

RECONNECT CHINA

POLICY BRIEF 22

— June. 2025 —

Responding with data to China's supposed divide-and-rule diplomacy in the EU

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Whether or not the People's Republic of China (PRC) engages in divide-and-rule diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU can be investigated empirically. Based on unique databases of Beijing's diplomatic engagement created by the author, and secondary literature, this policy brief describes what Chinese state and political level engagement with Europe actually looks like – and what lessons can be drawn from that for EU foreign policy on China.

The paper first discusses two tools of China's foreign affairs work that owe their unique features to the Chinese party-state: Chinese 'new type of great power relations' and the use of 'friendship'. Second, the paper looks at empirical data on state-to-state interactions that makes clear the friends and great power counterparts in Europe. Third, the paper discusses Beijing's party diplomacy targeting European elites and finds different permutations of the same groupings.

The brief concludes with a consideration of possibilities for the EU to deal with Beijing's diplomacy among member states as it really exists. It takes two hands to clap: compatibility with member states' own foreign policy decisions

is vital. The issue is not so much the quantity of interactions with China as it is the quality.

Moving forward, the EU needs to take steps for:

- **Exposure** – so that methods and ideology behind Beijing's actions are understood and member states receive clear signals about EU policy.
 - Public education on ideology.
 - Public education on the party-state.
 - Regular reports tracking visits.
- **Restraint** – so that EU member states and institutions do not create opportunities for weakening of unity and EU competences.
 - National self-discipline.
 - Protect EU competences.
- **Compensation** – to increase European strength by relying on the options for coordination that the EU as a group has.
 - Share reports with member states.
 - Ensure party contacts include member state officials.

DMDE AND RULE?

European debates on relations with China often touch on concerns that Beijing adopts an approach of divide and rule versus the European Union (EU)'s member states. For all of Beijing's talk about sovereign equality, not all

countries are equal in its worldview. The way this shapes its engagement with Europe clashes with EU interests.

The creation of the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) summit in 2012 saw Beijing bring together a group of smaller countries. The summit's set-up of both EU members and non-members appearing in concert before a Chinese leader led to accusations from some quarters about weakened European cohesion. Lithuanian foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis responded to these complaints by calling out the more populous, larger European countries – like e.g. France or Germany – also pursue their own interests through individual dealings with Beijing.¹

Adopting a 27+1 approach to relations with China – as Landsbergis suggested – is hard. The primacy on foreign and security policy remains at the national level. However, the effects of individual member states' sometimes conflicting stances in vital dossiers such as Ukraine and countervailing duties on Chinese electric vehicles demonstrate that a degree of unity is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of EU policies. To know how to respond to these challenges, we need to start from an empirical base.

CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC TOOLKIT

Most of the foreign affairs toolkit Beijing has at its disposal naturally consists of the same instruments any other country has available to itself. Some facets are unique to the PRC. Two aspects that cause a challenge for Europe stem from the nature of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Leninist party-state and the Chinese nationalist ideology that animates it.

Beijing is able to execute a relatively coherent strategy vis-à-vis Europe thanks to its political system. Behind the façade of the civilian state, with all the component parts a European official would recognise, stands the coordinating hierarchy of the CCP. A pyramid of party secretaries serve as actual chief officers in government organs, the military, civil society, and education and research institutes at all levels, and even have representation in business. At the top stands General Secretary Xi Jinping.

Instructions in the forms of speeches and slogans pass down these hierarchical lines of command. Actual policy

planning is in the hands of party committees that control the public-facing components of the Chinese state. The particular hierarchy that works on diplomacy and foreign policy is referred to as the so-called 'foreign affairs system' (*wàishì xìtǒng* 外事系统).

Foreign affairs system

For the CCP, foreign affairs (*wàishì* 外事) work concerns 'all matters related to foreigners and foreign things in China and abroad, not merely diplomacy.'² Unique is that all of this falls under the responsibility of one integrated system. This already-mentioned 'foreign affairs system' is commanded by the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC), chaired by Xi Jinping and directed by State Counsellor Wang Yi.

In the CFAC are represented the ministers in charge of foreign affairs and defence, but also officials controlling propaganda, state security, and Taiwan policy, as well as the CCP's own 'foreign ministry', the International Department (ID), and its influence organ, the United Front Work Department (UFW).

New type of great power relations

A term that makes a frequent occurrence in Beijing's textual output is a 'new type of great power relations' (*xīnxíng dàguó guānxi* 新型大国关系). This term was originally used to point to the special responsibilities of the US and China towards the world. Since ties deteriorated between Beijing and Washington, instead ties with Russia are held up as an example for the nascent post-American world.³ This should be seen in the context of Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation. This mobilising slogan is a narrative of how Beijing is reclaiming its deserved role in the line-up of great powers through a rise in material power.

