Jäckel, who pointed out that such fundamental differences made any form of cooperation untenable.¹²⁵

122 dpa, 'Wissenschaftsfreiheit: Uni Hamburg Zieht Sich Aus Konfuzius Institut Zurück - Forschung & Lehre', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/management/uni-hamburg-zieht-sich-aus-konfuzius-institut-zurueck-2978>.

123 Kirsten Bialdiga, 'Propaganda-Verdacht: Diskussion über Chinesisch-Unterricht in NRW', General-Anzeiger Bonn, 15 January 2020, https://ga.de/region/koeln-und-rheinland/propaganda-verdacht-uni-duesseldorf-kuendigt-konfuzius-institut_aid-48332663.

124 Soffel, C., & Shi-Kupfer, K. (2020). Hintergrundinformationen zum Status der Konfuzius-Institute mit Blick auf Kooperationen mit deutschen Universitäten. Retrieved March 10, 2024, from https://www.uni-trier.de/fileadmin/fb2/SIN/Sinologie_Publikationen/2023_Soffel_ShiKupfer_Hintergrundinformationen_KI.pdf

125 'Uni Trier trennt sich von Konfuzius-Institut', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/management/uni-trier-trennt-sich-von-konfuzius-institut-5095>.

3.4 Student Exchanges with Chinese Characteristics

In its China strategy, the German Government explicitly continues to put its seal of approval on mobility for students and youth exchanges between both countries¹²⁶ and China is the number one country of origin for international students (42,541 out of all 458,210 foreign students in the 2022/2023 winter semester came from China).¹²⁷ As of 2024, there are more than 1,300 cooperation agreements between 216 German and 378 Chinese universities.¹²⁸ There are sufficient reasons to re-think whether and the extent to which this cooperation should continue in the future.

Using the China Scholarship Council (CSC) as an example, stipendiaries coming to Germany are required to sign a contract that prohibits them from engaging in activities "that harm the interests of the ancestral country." These students must also maintain close contact with the Chinese Embassy, effectively creating a monitoring system overseen by the embassies due to the obligation to report any negative portrayals of the party or misconduct by peers. In July 2023, the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg became the first German university to halt its cooperation with the CSC, although

126 China-Strategie.

127 Deutscher Bundestag, 'Antwort Der Bundesregierung Auf Die Kleine Anfrage Des Abgeordneten Markus Frohnmaier Und Der Fraktion Der AfD- Drucksache 20/8166 -', 27 September 2023, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/084/2008476.pdf>.

128 See: Statistik über Kooperationen und Institutionen. (2024, March 9). Internationale Hochschulkooperationen. Retrieved March 9, 2024, from https://www.internationale-hochschulkooperationen.de/statistik/act/stat.html?tx_szcooperationsearch_pi2%5Bcontoller%5D=CooperationResults&cHash=43826ae86ab83901a6afc0a42ccf4849

CSC-sponsored students continue to be present in approximately 30 universities across Germany.¹²⁹

Student exchanges with China import restrictions on individual freedoms and pose a threat to dissidents and those who speak up against China, as it has been shown that violations can lead to serious financial consequences and may jeopardize the security of their guarantors in China.¹³⁰

In June 2023, family members of a Chinese international student were taken to a police station and given a warning after the student attended a protest against China's human rights infringement during Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Berlin. Protests against China in Germany are reportedly monitored, filmed, and tracked. Families of overseas protesters are often pressured to encourage protesters to return back to China for police "interviews"¹³¹

When the German student union ASTA showed support for Hong Kong's Polytechnic University students amidst their protests against an extradition bill, political tensions emerged at the Technical University (TU) Berlin. This stance led to a severe backlash, including about 5000 Facebook comments and death threats. The Society of Chinese Academics at TU Berlin demanded ASTA apologize, alleging misrepresentation of Chinese students' views and accusing them of violating China's national unity. TU's leadership stressed open communication with all parties, including the Chinese Embassy, without directly addressing specific interactions with the embassy.¹³²

*"For every couple of papers that are published, you will possibly also see an actual Chinese military officer who's worked and studied at a European university and built a relationship that's led to these collaborations and research papers."*¹³³

In China, the lines between private and public life are blurred, and the line between civilian and military research has been erased entirely. All serve the CCP, and that does not change when Chinese (soon-to-be) scientists go abroad to conduct research. Scientists from PLA-affiliated universities often hide their military connections when engaging with Western institutions, presenting themselves as part of civilian academia.¹³⁴

A notable instance involved a top missile expert from China's Rocket Force, Major General Hu Changhua. In 2008, he spent time at UDE, concealing his true affiliation with the Rocket Force Engineering University and falsely claiming to represent a non-existent civilian institute.¹³⁵ Another example for the lack of caution and expertise on the German side can be found in the state-funded Helmholtz-Zentrum Dresden-Rossendorf's collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Engineering Physics, which develops China's nuclear weapons and high-energy lasers.¹³⁶

An investigative report found that between 2000 and 2022, at least 230 papers were published as a result of collaborations between German research institutions and China's National University of Defense Technology - some of them with clear dual-use potential.¹³⁷ In response to the findings, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBWF) maintains that universities operate autonomously. The Federal Government's role, they assert, lies primarily in "raising awareness" of potential issues rather than imposing direct control or measures.¹³⁸

3.5 Port of Contention: The Tug-of-War Over Hamburg's KRITIS

Awareness of the potential repercussions that doing business with China brings has been present in Germany for some time. In 2019, the Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie (BDI) labelled China as a systemic competitor, citing its increasing centralization of power and significant state control over the economy and society. This includes state-led industrial policies aimed at gaining technological dominance, often undermining foreign competitors through forced technology transfer and strategic acquisitions. The BDI criticized China for market distortions due to state interventions, over-capacities impacting global markets, and protectionist policies limiting market access for non-Chinese companies.¹³⁹

The acquisition of 24.9% of a container terminal in Hamburg Port through China's state-owned shipping company COSCO in October 2022 was arguably one of these strategic acquisitions.¹⁴⁰ China uses corporate in-

129 Till Eckert and Sophia Stahl, 'Uni Erlangen setzt Zusammenarbeit mit chinesischen Stipendiaten aus', [correctiv.org](https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/international/2023/07/18/chinese-scholarship-council-uni-erlangen-setzt-zusammenarbeit-mit-chinesischen-stipendiaten-aus/) (blog), 18 July 2023, <https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/international/2023/07/18/chinese-scholarship-council-uni-erlangen-setzt-zusammenarbeit-mit-chinesischen-stipendiaten-aus/>.

