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Barisan Nasional and the Chinese Communist Party: A Case Study in China’s Party-Based Diplomacy*

Ngeow Chow Bing

Abstract

As Malaysia and China have become “comprehensive strategic partners” since 2013, the bilateral relations of these two countries have been getting stronger. However, party-to-party relations between the two countries have not received much scholarly attention. This article discusses the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) interactions with the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and its main component parties, United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) in Malaysia. It discusses the origins of China’s party-based diplomacy, the actual development in this area of diplomacy between Malaysia and China, and the implications of this kind of party-based diplomacy. It suggests that one of the main activities carried out under party-based diplomacy is for CCP to offer its governing lessons to other ruling parties, which has not been discussed much by other analysts of China’s party-based diplomacy.

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In October 2013, China’s president and general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping visited Malaysia. During this visit, Xi made a five-point proposal to upgrade the existing bilateral “strategic partnership” between Malaysia and China to the level of “comprehensive strategic partnership.” The first point was the continuation of the strengthening of political relationship between leaders of the two countries. Among the suggested actions to enhance political relationship was party-to-party diplomacy: “The two countries should also enhance party-to-party exchanges and share experience on governance and policy-making.”

This article contributes to the academic literature in two areas. First, the existing research on Malaysia-China relations generally concentrates on economic, geostrategic, and cultural issues. However, party-to-party diplomacy has not been the focus of scholarly attention. This study fills this gap and provides a description and analysis of party-to-party diplomacy between Malaysia and China.

Second, although there are many studies of China’s foreign policy and diplomacy, much less attention has been paid to China’s party-based diplomacy (PBD). David Shambaugh’s study of CCP’s International Department (中央对外联络部 Zhongyang duiwai lianluobu, the unit in charge of conducting PBD) is one of the few available studies. Shambaugh discusses the history of the International Department, its internal organizational structure and personnel, and its functions.

Apart from Shambaugh’s work, the only study on China’s PBD in English is a translation of a volume on Chinese diplomacy edited by Yang Jiemian, the famed director of Shanghai Institutes of International Studies and the younger brother of Yang Jiechi, the Chinese state councilor in charge of foreign affairs. A chapter and several passages in other chapters of this edited volume are devoted to China’s PBD. Similar to Shambaugh’s work, the chapter by Niu Haibin traces the historical evolution of China’s PBD and discusses its roles and influences.

Publications from Mainland-based scholars and party officials have also revealed much about CCP’s International Department and PBD. Several former officials of the International Department have produced memoirs that described the origin, growth, and significance of PBD. In addition, the International Department also publishes its own official history, which is very useful to discern its changing policies as China moved from the phase of building up socialist fraternity with fellow socialist states and engaging in anti-hegemonic revolutionary struggles...
worldwide to the era of making PBD serve the overall goal of modernization since the 1980s. Furthermore, since the 1990s, the International Department has published an annual *Survey of the External Work of the Chinese Communist Party* (中國共產黨對外工作概況 Zhongguo gongchandang duiwei gongzuo gaikuang), a very detailed chronicle of the kind of external relations that the CCP is engaging in. Finally, some Chinese scholars have also undertaken theoretical and historical studies of China’s PBD.

Based on these studies, a clearer picture of China’s PBD can be presented. In terms of history, CCP was part of the Communist International and had extensive ties with the Soviet Communist Party from its birth. However, the formal unit in charge of dealing with relations with foreign parties was established only in 1951. This unit, the International Department, evolved from the Third Section of the United Front Work Department. The original mission of the International Department was to engage with only the foreign communist parties, with some exceptions to be made in some nationalist liberation movements in the Third World. In the late 1970s and early 1980s it expanded its formal contacts to nationalist parties in the developing countries. As Deng Xiaoping’s reforms proceeded further, first the left-leaning social democratic parties in the West, later the conservative parties of various sorts, and finally parties of all ideological leanings were engaged, although “fascist” parties continued to be excluded from its web of engagement. While it is easy to assume that CCP has interest to interact only with ruling parties since it does not tolerate opposition parties at home, this is not the case. The International Department is mandated to deal with important opposition parties as well. To date, CCP has had relations of various sorts with more than 500 political parties around the world.

In 1999, amid the “talk politics” campaign, the CCP leadership defined the orientation, goals, and missions of PBD as “four services and one implementation” (四個服務，一個履行 shige fuwu, yige lüxing). The “four services” refer to (1) the opening up and reform policy and socialist modernization; (2) the overall diplomatic strategy of the country; (3) consolidating and strengthening the ruling status of the CCP; and (4) consolidating and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics. The “one implementation” refers to “implementation of responsibilities as the advising staff and assistant (參謀助手 canmou zhushou) to the [party’s] center.” In conjunction with “four services and one implementation,” the International Department also proposed the idea of “investigation and
research to build up the Department “（调研部 diaoyan xingbu）as the basic guideline for its own work.”

The interesting aspect of PBD defined as such is that there is a domestic aspect to its work. A Chinese scholar notes that a theory of PBD is necessarily a crossover from two theoretical fields: diplomatic theory and party-building (党建 dangjian) theory. The stress on the party-building aspect points to the considerable importance placed on learning and researching governing capabilities of foreign parties. Another Chinese author argues that PBD serves to “increase the capacity and quality of the governing party, and as an important channel for the Chinese Communist Party to learn and understand the world and to strengthen its own building.” Hence, an important part of the work done by the International Department through PBD’s activities is research. For example, a passage in the book edited by Wang Jiarui, the former director of CCP’s International Department, states that

in the process of party-to-party interactions, it is important to strengthen the research on series of important issues such as the developments of economic globalization and future directions of developments, international finance, reforms of the trade regime, eradication of poverty, and environmental protection, to understand and conclude from the developmental lessons and experiences from both developed and developing economies, and to borrow from foreign countries important lessons and ways of governance. … [In addition, it is important to] conclude from the experiences of foreign ruling parties, to consolidate CCP’s own party-building.

Mandated to conduct extensive research into foreign parties and foreign political developments, International Department has therefore become one of the important foreign policy advisors and think tanks of the party, even though it does not explicitly promote itself in such a way. It is perhaps this strong focus on learning from foreign parties that prompted Shambaugh to suggest a bold argument: that CCP, by conducting PBD and engaging especially with many parties (ruling or opposition) in democracies around the world, its International Department “could even become a conduit for fashioning transformation of the CCP from a Leninist Party into some new kind of proto-democratic hybrid.”

Other than the research and learning in support of CCP’s domestic agenda, PBD also aims to perform a number of functions that are more externally oriented. Accordingly, the International Department has postulated five categories of relations with foreign parties, each with a different
emphasis and focus: (1) ruling parties of fellow socialist states; (2) parties in major neighboring countries; (3) parties in developing countries; (4) parties in developed countries; and (5) multilateral party-based fora.17 Table 1 summarizes the different types of party-to-party engagements with these foreign parties.

