

# City Clusters in China-Ger- many Subnational Diplo- macy

## Mapping the New Logic in Sister-city Partnership

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# Imprint

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# Preface

The AIA Fellow cohort of 2025/26 focuses on the topic of sub-national diplomacy. City partnerships are an essential component of this, and for us as an academy based in North Rhine-Westphalia, the partnerships between cities in North Rhine-Westphalia and the global power China are of particular interest. However national relations between Germany and China may develop, at the regional and city level there is a network that has grown over decades and will leave its mark on the economy and politics of the 21st century. This requires mutual understanding. In Germany, there is often little awareness of the role that megacities and, in particular, city clusters in China play in this context. AIA Fellow Anna Shpakovskaya is not only an outstanding academic expert in this field, but also an important cultural mediator who makes a significant contribution to mutual learning. Among other things, two important case studies are discussed: Duisburg-Huangshi and Bonn-Chengdu. At the end, Anna formulates concrete policy recommendations. This paper is the result of her many years of work on the subject and was written during her fellowship at the Academy. We hope it will attract many interested readers and welcome feedback.

Der AIA-Fellowjahrgang 2025/26 setzt sich schwerpunktmäßig mit dem Thema Sub-national Diplomacy auseinander. Ein wesentliche Baustein sind Städtepartnerschaften und für uns als in NRW ansässige Akademie sind natürlich insbesondere die Partnerschaften zwischen NRW-Städten und der globalen Macht China von besonderem Interesse. Wie auch immer sich die nationalstaatlichen Beziehungen zwischen Deutschland und China entwickeln mögen, auf der regionalen und Städteebene existiert ein über Jahrzehnte gewachsenes Geflecht, dass der Wirtschaft und Politik des 21. Jahrhunderts seinen Stempel aufdrücken werden. Hierfür braucht es wechselseitiges Verständnis. Oftmals ist in Deutschland kaum bekannt, welche Rolle Megacities und insbesondere City Cluster in China in diesem Kontext spielen. AIA Fellow Anna Shpakovskaya ist hierfür nicht nur eine herausragende wissenschaftliche Expertin, sondern auch eine wichtige Kulturvermittlerin, die zum wechselseitigen Lernen einen wichtigen Beitrag leistet. Unter anderem werden mit Duisburg-Huangshi und Bonn-Chengdu zwei wichtige Fallstudien angesprochen. Am Ende formuliert Anna konkrete politische Handlungsempfehlungen. Dieses Paper ist Ausfluss ihrer jahrelangen Beschäftigung mit dem Thema und es ist während ihres Fellowships an der Akademie entstanden. Wir hoffen auf viele interessierte Leser und freuen uns auch über Feedback.

Manuel Becker  
Head of Scientific Programme

**Abstract:** *This paper offers a new framework for understanding China-Germany sister-city diplomacy through the lens of city cluster logic, enabling subnational actors to navigate complex institutional structures and networked partnerships more strategically. Drawing upon a comprehensive policy analysis and a series of 68 interviews conducted in Germany and China between 2022 and 2025, this study illuminates a notable shift in China's urban strategic approach to its partnership with Germany. It argues that today's China-Germany sister-city diplomacy is shaped not only by the local interests of individual cities but also by the regional dynamics of city clusters. By understanding city cluster logic, German municipalities can more effectively align agendas, leverage networks, and coordinate initiatives, thereby strengthening their engagement with Chinese cities.*

**Abstract:** *Dieses Paper bietet einen neuen Rahmen für das Verständnis der chinesisch-deutschen Städtepartnerschaftsdiplomatie aus der Perspektive der Stadtcluster-Logik, der es subnationalen Akteuren ermöglicht, komplexe institutionelle Strukturen und vernetzte Partnerschaften strategischer zu navigieren. Auf der Grundlage einer umfassenden Politikanalyse und einer Reihe von 68 Interviews, die zwischen 2022 und 2025 in Deutschland und China durchgeführt wurden, beleuchtet diese Studie eine bemerkenswerte Veränderung in Chinas städtischer Strategie für seine Partnerschaft mit Deutschland. Eine Kernthese lautet, dass die heutige chinesisch-deutsche Städtepartnerschaftsdiplomatie nicht nur von den lokalen Interessen einzelner Städte geprägt ist, sondern auch von der regionalen Dynamik von Stadtclustern. Durch das Verständnis der Stadtclusterlogik können deutsche Kommunen ihre Agendae effektiver aufeinander abstimmen, Netzwerke nutzen und Initiativen koordinieren und so ihr Engagement mit chinesischen Städten stärken.*