130 Till Eckert and Sophia Stahl, 'Wie China seine Studierenden in Deutschland kontrolliert', [correctiv.org](https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/international/2023/03/07/china-scholarship-council-studierende-in-deutschland-unter-kontrolle/) (blog), 7 March 2023, <https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/international/2023/03/07/china-scholarship-council-studierende-in-deutschland-unter-kontrolle/>.

131 David Missal, "Briefing: Chinas Terror in Deutschland," Tibet Initiative Deutschland e.V., December 15, 2023, <https://www.tibet-initiative.de/briefing-chinas-terror-in-deutschland/>.

132 Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, "Nach Solidaritätserklärung mit Hongkong: Asta der TU Berlin erhält Morddrohungen," Der Tagesspiegel Online, November 28, 2019, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/asta-der-tu-berlin-erhalt-morddrohungen-6869929.html>.

133 Esther Felden, Sandra Petersmann, and Naomi Conrad, "Are European Academics Helping China's Military?," DW, May 19, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/are-european-academics-helping-chinas-military/a-61834716>.

134 Asena Baykal and Thorsten Benner, 'Risky Business: Rethinking Research and Exchange with Non-Democracies'.

135 Kathrin Hille, 'Chinese Military Researchers Exploit Western Universities', 29 October 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/ebe95b76-d8cc-11e8-a854-33d6f82e62f8>.

136 William C. Hannas and Didi Kirsten Tatlow, eds., *China's Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage* (London: Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003035084>, 138.

137 Esther Felden, Sandra Petersmann, and Naomi Conrad, 'Are European Academics Helping China's Military?'

138 Vera Teillmann, "Chinese Military Made in Germany: How China's Military Uses Knowledge from Joint Research with German Universities," DW, May 29, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/chinese-military-made-in-germany-how-chinas-military-uses-knowledge-from-joint-research-with-german-universities/a-61845742>.

139 See: Grundsatzpapier: China – Partner und systemischer Wettbewerber. (2019). In BDI. Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie (BDI). Retrieved January 29, 2024, from <https://bdi.eu/media/publikationen/publikation/news/china-partner-und-systemischer-wettbewerber>

140 Christiane Rebhan, 'Chinesische Kaufinteressen im Hamburger Hafen: Kanzler Scholz blockiert die Kabinettsbefassung', Business Insider, 25 October 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.de/politik/deutschland/chinesische-kaufinteressen-im-hamburger-hafen-kanzler-scholz-blockiert-die-kabinettsbefassung/>.



■ PICTURE 2. Scholz together with Yunpeng Li, Former Cosco-CEO, during a China trip, on November 11, 2015, at Cocco-headquarters in Shanghai.

vestments to exert influence in global affairs, a tactic known as 以商逼政 (translation: using business means to apply governmental pressure). Through investments in key infrastructures like ports, China aims to secure its trade routes and create economic dependencies that can be leveraged for political purposes.¹⁴¹

The sale became highly controversial, as six German ministries, the EU Commission and German intelligence services, due to security concerns, openly opposed the deal which was pushed by Chancellor Scholz.¹⁴² Shortly after becoming Mayor of Hamburg in 2011, Scholz focused on building economic ties with Chinese corporations, including a visit to the China Shipping Group Company, later part of COSCO. These efforts aimed to secure a beneficial economic partnership for Hamburg's future, particularly for its port. Scholz's engagement with Chinese companies continued throughout his tenure as mayor, fostering economic relationships and significant Chinese investment in Hamburg.¹⁴³

Scholz's engagement with China comes from a longstanding tradition for Hamburg mayors, as part of the city's partnership with Shanghai (established in 1986). This relationship has fostered long-term economic exchanges, significantly influencing COSCO's choice to set up its European base in Hamburg.¹⁴⁴ Before Scholz, Hamburg's then-mayor Christoph Ahlhaus also engaged with COSCO in 2010, marking China's initial interest in Hamburg's port.

Today, China stands as Hamburg's largest foreign investor, a status reflected in the fact that one in every three containers at Hamburg's port comes from China, and the city hosts over 500 Chinese companies.¹⁴⁵ The evolution from Hamburg's historical partnership with Shanghai to Chancellor Scholz's defence of the controversial COSCO deal at Hamburg Port illustrates a deepening yet contentious economic engagement with China, reflecting a complex interplay between long standing local connections and broader national security concerns.

3.6 Volkswagen's Eastern Venture: Wolfsburg's Twinning Trail

The intertwining of business interests and town twinning is nowhere more evident than in Wolfsburg, a city synonymous with Volkswagen (VW), and by extension, its subsidiary Audi.¹⁴⁶ Founded in 1938 to house VW's operations, Wolfsburg has actively pursued town twinning in China, reflecting the deep economic ties VW has with the country.¹⁴⁷

China stands as the largest market for VW, accounting for over a third of its global sales,¹⁴⁸ making the company heavily dependent. That the state of Lower-Saxony holds 11,8% of VW shares and 20% of voting rights¹⁴⁹ underscores the regional dependency¹⁵⁰ in this international relationship.

141 Fabian Kretschmer, 'Pekings langer Arm: China kauft sich im Hamburger Hafen ein', Der Tagesspiegel Online, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wirtschaft/china-kauft-sich-im-hamburger-hafen-ein-4768057.html>.

142 Rebhan, 'Chinesische Kaufinteressen im Hamburger Hafen'.

143 Zara Riffler, 'Hafen-Deal: Die Brisante China-Freundschaft von Olaf Scholz', Bild, October 26, 2022, <https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/politik-inland/hafen-deal-die-brisante-china-freundschaft-von-olaf-scholz-81739554.bild.html>.

144 Fabian Kretschmer, 'Pekings langer Arm'.

145 Zara Riffler, 'Hafen-Deal: Die Brisante China-Freundschaft von Olaf Scholz'.

146 See: Volkswagen Group. (n.d.). Volkswagen Group. Retrieved January 30, 2024, from <https://www.volkswagen-group.com/en/group-15765>

147 'Stadtgeschichte', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.wolfsburg.de/leben/stadtportraitstadtgeschichte/stadtgeschichte>.

148 Frank Stocker, 'Ohne Volkswagen Ist Niedersachsen Nichts,' Die Welt, August 8, 2017, <https://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/artikel167476785/Ohne-Volkswagen-ist-Niedersachsen-nichts.html>.