Table 1: Five Categories of CCP’s Party-Based Diplomacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Party-Based Diplomatic Relations</th>
<th>Functions of Party-Based Diplomacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Socialist states (Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, North Korea) | • Sharing and exchanging reform experiences and Marxist theories as ruling parties of the socialist states 18  
• Solidifying fraternal relations against the common threat of “peaceful evolution” or “color revolution” propagated by the West  
• Serving as another channel of communication with the ruling communist parties of socialist states  
• Networking between the second-echelon party officials in China and other socialist states |
| Major neighboring states (Japan, Russia, India, Southeast Asia) | • Securing friendly exchanges with all major parties (ruling or opposition) of China’s major neighbors 19  
• Serving as an alternative track of dialogue when the bilateral relationship is poor (e.g., China-Japan Ruling Parties Exchange Mechanism) 20  
• Sharing and exchanging governing experiences with major ruling parties (e.g., Memorandum of Understanding between CCP and United Russia Party, China-Russia Party Forum) 21  
• Learning from the successful experiences of foreign ruling parties 22 |
| Developing states (Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, Central and Eastern Europe) | • Sharing China’s governance experiences 23  
• Using party-to-party ties to promote economic cooperation  
• Serving as channel of contact with countries that have not yet established diplomatic ties with China 24  
• Securing friendly ties with both the social-democratic and right-leaning parties in Central and Eastern Europe |
| Developed states (Europe, Australia and New Zealand, the United States, and Canada) | • Securing friendly ties with all major parties  
• Assisting in the publicity work of China to create positive image  
• Maintaining dialogue channels  
• Learning from foreign parties |
| Multilateral party-based fora | • Participating in multilateral party-related forums 25 |

It can be seen from Table 1 that indeed PBD has played a wide variety of functions and roles in support of China’s overall diplomatic
work. For fellow socialist states, PBD still carries certain undertones of socialist fraternity and ideological affinity, and remains an important channel of official contact in a bilateral relationship. For major neighboring states, it is particularly important for PBD to cultivate ties with the major ruling or opposition parties to ensure that they will stay friendly with China whatever their ruling status. For developing countries, China’s sharing of its own governance experiences with foreign parties is an important agenda. For parties in developed countries, since they are likely to be democratic, an important function for PBD is to assist in the publicity of China and to convince these parties that despite ideological and political differences CCP is willing to work with parties in democratic systems.

The above review of studies of China’s PBD suggests much still needs to be done. Importantly, much of the extant research has adopted a macro-historical overview, without undertaking an in-depth study of how PBD proceeds between two countries. This is the aim here. In the following sections, this article analyzes the shifting direction of China's PBD during the reform era, reviews the evolution of party-to-party diplomacy between China and Malaysia, examines in more detail CCP’s relations with two major political parties in Malaysia, and discusses the implications for scholarship on China’s PBD. The final section concludes with some reflections.

1. Redefinition of China’s Party-Based Diplomacy during Deng’s Era

The phrase “party-to-party relations” did not immediately evoke positive reaction from Malaysia, especially in the immediate decade after the establishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1974. The obvious reason of course was that for CCP, the main external party-to-party relations it cultivated at that time remained fellow communist parties. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was still at war with the government of Malaysia. For Malaysia, it was ingenious for the Chinese that on the one hand they established formal government-to-government diplomatic ties but on the other hand they kept the “party-to-party” relations with MCP, which sought to overthrow the very government they had diplomatic relations with.

It took the end of the Cultural Revolution, the overthrow of the radical leaders in CCP, and the ascendance of a group of pragmatic
leaders led by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s to substantially change the
direction of PBD. In an important talk in May 1980, Deng discussed the
principle of maintaining party-to-party ties with other “brotherly”
(communist) parties in foreign countries and asserted that all parties
should treat each other equally and should not interfere in others’
internal affairs, and that other parties are to find their own ways of
carrying out revolution and national construction.26 This had the effect of
making PBD in the service of building socialism at home, and not
exporting revolution. Therefore, for fellow communist parties in devel-
oping countries, CCP affirmed that it respected their search for their own
road to revolution but would strictly follow the principles of “peaceful
coexistence” with the governments that these parties rebelled against. The
party-to-party relations of the past, divided between friends and enemies
according to an ideological stand, would no longer be applicable. Since
then, top CCP leaders regularly sought to assure foreign leaders about
this new form of PBD. For example, in July 1980, Li Xiannian, one of the
top leaders at the time, in a meeting with a Thai delegation said the rela-
tionship between CCP and the Thai Communist Party was only “providing
spiritual support,” and that CCP no longer wished to “export revolu-
tion.”27 The change of the meaning of PBD therefore paved the way for
CCP to “readjust” (practically cutting the ties with) relations with
communist parties in Southeast Asia while establishing relations with the
noncommunist ruling parties in the region.

In June 1982, the general secretary of CCP, Hu Yaobang, in meeting
with a delegation of the Dutch Communist Party suggested four stan-
dards for handling party-to-party relations: (1) independence and
autonomy, (2) equality between parties, (3) mutual respect, and (4)
noninterference in the internal affairs of the other party. In September
1982, the Four Principles were written into the Party Report to the 12th
Party Congress and the Party Constitution. In the following years,
whenever CCP leaders spoke about party-to-party relations or PBD, they
reiterated the Four Principles, which initially seemed to be more appli-
cable to fellow communist parties. But as CCP’s relations with other
noncommunist parties grew, the Four Principles had wider application.

The Four Principles of PBD stabilized China’s foreign relations and
served the goal of promoting “good neighborliness” of China’s foreign
policy. From the 1980s to the 1990s, most political parties of various
ideological strands of the neighboring countries of China established or
reestablished ties with CCP. It was within this context that the first formal
relations between Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition of Malaysia since independence, and CCP were instituted.

Barisan Nasional (BN) is currently a coalition of 13 parties, the most powerful of which is United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The membership of the coalition varied over the years (some parties left, others joined, some of them merged), but it has always been based on a pseudo-“consociational” pact between three most important ethnic-based component parties: UMNO, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Each of these three parties represents the interests of the ethnic Malays, Chinese, and Indians (respectively about 55 percent, 26 percent, and 8 percent of the population of Malaysia currently). The coalition has been in power since 1957, the year of Malaya’s independence, and is one of the oldest ruling parties/coalitions in the world. It was formed on the basis of consociational spirit, in the sense that each ethnic-based party articulates and caters to the interests of the ethnic group, but as members of a coalition, they bargain and negotiate among each other so that the public policies of the government are inclusive of the interests of all. However, over the years BN has become much more UMNO-dominated, while the political system has also become much more authoritarian following a democratic beginning. Although a veneer of consociational spirit has been preserved, BN as a whole has become a much more Malay-centered coalition, and the roles of MCA and MIC have declined significantly over the years.