# 1. Introduction

This research contributes to the field of subnational diplomacy, highlighting the growing role of cities as international actors and challenging the traditional state-centered approach to foreign policy. A broad body of literature has been devoted to Chinese cities to demonstrate how cities are increasingly engaging in economic, political and cultural exchanges that intersect with broader geopolitical transformations. However, gaps remain, and this research tackles one such gap by shifting the focus from individual cities to city clusters and the logic thereof, which, as argued in this paper, is becoming a driving force behind urban diplomacy today.

Empirically, this paper draws on a content analysis of urban development policy papers and 68 interviews conducted between 2022 and 2025 with stakeholders from China and the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, traditionally considered as an Asia-friendly region which is actively involved in city partnerships with Chinese cities. German interviewees included municipal officials, government advisors, NGO representatives, governance network members, and cultural and educational representatives. Chinese interview participants comprised NRW-based entrepreneurs and investors, professionals from IT, logistics, manufacturing and consulting, and members of business associations and NGOs. Experts and scholars provided additional insights on China-Germany relations and city diplomacy. The semi-structured format ensured thematic consistency while allowing contextual depth, producing ample qualitative data on the institutional, operational, and perceptual dimensions of China-Germany municipal partnerships.

A central puzzle in this paper is the highly proactive approach of Chinese cities in initiating partnerships with German counterparts. Interviews reveal that Chinese actors often inquire about the networks and cluster affiliation of German cities, signaling not only an advanced awareness of the importance of municipal networks but also the potential for strategic alignment. The interviews also revealed that Chinese participants frequently perceive German cities not as independent individual units but rather as part of larger cooperation networks. They also question the loose coordination among German cities, seeing greater economic and investment potential in clustering. This proactive approach stands in contrast to the more cautious and decentralized engagement of German cities. These interview results raise the question as to whether such prevalent perceptions and acute awareness translate into an observable mechanism, or underlying logic, that shape contemporary diplomacy?

City clusters (城市群) can be understood as groups of nearby cities, usually with a main core and smaller surrounding cities, that work together on resources, infrastructure, and development to achieve shared socio-economic goals. These goals are articulated through centrally designed policies that promote the transition to high-quality urban development and regional integration and internationalization. Thus, city clusters are intended to act as strategic actors in both domestic governance and global engagement.

The paper presents two case studies to illustrate how these emerging dynamics operate in practice. The Huangshi-Duisburg case highlights how a secondary Chinese city leverages the network of its cluster's core city, Wuhan, to participate in international cooperation,

while the Bonn-Chengdu case demonstrates how access to the broader Chengdu-Chongqing city cluster can potentially enable long-term, sector-specific collaboration, particularly in healthcare and innovation. Together, these cases show how city cluster logic shapes the initiation, negotiation, and strategic orientation of sister-city partnerships.

Following the Introduction, Section 2 defines China's city clusters and examines related policies, while Section 3 discusses challenges and tensions within clusters, Section 4 exemplifies the role of cluster logic in sister-city partnerships through empirical case studies, and Section 5 offers policy recommendations for German municipalities. The paper concludes with a summary of key research findings.

## 2. China's city clusters: Definition and strategic positioning

The Chinese government sees cities and city clusters as key engines of national development, mobilizing resources and fostering innovation and economic activities in order to drive domestic growth and regional coordination. At the same time, they are also viewed as global players, forging international partnerships and engaging in cross-border networks that extend China's influence beyond national borders. This section offers an overview of China's city cluster strategy and provides the foundation for understanding how these clusters increasingly engage internationally, setting the stage for the analysis of China-Germany sister-city diplomacy.