149 'Aktionärsstruktur', Volkswagen Group, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.volkswagen-group.com/de/aktionaeersstruktur-15951>.

150 Frank Stocker, 'Ohne Volkswagen Ist Niedersachsen Nichts.'

This commitment to the Chinese market was further solidified with the establishment of Shanghai Volkswagen in the late 1970s,¹⁵¹ a move replicated by Audi's collaboration with First Automotive Works (FAW) in 1988, leading to Audi China's foundation in Beijing.¹⁵² These ventures underline the companies' commitment to the Chinese market, with VW and Audi embedding themselves deeply within the local automotive sector through over 40 manufacturing sites and nearly 100,000 employees for VW alone.¹⁵³

Building on these foundations, Wolfsburg's formal friendship agreements with Changchun, Dalian, and Nanhai following joint ventures with FAW in the cities¹⁵⁴ enduring connections fostered through VW's and Audi's expansions. Amid growing geopolitical tensions, VW is adopting an "in China for China" strategy, focusing on local procurement and integration into China's EV supply chain. This approach, emphasizing R&D and manufacturing expansion, reflects a strategic pivot towards deepening collaboration with Chinese partners and dependence on the Chinese market.

Similarly, Ingolstadt, the heart of Audi, has engaged in a city partnership with Foshan,¹⁵⁵ arguably due to Audi's deep-rooted influence in Ingolstadt, where the company's preferences significantly swayed decisions in the local city council.¹⁵⁶ Foshan also hosts the FAW-VW automotive plant, a joint venture involving FAW, VW, and AUDI, which has been operational since September 2013.¹⁵⁷

In 2016, the Audi Confucius Institute was opened in the city¹⁵⁸ and Ingolstadt joined the Chinese-German Industrial Cities Alliance.¹⁵⁹ Both were ostensibly created to foster connections between businesses in China and Germany. However, this initiative was soon leveraged by the Chinese United Front as a vehicle for spreading Beijing's viewpoints and strategically establishing political connections at the municipal level. Under the guise of fostering international cooperation, the Chinese United Front adeptly advanced Beijing's foreign policy and economic objectives, embedding its

influence deeply within the fabric of German municipal politics and industry.¹⁶⁰

The partnership was further used to facilitate a partnership between FC Ingolstadt and football clubs in Beijing and Foshan.¹⁶¹ Similarly, Volkswagen, and by extension VFL Wolfsburg, participated in CPAFFC-initiated Rainbow Bridge Project with "the main emphasis is on soccer coaching for young people in four Chinese provinces."¹⁶²

3.7 Soccer and Censorship: China's Playbook in German Sports

China's strategic use of sports, particularly football, as a platform for exerting its international influence and promoting its interests, reveals a complex interplay between cultural diplomacy and economic power. The 2016 memorandum of understanding on football cooperation between China and Germany, initiated under Xi Jinping's Great Chinese Soccer Dream,¹⁶³ epitomizes this approach. Officially framed as a means to foster people-to-people connections, reminiscent of town-twinning initiatives, underlying economic motives play a significant role. Despite these high hopes, the German Football Association (DFB) found its expectations of benefiting from the collaboration unmet, indicating a challenging start to this international sports partnership.

Tensions escalated in 2017, when a seemingly innocuous friendly match between the Chinese U20 team and TSV Schott Mainz became a diplomatic incident over fans displaying Tibetan flags. This event not only strained the Sino-German football relationship but illuminated China's broader strategy of leveraging economic influence to suppress international criticism or politically sensitive actions. The DFB's predicament in the aftermath, coupled with the economic pressures faced by other German football entities like the Bundesliga and its clubs, underscores the complexities of engaging with China in the sports arena.¹⁶⁴

The incorporation of "political (exit) clauses" in agreements with Chinese partners is a testament to the precarious nature of these international collabo-

151 'ETDs: Virginia Tech Electronic Theses and Dissertations', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/communities/e7b958c7-340d-41f6-a201-ccb628b61a70>.

152 'Audi in China im Porträt', Audi MediaCenter, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.audi-mediacentre.com/443/de/audi-in-china-5583/audi-in-china-im-portraet-5585>.

153 Scott Foster, "Volkswagen Going Fully Native in China," Asia Times, January 22, 2024, <http://asiatimes.com/2024/01/volkswagen-going-fully-native-in-china/>.

154 'Städtepartnerschaften und -freundschaften', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.wolfsburg.de/leben/stadtportraitstadtgeschichte/staedtepartnerschaften>.

155 'Audi in China im Porträt'.

156 Michael Schmatloch, 'Audi will das?', ingolstadt-today.de, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.ingolstadt-today.de/news/audi-will-das-891136>.

157 'Foshan', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.ingolstadt.de/partnerstaedte/partnerstaedte/foshan.html>.

158 'Über uns', AUDI Konfuzius-Institut Ingolstadt (blog), accessed 1 April 2024, <https://audi-konfuzius-institut-ingolstadt.de/institut/ueber-uns.html>.

159 "Stadt Ingolstadt: Ingolstädter Delegation Reist Nach Foshan - Bayerisch-Chinesische Kontakte Werden Intensiv Gepflegt," Focus Online, October 23, 2017, https://www.focus.de/regional/ingolstadt/stadt-ingolstadt-ingolstaedter-delegation-reist-nach-foshan-bayerisch-chinesische-kontakte-werden-intensiv-gepflegt_id_7753537.html.

160 Leonhard Landes and Lennart Pfahler, "China Und Deutschland: Die Versuchte Unterwanderung," Die Welt, April 29, 2023, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus245040816/China-und-Deutschland-Die-versuchte-Unterwanderung.html>.

161 "Audi FC Ingolstadt Soccer Camps in Mexiko und China," FC Ingolstadt 04, July 8, 2019, <https://www.fcingolstadt.de/audi-fc-ingolstadt-soccer-camps-in-mexiko-und-china/>.

162 'Volkswagen Supports Intercultural Exchange Program with China', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://media.vw.com/en-us/releases/237>.

