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**The sub-national dimension of the European Union’s relations with China in the context of growing Sino-American tensions. A Solution for Tough Times?**

**Abstract**

Regional governments actively participate in international relations by opening trade and cultural missions abroad, joining international networks of cooperation and signing treaties and agreements with their partners from other countries. In cases of tension between nation states that might paralyze global governance, relations at the regional and local level may rise to prominence.

The main goal of the paper is to examine how the EU could benefit from growing sub-national connections with China in the context of pressure affecting the triangle of the United States, China and Europe. The authors suggest that, in the possible case of escalating conflict between Beijing and the West, such low-key channels of communication with China might be very useful for both the national governments of its Member States and for the EU.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the phenomenon of fast-growing cooperation on the sub-national level between Europe and China is outlined. Secondly, the opportunities and limits of the instrumental use of paradiplomatic ties in EU-level foreign policy towards China are presented. Finally, in the case of Germany, the paper describes the benefits of the development of sub-national contacts in the bilateral relations of Member States with China.

**Keywords(s):** paradiplomacy, EU-China relations, sub-national governments, Germany

**Introduction**

Subnational units, such as regions, are very internationally active and are attracting increasing attention from scholars, although much less from the general public. Researchers tend to look at regions as non-state actors conducting ‘paradiplomacy’ and analyse their activities in the context of rising ‘pluralisation’ in diplomacy. Diplomatic practices, institutions and discourses are thus no longer limited to traditional international diplomacy. This paper takes a slightly different angle by examining regional paradiplomatic activities as a possible instrument of foreign policy by the European Union and its Member States.

According to our assumption, promoting and maintaining relations at the sub-state level may be a perfect solution for difficult relations in the triangular relationship between the European Union, the United States and China. We assume that these relations are mostly focused on pragmatic cooperation in low politic areas. Nevertheless, they can be an important tool in creating norms and values ​​that are crucial from a European point of view, such as human and labour rights or environmental standards. It can therefore be said that Europe should be guided by the qualities ​​of its international policy and can do so, *inter alia*, by using cities and regions as ‘transmission belts’ to promote its values. Substantially, such economic cooperation may promote principles of democracy, equality and justice, which are core for the European Community.

In the context of growing tensions between China and the West, one may reasonably look for possible ways to mitigate these tensions. We argue that paradiplomatic relations might be part of the solution. At the same time, it seems that, in relation to both global governance problems and regional matters in the Asian region, Europe should wisely choose partners for cooperation. It should remember, however, that the United States remains a key partner in maintaining European security. For this reason, the position of the European Union towards the USA cannot be confrontational, although it cannot be closed to other global partners. In practice, the norms and values ​​represented by the two transatlantic partners have been built on common foundations. However, modern challenges require openness to cooperation with other states, particularly China. This tripartite cooperation is extremely difficult and is under constant pressure, which may cause crises in international relations. Nevertheless, in the event of a deterioration of connections at the central level, it is the cooperation of cities and regions that can help maintain Western unity, including in the context of competition with China.

The main goal of the paper is therefore to answer the question of how Europe, identified in our text with the European Union, could benefit from increasing sub-national connections with China in an atmosphere of anxiety in the triangular relationship of the United States, China and Europe. The authors suggest that, in the possible case of escalating conflict between Beijing and the West, such low-key channels of communication with China might be very useful both for national governments and the EU.

The chapter[[1]](#footnote-1) is structured as follows. Firstly, the phenomenon of fast-growing cooperation on the sub-national level between Europe and China is discussed, based on a survey conducted in the five largest EU Member States (Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Poland).[[2]](#footnote-2) Secondly, we present the opportunities and limits of the instrumental use of paradiplomatic ties in foreign policy towards China on the EU level. Finally, in the case of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), we try to indicate the possible ways of benefiting from further development of sub-national contacts in bilateral relations with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC).

The paper is based on in-depth literature research, interviews with EEAS and European Commission officials, and with representatives of national foreign ministries and sub-state authorities.

**EU-China cooperation on the sub-national level**

The development of the European Union’s relations with China is characterised by a growing number of interactions on the supranational and interstate, but also on the sub-state, levels. Scholars and experts tend to concentrate on the first two levels and the academic literature on EU-China relations has been largely reticent on the sub-national dimension. Existing studies ignore this phenomenon, even when they note areas where sub-state actors are very active, such as economic relations (Farnell and Crooks 2016; Christiansen and Maher 2017; Minghao 2016) or people-to-people dialogue (Burney, Hivonnet, and Raube 2014).

