

# Political values in Europe-China relations

Edited by: Tim Nicholas Rühlig, Björn Jerdén, Frans-Paul van der Putten, John Seaman, Miguel Otero-Iglesias and Alice Ekman



A report by the European  
Think-tank Network on  
China (ETNC)  
December 2018



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI  
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET  
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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ETNC Report

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ISBN: 978-91-7507-429-0

Cover photo: © Shutterstock.com

Layout: Tim Nicholas Rühlig (UI)

Language editing: Andrew Mash

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# Foreword

The European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) is a gathering of China experts from a selection of European research institutes. It is devoted to the policy-oriented study of Chinese foreign policy and relations between China and European countries as well as the European Union (EU). The network facilitates regular exchanges among participating researchers with a view to deepening the understanding of how Europe, as a complex set of actors, relates with China and how China's development and evolving global role is likely to impact the future of Europe. The network's discussions, analyses and recommendations take a decidedly "bottom-up" approach, examining the various aspects of bilateral relations between European countries and China in order to generate a more complex perspective on the broader EU-China relationship.

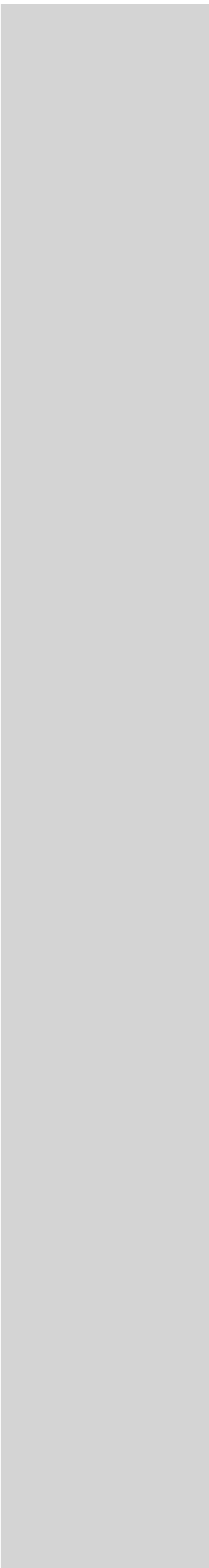
The network was first launched on the initiative of the Elcano Royal Institute and the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) in Brussels on 6 November 2014. This meeting brought together experts from eleven EU member states, as well as observers from EU institutions. The ETNC members decided to meet in a different capital every six months and the Mercator Institute of China Studies (MERICS) joined Elcano and Ifri in their efforts to move the project forward.

*The ETNC's goals are:*

- To facilitate regular exchanges among European researchers on key issues related to China and Chinese foreign policy, particularly on how they relate to the EU, individual EU member states, and other European countries.
- To generate discussions among European policy experts on bilateral relationships between EU member states and China, and subsequently on the EU–China relationship more broadly.
- To contribute to the analysis of China's emerging grand strategy by focusing on European perspectives, with an eye on how this crucial relationship impacts the broader global economic and political order.
- To provide recommendations for the conduct of Europe–China relations based on in-depth discussions and research conducted by experts within the network.
- To create a European pool of expertise and contact networks in and on China that can be activated and utilized whenever one of the participating members requires it.

Ultimately, the ETNC's main aim is to enhance European expertise, knowledge and networking capacity on China's foreign policy and its foreign relations with the EU member states and the EU itself, by focusing on all the different levels of interaction. These range from the local to the supranational, but the ETNC considers the national sphere to be the analytical point of departure.

This report is the fourth in an on-going effort to dissect and reassemble Europe-China relations from a European country-level perspective. The first roundtable



discussions on the report were graciously hosted by the University of Aveiro in Portugal in May 2018, and its conclusions further refined in discussions organized at the China Studies Centre of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs and the New Silk Road Programme at the Rīga Straņdind University in October 2018. The report has been coordinated by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) with the Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’, Ifri, and Elcano Royal Institute contributing to the editorial process and with the active participation of all ETNC institutions.



# List of institutions contributing to ETNC

## Coordinating Institutions

- French Institute of International Relations (Ifri), France
- Elcano Royal Institute, Spain
- Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), Germany

## Participating Institutions

- Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Belgium
- Institute of International Relations (IIR), Czech Republic
- Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Denmark
- Finnish Institute for International Affairs (FIIA), Finland
- Institute of International Economic Relations (IIER), Greece
- Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary
- Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Italy
- Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA), Latvia
- The Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael”,  
The Netherlands
- Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Norway
- Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland
- University of Aveiro, Portugal
- Institute for World Economy, Romanian Academy, Romania
- University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia
- The Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), Sweden
- Chatham House, United Kingdom

## Important Disclaimer

The views presented in ETNC reports are the sole responsibility of the signed authors and do not in any way represent the views of all members of ETNC, its participating institutions, nor the institutions with which the authors are affiliated.



# Executive Summary

- Through case studies of 17 countries and the European Union (EU) as an actor, this report analyses the role political values play in Europe's China policy and whether China has any influence on the understanding of political values in the EU member states and Norway.
- The findings of the report are the result of a bottom-up research process that has engaged with researchers in the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC).
- Political values may be perceived differently across Europe. For the purposes of this report, we start from the EU definition, which makes democracy, human rights and the rule of law core political values.
- While these three political values are deeply rooted in most European states, the ways in which states address these issues in their relations with China differ significantly. Based on the analysis of bilateral and multilateral practice, it is possible to distinguish four different patterns of behaviour among the various states: vocal and active; active and discreet; passive; and passive and potentially counteractive.
- Our findings suggest that three factors are of particular importance to the variety in European approaches: historical legacy, economic relations with China and Chinese pressure:
  - While there has been a general downgrading of the importance of political values in the approaches to China of most European states, younger democracies have been more affected by this trend.
  - Although there are exceptions, states with a higher per capita gross domestic product tend to be more active in the field of political values in their relations with China. Close trade relations with China also correlate with a higher level of activity in this field. Meanwhile, the share of Chinese investment does not make a major difference. Instead, investment in strategic sectors of the economy or the hope of attracting Chinese money to fill an investment gap are more decisive factors.
  - Chinese pressure has led some European states to reconsider their level of activity in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Even so, they have not taken political values entirely off the agenda.
- The EU as a supranational institution is one of the most vocal advocates of the importance of political values in relations with China. Most prominently, concerns over political values are addressed in the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue and EU-China Legal Affairs Dialogue

but also in many resolutions in the European Parliament. At the same time, engagement at the EU level serves as an excuse for inactivity in this field in many member states.

- Europe's recent impact on China's political values has been rather limited. However, it is likely that it has had some impact in individual human rights cases as well as with regard to legal reform in areas with direct economic implications.
- Despite China's increased efforts to promote its image abroad, in all the countries analysed the general public and large sections of the political elite and media hold largely negative views of China's political system. For instance, negative views were found in the reporting in Europe on the removal of presidential term limits at the National People's Congress in 2018.
- Despite this generally negative image, China has occasionally gained influence over decision making in some sensitive fields and is increasingly seeking to align Europe with China's own interests and values.
- Those political elites with an affinity for or acceptance of China's political system are for the most part Eurosceptic. Nonetheless, not all Eurosceptics have a favourable view of China.
- Finally, this report highlights the diverging views and approaches within Europe on the defence of political values in relations with China. This leaves a number of questions still open for debate: Should Europe's political values extend beyond the scope of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, for instance, to include concepts of economic liberalism? How far should Europe go in defending its political values beyond its borders? What ultimately is the most effective way to approach China on these issues?

# Introduction: Political values in Europe-China relations

Tim Nicholas Rühlig, Björn Jerdén, John Seaman, Frans-Paul van der Putten, Miguel Otero-Iglesias and Alice Ekman

Questions of democracy, human rights and the rule of law have long been a source of tension in Europe's relations with China, both in exchanges with China and among Europeans themselves. The European Union was in part built on a foundation of common political values,<sup>1</sup> but member states are often at odds over the extent to which these values should constitute a central element of their respective relations with China. In the inaugural 2015 report of the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), Europe's lack of unity on this question was striking.<sup>2</sup> This remains true today, if not more so. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has become increasingly critical of Western political values and sought to position itself as a role model for other countries.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the question of how to treat political values in relations with China only grows more relevant for Europe, as does the question of how China will seek to promote its own understanding of political values in Europe.

Through an analysis of 16 EU member states, Norway and the EU as an institution, this report sets out to examine how political values enter into Europe-China relations.<sup>4</sup> It looks at how European actors treat political values in relations with China, and how China, directly or indirectly, shapes the debate on political values in Europe. From the outset, Europe's political values are defined as those identified by EU convention – the so-called triad of democracy, human rights and the rule of law that forms its constitutive political values. As evidenced by some of the contributors to this report, however, political values can sometimes take on broader dimensions to include issues related to political economy and the rules-based international order. Such a broad definition, which is seen for example in Italy and the UK, links liberal political and economic values and treats them as mutually constitutive. While this approach takes a more comprehensive view of Europe-China relations, it has proved far less consensual at the EU level. Moreover, under this broad definition the boundaries of political values are blurred, which runs the risk of confusing policies driven by economic interests with concerns over what EU member states have jointly defined as their core political values.

This report does not take a stand for or against any particular definition of political values. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law serve as the minimal core definition that all chapters draw on while allowing for an analysis of further aspects, including the economic dimension. In the introduction that follows, we compare the results of all the chapters using this base definition of political values, and are careful not to establish any hierarchies between member states.

## Mapping European approaches to political values and China

Under the Lisbon Treaty, all EU member states have committed themselves to the external promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.<sup>5</sup> Two questions arise from this basic position. First, in what way and by which means do

<sup>1</sup> European Union, *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, 2012, Brussels, EU, § 21.

<sup>2</sup> Mikko Huotari et al., *Mapping Europe-China Relations: A bottom-up approach*, 2015, Berlin, European Think-tank Network on China, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/ouvrages-de-lifri/mapping-europe-china-relations>.

<sup>3</sup> China Copyright and Media, *Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere (Document No. 9). Report concerning the Present Situation in the Ideological Area*, 2013, <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/04/22/communique-on-the-current-state-of-the-ideological-sphere-document-no-9>.

<sup>4</sup> Countries were selected based on the participation of institutes in the ETNC.

<sup>5</sup> The only non-member state reviewed in this report, Norway, endorses identical values.

EU member states promote these values in their relations with China? Without a doubt, strategies differ among the states, but so do their respective degrees of leverage in relation to China. Second, what importance do EU member states place on political values when they conflict with other interests, such as those in the economic field? Promoting political values and protecting economic interests are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but trade-offs between different objectives often arise. Hence, only the relative differences among European states are discussed.

With regard to the first question, we identified particular approaches in bilateral and multilateral contexts. At the bilateral level, we assessed EU member states' actions against three options for promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law: (a) "megaphone diplomacy", or government representatives making public statements on sensitive human rights issues; (b) discreet diplomacy, such as demanding the release of dissidents in non-public settings; and (c) cooperative projects, such as assisting China's judiciary in developing the rule of law. At the multilateral level, EU member states have the option to actively initiate EU policies that prioritise the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. A further approach is to remain passive but be supportive of such initiatives within the EU framework. This is often closely related to a policy of "outsourcing", whereby member states argue that only the EU as a whole has the strength to promote political values in relation to China. Some states may also raise objections to joint attempts by the EU to promote such values. Outside the EU framework, states may form like-minded coalitions and formulate common statements and policies. Two recent examples date from 2016, when a group of states submitted a statement to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) raising concerns about China's treatment of human rights defenders,<sup>6</sup> and from 2017, when another group of states signed a letter highlighting the situation of human rights lawyers in China.<sup>7</sup>

### Patterns of action and inaction

When dealing with China on issues of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the study found that European countries differ to a large degree in the scope of their political action. Based on their behaviour in bilateral and multilateral contexts,<sup>8</sup> they follow four relatively distinct patterns: (a) active and vocal; (b) active and discreet; (c) passive; and (d) passive and potentially counteractive.

<sup>6</sup> United States, *Item 2. Joint Statement - Human Rights Situation in China. Delivered by US Ambassador to the HRC Keith Harper*, 10 March 2016, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2016/03/10/item-2-joint-statement-human-rights-situation-in-china>.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Denyer and Emily Rauhala, "Eleven countries signed a letter slamming China for torturing lawyers. The U.S. did not", *Washington Post*, 22 March 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/22/eleven-countries-signed-a-letter-slaming-china-for-torturing-lawyers-the-u-s-did-not/?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-china-torture-lawyers&utm\\_term=.0813240ae3cf](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/22/eleven-countries-signed-a-letter-slaming-china-for-torturing-lawyers-the-u-s-did-not/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-china-torture-lawyers&utm_term=.0813240ae3cf).

<sup>8</sup> Information on some of these aspects is based on publicly available data; others were assessed according to the analysis in the chapters below and the knowledge and judgement of their authors, although the responsibility for qualifying patterns of behaviour lies with the authors of this introductory chapter. Moreover, while the editorial deadlines of this report did not allow for an analysis of how various European countries have voiced their concerns about human rights in Xinjiang, debates within the EU and views expressed at the UNHRC could be used to further elaborate on these observed patterns in the future.

<sup>9</sup> Norway and Denmark supported the 2016 UNHRC statement, and France and

<i>Country</i>	<i>Strategy relative to EU policy action</i>	<i>Cooperative projects</i>	<i>Discreet diplomacy</i>	<i>Megaphone diplomacy</i>	<i>Ad hoc multilateral activism (signing the 2016 and 2017 statements)</i>	<i>Characterisation of policy action towards China</i>
Belgium	Proactive and supportive		X		2017	Active and discreet
Czech Republic	Passive and supportive				2017	Passive
Denmark	Passive and supportive	X	X		2016	Active and discreet
France	Proactive and supportive		X		2017	Active and discreet
Germany	Proactive and supportive	X	X	X	Both	Active and vocal
Greece	Passively supportive, occasional opposition					Passive and potentially counteractive
Hungary	Passively supportive, occasional opposition					Passive and potentially counteractive
Italy	Passively supportive, occasional opposition					Passive and potentially counteractive
Latvia	Passive and supportive		X			Passive
Netherlands	Proactive and supportive		X		Both	Active and discreet
Norway	Not member	X	X		2016	Active and discreet
Poland	Passive and supportive	(X)	X			Passive
Portugal	Passive and supportive					Passive
Romania	Passive and supportive		(X)			Passive
Spain	Passive and supportive		X			Passive
Sweden	Proactive and supportive	X	X	X	Both	Active and vocal
United Kingdom	(Brexit)	X	X	X	Both	Active and vocal

The active and vocal states, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK), currently employ the broadest scope of policies. All frequently voice criticism of China publicly as well as in discreet diplomatic channels. They also carry out cooperative projects to strengthen the rule of law and human rights in China. All three countries also joined multilateral initiatives in 2016 and 2017 by signing statements denouncing the human rights situation in China. In addition, they have been proactive and supportive of EU efforts, although more recently the implications of “Brexit” means that the UK has largely neglected this channel.

It is noteworthy that the UK and Sweden have explicitly broadened their human rights agenda with regard to China to include issues such as human trafficking, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender and Intersexual (LGBTI) and women's rights.

Other countries, such as Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and Norway, are active in voicing their concerns about human rights and the rule of law in China, but currently less vocal in their approaches. They work through discreet diplomacy and avoid bilateral "megaphone diplomacy". All have spoken out as part of multilateral coalitions, and they all endorsed one of the two statements in 2016 and 2017 condemning human rights violations in China (the Netherlands signed both).<sup>9</sup> Some, such as Denmark, have parliaments that are vocal regarding human rights violations in China. Norway and Denmark carry out projects in China to enhance the above-mentioned triad of political values. France, the Netherlands and Belgium proactively support a unitary EU approach to strengthening democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China, while Denmark is more passive within the EU.

The group of more passive countries currently comprises the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain. While these countries tend to be less active in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law in their relations with China, this does not mean that they do not support these values. They avoid public criticism but raise concerns in discreet diplomatic meetings, while not making them a priority. Within the EU, they vote in favour of policies that promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law but do not actively initiate or push for these policies. With the exception of the Czech Republic, which supported the 2017 letter, they have not signed the above-mentioned joint statements.<sup>10</sup> None of these states carries out significant cooperation projects in China.

Meanwhile, other countries have not only remained passive with regard to the EU's direct promotion of political values in China, but also shown signs of attempting to counteract these attempts. Perhaps the best known example is Greece's veto of a unified European stance on China's human rights violations in the UNHRC in 2017. This marked the first time in the EU's history that a consensus could not be reached on the subject. While other countries have not been so disruptive on the three political values, Hungary joined Greece (and Croatia) in drastically tempering the EU's joint statement on the International Court of Arbitration's ruling with regard to the South China Sea – a ruling that has China adamantly refused to recognise. In Italy, meanwhile, changes are also under way. Previous Italian governments remained fairly passive on issues of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China, but their insistence on issues such as not granting Market Economy Status to China and developing an EU-wide investment screening mechanism are considered by some to have been at least partly motivated by such concerns. There are early indications, however, that the new government, made up of the Five Star Movement and the Lega, is likely to change tack and become more conciliatory towards China.

The above categorisations are limited to the approaches of European states to democracy, human rights and the rule of law by means of megaphone diplomacy, discreet diplomacy, cooperative projects, EU initiatives and ad hoc multilateral statements. If economic and other policies had been included, some results might have turned out differently. This analysis is not an exhaustive comparison of how "tough" countries are towards China in their overall policies, but a benchmark of their policy preferences in directly dealing with questions of democracy, human

Belgium signed the letter in 2017.

<sup>10</sup> President Zeman has criticised the decision to sign but did not have the constitutional power to withdraw the Czech Republic's support for the statement.

<sup>11</sup> Katrin Kinzelbach, *The EU's Human Rights Dialogue*



rights and the rule of law in China. It is also important to note that a country's policy actions can and do change over time, sometimes dramatically, depending on national elections. Some countries, such as the Czech Republic or Hungary, have in recent decades gone from vocal and active to passive or even potentially disruptive, while others, such as Germany, have become more vocal and proactive in recent years. This classification therefore represents a snapshot in time.

### **The role of historical legacy, economic ties and Chinese pressure**

Our findings suggest three factors to be of particular importance in the varied European approaches: historical legacy, economic relations and Chinese pressure.

**Historical legacy:** While existing research and commentary tend to focus on economic factors, our cross-country survey indicates that a variety of historical legacies continue to shape China policy. We found that the year of democratisation tends to correlate with approach to democracy, human rights and the rule of law in relations with China. While most of the states analysed in this report attributed more importance to democracy, human rights and the rule of law in their relations with China in the 1990s, several, particularly former communist countries, have since downgraded the importance of these three values more than others. This suggests that older democratic institutions tend to resist such downgrading more than those in younger democracies. That said, correlation does not mean causality.

A closer examination of individual countries adds further nuance to the role of history. Historical references appear throughout Europe in discourses on the role of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. While this may be a discursive strategy to some extent, all politics start with words. Hence, such discourses should not be ignored.

Sweden and the Netherlands have a long tradition of promoting human rights internationally. The legacy of the Nazi period remains a crucial component of Germany's self-identification and has a big impact on its policy regarding democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The Czech Republic's communist past for many years made the country one of the most vocal critics of human rights violations in China. To this day, the Hungarian people remain highly sceptical of the Communist Party of China (CPC), despite the record of the government in expressing ideological affinity with China. In Poland, historical legacy also fuels widespread suspicion of communism, which influences attitudes to the CPC. The contrasting symbolism of 4 June 1989 in Poland and China is telling – while China conducted its violent repression of protestors in Tiananmen Square, Poland was holding its first semi-free elections – and for many years served as a marked example of the different political values in the two countries. Only when the Law and Justice Party (PiS) won the most recent elections did criticism of the semi-free elections of 1989 become more mainstream.

In Portugal, a critical examination of the country's colonial past has led many to highlight the need to respect sovereignty and a plurality of political models. In Latvia, the conviction that political values are solely a domestic matter stems from the violation of the country's sovereignty by the Soviet Union. Spain's gradual transition to democracy after the death of Franco makes many Spaniards reluctant to opt for the active promotion of democratic values in foreign countries. Many people in Greece feel that their country has frequently been manipulated by larger powers and are thus less inclined to suggest norms of governance to other nations. In sum, while most Europeans seem to share the belief that democracy,

human rights and the rule of law are universal values, they disagree about the degree to which these principles should be externally promoted.

The importance of historical legacies notwithstanding, domestic political dynamics clearly have an impact too. Germany's former Social Democrat government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder paid less attention to promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China than Angela Merkel's subsequent administrations. In France, Emmanuel Macron's policies seem to indicate a shift towards increasing the importance of the three values in French-Chinese relations compared to his predecessors, Francois Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy. Under President Zeman, meanwhile, the Czech Republic's government has made considerable changes to the policies of Václav Havel. Italy's new government has shown signs of downgrading the role of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in its relations with China.

**Economic relations:** Economic relations with China differ in both quantity and quality among European states. Countries with a higher GDP per capita tend to take a stronger position on political values, but there is no correlation with absolute GDP. In other words, richer countries – but not necessarily big economies – adopt a more active stance on the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China. Of course, in many cases richer countries are also older democracies, which makes it difficult to distinguish between the relative effects of historical legacy and economic performance.

Contrary to the common belief that extensive economic cooperation with China makes European states more reluctant to promote political values, our findings demonstrate the opposite. The higher China's share in a country's overall trade, the more active and vocal that state tends to be in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law in its relations with China. Moreover, the correlation is stronger with China's share of a country's exports than its share of imports. In other words, China's status as an important target market does not appear to reflect a greater reluctance to promote the triad of political values.

The results with regard to Chinese direct investments in Europe are less clear-cut. There is no strong correlation between absolute or relative amounts of incoming Chinese investment and the active promotion of political values by European states. Nonetheless, individual cases demonstrate that Chinese investments, or the expectation of such investments, may have a significant impact in some countries. Portugal has received substantial Chinese investment in strategic sectors and keeps a low profile on democracy, human rights and the rule of law in its China policy. The engagement of the Chinese firm COSCO in the Greek port of Piraeus has created high hopes of further Chinese investment. Chinese money does not just fill the apparent investment gap in Greece – it also offers a potential alternative to the EU. The chapter on Greece demonstrates that this has affected the country's approach to promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China. The Czech Republic has also received some investment in recent years, which has contributed to the downscaling of political values on the government's agenda. Romania and Hungary have not received Chinese investment on a similar scale to that of Western European countries, but have high hopes of inflows in the future. The UK, which had been fairly active in calling for democracy, human rights and the rule of law in the past, is seeking new economic cooperation as it prepares to leave the EU in 2019. This seems to have prompted a rethink of the trade-offs between economic interests and political values in its relations with China.

Finally, comparing the results with the 2017 ETNC report on Chinese investments in Europe, even though the countries that are more critical of investments tend to place greater importance on the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, there are numerous exceptions to this trend. The Netherlands and the UK, for example, are openly critical of China's political values but welcome investment projects. Previous Italian governments, in turn, have been much more vocal on the economic dimension of China's growing influence in Europe than on issues related to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

**Chinese pressure:** The findings indicate that Chinese pressure has led some European states to reconsider their level of active promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China, although none of them have given up their normative aspirations altogether. Hence, while Chinese pressure has induced some change, it has not taken political values entirely off the agenda. The most prominent example is Norway, which suffered from a freeze in political relations and some degree of economic retaliation, such as restrictions imposed on the import of Norwegian salmon, after the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded Liu Xiaobo the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. After six years of not apologising for the Nobel Committee's decision, Norway opted for a pragmatic approach in order to resume relations with China in late 2016. The fact that support for Norway from other European countries was rather low-key sent a signal that the issue was not a priority for the rest of Europe.

Denmark and the Netherlands had similar but less serious experiences after sponsoring a China-critical resolution in the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) in 1997. At first, the Netherlands as the holder of the rotating presidency of the EU drafted a China-critical resolution in the UNCHR. Between 1989 and 1996, the EU had sponsored such a resolution annually. In 1997, however, several EU member states declared that they would no longer support such a resolution, which led Denmark to take the initiative and draft it without EU support. China retaliated against Denmark for the resolution and the Netherlands for making a China-critical speech at the UNCHR and trying to draft the EU-wide resolution. In 2008, France faced strong political and economic reaction from the Chinese government after a short, half-hour meeting between the Dalai Lama and Nicolas Sarkozy; the same happened to Denmark in 2009. More recently, the UK encountered a freeze in high-level political ties with China after the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, met the Dalai Lama in 2012.

### **The role of the EU: Asset or obstacle in pursuing political values?**

The EU aims to coordinate and carry out a joint foreign policy that is partly based on its political values. At the same time, the EU mirrors the diversity of perspectives and interests of its member states. This holds particularly true in the area of foreign and security policy, which remains an intergovernmental competence, that is, an area that all member states decide on unanimously in the European Council. The EU's bureaucracy, however, has a significant impact on foreign policymaking even though it lacks formal decision-making power. The agency of the EU strengthens a China policy that aims to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and all member states to varying degrees share a belief in these political values. For the EU, however, these values are constitutive of its historical emergence and development, and thus at the heart of the self-identification of the European institutions.

This multilayered structure results in two ambivalences that are crucial to the EU's China policy. First, while the EU bureaucracy tends to highlight democracy,

human rights and the rule of law, the EU remains vulnerable to disunity due to the different national interests of its member states. At the same time, the EU provides a framework for constant coordination which – at least to some extent – tends to harmonise European foreign policy. Hence, the EU is both a mechanism for unifying the continent and somewhat vulnerable to disunity.

Second, if united and with the full support of all the member states, the EU has the potential to exercise more leverage than individual member states vis-à-vis China with regard to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. However, this potential leverage serves as a good excuse for member states to take contentious issues off their bilateral agendas with China and outsource these to the EU. In short, the argument that the EU has more leverage and is thus better equipped to address concerns over political values in China might be valid, but also clears the way for inaction at the member state level.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to find any other actor in world affairs today that places more importance on democracy, human rights and the rule of law in relations with China than the EU. The EU makes use of the full range of instruments, such as megaphone diplomacy, discreet diplomacy and specific cooperative projects. Without doubt, the supranational bodies of the EU promote its constitutive political values in relations with China. Critics argue, however, that the EU applies double standards when it comes to the promotion of political values.

### **The effectiveness of European policy**

In one sense, the recent European impact on China's treatment of political values has been limited. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law are suffering a severe backlash in China. In the absence of any breakthroughs, NGOs and social scientists have called for the termination of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, there are a number of reasons to believe that European efforts have made at least some difference.

Improvements in civil liberties or civil rights are restricted to individual cases. There is some indication that when the EU raises the fate of imprisoned individual human rights lawyers and activists, for example, in the context of the EU-China or other bilateral human rights dialogues, their conditions of detention often improve.<sup>12</sup> In other cases, Chinese leaders have agreed that dissidents under house arrest can leave the country. The most recent example was the permission given for Liu Xia, the widow of the late Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, to leave China in July 2018.

When it is in the self-interest of the Chinese government to reform, the EU is likely to have a more significant impact. The development of China's judicial system might well facilitate economic development, foreign investment and international trade. Hence, Chinese leaders have a keen interest in the development of legal affairs compared to issues of civil liberties and the civil rights components of the rule of law – albeit that there is still clear resistance to the idea of making the CPC itself subject to an independent judiciary. Other examples of Chinese self-interest are the fight against pollution or attempts to improve economic development – issues that come under the category of social and economic human rights that the CPC advocates. European assistance in these fields is mostly welcomed by China. Another possible success is the significant reduction in the number of executions carried out in China. Some argue that the EU's continuous lobbying combined with its own track record may have facilitated this development.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, European China policy may have had more general effects. The EU's treatment of political values in its relations with China helps to shape Europe's

*with China. Quiet Diplomacy and Its Limits*, 2015, New York, Routledge.

