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**A TIME OF GLOBAL CHANGES
What China's Two-Level Diplomacy Means
for the World Today**



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ABSTRACT

This study concerns China's model of "two-level" diplomacy: state-to-state diplomacy and party-to-party diplomacy. While both levels try to hold to the principles of mutual respect and mutual non-interference, they differ in a key respect. State-to-state diplomacy seeks to be as depoliticized as possible, in the sense that the political orientation of a country's government should not hinder relations between states. Party-to-party diplomacy seeks to connect more closely with like-minded political parties across the world, as well as any political party that seeks to engage and cooperate with the Communist Party of China (CPC). In order to understand how such diplomacy has risen and how it works, we need to consider: (a) the political system in China from which two-level diplomacy arises; and (b) how this approach to diplomacy has developed historically. Understanding both of these aspects—political system and history—enables us to deal with the present, especially in terms of what is clearly a new stage of such diplomacy. This new stage is emerging against the backdrop of the significant global changes that are underway today.

1. Opening Remarks

My topic concerns the two-level diplomacy of a major or “big country” (大国 *daguo*) as they say here in China, or as some may put it in English, as a “major power.” The two levels in question concern state-to-state diplomacy and party-to-party diplomacy, which I will explain in more detail in due course. While diplomacy now entails many aspects, such as governmental diplomacy, non-government or people-to-people diplomacy, academic cooperation, ever-deepening economic engagement, political party diplomacy, and so on, I will focus on the two aspects of state-to-state diplomacy and party-to-party diplomacy.

In order to understand how these aspects relate to one another and what they mean, I will follow two trajectories: (a) how the political system in China works, and how it has given rise to two-level diplomacy; and (b) the history of how this two-level diplomacy has developed over the last century or so. Thus, after setting the scene with an overview of the situation today, the paper delves into the political system in China, especially how the comprehensive governmental structures relate to the Communist Party of China (CPC). This is followed by a historical overview that identifies key steps over the last one hundred years, or more, in the development of the two levels, with an emphasis from the late 1970s until today. This brings us to an examination of how the two levels of diplomacy relate to one another in our own time, a time characterized by “qualitative change,” or “great changes unseen in a century.”

By way of a footnote to these opening remarks, I would like to emphasize that the sources of the material presented here come from a significant amount of scholarly and scientific research results, which I

have studied in depth in some earlier works and on which I rely here.¹ I have also spent a good deal of time in various parts of China, including villages in the countryside, enterprises in the cities, and local government areas in these cities, often discussing matters pertaining to what is presented below.²

2. Setting the Scene

Let us begin with a specific incident. In March of 2021, Yang Jiechi, then Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China, met with the then U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, in Alaska. At the time, China-U.S. relations were experiencing a rather difficult period, so the meeting was well overdue. In response to Blinken's usual points from a U.S.-perspective, Yang stunned the U.S. delegation with a reply that rang around the world. He pointed out that

China upholds humanity's common values of peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom. China stands for safeguarding the international system with the United Nations (UN) at the core and the international order based on international law, rather than the order based on the rules formulated by a small number of countries. Most countries in the world do not recognise that US values represent international values, do not recognise that what the USA says represents international public opinion, and do not recognise that the rules formulated by a few countries represent international rules. The

¹ Roland Boer, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Singapore: Springer, 2021); and Roland Boer, *Socialism in Power: On the History and Theory of Socialist Governance* (Singapore: Springer, 2023).

² For relevant government materials, one may consult www.12371.cn/special/xxzd/hxnr/wj/index.shtml (in Chinese).



USA has its own model of democracy, and China has its own style of democracy. Unlike the USA, which wilfully uses military force, and causes instability and unrest worldwide, China is committed to the path of peaceful development and has made unremitting efforts to promote international and regional peace and development, as well as uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.³

At the heart of this statement was the point that China should no longer be treated in a patronizing manner as an inferior, but rather as an equal on the world stage. For some—the usual suspects in the West—this new tone signaled what they called an “aggressive” or “wolf-warrior” (based on the films of the same name) approach to international relations. For many others—especially in developing countries—these words rang out and saw widespread agreement. Indeed, these words expressed what they had felt for a long time.

What was at stake here? And what had brought about the changes? The answer to these questions has a more general aspect and a very specific aspect. As for the general or overall situation, over the last four to five decades China has emerged as one of the world’s largest, diverse, and innovative economies, with a growing middle-income group that now numbers 600 million (and a target of 800 million with the fifteenth five-year plan). In light of this economic base, the cultural, educational, and political importance and influence have grown. As we know, these developments have caused mixed reactions from other countries, from alarm, through unease, to a distinct note of enthusiasm. Of course, we may find these reactions within each country to varying

³ A report on the meeting that includes this text may currently be found here: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1694681315446932341&wfr=spider&for=pc>. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations in this article are my own.

degrees and they are based on various levels of accurate knowledge of what is actually happening in China. No matter what the response, what is obvious is that much more international attention is now paid to China on a daily basis than was the case ten or twenty years ago.

