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ARTICLE

Between disconnection and connection: The paradoxes of Cold War export controls

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Abstract

This article reinterprets Cold War multilateral export controls not simply as mechanisms restricting access to strategic technologies, but as sites of mediated connection within Cold War globalisation. Moving beyond a US-centred framework, it examines West Germany's experience of the China embargo under ChinCom in the 1950s and the liberalisation of controls in respect of China within CoCom in the 1980s. It asks how regimes designed to enforce technological disconnection generated new forms of global connectivity, arguing that this transformation can be understood through Western alliance asymmetries and CoCom's role as an institutionalised site of transit. In the 1950s, embargo enforcement produced alternative re-export routes and unintended transnational connections. In the 1980s, competitive alliance manoeuvring revealed CoCom's regulatory architecture as a space of negotiation where technological circulation was enabled, delayed, redirected, or politically obscured. A case study of Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm illustrates how these dynamics operated in practice. By tracing mediated technological circulation across different phases of controls in respect of China, the article reframes Cold War globalisation as shaped by dis:connectivity: the mutually constitutive interplay of connection and disconnection.

Keywords: Cold War globalisation; intra-alliance competition; dis:connectivity; export controls; CoCom; Sino-West German relations

Introduction

On 20 October 1987, Alan Wendt, the US State Department's representative for strategic technology policy, urgently convened the representatives of all CoCom member states in Washington and requested the cancellation of a session scheduled for six days later in Paris, where further relaxation of export controls on China was to be discussed.[1] CoCom, the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls, was an informal regime linking NATO members (except Iceland) and Japan to regulate exports to the Warsaw Pact and China.[2] By limiting transfers of strategically sensitive goods and technologies, it functioned as a central instrument in structuring the Cold War's economic and technological order. The immediate trigger for Wendt's intervention was Iran's deployment of Chinese-made 'Silkworm' missiles during the Iran–Iraq War,

[1]'COCOM: Postponement of China Meeting', B 70/135891, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin (hereafter, PA AA).

[2]John H. Henshaw, *The Origins of CoCom: Lessons for Contemporary Proliferation Control Regimes*, Report no. 7 (Henry L. Stimson Center, May 1993), 5; James K. Libbey, 'CoCom, Comecon, and the Economic Cold War', *Russian History* 37, no. 2 (2010): 133–52.

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which posed a direct threat to US vessels and citizens in the Gulf.[3] The Paris meeting was cancelled with little discussion.[4] Yet this appearance of agreement masked more complex political calculations within the regime. As the West German representative observed, Washington's intervention was less a substantive policy reversal than a diplomatic signal to Beijing, intended to secure greater alignment with the broader arms embargo rather than to halt the ongoing process of liberalisation.[5] This approach, however, made it difficult for West German officials to justify the asymmetry of a regime that, despite the logic of détente, maintained strict controls on the Warsaw Pact while increasingly relaxing restrictions on China.

Using West Germany's experience of the China embargo in the 1950s and the liberalisation of export controls towards China in the 1980s as an analytical lens, this article interrogates a broader paradox at the heart of the Cold War export control regime: how a regime designed to enforce technological disconnection came to generate new forms of global connectivity. It argues that this transformation can only be understood by foregrounding asymmetries within the Western alliance and CoCom's role as an institutionalised site of transit. In doing so, the article reframes globalisation during the Cold War as a process structured by selective connectivity rather than by simple integration or division.

Recent scholarship in global history has moved beyond framing globalisation in terms of a binary opposition between connection and disconnection.[6] Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci, and Roland Wenzlhuemer have advanced the concept of 'dis:connectivity' to capture the dynamic interplay of multiple, coexisting forms of connection and non-connection.[7] From this perspective, connections are neither singular nor stable, but emerge as 'bundles' of heterogeneous strands—some facilitating exchange, others delaying, redirecting, or blocking it.[8] Disconnection, therefore, does not negate globalisation, but is constitutive of it. Building on this conceptual shift, this article approaches CoCom as a particularly revealing site for analysing such dis:connective dynamics. Rather than simply enforcing technological separation across the Cold War divide, CoCom operated as a dense institutional space in which diplomatic, commercial, technological, and informal forms of connection were continuously negotiated, recalibrated, and selectively enabled. In this sense, the regime did not merely restrict flows but contributed to new pathways and forms of mediated connectivity.

This approach also resonates with a growing body of work that conceptualises international organisations as key sites of global connections.[9] As Akira Iriye has argued, international organisations can facilitate, steer, and at times resist globalisation.[10] Although CoCom rested on a 'gentlemen's agreement' and remained an informal intergovernmental arrangement, its procedures, committees, control lists, and channels of communication nonetheless made it a site of institutional coordination. This framing, in turn, allows the notion of transit, hitherto largely

[3]Telegram from Washington to the Foreign Office, 20 October 1987, B 70/135891, PA AA; Eric Setzekorn, 'Structural Dissonance: The Failed US-PRC Defense Relationship, 1979–1989', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 19, no. 1 (2018): 37–63, 56.

[4]Washington cito, 22 October 1987, B 70/135891, PA AA.

[5]Telegram from Washington to the Foreign Office, 20 October 1987, B 136/23498, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz (hereafter, BArchK). On resuming talks on further China liberalisation, see 'BMWi, TOP: VR China, 13. Oktober 1988', B 136/23498, BArchK.

[6]Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci, and Roland Wenzlhuemer, 'Introduction', in *Dis:connectivity and Globalisation: Concepts, Terms, Practices*, ed. Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci, and Roland Wenzlhuemer (De Gruyter, 2025), 1–2.

[7]Ibid., 10–14.

[8]Roland Wenzlhuemer, 'Bundles of Connections', in *Dis:connectivity and Globalisation: Concepts, Terms, Practices*, ed. Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci, and Roland Wenzlhuemer (De Gruyter, 2025), 53–4.

[9]Sandrine Kott, 'International Organizations: A Field of Research for a Global History', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 8, no. 3 (2011): 445–53.

[10]Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (University of California Press, 2002), 8.

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associated with maritime vessels, to be extended to the institutional realm.[11] CoCom operated through a multilayered apparatus of committees and negotiations that selectively governed the circulation of goods and technologies. Its central node in the US Embassy in Paris, connected to member states through advanced telecommunication systems, enabled near-instantaneous coordination, while control lists were continuously renegotiated across different institutional levels and political arenas. Alongside this institutional architecture, dense bilateral and corporate interactions further shaped the terms of circulation, often stretching or undermining the very regulatory principles CoCom sought to enforce. At its various negotiating interfaces—between member states, between members and controlled states, between companies and their governments, and between companies and controlled states—multiple, overlapping, and often competing temporal-spatial logics converged around the same objects, revealing transit as a contested and co-produced process rather than a neutral passage.

Historians have largely approached CoCom through the prism of the 'economic Cold War', focusing on both its institutional architecture and the divergent practices of its member states. While much of this literature addresses the socialist bloc as a whole, it consistently highlights the tensions embedded within the CoCom system itself.[12] Yasuhara Yoko, for instance, demonstrates that the embargo regime emerged out of substantial disagreement, not only within the US government between military hardliners and the more flexible State Department, but also between Washington and its European allies, whose reliance on East–West trade made them resistant to broad US embargo demands.[13] Cui Pi also emphasises these internal tensions, arguing that the Reagan administration's increasing recourse to sanctions intensified centrifugal pressures within CoCom and contributed to its eventual dissolution in 1994.[14] Political science scholarship at the time likewise offered broad assessments contrasting the US preference for comprehensive control lists with Western European support for a more limited small-list approach.[15] Taken together, this literature provides a foundation for analysing intra-alliance asymmetries, but remains largely confined to the level of policy disagreement, paying limited attention to concrete practices of restriction. This article shifts the focus to these practices and their effects, examining how export controls targeting China shaped the operation and limits of the CoCom regime.

Studies of CoCom controls on China have most often proceeded through a predominantly US-centred lens, albeit with some attention to other Western actors.[16] Much of this literature has focused on how Japan and Britain attempted to reconcile US strategic imperatives with their own

[11]Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Doing Global History: An Introduction in 6 Concepts* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Martin Dusinberre, 'Writing the On-Board: Meiji Japan in Transit and Transition', *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 2 (2016): 271–94; Gopalan Balachandran, 'Indefinite Transits: Mobility and Confinement in the Age of Steam', *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 2 (2016): 187–208.

[12]Libbey, 'CoCom, Comecon, and the Economic Cold War', 133–52; Ian Jackson, *The Economic Cold War: America, Britain and East–West Trade 1948–63* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Alan P. Dobson, *US Economic Statecraft for Survival 1933–1991: Of Sanctions, Embargoes and Economic Warfare* (Routledge, 2002).

[13]Yoko Yasuhara, 'U.S. Economic Warfare and the Embargo on China, 1945–50', *Kokusai Seiji*, no. 70 (1982): 31–46.

[14]Cui Pi, *Meiguo de lengzhan zhanlue yu Bali tongchou weiyuanhui, Zhongguo weiyuanhui: 1949–94* (Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 472–512; Hanns-Dieter Jacobsen, 'U.S. Policy in COCOM', in *The Reagan Administration: A Reconstruction of American Strength?*, ed. Helga Haftendorn and Jakob Schissler (De Gruyter, 1988).

