

German Multi-Level Relations with Superpowers. The Comparison of Subnational Cooperation with American and Chinese Partners

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Abstract: The article explores the role of German cities in international relations, particularly focusing on their interactions with superpowers such as the United States and China. It highlights the increasing importance of sub-state actors in shaping foreign policy within the multiplex world order. Through a multi-level governance framework, the study examines how German cities engage in paradiplomacy and city diplomacy, addressing global challenges like climate change, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange. The research utilizes a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys and interviews with city officials and experts, to analyse the scope and nature of city-to-city partnerships. The results show the most important areas of cooperation, forms of cooperation, success factors and barriers to the development of city partnerships. The findings reveal a dynamic landscape where cities act as crucial players, complementing national and EU-level foreign policy efforts. The study also discusses the challenges of limited coordination between different levels of government and the unique roles cities play in international diplomacy. The article argues for the necessity of integrating cities into broader foreign policy strategies, emphasizing their potential to enhance Germany's international influence and address transnational issues effectively.

Keywords: Germany; United States; China; city diplomacy; paradiplomacy

Introduction

On July 13, 2023, Germany published its first 'Strategy on China,' a comprehensive 64-page document which assesses German-Chinese relations, detailing Berlin's values, interests, and goals, with sectoral analyses on the economy, climate, security and human rights. Notably, the strategy introduces the idea for enhancing coordination among various levels of German

administration in its policy towards China, declaring: ‘China pursues efforts in Germany on all levels - Federal, Land and municipal (...). So that Germany’s diversity and decentralised structure does not place us at a disadvantage in our dealings with China, the Federal Government aims to increase, within current structures, coordination regarding its policy on China’ (‘Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany’ 2023, p. 60).

This recognition of the role of cities and regions in supporting German foreign policy, especially concerning a global power like China, underscores the rising importance of sub-state actors. This shift highlights the complexity of contemporary world politics, which increasingly involves a diverse array of actors beyond traditional nation-states (Cerny and Prichard 2017). Doubtless, addressing the opportunities and challenges of today’s world is task both for the international community as well as national and local authorities (Leffel 2018). These issues range from tackling global challenges like climate change and cybersecurity to fostering market and societal openness. German municipalities already play an essential role in maintaining security, stability and prosperity, often leading the way in implementing effective solutions to global issues (Athenstaedt 2011). Therefore, it is encouraging to see the federal government emphasizing the need for enhanced collaboration with the subnational entities, appreciating their knowledge and experience resulting from international activities.

Throughout last decades, German and international literature described thoroughly cross-border contacts between Germany and other countries (Nagel 2010; Bulmer, Jeffery, and Paterson 2001; Gorzelak, Bachtler, and Kasprzyk 2005; Ziegler 1992; Langenohl 2015), emphasising the importance of subnational connections within the European Union, including with France, Poland, Italy, and Great Britain (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018). However, these partnerships were mostly described through the prism of town-twinning, focused on cultural or social opportunities, without indicating how important such collaboration may be for international policy implemented at higher levels of authority. So, despite the growing significance of cities on the global stage, there was a notable gap in academic research regarding the comprehensive role of sub-state actors in foreign policy. As most existing literature primarily focused on nation-states as the central units of foreign policy analysis (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), it often overlooked the contributions of cities and regions to the global politics, particularly in areas such as economic diplomacy, cultural exchange, and global governance. Elevating multi-level coordination to a priority within German foreign policy towards China indicates, that German cities can not only act as administrative entities, but also as implementers of national policies or agents capable of shaping international agendas. It also gives the potential for a scientific analysis.

As mentioned, much has been written about German intra-European relations at the subnational level. However, insufficient scholarly attention has been directed towards paradiplomatic relations with outer-European substate actors, involving cities in China and the United States (Statz and Wohlfahrt 2010; Pfundheller 2014). Empirical observations indicate that Germany has globally the third highest number of sister city affiliations with Chinese cities and fifth with American municipalities, encompassing numerous long-standing partnerships (US MISSION

GERMANY 2021). Yet, while the topic of relations with entities in China has been covered in recent years (Goette and Gao 2019; Ciesielska-Klikowska 2021; Kefferpütz 2021), there exists a paucity of comprehensive studies and data concerning the current state of the partnerships between Germany and the US (McMillan 2006; 2008), rendering this field significantly under-explored. This text attempts to address this critical research deficiency.

The article intends to answer the following questions:

- what is the scope, and what are the patterns of cooperation between German and US/Chinese cities?
- What are the decisive factors for successful collaboration with US-American and Chinese partners?
- What are the benefits and obstacles for German cities in their relations with the US/China?
- To what extent and in what forms the city diplomacy is vertically coordinated with national and supranational authorities (e.g., the EU institutions)?

The responses to these questions will help us identify the current model of substate activities between Germany, the United States and China. Our research focuses on the role of city diplomacy in shaping German foreign policy towards the US and China, particularly in the context of the ‘actorness’ of subnational units. The main argument of the paper is that city diplomacy, as a component of substate activities, should play a significant role in shaping German foreign policy towards major global powers, giving a broader perspective on global politics than just a state-centric view. We argue that these subnational interactions are crucial for understanding the dynamics of the multiplex world.

The primary emphasis of the study is on city-to-city relations with the United States, informed by recent research. In contrast, the analysis of the Chinese component serves as a counterbalance, offering a clearer understanding of how city-level relations are conducted with the second superpower. This latter part of the study builds on insights from a previous project.

Worth noting is the unique nature of our method, extracting the information from three complementary sources. This triangulation is based on data from surveys, interviews with city officials and experts, and analysis of cities’ and institutions’ websites. This approach was used both to research German-Chinese and German-US city relations. Detailed information about the study is included in the methodology section.

The article is structured as follows: it begins with an ‘Introduction’ that outlines the significance of the study and the research questions. The ‘Theoretical framework and methodology’ section follows, providing a review of relevant literature and conceptual framework. Next, the ‘Results and findings’ section presents the data gathered from surveys, interviews, and case studies, highlighting key trends and patterns in cities’ activities. This is followed by the ‘Implications and discussion’ section, which interprets the findings and discusses their consequences for foreign policy and international relations. Finally, the ‘Conclusions’ section summarizes the main insights of the study, reflecting on its contributions to the field of German politics.

Theoretical framework – city diplomacy in the multiplex world order

The ever-evolving landscape of international relations highlights the significance of cities as significant actors in global diplomacy (Acuto 2013; Barber 2013; Muggah 2020). Urbanisation accelerates this trend, with cities starting to play an increasingly important role in areas and sectors thus far reserved for states, such as international relations, development cooperation, environmental protection, or migration management. Tackling the challenge of climate change is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Cities not only bear the responsibility for the practical implementation of climate policies but also try to play an active role in state-dominated climate negotiations (Kern 2019). As urbanisation intensifies, cities are poised to become pivotal actors, profoundly impacting national foreign policies and international affairs (Acuto 2013; Barber 2013; Friedmann 1986; Leffel 2022).

