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Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska, Tomasz Kamiński & Marcin Frenkel

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

JOANNA CIESIELSKA-KLIKOWSKA , TOMASZ KAMIŃSKI  and MARCIN FRENKEL 

Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Lodz, Lodz, Poland

ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolving role of German cities in international relations, particularly in their interactions with partners in the United States and China. By employing a multi-level governance framework, the paper addresses the growing significance of substate actors in foreign policy within the complex world order. Through original data collection, including an extensive survey and interviews with German city officials, the study provides a detailed mapping of the forms and expressions of city-to-city cooperation, identifying perceived benefits, barriers, success factors, and coordination patterns with partner municipalities. The analysis highlights key areas of cooperation, while examining the mechanisms that enable and hinder successful city diplomacy. Findings suggest that German cities are critical in complementing national and EU-level foreign policy efforts, acting as independent and dynamic players on the international stage. However, the study also uncovers challenges related to limited coordination between different levels of government and the unique roles cities adopt in addressing global challenges. The article argues for a more integrated approach to foreign policy that includes cities as strategic partners, emphasising their potential to enhance Germany's international influence and contribute to addressing transnational issues effectively.

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Introduction

On 13 July 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 of enhancing coordination among various levels of German administration in its policy towards China, declaring: 'China pursues

CONTACT Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska  joanna.ciesielska@uni.lodz.pl  Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Lodz, ul. Składowa 43, 90-127 Lodz, Poland  <https://www.linkedin.com/in/joanna-ciesielska-klikowska/>

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, 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 substate actors. This shift highlights the complexity of contemporary world politics, which increasingly involves diverse actors beyond traditional nation-states (Cerny and Prichard 2017). Doubtless, addressing the opportunities and challenges of today's world is a task for both the international community and 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 practical solutions to global issues (Athenstaedt 2011). Therefore, it is encouraging to see the federal government emphasising the need for enhanced collaboration with the subnational entities, appreciating their knowledge and experience resulting from international activities.

Throughout the last decades, German and international literature described thoroughly cross-border contacts between Germany and other countries (Bulmer, Jeffery, and Paterson 2001; Gorzelak, Bachtler, and Kasprzyk 2005; Langenohl 2015; Nagel 2010; Ziegler 1992), stressing the importance of subnational connections within the European Union, including with France, Poland, Italy, and Great Britain. Yet, these partnerships were mainly 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.

A separate strand of the literature consisted of works comparing the participation of regions during international negotiations using the examples of the EU, the US and Canada (Freudlsperger 2018, 2020) or analysing changes in the way German *Länder* represent their interests in EU-level negotiations (Jaursch 2014). However great these works were, they dealt with a relatively narrow slice of the international activity of German substate actors. So, despite the growing significance of cities and regions on the global stage, there was a notable gap in academic research regarding the comprehensive role of substate actors in foreign policy.

As most existing literature primarily focused on nation-states as the central units of foreign policy analysis (Wimmer and Schiller 2002), it often overlooked the contributions of cities and regions to 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, but insufficient scholarly attention has been directed towards paradiplomatic relations with outer-European sub-state actors involving cities in China and the United States (Pfundheller 2014; Statz and Wohlfahrt 2010). 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; 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?
- How do city officials evaluate the key factors contributing to successful cooperation? What are the benefits and obstacles for German cities in their relations with the US/China in the perception of the respondents?
- 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 provide critical insights into the features of substate activities between Germany, the United States, and China. By analysing the resulting data, it will be possible to understand better the unique dynamics, challenges, and opportunities that shape the interactions between cities within this trilateral relationship, highlighting the role of local-level diplomacy in broader international engagements. This 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, has the potential to play a significant role in shaping German foreign policy towards major global powers, as it may give a broader perspective on global politics than just a state-centric

view (Biba 2024). It is argued that these subnational interactions are crucial for understanding the dynamics of the complex world of the 21st century.

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.

It is worth noting the unique nature of the methodological approach, which extracts information from three complementary sources. This triangulation is based on data from surveys, interviews with city officials and experts, and analysis of cities' websites. This approach was used both to research German-Chinese and German-US city relations. Detailed information about the study is included in the 'Research Design' section.

