



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

China is changing the game – party diplomacy is becoming a central instrument of influence



On 30 September, the Chinese Communist Party **appointed** Liu Haixing as head of the International Department of the Central Committee.

Liu Jianchao, his predecessor, last appeared in public in July and then vanished from the media. Foreign sources **indicate** that he is under party investigation.

Beijing has not provided an explanation, consistent with a **pattern** seen in other cases where high-ranking officials suddenly disappear and their replacement is announced later.

This department does not conduct traditional foreign policy. Its task is to build and maintain relationships with parties around the world – both those in power and those in opposition.

This channel operates in parallel with ministries and embassies and carries special weight because it allows Beijing to develop influence beyond official state protocols.

The change at the head of this department is therefore not just a personnel matter but a strategic move that alters the way China engages with international partners.

A profile of the new man

Liu Haixing, born in 1963, graduated from Beijing Foreign Studies University and spent part of his career in Europe.

He was responsible for European affairs in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, in recent years, held a senior position in the office of the Central National Security Commission.

This **means** he brings a combination of diplomatic experience with European capitals and the direct trust of the party's security apparatus.

Such a combination suggests that Beijing is preparing to give party diplomacy an even more disciplined and strategically focused

role.

What changes

In practice, a stronger focus on Europe is expected. During next year, several key states will undergo election cycles and coalition negotiations.

Beijing knows that during such periods, influence through party channels is often more effective than formal diplomatic pressure.

Contact with opposition parties that could enter government is part of the standard repertoire of the International Department

Contact with opposition parties that could enter government is part of the standard repertoire of the International Department.

With Liu Haixing, who understands the European political landscape, that channel will become even more significant.

In Africa and Latin America, Chinese projects are **incorporated** into the programmes of ruling parties, so they endure because those parties protect them as their own political promises and continue to implement them after elections.

Signals of internal politics

Liu Jianchao's removal fits into a broader pattern of party discipline. In the past two years, ministers and high-ranking officials have **disappeared** from public view, only to be quietly replaced.

This indicates that internal consolidation remains a priority and that party discipline takes precedence over international perception.

For foreign observers, this means that even

party channels cannot be seen as a parallel, independent structure but as an extended arm of centralised control.

The political reach of change

For Europe, this means more contacts will occur not through official notes and diplomatic channels, but via party visits, forums, and foundations.

China will focus on topics that do not carry high political risk — such as education, industrial standards, and regional development — but will use these channels to build political capital that can later be leveraged on more difficult issues, such as technology or investment restrictions.

For the Global South, especially countries included in the Belt and Road Initiative, Liu Haixing is likely to strengthen the model in which party dialogues provide political legitimacy for infrastructure projects.

This means Chinese influence will depend less on formal contracts and more on political synergy with local parties.

Beijing believes that this combination of discipline and persistent political work in the background is sufficient to preserve space for its interests

China is now **increasing** party contacts in Europe and Asia, focusing cooperation on less contentious areas and crafting messages more carefully, aiming to maintain stable channels of communication even when official diplomacy stalls.

For European interlocutors, this presents an opportunity but also a challenge. If they are to use party channels to maintain dialogue with China, they will need to develop a more profound understanding of Chinese party dynamics, which they have largely failed to do so far.

Beijing, meanwhile, believes that this combination of discipline and persistent political work in the background is sufficient to preserve space for its interests, even during periods of strained relations with the West.

A new phase of party diplomacy

The international department is not a formal ministry, but it is often more important for the party than state diplomacy itself. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs handles protocol, party diplomacy shapes narratives and builds networks with longer-term effects.

This has been the case since the 1950s, when China opened the door to communist and left-wing parties in Europe and Asia through this channel, and it remains so today, though the partners are now broader — from social democratic parties in Europe to nationalist and conservative forces in Africa.

When economic channels narrow, political ones become more valuable

Even when relations between countries freeze, the department can maintain ties, acting as a safeguard in China's foreign policy system.