These shifts suggest the emergence of the global landscape, which is ‘multiplex’, characterised by the active involvement of diverse stakeholders in shaping international relations. The idea of ‘multiplexity’ has been introduced by Amitav Acharya, to describe new realities that are replacing the liberal, US-dominated world order (Acharya 2017). It emphasises the complexity and diversity of interactions among global actors. Unlike traditional models that focus primarily on state-centric interactions, and similarly to neo-medievalism (Bull 1977; Spalińska 2022), multiplexity recognises the role of various non-state actors, including states, international organisations, multinational corporations, non-governmental organisations, and sub-state entities such as cities and regions. The concept stresses power inequalities and competing hierarchies between them in a way that is characteristic of the heterarchy (Cerny 2022). Multiplexity also draws from the multi-level governance approach (Bache, Bartle, and Flinders 2016), referring to ‘a dynamically pluralising global governance architecture with an emerging multilevel governance architecture comprising global, regional and subnational layers (e.g. cities), each with formal and informal institutions, networks and hybrid structures’ (Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman 2023).

We believe the ‘multiplexity’ perspective proposes a big synthesis of many different theoretical approaches to draw a better picture of today’s world. This new research paradigm can interestingly fill the gap in the scientific analysis of activities on the global scene, catching the complexities of contemporary international relations. It also perfectly complements the existing concepts of studying ‘paradiplomacy’ and ‘city diplomacy’, pointing out that regions and cities are important stakeholders.

The idea of paradiplomacy emerged in the 1970s and gained traction in the 1980s (Duchacek 1984). Paradiplomacy involves subnational governments (regions) in international relations, engaging in diplomatic practices traditionally led by states (Cornago 2013; Tavares 2016; Kuznetsov 2015). The increasing importance of cities in the global arena has also led to the emergence of ‘city diplomacy,’ where cities act as international actors, establishing direct contacts with other cities to develop economic, cultural, or educational partnerships (Amiri and Sevin 2020). This approach represents a pioneering shift in international relations, where cities transcend traditional roles to become active global participants. City diplomacy involves

mayors and municipal leaders forging international alliances, engaging in global summits, and establishing collaborations to champion their interests and influence global policies (Blank 2006).

Initially, city diplomacy research centred on large, influential cities like New York, Tokyo or Paris, which use their economic, cultural, and political clout to engage in direct diplomacy and international partnerships (Sassen 1992; Abrahamson 2004). However, it is now recognized that even smaller cities actively participate in international relations, seeking cooperation partners and addressing global issues beyond their borders (Haselmayer 2018). The small German town of Dietzenbach (Bundesland Hesse), with a population of 35,000, maintains active partnerships with as many as seven cities around the world - including Oconomowoc in Wisconsin, USA, and Kunming in China (Interview with Norbert H. Kern and Cengiz Hendek 2023). Today, city diplomacy encompasses cities of all sizes, acknowledging their roles as hubs of innovation, culture, and economic activity, and leveraging their unique strengths to tackle global challenges, thereby enhancing their positions on the world stage (Marchetti 2021).

In recent years, substate entities have also become significant players in shaping national and EU foreign policies, reflecting a broader trend of subsidiarity across Europe. As these actors gain autonomous decision-making powers, they expand their roles in areas traditionally dominated by nation-states. This growing influence can be seen in their capacity to i). lobby, ii). exercise formal powers within EU institutions, and iii). undertake direct diplomatic actions (Parkes 2020; Tatham 2018).

When analysing the involvement of sub-state entities, they engage in lobbying both domestically and at the EU level. They often form networks, such as Deutscher Städtetag (German Association of Cities) or the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, to strengthen their collective influence. These networks allow cities to voice their interests more effectively, especially in the Committee of the Regions, where they can impact EU legislation relevant to foreign affairs, such as environmental or trade policies. In some cases, regions even possess veto rights over international treaties, which can significantly influence EU foreign policy, as demonstrated by Wallonia's opposition to the CETA agreement (Paquin 2021). Beyond lobbying or vetoing, cities can undertake direct actions - they may independently initiate projects or partnerships, often aligning with or challenging national and EU policies. Cities may behave as 'contributors' that help achieve broader policy goals, such as those recorded in the European Neighbourhood Policy, where local governments play crucial roles in fostering stability and reform in EU neighbouring countries. Additionally, cities can function as 'deal-brokers,' facilitating negotiations and cooperation between parties, as demonstrated by the European Committee of the Regions' work with Libyan cities. Cities can also serve as 'antennas,' gathering and relaying critical information from the local level to decision makers, as was visible in the case of EU cities engaging with Belarusian municipalities. Alternatively, cities can act as 'trouble-makers' by taking positions that challenge national and EU foreign policies. For example, the German city of Weimar recognized an Uyghur dissident, a move that opposed Chinese government views and highlighted discrepancies in respect for human rights (Ciesielska-Klikowska and Kamiński 2022).

With its federal system and significant global role, Germany serves as an attractive political case study for exploring paradiplomacy and city diplomacy within this multiplex world (Michelmann 1988). The country's federal structure grants significant autonomy to municipalities, giving them the possibility to 'lobby' at the state and international level, utilize 'formal authority' within EU institutions or undertake 'direct actions' making them vibrant hubs of economic, cultural, and political activity. Cities are allowed to engage directly in international relations, fostering partnerships and addressing global challenges, which complement and sometimes exceed the reach of the federal government (Interview with the official from the Deutscher Städtetag 2022).

Incorporating cities into the analysis of foreign policy and international activities is therefore crucial for understanding the multi-layered and complex nature of today's global governance (Leonardy 1999). Cities like Berlin, Hamburg or Munich have significant economic, cultural, and political influence both domestically and internationally. As major urban centres, they host key international organizations, diplomatic missions, and multinational corporations, making them pivotal hubs for international engagement and diplomacy. These cities often lead in setting agendas on global issues such as climate change, migration, and cultural exchange, reflecting Germany's broader foreign policy priorities (Interview with city officials from Hamburg 2023; Interview with city official from Berlin Senate Chancellery 2023). They can also generate interesting internal disputes and international interest – as when Hamburg sold in 2022 a minority stake in one of its port terminals to the Chinese company COSCO, a case that for weeks caused political friction between the city and the port authority, and the federal cabinet (Rinke and Schwartz 2022).