The article is structured as follows: it begins with an 'Introduction' outlining the study's significance and the research questions. The sections on 'Theoretical Approach' and 'Research Design' provide an in-depth review of the relevant literature, laying the foundation for the conceptual framework. They also describe the methodology employed in collecting quantitative data. 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 'Discussion' section, which interprets the findings and discusses their consequences for foreign policy and international relations. In the final section, we reflect on the paper's contribution to the field of German politics.

Theoretical Approach – City Diplomacy in the Multi-Level Governance Framework

The theory of multi-level governance (MLG) provides a valuable paradigm for analysing the international activities of cities. MLG, introduced in the 1990s (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Marks 1993, 1996), emerged as a concept to describe the interconnectedness between domestic and international levels of authority in the European context. It simplifies the complexity of European policymaking by offering a perspective that allows for a nuanced understanding of how power and competencies are distributed vertically - across different levels of governance, and horizontally - between various non-state actors at each level (Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2020; Marks and Hooghe 2004). According to its authors, the MLG framework can be divided into two types: type I refers to a stable, hierarchical governance structure with clearly defined levels (local, regional, national, supranational), while type II involves more flexible, issue-specific networks that allow

numerous actors to collaborate on particular policy challenges across different scales and sectors (Hooghe and Marks 2003).

City-level activities fit both types. In type I, cities engage within stable, hierarchical structures, such as participating in long-term environment management policies across local, national, and supranational levels. Type II, on the other hand, involves adaptable, issue-based networks where cities collaborate directly on specific challenges like crisis management during floods. This growing complexity across territorial scales and policy sectors also aligns with the vertical dimension of MLG, as highlighted by Tatham (2022), emphasising cities' adaptability within broader political frameworks.

Multi-level governance provides an excellent theoretical background for analysing German cities' involvement in international diplomacy, mainly through a system that permits significant autonomy for local actors. As a federal republic, Germany's constitution grants a high degree of autonomy to its regions and municipalities (Articles 28, 30, 32, 70, 72), allowing them significant freedom in conducting external relations within specific legal frames ('Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland' 2022). This system empowers German self-government units to manage local affairs independently and positions them as active players in global governance, making them crucial actors in international cooperation (Soldatos 1990). Municipalities have formal competencies that allow them to engage in activities beyond their borders, particularly within the European Union (Schiavon 2018). Through instruments like city partnerships, town-twinning agreements, and regional networks, German cities have developed strategies that enable them to foster international collaborations independently of the federal government (Langenohl 2015). The German constitution in Article 28 permits self-government units to manage their affairs, which includes international engagement, as long as these actions do not conflict with federal policies. So, this system enables cities to act both vertically, aligning with the foreign policies of Germany and the EU, and horizontally, working directly with foreign cities, businesses, and academic institutions on issues of mutual interest. Through city partnerships and regional networks, German cities develop international collaborations that often complement and sometimes expand upon federal government initiatives. The dispersion of authority in this multi-layered system allows cities to pursue diplomacy while also contributing to Germany's overall foreign policy strategy (Piattoni 2010; Stephenson 2013).

These activities stress the vital role that substate entities play in shaping German international diplomacy. Their active engagement emphasises the rising significance of paradiplomacy, an analytical framework focusing on the international activities of local governments. First introduced by Ivo Duchacek in the 1980s (1984), paradiplomacy highlights how local governments engage in foreign relations, taking on roles traditionally reserved for

states (Cornago 2013; Kuznetsov 2015). Over the past three decades, a narrower concept of 'city diplomacy' has emerged within this framework (Marchetti 2021). City diplomacy emphasises how municipalities establish direct international ties, building economic, cultural, and educational partnerships that position cities as valuable actors (Amiri and Sevin 2020). This shift reflects the growing role of cities in global governance, with mayors and municipal leaders engaging in international summits, forming cross-border alliances, and influencing global policies to address local and global challenges (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 (Abrahamson 2004; Sassen 1992). However, it is now recognised 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*) 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 and leveraging their unique strengths to tackle global challenges, thereby enhancing their positions on the world stage (Marchetti 2021).

At this point, it is worth emphasising the differences between traditionally understood diplomacy and the one implemented by cities. Traditional diplomacy is conducted by national governments and focuses on formal relations between sovereign states. It is characterised by negotiations on treaties, international security, trade agreements, and geopolitical concerns, typically managed by diplomats, foreign ministries, and heads of state (Jönsson 2002). Its primary goal is safeguarding national interests, often involving high-stakes political, economic, or military matters (Faizullaev 2022). State diplomacy is conducted through formal, well-established institutions that operate continuously, are supported by state resources, and are driven by long-term foreign policy goals, which persist despite changes in government or crises (Barston 2013).