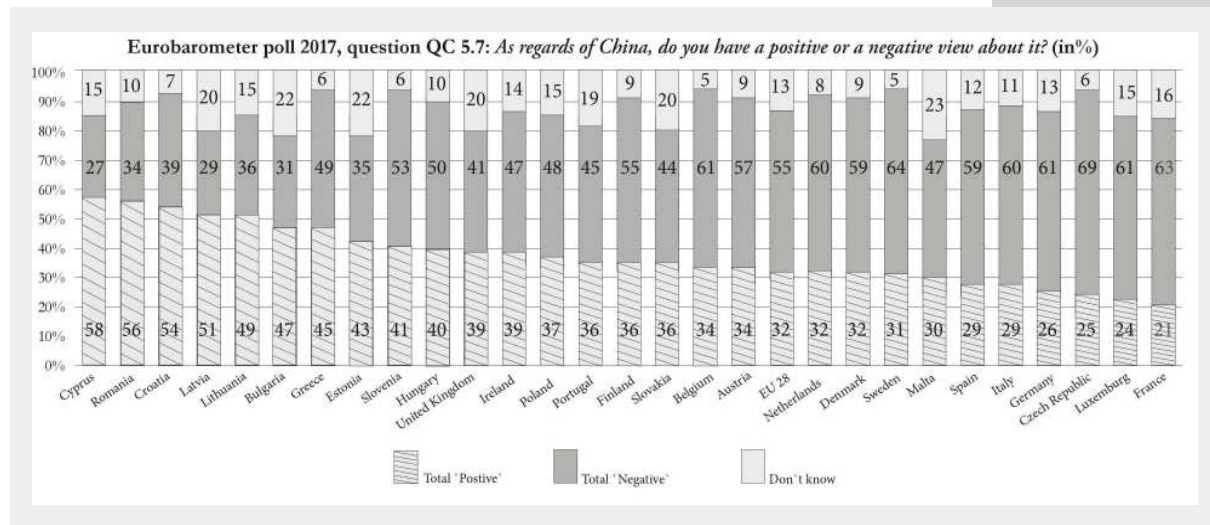
<sup>12</sup> Author interviews in several cities in China, 2016 and 2017.

<sup>13</sup> See eg Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, *Europe, China, and the Limits of Normative Power*. Forthcoming 2019, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.

self-identification. It also signals to the rest of the world what Europe stands for and that China's attempts to redefine concepts such as democracy and human rights do not go uncontested. Hence, the role of political values in Europe-China relations should be seen in the broader context of shaping the normative framework of the international order.

### Does China shape the concept of political values in Europe?

China's growing outreach to Europe corresponds with decades-long European attempts to encourage China to adopt a more open and democratic system, but what do Europeans think of China's political system? What are the effects of Chinese attempts to shape European policy and public opinion? Throughout the 17 countries analysed, the public remains largely negative about China's political values. The findings in the chapters correspond with similar results from Eurobarometer opinion polls.



Although these polls do not explicitly measure European support for China's political values, they do indicate largely negative general views on China. These sceptical perceptions are notable in the light of the intensified Chinese foreign propaganda push in the past decade. China launched a broad public diplomacy initiative in France, for example, among other EU member states. In other countries, China aims for influence by means of financial investments.<sup>14</sup>

This demonstrates that not all Chinese attempts to affect European public opinion amount to actual influence. "Influence" refers to the capacity to affect the actions or feelings of others. This means that influence only exists within relationships – and is never the property of an actor. To analyse influence is thus to study the effects of actions, not merely the intentions behind the actions. For example, the fact that a Chinese ambassador writes an opinion piece in a widely read European newspaper extolling the virtues of China's political system does not equal influence. To gauge its possible influence we need to study the reception given to the article. For example, if its content appals readers it could even have negative effects on Chinese influence.

When it comes to political elites, Chinese political values mostly meet opposition. China's growing footprint does however serve the interests of some political elites. In particular, favourable views of China's political system seem to be correlated with negative views of the EU. Political actors that are critical of the EU tend to use China as leverage vis-à-vis the EU institutions and other EU member states. The Greek government, for example, does not praise Chinese

<sup>14</sup> Francois Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, *China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, London, ECFR, 2017 p. 76.

authoritarianism, but it does side with China occasionally to demonstrate that it possesses an alternative to the EU.

The Hungarian government is alone in expressing ideological interest in China's political values. Viktor Orbán contrasts what he describes as China's efficient, labour-oriented society with the lengthy processes of the EU. In the Czech Republic, the public and most political parties are critical of China with the exception of the Eurosceptic and pro-Chinese supporters of President Zeman. In Romania, most of the China enthusiast voices emanate from among the Eurosceptic. While all the China-friendly political elites are Eurosceptic, the opposite is not true. In fact, a number of Eurosceptic political parties are openly critical of Chinese authoritarianism, including the major right wing populist parties in Denmark and Poland.

Furthermore, there have been instances where Chinese attempts at influence have backfired. In Denmark, opinion formers and opposition politicians have reacted strongly to revelations that in 2017 the Chinese Embassy had pressured a theatre not to host a show featuring a dance company associated with Falun Gong. Another example is the closure of all but one of the Confucius Institutes attached to Swedish universities. In Belgium, reports that the country's security services were investigating the Confucius Institute of the Free University of Brussels sparked controversy.

However, even in the absence of outright admiration, tacit acceptance of China's political system as a legitimate alternative can still make a big difference. In a way, this would resemble China's own official position: Europe should not change to become more like China, but the leaders in every country should be free to decide its political system without intervention from the outside world. (Whether China has always adhered to this principle is another matter.)

### **Factors in the attractiveness of China's political model**

Two factors appear to facilitate China's outreach: the hope of receiving Chinese investment and irritation towards the EU for meddling too much in the domestic affairs of member states. The economic incentives largely resonate with business communities throughout the continent. However, some academic institutions and think tanks also hope and compete for funds. Most intensive are Chinese investments in Brussels-based think tanks and invitations to China addressed to individual European scholars focused on China or international relations more widely. China's largest government-sponsored think tank, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, opened its first European subsidiary, the China-Central and Eastern European Institute, in Hungary in 2017.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, European media coverage of China's political system tends to be negative, a trend that the case studies indicate has strengthened further since Xi Jinping's authoritarian turn. A recent example is the negative European coverage of the Chinese National People's Congress in 2018, which abolished presidential term limits and thus centralised power in the hands of Xi Jinping.

While often easy to detect, it is more difficult to assess the effectiveness of China's attempts at influence. Even though our findings indicate that European perceptions of China's political values are becoming increasingly unfavourable, we should perhaps be cautious about drawing conclusions too quickly. One possibility might be that European perceptions of China would have been even more negative without these attempts. A second possibility is that the effects are difficult to measure. China's influence on European perceptions partly works through mechanisms such as self-censorship and self-denial, which are not

<sup>15</sup>The Hungarian government, however, did not allow the institute to register as a think tank, but only as a company.

easy to detect using conventional research methods. A third possibility is that China expects its influence operations to produce their main returns in the long run. Activities such as funding think tanks, university programmes and visits by European researchers, moulding key individuals and organisations, and investing in a media presence might improve underlying perceptions of China in Europe, but will take time.

More crucially, China has gained in influence in particularly sensitive fields of decision making. Prominent cases include the watering down of the EU's position on adherence to international law in the South China Sea dispute in 2016 and the Greek veto of the EU's condemnation of China's human rights violations in the UNHRC in 2017. China has undoubtedly attempted to influence Europe's political decisions on accommodating China in a wide range of fields, including political values.

### **Questions for the way forward**

There are diverse approaches to China across Europe. Governments have different priorities, follow different strategies and have different perspectives on the role of China in Europe. European states possess limited leverage over China to achieve their goals. If Europe wants to remain relevant it needs to find higher levels of convergence in at least five fields that are currently subject to contentious debate.

**Definition:** Most fundamentally, Europeans already disagree on the very definition of political values beyond the Lisbon Treaty. Should political values be restricted to the three core values of the EU, or should the definition be broadened to include other aspects, such as those related to the role of the state in the economy?

**Goals:** Regardless of how Europe defines the political values it aims to follow in its relations with China, the role of pursuing these values needs to be clarified. What are the priorities of Europe's China policy and where do political values fit? Does the EU aim to actively promote its political values in its relations with China (offensive interpretation) or to restrict their validity to Europe (defensive interpretation)? Are some political values, even within the core three, being prioritised over others when dealing with China?

**Strategy:** To promote Europe's priorities effectively, a careful study of China's interests is needed as well as a strategic assessment of how it reacts to different policies. This requires more long-term thinking than is currently being pursued in Europe. How can the EU link different issues effectively to acquire leverage and achieve improvements in the fields that are of primary concern to it?

**Methodology:** What is the most efficient methodology for communicating with China? Should the EU continue to promote bilateral dialogues? If so, which ones and under what conditions? Is discreet diplomacy efficient? Should megaphone diplomacy be used to a greater extent?

**Decision making:** More efficient policymaking requires that Europe consider processes of coordinating policy if not decision making. This would require nation states to compromise and perhaps even give up some of their competences. How can Europe become more united in its decision making? Are institutional reforms of the European Council and/or the European Commission needed, such as the introduction of qualified majority voting in the European Council?

All these issues need to be discussed not only among policymakers but also among the public, in academia and with think tanks. In fact, the experts in the European

Think-tank Network on China have differences of opinion on all these five fields too. Hence, we do not seek to formulate answers to these questions but rather to provide some insights into the issues in the chapters that follow. From our experience of working on this report, discussions on these controversial issues are extremely fruitful and we hope to take some of these aspects beyond the network to contribute to a wider debate on the role of political values in Europe-China relations.

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# Belgium's multilayered China policy: A case of principled pragmatism?

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## Abstract

*Belgium is a small power and a pragmatic trading nation. It is also host to several multilateral and international institutions and committed to the defence of liberal values. Its relationship with China reflects both dimensions – Belgium merges an interest-based foreign policy with a strong emphasis on values. As a federal state with limited resources, it relies on and supports multilateral institutions in its engagement with China as it does in its other relationships. When it comes to values, Belgium prefers dialogue over confrontation and avoids acting alone. Recent developments, however, highlight a growing unease with what is perceived as Chinese intransigence – and sometimes even undue pressure – over values. An important factor in the shaping of the country's future China policy will be the differences in perception and priorities among and between Belgium's regions and communities.*

Belgium prides itself on having a foreign policy that is at the same time both pragmatic and principled. Its diplomacy regularly emphasises its commitment to “the country's fundamental values”, such as “democracy, human dignity, human rights and gender equality”.<sup>1</sup> This ambition runs through every international partnership Belgium enters into, even when, as is the case with China, economic interests are a clear priority.<sup>2</sup>

Before examining the specifics of Belgium's China policy, it is important to keep the broader picture in mind. Belgium is a staunch sponsor of European unity and solidarity, and it sees multilateral institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which it hosts, as well as the United Nations (UN) system as indispensable pillars of a stable, rules-based international order. It believes in multilateralism not just as a diplomatic tool, but also as a structuring principle of international life and, in a context marked by a rising tide of populism and mounting protectionist trends, a value to defend. As a trading nation, Belgium is also very much focused on upholding a free, open and rules-based trading system, and on defending the interests of its companies.

## Belgium's China policy

This overall perspective unambiguously frames the country's relationship with China. The federal government aims for both a principled commitment to liberal political values and economic pragmatism. To achieve these, it seeks to make the best use of multilateral settings in which to engage with China. However, the fragmented nature of Belgium's political and administrative landscape also means that there is no single China policy. Initiatives taken at the federal level are only part of a wider and more complex equation featuring decentralised authorities. By implication, there is no clear hierarchy of economic interests, political engagement and political values. Belgium tends to address issues as they arise on a case-by-case basis and to favour dialogue and consultation over confrontation.

An interest-based China policy is not peculiar to Belgium. Nor is the country's emphasis on the transcendental importance of political values. Rather, Belgium's specificity in regard to its China policy is linked to three separate elements: (a) its

<sup>1</sup> These are the first of the Foreign Ministry's six “fundamental tasks”. Belgium has highlighted a number of priorities with regard to its Human Rights agenda: “the abolition of the death penalty, the protection of the rights of women, children and defenders of human rights, the fight against all forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on sexual orientation, and the fight against impunity”. Kingdom of Belgium, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, *Belgium and human rights*, [https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy\\_areas/human\\_rights](https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy_areas/human_rights).

<sup>2</sup> Kingdom of Belgium, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, *Asie et Océanie*, [https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/politique/regions\\_mondiales/asia\\_et\\_oceanie](https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/politique/regions_mondiales/asia_et_oceanie).

interests and self-reflection as host to international institutions; (b) its complex institutional set-up; and (c) its pragmatic and creative approach to the defence of values, which is mostly reliant on multilateral channels and informal settings.

### The primacy of economic relations

How has this played out in recent years? Belgium considers that “it is China that determines the Asian policy of our country in all its dimensions: economic, military and bilateral”.<sup>3</sup> It recognises that developing (and regulating) trade with China is a major task, and challenge, for the country’s diplomacy. Economic interests have undoubtedly been the main concern on landmark occasions such as the state visit by President Xi Jinping in 2014, the royal mission to China in 2015, Prime Minister Charles Michel’s visit to China in 2016 and the visit of Prime Minister Li Keqiang in 2017. When in 2017 Charles Michel hosted Li Keqiang in order to conclude several important – mostly economic – agreements, he was flanked by his four deputies, making clear that the relationship is a clear political priority for Belgium.<sup>4</sup>

This economic diplomacy relies on a diplomatic and political relationship that is deftly managed. Managing power asymmetry in bilateral relations is acknowledged to require creativity and skill. The Ministry of Foreign affairs presents itself as playing a key role in “harmonising our interests and developing policy options (*“étouffement des dossiers?”*) in order to present a substantial counter-offer to Chinese dominance in our bilateral relationship”.<sup>5</sup>

As part of this pragmatic approach, the Belgian Government carefully addresses issues around political values. In 2018, for instance, Foreign Minister Reynders noted that the death penalty was a priority for his diplomacy, but one that would be pursued as part of a positive dialogue: “since in the short term, its abolition or a moratorium do not seem to be a realistic option, our efforts will focus on obtaining at least greater transparency and limiting as much as possible the application of capital punishment”.<sup>6</sup> Chinese sensitivity over other issues and values is taken very seriously and constructive dialogue is in all cases preferred to confrontation. Nonetheless, Chinese pressure over invitations to the Dalai Lama or with regard to Taiwan have resulted in occasional hiccups in the relationship.<sup>7</sup>

For instance, in 2015, at the initiative of Amnesty International, Foreign minister Reynders submitted a list of Tibetan prisoners to the Chinese authorities, asking for an update on their status.<sup>8</sup> By voicing such concerns, Belgium was not trying to set an example or force China to change its course of action. This was instead a way of displaying solidarity with fellow European countries that were making the same case, and maintaining the relationship within the framework of the China-EU strategic partnership. On values as well as key policy interests such as reciprocity, market access and a level playing field for the private sector, Belgium relies on and supports the EU institutions, where power discrepancies can be evened out.<sup>9</sup> This last point is important in that the Federal Government does not seek to simply “outsource” sensitive discussions. The Belgian Premier made clear that in Europe, defending political values is an important endeavour and a precondition for a principled foreign policy: “We are committed to democracy and the rule of law at all costs [and] for this reason, Belgium proposes setting up a peer review mechanism on the rule of law” (within Europe).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Knack, *België en China sluiten acht handelsakkoorden*, 2 June 2017, [www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/belgie-en-china-sluiten-acht-handelsakkoorden/article-normal-861133.html](http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/belgie-en-china-sluiten-acht-handelsakkoorden/article-normal-861133.html).

<sup>5</sup>Kingdom of Belgium, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, *Rapport annuel, 2016*, [https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/sur\\_lorganisation/rapport\\_dactivite](https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/sur_lorganisation/rapport_dactivite).

<sup>6</sup>Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, Débats Parlementaires (5th session), *CRIV 54 COM 819*, 7 February 2018, [www.lchambre.be/doc/CCRI/pdf/54/ic819.pdf](http://lchambre.be/doc/CCRI/pdf/54/ic819.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>François Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, “China at the gates: A new power audit of EU-China relations”, *ECFR*, 1 December 2017, [www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china\\_eu\\_power\\_audit7242#](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china_eu_power_audit7242#).

<sup>8</sup>7sur7, *Reynders évoque le cas d’un Belge retenu en Chine*, 24 June 2015, [www.7sur7.be/7s7/fr/1502/Belgique/article/detail/2374596/2015/06/24/Reynders-evoque-le-cas-d-un-Belge-retenu-en-Chine.dhtml](http://www.7sur7.be/7s7/fr/1502/Belgique/article/detail/2374596/2015/06/24/Reynders-evoque-le-cas-d-un-Belge-retenu-en-Chine.dhtml).

<sup>9</sup>Author interview with a Belgian official, Brussels, March 2018.

<sup>10</sup>Charles Michel, *Debate on the Future of Europe*, 4 May 2018, <https://premier.fgov.be/en/debate-future-europe>.

## Belgium's multilateral approach

When Belgium seeks to make a difference, it tries to do so tactfully. In June 2018, when he met his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Reynders did more than just mention the importance of human rights for Belgium – he invited Wang Yi to the 7th World Congress Against the Death Penalty, a conference on capital punishment to be organised by Together Against the Death Penalty (Ensemble contre la peine de mort, ECPM) in Brussels in 2019.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, Belgium will co-host this Congress with the European External Action Service (EEAS). On the same occasion, the two ministers discussed areas of cooperation within UN institutions and agreed “to take a common initiative on the rights of children”, Belgium having been elected a non-permanent member of the Security Council for 2019–2020.<sup>12</sup>

One reason for Belgium to rely on multilateral institutions and pragmatic diplomacy is that it lacks resources. It is a small, federal state where a number of competences and budgetary means have been devolved to regional entities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has only limited resources for managing its China policy, while the decentralised authorities have their own mandate for several domains of cooperation, such as trade, investment, cultural affairs and academic exchanges. Parliamentary questions in the Flemish and Walloon hemicycles exhibit a shared preoccupation with the economy, linked to the status of the Chinese economy, market access, the protection of investments and participation in joint projects, not least the “Belt and Road Initiative”, but also with values. Diverse legislative proposals have been considered from the issue of relations with Taiwan to the situation in Tibet. Nonetheless, it is difficult to argue that these debates, and the criticisms that are occasionally voiced by non-governmental organisations, fundamentally affect Belgium’s pragmatic, two-tiered approach.

## Chinese influence in Brussels

With regard to Chinese pressure, Belgium is in a peculiar position by virtue of it being host to EU and NATO institutions. When President Xi visited Brussels in 2014, demonstrations against human rights abuses were forbidden by the city authorities.<sup>13</sup> The idiosyncratic position of Brussels is further reinforced by the weight of Chinese funding and connections for think tanks, cultural institutions and lobbyists, all of which contribute to a positive narrative on China.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, there is a lingering fracture between the other two regional entities: Flanders (where Chinese investments are considerably higher) and Wallonia. In Flanders, Chinese investment and suspected attempts at influence, for instance through cultural and academic cooperation, are viewed more critically than has been the case in the past. For instance, in 2018 Chinese activities at the Confucius Institute of the Free University Brussels (VUB) were audited following a negative report by the Belgian State Security Service, which was issued in 2015 and had initially been ignored.<sup>15</sup> There is little indication that similar questions are being asked in Wallonia. Worse, there is apparently little to no dialogue between regions on the implications of growing Chinese investment in the country, not only in economic terms but also in terms of its impact on values and influence.

In the Belgian media, questions of political values have begun to surface in recent years as a consequence of China’s growing presence and influence. When the Charter of the Chinese Communist Party was amended to abolish presidential term limits, the Belgian media portrayed this as a power grab and a return to Maoist times,<sup>16</sup> a “great step backwards”,<sup>17</sup> a hollowing out of democracy,<sup>18</sup> and the making of a new emperor.<sup>19</sup> A couple months later, it was reported that

<sup>11</sup> Kingdom of Belgium, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, *Didier Reynders rencontre son collègue chinois WANG Yi*, Press Release, 1 June 2018, [https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/newsroom/nouvelles/2018/didier\\_reynders\\_rencontre\\_son\\_collegue\\_chinois\\_wang\\_yi](https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/newsroom/nouvelles/2018/didier_reynders_rencontre_son_collegue_chinois_wang_yi).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Pierre Stroobants, “En visite en Belgique, le président chinois fixe ses conditions”, *Le Monde*, 30 March 2014, [www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2014/03/30/en-visite-en-belgique-le-president-chinois-fixe-ses-conditions\\_4392279\\_3214.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2014/03/30/en-visite-en-belgique-le-president-chinois-fixe-ses-conditions_4392279_3214.html).

<sup>14</sup> Thorsten Benner and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, “Europe needs to step up vigilance on China’s influence”, *Financial Times*, 16 February 2018, [www.ft.com/content/a58b0a0c-127b-11e8-940e-08320fc2a277](http://www.ft.com/content/a58b0a0c-127b-11e8-940e-08320fc2a277). Harold Thibault and Cécile Ducourtieux, “Pékin tisse discrètement sa toile à Bruxelles”, *Le Monde*, 9 January 2018, [www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/01/09/pekin-tisse-discretion-sa-toile-a-bruxelles\\_5239124\\_3214.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/01/09/pekin-tisse-discretion-sa-toile-a-bruxelles_5239124_3214.html).

<sup>15</sup> Roland Legrand (Belga), “VUB voert onderzoek naar samenwerkingen met China”, *De Tijd*, 10 July 2018, [www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/vlaanderen/vub-voert-onderzoek-naar-samenwerkingen-met-china/10030139.html](http://www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/vlaanderen/vub-voert-onderzoek-naar-samenwerkingen-met-china/10030139.html). Jan Lippens, “Big Brothertechnologie: rector Pauwels onderzoekt samenwerking VUB-prof en China”, *Knack*, 10 July 2018, [www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/big-brothertechnologie-rector-pauwels-onderzoekt-samenwerking-vub-prof-en-china/article-longread-1171655.html](http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/big-brothertechnologie-rector-pauwels-onderzoekt-samenwerking-vub-prof-en-china/article-longread-1171655.html).

<sup>16</sup> *De Tijd*, “Xi Jinping gaat Mao achterna”, *De Tijd*, 26 February 2018, [www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/internationaal/azie/xi-jinping-gaat-mao-achterna/9986488.html](http://www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/internationaal/azie/xi-jinping-gaat-mao-achterna/9986488.html).

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Paquet, “Édito: le grand pas en arrière de la Chine”, *La Libre*, 28 February 2018, [www.lalibre.be/debats/edito/edito-le-grand-pas-en-arriere-de-la-chine-5a95bbe8cd70f0681dd7a195](http://www.lalibre.be/debats/edito/edito-le-grand-pas-en-arriere-de-la-chine-5a95bbe8cd70f0681dd7a195).

<sup>18</sup> Giselle Nath, “Waarom democratie in China holler klinkt dan Xi?”, *De Standaard*, 27 February 2018, [www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180226\\_03379514](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180226_03379514).

<sup>19</sup> L’Echo, “Xi Jinping, le nouvel empereur”, *L’Echo*, 17 March 2018, [www.lecho.be/economie-politique/international/asiexi-jinping-le-nouvel-empereur/9993346.html](http://www.lecho.be/economie-politique/international/asiexi-jinping-le-nouvel-empereur/9993346.html).

<sup>20</sup> Sabine Verhest, “Comment la Chine menace les musulmans ouïghours jusqu’en Belgique”, *La Libre*, 27 April 2018, [www.lalibre.be/actu/international/comment-la-chine-menace-les-musulmans-ouighours-jusqu-en-belgique-enquete-5ae1e2cd702e6324ea9b37](http://www.lalibre.be/actu/international/comment-la-chine-menace-les-musulmans-ouighours-jusqu-en-belgique-enquete-5ae1e2cd702e6324ea9b37).

<sup>21</sup> Lars Bové, “België maakt vuist tegen economische spionnen”, *De Tijd*, 5 May 2018, [www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/algemeen/belgie-maakt-vuist-tegen-economische-spionnen/10009095.html](http://www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/algemeen/belgie-maakt-vuist-tegen-economische-spionnen/10009095.html).

the Chinese security services had been actively threatening Uighur migrants in Belgium, emphasising the scope of the crackdown in Xinjiang. In addition, an inquiry exposed the ongoing practice of persuading Chinese citizens living abroad to collect information, using coercion if necessary.<sup>20</sup>

An important development in 2018 was the setting up of a federal platform, led by the State Security Service, with a mission to protect the country’s “economic and scientific potential” from foreign interference.<sup>21</sup> This came about as a result of the arrest of a Chinese citizen on charges of industrial espionage. While not itself a charge on values, industrial espionage may prompt greater attention and criticism toward Chinese activities in Belgium, but the major hindrance to a major policy shift will remain the lack of cooperation across authorities and sectors.

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# The Czech Republic's values-based policy towards China reconsidered

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## Abstract

*The Czech Republic's China policy balances its economic and political priorities. The Czech values-oriented policy was introduced in the 1990s, mainly by the former dissidents who significantly shaped the country's democratic transition. Democracy and human rights support is still part of official Czech policy. However, specific implementation and strategies are a matter of continual dispute between different political groups. The public perception of China is becoming polarised and ideologised in reaction to China's increasing economic relevance, as well as the role of the Czech business lobbies that push for a more pragmatic agenda.*

The Czech values-based policy on support for human rights in China, inspired by the legacy of Czech dissidents, refers to the principle of solidarity with those who live under oppressive regimes. After the fall of communism in 1989, President Václav Havel, a former dissident playwright who had been jailed by the communist regime, declared a number of moral principles that he considered essential for the reconstruction of democracy.<sup>1</sup> Such specific idealism-rooted activism, which might be regarded as a kind of self-construction of a new democratic identity, led to a certain amount of high-level political support for Tibet, Taiwan and individual Chinese dissidents, who found a warm welcome in Prague. However, this enthusiastic activism never achieved an overwhelming consensus and remained a permanent subject of domestic discord.

## The solidarity-based idea of assertive human rights support in China

President Havel was the first Czech Head of State to meet with the Dalai Lama, and later also met with exiled dissidents such as Wei Jingsheng, Harry Wu and Wang Dan. In addition, in the 1990s support for human rights became part of the country's new democratic constitution, and a permanent Department for Human Rights was established within the Czech Foreign Ministry. The human rights agenda has been explicitly incorporated into several core foreign ministry programme documents since the 1990s, such as the most recent Foreign Policy Concept of the Czech Republic of 2015, which refers to values-oriented basic starting points such as democracy, safeguarding human dignity and sharing the country's experience of its transition to democracy with other countries that are similarly transitioning.<sup>2</sup>

The top priorities of 1990s Czech foreign policy were accession to the European Union (EU) and to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Political dialogue with China did not rank as highly in Czech perceptions at that time. At the same time, Czech human rights policy on the People's Republic of China (PRC) assumed a relatively activist style while the PRC's efforts to tame the Czech Government by issuing official protests proved ineffective. In addition to supporting Tibetan exiles, it dared to host a Taiwanese delegation led by the Prime Minister and Vice-President, Lien Chan, in 1995; and in the same year, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, President Havel voiced his support for Taiwan's membership of the UN.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Ondřej Ditrych et al., "Understanding Havel?", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 2013, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 407-417.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Czech Republic*, 2015, [https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign\\_relations/policy\\_planning/concept\\_of\\_the\\_czech\\_republic\\_s\\_foreign.html](https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/policy_planning/concept_of_the_czech_republic_s_foreign.html).

<sup>3</sup> Taiwan Today, *Paying Tribute to Vaclav Havel*, 24 December 2011, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=2&post=2126>.

theme of human rights and Tibet was also raised in 1997 in the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament, and the draft of a resolution criticising China for its human rights abuses and calling on the Czech Government to uphold human rights when dealing with China was eventually passed by the Senate in the following year.<sup>4</sup>

Czech support for Tibet became more assertive and received greater media exposure after the Green Party joined the government in 2006. Governmental bodies made a series of non-China-friendly gestures, such as establishing a Parliamentary Group of Friends of Tibet, and placing Tibetan flags inside the Lower House during a visit by a Chinese parliamentary delegation. Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek posed for cameras with a Tibetan badge on his jacket and Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg compared the upcoming 2008 Olympics in Beijing to the Nazi-dominated 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. During his official visit to France, which at the time held the EU Presidency, Schwarzenberg lobbied for a boycott of the opening ceremony of the Chinese Olympics.<sup>5</sup> There were no high-level Czech political representatives at the official Olympic opening ceremony. Shortly after, in 2009, the new Prime Minister, Jan Fischer, met with the Dalai Lama at his official residence.

