OXFORD

The Contagion of Foreign Policy Convergence: Spatiotemporal Dynamics of Chinese Leadership Visits, 1978–2014

Chong Chen [iD]*

Associate Professor of International Relations, School of Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, China
*Corresponding author. Email: chongchen@tsinghua.edu.cn

Abstract

Previous research on the sources of foreign policy convergence has focused exclusively on changes at either the dyadic level, between sender and receiver countries, or monadic level of these states. Although such approaches are helpful to understand how states affect foreign policy change in other countries, they generally overlook the third source of foreign policy convergence, that is, the indirect impact of significant events in neighbouring countries. I investigate whether and how leadership visits—a major diplomatic phenomenon—affect foreign policy convergence within and beyond host countries. Specifically, I argue that leadership visits directly facilitate foreign policy convergence in host countries and indirectly produce favourable diffusion effects in their neighbourhood. I develop an original dataset that tracks the visits of high-level officials between China and its foreign counterparts from 1978 to 2014. The results from spatial panel models support my proposed direct and indirect effects whereby Chinese leadership visits are positively associated with foreign policy alignments with China in both host countries and their neighbours.

Introduction

How and *when* great powers influence foreign policy change in other countries has recently been the focus of a large body of literature.[1] Most existing scholarship attributes the main sources of foreign policy change to either the domestic politics of target states or the dyadic interactions between the two sides, such as in terms of bilateral trade, economic sanctions, and alliance partnerships.[2] These studies have nevertheless seldom touched on the indirect

---

[1] Gustavo A. Flores-Macías and Sarah E. Kreps, "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade: China's Commercial Relations with Africa and Latin America, 1992–2006," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2013), pp. 357–71; Scott L. Kastner, "Buying Influence? Assessing the Political Effects of China's International Trade," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 6 (2016), pp. 980–1007; Xun Pang, Lida Liu, and Stephanie Ma, "China's Network Strategy for Seeking Great Power Status," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1–29; Georg Strüver, "China's Partnership Diplomacy: International Alignment Based on Interests or Ideology," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2017), pp. 31–65.

[2] Flores-Macías and Kreps, "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade," pp. 357–71; Robert A. Galantucci, "The Repercussions of Realignment: United States–China Interdependence and Exchange Rate Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (2015), pp. 423–35; Kastner, "Buying influence?," pp. 980–1007; Scott L. Kastner and Phillip C. Saunders, "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State? Leadership Travel as an Empirical Indicator of Foreign Policy

---

influence of neighbouring countries on foreign policy convergence.[3] This absence of attention to third-party influence is indeed surprising, as the *spillover effects* of neighbouring events often present nearby states with opportunities and incentives to adjust their foreign policies accordingly.

In this article, I examine a particular pathway through which states might unitize to converge on matters of foreign policy issues. Specifically, I examine the diffusion effects of *leadership visits*—diplomatic visits of political leaders, such as the head of state or head of government—on foreign policy change in a host country and its neighbour(s). Political leaders travel abroad extensively for various purposes.[4] However, with only a few exceptions,[5] most existing studies focus on the economic implications of leaders' visits[6] and rarely examine their foreign policy consequences. Drawing perspectives from the diffusion literature in international relations (IR),[7] I argue and demonstrate, through an illustrative case study of Chinese state visits to foreign countries, that leadership visits *directly* facilitate foreign policy convergence in host countries and *indirectly* produce diffusion effects among their neighbouring countries, which in turn affects foreign policy convergences in the host countries.

Empirical evidence from Chinese leadership visits strongly supports my argument. Leveraging an original dataset that tracks the visits of high-level officials between China and its foreign counterparts from 1978 to 2014, the results from various spatial panel models provide support for the diffusion effects of *leadership visits* on foreign policy convergence. Specifically, I find that Chinese leaders' visits to foreign countries significantly increase the

Priorities," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012), pp. 163–77; Randall W. Stone, Yu Wang, and Shu Yu, "Chinese Power and the State-Owned Enterprise," *International Organization*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (2022), pp. 229–50; Georg Strüver, "What Friends are Made of: Bilateral Linkages and Domestic Drivers of Foreign Policy Alignment with China," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2016), pp. 170–91.

[3] Throughout this article, I use the terms "foreign policy convergence," "foreign policy change," and "foreign policy alignment" interchangeably to refer to the preferred policy outcomes that are in accordance with countries' interests and preferences.

[4] Amnon Cavari and Micah Ables, "Going Global: Assessing Presidential Foreign Travel," *Congress & the Presidency*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2019), pp. 306–29; Tyler Jost and Austin M Strange, "Delegate and Conquer: Civilian and Military Diplomacy in Contemporary China," (2017), Working Paper, http://www.tylerjost.com/uploads/1/1/0/4/110425699/jost_strange_manuscript_20180428.pdf; Kastner and Saunders, "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State?," pp. 163–77; James H. Lebovic and Elizabeth N. Saunders, "The Diplomatic Core: The Determinants of High-Level US Diplomatic Visits, 1946–2010," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2016), pp. 107–23; Volker Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," *World Economy*, Vol. 30, No. 12 (2007), pp. 1797–816; Qingmin Zhang and Bing Liu, "Leadership Visits and Chinese Foreign Policy (shounao chufang yu zhongguo waijiao)," *Journal of International Studies (Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu)*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2008), pp. 1–20.

[5] Benjamin E. Goldsmith, Yusaku Horiuchi, and Kelly Matush, "Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion? Identifying the Effect of High-Level Visits," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 115, No. 4 (2021), pp. 1342–57; Matt Malis, "Conflict, Cooperation, and Delegated Diplomacy," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (2021), pp. 1018–57; Matt Malis and Alastair Smith, "State Visits and Leader Survival," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (2021), pp. 241–56.

[6] Andreas Fuchs and Nils-Hendrik Klann, "Paying a Visit: The Dalai Lama Effect on International Trade," *Journal of International Economics*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (2013), pp. 164–77; Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," pp. 1797–816; Stone, Wang, and Yu, "Chinese Power and the State-Owned Enterprise," pp. 229–50.

[7] Daniel Brinks and Michael Coppedge, "Diffusion Is No Illusion Neighbor Emulation in the Third Wave of Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2006), pp. 463–89; Douglas M Gibler, "Contiguous States, Stable Borders, and the Peace Between Democracies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (2014), pp. 126–9; Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, *All International Politics Is Local: The Diffusion of Conflict, Integration, and Democratization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward, "Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2006), pp. 911–33; Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, "Diffusion, Reinforcement, Geopolitics, and the Spread of War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (1980), pp. 932–46, Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, "Theoretical and logical issues in the Study of International Diffusion," *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1990), pp. 391–412; Randolph M. Siverson and Harvey Starr, "Opportunity, Willingness, and the Diffusion of War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (1990), pp. 47–67; Yuri M. Zhukov and Brandon M. Stewart, "Choosing Your Neighbors: Networks of Diffusion in International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2013), pp. 271–87.

policy alignment of such countries with China. Moreover, this rapport effect also indirectly affects policy alignments with China in the host country's neighbourhood, which suggests a strong spatiotemporal diffusion effect of Chinese leadership visits. These findings are also robust to various model specifications and alternative measurements. Taken together, this article makes three contributions related to the study of foreign policy change in general and to Chinese foreign policy analysis in particular.

First, the present work offers a comprehensive new dataset on the *outgoing* visits to foreign countries by Chinese high-level officials at the vice-minister level or above and on the *incoming* visits by high-level foreign officials across 170 countries to China from 1978 to 2014. To the best of my knowledge, this dataset constitutes the first comprehensive data with the longest temporal coverage related to Chinese diplomatic visits.[8] This dataset allows scholars to examine the evolution of Chinese foreign policy priorities by tracing the travels of high-level Chinese officials, including heads of states and ministers, while also providing sufficiently strong evidence to resolve certain fundamental debates within the study of Chinese foreign policy.[9] These newly collected data enable researchers to both capture and understand the dynamics of Chinese diplomatic activities from the beginning of the "Reform and Opening-up" period.

Second, this research explicitly accounts for the spatial and temporal dependencies in the study of foreign policy change—a topic long neglected in the literature on leadership visits.[10] States do not live independently; rather, the neighbourhood wherein states regularly interact with other partners plays an important role in shaping their behaviours. As Waldo Tobler stated in the first law of geography, "Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things,"[11] and this article emphasizes neighbouring influences as a third source of foreign policy convergence and specifically addresses this type of influence with a spatial modelling strategy applied to a large-N study. In contrast to previous work that assumes the independence of diplomatic visits,[12] this study sheds light on the study of China's foreign policy strategies by taking spatial–temporal dependence into consideration. Therefore, it provides a new approach in the literature to understanding the causes and consequences of foreign policy change.

Third, this article contributes to the general understanding of a great power's strategy to induce foreign policy change in another country. Unlike existing studies that focus exclusively on the visits of US leaders,[13] I demonstrate that—at least in the case of China—selective engagement with a target state's neighbour(s) may serve not only as a "reward" for countries that support China's preferences but also as a "punishment" for countries that oppose China's stances. I refer to this strategy as "rapport with your neighbours," one that is surprisingly effective as China continues to rise in global politics. In this sense, my research

---

[8] A recent paper by Yu Wang and Randall W. Stone examines only outgoing visits by Chinese presidents and premiers from 1998 onwards; see Yu Wang and Randall W. Stone, "China Visits: A Dataset of Chinese Leaders' Foreign Visits," *Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 18, No.1 (2003), pp. 201–225

[9] Kastner and Saunders, "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State?," pp. 163–77.

[10] Jakob Gustavsson, "How Should We Study Foreign Policy Change?" *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1999), pp. 73–95; Brett Ashley Leeds and Michaela Mattes, *Domestic Interests, Democracy, and Foreign Policy Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Yu Wang, "Leader Visits and UN Security Council Membership," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (2022), sqac064; Wang and Stone, "China Visits," pp. 1–25.

[11] Waldo R. Tobler, "A Computer Movie Simulating Urban Growth in the Detroit Region," *Economic Geography*, Vol. 46, No. supp1 (1970), p. 236.

[12] Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush, "Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion?," pp. 1342–57; Malis, "Conflict, Cooperation, and Delegated Diplomacy," pp. 1018–57; Malis and Smith, "State Visits and Leader Survival," pp. 241–56.