City diplomacy, by contrast, involves local governments engaging directly in international relations. Unlike traditional diplomacy, it focuses more on issues such as sustainability, economic development, cultural exchange, and education (Acuto 2013). City diplomacy operates more decentralised, with mayors, city councils, and other municipal actors playing central roles. City diplomacy is more flexible and issue-driven, focusing on matters relevant to residents. It is not as institutionalised or resource-backed as state diplomacy, and its international involvement depends mainly on the priorities of local decision-makers (Amiri and Sevin 2020;

Marchetti 2021). As a result, city diplomacy is more opportunistic and less pressured to maintain consistent relations during crises.

In recent years, Europeanisation and regionalisation have elevated the role of substate entities in diplomacy, positioning them as influential actors in shaping national and EU foreign policies. 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 lobby, exercise formal powers within EU institutions, and undertake direct diplomatic actions (Parkes 2020; Tatham 2018), which sometimes even take actions that oppose the steps taken by the national authorities (Keating 2000).

Yet, substate entities in the European Union have many possibilities of action to support and advance the goals of their parent states. Firstly, 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. Secondly, they exercise formal powers, operating in the lower houses of their national parliaments. 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). Thirdly, cities can undertake direct actions - they may independently initiate projects or partnerships, often aligning with or challenging national and EU policies. Here, 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 recognised an Uyghur dissident who opposed Chinese government views and highlighted discrepancies in respect for human rights (Ciesielska-Klikowska and Kamiński 2022).

German cities often lobby and use the influence to advance local interests on international stages, pushing for resources, partnerships, and policies that benefit their urban agendas (Kern 2019). Moreover, substate entities utilise their legally designated powers to exercise formal authority (Tatham

2018). Additionally, German cities take direct actions by establishing their own international relations offices or appointing local ambassadors to co-ordinate foreign affairs (Osnabrück 2024). This autonomy allows them to build partnerships with foreign cities and regions, such as sister city agreements or collaborative ventures, which sometimes may even surpass federal initiatives in scope and impact (Interview with the official from the Deutscher Städtetag 2022).

Therefore, incorporating cities into the analysis of foreign policy and international activities is crucial for understanding the multi-layered and complex nature of German governance (Leonardi 1999). Cities like Berlin, Hamburg or Munich have significant economic, cultural, and political influence both domestically and internationally. As major urban centres, they host international organisations, diplomatic missions, and multinational corporations. 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 a city official from Berlin Senate Chancellery, 2023). They can also generate challenging disputes – as when Hamburg sold, in 2022, a minority stake in one of its port terminals to the Chinese company COSCO. For weeks, this case caused political friction between the city, 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 EU – 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 steadily expanded in scale and significance, becoming a prime example of how cities can assert themselves as influential actors on the global stage.

Research Design and Methodological Approach

To answer the research puzzle, this paper utilises quantitative and qualitative data. It has a descriptive nature and draws on a comprehensive literature review, surveys, interviews and website analyses. The research began with a study of all 126 German cities with populations over 50,000, conducted from February to June 2023. 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). Electronic questionnaires were distributed to city officials responsible for international cooperation, identified through systematic searches of city websites and direct contact when necessary. The surveys were anonymous to ensure freedom of expression. This means that the questionnaire results are based on the respondents' self-perceptions and should be treated as a personal assessment of how the city's cooperation looks. 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 investigating Sino-German relations (Ciesielska-Klikowska 2021). The questionnaires were distributed to representatives of the same group of cities using the same approach, and the only difference was that three new questions were added to the second one. It allowed us to compare answers to almost all questions, although time laps between surveys created an obvious limitation for the 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. Both cases were well above the typical survey response rates of 5-30% (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2014; Keeter et al. 2017).

Complementing the survey, 14 in-depth interviews were conducted between January 2023 and April 2024. Five cities¹ with robust partnerships with US cities were selected, ensuring a mix of sizes and geographical locations. Additionally, two interviews were made with cities that have extensive cooperation with China to provide a valuable counterpoint.² Two other interviews were conducted with citizen diplomats involved in the collaboration between Chicago, Hamburg and Warsaw, as well as an interview with an American scholar specialising in city diplomacy. Additionally, an interview was conducted with the director of San Francisco Mayor's Office of International Trade and Commerce. Moreover, three interviews were made with representatives of institutions analysing the substate 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 understand the phenomena of cooperation better. Two interviews were conducted in person, while the remaining were conducted online.