The frequent visits to Prague by the Dalai Lama – there have been 11 thus far – were officially labelled semi-private and on a non-governmental basis, and usually arranged as informal meetings with several politicians. Czech support for Tibet won an unusual degree of popular sympathy that was strongly pushed by civil society and the media. In 2006, Prague hosted the 4th Conference of Tibet Support Groups. Moreover, the annual festival, “Days of Tibet”, which commemorates the 1950 Tibet uprising with meetings, discussions and the hanging of over 700 Tibetan flags at city halls, has become increasingly popular. Such efforts marked the period 2008–2012, when the Czech political dialogue with China was frozen. After the victory of President Miloš Zeman in a direct public vote in 2013, however, Czech policy on Beijing was given a “restart”.

### The shift towards a business-oriented approach

The divergent views on China among human rights activists and business leaders have led to strong disputes between political groups. Activist promoters of democracy stress big gestures and media appeal, while a less strident group views human rights in a wider context and values the political dialogue with Beijing. In contrast to the democracy promoters, the pragmatists together with powerful financial lobbies began to activate economic diplomacy with the PRC. Havel was replaced as President by Václav Klaus (2003–2013), a leading right-wing pragmatist who was closely linked to pro-Chinese financial groups, mainly the PPF. Klaus repeatedly voiced his disdain for “NGO-ism”, “human-rightsism” and “dalai-lamism”, and backed the then Prime Minister, Petr Nečas, in his efforts to unfreeze Czech-Chinese relations.<sup>6</sup> Nečas initiated the Czech policy U-turn towards China in 2012, shifting direction not just because of domestic political pressure, but also in the light of the emerging multilateral format, the 16+1, which offered the Czech Republic a smooth way to adapt to a new investment-driven China policy.<sup>7</sup>

Having lost its government-level influence, the China-critical group pushed harder with its anti-communist rhetoric, which hit China in the areas of security, human rights and even economics. Meanwhile, the Foreign Ministry of the new Social Democratic Government (2012–2017) attempted to promote a more comprehensive concept of human rights policy.<sup>8</sup> This updated the concept of

<sup>4</sup>Parliament of the Czech Republic, *Resolution of the Senate*, March 1998, [www.senat.cz/xqw/xervlet/pssenat/htmlhled?action=doc&value=19845](http://www.senat.cz/xqw/xervlet/pssenat/htmlhled?action=doc&value=19845).

<sup>5</sup>iDNES.cz, *Zahájení OH v Pekingu by se mělo bojkotovat, vyzval Schwarzenberg*, 9 April 2008, [https://zpravy.idnes.cz/zahajeni-oh-v-pekingu-by-se-melo-bojkotovat-vyzval-schwarzenberg-pyj-zahranicni.aspx?c=A080409\\_173706\\_zahranicni\\_jte](https://zpravy.idnes.cz/zahajeni-oh-v-pekingu-by-se-melo-bojkotovat-vyzval-schwarzenberg-pyj-zahranicni.aspx?c=A080409_173706_zahranicni_jte).

<sup>6</sup>Česká televize, *Nečasův dalajlamismus pobíral opozici i Schwarzenberga*, 11 September 2012, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/1147086-necasuv-dalajlamismus-pohneval-opozici-i-schwarzenberga>.

<sup>7</sup>Česká televize, *Nečas: Čínské investice získáme díky průmyslové tradici ČR*, 26 April 2012, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/ekonomika/1175955-necas-cinske-investice-ziskame-diky-prumyslove-tradici-v-cr>.

<sup>8</sup>Department of Human Rights and Transformation Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Koncepce podpory lidských práv a transformační spolupráce*, October 2015, [https://www.mzv.cz/file/1610424/Koncepce\\_podpory\\_lidskych\\_prav\\_a\\_transformacni\\_spoluprace.pdf](https://www.mzv.cz/file/1610424/Koncepce_podpory_lidskych_prav_a_transformacni_spoluprace.pdf).

political rights to include social cohesion, sustainable development, ecological aspects and development aid, and called for a human rights dialogue with states that were known to have a poor record in these areas. This attempt to rewrite the originally more assertive pro-USA human rights strategy to focus mainly on political rights was massively rejected by the mainstream Czech media as abandoning the legacy of Václav Havel.<sup>9</sup>

The public outcry over the government's new interpretation of human rights policy did not fit well with soaring Chinese investment in Europe. When President Zeman appointed the Director of the Chinese CEEF Group, Ye Jianming, his official adviser on the economic agenda with China, this gave the anti-Zeman narrative in the Czech media a stronger impetus. Furthermore, the issue of Russia as a security issue became emotionally intertwined in the media debate with a recent Chinese investment spree in the EU member states, which also partly touched the Central and Eastern European states. Thus, doubts over the transparency of these investments and a fear of China's attempts to impose its influence in Europe flooded the Czech domestic media discourse.

This media reporting was well timed, coinciding with President Xi Jinping's arrival in Prague in 2015, which was contentiously followed by the thus far most recent visit by the Dalai Lama several months later at the invitation of the Forum 2000 Foundation.<sup>10</sup> The public clashes over the hosting format for the Dalai Lama's visit revealed two competing ad hoc coalitions of state and non-state organizations. On one side of the debate there were the President and the Government, including the Foreign Minister, who opposed any official meeting. On the other side there were pro-Tibet supporters, which included two former Czech Ambassadors to the USA, a Deputy Speaker from each chamber of parliament, three ministers and about 50 parliamentarians – including leaders of opposition parties, mainly TOP 09 and the Green Party – as well as the director of the National Gallery, various academics, members of conservative think tanks, church representatives and hundreds of individual sympathisers, who wanted the meeting to be official.<sup>11</sup> The Dalai Lama was eventually welcomed at a public meeting in front of Prague Castle, the official presidential office, and politically the most favourable position in Prague, regardless of the fact that the Castle did not approve the use of the public space for the meeting. He also had an audience with the Minister of Culture at his official residence.

In response, the President, the Prime Minister and the speakers of both parliamentary chambers issued a joint statement to the Chinese Embassy, officially distancing themselves from the meeting and reassuring China that the private visit of the Dalai Lama did not change official Czech policy on the Strategic Partnership signed in March 2015.<sup>12</sup> The four signatories of the joint statement were severely criticised for the allegedly humiliating message they sent out, kowtowing to the PRC, and the media amplified its allegations of a Czech shift from democracy and human rights advocacy to favouring the non-democratic East. The increasing polarisation and ideologisation of Czech perceptions of China has strengthened since then, and Zeman has been challenged by an increase in anti-China sentiment.

According to a Eurobarometer opinion survey, the Czech public is currently the most negative about China of all the countries in Europe.<sup>13</sup> Despite its soft power strategy, China has so far failed to develop a more benign public face. Its media presence and the support of a few China-friendly Czech media sources and a tame Confucius Institute in Olomouc cannot sufficiently rebut the massive critical mainstream media stereotypes. The establishment of several Czech-

<sup>9</sup> Marek Hudema, "Odklonem od Havla Česko prodělá", *Hospodářské noviny*, 30 October 2014, <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-63029230-odklonem-od-havla-cesko-o-prodela>.

<sup>10</sup> The Forum 2000 Foundation, which promotes democracy and respect for human rights, was established in 1996 by President Václav Havel, the philanthropist, Yohei Sasakawa, and the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Elie Wiesel. See <https://www.forum2000.cz/en/about>.

<sup>11</sup> The Foreign Minister, Lubomír Zaorálek, accused the Minister of Culture, Daniel Herman, of breaking a commitment to avoid meeting with the Tibetan guest in the official residence. *Lidové noviny*, *Reakce na dalajlamu servilní nebyla, Herman nedodržel dohodu, řekl Zaorálek*, 30 October 2016, [https://www.lidovky.cz/reakce-na-dalajlamu-servilni-nebyla-herman-ze-sebe-udlal-hrdinu-rekl-zaoralek-1x6-/zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A161030\\_114230\\_in\\_domov\\_ele](https://www.lidovky.cz/reakce-na-dalajlamu-servilni-nebyla-herman-ze-sebe-udlal-hrdinu-rekl-zaoralek-1x6-/zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A161030_114230_in_domov_ele).

<sup>12</sup> Pražský hrad, *Společné prohlášení nejvyšších ústavních činitelů České republiky*, 18 October 2016, <https://www.hrad.cz/cs/promedia/tiskove-zpravy/aktualni-tiskove-zpravy/spolecne-prohlaseni-nejvyšších-ustavních-činitelů-ceske-republiky-12953>.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, *Public Opinion*, November 2017, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2179>.

<sup>14</sup>The Czech server Chinfluence found some comparatively less negative coverage of China there. CEFC withdrew from the Czech media group in 2017. Chinfluence, *Czech media analysis*, 4 September 2018, <http://www.chinfluence.eu/media-analysis/>. The analysis, however, confirmed a prevailing negative perception of China in the Czech media.

<sup>15</sup>Simon Denyer and Emily Rahula, "Eleven countries signed a letter slamming China for torturing lawyers: The US did not", *Washington Post*, 22 March 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/22/eleven-countries-signed-a-letter-slamming-china-for-torturing-lawyers-the-u-s-did-not/?utm\\_term=.0c387cbca8a9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/22/eleven-countries-signed-a-letter-slamming-china-for-torturing-lawyers-the-u-s-did-not/?utm_term=.0c387cbca8a9).

Chinese think tanks and some timely CEFC China Energy investment in the Czech media have not thus far been able to establish a convincing pro-China narrative.<sup>14</sup>

### **From solidarity to the politicisation of values**

Czech human rights policy on China has been highly active, even though it has lacked domestic consensus, coherence, sufficient strategy and coordination, and a deeper international cooperative format. Despite joint international efforts, such as the recent signing of a letter by 11 states criticising China for the mistreatment of detained human rights lawyers in 2017,<sup>15</sup> Czech activities have been concentrated mainly in UN Human Rights Council discussions rather than common EU policy. The Czech Republic has not so far experienced any retaliation for its policy from China, probably due to the thus far weak economic ties between the two countries. Allegations about the rising influence of China, which dominate media and scholarly debates, have exposed a lasting trend for domestic politicisation of and polarisation on this issue. The Czech experience, defined by minimal correlation between its political agenda and trade with China, proves that in cases pertaining to small states, outspoken support for human rights cannot derail economic ties with oppressive regimes.

The teasing of China with Tibetan flags during President Xi's visit to Prague in 2015, which illustrates the popularity of the human rights agenda among Czech urban society, displayed the prevailing Czech focus on its domestic audience and had no specific effect on the human rights situation in China that could be of any concern to the Chinese Government. The Czech sense of values in politics and anxiety about its Western identity could explain why such issues matter so much in a post-communist democracy, and the specific discourses that derive repugnant images of non-European autocratic regimes. Unfortunately, the Czech human rights critique of China is becoming a moralistic message that has diverged from the original idea of solidarity with people in need, and instead targets Czech domestic policy.

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# Discreet diplomacy: Denmark's pragmatic stance towards China

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## Abstract

*Having been one of Europe's harshest critics of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, Denmark has deliberately lowered its voice over the past two decades. Today, the Danish Government only raises sensitive political issues such as Tibet and Falun Gong bilaterally, in a discreet and non-consequential manner, while increasingly speaking of the annual EU-China dialogue on human rights as the relevant forum for addressing such issues. Meanwhile, Denmark is eagerly pursuing an ever closer and more diversified bilateral relationship with China, as envisaged in the 2008 Danish-Chinese Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) agreement, which, among other things, has rapidly turned China into Denmark's second-most important economic partner outside Europe. Underneath the current state of bilateral harmony, however, lurks a clash of political values that could ultimately force the Danish Government to revise its current policy of pragmatic adaptation.*

As a small state, Denmark has a long history of combining pragmatic realism with an idealistic promotion of liberal values. Nonetheless, the balance has somewhat shifted in recent years towards the realist end of the spectrum. In its *Foreign and Security Policy Strategy, 2017–2018*, the first ever official document of its kind, the Danish Government promotes an image of Denmark as a staunch champion of liberal democracy, pledging in the opening lines that: “We must fight for the values and freedoms on which our society is built. We want a world with more democracy and freedom, including more freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion”.<sup>1</sup> However, these goals are not translated into clear foreign policy guidelines either generally or in the context of China in particular. In fact, China is only mentioned twice throughout the 25-page strategy: a brief general point about China's growing importance in the international system;<sup>2</sup> and a more specific observation that “Denmark has a strong and broad-based engagement... [and a] ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ with China. The experiences from these efforts have been extremely positive”.<sup>3</sup> All this gives the impression that the government is deliberately seeking to depoliticise Denmark's relationship with China.

## Quiet bilateral diplomacy

In practice, political values have long been reduced to a peripheral concern for Denmark in its relations with China. This change of attitude can be traced back to 1997, when Denmark was subjected to political and economic sanctions by the PRC for sponsoring a resolution critical of China in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC).<sup>4</sup> With little appetite to draw the ire of the Chinese Government again, successive Danish governments have generally enjoyed broad bipartisan support for their “discreet diplomacy” vis-à-vis China. Only the right wing populist Danish People's Party has repeatedly raised China-critical questions in the Danish Parliament, sometimes with the support of the far left.<sup>5</sup> This discreet diplomacy can be described as non-public exchanges of well-known views on sensitive political issues that take place during high-level meetings as a pre-scripted prelude to more important and substantive issues.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Danish Government, *Foreign and Security Policy Strategy, 2017–18*, June 2017, [http://um.dk/~media/UM/English-site/Documents/News/Publikation\\_Udenrigsministeriet\\_UK\\_01%20\(002\).pdf?la=en](http://um.dk/~media/UM/English-site/Documents/News/Publikation_Udenrigsministeriet_UK_01%20(002).pdf?la=en), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Until 2006, the UNHRC was called UNCHR (United Nations Commission on Human Rights). Clemens S. Østergaard, “Danish-Chinese relations: Continuity and change, 1949–2011”, in Nanna Hvidt and Hans Mouritzen (eds), *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook, 2011*, Copenhagen, Danish Institute for International Studies, pp. 48–77.

<sup>5</sup> Claus Kvist Hansen et al., “Forfølgelsen af Falun Gong”, §20-forespørgsel til udenrigsministeren, *Folketinget (the Danish Parliament)*, 5 April 2018, [http://www.folketingstidende.dk/RIpdf/samling/20171/forhandling/M77/20171\\_M77\\_helemoedet.pdf#nameddest=F20](http://www.folketingstidende.dk/RIpdf/samling/20171/forhandling/M77/20171_M77_helemoedet.pdf#nameddest=F20).

<sup>6</sup> Andreas B. Forsby, “A ‘critical’ dialogue? Taking stock of Europe’s human rights dialogue with China”, *Europe Now*, June 2018, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/04/a-critical-dialogue-taking-stock-of-europes-human-rights-dialogue-with-china>.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in J. B. Lauridsen, “Kristian Jensen: ‘Jeg tror ikke på megafon-diplomati’”, *BT*, 25 October 2015, <http://www.bt.dk/politik/kristian-jensen-jeg-tror-ikke-paa-megafon-diplomati> (author’s translation).

<sup>8</sup> Folketinget, *Om forfølgelsen af Falun Gong-udøvere og andre politisk og religiøst forfulgte fanger i Kina, vedtagelse af folketingsforslag (V46)*, 5 April, 2018, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20171/vedtagelse/V46/index.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Folketinget, *Om den kinesiske stats brug af samvittighedsfanger som organdonorer*, vedtagelse af folketingsforslag (V22), 8 December, 2016, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20161/vedtagelse/V22/index.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Folketinget, *Om retstilstanden i Kina*, vedtagelse af folketingsforslag (V40), 22 February, 2013, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20121/vedtagelse/V40/index.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Folketinget, *Om Tibet*, vedtagelse af folketingsforslag (V47), 4 March, 2010, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20091/vedtagelse/v47/index.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Kingdom of Denmark, *Joint Statement between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, 25 October 2008, <http://kina.um.dk/en/about-denmark/sino-dk-relations/denmarks-china-policy//~/media/Kina/Documents/Other/CSPJointstatement.pdf>.

In the words of a former Danish Foreign Minister, Kristian Jensen, “I do not believe in megaphone diplomacy, where you end up shouting at each other. I’m sure that the Chinese side will be well aware of our position on human rights by the end of our meeting. But I’ll reserve this for the direct dialogue with my Chinese colleagues”.<sup>7</sup> While sensitive issues are thus dealt with in a discreet and non-consequential manner, less sensitive human rights-related issues such as rules of criminal procedure and the rights of domestic migrants in China are addressed more directly and substantively by the Danish Government.

The overall guidelines for conducting the bilateral dialogue with the PRC on sensitive political issues are derived from three different sources. Most importantly, over the years the Danish Parliament has passed a number of legally binding motions committing the government to raise sensitive issues such as Falun Gong (2018),<sup>8</sup> organ transplants (2016),<sup>9</sup> human rights (2013),<sup>10</sup> and Tibet (2010) during ministerial meetings with Chinese counterparts.<sup>11</sup> Ministers must also report back on the results of this dialogue to the Foreign Relations Committee in parliament after each high level visit to or from China. Moreover, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement of 2008 stipulates that the two countries “place value on the exchanges and cooperation on human rights” and that they will take unspecified “concrete steps”.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Denmark together with its EU partners have collectively vowed to address human rights issues bilaterally with China.

### Outsourcing the dialogue

Apart from this bilateral dialogue with the PRC, the Danish Government mainly relies on two further actors to address sensitive political issues. First, since the mid-1990s, the Danish Government has opted to multilateralise the human rights dialogue, using the annual EU-China dialogue mechanism to jointly raise sensitive issues and sending Danish observers to the dialogue while also helping to prepare the dialogue by providing input from a Danish perspective. Indeed, the Danish Government frequently cites the EU-China dialogue as a way of fending off domestic criticism of its unwillingness to publicly criticise China.<sup>13</sup> With the exception of Danish support for a US-sponsored resolution in the UNHRC in March 2016, the Danish Government has generally kept a low profile in other multilateral forums or regarding ad-hoc initiatives to criticise China over human rights issues. For instance, Denmark was not among the seven EU member states to sign a letter to the Chinese Government in 2017 expressing strong concern about the deteriorating human rights situation in China.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, since 1999 the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR), an independent state-funded institution, has carried out a practice-oriented human rights dialogue and teaching programme in partnership with Chinese universities, research centres and law firms.<sup>15</sup> Coordinated with the Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs but administered by the DIHR, this dialogue and teaching programme has primarily focused on the rules of criminal procedure, the rights of migrant workers and environmental protection – areas that have allegedly seen some progress in recent years. Following a recent tightening of Chinese rules on foreign NGOs, the work of the DIHR was put on hold in 2017, but the institute expects to be fully operational again by the end of 2018.

### Trends and drivers

Over the past decade, harmonious bilateral relations have only been seriously upset once, when Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen hosted a semi-official visit to Copenhagen by the Dalai Lama in 2009. This prompted China to immediately freeze bilateral relations until the Danish Government published

a verbal note stating that Denmark “opposes Tibetan independence”. This was quite a humiliating clarification of Denmark’s official position, given decades of deliberate ambiguity in this regard and the widespread unofficial support for the Tibetan cause in Denmark.<sup>16</sup> Since then, successive Danish governments have been extremely cautious about provoking China, as clearly demonstrated in 2012 during China’s first-ever state visit to Denmark by the then-president, Hu Jintao. On this occasion, the police authorities violated the Danish Constitution by actively preventing activists from displaying their pro-Tibet messages in front of Hu’s motorcade.<sup>17</sup> The extent to which this constitutional breach was somehow orchestrated by a higher level of authority is still unclear, but is currently being reinvestigated by a special investigatory commission.

Denmark’s softened stance on political issues that are deemed sensitive by the Chinese Government seems first and foremost to be motivated by economic concerns. Denmark has rapidly become one of the most China-oriented economies in Europe, and more than 500 Danish companies currently operate in the country. Moreover, the deepening political relationship, based on an expansive list of bilateral memorandums of understanding, seems to make Danish Government representatives less willing to alienate their Chinese counterparts by confronting them on sensitive issues.<sup>18</sup> Tellingly, the recently updated 55-page Joint Work Programme on upgrading the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership barely mentions human rights issues, apart from a brief reference to the work commissioned by the Danish Human Rights Institute.<sup>19</sup> Finally, fear of being subjected to yet another political and/or economic boycott by the PRC, similar to those of 2009 and 1997, undoubtedly has a “disciplining effect” on the Danish Government.

### China’s lack of ideological influence on Denmark

While the Danish Government has adopted an increasingly pragmatic China policy to avoid confrontation on sensitive political issues, there is no evidence that China has had any ideological influence on Denmark. On the contrary, China’s political development is largely negatively portrayed in the mainstream Danish media, as domestic scholars, NGOs and commentators emphasize the authoritarian and repressive nature of the Chinese regime. A case in point is the amendment of the Chinese Constitution in February 2018 to abolish presidential term limits, which received highly negative press coverage in Denmark right across the political spectrum.<sup>20</sup> Even the Secretary General of the Sino-Danish Business Forum recently struck a note of caution about China’s political development.<sup>21</sup> However, Danish domestic actors with a vested interest in China, such as the business community, generally tend to ignore the political aspects of China’s development or to avoid making any moral judgement.

Rather than having any positive reputational effects in Denmark, Chinese influence attempts have backfired in at least two cases that have recently attracted public attention. In August 2017, the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen put pressure on the Royal Danish Theatre, urging it behind the scenes not to host a show by a Falun Gong-associated dance company.<sup>22</sup> In addition, back in 2013 the Copenhagen International Documentary Festival was subject to strong pressure from the Chinese Embassy to remove certain films about China from its official programme.<sup>23</sup> These revelations prompted a strong reaction from both commentators and opposition politicians. Similar Chinese influence attempts have been documented by the Tibet Special Investigatory Commission (see above), such as several requests from the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen that senior Chinese Government officials should not be exposed to pro-Tibet demonstrators

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. the answer by the Danish Foreign Minister, Anders Samuelsen, during a parliamentary debate, Folketinget, *Besvarelse fra udenrigsminister Anders Samuelsen under Folketingsdebat*, 5 April 2018, [http://www.folketingstidende.dk/RIpdf/samling/2017/forhandlinger/M77/20171\\_M77\\_hele\\_moedetpdf#nameddest=F20](http://www.folketingstidende.dk/RIpdf/samling/2017/forhandlinger/M77/20171_M77_hele_moedetpdf#nameddest=F20)

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. citation by Samuelsen in Laura Dombernowsky, “Danmark vil ikke være med til at kritisere Kina for brud på menneskerettighederne”, *Information*, 3 April 2017, <https://www.information.dk/indland/2017/04/danmark-vaere-kritisere-kina-brud-paa-menneskerettighederne>.

<sup>15</sup> The Danish Institute for Human Rights, *China programme*, July 2018, [https://menneskeret.dk/sites/menneskeret.dk/files/media/dokumenter/lande/chinaprog\\_samlet.pdf](https://menneskeret.dk/sites/menneskeret.dk/files/media/dokumenter/lande/chinaprog_samlet.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Tibet Support Committee Denmark, *Ændringer i Danmarks syn på Tibet 1950-2009*, 12 February 2013, <http://www.tibetkomite.dk/verbalnoten-om-tibet/62-danmarks-syn-pa-tibets-status/102-aendringer-i-danmarks-syn-pa-tibet-fra-1950-til-2009>.

<sup>17</sup> Andreas B Forsby, “With the liberal west in decline, will China be given free rein?”, *The Diplomat*, 14 December 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/with-the-liberal-west-in-decline-will-china-be-given-free-rein>.

<sup>18</sup> Andreas Forsby, “Denmark’s relationship with China: An odd couple’s quest for bilateral harmony”, in B. Sverdrup-Thygeson et al. (eds), *China and Nordic Diplomacy*. 2017, London: Routledge.

<sup>19</sup> Government of Denmark, *China-Denmark Joint Work Programme, 2017–2020: Upgrading the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership to a Higher Level*, May 2017, <http://kina.um.dk/~media/Kina/Documents/China-Denmark%20Joint%20Work%20Program%2020172020%20English.PDF?la=da>.

<sup>20</sup> Laura Dombernowsky, “Kina bruger forfatningen til at legitimere sit diktatur”, *Information*, 27 February 2018, <https://www.information.dk/udland/leder/2018/02/kina-bruger-forfatningen-legitimere-diktatur>. For an exception to this trend, see Lise Karshøj Ipsen, “Kinas stærke mand får endnu mere magt”, *DR*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/portraet-kinas-staerke-mand-faar-endnu-mere-magt>.

<sup>21</sup> Hans H. Pontoppidan, “Danmark skal holde alle døre åbne til Kina”, *Børsen*, 1 March 2017, <http://borsen.dk/nyheder/opinion/artikel/11/164444/artikel.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Foght, “Kina lagde pres på Det Kongelige Teater i sag om forfulgt dansetrup”, *Radio 24-syv*, 18 February 2018, <https://www.radio24syv.dk/udvalgte-nyhedshistorier/kina-lagde-pres-paa-det-kongelige-teater-i-sag-om-forfulgt-dansetrup>.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Foght, “Kina lagde massivt pres på dansk filmfestival”, *Radio 24-syv*, 26 September 2018, <https://www.radio24syv.dk/udvalgte-nyhedshistorier/kina-lagde-massivt-pres-paa-dansk-filmfestival>.

<sup>24</sup> Justitsministeriet, *Tibetkommissionens Beretning*, 18 December 2017, <http://www.justitsministeriet.dk/nyt-og-presse/pressemeddelelser/2017/tibetkommissionen-har-afgivet-sin-beretning>.

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, “Public views of China among the EU countries in 2017”, *Euro Barometer*, July 2018, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/General/index>.

during their visits to Copenhagen.<sup>24</sup> Looking ahead, if China starts to assert its political interests more actively or openly in Denmark, the almost two decade-long bipartisan consensus on Denmark’s pragmatic China policy could eventually fall apart. Indeed, a highly China-skeptical public opinion in Denmark might make it tempting for Danish politicians to politicise Denmark’s relationship with China once again.<sup>25</sup>

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# Political values in France-China relations, 2018: The start of a policy shift under Emmanuel Macron

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## Abstract

*Official visits by French representatives to China often raise questions in the French media and among the general public about the issue of human rights. Two types of question are usually raised: questions about the political willingness of the French Government to actually raise the issue with its Chinese counterparts, and questions about the efficiency of French methods. Is megaphone diplomacy really counterproductive? Why are human rights issues not raised more openly and directly? Have legal and human rights dialogues with China been of any use thus far? If these questions remain open, recent evolutions of China's domestic political context as well as France's renewed commitment to stand for democratic values globally is progressively leading to a conceptual and methodological readjustment of France-China relations.*

The French Government's approach to China must be understood within President Emmanuel Macron's broader foreign policy framework. Since his election in May 2017, Macron has promoted - in comparison with former presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande – a broader approach to political values that includes a defence of universal human rights. This can be summarised as, first, a pro-European Union (EU) stance with a strong commitment to preserving the values traditionally seen as the core of the EU project – democracy, human rights, freedom, equality and the rule of law<sup>1</sup> – as well as opposition to decisions taken by the governments of some EU member states, such as Poland and Hungary, that are perceived as non-democratic in some respects. This translates into French support for the development of a more coordinated China policy at the EU level, including on the issue of the defence of democratic values.

Second, a philosophical framing of French foreign policy that includes consideration of the role of the individual in the state and society. It is through this universal approach that the President raises the issue, more or less directly, of individual freedom and human rights in number of countries including China. In a speech during his state visit to China in January 2018 he included a philosophical consideration of the definition of a human being that emphasised the diversity of individuals.<sup>2</sup>

Third, a global approach to democracy. Emmanuel Macron has publicly expressed on several occasions<sup>3</sup> the urgency and importance of preserving democracy in Europe and the world against not only national or European threats, but also external threats at a time of increasing competition between models of governance around the world. Among these threats, he has identified first and foremost Daesh and terrorism, but also authoritarian countries that are keen to promote – in developing countries in particular – a model of governance that differs from the democratic. The French President is increasingly clear about his willingness to counter authoritarian influences in Europe and beyond.