BN’s broad ideological outlook can be described as moderately conservative or right-wing, and notwithstanding the presence of some small left-leaning parties in the coalition, it has always seen communism as an ideological enemy. However, it was also under the BN government that Malaysia established diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China in 1974, although bilateral relations remained frosty until the 1990s.


The Chinese Communist Party was the one that took the initiative in establishing party-to-party ties with Malaysian political parties. In early 1992, a little known CCP delegation, led by Jiang Guanghua, the deputy director of CCP’s International Department, was dispatched to Kuala Lumpur, with the explicit aim of initiating a party-to-party relationship between UMNO and CCP. Before the trip, CCP queried Kuala Lumpur’s
ambassador in Beijing about the likely receptivity of such a visit, and the Malaysian positive response was forthcoming swiftly, underscoring the importance UMNO attached to this CCP-led delegation.

All UMNO top leaders at that time, including President Mahathir Mohamad (also the Prime Minister of Malaysia at that time), Deputy President Ghafar Baba (Deputy Prime Minister), Vice Presidents Anwar Ibrahim (Finance Minister) and Abdullah Badawi (Foreign Minister), and general secretary Mohamed Rahmat (Minister of Information), received the delegation. The first person the delegation met was Mohamed Rahmat, who was still inquisitive of the ties between CCP and MCP during their conversation, but to which the CCP delegation answered with affirmation that there were no longer ties between them and the Malayan communists. In meeting with the Foreign Minister Abdullah Badawi (who later became Prime Minister of Malaysia from 2004 to 2009), Abdullah Badawi underscored the importance of party-to-party ties, especially since both UMNO and CCP were (and still are) ruling parties, and positive ties between the two ruling parties will translate into substantial bilateral cooperation between the two governments. In general, they all agreed with the Four Principles laid out by CCP as the basis for development of the relationship between the two parties. The CCP delegation also invited a reciprocal visit to China.²⁹

The reciprocal visit took place in September 1994. A large delegation consisting of representatives from 12 of the then 14 component parties of BN paid a seven-day visit to Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. The delegation was mostly represented by politicians with the rank of general secretary of the component parties. It was led by Mohamed Rahmat, who, other than being a Minister of Information, was also concurrently the general secretary of BN. Although BN has had some kind of relations with other ruling parties (such as the People Action Party in Singapore, the Golkar Party in Indonesia, and the African National Congress in South Africa) before, the visit to CCP was by far the largest and highest-level delegation ever sent out by BN for the purpose of party-to-party diplomacy.³⁰ The visit further signified that ideological differences (BN being staunchly anticommunist) no longer hampered normal relations developing between China and Malaysia. Furthermore, it took place amid the immediate end of the Cold War, when Western powers, principally the United States, were in full euphoria proclaiming the arrival of a new world order premised upon liberal democratic and capitalist principles. China was recovering from the isolation imposed by the West after the
Tiananmen Incident in 1989, and anti-West sentiment was still quite prevalent. Malaysia, under the leadership of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed, shared with China the distrust of Western values and institutions, and his articulation of the “Asian Values” also made him a leader admired by CCP.

Incidentally both China and Malaysia were judged authoritarian countries helmed by two ruling parties with the longest history of continuous rule. The forging of a relationship between these two ruling parties heralded a form of anti-Western nationalism common in both countries. They found much common ground in emphasizing the importance of order, stability, economic growth, strong executive power, nationalism, and anti-West sentiments. Both BN and CCP also tended to dismiss the importance of opposition politics, free media, governmental transparency, civil liberties, and restrictions on executive power. In short, despite the fundamental differences in political system (one being a parliamentary system modeled after Britain and the other being the Leninist party-state modeled after the defunct Soviet Union), the ruling parties of both countries do have quite similar political views about a number of issues.

From the very beginning of the development of BN-CCP ties, CCP had made it known to BN that apart from BN, CCP had no interests to develop relations with any of the opposition parties in Malaysia. As mentioned before, CCP’s PBD does not exclude engaging with foreign opposition parties, so the fact that CCP has not been engaging with opposition parties in Malaysia could be a result of BN’s insistence that such engagement should not take place. The leaders of BN’s delegation to China also stated that BN’s policy was to develop relations with other ruling parties only. Underlying this “ruling party–to–ruling party” relationship is also the assumption that they were to be long-lasting ruling parties, so contacts with opposition parties were unnecessary.

In March 1996, CCP sent the first official delegation to visit Malaysia (the 1992 visit was more “secretive”). The delegation was led by Li Shuzheng, a deputy director of CCP’s International Department. Two months later, under the leadership of another deputy director (Li Chengren), CCP sent a delegation to attend the 50th anniversary of the founding of UMNO. In June 1997, the president of Wanita UMNO (the women’s wing of UMNO) brought another BN delegation to China, this time with numerous representatives from the youth and women’s wings of the BN component parties. This visit was reciprocated in December
1997 with a delegation led by Wei Jianxing, a member of the CCP’s Politburo. Since this visit, there have not been any party-to-party exchanges under the name of the BN coalition; all visits since then have occurred under the auspices of the individual component parties of BN.

In the late 1990s CCP began regularly sending its delegation to attend the annual congress of UMNO. In 2010, CCP and UMNO signed an MOU on party-to-party cooperation, and mutual visits between UMNO and CCP intensified afterward. Other than UMNO, MCA is the party that interacts most frequently with CCP. Since the late 2000s, MCA has dispatched many delegations to visit China to learn from CCP’s work on party building, crisis management, handling of party-mass relations, and public relations (more discussion on CCP’s relations with both UMNO and MCA later).

Other than UMNO and MCA, other component parties of BN have had very little engagement with CCP. In August 1997, the youth wing of the Gerakan party (a smaller Chinese-based but purportedly multiracial party in the BN coalition) invited the leader of the Chinese Communist Youth League, Li Keqiang (the present premier), to visit Malaysia.35 Sarawak United People’s Party, a party that was originally a front organization of the communists in North Borneo but now has been completely transformed and mainly caters to ethnic Chinese voters in the state of Sarawak (in eastern Malaysia), was invited to visit CCP in 2007. This is the only known party-to-party ties between CCP and a political party from eastern Malaysia. Table 2 presents a compilation of these visits over the years.