It is only very recently that the sub-national dimension of European relations with China has attracted attention, and a few studies have tried to map this phenomenon on the EU level (Skorupska, Szczudlik, and Kamiński 2019; Kamiński 2019c; Neves 2018), particularly for Member States (Goette and Qianlan 2018; Skorupska 2017) or in certain regions (Czapiewski 2015; Kamiński 2019b). There are also some studies on Chinese provinces’ foreign activities, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Summers 2016; Mierzejewski 2018).

In trying to characterise the picture of subnational links between the EU and China that emerge from the existing research, three things seem to be apparent. Firstly, the development of sub-state links with PRC has been quite dynamic in recent decades. Different analyses show that the number of bilateral partnerships has been rising steadily. Data from the European Commission (see Figure 1) indicates that, in 2011, the number of partnerships reached almost 500, mainly between cities.

**Figure 1.** The number of partnerships between European and Chinese regions and cities, from 1979 to 2011.

Source: (Kamiński 2019c)

More recent research (Skorupska, Szczudlik, and Kamiński 2019; Kamiński 2019c) in five EU Member States (Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Poland) has revealed that sub-national cooperation with China is very common. Based on data obtained in 2017, nearly 80% of the surveyed regions have cooperated with partners from China. The original contacts were launched in the 1980s, particularly by German and French regions. From this time, a few new partnerships have been established almost annually. The dynamic changed in 2014 and the number of new partnerships soared, which can be linked to extended connections under the aegis of the BRI. More than half of existing region-to-region relationships with China commenced in 2014–2016 (see Figure 2). Consequently, in many cases the relations with Chinese partners stem from the earliest stages of development.

**Figure 2.** Number of established EU-China region-to-region partnerships 1983–2016

Source: (Kamiński 2019c)

Anecdotal evidences also indicates that the number of city-to-city contacts has been rising (Interview with the project officer in Eurocities 2019; Interview with the European Commission official from DG REGIO 2017; Kontinakis, Liu, Huo, Li, and Jinjing 2019); however, there is lack of comprehensive research regarding this.

Secondly, according to recent research (Kamiński 2019c), the economy seems to be the main area of regional cooperation with China for more than 80% of the surveyed European regional officials. Other popular areas of collaboration are higher education (almost 70%) and tourism (almost 60%). When asked about the motivation for activities with Asian partners, regions usually indicated the promotion of culture and tourism, developing business links, and exchange of experiences. Many of them perceive paradiplomatical relations with Chinese regional authorities as important for development in certain areas. For example, the Italian region of Umbria has managed to attract more Chinese tourists, the French region of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes stresses the importance of academic cooperation with Shanghai, and the Polish region of Lodzkie reports rising trade (Skorupska, Szczudlik, and Kamiński 2019).

These interests have been reflected in the choice of local partners engaged with regional authorities in the process of cooperation with Chinese partners. For many regional authorities, universities and business partners are the closest collaborators. They form an effective cooperation triangle (Skorupska, Szczudlik, and Kamiński 2019), which is an adaptation of the “triple helix” model of university, industry and local government relations (Etzkowitz and Zhou 2017; Kontinakis, Liu, Huo, Li, and Jinjing 2019). According to this model, academia, business and local/regional government build a complex network of relationships in which they dynamically cooperate. One of the experts, working as a facilitator of city-to-city links with China, said:

At times, they ‘take the role of the other’ by adopting new, non-traditional roles. For example, companies become educators, the university becomes more entrepreneurial and the local government a business facilitator. In the triple helix model, knowledge does not only flow from university lab to business (the traditional ‘linear’ model of innovation): there are multiple links, flows and backflows between multiple partners that make up a complex tissue of public, private and knowledge actors (Interview with the project officer in Eurocities 2019).

Thirdly, interviews with EU institutions (Interview with the European Commission official from DG REGIO 2017; Interview with the European Commission official from DG ENER 2018; Interview with the European External Action Service officer 2017) show a limited recognition of the phenomenon of sub-national collaboration with China. The EU has no monitoring mechanism that could provide its officials with up-to-date figures. There are some activities to encourage cooperation but they are mainly limited to pilot projects which concentrate on urbanisation dialogue (Kamiński 2019a). All such activities are affected by a lack of funds and human resources as well as by a lack of coordination and strategic vision. The EU has never acknowledged the role of sub-state actors in its foreign policy towards China. Considering the rising number of partnerships with China, this failure might be a serious mistake. In the next section, we will demonstrate that sub-national levels of relations affect EU foreign policy and create opportunities to advance European interests, norms and values in China. They should, therefore, not be neglected.