Indeed, German municipalities – big and small – perform central functions and are constitutionally assured the autonomy to regulate their local affairs freely, reflecting the federal structure's decentralisation. Yet, there is also criticism that increased regulatory density from higher-level structures - the *Bundesländer*, federal state, and European Union - reduces their manoeuvrability and decision-making capacity. For instance, the German Association of Cities noted in a position paper on federalism reform that the original idea of local self-government often fails in practice. This criticism highlights the challenges cities face in managing not only local tasks but also broader issues beyond their immediate scope. Consequently, 'big politics' often appear beyond the reach of municipal actors, who are more often objects rather than subjects of political shaping (Deutscher Städtetag 2016).

Contrary to these assumptions, recent years have shown that municipalities are provided space to act. However, their impact is typically cumulative rather than stemming from individual measures by a single municipality. A notable example of municipal activities in a broader context is the creation of extensive cross-border partnership networks. The German-US and German-Chinese cooperation between cities, which has been evolving over the last 70 and 40 years respectively, exemplifies this trend. This cooperation has grown in size and importance, serving as a paradigm of the role cities can play in the global landscape.

Research design and methodological approach

To answer the research puzzle, this paper utilises a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. It draws on a comprehensive literature review, surveys, interviews and website analyses. Our research began with a survey of all 126 German cities with populations over 50,000, conducted from February to June 2023. We distributed electronic questionnaires to city officials responsible for international cooperation, identified through systematic searches of city websites and direct contact when necessary. The city list was compiled using the OECD's and EC's report entitled 'Cities in Europe' (Dijkstra and Poelman 2012) and updated with Eurostat's 2023 population data (Eurostat 2023). The survey featured a German-language questionnaire with 25 questions for cities engaged in cooperation with US cities and seven questions for those that were not.

The design of this survey was almost the same as the one conducted between May 2020 and May 2021, when we investigated Sino-German relations (Ciesielska-Klikowska 2021). The questionnaires were distributed to representatives of the same group of cities using the same method, and the only difference was that we added three new questions to the second one. It allows us to compare answers to almost all questions, although time laps between surveys create an obvious limitation for our study.

The response ratio for the US-focused survey was 47%, with 59 German cities participating. To compare, the China-focused study achieved a response ratio of 63%, with 79 questionnaires sent back. In both cases we were well above the typical survey response rates of 5-30% (Keeter et al. 2017; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2014).

Complementing the survey, we conducted 13 in-depth interviews between January 2023 and April 2024. We selected five cities¹ with robust partnerships with US cities, ensuring a mix of sizes and geographical locations. Additionally, we made two interviews with cities that have extensive cooperation with China to provide a valuable counterpoint². We conducted two interviews with citizen diplomats involved in the cooperation between Chicago, Hamburg and Warsaw, as well as an interview with an American scholar specializing in city diplomacy. Moreover, we did three interviews with representatives of institutions dealing with research and analysis of sub-state activities (German Marshall Fund of the United States) and supporting international cooperation between cities (Deutscher Städtetag and Sister Cities International). All these interviews were semi-structured and based on a scenario of 15-17 questions for institutions and scholars, and 16 for cities. The interview script for city representatives was the same to allow for comparative material, but follow-up questions were asked to better understand the phenomena of cooperation. Two interviews were conducted in person, while the remaining were conducted online.

¹ These cities are: Berlin (partnership with Los Angeles), Duisburg (Fort Lauderdale), Leipzig (Houston), Magdeburg (Nashville) and Würzburg (Rochester).

² These cities are: Hamburg (partnership with Shanghai) and Dietzenbach (Kunming).

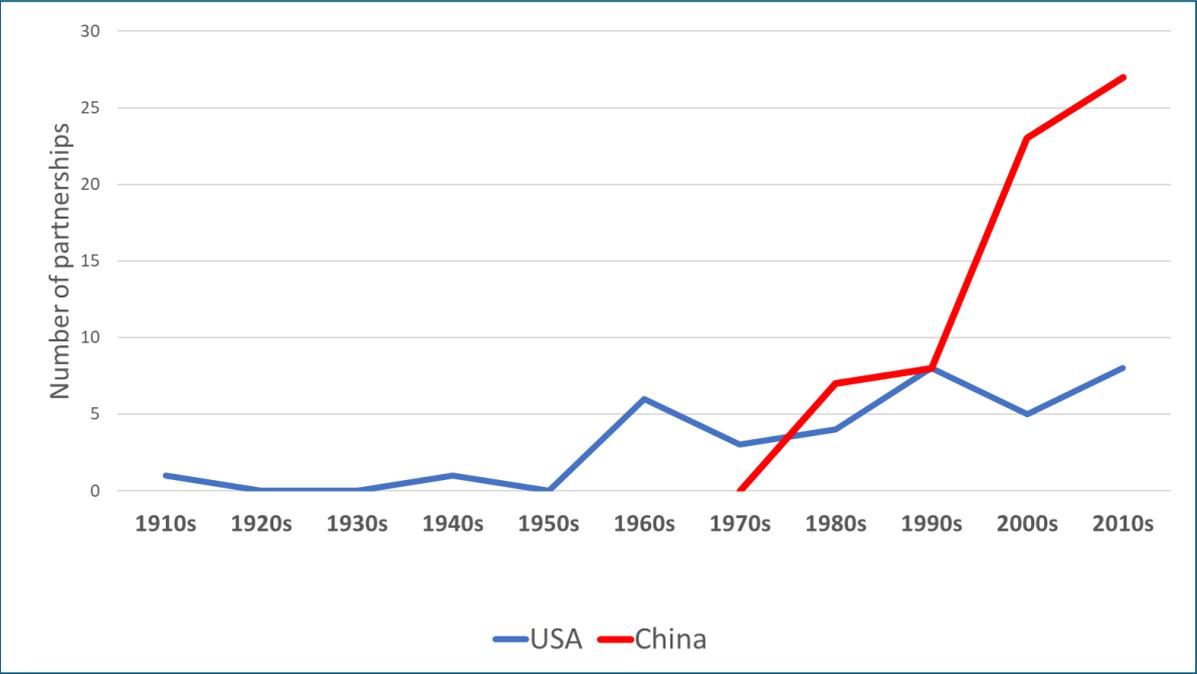
This research marks the first large-scale attempt to scrutinise the international activities of German cities in their collaborations with US-American cities. The findings presented in the next section highlight these partnerships' dynamic and multifaceted nature. Given the space limitations of this paper, we report only some of the 25 survey questions, concentrating on the most important findings about cities which cooperate with the US or Chinese partners. We identified 30 cities in the former and 47 in the latter group. The following section presents the survey responses from those cities.

German city diplomacy with superpowers – results and findings

According to Sister Cities International (SCI), European cities account for most foreign partnerships with US cities, representing one-third of all such partnerships - as far as the continental division is concerned ('2018 Annual Impact Report' 2019). Among these, German cities are the leading European partners, holding the highest number of signed agreements over the years. From the Berlin perspective, US cities rank fifth as partners for German cities, accounting for 7% of all foreign partnerships, behind French, Polish, Chinese, and Italian cities (Ciesielska-Klikowska 2021).