This research marks the first large-scale attempt to scrutinise the international activities of German cities in their collaborations with American cities. The findings presented in the next section highlight these partnerships' dynamic and multifaceted nature. Given the space limitations of this paper, only some of the 25 survey questions are reported, concentrating on the most important findings about cities that cooperate with US or Chinese partners. Thirty cities in the former and 47 in the latter group were identified, so 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 organisation registering and supporting foreign cooperation of US cities, counties, and states. The presence of American soldiers in West Germany, the desire of West 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 [Figure 1](#)). Establishing relations with Chinese partners started later. However, it resulted in more partnerships in a shorter period.

The below figure clearly shows that the breakthrough moments for making subnational 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,

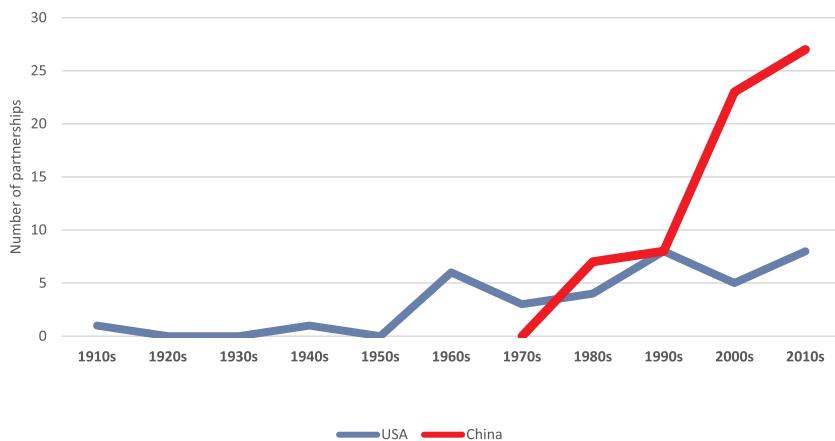


Figure 1. Number of links established annually between German-US and German-Chinese cities. Source: own elaboration based on survey responses.

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 the 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 city officials. 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 respondents indicating these areas. However, cooperation in health care and social affairs is minimal, noted by only 3% of cities (see Figure 2).

The importance of cooperation in the fields of culture and education, visible in the survey results, is fully confirmed in the interviews. The 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

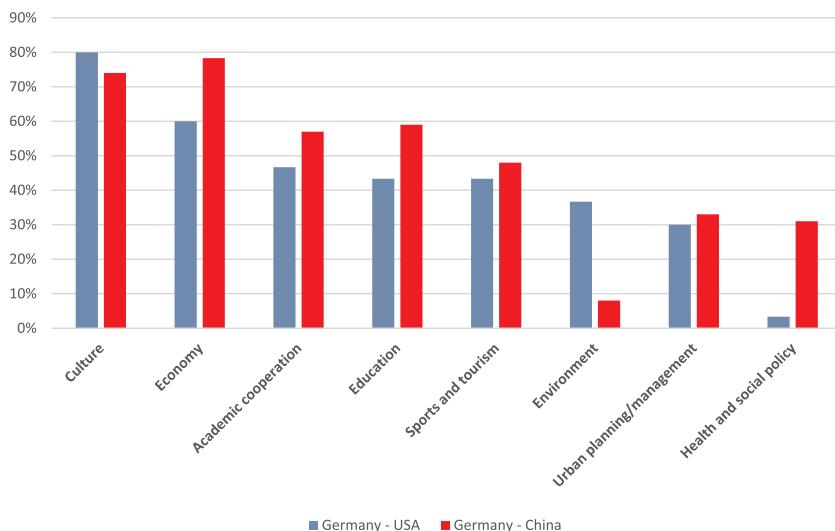


Figure 2. Areas of German-US and German-China city-to-city cooperation. Source: own elaboration based on survey responses (multiple choice).

2024); in others, they led to the partnership (Interview with a city official from Leipzig 2024).