**How sub-state activities may affect EU foreign policy**

The influence of sub-state activities on EU foreign policy may be examined from two perspectives. The first looks at the rise of regional authority in Europe as logical consequence of the empowerment of regions (Tatham 2018). It focuses on ways in which sub-state actors exert both informal and formal influence over EU affairs. The second perspective concentrates on the possible methods of employing the paradiplomatic activities of cities and regions within European foreign policy in order to realise the latter’s goals more effectively (Kamiński 2019c).

International relations scholars often ignore sub-state actors; they consider nation-states the default unit of analysis. This has been called by critics a form of “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Jeffery and Wincott 2010). The bulk of literature on paradiplomacy (eg. Kuznetsov 2015; Duchacek 1984; Michelmann and Soldatos 1990) was developed in contradiction to these assumptions and is trying to attract attention to the rising role of subnational actors.

The role of sub-state entities in Europe, particularly regions, has grown over time (Marks, Hooghe, and Schakel 2010). Central governments, as well as the EU, must increasingly compromise with sub-state actors throughout the policy cycle, from policy initiation to decision-making and implementation (Tatham 2018). The decentralisation of some competencies by nation-states subsequent to their centralisation at the EU level are perceived as main drivers of this trend. It also resulted in increasing overlap, especially in areas such as the environment, transport, agriculture, fisheries, regional economic development and spatial planning (Panara and De Becker 2010). To avoid disempowerment, regions have to “Europeanise” their administration and begin interacting directly with the EU’s institutions (Tatham 2016).

Tatham (2018) indicates three ways in which sub-state actors influence the Union[[3]](#footnote-3). Firstly, they *lobby*, either through their parent state (‘intra‐state’ channels) or directly at the EU level (‘extra‐state’ channels). Supranationally, they act through their staff based in their official offices in Brussels, through activities in the Committee of Regions (CoR) or through international networks of subnational governments. Organisations such as C40 or Eurocities are good examples of this.

Secondly, sub-state actors try to increase their *formal power* on EU issues. Treaty revisions have expanded the role of the CoR over time, adding further areas over which this institution has direct influence on European legislation (Hönnige and Panke 2016). Moreover, they have managed to strengthen the subsidiarity principle, its monitoring and enforcement (Tatham 2018).

Thirdly, regions have formal *veto rights* at the domestic level that may affect the EU policy-making process in even high‐political issues such as international trade deals. The most spectacular case is the government of Wallonia, which vetoed the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between the EU and Canada in 2016. The agreement of Wallonia’s regional parliament was needed in order to implement CETA; for the first time in its history, the EU Commission had to negotiate directly with a region and introduce changes under pressure from the citizens of a particular region (Magnette 2016)[[4]](#footnote-4).

In the case of EU policy toward China, all three of these elements may play a role. This would be particularly evident in any trade deal with China. Such a deal must be agreed upon not only by Member States’ governments and the European Parliament but also by the EU’s national parliaments, the seven federal, regional and community parliaments in Belgium, and ten upper chambers, some of which include strong sub-state representations (such as the Italian, Spanish, Austrian or German upper chambers). As Tatham (2018) correctly noted: “The rise of regions not only multiplies institutional dynamics in Europe, it also visibly complicates the political dynamics of policy negotiations”. One can easily imagine that particular regions (as veto players) might be targeted by foreign powers in order to influence, delay or even block the process.

In this context, sub-national links may create a channel for the Chinese to further undermine European cohesion. China may use its relationship with particular regions to convince their authorities to act as agents of Chinese interests. Attaching political influence to China’s economic presence is not unusual at the level of Member States. There are examples where European countries were reluctant to support the EU’s “anti-Chinese” political actions (e.g. in 2017, Greece blocked an EU statement at the UN Human Rights Council condemning China’s human rights violations). The same mechanism of influence may potentially be adopted at the subnational level.

The case of EU-China relations also indicates that, in addition to the three above ways in which sub-state actors affect EU policy, we can add another element: *direct actions*. Regions and cities take autonomous actions that impact national and European relations with China. To illustrate this point, we consider several cases.