The new type of great power relations concerns the special importance of great powers' mutual relations for world peace. Avoiding global conflict requires respect for each other's 'core interests' and pursuing mutual benefit. What this looks like in practice can be seen in Chinese language describing a future settlement for Europe's regional order after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine uses the principle of 'indivisible security'. Moscow uses this concept to claim Eastern European countries' NATO membership harms Russian sovereignty.⁴ China's adoption of the term in Xi's Global Security Initiative (GSI)

makes clear great powers' interest are privileged above all. In the end, it justifies a realist concern with a region's preeminent powers to the exclusion of smaller powers.

Friendship

The CCP's 'foreign affairs work' is about *all* ties outside of the Party. This includes state-to-state as well as personal ties. One unique tool used in both arenas is 'friendship' (yǒuyì 友谊). Inspired by the Soviet use of friendship 'druzhba' (дружба),⁵ it refers to working on states or individuals to give them the feeling they have a special connection. The loss of that special connection – and its economic or access advantages – can then be held over someone's head to ensure they avoid 'provocations'.

Building and maintaining affection through friendship is a more substantial and conscious part of Chinese foreign affairs work than is the case in other countries' diplomacy. Such connections can be coordinated to greater effect, thanks to party hierarchy behind all ministries, provinces, and the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). The different levels of government often act independently but have their own role in executing foreign affairs work.

Table 2: ministerial-level visits between China and EU27+EC under Hu

Visits from China (EU27) under Hu		Visits to China (EU27) under Hu	
Germany	18	Germany	17
France	14	European institutions	17
European institutions	11	France	14
Italy	8	Spain	8
Belgium	7	Italy	8
Hungary	7	Romania	8
Spain	6	Hungary	7
Ireland	5	Netherlands	7
Portugal	5	Finland	6
Greece	5	Ireland	6
Finland	5	Cyprus	6
Poland	5	Austria	6
Austria	5	Latvia	6
Sweden	5	Sweden	6
Cyprus	4	Portugal	5
Croatia	4	Luxembourg	4
Czechia	4	Slovakia	4
Romania	4	Slovenia	4
Denmark	4	Czechia	4
Luxembourg	3	Denmark	4
Slovenia	3	Bulgaria	4
Slovakia	3	Croatia	4
Bulgaria	3	Poland	3
Netherlands	2	Belgium	3
Estonia	2	Greece	3
Latvia	2	Lithuania	3
Lithuania	2	Malta	2
Malta	1	Estonia	2

STATE-TO-STATE CONTACTS

Although foreign policy is set by the Party's CFAC, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) remains fundamental to execution. As the face of China to the world, the MFA sets the tone at home and abroad by speaking on behalf of 'China' and organising the bilateral visits that are countries' main exposure to Chinese officials.⁶ The highly scripted nature of a Leninist party-state means not just destinations but also visit announcements' phrasing are carefully chosen to reflect policy, so a great deal can be discerned from a structured analysis.

The author has created a database of incoming and outgoing visits from and to China and analysed general trends elsewhere previously.⁷ The data on state-to-state contacts illuminates Chinese priorities in Europe. Table 1 and Table 2 provide overviews of all outgoing and incoming diplomatic visits at ministerial level or higher under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. Figure 1 is a map of total visits to and from EU member states per million inhabitants, minus the countries that have less than one million people. Table 3 shows how visit numbers

Table 1: ministerial-level visits between China and EU27+EC under Xi (last updated 2024/05/27)

Visits from China (EU27) under Xi		Visits to China (EU27) under Xi	
France	31	France	31
Germany	27	Germany	18
European institutions	14	European institutions	15
Italy	13	Hungary	12
Spain	9	Italy	11
Hungary	87	Netherlands	1110
Belgium	7	Denmark	9
Netherlands	7	Greece	98
Greece	7	Czechia	7
Croatia	5	Poland	7
Czechia	5	Spain	7
Portugal	5	Finland	6
Ireland	4	Luxembourg	5
Finland	4	Belgium	5
Poland	4	Malta	5
Slovenia	4	Portugal	5
Romania	3	Ireland	4
Luxembourg	2	Austria	3
Cyprus	2	Bulgaria	3
Bulgaria	2	Croatia	3
Austria	2	Estonia	3
Malta	1	Lithuania	3
Slovakia	1	Romania	3
Estonia	1	Slovakia	3
Latvia	1	Latvia	2
Lithuania	1	Slovenia	2
Denmark	0	Sweden	2
Sweden	0	Cyprus	1

