

## EDITORIAL

### EU RELATIONS WITH CHINA: SEEKING STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AMID GROWING SUPERPOWERS COMPETITION | AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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## EDITORIAL<sup>1</sup>

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Since China lifted its anti-COVID 19 restrictions and reopened its doors to the world towards the beginning of 2023, leaders of more than 20 countries and international organizations have visited, issued joint statements and/or deepened partnerships with the Asian country in the first half of the year. The most high-profile was French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's joint visit. The results of this joint visit to China are still to be seen, but two things are worth noting. First, even though EU-Chinese relations — which Von der Leyen calls "one of the most intricate and important anywhere in the world" (DW, 2023) — has experienced months of tensions, it seems that there remains room for dialogue, and the Chinese government welcomes the EU's "positive desire to...grow relations" (MFA, 2023). Second, the EU is clearly still calibrating its position vis-à-vis China, as evidenced by von der Leyen and Macron's somewhat differing positions: von der Leyen focused on the importance of de-risking commercial relations with China and the need to tie economic prospects to security considerations. Macron, on the other hand, while showing desires for continuing a robust economic relationship with China, *downplayed* security concerns. On his return from China, he further hinted that Europe should strive for strategic autonomy and minimize its dependence on external actors. In particular, Europe must reduce its dependency on the United States and at the same time avoid getting dragged into a tussle between China and the U.S. over Taiwan (Anderlini and Caulcutt, 2023). A month later, the French president reaffirmed this position by stating that "being allies does not mean being a vassal [...] doesn't mean that we don't have the right to think for ourselves" (Ridgwell, 2023).

As differing as von der Leyen and Macron's positions may be, they both point to something integral to current EU strategic consideration — what role should the EU play amidst a Sino-U.S. competition (i.e., a bipolar world) (Biscop, 2023)? It is in this context

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to convey our gratitude to the individual authors for their invaluable contribution, and to all reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.



that the idea of a European “strategic autonomy” gains traction. The idea itself is not new. The debate emerged in the late 2010s after Macron called for a conscious “European sovereignty”, before former German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that Europe should take its destiny into its own hands, as it could no longer rely on protection from the U.S. (European Parliament, 2021). By “strategic autonomy” or “European sovereignty”, decision-makers refer to the capacity of the EU to act independently from other countries in strategically essential policy areas, which can range from defence policies to economic concerns and the capacity to uphold democratic values (European Parliament, 2022). This rationale applies with respect to not only China but also the U.S. One of the lessons that European authorities have drawn from the Trump administration is that American domestic politics can strain bilateral relations with the EU. Between 2016 and 2020, it became apparent that in a number of areas the U.S. was no longer a reliable partner — trade, the environment, security, and health. Such dubious tendency of the U.S. administration was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it assumed a solid nationalistic and un-scientific position, departing from the World Health Organization (WHO) and adopting an ambiguous stance regarding the role of vaccination. At the same time, the pandemic also spotlighted the EU’s own over-reliance on medical supplies such as masks and gowns produced in China (Bradsher and Alderman, 2020), therefore accelerating the EU’s awakening of the need to become more autonomous.

Despite being impacted heavily by the pandemic, the EU remains an economic powerhouse today: it continues to be the third-largest economy in the world and accounts for one-sixth of global trade. However, despite having this economic might, it will require a great deal of work on the European authorities’ part to achieve strategic autonomy vis-à-vis China and the U.S. For China, the fact is that, after 20 years of strategic partnership, European Union–China relations have grown into a multifaceted and complex relationship. They are interdependent in various areas, especially in the economic sector. In 2022, China was the third largest partner for EU exports (9%), and the most significant partner for EU imports (20.8%) (Eurostat, 2023). The EU is also highly dependent on China’s metals. Of the 30 raw materials classified by the EU as critical, 19 are predominantly imported from China. These include magnesium, rare earth and bismuth, of which China has a de facto monopoly (European Commission, 2020); these resources are crucial to developing wind turbines, electric vehicles, solar cells and semiconductors, and are fundamental to success in the energy transition and digitization drive (Wrede, 2022). Primarily (but not exclusively) in response to this situation, in March 2023, the European Commission proposed a new Critical Raw Materials Act whose goal is to diversify and enhance the resilience of EU critical raw material supply chains (European Commission, 2023). While the details of the (implementation of the) act is still being laid out, the proposal itself has already shown a concerted effort by the European countries to respond to structural vulnerabilities.