After backing away under Chinese pressure from plans to give the Dalai Lama honorary citizenship in 2012 (Alpert 2012), Milan’s authorities did so four years later. This provoked official reaction from the Chinese Foreign Ministry condemning the Italian city (Barry 2016). The situation complicated *post factum* talks between the European Commission and China on the project of “EU-China Tourism Year 2018”. Milan had to be excluded from the list of places officially engaged in this venture (Interview with the European External Action Service officer 2017).

A similar case occurred in 2017, when the city of Weimar awarded a human rights prize for Ilham Tohti, a Uyghur dissident. Beijing had protested to Berlin through diplomatic channels (Interview with German diplomat 2019) and the official website of the city of Weimar was attacked by hackers who deleted all content related to the prize (China Change 2017).

A recent example comes from Prague, where liberal mayor Zdenek Hrib withdrew the city from a twin cities agreement with Beijing that explicitly recognised the “one China policy”, under which the PRC claims sovereignty over Taiwan. Moreover, the mayor met the head of Tibet’s government-in-exile, Lobsang Sangay and restored the practice of flying the Tibetan flag from Prague’s town hall (Tait 2019). In response, Beijing cancelled a tour in China by the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra, which had spent two and a half years in preparation and lost nearly USD 200,000 on the cancelled visit. Czech President Milos Zeman wrote to Xi Jinping distancing himself from Prague’s policy (Schmitz 2019).

These incidents show that autonomous actions taken by sub-state actors can potentially impact not only national relations with China but sometimes also European-level policy. In the next part of this chapter we will examine how the EU, using the example of Germany, can potentially make use of sub-state relations with the PRC.

Theoretically, paradiplomacy may positively influence state and international policies because it brings extra rationalisation to the decision-making process. The external relations of sub-state actors can contribute to the foreign policy of states and even make it more efficient (Soldatos 1990; Kuznetsov 2015). In the context of European policy, we can point out two ways in which EU foreign policy might benefit: by fostering the implementation of some policy goals, and by creating of alternative political channel of communication with foreign partners. The latter might be even more important than the former.

The EU’s China strategy (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2016) does not stress the importance of sub-national actors’ activities to achieve its goals, a seemingly major omission. The sub-state level is appropriate for tackling many important problems presented in the document and plays a crucial role in reaching some of its objectives (Kamiński 2019c).

Firstly, the EU aspires to promote a more open, sustainable and inclusive growth model in China by supporting and encouraging economic, environmental and social reforms in the PRC. Contacts on the sub-state level can enable the direct transfer of knowledge and best practice where they are needed—to local communities. In by-passing highly politicised dialogues on the state level, cities and regions can offer more channels for influencing Chinese society.

Secondly, the EU aims to attract “productive Chinese investment in Europe”. Regional authorities play a crucial role in negotiating FDI deals. Big Chinese investments in particular are accompanied by political agreements between local or regional authorities (Mierzejewski 2018). Even establishing train connections which facilitate and promote bilateral trade are politicised and engage regional authorities on both sides. The development of the Lodz-Chengdu cargo train link may serve as a good example of such a connection (Kamiński 2019b).

Thirdly, the strategy says that the EU will strengthen cooperation with China on research and innovation. Skorupska, Szczudlik, and Kamiński (2019) show that universities closely cooperate with regions in their activities with China. Consequently, the EU’s science diplomacy should acknowledge sub-state authorities as important stakeholders and partners for collaboration.

Finally, the EU hopes to strengthen people-to-people (P2P) links by attracting more Chinese students and tourists who “…would contribute to fostering inter-cultural dialogue and promoting cultural diversity and civil society participation”. The development of sub-national links creates a network necessary to implementing this policy goal. Moreover, cultural and educational exchange, not to mention tourism promotion, are on the list of priorities in regions’ relations with Chinese partners. A community of interest between the EU and sub-state actors is also quite clear in this regard. This should lay a good foundation for closer cooperation with China, but there are even more strategic reasons why the EU should promote sub-state contacts.

Hence, interconnections between regions and cities create new channels of political communication with China, which might prove very useful in cases of deteriorating relations at the inter-governmental level. Rising tensions between the US and China might force Europe to be involved in the diplomatic conflict, most probably on the American side—voluntarily or under US pressure. Europeans, however, are also looking for their own, third path of cooperation between the powers. An example of this is a reaction to Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, an illustration of the significance of sub-state relations in mitigating crises on the diplomatic level. Despite a political impasse between Washington and Beijing, many local and regional authorities in the USA have declared their continued cooperation on climate, clean energy or low-carbon development. China has acknowledged this and president Xi Jinping even met in person with the governor of California, Jerry Brown (Hernández and Nagourney 2017).

