

On the Role of Track II Diplomacy in Sino-West Relations

A UKNCC Commissioned Research Paper

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UK National Committee on China (UKNCC) Commissioned Research Papers are occasional papers published to stimulate discussion and new thinking on topics that the UKNCC Directors consider to be under-represented in the body of research and commentary on UK-China affairs.

Navigating the intricate terrain of Western-Chinese relations, Track II diplomacy has emerged as a vital instrument for tackling global challenges.

Track II diplomacy can be defined as the efforts of non-governmental, non-state players—such as think tanks, academic institutions, cultural organisations, and influential private individuals—to achieve goals traditionally linked with official government-to-government diplomacy.

The Track II space creates a vibrant forum for experts, intellectuals, and civil society groups to engage in lively discussions and negotiations.

This dynamic space is particularly valuable when formal channels of communication are limited or when governments find themselves unable to engage directly.

By fostering open dialogue and cooperation, Track II diplomacy helps pave the way for constructive solutions and deeper understanding between nations.



An Overview of the Impact of Track II Diplomacy on International Relations and Collaboration.

Two prominent examples of successful Track II diplomacy initiatives illustrate its impact. Firstly, the U.S.-China Diplomatic Normalisation in the 1970s, often referred to as "Ping Pong Diplomacy," saw American and Chinese table tennis teams engage in friendly matches in 1971. This informal sports exchange broke the ice between the two nations, paving the way for diplomatic normalisation and President Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972.

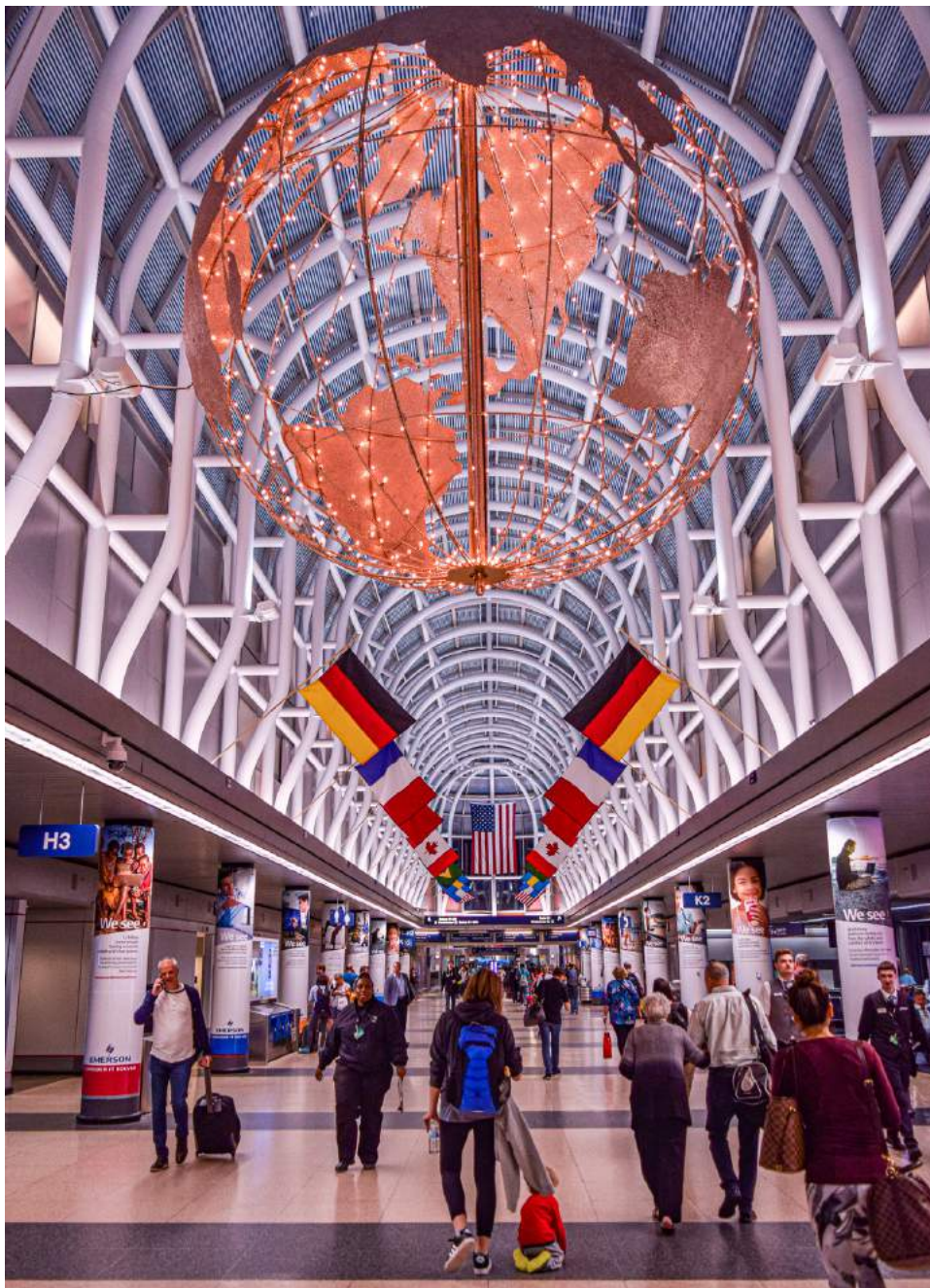
Secondly, the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) emerged from secret, informal negotiations in Norway. Track II diplomacy helped build confidence and understanding, culminating in the landmark accord that established the Palestinian Authority and laid the foundations for additional negotiations. More recently,