### 2.1 Cities and city clusters as drivers of national development

Since the launch of the Reform and Opening policy in 1978, China's rapid urbanization has placed cities at the center of national economic growth. However, this rapid expansion has come at a cost, with cities increasingly confronting mounting population pressures and ecological challenges (Wang 2014). Thus, over the past four decades, cities in China have not only been lauded for driving an unprecedented economic miracle; they have also faced significant challenges, often to be solved at the municipal level. These dynamics have been further complicated by the rise of new megacities, such as Shenzhen, which compete economically with traditional urban centers, for example Guangzhou or Shanghai (Jiang and Yeh 2005).

To reduce inter-city rivalry and foster more coordinated regional development, the central government has gradually developed a policy of city clusters. Accordingly, cities are encouraged to collaborate in solving shared production, infrastructural and social challenges by pooling material and human resources. It is important to note that competitiveness has always been valued in China as an economic development strategy. Thus, city cluster policies have been strategically framed not to avoid competition, but rather to reduce rivalry between individual cities within clusters and enhance overall regional competitiveness, seeking to would narrow the developmental gap between large and small cities and contribute to overall national growth.

Policy papers systematically followed the 2006 11th Five-Year Plan, which was the first to announce city clusters as the main form for advancing urban development. The 2017 19th Party Congress Report (中共十九大报告) formally positioned city clusters as the primary framework for coordinating large, medium and small cities. Subsequent policy documents, including the 2018 Opinions on Establishing New More Effective Regional Coordination Mechanisms (关于建立更加有效的区域协调发展新机制的意见) and the 2019 Guidelines on Developing Modern Metropolitan Areas (关于培育发展现代化都市圈的指导意见), further deepened this orientation.

The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) further defines the development trajectory of China's city clusters and is widely regarded as "the foundation for concrete megaregions planning policies in China" (Wang and Meijers 2024). By 2024, the State Council had approved 11 national level city cluster plans (城市发展规划), covering multiple regions and structuring clusters around core cities to drive the coordinated development of medium and small cities (Ke et al. 2025). Most recently, in 2025 the State Council issued the Opinion on Promoting High-Quality Urban Development (中共中央国务院关于推动城市高质量发展的意见) that further emphasizes a shift from large-scale urban expansion to quality improvement, aiming to build a modern, livable and innovative ecosystem in cities across China. It highlights integrated city cluster development that aims at strengthening core-periphery coordination, fostering transition to a low-carbon economy and digitalized governance. Together, these policies reflect a long-term top-down strategy for achieving sustainable urban modernization.

In their 2019 book, *China's Urban Agglomerations*, Chuanglin Fang and Danlin Yu trace the concept of city clusters (also named urban agglomerations) in Western theories of urbanization and modernization. While noting that scholars have yet to reach a unified definition, they define a city cluster as a specific region containing one super city (with more than 10 million permanent residents) or megacity (with over 5 million residents), at least three metropolitan or large cities as fundamental nodal points, and highly developed transportation and telecommunication infrastructure networks. The region must be spatially compact, closely economically integrated, and socio-economically highly urbanized (Fang and Yu 2019). This definition is adopted in this paper.

Furthermore, the size of a city cluster is generally assessed by three indicators: population, land area and annual GDP. At present, the 19 city clusters have repeatedly appeared in major national strategies. These 19 clusters host over 70% of China's population and contribute more than 80% of the country's GDP (Economic Daily 2025). Dong Xin, researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, notes that these city clusters currently occupy an "absolutely dominant" position in the development of China's national economy and serve as an important driving force not only for China's but also the world's economic development (Dong 2024). Among them, the five most prominent clusters are Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei (京津冀城市群), Yangtze River Delta Cluster led by Shanghai (长三角城市群), Pearl River Delta Cluster (珠三角城市群) centered on Guangzhou and Shenzhen, Chengdu-Chongqing Cluster (成渝城市群), and the Central Yangtze River Cluster (中部长江城市群) with Wuhan as its core. These five strongest clusters are actively reshaping China's regional economic landscape and international outreach. The 2025 Opinions on Promoting High-Quality Urban Development further classify the five into two groups: three world-class clusters



(Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, Yangtze River Delta Cluster, Pearl River Delta Cluster) and two growth poles for high-quality development (Chengdu-Chongqing and the Central Yangtze River Cluster).