**Sub-national interactions with China: case study of Germany**

In these considerations, Germany (FRG) is a special case of a country that conducts intensive three-tier international cooperation—at the *macro-level* of the European Union, at the *medium-level* of its Member States, as well as at the *micro-level* of region-to-region cooperation.

At the *macro-level*, Germany is an economically and politically leading country in Europe and an actor which masterfully plays the game between EU, United States and China. Today, the FRG is trying to find its own place on the global stage, somehow denying the well-known saying of Henry Kissinger that it is “too big for Europe, but too small for the world”. Thus, as Habermas (2011) indicates, by going through a series of difficult crises in the EU with a defensive hand, Germany has facilitated the “Germanisation*”* of European politics and transformed itself into a European leader which can impose on Europe to realize German policy (Bulmer and Paterson 2018; Schoeller 2019). At a *medium–level*, the FRG values close relations with neighbouring or partner states — with Western ones since the 1950s, especially France (Ciesielska-Klikowska 2017) and the US (Gatzke 1980; Trommler and Shore 2001) and, since its 1970s turn to *Ostpolitik*, with the Eastern states (Hofmann 2007). However, German political activity is also intensive at the *micro-level*. The 16 German *Länder* conduct rigorous, multifaceted and multidimensional *quasi*-foreign policies, thus complementing the possibilities of pursuing interests in foreign policy conducted at the central level. The issue of making use of paradiplomatic cooperation is broadly anchored in the German federal system, described in the Constitution from 1949 and supported in practice by additional laws (Sturm 2013; Plöhn and Steffani 1994).

According to jurisprudence and the prevailing view of law, German *Länder* have original state power, are parliamentary republics and, thus, have the quality of states. As legal institutions, they conduct economic, social and cultural policies, maintain contacts with regions in other countries, establish foreign representations, become members of international organizations and associations, and sign international agreements, as confirmed in the Lindau Agreement of 1957 (Bundesratsdrucksache 1992; Leonardy 1999; Jeffery 1999). They also make use of paradiplomatic tools within the framework of EU—since the mid-1980s, the *Länder* have had representative offices in Brussels (Nagel 2010). They have participated in European politics through the legal provisions of the “European Article” (Art. 23), the *Act on Co-operation between the Federation and the Federal States in matters concerning the European Union*, and the *Agreement between the Federation and the Federal States*; moreover, the upper chamber of the FRG’s legislature, the *Bundesrat*, has extensive competence to speak on European matters (Jeffery 2007).

There are three levels in which the German federal states participate in European politics, depending on the extent to which the competence of *Länder* or the *Bundesrat* applies: i) in the case of EU matters concerning political areas in which the *Bundesrat* was previously entitled to participate, the *Länder* have the right to participate in deliberations which determine the position of the federal government; ii) when the essential interests of the *Länder* are at stake, the *Bundesrat* has the right to appoint representatives who, together with the competent federal ministry, can participate in negotiations in the EU Council; iii) a representative of the *Länder* may also be the only representative of Germany in the Council convening EU applications solely regarding *Länder* authority. It should also be emphasized that, in cases where the federal government has legislative powers, it must take into account the position taken by the *Bundesrat* in determining the German negotiating position. The consent of the *Bundesrat* is also required to change and amend EU treaties. Thus, *vis-à-vis* the above-mentioned Tatham study (2018), the *Bundesrat*, as representative of all *Länder*, may implement its competencies on European policy through *lobbying*, *formal powers* or *veto rights*.

It can therefore be assumed that the *Länder* assist the implementation of the foreign policy objectives of the entire federation by supporting the execution of certain policy goals through the *Bundesrat*, the federal government or at the EU level, and by creating an alternative political channel of communication with foreign partners.

The latter is realized in practice in a number of ways. One is sustaining political relations with other regions and countries by signing international agreements and partnerships, and by carrying out international visits. Another is establishing offices as representations in regions of third-party countries. A third is by activities carried out in cooperation with partner regions (joint fairs, exhibitions, conferences or academic collaboration). A fourth is that the *Länder* create alternative political channels of communication with foreign partners by the exchange of good practices in public administration. Germany thus increases the benefits of bilateral and multilateral international cooperation at sub-state level.

