

## International Liaison Work for the New Era: Generating Global Consensus?

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*In recent years, party-to-party diplomacy conducted by the Chinese Communist Party's International Department, a feature of China's foreign affairs since its establishment, has flown under the radar and thus escaped the notice of foreign analysts. This year, however, the department has become more visible by institutionalizing its liaisons with foreign political parties through high-profile events reported widely in Party media, reflecting the increasing importance of party-to-party diplomacy under Xi Jinping. CCP theorists and propagandists insist that the International Department is a vital platform for projecting a positive image of China to the world and building global support for China's foreign policy. It therefore merits further scrutiny by analysts seeking to understand China's global influence operations.*

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The Chinese Communist Party's International Department (CCP/ID), one of the four official CCP departments that work directly under the Central Committee, has long played an important yet overlooked role in extending the Party's international influence. While its prominence in China's foreign affairs has waxed and waned as China's foreign affairs have undergone multiple transformations, throughout its almost 70-year history the department has pursued overlapping agendas with the country's diplomatic, intelligence, propaganda, and united front bodies, maintaining unofficial ties with foreign political parties, movements, and organizations in support of China's diplomatic objectives.

Initially established to cultivate diplomacy with other foreign socialist or communist parties, the CCP/ID has re-identified itself over the past few decades, developing relations with a wide variety of political parties worldwide. The department uses party-to-party exchanges as a more flexible channel to influence state-to-state relations and promote China's interests abroad, making it a unique diplomatic tool that often flies under the radar. Today, the CCP/ID boasts relations with more than 600 political parties in more than 160 countries. The CCP/ID itself claims to play an essential role in the country's overall diplomatic agenda, working to create a network of foreign organizations and political parties that support CCP objectives, strengthening

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foreign intelligence, and broadcasting a “good China story” to the world.<sup>86</sup> As David Shambaugh pointed out in one of the only studies of the organization to date, “no ruling party or government in the world mounts anywhere near as extensive an effort to maintain links with domestic political parties, groups, and personages as the CCP/ID.”<sup>87</sup>

Recent events indicate that the importance of the CCP/ID in carrying out China’s foreign policy objectives is increasing under Xi Jinping. While many assumed the CCP/ID would gradually lose relevance, under Xi Jinping, the department has taken great pains to demonstrate that it remains essential to China’s foreign affairs by creating the underlying theoretical basis for its place in Xi Jinping’s new era diplomacy—“party diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.” Under this framework, political party-based diplomacy is said to be an important channel for extending China’s external propaganda work as well as shoring up international support for Beijing’s foreign policy. Furthermore, the department’s relationships with political parties are being institutionalized in high-profile events intended to demonstrate global support for China’s rise on the world stage and its foreign policy objectives.

There is another reason to increase scrutiny of CCP/ID activities. Xi Jinping has begun placing more emphasis on the central and guiding role of the CCP in China’s foreign and diplomatic affairs. In a highly publicized speech at a meeting of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission in May, Xi called for “reinforcing the centralized and unified leadership of the Party over foreign affairs work,” stressing that the commission is to play a “coordinating role” in China’s foreign affairs decision-making and innovation of diplomatic theory and practice.<sup>88</sup> Just a month later at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, Xi repeatedly called for reinforcing and expanding the Party’s role in foreign affairs, stating, “we must insist on diplomatic power residing in the Party Central Committee.”<sup>8990</sup> Amidst efforts to consolidate foreign affairs

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<sup>86</sup> International Department, “A Brief Introduction to Our Department” [我部简介]. <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/gywb/wbjj/>.

<sup>87</sup> David Shambaugh, “China’s ‘Quiet Diplomacy’: The International Department of the Chinese Communist Party,” *China: An International Journal* 5 no. 1, (March 2007). <https://doi.org/10.1142/S0219747207000039>

<sup>88</sup> “Xi Jinping Presides over Convening of the First Meeting of the Central Foreign Affairs Work Committee [习近平主持召开中央外事工作委员会第一次会议],” *Xinhua*, May 15, 2018. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-05/15/c\\_1122836914.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-05/15/c_1122836914.htm).

<sup>89</sup> Ng, T, “Xi Jinping to Diplomats: Toe the Communist Party Line,” *South China Morning Post*, June 25, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2152397/xi-jinping-puts-out-call-diplomats-toe-communist-party>.