In sum, city clusters have emerged as central drivers of China's national development designed to balance the growth of mega, medium and small cities. Over time, city cluster policy has developed as a coordinated response from the central government to mounting challenges in the municipalities. City clusters now underpin the transition from rapid urban expansion, which came at a high price, to a more balanced, high-quality, innovation-driven urban growth, positioning city clusters both as hubs of regional modernization and as engines of national socio-economic prosperity.

## 2.2 Cities and city clusters as global players

Chinese cities are not only central to domestic economic transformation but have also quickly become influent international actors, particularly with the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 (Shpakovskaya 2022). Zhao Kejin, Professor at Tsinghua University and a leading scholar on China's urbanization, compares the BRI to a "golden ribbon" with cities as the "shining pearls and jewels" that give the Initiative its brilliance and key to success (Zhao 2014). Similarly, Li Xiaolin, former president of the Chinese People's Society for Friendship with Foreign Countries, emphasized in 2019 that friendly city relations have become one of the most important channels for implementing the BRI, facilitating exchanges, cooperation, and mutual learning between Chinese and foreign cities (China Daily 2019).

Du Dong, Chief Expert at the Think Tank on High-Quality Development of Regions and City Clusters at Hohai University, notes that city clusters led by Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen act as international hubs, providing essential services in global economic, trade, financial, and technological networks. They support domestic firms abroad, strengthen overseas production and service networks, accelerate the internationalization of production, and facilitate integration into global industrial and supply chains, significantly increasing their role in China's subnational diplomacy (Du 2021).

Lu Yao, Assistant Researcher at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, further outlines how the government of Shanghai city that lead the Yangtze River Delta Cluster strives to optimize communication resources in the Yangtze River Delta, jointly carry out international exchanges and cooperation, and collectively enhance the international influence of the city cluster. Lu also stresses that expanding the international influence of Yangtze River Delta Cluster is of great significance for comprehensively enhancing China's overall international standing (Lu 2024). In an interview with Xinhua News Agency, Hu Ang, Specially Appointed Professor at the University of Tokyo, pointed at how the Yangtze River Delta city cluster seeks to strengthen its global value chain position, highlighting the critical role of city cluster internationalization in advancing both regional development and China's national economy (Xinhua News Agency 2024).

In the interview, Professor Liu Bo, Director of the Institute of International Studies at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, further explained to the author of this paper how

Chinese cities utilize cluster networks and share resources to jointly attract international organizations to China to host events such as expos, summits, and conferences.

This reveals how by building on domestic cluster strategies, Chinese cities are positioned to attract international resources to China, extend their influence abroad, collectively coordinate international initiatives, and participate in global governance networks, reflecting a broader shift toward urban diplomacy and the emergence of city clusters as central actors in China's international strategy.

Interestingly, Chinese city clusters not only serve as a model for domestic urban development and internationalization but also aim to guide cities in the developing world by sharing their urban development experience globally. Wei Jianguo, former Vice Minister of Commerce and Secretary-General of the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, observes that global competitiveness is no longer driven by individual cities but increasingly relies on coordinated city clusters, where cities of different sizes complement one another. Through integrated planning, innovation, green development, and advanced governance, Chinese city clusters are emerging as engines of economic growth and exemplars for global urban development (Wei 2025).

### 3. City clusters: Challenges and tensions

Much English and Chinese-language scholarship has been devoted to analyzing the governance challenges within and between China's city clusters, as well as the growing competition among them. Scholars highlight challenges to intercluster governance such as institutional fragmentation, overlapping administrative boundaries, and coordination difficulties among local governments who often prioritize regional interests over collective goals. For example, Wang Tongjing and Evert Meijers evaluate the degree of inclusion, connectivity, and consistency among cities within fifteen city clusters. They conclude that nearly half of these clusters are in fact "imagined" - arbitrary collections of cities that lack genuine integration and do not function as cohesive systems of cooperation (Wang and Meijers 2024). Du Yizhao et al. further demonstrated that when clusters form, it is primarily the core cities that benefit, while secondary cities, often constrained by their comparatively lower capacities and weak position in the administrative hierarchy, tend to experience greater peripheralization and derive only limited advantages from the clustering process (Du et al. 2024).

