

China's Development Playbook: A Test for European Democracy Support

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Introduction

— Anu Juvonen, Evelyn Mantoiu

The European Union (EU) has consistently stressed that it now finds itself in direct competition with China for global influence and power. For a long time, Europe's strength lay in its economic weight and soft power, but as China's economy expanded and its ambitions grew, Europe's position began to shift. In 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as its flagship global development programme. In 2019, the EU adopted a new China strategy that portrayed the country as a systemic rival, an economic competitor, and a partner, highlighting the growing tensions between the two sides in the struggle for global influence.¹ Building on this, in 2021, the EU announced the launch of the Global Gateway, seen by many as a response to the BRI.²

As western aid recedes, with the United States (US) winding down the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and Europe shifting funds from development to defence, there is a vacuum for international support, in which emerging donors like China can reshape the development landscape. According to data from the Donor Tracker project, official development assistance (ODA) from the 17 largest donors in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development dropped from \$213.1 billion in 2023 to \$198.7 billion in 2024 and is projected to have fallen by another \$31.1 billion in 2025.³

China has moved away from large-scale, state-driven lending and now focuses more on commercially oriented infrastructure financing and blended-finance models. In 2024 alone, China issued \$6.1 billion in bank loans and over \$120 billion in BRI contracts, outpacing the Global Gateway, whose total budget is €300 billion (\$349 billion) and which had a much slower start at mobilising investment.⁴ These financing trends are examined in detail in the first chapter of this report.

In 2019, China shifted from large infrastructure projects to smaller schemes. This move came as a reaction to both external criticism and internal economic pressures. Internationally, Beijing faced a backlash for fuelling debt crises, ignoring climate change risks, and prioritising geopolitics over local needs. Domestically, slower economic growth demanded lower-risk investments, and debt forgiveness abroad stoked anger in China. With US and European aid declining, China has reframed this new model as central to its development agenda. In a 2025 report, the China International Development Cooperation Agency emphasised scaling up its “small and beautiful projects”, portraying them as a natural evolution from large infrastructure investments.

At the same time, the EU is moving in the opposite direction. European actors are prioritising large-scale and visible infrastructure projects under the Global Gateway, increasingly moving away from classic ODA towards private-sector and blended financing. This shift also signals a potential move away from investment in the areas in which the EU has a strong and positive reputation: civil society, good governance, and democratic institutions. Analysis by the European Democracy Hub shows that European donors invest around €4 billion (\$4.6 billion) a year, on average, in core democracy support. This figure accounts for only a small proportion of Europe's total ODA investments and is in danger of decreasing.⁵ This report demonstrates how China is increasingly present in this space and is chipping away at Europe's competitive advantage.

The EU presents its development cooperation as guided by core values, such as democracy, human rights, good governance, and the rule of law, although these have not always been consistently reflected in practice.⁶ These principles have contributed to shaping Europe's engagement with partner countries and have continued to serve as a central pillar of European soft power. These values are institutionalised in EU strategies, funding instruments, and partnership agreements, even if their practical application is often constrained by competing geopolitical and economic priorities.

In contrast, China's development cooperation is not tied to such principles. Beijing's approach is underpinned by sovereignty and non-interference, a preference for state-to-state cooperation, and a focus on economic and infrastructure outcomes. In the context of rising competition with China, reaffirming European values is crucial for the EU to maintain its credibility as a development partner.

This report examines four thematic areas of Beijing's cooperation with different countries to offer a comprehensive overview of what Chinese engagement looks like and what effects it has:

1. **Development financing:** Tau Yang looks at how Chinese development funding has changed in recent years and compares it with the EU's Global Gateway.
2. **Political-party engagement:** Christine Hackenesch and Julia Bader examine how China cooperates with political parties in different world regions, and how this cooperation differs between the global north and the global south.
3. **Media development:** Hangwei Li investigates Chinese investment in media development, analysing how this shapes local journalism and supports the proliferation of pro-China narratives.
4. **Digital technology cooperation:** Valentin Weber explores how China is exporting its digital technology, and how this transfer of expertise and infrastructure impacts on human rights.

We acknowledge that cooperation and competition happen in other areas as well, and these four themes do not represent all of Beijing's engagement. Choosing to focus on these areas was a deliberate decision. The first three are issues on which European donors have long cooperated with partners in developing countries. To us, they represent areas where Europe has a competitive advantage, having built up expertise, partnerships, and approaches that centre on local ownership and respect for human rights and democratic principles. Meanwhile, the last thematic area has been the focus of intense regulation by the EU, which has developed a model of tech governance that puts citizens' privacy and protection at its heart – the exact opposite of the Chinese model.

Examining these four themes reveals some interesting lessons for European donors. The first two chapters show how China's development financing and its political-party engagement are ultimately geared towards advancing Beijing's foreign policy agenda and shaping global narratives. Central to this agenda is securing international adherence to the One China policy. Today, only 12 countries recognise Taiwan. Since 2016, Taiwan has lost the recognition of 10 states following intense lobbying by Beijing and the promise of financial and political incentives.⁷

The first chapter explores in more depth how geostrategic and economic interests – particularly access to key natural resources, such as rare minerals – drive China's cooperation with other countries. Establishing economic partnerships through BRI initiatives helps Beijing balance its economic growth and make use of its domestic industrial overcapacity. The chapter shows that Chinese development financing can exploit weak institutions and a lack of oversight capacity but does not explicitly favour autocratic countries.

The second chapter explores how political-party diplomacy has become a means for Beijing to present its political system as a legitimate and successful variant of democracy. It examines how party-to-party cooperation has become a vehicle to normalise China's authoritarian governance and share lessons with other autocrats.

Meanwhile, China's investment in media development has produced mixed results, as showcased in the third chapter. While this engagement is used to foster pro-China narratives, the extent to which this venture has been successful is debatable, as it is highly dependent on the strength and resilience of local media ecosystems. Although China provides knowledge transfer and training, it does not support independent watchdog media actors, as European donors do, preferring a different journalistic model, where the focus is on positive reporting. The aid cuts that took place in 2025 left many media organisations vulnerable and allowed China to gain influence in this sector.

Digital technology cooperation poses the greatest challenge for pro-democracy actors, as it frequently enables tighter government surveillance and a constricted civic space – features often explicitly pursued by the countries that seek such technologies. The fourth chapter explores how this happens in practice and how digital technologies are being used to prop up authoritarian leaders and position Chinese surveillance infrastructure in strategic locations. The chapter shows that there is a real demand for such models and offers recommendations on how to tackle this.

This report invites European policymakers and the broader democracy-support community to reflect on how to balance Europe's competition with China and explore the extent to which China's development cooperation in the four thematic areas is testing European democracy support. As European donors and the EU aim to pivot towards infrastructure development and reduce aid to governments and civil society, China is rethinking its cooperation in these areas as well. While China does not generally overtly promote authoritarian practices, it adapts its cooperation to different contexts, often reinforcing already existing powers and dynamics. In some cases, this leads to Beijing's support emboldening authoritarian forces, while in others this does not happen. Taken together, these findings show that China's development cooperation in the four thematic areas is not politically neutral and warrants more scrutiny from European donors.

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Understanding and Countering China's Development Offer

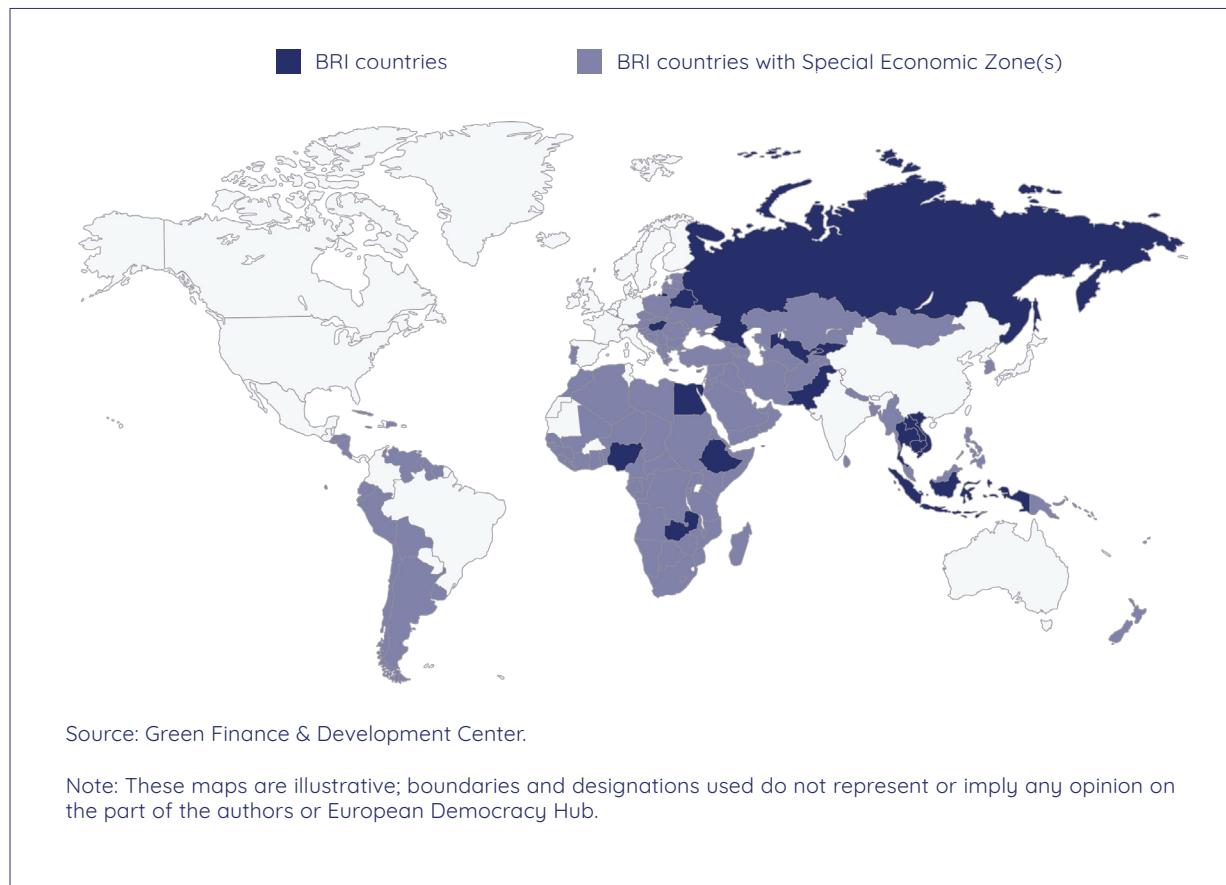
Tau Yang

Understanding and Countering China's Development Offer

— Tau Yang

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, is Chinese President Xi Jinping's flagship global development strategy. The BRI aims to deepen trade, investment, and economic integration between China and partner countries through infrastructure projects, development financing, regulatory alignment, and other means. Beijing frames the partnership as a form of win-win cooperation, and 150 countries have signed BRI memorandums of understanding with China.⁸ Of these countries, 15 have established BRI special economic zones, further deepening their economic integration with Beijing (figure 1.1).

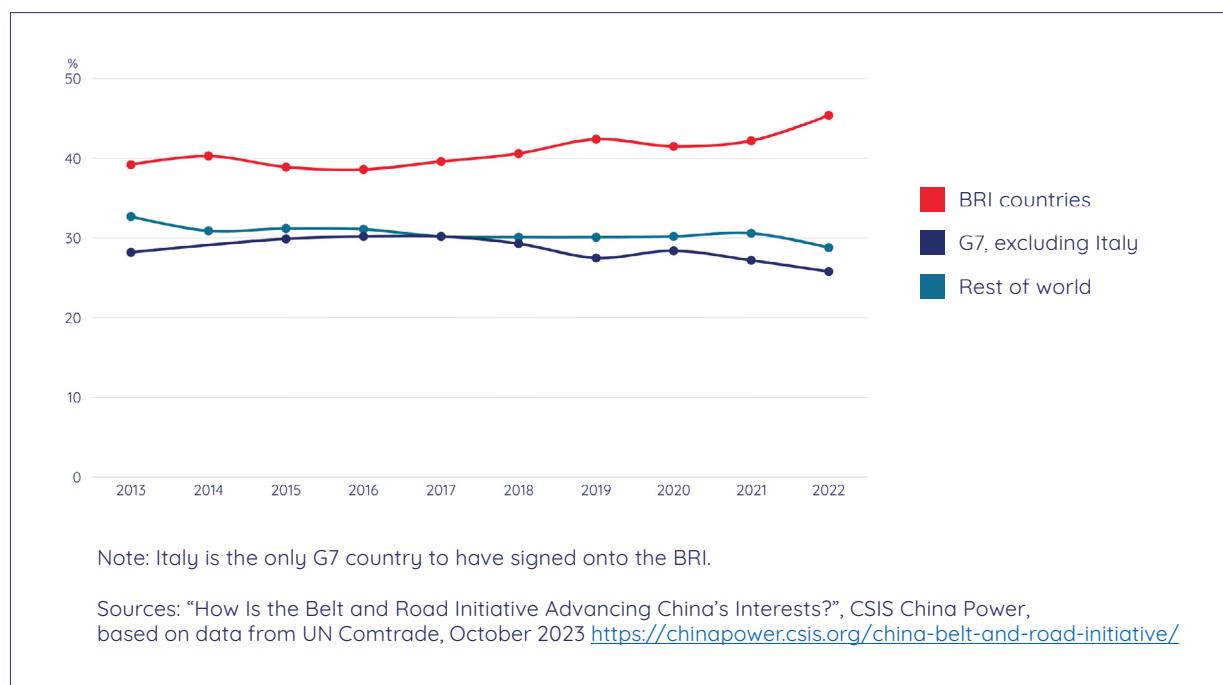
Figure 1.1: Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative



The BRI serves both strategic and economic objectives for China. On a strategic level, the initiative has enabled China to secure access to critical resources such as rare-earth elements, promote financial structures using the Chinese renminbi, and gain widespread diplomatic support. On an economic level, the BRI has provided major contracts for Chinese firms while offering an expanding export market for China's industrial base and building the global reputation of Chinese brands. More broadly, the BRI is part of Beijing's efforts to rebalance its long-term economic growth by increasing outbound investment and absorbing domestic industrial overcapacity.