However, as Neves (2018) observes, these relationships have completely different characteristics to *macro-* and *medium-level* relations for several reasons: they are based on the multidisciplinary and holistic approach of economic, social, environmental, educational and cultural ties, which are demonstrably more vivid than those at higher levels; they bind representatives of regional governmental, private and non-governmental sector; they are founded on strong interpersonal relations; and they are oriented to the long-term, which makes them generally very stable.

Given the high effectiveness of German policy implemented by regions in the European and American contexts—described many times (Roose 2010; Statz and Wohlfarth 2010; Gorzelak, Bachtler, and Kasprzyk 2004; Cziomer 2005; Kiwerska 2013)—it is worth investigating the less researched contacts of *Länder* with Chinese provinces through lenses mentioned above.

1. The first Sino-German sub-state contacts were based on the political decisions of central and regional authorities from both sides which were related to the desire to develop economic relations and were founded on bilateral visits and the signing of partnerships between regions and cities. The first region-to-region cooperation was established in 1982 (Baden-Württemberg with Liaoning), as was the earliest city-to-city relation (Duisburg-Wuhan). There are today 23 regional and 141 city partnerships—their number has increased over 40 years, but the upward trend does not reflect that characterizing regional cooperation with the PRC for the entire EU (see Table 1, compare to above Figures 1 and 2).

**Table 1.** Regional partnerships with China

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **German *Land*** | **Chinese province** | | |
| Baden-Württemberg | Liaoning (1982) | Jiangsu (1984) |  |
| Bayern | Shandong (1987) | Guandong (2004) |  |
| Brandenburg | Hebei (2015) |  |  |
| Bremen | City of Dalian (1985) | Guandong (2004)\* |  |
| Federal State of Berlin | Beijing (1994) |  |  |
| Hamburg | Shanghai (1986) |  |  |
| Hessen | Jangxi (1985) | Hunan (1985)\* |  |
| Mecklenburg-Vorpommern |  |  |  |
| Niedersachsen | Anhui (1984) |  |  |
| Nordrhein-Westfalen | Jiangsu (1986) | Shanxi (1984) | Sichuan (1988) |
| Rheinland-Pfalz | Fuijan (1989) |  |  |
| Saarland | Hunan (2006)\* | Hubei (1996) |  |
| Sachsen-Anhalt | Shanghai (2017) | Heilongjiang (2003)\* |  |
| Sachsen | Hubei (2007) |  |  |
| Schleswig-Holstein | Zhejiang (1986) |  |  |
| Thüringen | Shaanxi (1997)\* |  |  |

\* Non-active or probably non-active partnerships (pointed out as non-active by regional officers in the survey or no information about any form of activity in recent years found)

Source: own elaboration on the basis of the survey (2016/2017) among all regional offices responsible for cooperation with China, combined with Goette and Qianlan (2018) and followed by review of official websites of German *Länder.*

The main driving forces behind establishing region-to-region relationships were the changing economic conditions and China’s increasing opening to the world. However, it cannot be forgotten that deepened cooperation was also supplemented by central governments in Berlin and Beijing—a particularly significant development of regional cooperation followed the signing of the Strategic Partnership in Global Responsibility in 2004, the implementation of Sino-German governmental consultations in 2011 and the upgrading of strategic partnership into the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2014 (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung 2014). In contrast to other European countries, the BRI did not fuel the building of regional cooperation (Interview with German diplomat 2019) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** The number of established links between German and Chinese cities

Source: own elaboration based on Goette and Qianlan (2018).

2. The *Länder* remain significant actors on the global arena, thus proving their high activity in international affairs by establishing their own representative offices to pursue their interests in the partner region. Such offices are not necessary, but certainly desirable, for an active international policy. Western and southern federal states (Baden-Württemberg, Bayern, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Rheinland-Pfalz or Saarland) are especially vigorous in global affairs, although their potential to develop their foreign activities is not the same due differences in populations and the relative size of their economies (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder 2019; Eurostat 2019). The importance of international offices can be confirmed by the example of Hamburg, a city with *Land*-status, the largest seaport in Germany and a huge industrial and financial centre; its authorities have placed great emphasis on internationalization. For many years, relations with China have been fostered by Hamburg’s office in Shanghai, together with its Chamber of Commerce, Port of Hamburg and Hamburg Travel. These efforts have had measurable effects: China is today the second most important trade partner for the Hamburg agglomeration (Goette and Qianlan 2018).