In response, policymakers have increasingly called for greater integration (一体化), a concept that has become central both in government policy documents and academic analyses. For example, scholars Ou Yanghui and Li Zhi understand integration as a multi-dimensional process that strengthens coordination across city clusters, encompassing governance, infrastructure, markets, and industry. They emphasize that coordination mechanisms provide organizational and institutional guarantees for integration and that cooperation in transportation, industrial innovation, unified markets, environmental protection, and public services has significantly increased the level of integration in some clusters (Ou and Li 2024).

Wen Yuyuan, Professor at the School of Applied Economics at Renmin University, explains that China's urban clusters are unevenly distributed across East, Central, West, and North-east regions, with eastern clusters like the Yangtze River Delta, Pearl River Delta, and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei leading economically. Urban cluster integration, Wen proceeds, should largely rely on coordinated planning, intercity transportation, industrial collaboration, and shared public services, but regional disparities, limited factor mobility, and weak cross-jurisdiction mechanisms remain challenges (Economic Daily 2025).

The different degrees of lacking integration are evident across virtually all city clusters. Even the leading clusters, such as the Yangtze River Delta led by Shanghai, categorized by Wang Tongjing and Evert Meijers as a highly integrated “real” cluster, still require further integration (Wang and Meijers 2024). Professor Sun Bindong, Director and Professor, China Administrative Division Research Center, East China Normal University, highlights that deeper integration in the Yangtze River Delta is needed across policy, industry, market, innovation, infrastructure, and ecological management (Economic Daily 2025). Oftentimes, however, the policy documents do not provide a clear roadmap for achieving deeper integration, leaving it to leading cities like Beijing or Shanghai to implement improvements and serve as a model or blueprint for other, less developed clusters. These leading cluster cities are further reinforced by another central policy designating nine “National Central Cities” (国家中心城市): Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Chengdu, Wuhan, Zhengzhou, and Xi'an. These cities play a key role in “radiating” economic growth and development across their respective regions (Hamnett et al. 2023).

At the same time, another strand of analysis focuses on competition among city clusters. A particularly prominent example is the rivalry between the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta, which has intensified as both regions strive to become national innovation hubs and global economic gateways. This competition encompasses high-end industries, financial institutions, and talent, and at times leads to uncoordinated policies and regional protectionism. As China Report notes, while competition can be benign and stimulate innovation and efficiency (China Report 2024), it may also exacerbate regional disparities and challenge the central government's goal of balanced development. The central government's response is to further group clusters. For example, as mentioned earlier, the 2025 Opinions on Promoting High-Quality Urban Development subgroups the five leading clusters into three world-class clusters and two growth poles for high-quality development. This classification aims to reduce rivalry among regions by clearly delineating the roles and priorities of each cluster in line with national development goals. By defining which clusters are expected to serve as world-class hubs and which as regional growth poles, the government seeks to guide investment, talent allocation, and policy support, promoting coordinated development while mitigating destructive competition. Wu Fulong assesses this as the state's response to “uncoordinated competition” that stems from “regulatory deficit” (Wu 2016).

During her fieldwork in China, the author of this paper observed how these dynamics are communicated and reinforced through Urban Planning Exhibition Halls in Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Suzhou. These venues not only presented each city's history, economic development, and future plans, but also highlighted their role within the broader city cluster. By emphasizing a city's position in the cluster, the exhibitions help to

shape a still evolving collective cluster identity, reduce intra-city rivalry, and encourage coordination across the region. This identity formation is largely top-down, guided by central policies and strategic planning, while simultaneously allowing local governments to negotiate their priorities within the framework.

Finally, China's city clusters present opportunities but face governance challenges. Integration advances coexist with uneven development, and competition can spur innovation while creating inequalities. Importantly, the clustering process in China should not be understood as a form of decentralization or democratization. Rather, it is a state-led process driven by national development strategies, defined by Wu Fulong as a "state-dominated development regime" (Wu 2016). This process is continuously adjusted through negotiations with local governments, reflecting both top-down planning (known as 顶层设计, top-level design) and local agency. Central government strategies, including the designation of world-class clusters and high-quality growth poles, aim to clarify roles, guide investment, and foster coordination, balancing competing local interests with overall cohesion. In response, local municipal governments negotiate their priorities, with outcomes depending on their relative negotiating power.