<sup>1</sup> See Macron's speech at the European Parliament, Brussels, 17 April 2018.

<sup>2</sup> See Macron's speech during his first state visit to China, Xi'an, January 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See Macron's speech at the US Congress, Washington, DC, 25 April 2018.

## A re-emerging role for political values in France's China policy

In this context, China is increasingly perceived by the French Government as a threat to democracy, and Macron has called on democracies to fight for their status and the predominance of the “international liberal order”.<sup>4</sup> Macron hopes to promote a new pro-democratic offensive around the world with France as one of its legitimate leaders, given its history of revolutions, enlightenment philosophers and Humanism, as well as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. This ambition appears explicitly in his recent speeches. Such an ambition, and the overall willingness of the current Presidency to promote not only French economic and security interests but also French political values, is likely to affect relations with China in the coming years, and in particular the interactions between the two countries in multilateral settings. A more concrete and offensive multilateral policymaking agenda could unfold at a time when France's diplomacy is consolidating its commitment to an “Indo-Pacific strategy” and the preservation of the “international liberal order”. At the bilateral level, official visits are likely to continue to address first and foremost economic cooperation as usual. But human rights issues may affect bilateral relations on a case-by-case basis, related to specific events that may arise on both the Chinese and French territories. And the most recent speeches by the French presidency indicate a clearer promotion of universal values in general terms at both bilateral and multilateral levels.<sup>5</sup> If a clear policy shift has not been noticed thus far, it is partly due to the fact that France's China policy under Macron, and the Indo-Pacific strategy more broadly, are at the early stages of development and currently unfolding one step at a time.

### An updated official assessment of China's domestic context

A clearer policy shift might also emerge as there is a general acknowledgment among French officials that political control has been reinforced significantly in China since the beginning of the Xi Jinping Presidency. In particular, French diplomacy has been confronted with specific cases affecting French actors on Chinese territory. Journalists have been expelled or had problems renewing their visas, the French media – such as *Le Monde*<sup>6</sup> – have been facing total or partial censorship on the Chinese Internet and Chinese territory, and there have been questions about the consequences of the new NGOs law for French NGOs operating in China. The French Government is also increasingly being confronted with cases affecting Chinese nationals on French territory, such as questions about the forced repatriation of a Communist Party of China (CPC) cadre to China as part of the “fox hunt”,<sup>7</sup> and questions about surveillance by the Chinese Government of the Uighur community in France,<sup>8</sup> as well as of some other members of the Chinese community living in France. The French Government – along with the governments of other EU member states such as Germany – had called for Liu Xiaobo to be freed, and expressed its condolences and called for freedom of movement for his wife, Liu Xia, after the dissident died in February 2017.<sup>9</sup>

The French authorities have so far adopted a case-by-case and fairly discreet approach to dealing with human rights issues in China. It regards “megaphone diplomacy” as counterproductive, and continues to follow the approach promoted by French diplomats under previous administrations,<sup>10</sup> including the presidency of François Hollande (2012–17), which did not address human rights issues in public during presidential visits to China. This approach also includes French attempts to maintain a dialogue on law and justice with China,<sup>11</sup> which has continued for a long time, albeit with only limited results and engagement

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Emmanuel Macron's pro-EU stance is unlikely to lead to an outsourcing of human rights issues to the EU.

<sup>6</sup>*Le Monde* was totally censored during most of 2018, until September, when the censorship has been partly lifted.

<sup>7</sup>The international component of China's anti-corruption campaign, which is also used for what the CPC calls “political discipline”. In February 2017, the Chinese police repatriated Zheng Ning, a CPC cadre, without informing the French authorities beforehand. This case caused significant dissatisfaction and raised concerns in various French ministries, which raised the issue in private. It was eventually covered by *Le Monde*, but did not become the centre of public debate in France.

<sup>8</sup>This is still an emerging topic not widely discussed by the French general public, but several French media outlets have reported on the topic recently, see France Culture, *Les pieds sur terre, a documentary by Sonia Kronlund*, 8 October 2018, <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-pieds-sur-terre/la-repression-des-ouighours-comment-vivre-sous-lintimidation-chinoise>.

<sup>9</sup>See the short declaration by Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister of Foreign Affairs, 13 July 2017, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/chine/evenements/article/chine-deces-de-liu-xiaobo-declaration-de-jean-yves-le-drian-13-07-17>. He concluded that: “La défense des droits de l'Homme est une priorité de la diplomatie française partout dans le monde. A ce titre, cette question fait partie de notre dialogue avec la Chine” [Human rights protection is a priority of French diplomacy anywhere in the world. It is an issue that is part of our dialogue with China].

by the Chinese side. Even within these attempts, the 2018 “high level dialogue on human exchange” – an annual bilateral civil society dialogue – had to be cancelled due to lack of commitment and participation by the Chinese side.<sup>12</sup> As obstacles to dialogue persist and human rights cases accumulate, a more assertive and public position could emerge.

### **French public debate: mixed perceptions of China’s political system and influence**

Several China-related topics have fuelled and broadened the debate on political values in France. One is related to the notion of sharp power – and more specifically potential interference by states such as Russia or China in political elections. Although France does not seem to have been targeted by China as much as New Zealand or Australia have been in recent years, these cases have raised concerns and caused discussion in France, and potential Chinese political interference on French territory is followed more closely as result.

Another topic that has generated significant media coverage and discussion in France is the recent constitutional amendment in China to remove presidential term limits. This move has not been commented on publicly by the French Government but has been negatively perceived by the majority of the French media and the general public, and has degraded the image of the Chinese leadership as a result.

If French diplomacy, the media and the general public tend to share a critical view of recent developments in China’s domestic politics, the French private sector appears much less critical. Members of the French business community, who are primarily interested in the economic opportunities that may arise in the Chinese market, sometimes express their admiration for what they perceive as the “effectiveness” of China’s long-term strategic planning as well as China’s economic achievements.<sup>13</sup> This admiration is shared by some retired or active French political figures,<sup>14</sup> whose opinions sometimes appear to contradict the current position of the French Government.

At the same time, during recent delegation visits to Paris, Chinese officials have not hesitated to underline the perceived challenges facing France as well as the political, economic, security, demographic and social weaknesses of Europe more generally,<sup>15</sup> in contrast to China which, according to official communications, is faring much better. A communication strategy that emphasises the weaknesses of Europe is not new but has been strengthened in the past two years. It is framed by the CPC premise that “the Western world is being overwhelmed by populism”,<sup>16</sup> as well as the CPC’s ambition to promote a post-Western world order.

At present, there is no evidence to indicate that such campaigns have led to a strengthened pro-China stance in France, or to a shift in France’s China policy, at least at the official level. On the contrary, the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 have led to an increased awareness among French actors based on the Chinese territory that political control is being strengthened, and that this new context needs to be taken into account and the bilateral relationship readjusted in accordance.

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<sup>10</sup> French diplomacy has repeatedly addressed the issue of human rights in a discreet way. Lists of dissidents have been prepared and discussed behind closed doors, and French diplomats visit dissidents under house arrests in Beijing, among other things.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, French lawyers were part of the Presidential delegation to China in January 2018 and for many years France has promoted judicial training programmes for Chinese lawyers.

<sup>12</sup> Author interviews and informal exchanges, French diplomats, Paris, September–October 2018. The official French title of this dialogue is “Dialogue de haut niveau sur les échanges humains”.

<sup>13</sup> Author interviews and informal exchanges with Shanghai- and Beijing-based members of the French business community, February–October 2018. Some of the members’ admiration for China’s economic achievements translates into a broader admiration for China’s political system. In addition to the economic perspective, some see this system positively from a security perspective. Some French expatriates interviewed in Shanghai and Beijing underlined the overall security environment that a “strong state” provides in China, in comparison with what they see as an “unsafe” France with a weak state unable to “maintain order”.

<sup>14</sup> Such as former prime ministers Jean-Pierre Raffarin and Dominique de Villepin.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, throughout 2018, Chinese officials have underlined the migration issues facing Europe. In front of their French counterparts, they have also highlighted the “wave of populism” that, in their opinion, Europe is facing.

<sup>16</sup> Xinhua New Agency, *The Western world is overwhelmed by populism*, 2 November 2016.

## Mapping Europe-China Relations A Bottom-Up Approach

Edited by Mikko Huotari, Miguel Otero-Iglesias,  
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# Germany's promotion of liberal values vis-à-vis China: Adapting to new realities in political relations

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## Abstract

*Germany faces the challenge of pursuing economic and strategic interests while maintaining its commitment to promote liberal values in its dealings with an ever more authoritarian China. Despite their limitations, Germany still mostly relies on formal dialogue and quiet diplomacy to promote human rights, the rule of law and other democratic principles vis-à-vis China. In addition, while some political and business leaders see China as a “systemic challenge” to liberal democracy, others openly praise the alternative that the Chinese political system and development model represent. The balancing of economic, strategic and values-based considerations in Germany’s discussions about China will contribute to determine how Berlin promotes liberal values vis-à-vis China in the years to come. If they want to address the long-term systemic challenge posed by China’s rise, political and business leaders will need to work together to ensure that commercial interests do not impede Germany’s promotion of liberal political values in the People’s Republic.*

German foreign policy is strongly aligned with the principles underpinning the European Union (EU) and its external action: strengthening democracy, the rule of law and human rights worldwide as well as the rules-based international order. Historical legacies resulted in Germany’s moral obligation to promote liberal democratic values in its internal and external policies. Germany also sees these values in terms of its own political interest, viewing them as a basis for long-term peace and development.<sup>1</sup> European cohesion and integration are also central to German foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

In its relations with China, upholding the above-mentioned principles is complicated by Germany’s need to cooperate with Beijing on economic and strategic issues. China has been Germany’s largest trading partner since 2016. In addition, in the face of shifting transatlantic relations, Germany is putting greater emphasis on cooperation with China on global governance issues, from protecting the World Trade Organization (WTO) to fighting climate change. Hence, a debate among German policymakers about how to balance economic, strategic and values-based considerations is intensifying.

More recently, this debate has been increasingly informed by a general sense among German political elites that China will not become ‘like us’, that is, adopt western liberal democratic values. This view is in striking contrast with the 2002 Foreign Office East Asia Concept (the latest concept made publicly available by the Federal Foreign Office), which states that the German Government would support “China’s transition to an open society based upon the rule of law and the respect for human rights”.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that this concept was drafted only one year after China’s accession to the WTO, which nurtured hopes that political liberalisation would follow economic reform. While domestic developments in China in the areas of human rights and the rule of law are discouraging, their improvement and strengthening remain key objectives of the German Government.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, *Human rights: A cornerstone of German foreign policy*, 23 November 2017, [https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/menschenrechte/01-menschenrechte-fundament#content\\_4](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/menschenrechte/01-menschenrechte-fundament#content_4). Auswärtiges Amt, *The rule of law and security reform*, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/krisenpraevention/3-rechtsstaat>.

<sup>2</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, *Germany’s foreign and European policy principles*, 12 March 2017, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/-/229790>.

<sup>3</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, *Tasks of German foreign policy: East Asia*, May 2002, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/231800/756f9f7a0ea08ba707759d3b052e6682/konzeptostasien-data.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, *China: A land with many faces*, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/china>.

## Despite their limitations, Germany still mostly relies on formal dialogue and quiet diplomacy to promote liberal political values in China

Frequent political contact and dense economic relations give Germany some leverage to address values-related issues vis-à-vis Beijing. The German Government relies on a combination of relatively strong public rhetoric and behind-closed-doors diplomacy to promote liberal values in China.

Germany and China have held annual intergovernmental consultations since 2011. Over 80 official dialogues have also been conducted during this period. Of the latter, those most directly related to political values are the German-Chinese High-level Rule of Law, Human Rights, Media and People-to-People (civil society) dialogues. These formats facilitate the establishment of cooperation projects, such as legal training.<sup>5</sup> They also complement regular reminders of China's human rights shortcomings by German politicians and officials, and Chancellor Angela Merkel's own commitment to meet the families of jailed human rights defenders during her visits to China.<sup>6</sup>

This type of pressure has thus far positively contributed to the release of a number of Chinese human rights defenders. The release of Liu Xia – the widow of the late Nobel Peace Prize winner, Liu Xiaobo – and her move to Germany in July 2018 is a case in point.<sup>7</sup>

However, this approach does not address the broader deterioration in the human rights situation and regression in the rule of law, which is exemplified by the fact that an estimated one million Muslims in Xinjiang have been sent to internment camps. The arrest of the pro-democracy activist, Qin Yongming, one day after Liu Xia's release also shows the limits of this approach.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, cases like Liu Xia's give German officials some confidence in quiet diplomacy. By contrast, they increasingly see high-level dialogues as limited and lacking substantive discussions.<sup>9</sup> This has led some policymakers to question whether the continuation of such formats is worthwhile and seek alternative ways to promote liberal values in China.

### Political and business leaders see China as a 'systemic challenge' to liberal democracy

Some German political and business elites increasingly describe China's authoritarian system as a 'systemic challenge' to liberal democracy. This view is well summarised in the words of former Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel. In a speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2018, he warned that "China is developing a comprehensive systemic alternative to the Western model that, in contrast to our own, is not founded on freedom, democracy and individual human rights".<sup>10</sup> This view has been bolstered by the President of the German Parliament, Wolfgang Schäuble,<sup>11</sup> and other members of parliament.<sup>12</sup>

Some business representatives have also started to talk about a 'Cold War of two economic systems'. In January 2019, the Federation of German Industries (BDI) will publish a position paper that defines China as a partner, but also a 'systemic competitor'.<sup>13</sup> Occasionally, they also voice their frustration with authoritarian developments in China. In 2017, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) announced its intention to start installing party cells in foreign enterprises operating in China. This led German industry representatives to warn that some firms might reduce their activity in the Chinese market.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, however, German political and business interests sometimes diverge significantly. This makes it harder for German politicians who wish to

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, *Sino-German legal cooperation programme*, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/15590.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Gao, "Was Merkel's visit to China successful?", *The Diplomat*, 29 May 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/was-merkels-visit-to-china-successful>.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Shepherd and Riham Alkousaa, "Widow of Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo arrives in Germany", *Reuters*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-germany-rights/widow-of-chinese-dissident-liu-xiaobo-arrives-in-germany-idUSKBN1K00C6>.

<sup>8</sup> South China Morning Post, *Leading Chinese dissident Qin Yongming jailed for 13 years for 'subversion'*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2154749/leading-chinese-dissident-qin-yongmin-jailed-13-years>.

<sup>9</sup> At the latest state-level media dialogue, Chinese journalists often shifted away from media-related topics to promote the party line on the BRI or other economic and political issues important to the CCP leadership. Didi Tatlow, "German-China media dialogue: Some connections amid fundamental differences", *MERICs Blog*, 9 May 2018, <https://www.merics.org/en/blog/german-chinese-media-dialogue-some-connections-amid-fundamental-differences>.

<sup>10</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, *Speech by Foreign Minister Gabriel at the Munich Security Conference*, 17 February 2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/rede-muenchener-sicherheits-konferenz/1602662>.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Braun and Robert Roßmann, "Das dauert alles zu lange", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 11 May 2018, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/wolfgang-schaeuble-im-interview-das-dauert-alles-zu-lange-1.3976042?reduced=true>.

counter the geostrategic goals of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for example, to negotiate common positions with business leaders who, by contrast, want to increase cooperation with China on the BRI in order to harness business opportunities. Shortly after Gabriel warned that the BRI is "an attempt to establish a comprehensive system to shape the world according to China's interests", the business conglomerate Siemens set up a Beijing office specifically dedicated to the initiative<sup>15</sup>, which Siemens' CEO has called "the new WTO".<sup>16</sup>

German political elites are also worried about China's influence over decision making in Europe and its neighbourhood, and the possible impact on EU integration and the EU's ability to cohesively uphold international law and human rights vis-à-vis China. They also worry about the erosion of EU standards and norms, particularly in EU candidate countries that are not yet bound by EU legislation and which are signing deals with China. Chancellor Merkel has warned EU candidate countries against acceding to the political demands attached to Chinese money and called on EU member states to maintain a unified China policy.<sup>17</sup> Germany's Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, has recently reiterated the need to counter China's influence in the Western Balkans.<sup>18</sup>

### From wariness to support: the spectrum of opinion on China is widening

Amid scepticism about Chinese initiatives in Europe, there is also some degree of admiration or even support within Germany for the systemic alternative represented by China. So far, this has not corroded Germany's resilient democratic system, however, or translated into concrete policies. Nonetheless, it is useful to take note of different domestic actors' views on China in order to understand how Germany's China policy might evolve in the years to come, with implications for the promotion of liberal values in Germany's internal and external policies.

For example, the far-right political party Alternative for Germany (AfD) recently announced, in the words of the spokesperson for its co-leader, Alice Weidel, that Germany should learn from China's development strategy in third countries (e.g. in Africa) by downplaying "politically correct measures" on, for example, good governance and focusing instead on investment opportunities for German companies.<sup>19</sup> While it is difficult to discern whether such statements are informed by genuine admiration for the Chinese model, or just aimed at challenging the ruling group, such words by elected parliamentarians should not be overlooked. This adds to various cases of retired politicians or former ministers reportedly recruited by Chinese party-state organisations to act as China spokespersons in German policy circles.<sup>20</sup> Although currently irrelevant politically, a minor political party, BÜSo,<sup>21</sup> is already offering unconditional support for China inside Germany.

At the same time, Beijing's violation of democratic values in Germany have also backfired. The last notable outcry linked to German public opinion on China was a call to boycott the 2008 Beijing Olympics in response to a crackdown by the Chinese Government in Tibet. Recent examples of China's infringement of free speech in Germany also raised eyebrows, most notably after Daimler publicly apologised to the Chinese Government for quoting the Dalai Lama in a Mercedes-Benz advertisement,<sup>22</sup> or when Chinese football players halted a friendly game in Mainz to protest against the presence of free-Tibet activists in the crowd.<sup>23</sup>

German intelligence is also increasingly aware of Chinese attempts to silence critics within Germany. In 2017, China warned Weimar City Council against awarding its annual human rights prize to Uighur activist Ilham Tohti. Hackers

<sup>12</sup> Michael Roth, "Wir brauchen eine 'Ein-Europa-Politik'", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 March 2018, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/michael-roth-wir-brauchen-eine-ein-europa-politik-15477746.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Noah Barkin, *Exclusive: German firms urged to cut dependence on China*, 31 October 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-china-report-exclusive/exclusive-german-firms-urged-to-cut-dependence-on-china-idUSKCN1N511H>

<sup>14</sup> He Huifeng, "German trade body warns firms may pull out of China over Communist Party pressure", *South China Morning Post*, 29 November 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/economy/article/2122104/german-trade-body-warns-firms-may-pull-out-china-over-communist>.

<sup>15</sup> OBOreurope, *Siemens BRI headquarters in Beijing*, 28 March 2018, <http://www.oboreurope.com/en/siemens-bri>.

<sup>16</sup> Janne Suokas, "Germany's Siemens signs Belt and Road deals with Chinese firms", *gbrtimes*, 6 June 2018, <https://gbrtimes.com/germanys-siemens-signs-belt-and-road-deals-with-chinese-firms>.

<sup>17</sup> Wendy Wu, "Is China using 'divide and rule' tactics to gain influence in Europe?", *South China Morning Post*, 1 March 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2135244/china-using-divide-and-rule-tactics-gain-influence>.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Rettmann, "Germany urges EU to rival China in Western Balkans", *EU Observer*, 13 September 2018, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/142823>.

<sup>19</sup> Fraktion der AfD im Deutschen Bundestag, *Markus Frohnmaier: Von China lernen heißt siegen lernen*, 22 March 2018, <https://www.afdbundestag.de/markus-frohnmaier-von-china-lernen-heisst-siegen-lernen>.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Crawford and Patricia Suzara, “Riding China’s rise: The European politicians in Beijing’s orbit”, *Bloomberg*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-03/riding-china-s-rise-the-european-politicians-in-beijing-s-orbit>.

<sup>21</sup> Bürgerrechtsbewegung Solidarität (BüSo), <https://www.bueso.de>.

<sup>22</sup> Sui-Lee Wee, “Mercedes-Benz quotes the Dalai Lama: China notices, apology follows”, *New York Times*, 6 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/business/mercedes-daimler-dalai-lama-china.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Sieren, “Beijing’s fight against separatism in fourth-tier football”, *Deutsche Welle*, 23 November 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/sierens-china-beijings-fight-against-separatism-in-fourth-tier-football/a-41508911>.

<sup>24</sup> China Change, *The City of Weimar in Germany saw its website attacked for giving human rights prize to Uighur Professor Ilham Tohti*, 8 November 2017, <https://chinachange.org/2017/11/08/the-city-of-weimar-in-germany-saw-its-website-attacked-for-giving-human-rights-prize-to-uighur-professor-ilham-tohti>.

<sup>25</sup> Christoph Giesen and Ronen Steinke, “Wie chinesische Agenten den Bundestag ausspionieren”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 July 2018, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/einflussnahme-auf-politiker-wie-chinesische-agenten-den-bundestag-ausspionieren-1.4042673>. Reuters, *German intelligence unmask alleged covert Chinese social media profiles*, 10 December 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security-china/german-intelligence-unmasks-alleged-covert-chinese-social-media-profiles-idUSKBN1E40CA>.

subsequently removed online content related to the prize from the city council’s website.<sup>24</sup> This is in addition to revelations about Chinese agents’ espionage activities such as information-gathering through fake LinkedIn accounts and bribes to German parliamentarians.<sup>25</sup>

### Outlook: Ways ahead for Germany’s China policy

The role of political values in Germany’s China policy in the years to come will depend on a number of factors, including: (a) the commitment of the next Chancellor; (b) public and official perceptions of China, which could increase – or reduce – the pressure on the German Government to emphasize the importance of liberal values beyond words and quiet diplomacy; and (c) the outcome of internal and external debates about whether Germany should play a greater role in international and European politics.

In the short term, economic interests are likely to continue driving German foreign policy on China. As these have started to diverge, sometimes considerably, from strategic and values-based considerations, German policymakers will need to incorporate political values more frequently into their discussions about China. While promoting business interests is key to bringing economic benefits to Germany, if they want to address the long-term systemic challenge posed by China’s rise, political and business leaders will need to work together to ensure that commercial interests do not impede the promotion of liberal political values in China.

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# Sino-Greek relations: Marked by values or opportunism?

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## Abstract

*The impressive rapprochement between Athens and Beijing should be judged in the context of the ongoing crisis in Greece. The decade-long socio-economic and political turmoil in the country has clearly weakened the commitment of Greece to core European Union (EU) values. In addition, Greece's stance vis-à-vis China is conditioned by two more key factors: an expectation that the Asian giant will help the country's economy to stand on its own feet once again; and a deliberate choice by the current government to demonstrate to its western partners and creditors that Greece has a powerful ally as an alternative to the EU. Values play only a limited role, if any, in this gambit.*

Over the past decade, Greece's support for liberal political values and the European Union (EU) has suffered from the consequences of the severe fiscal and socio-economic crisis, which has drastically reconfigured the country's economy and politics. Over the past nine years, Greece has had five general elections, four different governments and two caretaker prime ministers. Since May 2010, the country has been forced to accept massive financial support through three bailout agreements in return for painful belt-tightening and sweeping structural reforms. Frustration and resentment have permeated every fibre of Greek society and affected the country's attitude towards fundamental political values.

The January 2015 general election was won by the Radical Left Coalition, Syriza, which formed a government with an unlikely partner, the right-of-centre and xenophobic Independent Greeks (Anel). Golden Dawn, a far-right, neo-Nazi group, became the third largest party in Parliament. The entire political spectrum went topsy-turvy and the democratic ethos of society was dealt a heavy blow. Deep-rooted certainties were put to the test and long-held political values shaken to the core.

With regard to international relations, the perceptions of Greece's friends and foes have also changed dramatically. In the first six months of its term of office, the cabinet led by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras appeared bent on a headlong collision with the country's international creditors, which were persistently dubbed 'neoliberal' in Greece. Although it later made a U-turn on all of its populist pledges, the Syriza-Anel government fuelled fierce, and at times heinous, anti-European rhetoric. Against this backdrop, and in a quest for alternatives to the much-vilified EU, Greece pursued closer ties with China, as well as other illiberal states such as Russia, Iran and even Venezuela.

## A Sino-Greek romance?

Before Syriza came to power in 2015, its activists protested vehemently against the 2008 concession agreement between the then government and the Chinese shipping conglomerate COSCO, which took over a large part of the Piraeus seaport. When COSCO won a second bid for a majority stake in the Piraeus Port Authority in early 2016, the Syriza-Anel administration again had misgivings about relinquishing state control over such a strategically important asset. Nonetheless, the deal passed through parliament a few months later. Since then, Tsipras has travelled to China twice and developed an impressively friendly rapport with the Chinese government. This includes the provision of support to China on certain high-profile political issues.

<sup>1</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce and Somini Sengupta, "In Greece, China finds an ally against human rights criticism", *New York Times*, 19 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/europe/china-human-rights-greece-united-nations.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Xinhua, *China, Greece ink MOU to promote Belt and Road Initiative*, 28 August 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2018-08/28/c\\_137425525.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2018-08/28/c_137425525.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Sébastien Falletti, "La Grèce, cheval de Troie de la Chine dans l'UE", *Le Point*, 20 June 2017, [http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/la-grece-cheval-de-troie-de-la-chine-dans-l-ue-20-06-2017-2136800\\_24.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/la-grece-cheval-de-troie-de-la-chine-dans-l-ue-20-06-2017-2136800_24.php).

<sup>4</sup> Philip Chrysopoulos, "Greece is China's most reliable EU friend, says President Xi Jinping", *Greek Reporter*, 5 July 2016, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/07/05/greece-is-chinas-most-reliable-eu-friend-says-president-xi-jinping>.

<sup>5</sup> Plamen Tonchev and Polyxeni Davarinou, *Chinese investment in Greece and the big picture of Sino-Greek relations*, 2017, Athens, Institute of International Economic Relations, [http://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Chinese-Investment-in-Greece\\_4-12-2017.pdf](http://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Chinese-Investment-in-Greece_4-12-2017.pdf), pp. 15–16.

<sup>6</sup> Greek Public Opinion, December 2016, <http://gpo.gr/el/erevna-koinis-gnomis-gia-tin-cikona-tis-kinas-stin-ellada/>, pp. 9, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Plamen Tonchev (ed.), *China's Image in Greece, 2008–2018*, 2018, Athens, Institute of International Economic Relations, [http://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/China-Image-in-Greece\\_9-10-2018.pdf](http://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/China-Image-in-Greece_9-10-2018.pdf), p. 16.

Greece's conspicuous overtures to Beijing not only reflect the corrosion of the country's commitment to liberal political values, but also undermine the EU's ability to maintain a principled position vis-à-vis China. Thus, a few days after Tsipras' first visit to China in July 2016, his government backed Beijing over the South China Sea dispute in the wake of the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. In May 2017, Alexis Tsipras was one of only five EU leaders to attend the Belt & Road Forum, an event actively promoted by the President of China, Xi Jinping. A month later, Greece blocked the annual EU statement on human rights in China, causing fury in many western capitals.<sup>1</sup>

In June 2018, Alexis Tsipras stated that Greece was willing to join the 16+1 platform, which is seen by EU institutions and some EU member states as a Chinese 'divide and rule' strategy towards the European Union. Although this plan has not materialised to date, Greece retains its observer status. Yet, in August 2018 the foreign ministers of Greece and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding to advance Beijing's flagship Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>2</sup>

These ever-closer relations between the two countries have given rise to speculation about where the Sino-Greek romance is heading. This stance of the Greek government is regarded by some western onlookers as 'Trojan horse' behaviour, dictated by China in return for investment in the cash-strapped Greek economy.<sup>3</sup> This only serves to confirm the image of Greece as a strategic ally that China has projected on numerous occasions, including at the highest possible level.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, while it is true that Greece badly needs foreign investment, including Chinese investment, this is not the whole story. In fact, the value of Chinese investment projects to date is a tiny fraction of the huge investment gap that the Greek economy is facing.<sup>5</sup>

### A lukewarm romance

Could it be that this romance is anchored in an affinity with China's economic model and governance template, or a set of shared values between the two nations? There is no clear answer to this question, as China is viewed in Greece through different lenses by different stakeholders.