From a trade-facilitation perspective, the BRI has been a success. According to the Chinese government's own statistics, the trade volume between BRI-participating countries and China almost doubled between 2013 and 2022, from \$1.04 trillion to \$2.07 trillion.⁹ China's trade with BRI countries increased to 45.4% of its total trade in 2022, a rise of 6.2 percentage points over the previous decade (figure 1.2).¹⁰ In the same period, Chinese enterprises signed more than \$1.2 trillion worth of construction contracts in BRI-participating countries.¹¹

Figure 1.2: Breakdown of China's global trade (% of total trade value), 2013-22



Although the BRI has contributed to addressing global development needs, it is not in Europe's strategic interest for so many countries to be dependent on Beijing. The European Union (EU) should therefore take steps to ramp up its own development offer as an attractive alternative to the BRI.

Comparing Chinese and EU development spending

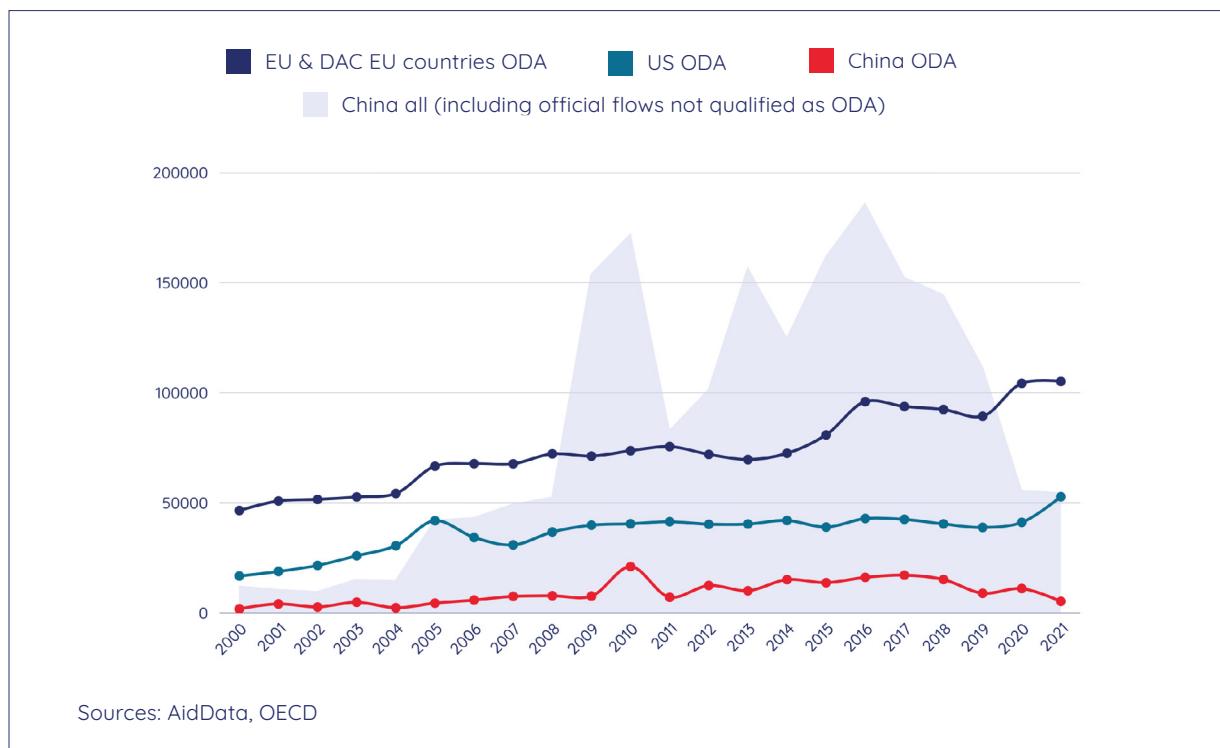
Comparing China's development spending with the EU's is challenging as the BRI does not fall easily into a conventional foreign-aid categorisation. Traditionally, official development assistance (ODA) focuses on pure grants, highly concessional loans, or technical assistance, guided by developmental or humanitarian objectives. Meanwhile, other official flows (OOF) have a partial element of concessionality but also a greater commercial undertaking.

The BRI, by contrast, blurs these two categories and often fuses development goals with China's geoeconomic interests. Typical development projects under the BRI involve forms of concessional loans, buyer credits, resources-for-infrastructure deals, and debt refinancing, which often form parts of larger investment-and-trade partnerships between China and recipient countries.

To overcome this analytical barrier, the investigation for this chapter used data provided by the research lab AidData, which captured 20,985 projects supported by loans and grants from official-sector Chinese institutions from 2000 to 2021, mostly under the BRI framework.¹² The dataset categorised all projects as "ODA-like", "OOF-like", or "vague", in accordance with the classification schemes of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

From this data, a clear contrast emerges. While China's ODA provision has been consistently lower than that of the EU or the United States (US), when combined with OOF-like financing, China's development spending between 2008 and 2019 vastly surpassed that of the EU and the US, which mostly consisted of ODA (figure 1.3).¹³ China's superior spending in this period is largely attributable to the massive scale of the BRI, which is estimated to have reached a cumulative value of almost \$1.18 trillion since its inception in 2013.¹⁴

Figure 1.3: Development aid from China, the EU, and the US (\$millions, 2023 prices), 2000–21



Also notable is the tailing off of China's development spending since 2018. This is consistent with a restructuring of the BRI away from infrastructure-heavy mega-projects. This trend is reflected in a near wipeout of Chinese investment in overseas energy-infrastructure construction projects. In terms of coal investment, for example, China shelved or cancelled 4.5 times more capacity between 2017 and 2021 than it put into construction.¹⁵ By 2021-22, China's energy-investment activities had fallen more than ninefold from their pre-2018 peak.

New loan commitments under the BRI declined sharply in the early 2020s. At the height of China's BRI lending surge in 2016, state-backed loans exceeded \$50 billion, surpassing the combined lending of all western creditors that year. However, since China became the world's largest sovereign creditor, the BRI's financial flows have shifted from a net source of capital to a net drain for recipient countries, as repayments and debt servicing now outweigh new financing.¹⁶

In recent years, China's top leadership and state media have increasingly adopted new rhetoric about the country's global brand of development financing, including the Global Development Initiative (GDI). Launched in 2021, the GDI remains a nebulous concept with a vague remit, much like the BRI was at its inception.¹⁷ Rather than a replacement for the BRI, the GDI is often presented by Beijing policymakers and think tanks as a complement to the earlier initiative, which coexists with it as part of a broader development agenda.¹⁸

While data suggests a marked drop-off in China's development financing from around 2018 until 2021, it is unlikely that the BRI will disappear entirely. It remains one of the few policy initiatives formally enshrined in the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party and is a flagship project for Xi.¹⁹ While the BRI's focus may shift, it is likely to continue for some time. After deteriorating bilateral ties with Beijing and perceptions of the BRI not bringing significant benefits to them, Italy and Panama exited the BRI in 2023 and 2025, respectively.²⁰ However, its 150-strong membership worldwide suggests the initiative still has broad appeal across much of the global south.

China's alternative development model

China has sought to set itself apart from the values-driven development offer of the EU and like-minded countries, which typically include support for human rights and the rule of law in their development initiatives. The EU's development policies are explicitly aligned with the 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals and support for democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.²¹ In comparison, China's Ministry of Commerce, which oversees and implements the country's ODA expenditure, states that its development policies are "not to come with any political conditions" and "sufficiently respect the recipient countries' rights to choose their developmental trajectory and mode autonomously".²²

While recognising critiques of its aid practices, China spares no effort in defending its approach. In a 2017 conference with world leaders from over 300 political parties, Xi highlighted that Beijing's foreign aid "does not seek to export China's own mode of growth" and "does not require other countries to copy China's practices".²³ And in a 2019 official document rebutting external criticism of

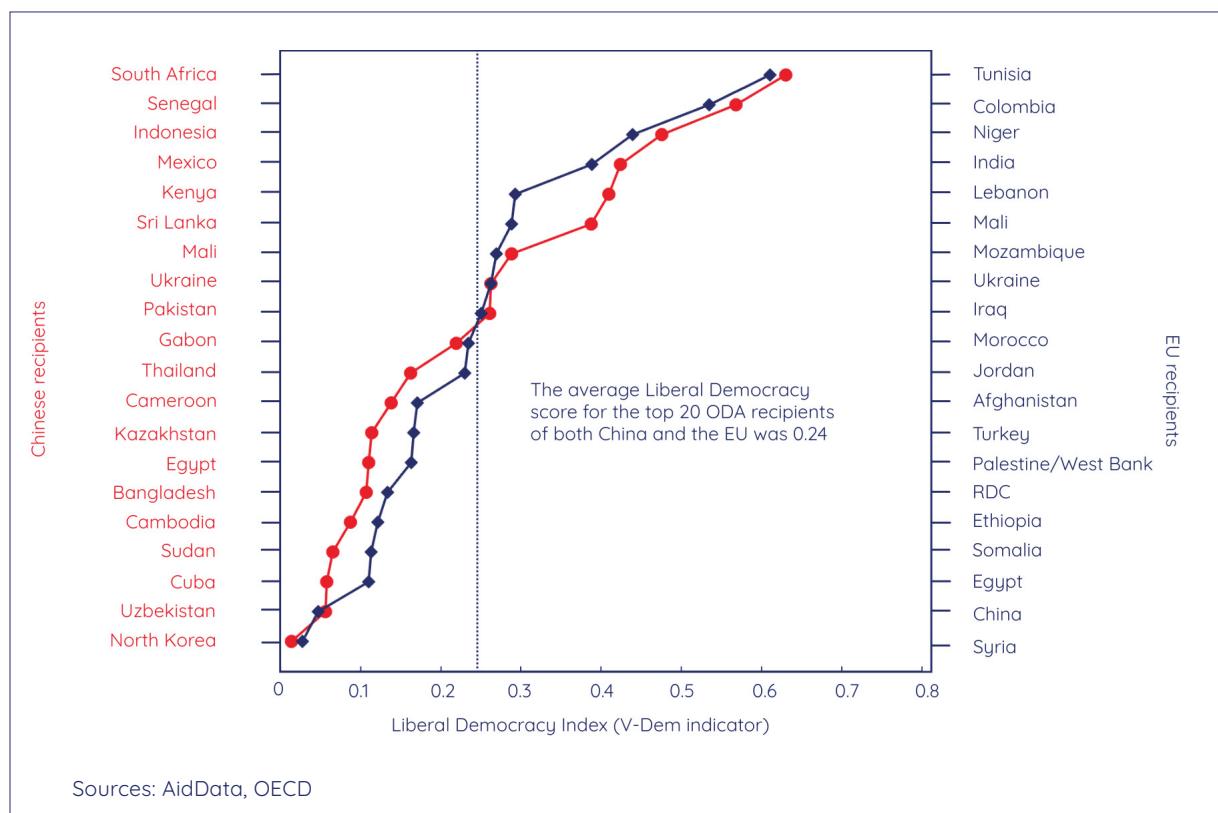
the BRI, China explicitly rejected the idea of the initiative as a debt trap, an ideological instrument, or a geopolitical vehicle, instead celebrating it as offering “equal partnerships” that “ultimately benefit people of all countries and enable ordinary people to gain benefits”.²⁴

The BRI and authoritarian governance systems

There are many factors behind China’s choice of aid recipients. Importantly, the presumption that Beijing primarily supports authoritarian regimes in its development financing should be taken with a pinch of salt. Under the BRI, Chinese financing is not directed exclusively towards such regimes. In fact, this investigation shows that China and the EU are broadly comparable in their levels of ODA-like spending towards less liberal democratic countries.