[13] Faradj Koliev and Magnus Lundgren, "Visiting the Hegemon: Explaining Diplomatic Visits to the United States," *Research & Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2021), pp. 1–7; Malis and Smith, "State Visits and Leader Survival," pp. 241–56; Roseanne W. McManus, "Making It Personal: The Role of Leader-Specific Signals in Extended Deterrence," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 80, No. 3 (2018), pp. 982–95.

is an important addition to a growing body of work on the foreign policy consequences of leadership visits.

This article proceeds as follows. First, it briefly reviews the relevant literature on foreign policy change in the context of Chinese foreign policy. In so doing, I situate my approach in a broader context within the IR literature on foreign policy convergence. Next, this article discusses the theoretical framework and hypotheses, explaining how leadership visits can, directly and indirectly, affect foreign policy convergence. Third, the paper outlines the research design, including my new data on leadership visits and modelling strategies. Fourth, I present the empirical results of the spatial panel models and an illustrative case study of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's "trip of confidence" to Europe in 2009. The concluding section highlights theoretical and empirical implications for future research.

Sources of Foreign Policy Convergence

Understanding the causes and consequences of foreign policy change has become an essential goal in IR.[14] Broadly speaking, previous studies on foreign policy change can be divided into three approaches: the bilateral approach, emphasizing dyadic interactions between the sender and receiver (target) states as a source of policy change; the domestic politics approach, highlighting the institutional and leadership characteristics in both countries as a driver of policy change; and the extra-dyadic approach, focusing on events or conditions beyond the two countries as a source of policy convergence. These studies have nevertheless rarely regarded leadership visits as a pathway through which states may induce foreign policy changes in other countries.

First, studies within the bilateral approach focus primarily on the role of bilateral linkages, such as economic ties,[15] alliance relationships,[16] and diplomatic exchanges,[17] in inducing foreign policy convergence (or divergence). These studies generally assert that increasing bilateral dependence between states can produce foreign policy convergence. The key mechanism is that whereby strengthened bilateral ties can "generate vested interests that advocate foreign policies that do not antagonize key trading patterns."[18] For example, Flores-Macías and Kreps find that states that trade more heavily with China are more likely to side with China on key foreign policy issues.[19] In regard to the Chinese case, however, the evidence is often mixed, and the effects of bilateral linkages tend to be conditional.

On the one hand, empirical studies find that political matters may influence these bilateral linkages,[20] which, in turn, strengthens the argument that bilateral ties drive foreign policy change. For instance, Kastner finds that states are more inclined to converge their stances with China on economic issues (i.e., market economic status). However, such states, even when they are well economically integrated, are not necessarily inclined to side with China on political issues.[21] Likewise, Fuchs and Klann examine whether countries

[14] Gustavsson, "How Should We Study Foreign Policy Change?" pp. 73–95; Judith G. Kelley and Beth A. Simmons, "Politics by Number: Indicators as Social Pressure in International Relations," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2015), pp. 55–70; Leeds and Mattes, *Domestic Interests, Democracy, and Foreign Policy Change*.

[15] Christina L. Davis, Andreas Fuchs, and Kristina Johnson, "State Control and the Effects of Foreign Relations on Bilateral Trade," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (2019), pp. 405–38; Flores-Macías and Kreps, "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade," pp. 357–71; Kastner, "Buying Influence?," pp. 980–1007; Zeev Maoz, "The Effects of Strategic and Economic Interdependence on International Conflict across Levels of Analysis," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (2009), pp. 223–40.

[16] Strüver, "What Friends Are Made of," pp. 170–91.

[17] Kastner and Saunders, "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State?," pp. 163–77.

[18] Kastner, "Buying Influence?," p. 3.

[19] Flores-Macías and Kreps, "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade," pp. 357–71.

[20] Fuchs and Klann, "Paying a Visit," pp. 164–77; Galantucci, "The Repercussions of Realignment," pp. 423–35; Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," pp. 1797–816.

[21] Kastner, "Buying Influence?," pp. 980–1007.

that receive the Dalai Lama are punished through reductions in their exports to China. They find that China did employ this strategy to discourage its trading partners from meeting with the Dalai Lama in the Hu Jintao era.[22] However, existing studies also cast doubt on the influence of economic interdependence. For example, Robert Ross finds no strong relationship between a country's economic dependence on China and its willingness to align with China.[23] Similarly, Daniel Drezner finds that China's vast holdings of US government debt have not translated into significantly increased financial influence vis-à-vis the USA.[24]

Second, research adopting the domestic politics approach aims to bring institutional and leadership characteristics back to the analysis of foreign policy change. These scholars emphasize the effects of domestic factors, such as leadership turnover or regime types, on foreign policy change. For example, Michaela Mattes and colleagues find that foreign policy change is driven by changes in leaders' societal support base.[25] The authors also demonstrate that both domestic and international institutional contexts can condition the effects of leadership turnover on foreign policy change.[26] Therefore, in light of this strand of scholarship, although China's growing economic power has influenced important decisions in other countries, such influence may be conditional upon the target country's domestic political process. For instance, Strüver finds that only countries that share regime characteristics with China are more likely to align with it.[27] In other words, conditional effects might have been overlooked in previous examinations of China's economic influence on foreign policy change in other countries. Additionally, depending on a country's regime types, its domestic leaders may face different audience costs and, therefore, respond quite differently from other domestic leaders to external pressures.[28]

Unlike the first two approaches, the extra-dyadic approach focuses more on the impacts of "external conditions and events" on (foreign) policy change. Although this approach is less commonly used and influential than those whose focus is on explanatory factors at the bilateral and domestic levels, it is nevertheless rooted in the broader literature of network analysis[29] and security studies, in particular that focused on the diffusion of conflict and wars.[30] Generally, this strand of explanation tends to attribute a country's foreign policy change towards another country to factors that extend beyond their bilateral relationships or within their countries. The influence of neighbouring states is one source of such an "external condition." For example, Giorgio Malet finds that the French rejection of the 2005 Referendum on the European Constitution increased public opposition to the Constitution in other European countries, demonstrating the interdependence of national publics and

[22] Fuchs and Klann, "Paying a Visit," pp. 164–77.

[23] Robert S. Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2006), pp. 355–95.

[24] Daniel W. Drezner, "Bad Debts: Assessing China'S Financial Influence in Great Power Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2009), pp. 7–45.

[25] Michaela Mattes, Brett Ashley Leeds, and Royce Carroll, "Leadership Turnover and Foreign Policy Change: Societal Interests, Domestic Institutions, and Voting in the United Nations," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (2015), pp. 280–90.

[26] Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll, "Leadership Turnover and Foreign Policy Change," pp. 280–90.

[27] Strüver, "What Friends Are Made of," pp. 170–91.

[28] Michael Tomz and Jessica Weeks, "Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 3 (2013), pp. 849–65; Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (2008), pp. 35–64.

[29] Xun Cao, "Global Networks and Domestic Policy Convergence: A Network Explanation of Policy Changes," *World Politics*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2012a), pp. 375–425; Xun Cao and Aseem Prakash, "Trade Competition and Domestic Pollution: A Panel Study, 1980–2003," *International Organization*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2010), pp. 481–503; Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2019), pp. 42–79.

[30] Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Julian Wucherpfennig, "The Diffusion of Inclusion: An Open-Polity Model of Ethnic Power Sharing," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 10 (2018), pp. 1279–313; Gleditsch and Ward, "Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization," pp. 911–33.

their cross-national influences.[31] As such, there exists a third neighbouring channel whereby a state can affect policy change in other states. Rather, the policy learning literature has long recognized this channel whereby policy adoption and innovation diffuse from one entity to another.[32] However, existing work on foreign policy change has nevertheless largely fallen short of an investigation into possible lists of external events, especially *leadership visits* that might trigger policy convergence from a host country to its neighbours.

Recent studies have shown that high-level diplomatic visits, such as state visits, can promote bilateral trade,[33] shape international conflict,[34] and prolong leaders' political survival in host states.[35] For example, Nitsch finds that state and official visits are positively associated with exports.[36] However, these studies concentrate almost exclusively on the impacts of diplomatic visits on host states, thereby overlooking the possibility that their effects may not be limited to the two parties involved but rather that these effects—as with other political events—may produce cross-national effects on neighbouring countries.[37] Furthermore, these studies focus exclusively on the causes and consequences of diplomatic visits either to the USA or by the USA.[38] We thus still know very little about the foreign policy impact of leadership visits from other great powers such as China.

In summary, while the first two approaches suggest that a country might change its foreign policy because of factors at the bilateral level, such as a change in trade flow, or because of changes in its domestic politics, such as a leadership transition, I primarily concentrate on the third source, that is, how diplomatic visits conducted by political leaders can produce the diffusion effect of foreign policy convergence. As I argue and demonstrate in the following, a *leadership visit* can be an external event that may result in the diffusion of policy convergence from the host country to its neighbours.

[31] Giorgio Malet, "Cross-national Social Influence: How Foreign Votes Can Affect Domestic Public Opinion," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 14 (2022), pp. 2416–46.

[32] Justus Bamert, Fabrizio Gilardi, and Fabio Wasserfallen, "Learning and the Diffusion of Regime Contention in the Arab Spring," *Research & Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2015), pp. 1–9; Vincenzo Bove and Tobias Böhmelt, "Does Immigration Induce Terrorism?" *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (2016), pp. 572–88; Daniel M. Butler, Craig Volden, Adam M. Dynes, and Boris Shor, "Ideology, Learning, and Policy Diffusion: Experimental Evidence," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2017), pp. 37–49; Federica Genovese, Florian G. Kern, and Christian Martin, "Policy Alteration: Rethinking Diffusion Processes When Policies have Alternatives," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (2017), pp. 236–52; Fabrizio Gilardi, "Who Learns from What in Policy Diffusion Processes?" *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2010), pp. 650–66; Erin R. Graham, Charles R. Shipan, and Craig Volden, "The Diffusion of Policy Diffusion Research in Political Science," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2013), pp. 673–701.

[33] Eugene Beaulieu, Zeng Lian, and Shan Wan, "Presidential Marketing: Trade Promotion Effects of State Visits," *Global Economic Review*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2020), pp. 309–27; Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," pp. 1797–816; Michael Plouffe and Roos van der Sterren, "Trading Representation: Diplomacy's Influence on Preferential Trade Agreements," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2016), pp. 889–911; Stone, Wang, and Yu, "Chinese Power and the State-Owned Enterprise," pp. 229–50; Robin Visser, "The Effect of Diplomatic Representation on Trade: A Panel Data Analysis," *World Economy*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2019), pp. 197–225.