163 Xi Jinping's Great Chinese Soccer Dream is a national initiative aimed at elevating China's status in elite football. Managed by the State Council, it focuses on developing youth football, enhancing professional autonomy, and partnering with European and South American clubs. This strategy, involving government coordination and private sector investment, aims to realize China's aspirations in global football, including achieving success in the World Cup. in: Tan, T., Huang, H., Bairner, A., & Chen, Y. (2019). Xi Jin-Ping's World Cup dreams: From a major sports country to a world sports power. In Routledge eBooks, 147-162, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351181488-10>

164 Ilker Gundogan, 'Where Good Intentions Fail: The Limits of Sport Diplomacy with the People's Republic of China under the Leadership of Xi Jinping', Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal 1 (31 January 2023): 111-36, <https://doi.org/10.30925/slpoj.1.1.4>.



■ PICTURE 3. Winterkorn presents a jersey to Xi Jinping

rations, subjecting foreign sports entities to China's political sensitivities. Instances involving high-profile figures like Daryl Morey¹⁶⁵ and Mesut Özil¹⁶⁶, who faced significant backlash from China for expressing support for the Hong Kong protests and Uyghurs respectively, further illustrate the PRC's readiness to employ its economic clout to influence the global discourse on freedom of expression.

The case of FC Köln highlights the financial vulnerabilities and the diplomatic tightrope walk faced by clubs engaging with Chinese partners. The club's experience with a cancelled sponsorship deal and controversy surrounding comments on China's human rights record demonstrate the potential consequences of political entanglements.¹⁶⁷ Despite official denials of broadcast or financial retaliations, these incidents reveal the underlying tensions and the need for strategic caution when navigating partnerships with Chinese entities.

165 Reuters, 'China's CCTV Shows NBA Game, Ending 18-Month Blackout', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/chinas-cctv-shows-nba-game-ending-18-month-blackout-2022-03-30/>.

166 Jonathan White, 'Cologne and Mesut Ozil Count Cost of China Backlash', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/sport/football/article/3045742/cologne-and-mesut-ozil-count-cost-china-backlash>.

167 Stefan Nestler, 'FC Cologne's China Sponsorship Deal Breaks Down', [dw.com](https://www.dw.com/en/fc-cologne-left-to-pick-up-the-pieces-as-china-sponsorship-deal-breaks-down/a-51956512), accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/fc-cologne-left-to-pick-up-the-pieces-as-china-sponsorship-deal-breaks-down/a-51956512>.

4. Capital Decisions: A Tale of Two Cities

4.1 Berlin-Beijing

As the national capital, Berlin serves a special function in Germany's foreign relations, both in terms of its representational and its leadership role - when the world looks to Germany, it looks to Berlin. Berlin currently has 18 partner cities across 18 countries, 16 of which are also national capitals.¹⁶⁸

The partnership between Berlin and Beijing was from the onset a transparency-lacking economic endeavour - after China's short-lived isolation following the Tiananmen massacre, Germany began normalizing its relations with China in 1993, when Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) visited China with a trade delegation and secured contracts for the Germany industry.

In 1994, Berlin Mayor Eberhard Diepgen (CDU) formalized the partnership between the two capitals in a unilateral move, without the knowledge of and against the will of its governing partner.¹⁶⁹ Interestingly, the memorandum was approved beforehand by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,¹⁷⁰ allowing speculation that it was an endeavour set by the Kohl Government in the year before.

It was Diepgen's second visit to China after 1988 when he "tried to improve the atmosphere" to get a Berlin consortium of enterprises, including AEG and Siemens, commissioned for the construction of the Shanghai subway.¹⁷¹ In 1996, following a meeting between Diepgen and the Chinese Deputy Prime Minister, the consortium was granted another subway line project in Shanghai, alluding to the improved atmosphere.¹⁷²

The following year, Diepgen initiated the Asia-Pacific Weeks Berlin (APW).¹⁷³ Before the event, the Senate Chancellery announced that anyone inviting Chinese dissidents would not be included in the official program.¹⁷⁴ Underfinanced during the first two events in

1997¹⁷⁵ and 1999,¹⁷⁶ in 2001, China contributed two-fold the funds that Berlin spent.¹⁷⁷ The China Business Day is a key part of the calendar of events. Since 2017, this PRC funded event has been a forum for the exchange between and the support of start-ups, especially in smart cities and digitalization.¹⁷⁸

Berlin has strategically prioritized China as a key market and provides activities there with "special political support."¹⁷⁹ In 2018, Berlin established a representation in Beijing to enhance collaboration in innovation and technology.¹⁸⁰ However, in recent years this economic focus has been dampened by concerns regarding China's intelligence activities in Berlin.

The Berlin Verfassungsschutz report 2022 revealed the active presence of Chinese intelligence services in the city.¹⁸¹ Despite the frequent visits of expert delegations from China, Berlin does not maintain a comprehensive record of these exchanges,¹⁸² indicating a lack of transparency and oversight of these engagements.

Berlin began holding further legal exchanges with Beijing in 1999 on the municipal level and signed a memorandum of legal cooperation in 2002, which was renewed in 2014.¹⁸³ Building on these collaborative frameworks, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) seminars in 2003 and 2004 on Anti-Terrorism in Beijing and Berlin laid the groundwork for further joint counter-terrorism efforts.¹⁸⁴

168 'Städtepartnerschaften', 1 April 2024, <https://www.berlin.de/rbmskzl/politik/senatskanzlei/internationales/staedtepartnerschaften/>.

169 Uwe Rada, 'Städtepartnerschaft Mit Peking Entzweit Koalition', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://taz.de/Staedtepartnerschaft-mit-Peking-entzweit-Koalition/11568054/>.

170 See: Plenarprotokoll 12/65. (1994). In Parlament Berlin. Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin. <https://pardok.parlament-berlin.de/starweb/adis/citat/VT/12/PlenarPr/p12065.pdf>

171 dpa, 'Berlin Plant Shanghais U-Bahn', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://taz.de/Berlin-plant-Shanghais-U-Bahn/1923636/>.

172 Mitbauen an Shanghaier U-Bahn. (1996, February 9). TAZ Verlags- und Vertriebs GmbH. Retrieved February 4, 2024, from <https://taz.de/Mitbauen-an-Shanghaier-U-Bahn/1472368/>

173 'Archives', AsiaBerlin (blog), accessed 1 April 2024, <https://asia.berlin/archive/>.

174 Sven Hansen, 'Viel Wirtschaft, wenig Demokratie', Die Tageszeitung: taz, 15 September 1997, sec. taz.

175 Sven Hansen, 'Der Berliner Senat hat Asien entdeckt', Die Tageszeitung: taz, 15 September 1997, sec. taz.

176 Sven Hansen, 'Traum Vom „europäischen Brückenkopf Für Asien"', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://taz.de/1269500/>.