Sino-Greek relations under the Tsipras government may be both ostentatious and substantive. They are meant to demonstrate to Greece's international creditors that the country is not isolated. It might also be that while the country certainly needs foreign capital, the Syriza-Anel government is more comfortable with China's style of state capitalism than with private-sector corporations investing in Greece.

In principle, Greek enterprises take a positive view of the Chinese presence, in the hope that an influx of foreign investment capital will generate business opportunities. Long addicted to public procurement contracts, which have now slowed to a trickle, and strangled by the capital controls that have been in place since July 2015, most Greek businesses find themselves in a tight spot. Many have shut down while others have moved abroad.

The general public is confused. Greek citizens appear to support closer relations with China, albeit to varying degrees, in three major areas: cultural ties (87.5%), economic cooperation (83.5%) and political relations (71.1%). At the same time, a majority of Greek citizens polled have a negative view of China's democracy (60.7%) and its respect for human rights (62.4%).<sup>6</sup> This glaring contradiction illustrates the significance Greeks attach to economic recovery and political support for the country, even if this is at the expense of upholding traditional European values.

Media coverage of China, in terms of both content and tone, is slightly more negative than positive, but not adversarial.<sup>7</sup> The media outlets monitored by the Institute of International Economic Relations (IIER) offer their readers fairly

objective and wide-ranging content on China, even if there is a degree of China-friendly slant among some pro-government media. Once again, this pro-China tone can be attributed to either a willingness to portray Beijing as an alternative to ‘neoliberal’ Berlin and Brussels or a hope that economic cooperation between the two countries will help Greece crawl out of its protracted slump.

The same IIER report identifies a gap between Greek society and the Greek government as far as perceptions of China are concerned. The fact that Greek citizens are no fans of the Chinese governance model did not prevent the Greek government from blocking the 2017 statement by the EU on the state of human rights in China. The lack of vocal opposition to the Greek government’s decision could be explained by the fact that, still reeling from a gloomy decade, Greek society is much too pre-occupied with its own predicament, and its behaviour largely marked by apathy regarding developments in a country as remote as China.

### **The true story behind the Sino-Greek relationship**

Sino-Greek relations do not seem to be predicated on any shared values between the two countries. Instead, since 2015 the political flirtation between Athens and Beijing has been more of a mix of an opportunistic and expectations-driven stance on the part of Greece, and a diplomatic gambit in the current government’s tense relations with the EU, than a deep-rooted and genuine relationship between the two countries. In fact, it can be seen as a give-and-take, or rather transactional, relationship.

A general election must be held in Greece by September 2019 at the latest. However, even if a new government is put in place, the Chinese presence in the country will remain strong and highly visible. New Democracy, the main opposition party, supported the initial overtures to China in the 2000s and considers the 2008 COSCO investment in Piraeus to be one of its most significant achievements. If it returns to power, it will probably seek to mend fences with the EU, but attracting foreign, including Chinese, investment will remain a top priority for the country.

However, it should not be taken for granted that Sino-Greek relations will develop on firm ground. Precisely because the nature of the relationship is not values-based, but essentially opportunistic on both sides, there is a risk that hubristic and persistently over-optimistic statements about the bright future for Sino-Greek relations may eventually lead to ‘China fatigue’ in Greece. The slump in the popularity of the EU across the country since 2010 suggests that this could happen to any other partner, including China. Therefore, unless the Athens-Beijing romance delivers tangible benefits, which are much-needed in Greece, generic pronouncements about the ‘strategic partnership’ between the two countries might start to ring hollow to Greek society and could backfire in the future.

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# Europe and China's New Silk Roads

Edited by: Frans-Paul van der Putten, John Seaman, Mikko Huotari, Alice Ekman, Miguel Otero-Iglesias



A Report by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) December 2016

## Have you seen our previous reports?

As China elaborates on the design of its “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), the place of Europe within this project is slowly but surely taking shape.

In 2016, we have published a report that provides a comparative perspective of the BRI as seen from various European Union member states. The Chinese leadership officially launched the BRI framework in autumn 2013, presenting it immediately as a key national concept and foreign policy priority for the years to come.

Core questions covered in the report are: Which BRI-related activities exist currently in the European host countries and at the EU level? What is China’s approach towards individual EU member states with regard to the BRI? What are the perceptions and reactions in individual European countries and at the EU level?

The report is available for download free of charge from the websites of the network’s participating institutes.



# Absent political values in a pragmatic Hungarian China policy

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## Abstract

*Hungary's current China policy is focused mainly on pragmatic, business-related exchanges. Political values and principles do not play a significant role. The Hungarian Government sees the world as moving towards a more transactional time, in which the economy will become the main field of tension and competition. In such a period, making new and influential friends such as China could be very useful. However, there are also signs that the Hungarian leadership is ideologically attuned to illiberalism – both politically and economically – and sees a bright future for authoritarian states like China. While independent media outlets are aware of the debate over values in EU-China relations, the general public shows little interest in it.*

Chinese-Hungarian relations have gone through remarkable developments in recent decades. In 1999, Hungary was one of the first countries to begin a bilateral dialogue mechanism on human rights with China. This initiative gradually disappeared off the agenda, however, and the consultation has not been convened since 2010. Having spent more than a decade preoccupied with reintegration into Europe, successive socialist administrations found China an important partner following the conclusion of Hungary's accession to the European Union (EU) in May 2003. The main goal of Hungary's China policy has been to enhance political relations in order to boost bilateral trade and the inflow of Chinese investment. Since 2010, the second, third and fourth administrations of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán have focused entirely on gaining economic and political advantage, while political and social values and principles are barely mentioned.

## What role do political values play in Hungary's China policy?

Viktor Orbán was once well known for his fierce anti-communist attitudes and liberal values. During his first term (1998–2002) he held an official meeting with the Dalai Lama in his office in 2000. Even though the Dalai Lama's visit had no negative consequences for Hungary, a decade later Orbán became surprisingly pragmatic and established official party-to-party relations with the Communist Party of China in his role as the leader of Fidesz party.<sup>1</sup> Following his return to power in 2010, he initiated the so-called Eastern Opening Policy in reaction to the economic crisis and to forge better economic relations with China. Orbán visited China in 2010, 2014 and 2015, and again in 2017 when the two governments elevated bilateral relations to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership. Beyond economic relations, China became a potential political partner during Orbán's second term (2010–14), when clashes with the EU led to the emergence of a political element to China-Hungary relations. Orbán seemingly decided to enhance political cooperation with the Chinese Government in the belief that Chinese support might provide political leverage in Hungary's relations with the EU and Germany. Orbán has repeatedly used this potential cooperation with China as a threat or extortion in bilateral relations with other EU member states and the EU institutions, as for example when he told German business leaders: "If the European Union cannot provide financial support, we will turn

<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister's Office, *Kínai látogatás*, 2 December 2009, [http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/cikk/kinai\\_latogatás](http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/cikk/kinai_latogatás). Since no foreign policy guidelines have been published since 2011, it is not possible to analyse the role of political values in the policies of the current government more generally.

to China”.<sup>2</sup> In further evidence of the growing ideological importance of the Chinese political and economic model, Orbán has mentioned China several times as a good example of a successful ‘labour-based society’, and as an alternative to Western economies “based on speculation”:

“This...is the explanation for the fact that the most popular topic in thinking today is trying to understand how systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies, can nevertheless make their nations successful. The stars of the international analysts today are Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey. [...] We want to organise a work-based society that, as I have just mentioned, undertakes the odium of stating that it is not liberal in character.”<sup>3</sup>

It might be expected that China has become an important factor in Hungarian domestic politics, and opposition parties might try to denounce the government as pro-China or pro-communist. In fact, the opposite is true. Despite all the deep divisions in the Hungarian political arena, good Sino-Hungarian relations enjoy broad political consensus. None of the major parties publicly question the importance of China, and politically sensitive issues such as human rights, Tibet or autocratic tendencies are not part of the domestic political agenda. Prominent politicians in the opposition parties barely mention China at all in their public statements, and, unlike in some other countries, its increased political and economic presence has not triggered any alarm in Hungarian political circles or among the wider public. Critical commentary on Hungarian China policy currently exists only in independent media (see below).

Thanks to a major international research project, ChinfluenCE, there is sufficient data to analyse how China is depicted in the Hungarian media, how this picture is formed and by whom.<sup>4</sup> The results prove that attitudes to China are mostly influenced by domestic political inclinations. Over the past seven years, Hungarian media coverage of China has been highly pragmatic and value-free. Most of the articles and thus the public discourse analysed have focused on the general economic situation in China, its role in world politics and economics, and the development of Hungarian-Chinese relations. Topics such as human rights, Tibet, the Dalai Lama or the protection of intellectual property rights were barely mentioned in the period 2010–2017. The topics ‘Chinese economy’, ‘China and the word’ and ‘Hungarian economic relations with China’ were by far the most frequently mentioned, while ‘censorship’, ‘Tibet’ and ‘Uighurs’ had almost zero impact.

In sum, the EU’s political values play virtually no role in Hungary’s China Policy while the Hungarian Government is more apt to build on the values it perceives that it has in common with China. In sharp contrast to the EU, which explicitly strives to actively promote liberal values by means of its foreign policies, Orbán rejects the universal validity of political and economic principles and advocates the principle of sovereign non-interference:

“We believe that each nation has its own character, and that this is embodied in specific and unique political systems. [...] The Chinese political system is a matter for the Chinese people, just as the Hungarian political system is a matter for the Hungarian people. No one has the right to interfere with this by adopting the role of a kind of self-appointed judge.”<sup>5</sup>

Hence, the Hungarian Government has adopted a highly critical stance on the EU’s China policy.

<sup>2</sup>Budapest Business Journal, *Orbán: if EU doesn't pay, Hungary will turn to China*, 11 January 2018, [https://bbj.hu/economy/orban-if-eu-doesnt-pay-hungary-will-turn-to-china\\_143836](https://bbj.hu/economy/orban-if-eu-doesnt-pay-hungary-will-turn-to-china_143836).

<sup>3</sup>Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, *The speech of Viktor Orbán on July 26, 2014*, 26 July 2014, [http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in\\_english\\_article/\\_prime\\_minister\\_viktor\\_orban\\_s\\_speech\\_at\\_the\\_25th\\_balvanyos\\_summer\\_free\\_university\\_and\\_student\\_camp](http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_article/_prime_minister_viktor_orban_s_speech_at_the_25th_balvanyos_summer_free_university_and_student_camp).

<sup>4</sup>*Chinfluence*, [www.chinfluence.eu](http://www.chinfluence.eu). Within the framework of ChinfluenCE, we analysed almost 4000 Hungarian media outputs published between 2010 and June 2017 from 15 selected media sources which were among the most widely read, listened to or followed and had nationwide coverage.

<sup>5</sup>Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, *Viktor Orbán's speech at the conference: 'China-CEE Political Parties Dialogue'*, 6 October 2016, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-conference-china-cee-political-parties-dialogue>.

## The image of China in Hungary

Despite the cross-party political consensus on the importance of China, domestic political divisions still have an impact on the image of China itself. Media outlets believed to be close to the government carry mostly positive reports about China while independent or opposition media sources publish more critical comments, for instance, harsh criticism of the Belgrade-Budapest railway project. However, the main aim is to criticize the Hungarian Government's China policy, not necessarily China itself. Since 2010, this criticism has been increasing consistently, which could be explained by the lack of economic successes in China-Hungary relations but almost certainly not by the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies inside China.<sup>6</sup> For example, the mainstream media hardly reported the abolition of presidential term limits in China, which centralized authoritarian power in the hands of Xi Jinping. The independent press, however, did make some critical comments.

The people with the most influence over the public discourse on China in Hungary are politicians and journalists. Even when it comes to politicians, however, only a small circle has had any impact on the discourse. For obvious reasons, the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister occupy the top two positions with by far the highest numbers of citations, followed by various government officials and the President of the Hungarian National Bank. One of the most striking findings is the total lack of comments on China from opposition politicians among the several dozen most important opinion formers. Comments were made only by members of the governing Fidesz Party – the group of politicians with the most favourable attitude to China. This is in accordance with the above-mentioned findings that China is not a major concern for the political parties or the public, and that the majority of the population and most politicians agree with current developments and the current focus of bilateral relations.

In the light of Hungary's fairly cooperative approach to China, the Chinese Government has not sought to directly influence or actively intervene in the domestic debate in order to change public perceptions. Confucius Institutes have been set up but are not influential beyond university circles and do not reach out to the wider public.

China's reluctance to target the Hungarian public may have contributed to the fact that China does not enjoy a favourable position in public opinion surveys. According to a Eurobarometer survey in December 2017, only 40 per cent of Hungarians have a positive view about China, while 50 per cent have negative feelings.<sup>7</sup> A similar survey by the Center for Insights in Survey Research concluded that only 25 per cent of Hungarians agreed that maintaining strong relations with China serves the interests of the country, while 32 per cent disagreed.<sup>8</sup> This was the lowest share among the Visegrad countries and is more or less in line with the findings of the Budapest-based China-CEE Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Its research suggests that just 35 per cent of Hungarians consider the relationship between Hungary and China to be either close or very close.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, two-thirds of the population have a high regard for the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and are concerned about the polarisation of domestic politics and high levels of corruption, as well as the style of government in Russia.<sup>10</sup>

The Hungarian public is not resistant to the question of political values and principles in general but due to the absence of a domestic public discourse or debate about China, it seems that few mind whether such values are represented in the country's policies on China. The findings of the above-mentioned media

<sup>6</sup> For further details see [www.chinfluence.eu](http://www.chinfluence.eu).

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer*, 467, December 2017, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Centre for Insights in Survey Research, *Public opinion in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia*, March 2017, [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/four\\_country\\_full\\_presentation\\_may\\_24\\_2017.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/four_country_full_presentation_may_24_2017.pdf), p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Chen Xin (ed.), *How the CEE citizens view China's development*, 2018, Budapest, China-CEE Institute, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Centre for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion in Hungary*, 30 November to 20 December 2017, [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/hungary\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/hungary_poll_presentation.pdf)

content analysis provide evidence of this attitude, as most of the articles found focused on the general economic situation in China, its role in world politics and economics, and the development of Hungarian-Chinese relations. Meanwhile, values-based topics such as human rights, democracy, Tibet, the Dalai Lama or the protection of intellectual property rights were hardly mentioned.<sup>11</sup> It is hard to decide whether such a carefree attitude is based on pure pragmatism – that “Chinese affairs are none of our business” – or the lack of information about such matters.

In sum, the discourse on China in Hungary is mostly one-dimensional, focused overwhelmingly on economic data and the development of bilateral relations. The view of Hungarian-Chinese relations in the media is strongly influenced by the political outlook of the media source concerned and its attitude to the government. It is also noteworthy that the Hungarian media discourse is mostly materialistic, focused mainly on economics and potential financial opportunities and risks, while topics such as political values, human rights, minorities or democracy are almost completely absent from the agenda. The same applies to the political discourse in the country, in which China itself is not high up the agenda, while European values on China policy are totally irrelevant and invisible.

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# Political values in Italy's China policy: A “constructive approach”

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## Abstract

*Italy has adopted a “constructive” approach to China that denounces violations of democracy, human dignity, human rights, freedom, equality and the rule of law inside China without jeopardising its economic ties with the Asian giant. Successive Italian governments have tended to pay particular attention to international political values such as multilateralism, open markets and the rules-based trading system, since Italy is heavily dependent on exports and open access to resources for its well-being. The current Italian Government takes a nationalist approach aimed at safeguarding Italy's small and medium-sized enterprises and Italy's manufacturing industry from unfair competition, but it also wants to attract Chinese capital and to reposition Italy as the end-point of the Belt and Road Initiative. This could lead the Italian Government to scrap the previous administration's efforts to limit Chinese investment in strategic sectors. At the same time, the critical views on China that are shared by the majority of the Italian population could seep into the decision-making process of the populist government, tipping the balance in favour of a more principled China policy.*

Italy shares the commitment of the European Union (EU) to a number of basic political values: democracy, human dignity, human rights, freedom, equality and the rule of law. Successive Italian governments have succeeded in promoting these values at various times, while on other occasions, depending on the identity of the ruling coalition, these same values have been overshadowed by commercial considerations or geopolitical interests.

The approach adopted by the range of Italian administrations since the early 1990s – after the Tiananmen Square crackdown on students by the People's Liberation Army and when China's economic emergence began in earnest – can be broadly defined as ‘constructive’, that is, an approach that acknowledges and denounces violations of basic political rights inside China but at the same time does not want to jeopardise economic ties with the Asian giant.

## The role of the courts and parliament

It is possible to identify a number of important actions recently undertaken in Italy to counter various political decisions made by China in contravention of human rights. During the 17th legislature, the Italian Senate published two important documents on repression in Tibet, the persecution of Falun Gong and coercive organ harvesting.

On 18 December 2013, David Matas gave evidence to the Senate Commission for the Safeguarding and Promotion of Human Rights on coercive organ harvesting from executed prisoners and the repression of Falun Gong. The Commission recommended key steps to be implemented to enable improvement of the human rights situation in China. The Commission also showed its support for the release of Falun Gong practitioners, data collection on coercive organ harvesting and the prosecution of organ trafficking.<sup>1</sup>

On 5 March 2014, Dicki Choyang provided details to the Commission of violations of human rights in Tibet. The Commission recommended that the Italian Government take action in seven key areas. In particular, it is worth noting

<sup>1</sup> Senate of Italy, *Risoluzione della Commissione Straordinaria per la tutela e la Promozione dei diritti umani*, Doc. XXIV-ter n. 7, 5 March 2014, <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/750984.pdf>.

the willingness to enhance the freedoms of speech, association and faith, deepen the EU-China dialogue on human rights and work closely with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on monitoring the human rights situation in Tibet.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, on 27 June 2018 the Court of Appeal in Perugia granted refugee status to two female members of the Church of Almighty God, a Chinese Christian religious movement, recognising them as victims of torture.<sup>3</sup>

### Balancing values and economic interests

In recent years, successive Italian governments have become increasingly concerned about China's international role and the fact that a more powerful – and at times assertive – China continues to be ruled by an authoritarian Communist Party with values and principles quite distinct from those of the West.

The most recent round of constitutional reform, in particular the extension of Xi Jinping's powers as well as the tightening of control over civil society, coupled with China's more assertive international role and unfair economic practices led Italy in February 2017 to join Germany and France in calling for an EU-wide investment screening mechanism. This is clearly aimed at blocking China's state-owned enterprises from acquiring strategic assets – and thus political influence – across Europe.

In spite of criticism of China's new Silk Roads in many European capitals, Italy's then Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, attended Xi Jinping's High-level Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Forum in Beijing in May 2017. He was the only Head of Government of an EU member state and of a G-7 country to do so. His decision to attend was at least in part intended to put Italy-China relations back on track after China had begun to reduce investment in Italy and boycott some Italian manufactured goods following the Italian Government's refusal to grant China coveted Market Economy Status.<sup>4</sup> Italy had been the only EU member state to overtly deny such status. This perfectly describes the 'dilemma' that Italy's differentiated strategy vis-à-vis China generates when it comes to balancing the need to promote national interests with the need to uphold core political values.

Italy's China policy is currently conducted through an official bilateral mechanism established by the two sides in 2004. The Italy-China Government Committee (Comitato Governativo Italia-Cina) is an annual gathering co-chaired by the countries' respective foreign ministers. An Action Plan adopted by the two sides during a visit to Beijing by Paolo Gentiloni in May 2017 gives priority to economic considerations and the rules-based global trading system.<sup>5</sup>

### International political values

Italy has tended to pay particular attention to international political values such as multilateralism, open markets and the rules-based trading system. For instance, the visit by Gentiloni to Beijing in May 2017 served to connect China and Italy around an agenda based on support for open trade and multilateralism – a clear message to counter the protectionist and unilateral policies of US President Donald J. Trump. The message was reiterated by Italy's Economy and Finance Minister, Giovanni Tria, who visited China in August 2018 – his first official trip outside Europe – to boost Sino-Italian economic ties.

International political values are very important to a country like Italy, which depends heavily on exports and open access to resources for its well-being. For this reason, the main challenge from China is perceived to be an economic one, most notably the idea that China does not respect some of the basic rules and

<sup>2</sup>Senate of Italy, *Risoluzione della Commissione Straordinaria per la tutela e la Promozione dei diritti umani*, Doc. XXIV-ter n. 6, 5 March 2014, <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/75093.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>Tribunale di Perugia, *Ordinanza n. cronol. 462/2018 del 27/06/2018*, RG n. 7109/2017, [https://www.meltingpot.org/IMG/pdf/1\\_tribunale\\_di\\_perugia\\_ordinanza\\_del\\_27\\_giugno\\_2018.pdf](https://www.meltingpot.org/IMG/pdf/1_tribunale_di_perugia_ordinanza_del_27_giugno_2018.pdf). Tribunale di Perugia, *Ordinanza n. cronol. 459/2018 del 27/06/2018*, RG n. 310/2018, [https://www.meltingpot.org/IMG/pdf/2\\_tribunale\\_di\\_perugia\\_ordinanza\\_del\\_27\\_giugno\\_2018.pdf](https://www.meltingpot.org/IMG/pdf/2_tribunale_di_perugia_ordinanza_del_27_giugno_2018.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>Nicola Casarini, "Cina: l'Italia nella nuova Via della Seta", *Affari Internazionali*, 17 May 2017, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/2017/05/cina-litalia-nella-nuova-via-della-seta>. Il Sole 24 Ore, *Gentiloni: Xi vuole inserire i porti italiani nella via della Seta*, 16 May 2017, <http://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/notizie/2017-05-16/gentiloni-xi-vuole-inserire-porti-italiani-via-seta-092436.shtml?uuiid=AEjxHBNB>.

<sup>5</sup>Ettore Sequi, "Further opening-up will benefit Italy", *China Daily*, 17 March 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201803/17/WS5aac6deca3106e7dcc142369.html>.

values of the international trading system. This view is strengthened by China's active industrial policy, which is turning the country into a low-cost competitor in high-tech industries. The rapid growth of skill-intensive imports from China represents a serious challenge for many Italian industrial sectors that are considered sensitive.

Italy's firm approach to Chinese commercial practices finds support among Italian public opinion, which has over the years become highly critical of China. According to the Pew Research Center, 60 per cent of Italians perceive China unfavourably, the highest in all the Western countries, and more than 70 per cent believe that China does not respect personal freedoms.<sup>6</sup> Such attitudes are likely to influence the political direction of the current government, which plays a so-called two-level game that seeks a convergence between society's feelings and international relations practice in an effort to increase electoral support.<sup>7</sup>

In the most recent electoral campaign, which elected a new parliament on 4 March 2018, the Northern League and the Five Star Movement – the two parties that currently form the coalition government in Rome – used anti-China rhetoric to attract “blue collar” voters and the impoverished middle class. For similar reasons, Italy has also led the campaign against relaxing the anti-dumping measures put in place against China.

## Conclusion

The current Italian Government seems to have embraced the provision of mixed messages to China. On the one hand, the government takes a nationalist approach aimed at safeguarding Italy's small and medium-sized enterprises and manufacturing industry from unfair competition. On the other hand, there is a keenness to attract Chinese capital and reposition Italy as the end-point of the BRI. This mixed policy is embodied in the recently created ‘China Task Force’ within the Ministry of Economic Development.

Italy's current government seems to be intent on scrapping the previous administration's efforts to limit Chinese investment in strategic sectors in favour of fostering relations with China. In this context, Italy may sign a memorandum of understanding on the BRI with China, becoming the first member of the G7 nations to do so.<sup>8</sup> This attempt at reversing policy is led by Michele Geraci, Undersecretary of State at the Ministry for Economic Development, a member of Matteo Salvini's Northern League.

However, Italy's future approach to China may be more nuanced than is being reported in the media. Because of the peculiar composition of the government, it is likely to be more influenced than past administrations by Italian public opinion. The Five Star Movement – the dominant party in the current coalition – continues to adopt a bottom-up political strategy to Italian politics. Therefore, the critical views on China's political system, which are shared by a majority of the Italian population, could seep into the decision-making process, provoking possible friction between economic necessities and political will. If this scenario plays out, it could tip the balance in favour of a more principled policy on China.

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<sup>6</sup> Wike, Richard et al., 5. International publics divided on China, 1 October 2018, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/10/01/international-publics-divided-on-china>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games”, *International Organization*, 1988, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 427–60.

<sup>8</sup> John Follain and Rosalind Mathieson, “Italy pivots to China in blow to EU efforts to keep its distance”, *Bloomberg*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-04/italy-pivots-to-china-in-blow-to-eu-efforts-to-keep-its-distance>.

# Chinese Investment in Europe

## A Country-Level Approach

Edited by: John Seaman, Mikko Huotari, Miguel Otero-Iglesias



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# Latvia: A Pragmatic Approach Without Making Significant Concessions to China

Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova and Māris Andžāns,  
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## Abstract

*Political values do not play a crucial role in Latvia's relations with China. Latvia adheres to the political values set out in the basic documents of the European Union, but prefers to outsource human rights and other political values-related issues linked to relations with China to the EU level. Economic issues prevail over political values in relations with China, although there have been no significant concessions to China regarding such values. Nor are there any sympathies with the Chinese model of governance in Latvia, or the Chinese approach to the international law. Latvia has yet to experience direct pressure from China with regard to its own political values.*

Apart from when China's diplomatic representation was withdrawn from Latvia in 1992–1994 while Latvia established de facto diplomatic relations with Taiwan, there has been active political dialogue between the two countries.<sup>1</sup> The respective heads of state and government have exchanged visits on a regular basis. While Latvian representatives have travelled to Beijing more often than their Chinese counterparts have travelled to Riga, the then President of China, Jiang Zemin, visited Riga in 2002.

In 2016 and the beginning of 2017 there was a series of high-profile visits to Latvia by senior Chinese officials, such as China's Prime Minister, Li Keqiang, the then speaker of the National People's Congress, Zhang Dejiang, and several ministers and deputy ministers, accompanied by business delegations. A factor behind this enhanced political dialogue was the 5th Meeting of the Heads of Government of Central and Eastern European Countries and China (the "16+1" Summit), which was held in Riga in November 2016, as well as its side events and related activities.

Like many countries, Latvia does its best to gain economically from its cooperation with China (as well as from other countries with economic potential). To a large extent, this has been the main driver behind Latvian interest in cooperation with China. China was ranked 12th among Latvia's trading partners in 2017 but trade grew by almost 9.5 per cent (or €49.42 million) in 2017.<sup>2</sup>

## The role of political values in Latvian-Chinese relations

Latvia is far more advanced than China in terms of the state of democracy and the freedoms of its citizens. (Freedom House, for instance, ranks Latvia as "free" and China as "not free".<sup>3</sup>) Nonetheless, Latvia has not been active in promoting its political values in its relations with China.

One reason why Latvia is not vocal on territorial issues in Latvian-Sino relations is because of the unsettling experience it underwent of being forced to adjust its position on China's territorial claims in the early 1990s. In January 1992, a Consulate General for Taiwan was established in Latvia,<sup>4</sup> possibly motivated both by ideals of self-determination and the promise of Taiwanese funds. Latvian-Taiwanese government ties were active up until 1994, when the Taiwanese Consulate General was downgraded to the status of a "mission" and Latvia subsequently readopted a "One-China" policy.

<sup>1</sup>This section is based on Māris Andžāns and Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "Perception of the 16+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative: A perspective from Latvia", in: Huang Ping and Liu Zuokui (eds), *How the 16+1 Cooperation Promotes the Belt and Road Initiative*, 2017, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, pp. 124–131.

<sup>2</sup>Latvijas Republikas Ārlietu ministrija, *Latvijas Republikas un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas divpusējās attiecības*, 31 August 2018, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/divpusejas-attiecibas/latvijas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-attiecibas>.