Table 2: Mutual Visit between Barisan Nasional and the Chinese Communist Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Visit Description</th>
<th>Delegation</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 1992</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Jiang Guanghua, deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
<td>CCP’s first attempt to establish ties with Malaysia; received by all top leaders of UMNO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1994</td>
<td>Barisan Nasional’s visit to China</td>
<td>34-person delegation from 12 of the 14 Barisan Nasional parties, led by Mohamed Rahmat, general secretary of BN</td>
<td>Barisan Nasional’s first official visit to China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1996</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>7-person delegation, led by Li Shuzheng, deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
<td>CCP’s first official visit to Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Details</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>May 1996</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>3-person delegation, led by Li Chengren, deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
<td>CCP’s delegation to attend UMNO’s 50th anniversary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1997</td>
<td>Barisan Nasional’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Siti Sahara, leader of Wanita UMNO</td>
<td>Delegation from the youth wings and women wings of the Barisan Nasional component parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1997</td>
<td>CYL’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Li Keqiang, leader of Communist Youth League</td>
<td>Invited by Gerakan Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1997</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Wei Jianxing, member of CCP Politburo</td>
<td>Invited by BN, delegation including Director of International Department Dai Bingguo and other party officials, met with Mohamed Rahmat, BN’s secretary general, and Anwar, the deputy prime minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1999</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Ma Wenpu, deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
<td>Attending UMNO annual congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2001</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Li Changchun, member of the Politburo Standing Committee, together with Cai Wu, deputy director of International Department</td>
<td>Meeting and having a dialogue session with Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2001</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Wang Tianhua, CCP secretary of Anhui Province</td>
<td>Attending UMNO annual congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2002</td>
<td>Central Party School of CCP visiting Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Li Hanru, deputy director of the Central Party School</td>
<td>Invited by UMNO, leading a &quot;cadre field observation&quot; delegation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2002</td>
<td>Central Party School of CCP visiting Malaysia</td>
<td>14-person delegation led by Duan Ruopeng, deputy dean of the graduate school of the Central Party School</td>
<td>Visiting MCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2003</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Cai Wu, deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
<td>Attending UMNO annual congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2003</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Chen Ximing, alternate member of CCP’s Central Committee, deputy secretary of the Work Committee for the Organs Subordinate to the Central Committee</td>
<td>Invited by Gerakan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2004</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by He Yong, deputy director of the Central Disciplinary Inspection Committee of CCP</td>
<td>Meeting with Radzi Sheikh Ahmad, secretary-general of UMNO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2004</td>
<td>UMNO, MCA, MIC, and Gerakan visiting China</td>
<td>Attending the 3rd General Assembly of the International Conference of Asian Political Parties, meeting with Wang Jiarui, the director of CCP's International Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2004</td>
<td>CCP's visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Cai Wu, deputy director of the International Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2005</td>
<td>CCP's visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Hu Jiyan, deputy secretary of the CCP’s Committee in Xinjiang</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2006</td>
<td>MCA's visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Ong Tee Kiat, vice president of MCA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2007</td>
<td>CCP's visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Fang Li, deputy director of CCP’s Central Policy Research Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2007</td>
<td>MCA's visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Ong Ka Ting, president of MCA and minister of housing and local government</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2007</td>
<td>SUPP's visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Sim Kheng Hui, secretary general of SUPP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2007</td>
<td>CCP's visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Zang Xianpu, committee member of the Central Disciplinary Inspection Committee of CCP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2009</td>
<td>MCA's visit to China</td>
<td>70 people delegation Led by Ong Tee Kiat, president of MCA and minister of transport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>CCP's visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Liu Hongcai, deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>CCP's visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Qiang Wei, general secretary of the CCP’s Committee in Qinghai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2009</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Liu Qi, general secretary of the Beijing party committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2010</td>
<td>CCP's visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Li Yuanchao, director of the Organizational Department of CCP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2010</td>
<td>UMNO's visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Tengku Adnan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>CCP's visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Huang Xianyao,</td>
<td>Attending UMNO annual congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>committee member of the CCP’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial Committee in Hubei</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Ai Ping, deputy</td>
<td>Invited by UMNO, attending the 15th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>director of CCP’s International</td>
<td>Conference of Asian Political Parties held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on the sideline of ICAPP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Committee</td>
<td>Conference on Natural Disasters and Environmental Protection under the auspices of UMNO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2011</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Sun Gan, deputy</td>
<td>Attending UMNO annual congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>director of the Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Committee for Organs Subordinate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to the Central Committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2012</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by He Guoqiang, member of</td>
<td>Signing of bilateral agreements on the Industrial Parks and on Panda loaning and protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the CCP’s Politburo Standing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Committee and director of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Central Disciplinary Inspection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Committee of CCP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2012</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by He Jialong, deputy</td>
<td>Attending UMNO annual congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>director of CCP’s Commission on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public Sector Appointments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2013</td>
<td>MCA’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Liow Tiong Lai, deputy</td>
<td>Learning from CCP’s work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>president of MCA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2013</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Sun Chunlan, general</td>
<td>Meeting with Prime Minister Najib</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>secretary of the CCP’s Committee in Tianjin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Sun Qingyun, deputy</td>
<td>Attending UMNO annual congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>secretary of the CCP’s Committee in Shaanxi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2014</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Hu Chunhua, general</td>
<td>Invited by UMNO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>secretary of the CCP’s Committee in Guangdong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2014</td>
<td>MCA’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Ong Ka Chuan, general</td>
<td>Signing of a MOU on party-to-party exchange and cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>secretary of MCA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>MCA’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Hou Kok Chung, vice</td>
<td>First MCA “cadre-training delegation” in China, undertaking training in Pudong, Shanghai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>president of MCA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Leader/Delegation Details</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2014</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Li Jun, assistant to the director of the International Department</td>
<td>Attending UMNO congress and meeting with MCA’s leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2015</td>
<td>MCA’s visit to China</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Second MCA “cadre-training delegation” in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2015</td>
<td>UMNO’s visit to China</td>
<td>Leading UMNO’s “cadre field trip” delegation, meeting with Chen Fengxiang, the deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
<td>Leading UMNO’s “cadre field trip” delegation, meeting with Chen Fengxiang, the deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2015</td>
<td>MCA’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Liow Tiong Lai, president of MCA</td>
<td>Discussion with CCP over China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative, Extensive Agreement on Party-to-Party Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2015</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Guo Yezhou, deputy director of CCP’s International Department</td>
<td>Invited by UMNO, meeting with UMNO secretary general and MCA’s president, visits to Malaysian media and think tanks, discussion over One Belt, One Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>MCA’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Liow Tiong Lai, president of MCA</td>
<td>Leading a party/business delegation in discussing with Chinese officials over One Belt, One Road in an international business conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2015</td>
<td>MCA’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Lim Si Cheng, deputy chairperson of the Disciplinary Board of MCA</td>
<td>Attending conference of “2015 Chinese Communist Party’s Dialogues with the World,” jointly organized by the CCP’s International Department and Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission; may coincide with the third MCA “cadre training delegation” to China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2015</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Lu Yunyao, president of the National Party Building Research Association</td>
<td>Attending MCA’s general assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2015</td>
<td>MCA’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Liow Tiong Lai, president of MCA</td>
<td>Attending the Asian Political Parties’ Special Conference on the Silk Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2016</td>
<td>UMNO’s visit to China</td>
<td>Led by Annuar Musa, information chief of UMNO, delegation included members of the supreme council of UMNO and its women’s and youth’s wings</td>
<td>Meeting with deputy director of CCP’s International Department Chen Fengxiang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2016</td>
<td>CCP’s visit to Malaysia</td>
<td>Led by Song Tao, Director of the International Department of CCP</td>
<td>Meeting with both UMNO leader and Prime Minister Najib and MCA leader Liow Tiong Lai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s compilation from various sources.
As can be seen from this table, mutual visits between the two ruling parties/coalitions are quite frequent, especially since the middle of 2000s. The frequent mutual visits took place within the context of a drastically improved Malaysia-China relationship compared to the 1980s. It was indeed remarkable in the sense that before the 1992 breakthrough in party-to-party ties between BN and CCP, Malaysia was still very much worried about communism (the BN-led government concluded the peace treaty with the domestic communist insurgents only three years earlier, in 1989) and China as a communist giant in Asia. But these deepening party-to-party ties played an important part in effecting a perceptual change that the CCP was no longer a communist threat to Malaysia but rather a party sharing the common “Asian Values” and anti-Western nationalism.