177 Sven Hansen, 'Peking spendiert dem finanzschwachen Berlin ein Fest', Die Tageszeitung: taz, 18 September 2001, sec. taz.

178 'Botschafter Shi Mingde Nahm an Der Pressekonferenz Der Asien-Pazifik-Wochen Teil', accessed 1 April 2024, http://de.china-embassy.gov.cn/det/zt/blvtz/201505/t20150512_3126246.htm.

179 'Außenwirtschaft', 22 February 2024, <https://www.berlin.de/sen/wirtschaft/europa-und-internationales/aussenwirtschaft/artikel/61967.php>.

180 Berlin Business Liaison Desk, 'Berlin Business Desk China: About Us', accessed 1 April 2024, <https://berlinoffice-china.com/about-us>.

181 Drucksache 19/1102. (2023). In Parlament Berlin. Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 85-86. <https://pardok.parlament-berlin.de/starweb/adis/citat/VT/19/DruckSachen/d19-1102.pdf>

182 Wowerit, K. (2014, November 30). Drucksache 17 / 14 952. Kleine Anfragen. <https://kleineanfragen.de/berlin/17/14952-staedtepartnerschaft-berlins-mit-pekings-tzt>

183 Drucksache 17 / 14 952. (2014). In Parlament Berlin. Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin. <https://pardok.parlament-berlin.de/starweb/adis/citat/VT/17/SchrAnfr/s17-14952.pdf>

184 '1st ASEM Seminar on Anti-Terrorism', ASEM InfoBoard, accessed 1 April 2024, https://aseminfoboard.org/sem_events/1st-asem-seminar-on-anti-terrorism/.

Despite drastically different understandings of terrorism (particularly as it pertains to human rights),¹⁸⁵ in 2004 Beijing sent 16 police officers to Berlin for a year of intensive police training to enhance their counter-terrorism skills.¹⁸⁶ A PRC police officer who participated in this program shared insights from the training in an interview, noting that it covered German police surveillance and undercover tactics for anti-terrorism intelligence gathering, and strategies for collaborating with local authorities in managing protests.¹⁸⁷ Deepening this cooperation, Berlin provided expertise in averting terrorism risks during the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008¹⁸⁸ and both police departments exchanged experiences in preparation for the Beijing Winter Olympics 2022.¹⁸⁹

The city explains on its webpage that the town-twinning network ‘serves as the institutional backbone’ of Berlin’s international outreach, focusing on economy, science, and culture. Human rights are not mentioned. Yet, allegedly to the benefit of Berlin citizens, the website states that exchanges between civil society, institutions, and NGOs, political and social groups are pledged to be facilitated.¹⁹⁰

Despite the lack of prominence of human rights issues on its website, Berlin claims to actively promote them in its engagements with Chinese officials, as during the current Mayor’s 2019 visit to Beijing, where he advocated for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Hong Kong.¹⁹¹ The city underscores the significance of freedoms of expression, the press, and human rights to assert the importance of city partnerships in fostering civil society dialogue “during politically challenging times.”¹⁹²

Culture groups from both Berlin and Beijing do indeed regularly reach audiences in their twin cities¹⁹³ and in May 2008 the China Cultural Centre was founded in Berlin.¹⁹⁴ That being said, cultural exchange is not without problems. In 2018, the Berlin Schaubühne theatre group’s tour in China was abruptly cut short after their

performance of Henrik Ibsen’s “Ein Volksfeind” (“An Enemy of the People”) sparked heated debates, leading to the cancellation of the remaining two shows. Official statements claimed technical problems as the reason for the cancellation, however the play’s director has stated censorship as the real reason.¹⁹⁵

Berlin’s partnership with Beijing needs both a recalibration of its strategic objectives and a reaffirmation of its commitment to transparency and human rights. The city has historically prioritized economic and technological collaboration with China, this focus has often overshadowed the equally critical dialogue on democratic values and human rights.

A partnership driven initially by economic motives and established amidst a lack of transparency, has evolved to include cultural exchanges and legal cooperation. Yet, the foundation of these relationships deserve proper scrutiny in light of concerns regarding intelligence activities and the suppression of dissenting voices.

As Berlin continues to navigate its relationship with Beijing, it must ensure that its international engagements are aligned with its core values, promoting an open dialogue on human rights alongside economic collaboration. This approach will not only uphold Berlin’s reputation as a city that values ethical integrity, but also foster a more balanced and mutually respectful international partnership.

4.2 Cologne-Beijing

Cologne - as the largest city in North Rhine-Westphalia - has town twinning partnerships with 24 cities across 22 countries, more than any other German city.¹⁹⁶ Given the magnitude of its town twinning relationships, Cologne plays a leading role in shaping the practice and standard for subnational diplomacy in Germany.

Similar to most of the German-China city partnerships, business interests had been the main driver behind the partnership from the very beginning.¹⁹⁷ Between 2009 and 2019, the mayor of Cologne, accompanied by delegations, travelled to Beijing five times to foster economic cooperation between the two cities.¹⁹⁸

In 2005, Cologne’s Office for Economic Development kicked off an initiative to attract Chinese investment - the so-called ‘China-Offensive’. Within six years, the number of Chinese companies in Cologne quadrupled.

185 China defines terrorism through the lens of the ‘three evil forces’ of separatism, extremism, and terrorism, often associating it with independence movements such as those in Xinjiang. Europe, however, interprets terrorism as a threat to democratic values, with a focus on freedom of expression. in : Duchâtel, M., & Ekman, A. (2015). Countering terrorism: an area for EU-China cooperation? In ETHZ. European Union Institute for Security Studies. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191349/Brief_14_China_counter-terrorism.pdf

186 ‘北京警官赴德国接受秘密培训 为奥运会储备警力_新闻中心_新浪网’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2004-09-22/14144393252.shtml>.

187 ‘学习国外反恐高招 中国奥运警察国外取经’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://ent.cctv.com/news/china/20050718/102243.shtml>.

188 Held and Merkle, ‘Deutsch-chinesische Kommunalbeziehungen: Motivationen, Strukturen, Aktionsfelder’, 63.

189 ‘十国警务专家共议北京冬奥安保 交流反恐处突技术保障等内容 | 北晚新视觉’.