Moreover, even though Chinese investments in Europe have been steadily declining since 2017, with a 77% drop between 2021 and 2016’s peak figures (Kratz et al., 2022), China remains one of Europe’s largest investors. For instance, under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese companies and authorities have invested significantly in ports and railways, two of the most important investments being the Piraeus port in Greece and the more recent port in Hamburg, Germany (Kijewski, 2022). On the back of this flow of investments, the EU and China signed in 2020 a Comprehensive Agreement on



Investment (CAI) which aimed to overcome the hurdles in investment from the two sides. However, the EU froze the ratification of the CAI on the grounds of human rights violations in Xinjiang arising from China's repression of the ethnic Uyghurs there (which the international community accused the Chinese government of but the Chinese vehemently denied), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s crackdown on the dissident pan-democracy camp in Hong Kong (Mathias, 2022). Once the EU had adopted the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (GHRSR), a tool to "address serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide", it imposed several sanctions on Chinese officials. These sanctions prompted the CCP to retaliate with sanctions on members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (European External Action Service, 2021).

This shows that, despite strong economic ties, the two sides do not see eye to eye on several political issues, namely, human rights, democratic rule, and the rule of law. Moreover, China's growing economic relevance under President Xi has given the country the desire for a bigger say on international matters (Rudd, 2022), and the BRI is proof of it. As one of the largest trade powers in the world, China expects to consolidate that position. At the same time, China regards global governance institutions as having disproportionately served European and American interests, and therefore makes no secret of its intention to reform them. On this China is joined by other revisionist states such as Russia, Brazil, India, and South Africa, who together created the BRICS forum in 2009 to build alternative and/or complementary global governance structures to the post-Second World War ones developed by the U.S. and Europe. Indeed, China has grown more suspicious of Europe and the U.S. under Xi. In a recent speech (6 March 2023), Xi stated that "Western countries headed by the United States have implemented containment from all directions, encirclement and suppression against us, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development" (Xinhua, 2023). This followed U.S. President Joe Biden's State of the Union address on 7 February 2023, in which he posited that "winning the competition [against China] should unite all of us!" (White House, 2023).

Even in strictly economic terms, it has been difficult to keep up relations; the EU, for example, has been expressing concerns and even complaints about China's state subsidies, industrial policies, and lack of reciprocity in market access, particularly in security-sensitive sectors. For this reason, in 2019 the EU put in place a Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) screening mechanism. While not exclusively directed at Chinese companies, the significant growth of Chinese investment in Europe was one of the main reasons to develop the instrument (Mathias, 2022). According to French President Macron, this move also showed that the EU was not naïve regarding China and was working towards building a "united front" against the Asian country (Gill, 2019).

In March 2019, the EU adopted a twofold definition of its relations with China — comprising both competition and cooperation — in acknowledgment of the fact that there were both strong economic relations as well as political tensions. This new definition stemmed from a 2019 document entitled "EU-China Strategic Outlook: Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council", in which China was presented in different policy areas simultaneously as a cooperation partner (with whom the EU shares closely aligned objectives), a negotiating partner (with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests), an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, as well as



a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance (European Commission, 2019).

This stance is reinforced by another EU document in 2022 called "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence", which aimed to improve the bloc's common defence and security policy by 2030. The document highlighted China as one of two critical actors of concern after Russia (China was referenced nine times in the document, compared to 19 mentions of Russia), and while reiterating the EU's multi-faceted approach towards China, it presented China as a revisionist actor challenging the rules-based international order, albeit shying away from adopting decisive language. The document also pointed out that EU-China relations were souring, and that the trust gap between them was widening. This mistrust grew particularly in 2020 and 2021 as a result of several events, including the pandemic and ensuing disruptions in production and logistics chains, the aforementioned situations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. The more recent war in Ukraine has exacerbated the rift: while China has publicly expressed its neutrality over the war, it has also been strengthening relationships with Russia. In fact, even before the war, in 2021, Chinese politicians had embraced a new formula for cooperation with Russia, which they characterized as having "no limit, no forbidden zone and no ceiling to how far [it could] go" (Xinhua, 2021). In February 2022, the Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on International Relations Entering a New Era and Global Sustainable Development reaffirmed the no-limit friendship between the two states, stating that the strengthening of their bilateral strategic cooperation was neither "aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries" (Kremlin, 2022) thereby serving to justify the maintenance of good relations between the two countries despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, despite tensions and evolving rhetoric, diplomatic relations between the EU and China have seemed slightly more stable in recent months. Efforts have been made from both sides to resume high-level exchanges. In late 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Beijing, as did European Council President Charles Michel. China's new ambassador to the EU Fu Cong has also been busy with meeting key European stakeholders in recent months (Houtari and Stec, 2023).

The recent years have therefore shown that the EU is still calibrating its China strategy. While European authorities want to assume a more defensive yet assertive position towards Beijing, they do not expect to compromise bilateral relations, nor to become dependent on the U.S. What in fact will be prudent is to find a balance between cooperation and confrontation, and to identify when and where China should be treated as a partner, a rival, or as a threat. Portugal's recent decision to exclude non-OECD, non-EU and non-NATO companies from being involved in the development of its 5G network (Almeida & Mayger, 2023), and Germany's approval of a COSCO investment in one of its largest ports are both signs of splintering within the EU, showing that individual EU countries treat Chinese investment differently. What this also shows is that the definition of what should be considered critical areas to be protected from Chinese investments is still open for debate.