[34] Julia Gray and Philip B. K. Potter, "Diplomacy and the Settlement of International Trade Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 64, Nos. 7–8 (2020), pp. 1358–89; Malis, "Conflict, Cooperation, and Delegated Diplomacy," pp. 1018–57; McManus, "Making It Personal," pp. 982–95; Oliver Westerwinter, "Uncertainty, Network Change and Costly Signaling: How the Network of Diplomatic Visits Affects the Initiation of International Conflict," (2017), Working Paper University College Dublin.

[35] Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush, "Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion?," pp. 1342–57; Malis and Smith, "State Visits and Leader Survival," pp. 241–56.

[36] Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," p. 1798.

[37] Bamert, Gilardi, and Wasserfallen, "Learning and the Diffusion of Regime Contention in the Arab Spring," pp. 1–9; Butler, Volden, Dynes, and Shor, "Ideology, Learning, and Policy Diffusion," pp. 37–49; Genovese, Kern, and Martin, "Policy Alteration," pp. 236–52; Gilardi, "Who Learns from What in Policy Diffusion Processes?" pp. 650–66; Graham, Shipan, and Volden, "The Diffusion of Policy Diffusion Research in Political Science," pp. 673–701.

[38] Cavari and Ables, *Going Global*; Jeffrey E. Cohen, "Travel to and from the United States and Foreign Leader Approval," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2022), pp. 490–508; Koliev and Lundgren, "Visiting the Hegemon," pp. 1–7; Vaclav Vlcek and Michal Parizek, "Participation of Ministers in Council of the EU Meetings: Variation across Members and Decline over Time," *Journal of European Integration*, (2021), pp. 1–7.
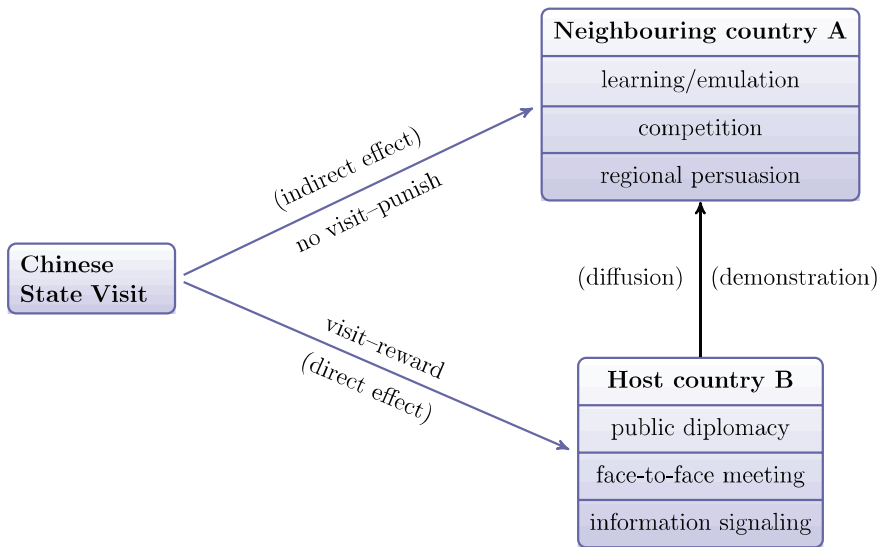
Fig. 1. Mechanisms: Leadership Visits and Foreign Policy Change

Note: Figure 1 summarizes the mechanisms through which Chinese state visits affect foreign policy change in host country *B* and its neighbour(s) *A*.

The Diffusion Effects of Chinese Leadership Visits on Foreign Policy Change

Although a country may employ a set of strategies to influence foreign policy change in other countries, my interest lies specifically in one strategy: *leadership visits* conducted by political leaders, such as the head of state or head of government. Since foreign services are expensive and glamorous, a state can reasonably be assumed to utilize diplomatic visits as an instrument for promoting policy convergence in other countries. I argue that leadership visits can produce both direct and indirect effects on foreign policy change towards a host country. Specifically, leadership visits *directly* facilitate foreign policy convergence in host countries, which in return, due to the presence of spatial and temporal dependencies among states, *indirectly* produces favourable diffusion effects in their neighbourhood. Figure 1 summarizes the general argument.

The direct effect of *leadership visits* is evident from existing studies and consistent with conventional wisdom. Building upon existing work, I argue that *leadership visits* can provide a direct catalyst for foreign policy convergence *through* mechanisms related to public diplomacy,[39] face-to-face communication,[40] and strategic

[39] Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush, "Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion?," pp. 1342–57; Yue Hu, Yufei Sun, and Donald Lien, "The Resistance and Resilience of National Image Building: An Empirical Analysis of Confucius Institute Closures in the USA," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2022), pp. 209–26.

[40] Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The Personal Touch: Leaders' Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (2012), pp. 560–73; Marcus Holmes, "The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Mirror Neurons and the Problem of Intentions," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (2013), pp. 829–61; Marcus Holmes and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The Psychological Logic of Peace Summits: How Empathy Shapes Outcomes of Diplomatic Negotiations," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2017), pp. 107–22; Robert F. Trager, "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy: How Communication Matters," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (2010), pp. 347–68.

signalling.[41] According to Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush's findings,[42] leadership visits can promote public approval among foreign citizens of the host country because such high-level diplomatic visits usually increase public awareness of the visiting leaders and help convey positive messages about the promising development of future bilateral relations. In this sense, a Chinese leadership visit may help sway public opinion in favour of China, which prompts favourable policy alignment in the host country.

Meanwhile, face-to-face meetings during leadership visits can usually help overcome distrust and differences and promote sincerity between the two leaders,[43] which is conducive to reaching consensus while also mitigating disagreement about their foreign policy stances. For example, on 14 November 2022, US President Joe Biden said to President Xi Jinping that "there's little substitute to face-to-face discussions"[44] during their first in-person meeting at the G20 Summit since President Biden became the President of the USA. In face-to-face meetings on a state visit, leaders can better understand their respective intentions and engage in an open and private conversation,[45] which is crucial for inducing policy convergence.

Furthermore, as leadership visits are costly in terms of both materials and opportunities, they also incur *signalling effects* on both international and domestic audiences.[46] For example, Cohen finds that US leaders' visits to foreign countries can improve foreign leaders' approval due to the expected benefits of face-to-face meetings with their great power counterpart, which also sends the signal to domestic and international audiences that the host country is a peer and hence equal of that great power.[47] Likewise, visits from Chinese leaders usually culminate in large-scale trade deals or commercial concessions to host countries during their face-to-face meetings, which directly create immediate and favourable conditions for policy convergence and may even enhance host countries' international prestige and welfare.[48] As a result, I expect Chinese leadership visits to be positively associated with host countries' foreign policy convergence towards China. Based on this discussion, I propose the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 1 (direct effect): Increasing the number of China's leadership visits to the target country is positively associated with the target country's policy convergence towards China.*

However, the indirect effect of leadership visits, which I argue is mainly produced through a *diffusion* process, is less straightforward in the literature. Specifically, I argue that the impact of leadership visits on foreign policy convergence can *diffuse* among neighbouring states *through* demonstration effects during Chinese leaders' visits to host countries.[49]

---

[41] McManus, "Making It Personal," pp. 982–95; Roseanne W. McManus and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The Logic of 'Off-stage' Signaling: Domestic Politics, Regime Type, and Major Power-protégé Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (2017), pp. 701–33; Robert F. Trager, "Diplomatic Signaling Among Multiple States," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (2015), pp. 635–47.

[42] Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush, "Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion?," pp. 1342–57.

[43] Holmes, "The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy," pp. 829–61; Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, "The Psychological Logic of Peace Summits," pp. 107–22.

[44] The White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China Before Bilateral Meeting", 14 November, 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/11/14/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-before-bilateral-meeting/.

[45] Malis and Smith, "State Visits and Leader Survival," pp. 241–56.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Cohen, "Travel to and from the United States and Foreign Leader Approval," pp. 490–508.

[48] Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," pp. 1797–816; Koliev and Lundgren, "Visiting the Hegemon," pp. 1–7.

[49] While the literature has emphasized the roles of learning, emulation, competition, and coercion in policy diffusion, these mechanisms are largely empirically indistinguishable in the study of foreign policy convergence. See Frank Dobbin,

Although the general purpose of leadership visits is to develop and enhance bilateral relations,[50] the target audience might extend beyond the host state to produce a "demonstration effect" on the host country's neighbours. As China strengthens diplomatic exchanges with a country's neighbouring states in the hope of promoting better bilateral relations, such as a demonstration effect, this may compel that country to align its stance with China.[51]

On the one hand, the demonstration effects may result from learning from and emulating the host states' stance towards China because doing so could bring certain rewards and avoid certain losses or punishment. In this sense, a leadership visit can represent a diplomatic priority[52] and hence be perceived as a reward by the host country vis-à-vis the punishment imposed on its neighbours by virtue of not being visited. In international politics, rewards and punishment may take both *tangible* and *intangible* forms. For example, tangible benefits can include foreign aid, trade, and investment, while intangible benefits can include commendation, acceptance, and legitimacy.[53] The reward for having similar policies is less important than the target state's belief that such a reward exists. Due to the opportunity, coordination, and reputational costs associated with state visits,[54] Chinese leadership visits can serve as a reward.[55] In view of the enormous foreign commercial demands on China's rising economy, it is now customary for Chinese leaders to be accompanied by high-ranking delegations of business people and managers on their state and official visits to other countries. China's leadership visits can thus offer economic opportunities to the country visited. As Andrew Rose finds, even the presence of foreign missions positively correlates with exports, not to mention official visits by the head of state or head of government.[56]

Meanwhile, some IR theorists argue that states possess positive learning ability in international politics by adopting their own and others' successful ideas, behaviours, cultures, and institutions.[57] Geographical proximity also provides neighbouring states with more direct channels through which they can observe the benefits of hosting Chinese state visits and hence facilitate learning and emulation between one another. When a country's neighbours are "rewarded" for adopting a particular policy, that country is highly likely to learn and emulate a similar one. Consider, for example, the following scenario: country *A*'s neighbour *B* has experienced trade growth with China for 12 consecutive months. Regardless of why *B* initially chose to align with China on certain specific issues, country *A*, especially when it has resources and capabilities similar to those of *B*, is more likely to attribute *B*'s 12-month

Beth Simmons, and Geoffrey Garrett, "The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition, or Learning?" *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 33 (2007), pp. 449–72; Graham, Shipan, and Volden, "The Diffusion of Policy Diffusion Research in Political Science," pp. 673–701; Charles R. Shipan and Craig Volden, "The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (2008), pp. 840–57.