190 Städtepartnerschaften. (n.d.). [Berlin.de](https://www.berlin.de/rbmskzl/politik/senatskanzlei/internationales/staedtepartnerschaften/). Retrieved February 4, 2024, from <https://www.berlin.de/rbmskzl/politik/senatskanzlei/internationales/staedtepartnerschaften/>

191 Drucksache 18 / 22 956. (2020). In Parlament Berlin. Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin. <https://pardok.parlament-berlin.de/starweb/adis/citat/VT/18/SchrAnfr/s18-22956.pdf>

192 Drucksache 18 / 21 162. (2019). In Parlament Berlin. Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin. <https://pardok.parlament-berlin.de/starweb/adis/citat/VT/18/SchrAnfr/s18-21162.pdf>

193 Anja Goette and Qianlan Gao, ‘Deutsch-Chinesische Kommunalbeziehungen’, 26.

194 ‘Chinesisches Kulturzentrum Berlin’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://c-k-b.eu/?pid=vorstellung>.

195 dpa, ‘Eklat in Peking: Berliner Schaubühne muss Tournee in China abbrechen’, Die Zeit, 12 September 2018, <https://www.zeit.de/news/2018-09/12/berliner-schaubuehne-muss-tournee-in-china-abbrechen-180912-99-927908>.

196 Stadt Köln, ‘Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln’ (Köln: Amt der Oberbürgermeisterin, Büro Europa und Internationales, November 2022), <https://ratsinformation.stadt-koeln.de/getfile.asp?id=905549&type=do>.

197 For example, the Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie (BDI), Federation of German Industries e. V., the leading umbrella organization of German industry and industry-related service providers, had set its headquarters in Cologne for 50 years before moving to Berlin in 1999. The Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft (German Eastern Business Association), which represents the business sector’s effort to normalize West German trade relations with the East, also had offices in Cologne from 1952 to 2000. See: <https://english.bdi.eu/bdi/history> and <https://www.ost-ausschuss.de/de/oa70>

198 Büro Europe und Internationales Amt der Oberbürgermeisterin Stadt Köln, 2022, p.28

pled from 50 to 200, and around 660 people began working in the companies partaking in the scheme.¹⁹⁹

Commenting on the importance of the partnership between Cologne and Beijing, Alexander Hoeckle, Managing Director International at the Cologne Chamber of Commerce and Industry says “City partnerships [...] are an important vehicle for giving companies an entrée in China.”²⁰⁰

Like Berlin, Cologne's partnership with Beijing is multifaceted, ranging from education to culture to urban management. Examples of cooperation include the coordination of the “Project Office of German Universities in China” by the University of Cologne's Beijing office,²⁰¹ official exchanges between Cologne and Beijing's authorities,²⁰² and the China Festival²⁰³ In 2017 the leading regional network operator in the greater Cologne area, NetCologne, signed a strategic cooperation agreement for the construction of advanced telecommunications infrastructures in the area.²⁰⁴

Despite the aforementioned collaborations with Beijing, Cologne differs from Berlin, Beijing's other German twin city, in that it has not entirely cast aside the values that are supposedly integral to subnational diplomacy, namely democracy and human rights.

To underline its commitment, the city joined the campaign “10, 100, 1000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030” of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCGL), which was approved by the city council on 23rd March 2023. The resolution reaffirmed that the values and principles of Cologne's foreign policy are freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.²⁰⁵

4.1.1 Cologne's Handling of Chinese Human Rights Violation

Asked by a journalist how the city authority would approach the partnership with China in light of increasing human rights abuses in China, the city authority responded that a partnership “opens up room for manoeuvre that should be used independently in addition to state foreign policy.” “The city ‘naturally’ uses discussions about specific municipal tasks to address the values of civil and human rights.”²⁰⁶ The following examples

199 Rainer Morgenroth, ‘Wirtschaftsförderung: China-Offensive lockt Firmen nach Köln’, DIE WELT, 6 December 2011, <https://www.welt.de/regionales/koeln/article13754365/China-Offensive-lockt-Firmen-nach-Koeln.html>.

200 Rainer Morgenroth, ‘Wirtschaftsförderung: China-Offensive lockt Firmen nach Köln’.

201 ‘UoC China Office’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://portal.uni-koeln.de/en/uocchina>.

202 Foreign Affairs Office Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, The People's Government of Beijing Municipality, ‘City Profile-Cologne’, accessed 7 April 2024, https://wb.beijing.gov.cn/en/sister-cities/sister-cities-of-beijing/europe/european-cologne/european-cologne-city-profile/202212/t20221214_2878977.html.

203 City Profile-Cologne.

204 Liu Yang, ‘NetCologne CTO: “My Vision Is to Give Our Customers the Best Infrastructure in Germany”’, accessed 1 April 2024, https://www.zte.com.cn/global/about/magazine/zte-technologies/2017/3/en_740/463789.html.

205 ‘Neue Grundpfeiler für Kooperation mit Kölner Partnerstädten’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.stadt-koeln.de/politik-und-verwaltung/internationales/neue-grundpfeiler-fuer-kooperation-mit-koelner-partnerstaedten>.

206 David Ehl, ‘Heikle Partnerschaften mit China – DW – 21.12.2019’, DW.COM, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.dw.com/de/heikle-partnerschaften-mit-china/a-51720820>.

show how Cologne attempted to integrate the promotion of human rights in its town twinning with Beijing.

Despite being a highly sensitive issue for China, the Cologne city government's website mentions the Tian'anmen massacre of June 1989, when “the army entered the capital and used force to clear the square [...] several thousand people lost their lives.”²⁰⁷ In contrast, no such statement can be found anywhere on the website of the Berlin city government.

After Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, the Cologne City Council passed an emergency resolution, calling on the Chinese government to release him.²⁰⁸ The resolution triggered reactions from Beijing, whose officials said they could not understand why Cologne's mayor could not simply withdraw the city council's resolution.²⁰⁹

When Liu Xiaobo died in Chinese custody in 2017, Cologne Mayor Henriette Reker paid tribute to his widow Liu Xia and expressed support for her to leave the country.²¹⁰ Furthermore, the city council's general committee has passed a resolution calling on the Beijing government to release Liu Xiaobo's widow and brother.²¹¹

While Berlin tends to exclude Chinese dissidents from their events with Beijing, Amnesty International (Cologne) was allowed to organise a series of protests outside the Business and Investors Forum China 2019, and set up an information stand to inform and remind participants about the human rights violations in China.²¹²

In addition, Jörg Frank, parliamentary executive director of the Green Party in Cologne (Fraktionsgeschäftsführer), emphasised in his speech the essential values of freedom, democracy and human rights in the city's partnerships during the Festival's ceremony in front of Beijing's Vice-Mayor.²¹³

4.1.2. Cologne's Concept Paper on City Diplomacy

Seeking a balanced approach between economic interests and values has always been a challenge for poli-

207 ‘Peking / Beijing - China’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.stadt-koeln.de/politik-und-verwaltung/internationales/staedtepartnerschaften/peking-beijing-china>.