3. Regions actively cooperate in the organization of joint trade fairs, trade missions, exhibitions, conferences and academic cooperation. In fact, by conducting regional cooperation with China, German *Länder* and cities have achieved numerous goals, mostly focused on five issues: business and trade, tourism, academic exchange, and educational and cultural cooperation (Federal Ministry of Education and Research 2015). One of the regions particularly determined to cooperate with China is Nordrhein-Westfalen. The city of Duisburg, located there, can boast the largest dry port in Europe, which is a great flywheel for the German economy, and regional contacts with the PRC. This hinterland hub, two-thirds owned by the *Land* and one-third by the city, drives the relationship on a *macro* and *micro* scale. Duisburg receives 40 cargo trains from Chongqing every week and has over 80 Chinese companies actively participating in its economy, while the University of Duisburg-Essen has one of the most important research centres dealing with China, and Asia in general—the Institute of East Asian Studies—which fuels discussion about the Middle Kingdom throughout the region (Interview in In-East 2019). Partners organise, *inter alia*, the Chinese Spring Festival—sponsored jointly by GFW Duisburg, the Confucius Institute Metropole Ruhr and the University of Duisburg-Essen—and arrange support for Chinese students and graduates (GFW Duisburg 2019).

Nevertheless, the benefits associated with cooperation with China are also available to smaller urban centres. Economically-weak Magdeburg (the capital city of Sachsen-Anhalt) has been implementing a dynamic partnership with Harbin since 2008; Sachsen-Anhalt also has an office in Shanghai. Magdeburg and Harbin actively support cooperation projects in business, training and education, as well as cultural projects. Examples of this are the Ice and Snow Festival, the Harbin Fair or more local *Buntes China in Magdeburg* (Eng. Colourful China in Magdeburg). Considering the fact that Magdeburg and the wider *Land* do not have a broadly developed industry that would be a driving force in contacts with China but so have high schools and colleges that specialize in exact sciences, they focus on maintaining broad contacts in the educational sector through, for example, Otto-von-Guericke University or the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences (Interview with Dr. G. Henkel 2018).

4. The regions and cities share good practice in the field of public administration. Taxes, construction, administration management, natural environment and municipal waste management remain themes that connect all cities. Therefore, Sino-German relations feature a vital exchange of knowledge and experience related to waste management, urban transport, caring for municipal greenery or building smart cities (Münchner Kreis 2013). Green management is one of the crucial working areas between Baden-Württemberg, Jiangsu and Liaoning (Baden-Württemberg 2015). Germans give environmental protection the priority among contemporary social challenges, so collaboration with China on the latest technology and environmental monitoring is extremely important (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2019). In light of the withdrawal of President Trump from the Paris Agreement, the search for an international partner in pro-environmental change is fundamental for Germany—so China can take its place as Germany’s main partner in this matter. The framework of regional cooperation has a long history; hence, the experience can be easily moved to the central level, which is already happening through the German and Chinese ministries responsible for the environment and for urban and rural development (GIZ 2020).

Generalizing the research results, it should be stated that regions may use bilateral relations with other sub-state actors to build a strong political position in their own country, to promote themselves in the international arena, to eliminate investment risk, to build a regional/city brand attractive for foreign direct investments, to benefit from social and information networks, and to support *diasporas*, especially students and employees (Düben 2019).

Given the dynamics of change on the world stage and current growing tensions, especially in the EU-US-China triangle, these *micro-level* relationships can also be used firstly to safeguard relations at the central level, which are today in a difficult position due to the ongoing US trade war with the PRC. The United States and China are among the largest export markets for German and European companies outside the EU. A crisis between these two would therefore directly damage European economies, including the budgets of individual companies (mainly in the automotive and high-tech industry), and thus also the funds of local governments. Great risks to the EU associated with escalating trade tensions and increased global protectionism could also arise. This could lead, in turn, to uncertainties in global trade, potentially reducing future investment and trade growth and jeopardizing the credibility of the World Trade Organization. Trade misunderstandings between the two major powers would therefore brutally affect the export-oriented German and European economy. A return to bilateralism, protectionism and global trade uncertainty would thus be tough for Germany and for the EU as a whole (Schmucker 2018). It seems that, in this situation, individual states and regions may lobby for a return to open and multidimensional international cooperation, which will be profitable at the *macro-*, *medium*- and *micro-levels*.

Independent communication channels at the sub-national level might make many areas of cooperation with China and the US more resilient through diplomatic storms. Such a detachment of low-policy issues from high-politics may be very beneficial, especially in the case of tensions that make political communication more difficult or even impossible.