[50] Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," p. 1797.

[51] Brinks and Coppedge, "Diffusion Is No Illusion Neighbor Emulation in the Third Wave of Democracy," pp. 463–89; Malet, "Cross-national Social Influence," pp. 2416–46.

[52] Kastner and Saunders, "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State?," p. 165.

[53] Brinks and Coppedge, "Diffusion Is No Illusion Neighbor Emulation in the Third Wave of Democracy," pp. 463–89; Jay Goodliffe, Darren Hawkins, Christine Horne, and Daniel L. Nielson, "Dependence Networks and the International Criminal Court," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012), p. 132.

[54] Cohen, "Travel to and from the United States and Foreign Leader Approval," pp. 490–508; Malis and Smith, "State Visits and Leader Survival," pp.241–56.

[55] While there is no direct evidence to suggest that leaders regard *state visits* as a kind of reward, Chinese leaders nevertheless take pride in the number of such visits. They are consequently cautious about accepting foreign countries' invitations and sending their own to other countries. Their first action when foreign crises occur is generally to stop or delay leadership visits. In this sense, whether or not a country is visited depends on the country's tendency to bestow rewards or impose punishment.

[56] Andrew K. Rose, "The Foreign Service and Foreign Trade: Embassies as Export Promotion," *World Economy*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2007), p. 23.

[57] Shiping Tang, *The Social Evolution of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 168–9; Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, "Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2000), pp. 78–80.

trade growth to its rapport with China. In particular, because country *A* believes that its neighbour *B*'s favourable policy stance towards China is the reason for *B*'s trade growth, country *A* will more likely emulate neighbour *B* by adopting a similarly favourable policy stance towards China.

On the other hand, the demonstration effects may result from competition with and persuasion from neighbouring states.[58] In other words, when a country displays antagonistic behaviour towards China, China does not necessarily need to exert coercive economic statecraft,[59] such as trade reductions or economic sanctions, to affect that country's policy choices. China can still achieve policy convergence in the target country by "rewarding" its neighbours—with increased diplomatic exchange—to align with China.[60]

Returning to the aforementioned scenario, if the two neighbouring states, *A* and *B*, are competitors, country *A* may perceive leadership visits between China and *B* as pressure on its relative position in the global marketplace.[61] Thus, *B*'s favourable policy stance towards China and its subsequent trade growth may generate demonstration effects that manifest in "peer pressure" on *A*. Succumbing to a creeping "fear of falling behind",[62] country *A*'s domestic audiences may as a result call for a policy change to mirror that of its neighbour *B* in expectation of a similar reward from China. Meanwhile, the fear of disrupting regional public goods is an important driver of the global diffusion of inclusive policies.[63] Some interventionist organizations, such as the European Union (EU) and the African Union, often place pressure on their member states to adopt policy changes through incentives, persuasion, and socialization.[64] Likewise, if neighbouring states *B* fear that *A*'s unfavourable policy will jeopardize regional public goods from China (e.g., security, stability, and/or economic investment), *B* will likely attempt to persuade *A* to align with its policy stance towards China in the interest of optimizing regional benefits. For example, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad once warned the Quad countries not to provoke China, as he feared that deteriorating relations with China could trigger strong global economic backlash and undermine regional stability.[65]

In light of these mechanisms, I argue that bilateral visits between China and *B* will often lead *A* to change its foreign policy to one more favourable to China, thus inducing *B*'s neighbour *A* to adopt a foreign policy that is also in line with Chinese preferences. Therefore, if country *A* is reticent about aligning with China on certain issues, China may use leadership visits to *A*'s neighbours *B* as a reward that compels *A* to change its policy. A Chinese *leadership visit* can thus constitute a form of reward for the visited country and engender demonstration effects among the countries that China does not choose to visit. In doing so, this selective visit strategy is analogous to the Chinese wisdom of "killing the chicken to scare the monkey,"[66] which China can use to promote rapport with a target country's neighbouring states.[67]

[58] Xun Cao, "Networks as Channels of Policy Diffusion: Explaining Worldwide Changes in Capital Taxation, 1998–2006," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2010), pp. 823–54; Cao, "Global Networks and Domestic Policy Convergence," pp. 375–425; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Wucherpfennig, "The Diffusion of Inclusion," pp. 1279–313.

[59] Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2019), pp. 117–59.

[60] Economic statecraft and leadership visits are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the context of Chinese diplomacy and hence are not independent of each other as to whether they can produce the intended demonstration effects.

[61] Cao, "Global Networks and Domestic Policy Convergence," pp. 375–425; Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (1991), pp. 1303–20.

[62] Cao, "Global Networks and Domestic Policy Convergence," pp. 375–425.

[63] Cederman, Gleditsch, and Wucherpfennig, "The Diffusion of Inclusion," pp. 1279–313.

[64] *Ibid*.

[65] "Malaysia's Former PM Warns Quad Countries Not to Provoke China", *Xinhua*, 26 May, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/26/c_139969359.htm.

[66] Zhang, "Cautious Bully," pp. 117–59.

[67] Note that it is beyond the scope of this research to determine whether and when Chinese leaders will use this "rapport with your neighbours" strategy. It is possible that the proposed diffusion effects are unintentional in most cases. However, we cannot eliminate the possibility that China strategically uses this approach to influence the neighbouring countries

Consider the relationship between China and Japan as an example of this strategy. The Sino-Japanese relationship has deteriorated in recent years. In parallel, China accentuates its bilateral relationships with Japan's neighbours, such as South Korea, by increasing the frequency of leadership visits and increasing bilateral trade flows. This is South Korea's reward to the detriment of Japan. Conversely, by "rewarding" Japan's neighbouring countries, China has imposed on Japan the particular punishment of freezing top leadership visits and decreasing bilateral trade flows. Japan has consequently been under domestic pressure from the business community to call for a rapport with China.[68] Based on this discussion, I propose my second hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2 (indirect effect): Increasing the number of Chinese leadership visits to the target country's neighbours is positively associated with the target country's policy convergence towards China.*

Taken together, Hypothesis 1 elucidates the mechanism of policy convergence resulting from leadership visits within a host country, whereas Hypothesis 2 pertains to the diffusion of the effect of leadership visits to other neighbouring countries. While these specific mechanisms, as illustrated in Figure 1, may not be present in all empirical cases at the same time, their observational implications should be relatively easy to capture in the real world. I now resort to an empirical test of these two hypotheses in the rest of the article.

Research Design
Dependent Variable

My sample includes all countries based on the Gleditsch and Ward country code[69] in the international system from 1978 to 2014.[70] The unit of analysis is the *country-year*, which allows us to examine whether Chinese leadership visits can lead to foreign policy changes in the host country and its neighbours in a given year.

Although systematically assessing general foreign policy convergence requires measuring states' foreign policies and the degree of convergence, some studies operationalize policy change and convergence in concrete terms, such as in terms of whether states adopt their policies in accordance with Chinese interests on issues pertaining to Taiwan and Tibet, which China clearly cares about deeply.[71] Beyond the specific policy areas, the literature also relies on two common measures of *foreign policy convergence*, including "similarity scores" (or affinity scores)[72] and the distance in ideal points from the UN General Assembly (UNGA) voting data.[73] One advantage of the second measure is that it includes "all UN member

---

of the host country. This is particularly the case when the direct communication channel between China and the target country is constrained.

[68] In light of Kelly Matush Japanese leaders can also benefit from antagonizing China and win domestic support. Therefore, although the Chinese decision to freeze exchanges of top leadership visits between the two sides can result in backlash among the Japanese people, it can increase domestic support for Japanese leaders. See Kelly Matush, "Harnessing Backlash: How Leaders Can Benefit from Antagonizing Foreign Actors," *British Journal of Political Science*, Published online on 25 January 2023, pp. 1–7, http://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000370.

[69] Nils B. Weidmann, Doreen Kuse, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "The Geography of the International System: The CShapes Dataset," *International Interactions*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2010), pp. 86–106.

[70] I focus on this specific period because my original data on Chinese leadership visits are limited to this period from 1978 to 2014.

[71] Kastner, "Buying Influence?," pp. 980–1007.

[72] Frank M. Häge, "Choice or Circumstance? Adjusting Measures of Foreign Policy Similarity for Chance Agreement," *Political Analysis*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2011), pp. 287–305; Curtis S. Signorino and Jeffrey M. Ritter, "Tau-b or Not Tau-b: Measuring the Similarity of Foreign Policy Positions," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1999), pp. 115–44.

[73] Michael A. Bailey Anto Strezhnev and Erik Voeten, "Estimating Dynamic State Preferences from United Nations Voting Data," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (2017), pp. 430–56; Anton Strezhnev and Erik Voeten, "United Nations General Assembly Voting Data", http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/12379.

states and a large number of votes per year."[74] However, one often-cited drawback of this UN voting measure is that many UNGA votes are procedural in nature and not particularly important to a state's national interest.[75] Scholars noting this drawback thus argue that convergence based on UNGA votes is most likely a relatively meaningless measure.[76] However, as Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll[77] argued, the pattern of UNGA voting can capture "latent tendencies in a nation's foreign policy orientation and international alignments" and can reflect "the broader foreign policy positions of state." Furthermore, the UN voting dataset is by far the most comprehensive data project covering all UN member states from 1946 to the present.

With these concerns in mind, I measure foreign policy change in terms of the absolute difference in the ideal point between a country and China. The dependent variable (DV), *distance in ideal points*, thus captures the extent to which a target country's foreign policy preference diverges from China's stance. Larger values of the dependent variable indicate more policy divergence, while smaller values reflect more policy convergence. Due to its skewed distribution, I take the logarithm of the distance in ideal points. I also use the *agreement score* from Bailey and Voeten's research[78] as an alternative measurement to the dependent variable in the subsequent robustness checks. Unlike the *distance in ideal points (logged)*, the *agreement score* ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating that the country completely agrees with China and 0 indicating complete disagreement with China on foreign policy preferences.

A New Dataset of High-Level Chinese Diplomatic Visits

To test my two hypotheses, I created a new comprehensive dataset of all leadership visit events held between China and foreign countries from 1978 to 2014.[79] I primarily collected information on Chinese leadership visits from *Xinhua Monthly Magazine (Xinhua Yuebao)* published by Xinhua News Agency, the official press agency of the People's Republic of China. The section titled *Chinese Foreign Relations* records all leadership visit events held between China and other foreign countries at the vice-minister level or above. I also supplemented this data source with data from the *Yearbook of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*. A team of four coders then hand-coded the event data. Verifying the data entailed the four coders reach a consensus on leadership visit classifications.