208 ‘SessionNet | TOP Ö 3.1.15: Dringlichkeitsantrag Der SPD-Fraktion, Der CDU-Fraktion, Der Fraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen Und Der FDP-Fraktion Betreffend “Köln - Peking: Unterstützung Des Friedensnobelpreisträgers Liu Xiaobo”’, accessed 1 April 2024, https://ratsinformation.stadt-koeln.de/to0050.asp?_ktonr=94170.

209 Florian Struth, ‘北京-科隆: “相称”的伙伴’, DW.COM, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.dw.com/zh/%E5%8C%97%E4%BA%AC-%E7%A7%91%E9%9A%86%E4%B8%8D%E7%9B%B8%E7%A7%BO%E7%9A%84%E4%BC%99%E4%BC%B4/a-15691263>.

210 Stadt Köln, ‘Oberbürgermeisterin kondolierte Witwe von Liu Xiaobo’, Kölner Stadtteile | 86 Veedel (blog), 25 July 2017, <https://www.koelner-stadtteile.de/oberbuergermeisterin-kondolierte-witwe-von-liu-xiaobo/>.

211 See: Der Rat der Stadt Köln. (2017, July 31). Köln—Freilassung und Ausreise von Liu Xiaobos Witwe und deren Bruder AN/1077/2017 <https://ratsinformation.stadt-koeln.de/getfile.asp?id=624625>

212 ‘Amnesty-Aktionen zum Business and Investors Forum China und zum Chinafest der Stadt Köln – Köln Ehrenfeld’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://amnesty-koeln-ehrenfeld.de/2019/09/amnesty-aktionen-zum-business-and-investors-forum-china-und-zum-chinafest-der-stadt-koeln/>.

213 ‘30 Jahre Städtepartnerschaft Köln - Peking: „Menschenrechte Sind Unteilbar“ : Anlässlich Der Offiziellen Feierlichkeiten Und Des...’, accessed 1 April 2024, <https://www.gruenekoeln.de/aktuelle-artikel/nachricht/30-jahre-staedtepartnerschaft-koeln-peking-menschenrechte-sind-unteilbar-3112>.

cymakers and particularly difficult in German-Chinese relations. According to a 2013 report by the Stiftung Asienhaus, Cologne's Government has often been torn between the Mayor's office as well as the International Department, which are more focused on economic cooperation with China for economic growth, and the city council, which has greater concerns about human rights.²¹⁴



■ PICTURE 4. Cologne's Concept Paper on City Diplomacy

In order to review and realign the objectives of town twinning,²¹⁵ Cologne's city council passed a resolution in 2008, proposed by the Greens, SPD, and the Linke ("Left") parties, which commissioned the city administration to develop a concept paper on "the further development of future town twinning and international city cooperation."²¹⁶ In 2016, another follow-up resolution was passed, this time proposed by the SPD, CDU,

214 Sausmikat, N. (no date) Partnerschaften zwischen NRW und China-Die Rolle der Zivilgesellschaft stärken. rep. Köln: Asienstiftung, p. 28. Available at: https://www.asienhaus.de/upload/user_upload/2012_12-partnerschaften-nrw-china_13-04-06_01.pdf

215 'Weiterentwicklung der kommunalen Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit', DIE LINKE. Fraktion im Kölner Rat, 29 January 2008, <https://www.linksfraktion-koeln.de/politik-im-rat/infobox/weiterentwicklung-der-kommunalen-staedtepartnerschaftsarbeit/>.

216 See: Der Rat der Stadt Köln. (2008, January 29). Antrag der SPD-Fraktion, der Fraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen und der Fraktion Die Linke.Köln betreffend "Weiterentwicklung der kommunalen Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit"

AN/0122/2008. Available at: <https://ratsinformation.stadt-koeln.de/getfile.asp?id=151862&type=do>

Greens, the Linke party, the FDP, the Pirate Party, and the Freie Wähler Köln.

The latest concept paper on the development of city diplomacy, published in November 2022, has put more emphasis on the promotion of civil and human rights.²¹⁷ To adhere to its values and objectives, the city has developed 7 guidelines and 40 concrete measures for safeguarding human rights in its foreign policy. The measures that may be related to its partnership with Beijing include:

1. Continuous exchanges with Beijing regarding issues on public order²¹⁸
2. Continuation of the public symposium "Urbanization Processes and Participation in German-Chinese Partnerships"²¹⁹
3. Continue to cooperate with human rights organizations, particularly Amnesty International Cologne²²⁰
4. Support civil society organizations hosting public educational forums on human rights²²¹
5. Cologne's mayor plans to regularly meet Amnesty International and other Cologne-based human rights organizations to learn about human rights abuses in its twin cities, and to consult them for major events like the China Festival and ahead of city officials' trips to its partner cities²²²
6. Provide individual persecuted human rights defenders from the twin cities a safe place of refuge for a limited period²²³
7. Continue and share its fair procurement practice²²⁴

In terms of the long-term development of its partnership with Beijing, the city government has identified the need to "promote and strengthen China expertise across the city and develop a China strategy." The city believes that these will be the key themes for the coming years.²²⁵

While it may appear that small measures to address human rights issues in China could be ineffectual in the face of China's increasingly assertive stance, the true value of the more than 115 municipal partnerships with China cannot be overlooked. These partnerships, like a mosaic of small but vibrant pieces, come together to form a larger picture of international cooperation and understanding. Each one, in its own unique way, contributes to a tapestry of diplomatic relations that, when viewed as a whole, is greater than the sum of its parts.

217 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln', 7.

218 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln', 57

219 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln', 59

220 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln'.