## 4. City cluster logic in China-Germany subnational diplomacy practices

City diplomacy between China and Germany remains an under-researched area in English and German language scholarship alike, with few systematic studies available. For example, Heberer and Shpakovskaya (2022) analyze municipal diplomacy and sister-city partnerships between Germany and China, highlighting implications for North Rhine-Westphalia. Romano and Taube (2023) present an in-depth case study of Duisburg and its partnership with Wuhan, illustrating the dynamics of an "all-weather" friendly relationship amid contemporary crises. Frenzel, Godehardt, Pantekoek, and Schulze (2024) position municipalities as central actors in German China policy while outlining its developments and future trajectories. Offering a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding city diplomacy, Ciesielska-Klikowska, Kamiński, and Frenkel (2025) examine German multi-level relations with superpowers, comparing subnational cooperation with American and Chinese partners. Most recently, Ciesielska-Klikowska's monograph (2025) further explores how Germany's decentralized, multi-level governance shapes both constraints and opportunities for municipalities engaging with Chinese cities.

While these studies provide valuable theoretical, conceptual, and empirical insights into municipal partnerships, they leave important questions unanswered. In particular, the role of city clusters in shaping subnational diplomacy has received little attention. Despite growing recognition of the international significance of city clusters in China, the city cluster logic that, as argued in this paper, increasingly drives Chinese cities' behavior in their partnerships remains largely unexplored in the context of China-Germany relations. The two cases presented in this section illustrate this logic in practice. Before turning to the cases, however, it is important to clarify two central points.

Firstly, as previously noted, city cluster development in China is guided by top-level design (顶层设计) and supported by complementary urban development policies, most notably the National Central Cities (国家中心城市) strategy. This multi-layered framework ensures that cluster formation is not a temporary or ad hoc process, but rather part of a long-term, institutionalized vision for spatial and economic coordination in China. Through deeper integration (一体化), ongoing negotiation, and policy refinement, city clusters establish themselves as stable and enduring structures.

Secondly, with a strong emphasis on internationalization, city clusters are increasingly extending their engagement into city diplomacy. Guided by central government policies, clusters naturally prefer to operate within established institutionalized frameworks such as sister-city partnerships. Accordingly, these partnerships are increasingly shaped not just by individual municipal interests but also by collective cluster vision and strategies. Chinese cities do not yet engage with German counterparts as fully unified clusters, as their cluster identities are still evolving. However, interviews indicate that internal coordination within clusters is becoming more structured. For example, interviewees noted that the international offices of individual cities are forming networks for information exchange, network sharing, and joint agenda-setting, enabling cluster logic to shape bilateral sister-city partnerships. The following two case studies further illustrate this logic.

## 4.1 Case 1: Network sharing - Duisburg-Huangshi

On April 25, 2024, the author attended the Huangshi-Duisburg Investment Promotion Meeting, organized by the Huangshi local government and held in Duisburg. The meeting followed a conventional format: senior city officials delivered speeches, business executives presented Huangshi's leading industries, and the event concluded with a ceremonial ribbon-cutting and photo session. Despite careful preparation and formalities, the meeting did not produce concrete agreements or immediate economic cooperation. However, when viewed through the lens of city cluster logic, the event takes on heightened significance, and this logic also explains why Chinese media portrayed it as a symbolic reaffirmation of enduring cooperation (Huangshi Municipal Government 2024a).

To understand the strategic logic of this visit, it is important to consider Huangshi's role within the Central Yangtze River City Cluster. The Huangshi City Master Plan (2011–2020) positions it as a regional central city and an advanced manufacturing base, highlighting its industrial importance in the cluster. The Huangshi Land and Spatial Master Plan (2021–2035) further elevates the status of Huangshi to a growth pole (增长极), reinforcing its function as a key hub city boosting regional integration, coordination, and long-term development (Huangshi Municipal Government 2025). This new role explains why Huangshi is intensifying its internationalization efforts, which city authorities regard as essential for achieving success (Huangshi Municipal Government 2024b).

From a diplomatic perspective, the Huangshi delegation's visit to Duisburg illustrates how cluster logic shapes sister-city partnerships. Wuhan, as the core of the Central Yangtze River City Cluster and a long-standing sister city of Duisburg, appears to have strategically shared its network and access with Huangshi, enabling the city to participate in an international cooperation network while reinforcing Wuhan-led metropolitan influence.