German and US city partnerships have a long history, beginning in 1914. Significant growth occurred after WWII, particularly in the 1960s, partially due to President Eisenhower establishing Sister Cities International in 1956 - a nonprofit organization registering and supporting foreign cooperation of US cities, counties, and states. The presence of American soldiers in Germany, the desire of German citizens to maintain ties with the US as a primary protector against Soviet communism, and the activities of German emigrants in the US also had an impact (Interview with Ricki R. Garret, Sister Cities International 2023). The growth continued modestly through the 1970s and 1980s and peaked in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War and German reunification. The 2010s saw the highest number of new agreements (see Chart 1). Establishing relations with Chinese partners started later. However, it resulted in more partnerships in a shorter period.

Chart 1. The number of links established annually between German-US and German-Chinese cities



Source: own elaboration based on survey responses.

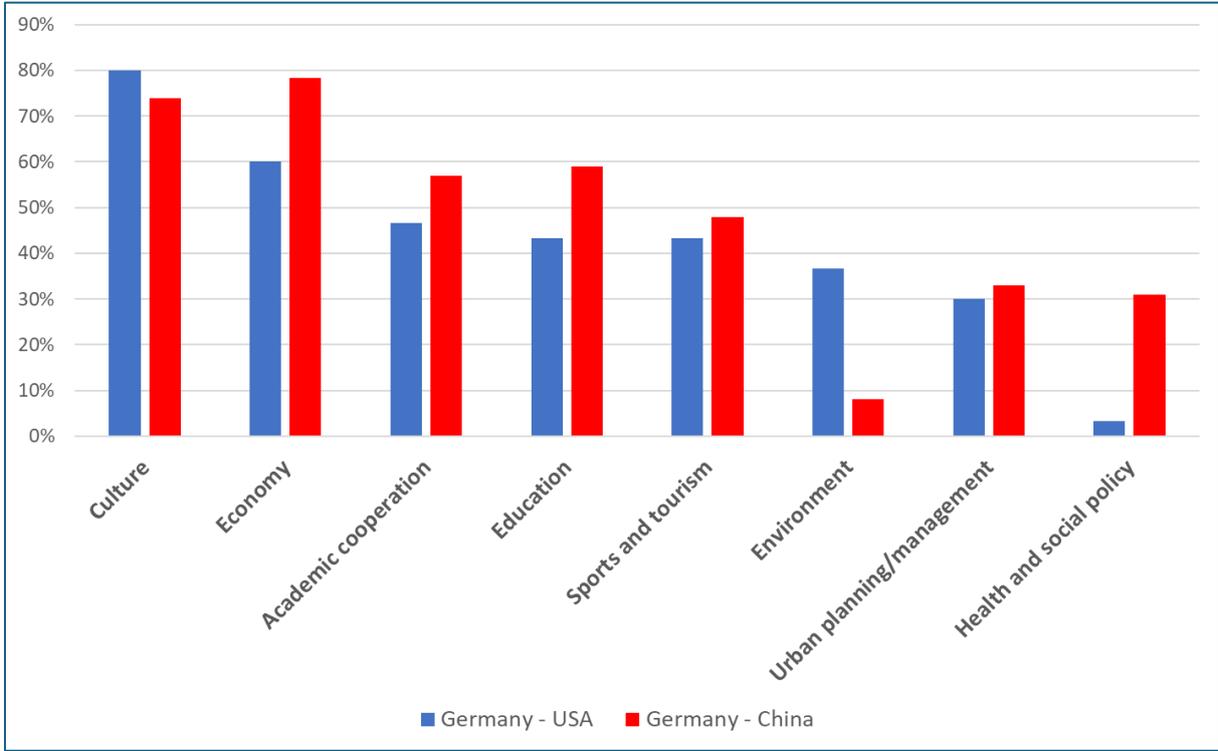
The above figure clearly shows that the breakthrough moments for making sub-state contacts were related to the policies pursued by the Bonn/Berlin and Beijing governments. Initially, the flywheel for the cooperation was the Chinese policy of reforms and opening-up, implemented by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Particularly significant developments in local cooperation followed the signing of the Strategic Partnership in Global Responsibility in 2004, the implementation of the Sino-German governmental consultations in 2011, and the upgrading of the strategic partnership into the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2014 (Ciesielska-Klikowska 2021).

One of the most critical questions in our survey concerned the vital content of the partnerships: areas of cooperation. These areas can be divided into four major groups based on their popularity. The most common form of collaboration is in the broadly defined cultural sector, highlighted by 80% of the surveyed cities. The second most significant area is economic cooperation, indicated by 60% of cities. The third category, identified by over 40% of respondents, encompasses academic, educational, tourism, and sports cooperation. Environmental protection, urban planning, and urban management form the fourth significant category, with approximately one-third of cities indicating these areas. However, cooperation in health care and social affairs is minimal, noted by only 3% of cities (see Chart 2).

The importance of cooperation in the fields of culture and education, visible in the survey results, is fully confirmed in the interviews. Our interviewees often mentioned the popularity of school or university exchanges, art exhibitions, and performances by theatre and music groups (Interview with Co-Chair of Hamburg-Chicago Committee of SCI 2024; Interview with city official from Magdeburg 2024; Interview with city official from Würzburg 2024). In some

cases, those exchanges resulted from the partnership (Interview with the Co-Chair of the Chicago-Warsaw Committee of SCI 2024); in others, they resulted in the partnership (Interview with city official from Leipzig 2024).

Chart 2. Areas of German-US and German-China city-to-city cooperation.



Source: own elaboration based on survey responses. Due to the multiple-choice nature of the question, the percentages do not sum up to 100%.