<sup>90</sup> “Xi Jinping: Work Hard to Start a New Phase of Great Power Relations with Chinese Characteristics [习近平: 努力开创中国特色大国外交新局面]” *Xinhua*, June 23, 2018. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-06/23/c\\_1123025806.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-06/23/c_1123025806.htm).

decision-making powers within the Party, it can be expected that, as the CCP department that deals specifically with foreign relations, the CCP/ID will be accorded a more prominent role. In March, it was reported that the CCP/ID would actually be merged with the Central Foreign Affairs Commission in order to streamline the Party's foreign affairs bodies, though this has not yet been confirmed.<sup>91</sup>

### “Party Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics”

At first glance, political party-based diplomacy appears to be a vestige of the PRC's earliest decades, when other communist parties were China's most important foreign relationships. However, under Xi Jinping, the CCP/ID insists that it remains a vital area of China's international engagement.

Since 2012, Xi Jinping has placed a greater emphasis on the role of political parties in international diplomacy leading the Party's theorists and propagandists to conceptualize and define “party diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” in the lead-up to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, to serve as the theoretical underpinnings of the CCP/ID's work.<sup>92</sup> A 2017 book on the subject published by the Social Sciences Academic Press, which is affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), explains how the CCP envisions the role of party diplomacy in its foreign affairs, largely reflecting the stated goals of the CCP/ID in recent decades. Party diplomacy is meant to play a “guiding role” in China's international relations by encouraging foreign political parties, politicians, and political organizations to understand and respect China's values and interests.<sup>93</sup>

In addition, party diplomacy is said to be particularly useful as a tool for generating a “global consensus” in China's favor, particularly regarding China's diplomatic goals.<sup>94</sup> At a press conference on the sidelines of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, CCP/ID Vice Minister Guo Yezhou (郭业洲) explained the logic behind using political party diplomacy in consensus building:

*“Political parties play an important role in the political life of most countries. Dialogues between political parties facilitate deeper consensus in terms of values and*

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<sup>91</sup> Teddy Ng, “China to Restructure Foreign Affairs Team in Push for Greater Role on the World Stage,” *South China Morning Post*, March 10, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2136651/china-restructure-foreign-affairs-team-push-greater>.

<sup>92</sup> Yu Hongjun, *Party-to-Party Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics [中国特色政党外交]* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, June 2017), 7-8.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 36-37.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

*developmental orientation, and strengthen political power for developing international relations.*”<sup>95</sup>

The CCP/ID is particularly proud of its achievements in this respect. In a self-congratulatory article published in *Qiushi Journal* in the weeks before the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the CCP/ID explained that it had utilized party exchanges to build support for China’s position in the 2016 South China Sea arbitration by getting over 240 political parties in more than 120 countries and over 280 well-known think tanks and non-government organizations to openly support China’s position,<sup>96</sup> supplementing the party-state’s wider effort to find allies in the dispute.<sup>97</sup>

In addition to consensus building, party diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is valued for its propaganda utility in promoting a positive image of China to the world. Through the format of informal exchanges, political party leaders can “frankly exchange views” and “clear up deep doubts.”<sup>98</sup> In the aftermath of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the CCP/ID has displayed confidence that the influence of China’s development and governance models can be utilized to draw foreign political parties into close cooperation with the CCP. Careful to avoid language that comes across as overtly promoting a “China model” for other countries to follow, CCP/ID officials proclaim that the CCP’s successful “governance and administration experience” provides a wealth of wisdom from which other countries can benefit.

In a 4 November *People’s Daily* interview, CCP/ID Minister Song Tao explained that he has witnessed an unprecedented desire by foreign political organizations to learn from the governance experience of the CCP and that the success of the CCP’s governance of China has become a “model for the world.” Song said that the CCP/ID would focus on demonstrating the meaning of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era so that

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<sup>95</sup> “Press Conference: CPC’s United Front and International Relations,” State Council Information Office, October 23, 2017. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1566519/1566519.htm>.

<sup>96</sup> International Department, “Deeply Learn General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Important Thought on the Party’s External Work and Strive to Open a New Page for the Party’s External Work—The Achievements and Implementation of the Party’s External Work since the 18th Party Congress [深入学习习近平总书记党的对外工作重要思想 努力开创党的对外工作新局面——十八大以来党的对外工作的成就与实践],” *Qiushi Journal*, October 15, 2017. [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-10/15/c\\_1121801004.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-10/15/c_1121801004.htm).

<sup>97</sup> Tom Mitchell, “China Struggles to Win Friends over South China Sea,” *Financial Times*, July 13, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/a9a60f5e-48c6-11e6-8d68-72e9211e86ab>.