Track II initiatives spearheaded by former State Department policy official Leon V. Sigal and former

U.S. ambassador to South Korea Kathleen Stephens helped facilitate the negotiations with the North Koreans leading up to the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore in June 2018. These stories highlight Track II diplomacy's potentially transformative power in tackling complicated global disputes and fostering collaboration.

While Track II diplomacy may not always yield tangible outcomes or be well publicised, such efforts lay the groundwork for future progress by encouraging open communication and mutual understanding between opposing parties.

In the space of Sino-American relations, the U.S.-China Track II Dialogue on Healthcare, organised annually since 2017 by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations and the National School of Development at Peking University, provides a prime example of this approach, successfully promoting collaboration between healthcare professionals from both nations and leading to advancements in healthcare research and treatment. This initiative has demonstrated the potential of Track II diplomacy to foster tangible outcomes in areas of mutual interest. Meanwhile, the one-off China-U.S. Dialogue on the South China Sea, held in 2016 by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, sought to offer the opportunity for academics and policy specialists in the US to hear from and speak with China's former top diplomat under Hu Jintao, Dai Bingguo. While Track II diplomacy in this specific case did not result in the resolution of complex security challenges, such conversations still serve a necessary, if insufficient, role in fostering tentative understanding between nations.





In common with most other countries, China remains open to Track II dialogue beyond US-Chinese exchanges. The European Union and China established a high-level people-to-people dialogue mechanism in 2012 that includes Track II initiatives focused on dimensions including cultural and educational exchanges, civil society engagement, economic cooperation, cybersecurity, and—resumed most recently two months ago—human rights. Elsewhere, Canada and China also engage in Track II diplomacy through the Canada-China Track II Economic and Strategic Dialogue. This initiative brings together academics, business leaders, and former government officials from both countries to address economic and strategic issues, including trade, investment, and geopolitical challenges. Since the pandemic, weakened Track II channels, the result of strategic tensions and COVID-19 restrictions, have led to a deterioration in the ability of the US and China to manage mutual crises and disagreements, such as, perhaps most conspicuously, the fracas over the balloon earlier this year.

How successful these initiatives are today and how such initiatives have evolved over time, of course, remain two important and intertwined questions.

It is equally important to note that conversations that are otherwise broadly Track II could well feature governmental participants; such involvement would thus, more precisely, make these discussions Track 1.5 (a hybrid of state-based and non-state participants).

The US-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue (CED), a Track 1.5 effort (with participants from both state-affiliated and non-affiliated parties) that has aimed to resolve concerns about China's intellectual property policies and market access hurdles, is a prominent case study of diplomatic cooperation with government and corporate actors. In a further example, between the 1990s and 2018, China mandated that international automakers establish joint ventures with Chinese corporations in order to gain access to the Chinese market.

This policy facilitated the transfer of vital technology and information to domestic firms and has been viewed as a strategy to strengthen China's automotive industry at the expense of global competitors.

As a result, the US Trade Representative Office continuously urged increased transparency and accountability in China's economic policies throughout discussions with China. American business leaders and policy experts have also called for stronger intellectual property rights safeguards and equal market access for American companies, emphasising the need for economic reciprocity. This case study illustrates how, while both parties utilised formal diplomatic channels to promote their interests and resolve China-US trade disputes, informal channels also served as an important feature for negotiations—in other words, using Track 1.5 and Track II diplomacy.

Notably, in 2018, as President Trump initiated his trade war, the Chinese government eliminated the joint venture requirement.

Although there is no definitive evidence that US pressure from Trump or through Track II diplomacy was the key factor leading to this concession from Beijing, testimonies from companies suggest that it likely contributed to the growing realisation among Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) bureaucrats that China needed to further open its market in order to establish itself as a global leader in electric vehicle manufacturing.