[15]Angela Stent, *From Embargo to Ostpolitik: The Political Economy of West German-Soviet Relations, 1955–1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Hanns-Dieter Jacobsen, 'European Perspectives', in *Export Controls in Transition: Perspectives, Problems, and Prospects*, ed. Gary K. Bertsch and Steven Elliott-Gower (Duke University Press, 1992); Reinhard Rode, *Wieviel Exportkontrolle COCOM auf dem Prüfstand*, *HSFK-Report* 6/1988, July 1988.

[16]Jingdong Yuan, 'The Politics of the Strategic Triangle: The U.S., COCOM, and Export Controls on China, 1979–1989', *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1995): 47–79; Michael Mastanduno, *Economic Containment: CoCom and The Politics of East–West Trade* (Cornell University Press, 1992); Cui, *Meiguo de lengzhan zhanlue*; Hugo Meijer, *Trading with the Enemy: The Making of US Export Control Policy toward the People's Republic of China* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

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economic interests, an understandable emphasis, given Japan's geographic and cultural proximity to China and Britain's stake in Hong Kong and wider interests in South-East Asia.[17] More recent studies have moved beyond explanations grounded solely in great-power geopolitics, showing how competition from Japan and Western European countries pressured Washington to relax export restrictions at both unilateral and multilateral levels.[18] Yet allied states continue to appear primarily as external constraints on US policy rather than as differently positioned actors within an asymmetrical alliance order.

West Germany's limited political room for manoeuvre offers a particularly instructive vantage point for examining the dynamics of export control coordination.[19] Although Bonn also supported a relaxation of controls on China for economic reasons, its policy remained filtered through the imperatives of German unification and the overriding importance of maintaining stable arrangements with both the United States and the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, this translated into a position largely aligned with US policy, one that persisted beyond the end of the occupation regime, as the constitutional commitment to eventual unification implied a more circumscribed understanding of sovereignty.[20] The security doctrine pursued since the Willy Brandt era, a dual strategy combining anchoring in the Western alliance (*Westbindung*) with engagement towards Eastern Europe (*Neue Ostpolitik*), repeatedly came into tension with CoCom's evolving efforts to grant special treatment to China. On the one hand, Bonn sought to act as a coordinator within CoCom, positioning itself as a balancing force within emerging Western European consensus when economic interests diverged from those of the United States.[21] On the other hand, it adopted a cautious stance towards the liberalisation of controls on China, wary that any formalised preferential treatment might provoke Soviet opposition.

This article draws primarily on German archival sources from the Federal Chancellery, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Economics, the Ministry for Research and Technology (BMFT), and the Ministry of Defence (BMVg), complemented by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) files from the US National Archives, selected Chinese materials from the Shanghai Municipal Archives, and a small number of British Foreign Office files. It examines different categories of controlled trade, ranging from a broad spectrum of industrial goods in the 1950s to military equipment and advanced technologies in the late Cold War. These shifts reflected changing and contested understandings of what constituted strategically significant goods.[22] The early China embargo covered a broad range of goods, including as many as 207 items outside the CoCom control lists, since even basic or outdated products could have significant effects given China's level of economic development.[23] As controls were gradually relaxed from the late 1970s onwards, the focus

[17]Li Mingnan, 'Chaoxian zhanzheng qijian Riben dui Hua chukou guanzhi zhengce de tiaozheng', *Shijie lishi*, no. 2 (2025): 20–35; Cui Pi, *Lengzhan shiqi MeiRi guanxishi yanjiu* (Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 2013); Li Mingnan, '1957 nian Riben feichu "Zhongguo chabie" zhengce yu dui Mei jiaoshe: yi Riben jiemi dang'an wei zhongxin de kaocha', *Shilin*, no. 2 (2024): 45–55; Yoko Yasuhara, 'Japan, Communist China, and Export Controls in Asia, 1948–52', *Diplomatic History* 10, no. 1 (1986): 75–91; Frank M. Cain, 'Exporting the Cold War: British Responses to the USA's Establishment of COCOM, 1947–51', *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 3 (1994): 501–22.

[18]Biying Gong, 'Indispensable Allied Collaboration: The Coordinating Committee and US Export Control Policies of China, 1966–80', *Journal of Contemporary History* 60, no. 4 (2025): 669–89.

[19]On West Germany as a 'political dwarf' in conservative discourse, see Hans Peter Schwarz, *Die Zentralmacht Europas. Deutschlands Rückkehr auf die Weltbühne* (Siedler Verlag, 1994), 105–51.

[20]Wilhelm G. Grewe, 'Deutschlandvertrag', in *Handbuch zur deutschen Einheit 1949–1989–1999*, ed. Werner Weidenfeld and Karl-Rudolf Korte (Campus Verlag, 1999), 297; Sebastian Gehrig, 'Dividing the Indivisible: Cold War Sovereignty, National Division, and the German Question at the United Nations', *Central European History* 55, no. 1 (2022): 70–89.

[21]Telegram from Paris (Diplo), 5 October 1982, B 136/23491, BArchK.

[22]Alan Dobson, 'Some Thoughts about Concepts and Explanation', in *East–West Trade and the Cold War*, ed. Jari Eloranta and Jari Ojala (Jyväskylä University Printing House, 2005).

[23]Cui, *Meiguo de lengzhan zhanlue*, 305–6; Economic Defense Officers Meeting, Paris, November 1952, The China Committee (CHINCOM), 1, RDP62-00647A000200110005, CREST System, National Archives at College Park (hereafter, NACP).

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increasingly narrowed to military equipment and advanced, particularly dual-use technologies such as telecommunications.

This article begins by examining the Coordinating Committee for China (ChinCom) in the 1950s, established in response to the Korean War. Even at a time when the United States possessed considerable economic leverage to enforce its embargo through foreign aid, the absence of a coherent Western strategy proved a persistent feature of the ChinCom. West Germany's constrained sovereignty and dependence on the Western alliance obligated it to comply with the strictest export controls imposed by Washington. Yet alternative export channels emerged, generating dense grey-market linkages that exposed both the limits of these controls and their unintended role in fostering new patterns of global interconnection.

The second section turns to the late 1970s and 1980s, when member states, driven by economic interests, expanded exports of military goods to China while progressively legitimising its exceptional status, thereby eroding the regime's core security principles. In the absence of an immediate military threat, commercial considerations frequently outweighed strategic caution.[24] West Germany's sensitivity to Soviet reactions, given that Moscow continued to view Beijing as a major threat well into the mid-1980s, placed West German companies at a competitive disadvantage, while preferential treatment for China became a key argument for relaxing controls across the CoCom system as a whole. The final section develops a microhistorical case study of Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm (MBB) in the satellite-communications sector, showing how economic actors operating across overlapping institutional spaces reshaped CoCom's security framework.

The disproportionate embargo and rerouting trade

In January 1950, CoCom began operations under the leadership of the Consultative Group (CG), which had been established in Paris the previous month. At that point, no export restrictions had yet been imposed on trade with Beijing.[25] The United States remained undecided as to whether China should be integrated into the global trading system or subjected to strategic export controls. Against this backdrop, tentative signs in the spring of 1950 even suggested a possible revival of Sino-German trade relations.[26] Yet the room for such uncertainty began to narrow after the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, which strengthened US concerns about China's alignment with the Soviet-led socialist bloc. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 accelerated this shift. Within a month, the United States revoked all existing export licences.[27] In October, the conflict escalated further when Mao Zedong deployed Chinese forces into the Korean Peninsula.[28] From 1 June 1951 onwards, Washington required licences for all exports to China.[29] Although armistice negotiations began as early as July 1951, active hostilities continued, as both sides sought to improve their bargaining position through military means. The economic isolation of Beijing thus emerged as a central pillar of Western policy towards China. At US initiative, CG member states established ChinCom in November 1952 as a distinct body within the broader export control system, thereby

[24]For a comparable historical pattern, see Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (Yale University Press, 2022), 14–15, 216–17.

[25]Cui Pi, 'Meiguo de ezhi zhanlue yu Bali tongchou weiyuanhui Zhongguo weiyuanhui lungang', *Dongbei shida xuebao (Zheshe ban)*, no. 2 (2000): 50.

[26]'Übersicht über den deutsch-chinesischen Warenaustausch', B 136/17120, BArchK.

[27]Frank Cain, 'The US-led trade Embargo on China: The Origins of CHINCOM, 1947–52', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18, no. 4 (1995): 33–54.

[28]Meijer, *Trading with the Enemy*, 36.

[29]Karl-Heinz Schlarp, 'Das Dilemma des westdeutschen Osthandels und die Entstehung des Ost-Ausschusses der Deutschen Wirtschaft 1950–1952', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 41, no. 2 (1993): 240.

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institutionalising the Western trade embargo against China.[30] This more restrictive treatment of China was later referred to as the China differential.

The embargo did not end China's efforts to preserve commercial ties with Western economies. Beijing still needed machinery, equipment, and precision instruments essential to socialist construction, many of which could be obtained only from West Germany and other advanced industrial economies. The embargo therefore created a tangible geographical barrier, but it did not produce a complete rupture. Instead, it encouraged rerouting. After learning in December 1950 of impending US economic countermeasures, China's Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission instructed Chinese agencies to expedite shipments of 'existing orders already placed' with suppliers in West Germany, other European countries, and the sterling area 'as quickly as possible'. Where this was not feasible, remittances were to be withdrawn or redirected towards immediately available spot purchases 'so as to save time'.[31]

This section examines two such cases—the re-export of West German goods via East Berlin and British companies—to demonstrate how, even under embargo conditions, goods reached China through transit and trans-shipment mechanisms. These cases reveal that the embargo did not block the flow of restricted products to China; rather, it created commercial opportunities for intermediaries and raised coordination costs for member states. In this sense, ChinCom reshaped patterns of circulation by encouraging indirect trading routes within a system ostensibly designed to enforce disconnection.