<sup>98</sup> Niu Haibin, “Party Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics,” in *China’s Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, edited by Jiemian Yang (Hackensack, NJ: World Century Publishing Corporation, 2014): 462.

more foreign political parties can “understand, support, and agree” with China’s development path and the CCP governance model.<sup>99</sup>

### Institutionalizing Party Diplomacy

The CCP/ID is institutionalizing its own platform for political party exchange through the hosting of high-profile events for international political parties. From 30 November to 3 December 2017, the CCP/ID hosted its first “CCP in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting” (中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会) in Beijing. It was attended by 300 political leaders from over 120 countries, most notably Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi. The attendance of Xi Jinping and the conference’s proximity to the end of the 19th Party Congress indicated the meeting’s salience for the CCP’s post-Congress diplomatic agenda.

In an interview with *People’s Daily*, Song Tao (宋涛) explained that the goals of the conference were threefold: first, it explains to foreign political parties the global significance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era; second, it creates a platform for communication and dialogue among political parties in which the CCP plays a leading role; third, it creates an opportunity for the CCP to contribute to the efforts of global political parties to “build a better world.”<sup>100</sup>

Xi’s speech at the conference elevated the role of political parties in China’s diplomacy by declaring the CCP’s intention to work with political parties across the globe to build a “community of shared future for mankind” (人类命运共同体), a concept promoted at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress that describes how China will approach its role as a global leader. Xi called on political parties to develop a “new type of political party relations,” (新型政党关系) in which political parties work together to build a community of shared future for mankind and construct a “new type of international relations.”<sup>101</sup> In January 2018, Song explained that the new type of political party relations is based on the building of a new type of international relations.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Wu Qimin (吴绮敏), Li Weihong (李伟红), and Yang Xun (杨迅), “Entering a New Era, the CCP’s International Influence Experiences an Unprecedented Rise [进入新时代, 中国共产党国际影响力空前提升],” *People’s Daily*, November 1, 2017. [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-11/01/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20171101\\_1-04.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-11/01/nw.D110000renmrb_20171101_1-04.htm).

<sup>100</sup> Ma Xiaoning (马小宁), Meng Xianglin (孟祥麟), and Li Weihong (李伟红), “Use Political Party’s Functions to Build a Better World Together [发挥政党作用 携手建设更加美好的世界],” *People’s Daily*, December 4, 2017. [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-12/04/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20171204\\_4-03.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-12/04/nw.D110000renmrb_20171204_4-03.htm).

<sup>101</sup> Ma, Meng, and Li.

<sup>102</sup> Song Tao (宋涛), “Build a New Type of Party Relations and a Better World [建立新型政党关系 建设更加美好世界],” *Contemporary World* 1 (2018). [http://www.idcpc.org.cn/zlfb/201801/t20180104\\_94878.html](http://www.idcpc.org.cn/zlfb/201801/t20180104_94878.html).

The crowning achievement of the event was the signing of the “Beijing Initiative” by the conference participants, a document that embodies the CCP/ID’s goal of using diplomacy with foreign political parties to generate consensus backing China’s diplomatic goals. The document contains the signatures of the more than 300 political leaders who attended the conference. It extols the achievements of the CCP and endorses Xi’s leadership, Xi Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, the Belt and Road Initiative, and “building a community of shared future for mankind.” Signatories are said to advocate respect for each country’s own development path and values, call for the abandonment of a “Cold War mentality,” note that China’s BRI-related concepts have “entered into people’s hearts day by day,” note that the CCP stands for humanity’s progress, and recognize that the CCP Central Committee with Xi at its core has displayed China’s role as a responsible power.<sup>103</sup>

In May, the CCP/ID held another high-profile event reportedly attended by over 500 representatives of 200 political parties from over 100 countries around the world. The event, entitled “The Story of the CCP: Guangdong’s Practice of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” was held in Shenzhen because it is a “window for demonstrating the success of China’s reform and opening up.” At the conference Song Tao told attendees that reform and opening up is the only way to promote the development of the country and stated that the CCP is willing to share opportunities and seek common development with political parties of various countries.<sup>104</sup>

A *People’s Daily* article providing key takeaways from the event stated that as sources of political decision-making, and the representatives and shapers of public opinion, political parties play an important role in “promoting the progress of human civilization.” China is therefore actively setting up a platform for political party exchange that will establish a “new type of political party relations.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Hu Ping, “Do ‘We’, the World’s Political Parties, Know that ‘We’ Have Issued an Initiative Extolling the CCP’s Global Leadership for a Better World?” *China Change*, December 5, 2017. <https://chinachange.org/2017/12/05/do-we-the-worlds-political-parties-know-that-we-have-issued-an-initiative-extolling-the-ccps-global-leadership-for-a-better-world/>