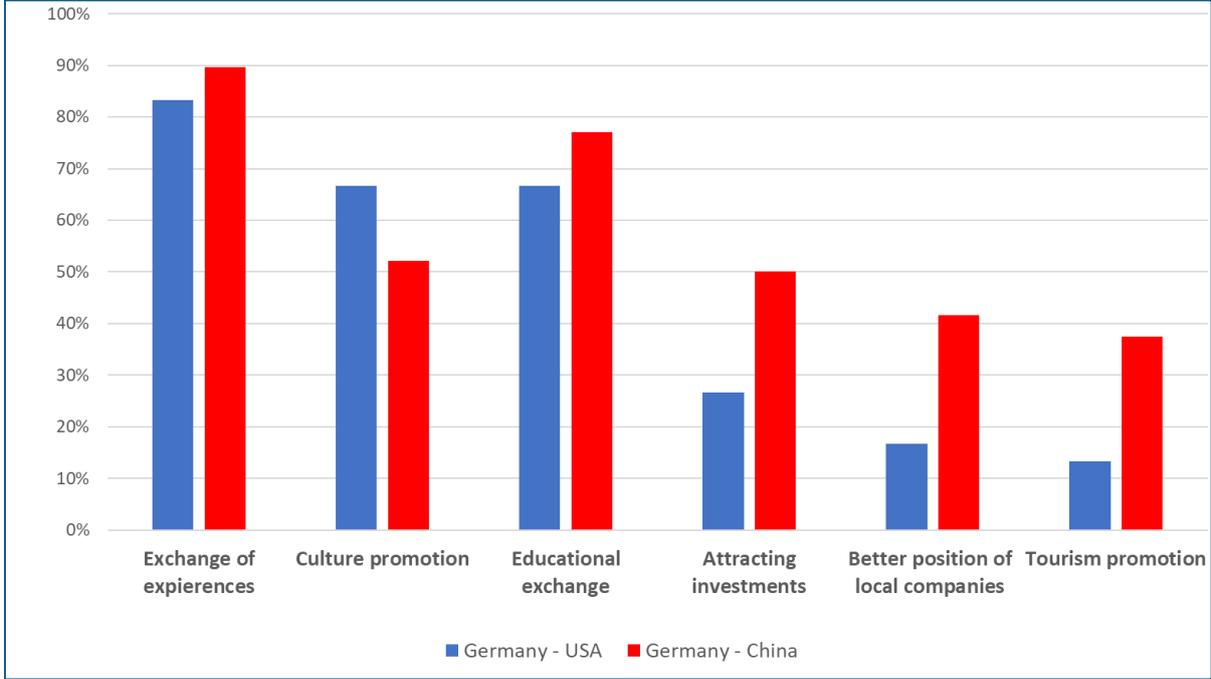
The analysis of city-to-city cooperation between German cities and their Chinese counterparts reveals a marked emphasis on economic collaboration. Data indicates that 78% of German-Chinese partnerships focus on economic activities, significantly higher than the 60% in German-American collaborations. This economic orientation is further supported by substantial involvement in education (59%) and academic cooperation (57%) with Chinese cities, highlighting a strategic approach to fostering long-term economic growth and innovation. The specific attention to urban planning and management (33%) and health and social policy (31%) in German-Chinese partnerships underscores the comprehensive nature of economic cooperation, aiming to integrate various sectors to bolster sustainable urban and economic development.

The more substantial role of economic ties with China is also visible in the answers to the questions about the benefits of city-to-city cooperation (see Chart 3). Although, in the case of both partners, the most frequently mentioned benefit was the exchange of experiences, the reported economic benefits differ significantly. Just over a quarter (27%) of German cities cited see attracting American foreign investments as a benefit, and even fewer reported improvements in the position of local enterprises (17%) or the promotion of local tourist attractions (13%). In the case of China, the numbers are twice as high. Given that economic

cooperation was identified in the previous answers as a relatively important area, the low reported economic benefits may be surprising.

Benefits in cultural promotion were indicated more often in partnerships with Americans. The possible reason might be related to the fact that from the US perspective, the role of city cooperation is primarily social rather than economic. This characteristic is typical of US-German city partnerships and those with other European cities. It is related to the founding idea of SCI, which emphasises the importance of grassroots interpersonal contacts and mutual understanding but not necessarily trade (Interview with Ricki R. Garret, Sister Cities International 2023). Another explanation, directing the spotlight towards the Asian partner, is that due to the nature of the economic system, Chinese companies are used to searching for a political umbrella while doing business with foreign partners. Thus, they perceive the agreements between the sister cities as a framework for economic cooperation (Mierzejewski 2021). The US and German companies - operating in a more liberal environment - are used to doing business more independently from the political conditions.

Chart 3. Benefits of German-US and German-China city-to-city cooperation

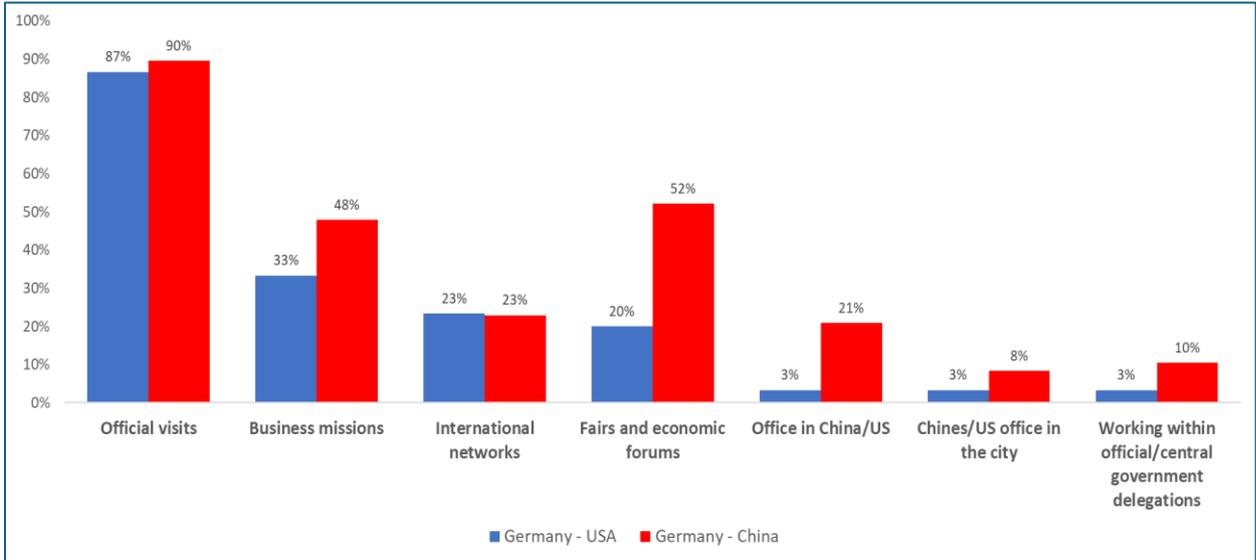


Source: own elaboration based on survey responses. Due to the multiple-choice nature of the question, the percentages do not sum up to 100%.

The economisation of links to China is further proven by analysis of the forms of city-to-city cooperation (see Chart 4). Our survey indicates a relatively high level of formalisation in city relationships. City officials primarily mentioned official visits as the most common form of contact. Business missions (33%) and participation in trade fairs or economic forums (20%) were much less common in the case of the US but prevalent in relations with the Chinese. Around half of the German cities indicated those forms of economy-related collaboration.

Despite the engagement of German cities in transnational urban networks (Kern 2019), fewer than a quarter (23%) utilise this cooperation platform. Establishing permanent representations of German cities in the USA or American cities in Germany and participation in official government delegations plays a negligible role, with only 3% reporting involvement. In the case of China, those forms are much more significant. More than 20% of surveyed German cities had a permanent office in China, and 10% reported working with central government delegations to China.