The embargo, originally envisaged as a uniform measure across all participating states, affected West German businesses especially strongly due to West Germany's limited sovereignty and constrained political latitude. Under the Occupation Statute and Military Government Law No. 53, the Allied High Commission (AHC) could intervene in individual export transactions.[32] In Bonn, supporters of the embargo ultimately prevailed despite internal disagreements, presenting it as an 'effective political instrument' in the struggle against communist states.[33] This stance was shaped not least by US economic and military assistance, but also by the broader objective of consolidating West Germany's integration into the Western bloc.[34] As foreign policy considerations took precedence over economic interests, Bonn relegated trade with China to the margins of its political agenda. Although the expiration of the Marshall Plan in late 1951 weakened the efficacy of these restrictions, and despite Bundestag discussions on expanding East–West trade, West Germany remained under close US supervision.[35] Commercial relations with China therefore remained largely informal and were not institutionalised through government-to-government trade agreements.

German companies active in China before the Second World War nonetheless sought to re-establish their commercial presence. Their commercial ties with China had once been substantial. In 1936, imports from and exports to China accounted for 2.7% and 2.8% respectively of Germany's total foreign trade; as a share of total trade, the latter figure exceeded even the peak level of German exports to China during the 1980s.[36] The tightening embargo regime disrupted

[30]Economic Defense Officers Meeting, Paris, November 1952, The China Committee (CHINCOM), 1, RDP62-00647A000200110005, CREST System, NACP; Untitled memorandum, 1, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[31]Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan and Zhongyang dang'an guan, eds., *1949–1952: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingji dangan ziliao xuanbian: Zonghejuan* (Zhongguo chengshi jingji shehui chubanshe, 1990), 159.

[32]'Gesetz Nr. 53: Devisenbewirtschaftung', *Military Government Gazette Germany/Twenty-first Army Group Area of Control 1945*, no. 3, 22; 'Gesetz Nr. 53 (Neufassung): Devisenbewirtschaftung und Kontrolle des Güterverkehrs', *Beilage Nr. 15 zum Gesetz- und Verordnungsblatt für das Land Hessen*, no. 35/36, 19 October 1949, 89–92; Memorandum, Cologne, 17 February 1951, 72-383-1, Rheinisch-Westfälisches Wirtschaftsarchiv, Cologne (hereafter, RWWA).

[33]Schlarp, 'Das Dilemma', 233.

[34]Jackson, *The Economic Cold War*, 23.

[35]Schlarp, 'Das Dilemma', 254.

[36]'Handel mit China', B 102/57808, BArchK; Ludwig Erhard to Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, 5 June 1950, B 102/57808, BArchK.

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these established commercial networks, prompting business associations to advocate new frameworks for East–West trade. Among these initiatives was the China-Arbeitskreis (China Working Group), established in October 1952 within the Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft (German Eastern Business Association), a legally independent body with close ties to the West German Ministry for Economic Affairs.[37] It argued that West Germany should emulate the British approach, in which the semi-official China Association negotiated with Beijing, even though London and Beijing maintained diplomatic relations at chargé d'affaires level and could have acted through formal channels.[38] This logic materialised in 1957, when representatives of the Ost-Ausschuss travelled to China and concluded the first bilateral trade agreement, although the agreement remained valid for only one year and had limited practical effect.[39] To accommodate the semi-official status of the Ost-Ausschuss, the Chinese signatory was not the central government but the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), a state-sponsored semi-official organisation established in the early 1950s partly in response to the US-led trade embargo.[40] Both governments merely acknowledged the agreement through an exchange of letters.[41] Until the establishment of diplomatic relations, it remained the only bilateral trade agreement of its kind between the two countries.

Other organisations such as the Deutsche China-Gesellschaft (DCG, German China Society) also formed part of a broader China lobby within West German business circles.[42] The DCG even received visiting Chinese delegations from East Berlin and hinted at the possibility of establishing official relations between the two countries without any authorisation from the federal government.[43] Such initiatives revealed the tension between Bonn's political alignment with the Western embargo and the commercial interests of West German companies.

The most accessible interlocutors for West German companies in the early 1950s were Chinese representatives and trade missions operating in East Berlin and East Germany. These companies showed little hesitation in engaging with trade organisations that Beijing had established there for explicitly political purposes. During the negotiations for a Sino-East German trade agreement in 1950, both sides directed their attention towards West Germany.[44] East Germany sought to channel all Sino-West German trade through its own territory, positioning itself as an intermediary between Beijing and Bonn and presenting this arrangement as a means of preserving a semblance of German economic unity.[45] Beijing, for its part, was prepared to accommodate these preferences, not least because the embargo created an acute dependence on West German industrial goods.

Out of these negotiations emerged the China Export Corporation (CEC), formally organised as a *GmbH* (limited-liability company) but in practice operating as an extension of the East German

[37]'Status des Ost-Ausschusses', 21 June 1954, B 102/57827, BArchK.

[38]'How Can East–West Trade Be Rehabilitated?', *Wirtschaftsdienst Monthly Review* (English Edition), ed. Hamburgisches Weltwirtschafts-Archiv and Institut für Weltwirtschaft an der Uni Kiel, October 1952, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[39]Bernd Ziesemer, *Maos Deutscher Topagent: Wie China die Bundesrepublik eroberte* (Campus Verlag, 2023), 100; 'Zhongguo jixie jinchukou gongsi guanyu Zhongguo he Xide maoyi de dafu', 15 November 1957, B230-2-43-31, Shanghai Municipal Archives, Shanghai (hereafter, SHA).

[40]'Vermerk. Besuch beim China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT)', 9 March 1978, 175-32-2, RWWA.

[41]'Zhonghua renmin gongheguo he Deyizhi lianbang gongheguo shuangfang zhengfu bumen guanyu cushi maoyi xieding shixian de gonghan', 20 August 1956 and 26 September 1967, Treaty Database, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.

[42]Otto Wolff von Amerongen, *Der Weg nach Osten: Vierzig Jahre Brückenbau für die deutsche Wirtschaft* (Droemer Knaur, 1992), 264; Ziesemer, *Maos Deutscher Topagent*, 102.

[43]'Chinesische Handelsdelegation besucht Ruhrgebiet', *Industriekurier* 11, no. 67, 6 May 1958, 1.

[44]Ge Jun, 'Shilun xin Zhongguo yu Minzhu Deguo de zaoqi maoyi guanxi (1950–1955)', *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, no. 11 (2016): 70–83, 73.

[45]Ibid., 72–3.

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Ministry of Foreign Trade.[46] Bonn attempted to classify the CEC as illegal and to prohibit West German companies from entering into contractual relations with it; however, enforcing such restrictions proved difficult.[47] West German business associations such as the Ost-Ausschuss concluded that the CEC had become a fait accompli: if West German companies refused to route transactions through the CEC, business would simply pass to competitors in countries such as Britain or France.[48]

Although the CEC soon proved incapable of fulfilling its ambitious mandate, it nonetheless maintained a channel through which goods could reach China.[49] In practice, it functioned as 'an extended and largely unregulated inter-zonal trade mechanism'.[50] Evidence of these clandestine operations often surfaces only indirectly through cases uncovered by the authorities. In 1955, *Die Zeit* reported on a case dating back to 1951–53, in which the haulier Knopke smuggled precision instruments from the Askania plant in West Berlin into East Berlin, from where they were forwarded to China via the CEC.[51] Such incidents were likely only the visible portion of a much larger trade. In 1951, the Panamanian-flagged vessel *Montesa*, under the effective control of a Chinese company, prepared in Hamburg to load transit cargo originating in East Germany and destined for China.[52] East German authorities attempted to exploit the legal definition of 'transit goods', which were not formally subject to export restrictions, by routing the cargo through the Hamburg free port. The US Consul intervened directly to block the loading. Hamburg, still mindful of the recent Morella episode, an attempted shipment to China during which its effort to resist US intervention had failed, promptly acquiesced.[53] Although the shipment was prevented from leaving Hamburg, it eventually reached China through a port in the Low Countries.[54] Repeated US interventions in similar cases prompted Bonn to tighten its supervision of strategic goods reconsigned through the Hamburg free port. By the following year, the US Department of State and the Mutual Security Agency acknowledged that West Germany had made progress, while criticising the Free Port of Antwerp for continuing to permit extensive illicit re-export.[55]

Beijing also adapted its institutional presence in Europe to this rerouting economy. In 1953, it established a branch of the China National Import and Export Corporation (CNIEC) at the Johannishof Hotel in East Berlin. A CIA assessment described the office as strategically significant, noting that it served as the main purchaser of strategic goods in Western Europe needed to support the Chinese war effort on the Korean Peninsula.[56] Beijing continued to take East Germany's special interests into account. CNIEC avoided signing contracts directly with West

[46]'Memorandum für den Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie und das Bundeswirtschaftsministerium zur Lage und den Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten im deutschen China-Handel', 25 September 1952, B 102/57808, BArchK; Information Report, Germany (Russian Zone), Personalities and Organisation of China Export Corporation and DEAG, 18 May 1951, RDP82-00457R00700046001, CREST System, NACP.