I define *leadership visits* as state visits paid by the *head of state* or *head of government*. In the case of China, only visits involving the President or Prime Minister qualify as *state visits*.[80] Note that the definition of a "leader" in Chinese politics is more complex than that in other countries. Typically, only officials at the vice-state level are considered "national leaders." For example, a vice-premier is considered a "national leader" only if he or she is a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, what I mean by a state visit is one paid solely by the President or Prime Minister. In contrast, visits paid by other high-level officials, including members of the Politburo Standing Committee, are coded as minister visits. Note that the overwhelming majority of foreign travels by the heads of state or government are official (or working) visits rather than *state visits*, with the latter being relatively rare.[81] For coding convenience, I place state, official, and working

[74] Flores-Macías and Kreps, "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade," p. 360.

[75] *Ibid*.

[76] Te-Yu Wang, "US Foreign Aid and UN Voting: An Analysis of Important Issues," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1999), pp. 199–210.

[77] Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll, "Leadership Turnover and Foreign Policy Change," p. 284.

[78] Bailey and Voeten, "Estimating Dynamic State Preferences from United Nations Voting Data," pp. 430–56.

[79] The full data are available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/D4L1F2.

[80] My data also include visits by other officials at the vice-minister level or above, such as those by vice presidents or vice premiers, which I refer as *minister visits*.

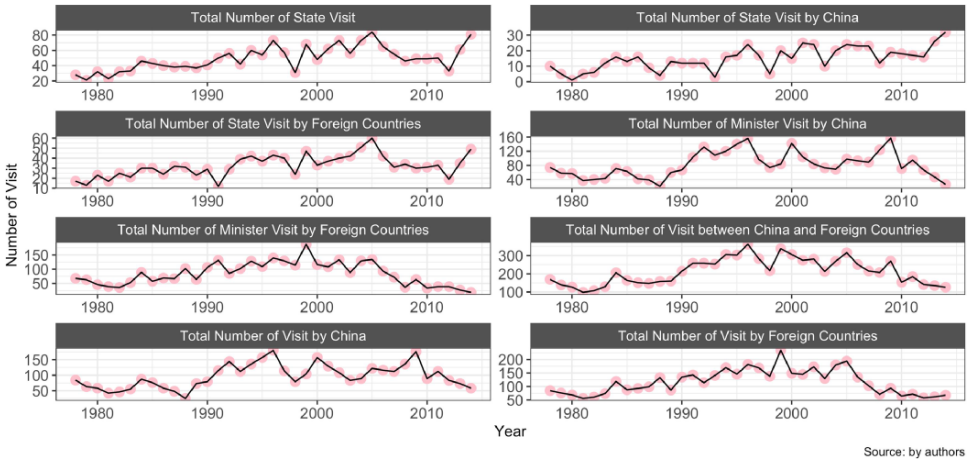[81] Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," p. 1799.

Fig. 2. The Temporal Variations in Chinese Leadership Visits, 1978–2014

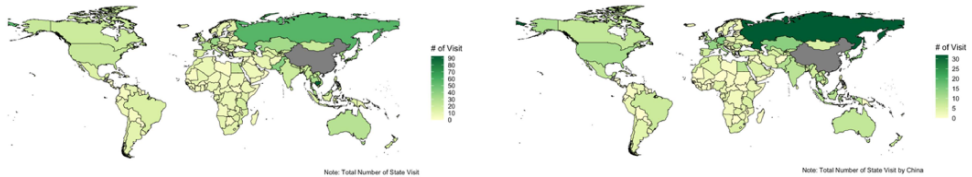Note: Figure 2 shows the total number of visits across types of visits from 1978 to 2014.

Fig. 3. The Geographic Distribution of Chinese Leadership Visits, 1978–2014. (a) Total Number of State Visits between China and Foreign Countries. (b) Total Number of Outgoing State Visits by China

Note: Figure 3 shows the total number of visits between China and foreign countries and the total number of outgoing state visits by China from 1978 to 2014.

visits in the same category but exclude private visits by the head of state or government. Figures 2–3 show the temporal and geographic variations in Chinese leadership visits from 1978 to 2014.

To test my first hypothesis, I create a variable, *Chinese state visits*, which is a count of Chinese leadership outgoing state visits to a target country *j* in year *t*. I also lag the *Chinese state visits* for one year in all models to address concerns about contemporaneous endogeneity between Chinese state visits and foreign policy change. I therefore expect *Chinese state visits* to be negatively associated with the dependent variable *distance in ideal points*.[82]

There are generally two approaches to testing my second hypothesis about the diffusion effects of Chinese leadership visits on foreign policy convergence. On the one hand, we could rely on a model that allows us to capture how the direct impact of *Chinese state visits* on foreign policy change in a target country *diffuses* to its neighbourhood. In this sense, a spatial autoregressive (SAR) model is an appropriate choice.[83] On the other hand, we could also create a new explanatory variable, *Chinese state visits to neighbouring countries*, to record the occurrence or frequency of Chinese state visits to a target country's neighbours and examine whether such a variable is positively associated with the foreign policy change

---

[82] I also use a dichotomous version of the count variable as alternative independent variable, and the results are robust and consistent. See Online Appendix Table A5.

[83] Scott J. Cook, Jude C. Hays, and Robert J. Franzese, "STADL Up! The Spatiotemporal Autoregressive Distributed Lag Model for TSCS Data Analysis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 117, No. 1 (2023), pp. 59–79.

of the target country. In this case, a spatial-X (SLX) model is also appropriate.[84] Consequently, I use both approaches in the subsequent analyses to ensure the robustness of my findings.

Meanwhile, both approaches require identifying a neighbouring list for each target country. While existing studies have recognized various ways to define what constitutes a country's neighbourhood[85] and have pointed out that a neighbourhood is not limited to geography,[86] I primarily focus on geographic neighbours in this project. I rely on a spatial weight matrix **W** to represent the geographic neighbours of all countries from 1978 to 2014. Because international state membership varies from year to year, I use the K-nearest neighbour approach to construct a set of spatial weight matrices for every year within this period.[87] One advantage of using the K-nearest neighbour approach is that we can ensure that all countries are assigned the same number of K neighbours while avoiding any "islands" in the spatial weight matrix, which is a common challenge for spatial econometric models.[88]

Control Variables

I control for various confounders that may affect foreign policy changes and the key independent variable—Chinese leadership visits. First, I control for trade dependence between China and a target country. I follow Zeev Maoz and define the *trade dependence* of the target country on China as the percentage of its import values from China in its total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) values.[89] The bilateral trade data are taken from the Correlates of War (COW) project.[90] Second, I consider the influence of power balance between the target country and China. For the *capability ratio*, I use COW's National Material Data[91] to calculate the *capability ratio* of the target country's Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) scores to the total sum of CINC scores between the target country and China.

Third, I also use the *electoral democracy index* from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project[92] to control for the effect of regime type.[93] Fourth, I control for the target country's *GDP per capita* ("Ln(GDP per capita)") and *Population* ("Ln(Population)") and take their logarithm in my models. Data on GDP and population are taken from Penn World Table

---

[84] Cameron Wimpy, Guy D. Whitten, and Laron K. Williams, "X Marks the Spot: Unlocking the Treasure of Spatial-X Models," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (2021), pp. 722–39.

[85] Zhukov and Stewart, "Choosing Your Neighbors," pp. 271–87.

[86] Nathaniel Beck, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Kyle Beardsley, "Space is more than Geography: Using Spatial Econometrics in the Study of Political Economy," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2006), pp. 27–44.

[87] In the main results, I use $K = 5$ to test my hypotheses, but the results are consistent and robust when I choose $K=2$, 3, …, 20 to construct the neighbouring country list.

[88] Roger S. Bivand, Edzer Pebesma, and Virgilio Gómez-Rubio, *Applied Spatial Data Analysis with R* (New York: Springer, 2013), p. 246.

[89] Zeev Maoz, *Networks of Nations: The Evolution, Structure, and Impact of International Networks, 1816–2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 294.

[90] Katherine Barbieri, Omar M. G. Keshk, and Brian M. Pollins, "Trading Data Evaluating: Our Assumptions and Coding Rules," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (2009), pp. 471–91. While trade dependence on China is not a perfect proxy for Chinese economic statecraft, it should be able to capture the extent to which China can employ economic statecraft to induce foreign policy changes. Other alternative measurements such as FDI or economic sanctions are also viable options, but they rarely cover all sample countries for the entire period from 1978 to 2014. These data include too many missing values about Chinese economic statecraft. For example, the bilateral-level data on Chinese FDI only include fewer than 280 observations from the most comprehensive FDI project at https://unctad.org/topic/investment/investment-statistics-and-trends.

[91] J. David Singer, "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816–1985," *International Interactions*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1988), pp. 115–32.

[92] Michael Coppedge et al., "Varieties of Democracy: Codebook v6," *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*, (2016).

[93] Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jaggers, "Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2002," https://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4x.htm.

version 9.0.[94] Meanwhile, I control for the years of formal diplomatic relations between China and a target country.[95] Moreover, I include a variable, *change in the source of leader support,* to control for the impact of leadership turnover in target countries.[96] Finally, to mitigate the influence of past levels of foreign policy convergence with China, I include the 1-year lagged version of the dependent variable as a regressor in all of the models.[97] All of my covariates are lagged for 1 year to address concerns over simultanity bias and potential reverse causality issues. Supplementary Appendix Table A1 presents descriptive statistics of the covariates.

The Spatial–Temporal Models

Because of the panel data setting and the spatiotemporal dependencies in the data, I use the first-order SAR model and SLX model for panel data to test my hypotheses. One limitation of the traditional spatial panel data model is that it requires a static panel[98] (i.e., all the units across times are constant), which might not be a realistic assumption for IR because countries do form and dissolve over time. To overcome this constraint, I extend the recent spatiotemporal autoregressive distributed lag (STADL) model by Cook, Hays, and Franzese,[99] which allows us to estimate the SAR and SLX models. Specifically, I estimate the following SAR model as the aforementioned first approach to testing my hypotheses:

$$y_{it} = \theta y_{it-1} + \rho_y \mathbf{W} y_t + \beta x_{it} + \mathbf{Z}_{it}\gamma + f_i + g_t + \epsilon_{it},$$

where β denotes the direct effect of Chinese state visits (x_t) on a target country's foreign policy convergence. In contrast, the indirect effects on its neighbours' policy convergence with China are realized through the effect of ρ_y via the spatial lag $\mathbf{Wy}$. The latter is referred to as the "feedback effect", that is, x_{it} will affect neighbouring states y_{jt}, which in turn feeds back into y_{it} through the impact of the spatial lag.[100]

Alternatively, we can also estimate the following SLX model[101] in the panel data setting:

$$y_{it} = \theta y_{it-1} + \rho_x \mathbf{W} x_t + \beta x_{it} + \mathbf{Z}_{it}\gamma + f_i + g_t + \epsilon_{it},$$

where β represents the direct impact of Chinese state visits on y_{it} and ρ_x denotes the effects of Chinese state visits to neighbouring countries on y_{it}. In both the SAR and SLX models, ϵ_{it} denotes the disturbance terms. The spatial panel design also allows us to incorporate

[94] Robert C. Feenstra, Robert Inklaar, and Marcel P. Timmer, "The Next Generation of the Penn World Table," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 105, No. 10 (2015), pp. 3150–82.