Chart 4. Forms of German-US and German-China city-to-city cooperation



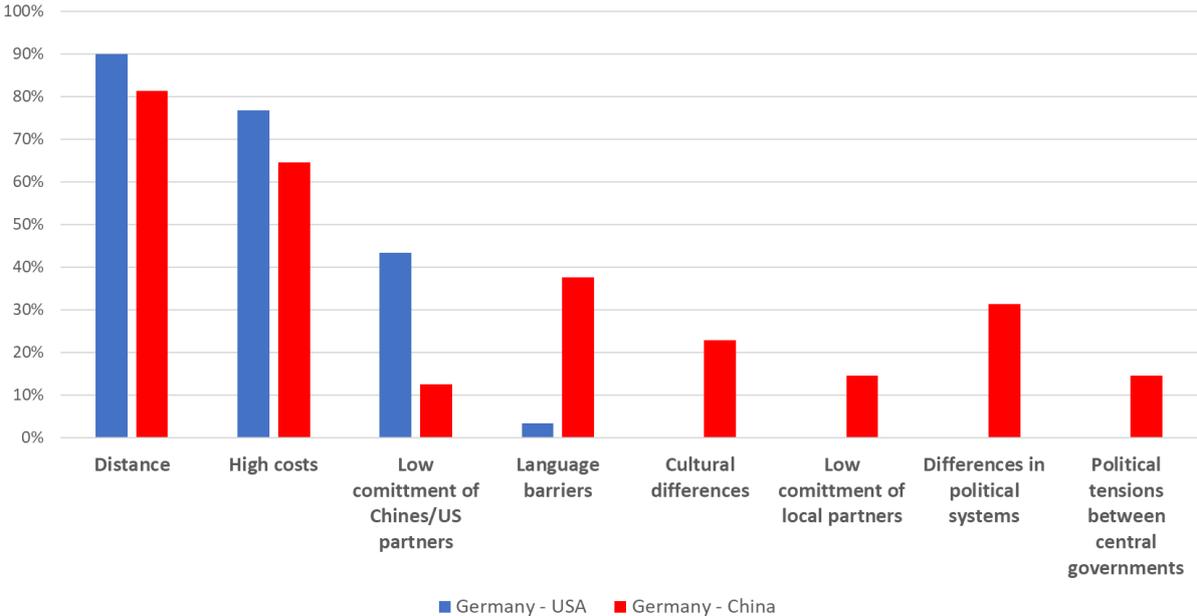
Source: own elaboration based on survey responses. Due to the multiple-choice nature of the question, the percentages do not sum up to 100%.

City representatives identified the main barriers to cooperation as primarily objective factors, such as geographical distance and the associated costs limiting travel and in-person contacts. Interestingly, nearly half of the cities (43%) cited the low involvement of American partners as a significant subjective barrier. This problem seldom appears in their contact with the Chinese, who seemed more engaged in city diplomacy. In contrast, cultural differences or political tensions were deemed marginal in German-American relations but visible with the Chinese.

The interviews provided further insights into the importance of geographical and financial barriers and the low commitment of US partners. Surprisingly, from a European perspective, US city officials, including mayors, often lack budget allocations for overseas trips (Interview with Director of International Trade and Commerce, San Francisco City Hall 2024). Citizens of US cities are generally sceptical about cooperation with foreign partners and are reluctant to fund delegations abroad with their taxes (Interview with city officials from Duisburg 2024). One expert noted that ‘there is no push from the electorate to be active internationally’ (Interview with Prof. Cristian Cantir, Oakland University 2023). Another interlocutor pointed out ‘America is as big as the whole of Europe, so there is no need for cooperation outside of America’ (Interview with city officials from Duisburg 2024). Another interviewee observed that

American cities prioritise measurable, short-term results, which often do not align with the nature of international partnerships (Interview with Co-Chair of Hamburg-Chicago Committee of SCI 2024). Although US mayors travel overseas, such trips are rare and typically require securing external funding, which does not find understanding among voters (Interview with Director of International Trade and Commerce, San Francisco City Hall 2024; Interview with city official from Leipzig 2024).

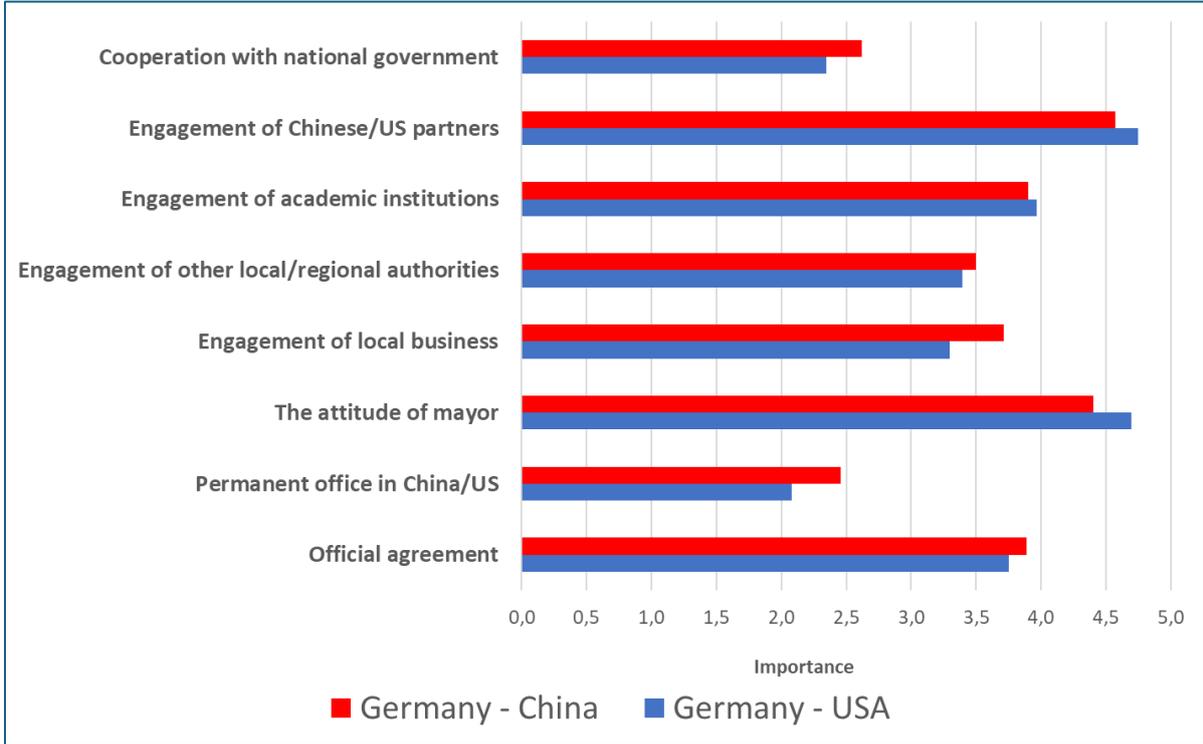
Chart 5. Barriers to German-US and German-China cities cooperation.