The analysis of city-to-city cooperation between German cities and their Chinese counterparts reveals a marked emphasis on economic collaboration. According to the indications of officials, 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 underlines the comprehensive nature of economic cooperation, aiming to integrate various sectors to bolster 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 Figure 3). Although, in the case of both partners, the most frequently mentioned benefit was the exchange of experiences, the reported economic gains differ significantly. Just over a quarter (27%) of German cities' officials perceive 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

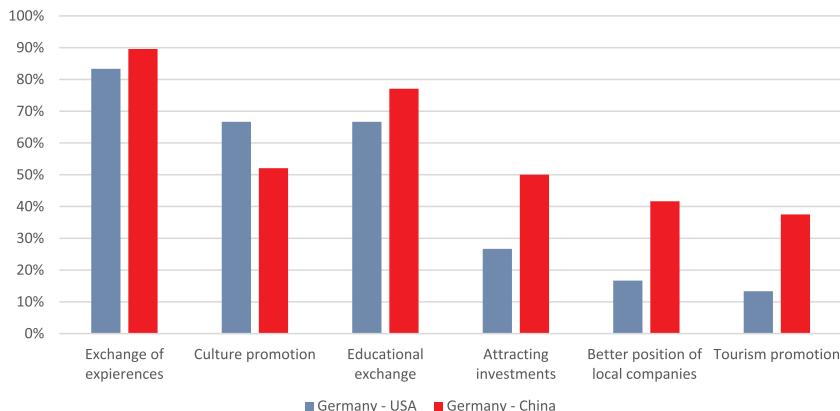


Figure 3. Benefits of German-US and German-China city-to-city cooperation. Source: own elaboration based on survey responses (multiple choice).

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

Advantages 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 (Interview with Paul Costello, German Marshall Fund of the US 2023). 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.

The economisation of links to China is further proven by analysis of the forms of city-to-city cooperation (see Figure 4). The 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.

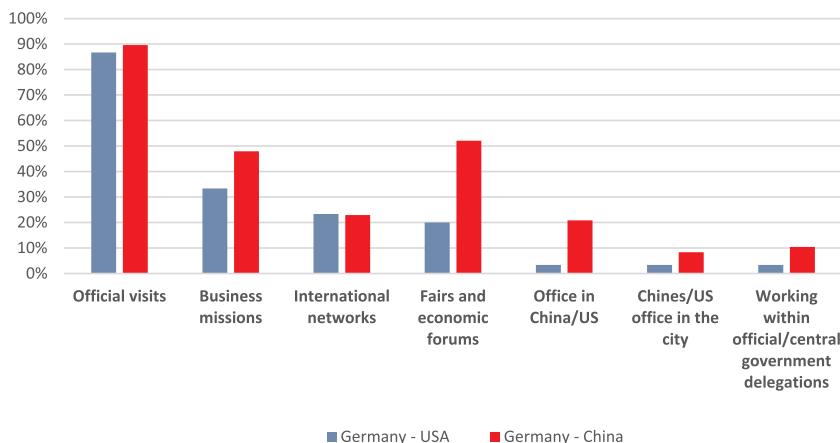


Figure 4. Forms of German-US and German-China city-to-city cooperation. Source: own elaboration based on survey responses (multiple choice).

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.

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 (see Figure 5). Interestingly, nearly half of the respondents (43%) cited the low involvement of American partners as a significant subjective barrier. This problem seldom occurs with the Chinese, who seemed more engaged in city diplomacy. In contrast, cultural differences or political tensions were 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). The second

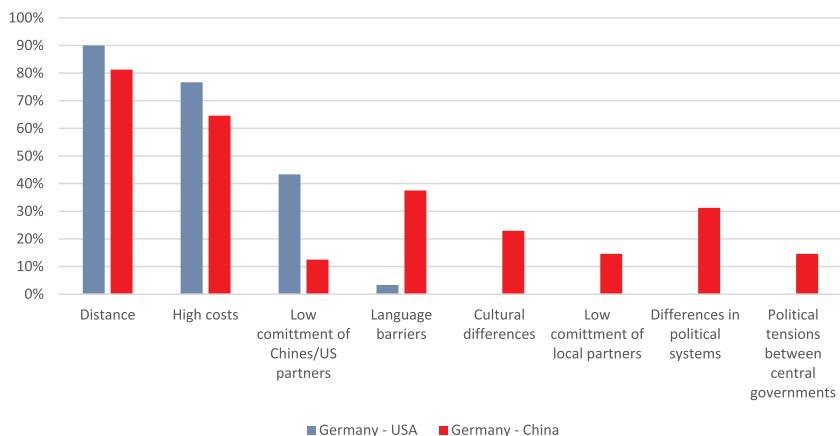


Figure 5. Barriers to German-US and German-China Cities Cooperation. Source: own elaboration based on survey responses (multiple choice).

interlocutor – citing her American counterpart – 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).