Our research compared the average scores on the Liberal Democracy Index – a measure developed by the Varieties of Democracy Institute – of the 20 biggest recipients of Chinese and EU ODA. Both donors supported projects across a very similar range of more or less authoritarian states during the BRI’s apex in 2013–21 (figure 1.4).²⁵ Notably, the average score of the top 20 aid recipients of both donors in this period was identical (0.24).

Figure 1.4: Average Liberal Democracy Index scores of the top 20 Chinese and EU ODA recipients, 2013–21



What is more, contrary to the assumption that the EU may fund more liberal countries than China, the EU's three largest ODA recipients in this period – Turkey, Syria, and Afghanistan – had a lower average score than China's top three recipients – Sri Lanka, Thailand, and South Africa. Interestingly, among China's 20 leading ODA recipients, all except North Korea had higher democracy scores than China itself.

Exploiting institutional fragility

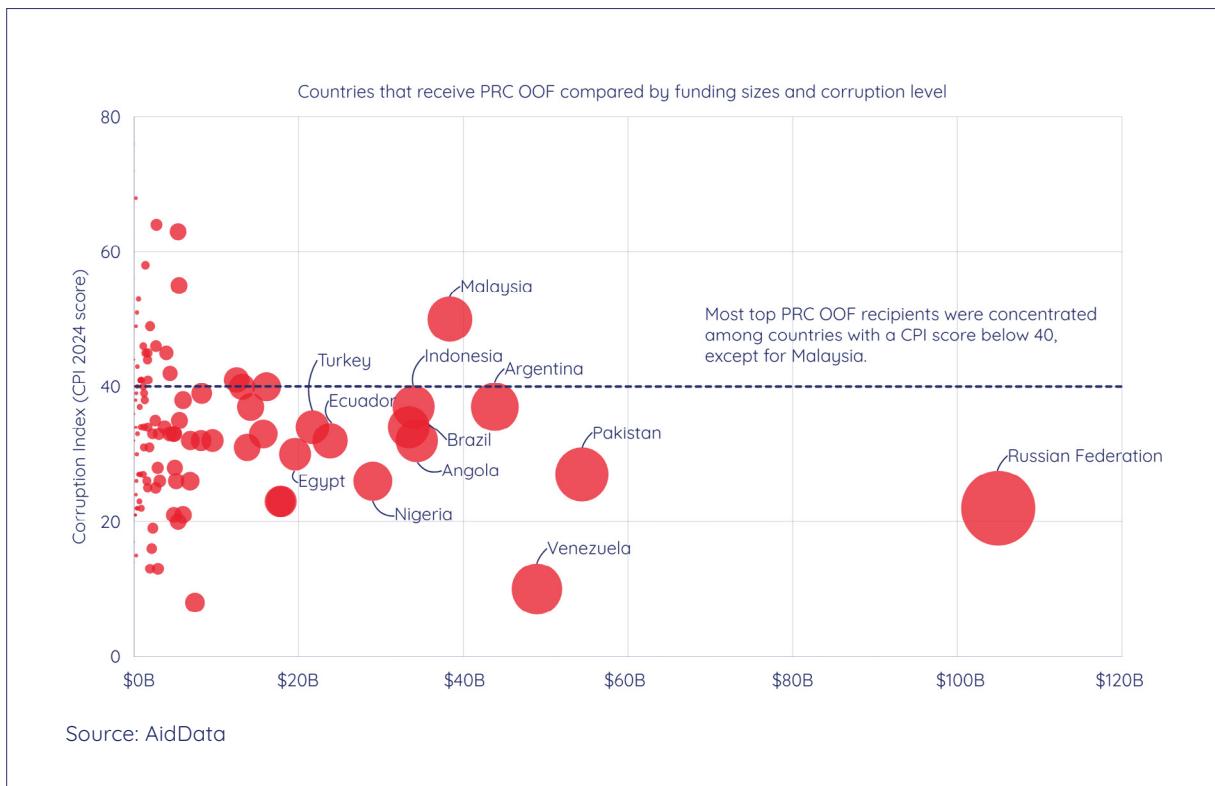
While China's ODA-like spending does not exclusively support authoritarian states, there is significant alignment between OOF-like BRI spending and the weakened institutions typical of many authoritarian regimes. Studies have found that BRI investments have favoured countries with greater institutional fragility, weaker rule of law, laxer regulatory environments, and limited civil society. This preference allows major investment and construction projects to take place without complex consultation processes.²⁶

Corruption can also play a major part in enabling greater BRI investment. OOF-like loans and arrangements allow Chinese financing to grease the wheels of corrupt officials in unaccountable regimes. A 2014 Financial Times investigation detailed how Queensway Group, a Hong Kong-registered company, helped broker a multimillion-dollar oil-and-infrastructure deal under the BRI between China and several corrupt African countries.²⁷ Beijing employed cash payments and other forms of political patronage to curry favour with military juntas and political elites to secure resource contracts.

Another analysis has suggested that borrower countries with more corruption tend to receive more development credits from Beijing. Roughly, for every 10% rise in corruption, there is an average increase of 69% in access to Chinese credit.²⁸ The least democratic borrower can expect to receive nearly ten times more lending from Beijing than the most democratic counterpart.²⁹ This stark contrast is likely to explain the impression that Chinese aid promotes autocracy. However, it is important to note that such patterns are observed only in debt served by Beijing; analysis of China's aid as a whole finds no evidence of favourable treatment of more authoritarian regimes.³⁰

Using data from Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), we also found that China's OOF-like aid is concentrated in countries with low CPI scores, which indicate higher levels of corruption (figure 1.5). Most top destinations of Chinese OOF have high levels of corruption, with Malaysia as an exception. Among these countries, Russia took the lion's share of China's OOF between 2013 and 2021, with \$105 billion, followed by Pakistan and Venezuela, with \$54.4 billion and \$48.9 billion, respectively.

Figure 1.5: Recipients of Chinese OOF-like aid by funding and corruption levels, 2024

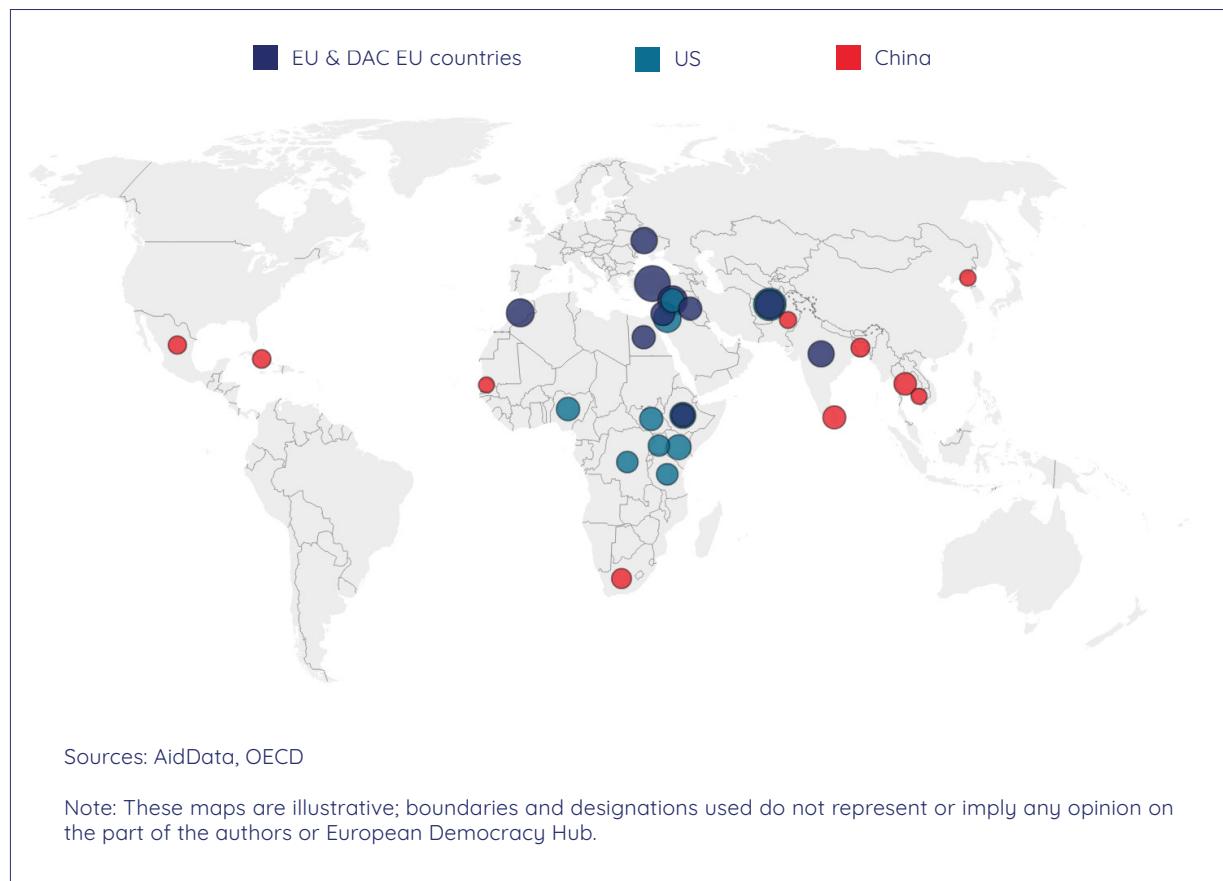


Consolidating China's spheres of influence

China's development spending is geared towards securing its geostrategic and diplomatic objectives. In particular, Beijing uses this spending to consolidate its spheres of influence and reward countries for aligning with China's interests.

Analysis of the countries that benefit most from China's ODA-like spending indicates that Beijing is more interested in protecting its existing spheres of influence than in directly challenging US or EU influence. In fact, none of the top 10 recipients of China's ODA-like spending overlaps with the 10 biggest recipients of US or EU ODA (figure 1.6).

Figure 1.6: Top 10 recipients of EU, US, and Chinese ODA, 2013–21



China's highest-profile aid recipients are concentrated in south and southeast Asia, including Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bangladesh. Meanwhile, EU and US ODA is focused on and around the Middle East. The US also has a strong foothold in east Africa, which China's aid has largely avoided. Beijing has a relatively low tolerance for risk and has devoted only 16% of its international development finance to countries where the EU and the US have strong influence.³¹

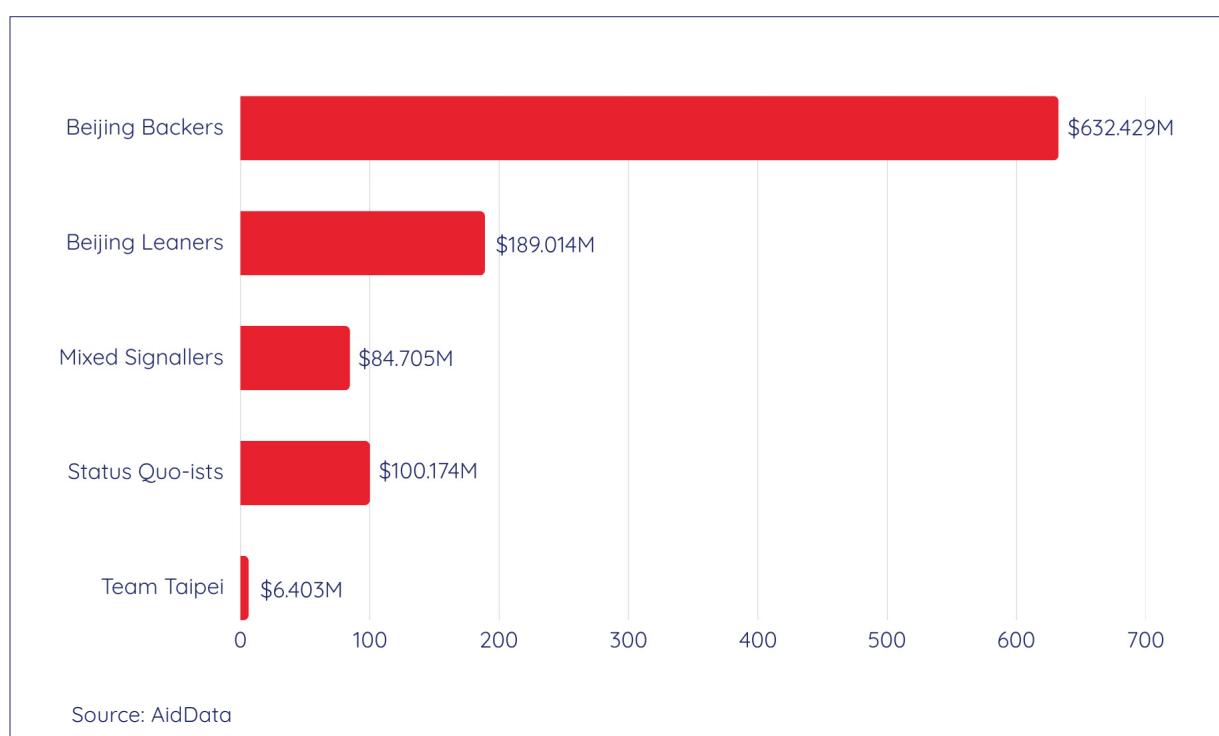
Gaining support for China's bid to isolate Taiwan

China's use of development financing to pursue its strategic goals is most evident in the way Beijing leverages aid to support its sovereignty claim over Taiwan. Deterring other countries from recognising Taiwan while building support for China's claim over the island has been one of Beijing's core diplomatic objectives for decades. Evidence shows that the BRI and China's development spending are aligned with efforts to achieve this goal.