[95] The information on formal diplomatic relations is taken from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. See https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/2193_674977/200812/t20081221_9284708.shtml.

[96] Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll, "Leadership Turnover and Foreign Policy Change," pp. 280–90.

[97] I impute missing values to avoid excluding instances of policy alignment. As previous research has highlighted that simply removing missing observations can lead to biased results , I use a copular-based approach to impute missing values following Peter D. Hoff, which is estimated through a Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) algorithm. I run 10 000 MCMC, whereby each MCMC leads to the creation of one dataset with all missing values imputed. I discard the first half of the 10 000 datasets to treat them as the "burn-in" and using the average of the remaining 5000 generate an imputed dataset for my final analysis. See James Honaker and Gary King, "What to Do about Missing Values in Time-Series Cross-Section Data," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2010), pp. 561–81; Peter D. Hoff, "Extending the Rank Likelihood for Semiparametric Copula Estimation," *Annals of Applied Statistics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), pp. 265–83.

[98] Giovanni Millo, Gianfranco Piras, and others, "Splm: Spatial Panel Data Models in R," *Journal of Statistical Software*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2012), p. 5.

[99] Cook, Hays, and Franzese, "STADL Up! The Spatiotemporal Autoregressive Distributed Lag Model for TSCS Data Analysis," pp. 59–79.

[100] Michael D. Ward and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, *Spatial Regression Models* (London: Sage, 2008), p. 45.

[101] Wimpy, Whitten, and Williams, "X Marks the Spot," pp. 722–39.
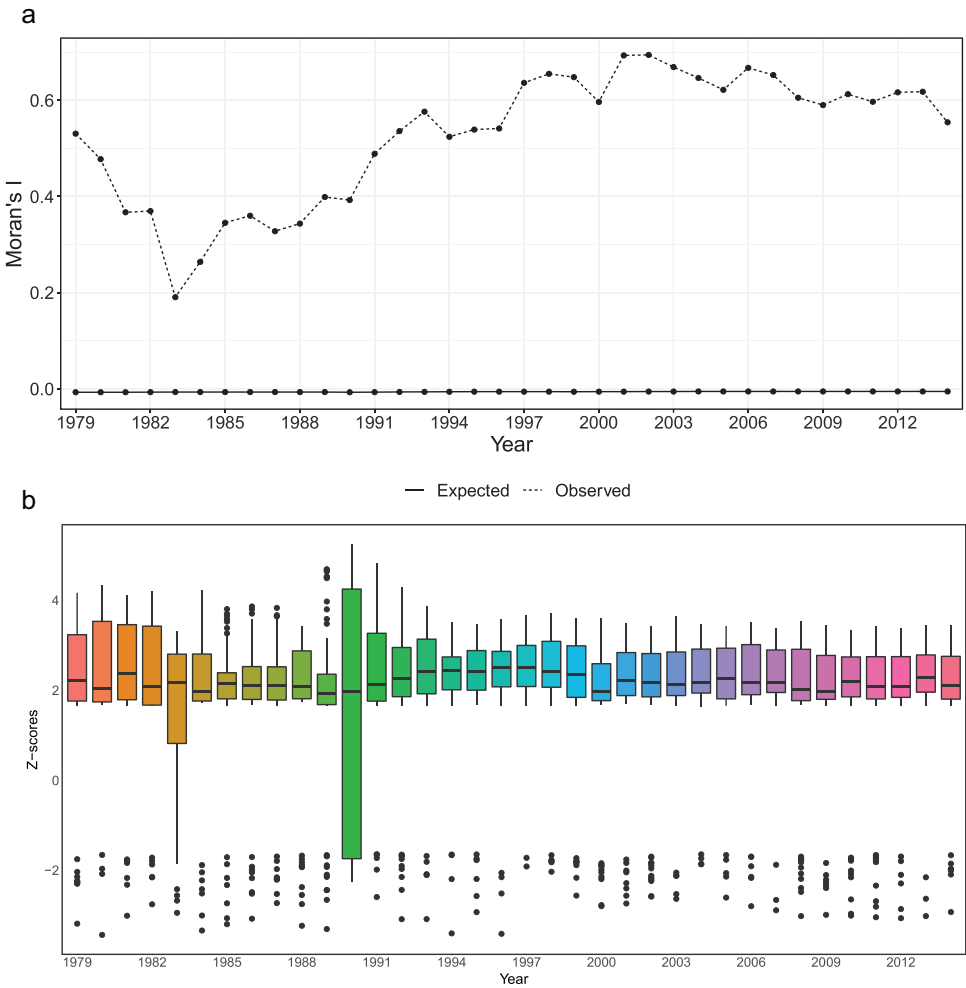
a

b

Fig. 4. Spatial Autocorrelation for 1979–2014. (a) Global Moran. (b) Local Spatial Autocorrelation

Note: Panel a of Figure 4 shows the trend of global Moran's *I* identified when using a 5-nearest neighbour approach. Panel b of Figure 4 shows outliers indicating the presence of local spatial autocorrelation.

impacts of other covariates (γ), the temporal autocorrelation through θ as well as the unit fixed effect (f_i) and time fixed effect (g_t). I report the results in the next section.

Results and Discussion
The Spatial Dependence of Foreign Policy Convergence
Before estimating the spatial panel model, I use *Moran's I* statistics[102] (a.k.a., a spatial autocorrelation index)—which is a global correlation of the values of an observation with those of its neighbours—to assess the spatial dependence in the absence of covariates.[103]

---

[102] Patrick A. P. Moran, "Notes on Continuous Stochastic Phenomena," *Biometrika*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1950), pp. 17–23.
[103] Ward and Gleditsch, *Spatial Regression Models*, p. 23. In short, *Moran's I* "compares the relationship between deviations from the mean across all neighbors of j, adjusted for the variation in y and the number of neighbors for each

Panel a of Figure 4 displays the global *Moran's I* for the spatial distribution of foreign policy convergence towards China from 1979 to 2014.[104] The positive coefficients indicate strong evidence of global spatial autocorrelation. Furthermore, Figure 4 shows that the clustering of foreign policy convergence towards China increases over time, suggesting that as China continues to rise in influence, foreign policy convergence with China in a given country has a stronger effect on its neighbouring countries.

Meanwhile, I follow Anselin's[105] strategy to detect outliers of spatial autocorrelation. Panel b of Figure 4 plots the *z* scores of local Moran's *I* of foreign policy convergence towards China. For local spatial autocorrelation, the *z* scores represent the ratio between the observed and expected local Moran's *I* with positive values indicating spatial clustering, and the size of the *z* score indicates the magnitude of local spatial autocorrelation. Panel b of Figure 4 shows only statistically significant clusters. The trend suggests that as foreign policy convergence evolves in a target country, the spatial contagion of foreign policy convergence to its neighbouring countries also intensifies. Therefore, Figure 4 demonstrates the need to account for spatiotemporal dependencies more systemically when evaluating the foreign policy consequences of leadership visits.

The Contagion Effects of Chinese Leadership Visits

Table 1 summarizes the main results of the spatial panel data analysis using a 5-nearest neighbour approach. As a starting point, Model 1 is a non-spatial ordinary least square (OLS) model with country and year fixed effects, whereas Model 2 and Model 3 are, respectively, the SAR and SLX models with country and year fixed effects. As the dependent variable for Models 1–3 is the *distance in ideal points*, a negative and statistically significant coefficient for *Chinese state visits* would provide strong evidence for the first hypothesis.

Consistent with my first hypothesis, the coefficient for *Chinese state visits* in Model 1 is negative and statistically significant at the 99% confidence interval, suggesting that Chinese state visits are positively (negatively) associated with foreign policy convergence (divergence) with China in target countries. Model 1 also shows that the past level of foreign policy convergence has a strong positive impact on the current level of policy alignment, as the coefficient of the temporal lagged DV is also positive and statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. While including unit and time fixed effects does capture some forms of spatiotemporal dependence, as Cook, Hays, and Franzese[106] noted, these effects are largely "additive mean shifts, time-invariant clustering and are not autoregressive or distributed-lag in form." More importantly, Model 1 does not allow us to test my second hypothesis about the diffusion effect of Chinese leadership visits. Therefore, I primarily focus on the SAR and SLX results of Model 2 and Model 3, respectively.

In Model 2, the SAR model replicates Model 1's specification while estimating a spatial lag parameter ρ. I find that the coefficient for ρ is positive and statistically significant at the 99% confidence level, which indicates that the effect of Chinese state visits on foreign policy convergence in one country reverberates autoregressively among its neighbouring countries. Note that interpreting regression coefficients for covariates in SAR models becomes less straightforward than that in non-spatial models (or in SLX) because of the presence of a spatial multiplier that will produce a "feedback loop" effect among neighbouring countries.[107] I thus estimate the three types of impact from a change in a model parameter from

---

observation, ···, higher values of Moran's *I* indicate stronger positive clustering, i.e., values for neighboring units are similar to one another." (Ward and Gleditsch, *Spatial Regression Models*, p. 24).

[104] As I lagged the covariates by one year, the temporal coverage runs from 1979 to 2014.

[105] Luc Anselin, "Local Indicators of Spatial Association—LISA," *Geographical analysis*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1995), pp. 93–115.

[106] Cook, Hays, and Franzese, "STADL Up! The Spatiotemporal Autoregressive Distributed Lag Model for TSCS Data Analysis," p. 66.

[107] David Darmofal, *Spatial Analysis for the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ward and Gleditsch, *Spatial Regression Models*.