Although the meeting yielded no immediate economic agreements, it served as a symbolic and relational tool, situating Huangshi within Wuhan's broader urban cluster strategy of growth poles for high-quality development and enhancing its visibility in Sino-German municipal diplomacy. Huangshi's role as an advanced manufacturing base and growth pole complements Wuhan's regional strategy, particularly the "965" industrial cluster plan. Its industrial strengths, from metallurgy to machinery and automation, reinforce Wuhan's core functions, underscoring Huangshi as a node city that facilitates regional integration and industrial coordination. In this light, the Duisburg visit symbolizes Huangshi's participation in high-value regional networks and its alignment with the Central Yangtze River City Cluster strategy (Xinhua 2025).

In sum, the Huangshi-Duisburg Meeting highlights how cluster logic shapes contemporary sister-city partnerships and underscores the importance of recognizing this underlying framework for a more effective strategic response. Wuhan appears to have extended its cluster network to Duisburg, reinforcing historical ties and industrial complementarities. In turn, Duisburg authorities appropriately assessed the meeting's significance: while Huangshi does not hold the same status as Wuhan, the city hosted the event and ensured participation by key representatives, even though Sören Link, Mayor of Duisburg, was not present.

## 4.2 Case 2: Strategic agenda setting - Bonn-Chengdu

In December 2024, Bonn and Chengdu celebrated the 15th anniversary of their sister-city partnership, which was originally established in 2009 (Bonn Municipal Government 2024a). Over the course of their partnership, Bonn and Chengdu have collaborated across multiple fields, with cultural exchange remaining at its core. In 2025, Bonn's Mayoress Dr. Ursula Sautter attended the Chengdu International Friendship Cities Cooperation and Development Conference, where she explored new avenues for collaboration, including a visit to the West China Medical Center (Bonn Municipal Government 2024b). In June 2025, the author had the opportunity to meet Mayoress Sautter, who reaffirmed Bonn's strong interest in developing cooperation with the West China Medical Center, particularly in the field of Traditional Chinese Medicine, thereby indicating the expansion of the Bonn-Chengdu partnership into new domains of collaboration.

City cluster logic offers a compelling framework for assessing whether this new focus on health cooperation is a product of chance or reflects a long-term perspective with potential for fruitful collaboration. As previously noted, Chengdu and Chongqing together form a distinctive two-city cluster. The Chengdu-Chongqing City Cluster has been designated by the central government as a "growth pole for high-quality development." Both cities are also recognized as National Central Cities (国家中心城市), which entails a responsibility to achieve advanced development levels, serve as a model for other cities, and drive broader regional growth. Healthcare is a key pillar of high-quality development, which is why the municipal governments of both cities promoted the creation of the Chengdu-Chongqing Health Hub (成渝健康圈). This initiative is introduced in the 2024 policy "Ten Actions for Promoting Integrated Health and Medical Development in the Chengdu-Chongqing Twin-

City Economic Hub” (2024年推动成渝地区双城经济圈建设卫生健康一体化发展十项行动). The document emphasizes deeper integration as its central guiding principle.

In line with central policy priorities, the West China Medical Center has hosted several forums bringing together medical professionals from Chengdu and Chongqing to discuss improved health governance, innovation, and enhanced intracity integration in the healthcare sector (West China Medical School 2025). With four affiliated hospitals consistently ranked among the best in China, the Center is also highly active in international exchange (PR Newswire 2025).

Viewed through the lens of city cluster logic, Bonn’s collaboration with Chengdu, particularly via the West China Medical Center, grants the city access not only to Chengdu but, through the sister-city partnership, to the broader Chengdu-Chongqing cluster, which includes one of China’s largest megacities, Chongqing. This extended network enables Bonn to pursue long-term initiatives in healthcare innovation, governance, and international collaboration, aligning its city diplomacy with China’s regional development strategies. It should be noted that international multilateral city cooperation is widely recognized and embraced in China. As early as 2014, Chinese scholars highlighted that multilateral cooperation formats constitute “the new stage for city diplomacy” (Chen 2014). Interviewees in the present paper also emphasized that multilateral city partnerships represent the future of subnational diplomacy and are crucial for promptly and adequately addressing global challenges.