City officials were also asked to judge 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 their assessments, the two critical success factors are the engagement of partners and the mayor’s attitude (Figure 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.

The importance of the mayor’s role and the engagement of foreign partners is unsurprising. From the founding idea of SCI, which emphasises grass-roots interpersonal contacts (‘About Us – Sister Cities International (SCI)’ 2024), to the current practice of paradiplomacy (Antunes, Guimarães, and Egan 2023; Lee 2016), these people-to-people contacts form the foundation of international cooperation. The significance of personal authority, interests, and commitment in developing city-to-city links was confirmed in all

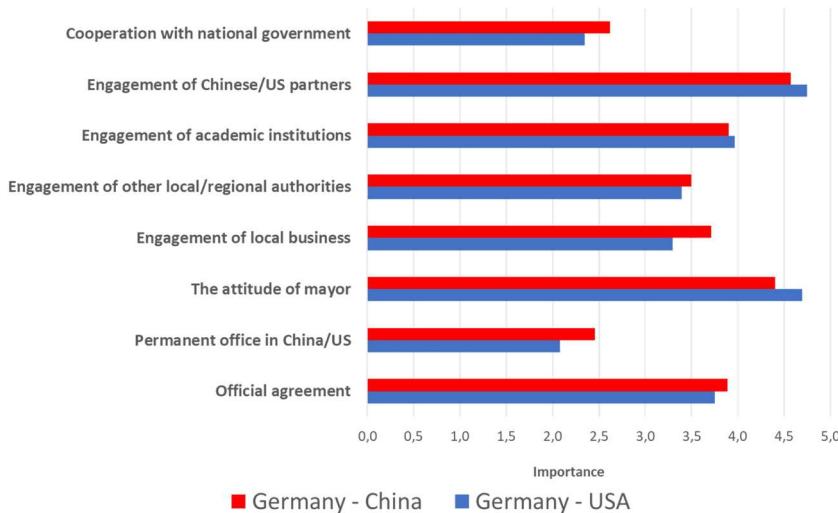


Figure 6. Success factors for German-US and German-China cities cooperation. Source: own elaboration based on survey responses (multiple choice).

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, ‘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 a city official from Leipzig 2024), which involves attracting or initiating joint projects with various entities on both sides of the ocean (universities, businesses, artists, and even fire brigades or police). This finding aligns with the 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 a 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 German-China relations, differences in locating city diplomacy in the institutional setup of the city hall may hinder cooperation with American partners. The responsibility for operational managing and developing city diplomacy in the US is often ‘outsourced’ from the city hall. Three models exist in the US (Frenkel 2023): 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. San Francisco). 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 must work with volunteers, loosely linked to the city hall and engaging in paradiplomacy as a hobby rather than a job.

Finally, we asked about coordinating policy with other partners on different levels. Officials assessed on a 0–5 scale the level of policy coordination towards the US at the regional, national, EU and other city levels (Figure 7).

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 closed in the box, with limited contacts even with regional partners.

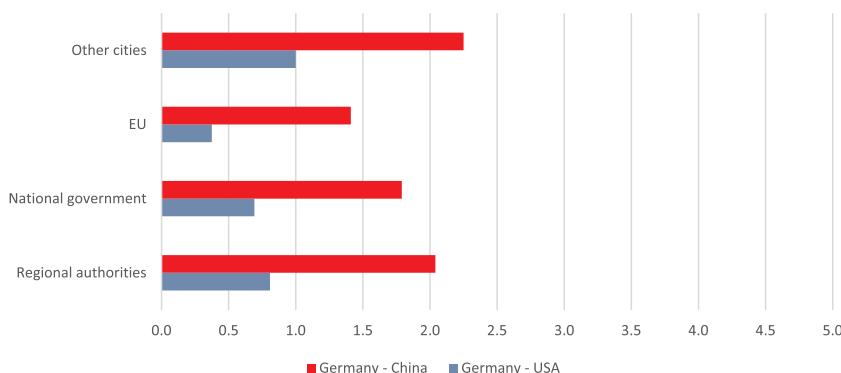


Figure 7. Coordination of city policy towards China/the US with other actors. Source: own elaboration based on survey responses.