<sup>104</sup> “The Story of the Chinese Communist Party -- Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era is Put into Practice in Guangdong” 中国共产党的故事——习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想在广东的实践”专题宣介会在深圳举行], *People’s Daily* Online, May 27, 2018. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0527/c33831-30016383.html>

<sup>105</sup> Zhong Sheng, “Strengthen Political Party Dialogue, Jointly Promote Cultural Progress [加强政党对话 共促文明进步（钟声）],” *People’s Daily*, May 29, 2018. [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2018-05/29/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20180529\\_3-03.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2018-05/29/nw.D110000renmrb_20180529_3-03.htm).

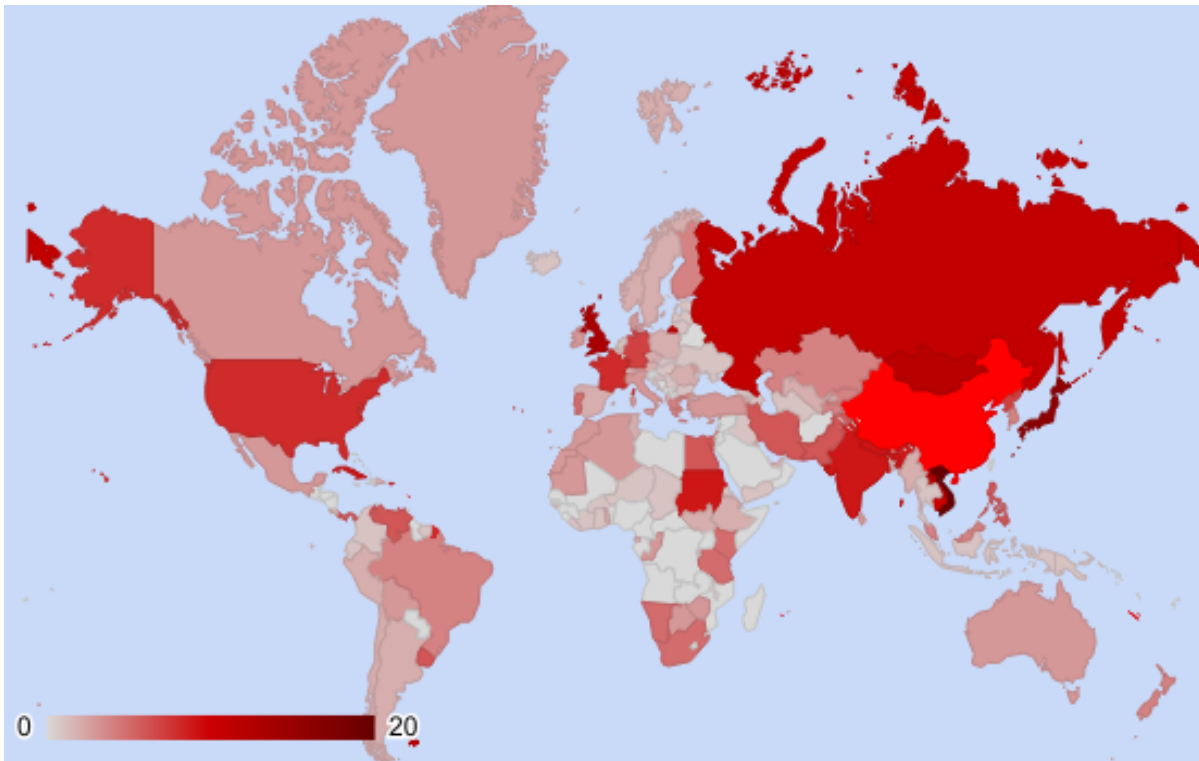


## Expanding International Contacts

The CCP/ID is actively expanding its activities, holding an unprecedented number of meetings.<sup>106</sup> From the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 2017 to the beginning of October 2018, the CCP/ID has reported an approximate total of 440 exchanges with foreign political parties (see Figure 1). At the very least, where the CCP/ID chooses to focus its resources can provide insight into overall diplomatic priorities. The most attention was paid to peripheral countries, especially Vietnam and Japan, two countries with which China has ongoing territorial disputes. The CCP/ID also appears to focus more on relations with major powers, concentrating on Russia, the United States, and India.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the major foreign policy objective that the CCP/ID has promoted through its exchanges, attempting to generate an international consensus in its favor, is the Belt and Road Initiative. Exchanges are utilized to solicit support from political party leaders and seek public affirmations of support, which are then publicized (see Figure 2).