As for the specific point, from my perspective the CPC's 19th National Congress in October of 2017 was especially important. I was in Beijing at the time and listened online to the main reports and speeches of the Congress, and I can attest that the feel in the air was electric. Major developments were afoot and these became known—in Chinese parlance—as “Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” In terms of diplomacy, one sentence stands out from the main report of the Congress: this theory “makes clear that major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aims to foster a new type of international relations and build a community with a shared future for humankind.”⁴ The ramifications of this single sentence and each of its phrases would enter into the comprehensive process of consultation, deliberation, discussion, debate, and feedback, leading to what are known as the “Ten Perserverances” from June of 2018,⁵ which set the

⁴ The text of the three-hour plus report has been translated into English: Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (18 October 2017),” in *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 1–82 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020). The sentence quoted appears on p. 21.

⁵ Promulgated in June of 2018, the “Ten Perserverances” entail perservering in: (1) the overarching leadership of the CPC; (2) China’s “Great Rejuvenation”; (3) promoting the building of a community with a shared future for humankind; (4) socialism as it has been localized and concretized in China (or socialism with Chinese characteristics); (5) the Belt and Road Initiative as the core economic aspect; (6) peaceful development based on mutual respect and win-win cooperation; (7) building global partnerships by deepening diplomacy; (8) reform of global governance based on fairness and justice; (9) safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests; and (10) shaping a

benchmark for “major country diplomacy” in a Chinese style with a “community of shared future for humanity” as its key principle.

Further, the whole process would generate the latest steps in two-level diplomacy, state-to-state and party-to-party diplomacy. Of course, both have a longer history—to which I will turn in a moment—but more recently we have seen a noticeable uptick in party-to-party diplomacy. This has been particularly noticeable since the 19th Congress in 2017. The CPC’s sizeable International Department (which is separate from the government’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs) has dedicated offices working with communist and workers parties in different regions of the world, and indeed any political party seeking to engage with the CPC. Delegations are sent out from China from time to time, and there is now a constant flow of international delegations coming to China under the auspices of the CPC’s International Department.

At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has, again especially since the 19th Congress and with even greater emphasis since the 20th Congress in 2022, become engaged at an even higher level on the international stage. Think for a moment of the now five initiatives: while the BRI was launched in 2013, the other four were all launched in the last few years. These are: the Global Development Initiative in 2021, the Global Security Initiative in 2022, the Global Civilization Initiative in 2023, and the Global Governance Initiative in 2025.⁶

distinctive diplomatic style of China by integrating the best of the Chinese tradition of overseas work with the characteristics of the era. See <https://www.12371.cn/special/xxzd/hxnr>. Also see, Gao Zugui, “On Strengthening the Central Committee’s Centralised and Unified Leadership of Foreign Affairs Work,” *Journal of the Party School of the Central Committee of the C.P.C. (Chinese Academy of Governance)* 2022 (3): 30–39.

⁶ For an analysis of the relationship between these initiatives, see Chen Jian and Tang Mengyuan, “The Logical Analysis and Practical Approaches of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Three Major Global Initiatives,” *World Marxist Review* 1.3

In light of all these developments, Yang Jiechi's breakthrough response in Alaska in March of 2021 may now be seen as a signal of the changes underway. However, the reality today raises the question as to the relationship between these two levels of diplomacy. In order to understand how this works, we need to follow two trajectories or angles: as mentioned, the first concerns the political structures in China, and the second concerns the historical development of two-level diplomacy.

3. The Political System in China

As I set out to write the following section, I pondered long the challenge of presenting a factual and objective description for an international audience, so I would like to emphasize that the description below seeks to outline the facts on the ground, based on the scientific research results of scholars and personal visits to many areas in China. Since I have written much on this topic in the last few years, the following is a brief overview.⁷

In this case, I begin with a political philosophy, which I teach at Renmin University of China, in Beijing. The point may initially seem somewhat abstract, but grasping this point is crucial for understanding China's political system: the leadership of the Communist Party is strengthened through the comprehensive process of what is now known as "whole-process people's democracy," and this whole-process people's democracy is enhanced through the leadership of the CPC. Isn't this a contradiction? Indeed, it is, but it all depends on how we tackle

(2024): 83–98. Note that this article was written before the announcement of the Global Initiative on Governance, but the framework of the analysis also applies to the latest initiative.

⁷ Roland Boer, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), and Roland Boer, *Socialism in Power: On the History and Theory of Socialist Governance* (Singapore: Springer, 2023).

contradictions. Here a common saying in China—I select one among many possibilities—is pertinent: things that oppose each also complement one another (相反相成 *xiangfan-xiangcheng*). In other words, contradictions are not diametrically opposed or paradoxes; they are inevitably related to one another. This approach, which runs deep in Chinese cultural consciousness and is also a distinctive characteristic of Marxist philosophy, goes by various names, but let us use one term out of many, “contradiction analysis.” Contradictions relate to one another not by either-or (either this or that, which is unfortunately a characteristic of the dominant form of thought in the “West”), but by both-and (both this and that).

3.1 The Structures of Governance

What does all this mean in practical terms? As for the structures of governance, we find an increasing number of base-level or “grassroots” activities, such as village assemblies, committees in the many city communities, volunteer groups which often include retired people engaged in myriad everyday tasks for the local community, budget and project committees dealing with very local issues, grassroots legislative contact points for developing new legislation from the ground up, and, of course, the first and local level of the People’s Congress and the Political Consultative Conference. For the local People’s Congress, direct elections take place: any eligible citizen over eighteen years of age may be nominated, there must be 30 to 100 percent more candidates than positions available, and an election is valid only if more than 50 percent of people vote. Voter turnout is usually much higher, and in some regions as high as 90 percent (Xizang or Tibet stands out in this respect).