Total ministerial visits per million inhabitants

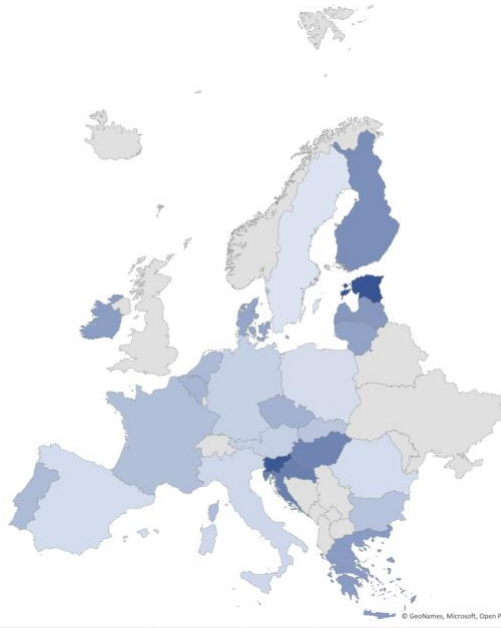


Figure 1: Map of EU27 (countries of 1 million people or more)

developed over Xi's three terms for a selection of countries.

The first trend is the focus on the big EU powers France and Germany, and Italy before its current government. The second trend is the focus on building friendship with especially countries in Central and Southeast Europe. Big states and friends get more attention under Xi while attention to the rest is similar to Hu Jintao's era.

In state-to-state contact, great power diplomacy and friendship interact. One case is Germany. As a major EU player, it is a 'great power' within Europe, but its obvious economic interests also make Berlin a target for friendship approaches. Most of the German visits were trade mission heavy trips during Merkel's time in office⁸ – under the 'Ampel' coalition, they shrank.

France's status as a UN Security Council (UNSC) member with a leading EU role and support for Europe's strategic autonomy make it one of Beijing's most important counterparts. In contrast with Germany, its unitary state means France faces China's coordination with the centrality of Paris. The comparison with the UK is instructive. London is also a UNSC member, but saw its importance decline as it was less amenable for 'friendship' plays after Prime Minister Cameron's Golden Era ended and London left the EU.

Russia's status as a perceived great power, UNSC member, and friend of China makes it Beijing's most important diplomatic partner globally for the entirety of the 21st century.⁹ Great power politics reinforces strategic and ideological convergence.

The intensity of CEEC 17+1 countries' interactions overall declines as several members grew disappointed over the forum's contributions to development. Political values became more determinant: attention remained for countries such as Hungary, Serbia, and Belarus, while it declined for others. The disappearance of attention for Ukraine after 2014 is particularly notable.

Table 3: selection of ministerial visits between China and Europe under Xi (last updated: 2025/05/27)

Selection of ministerial visits from and to China			
From China in Xi's 1st term (2013–8)		To China in Xi's first term (2013–8)	
Russia	38	Russia	21
Germany	12	France	19
France	11	United Kingdom	10
United Kingdom	10	Belarus	9
Italy	7	Germany	9
Serbia	4	Italy	7
Belarus	3	Serbia	7
Hungary	3	Hungary	6
Spain	3	Spain	4
Ukraine	2	Ukraine	3
From China in Xi's 2nd term (2018–23)		To China in Xi's second term (2018–23)	
Russia	13	Russia	12
France	11	Germany	6
Germany	10	Serbia	6
Italy	6	France	5
Spain	4	Hungary	4
Hungary	3	Belarus	3
Serbia	2	Italy	1
United Kingdom	2	Spain	0
Belarus	0	United Kingdom	0
Ukraine	0	Ukraine	0
From China in Xi's third term so far (2023–present)		To China in Xi's third term so far (2023–present)	
Russia	15	Russia	7
France	9	France	7
Germany	5	Germany	3
Belarus	2	United Kingdom	3
Hungary	2	Serbia	4
Serbia	2	Italy	3
Spain	2	Spain	3
United Kingdom	2	Belarus	2
Italy	0	Hungary	2
Ukraine	0	Ukraine	1

PERSON-TO-PERSON CONTACTS

The foreign ministry occupies itself with state-to-state contacts. In foreign affairs work, person-to-person contacts also matter. The two main organisations responsible for this, are departments of the CCP's Central Committee: the International Department (ID) and the United Front Work Department (UFW).

Firstly, the ID is sometimes referred to as the Party's 'foreign ministry'. It has gained in prominence in recent years as it moved from communist party exchanges to meetings with politicians of all stripes.