Indeed, alignment with Beijing in international diplomacy is a strong indicator of how China distributes its aid. According to research published in 2022, countries that do not recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state can expect to receive an additional 1.6 projects compared with those that do.³² Similarly, countries with similar voting records to China at the UN General Assembly receive an average of 0.3 more development projects from Beijing for every 10% increase in voting similarity. Given that China commits an average of only 2.3 new projects a year, these patterns are significant.

This trend can also be seen by cross-referencing AidData figures with the Lowy Institute's classifications of countries' stances on Taiwan.³³ While a tiny proportion of China's development finance goes to countries that recognise Taiwan ("Team Taipei") or support the status quo ("Status Quo-ists"), an overwhelming majority goes to countries that back Beijing's claims over Taiwan. In particular, the 87 states that have explicitly supported China's so-called reunification efforts ("Beijing Backers") received over \$632 billion in 2013–21, or more than 63% of China's development finance (figure 1.7).

Figure 1.7: Chinese development finance according to recipients' positions on Taiwan (\$millions), 2013–21



How Europe can compete with the BRI

The launch of the BRI was initially met with optimism from European leaders. The joint EU-China Connectivity Platform of 2015 was designed to find synergies between the BRI and the EU's development programmes, based on a shared interest in bolstering connectivity across Europe and Asia. However, growing concerns about the BRI's human rights record, lack of environmental sustainability, and barriers to access for European firms to Chinese procurement stalled meaningful cooperation.

A period of what analysts have termed “conditional EU engagement” with the BRI followed between 2016 and 2020.³⁴ In practice, this meant the EU remained open to limited cooperation with the BRI while pursuing its own connectivity projects – such as the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy – and cooperating with other regional partners, such as India and Japan.

The launch of the EU’s Global Gateway initiative in 2021 marked a further step change in the EU’s response to the BRI, with a decisive shift from cooperation to competition.³⁵ The Global Gateway aimed to bring together the EU and its member states to provide a “Team Europe” development offer.

However, there is still uncertainty about how effectively the Global Gateway can position itself as an alternative to China’s BRI. Critics argue that the initiative – much like the BRI – lacks genuine engagement with civil society in monitoring the political and social impacts of its projects.³⁶ And while Brussels presents its development financing as distinct from Beijing’s model, an uncomfortable reality undermines that claim: Chinese companies have quietly secured around 13.1% of the contracts in developing countries funded by the European Investment Bank, including some under the Global Gateway.³⁷

At a time when China has scaled back its overseas infrastructure financing after uneven returns and mounting debt concerns under the BRI, it is worth asking whether the EU’s belated attempt to emulate this model remains feasible. After a decade in which China’s development spending far outpaced Europe’s, the EU has accelerated its efforts: by 2024, more than 225 Global Gateway projects had been completed in under two years, including projects in the areas of electricity, rail, and digital connectivity in Egypt, Israel, Morocco, and Tunisia.³⁸ However, the EU’s Global Gateway still lags significantly behind China in terms of total infrastructure funding, with only around €300 billion (\$347 billion) committed by 2027, compared with the BRI’s massive debt holdings of over \$1 trillion at the end of 2023.³⁹

With the US rapidly withdrawing its global development offer, there is an even greater need for Europe to step up and provide a meaningful development model. Doing so is important first and foremost to meet the pressing need for development finance worldwide: the annual shortfall to reach the UN Sustainable Development Goals is now estimated at over \$4 trillion globally.⁴⁰ This shortfall is exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and new challenges posed by climate change.

A European development offer is also important to provide an alternative to the BRI. While the Chinese initiative has achieved significant results in meeting development needs globally, it is not in Europe’s strategic interest to leave countries in the global south dependent on China.

Recommendations

In response to China’s development model, the EU should take five steps.

First, the EU should expand its programmes in strategic locations. While the EU should not aim to replace the BRI, it can seek to compete in certain areas – ensuring that countries are not left wholly

dependent on China. The EU should be strategic in its approach, targeting areas of geoeconomic importance where China is seeking an increasing foothold. Examples include strategically important Pacific islands or resource-rich regions in Latin America. The EU's near abroad – including the Middle East, north Africa, and the western Balkans – are also strategic areas where the EU can build on its existing influence.

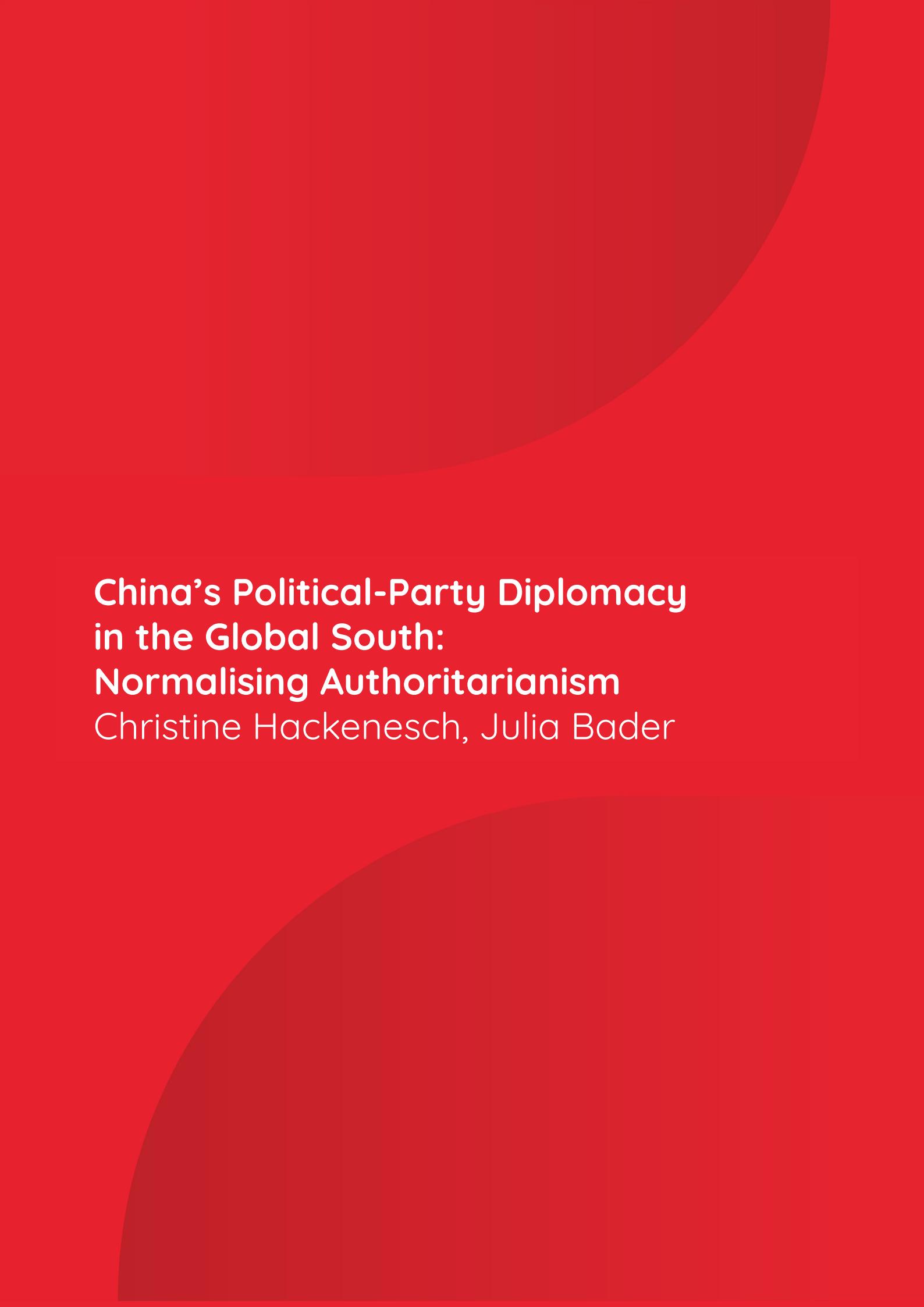
Second, the EU should encourage trade, not just aid. For many BRI countries, China's development offer has come hand in hand with rapidly expanded trade and investment opportunities. In contrast, Europe's trade with regions such as Africa and Latin America has grown only incrementally in recent years. Bundling aid with meaningful opportunities to grow trade with the world's largest single market could be an attractive option for many countries in the global south.

Third, the EU should step up its support for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. With the US rapidly cutting back its programmes in these areas, the onus is on the EU and its partners to fill the gap. As the Global Gateway focuses on connectivity projects, it is more important than ever that other ODA packages ensure that civil society, journalists, lawyers, and other groups continue to be supported.

Fourth, Europe should expand its partnerships with like-minded partners. The EU should seek synergies with democratic partners looking to provide a meaningful development offer that can compete with China's BRI in areas of strategic importance. Australia, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and other countries could be important partners in this regard.

Finally, the EU should build a Global Gateway narrative based on accountability. The EU should avoid replicating the BRI approach of permissive lending practices and flexible compliance with partner-imposed standards. Instead, the Global Gateway should leverage the EU's rigorous financial management, environmental, social, and governance safeguards, and industrial standards as a credible counteroffer to fill Beijing's accountability gap.

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China's Political-Party Diplomacy in the Global South: Normalising Authoritarianism

Christine Hackenesch, Julia Bader

China's Political-Party Diplomacy in the Global South: Normalising Authoritarianism

— Christine Hackenesch, Julia Bader

Whether and how China contributes to global authoritarianism has been a central topic of political and academic debate for over a decade. In the current era of heightened geopolitical competition, this issue has gained renewed relevance. One important actor in China's international engagement that may play a significant role – directly or indirectly – in promoting authoritarianism is the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP-ID).⁴¹

The diplomacy of the CCP-ID is a distinct feature of China's foreign policy and cannot be directly compared with the interactions between European political parties or foundations and their counterparts in the global south. What sets China's political-party diplomacy apart is the substantial political and administrative resources that the CCP devotes to its engagement with foreign parties.⁴² While many European political parties or foundations maintain international contacts and participate in transnational party networks, none possesses a network as extensive or institutionally embedded as that of the CCP.

This distinctiveness is reinforced by the structure of China's party-state system, in which power – especially over foreign policy – is concentrated within a single ruling party, the CCP. Political-party diplomacy functions alongside state diplomacy conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other state organs; however, the head of the CCP-ID holds a higher bureaucratic rank than Chinese state ministers. Moreover, China's political-party diplomacy can complement and enhance state diplomacy by operating at a high level while maintaining a degree of informality. That allows access to key political actors who may lack formal government roles and would otherwise be beyond the reach of traditional diplomatic channels.

Political-party diplomacy serves to advance Beijing's core foreign policy interests, promote an alternative global narrative about China, and disseminate lessons from its political system. The CCP-ID adapts both its discourse and its instruments of cooperation depending on whether it is engaging with parties from the global south or the global north. In its outreach to global south countries, the CCP-ID employs foreign policy concepts such as the “community with a shared future for mankind” or the Global Civilization Initiative to frame bilateral relations. In contrast, its interactions with global north parties tend to focus on “informing” partners about China's foreign policy goals and conceptual frameworks, rather than seeking to make partners subscribe to these concepts.

The CCP-ID also offers capacity-building programmes to partners in the global south, which are not extended to parties in the global north. While the CCP-ID engages with both authoritarian and democratic parties, it tailors the objectives and tools of its political-party diplomacy to the specific context of each country.