Representative appointments take place for the Political Consultative Conference, representing the relevant minority nationalities in the

area (there are 55 minority nationalities across China), the eight other political parties,⁸ religious groups (representing Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism), influential “political personages,” and much more. Further, both the People’s Congresses and Political Consultative Conferences have four other levels, rising up to the level of county and district, the level of provinces and autonomous regions, and finally to the country-wide level.

A final question: what is the relationship between the People’s Congresses and Political Consultative Conferences at all levels? This again is a combination or integration of what may seem like opposites in a contradiction, but for a Chinese approach the two are necessary and related aspects of the political system: the integration of electoral and consultative political processes.

3.2. *The CPC*

As for the CPC itself, a distinctive feature should be noted: while most political parties around the world express, and serve the needs of, distinct interest groups or classes, the CPC has developed from its initial emphasis on the small working class and majority peasantry to rising above interest groups and representing and leading the whole country and its people.⁹ Further, the CPC has its own structures as a large political party of now almost 100 million members. To begin with grassroots party branches: there are ten main types, all the way through

⁸ The eight other parties are: Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang (81,000 members); China Democratic League (181,000 members); China National Democratic Construction Association (108,000 members); China Association for Promoting Democracy (103,000 members); Chinese Peasants and Workers Democratic Party (99,000 members); China Zhi Gong Party (28,000 members); Jiusan Society (105,000 members); and the Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League (2,100 members).

⁹ Many thanks to Gao Jian for this point.

from village branches and non-public enterprises (including foreign enterprises) to mobile and retired member branches. From here the layers move upwards, to local committees overseeing a number of branches, county-level, city-level, the level of provinces and autonomous regions, to the country-wide level. Much is the further detail, but I restrict myself to the following point.

Over the last 13 years, since 2012, there has been a comprehensive process of reforming the CPC, from grassroots branches and upwards. The overall purpose has been to improve the functioning and unity of an almost 100 million-member political party, developing competent and skilled branch and committee secretaries, ensuring that the branches are deeply involved in their local villages and communities, establishing “Party-to-the masses service centres,” focusing Party building on the “Eight-point Regulation” and its spirit (setting boundaries for acceptable behavior and promoting a high moral code), and so on.

Let me say a little more about the “Eight-point Regulation,” which at the time of writing (late 2025) has been at the core of Party building in 2025.¹⁰ They were initially promulgated soon after the CPC’s 18th Congress in late 2012 and have seen continual emphasis since that time. In light of the progress made in the thoroughgoing reform of the CPC at all levels, it was decided to return to the “Eight-point Regulation” and its “Spirit,” and make them the core of Party building in 2025.

¹⁰ These regulations may be summarized as follows: improving the quality of investigation and research, streamlining meetings and activities, simplifying documents and briefings, regulating travel and visits, minimizing security protocols so as to cause minimal disruption, improving news reporting, strictly regulating the publication of documents, and practicing diligence and thrift.

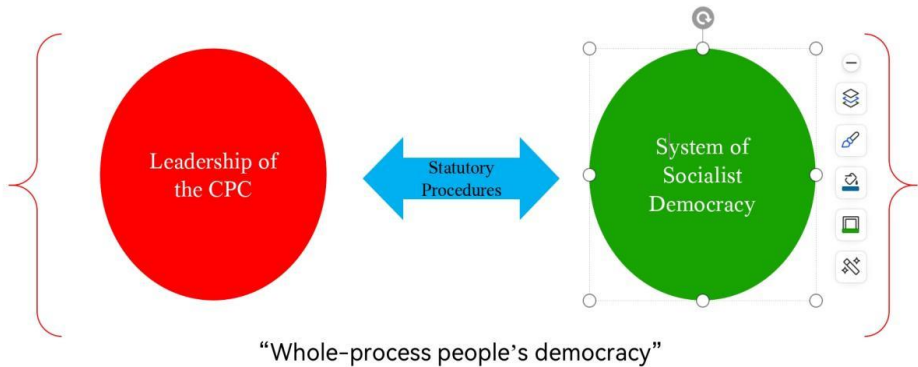
But what does the “Spirit” of the Eight-point Regulation mean, especially since this “Spirit” has been emphasized more and more?¹¹ Let me put it this way: the Eight-point Regulation and its Spirit embodies the relation between what to avoid and what should be promoted, the temptations to be negated and the values that should be upheld, strict enforcement of the regulations, and the promotion of a healthy work-style.¹² We may put it in the following terms: the Eight-point Regulation indicates the boundary between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable; however, within this boundary we also need a positive model, a code of ethics, a work style to which all Party members should adhere and seek to develop and promote.

3.3. The Relationship Between the Two Aspects of the Political System

In light of the preceding overview, it should be clear that structures of governance are distinct and also relate with one another in many ways. But how do they do so? The answer to this question has both a theoretical and a historical aspect. As for theory, I will initially use a diagram and explain.