Finally, while city cluster logic does not automatically guarantee partnership success, it provides a clear framework for understanding how cooperation agendas are set and offers a foundation for more strategic and effective partnership governance.

## 5. Policy recommendations for German cities

Building on the discussion of cluster-driven city diplomacy in China, the following seven recommendations are united in one central principle: any partnership with Chinese cities must be in the strategic interests of the German city. Recommendations that do not align with these local interests should be set aside. These guidelines aim to help German municipalities engage effectively with Chinese city clusters while ensuring that all initiatives serve domestic priorities and long-term municipal goals.

- **Recognize city cluster logic:** German cities often lack recognition from the federal government and face weak coordination across federal, state, and municipal levels. In contrast, Chinese cities are strongly incentivized to internationalize and act with autonomy within central policies. When Chinese cities approach German cities, they automatically acknowledge the importance of both the city and its networks, giving German municipalities external legitimacy they often lack domestically. To



leverage this, German cities should increase their awareness of China's urban policies, enabling them to operate within the same conceptual framework and strategically align initiatives with Chinese cluster priorities.

- **Map cluster networks:** Identify the Chinese partner city's position within its broader city cluster. Understanding these hierarchies clarifies which actors influence international cooperation and where strategic engagement may be most effective.
- **Monitor policy signals:** Track central, provincial, and municipal policies that shape cluster development, as these indicate long-term priorities and preferred collaboration areas, allowing German municipalities to selectively align initiatives with the evolving cluster strategy.
- **Leverage extended networks:** Recognize that collaboration with one city can provide indirect access to the entire cluster, including megacities like Chongqing, Shanghai, Beijing, etc. German municipalities can use sister-city partnerships to tap into these high-value regional networks for long-term strategic projects.
- **Recognize symbolic significance:** Some visits or meetings may have limited immediate economic outcomes but carry substantial symbolic weight in cluster-based diplomacy. German municipalities should interpret such events as relational tools that build trust and pave the way for future cooperation.
- **Coordinate internally:** Understanding city cluster logic helps German cities use scarce human and financial resources more efficiently by focusing on strategically relevant partner cities. Germany's decentralized municipalities enjoy local autonomy, which, combined with Chinese cluster planning, allows flexible coordination with other German cities. Aligning key departments enables effective management of sister-city agendas. For example, Bonn can leverage the Chengdu-Chongqing cluster: since Chongqing is also a sister city of Düsseldorf, joint initiatives between Bonn and Düsseldorf can extend collaboration across the cluster, maximizing impact with limited resources. Such cooperation can build upon the widely recognized and broadly accepted concept of multicity partnerships in China, as highlighted in this paper.
- **Use cluster logic for partnership governance:** Apply a cluster perspective when negotiating joint projects, while prioritizing the strategic interests of the German city. This approach enables municipalities to select initiatives that align with both the partner city's cluster role and the German city's long-term objectives, ensuring that cooperation is sustainable and mutually beneficial. City cluster logic provides a comprehensive framework for agenda-setting, project selection, and risk management.

## 6. Conclusion

City cluster logic offers a crucial lens for understanding contemporary China-Germany subnational diplomacy. This paper demonstrates how Chinese cities often operate not as isolated actors but as parts of strategically coordinated city clusters that dictate leadership in initiatives, the allocation of resources and access, and prioritization of partnerships.



The empirical cases of Huangshi-Duisburg and Bonn-Chengdu exemplify how this cluster logic operates in practice.

It is important to note, however, that city clusters differ markedly in their structure and level of maturity. Some are highly integrated, with well-defined governance mechanisms and collective agendas, while others are still forming a shared identity. Some clusters emphasize cooperation and mutual development, while others remain competitive, vying for investment, talent, and national recognition. This diversity reflects both the adaptive nature of China's regional governance and the ongoing evolution of its cluster system as a tool for spatial coordination and international projection.

It is thus essential that German municipalities recognize the complexity of city cluster logic. It helps clarify how cooperation agendas are set and networks accessed, how strategic opportunities emerge, and provides guidance for internal coordination and departmental alignment. Awareness of cluster dynamics, whether cooperative or competitive, can enable German cities to interpret Chinese behavior more accurately and optimize engagement strategies to foster mutually beneficial partnerships.

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