The frequent exchanges, although not directly having a substantive impact, do reinforce the sense of friendship, cooperation, and common ground between both parties. As an interviewed official of the International Department put it, “PBD does not necessarily focus on concrete policy issues between countries; its work is more about ‘work on the people’ (做人的工作 zuo ren de gongzuo).” “Work on the people” means the building up and cultivation of friendly ties, and in a way is to add a “personal” dimension to the “official” relationships. In this sense, customary visits with no substantive agenda, which happened quite a lot before the 2010s, carried the PBD’s function of cultivation of friendly ties. Nonetheless, beginning in the 2010s, as can be seen in Table 2, there were more and more substantive visits, such as those involving cadre training and field observation, as well as MCA’s promotion of economic cooperation with China (through China’s Belt and Road Initiative). This is discussed in more detail in the following two sections.

3. CCP’s Relations with UMNO

In 2010, UMNO sent a high profile delegation to China and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with CCP’s International Department. During the signing ceremony Tengku Adnan, the leader of the delegation and who was then (and still is) the general secretary of BN and UMNO supported the Chinese position that China must have a one-party system, while a multiparty system would only destabilize China. In October 2012, amid the power transition within CCP (from the Hu
Jintao-Wen Jiabao team to the current Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang team), Tengku Adnan, in a television interview, again reaffirmed his confidence in CCP and the importance of CCP in governing a huge country like China.39 Again, it can be seen here that both UMNO and CCP see themselves as indispensable ruling parties and that party-to-party diplomacy reinforces their common ground in political and governance values. Statements such as this reinforced at least the perception that UMNO-CCP ties cemented cooperation between two authoritarian ways of governance.

The 2010 UMNO-CCP MOU stipulated five main points:

First, the Chinese Communist Party and UMNO have reached consensus regarding the comprehensive development of the exchange and cooperation between the two parties. Both parties are willing to develop bilateral relations based on the principles of autonomy and independence, equality, mutual respect, and noninterference in the internal affairs of each other; and to jointly work for the promotion of the strategic partnership between China and Malaysia.

Second, both sides agree that beginning in 2010 an exchange program will be implemented. Each year each party sends one to two representatives for mutual visit and for exchanging views and experiences in issues that are common concerns to both.

Third, both sides agree that exchange of experience between the young political leaders is important, enhances understanding of the economic and social development of each other’s country, and promotes friendship among the young people in both countries.

Fourth, both sides wish that through conferences that focus on issues that are common concerns to both sides, both sides can discuss and exchange views, and developmental experiences can be shared.

Fifth, both sides agree that each side can formulate its own plan of action for this MOU according to its needs.40

In the second point, it is said that there would be an exchange program consisting of a delegation mutually visiting each other for exchange. It can be seen that apart from the regular attendance of UMNO annual congress by CCP delegation, in each year after the MOU, except for 2011, there was at least one high-profile CCP delegation invited by UMNO to visit Malaysia (June 2012 by He Guoqiang, November 2013 by Sun Chunlan, April 2014 by Hu Chunhua, June 2015 by Guo Yezhou, March 2016 by Song Tao). It should be pointed out that even before the
signing of the October 2010 MOU, CCP sent visiting delegations quite often (outside of the annual attendance of UMNO congress), so the MOU may have only institutionalized a regular practice. The status and importance of the leader of each of this delegation varied (from as high-profile as He Guoqiang, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of CCP, to Guo Yezhou, a deputy director of the International Department). Some of these visits carried state-related functions, as can be seen in the June 2012 visit by He Guoqiang, where he was also entrusted to represent the Chinese government to sign agreements on the Dual Industrial Parks projects with the Malaysian government.

The returning UMNO’s visits to CCP, however, have been reported only sporadically in public. In April 2015, there was a report, carried by the website of the International Department of CCP, about UMNO delegation, led by an UMNO Youth leader, visiting China. The delegation was described as ganbu kaochatuan (幹部考察團), or “Cadre Field Research Delegation.”\(^\text{41}\) This may be something more related to the third point of the MOU, which involved training of young party leaders. A discussion with a Chinese official based in Kuala Lumpur also confirmed that such a training program has been taking place since 2010. According to the official, each UMNO delegation visiting China will spend about two weeks in China. Usually part of the program includes undergoing training in short-term courses offered by the Central Party School of CCP in Beijing, and then at another location. Each year there are at least two such delegations. The delegation usually numbers around 20 midlevel party officials.\(^\text{42}\) Reciprocal CCP delegations from China undergoing short-term training in Malaysia have not been reported in the media at all. However, an interview with officials of the International Department confirmed that such delegations did take place in the years since the MOU, and reportedly some CCP delegations did visit some grassroots branches of UMNO and were interested in discussing with UMNO how to handle the increasingly challenging political environment with stronger opposition since the 2010s.\(^\text{43}\)

4. CCP’s Relations with MCA

Compared to UMNO, MCA actually began earlier to engage more actively with CCP. In 2007, a large MCA delegation led by the then MCA President Ong Ka Ting visited Beijing and CCP. One item on the agenda
for this visit was to consult the Central Party School of CCP in the setting up of a Party School of MCA. His successor, Ong Tee Kiat, also chose CCP as the first foreign party he visited as president of MCA, in 2009.