<sup>3</sup>Freedom House, *Freedom in the World, 2018: Democracy in Crisis*, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>.

<sup>4</sup>Jelena Staburova, *Latvia-China-Taiwan: Triangle or Circle?* 1993, Riga, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, <http://www.liia.lv/en/publications/latvia-chinataiwan-triangle-or-circle-5>.

In accordance with the EU's approach, the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs underlines the need for an EU human rights dialogue with China at the director-general level at least. As State Secretary Andrejs Pildegovičs confirmed, Latvia stresses freedom of speech and the importance of uncensored journalism, advocating that journalists and opinion formers should have wide access to China to be able to form their independent impressions: "We formulate a clear message to the Chinese media – we care about objective, comprehensive and independent information".<sup>5</sup>

Ojārs Ēriks Kalniņš, an experienced parliamentarian and Chair of the Latvian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, also made clear, however, that international political values and domestic values should remain separate:

"In Latvia, we look at China's international role and for the most part do not see it as threatening or contradictory to our values, even though their internal values differ from ours. But China is not a part of the EU community. As long as their internal values are not applied to us internationally, we should not pass judgment on them. When it comes to issues like human rights, we share the EU position: We acknowledge that there are differences with China's values, but we do not impose our views. Whether it is Tibet or other issues, we just let it be known what our differences are. We have to prioritize and the economy takes precedence over these issues, especially if we have no influence over them."<sup>6</sup>

### Actors addressing values-based issues with regard to China

Business representatives, the Ministry of Transport, the Economics Ministry and others actively promote friendly relations with China and call for a pragmatic approach that avoids raising issues that would harm economic relations. The major actors addressing values-based issues are NGOs, think tanks and various civil society groups. Falun Dafa activists, for example, are known for their weekly silent demonstrations outside the Chinese Embassy and their active physical and online presence at China-related events.

Less partisan opinions on China are occasionally expressed in parliament, since its members are able to speak and act based on their personal beliefs. There is, for example, a parliamentary group that presses for cooperation with the Taiwanese Parliament.<sup>7</sup> There is also a support group for Tibet, which has been vocal at times.<sup>8</sup> In 2008 it drafted a letter to China's leaders expressing support for human rights in Tibet.<sup>9</sup> None of the political parties, however, even among the opposition, has an outspoken stance that challenges China on issues such as the state of human rights.

A visible values-related issue between Latvia and China is the annual visit to Riga and public lecture by the Dalai Lama. China's concerns mean that there have been no government-level meetings with the Dalai Lama in the recent years. Officially, it is claimed that these visits are linked to Buddhism and Tibetan culture, and that therefore, in accordance with national and EU values and norms, Latvia cannot and does not limit freedom of movement, assembly and religious belief.<sup>10</sup> As Ojārs Ēriks Kalniņš puts it, actions in support of the above-mentioned issues "have raised awareness, but it has not changed policy. It adds an item to the list of topics to be discussed."<sup>11</sup>

### The role of Chinese political values in Latvia

On the role of Chinese political values in Latvia, there has been no discernible shift towards advocacy of the "China model". Among those who follow developments in China, the decision to remove presidential term limits from the

<sup>5</sup> Author interview with the State Secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Andrejs Pildegovičs, 10 July 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Author interview with Ojārs Ēriks Kalniņš, Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), 13 July 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Saeima, *[Deputātu grupas] Sadarbībai ar citu valstu parlamentiem*, [http://titania.saeima.lv/Personal/Deputati/Saeima12\\_DepWeb\\_Public.nsf/structureview?readform&type=7&lang=LV&count=1000](http://titania.saeima.lv/Personal/Deputati/Saeima12_DepWeb_Public.nsf/structureview?readform&type=7&lang=LV&count=1000).

<sup>8</sup> Saeima, *[Deputātu grupas] Cīņas*, [http://titania.saeima.lv/Personal/Deputati/Saeima12\\_DepWeb\\_Public.nsf/structureview?readform&type=9&lang=LV&count=1000](http://titania.saeima.lv/Personal/Deputati/Saeima12_DepWeb_Public.nsf/structureview?readform&type=9&lang=LV&count=1000).

<sup>9</sup> Saeima, *Saeimas deputātu grupa Tībetas atbalstam sagatavojusi vēstuli Ķīnas augstākajam amatpersonam*, 20 March 2008, <http://saeima.lv/lv/aktualitates/saeimas-zinas/10722>.

<sup>10</sup> Author interview with Andrejs Pildegovičs, State Secretary, Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 July 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Author interview with Ojārs Ēriks Kalniņš (note 6).

Chinese Constitution was perceived as an alarming sign of the concentration of power, but not as having any impact on political values in Latvia. As Ojārs Ēriks Kalniņš noted, Latvia's political elite perceived this development, "with concern – only because it seems to be a trend in many countries around the world, where democracy is being inhibited". He emphasised, however, that this remains a topic for Chinese domestic policy, while expressing the hope that the opinion of the majority of Chinese people was taken into account when the decision was made.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the assertive One-China message on the diplomatic agenda, there is no evidence to suggest that China has ever had any substantive influence on Latvian opinion regarding political values. As has been the case elsewhere in the world, China has sought to increase its soft power in Latvia by opening institutions such as the Confucius Institute at the University of Latvia in 2011 or a newly established China Culture Centre, an overseas unit of the Ministry of Culture of the PRC. The activities of these institutions have not sparked any notable discussion as they mainly focus on the arts, literature and language teaching. Although the national media have reported on scandals involving similar institutions abroad.<sup>13</sup>

However, a number of activities have increased China's visibility in Latvia, such as state visits, lucrative business opportunities and Chinese outreach to politicians, civil servants, NGOs, academics, students and business representatives. For example, free or partially subsidized trips to China have been provided as part of the 16+1 format. As a result, the visibility and awareness of China and its approach to governance have increased among interested sections of society.

One surprising example of values trading emerged in 2016 during the 16+1 Summit in Riga. The official materials for the meeting included a map of the 16 European partners, which depicted Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. Latvia has recognised Kosovo as an independent state while China has not.<sup>14</sup> This signified a kind of double standard in the light of Latvia's principled non-recognition policy regarding such territories as Crimea, South-Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>15</sup>

A more recent event that raised eyebrows in foreign and security policy circles was the invitation to the port of Riga extended to three ships from the Chinese Navy that had travelled to the Baltic Sea to participate in training manoeuvres with the Russian Navy in August 2017. According to the Latvian National Armed Forces, the visit of the warships was "further proof of the active and successful cooperation of both countries".<sup>16</sup> This, despite the fact that the vessels entered the Baltic Sea for manoeuvres with the Russian Navy. Russia is still widely regarded domestically as the main external threat to the national security of Latvia. This visit could indicate that the image of China has also undergone reassessment in the defence sector.

## Conclusions

Economic interests have taken centre stage in the Latvian approach to China and the image of China has been gradually improving in the country. However, China is only one among many to have future cooperation plans with Latvia, and it must therefore be underlined that economic cooperation is not being pursued at any cost. Nor are there any sympathies with the Chinese model of governance at the national level – or with its approach to international governance, as Latvia strongly adheres to EU political values. Accordingly, there is no evidence to suggest any meaningful influence of Chinese political values on Latvia's domestic, foreign or public policy. Even though there are examples of some

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> LSM, *Ķīnas Konfucija institūts tur aizdomās spiegošana*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/arzemes/kinas-konfucija-institutus-tur-aizdomas-spiegosana.a282671>.

<sup>14</sup> See the website of 5th Meeting of Heads of Government of Central and Eastern European Countries and China, Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, 2016, <http://ceec-china-latvia.org/about>.

<sup>15</sup> Māris Andžāns and Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "16+1' and China in Latvian foreign policy: Between values and interests", in: Andris Sprūds et al. (eds), *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook, 2017*, 2017, Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, pp.163–171, [http://liia.lv/en/publications/latvian-foreign-and-security-policy-yearbook-2017-577?get\\_file=1](http://liia.lv/en/publications/latvian-foreign-and-security-policy-yearbook-2017-577?get_file=1).

<sup>16</sup> National armed forces, *Rīga mēsosies Ķīnas jūras spēku kuģu grupā*, 1 August 2017, [http://www.mil.lv/Aktualitates/Preses\\_pazinojumi/2017/08/01-01.aspx](http://www.mil.lv/Aktualitates/Preses_pazinojumi/2017/08/01-01.aspx).

values trade-offs – such as the lack of official public criticism of China’s human rights record and its trade policies, no high-level meetings with the Dalai Lama and official endorsement of a map depicting Kosovo as Serbian territory – these examples should be considered a necessary price to pay for the government to be able to maintain the current level of political relations and not risk negative consequences for economic interaction.

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# Human rights promotion and the changing role of political values in Netherlands-China relations

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## Abstract

*Human rights are an integral part of Dutch policy on China but other issues based on political values are less visible in the bilateral relationship. Beyond this relationship, however, China is working to form an international system that is not supportive of core Dutch political values. In such an international environment it will be harder for the Netherlands to maintain its policymaking autonomy on values-related issues that are regarded as controversial beyond its borders. In its relations with China in the coming decades, maintaining its political values is likely to present a major challenge for the Dutch Government.*

Human rights promotion is the stand out political values-based element of Dutch China policy.<sup>1</sup> Development of the international legal order is another closely related major foreign policy aim.<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, additional political values play a – usually implicit - role in the Dutch approach to China. The core values of Dutch society are freedom, equality and solidarity.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, human rights promotion is the most visible values-based policy aim in the Dutch Government's main strategy document on China.<sup>4</sup> Within the domain of human rights promotion, the Dutch Government regards support for human rights defenders, equal rights for members of the Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) community and equal rights for women as priorities.

## Human rights as the focus topic

Human rights have been a prominent theme in Dutch China policy since the violent suppression of the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Most visibly, when the Netherlands held the rotating chair of the Council of the European Union in 1997, it prepared an EU resolution condemning China's human rights record for submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The EU had submitted similar resolutions every year since 1989, but on this occasion the resolution was not passed because France, Germany, Spain and Italy refused to endorse it.<sup>5</sup> China singled out the Netherlands and Denmark, which submitted a separate critical resolution, for retaliation. It cancelled a high-level Dutch trade mission to remind the Netherlands that China was ready to use economic means to serve its political interests,<sup>6</sup> as it had done in the early 1980s in response to the sale of two Dutch submarines to Taiwan.

There was intense public debate before the Beijing Olympics in 2008, when Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende and Crown Prince Willem Alexander, then a member of the International Olympic Committee, decided to attend the opening ceremony. The government's position was that despite the deteriorating human rights situation in China, engagement was the most effective way to make progress in this area. In 2011, the award of a human rights prize by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs aroused little public attention. Chosen by an independent jury, the Human Rights Tulip and the sum of €100,000 were awarded to a Chinese lawyer, Ni Yulan. When the jury informed the ministry of its choice, and before the outcome was made public, the jury received a phone call from the Chinese

<sup>1</sup> A new China strategy is being prepared and will be published in the spring of 2019. Dutch Cabinet to Second Chamber, *Het Nederlandse China-beleid: Investeren in Waarden en Zaken*, Nov. 2013. Government of the Netherlands, *Letter of Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Blok and Minister of Foreign Trade and Development S. Kaag to the Second Chamber*, 13 July 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *HGIS Nota 2018*, 19 September 2017, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2017/09/19/kamerbrief-betref-hgis-nota-2018>, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Derived from Netherlands Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, *Core Values of Dutch Society*, 20 February 2014.

<sup>4</sup> In addition, the 2017 coalition agreement, on which the current government is based, stresses the importance of universal human rights in Dutch foreign policy.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Lewis, "China warns Denmark on resolution", *New York Times*, 8 April 1997, p. 7. Klaassen, "Van Mierlo ervaart China-debacle als nederlaag", *de Volkskrant*, 8 April 1997.

<sup>6</sup> NRC, *Peking straft Nederland voor kritiek: China zegt bezoek minister Weijers af*, 15 April 1997.

Embassy offering “assistance”. Subsequently, the jury was approached by an undisclosed cabinet member – presumably the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Uri Rosenthal – who asked whether there were any other possible candidates for the award.<sup>7</sup> While the jury did not change its decision, the ministry kept the announcement low-key and the award has never been presented to Ni Yulan, who at the time was in detention awaiting trial.<sup>8</sup> According to the Dutch media, her daughter was prevented by the Chinese authorities from travelling to the Netherlands to collect the award on her behalf.<sup>9</sup> Another indication that the Dutch Government was careful not to antagonize China at this time is that it did not take a strong position in support of Norway when China exerted heavy diplomatic and economic pressure on the Norwegian Government after the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Liu Xiaobo.

Despite this more cautious Dutch stance since 1997, and the fact that public attention on human rights in China receded after the 2008 Olympics, human rights continues to be a focus of Dutch China policy. When cabinet members visit China they usually raise the issue during closed-door meetings with their Chinese counterparts. In addition, the Netherlands and China maintain a bilateral human rights dialogue, the 11th meeting of which took place in June 2018. An account of a meeting in October 2015 submitted to parliament by the Minister of Foreign Affairs provides some insight into the dynamics of the dialogue.<sup>10</sup> On that occasion, the Dutch delegation consisted of government officials from various departments and was led by the Dutch Ambassador for Human Rights. The Chinese delegation, which included representatives from the Ministry of Public Security, the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party, the National People’s Congress and the Supreme People’s Court, was led by the Special Representative for Human Rights of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the meeting, the Dutch side focused on human rights defenders, LGBTI rights, women’s rights, freedom of expression and freedom of faith, minority rights, and business and human rights. The Dutch delegation also expressed concern about the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang.

The Chinese delegation countered this criticism by expressing concern about various events in the Netherlands, such as women receiving lower rates of pay than men, recent remarks by the right wing politician, Geert Wilders, that he would like to see a reduction in the number residents of Moroccan descent, discrimination against Muslims in terms of access to housing and employment, a much-publicised case of a person who died while being arrested by the police, sexual abuse in the Catholic church, Black Pete (a controversial figure in traditional children’s stories) and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which the Netherlands had not ratified at the time. While, for many Dutch people, these counter-criticisms are not comparable in severity to the human rights situation in China, and therefore not to be taken seriously, for China they serve an important purpose. By turning the dialogue into a two-way mechanism, the Chinese Government avoids becoming stigmatized by a dialogue series that was originally intended by the Dutch to discuss human rights issues in China. At the same time, it also assists China’s efforts to move the definition of human rights away from an emphasis on political rights.

The Dutch Government regards the bilateral dialogue mechanism as complementary to the EU human rights dialogue and the activities of UN bodies such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Council. The bilateral dialogue is based on the overall Dutch approach to human rights in its foreign policy, however, and it is unclear whether there is any coordination between the bilateral and the EU dialogues. At the

<sup>7</sup>NU, *Minister wilde staatsprijs voor mensenrechten beïnvloeden*, 8 February 2012, <https://www.nu.nl/politiek/2736196/minister-wilde-staatsprijs-mensenrechten-beïnvloeden.html>; and “Minister probeerde jury van de Mensenrechtentulp te beïnvloeden”, *HP/De Tijd*, 8 February 2012, <https://www.hpdetijd.nl/2012-02-08/minister-probeerde-jury-van-de-mensenrechtentulp-te-beïnvloeden>.

<sup>8</sup> Martijn Roessingh, “Rosenthal distantieert zich van eigen mensenrechtenprijs”, *Trouw*, 31 December 2011.

<sup>9</sup> AD, *Celstraf voor Chinese activiste Ni Yulan*, 10 April 2012, <https://www.ad.nl/buitenland/celstraf-voor-chinese-activiste-ni-yulan~a1541202>.

<sup>10</sup> Netherlands Minister of Foreign Affairs to Second Chamber, *Mensenrechten in het buitenland beleid*, 7 December 2015, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-32735-148.html>.

EU level, the Netherlands has been promoting the “mainstreaming” of human rights by incorporating human rights into the many regular EU-China dialogues that by themselves are not human rights-specific. At the Human Rights Council, the Dutch and Chinese governments often take up contrary positions. Whereas the Netherlands strongly emphasizes the universality of human rights, China is increasingly active in promoting the notion that the right to development should be the top priority for any UN body and, by implication, is more important than political and civil human rights. The recent US withdrawal from the Human Rights Council is a setback for the Dutch policy of resisting China’s attempts to revise human rights norms within the UN.

As noted above, human rights are an integral part of Dutch policy on China. Other values-based topics, however, are less visible. For instance, the Dutch foreign policy aim of promoting international law as a means for resolving international disputes did not play a visible role in bilateral relations during the South China Sea arbitration tribunal, which was hosted by the Netherlands. The tribunal concluded in 2016, ruling in favour of the position of the Philippines and critical of the Chinese approach. At the EU level, the Dutch Government supported a strong joint statement endorsing the tribunal’s findings, which was subsequently toned down at the insistence of Hungary, Croatia and Greece. However, it did not issue a unilateral statement declaring its support for the tribunal after the latter was strongly criticised by China.

It is impossible to measure the effect of Dutch policy on the human rights situation inside China or on China’s behaviour and influence at the international level, but perhaps its symbolic value is of greater relevance. The fact that the Dutch Government continues to demonstrate, albeit cautiously, significant concern over the human rights situation in China and China’s impact on global norms is an implicit signal that the Netherlands questions the acceptability of the Chinese political system and China’s role as a leading great power. It also shows that China’s global influence has not reached the level where it can silence criticism from relatively small Western nations.

### **Limited direct Chinese influence, but fundamental changes in the international context**

There are no indications that China is able to actively influence the understanding of political values in the Netherlands, or that it has even attempted to do so. When Dutch media outlets report on political events in China, they tend to be critical, as was the case when it became clear that President Xi Jinping would be able to remain in office after the end of his second term. The negative tone of such reporting indicates that public opinion does not regard China’s political system as a possible example for the Netherlands. Relations with China are not a significant topic of debate among Dutch political parties. Among the groups in the Netherlands that interact with their Chinese counterparts, the business community seems relatively more likely to accept China’s political system as a given. This is part of a long-standing conviction among Dutch business leaders that “companies are not equipped to determine what [appropriate] standards and values ought to be”.<sup>11</sup> Thus far, the increasing visibility of China’s global role and the increase in the number of Chinese companies active in the Netherlands do not seem to have changed Dutch perceptions of China’s political system. Nor do they seem to have had an impact on how the Dutch regard their own political values.

<sup>11</sup> van der Putten, F. P. et al., “The ability of corporations to protect human rights in developing countries”, in R. Sullivan (ed.), *Business and Human Rights: Dilemmas and Solutions*, 2003, Sheffield, Greenleaf, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Xi Jinping, “Ik heb hoge verwachtingen van mijn bezoek aan Europa”, NRC, 23 March 2014, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2014/03/23/ik-heb-hoge-verwachtingen-van-mijn-bezoek-aan-europa-a1426317>.

Since 1997, Dutch human rights promotion has not been a significant obstacle to closer economic and diplomatic relations between the two countries. Even several visits by the Dalai Lama have had no noticeable effect on the bilateral relationship. For its part, China refrains from promoting its core political values in bilateral communications with the Netherlands, other than in response to human rights criticisms during bilateral dialogue meetings. When Xi Jinping visited the Netherlands in March 2014, he published an open letter in a Dutch newspaper in which he did not refer to political values except to note that both China and Europe are striving for an “honest and just” society.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas political values play only a small role in China’s policy towards the Netherlands, they play a major role in its relations with developing countries. This is relevant in two ways. First, China is undermining relations between Western countries, such as the Netherlands, and developing countries by asserting that the West is trying to impose its values – and thereby its interests – on others, and that this is harmful to developing countries. China refers to colonial history, in which the Netherlands and other European nations played an active part, to underline this message. Second, China is attempting to legitimise its political system by weakening the appeal of Western political values, in particular democracy and human rights, throughout the non-Western world. Given the numerical preponderance of developing countries, China could thus, in the long run, play an important role in forming an international system that does not endorse the core political values of the Netherlands. In such an environment, it will be harder for the Netherlands to maintain its autonomy in policymaking on values-related issues that are regarded as controversial beyond its borders.

Apart from Dutch efforts to engage with China on its domestic human rights situation, political values have not thus far played a significant role in Sino-Dutch relations. This seems likely to change as it becomes clear that the international system is being increasingly influenced by China. In its relations with China, dealing with political values is likely to be a major challenge for the Dutch Government in the coming decades.

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# Political values in Norway's relations with China: Standing ground or giving in?

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## Abstract

*The six-year freeze in bilateral political relations following the award of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize makes Norway an interesting case study of political values in relations with China. The big picture, however, is that Norway still fits into the pattern of many other European countries. While political values feature prominently in Norway's general foreign policy, explicit government level criticism of China is rare, and the avenues for official discussions on values-laden issues are largely limited to closed settings.*

Norway wants to be a champion of democracy, human rights and international law, which constitute the core political values of the government's overall foreign and development policies. Shared values are emphasised in the especially close relations between the Nordic countries, in Norway's close association with (but non-member status in) to the European Union (EU) and in the transatlantic partnership with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Norway's core political values also steer its position on China. Nonetheless, it is economic – and not political or values-oriented – issues that are centre stage in most Sino-Norwegian interactions. China's reaction to the award of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, however, moved political considerations to the fore for several years.

In 2010, the Norwegian Nobel Committee, which is independent of the government but includes members who have previously held prominent government positions, awarded the Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese citizen who was then serving an 11-year prison sentence for subversion of state power. Although the laureate himself was prevented from attending the award ceremony, he received a congratulatory message from the Norwegian government, as is tradition, and guests at the award ceremony were given the traditional dinner also attended by the King and many political and social dignitaries. The Norwegian government maintained that the prize should not be treated as a governmental affair, but China chose to react politically.

China's reaction must be seen in the light of an earlier Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the Dalai Lama in 1989. Ever since, China has warned against prizes that could be regarded as interference in its domestic affairs.<sup>2</sup> Following the 2010 prize, it took six years and the formulation of a joint statement, in which Norway reiterated its respect for China's development path and expressed attaching importance to China's core interests, before political relations were restored. Although the six-year freeze was momentous and had negative implications, it is easy to overstate its influence on China–Norway relations. In terms of political values, it remains open to debate whether Norway stood its ground for six years or succumbed in a compromising statement. Nonetheless, Norway today does not really stand out from other, similarly placed Nordic and European countries with regard to its China policy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Setting the course for Norwegian foreign and security policy, Government White Paper (Meld. St. 36 (2016–2017))*, April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Jørgen Gåsemyr, "Norge provde å gå mot strømmen", *NRK Ytring*, 10 September 2014, <https://www.nrk.no/ytring/norge-provde-a-ga-mot-strommen-1.11922793>.

<sup>3</sup> Bjørnar Sverdrup-Thygesen et al. (eds), *China and Nordic Diplomacy*, 2017, London, Routledge.

## Changes to How Values are Expressed and Discussed

The Norwegian government formulated a China strategy in 2007. Expanding economic relations are mentioned as the first among many priorities, but democracy building and human rights still feature prominently.<sup>4</sup> The document states that in China, Norway hopes to see “development that leads to greater democracy, guarantees basic human rights and protects human dignity in accordance with internationally recognised economic, social and cultural rights”. Norway’s human rights dialogue with China – which was still operating at the time – is mentioned as an “important arena for bilateral cooperation”. The human rights dialogue was suspended following the Nobel Peace Prize controversy in 2010 and has not been restored since. It is open to question how democracy and human rights would be addressed should the Norwegian government formulate a new China strategy. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Norway has tempered its explicit criticisms of China, as other countries have done, over the past decade.

Following the normalisation of political ties in 2016, the Norwegian Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, visited China in April 2017, and there was a State Visit to China led by the King in October 2018. Norway’s ministers of Foreign Affairs and Trade also participated in both visits, accompanied by large delegations of business leaders, again emphasising the predominance of economic ties. Furthermore, a long list of additional delegations from both sides has worked to restore, renew and expand relations. The Norwegian Parliament (*Storting*) Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence also visited China in the autumn of 2018. While the prime minister made a point of restoring trust before raising human rights issues in 2017, both the parliamentary and the state visits in 2018 addressed human rights concerns, albeit in rather careful forms and settings.<sup>5</sup>

Since the 2016 normalisation, the main avenue for bilateral discussions has been a new so-called political consultation mechanism that covers all types of political issues, including civil and political rights. The first round of these annual discussions was arranged in Oslo in the autumn of 2017.<sup>6</sup> The format is limited to a few hours, and little information from the closed meetings is shared publicly. Little is therefore heard about the extent to which particular issues have been discussed. Some Norwegian politicians want to re-establish the human rights dialogue of 1997, which was quite dynamic and involved discussions with academics and interest groups. However, the dialogue was also criticised for not producing tangible results.

The Norwegian Centre for Human Rights (Faculty of Law, University of Oslo) played a central role in organising activities as part of the former human rights dialogue. Although some activities have been scaled down compared to previous years, the centre maintains an educational programme on human rights law in China, supported by the Norwegian government, and has several new projects on domestic violence, gender issues and police investigation methods. Other academic exchanges around human rights and international law have expanded. The Faculty of Law at the University of Bergen has extended its educational collaboration with several Chinese universities. In civil society, Norwegian non-governmental organisations such as the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights and the Norwegian division of Amnesty International play active roles in communicating their concerns about China-related developments. The Norwegian Nobel Institute, along with the Peace Prize Committee, have played a particularly visible role in this regard.

Internationally, Norway invests a lot of resources in international organisations, particularly in the United Nations, and it regards the Human Rights Council as

<sup>4</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Government’s China Strategy*, August 2007.

<sup>5</sup>For relevant media coverage, see VG, *Solberg: – Jeg mener fortsatt at Norge skal være et fyrverkeri for menneskerettigheter*, 6 July 2017, <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/i/55oMz/solberg-jeg-mener-fortsatt-at-norge-skal-vaere-et-fyrverkeri-for-menneskerettigheter>. NRK, *Utenrikskomiteen drøftet betent tema med Kina*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.nrk.no/urix/utenrikskomiteen-satt-utgurene-pa-dagsorden-i-kina-1.14196812>. NRK, *Kongen i Kina: – Vil ta opp menneskerettigheter*, 13 October 2018, [https://www.nrk.no/norge/kongen-i-kina\\_-\\_vil-ta-opp-menneskerettigheter-1.14245597](https://www.nrk.no/norge/kongen-i-kina_-_vil-ta-opp-menneskerettigheter-1.14245597).

<sup>6</sup>Government of Norway, *Successful round of consultations between Norway and China*, 29 August 2017, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/consultations-norway-china/id2568591>.

important, as it did its predecessor the UN Commission on Human Rights. In these forums, Norway has signed joint statements together with so-called like-minded countries, including those directed at China as recently as 2016.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to acting alone and expressing direct concerns, however, Norway has become more cautious.

### Chinese Interests and Norwegian Debates

Political relations between Norway and China were frozen in 2010. When normalisation occurred in late 2016, it came with a written statement that offered both sides room for interpretation. One sentence in particular attracted attention in the Norwegian context: “The Norwegian Government reiterates its commitment to the one-China policy, fully respects China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, attaches high importance to China’s core interests and major concerns, will not support actions that undermine them, and will do its best to avoid any future damage to bilateral relations”.<sup>8</sup> While some politicians, various scholars and some media commentators criticised the statement for giving in to Chinese interests, and some even called it kowtowing to Chinese demands, such criticism was relatively limited.<sup>9</sup> Political leaders, the media and the public have been largely supportive of the normalisation process, seeing the agreement as reasonable. Nonetheless, many have called for attention to continue to be paid to human rights and values-driven issues.

During the six years of political freeze, there was relatively limited debate on how to resolve the situation. Some business and interest group representatives called for more proactive steps, but there was no strong push and political agreement on the issue outlived the change of government from a Labor Party-led coalition to a Conservative Party-led coalition in 2013. Two separate but related issues, however, triggered considerable discussion in 2014. The first was the alleged drafting of a diplomatic note to restore China–Norway relations in the previous year.<sup>10</sup> Media reports indicated that the Norwegian side had discussed the possibility of secretly accepting tough Chinese demands, but the precise wording – or indeed the actuality of finalizing such a note at that time – remain unclear.