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.

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 EU foreign relations, inter-governmental contacts, 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, this research fills the gap in knowledge regarding substate cooperation. The survey results reveal that partnerships with US and Chinese counterparts are prevalent among German cities, with 47 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 officials 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 a city official from Magdeburg, 2024). It suggests that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not actively coordinated multi-level relations with the US and China. As the city authorities point out, 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 this 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, the 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 surveys show this picture, which indicates that there is possibly a space for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate dialogue with cities and 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.

The research reveals that German cities' partnerships with China and the United States have distinct focuses. Economic objectives and business benefits are primary drivers in partnerships with Chinese counterparts, reflecting a strong emphasis on trade, investment, and industrial collaboration. Conversely, collaborations with American cities prioritise academic partnerships, educational exchanges, and cultural initiatives, focusing less on direct economic benefits. While climate action and migration management - usually indicated in the literature as the main areas of cooperation between cities - were not prominent aspects of these relationships in our survey outcomes, they represent potential areas for future cooperation. During the interviews, officials emphasised that discussions, i.e. on environmental issues, are significant, but cooperation is mainly implemented through city networks, not town-twinning (Interview with city official from Leipzig 2024).

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, it can be noted that many American cities have very limited budgets for overseas initiatives, and mayors are often focused on local politics, making them less eager to invest time and resources in subnational diplomacy.

Yet, the research results confirmed that successful paradiplomatic cooperation relies heavily on both sides' engagement, particularly the mayor's role. Both surveys and all interviews emphasised the importance of leadership and interpersonal contacts. These are the most critical drivers of cooperation, reinforcing earlier claims in the literature that might not be empirically tested on such a scale (Antunes, Guimarães, and Egan 2023).

Conclusions and Implications

The current world order, with the rising role of non-state actors and 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. Still, 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 substate level in the planning and implementation of foreign policy.

This 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. Using the mentioned theoretical categories, they can serve perfectly as 'contributors' or 'antennas'.

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 organised 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 changes in the American approach to the Paris Agreement, the sub-national 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 subnational channel might complement the traditional foreign policy. Through those 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, substate 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, sub-national 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 the study creates natural limitations for conclusions; however, it is evident that the role of substate actors is becoming crucial in other areas of foreign policy as well. The rebuilding process of Ukraine might be a good example, considering that German cities ceased partnerships with Russia and at the same time actively developed 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 shape the post-war reconstruction process effectively. Beyond businesses, substate 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 US-American politics. In the changing world order, foreign policy is increasingly becoming local, as there is a growing necessity for the engagement of cities in the entire policy process - from planning through implementation and evaluation. Germany has a chance to understand it earlier than others.

NOTES

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).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joanna Ciecielska-Klikowska, PhD in Political Science, assistant professor at the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Lodz. In her research work, she focuses on paradiplomacy and city-diplomacy, particularly substate relations between the member states of the European Union and China. As a German studies expert, she deals with the political system of Germany and issues of European integration, including the importance of Germany in international relations and German foreign policy in the context of German-Chinese relations. Member of

the European International Studies Association (EISA), University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) and European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). Scholarship holder of the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD).

Tomasz Kaminski, PhD in Political Science and Associate Professor at the Faculty of International and Political Studies at the University of Lodz, specialises in paradiplomacy and city diplomacy, particularly in the context of the European Union's policy towards China. His research has received support from numerous funding sources, including the European Commission's Horizon 2020, Jean Monnet Module programs, and the Polish National Science Centre. Kaminski is also a co-author of the book 'The Role of Regions in EU-China Relations.' To learn more about Kaminski's work and publications, visit his website at www.tomaszkaminski.eu.

Marcin Frenkel, PhD in Political Science, assistant professor at the Department of American Studies and Mass Media at the Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Lodz. Author of papers on international cooperation of cities and author of the book 'Partytura na wietrze. Koncepcje paryskiej Kultury a polska polityka wschodnia w latach 1989-2014' (Score in the Wind: the Parisian 'Culture' concepts and the Polish eastern policy 1989-2014). His academic focus encompasses paradiplomacy, international relations, and Polish foreign policy. Member of the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) and International Studies Association (ISA).

ORCID

Joanna Ciecielska-Klikowska  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0938-5771>
Tomasz Kamiński  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2389-4038>
Marcin Frenkel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1151-1968>

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