Trends in China's political-party cooperation

The CCP-ID operates independently from, but in parallel with, state diplomatic institutions. It dispatches party officials abroad to collect information on political developments and foreign policy trends, and provides strategic policy advice to the CCP's Central Committee and the Politburo Standing Committee.⁴³ The department also offers training programmes for party officials from third countries, aimed at sharing lessons from China's modernisation process, and regularly hosts foreign party delegations in China.⁴⁴ In addition, the CCP-ID organises overseas visits for its own representatives, including members of the Politburo, the Central Committee, and senior provincial party leaders who may not hold formal government posts.

Unlike most other departments of the CCP, the CCP-ID has comprehensively documented its international activities. A systematic analysis of the CCP-ID's website reveals with whom the CCP has interacted and where and when meetings with foreign partners have taken place since the early 2000s.⁴⁵

The department's reporting is limited to high-level contacts that involve, for instance, the minister or vice-ministers of the CCP-ID. Despite this limitation, a systematic assessment of online news items substantially increases analysts' understanding of the CCP-ID's party diplomacy and its discourses. For the period between January 2002 and September 2023, the website contained more than 9,000 news items. Some of these describe meetings with one party; others refer to meetings with several counterparts at once. Some items reference meetings with non-party partners, such as think tanks, business representatives, or state officials, without mentioning their party affiliations.

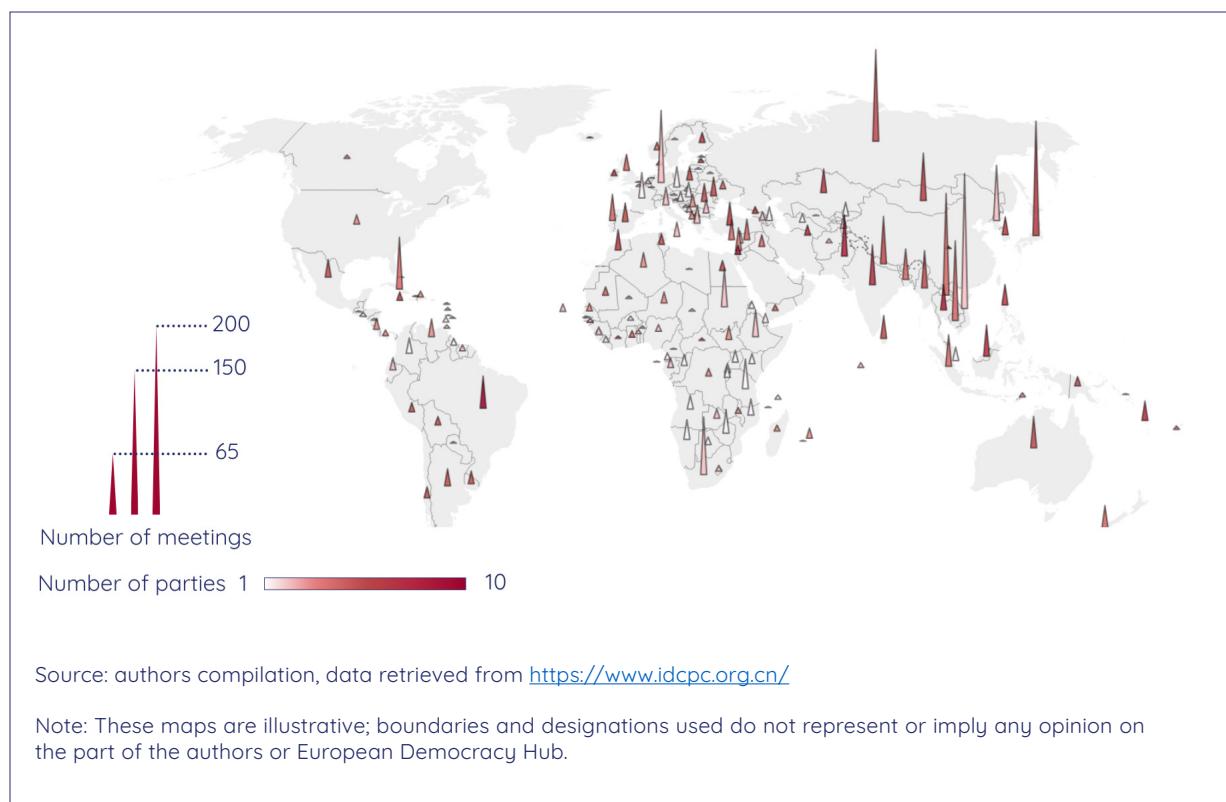
A long history of political-party diplomacy

The People's Republic of China introduced political-party diplomacy shortly after the country's foundation in 1949. In the 1950s and 1960s, party relations served to promote ties with other socialist parties and movements as part of the global bloc confrontation. During the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, political-party relations almost came to a standstill, not unlike China's diplomatic relations.

With China's economic opening up from 1978 onwards, party relations were also gradually revived. They have regained prominence particularly since the early 2000s to accompany China's rise to become a major global economic and political power. That rise, and Beijing's re-engagement with the global south, has been underpinned by substantial investment in public diplomacy and a strategy to promote Chinese soft power. In this context, the CCP revitalised its party-to-party engagement.

Since Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the CCP-ID has considerably expanded its international outreach. In 2023, the department maintained ties with more than 520 political parties across 171 countries (figure 2.1). High-level CCP officials regularly meet foreign counterparts to discuss political and economic developments, party strategies, and the relationship between party, state, and society. The CCP-ID also organises large-scale, high-level forums to engage multiple parties simultaneously.

Figure 2.1: China's international political-party diplomacy, 2002-23



Political-party diplomacy gradually intensified between 2000 and 2018 across all world regions (figure 2.2). Party contacts saw a peak around 2018, after Xi started his second term and before the Covid-19 pandemic made international travel impossible. In autumn 2020, the CCP started to use online formats to meet party officials from third countries. In 2023, after the relatively late opening up of travel in and out of China, most meetings took place in person again, but not as frequently as before the pandemic.

Figure 2.2: CCP meetings worldwide, 2002–23



Partnering with democratic and authoritarian parties

The CCP-ID claims to engage with both governing and opposition parties, yet a systematic analysis reveals a clear preference for ruling parties. Between 2002 and 2017, over 70% of the CCP-ID's contacts were with parties in government.⁴⁶ Engagements with opposition parties occurred mainly in Asia, Europe, and the Americas, whereas in Africa the department maintained high-level contacts almost exclusively with ruling parties.⁴⁷

These regional variations reflect the CCP-ID's pragmatic and highly adaptive approach to differing political contexts and regime types.⁴⁸ The department appears to engage with opposition parties primarily in democratic systems where these actors have previously held power or are considered viable contenders for future leadership.⁴⁹

The CCP-ID engages closely with political parties in both democratic and authoritarian contexts, but again, its objectives and instruments are carefully adapted to each country's regime type and political dynamics.⁵⁰ The examples of Japan and Vietnam illustrate this variation. Political parties in both countries – one a multiparty democracy, the other an authoritarian one-party state – are among the CCP-ID's most frequent and trusted interlocutors globally, indicating that the intensity of engagement is not determined by regime type.⁵¹ Yet, the modalities and goals of political-party diplomacy differ significantly across the two contexts.⁵²

In Japan, the CCP-ID has close relations with multiple political parties. Political-party diplomacy serves as an alternative communication channel during periods of diplomatic tension or political stalemate, functioning as a complement to formal state-to-state diplomacy. In contrast, in Vietnam,

the CCP-ID cooperates exclusively with the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam. Here, political-party diplomacy is highly institutionalised and centres on organisational learning, ideological exchange, cadre training, and the advancement of broader foreign policy objectives. These cases demonstrate the CCP-ID's pragmatic and strategic flexibility in adapting its approach to diverse political environments.

The CCP-ID's main counterparts are political parties. However, it also reaches out to non-party actors, such as kings, diplomats in Beijing, or business actors. Presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers are sometimes engaged in their state functions and not as party representatives.

What is more, the CCP-ID cultivates contacts with so-called friends of China, which refers to well-connected foreigners, often politicians who have retired from office. In Europe, examples include the former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and the former German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping. The latter still meets CCP-ID officials in Beijing regularly, long after leaving his ministerial position and party office. He has been criticised not only for using his networks to enable business relations but also for speaking positively about the CCP in the Chinese media, thereby generating external legitimacy for the party.⁵³

The CCP-ID increasingly reaches out to think tank representatives or journalists. The importance of these contacts, however, varies across regions. Whereas non-party actors do not play a prominent role in China's relations with African countries, Asian and European non-party actors are becoming ever important counterparts for the CCP-ID.⁵⁴

The main instruments of China's political-party diplomacy

The CCP's engagement with foreign political parties takes various forms, and the instruments of engagement have been evolving over the past few years. A key feature of the CCP's political-party diplomacy consists of high-level bilateral meetings between the minister of the CCP-ID or his deputies and senior foreign party officials. This type of bilateral meeting has been a constant in the CCP's global engagement, although it seems to have become less frequent over time, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another constant in Beijing's political-party diplomacy has been study tours to China, especially for parties from global south countries. Yet, as China did not lift its Covid-19 travel restrictions or reopen its borders for international visitors until 2023, this type of visit has also been less common since 2020.

In addition, the CCP has introduced various new mechanisms of cooperation to engage many party partners at the same time. It appears that during these large-scale meetings, the CCP can spread its messages more easily and widely, sometimes convincing its partners to subscribe to its concepts and messages.

The most prominent such forum is the CCP in Dialogue with World Political Parties, which takes place every two years. In 2023, more than 500 virtual participants from over 150 countries joined discussions under the title “Path Towards Modernisation: The Responsibility of Political Parties”.⁵⁵ A main purpose of the event was to launch China’s Global Civilization Initiative, which advocates the diversity of civilisations and cultures as an alternative to the universality of human rights and democratic values.⁵⁶ Various regional meetings of the initiative take place with parties from central and eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Arab world.

With the spread of online meetings and attempts by the CCP to reach a broad range of parties at once, several new cooperation formats have been introduced and others intensified. Most notably, the CCP has rolled out regular online training sessions for cadres from parties in the global south, particularly Africa, and for close allies, such as ruling parties in Laos and Vietnam. In 2021 alone, such seminars, designed for 20 or more cadres, were held for the ruling parties of Algeria, Angola, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe, among others.

The major topics for cadre training include classical development themes, such as poverty alleviation; questions of internal party structure and organisation; and the relationship between party and state, notably relations with the media, censorship, and opposition monitoring.⁵⁷ These meetings allow the CCP to reach out to important decision-makers in ruling parties or to future political leaders. The online training sessions are specific to the CCP’s cooperation with African countries and are not offered, for instance, to counterparts in Europe.

In its relations with African political parties, the CCP also supports political-party schools. The most prominent and most widely debated example is the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania (see box).

China’s motives and interests in its political-party diplomacy

China’s foreign relations aim to sustain the country’s economic growth and promote China’s rise from a regional to a global power. As with government-to-government relations, the CCP uses its contacts with other political parties to advance these economic and political interests, which also include normalising its authoritarian governance system. Party ties therefore complement intergovernmental relations but also have some strategic advantages over government diplomacy.

Box: The Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School

From the early 2000s, six former liberation movements and dominant ruling parties across southern Africa – in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe – had long-standing plans to create a joint school for the formation of political-party cadres. In 2018, the CCP offered to support the establishment of the school. Beijing provided about \$40 million to construct the building, and the school opened in February 2022.⁵⁸

Today, the CCP cooperates with the school on the teaching curriculum and organises some of its training sessions. One example is an annual seminar specifically for young and middle-aged cadres. While this school has received particular public attention, the CCP also supports political-party schools at the national level, for instance in Zimbabwe.⁵⁹

China's support for political-party schools has been particularly controversial among European policymakers and media. One reason for the attention devoted to these schools might be that they are a very visible way of engaging with foreign partners. Compared with the many high-level meetings, whose patterns and purposes are more difficult to grasp when looking at a single event, supporting a political-party school is a tangible form of engagement. In terms of substance, this type of support implies that the CCP potentially has very relevant access to key future decision-makers and can contribute to shaping their norms and values.

However, support for political-party schools is only one instrument in the large toolbox of China's party diplomacy, and it seems to be more prominent in the CCP-ID's engagement with African partners than with other world regions. Elsewhere, general contacts with CCP or local political-party schools exist, but cooperation seems less formalised than in Africa.

Advancing political interests

Political-party ties promote China's core foreign policy interests, much like government diplomacy. But party relationships are instrumentalised even more strategically to manufacture consent with Beijing's narratives about the international order and China's role in it.⁶⁰

For one, China's political-party diplomacy complements and reinforces its state efforts to isolate Taiwan. By establishing informal contact with a party, the CCP can pave the way for official government relations. Once a country has switched its relations from Taiwan to China, the CCP regularly meets the ruling party of the country in question to ensure its continued compliance with

Beijing's One China policy. This happened, for instance, with Benin, Burkina Faso, and Vanuatu, where the CCP engaged very actively with the ruling parties after they had suspended relations with Taiwan, both to reward the countries for their decisions and to ensure that they did not switch back. Overall, political-party diplomacy is therefore an important tool in reducing the number of countries that maintain ties with Taiwan.