The other hot-button issue was a 2014 visit by the Dalai Lama. Norwegian government representatives, including the prime minister in 1994, have met with the Dalai Lama during some of his previous visits.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese government was clear about the damaging effects to the already strained relations that such a government-level meeting would have. When the Norwegian government finally rejected a meeting, the media debate became intense for a couple of weeks.<sup>12</sup> The Norwegian government’s decision was a clear confirmation that China had successfully obtained respect for its interests. That said, regardless of the impact of Norway’s Nobel Prize freeze, the Norwegian government’s decision on the visit by the Dalai Lama fits the international and European pattern.

### Standing Ground While Adjusting to China’s Increasing Influence

The full implications of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize and China’s political boycott remain open to debate but some things have become clear. First, the China–Norway Nobel Peace Prize ordeal remained a Norwegian and bilateral problem. Some countries, most notably Germany, advocated on Norway’s behalf, but as far as international politics and public relations are concerned, this never became much of an issue. Moreover, since Norway is not a member, it does not have the convenience of “outsourcing” politically tricky issues and statements to EU-level bodies. Norway largely has to stand up for political values on its own.

<sup>7</sup> Mission of the United States, Item 2: Joint Statement – Human Rights Situation in China, 10 March 2016, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2016/03/10/item-2-joint-statement-human-rights-situation-in-china>.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Norway, *Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Norway on Normalization of Bilateral Relations*, [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/vedlegg/statement\\_kina.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/vedlegg/statement_kina.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Rasmus Hanson and Une Aina Bastholm, “Knefall for Kina koster”, *NRK Ytring*, 26 July 2017, <https://www.nrk.no/ytring/knefall-for-kina-koster-1.13616487>.

<sup>10</sup> NTB, “–Stoltenberg stanset hemmelig norsk Kina-avtale”, 2 September 2014, [https://www.nrk.no/norge/\\_-stoltenberg-stanset-kina-avtale-1.11910249](https://www.nrk.no/norge/_-stoltenberg-stanset-kina-avtale-1.11910249).

<sup>11</sup> Grete Holstad, “Dalai Lama møtte Gro i Trondheim”, *Adresseavisen*, 10 April 2014, <https://www.adressa.no/nyheter/trondheim/article9491831.ece>.

<sup>12</sup> For an example of sharp government criticism, see Harald Stanghelle, “Feighetens hus”, *Aftenposten*, 21 April 2014, <https://www.aftenposten.no/mening/i/j1vo/Feighetens-hus>.

<sup>13</sup> Khrono, a leading online newspaper for research and higher education, has regular coverage of this debate; see <https://khrono.no/emne/kina>.

<sup>14</sup> For a summary of statements criticising the government's caution, see NRK, *Kritiserer regjeringens Liu-svar*, 13 July 2017, <https://www.nrk.no/norge/kritiserer-regjeringens-liu-svar-1.13601019>.

Second, although the six-year political boycott triggered some debate on how to befriend China, and many Norwegian politicians have expressed admiration for China's development-related achievements, the overall public discourse on China remains quite critical and cautious, especially with regard to political issues and values. The overtly negative media coverage following China's abolition of presidential term limits in 2018 further illustrates this point. Moreover, when collaboration with Chinese actors touches on political values that Norwegian institutions traditionally hold in high regard, such as academic freedom, there is heightened debate, leading many people and institutions to take up more values-based and principled positions.<sup>13</sup>

Third, China's reaction spurred debate about the composition and independence of the Norwegian Nobel Committee. The political parties in the *Storting* still nominate committee members, but several recent nominees have been from more diverse backgrounds, had a wider range of qualifications and held less politically prominent positions.

Finally, the normalisation came with a formal statement that stressed mutual respect and understanding. The Norwegian government has certainly been cautious when it comes to criticising China, which could also be observed in the careful, limited statements made when the health of Liu Xiaobo deteriorated and he died in the summer of 2017, and when his wife continued to face constraints on her freedom.<sup>14</sup> However, the Norwegian government does not condone the authoritarian nature of China's development model and it continues to raise political values and human rights in its relations with China. Like many of its European counterparts, however, Norway is attempting to do so without pointing fingers or poking any bears.

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# Poland's modest approach to a values-based China policy

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## Abstract

*Poland's values-based policy on China<sup>1</sup> is low profile and dual level. The EU level is seen as the correct forum in which to talk about values and address sensitive issues. Poland places itself in the mainstream, which means approving the EU's proposals but not necessarily submitting its own ideas. The second level, the bilateral dimension, is also discreet, which means raising issues without making them public. The Chinese Government's recently general more assertive policy and sparse achievements in economic cooperation have led Poland to rethink its China policy. In this sense, Poland does not admire the "Chinese model".*

In terms of values, Polish foreign policy has traditionally largely been influenced by the country's transformation from an autocracy to a fully fledged democracy, which was achieved by peaceful means as a result of civil protests and strong support from the Catholic Church. The symbols of this process and success are the Solidarity Movement and the Roundtable Talks of February to April 1989, which forced the Communist regime into a peaceful handover of power. The beginning of regime change was the first semi-free elections on 4 June 1989. In addition, the legacy of centuries of violations of Polish sovereignty – from partition and occupation, to the Cold War, when the country was under the influence of the Soviet Union as part of the Eastern bloc – induce renewed concerns in the light of Russia's aggressive foreign policy, as demonstrated by its aggression in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. From this historical legacy flow the fundamental elements of the recent Foreign Policy Strategy (2017–2021) and Poland's agenda for its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (2018–2019). These elements comprise a rules-based order, sovereignty, territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders, renunciation of war and solidarity with neighbours, freedom, peaceful coexistence of nations, human rights and the dignity of the person. The current right wing government, which came to power in 2015, appreciates Poland's achievements in fighting communism and for the country's independence but is less enthusiastic about the post-1989 settlement and the subsequent transformation path. Tied in with its own history, the Polish Government pays particular attention to the role of the Christian tradition.<sup>2</sup>

## Values and Sensitive Issues in Poland's China Policy: A Low-Profile Approach

Given the above-mentioned historical legacy, China has been rather negatively perceived in Poland, especially since the Cultural Revolution. It is also worth noting, however, that both countries share a common "socialist" history and were united in their opposition to the Soviet Union in 1956 and 1981. The contrast between Poland and China was most visible in 1989. While Poland was experiencing a peaceful transition to an independent and democratic society, China was cracking down on civil protest in Tiananmen Square. Poland's first elections and the massacre in Beijing both took place on 4 June 1989. It seems

<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, the author defines a values-based policy narrowly as democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The latter in particular is often seen as a sensitive issue for China. There are also examples of a broader understanding of political values as including economic factors such as free trade, market access and a level playing field. This broader understanding is discussed here as well in connection with the Chinese model and Poland's economic goals in its relations with China.

<sup>2</sup> Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), *Strategia Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej, 2017–2021*.

that since then Poland has been perceived in China as a country that would like to promote its 4 June legacy. This is probably the reason why China did not allow a Polish Institute to be set up in the Haidian district of Beijing, where most of the universities are located.<sup>3</sup>

In the period 1989–2008 bilateral relations were not extensive and public interest in China was not great. China's image in the Polish media was one-dimensional, focused on human rights violations, a negative assessment of Chinese reforms and EU/Poland–China economic relations. The situation changed in 2008, at the start of the global financial crisis, when Poland decided to enhance its relations with China. The symbol of Poland's shift was Prime Minister Donald Tusk's visit to China in 2008, when he focused on economic cooperation and remained silent about sensitive issues. Since then, Polish policy on China has been focused on intensive political dialogue as a facilitator of the main goal of economic cooperation – expanding Polish exports to China, attracting Chinese investment to Poland and increasing the level of Polish Foreign Direct Investment in the People's Republic of China (PRC). If values are understood in the broadest sense, Poland's attempts to convince the PRC to open up its markets by removing tariff and non-tariff barriers and granting access to public procurement procedures are examples of Poland's active values-based policy on China.

When it comes to values in the narrow sense, Poland's focus on religious freedom, freedom of speech, minority rights and the promotion of trade unions (a legacy of the Solidarity movement) provides further examples of the importance that the historical experience of transformation still has today. Poland is also ready to share its experience should China decide to pluralize its political system. More recently, Poland has been trying to direct China's attention to the rules-based international order, especially when it comes to China's cooperation with Russia, given Russia's aggressive policy and China's closer ties with Russia and its allies in the Eastern Europe – as demonstrated, for example, by its military exercises in the Baltic Sea.

Poland adopts a dual approach to values in its policy on China: outsourcing to the EU and using its own bilateral agenda to raise issues in a discreet way. With regard to the first approach, the EU is seen as an effective forum for discussing sensitive issues with China. The mindset is that if such powerful forces as France and Germany cannot be effective separately, Poland has even less chance of influencing China. Poland argues that human rights are an element of the EU's China agenda, and Poland advocates a cohesive EU policy. Poland endorses the EU's assistance with implementing solutions to ratify the international human rights conventions, as well as micro programmes in selected communities, and so on. In general, however, Poland's stance at EU forums might be described as staying in the mainstream, which means accepting the agenda proposed by e.g. the European Union External Action Service while not necessarily initiating or submitting its own proposals. When the second approach is concerned, it should be noted that there is no bilateral human rights dialogue between Poland and China. Sensitive issues and those related to values are discussed at bilateral meetings with Chinese counterparts, but not made public. Poland argues that it also carries out its own programmes in China (some years ago, for example, it financed the digitisation of Tibetan library resources). These are carried out behind the scenes, using the logic that “we care about results, not media plaudits”. There is also a diplomat in the Polish Embassy in Beijing assigned to monitoring human rights in China.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Polish Institutes are established abroad by the Polish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Their aims are linked to public diplomacy. A Polish Institute was opened in Beijing in mid-2014 but, in reality, it is an enlarged cultural department of the embassy.

<sup>4</sup> *Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on the Nomination of T. Chomicki to be Poland's Ambassador to China*, 7 May 2009. *Hearing on the Nomination of M. Gajewski to be Poland's Ambassador to China*, 5 February 2015.

It is also worth mentioning Poland's stance on two particular people: the Dalai Lama and Liu Xiaobo, as well as human rights in a broader sense as sensitive issues for China. The Dalai Lama has visited Poland several times since the country reinvigorated its relations with the PRC. Only the visit in December 2008 was politicized by China and was in that sense controversial. On that occasion the Dalai Lama was attending an event to mark the 25th anniversary of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Lech Wałęsa. During the visit, he met with the Donald Tusk, just two months after Tusk's trip to China, which had been seen as a breakthrough in Poland's China policy. The PRC lodged a protest and bilateral relations cooled for several months. In contrast, the Dalai Lama's visit in 2016 was low-profile, during which he met with the Mayor of Wrocław city. The visit was presented as a visit by a religious leader who met with Buddhist believers. Officially, Poland perceives the Dalai Lama as a great moral and religious leader and a private person.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of Liu Xiaobo, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on its website in 2010 in which it appreciated a choice the Norwegian Nobel Committee has made to award of the Noble Peace Prize to a dissident who struggled for human rights. Poland stated that its stance was in line with that of the EU and highlighted the EU's attempts to gain access to Liu, as well as its efforts to convince the Chinese authorities of the importance of the rule of law and recognition of the rights and liberties of Chinese citizens, including political and civic rights.<sup>6</sup> When Liu died in 2017, the ministry published condolences addressed to Liu's wife, calling him a great thinker, activist and writer, and a person guided by freedom and democracy.<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to human rights as a general topic, Poland supports EU policy. A good example is the Local Statement of the EU Delegation on International Human Rights Day published on the website of the Polish Embassy in Beijing. The statement appreciates the progress made on living standards, such as access to social services, in China, but also highlights problems. These problems are listed as a deterioration in the situation with respect to freedom of information, expression and association, including online activity, the situation of human rights lawyers and defenders, and the consequences of China's new NGO law.<sup>8</sup>

### **Poland Does not Admire the Chinese Model**

Poland-China relations today are said to be the best in history, but the hype is mostly visible at the political level. Economic cooperation has not been a success. The trade deficit is expanding while Chinese investment offers are unattractive. Looking at the Chinese model from a wider perspective, as the promotion of a Chinese vision of the economy, a form of state capitalism that undermines the country's comparative advantage; politics, a non-liberal system that is marketed as "more effective"; and security, access to critical assets and infrastructure, there is no admiration for the Chinese model in Poland. In fact, Poland is currently reconsidering its relations with China. This ongoing process is a fairly new phenomenon which became apparent at the beginning of 2017. This does not mean a change in Poland's policy goals towards China, but rather that it will take a more measured approach. Under the previous centrist government, relations with China had improved remarkably. Nonetheless, the current right wing conservative cabinet, which came to power in 2015, is generally continuing the same policy towards the PRC as its predecessors.

The reasons for this reconsideration are linked not only to the huge trade deficit, which is seen as a political issue, but also to China's more assertive policies

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* (Hearing Gajewski).

<sup>6</sup> Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), *MFA statement on this year's choice by the Norwegian Nobel Committee*, 6 October 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Polish MFA, *Minister Witold Waszczykowski's condolences on Liu Xiaobo's death*, 14 July 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Polish Embassy in Beijing, *Local Statement of the Delegation of the European Union on International Human Rights Day*, 10 December 2017.

on trade and investment, and based on lessons learned from other countries. Among these lessons are Chinese moves to acquire high-tech companies in the EU (e.g. Germany) and take full control of strategic assets (e.g. Piraeus port), as well as credit-based projects that increase public debt (e.g. investments in the Balkans). There are also examples of close cooperation between Chinese and Czech politicians and entrepreneurs (e.g. the CEFC's case: a Chinese, officially private, energy and finance-profiled company which invested in Czech Republic, including attempts to get access to Czech politicians), which have not been replicated in Poland. In that sense, there is no lobby in Poland that is seen as a pro-Chinese agenda-setter.

In addition, the centralization of power in the PRC and China-Russia cooperation in the security domain have increased Poland's caution with regard to the Chinese model. Despite the fact that there is a degree of animosity between Poland and the EU institutions, for instance over changes to the Polish judicial system, Poland does not see China as an alternative as some EU member states do, using China as a bargaining chip in discussions with the EU institutions. In this sense, at least in the public domain, there have been no noticeable attempts by China to influence Polish perceptions of liberal values.

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# Portugal-China relations: Political values play second fiddle

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## Abstract

*Differences in political values do not play a role in the current state of affairs between Portugal and China. Bilateral relations between the two countries are at a high point and free of any turbulence linked to such differences. In fact, Portuguese society has an overall positive perception of China. This perception has as its basis certain common ground in the countries' history, economic interests and future development prospects, as well as the role of Portugal in the Portuguese-speaking world]. Moreover, it mirrors an acknowledgment of Chinese economic achievements and a sort of fascination for Chinese culture. Nonetheless, the overall positive stance and lack of concern about the political values realm goes hand in hand with a lack of any expression of admiration for the Chinese political system.*

Political values play second fiddle in the relationship between Portugal and China. Despite Portugal's alignment with the EU's overall discourse on human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, the current status of relations between the two countries is free of any turbulence linked to an affirmation of differences in political values. This has every appearance of a long-term position. There is evidence that even in the EU context, while generally subscribing to declarations with a critical stance towards China, Portugal tends to avoid any risk of confronting China and jeopardising the strong momentum behind relations. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang perceives the current state of bilateral relations as maintaining the “momentum of high-level exchanges, [to] deepen political mutual trust, expand practical cooperation, intensify people-to-people and cultural exchanges and enhance communication and coordination in international and regional affairs, so as to better benefit the two countries and their peoples”.<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, the Portuguese President, Rebelo de Sousa, regards the relationship as furnished with “profound friendship support as well as a common vision to strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation”.<sup>2</sup> This chapter discusses two notions: (a) the idea that current Portugal-China relations have reached a peak; and (b) that political values are not an issue in the current relational dynamics.

## Consensual ground

According to Rebelo de Sousa, “Conducting cooperation with China has always been the unanimous consensus of the people and administration of Portugal”.<sup>3</sup> This statement accurately depicts the widespread perception in Portuguese society of relations with China. It is hard to find written, spoken or televised opinion that adopts a critical tone towards China, particularly as far as political values are concerned. Moreover, when such views are expressed, they have almost zero impact on perceptions.

Although Portugal is far from being an exceptional case in the EU with regard to its relational context with China, a number of ‘specificities’ affecting that context require some attention. They contribute to a better understanding of the reasons underlying the widespread consensus mentioned above and the turbulence-free state of affairs that cuts across the various dimensions of Portugal-China relations.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Li Keqiang holds talks with Prime Minister António Costa of Portugal, stressing to give play to complementary advantages and release cooperation potential to forge an upgraded version of cooperation between China and Portugal as well as between China and Portuguese-speaking countries*, 9 October 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1404691.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1404691.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> Mu Xuequan, *Portugal firmly supports China's proposed Belt and Road Initiative*, Xinhua, 19 May 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa of Portugal meets with Wang Yi*, 19 May 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1561275.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1561275.shtml).

Hence, they can also provide an explanation for the lack of any assertive affirmation of difference in terms of political values. These specificities can be grouped according to four major fields: history, economic interests, future development prospects, and the role of Portugal in the Portuguese-speaking world.

First, it is commonly accepted that China looks to history and the past as a continuous reference when outlining its external policy.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the pioneering role of the Portuguese in the East-West civilizational contacts of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the mainly successful negotiation process that underpinned the transfer of sovereignty over Macao in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are recurrent topics in the discourse of officials from both governments.

Second, the perceived win-win developments associated with the recent flow of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into Portugal, which allows China access to cutting-edge knowledge and extends its global influence while providing Portugal with “fresh” resources to mitigate the effects of its profound financial crisis,<sup>5</sup> have emerged as a cornerstone of the current state of Sino-Portuguese relations. In a short period, Chinese FDI has taken advantage of the privatization frenzy begun in 2011 to leave large Portuguese-flagged firms in strategic and/or sensitive sectors partially or wholly owned by Chinese, usually state-owned, companies. Portugal is now highly dependent on China for FDI.

Third, Portugal has huge expectations of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), driven by the recurrently stated willingness of China to make Portugal an important hub in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road. This has been complemented by a Portuguese eagerness to assume an active role in BRI-related dynamics. According to the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Santos Silva, Portugal “as a pioneer of global trade through sea routes, welcomes China’s efforts towards establishing a new Maritime Silk Road”, and “looks forward to contributing to a new Maritime Silk Road, namely through the development of the existing infrastructures on its Atlantic facade”.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the importance assigned to the BRI can be extended to the development of third-party cooperation involving Portugal, China and the Portuguese-speaking nations. This multilateral framework is expected to reinforce Portugal’s role in the international arena, particularly in Africa. In addition, Portugal’s knowledge of and long-standing ties with Africa together with China’s political and economic influence on that continent are considered a means for fostering joint efforts to generate opportunities in third – African and Portuguese-speaking – countries.

Nonetheless, any attempt to understand the soil in which this consensus is rooted would be thwarted if the astonishing achievements of China in recent decades were to be ignored. This may be the best way to understand the way in which Portuguese politicians, officials, media, scholars and business leaders perceive China and its transformative development path. China’s fast and continuing economic growth, efficiency in implementing development programmes and projects, and pragmatism tend to be positively perceived by domestic actors. These aspects, together with a level of curiosity and a certain fascination for Chinese culture, can be added to the four ‘specifics’ outlined above in an attempt to understand why political values play such a minor role in Portuguese perceptions of China and, concomitantly, in bilateral relations.

It is worth noting that this lack of concern with regard to distinct values finds its counterpart in an absence of expressions of admiration for China’s political system and values. Put simply, the overall positive perception ignores any link between the Chinese political setting and China’s social and economic achievements.

<sup>4</sup> José M. Duarte de Jesus, “Precisará Portugal de uma Política Externa para a Ásia?”, *Nação e Defesa*, no. 134, pp. 8–20.

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Rodrigues, “Chinese investment in Portugal: gaining access to cutting-edge knowledge and extending global influence”, in: John Seaman et al. (eds), *Chinese Investment in Europe: a Country-level Approach*, 2017, Paris, European Think Tank Network on China.

<sup>6</sup> Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Abertura da Conferência ‘Financing Belt & Road’*, 22 March 2018, <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/download-ficheiros/ficheiro.aspx?v=455d4137-8261-42e7-9e34-a39679b2810a>.

## About a minor role

To understand more about the minor role played by political values in Portuguese realpolitik requires a closer look at the foreign policy principles enshrined in the Portuguese Constitution. Particular attention should be paid to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of another nation. This can be seen as a marker of post-revolutionary Portugal's diplomatic history, and as underpinning above all a smooth relational dynamic with almost every nation in the World, largely independent of the degree of compliance with any stated political values. The case of Timor-Leste, a former Portuguese colony invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and occupied until 1999, emerges as the exception that proves the rule.

Portugal generally makes full use of the constitutional principles of “non-interference in the internal affairs of other states” and “cooperation with all other peoples with a view to the emancipation and progress of mankind”<sup>7</sup> to dodge any turbulence in bilateral relations with countries that are relevant partners in economic, cultural and/or historical terms – as is the case with China. This was evidenced, for instance, during Portugal's membership of the UN Human Rights Council in 2015–2017. Portugal was highly proactive in discussing and proposing resolutions on the general implementation of economic, social and cultural rights, as well as condemning racism and xenophobia, thereby avoiding calls on specific countries. Nonetheless, the country adopted a particularly assertive stance in opposition to the death penalty, promising to put the United States, Saudi Arabia and China under particular pressure.<sup>8</sup> This episode might represent the single critical undertone in Portuguese diplomacy towards China in recent decades, at least outside of common EU settings. The country's engagement in such a cause could be seen as mirroring the historical fact that Portugal was the first European sovereign state to abolish the death penalty. The last execution on Portuguese territory took place in 1846.

More evidence of the minor importance of differences in political values is provided by the China-Portugal strategic partnership, established in 2005, and the section on political dialogue. This sets out Portugal's acceptance of the ‘One China policy’ and indicates a willingness to continue to push for the lifting of the EU arms embargo on China. (In 2005, government sources indicated that “due to the progress made by China” it regarded the arms embargo as “inadequate and outdated”.) It also commits to make efforts to achieve EU recognition of China's market economy status. Vaguely enough, the Portuguese Government has sought a “balanced decision” from the EU on China's market economy status.)<sup>9</sup> Moreover, both countries subscribed to the need to promote and protect human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration and collaborate on achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

China and Portugal will loudly celebrate the 40th anniversary of their re-establishment of diplomatic relations. President Xi Jinping is expected in Lisbon in December 2018. Xi's official visit anticipates 2019 as Portugal's year in China and China's year in Portugal. It can hardly be expected that any differences in political values will disturb the current strong and smooth state of China-Portugal relations.

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<sup>7</sup> Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (Revised 2005), Article 7.

<sup>8</sup> Comissão Nacional para os Direitos Humanos, *Planos de ação da UE para os Direitos Humanos e Democracia*, <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc21/area-de-governo/negocios-estrangeiros/informacao-adicional/cndh.aspx#pue>.

<sup>9</sup> Ilídia Pinto, “Dilema na UE: como a China pode fazer Portugal perder até 91 mil empregos”, *Dinheiro Vivo*, 30 July 2016.

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# Political values: A sensitive issue almost absent from Romania's relations with China

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## Abstract

*Romania's approach to political values in connection with China, as well as in relation to other countries, is to avoid directly critical stances and instead choose supranational, subregional or multilateral institutions in which to express its views indirectly by adhering to joint positions. Romania's bilateral dialogue with China is focused on economic and cultural issues that leave no room for misinterpretation.*

In 2009, John Fox and François Godement wrote a seminal study on EU-China Relations,<sup>1</sup> which classified the EU member states into four categories according to the priorities of their foreign policy on China. Romania was considered part of the group of “Accommodating Mercantilists”, which shared the belief that “good political relations with China will lead to commercial benefit” and “economic considerations must dominate the relationship with China”.<sup>2</sup> Almost a decade later, Romania remains an Accommodating Mercantilist and political values continue to be absent from the bilateral agenda with China. This in spite of the objectives reflected in the EU Strategy on China, that: “mutual economic and commercial interests are strong but should not prevent the EU from upholding its values in its relations with China”.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Romania supports EU values and norms but does not actively engage in advocating these values, in relation either to China or to other countries.<sup>4</sup>

That said, Romania remains a Euro-optimist. The communist period, which lasted for four decades until the fall of the Iron Curtain, generated a kind of “blind faith” in the EU institutions, correlated with a mistrust of national ones, among other things due to the “disastrous situation in the public sector”.<sup>5</sup> To Romania, the EU is still seen as a “watchdog of democracy”, “a problem-solver”, “a legitimate actor” and a prosperity enabler, which explains why the country is among the biggest admirers of European values and norms.<sup>6</sup> Romania regularly reaffirms its strong support for fundamental values and freedoms, and has done so especially in 2018, the year that marks the 70th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>7</sup>

## Romanian-Chinese channels of communication

Even though it is an adherent to EU values and norms, Romania is also an ambitious partner in the 16+1 platform, as demonstrated by its cooperation initiatives and proposals, although its attitude can also be described as “wait-and-see” in terms of the number and scale of Chinese-Romanian projects actually implemented.

It should be added that the 16+1 format, together with the wider EU framework and the multilateral architecture governed by the United Nations, are the main bodies or institutions in which Romania adheres to the common approach to values, rules and norms with regard to China. For instance, the Budapest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe

<sup>1</sup>John Fox and François Godement, *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, 2009, London: European Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>2</sup>The other Accommodating Mercantilists were Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

<sup>3</sup>European Commission, *Elements for a new EU strategy on China, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council*, JOIN (2016) 30 final, 22 June 2016, Brussels.

<sup>4</sup>Such as Turkey, a NATO member and one of Romania's significant strategic partners.

<sup>5</sup>Flavia Durach, *Public Opinion Towards the EU: Triumphalism, Euroscepticism or Banal Representations?* 2016, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Moreover, the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, received the Franz Josef Strauss award from the German foundation, Hanns Seidel, in 2018 “for promoting... throughout his political career, democratic values, a united society and confidence in the European project”. See, Irina Marica, *Romanian President goes to Germany to receive award for promoting democratic values*, 2018, Romania-Insider.com.

(CEE) Countries underline that “Participants should firmly safeguard the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, stand for multilateralism, and strive for openness in [the] global economy with WTO rules at its core”. Romania strongly supports such commitments but bilateral dialogue is focused on economic issues, as demonstrated by Romanian Government programmes.

The two realities of Romanian foreign policy – strong support for the European project, on the one hand, and a strategic partnership with the United States, on the other – but associated with a declared political will to strengthen cooperation with China have prevented Romanian decision makers from addressing political values in the relationship with China in a separate, distinct or clear framework, preferring instead to go through the EU supranational level.

There are many channels of communication in Romanian-Chinese relations: the Joint Commission, economic missions, high-level visits and visits at other levels, the 16+1 platform, forums and conferences such as the “Belt and Road” forum, people-to-people exchanges, activities organized by the Chamber of Commerce, Chinese-Romanian friendship associations, participation by the business sector in fairs and exhibitions and, of course, through the mass media. With the exception of the mass media, political values do not play a role in any of these. Romanian media outlets often criticize China from the perspective of political values. For instance, the recent constitutional amendments in China through which presidential term limits were abolished were described in the Romanian mass media, both public sector and privately owned, as a “return to the cult of personality” and a way of strengthening censorship, and repressing democracy and human rights defenders.<sup>8</sup> This is a perception shared by some Romanian politicians and researchers but rejected by others. In my opinion, the unlimited presidential term offers China the chance to pursue its long term economic objectives without the danger of giving them up along the way. Romania’s unfortunate experience of a permanent change of decision makers and of vision regarding the correct development path shows that smooth progress can easily be endangered. If this is possible in an EU member state, it is probably much easier for it to happen in other countries, such as China.

### **Perceptions of China in Romania: opinions confirmed by the results of a survey**

Previous research has divided Romanian elites into three main groups according to their general perceptions of China: (a) the dominant group, which has a low level of awareness; (b) those with a higher level of awareness who are sceptical about China; and (c) a tiny minority of China-enthusiasts.<sup>9</sup> There is still only a limited understanding of China in Romania, linked to insufficient knowledge about the realities of the country.