Under Xi Jinping, the ID has begun sending briefing delegations to foreign countries to explain policies in above all Global South countries. In the period of 2014–9, an increasing number of European countries was visited.¹⁰ Besides these trips, the ID also publishes meetings its minister has, in the same structured way as the MFA. The author has made an overview of all meetings of the years 2023 and 2024 in Table 3.

Table 4: high-level CCP International Department contacts

Top ID contact list European countries (2023–4)	
Germany	10
Italy	5
France	4
Denmark	4
Spain	4
Ireland	4
Croatia	3
Finland	3
Norway	2
Iceland	2
Slovakia	2
Cyprus	2
Czechia	1
European Union	1
Luxembourg	1
Bulgaria	1
Slovenia	1
Hungary	1
Netherlands	1
Poland	1
Romania	1
Portugal	1

Secondly, the UFW is responsible for society outside the Party and thus has a broader remit than the elite-focussed ID. It often works together with think tanks or community organisations. It is harder to document these activities. Besides the national UFW, every Chinese

locality has its own department. Local governments, business ties, think tanks, and academics also play a role in the broader united front system.¹¹

The combination of great power diplomacy and friendship is clear. Germany has the most established party-to-party relationship with the CCP. It leads in both the briefing overview and recent contact moments. In contrast to also-visited France, Italy, and Spain, the German political scene is unique in the party-centred nature of its exchanges. The SPD, CDU/CSU, and FDP have regular party dialogues with the CCP, while Die Linke visits China. There is much less contact with Italy's PD and France's Renaissance. Hungary's Fidesz only shows up once in the data.

A clear example is presented by the friendship ties developed with cities or provinces. The coordinating association is controlled by the UFW.¹² Subnational diplomacy in Europe serves to shape national politics from below and influence politicians' views before their career advances, leading to some worries about circumvention of national ministries especially in federal Germany, where friendship ties are particularly active.¹³

Aid diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic was a classic case of the ways affection and material interests are deployed to build 'friendship'. Aid per capita was especially high in Portugal, Southeast Europe, Ireland, and, to a lesser extent, in Italy and Denmark.¹⁴ Serbia's case was an illustration of the fact that China succeeded in leveraging its contribution to greater effect even though it was smaller than that of the EU.¹⁵

THE TRUE SOURCES OF DISUNITY

For all the talk of ways in which Beijing plays up favourites, the above data shows a relatively predictable pattern. Big and friendly countries with active foreign policies of their own dominate. Still, as Hu gave way to Xi, there was more sophisticated diplomatic outreach focussed on friends and big powers.

Rather than cast suspicion on every interaction, we should look at intensity of contact relative to ability or willingness to withstand the messages propagated at such moments. For example, though China regularly pushes its One China Principle with regard to Taiwan, only some European countries ended up (inadvertently?)

giving away concessions on their own One China policies.¹⁶

Within the EU, two groups stand out. The established group are the powers that reflect Chinese-style great power diplomacy and attempts at building affective connections through friendship. France is the clearest target of this play, which chimes with Paris' own view of its role in Europe and the world.

In a second group of 'friendly' but smaller countries, Hungary is the clearest example. For Budapest, this connects clearly to the ideology behind its foreign policy. Germany is an example where the effects of size and friendship-building are deployed with greatest intensity, connecting to the weight given in Germany to the country's economic relations with China. It takes two hands to clap: it is obvious that member states' own foreign policy choices determine receptivity to Chinese outreach.

The European Union can respond more coherently to the challenges presented by both foreign affairs work tools. The policy recommendations are as follows:

Exposure

That EU foreign policy is dominated by the member states means that public signals are important to demonstrate to the European political community what is permissible or desirable.

Measures:

- Public education on the sovereign inequality inherent in Chinese great power diplomacy through funding for work explaining Beijing's ideology.
- Public education on the coordination made possible by China's foreign affairs system through funding for work explaining Beijing's party-state.
- Regular reports that keep track of both diplomatic visits and united front engagement,

either in public by a third party or as an internal EEAS database open to all member states.

Restraint

When one leader flies to Beijing, others may want to follow. When one political party engages in a dialogue, others may not want to be left out. Preventing an uncontrolled rush requires restraint.

- Discipline among member states and political parties with reference to the database of exchanges.
- EU competences such as trade executed through European Commissioners only, learning from the power of unity during Brexit negotiations.

Compensation

Lack of resources, punishment through exclusion, and difference in size mean that not all member states are equally well-positioned to deal with the challenges discussed. If the advantage of the Chinese party-state is behind-the-scenes coordination of seemingly independent organs, the EU can compensate for this benefit by coordination among its independent member states.

- Share reports of diplomatic engagement with member states ignored by Beijing.
- Ensure party contacts through increasingly important ID channels include member state officials.

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Funded by
the European Union

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