[47]Federal Office for Commercial Goods Traffic to Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs, 21 October 1953, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[48]Senator for Trade and Food of Berlin to the Federal Minister of Economics, 29 July 1953, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[49]On the failure of the CEC, see Ge, 'Shilun xin Zhongguo yu Minzhu Deguo', 75–8.

[50]'Memorandum für den Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie und das Bundeswirtschaftsministerium', 25 September 1952, 5, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[51]'Die Geschäfte der Askania', *Die Zeit*, 7 April 1955.

[52]On the use of Panamanian-flagged vessels as 'flags of convenience' to obscure ownership and operational control in early Cold War maritime trade, see Meng Yang and Huixin Huo, 'Grey Ships under the Red Flag: China, Poland, the 1952 Chipolbrok Flag Dispute and Maritime Geopolitics during the Early Cold War', *History* 111, no. 396 (2026): 423–5.

[53]Dietrich Eberhard Gross, 'Westdeutschlands Chinahandel im Zeichen der weltpolitischen Spannungen', *Wirtschaftsdienst*, no. 10 (1951): 24–8, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[54]'AUDIATUR ET ALTERA PARS', *Übersee Rundschau*, no. 4 (1952), 87, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[55]'Fourth Progress Report on NSC 104/2: United States Policies and Programs in the Economic Field Which May Affect the War Potential of the Soviet Bloc', 1 March 1952, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter, *FRUS*), *1952–1954, General: Economic and Political Matters*, vol. I, part 2 (Government Printing Office, 1983), 835–46.

[56]'Secret Security Information. China National Import Export Corporation', 23 May 1956, RDP79T01049A001600310002, CREST System, NACP.

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German companies; instead, it transferred contracts to the CEC for formal signature, while providing confirmation through separate letters.[57] The arrangement thus rested on mutual accommodation: Beijing acquired an institutional foothold in Europe, while East Berlin retained a formal intermediary role in Sino-West German trade. Nor was East Berlin the only such conduit. Goods that could no longer be obtained directly from West Germany could be routed through Poland, Czechoslovakia, and other socialist-bloc intermediaries.[58] By 1956, French officials were already describing this situation as 'grotesque'.[59] West German authorities similarly acknowledged considerable opportunities for evasion, not only through East European re-export routes but also through inadequate trans-shipment controls in certain Western countries.[60]

Companies and intermediaries in several states participating in the embargo, most notably Britain, became involved in forwarding restricted goods to China. These practices undermined the very vision of a world market from which China was to be excluded and demonstrated the limits of the strategy of economic containment. A directive issued by China's Ministry of Foreign Trade in October 1955 revealed Beijing's acute awareness of Bonn's weak position in trade with China. It instructed that 'non-embargoed goods ordinarily purchased from West Germany were to be sourced from other countries whenever feasible' and stipulated that:

> Only where procurement from West Germany was unavoidable should orders be placed, and in such cases they were to be handled exclusively through the Chinese representative office in East Berlin. Goods falling under the West German embargo were to be obtained through re-export channels. Where purchases were arranged through a third party, specifically a non-West German intermediary, letters of credit were to be issued to that intermediary on a non-transferable and indivisible basis. Under these conditions, Chinese buyers could still acquire West German products indirectly.[61]

These instructions reveal that the 'third party' played an even more consequential role than East Berlin itself in constructing the grey zones of global commerce. US records show that Washington recognised very early the centrality of transit trade and trans-shipments in circumventing controls on strategic goods, describing them as a 'significant loophole in the international security trade control effort' and repeatedly expressing frustration at British non-cooperation.[62] Britain's colonial trading system, particularly its maritime shipping routes, provided multiple opportunities to bypass controls.[63] West German companies, too, made use of British shipping networks to deliver goods to China, although these operations remained under continuous surveillance by US authorities.

A 1954 case illustrates these dynamics. Cornelis Goinga, a trade control officer with the US High Commissioner for Germany (HICOG), received information indicating that the Bremen-based company Westerschulte, Wegener & Co. intended to ship 2,000 Dodge-brand truck wheels to a business partner in Shanghai via the London company MacDonald, Hall & Co. Ltd. Goinga urged Bonn to investigate the case and accused the company of repeated involvement in illicit

[57]'Vermerk. Betr.: Arbeitskreis China', 11 September 1953, 2, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[58]Cui, *Meiguo de lengzhan zhanlue*, 14; H. Kraft, 'Fragezeichen Chinageschäft', *Die Zeit*, 1 April 1954; Meng Yang, '"Unwilling to Awaken": The Special Status of the Poland–China Route and Polish-Sino Shipping Cooperation in the Early 1950s', *Cold War History* 26, no. 2 (2026): 175–95.

[59]Excerpt from the Report of the Embassy in Paris, 14 February 1956, no. 1419/56, B 63-REF. 413/IIIA6/268, PA AA.

[60]Statement of the German Delegation, 5 November 1956, B 63-REF. 413/IIIA6/268, PA AA.

[61]'Zhongguo jixie jinchukou gongsi guanyu xiang Xide dinghuo wenti de han', 24 October 1955, B230-2-8-98, SHA.

[62]'Sixth Progress Report on NSC 104/22. United States Policies and Programs in the Economic Field which May Affect the War Potential of the Soviet Bloc', *FRUS, 1952–1954*, vol. I, part 2, 919; 'First Progress Report on "United States Policy on Economic Defense", NSC 152/3', *FRUS, 1952–1954*, vol. I, part 2, 1239–55.

[63]On Hong Kong's importance to Britain's limited compliance with the China embargo during the Korean War, see Shuguang Zhang, *Beijing's Economic Statecraft during the Cold War, 1949–1991* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2014), 316.

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trade with China.[64] On 8 April 1954, one day before the freighter *Kieldrecht* was scheduled to depart from Rotterdam, Bonn revoked the export licences of the companies involved without conducting a formal inquiry. Most of the wheels were offloaded in Rotterdam, but a portion stored at the bottom of the ship's hold could not be unloaded in time; it was discharged in Hong Kong before continuing to China.[65]

Britain also demonstrated a willingness to confront the United States over the easing of controls, especially after the expiration of US economic aid weakened a key instrument of leverage. The most striking example was Britain's unilateral abolition of the China differential in 1957. After the end of the Korean War, British officials increasingly regarded the more restrictive controls as anachronistic, but consultations with the United States produced no tangible progress.[66] The tractor incident of 1956 further highlighted Britain's assertiveness within CoCom. The case concerned a British request for an exceptional licence to export heavy agricultural tractors exceeding 50 horsepower, which the United States considered to have potential strategic value, whereas Western European countries insisted on their overwhelmingly civilian use.[67] The United States was the only country to oppose the British export licence. London nonetheless disregarded Washington's veto.[68] France went even further, exporting tractors valued at US$540,000 to China without prior notification to CoCom.[69]

West Germany's limited political room for manoeuvre allowed it only to engage in what officials described as 'candid discussion' when submitting its request to export 150 tractors. The US response consisted merely of a terse rejection. The German Foreign Office subsequently reduced its request to an exceptional licence for thirty tractors and justified it by invoking the French and British precedents as well as the dire condition of the German tractor industry. It emphasised that this was an isolated case and that Bonn had scrupulously adhered to the licensing principles outlined in US diplomatic notes.[70] Somewhat ironically, when Bonn continued to pursue a conciliatory line towards Washington's position even after London's unilateral lifting of the China differential, Washington rewarded Bonn at the CoCom meeting by approving its original request to export 150 tractors.[71]

Exceptional approvals thus became an instrument through which the United States encouraged West Germany's continued support for the broader embargo regime. West German exporters, however, increasingly regarded the system as unfair and discriminatory. They collected press reports on British trade activities and submitted them to the federal government.[72] British authorities themselves acknowledged that their shipping list was, in practice, enforced no more strictly than the existing international embargo regulations.[73] The consequences of this unequal

[64]Cornelis J.H. Goinga, Trade Control Officer, Office of the United States High Commissioner for Germany, to Richertsen, 10 March 1954, B 102/56055, BArchK.

[65]'Rechtsfolgen bei Widerruf von Lieferungsgenehmigungen', 4 May 1954, B 102/56055, BArchK; 'Vermerk über die Besprechung im Bundesministerium der Finanzen am 12.7.1954', 19 July 1954, B 102/56055, BArchK.

[66]Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, Paris, 'Französische Pressestimmen zur einseitigen Aufgabe des Chinazusatzembargos durch Großbritannien', 31 May 1957, B 63-REF. 413/IIIA6/218, PA AA.

[67]On the embargo on tractors, see Valeria Zanier, 'Counterbalancing Low Expectations with High Hopes: Integrating Global Technology and pre-1949 Legacy in China's Motor Vehicle Industry in the 1950s', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 30, no. 3 (2023), 370–90, 377.

[68]'Aufzeichnung betreffend Besprechungen mit den Delegierten der wichtigsten Cocom-Länder in Paris am 30. und 31. August 1956', B 63-REF. 413/IIIA6/268, PA AA.

[69]Foreign Office to the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Washington, 10 October 1956, B 63-REF. 413/IIIA6/268, PA AA.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Memorandum by Division 413, VLR Dr von Zahn-Stranik, 3 June 1957, B 63-REF. 413/IIIA6/218, PA AA.

[72]Werner Habermann, head of the export office at Daimler-Benz AG, to Ockard, press officer at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs, 23 April 1951, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[73]'Arbeitsgemeinschaft Aussenhandel der Deutschen Wirtschaft Ost-Ausschuss. Rundschreiben IV/9/54', 3 July 1954, 2, B 102/7225, BArchK.