In this way, Track II diplomacy subtly reinforces commercial partnerships through understanding and compromise.

Overcoming Trust and Political Barriers in Track II Diplomacy between China and the West

The utilisation of Track II diplomacy as a forum for dialogue between Western states and China carries with it a number of challenges that must be acknowledged.

One of the most significant of these challenges is the lack of interpersonal trust between participants, which undermines the ability of non-governmental actors to build relationships and engage in meaningful dialogue, particularly when sensitive topics such as human rights or territorial disputes are being discussed. This lack of trust is perpetuated by a number of factors, including mutual suspicions arising from the U.S. government's accusations of Chinese cyber-espionage and theft of trade secrets, as well as the Chinese government's and select segments of the public's criticisms of U.S. interference in its domestic affairs and pursuit of containment strategies.

The following factors make it difficult for Track II initiatives to gain traction and produce tangible outcomes.

In Track II dialogues, non-governmental players must balance personal or organisational interests, confidentiality and responsibility, legitimacy and representation, and political dynamics with their own governments' stated viewpoints. These players may have personal or organisational objectives that differ from those of their governments.

They may also have more creative or flexible solutions to the problem. Track II participants may not have the same information or accountability standards as government officials. This then makes it difficult for these actors to guarantee that their actions and recommendations do not contradict or damage their government's official viewpoint. Whenever a government is divided on an issue, non-governmental actors may be pressured to favour one faction or take a position that conflicts with their values.

These players may have different aims, interests, and views from their governments and may face different political pressures that may conflict with their countries' official positions.

A fundamental challenge today consists of the dangers of encroachment by Track I forces and elements onto Track II; that is, governments may opt to selectively and tactfully politicise Track II engagements to score easy and low-hanging political victories.

The possibility of Track I forces permeating and overflowing into Track II conversations in both Beijing and Washington D.C. raises serious concerns due to the specific difficulties confronting each side.

In China, the opacity of the political system, state control over non-governmental organisations, the ubiquitous presence of United Front organisations (organisations designed to co-opt and neutralise prospective opposition), as well as the government's approach to information and narrative control, make it difficult for non-governmental actors to maintain substantial autonomy and meaningful discussion. With increasing Party centralization and consolidation under the incumbent administration, the lines between Tracks II, 1.5, and I diplomacy are precipitously blurred. Specifically, the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s membership and Party-state structure demand that major decisions be made by the Party leadership. Moreover, in recent years, the CCP has increasingly tightened its control over academic exchanges and collaborations with the West. This has prompted questions about the independence of Chinese academics and their ability to conduct genuine Track II diplomacy. Attending overseas conferences, collaborating on research initiatives, or even having casual conversations with Western experts frequently requires approval and faces restrictions from the Chinese government. The formalisation in recent years of the need for prior government approval of academic exchanges and even the content of what is discussed in such exchanges, has rendered open debate difficult, though by no means impossible.

Some Chinese authorities and experts feel these restrictions are important to defend national interests and societal stability. They claim Western academia promotes ideological infiltration and interferes in China's internal affairs. However, this lack of understanding can potentially lead to misconceptions and misperceptions, making it difficult for Chinese policymakers to engage effectively with the West.

These restrictions may limit the effectiveness of Track II diplomacy efforts between China and Western countries.

On the other hand, the revolving door between roles in the US government and key DC think tanks; potential conflicts of interest in think tank financing; a heated political environment; and rising media sensationalism and polarisation are all contributing to a rapid blurring of the distinctions between government and non-government actors in Washington, D.C.

They lead to the risk of increasing conflicts of interest and compromising Track II diplomacy's informal, long-term character. With the recent turn towards a more trenchant, guarded American foreign policy towards China in Washington, individuals may be influenced by the career incentives they face, and opt accordingly to self-censor or pander to the shifting tides of discourse. American hawkish tendencies are in vogue, and as such, current Chinese attempts at engagement with the US are likely to be met with scepticism or a backlash. The recently published CSIS report and op-ed article co-authored by Scott Kennedy and Wang Jisi, highlight the poignant fact that the tenser the relationship between Beijing and Washington, the greater the need for dialogue. More recently, CSIS's European Trilateral Track 2 Nuclear Dialogues also illustrated how French, British, and American leading experts

and ex-officials are discussing mutual areas of concern, including how to confront China's growing global presence.

This also illustrates the means by which the US uses Track II to strengthen its own alliances outside of the US-China dyad. Yet the space for dialogue has been progressively squeezed out by individuals who castigate those who promote bilateral dialogue as naive at best and with questionable loyalties at worst. A new 'Washington Consensus' of sorts has arrived: that engagement has purportedly failed.