The CCP-ID's engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates the department's specific role in shaping China's international image and helping mobilise support, particularly from global south partners. In 2020, the CCP collected 230 signatures from parties around the globe for an open letter that called for international cooperation to fight Covid-19 and criticised the politicisation of the virus and the stigmatisation of certain countries.⁶¹ Most signatories came from the global south, although the full list was never published.

Now, the CCP-ID is seeking to deflect criticism of Beijing by approaching foreign parties to fish for compliments and fabricate international recognition of the CCP. Positive opinions of the CCP articulated during political-party meetings are subsequently published in Chinese media to legitimise the CCP's rule to a domestic audience. This shift in strategy is particularly prominent for partners in the global south.

In addition, political-party diplomacy helps spread China's foreign policy directions. Under former President Hu Jintao, concepts such as Peaceful Rise and Peaceful Development, and later Harmonious World, were regularly mentioned in political-party meetings. Under Xi, the CCP has used the political-party channel much more prominently to advance foreign policy concepts and strategies. In most meetings, the Belt and Road Initiative is a topic of debate, while interlocutors are introduced to Xi Jinping Thought and innovations in the president's foreign policy concepts, such as the "community with a shared future for mankind". It is interesting to note that while the CCP-ID seems somewhat cautious in promoting this notion with counterparts from the global north, it has directly framed bilateral relations with partners in the global south in these terms.

Normalising authoritarianism

China has become increasingly proactive in fostering strategic narratives about its domestic political system and its role in the global order. Departing from a defensive approach that seeks to fend off international criticism of Beijing's political system and human rights record, the CCP has more recently sought to collect positive statements from partners in the global south that share China's positions, for example on human rights in Tibet or Xinjiang. The CCP has started to use the political-party channel more actively to present its political system as a legitimate and successful variant of democracy.

In addition to advancing foreign policy interests, political-party diplomacy therefore becomes a vehicle to normalise China's authoritarian governance and share lessons with other autocrats. The CCP regularly invites party delegations from global south countries for study tours in China to introduce them to the CCP and the Chinese political system more generally, and to showcase China's economic development. These short-term visits are used to disseminate "norms, produce knowledge, and increase networking and social power".⁶²

In particular, since 2014, when Xi announced that China was willing to share the lessons of its political system, the CCP has used the political-party channel more prominently to share its governance experiences with African parties. References to learning have become more conspicuous over time in the CCP's relations with parties in the global south.

The CCP-ID's approach towards the human rights situation in Xinjiang illustrates Beijing's changing strategy in dealing with international criticism of China's domestic human rights violations. The CCP shifted its approach from defensively briefing partners about China's positions and reporting partners' support for those positions to organising dedicated study tours to Xinjiang, intended to "tell China stories well" and demonstrate that criticism of human rights abuses is unjustified.⁶³

Participants in these study tours were invited afterwards to make positive statements about the situation in the region to Chinese domestic and international media, bolstering the CCP-ID's domestic legitimacy and helping construct a positive counternarrative on Xinjiang. It is mostly parties from global south countries in Asia and Africa that participate in these study tours; these parties subsequently serve as megaphones for the CCP-ID's propaganda.⁶⁴

Whereas in the early 2000s, the CCP-ID spoke about mutual learning, or sometimes said that it was interested in learning from its partners, since 2014 the department has mainly reported on partners being interested in learning from the CCP. This changing discourse has gone hand in hand with new cooperation formats, which aim to familiarise counterparts with Chinese state governance and administration or the CCP's experience of party building.

Whether party cadres from global south countries are genuinely interested in learning from the CCP's experiences, and what the broader effects of cadre trainings are, is unclear. What is very clear, however, is that the CCP is increasingly eager to report its partners' interest in learning from it for the purpose of domestic propaganda and to strengthen domestic legitimacy in China.

Conclusion

China's political-party diplomacy is an increasingly important and effective foreign policy tool. It has enabled the CCP to secure positive public statements from foreign political actors on sensitive issues, such as the situation in Xinjiang, the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, and China's domestic response to the pandemic. These endorsements serve both external and internal legitimisation purposes, reinforcing China's preferred narratives at home and abroad.

In this sense, political-party diplomacy contributes to shaping an alternative global discourse on China and plays a role in the broader context of intensifying geostrategic competition. While it is unclear to what extent parties in the global south are genuinely interested in emulating the CCP's governance model, there is little doubt that many policymakers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America value the sustained, high-level engagement offered by Chinese party officials.

Among European policymakers, the role of political-party diplomacy in China's external relations has so far received limited attention. Yet, this form of flexible, informal, senior engagement operates alongside China's official diplomatic channels and is a strategic component of Beijing's efforts to advance its foreign policy objectives.

In light of growing geopolitical competition and shifting global alliances, European policymakers should reassess how they engage with partners in the global south. Transnational political contacts, including party-to-party cooperation, have not featured prominently in European foreign policy debates. To address this gap, European actors should consider investing more substantially in strengthening party cooperation, not to replicate China's model, but to maintain a democratic counternarrative, promote democratic governance, support political pluralism, and strengthen internal party democracy.

For political elites in global south countries, one essential feature that matters seems to be sustained, high-level outreach. These elites value the CCP's engagement in part because of a lack of alternatives. While individual European countries or parties can by no means match the intensity of the CCP's engagement, Europe has the advantage of a plurality of actors that could get involved. Taking dialogue with political elites in the global south seriously and investing strategically in this dialogue could be an important starting point. Such efforts should be grounded in transparency and respect for democratic principles. By doing so, Europe can offer a credible, values-based alternative to China's approach, thus contributing to the resilience of democratic institutions and political systems worldwide.

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China's Global Media Cooperation and Its Implications for Europe

Hangwei Li

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— Hangwei Li

In August 2013, at the National Conference on Publicity and Ideology Work, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the slogan “Tell China stories well”.⁶⁵ This mantra later became a nationwide campaign aimed at enhancing China’s international discourse power. As a self-declared member of the global south, China identifies countries in Africa, southeast Asia, and Latin America as its primary audiences.

To strengthen its global messaging, in 2018 China merged its three media giants – China Central Television, which includes the China Global Television Network (CGTN); China National Radio; and China Radio International (CRI) – into China Media Group (CMG). This move was part of a broader centralisation of power and discourse under Xi’s leadership.

Under the current administration, China is increasingly positioning itself as a normative and discourse power in the global south. Beijing’s bid for such power has grown more salient amid the withdrawal of international development aid by the United States (US) and the downscaling of US political engagement.

Within Beijing’s public diplomacy and external propaganda strategy, media cooperation with countries in the global south stands out as particularly significant. For European actors, Chinese media cooperation with Africa, southeast Asia, and Latin America warrants close attention, as Beijing’s expanding influence could marginalise Europe’s ability to project and uphold values such as democracy, transparency, and press freedom.

Africa

In January 1991, Qian Qichen, China’s then foreign minister, visited Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, setting in motion what Chinese media described as an “unstoppable trend”.⁶⁶ Since then, Chinese foreign ministers have continued to make Africa their first overseas stop each year, demonstrating the continent’s importance in China’s foreign relations.

In 2006, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation formally institutionalised China-Africa media ties.⁶⁷ Chinese media’s presence in Africa has since expanded significantly.

In the same year, Chinese state news agency Xinhua relocated its overseas headquarters from Paris to Nairobi. CRI also established its first overseas FM radio station in Nairobi. In 2012, China

Daily launched its first Africa edition, and CGTN set up an Africa division as part of a broader political objective to enhance China's discourse power and provide alternative or competitive narratives to western media in Africa. CGTN Africa has since grown into a major multilingual broadcaster in English, French, and Swahili, particularly after increased funding from Xi's administration.

In 2019, Xinhua started the construction of its 16-storey building in Nairobi – the agency's first purpose-built office block outside its headquarters in Beijing. Xinhua has expanded to over 37 bureaux across the continent, more than any other news agency.⁶⁸ Yet, as Chinese media expand their presence in Africa, media managers in African news outlets and western organisations such as the BBC have shared concerns that many talented African journalists whom these organisations trained for years have left to work for Chinese media companies, which offer more competitive pay.⁶⁹

Apart from Chinese state media, Chinese private media also play a role in shaping the African media landscape. StarTimes, a private digital television operator, is the only private Chinese firm authorised by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce to invest in foreign radio and television projects.⁷⁰ Since 2022, StarTimes has established subsidiaries in more than 30 African countries, attracting more than 13 million digital television subscribers throughout the continent.⁷¹ The company has also been involved in the process of digital migration in over half of African countries, enabling the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting across the continent.

Journalist training and capacity building are other key features of Chinese media cooperation with the global south. A major exchange initiative in this area is the China-Africa Press Centre Programme, launched in 2014. The programme enables journalists from African countries to work in Chinese newsrooms for extended assignments. By 2022, Chinese organisations had trained over 3,000 African broadcasting professionals.⁷²

Research on China's media influence in Africa highlights a clash between two distinct sets of journalistic values.⁷³ The first is the western liberal-democratic model, which promotes bottom-up, watchdog journalism. The second is China's so-called constructive journalism.⁷⁴ This is rooted in the country's domestic tradition, which takes a top-down approach and emphasises positive reporting that aligns with official narratives.⁷⁵

Despite heavy investment, China's media influence in Africa remains limited, although it has been gradually growing. Pilot studies suggest Chinese television channels face the challenge of a lack of awareness and sustained interest, especially compared with their western counterparts, which African audiences generally view more favourably.⁷⁶

The effects of China's media influence vary according to the context. In more pluralist and vibrant media markets, such as Kenya, Chinese content competes with diverse sources and faces greater public scrutiny. Meanwhile, in more authoritarian settings, such as Ethiopia, such content is more readily integrated into state-controlled media systems with limited pluralism, reinforcing illiberal norms and narratives.⁷⁷

During election periods and major policy debates, for example on topics like debt, mining, infrastructure, or employment, Chinese media content can also contribute to more favourable coverage of state-backed projects associated with ruling elites, while reducing investigative scrutiny of corruption or human rights concerns. These dynamics, although difficult to quantify, may subtly shape local politics and public perceptions in ways that reinforce the legitimacy of incumbent governments.

It is also interesting to note that while China's media influence in Africa is limited, those who consume Chinese media are more likely to hold a positive view of China, according to a 2022 survey carried out in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa.⁷⁸ This suggests that greater exposure to Chinese media could lead to more favourable attitudes towards China or increase the likelihood that ideas presented in Chinese media resonate with audiences.⁷⁹

Southeast Asia

Because of its geographic proximity, historical ties, and large Chinese communities, southeast Asia plays an important role in Chinese foreign policy. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional grouping that aims to promote economic and security cooperation among its ten members, is a particularly significant diplomatic and economic partner for China. Beijing defines its relations with ASEAN as “good neighbors, good friends and good partners” and seeks to build “a closer China-ASEAN community with a shared future”.⁸⁰

China has developed several initiatives that target southeast Asian audiences. The China-ASEAN Media Cooperation Forum, held annually since it was established in 2018, has become a major platform for media exchanges between China and ASEAN countries. Other initiatives, such as ASEAN-China Media Week, ASEAN-China TV Week, and the ASEAN-China Audiovisual Industry Cooperation Conference, further reinforce exchanges between Chinese and ASEAN media professionals. These initiatives also encourage content sharing, joint productions, and training programmes.

CMG, in particular, has played an active role in strengthening Chinese media cooperation with southeast Asia. During the 2021 ASEAN Media Partners Forum, Sheng Haixiong, president of CMG, stated that “CMG and media organizations of ASEAN countries have been engaged in multi-dimensional and multi-level exchange and cooperation, which has effectively promoted mutual understanding and trust”.⁸¹ He also emphasised that China hoped to see more media organisations from ASEAN countries join Chinese media in “telling China stories, ASEAN stories, and stories about China-ASEAN exchange and cooperation in an objective and faithful way”. As in Africa, CMG has signed cooperation agreements with various broadcasters in southeast Asia to share footage pools, co-produce documentaries, and coordinate coverage of regional events.

Southeast Asia has a large and influential Chinese diaspora that has established numerous Chinese-language or diaspora media outlets. Beijing has leveraged these platforms to promote China's development model and its constructive role in economic cooperation and regional stability.