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treatment are illustrated in the recollections of Hans Wilhelm Siegel, who worked at Bayer AG's liaison office in Hong Kong during the 1950s. He recalled that Bayer was compelled to channel its China-related business through a small London-based intermediary, as direct trade with the Chinese mainland remained prohibited for West German companies.[74]

The Bundestag also recognised this unequal competitive landscape. In 1956, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) politician Hermann Schwann, serving as the DCG's political liaison in Bonn, criticised the delegation of negotiating authority to the private gremium Ost-Ausschuss and called for the establishment of a permanent German commercial mission in China.[75] He argued that 80 per cent of West German exports to China were being channelled through third countries, a pattern that exposed both the diminished competitiveness of West German companies and the missed opportunities inherent in the absence of direct commercial relations.[76] Schwann's intervention contributed to the conclusion of the 1957 bilateral trade agreement, although the agreement was negotiated by the Ost-Ausschuss.

From the initially broad consensus surrounding the embargo to the increasingly fragmented landscape that emerged after the end of the Korean War, the evolution of transit and trans-shipment networks reveals a striking pattern. Strategic goods that could no longer be procured directly from West Germany still reached China indirectly, whether through East Berlin and the socialist bloc, or via Western European countries where enforcement of embargo regulations, as in the case of British companies, remained relatively lax. These indirect routes transformed what had once been a bilateral trading relationship into complex configurations, producing a–b–c or even a–b–c–d supply chains. The examples discussed above also show that East Germany not only exploited this network but also used it to strengthen its commercial links with West German businesspeople. Britain, for its part, consolidated its relative position in East Asian trade at West Germany's expense; officials in the German Foreign Office went so far as to describe Hong Kong as 'a sieve' for British exports.[77]

The emergence of the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s made the Soviet bloc less viable as a transit zone for Chinese access to Western industrial goods. East Germany's alignment with Moscow further diminished East Berlin's earlier intermediary role. CoCom members initiated a gradual, though often internally contradictory, relaxation of control measures.[78] At the same time, China deepened its commercial relations with Western European countries and Japan, treating them as alternatives to Soviet-style modernisation.[79] West Germany, however, continued to occupy a politically vulnerable position within the Western export control regime. This became evident in 1964, when Sino-West German negotiations over a bilateral trade agreement in Bern collapsed as a direct result of US intervention, and again in 1965, when Bonn issued an export guarantee for a cold-rolling mill project involving a European consortium headed by a West German company.[80] Washington responded with considerable anger, while Bonn could do little more than defend the project as a European contract; both France and Britain ignored US criticism.[81]

[74]Hans Wilhelm Siegel to Kurt Hansen, 7 April 1992, 302-1009, Bayer AG, Bayer Archives Leverkusen.

[75]Hans-Dietrich Genscher, *Meine Sicht der Dinge: Im Gespräch mit Hans-Dieter Heumann* (Propyläen, 2015), 61.

[76]'Deutscher Bundestag, 177. Sitzung, Bonn, Donnerstag, 6. Dezember 1956', 9811–15.

[77]Memorandum by Campbell, 28 July 1953, B 102/57808, BArchK.

[78]Jackson, *The Economic Cold War*, 159.

[79]Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split. Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 180; Valeria Zanier, 'Energizing Relations: Western European Industrialists and China's Dream of Self-Reliance: The Case of Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (1956–1965)', *Modern Asian Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 133–69.

[80]'Gespräch des Bundeskanzlers Erhard mit Präsident Johnson in Washington', 12 June 1964, *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1964* (hereafter, *AAPD)*, 657; 'Erhard: Keine Beziehungen zu China', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 July 1964, 2.

[81]'Botschafter Knappstein, Washington, an das Auswärtige Amt', 22 March 1966, *AAPD 1966*, 338–41; Erhard Louven, 'Bilateral Foreign Economic Relations between China and the Federal Republic of Germany', *Osteuropa* 38, no. 7/8 (1988):

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Although China's role within CoCom in the 1960s and during China's period of self-imposed isolation in the Cultural Revolution still merits closer examination, this article argues that the institutionalisation of preferential treatment for China within CoCom from the late 1970s onwards, driven by the US desire to counterbalance the Soviet Union, most clearly exposes the internal dynamics of economic competition among member states. As national industries sought to secure advantages in the Chinese market, restricted goods increasingly flowed towards Chinese ports. A regime conceived to produce a disconnected technological order in the name of security thus came to accommodate, and in some respects facilitate, new forms of connection.

From disconnected security regimes to connected trade networks: Dynamic geopolitics and enduring economic interests

As China's involvement in Vietnam deepened in 1966, the US State Department launched a systematic internal review of China policy and export controls.[82] China re-emerged as a substantive issue during the 1968–69 CoCom list review, when member states renegotiated the scope of the so-called second China differential and retained additional restrictions on forty-two items considered relevant to China's nuclear programme. As Western perceptions of China's geopolitical position changed, however, controls on China had largely converged with those applied to the Soviet Union by the mid-1970s.[83] This trajectory unfolded amid persistent divergences among CoCom member states, which continued to shape intra-CoCom dynamics throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Although a general consensus emerged in favour of easing restrictions, liberalisation was driven as much by economic competition as by strategic realignment. The result was not simply a weakening of CoCom's security principles, but its transformation into a negotiated space through which selective technological circulation could be enabled, delayed, or politically obscured.

For West Germany, the adjustment of export controls towards China proved particularly difficult to reconcile with its broader Cold War strategy. The Sino-Soviet border clashes coincided with the emergence of *Neue Ostpolitik*, under which Bonn prioritised détente with Moscow. The Soviet Union regarded China as a major strategic adversary and closely monitored West German interactions with Beijing, occasionally issuing warnings to Bonn.[84] West German policymakers therefore treated China initiatives with particular caution.[85] Even the Ost-Ausschuss, which represented West German economic interests, aligned itself with this approach. Trade with the Warsaw Pact far exceeded trade with China, and Soviet officials were fully aware of the Ost-Ausschuss's semi-official character.

Bonn maintained this cautious line even when initiatives emerged below the federal level. China understood Bonn's restrictive posture and therefore did not seek to discuss arms transactions directly with federal authorities. Yet subnational actors and individual defence manufacturers occasionally attempted to open such channels. One prominent example was Heinz-Herbert Karry (FDP), the Economics Minister of Hesse, who maintained close ties to business circles active in trade with China.[86] During his 1977 visit to China, Karry suggested

767–79, 769. On US Secretary of State Dean Rusk's warning to Bonn, see 'Rusk mahnt Bonn zur Vorsicht', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 March 1966, 3.

[82]Gong, 'Indispensable Allied Collaboration', 669–89.

[83]Ibid.; Biying Gong, 'Computers for China: Technology Trade and the Transformation of the Cold War in East Asia, 1968–80', *Journal of Global History* 20, no. 3 (2025): 383–403; Meijer, *Trading with the Enemy*, 36–9.

[84]Lili Li, 'Zwischen Erwartung und Illusion: Die Logik der bundesdeutschen China-Politik 1974–1990' (PhD diss., University of Munich, 2025), 97, 137–8.

[85]Lili Li, '"Domesticating" China through Economics? The Logic of West Germany's China Policy 1974–1990', *Contemporary European History* 35 (2026): e76, accessed 30 July 2026, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777326101751.

[86]Karry was assassinated in 1981 by the left-wing extremist group Revolutionäre Zellen. He was one of the most outspoken advocates of expanding West German commercial engagement with China throughout the 1970s.

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granting Chinese specialists access to defence-industrial facilities in Hesse and indicated that several companies in his delegation could supply military products and technologies.[87] When a Chinese delegation of six general staff officers accepted the invitation to visit Hesse in 1978, Bonn immediately distanced itself from the initiative and denied any federal involvement.[88] Once such overtures reached Bonn, federal authorities rejected them unequivocally and made clear that no export licences would be granted.

Bonn's rejection of subnational initiatives did not mean that China remained peripheral to Western export-control debates. On the contrary, the late 1970s saw a cautious reassessment of restrictions on China across several CoCom member states. Scholars generally agree that Washington promoted closer relations with Beijing in order to incorporate China into a wider containment framework directed against Moscow.[89] Relaxing restrictions on military-related equipment formed part of this recalibration, although the Carter administration remained constrained by domestic opposition from the Taiwan lobby.[90] Washington therefore also looked to its allies to support the modernisation of the Chinese armed forces by easing restrictions on selected categories of strategic exports.[91]

Britain pursued a similar logic. The future of Hong Kong constrained London's willingness to take risks, while Beijing's turn towards economic modernisation reduced the appeal of high-cost arms sales.[92] By 1979, Britain was already engaged in negotiations with China over the Harrier fighter jet and had expressed interest in supplying targeting and reconnaissance technologies for land and naval forces, items listed both on the CoCom munitions list and on the strategic goods list.[93] To facilitate such exports, Britain proposed the so-called 'no-comment' principle as a means of streamlining the approval process. Under this arrangement, export requests would be considered approved unless another member state raised an explicit objection within a designated time frame. Rather than initiating a formal debate within CoCom, the British delegation introduced the proposal informally in bilateral discussions with individual member states. Although the 'no-comment' procedure was formally applicable to all communist countries, British officials understood it primarily as a device for facilitating exports to China.[94] The proposal nevertheless encountered resistance within the German Foreign Office, despite its potential benefits for West German dual-use exports.[95]

France likewise benefited from China's balancing effect on the Soviet Union but approached cooperation as a means of strengthening its own strategic autonomy.[96] When France sought to export Franco-German co-produced HOT anti-tank missiles to China, Bonn adopted a posture of tacit non-opposition, refraining from endorsement while distancing itself from the political

[87]Ambassador Erwin Wickert to the Foreign Office, 10 December 1977, N/1785/189, BArchK.