¹¹ Among many studies of the Eight-point Regulation and its Spirit, I recommend: Sun Dawei, “The CPC’s Reform and Innovation in Implementing the Spirit of the Eight-Point Regulation and Its Experience and Implications,” *Social Science Journal* 6 (2024): 78-84; and Jin Yiwen, “The Theoretical, Historical, and Practical Logic of the CPC’s Implementing the Spirit of the Eight-Point Regulation,” *Journal of Sichuan Administration Institute* 2025, published online on 16 June 2025.

¹² For example, as this report from April of 2025 makes clear, the results of investigations and appropriate discipline are transparent and made available for public consultation: <https://www.12371.cn/2025/03/31/ARTI1743412261487795.shtml>



On the left of the preceding diagram is the leadership of the CPC, while on the right are all of the many types and levels of governance, or what is also known as the “system of socialist democracy” (which is obviously quite distinct from a Western-style parliamentary democracy with contesting and antagonistic political parties). However, the key is what mediates the relation between the two sides. The structures of governance and the CPC are distinct from one another and yet are closely related to one another. The short-hand way of putting this is in terms of “statutory processes” (法定程序 *fading chengxu*), by which is meant all of the necessary procedures through which proposals and opinions from the CPC Central Committee pass before these become laws and policies.¹³

¹³ Although I am limiting quotations and references to the leadership, the following is helpful here: “We should strengthen and improve the Party’s leadership, excel in working through statutory procedures [法定程序 *fading chengxu*] so that the Party’s propositions become the will of the state, excel in working through statutory procedures [法定程序 *fading chengxu*] so that candidates recommended by Party organisations become the leading personnel of the organs of state power, and excel in working through the organs of state power in implementing the Party’s leadership of state and society.” Further, in the same text we find an emphasis on exercising state power in an integrated way “through the People’s Congresses,” and that the Congresses at all of the five levels are “democratically elected, responsible to the people, and subject to the people’s supervision.” At the next level, the organs—administrative, supervisory, judicial, and procurat-

Historically, we may arguably trace a few major phases in this development, which entailed finding a way to construct a quite distinct political system that would not be a copy from elsewhere (although the influence of the Soviet Union was noticeable earlier on). The initial phase may be characterized as follows: since the struggle against semi-colonialism and then against the Nationalists (Guomindang) involved many groups and parties, albeit with the CPC increasingly in a leading position, we find that from the earliest days of the PRC (from 1949) that the initial foundations included both People's Congresses and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences as distinct entities. However, from the mid-1960s the tumultuous and chaotic decade of the "Cultural Revolution" threatened to undermine these initial developments, which led to the next phase's emphasis in the 1980s on the "Party should lead well, but its functions must be separated from those of the government."¹⁴ Another way of putting this is that during the "Cultural Revolution," what is known as "rule by a person" arose and so the emphasis afterwards was on "rule of law" (again, quite distinct from Western notions of "rule of law") and the division of labour between the CPC and the government. The next stage began in 2012 and brings us up to now. To sum up this period succinctly, we find even greater emphasis on the constitution, rule of law governance, and the "statutory

orial—created by the People's Congresses are responsible to and supervised by Congresses—all of them "in accordance with statutory mandates and procedures [依照法定权限和程序 *yizhao fadeng quanxian he chengxu*]." Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Central Committee's Work Meeting of the National People's Congress (13 October 2021)," *Qiushi* 2022 (5): 1–5. See also, Roland Boer, *Socialism in Power*, pp. 181–184.

¹⁴ The quotation comes from Deng Xiaoping, "On Reform of the Political Structure (September–November, 1986)," in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3: 178–81 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), p. 179.

procedures” for linking the CPC and the government. At the very same time and indeed through these emphases, the leadership of the CPC has become noticeably stronger, more centralized, and more unified. Think of the reform and rectification of the CPC mentioned above (the Eight-point Regulation and its Spirit and so on): one of its outcomes has been the increasing leadership role of Party secretaries in enterprises, government organs, education and so on. For example, I have noticed that the university-level Party secretary is now much more prominent in high-level university activities, albeit with a clear division of labour with the university president.

To sum up: the objective reality is that China’s internal political system has two co-existing realities. While the relations between the two have undergone various phases of greater separation, and then greater unity, we may distinguish between a multi-layered and rather well-developed governmental structure and a political party with almost 100 million members. The two must relate with one another, and the shorthand for this relationship is “statutory procedures.” It is precisely this internal political structure with its two closely related aspects that has generated the two-level diplomacy that we see today.

4. The Historical Background

Apart from the need to understand the internal political system, it is also necessary to appreciate the historical background of two-level diplomacy. It is to this task that I now turn.

4.1 Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew

Let me begin this section with a specific incident. In November of 1978—not long before the launch of the reform and opening-up at the Third Plenary of the CPC’s Central Committee—Deng Xiaoping made his first visit to Singapore. He stayed for two days and struck up a deep and long-

lasting with friendship with Lee Kuan Yew.¹⁵ They began by accommodating to each other's habits: Lee provided a spittoon and an ashtray (along with a specially constructed duct in the wall to enable the smoke to dissipate); Deng had been told of Lee's preferences and allergies, and neither smoked nor spat. As the conversation wound on, at one point Deng asked, to Lee's great surprise: "What do you and the ASEAN countries want us to do?" Lee replied, "Stop the radio broadcasts." Lee was even more surprised when Deng said he would think deeply about the question. It would still take a while for the broadcasts to stop, but what impressed Lee most was that Deng was willing to change his mind when confronted with an uncomfortable truth.