Table 1. The Impact of Chinese Leadership Visits on Foreign Policy Convergence

	DV: Distance in Ideal Points			DV: Agreement with China		
	M1:OLS	M2:SAR	M3:SLX	M4:OLS	M5:SAR	M6:SLX
Temporal Lagged DV	0.6550***	0.6239***	0.6529***	0.4843***	0.4447***	0.4820***
	(0.0096)	(0.0095)	(0.0096)	(0.0109)	(0.0106)	(0.0109)
Chinese State Visits	–0.0271***	–0.0256***	–0.0285***	0.0042**	0.0033*	0.0046**
	(0.0066)	(0.0063)	(0.0066)	(0.0020)	(0.0019)	(0.0020)
Spatial Lag Parameter: ρ		0.2232***			0.2653***	
		(0.0137)			(0.0141)	
W_x: Chinese State Visits	–	–	–0.0483***	–	–	0.0156***
	–	–	(0.0148)	–	–	(0.0045)
Ln(Population)	–0.0466***	–0.0269**	–0.0454***	0.0075*	0.0029	0.0071*
	(0.0134)	(0.0128)	(0.0134)	(0.0041)	(0.0039)	(0.0041)
Ln(GDP per Capita)	0.0182***	0.0178***	0.0190***	–0.0016	–0.0026	–0.0018
	(0.0062)	(0.0059)	(0.0062)	(0.0019)	(0.0018)	(0.0019)
Trade Dependence	0.0089*	0.0106**	0.0091*	–0.0018	–0.0015	–0.0019
	(0.0048)	(0.0046)	(0.0048)	(0.0015)	(0.0014)	(0.0015)
Electoral Democracy Index	0.0126	0.0019	0.0113	–0.0323***	–0.0277***	–0.0320***
	(0.0170)	(0.0163)	(0.0170)	(0.0053)	(0.0050)	(0.0052)
Capability Ratio	–0.2852**	–0.0643	–0.3350***	0.0110	–0.0471	0.0268
	(0.1171)	(0.1127)	(0.1180)	(0.0358)	(0.0340)	(0.0361)
Years of Diplomatic Relations	–0.0017***	–0.0014***	–0.0017***	–0.0002	–0.0002	–0.0002
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)
Change in Source of Leader Support	–0.0067	–0.0052	–0.0068	0.0013	0.0012	0.0014
	(0.0069)	(0.0066)	(0.0069)	(0.0021)	(0.0020)	(0.0021)
Fixed Country Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Fixed Year Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
R^2	0.8770	–	0.8772	0.9034	–	0.9036
Adj. R^2	0.8720	–	0.8722	0.8995	–	0.8997
Num. obs.	6184	6184	6184	6184	6184	6184
Parameters	–	243	–	–	243	–
Log Likelihood	–	3892.3876	3774.6395	–	11 258.0032	11 099.3204
AIC (linear model)	–	–7054.1493	–	–	–21 702.2146	–
AIC (spatial model)	–	–7298.7751	–	–	–22 030.0064	–
LR test: statistic	–	246.6258	–	–	329.7918	–
LR test: p-value		0.0000			0.0000	
Sigma	–	–	0.1341	–	–	0.0410
Statistic	–	–	176.1697	–	–	231.0973
p-value	–	–	0.0000	–	–	0.0000
DF	–	–	241.0000	–	–	241.0000
AIC	–	–	–7063.2790	–	–	–21 712.6408
BIC	–	–	–5427.9568	–	–	–20 077.3187
Deviance	–	–	106.8117	–	–	9.9957
DF Resid.	–	–	5942	–	–	5942

***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; and *$p < 0.1$.

an SAR model, that is, the *average total effect* (ATE), *average direct effect* (ADE), and *average indirect effect* (AIE).[108] Specifically, as James LeSage and Pace[109] explained, "a change in a single observation (region) associated with any given explanatory variable will affect

[108] James LeSage and Robert Kelley Pace, *Introduction to Spatial Econometrics* (New York: CRC Press, 2009), pp. 34–9.
[109] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Table 2. The Short-Run and Long-Run Effects of Chinese Leadership Visits

Effect	Median Size	2.5% Lower CI	97.5% Higher CI
Direct short run (ADE)	−0.0258	−0.02587	−0.0256
Indirect short run (AIE)	−0.00716	−0.01226	−0.00114
Total short run (ATE)	−0.03296	−0.03813	−0.02674
Direct long run (ADE)	−0.0686	−0.06879	−0.06806
Indirect long run (AIE)	−0.01904	−0.03258	−0.03258
Total long run (ATE)	−0.08764	−0.10137	−0.10064

Note: Results are based on Model 2 listed in Table 1.

the region itself (a direct effect) and potentially affect all other regions indirectly (an indirect effect)." The ATE is the sum of the average direct and indirect impacts. Meanwhile, I can further calculate the short-run (first-period) and long-run effects for all three types of average impact due to the inclusion of the temporal lagged dependent variable.

Using Model 2's coefficient estimates, Table 2 calculates the short-run and long-run ADE, AIE, and ATE of Chinese state visits on foreign policy convergence in a target country and its neighbours. These effects are also significant at the 95% confidence interval. Specifically, one additional Chinese state visit decreases the distance in ideal points (logged) by 0.0258 in the same country (ADE) and by 0.00716 in other countries (ATE). These effects are considerable if we exponentiate them back to the original scales (i.e., an ADE of $e^{-0.0258} = 0.97453$ and an AIE of $e^{-0.00716} = 0.9928656$). Furthermore, the respective long-run cumulative estimates for Chinese state visits are ADE = –0.0686, AIE = –0.01904, and ATE = –0.08764. Table 2 provides strong support for my first and second hypotheses that Chinese state visits not only facilitate direct foreign policy convergence in the visited country but also indirectly promote foreign policy convergences among the visited country's neighbours.

Furthermore, the SLX model results listed in Column 3 of Table 1 also indicate consistent and robust evidence for the two hypotheses. On the one hand, the coefficient of Chinese state visits is negative and significant at the 99% confidence level, which is consistent with my expectation in the first hypothesis. On the other hand, I find that the coefficient for the spatial measurement of Chinese state visits, "$\mathbf{W_x}$: Chinese State Visits", is negative and significant at the 99% confidence interval, suggesting that Chinese state visits to a target country's neighbours are negatively associated with the distance in ideal points between the target country and China. In other words, all else being equal, one additional Chinese state visit to a neighbouring state can lead to a log of 0.0483 ($e^{-0.0483} = 0.9528479$) unit decrease in the distance of foreign policy divergence. In summary, the results of Models 1–3 confirm the two hypotheses.

Robustness Checks

My findings are also robust for the following considerations. First, I use an alternative measure of foreign policy convergence from the UNGA voting data. The *agreement score with China* ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 denoting complete agreement with China and 0 denoting complete disagreement with China on foreign policy preferences. Therefore, I expect Chinese state visits to be positively associated with this new dependent variable. Models 4–6 of Table 1 summarize the new results from the OLS, SAR, and SLX estimates. In consistent with my expectations, the coefficients for all of the key variables are statistically significant and of their expected signs, which provides strong evidence again for the two hypotheses.

Second, I consider alternative spatial modelling strategies. The SAR and SLX model results listed in Table 1 are appropriate to capture endogenous contagion/interdependence (SAR) and exogenous spillovers/externalities (SLX), respectively. Nevertheless, neither of

them assumes the presence of unobservable clustered spatial dependence. Thus, I use a spatial error model (SEM) and spatial autoregressive combined (SAC) models to replicate the results from Table 1. The results in Supplementary Appendix Table A2 further demonstrate the consistency and robustness of the main findings.

Third, I consider potential *endogeneity* between Chinese state visits and convergence in foreign policy. Chinese state visits are likely only when the host country is already on the path towards foreign policy convergence with China. If this is true, then Chinese state visits are more like proxies for convergence already underway for other reasons. However, this potential endogeneity issue is unlikely to be a valid threat to my main findings. On the one hand, existing studies and my analyses show that policy convergence measured by UNGA voting is not a significant determinant of Chinese leadership visits to target countries.[110] Studies on US presidential visits also indicate that strategic interests rather than policy convergence drive US leadership visits.[111]

On the other hand, even if we cannot completely eliminate the endogeneity concern from observational studies, my main findings are primarily related to the indirect diffusion effect of Chinese leadership visits rather than the direct bilateral interaction between China and host countries. Put differently, it is unlikely that the policy convergences within the neighbourhood of a host country are primary determinants of Chinese leadership visits to the host country. Moreover, the SAR model itself is endogenous in nature in the sense that the spatial lag, **Wy**, exerts simultaneous impacts on a host country and its neighbours. The SAC model in the robustness checks further accounts for unobservable clustered dependencies that may result in omitted variable bias. For example, it is routine for much groundwork to have been done before an official state visit. The state visits variable might still not capture such groundwork, but its impacts can be absorbed into the SEM part of the SAC model.

Fourth, I use different *K*s in constructing the *K*-nearest neighbours. Figure 5 plots the estimates for the coefficients of Chinese visits to neighbouring countries ("**W$_x$**: Chinese State Visits") and Chinese visits to a target country from 19 SLX models where I set $K = 2, \cdots, 20$. I find that the coefficients for both variables are considerably consistent, negative, and statistically significant at the 90% and 95% confidence levels.

Fifth, I consider the heterogeneity of the effects of Chinese state visits across time periods and different government administrations. In Supplementary Appendix Table A4, I split the sample into the pre-2008 period and post-2008 period to capture whether the effects of Chinese state visits are stronger in the context of Sino-US strategic competition.[112] The results show that the direct effects are statistically significant in the pre-2008 period, while the indirect diffusion effects are consistent and robust across the two periods. Likewise, I consider the effects of different Chinese leadership styles from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping. The results in Supplementary Appendix Table A5 suggest that the indirect diffusion effects are consistent and robust across different leadership styles. However, the direct effects are stronger and statistically significant in the President Hu Jintao era.