Source: own elaboration based on survey responses. Due to the multiple-choice nature of the question, the percentages do not sum up to 100%.

In our surveys, we also asked city officials about the factors determining successful cooperation with US cities. Respondents rated a list of factors on a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 indicated a lack of importance and 5 indicated high importance. According to the survey, the two critical success factors are the engagement of US partners and the mayor’s attitude. The responses almost mirror those collected earlier in the study regarding China (Chart 6). The involvement of academic institutions or other local or regional partners and the official agreement was deemed less necessary. The lowest significance was assigned to having a permanent office in the partner country and cooperation with the national government.

Chart 6. Success factors for German-US and German-China cities cooperation.



Source: own elaboration based on survey responses.

The importance of the mayor’s role and the engagement of foreign partners is unsurprising. From the founding idea of Sister Cities International, which emphasises grassroots interpersonal contacts (‘About Us – Sister Cities International (SCI)’ 2024), to the current practice of paradiplomacy (Lee 2016; Antunes, Guimarães, and Egan 2023), these people-to-people contacts form the foundation of international cooperation. The significance of personal authority, interests, and commitment (Jeffery, 2000) in developing city-to-city links was confirmed in all our interviews with city officials, experts, and the president of SCI. As the head of this latter institution stated in the interview, ‘we try very diligently to stay out of the political fray. We try diligently to focus on our people-to-people diplomacy’ (Interview with Ricki R. Garret, Sister Cities International 2023). The same attitude is visible on the other side of the Atlantic, when the city official from Magdeburg, underlying the crucial role of personal contacts, said in the interview, ‘we’re not working like a state or nation. We’re not political [...]. We’re working from person to person to get the connection between both cities, between the persons, and between the population of the cities’ (Interview with city official from Magdeburg 2024).

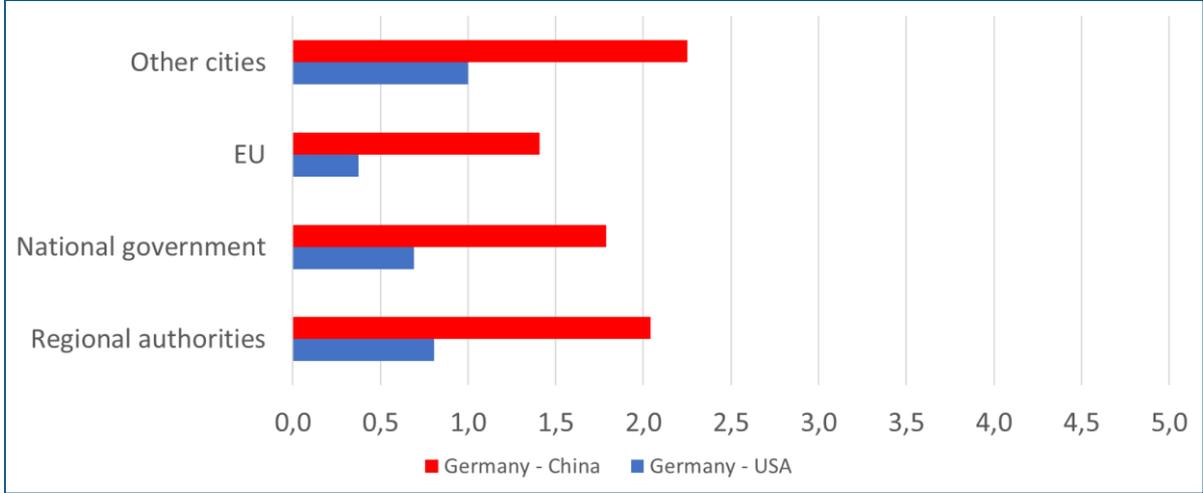
One interviewee noted another critical factor for successful cooperation—the ‘ability to manage the partnership’ (Interview with city official from Leipzig 2024), which involves attracting or initiating joint projects with various entities on both sides of the Atlantic (universities, businesses, artists, and even fire brigades or police). This finding aligns with our research on cooperation with China at the regional (Kamiński 2021) and city level (Kamiński, Ciesielska-Klikowska, and Gzik 2024).

While the official agreement initiating city-to-city partnerships is significant, some interviewees emphasised that the natural drive for cooperation often stems from common challenges. For instance, Duisburg and Fort Lauderdale focus on flood management. One interviewee said, ‘Urban diplomacy is all about having the same challenges, just in different global locations’ (Interview with city officials from Duisburg 2024). Online meeting platforms have facilitated more spontaneous and issue-focused contact between city representatives, contrasting with the formal agreements signed years ago (Interview with city official from Berlin Senate Chancellery 2023). Another interviewee echoed this observation and noted that many American cities prioritise climate issues and water management, often cooperating through city networks rather than sister city programs (Interview with Prof. Cristian Cantir, Oakland University 2023).

Contrary to the EU-China relations, differences in locating city diplomacy in the institutional setup of the city hall may hinder cooperation with German partners. The responsibility for operational managing and developing city diplomacy in the US is often ‘outsourced’ from the city hall. As Frenkel (2023) observed, three models exist in the US: cooperation managed by a volunteer group (e.g., Oklahoma City), a non-profit organisation (e.g., Tulsa), or a person or department within city hall (e.g., Chicago). Only the last of these models is similar to the European one, while the rest is based on ‘citizen diplomats’, not city hall employees. It results in the non-equal status of people engaged in transatlantic cooperation. Full-time employed city officials in Germany often have to work with volunteers, loosely linked to the city hall and engaging in paradiplomacy as a hobby rather than a job.

Finally, we asked about the level of policy coordination with other partners on different levels, knowing from previous research that in the case of China, it is very weak (Kamiński, Ciesielska-Klikowska, and Gzik 2024). Officials were asked to assess on a 1–5 scale the level of policy coordination towards the US at the regional, national, EU and other city levels (Chart 7).

Chart 7. Coordinate city policy towards China/the US with other actors.



Source: own elaboration based on survey responses.

It turned out that the coordination in the case of the relations with US partners is even weaker, almost non-existent. This result may suggest that there is no policy dialogue not only with the EU level but also with the national or even regional authorities. City-to-city relations with the US seem to be in the box, with limited contacts even with regional partners. It has been further confirmed by German city officials' assessment of their impact on the policy of their regional authorities. Regarding policy towards America, similar to China, it averaged about 1,7 points on a scale from 0 to 5.