As a footnote to this very important encounter, Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew would develop—not so much despite but because of their different backgrounds—a special and candid relationship that enabled them to keep up communication over the following years. Deng was deeply impressed with what Singapore had achieved in terms of public planning, housing, construction, environment, order, tourism, foreign enterprises, and so on. For his part, Lee felt that Deng was the most impressive leader he had ever met: able to think matters through and when a mistake was made to admit it and seek a solution. Before Deng went to Singapore in late 1978, the Chinese press was still describing Singapore as "a running dog of U.S. imperialism." After the first visit, this description disappeared and Singapore began to be spoken of as a place worth studying and from which much could be learned. Deng is reported to have observed on one occasion: "If I had only Shanghai, I too might be able to change Shanghai as quickly. But I have the whole of China."

¹⁵ For the following, see Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 287–291.

To return to the broadcasts: what were they and what does the change in policy indicate? The broadcasts had been developed during the previous decade or more, urging those of Chinese background in Southeast Asian countries to support their local Communist Party (where there was one) in order to overthrow the system and set out on the socialist road. Clearly, these broadcasts were somewhat irritating and even galling to the existing leadership, whether in Singapore, Thailand, or elsewhere. From mid-1979 until late 1980, the broadcasts to various countries were stopped one after another.

4.2. The History of State-to-State Diplomacy

The broadcast question brings into relief a distinct development in the history of Chinese diplomacy over the last one hundred years or more.¹⁶ Although the “five principles of peaceful coexistence” had already been proposed in 1953,¹⁷ the reality was that during the early years after the establishment of the PRC there was a preference to continue the earlier approach of working within the “socialist camp” headed by the Soviet Union and with other aligned communist and workers’ parties. However, the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s initiated the process of developing a more independent and well-rounded foreign policy, based on the five principles mentioned above: “mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each

¹⁶ A note is needed on tracking Chinese research on state-to-state diplomacy. For example, on the research repository “China Knowledge Net” (中国知网) there are more than 700 research articles, as well as doctoral and master’s theses, on this topic over the last decade.

¹⁷ Here I follow the careful analysis of Pan Jin’e, “Party Diplomacy’s Significant Contributions to the Creation of A New Form of Human Civilisation: Theoretical and Practical Innovations in Regard to Party Diplomacy of the Communist Party of China,” in *New Forms of Human Civilisation from a World Perspective: Proceedings of the Cloud Workshop, School of Marxism, Dalian University of Technology*, 29–31 October, 2021 (Dalian: Dalian University of Technology, 2021), pp. 161–169.

other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence." Further, Mao Zedong proposed at this time a two-level approach to diplomacy: "the state is concerned with inter-state relations, and the party is concerned with inter-party relations." At a theoretical level, this is the real beginning of what I am calling a two-level approach to diplomacy.

However, these principles would begin to come to fruition only with the reform and opening-up after 1978. Why? The tumultuous decade of what is known as the "Cultural Revolution" threatened to undo all of the advances made and, indeed, bring to an end China's new project. It was during this time that the infamous broadcasts were amplified across Southeast Asia. It would fall to the leadership after 1978 to pick up the earlier line once again. This took place under the banner of "peace and development," with a focus on economic construction and learning from other parts of the world to enable the drive to "socialist modernization." The shift in diplomacy was notable: from the support of world revolution to enabling domestic economic development. By 1998, a new principle for diplomacy was proposed: "avoiding alliances and confrontation, and not targeting any third country."¹⁸

From that time onwards, China has developed its state-to-state diplomacy into what it is today. From my perspective, this state-to-state diplomacy has become quite non-politicized, in the sense that no matter what the political orientation of a ruling party in a country may be, if they are willing to engage with China on the basis of mutual non-interference and cooperation, then China will do so. In more and more cases, this has meant that even when there has been a change in

¹⁸ This sentence appears in Jiang Zemin, "Speech at the Science City of Novosibirsk (24 November 1998)," in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, vol. 2, 231–35 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2012), p. 234.

government—even in more dramatic shifts—in another country, the two states have mostly been able to maintain substantial diplomatic connections.

4.3. The History of Party-to-Party Diplomacy

A few words are also needed on how party-to-party diplomacy has developed.¹⁹ To be clear, party-to-party diplomacy is a much wider global development of the last few decades,²⁰ so China's activity in this sphere in some respects is part of this wider development. At the same time, there are specific features of party-to-party diplomacy in relation to China, since the leadership in this case is exercised by a Communist Party.