221 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln', 60

222 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln', 60-61

223 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln', 62

224 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln', 66

225 Stadt Köln, 'Konzept Zur Weiterentwicklung Der Städtepartnerschaftsarbeit Der Stadt Köln', 29

5. Policy Recommendations

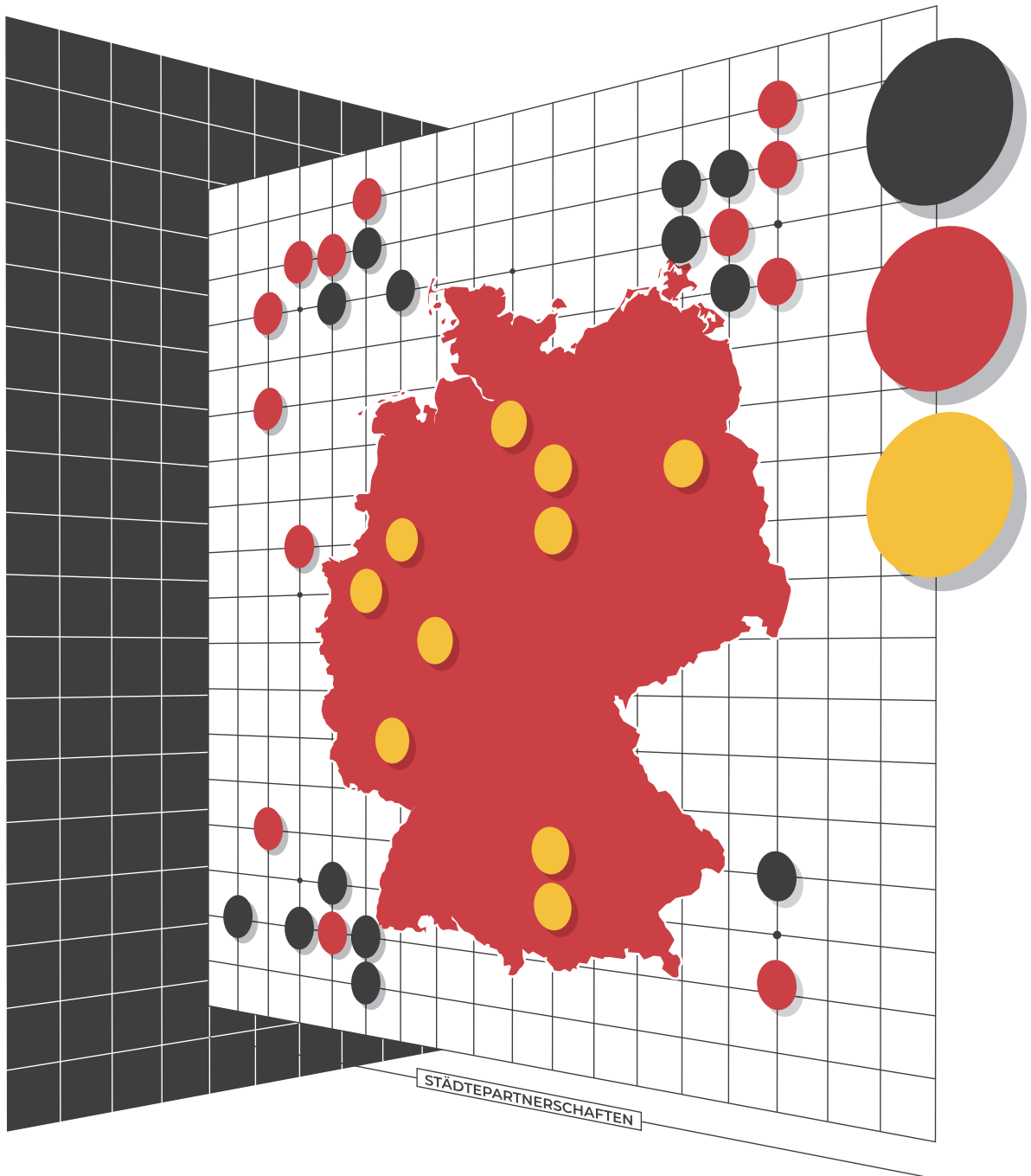
Enhancing the security framework for city and municipal partnerships is paramount to ensure alignment with national foreign policy objectives, to mitigate risks associated with China, and heighten awareness of China's united front activities within Germany. We propose a comprehensive policy framework aimed at federal, city, and municipal authorities.

Recommendations to the German Federal Government

- **Legislate to Empower Federal Oversight:** Introduce legislation enabling the Federal Government to regulate and coordinate subnational diplomacy effectively. This includes:
 - Mandating cities and municipalities to obtain approval from the Federal Foreign Affairs Ministry before establishing new partnerships or collaborations with China.
 - Empowering the Foreign Affairs Ministry with the authority to veto or terminate any subnational agreements conflicting with national foreign policy and interests.
 - Creating a dedicated office within the Foreign Affairs Ministry to support and coordinate the international engagements of city and municipal governments.
- **Increase Funding:** Tailor financial support for city and municipal governments to engage in subnational diplomacy, reducing vulnerability to China's united front efforts.
- **Enhance Local Authorities' Competence on China:** Bolster the understanding and capabilities of local authorities regarding China, fostering informed and transparent engagement.
- **Promote Values in International Engagements:** Encourage subnational authorities to champion universal values such as human rights and participatory democracy in their international dealings.
- **Raise Awareness on Human Rights:** Amplify the focus on human rights issues within the context of subnational diplomacy.
 - Engage and consult civil society organizations in bolstering the international engagement competence of city and municipal governments.

Recommendations to City and Municipal Authorities

- **Champion Universal Values:** Emphasize human rights, participatory democracy, and other universal values in international engagements.
 - Act decisively when a partner city is implicated in human rights abuses, ensuring that international partnerships reflect Germany's commitment to human rights.
 - City councils should oversee the international activities of mayors and other officials to guarantee that universal values are integral to all diplomatic efforts.
- **Develop Guidelines for International Engagements:** Craft comprehensive guidelines to direct the conduct of international relations, emphasizing ethical considerations and values.
- **Formulate a China Strategy:** Establish a strategic framework for partnerships with Chinese cities, explicitly addressing human rights and civic values to guide these international relationships responsibly.
- **Improve Transparency:** Enhance transparency regarding the processes and outcomes of international engagements and partnerships, ensuring public access to information about the objectives, activities, and achievements of these relations.



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■ This report argues that, within the current framework, pursuing town twinning initiatives with Chinese cities stands in contradiction to the strategy of de-risking. Subnational partnerships with Chinese towns pose strategic risks for Germany.



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