Implications and discussion

While it is seldom highlighted in the literature, German foreign relations with both superpowers - the United States and China - operate on three distinct levels. These include inter-governmental contacts, EU foreign relations, and the paradiplomatic activities of regions and cities. The cooperation with these economic and political giants at the EU and state levels is well-documented in scientific literature and the daily press. In turn, our research fills the gap in knowledge regarding the sub-state cooperation. The survey results reveal that partnerships with US and Chinese counterparts are prevalent among German cities, with 48 connections established with China and 30 with the US. The latest Truman Center's map of US subnational diplomacy confirms these findings, showing 28 city partnerships with Germany ('Multilevel Diplomacy Map | The Truman Center' 2024).

Despite such well-developed networks of contacts with both partners, they are disconnected from upper levels of German/EU foreign policy. As one of the city official stated 'there is no real coordination mechanism (...). We would be eager to collaborate with other German cities and learn more about their ideas for addressing current issues. I believe that receiving support from higher levels would be highly beneficial' (Interview with city official from Magdeburg 2024). It suggests that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not taken visible initiatives to coordinate multilevel relations with the US and China. As the city authorities point, the coordination is 'rather on demand, nothing on a regular basis' (Interview with city official from Leipzig 2024). Ministerial support for local authorities is incidental rather than systemic and the German cities are mainly left to themselves conducting foreign contacts. Given that our research revealed an almost complete lack of dialogue between regions and cities on their international activities, a concrete mechanism for coordinating and facilitating cooperation across different levels still needs to be developed.

Yet, also lack of horizontal coordination with peer cities suggests that German municipalities do not use opportunities for knowledge sharing and exchanging best practices of city diplomacy. Both our surveys show this picture, which indicates that there is possibly a space for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate dialogue, not only with cities but also between cities. This lack of integration can lead to fragmented approaches and missed opportunities for a more cohesive foreign policy. The Dutch example of soft cooperation mechanisms with subnational actors regarding policy towards China might be an inspiration ('VNG Survey on Sino-Dutch Decentralised Partnerships' 2020). However, it requires a conceptual change at the government level and the creation of new dialogue and coordination mechanisms that currently do not exist.

Our research also shows slightly different characteristics of German cities' relations with the US and China. Partnerships with China are much more focused on the economy and benefits related to business. Collaboration with Americans is driven more by academic cooperation, educational exchanges, and cultural promotion, while economic gains are less significant.

The Chinese are visibly more engaged than the US partners in the eyes of German officials. The differences in partnership management systems between the US and Germany might explain it. Engagement of citizen diplomats, volunteering to develop relations with Germans, might not always be compatible with much more professionally organised city diplomacy. To complement this picture, we can add very limited budgets for overseas initiatives in many American cities and the fact that mayors are often focused on local politics and not very eager to invest time and resources in subnational diplomacy.

What is important to stress is that our research results confirmed that successful paradiplomatical cooperation relies heavily on both sides' personal engagement, particularly the mayor's role. Both surveys and all interviews emphasized the importance of leadership and interpersonal contacts. These are the most critical drivers of cooperation, which reinforced earlier claims in the literature that might not be empirically tested on such a scale (Antunes, Guimarães, and Egan 2023).

Conclusions

Multiplex world order, with the rising role of non-state actors, their multifaceted interdependencies that extend beyond economic ties and leadership roles taken by cities in many domains, encourages national governments to rethink how foreign policy is conducted. This process is not limited to federal states, but countries like Germany, with a long tradition of multi-level governance, might be natural early adapters to this, possibly profound, change in diplomacy (Kamiński 2023). The German 'Strategy on China', which highlights non-state actors as significant stakeholders, demonstrates a shift away from 'mental nationalism' - the tendency to overlook the sub-state level in the planning and implementation of foreign policy.

Yet, our research suggests that German policy towards the US should also be framed in a multi-level way. The widespread network of city-to-city links shows that local authorities must not be overlooked in policy implementation. They can serve perfectly as 'contributors' or 'antennas', using the already mentioned theoretical categories (Ciesielska-Klikowska and Kamiński 2022).

German foreign policy, particularly towards the United States, is driven by the necessity to develop collective responses to 21st century challenges such as climate change, mass migration, and organized crime. These issues often manifest most acutely in urban areas, requiring the engagement of local knowledge and leadership (Bouchet 2022). Consequently, cities play a crucial role in implementing various foreign policy initiatives, as they are the focal points where these problems are most concentrated. Considering possible future changes in the American approach to the Paris Agreement, the subnational US partners, with proven capabilities to resist

the federal policy through a network called the US Climate Alliance (Leffel and Acuto 2017), might be significant allies. In times of turbulence and tensions on the national level, resulting from ideological differences, the sub-state channel might complement the traditional foreign policy. Through subnational contacts, Germany can develop substantial cooperation with the US in various areas, even if another transatlantic crisis occurs, such as the one during the first Trump administration (Blanc 2024).

Moreover, sub-state actors may be ‘antennas’, receiving and sending social and political signals from and to local and regional authorities outside Germany. Cities can transfer ideas, collect data or share knowledge in different areas, bringing benefits also to the central government. Firstly, subnational units can collect valuable information at the local level. City officials contacting their partners sometimes have better access to knowledge than professional diplomats on the national level. Secondly, city-to-city collaboration, often through transnational networks such as C40 (Acuto and Leffel 2021), frequently forms networked urban governance with some potential for global governance in various areas, like combating climate change. Germany can use those networks to promote its values, strengthen global influence or build a positive image abroad. However, the existence of efficient forms of coordination and vertical knowledge transfer is *conditio sine qua non* to use these ‘antennas’.

The geographical scope of our study creates natural limitations for conclusions; however, we can easily indicate other foreign policy directions where the role of substate actors is becoming crucial. The rebuilding process of Ukraine might be the best example, considering that German cities actively develop links with Ukrainians, representing over 20% of all the new partnerships established after the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022 (Matiaszczyk 2024). A multi-level approach seems necessary if Germany wants to effectively shape the post-war reconstruction process. Beyond businesses, sub-state actors are essential stakeholders, and it’s encouraging to see the German government involving them in the planning process. The Ukraine Recovery Conference held in June 2024, under the theme ‘All Reconstruction is Local,’ exemplified this approach effectively (‘All Reconstruction Is Local: A Forum on the Eve of the Ukraine Recovery Conference | German Marshall Fund of the United States’ 2024).

The conference’s title refers to the phrase ‘all politics is local’, commonly used in United States politics. In the changing world order, we are heading into a situation when foreign policy becomes local as well, in the sense of necessary engagement of cities in the whole policy process – from planning through implementation and evaluation. Germany has a chance to understand it earlier than others.

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