However, MCA did not institutionalize and intensify relations (like UMNO’s MOU with CCP in 2010) with CCP until 2014. The background of such intensification with CCP was the decline of political fortune of MCA. In two consecutive Malaysian general elections in 2008 and 2013, MCA suffered significant setbacks. Its seats in Parliament dropped from 31 in 2004 to 7 in 2013. These setbacks engendered a sense of urgency to learn from successful parties abroad, and MCA chose CCP whose experiences were thought to be relevant. MCA sent a delegation in August 2013 comprising Deputy President Liow Tiong Lai (currently the president) and a number of top leaders (who were then members of an internal party reform committee) to visit CCP, meeting with a number of leaders of CCP’s internal organs such as the International Department, Organizational Department, Propaganda Department, and the Central Party History Research Office. CCP understood that MCA was faring badly electorally. It organized a field trip for these MCA leaders to the grassroots level to interact with base-level CCP cadres. This was probably the first time that a Malaysian political party interacted with so many internal party organs of the CCP apparatus. Liow also invited CCP to send its experts and scholars to Malaysia in order to share the experience in cadre training and ideological work. CCP’s deputy director of the International Department, Ai Ping, obliged to help MCA.44

In July 2014, MCA signed an MOU with CCP. MCA’s general secretary Ong Ka Chuan flew to Beijing and signed the document with Wang Jiarui, director of CCP’s International Department. In signing the MOU, Wang stated that MCA played an important role in Malaysia-China relations and hoped that by readmitting itself to the Malaysian Cabinet,45 MCA could play a more significant role, and he emphasized that CCP would continue to have good relationship with MCA. In reaching the MOU, both parties also reached four points of consensus: (1) the strengthening of high-level exchange between the two parties to share governance experience; (2) the strengthening of exchange at all levels to promote mutual understanding and common development; (3) the development of cooperation in cadre training; and (4) the support for more exchanges between the think tanks and media organizations of both
countries. The MOU also stated that the relationship between the two parties is based on the Four Principles and will help to further develop the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Malaysia and China.\(^{46}\)

Another important visit was the May 2015 visit, led by President Liow. The visit resulted in several agreements, including the strengthening of cooperation between the think tanks and party schools of both parties, cooperation over cadre training, and MCA’s role in pushing for Malaysia-China cooperation over China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative.\(^{47}\)

Cooperation in cadre training and MCA’s participation in China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative deserve further discussion. CCP and MCA agreed that each year there will be two cadre-training delegations sent by MCA to study in institutions selected by CCP in China (in March and September). Subsequently in September 2014 the first such delegation led by Hou Kok Chung, a former academic and now a full-time politician serving as vice president of MCA, took place. According to an interviewed MCA official, each delegation consisted of about 20 midlevel to high-level party officials of MCA, who were selected from or recommended by the regional MCA leaderships and central bureaus at the MCA headquarters. They underwent five days of courses and fieldwork, principally at the China Executive Leadership Academy in Pudong (CELAP), in Shanghai.\(^{48}\) CELAP, established in 2005, is now a prestigious institution, the Chinese counterpart to Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. Its staff stress practice over ideology or theory, and they aim to produce the “best administrators.” Its students are mainly drawn from the ranks of deputy director generals in Chinese government, the fourth highest rung in the bureaucratic hierarchy.\(^{49}\) It is unlikely that the MCA’s officials could easily get into the short-term courses of CELAP without the help of the International Department of CCP.

According to the interviewed MCA official, the courses that the MCA’s officials took part in March 2015 at CELAP were an interesting combination of courses introducing Chinese politics and policy and courses on government’s management of crisis and media management, as summarized in Table 3. A field research trip to Wuliqiao Street in Shanghai was organized to allow the MCA delegation to learn from CCP’s grassroots-level work in party building and handling of party-mass relations. In addition, CELAP has obliged to send its lecturers to Malaysia to give lectures to the wider audience of MCA’s grassroots cadres, twice a year. In January 2015 it sent Jiang Haishan, deputy director of CELAP
Barisan Nasional and the Chinese Communist Party

(retired in July 2015), to lecture on China’s basic national conditions, and in July 2015 it sent another expert to Malaysia to lecture on traditional Chinese values and values of moderation.

Table 3: Course Structure at CELAP That MCA Delegation Undertook in March 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Lecturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Party Congress of CCP</td>
<td>Feng Jun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(note: a field trip to the actual site of the First Party Congress in Shanghai)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China’s Basic National Conditions</td>
<td>Liu Genfa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 18th Party Congress of CCP</td>
<td>Jiang Haishan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Management</td>
<td>Li Min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grassroots-Level Party Building</td>
<td>Gu Jun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation Simulation</td>
<td>Jiang Chunliu, Li Min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Management</td>
<td>Chen Liang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Organization and Society</td>
<td>The Committee of the Communist Youth League in Shanghai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(note: this class was cancelled)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s Interview with MCA Official.

It is interesting to scrutinize the courses further. Courses such as “crisis management,” “grassroots-level party building,” “situation simulation,” and “media management” essentially aim to address deficiencies in techniques of governance and governmental public relations, especially in the context of an increasingly active society, aided by Internet technology, that holds a skeptical view toward the government. Li Min, the lecturer of the “crisis management” course, has edited and published a handbook on crisis management based on case studies drawn mostly from China but also some foreign countries such as the United States and Britain. Scrutinizing the content of this handbook could in a way be a good indicator to gauge what was being taught to the MCA officials in this course. In the analysis of the cases in this handbook, governments’ missteps in responding to crises were highlighted and recommendations of how to better deal with them were proposed. Occasionally in some case studies there was a deeper analysis of the structural root of the crises. The handbook does recommend that the government should be as honest and transparent as possible to gain public trust. Ultimately it aims to draw lessons from the cases for the purpose of increasing the governing capabilities and longevity of the ruling party. MCA has found itself in the situation of facing constant criticisms over government missteps for years, and most Malaysian Chinese voters today support the opposition rather than MCA. CCP and MCA in this sense both face the similar
societal challenges, but the perceived success of CCP in handling these challenges makes the CCP in this case the “teacher” offering lessons to MCA. This “development of cooperation in cadre-training” is a one-way direction, as there is no indication so far that CCP has learned much in MCA’s experience in governance or other issues.