[88]On indications of China's interest in cooperation in the defence-industrial sector, see 'Direktorenkonsultation in Washington', 29 May 1978, *AAPD 1978*, 812.

[89]Meijer, *Trading with the Enemy*, 56; S. Mahmud Ali, *US–China Cold War Collaboration, 1971–1989* (Routledge, 2005).

[90]Setzekorn, 'Structural Dissonance', 37–63. The Carter administration made an initial commitment to supply China with dual-use technologies and non-lethal military equipment. Divisions 340/341 to the State Secretary, 21 September 1981, 7, B 37/125306, PA AA.

[91]'Aufzeichnung des Staatssekretärs Hermes', 15 June 1978, *AAPD 1978*, 938.

[92]Martin Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People's Republic of China, 1969–1982* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 158–9.

[93]On the 11 June 1979 Ministry of Defence discussion and subsequent British negotiations with China, including over the Harrier fighter jet, see Confidential Teleletter from R.J.T. Mclaren, 26 February 1980, FCO 21/1820, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter, TNA). On the planned exports, which included military targeting devices, electronic targeting systems, night-vision equipment for tanks, target-acquisition systems for artillery, and naval communication systems, see letter from the head of Division V of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs to the Federal Minister for Economic Affairs, 4 May 1979, 1, B 102/286199, BArchK.

[94]Division IV, Ministry for Economic Affairs, to the Minister of State, 2 May 1979, 2, B 102/286199, BArchK.

[95]'Aufzeichnung des Ministerialdirektors Lautenschlager', 21 June 1978, *AAPD 1978*, 984.

[96]Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany,* 148–50.

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implications of the transfer.[97] The Federal Ministry of Defence (Bev) deliberately prevented official contacts between the German co-producer MBB and the Chinese side, arguing that any publicly visible West German involvement in 'a project formally carried by France alone' might generate 'an attribution of political co-responsibility'.[98] West German authorities thus sought less to halt technological circulation as such than to regulate its political visibility and attribution.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 further sharpened the contrast between China and the Soviet Union. While CoCom tightened its stance towards Moscow through the no-exception policy, China increasingly came to be treated as a special case.[99] Under Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State Alexander Haig emphasised the strategic importance of US–China relations and signalled to the Chinese government that arms transfers were no longer categorically off the table.[100] From September 1981, under US leadership, a broad consensus began to emerge among CoCom member states in favour of informally permitting arms exports to China.[101] West German officials wanted to avoid any impression that they were tilting towards Beijing against Moscow. They therefore maintained a de facto zero-export policy in the military sphere and consistently opposed the formal recognition of preferential status for China within CoCom. At the same time, Bonn supported the US-led informal approach because it preserved room for flexible treatment without changing CoCom's formal rules.[102]

This informal relaxation of controls soon fed into open commercial competition, intensified by China's limited foreign-exchange reserves. Britain's offer of the Harrier fighter jet lost its appeal due to strong US competition and Chinese dissatisfaction with Britain's high pricing; the deal ultimately failed to materialise.[103] Instead, US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of military avionics in Beijing in 1983, aimed at enhancing China's defensive capabilities, particularly against Soviet aerial attacks and reconnaissance operations.[104] Although the United States did not export military aircraft to China in the short term, this positive signal, together with Washington's persistent advocacy of looser CoCom controls, strengthened the competitive position of US industry. In 1985, China chose McDonnell Douglas as its partner in the civil aviation sector, in large part because it was a leading producer of military aircraft such as the F-15 and F-18. From the Chinese perspective, the close technological integration of civilian and military aircraft production presented an opportunity to strengthen domestic defence capabilities through the import of ostensibly civilian systems, as a Chinese negotiating document at the time makes clear.[105]

During high-level bilateral meetings in the 1980s, Chinese officials also pressed West German delegations to clarify Bonn's overall stance within CoCom. These inquiries reflected a broader dynamic in which other member states capitalised on West Germany's cautious approach to secure stronger political backing for their own industries in the Chinese market. The United States, for instance, signalled in Beijing a general willingness to be more accommodating towards

[97]'Aufzeichnung des Ministerialdirektors Lautenschlager', 21 June 1978, *AAPD 1978*, 984.

[98]Memorandum (RÜ II) on arms exports from the FRG to China, 19 October 1978, BW 1/575481, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter, BArch-MA).

[99]Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs, 'TOP: No Exceptions Policy', 11 October 1988, B 136/23498, BArchK.

[100]'Kurzfassung über amerikanische Asienpolitik', 24 September 1981, 2, B 37/125306, PA AA; 'U.S. Reaches Accord with China on Arms Sales', *Washington Post*, 16 June 1981; Setzekorn, 'Structural Dissonance', 46–7.

[101]'Vermerk über die CoCom-Politik gegenüber China', 9 September 1982, 2, B 102/269027, BArchK.

[102]Ibid.

[103]On the decline of Chinese interest in the Harrier, Beijing's request for a price reduction after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and China's preference for future acquisitions of US aircraft, see Confidential Teleletter from R.J.T. McLaren, 26 February 1980, FCO 21/1820, TNA. On London's efforts to strengthen Sino-British relations after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, see Call on the PUS by Allen Greenwood, Deputy Chairman of British Aerospace, 5 February 1980, FCO 21/1820, TNA.

[104]Telegram from Washington to the Federal Foreign Office, no. 1002, 6 March 1986, BW 1/260258, BArch-MA.

[105]'Shangwu tanpan jianbao', 7 April 1984, B77-1-368, SHA; 'Guanyu "yinjin DC-9 chao 80 feiji zhuangpei jishu" xiangmu qingkuang', 22 June 1985, 8, B77-1-368, SHA.

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Chinese requests while simultaneously shifting responsibility for continued restraint onto its European partners, whom Washington accused of adhering to an excessively restrictive reading of CoCom rules.[106] France again informed Chinese interlocutors that Bonn would not bypass CoCom restrictions on civil nuclear exports, whereas Paris was prepared to do so, thereby strengthening France's competitive position.[107] Bonn, for its part, maintained a unified rhetorical line, declaring that it would 'not allow itself to be outdone by any of its partners' in pursuing a more liberal interpretation of the guidelines.[108]

Indeed, the Foreign Office responded positively to the gentlemen's agreement on flexible application introduced in 1985. In December that year, it concluded an agreement with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Trade on end-use certificates for dual-use goods.[109] Nonetheless, Bonn continued to adhere to the non-binding principles outlined in 1984, consciously avoiding emphasis on the differential treatment accorded to China by stressing its sovereign prerogative to determine independently which exports might merit more lenient consideration.[110] Moscow was not persuaded: it quickly denounced the arrangement as preferential treatment for China.[111]

After 1985, CoCom witnessed a failed attempt to institutionalise a more permissive set of rules for arms exports to China. The coordination process revealed that member states increasingly used their positions on China to promote their own commercial interests. The effort began with an Italian proposal submitted after Italy signed a defence-cooperation agreement with China in April 1985.[112] The proposal advocated such a broad relaxation of arms export controls to China that even the Italian delegation itself described the initiative as provocative.[113] It was rejected at an initial special meeting in October 1985. Italy then submitted a revised version, but the United States unexpectedly adopted a more restrictive stance at a second special session in April 1986.[114] By the third meeting in October that year, Washington formally rejected any comprehensive easing of arms exports to China, resulting only in a reaffirmation of the earlier understanding to grant informal 'favourable consideration'.[115] The resumption of US–Soviet dialogue in Geneva and Reykjavík, suspended since 1983, partly explains this shift. Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and détente policies inspired renewed optimism in the West, diminishing China's strategic significance within the context of great power relations.

Beyond these security-political considerations, economic interests also played a significant role. By October 1986, the CoCom procedure for US exports of military aircraft technology to China had been completed, giving Washington little incentive to extend comparable opportunities to other member states. Its more restrictive stance after 1986 did not indicate a withdrawal from its cooperative policy towards China; on the contrary, the United States continued to submit more export applications than any other country.[116] The BMVg noted that Washington deliberately

[106]Telegram from the Embassy in Beijing to the Foreign Office, 24 October 1983, 2, B 37/135888, PA AA.

[107]'Mögliche deutsch-chinesische Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet der friedlichen Nutzung der Kernenergie', Hans Werner Lautenschlager, State Secretary at the Foreign Office, 17 May 1987, 5, B 196/56091, BArchK.

[108]Telegram from the Embassy in Beijing to the Foreign Office, 24 October 1983, 2, B 37/135888, PA AA.

[109]'CoCom-Politik gegenüber der VR China', 14 July 1986, B 102/341803, BArchK.

[110]'Aufzeichnung des Ministerialdirektors Fischer', 26 January 1984, *AAPD 1984*, 129.

[111]On Soviet concerns about the possible lifting of CoCom restrictions for China, see n. 19, in 'Aufzeichnung des Ministerialdirigenten Pabsch', 26 June 1987, *AAPD 1987*, 933.

[112]Herzog (Rü II 4) to Head of Planning Staff, 6 May 1987, BW 1/262926, BArch-MA.

[113]German Foreign Office to the BMVg, 25 September 1985; West German Embassy in Paris to the Foreign Office, 19 June 1986, 2, B 37/135901, PA AA.