By the time the reform and opening-up was launched in late 1978, party diplomacy had already passed through a couple of phases: independent development from 1921 to 1949, during which relations with the Comintern moved from a subordinate status to the CPC taking its distinctive path in light of China's concrete conditions (see below on the Zunyi conference); ideological alignment with other communist and workers parties from 1949 to 1978, although the Sino-Soviet split by the

¹⁹ On the question of party-to-party diplomacy, China Knowledge Net (中国知网) has almost 300 scholarly articles, along with master's and doctoral theses, from the last decade or more. In what follows, I have drawn upon a number of the most important of these studies, with some offering historical perspectives, whether from Marx and Engels onwards, from the founding of the CPC in 1921, or from the beginning of the reform and opening-up in 1978. See especially Yang Yang and Zhu Huanghe, "Party-to-Party Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics since the Reform and Opening-Up: Achievements and Experiences," *Socialism Studies* 5 (2019): 56–62. Also see, Liu Zhenyu, "A Century of the CPC's Diplomacy: History, Experience, and Prospects," *Observe and Reflect* 10 (2021): 88–96; Yu Kejie, "Chinese Style Party-to-Party Diplomacy after the CPC's Twentieth National Congress," *Diplomacy Review* 3 (2023): 1–23.

²⁰ See Zhou Yuyun, "On Political Party Diplomacy," *World Economy and Politics* 7 (2001): 17.

1960s led to a breakdown in this approach, with relations souring also with parties in Eastern Europe.²¹

When the reform and opening-up was launched in 1978, party-to-party diplomacy was at a low ebb and it would take considerable effort to raise its profile. A significant step took place in 1982 at the CPC's 12th National Congress, which proposed and wrote into the Party's Constitution the "four principles of inter-party interaction," namely "independence, complete equality, mutual respect, and non-interference in each other's internal affairs."²² Two points need to be emphasized here. First, this move followed closely after the "broadcast incident" mentioned above and the initial efforts to enact the principles of state-to-state relations that had been proposed almost thirty years earlier. In other words, the need to clarify the nature and practice of party-to-party relations in the early 1980s arose in relation to development of state-to-state relations. Second, note also the final principle of party-to-party relations: mutual non-interference. The implications of this principle are rather significant, and I will return to them below.

Over the ensuing years, there were significant developments in party-to-party diplomacy, with increasing engagements with like-minded parties, but also and notably with parties that have rather different political orientations, especially those in the ASEAN or Association of Southeast Asian Countries, such as the Liberal Democratic

²¹ See Liu Zhenyu, "A Century of the CPC's Diplomacy," pp. 89–91. This point illustrates that while one would expect closest ties with other Marxist parties, this has not always been the case.

²² Pan Jin'e, "Party Diplomacy's Significant Contributions to the Creation of A New Form of Human Civilisation," p. 165.

Party in Japan, among others.²³ During this increasingly active period, the next major policy step took place between 1992 and 1997 at the CPC's 14th and 15th Congresses. By the time of the latter, the following proposal was approved: "to develop new types of inter-party exchanges and cooperation with the political parties of all countries that desire contact with our Party."²⁴ Why is this a major step forward? Not only do we have relations with like-minded communist and workers' parties, but also the indication that the CPC is willing to work with any political party that seeks to develop contacts, exchange, and cooperation with the CPC.²⁵ How does this work, especially since political parties are usually the most ideologically-charged organizations? The proposed answer was to "transcend" ideological differences. Lest we think this a hypothetical scenario, it actually relates to a concrete policy known as "seeking common ground while reserving differences" (求同存异 *qiutong-cunyi*)—a well-known phrase that dates back to the 1950s. In practice, it means acknowledging ideological differences so as to understand them, but not allowing them to become ideological confrontation which would hinder party-to-party relations.²⁶ Obviously, in some cases, this is a more difficult task.

²³ Yang Yang and Zhu Huanghe, "Party-to-Party Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics since the Reform and Opening-Up," p. 57; and Liu Zhenyu, "A Century of the CPC's Diplomacy," pp. 91-92.

²⁴ Pan Jin'e, "Party Diplomacy's Significant Contributions to the Creation of A New Form of Human Civilisation," pp. 165-166; and Chai Shangjin, "The Innovative Contribution to the Marxist Theory of Party-to-Party Relations by the CPC's Century of Experience in International Diplomacy," *Studies in Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping Theory* 4 (2021): 46.

²⁵ For an overview of the significant range of political parties with which the CPC has developed relations around the world, see Yang Yang and Zhu Huanghe, "Party-to-Party Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics since the Reform and Opening-Up," pp. 59-60.



The most recent phase began in 2012, and may be characterized as one of global development as China has become ever more important on the world stage. The tone of this phase has shifted from ensuring space for China's own development and modernization to proposing and supporting global development, especially in relation to developing countries. A notable moment was the first high-level dialogue with the world's political parties in December of 2017. The opening speech was delivered by none other than General Secretary Xi Jinping (his position in the CPC is used deliberately here), who emphasized: mutual trust, communication, and coordination; building a new type of relations among political parties based on seeking of common ground while reserving differences; moving even further to mutual respect and mutual learning between distinctly different political parties on the basis of a new type of international relations. The core of this recent phase is to "build a community with a shared future for humankind."²⁷ As an indication of how this stage has been developing, the CPC now has close relations with well over 500 political parties in 160 countries.²⁸ That said, this is by no means plain sailing. Ideological differences remain strong in some quarters (especially Western countries) and this reality poses significant challenges to party-to-party diplomacy.²⁹

²⁶ See Zhou Yuyun, "On Political Party Diplomacy," pp. 20–21.