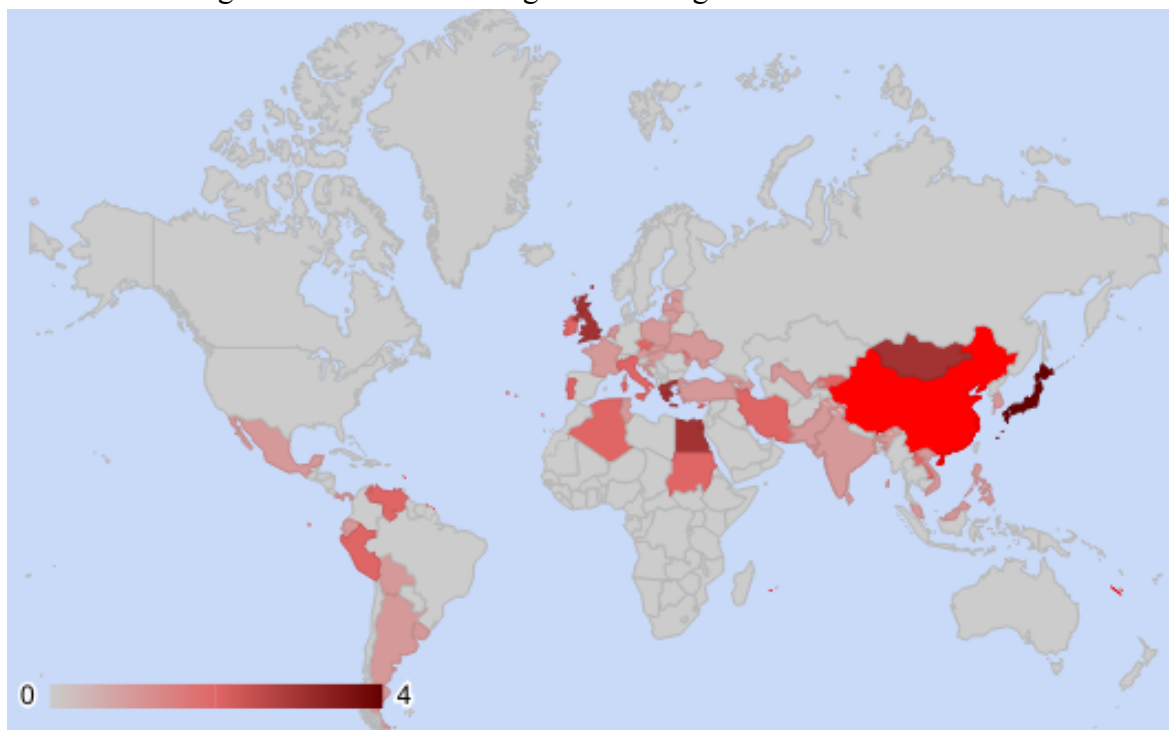
Figure 1: Total Reported CCP/ID Exchanges (October 2017-October 2018)



Source: International Department Website

<sup>106</sup> In 2007, David Shambaugh's study of the International Department reported that the CCP/ID conducted approximately 300 exchanges per year.

Figure 2: CCP/ID Exchanges Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative



Source: International Department Website

### Generating Global Consensus?

Whether CCP/ID efforts are effective or if “party diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” is essentially an elaborate yet futile propaganda scheme remains to be studied. China was notably criticized for overstating claims of foreign support for its position in the South Chinese Sea, which the CCP/ID supposedly helped produce.<sup>107</sup> Regarding documents like the Beijing Initiative, one is hard pressed to believe that a signature of a given party representative actually demonstrates the position of that political party on China’s foreign policy—even a representative of the U.S. Republican Party signed the document. Far more likely is that these meetings and events have utility for locating and cultivating individual supporters of China within foreign political parties—a slower and more subtle method of exerting influence.

Regardless, it is clear that China’s leadership views party diplomacy as an important tool for extending China’s global influence and is investing considerable resources to expanding and institutionalizing CCP/ID exchanges and establishing the underlying theoretical basis for its

<sup>107</sup> Jeremy Page, “Beijing’s Claims of South China Sea Support May Not Hold Water,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 2016. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/beijings-claims-of-south-china-sea-support-may-not-hold-water-1466138014>.



work. Given these developments, the CCP/ID appears set to play an enhanced role in augmenting China's state-to-state diplomacy in the pursuit of reshaping the international order to better accommodate China's interests. Its activities therefore merit increased scrutiny by analysts seeking to understand Beijing's global influence operations.

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