Unlike in Africa, where China has invested heavily in building new media infrastructure, its strategy in southeast Asia is more subtle. Rather than start from scratch, Beijing works through existing local Chinese-language newspapers, television channels, and radio stations to promote its messaging. In Singapore, for example, *Lianhe Zaobao*, a newspaper popular among both ethnic Chinese communities and Chinese-speaking Singaporeans, regularly reprints content from Chinese state media, such as the *People's Daily* and the *Global Times*, and is often seen as maintaining a generally pro-Beijing editorial tone.⁸²

Chinese media influence in southeast Asia depends on several factors: each country's domestic media landscape, the strength of its civil society, and its bilateral relations with China, including any territorial disputes with Beijing, especially in the South China Sea. For instance, Cambodia's strongman politics, tightly controlled media system, and long-standing pro-Beijing stance have shaped the way China is portrayed in local news. Chinese narratives are often framed in a favourable light.⁸³ Cambodian media frequently echo China's official positions on the disputed waters, portraying the South China Sea as a strictly bilateral issue rather than a regional dispute to be addressed through ASEAN.⁸⁴

Meanwhile in the Philippines, a vibrant press-freedom community and a strong public backlash against Chinese state media narratives have disrupted co-production agreements between Chinese media and Philippine outlets. Although Chinese state media succeeded in signing formal cooperation agreements based on their close ties with former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte before 2019, Chinese-language media programming in the country has declined in recent years, especially amid escalating territorial disputes between the two nations. In March 2022, the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines published guidelines for reporting on China, urging journalists to highlight the Philippines' positions and uphold the country's sovereignty.⁸⁵

Latin America

As in Asia and southeast Asia, Latin America has seen a gradual rebalancing away from traditional western influence towards deeper engagement with China, reflected in the continent's growing media cooperation with Beijing.⁸⁶ This shift is driven primarily by pragmatic incentives, economic interests such as market access and development finance, and the appeal of China's non-interference policy, as governments hedge to reduce overreliance on the US. China's engagement with Latin American media is not new: *Xinhua* established its Havana bureau as early as 1961, and outlets like *CRI* have been broadcasting in Spanish and Portuguese in the region for decades. But there has been a clear trend towards closer partnerships in recent years.

Since 2016, Chinese media organisations have actively engaged with their Latin American counterparts by holding international summits. These include the Summit of Media Leaders from China and Latin America and the Caribbean, the China-Latin America Media Forum, and the Latin America Partners Media Cooperation Online Forum, among many others. At a media forum in Santiago in 2023, Xi announced China's plan to train 500 media professionals from Latin America and the Caribbean over five years.⁸⁷

In recent years, Chinese state media, such as CMG and Xinhua, have established or expanded partnerships with multiple content providers in Latin America. These providers include not only major publicly funded media outlets, such as the Brazil Communication Company and Peru's National Institute of Radio and Television, but also influential privately owned media organisations, such as Brazil's largest media conglomerate, Grupo Globo.

Researchers have found that Chinese news channels in Latin America face “a dual problem of low recognition (and visibility) and low credibility”.⁸⁸ Other challenges include “changes in news consumption patterns, scarce availability and accessibility across Latin America”.⁸⁹ In Argentina and Mexico, for instance, CGTN struggles with low viewership, limited accessibility, and low credibility, especially amid shifts in news consumption and a growing preference for mobile and social media platforms.⁹⁰

In Colombia, despite generally favourable views of bilateral economic ties, a 2023 survey revealed that 53% of respondents believed Chinese influence in the region to be negative. However, scholars also note a certain degree of selective success when it comes to content integration.⁹¹ In Brazil, for instance, Chinese voices are a prominent feature on BandNews TV, a Brazilian 24-hour news channel.⁹²

There is also significant resistance among Latin American journalists to China's growing presence in the region. For instance, China Daily placed a paid China Watch supplement in several newspapers in Latin America, which triggered concerns from newsrooms and civil society about credibility and editorial independence. In recent years, this form of collaboration has met growing pushback, leading to clearer labelling, segregated sections, and tighter editorial standards for Beijing-linked content.⁹³ However, unlike some western cases, pushback in Latin America has rarely taken the form of outright cancellation, as occurred at Australia's Sydney Morning Herald and the United Kingdom's Daily Telegraph.

Finally, cybersecurity investigations have uncovered organised networks of pro-China Twitter (now X) accounts targeting Latin American audiences. These accounts, which are often associated with, but conceal their ties to, the China News Service, were set up to circumvent Twitter's state-media labelling policy. They promote favourable narratives about China's achievements in technology, space, and energy.⁹⁴

Similarities and differences

Estimates indicate that China's outlay on media engagement with the global south substantially exceeds European donors' spending. While China's exact expenditure is not clear, publicly available figures suggest Beijing spends billions of dollars a year on foreign information manipulation and propaganda, including a large amount on cooperation with media from the global south.⁹⁵ As for European Union (EU) donors, research has identified 94 EU-supported journalism projects, which totalled €295.1 million (\$343.1 million) in funding between 2018 and 2024.⁹⁶ This shows that Europe's media assistance is generally in the hundreds of millions of euros over multiyear cycles, versus China's low billions annually.

Although Africa, southeast Asia, and Latin America differ greatly in geography and economy, China's media engagement with these regions tends to follow a similar playbook. Beijing's layered approach can be summarised as including three elements: hardware (physical infrastructure and donation of equipment), software (low-cost or free access to Chinese-produced news), and capacity building (training and exchanges).

First, China builds its own media infrastructure, expanding its influence through television, radio, and print platforms that broadcast and publish in local languages. This includes the establishment of channels such as CGTN Español in Latin America and CGTN Africa in Nairobi and the growth of Xinhua bureaux across the three regions.

Second, Chinese state media seek content-sharing and co-production agreements with public broadcasters, private television groups, and newspapers to exchange wire copy, co-produce programmes, or publish branded supplements. They also purchase advertorial space, such as China Daily's China Watch, to promote positive narratives about China, especially its economic and social contributions to host countries.

Third, Beijing invests substantially in capacity building through journalist exchanges, training programmes, and media forums that range from short workshops to extended fellowships. Unlike European donor-led training, which emphasises watchdog norms and newsroom autonomy, Chinese programmes often pair technical skills with Beijing's state-centric media philosophy and are a form of curated exposure to China's governance and development model. These efforts are frequently integrated into larger diplomatic platforms.

Notably, the localisation of media production and distribution has become an important feature of China's media cooperation with the global south.⁹⁷ Localisation operates mainly on two levels. First, it involves localised production within Chinese media organisations, particularly through the recruitment of local media professionals for reporting and field coverage. However, editorial and managerial control remains in Beijing or with Chinese managers.⁹⁸ Second, localisation involves the distribution of media content to local media outlets, usually through content-sharing or co-production agreements with partner organisations. At times, this approach is supplemented by paid advertising to enhance Beijing's reach and influence.

The relationship-building aspect of China's media cooperation with the global south is also worth noting. Journalist training programmes, in particular, help participants not only to familiarise themselves with China's development story, governance model, and political ideology but also to socialise Chinese values, norms, and expert knowledge.⁹⁹ While such exchanges are framed as capacity building, they also promote Chinese media norms, which favour state-centric narratives and prioritise political stability over press freedom. These programmes foster the accumulation of *guanxi* – a term denoting personal or social connections, or social capital – between Chinese and local journalists and organisations.¹⁰⁰

While China's media cooperation with Africa, southeast Asia, and Latin America shares many similarities, especially in terms of approaches and tools, there are also notable differences. In Africa, China has built a strong physical presence through CGTN Africa, the Xinhua bureaux, and StarTimes. A large part of the collaboration between Chinese and African media organisations still focuses on traditional outlets, such as television, radio, and print, despite recent efforts to expand into the digital sphere. In southeast Asia, cooperation with local media also relies heavily on diaspora-oriented Chinese-language outlets and regional forums. In Latin America, by contrast, China's messaging leans on virtual platforms and locally tailored content, rather than significant investment in physical media infrastructure.

As Africa, southeast Asia, and Latin America together comprise nearly 100 countries, there is no simple way to summarise Chinese media influence in these regions. Empirical evidence suggests that the impact of Chinese media in the global south, as well as local journalists' responses to offers from their Chinese counterparts, is significantly shaped by the political economy of the local media.¹⁰¹

It is also important not to underestimate the agency of local journalists and media organisations. Research has shown that in many cases, local actors are not passive: many engage selectively with Chinese media to advance their own interests, while others actively push back against China's influence.¹⁰² However, while scholars acknowledge that Chinese media increasingly "incorporates elements of Western journalistic professionalism", Beijing's approaches in influencing audiences in the global south still rely on covert tactics, such as disinformation and fake accounts.¹⁰³ Yet, not all journalists from these regions are fully aware of, equipped to handle, or willing to counter Chinese propaganda and disinformation.

Implications for European actors

European funding cuts to foreign-assistance programmes because of budget pressures have weakened Europe's media cooperation and support for journalist training and democracy across Africa, Latin America, and southeast Asia. This has created a vacuum that China is seeking to fill as it deepens its media engagement with the global south. European actors also face mounting challenges in countering China's authoritarian influence, particularly as funding for international development and media cooperation declines and priorities shift towards defence and security.

Although Chinese media have expanded significantly in the global south over the past decade, examples such as the Philippines demonstrate that strong traditions of watchdog journalism and investigative reporting can limit Beijing's influence. Sustained external support, especially for investigative journalism, can serve as an effective counter to authoritarian narratives.

Instead of reacting defensively, Europe should adopt a more strategic and adaptive approach. To ease budget pressures, it is important to diversify funding sources by working more closely with non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, and the private sector. While the EU, its member states, and various media organisations in Europe have launched several initiatives

to strengthen media partnerships with Africa, these efforts are fragmented and lack a cohesive, collective approach or a shared strategic vision. More effective coordination of resources among European actors is therefore needed to counter China's growing media influence. The various stakeholders in Europe involved in promoting democracy and media freedom in the global south should come together to discuss common challenges, share lessons learned, and chart a way forward.

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The Shenzhen Effect: China's Export of Authoritarianism and What to Do About It

Valentin Weber

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— Valentin Weber

For two decades, China has been exporting its authoritarian digital technology around the world. Chinese companies, many of them headquartered in the southeastern city of Shenzhen, have been designing and producing technology and selling it to other countries to create authoritarian tech ecosystems abroad. As a result, surveillance infrastructure around the globe increasingly resembles that deployed in this city and in China more broadly.

This development, which I call the Shenzhen effect, increases the power of authoritarian ruling elites while weakening democratic opposition and critical media. Yet, when it comes to surveillance exports, China does not coerce: its products and ideas are in demand from authoritarian leaders. The Shenzhen effect is therefore an example of China's attractiveness and soft power.

China's exports are driven by the desire of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to expand its influence abroad. Exports of information-control technology are a vehicle to achieve this goal. With these exports, Beijing aims to prop up China-friendly authoritarian leaders, create full-stack tech ecosystems in other countries, and position its surveillance infrastructure in strategic locations.

The European Union (EU), donor organisations, and civil society should counter these developments by deepening their efforts to foster a democratic tech ecosystem. As a first step, Europe should establish a fund to propel freedom-enhancing technologies, complementing the United States (US) Open Technology Fund.

The diffusion of Chinese authoritarianism through companies

In Europe, norms are promoted through projects that support good governance, anticorruption, the rule of law, civil society, and free and independent media. By contrast, China's primary way of dispersing its authoritarian norms is through its companies. Beijing exports its norms via the Shenzhen effect, named after the home city of Huawei, one of the most pre-eminent exporters of information-control technology, including closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras, safe-city technology, and datacentres intended for public security. In recent years, Xiamen, Beijing, and Hangzhou have joined Shenzhen as China's leading high-tech-producing cities.

The Shenzhen effect is different from the Brussels effect, which refers to the EU's export of European norms, such as privacy, through legislation.¹⁰⁴ Thanks to the Brussels effect, overseas companies and entities must comply with high standards of privacy when they collect or process citizens' data;

as a result, foreign firms change their behaviour. The Shenzhen approach, meanwhile, is more akin to the Silicon Valley effect, in that it shapes technology at the beginning of its life cycle, when it is designed or produced.

Companies such as Huawei, Alibaba, and iFlytek often roll out the most advanced features of their technologies for the Chinese market first and then export them. For instance, city brains – an evolution of smart cities – were first deployed in China, where over 500 of them are now in operation or at the planning stage.¹⁰⁵ Only later were they exported, for example to Malaysia. Similarly, exported Chinese social media or large language models often mirror censorship within China: the chatbots DeepSeek and Baidu as well as the TikTok app refuse to show information about the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, for example.¹⁰⁶

The Shenzhen effect is reinforced by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in particular its Digital Silk Road. The EU's equivalent – the Global Gateway – focuses on increasing connectivity within countries and with Europe.¹⁰⁷ The Global Gateway primarily supports efforts to build submarine cables and wi-fi networks, as the 2025 list of flagship projects shows.¹⁰⁸ These EU projects are necessary but focus exclusively on basic infrastructure that China has been building for decades.