²⁷ Xi Jinping, 2017, "Turn People's Aspirations for a Better Life into Reality: Keynote Speech at the High-level Dialogue of the CPC and World Political Parties held on 1 December 2017," in *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 354–57 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), p. 356.

²⁸ Yu Kejie, "Chinese Style Party-to-Party Diplomacy," p. 4.

²⁹ See the realistic assessment by Jin Xin, "Party-to-Party Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era: Opportunities, Challenges, and Tasks," *Explorations and Views* 1 (2022): 5–8.

Let me add here that I know of someone who has been invited to participate in a number of these high-level meetings online after the initial conference in late 2017. At some meetings there were only communist and workers' parties, but at others there was a wide range of political parties. At one particular online meeting, this person's computer suddenly showed Xi Jinping live on screen delivering a speech, to be followed, among others, by Bob Carr (former foreign minister of Australia), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), Imran Khan (Pakistan), Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela), and so on.

To sum up: I have sought to present a brief history of the development of the two levels of diplomacy. As for state-to-state relations, we have seen that the principles, initially proposed in the early 1950s, would begin to be realized thirty or so years later with the reform and opening-up. The nature and practice of party-to-party diplomacy has also seen some significant historical steps, from an initial period of "leaning to one side" and being part of the "socialist camp," through a shift to working with any political party that wished to do so, to the situation now in which both levels of diplomacy have clearly become more active on the world stage. By way of a footnote, it needs to be mentioned that in terms of both levels of diplomacy there has been a distinct emphasis for the last forty or more years, at least, on China's historical and experiential closeness to developing countries, and we continue to find this emphasis today.

5. The Relationship Between the Two Sets of Principles

Thus far, I have followed two trajectories or angles. The first provided an overview of the political system in China, and how the reality of this system has given rise to two-level diplomacy. The second angle considered the historical background, emphasizing developments and



major steps through until today. In light of this material, we may now return to the present.

As mentioned earlier, we are currently seeing China's state-to-state diplomacy increasingly engaged ever more deeply on a global level. These are mostly clearly manifested in the Belt and Road Initiative (2013) and the initiatives in global development (2021), global security (2022), global civilization (2023), and global governance (2025). These are not random initiatives, but are already embodied in the "Ten Perseverances" from 2018 (see above). Further, there has been a notable uptick in party-to-party relations, with increasing engagements with communist and workers' parties, but also with forums and conferences at which many other types of political parties are also participating.

5.1. Between Five Principles and Four Principles

How should we understand the relationship between the two levels of diplomacy? I would like to compare the Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence between States (initially proposed in 1953 but not really enacted until the 1980s) and the Four Principles of Inter-party Interactions (initially promulgated in 1982). To reiterate, the Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence are as follows:

1. Mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.
2. Mutual non-aggression.
3. Non-interference in each other's internal affairs.
4. Equality and mutual benefit.
5. And peaceful coexistence.

The Four Principles of Inter-party Interactions are as follows:

1. Independence.
2. Complete equality.

3. Mutual respect.

4. And non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

Clearly, there are overlaps between the two sets of principles, with the former influencing the latter in terms of mutual non-interference, equality, and mutual respect. The reader may perhaps wonder at this point: why bother with the distinction between two levels of diplomacy when the principles are rather similar? And, since the CPC is the leading party in China, does state-to-state diplomacy not simply mirror the CPC's position? On these questions, I initially refer the reader back to the section on the structure of China's political system. However, a further answer is to consider the particular origins of these two sets of principles.

The state-to-state level arose from an early decision, soon after the founding of the PRC (or the "New China" as they say here) to set its policy in a way that was more attuned to the Non-aligned Movement. Zhou Enlai participated in the Bandung, or Asian-African, Conference in 1955, and we can see significant overlaps with the Declaration from Bandung. These developments took place despite what was still a relative closeness to the Soviet Union in 1950s, with the latter assisting with much early industrial construction (especially in the northeast of China), and education, and so on. However, for a number of historical reasons the Five Principles began to be realized in a meaningful way only after the launch of the reform and opening-up in 1978.

The Principles of Inter-party Interaction may have been proposed explicitly in 1982, but their genesis has a somewhat longer history and may be traced back to the Zunyi Conference of January 1935, in the early days of the Long March. Held in Zunyi, Guizhou province, the conference voted out the Central Committee of the CPC that had been



approved by the Comintern based in Moscow, and voted in a new Central Committee with Mao Zedong at the core. The reason was that it was increasingly felt that the policies and directives from Moscow were ill-suited to China's concrete realities and had actually led to some significant mistakes. From this meeting onwards, we began to see a greater emphasis on independence and non-interference in each other's affairs.³⁰ In the earlier phases, this emphasis would take different forms, even to the point of cutting off relations with other communist parties. But it would not be until a very different time, in the early 1980s, for the Four Principles to be articulated clearly. On the way, we can say that there were some deviations from the spirit of the Zunyi Conference (think of the infamous broadcasts that Lee Kuan Yew asked Deng Xiaoping to stop at their first meeting), so that by 1982 it had to be recovered and taken further.