Another novelty of CCP-MCA relations is regarding China’s One Belt, One Road (Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road) Initiative, which came out of Xi Jinping’s speeches in late 2013. MCA, suffering from declining support from its traditional constituencies (ethnic Chinese voters), and hence also losing its importance in the BN coalition (and increasingly seen by some hard-line UMNO politicians as liabilities), feels that it can turn its fortune around by leveraging on its ties to CCP and making itself indispensable in Malaysia-China policy plans over the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. To this end, it has consistently announced its full support for the One Belt, One Road Initiative. As mentioned before, in May 2015 the MCA delegation went to China for the purpose of presenting itself as the key partner for China to engage in facilitating its Maritime Silk Road Initiative. The delegation was received by Liu Yunshan, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, which was unusual, as normally only the director of International Department would receive delegation of such nature. CCP obliged to assist MCA in increasing its prestige and promised to take MCA as the main conduit or platform when the Chinese government implements projects relating to the Maritime Silk Road, although in effect how such arrangement is going to be worked out is unclear. However, the International Department did instruct its own Center for Economic Liaison to cooperate with MCA over the One Belt, One Road Initiative. The Center co-organized with MCA an international business matching conference on One Belt, One Road (held in July 2015) in Beijing, in which MCA brought along a large number of ethnic Malaysian Chinese trade delegations. The deputy director of CCP’s International Department, Zhou Li, remarked in his speech at this conference that Malaysia could utilize the party-to-party channel to build business platforms, strengthen ties with China’s think tanks and enterprises, and explore opportunities under the One Belt, One Road Initiative. MCA, in turn, established a special committee on One Belt, One Road in December 2015. The committee accordingly is meant to serve as a business information platform for China’s enterprises interested in Malaysia, and vice
versa.\textsuperscript{54} More crucially, MCA President Liow is also concurrently serving as a Minister of Transport in Malaysia, and he is in a strong position to help Chinese companies entering Malaysian construction and infrastructure sectors. In his own words, “[the] ultimate goal of Belt and Road Initiative is connectivity through infrastructure development. It brings Malaysia and ASEAN closer to China. When people from both sides are closer, there will be more economic opportunities.”\textsuperscript{55}

5. Discussion: China’s Party-Based Diplomacy toward Malaysia

From the above discussion, several preliminary observations can be drawn. First, China’s PBD is indeed a very elite-driven process that has the purpose of cultivating closer personal relationship between the elite of the ruling parties/coalitions in both countries. CCP’s delegations to Malaysia have often varied in terms of the leadership and membership of the delegation. Plenty of CCP delegations to Malaysia were led by CCP leaders at the provincial and municipal levels, which also help BN leaders to know more about the important CCP leaders at the provincial level who may rise to the center in the future, and also led these regional CCP leaders to build elite ties in foreign countries. In return, some of the UMNO and MCA’s visiting delegations to China, especially those under “field observation” and “cadre training,” contain potential members of future Malaysian political elite, and China’s PBD in this sense helps in building ties with future leaders of Malaysia.

Second, compared with UMNO, MCA seems to have a more active (and open) exchange program with CCP, even though UMNO is clearly the more important party. However, one should refrain from interpreting such development as China’s active cultivation of \textit{guanxi} with the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. The fact that CCP first signed the MOU with UMNO before it did with MCA shows that it understands clearly which one is the more important party for CCP to deal with. CCP obliges to assist MCA with MCA’s active courtship, but CCP is not the main initiator of such active program.

Third, increasingly there is an element of a confident CCP offering governing lessons to parties in Malaysia. While it may be true that at the initial stage of interaction, CCP was eager to understand how UMNO managed to stay in power continuously for decades in a parliamentary system within an overall multiethnic society. Especially with rising
problems in some of the ethnic minority areas in China, CCP has been searching for effective ideas and practices to govern multiethnic communities. For CCP, UMNO represents an overall successful political party, and the CCP’s International Department has praised UMNO’s resilience and ability to integrate a diverse society in its official journal.56

However, as CCP-BN interactions developed further, it can be seen that instead of learning from others, CCP has been offering governance lessons to UMNO, and much more so, to MCA. As noted early in this article, although there have been cases of political parties in developing countries sending delegations to China for learning purposes, the focus of learning has been China’s successful economic development and reform. In the case of Malaysia, both UMNO and MCA have been sending their party officials to China to receive training in CCP’s best institutions (Central Party School and CELAP). Especially in the case of MCA, it has been very much interested in learning from CCP how it trains its cadres, builds up organizational strength, manages its relations with the mass, handles media pressures, manages crisis situations, and so on. It is clear that the theoretical and practical courses the MCA cadres undertook at CELAP were meant to make MCA more resilient and adaptive in the context of increasing challenges coming from civil society, media, and political opposition. However, in practice whether MCA could really reinvent itself to become a powerful force again in Malaysian politics depends on more than just learning from CCP. Also, whether the lessons learned by UMNO and MCA were really useful in the Malaysian political context remains to be seen.

6. Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, this article aims to contribute to two areas of the academic literature: studies of Malaysia-China relations and studies of China’s PBD. By detailing the interactions between BN (mainly its component parties UMNO and MCA) and CCP over the years, this article has outlined the party-to-party ties between the two ruling parties/coalitions in Malaysia and China, a neglected dimension in the scholarly literature on Malaysia-China relations. Interpreting the significance of the presented factual information will lead to the article’s second contribution: contribution to the studies of China’s PBD. Here, it can be seen that through PBD, CCP-BN interactions are
reinforcing the common grounds that both countries share and the cooperation in the exchange of governance experiences. Moreover, the PBD between CCP and UMNO/MCA seems to be a case of CCP offering its own governance experiences and lessons to other parties. In this sense, the findings from this case study are at odds with what Shambaugh has speculatively suggested in his own study of the International Department—that CCP will be influenced by the governing experiences and normative values of foreign political parties. In short, what Shambaugh missed was his assumption that PBD-based exchange of governance experiences would be a “one-way street” in the form of CCP learning from others, especially the democratic parties in the developed countries. This case study has shown that in CCP’s interactions with two political parties in Malaysia, the reality is the other way round. This study suggests CCP is quite confident in the success of its own party’s governance experience and party building, and is not shy in offering its own experiences as lessons to foreign parties when requested, and this is a new dimension of PBD that has not been examined before.

Notes

3 Alternatively translated as Central Liaison Department or International Liaison Department.


7 Li Beihai, Waijiao xinyu (Innermost Thoughts on Diplomacy) (Beijing: Dangdai shijie chubanshe, 2011); Wu Xingtang, Zhengdang waijiao he guoji guanxi (Party-Based Diplomacy and International Relations) (Beijing: Dangdai shijie chubanshe, 2004); Jiang Guanghua, Jishu wenchong (Essays of Records of Actual Events) (Shenyang: Renmin chubanshe, 2002); Jiang Guanghua, Fangwen waiguozhengdang jishu (Records of Visits to Foreign Political Parties) (Beijing: Shijie zhishu chubanshe, 1997).


However, it should also be noted that the CCP sporadically dealt with a number of noncommunist parties on a party-to-party basis even in the 1950s (such as British Labor Party delegation to China in 1957).

11 Zhonggong zhongyang duiwai lianluobu and Zhonggong duiwai guanxi shiliao bianji xiaozu, Zhonglianbu shishinian, p. 30.