The arrival of Liu Haixing may indicate that Beijing will seek to intensify this instrument at a time when the global order is fragmenting and more governments are ready to restrict Chinese companies in strategic sectors. When economic channels narrow, political ones become more valuable.

A message to Europe

Over the past year, Brussels has increased regulations related to China — from investment controls to restrictions on telecommunications and artificial intelligence.

In such an environment, direct communication between the Chinese party and European

political structures acquires a new function. It is no longer just traditional "friendship building", but an active attempt to bridge institutional distrust.

With new leadership, party diplomacy may move to a more operational level, focusing on concrete topics

For European parties, the question is whether they will be ready to use this channel. Past practice shows that many contacts remained at a symbolic level, as Beijing was able to use them as proof of political openness, while European parties expected more economic benefits.

Now, with new leadership, party diplomacy may move to a more operational level, focusing on concrete topics — digital transformation, climate policies, and industry standards. These are areas in which China offers cooperation, but they are not at the centre of conflicts over security and technology.

Global South as a priority

More prominently, this move **draws** attention to the Global South. For years, the International Department has held special exchange programmes with parties in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.

China is now expanding party diplomacy to areas that have not traditionally been its focus—digital infrastructure, energy, and climate policies.

It no longer links only road and railway projects to the parties in power but also issues that directly affect regulations and laws.

This creates opportunities for Chinese influence to enter more deeply into the internal political debates of partner countries, not just their development plans.

Internal dynamics in Beijing

The case of Liu Jianchao shows that in China, personnel decisions in foreign policy are never separated from internal dynamics. President Xi's broader campaign, which has been ongoing for a decade, aligns with the party's investigation against Liu Jianchao, for which there are no official details.

Although it is often presented as a fight against corruption, it is also a mechanism for centralising power.

Party discipline affects every area, including those with a key international function

The similar disappearances of the ministers of foreign affairs and defence in recent years shows that party discipline affects every area, including those with a key international function.

For Liu Haixing, this means he will work under the direct supervision of the party leadership and that all talks with foreign parties must reflect the views of Xi Jinping and his inner circle, leaving no room for independent moves or adjustments.

Possible directions of development

The decision to appoint a person with European experience as head of the department may indicate that Beijing believes Europe is the region where relatively greater progress can be achieved.

Relations with Washington are at a low point and will be difficult to restore. In Europe, however, there is a gap between the EU's regulatory stance and the interests of individual member states in maintaining economic ties with China. Party diplomacy can serve as a tool to bridge these gaps.



The coming period will reveal whether Europe has the capacity to protect its political systems or whether it will yield to one of the most sophisticated instruments of Chinese influence – Wang Yi with Ursula Von der Leyen

If this direction is confirmed, the coming months could see more visits by party delegations; more intensive communication with European foundations and organisations involved in industrial policy; and the strengthening of cultural and educational programmes that serve as entry points for political dialogue.

For European parties, the question is whether they can separate political communication from Beijing's propaganda objectives.

If they approach these talks without a serious strategy, they risk becoming part of a narrative that China will use to legitimise itself. If they use party channels to shape the political context of cooperation, they can create more space for negotiations in areas important to them.

For countries in the Global South, this shift means that China's influence will be even more directly linked to domestic politics.

Chinese projects will not be presented solely as investments but as part of political promises and election platforms. This increases their sustainability but also heightens the dependence of local actors on Beijing.

The real message of Liu Haixing's appointment is that Beijing no longer treats party diplomacy as a secondary tool but as a testing ground for future power relations.

In an era when the international order is splitting into blocs and sub-blocs, China believes that power will be built at the level of political parties, as they shape legislation, determine the pace of change, and ensure continuity of power.

If this assessment proves correct, the coming phase will make understanding the internal dynamics of parties as important as understanding governments and ministries. China was the first to realise this, which is why it is changing the game.

For European democracies, this presents a serious risk, as the Chinese model of party channels undermines institutional transparency and allows Beijing to influence political processes out of public view.

This is precisely why the coming period will reveal whether Europe has the capacity to protect its political systems or whether it will yield to one of the most sophisticated instruments of Chinese influence.