Fundamentally, at a time when inter-country relations are tense in ways that reflect deeply embedded mistrust and antagonism, it is difficult for Track II efforts to make a genuine mark. As one of us noted in an article last year, "many of the ongoing efforts and initiatives at Track II diplomacy [...] have come under intense scrutiny for their alleged involvement or deployment within broader plans of infiltration and intelligence gathering." The encroachment of Track II by vested Track I forces bent on maintaining a rhetoric of escalation is a deep and pernicious worry that has yet to be redressed.

The Path Ahead: Trust-Building and Engagement in Track II Diplomacy

In light of the challenges discussed, the successful implementation of Track II diplomacy initiatives in the Western-Chinese context necessitates careful coordination, trust-building, and a willingness to address sensitive issues in a constructive and respectful manner. Technology, climate change, and global health are emerging areas of mutual interest for Western-Chinese Track II diplomacy.





Despite the blurring lines between government and non-government actors in China, engagement and communication at any level with China are still necessary for global stability. Likewise, despite the growing sense of McCarthyism in DC, engagement from and with the US also stands as necessary. Despite Congress' scepticism towards TikTok and other major Chinese technology companies, in order for trust to be built, communication must be the first step. Trust-building between parties transcends political barriers by stimulating engagement on shared issues and possibilities. Coordinated conversations on international norms and rules for developing technologies like artificial intelligence and cybersecurity can address intellectual property concerns and promote responsible development. While climate change requires global cooperation, Track II diplomacy can help share best practices and find areas of collaboration in renewable energy and sustainable infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of international cooperation in global health crises, even if it has also made clear the limits of where things stand today.

Track II diplomacy can allow Western and Chinese experts to share expertise, collaborate on pandemic preparedness, and build response tactics. Track II diplomacy can foster trust and stability by focusing on these novel approaches.

Moreover, youth engagement, the arts, and cultural exchanges are creative forms of Track II diplomacy that can improve international relations. Younger generations bring new perspectives to important topics and foster teamwork. Film, theatre, and art exhibitions allow the expression of feelings and experiences across languages, enabling the discussion of delicate topics. Academic programs, culinary diplomacy, and sports diplomacy can be pivotal in ameliorating misunderstandings and reducing unhelpful stereotypes, fostering goodwill, and creating a positive climate for resolving complex political concerns. By combining these creative ideas into Track II diplomacy, states can establish compelling and successful ways to build relationships, enhance understanding, and address key challenges that contribute to global cooperation and stability.

Youth-driven Track II may also be relatively immune from political pressures to take overtly partisan and ideologically entrenched stances; both Beijing and Washington foreign policy establishments tend to be more open and 'tolerant' of minority or divergent viewpoints amongst youth seeking to embark upon diplomatic and foreign policy careers. Non-governmental actors, although they have the potential to be important contributors to such dialogues, must navigate a range of complex political, cultural, and economic factors to achieve lasting impact. The involvement of experts and scholars from both sides can help build relationships, generate new ideas, and promote mutual understanding—as with military dialogues. As noted by Dr. David Santoro from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Track II US-China Strategic Nuclear Dialogues “have created habits of engagement between US and Chinese experts and enabled better mutual understanding of where the United States and China stand on key issues, [helping] identify areas of convergence and divergence between the two sides, opening the door to ideas about potential solutions or, at least, mitigation measures.”

Indeed, a [report](#) from the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission suggests Congress fund backchannel non-governmental military diplomacy with Beijing, citing growing gaps in Washington's knowledge of personnel matters and reform efforts in relation to the People's Liberation Army.

Track II initiatives have the potential to create a positive and cooperative atmosphere, thereby laying the groundwork for future official diplomatic negotiations. However, given the deep-rooted cultural and ideological differences between Western states and China, the efficacy of Track II diplomacy in this relationship will be contingent upon a range of factors, including political will, trust-building efforts, and the ability to bridge these differences. The successful execution of Track II diplomacy in this context requires a nuanced understanding of the challenges and limitations involved. Only through a sustained and concerted effort to foster trust and promote mutual understanding can non-governmental actors contribute meaningfully to this important process. The road ahead remains long, arduous, but continuing the journey remains a necessary one.

About the Authors

Brian Wong is a third-year DPhil Candidate in Politics and Rhodes Scholar at Balliol College, Oxford and a geopolitical strategist. He writes and consults extensively on Chinese foreign policy and its interactions with domestic politics and demographic trends, for a range of publications and clients in the financial and actuarial industries. He is also the Founding Editor-in-Chief of the Oxford Political Review and teaches undergraduates at both Oxford and Stanford.

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