[114]On Italy's bilateral discussion with the United States before the special session, and its expectation that it could secure broad support, see Kuchler (Fü S III 4) to State Secretary Rühl, 5 May 1987, BW 1/262926, BArch-MA.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Robert Price, 'COCOM after 35 Years', in *Selling the Rope to Hang Capitalism? The Debate on West–East Trade & Technology Transfer*, ed. Charles M. Perry and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff (Pergamon-Brassey's, 1987), 197. On CoCom export-application figures concerning China in 1984 and 1985, see 'Behandlung Chinas', Embassy in Paris, 1 December 1986, B 37/135891, PA AA; Nagel to the Embassy in Beijing, 27 June 1986, B 37/135891, PA AA.

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leveraged its dominant position within CoCom to promote its own exports while simultaneously obstructing those of other countries.[117] The issue was not liberalisation as such, but selective advantage.

At the fourth CoCom special meeting in 1987, the national interests of member states became increasingly pronounced, with their respective commercial priorities shaping the course of negotiations. France, mindful of the specifications of its own MILAN and HOT 1 & 2 production lines, proposed limiting the liberalisation of anti-tank missile exports to systems with a warhead diameter of no more than 150 millimetres and a range of up to 4 kilometres. This would have effectively excluded certain variants of the US-produced TOW 2 and TOW improved systems, prompting firm opposition from the US delegation, supported by Britain. In the domain of large-calibre weapons, Britain and West Germany jointly blocked France's attempts to liberalise exports of self-loading howitzers. A similar lack of consensus emerged over the technical parameters for light military helicopters, with conflicting commercial interests once again preventing agreement. As a result, export decisions continued to require case-by-case coordination among individual member states, bringing negotiations on the liberalisation of restrictions towards China to a standstill.[118]

The Silkworm incident mentioned at the outset of the article further undermined efforts to institutionalise preferential arms-export arrangements for China. This interruption opened space for Bonn to reassert the logic of détente. When discussions on liberalising the industrial list for China resumed in 1988, Bonn argued that the already established 'China Green Line', together with the availability of controlled technologies from non-CoCom countries such as neutral countries and newly industrialised countries, should serve as the basis for relaxing controls on the Soviet-led socialist bloc at an equivalent level.[119] In bilateral German–US consultations within CoCom, Bonn stressed: 'It does not make sense to strongly advocate the freer movement of peoples and ideas within the framework of the CSCE process, while at the same time trying to forestall any East–West transfer of technology.'[120] As an advocate of easing controls towards Eastern Europe, the preferential treatment accorded to China in the 1980s became, in the years preceding the Soviet Union's collapse, a useful instrument through which Bonn promoted broader relaxation of East–West technology restrictions.

CoCom as a negotiated space of transit: The MBB case

The West German satellite-communications sector offers a case study of how CoCom's regulatory architecture functioned less as a fixed barrier than as a space of competitive negotiation that generated new pathways of technological circulation. Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm (MBB), discussed above as a major West German aerospace and defence company headquartered in Ottobrunn near Munich, brings this paradox into sharp relief. With a product portfolio that carried pronounced dual-use potential, the company repeatedly operated at the intersection of commercial opportunity and CoCom oversight.

MBB first came to the attention of Chinese officials through its serially produced BO-105 helicopter. In 1974, the Chinese ambassador in Bonn visited MBB's production facilities.[121] The following year, China's Deputy Minister for Foreign Trade, Chai Shufan, toured the company's

[117]Fü S III 4 to the State Secretary in the BMVg regarding the British proposal to amend the Military List concerning China, 5 May 1987, BW 1/262926, BArch-MA.

[118]Ibid.

[119]Division 424, agenda item 'Foreign Availability', 27 June 1989, B 136/38110, BArchK.

[120]'Deutsch-amerikanische CoCom-Konsultationen, 19.–20. Oktober 1988', memorandum by Division 424, 10 October 1988, B 136/23498, BArchK.

[121]'China-Handel. Sehen, was paßt. Mit deutscher Hilfe wollen Chinas Planer ihr Verkehrssystem modernisieren—ein Helikopter aus Bayern soll dabei voranfliegen', *Der Spiegel*, 28 September 1975; Shu Wang, *Maos Mann in Bonn. Vom Journalisten zum Botschafter* (Societäts-Verlag, 2002), 171–3.

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Ottobrunn site and expressed interest in future technological cooperation. In the same year, MBB board member Sepp Hort expanded these contacts at the first West German industrial exhibition in Beijing, where he signalled MBB's interest in joint development projects in the field of reconnaissance satellites.[122]

These early efforts, however, did not translate smoothly into concrete cooperation. In 1977, initial plans for China to purchase a payload test rig from MBB and AEG were abandoned because of unfavourable domestic political conditions, foreign-currency shortages, and CoCom export restrictions.[123] In 1978, MBB again lost out to US competitors when China moved towards defining a preliminary concept for a communications satellite system. Chinese negotiators insisted on integrating domestically produced subsystems for broadcast satellites, whereas MBB's proposal relied almost entirely on its own components.[124]

As Britain, France, and the United States gradually adopted a more permissive stance towards China within the CoCom framework, Bonn also began to support German industry's entry into the emerging Chinese communications market. This support was most evident in the ambiguous dual-use domain, where civilian and military applications were difficult to disentangle and where authorities retained interpretive discretion. Yet these initiatives also provoked criticism over the risks associated with dual-use transfers.

Within this contested setting, the German Ministry for Research and Technology (BMFT) provided both symbolic and material support for Sino-German cooperation, ranging from test transmissions using the Franco-German *Symphonie* satellite to the provision of the Sikom network-planning software.[125] In 1978, BMFT minister Volker Hauff visited China and defined German industrial participation in the construction of a Chinese communications satellite system as a priority objective.[126] The visit resulted in a protocol that formalised cooperation in aeronautical research and satellite technology and placed MBB's negotiations under the political auspices of the BMFT.[127] At the same time, the ministry remained wary of MBB's independent initiatives because of the company's involvement in military production. When MBB sought to bring a framework agreement to China in February 1979, the BMFT informed the company that it would support only non-military projects. It also instructed MBB not to conclude any binding agreements until after planned official exchanges between the DFVLR, the predecessor of today's German Aerospace Centre, and the Chinese Electronics Corporation had taken place.[128] The instruction reflected the ministry's efforts to keep corporate initiatives within a politically manageable framework.

Nevertheless, MBB proceeded with the visit, reflecting not merely corporate initiative but also a longer pattern of Bavarian political self-assertion vis-à-vis Bonn.[129] The delegation included MBB

[122]'China-Reisebericht Osswalds "Technogerma" beendet', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, no. 215, 19 September 1975, 7.

[123]'Sachstand über die Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet Kommunikationssatelliten', 7 November 1979, B 196/21663, BArchK.

[124]'Reisebericht China', 3–4, B 196/21664, BArchK; see also B 196/21663, BArchK, which notes that in December 1978 a preliminary informal agreement was reached on the purchase of a US communications satellite system, including ground stations, valued at over US$50 million, an initiative of considerable political and technological significance.

[125]'Sachstand und Gesprächsvorschlag für die China-Reise vom BM Hauff', 1–3, B 196/21663, BArchK.

[126]Ibid., 6.

[127]Annex to 'Protokoll über die Gespräche zwischen dem Bundesminister für Forschung und Technologie und dem Vorsitzenden der Staatlichen Kommission für Wissenschaft und Technik Chinas', 20 November 1979, B 196/21663, BArchK.

[128]Arno Freytag to the Federal Chancellery, 31 January 1979, B 196/21637, BArchK.

[129]On Bavarian political self-assertion vis-à-vis Bonn and the CSU's role in linking Bavarian industrial modernisation to federal politics, see Mark S. Milosch, *Modernizing Bavaria: The Politics of Franz Josef Strauss and the CSU, 1949–1969* (Berghahn Books, 2006); Thomas Schlemmer, *Aufbruch, Krise und Erneuerung: Die Christlich-Soziale Union 1945 bis 1955* (R. Oldenbourg, 1998).

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supervisory board chairman and Bavarian finance minister Max Streibl. Prior to departure, the delegation assured the relevant authorities, including the BMVg, that discussions would be limited strictly to television satellite projects.[130] The outcome was a cooperation agreement with the Chinese Academy of Space Technology (CAST). Under this agreement, Chinese specialists were to participate in the Franco-German TV-SAT programme to acquire knowledge of satellite design and construction, while MBB experts would assist in the development of Chinese television satellites.[131]

These developments prompted intervention by the German Foreign Office. The trigger was a cooperation protocol signed by the DFVLR one month after MBB's visit. Its title referred to collaboration 'in the field of general and civil aeronautical research'. The Foreign Office feared that the term 'general' could leave room for military interpretation and therefore demanded its removal.[132] Reports from the German embassy in Beijing further indicated that Chinese counterparts were attempting to extend cooperation in aeronautical research into areas with military relevance. In response, the Foreign Office insisted that future cooperation exclude any military components and that German scientists refrain from participating in projects with potential military relevance.[133] Companies and research institutions involved were required to coordinate all travel to China with the BMFT. The content of presentations delivered in China was also subject to close scrutiny in consultation with the BMVg.[134]

When China announced the launch of a nationwide television broadcasting satellite system (CBSS) in 1983, MBB acted swiftly and was the first company to submit a proposal.[135] Drawing on the lessons of 1979, it took the lead in forming the Eurosatellite consortium together with AEG-Telefunken, France's Aérospatiale and Thomson-CSF, and Belgium's ETCA.[136] Earlier interactions had shown that Chinese officials were interested in satellite solutions framed at a European rather than a purely national level. In 1979, German representatives had already explained that a pan-European television satellite was unlikely to be realised. Yet Chinese interest in that earlier European H-Sat concept persisted.[137] MBB drew on this earlier preference when organising the Eurosatellite consortium in 1983. In its first configuration, the consortium assigned approximately 75 per cent of the production share to German companies.[138] After Thomson's subsequent withdrawal from the consortium, however, MBB reorganised its competitive strategy by forming a trilateral German–US–French consortium with Ford Aerospace and Aérospatiale.[139] Under the proposal, MBB and Aérospatiale would supply the satellite platform, while Ford would provide the communications payload, with national shares of roughly 40% for West Germany, 40% for the United States, and 20% for France.[140] The principal competitors were the US company RCA and a French consortium led by Thomson-CSF and Matra.[141]

[130]Arno Freytag to the Federal Chancellery, 31 January 1979, B 196/21637, BArchK.