12 Wang, Zhongguo gongchandang duiwai jiaowang 90nian, p. 199; Zhonggong zhongyang duiwai lianluobu bangongting, Zhonggong zhongyang duiwai lianluobu jianshi, 1951–2007, p. 244.

13 Xu, Jianguohou Zhongguo gongchandang zhengdang waijiao lilun yanjiu, pp. 141–142.

14 Du et al., Zhongguo gongchandang duiwai dangji jiaolou shijian, pp. 346–347.

15 Wang, Zhongguo gongchandang duiwai jiaowang 90nian, pp. 200–201.

16 Shambaugh, “China’s ‘Quiet Diplomacy,’” p. 54.

17 Wang, Zhongguo gongchandang duiwai jiaowang 90nian, pp. 211–238.

18 CCP regularly holds theoretical seminars with its counterparts in Laos and Vietnam on socialist modernization and sends its theoretical cadres to these countries to give lectures. See Wang, Zhongguo gongchandang duiwai jiaowang 90nian, pp. 213–214.

19 In anticipation of the ruling status of the National League for Democracy in Myanmar, CCP’s International Department started to engage with Aung San Suu Kyi; she was invited to visit China in June 2015.

20 CCP started with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Japan the China-Japan Ruling Parties Exchange Mechanism in 2006, and had used this channel to interact with LDP politicians but not Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) politicians when Japan was ruled by DPJ. The Mechanism was stopped in 2009 (when DPJ took over) but restarted in December 2015 when LDP sent its secretary-general Sadakazu Tanigaki (together with Yoshihisa Inoue, the secretary-general of LDP’s coalition partner, Komeito) to Qingdao and Beijing. See “Zhongduan 6nian, Zhong Ri chongqi zhizhengdang jiaoliu” (After 6 Years, China and Japan Restarted Exchange between Ruling Parties), Oriental Daily News, 14 December 2015, p. A59.

21 The China-Russia Party Forum has been held regularly since 2007. In these forums party officials and scholars from both sides hold wide discussions on regional and global issues, international relations, and Sino-Russia strategic coordinating partnership. See Quanqiu he diqu shiyezhong de Zhong E guanxi—Zhong E zhengdang luntan wenji (Sino-Russia Relations from Global and Regional Perspectives—Collected Articles from China-Russia Party Forum) (Beijing: Dangdai shijie chubanshe, 2007).

22 This is especially the case in Singapore. See Wang Lili, Zhongguo gongchandang yu Xinjiapo renmin xingdongdang dangji jiaowang yanjiu (A Study of the Party-to-Party Interaction between Chinese Communist Party and

23 From 2003 to 2010, more than 60 delegations were sent by African political parties to China to learn from the Chinese. See Wang, Zhongguo gongchandang duiwai jiaowang 90nian, p. 223.


25 In the past CCP would emphasize participation in the International Communist Movement. Now it mainly participates in the International Conference of Asian Political Parties, a loose and not-so-significant international nongovernmental organization. Beijing hosted the Third International Conference of Asian Political Parties in September 2004. The theme of the conference was Exchange, Cooperation and Development. CCP’s then general secretary Hu Jintao officiated the opening. See Jiaoliu, Hezuo, Fazhan: Disanjie Yazhou zhengdang guoji huiyi (Exchange, Cooperation, Development: The Third International Conference of Asian Political Parties) (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2005). In addition, CCP sent observers to the Socialist International.


27 Li Xiannian Zhuanxiezhu, Li Xiannian Zhuan (A Biography of Li Xiannian) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, 2009), p. 1289.

28 “Consociationalism” was the term used by political scientists such as Arend Lijphart to describe democratic power-sharing formula in deeply segmented societies. See Arend Lijphart, Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977). In the book Lijphart listed four features of a consociational democracy: a grand coalition, mutual veto (of parties representing different segments), proportionality (in civil service or electoral representation), and segmental autonomy (especially cultural and educational affairs).


30 Fu Defa, “Guozhen fanghua ju lishi yiyi: Mazhong xiaochu yishi xingtai
chayi” (BN’s Visit to China Historically Significant: Malaysia and China Dispel Ideological Differences), Sinchew Daily, 21 September 1994, p. 5.


32 “Mohamo: Guozhen zunbei yu renhe guojia zhizhengdang jianli zhengzhi guanxi” (Mohamed: BN Ready to Establish Political Relations with the Ruling Party in Any Country), Sinchew Daily, 26 September 1994, p. 5.


35 Xie Chunlan, “Mazhong tupo zhangai shuangying” (Malaysia and China Breaking through Obstacles and Win-Win Situation), Sinchew Daily, 18 August 1999, p. 2.

36 It should be noted that hundreds of foreign party delegations visit China each year and vice versa.

37 Interview with officials of the International Department of CCP, Beijing, 16 June 2016. Names withheld to protect anonymity.

38 Due to the fact that CCP-UMNO relations receive much less public scrutiny, the following discussions will have more focus on CCP-MCA relations.


41 The April 2015 visit was a rare report on such activities, and hence Table 1 may have missed these visiting training delegations.

42 Author’s discussion with a Chinese official, Kuala Lumpur, 14 September 2015. Name and rank of the official withheld to protect anonymity. Accordingly, the son of an important Malaysian minister underwent training at the Central Party School.

43 Interview with officials from the International Department of CCP, Beijing, 16 June 2016.


45 After the general elections in May 2013, MCA leaders chose to stay out of the Cabinet because it felt that it did not have the mandate from the
Chinese voters it claimed to represent. After about a year the decision was overturned.


47 “Fanghua qude chengguo, Mahua Zhonggong jiasheng jiaoliu” (Visit to China Bears Fruits, MCA and CCP to Deepen Cooperation), Sinchew Daily, 16 May 2015, p. 5.

48 Interview with an MCA official, Kuala Lumpur, 30 July 2015. Name withheld to protect anonymity.


51 Jiang Xun, “Mahua Gonghui zhichi yidai yilu” (MCA Supports One Belt One Road), Yazhou Zhoukan, 7 June 2015, p. 16.

52 The Center for Economic Liaison, originally a conduit for CCP to bring in foreign technologies and capital, was established in 1988. See Zhonggong zhongyang duidai lianluo bu and Zhonggong duidai guanxi shiliao bianji zu, Zhonglianbu shishinian, p. 43.

53 Gao Yuan Yuan, “Dangji qudao zengjing huxin Zhongma qiye hua shangji” (Party-to-Party Channel Increases Mutual Trust, China and Malaysia Businesses in Dialogue), Dangdai shijie (Contemporary World), No. 9 (2015), pp. 74–76.

54 “Mahua she Mazhong xinxi pingtai” (MCA to Establish a Malaysia-China Information Platform), Nanyang Business Daily, 6 December 2015, p. 4.


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