5.2. By Way of Illustration

I would like to provide two examples. The first concerns the responsibilities of embassies in various countries. These days, Chinese embassies have the task of developing two-level (and indeed multi-level) diplomacy. Thus, the embassy represents China's perspective in the country in question (in Australia the current foreign minister is of Malaysian Chinese background). However, the embassy also invites members of communist parties to dinners to discuss cooperation. Further, the embassy holds events on important days of the calendar, to which different groups are invited. For example, the celebration of the founding of the CPC tends to include representatives from communist and workers parties. However, the celebration of National Day on 1 October includes representatives from wider range of political parties

³⁰ Liu Zhenyu, "A Century of the CPC's Diplomacy," p. 93.

and indeed other relevant bodies in the countries in question. In many respects, in our time the Chinese embassies are at the forefront of developing two-level diplomacy, but the fact that such activities take place through the embassies indicates that the two levels are related to one another.

A second example: I recall some years ago participating in a conference in Beijing that included delegates from a range of political parties worldwide, but especially communist and workers' parties. One of the papers presented was particularly notable: it called on the CPC to provide funds and other forms of direct assistance to smaller parties in other countries—as the Soviet Union used to do. I am still not sure whether the speaker was ill-informed or not, but such talk was never going to gain any traction in light of the historically hard-won principle concerning non-interference in other like-minded political parties. Cooperation, close interaction, mutual learning, of course, but not interference, assistance, funding, and so on.

6. Conclusion: A Time of Qualitative Changes

I have tried to present as clearly as possible the developments in and nature of two-level diplomacy in China. This entailed both a factual description of the internal political structure and the history of these levels of diplomacy. While they are clearly related to one another, they also have their own distinctive features and practices, which may be understood in terms of a division of labor.

By way of conclusion, two points. First, a hard-won and now consistent emphasis in both levels of diplomacy is non-interference in each other's affairs. This entails that political parties treat each other as



equals and not in a hierarchical or paternalistic way.³¹ The same applies to inter-state relations, which has become particularly pertinent with China's growing importance on the world stage. A reader may ask: is this realistic and possible for a major power? The answer is twofold. On the one hand, both levels of diplomacy adhere to this principle almost to a fault. Even if a country has a political system or a ruling party thoroughly at odds with the values and ideals of the CPC or China as a state, there is a studied avoidance of requiring any internal political and social changes in the country in question. On the other hand, what may be called "soft power" and "smart power" does have an indirect influence. Indeed, this is an explicit aspect of international diplomacy in the sense of seeking to improve the understanding of how the CPC and how China works. We may go further: if a country is finally, through Chinese know-how, able to construct a rail system or a communications system (as has happened and is happening in Africa), it follows that the country in question and its people will appreciate the assistance and view China relatively more favorably. We may add here that the increasing number of international students from developing countries who are studying in China, produces a long-term result in terms of soft power.³²

Secondly, mention must be made of two phrases. Let us begin with "Great Changes Unseen in a Century" (百年未有之重大变革 *bainian weiyou zhi zhongda biange*), which—given the connotations of each

³¹ A point emphasized in the detailed history of the CPC's party-to-party relations by Chai Shangjin, "The Innovative Contribution to the Marxist Theory of Party-to-Party Relations." Here the relationship between universal and particular applies: while the "communist movement" is a world-wide phenomenon, each country and region develops its distinct path in light of concrete conditions and culture.

³² China is currently the second-most popular country for international students after the United States, and it is projected that China will soon overtake an increasingly isolationist United States on this score.

word—more specifically means weighty or substantial socioeconomic changes not experienced for a century. One need only think back to what was happening a century ago in many parts of the world to realize the import of this phrase,³³ which summarizes a significant amount of scientific research and analysis, along with deliberations concerning implications for policymaking, and especially international diplomacy. The next phrase is related and concerns a period of “qualitative change” (质变 *zhìbiàn*). I will not belabor the reader with the dialectical relationship between quantitative and qualitative change (which comes from Marxist philosophy, and especially dialectical materialism). I need only mention the multi-dimensional crisis of the West,³⁴ along with “the East rising and the West falling,” to illustrate the point. Such periods happen relatively rarely in human history, and they present immense challenges and risks (conflicts, social turmoil and breakdown, political upheaval, and so on) but also immense opportunities for discerning and fostering the qualitatively new configuration emerging in the world. As for a Chinese perspective on the current situation, I conclude with a quotation: “At present, China is experiencing its best period of development in modern times, while the world is seeing great transformations unseen in a century; the two are intertwined and mutually stimulating.”³⁵ As I write, it is with this assessment of the

³³ The First World War had come to an uneasy end and the Second was brewing; fascism was once again raising its head in Europe; the United States was moving to assert its hegemony over the West; and above all the October Revolution had taken place in Russia, which had significant implications across the world and especially for China.

³⁴ Whenever I visit a Western country, I cannot escape the overwhelming and pervasive sense of gloom and apprehension. Or as a young man from Wales, who has been living in China for more than fifteen years and has a family here now, put it: in the United Kingdom the common people have simply lost hope.

³⁵ Zhang Duo and Tang Yang, “The Role of Party-to-Party Diplomacy in Promoting the Construction of a Community of Shared Future for Humanity – An



global situation today that China's two-level diplomacy is in the process of moving to whole new way of engaging with the world.

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