[131]Sepp Hort to State Secretary Karl Schnell, BMVg, 10 January 1979, B 196/21637, BArchK.

[132]Telegram from the Embassy in Beijing to the Federal Foreign Office, 27 March 1979, B 196/21637, BArchK.

[133]Federal Foreign Office to the BMFT, 4 April 1979, B 196/21637, BArchK.

[134]Hans Schak (BMFT) to DFVLR, 25 August 1982, B 196/93501, BArchK; Hertrich to DFVLR, 11 October 1982, B 196/93501, BArchK; Federal Minister of Defence to Federal Minister for Research and Technology, 14 September 1982, B 196/93501, BArchK.

[135]'Meikan baodao: Zhongguo dianshi jiaoyu pengbo xingqi', *Cankao Xiaoxi*, 17 February 1984, 2.

[136]Memorandum on 'CoCom; Satellitentechnologie', 17 May 1984, B 70/135904, PA AA.

[137]Heinz Häberle, 'Kurzbericht über die Reise der ESA-Delegation nach China, 11.–20. Februar 1979', B 196/21663, BArchK.

[138]Memorandum on 'CoCom; Satellitentechnologie', 17 May 1984, B 70/135904, PA AA.

[139]Telegram from Beijing to the Federal Foreign Office, 14 November 1984, B 70/135904, PA AA.

[140]'Gesprächsführungsvorschlag', 27 November 1984, B 70/135904, PA AA.

[141]Ibid.

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Once again, US political leverage proved decisive. Although BMFT signed a new bilateral agreement on civilian space technology in March 1984, initially improving MBB's position, this advantage eroded within a year and left RCA as the sole remaining competitor.[142] MBB sought to justify its higher prices by emphasising superior hardware quality and extensive technology transfer. When West Germany applied for CoCom approval, however, it encountered resistance from the US delegation. Approval was granted in 1985, but only subject to seventeen conditions covering almost all technological elements that might have given MBB a competitive advantage. These restrictions ultimately rendered MBB's bid non-viable.[143] The German government and MBB appealed the decision, arguing that the technologies involved were obsolete and intended solely for civilian use.[144] In March 1986, CoCom agreed to lift restrictions on heat-pipe technology but maintained most of the remaining conditions.[145]

According to a report by the US Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, China ultimately abandoned the original request-for-proposals process for a high-power Ku-band system. Neither the MBB nor the RCA proposal was adopted as an integrated solution. The bidding process nevertheless facilitated substantial informal technology transfer.[146] Chancellor Helmut Kohl's visit to China in 1987 produced only limited results. MBB signed a contract under which its role was confined to the delivery of three subsystems valued only one-tenth of the volume envisaged in the 1984 bid.[147] Even so, German industry regarded the agreement as an important foothold in the prospective Chinese market.[148] The French company Matra, which had been eliminated earlier in the bidding process, later secured a contract for a data-processing centre. Although formally embedded within the CoCom approval framework and restricted to ground-based systems, the transaction nonetheless contributed to China's incremental capacity building in satellite operations.[149]

The MBB case reveals a further spatial dimension: sustained engagement with Chinese partners was accompanied by continuous efforts to mobilise political support at multiple levels within West Germany. This support extended beyond the federal government to the Bavarian state leadership. In addition to Finance Minister Max Streibl, who accompanied the 1979 delegation, Minister-President Franz Josef Strauß provided substantial backing for MBB's China business.[150] Parallel initiatives, such as the exhibition in China of the BO-105 CB/PAH combat helicopter after the removal of CoCom-sensitive components, as well as cooperation on small regional aircraft, helped create favourable conditions for securing smaller satellite-related contracts. The intersection of political and economic space, and of civilian and military domains, thus became visible within CoCom as a zone of transit. In the telecommunications sector, CoCom functioned not as a static obstacle but as a contested channel, in which internal competition eroded security rationales and interactions among companies, state agencies, and controlled states generated connections that

[142]Yang Mu and Liu Shi, 'Wei weilai dianji de you jiezhi de Zhongguo kongjian jihua', *Xitong gongcheng yu dianzi jishu*, no. 11 (1985): 58–60, 59.

[143]Memorandum on 'Satellitenprojekt China', 18 July 1985, B 70/135904, PA AA.

[144]CoCom objections and MBB responses, B 70/135904, PA AA.

[145]Telegram from Paris to the Federal Foreign Office, 19 March 1986, B 70/135904, PA AA.

[146]US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, Technology Transfer to China, OTA-ISC-340 (US Government Printing Office, July 1987), 90.

[147]Memorandum on 'CoCom; Satellitentechnologie', 17 May 1984, B 70/135904, PA AA; MBB communication, 19 October 1987, B 136/34325, BArchK.

[148]Telegram from the Embassy in Beijing to the Federal Foreign Office on major Sino-German projects, 8 February 1988, B 102/363397, BArchK.

[149]US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, Technology Transfer to China, 90.

[150]Franz Josef Strauß, table speech at the luncheon hosted by MBB at the State Guesthouse in Beijing, 16 October 1987, RS Strauß 1987: 1016, Archive for Christian Social Policy, Munich.

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exceeded the formal logic of embargo. The MBB case therefore reinforces the central argument of this article: mechanisms designed to preserve technological separation, through their internal frictions, became critical sites in the making of global patterns of technological circulation.

Conclusions

Building on recent debates emphasising that global history and national history are not rivals but mutually entangled, this article has shown how a putatively global mechanism of regulation was persistently reshaped, and in important respects distorted, by the specific temporalities and spatial priorities of nation-states.[151] CoCom, conceived in the age of Cold War globalisation as an instrument designed to produce disconnection, repeatedly generated new forms of connection that undermined its own logic.

In the 1950s, the China embargo was intended to erect a firm barrier separating China from Western goods and technologies. Yet this barrier was continually circumvented via East Berlin, other East European countries, and even member states of the embargo regime itself. These practices enabled restricted goods to reach China and, in the process, created unanticipated commercial, technological, and political linkages that exceeded the regime's formal design.

By the 1980s, CoCom's China policy was reshaped less by a coherent security logic than by shifting geopolitical interests and enduring economic competition among member states. West Germany's acute sensitivity to East German and Soviet security concerns was never fully shared by other CoCom members. Although the preferential space accorded to China also reduced certain control constraints on West German companies, in practice it intensified competitive pressures and often placed them at a disadvantage in the scramble for Chinese orders. Bonn thus found itself navigating a dual imperative: promoting civilian industrial engagement with China while simultaneously managing political and security risks in sensitive technological domains. As optimism surrounding Soviet reform grew, the preferential treatment extended to China became an argument for relaxing East–West controls more broadly, further eroding CoCom's foundational commitment to technological disconnection.

As export controls are once again being reinforced in response to geopolitical realignment, policy experts have returned to earlier multilateral coordination mechanisms in search of historical lessons. These discussions tend to focus on institutional design and on the need for export control frameworks that are politically defensible, economically sustainable, and capable of uniting Western countries.[152] This article suggests that such assessments should also attend to the connections that the regime actively produced, often in unintended ways. While CoCom succeeded, during periods of pronounced technological asymmetry, in delaying access to advanced technology and increasing the costs of acquisition for controlled states, security-driven regimes of regulation could slow circulation but never fully sever it. The history of CoCom thus underscores a broader point: mechanisms intended to enforce disconnection were continually transformed by the very connections they sought to contain.

[151]Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (2018): 1–21; Alessandro Stanziani, *Eurocentrism and the Politics of Global History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.

[152]Konark Bhandari, 'COCOM 2.0: Could a New Multilateral Regime Help Control High-Technology Exports?', 23 February 2024, accessed 31 July 2026, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/02/cocom-20-could-a-new-multilateral-regime-help-control-high-technology-exports?lang=en; Gregory C. Allen and Isaac Goldston, *Understanding U.S. Allies' Current Legal Authority to Implement AI and Semiconductor Export Controls* (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 2025), 31; Sofia Romansky, Joris Teer, and A. Plantenga, *Protecting European AI-Related Innovations: Preventing Their Use in China's Military Advancements* (Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, January 2025), 23; Ansgar Baums, 'Auf dem Weg zur Wirtschafts-NATO? Atlantik-Brücke', 13 December 2023, accessed 31 July 2026, https://www.atlantik-bruecke.org/auf-dem-weg-zur-wirtschafts-nato/.

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