China therefore takes a much broader view of which projects are to be pursued as part of the BRI. As Chinese President Xi Jinping said in 2017, “we should pursue innovation-driven development and intensify cooperation in frontier areas such as digital economy, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and quantum computing, and advance the development of big data, cloud computing and smart cities so as to turn them into a digital silk road of the 21st century”.¹⁰⁹ Not only does China export these cutting-edge technologies; it also seeks to export an entire tech ecosystem, which it monetises through maintenance and updates.

Supply and demand

A central question in the diffusion of Chinese information controls is whether it is driven more by a push, whereby China promotes the export of its authoritarian model, or by a pull, with diffusion occurring organically through companies that respond to demand from abroad. Diffusion is both a push and a pull.

Many of China's exports are company driven. Firms find a market to which they want to sell their products because the Chinese market, while large, has its limitations. Crucially, however, the Chinese government also encourages diffusion into certain regions, and the state directs exports to particular geographical areas. For example, the Ministry of Public Security instructed Xiamen Meiya Pico, a digital-forensics vendor, to export its products specifically to BRI countries.¹¹⁰

Another entity, the China Overseas Development Association, organised an event in 2020 to promote the satellite-based radio navigation system BeiDou, which is owned and operated by the China National Space Administration and serves as an alternative to the European Galileo system. The event included training on the use of BeiDou for participants from Ethiopia, Kenya, Nepal, and

Rwanda, and was hosted by the Beijing-based company UniStrong.¹¹¹ UniStrong is a major player in the surveillance market, where it supplies technologies that help, among other things, to position police forces.¹¹² Chinese surveillance gear has also been part of state-led bilateral deals. Ecuador, for instance, has exported oil to China in exchange for surveillance equipment.¹¹³

But there would be no export market for Chinese equipment and authoritarian ideas if there were no demand. Democracies and autocracies alike have imported information-control tools from China. This demand is most profound in authoritarian countries and those with hybrid regimes. Several countries have tried to copy China's Great Firewall, a structure put in place in the early 2000s to separate the country's information space from that of the rest of the world. Cambodia, Nepal, and Thailand have tried to follow suit.¹¹⁴

However, such a firewall is difficult to implement. It is also most effective when there is already a domestic ecosystem of social media, messaging, and email apps, as in China. Even Russia and Iran, two states with sophisticated security apparatuses, have had difficulties establishing a separate information space with a domestic app ecosystem that would be an alternative to western social media platforms. Other countries, such as Egypt, have copied China's cybercrime law, which is meant to regulate social media.¹¹⁵ This can be done more easily than creating a domestic social media ecosystem.

The demand for China's information controls is an example of Beijing's soft power. Authoritarian elites are not coerced or paid to align with China's surveillance practices. They have been attracted by, and persuaded to align with, Chinese values of control.¹¹⁶ China has demonstrated that its surveillance tools can maintain regime security in a country of over 1 billion people. Its Great Firewall is infamous. As the world turns more and more authoritarian, demand for Chinese tools only grows, while Beijing's soft power increases concurrently.¹¹⁷

Diffusion often occurs when overseas actors travel to China to experience how it handles information control. This was the case for Ugandan officials who met with representatives of a Chinese state-owned company, the China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation, in 2017.¹¹⁸ Ugandan and Chinese officials later agreed that the Chinese entity would help Uganda surveil social media.

Something similar happened with Ecuador. When Ecuadorian officials visited China for the 2008 Olympic Games, Chinese officials used this opportunity to showcase the surveillance infrastructure they had put in place for crowd control during the event.¹¹⁹ The Ecuadorian guests subsequently began to import Chinese surveillance equipment, which became the ECU-911 system at home. ECU-911 is an extensive public-surveillance network which connects CCTV cameras and social media monitoring with the cloud. Based on the data collected, command centres can then dispatch police and emergency forces in case of an incident.¹²⁰ Ecuador has been one of the most ardent countries when it comes to copying China's approach to information control.

Private companies are arguably the most effective way of diffusing norms of digital authoritarianism. Corporations have the necessary technical know-how. For instance, Huawei helped Ugandan and Zambian government forces to access the phones of opposition politicians and activists.¹²¹ In Zambia, this enabled the authorities to intercept the communication channels of members of the opposition and track their locations. In Uganda, information gained from the hacking was used to prevent opposition rallies from forming.

In another example, Chinese company Dahua allegedly supplied the Taliban in Afghanistan with thousands of CCTV cameras with facial-recognition capabilities to monitor Kabul. The Taliban might be using this surveillance equipment to enforce their strict morality code.¹²²

As a result of this demand from other countries, the Chinese government does not need to enable authoritarian leaders around the world. Xiamen Meiya Pico trains law-enforcement officers in the use of digital-forensics technology, which can be used to access locked phones. While the west is engaged in capacity building to strengthen cybersecurity, Chinese companies are developing capabilities that weaken it. In other words, these firms are enhancing authoritarian capacity.

As Chinese companies have added software products to their export endeavours, diffusion has become faster and easier. While it previously took weeks or months for smart-city equipment to arrive in destinations such as Lahore, social media and messaging apps whose censorship aligns with CCP objectives can now be disseminated in a matter of seconds.¹²³ There was no TikTok when Chinese companies started to export two decades ago, and there was no DeepSeek or other Chinese algorithm-based platforms steadily climbing the app download charts.

Impacts of the Shenzhen effect

One consequence of China's export of information controls is that they have become more affordable for authoritarian elites.¹²⁴ At least 70 countries have acquired these technologies.¹²⁵ In Venezuela, a Chinese-supplied public-surveillance system is likely to be used to monitor and record protests.¹²⁶ Chinese tech has been used in Serbia, too, to video-record demonstrations.¹²⁷ In August 2025, it was revealed in leaked documents that Serbia aims to buy even more CCTV cameras from Huawei.¹²⁸

The low cost of Chinese tech applies not only to CCTV but also to other infrastructure, such as fifth-generation (5G) technology and, most recently, DeepSeek, which is cheaper to run than some of its western competitors and is already widely used by Chinese police departments.¹²⁹ This affordability strengthens authoritarian leaders abroad: by equipping themselves with the latest tech, they can stay in power for longer. That, in turn, bolsters China's position in the world.

One could argue that it makes no difference whether the tech exporters are European or Chinese. European CCTV cameras record just like Chinese ones. But there is a crucial difference: Chinese technology is built to standards with the Chinese market in mind. In the past, this included an ability to identify members of China's Uyghur minority.¹³⁰ Chinese surveillance equipment is also

more prone to having weak cybersecurity.¹³¹ This is partly due to China's lax security culture, which stems from the state's need for total surveillance and control. Chinese equipment for the domestic market is therefore required to allow backdoor access; this tech might then also be exported.¹³² In short, Chinese technology comes with Chinese characteristics.

Chinese exports also create a deep dependence on China, whereby countries lose control over their data. Countries in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere often have little insight into the technology they are importing; it remains a black box. In one case, Huawei is alleged to have ordered the installation of a backdoor into the Lahore Safe City system, which provides the Pakistani city with a vast surveillance network of cameras and other sensors, giving the company and, in turn, Beijing access to in-depth information about Pakistani government officials and citizens.¹³³ In another case, Pakistani authorities found wi-fi modules in CCTV systems that could have initiated rogue communications without the authorities' knowledge.¹³⁴

The inscrutability of public-surveillance systems and social media algorithms will become an ever-larger problem. Internet infrastructure is transforming itself from a mostly human-populated endeavour to one increasingly steered by artificial intelligence (AI) agents.¹³⁵ These are pieces of code that can act on behalf of individuals, companies, cities, or governments. Chinese companies have been eagerly rolling out this technology in smart cities that provide not only situational awareness and decision-making support but also AI capabilities for the city authorities.¹³⁶ As a result, Chinese surveillance systems, which have so far been largely passive, are increasingly turning into infrastructure that can act. When this infrastructure is exported, other countries' agency may diminish, since it is unclear whether the embedded AI agents act in the interests of the CCP or the importing countries.

The Shenzhen effect is so deeply rooted because Chinese companies can provide end-to-end oppression capabilities throughout the technology stack. Chinese firms design and build the internet backbone, 5G connectivity, datacentres, and social media apps. Beyond that, Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) are becoming widespread. To give two examples: in Brazil, China accounts for 82% of the EV market; in Thailand, 77%.¹³⁷ Vehicles connected to the internet increasingly gather large amounts of data, and as they gain autonomous driving capabilities they could even turn into control vehicles, for example by driving citizens who are wanted by the authorities to the nearest police station.

Throughout the years, the effects of China's export of digital authoritarianism have become more pronounced. In the mid-2010s, China was exporting individual technologies, such as backbone networks, but in the past 20 years the sum of these technologies and the data they collect has created an authoritarian tech ecosystem. Today, this ecosystem is found in ever more places around the world, which is why many countries look increasingly like China.

The diffusion of China's authoritarian tech does not need a state policy of promoting authoritarianism abroad in order to be successful or effective. China has created a massive demand for surveillance at home, which has generated a security-industrial complex in China.

This industry itself is now pushing to export.¹³⁸ But Chinese officials do have overarching goals of propping up elites abroad and gaining strategic influence in global infrastructure. Chinese officials intervene to reach those goals, such as when they instruct companies to focus their surveillance exports on BRI trade routes. This state-led push to export technologies to specific regions is in line with China's drive to expand its BeiDou satellite navigation system.¹³⁹

Indeed, Chinese surveillance infrastructure is likely to be intentionally planned in strategic locations.¹⁴⁰ The One Belt One Road Fuga Island Smart City in the Philippines was supposed to be built by Xiamen Hongji Yongye Investment in an important maritime position that connects the Philippines and Taiwan. However, there were major security concerns in the Philippines about the project, and eventually the smart city was not built.¹⁴¹

In another case, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce pushed for a smart city in Daru, Papua New Guinea. Daru is a strategic site that hosts a landing station for one of the nation's submarine cables. Perhaps because of Australian security worries, the project did not go ahead. Nevertheless, in both of these locations, Chinese surveillance infrastructure would have had strategic consequences. It could have influenced events during a contingency in the Taiwan Strait and regional politics more broadly.

How the EU should respond

The diffusion of China's authoritarian tech ecosystem will be difficult to stop. It is already deeply ingrained in infrastructure across the world and will only continue to spread. With this in mind, the EU must work to improve privacy, anonymity, and access to media in other countries. That means competing with China, for instance by exporting the EU's own smart cities that meet democratic standards, such as by siloing data. But this is an ambitious goal, and Europe will need time for its technology exports to become more competitive. This should therefore be the EU's long-term objective.

In the short term, the EU, donors, and civil society organisations should focus on creating a fund to support freedom-enhancing technologies. This EU-based fund should complement, rather than duplicate, the Open Technology Fund, a US government-financed entity that supports the development of internet-freedom research and technologies, such as the Signal messaging app and the Tor browser.¹⁴²

As the Open Technology Fund is struggling under the second administration of US President Donald Trump, a European sister organisation could take on the financing of some Europe-based projects, which may otherwise soon run out of funding.¹⁴³ Having an EU-based body that supports the design and distribution of pro-freedom technologies would be a boon to internet freedom across the world. It would create a technological Brussels effect, which would be an important addition to the well-known Brussels effect in the legislative domain. Such a fund would need an annual budget of some €10-20 million (\$12-23 million) to get started and a long-term funding prospect to keep developing pro-freedom technologies.

The EU also needs to connect offline and online democracy-promotion initiatives. The EU institutions have vast democracy networks across the world, but they largely do not focus on digital authoritarianism. The EU should therefore add a digital component to its pro-democracy initiatives. For instance, these could bring together opposition parliamentarians in Africa, Latin America, and southeast Asia with an interest in human rights to exchange knowledge of the regional projects in which China-based entities are involved. Lawmakers are particularly well placed to raise controversial projects for debate in parliaments and beyond. One such example is Philippine Senator Leila M. de Lima's 2019 parliamentary resolution calling for the cancellation of Chinese smart-city projects on the Fuga, Grande, and Chiquita Islands on national security grounds.

What is more, the EU institutions should pay more attention to, and provide sufficient funding and expert support for, civil society and media organisations targeted by surveillance systems. Raising awareness of Chinese surveillance projects increases the chances that they can be shelved. One such example is Philippine Senator Leila M. de Lima's 2019 parliamentary resolution calling for the cancellation of Chinese smart-city projects on the Fuga, Grande, and Chiquita Islands on national-security grounds.¹⁴⁴

Finally, EU actors need to support local media. Many smart-city projects that are well known today would not have come to the attention of a global audience without the reporting of local media. EU funding could support the training of journalists in identifying modern surveillance infrastructure, the way it works, and its dangers.

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China's Political-Party Diplomacy in the Global South: Normalising Authoritarianism

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