The next years will determine the future of EU-China relations. First, given the interdependence between the two sides and significant world challenges ranging from



climate change to economic development and peace, it is unlikely that bilateral relations will be driven exclusively by rivalry, even though a certain level of systematic rivalry will remain. In addition, under the EU's goal of achieving more strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the world and China's intention to focus on domestic development and innovation, it is unlikely that economic and political relations between the two sides will be nearly as productive as they had been until 2019. Nevertheless, how it will all impact globalization, multilateralism and global governance remains to be seen.

This special issue is a result of the challenging times that we live in and the possibility of a transformation of the global order, in which the EU and China will both play determinant roles. The researchers participating in this special issue reflect on the topics mentioned above and problematize the impact of this conjuncture on the present and future of EU-China relations.

The inception of this special issue was the 6th edition of the International Conference "Europe as a Global Actor", hosted by ISCTE-IUL and OBSERVARE-UAL in May 2022, particularly its Panel 2 — The EU and China, but we also extended our invitation to scholars and experts from other countries and regions in the world. Therefore, as an international special issue, the present volume consists of five articles, offering valuable insights on China-EU relations from multiple perspectives. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has gradually begun to establish different types of partnerships with the EU as a whole and with individual European countries to strengthen bilateral relations and promote cooperation in various fields (on the premise of the one-China policy); indeed, the year 2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the EU and China. As of 2022, among the 27 EU countries, 19 have established different types of partnerships with China, and 18 have signed MoUs with China under the BRI.

The **first article** in this special issue was written by Cátia Miriam Costa and Yichao Li, who were inspired by the interesting observation that seven of the eight countries (Slovakia, Slovenia, Malta, Luxembourg, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia) that have not yet established partnerships with China have however signed BRI MoUs, while some countries that have long established partnerships with China (and have even deepened/strengthened those partnerships) have not signed BRI MoUs for the time being (e.g., Germany, France). Based on different types of Chinese partnerships, the authors divided all EU member states into four groups. They gather data on the outcome of the cooperations on trade and investment between China and EU member states, and find that there is no immediate positive impact or definite correlation between the type of partnership and trade in goods, the total value of trade in services and FDI. They therefore conclude that Chinese partnerships contribute to boosting cooperation results, but it has a political framework beyond economics.

In the past few years, China-EU relations have deteriorated due to bilateral and international issues. In the **second article**, using the theory of cognitive dissonance proposed by the psychologist Leon Festinger, Carlos Rodrigues evaluates possible attributes of China-EU relations' current state of affairs. Rodrigues concludes that the manner in which dissonance is being reduced does not fit with the theoretical predictions — rather than being based on changing dynamics in terms of behaviour, value and belief systems, and environmental conditions, the reduction seems to rely on a strategy of





hedging: the EU has seen China simultaneously as a partner, competitor, and rival, which is the precise notion of hedging — to separate the economic and political dimensions.

The first round of negotiations of EU-China investment agreement was initiated in January 2014, and after 35 negotiations in seven years, in December 2020, the two sides announced that the negotiations had in principle concluded in a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) (European Commission, n.d.). Soon after, however, in May 2021, the European Parliament passed a motion to formally freeze the CAI. Seeing the CAI as a relevant international event affecting international relations, the **third article** — penned by Carmen Mendes, analyzes China's reaction to this unexpected cessation and whether or not the EU Parliament's vote could have foreshadowed the debacle. Moreover, Mendes expects little chance of the CAI to be brought back to the table in 2023, as, for the EU, it is impossible to separate trade and investments from other policy areas and fundamental values, and the reality of Chinese assertiveness will remain a matter of urgent concern both for the present and the future.

Moreover, recent U.S.-China competition and the Ukraine war are important factors affecting EU-China relations. Emphasizing the concept of strategic autonomy, Pablo A. Sánchez-Rodríguez argues in the **fourth article** that the EU should play the role of a balancer and overcome internal and external barriers to pursue its global affairs agenda amidst U.S.-China competition. Specifically, this means exercising cautious discretion over its military, economic and political alliance with the U.S., and strengthening mutual trust with China in areas beyond the economic domain.

The **fifth article**, written by Francisco José Leandro and Roopinder Oberoi, illuminates how India and China's involvement may impact the EU's security in the context of the Ukraine war. The authors see the war as having a real possibility of inducing a new international order, and, through comparing how India and China approach the war and impact their relations with the EU, they identify six major security challenges. They suggest that the EU should not expect to rely on India as an extended partner, and, more importantly, the EU, India, and China should come together and cooperate to engineer a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

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