Finally, I consider additional covariates and control for the US influence[113] by controlling for the effect of US presidential visits and the effects of US alliances.[114] I also replace

[110] Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush, "Does Public Diplomacy Sway Foreign Public Opinion?," pp. 1342–57; Kastner and Saunders, "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State?," pp. 163–77; Wang, "Leader Visits and UN Security Council Membership."
[111] Cohen, "Travel to and from the United States and Foreign Leader Approval," pp. 490–508; Koliev and Lundgren, "Visiting the Hegemon," pp. 1–7; Lebovic and Saunders, "The Diplomatic Core," pp. 107–23.
[112] Minghao Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US–China Strategic Competition," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019), pp. 371–94.
[113] Peter Harris and Iren Marinova, "American Primacy and US–China Relations: The Cold War Analogy Reversed," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2022), pp. 335–51; Jue Zhang and Jin Xu, "China–US Strategic Competition and the Descent of a Porous Curtain," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2021), pp. 321–52.
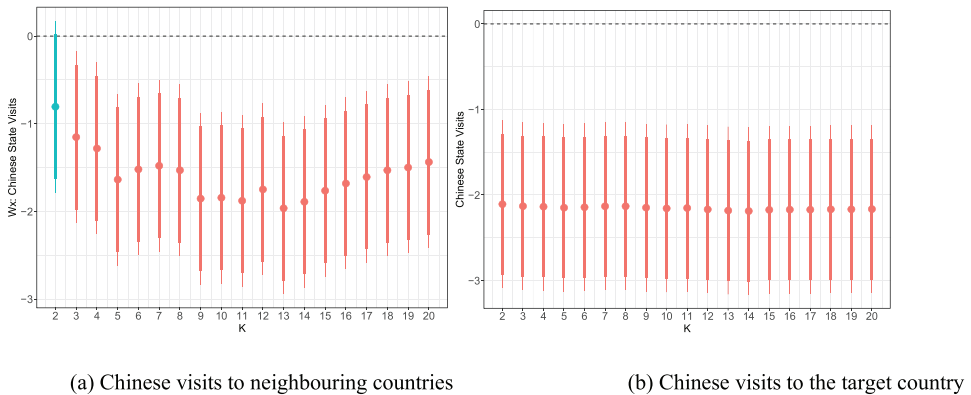[114] Data on US presidential visits are from the Office of the Historian Website: https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/travels/president.

(a) Chinese visits to neighbouring countries   (b) Chinese visits to the target country

Fig. 5. The Robust Effects of Chinese Leadership Visits Using K = 2, …, 20. (a) Chinese Visits to Neighbouring Countries. (b) Chinese Visits to the Target Country

Note: Figure 5 plots the estimated coefficients (rescaled) (with 90% and 95% confidence intervals) of leadership visits using K = 2, …, 20 in 19 SLX models. Coefficients for all other covariates are omitted from the visual presentation. I use the same SLX model specification in Table 1 while varying K from 2 to 20.

the *electoral democracy index* from the V-Dem project with the *Polity IV* scores.[115] The results are still consistent and robust when including these variables in these models (see Supplementary Appendix Tables A3 and A6).

Overall, I conclude that my findings are consistent and robust. The effects of *state visits* between China and the target country's neighbours on the host country's alignment with China are evident. To paraphrase Christian Houle,[116] one potential problem with the analysis presented thus far is that not all foreign policy changes are driven by leadership visits. It is unrealistic to believe that a single explanation could account for all policy convergences. However, I expect this analysis to provide evidence for the diffusion effect of leadership visits and to shed light on the IR literature on the study of foreign policy convergences.

Case Illustration

I present in this section a case illustration that shows how China's foreign policy utilizes leadership visits as a reward tool. In early 2009, China's then–Prime Minister Wen Jiabao paid official visits to Switzerland, Germany, Spain, the UK, and the headquarters of the EU in Belgium. However, as a "punishment" for President Sarkozy's meeting with the Dalai Lama, France was excluded from Premier Wen's itinerary. Premier Wen later told reporters, "When he looked at the map, he noticed that his airplane circled France, and the reason was known to all."[117] Note that prior to Wen's trip, China cancelled the 11th Annual EU–China summit, postponed a contract to purchase 150-passenger planes from Airbus, and crossed France off the travel itinerary of two Chinese trade delegations.[118] It is also worth mentioning that the first delegation alone signed $15 billion in trade deals in other European countries. Therefore, consistent with my statistical results, Wen's decision not to visit France during his "European trip of confidence" conversely served as a reward to the four neighbours of France that did not meet with the Dalai Lama. Wen Jiabao's visit, along

[115] Marshall and Jaggers, "Polity IV Project."
[116] Christian Houle, "Ethnic Inequality and the Dismantling of Democracy: A Global Analysis," *World Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (2015), p. 31.
[117] "Premier: We all Know Why", *China Daily*, 3 February, 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-02/03/content_7440286.htm (last accessed on 23 January 2015).
[118] Fuchs and Klann, "Paying a Visit," pp. 164–77.

with the substantial number of signed commercial contracts it entailed, signalled to France a strong *demonstration effect* in that President Sarkozy's meeting with the Dalai Lama caused a marked deterioration in the bilateral relationship between France and China and a consequent loss of considerable commercial benefits in that regard. Conversely, France's four neighbours, especially Germany, which did not host the Dalai Lama and had intensive foreign direct investment competition with France,[119] received lucrative trade deals during Wen Jiabao's visits.

As a result, by "rewarding" France's four neighbours with a high-level visit from the head of the Chinese Government and lucrative trade deals, China created a "neighbour emulation" opportunity for France to alter its "Tibet stance." We can further infer that France was under pressure both domestically and regionally to adjust its policy in regard to the "Tibet issue," having forfeited substantial commercial benefits (absolute gains) emanating from China while its neighbours were "rewarded" with billions of US dollars in contracts (relative gains). From a regional perspective, France's neighbours also pressured the country to adjust its stance because its deteriorating relationship with China could harm the trade interests of the entire region, especially in the midst of the financial crisis. Therefore, the favourable regional policy towards China may have diffused to France from its neighbouring countries that Premier Wen did visit.

Just 2 months later, in a joint press communiqué between China and France on 1 April 2009, France declared that it "fully recognizes the importance and sensitivity of the Tibet issue and reaffirms its adherence to the One-China policy and the position that Tibet is an integral part of the Chinese territory, […] refuses to support any form of 'Tibet independence'."[120] France subsequently resumed its place on China's shopping list and received the first trade delegation after the tension of 9 months earlier had abated.[121] In November 2010, China's then-President Hu Jintao paid a state visit to France, and after his meeting with Sarkozy, Sino-French relations entered a new stage.[122]

Although the importance of *leadership visits* to maintaining bilateral relations is well recognized in the foreign policy literature,[123] the possible influence on the host countries of such visits to their neighbouring states should not be overlooked. An overt decision not to visit a country can signal a demand for a change in foreign policy that may induce a change in foreign policy in the target country.[124] As the aforementioned example illustrates, by excluding France from Premier Wen's itinerary of visits to its neighbouring countries, China forced France to change its stance on the "Tibet issue" and adopt a Tibet policy more in line with China's preferences.

Conclusion

This study explores the effects of China's leadership visits to foreign countries on the visited states' policy convergence with China. The main takeaway is that to understand foreign policy change, we must consider not only domestic politics[125] and bilateral relations (as most studies have done) but also influence emanating from neighbouring states. In the case of Chinese foreign policy alignment, the host country is more likely to adjust its stance when

---

[119] Cao, "Networks as Channels of Policy Diffusion: Explaining Worldwide Changes in Capital Taxation, 1998–2006," pp. 823–54.
[120] See http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2009-04/01/content_1274928.htm (last accessed on 3 March 2023).
[121] Fuchs and Klann, "Paying a Visit," p. 167.
[122] *Ibid.*, pp. 164–77.
[123] Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," pp. 1797–816.
[124] James D. Fearon, "Signaling Versus the Balance of Power and Interests an Empirical Test of a Crisis Bargaining Model," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (1994), pp. 236–69; James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1997), pp. 68–90.
[125] Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll, "Leadership Turnover and Foreign Policy Change," pp. 280–90.

China rewards its neighbouring states. This "rapport with your neighbours" strategy spurs immediate reactions in compelling the target state's foreign policy to align with China's preferences. Therefore, the present research makes important contributions to the literature on China's foreign policy strategies.

First, I examine the external conditions[126] under which China may affect foreign policy change in other countries. The results from the spatial panel data model show that a country is likely to adjust its foreign policy when the number of Chinese leadership visits increases (or put differently, a country's neighbour is likely to adjust its policy due to a policy change in another nearby country). These findings supplement both the bilateral and domestic political approaches to foreign policy change. Second, I extend the scope of the IR literature on foreign policy with respect to diffusion. The primary focus of the previous literature on diffusion effects is on conflict processes or economic policy, with scant attention being paid to foreign policy change. By applying a spatial–temporal model to Chinese foreign alignment behaviour, I explore a broader diffusion phenomenon in IR.

This study also has important policy implications. As Flores-Macías and Kreps[127] noted, "Since more states are increasing their trade ties with China, this means China will more easily locate allies on foreign policy issues." Given that the "rapport with your neighbours" strategy can affect the target country's foreign policy convergence, China can gain increasingly greater leverage in foreign policy issues as it continues to rise in influence. Given that a direct trade reduction between China and the target country would harm China's interests, leadership visits may provide an alternative tool for China to achieve its policy goals.

My study also offers a new approach to examining bilateral relations in foreign policy analysis. As Gleditsch argues, "State actors will often take an active interest in events occurring in neighboring countries and may supply important resources to actors that affect political outcomes at the margin."[128] By constructing a new dataset of Chinese leadership visits, we can examine broader topics related to foreign policy extending beyond the traditional bilateral or domestic approaches. For example, although Kastner and Saunders examine whether China is a status quo or revisionist state through its pattern of leadership travel, my data enable researchers to also explore China's foreign policy priorities at the vice-minister level or above.[129] Moreover, the data contain information on incoming foreign leaders' visits to China, which has implications for future research. We can thus examine how trade relationships are affected by leadership travel patterns[130] and explore why some countries experience more leadership visits from China than others. Finally, future research can extend the definition of the neighbourhood and explore alternative spaces other than geography as potential pathways for the diffusion process. Such pathways may include similarities in regime types, cultures, and even economic interdependence.[131] These are topics for future study.

Acknowledgements

[126] Gleditsch and Ward, "Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization," p. 930.
[127] Flores-Macías and Kreps, "The Foreign Policy Consequences of Trade," p. 368.
[128] Gleditsch, *All International Politics Is Local*, p. 54.
[129] Kastner and Saunders, "Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State?," pp. 163–77.
[130] Fuchs and Klann, "Paying a Visit," pp. 164–77; Nitsch, "State Visits and International Trade," pp. 1797–816.
[131] Beck, Gleditsch, and Beardsley, "Space Is more than Geography," pp. 27–44.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* online.

Conflict of interest statement None declared.

Funding

Replication Data

The replication data and online appendix are available via the Harvard Dataverse Network at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/D4L1F2.