This can be illustrated by the example of Bayern, which, despite the arms embargo on the PRC since the early 1990s, maintains military cooperation with China. The current Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, as Prime Minister of Bayern in 2008–2018, pursued a policy of dynamic cooperation with the PRC, primarily with the partner province of Shantung. This resulted in a sales contract worth EUR 1 billion for 1,000 helicopters manufactured in Bavarian plants, which afterwards allowed the construction of a combat helicopter factory in Qingdao in 2019—a joint venture of Airbus Helicopters and the Chinese UGAC (Hegmann and Wüpper 2019). Seehofer today, as a member of the federal government and a known opponent of the Foreign Minister Heiko Maas—for whom issues of protecting human rights and resolving armed conflicts are crucial—would find lobbying for military cooperation with PRC at inter-state level rather difficult, if not impossible. However, the previously created opportunities for regional cooperation and lobbying in Berlin and Beijing have brought measurable profits. The steps taken by Seehofer have not led to tensions with the Americans, although the US Army Garrison Bavaria, with over 40,000 soldiers and civilians, are stationed in this *Land*. In fact, Germany’s limited expenditure on defence policy is to blame for the turbulence in German-US relations, not their military cooperation with China (Fischer and Winterer 2019).

The aspect of personal animosities, ideological differences or the ambitions of individual politicians is also significant for the implementation, pace and quality of regional connections. The human factor—involvement or the lack thereof from specific members of political circles, of the economic milieu, and increasingly from academic circles (the “triple helix” scheme)—also seems a key feature of cooperation. Undoubtedly, use of the sub-state channel via particular people can be observed as an alternative or counteraction to activities undertaken at the central level. This may lead to controversy in internal policy but, at the same time, make it possible to encapsulate interstate relations with additional opportunities at a lower level.

**Conclusions**

This research leads to the conclusion that the development of sub-state relations between Europe and China can be beneficial for both the national governments and the entire EU. Firstly, in the event of expanding international anxiety, sub-national channels of communication with China might be used to mitigate tensions and secure continued cooperation in many areas, despite political storms. Moreover, by utilising this *micro-level*, the EU may transmit democratic values and good practice, thus influencing consciousness changes in China while avoiding unnecessary animosities in the US-China-EU triangle.

Secondly, the closer coordination of activities with China at all levels of contact (supranational, national and sub-national) may help implement European policy goals. In fact, the cooperation of cities and regions, due to the intensive involvement of the political, economic and social milieus of all sides, is a potentially useful tool for transferring norms and values ​​significant for the EU. The interviews and data analysis we conducted show that the European Union and its Member States can stand on the side of decent values ​​and ensure their compliance at the central level, while focusing on pragmatic cooperation in low-political areas at the regional level. This channel often seems to be ‘depoliticized’ and rather non-confrontational because economic matters are the driving force for cooperation. This method may thus prove a solution during tough times as it does not cause international controversy nor adversely affect interstate cooperation.

Thirdly, given that the world is rapidly moving towards bipolarity, Europe must look for a third path for itself. Realizing that European security relies heavily on US involvement, Brussels cannot afford open political conflict with Washington. Therefore, the strategic partnership of both entities seems crucial to EU interests. Nevertheless, the Union can and should look for partners in areas beyond the transatlantic axis. The Asian direction, including towards China, thus seems natural because China is the second most important economic partner of the EU (after the USA).

Nevertheless, confronted with rising US and PRC influence or increasing competition between them (even in the form of a trade war), the EU position will be difficult. Assuming that the issue of maintaining the unity of the West is a prerequisite for maintaining European security, Europe’s task should be to seek channels of cooperation that do not cause political controversy but do not entail directly advocating either side. Thus, the EU should lead change in international policy with the help of paradiplomatic tools which can indirectly serve the pursuit of high policy interests. Sub-state actions, if uncoordinated with the national and the EU levels, may provoke tensions as well. Consequently, strengthening political dialogue on China between the EU’s institutions, national states and regional authorities would be desirable.

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2. In total, the data is from 75 regions in the five countries (91% of all the regions in these countries). The survey

   was conducted in December 2016 and in the first half of 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He concentrates on regions only; however, in our opinion, some of methods described (e.g. lobbying) apply to cities as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It agreed that CETA should be accompanied by a legally binding interpretative instrument that clarifies and completes the treaty on key issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)