Given that Romania takes a discreet approach to political values, and that its relations with China are focused on economic goals, while with the exception of the mass media political values are also absent from bilateral channels of communication, I conducted a survey to gather opinion on the role played by political values in bilateral relations.<sup>10</sup> In July 2018, questionnaires were distributed to 25 Romanian politicians, business representatives, scholars, experts and journalists.<sup>11</sup>

A majority of the 25 completed questionnaires confirmed the initial working hypotheses of this chapter. First, the EU’s basic political values – democracy, human dignity, human rights, freedom, equality and the rule of law – are considered *highly important* for Romanian foreign policy, and Romania also subscribes to political

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mapamond/daddy-in-varianta-chineza-cum-si-a-consolidat-puterea-si-cultul-personalitatii-presedintele-xi-jinping-896876>.

<sup>9</sup> Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai, “A Romanian view on the country image concept: Case study of China’s image in Central and Eastern Europe”, *Proceedings of the international conference, “Bulgaria and Romania: Member Countries of the EU, Part of the Global Economy”*, 2017, Sofia, Economic Research Institute, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, in collaboration with the Romanian Academy, pp. 213–236.

<sup>10</sup> Special thanks to the respondents to the survey.

<sup>11</sup> The questionnaire contained 24 questions, the majority of which had “yes or no” answers or were answered “positively/negatively”. Two gave the options “positively/negatively/neutral”; two were multiple-choice questions with answers from a list of four variants; three asked for ratings on a scale from 1 to 7. There was one open-ended question: “Which channels – formal and informal, communication and interaction platforms such as Joint Romanian-Chinese Commission – does Romania use in its approach to political values in relation to China?”.

values such as multilateralism.<sup>12</sup> Second, Romania focuses on the economic facets of relations with China but other issues such as culture and people-to-people exchanges are also important. Third, Romania takes a discreet approach and sensitive issues are left outside the bilateral dialogue to be addressed indirectly, largely within the framework of the United Nations, EU institutions or other relevant organizations – mainly supranational and multilateral. Fourth, there are differences of opinion among the most relevant actors regarding the approach to take to political values in the bilateral relationship with China, just as there are different perceptions of China, its values and assets. Fifth, in accordance with the principle of non-interference, China has not attempted to influence attitudes to or opinions on its system or political values.

Finally, in the long term, political values will continue to be overshadowed by the economic goals of Romania and other CEE countries. The development gap between the CEE states and the EU member states of Western Europe explains why the CEE countries seek to supplement their development resources from the EU with external sources. The absence of political values from the 16+1 format confirms this statement. Political values are perceived as less important than the achievements of the Chinese development model. Even if the mass media in Romania criticizes aspects related to human rights and the rule of law in China from time to time, this does not alter the official position of the country.

The importance of political values in Romanian foreign policy was evaluated by respondents on average as six on a scale of one to seven, with seven being the greatest importance. In relation to China, most respondents considered political values to be of *medium* importance on a scale of *low, medium and high* significance. All the respondents regarded economic and geopolitical objectives as more important than political values in Sino-Romanian relations. Thus, supranational (EU) and multilateral organisations (UN) remain the channels most frequently used. It is worth noting, however, that the majority of interviewees believed that political values would play a growing role in relations between Romania and China in the future.

In general, Romanian politicians do not discuss political values in connection with the relationship with China. Business representatives are more preoccupied with aspects related to profitability than the political values of a partner country. Scholars and researchers have diverging views on political values in China, while Romanian journalists are extremely exercised, even if most of the articles only reproduce the results of critical studies by the US Department of State, NGOs or the international mass media.

### **How are Chinese political values regarded in Romania?**

Political values have their roots in the past but are being continuously remodelled by a complex system of determinants that evolves over time. In Romania, the population at large has only a limited understanding of China. Some are familiar with its culture and history, or the evolution of its economic, political and social situation; other less so. This explains why there is no unitary opinion in Romania on the concept of Chinese political values. Even if there are many negative or critical views, Chinese values are generally accepted. In addition, a minority of Romanian sinologists and experts admire Chinese values, invoking arguments such as the Silk Road's spirit of "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit" as defined in Chinese official documents, or the "political meritocracy" reflected by "exemplary persons" and supported by Confucius two and a half millennia ago.<sup>13</sup> In my opinion, the

<sup>12</sup> Romania perceives multilateralism as a "safety net" that mitigates the effects of asymmetric relations with stronger partners, but also as a source of opportunities that might not otherwise be available.

<sup>13</sup> Professor Ana Eva Budura, a highly reputable Romanian sinologist, is among the admirers of Chinese values who resort to such arguments in order to explain their support for Chinese political values.

Chinese population can enjoy freedom, democracy and human rights even in a country with no electoral democracy. Chinese population is increasing its living standard and people are able to choose their way of life in China or abroad and this means freedom and democracy. They are allowed to express their opinions but in a way that does not escalate into radicalization and does not endanger the Chinese development path, and it means the presence of human rights. Better living standards mean better access to work and education, and this means also human rights.

Certainly, an acceptance of Chinese political values is not an argument why Romania is not actively contributing to EU initiatives linked to the political values agenda. Chinese internal affairs have not been placed at the core of Romanian public interests, even among the elites. Instead, in the Sino-Romanian dialogue, economic and cultural issues come first. If the level of development achieved by China is seen in the developed countries as a threat to their already achieved status, in developing countries, by contrast, it is often regarded as a desirable goal.

Furthermore, from my perspective, a country that seeks to address political values as a separate topic in its relationship with China in formal bilateral communications must first meet two preconditions. First, it should itself be a model for others with respect to the EU's basic political values. Second, it must understand the political values of China. In my view, Romania does not meet these two criteria, and that is why political values are left off the Romania-China bilateral agenda. This triggers criticism from the EU institutions, which argue that Romania is not an effective promoter of EU norms and values. It is therefore not easy for Romania to find the right balance between EU interests and its own priorities linked to its objective of becoming a developed country.

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# Political values in Spain-China relations: Empathy, discretion and patience

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## Abstract

*Human rights and political values are not a big factor in Spain-China relations. The Spanish authorities are fully aware that Spain is too small to confront China on such issues and prefer to outsource these matters to the European Union. Furthermore, the results of its own transition based on a consensual pact among Spanish political forces mean that the Spanish approach has always been to empathise with the reformist Chinese regime. The strategy developed by successive Spanish governments is to keep a sound distance, establish clear red lines against possible Chinese diplomatic pressure to change Spain's own policies, operate and develop discreet diplomacy on human rights and political values in China and be patient about how these might evolve in the future. For now, China's societal model has very little appeal in Spain. The media and public opinion are generally highly critical of the Chinese political system, which is seen as authoritarian.*

Human rights did not play an important role in diplomatic relations between China and the then European Economic Community (EEC) before the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. This was also the case for Spain-China relations. Even after 1989, however, Spain continued to take a softer approach to such sensitive issues. It was the only EEC member state that did not curtail economic relations with China and the first to send its Minister of Foreign Affairs to China after the event, on 22 November 1990.

Spanish diplomacy is grounded in the same basic political values as the rest of the European Union (EU), but Spanish leaders are cautious about the negative effects that foreign interventions in third countries can have. Thus, since the establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1973, Spain has always tried to maintain good relations with China in order to reap the potential economic benefits that come from such a huge market. For this reason, the Spanish Government has always kept a very low profile in its relations with Taiwan, the Dalai Lama has never been invited to Spain by the Spanish authorities and issues related to human rights and political persecution have always been dealt with discreetly to avoid angering the Chinese authorities. This should not be misinterpreted as kowtowing, however, but instead ties in with Spain's own experience of a "pacted transition" from dictatorship to democratic state, and of interregional tensions.

China is not a salient issue on the electoral agenda in Spain, so there is no partisan debate on the role that political values should play in bilateral relations. The elites of Spain's major political parties are convinced that any possible transition to a more open society in China will and should happen gradually and peacefully, and should not be triggered by external pressure. As was the case in Spain in the 1960s and 1970s, China's interaction with the rest of the world is seen as positive and as something that might soften the authoritarian regime. At the same time, openly and repeatedly criticising its human rights record – so-called megaphone diplomacy – could be counterproductive for the political liberalisation of China. This could isolate the country and reinforce the position of the most conservative sectors of the regime, particularly when the Chinese authorities are lambasted for

actions that are acceptable to the majority of the Chinese population. In addition, since modern Spain has had its own problems with separatist movements in both Catalonia and the Basque region it is unlikely that the Spanish Government would ever become particularly vocal inside the EU about making political statements that could encourage centrifugal forces in Taiwan, Tibet or Xinjiang. This is not to deny the overall concern about the human rights situation in China, including in Tibet or Xinjiang.

### **Political Values in Bilateral Relations**

Spain signed its accession to the EEC in June 1985, a milestone that marked the return of Spain to the front rank of European politics. Once that long-cherished objective had been secured, favouring domestic economic development became the main driver of Spanish foreign policy. The visit of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez to Beijing that same year accompanied by a very significant business delegation is a case in point. This situation has not changed and all non-economic issues, including human rights, are subordinate. In the absence of dramatic events in China, there is no indication that this approach will change in the foreseeable future.

With regard to political values, the Spanish Government has consistently adopted a double-layered approach that attempts to balance megaphone diplomacy with a discreet perspective. According to the white book, *A Strategic Vision for Spain in Asia, 2018–2020*,<sup>1</sup> within the EU and the UN Human Rights Council, Spain pursues a more confrontational multilateral strategy supporting EU statements critical of the human rights situation in China. However, the Spanish authorities do not sign letters criticising China that are endorsed by individual countries, such as those signed by a number of EU countries in March 2016 and March 2017. Bilaterally, Spain adopts a discreet strategy that emphasizes its commitment to democracy, human dignity, human rights, freedom, equality and the rule of law in different forms of formal and informal encounter with the political authorities, diplomats and officials. These remarks do not normally take centre stage and when they do, it is in the form of an offer by Spain to share its own experience should the Chinese authorities find it helpful in their own country.

The feeling shared by successive Spanish governments over the years is that there should be a complementarity between public criticism and discreet diplomatic pressure, and better coordination between the messages and actions of the EU member states, as well as between those of the European institutions – perhaps even including a concrete action plan. This could prevent double standards and the current division among various EU member states about how best to promote EU values in China. However, the Spanish authorities have not been particularly active in trying to advance a unitary and principled EU policy on China, since their policy on China has had other priorities.

It is important, for example, to establish dialogues not only on abstract notions of human rights, but also on concrete cases, for instance dealing with the more vulnerable groups in society such as women, children, elders and minorities. The relevant Spanish ministries have participated in bilateral seminars on these topics, sharing best practices with their Chinese counterparts. The Spanish officials who participated in these seminars believe that the willingness of their Chinese counterparts to learn about the Spanish experience was key to a meaningful and successful exchange.

<sup>1</sup> Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, *A Strategic Vision for Spain in Asia, 2018–2020*, 2018, Madrid, Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, [http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/Multimedia/Publicaciones/Documents/2018\\_02 ESTRATEGIA%20ASIA%20ENG.pdf](http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/Multimedia/Publicaciones/Documents/2018_02 ESTRATEGIA%20ASIA%20ENG.pdf).

## Impact on the Policymaking Process

As in other EU member states, NGOs in Spain are more critical and vocal about the human rights record of China. They do not, however, have much space in the public debate. For all the reasons explained above, Spain's foreign policy on China is more influenced by the business community than by human rights advocates. A good reflection of this fact is that some of the more recent Spanish ambassadors in Beijing have held managerial positions in Técnicas Reunidas, a Spanish multinational company with a long-standing presence in China. Thus, the main focus of the Spanish Government is to enhance business opportunities for Spanish firms and avoid any diplomatic tensions with the Chinese Government.

This business-friendly approach by the Spanish authorities gained international attention between November 2013 and April 2014, following prompt action by Mariano Rajoy's People's Party Administration to curb laws that allowed Spanish judges to pursue criminal cases globally. On 20 November 2013 the Spanish National Court issued international arrest warrants for five veteran senior Chinese leaders, including former President Jiang Zemin and former Prime Minister Li Peng, as part of a case involving alleged human rights abuses in Tibet.<sup>2</sup> However, in less than three months, on 12 February 2014, the Spanish Government passed a law to curb the use of universal jurisdiction by Spanish courts.<sup>3</sup> The way this case was handled showed the disposition of the governments of both countries to avert a diplomatic crisis. On the one hand, the Chinese authorities discreetly informed the Spanish authorities of their "great discontent" through diplomatic channels,<sup>4</sup> refraining from putting pressure on Spain or mobilizing Chinese public opinion through the media or social networking sites. This restrained approach avoided damaging the reputation and commercial interests of Spain in China. On the other hand, the Spanish authorities handled the issue quietly and Rajoy's government took the opportunity to change a law that the People's Party had never supported.

Another case in which the Spanish authorities appeared to act discreetly and successfully to avoid a diplomatic crisis with China caused by differences in political values was the police investigation "Operación Sombra" (Operation Shadow), through which six executives of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), including the two past directors of the branch of the Chinese bank in Madrid, were accused of participating in an international money laundering operation in February 2016. Chinese diplomats protested for months and criticised the Spanish authorities for not intervening in what they considered a public persecution campaign by the media and the judiciary against Chinese nationals, by repeatedly referring to the concept of a "Chinese mafia". Nonetheless, Spanish diplomats repeatedly emphasised to their Chinese counterparts that the media and the judiciary in Spain are independent and there was nothing they could do apart from give advice on how best to handle the situation.

In sum, Spanish policymakers believe that this softer, low-profile approach to China is helpful for Spain in times of need, as for example during the recent eurozone debt crisis when China bought substantial amounts of Spanish sovereign debt at crucial moments of market instability.<sup>5</sup>

## The 'China Model' in Spain

China's societal model has very little appeal in Spain. The media and public opinion are generally highly critical of the Chinese political system, which is seen as authoritarian. Here too, Spain's historical background is important. The

<sup>2</sup> Matt Moffet, "Spanish court issues arrest warrants for ex-Chinese leaders", *Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303985504579208322886635670>.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Yardly, "Spain seeks to curb law allowing judges to pursue cases globally", *New York Times*, 10 February 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/11/world/europe/spanish-legislators-seek-new-limits-on-universal-jurisdiction-law.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/11/world/europe/spanish-legislators-seek-new-limits-on-universal-jurisdiction-law.html?_r=0).

<sup>4</sup> The first contact took place on the same day the arrest warrants were issued, on 20 November 2013, at a meeting requested by Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, with the Spanish Ambassador in China, Manuel Valencia, see: Miguel González, "Spain fears China crisis over Tibet court case", *El País*, 22 November 2013, [http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/11/22/inenglish/1385124002\\_473819.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/11/22/inenglish/1385124002_473819.html).

<sup>5</sup> Miguel Otero-Iglesias, *How much Spanish sovereign debt does China hold?*, 2014, Madrid, Elcano Royal Institute, <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/much-spanish-sovereign-debt-china-hold>.

<sup>6</sup>Jesús Mosterín “El ejemplo de la meritocracia”, *El País*, 6 December 2015, [https://elpais.com/internacional/2015/12/04/actualidad/1449235715\\_017244.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2015/12/04/actualidad/1449235715_017244.html).

<sup>7</sup>See Mark Leonard, “China, el Estado vigilante”, *El País*, 7 March 2018, [https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/03/02/opinion/1520013653\\_315324.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/03/02/opinion/1520013653_315324.html). Ismael Arana, “China abre las puertas a que el presidente Xi Jinping se perpetúe en el poder”, *El Mundo*, 25 February 2018, <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2018/02/25/5a929265e2704e636d8b4614.html>.

majority of Spaniards are against anything that reminds them of the Franco regime – and one-party rule, media and internet censorship, and restrictions on political rights all fall into this category.

Certain features of the Chinese model are regarded positively, such as the meritocracy in the Chinese bureaucracy and political system,<sup>6</sup> and certainly the economic development and progress that China has experienced over the past four decades. Nor have the recent constitutional changes in China that allow Xi Jinping to serve for more than two terms been criticised per se, since there are no maximum term limits for prime ministers in Spain. What has been criticised, however, is the ever-increasing concentration of power in the hands of Xi Jinping.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, there are no political actors, experts or associations, even those less critical of the Chinese Government, that present China’s societal model as an alternative to the model advocated by the EU. China’s authoritarian regime is extremely unappealing in Spain, mainly due to its violations of civil liberties and political rights. Perhaps for this reason, Chinese diplomacy in Spain tends to be very low profile and cautious in its public relations initiatives, the modest nature of which have not caused suspicion or hostility in Spain.

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# The prudent proponent Sweden's normative China policy

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## Abstract

*Sweden has been active but careful when promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in its relationship with China. The Swedish Government has sought to keep a low profile by bringing sensitive issues within the European Union framework and seeking out cooperation on less contentious areas such as environmental protection and labour rights. The domestic debate has become more critical of China in recent years, in part because of the imprisonment of Gui Minbai, a Swedish citizen. A public diplomacy offensive launched in 2018 to defend China's actions and promote its vision appears to have backfired, generating increased suspicion and scepticism in Sweden.*

Sweden portrays itself as a firm defender of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It has a long history of vocal criticism of states that violate these principles. This legacy has only in part been translated into public criticism of China's infringements of human rights, as such exercises are typically limited to joint statements within the European Union (EU) and the United Nations. As is to be expected from a small country, Sweden has attempted to keep a low profile by seeking out low-risk channels to promote liberal values. It has done so primarily by bringing its work on sensitive political issues into the EU framework and formalising practical contacts with Chinese actors on less controversial issues such as environmental protection and labour rights.

Since the early 2000s, Sweden has sought to outsource some of its activities on sensitive issues to the EU.<sup>1</sup> On human rights in particular, it is now widely accepted in both government and parliamentary circles that the EU constitutes a crucial platform for managing Sweden's relations with China. Faced with calls in parliament and the media for a more proactive and publicly critical approach to China, ruling parties refer to existing initiatives within the EU framework and emphasise their role as active and principled players in EU discussions on breaches of human rights in China.<sup>2</sup> The long-standing EU–China human rights dialogue is an oft-cited example. Others include the EU statements on the human rights situation in China, the EU's development cooperation to promote human rights in China and its work to abolish the death penalty.<sup>3</sup> While these activities are not the product of Sweden's efforts alone, they are used to showcase Sweden's ongoing work to promote liberal values in China.

Sweden's China policy also contains an element of normative “teaching”, which comprises three types of activity. First, Sweden channels development aid to civil society organisations active in China. The Raoul Wallenberg Institute, which works to promote human rights through exchanges with academic institutions and the Chinese public sector, is the most notable example.<sup>4</sup> Second, Sweden and China signed a memorandum of understanding on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in 2007. Building on this memorandum, a Centre for CSR was created at the Swedish Embassy in Beijing in 2010. Since 2015, this cooperation has included components on business and human rights. The centre conducts seminars and organises study visits and courses linked to issues

<sup>1</sup> Anna Michalski, “Europeanization of national foreign policy: The case of Denmark's and Sweden's relations with China”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2013, vol. 51, no. 5, p. 895.

<sup>2</sup> For one example see Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, *Mänskliga rättigheter, demokrati och rättsstatens principer i Kina 2015–2016*, 2017, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Committee on Foreign Affairs (CFA), “FN och mänskliga rättigheter i svensk utrikespolitik”, *Utrikesutskottets betänkande*, 2017/18:UU15, 2018, pp. 25–26.

<sup>4</sup> Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (note 2), p. 19.

such as working conditions, the fight against corruption, the environment and the role of trade unions. These events gather businesses, industry associations, chambers of commerce and Chinese authorities at the central, regional and local levels.<sup>5</sup> Third, the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy, which has as its goal to promote “sustainable local democracy”, currently runs 20 China-related projects, 18 of which are “municipal partnership programmes” that bring together Swedish and Chinese counterparts to promote issues such as the inclusion of youth in society.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond work in the EU and bilateral cooperation initiatives, the Swedish Embassy in Beijing maintains regular contacts with civil society actors and integrates human rights into its outreach activities in China.<sup>7</sup> The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) publishes periodic reports on human rights, democracy and the rule of law in China as part of a global initiative. The most recent report, which spells out details of the deteriorating human rights situation in China, was firmly refuted as “biased” and “unfounded” by the Chinese MFA.<sup>8</sup> In the UN framework, Sweden has endorsed joint statements and signed letters condemning China’s human rights violations.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, participation in multilateral efforts and non-contentious cooperative projects to promote liberal values has enabled successive governments to deflect calls from the media and opposition parties for a more vocal, critical and demanding approach to China. In this way the state has sidestepped potential points of contention with China, which at least until recently has helped to ensure a stable economic and political relationship.

### Has Sweden’s approach been effective?

Sweden’s low-profile approach to promoting liberal values has been effective in that it has ensured some stability in the relationship with China. This might have helped Swedish economic interests in the short to medium term by allowing business ties to develop without any setbacks provoked by political disagreements. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the policy has been the most effective way to promote liberal values. It is possible that the impact of a more demanding, proactive and publicly critical approach, in concert with like-minded partners, might have put pressure on China to adapt in specific areas. Such a policy, however, was never a natural option for Swedish decision makers, who have sought to avoid going down the path of Norway and Denmark which were both punished for defying China – Denmark after its prime minister hosted the Dalai Lama in 2009 and Norway after it awarded a Nobel Prize to Liu Xiaobo in 2010.

### Policy shift ahead?

China has typically been a topic of little interest to Swedish public opinion. However, the case of an imprisoned Swedish citizen, Gui Minhai, has breathed new life into the debate. Gui ran a bookshop in Hong Kong specialising in books dealing with the intrigues of China’s senior leadership. In 2015, he was taken from his holiday home in Thailand only to reappear three months later on Chinese state television to recite what appeared to be a forced confession. Gui’s case has been highly publicised and Sweden and the EU have issued public statements condemning the actions of the Chinese state.<sup>10</sup> The case has put the spotlight on China’s human rights abuses and is likely to have a lasting impact on Swedish perceptions. In addition, politicians have taken note of the deteriorating human rights situation in China, as established in a 2017 report by the Swedish MFA.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Government Offices of Sweden, *Boosting CSR in China*, 9 September 2015, <https://www.government.se/opinion-pieces/2015/09/boosting-csr-in-china>.

<sup>6</sup> Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy, *Where we work*, <https://icld.se>.

<sup>7</sup> Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (note 2), pp. 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (note 2). Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference*, 2 May 2017, <http://www.china-un.org/eng/fyrth/t1458326.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Francois Godement and Abigael Vasselier, *China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, 2017, London, ECFR, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. European External Action Service, *Statement on the detention of Gui Minhai*, 24 January 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/38678/statement-detention-gui-minhai\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/38678/statement-detention-gui-minhai_en). Government Offices of Sweden, *Statement by Margot Wallström regarding the detention of the Swedish citizen Gui Minhai*, 5 February 2018, <https://www.government.se/statements/2018/02/statement-by-margot-wallstrom-regarding-the-detention-of-the-swedish-citizen-gui-minhai>.

<sup>11</sup> CFA, *FN och mänskliga rättigheter i svensk utrikespolitik*, p. 23.

In March 2018, a leading voice in the Swedish business community, Jacob Wallenberg, raised concerns about the lack of economic reciprocity between the West and China and the possible national security risks associated with Chinese investments.<sup>12</sup> A couple of weeks later, the main opposition party, Moderaterna, indicated that a sharper tone to Sweden's China policy might be necessary.<sup>13</sup> This growing criticism from businesses, media outlets and the political elite could lead policymakers to re-evaluate Sweden's current China policy, including its approach to promoting political values. However, it seems unlikely that Sweden will adopt a bold and outspoken approach. Successive governments from both left and right have historically been very careful not to antagonise China in ways that could harm commercial relations. In addition, Sweden's Export Strategy identifies China as a "priority market".<sup>14</sup>

### Chinese values in Sweden

There is some admiration for China in Sweden, particularly when it comes to the country's economic success, its efforts to fight climate change and environmental degradation, and its rich ancient culture. China's political values, however, are not held in high regard. In influential circles, China is seen as an oppressive one-party state with a deplorable human rights record.<sup>15</sup> Xi Jinping's recent move to abandon term limits on the presidency was met with a wave of critical reaction. An editorial in Sweden's most widely read broadsheet declared: "Not only is China a one-party dictatorship. The country has become a one-man show".<sup>16</sup>

In 2018, the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm significantly stepped up its attempts to shape Swedish public and elite opinion. The ambassador spearheaded a public diplomacy offensive by reaching out to media outlets to defend China's position and promote its stance on various issues, ranging from the Gui Minhai case to the Belt and Road Initiative and the treatment of Tibetans. The embassy has made a long list of statements, branding Swedish opinions "biased", "groundless" and "totally unacceptable".<sup>17</sup> These public diplomacy efforts, however, are likely to prove counterproductive. Rather than gaining support for Chinese views, the embassy's confrontational rebuttals have sparked a reaction and put the spotlight on China's human rights record.

In September these developments culminated in a peculiar chain of events, which began when a family of three Chinese tourists attempted to check into a hostel in Stockholm. After a disagreement with the staff, the tourists were removed from the premises in an seemingly non-violent way by the police. In response, the Chinese Embassy issued a forceful statement that the police had "brutally abused" and "severely endangered the lives" of the family.<sup>18</sup> A travel alert to Chinese tourists was issued and the embassy asked for the Swedish police to be disciplined and for an apology to be issued.<sup>19</sup> The situation worsened when the Swedish broadcaster SVT ran a highly provocative programme on the incident, which included racially charged jokes. Thus far, the Swedish authorities have made no moves to punish the police or issue a public apology. It remains to be seen whether China will continue to push the case. It is possible that the forceful Chinese reaction was a mechanism to shift attention away from China's own human rights record by highlighting Sweden's "violation" of the "basic human rights" of the tourists.<sup>20</sup>

The Chinese Embassy has also tried to influence the behaviour of politicians in Sweden. In connection with a visit to Sweden in 2017 by the President of the Tibetan government-in-exile, Lobsang Sangay, the Chinese Embassy reached out to parliamentarians, urging them not to attend the meeting. One parliamentarian

<sup>12</sup> Karin Grundberg Wolodarski, "Jacob Wallenberg om Kina: 'Vi får inte vara naiva'", *Dagens industri*, 26 March 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Ulf Kristersson, "En ny strategi för kinesiska företag", *Dagens industri*, 12 April 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Government Offices of Sweden, *Sweden's Export Strategy*, 2015, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Sveriges riksdag, *Riksdagens snabbprotokoll 2017/18: 122*, 30 May 2018, pp. 27, 30–31, 37–38.

<sup>16</sup> Gunnar Jonsson, "Ledare: Xi Jinping kröner sig till kejsare", *Dagens Nyheter*, 27 February 2018, <https://www.dn.se/ledare/signerat/gunnar-jonsson-xi-jinping-kroner-sig-till-kejsare>.

<sup>17</sup> Björn Jerdén and Viking Bohman, "What Chinese tourist row in Sweden says about the future of Europe-China relations", *South China Morning Post*, 21 September 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Sweden, *The Chinese Embassy spokesperson's remarks on the brutal abuse of Chinese tourists by Swedish police*, 15 September 2018, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/eng/mtfw/sgfyryw/t1595453.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Sweden, *The Chinese Embassy in Sweden reminds Chinese citizens in Sweden once again to improve their awareness and their safety*, 14 September 2018, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/chn/lswf/lswxyfw/t1595196.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Sweden (note 18).

<sup>21</sup> Mia Holmgren, “Kina till svenska riksdagsmän: Läg er inte i våra angelägenheter”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 November 2017, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/varlden/kina-till-svenska-riksdagsman-lagg-er-inte-i-vara-angelagenheter>.

noted that there was a “threatening undertone” to the discussions with the embassy. In the light of this atmosphere of threat, she later told a Swedish newspaper that meeting the Tibetan leader became particularly important for her: “We will listen to everyone. And human rights is a universal question, not an internal Chinese issue”.<sup>21</sup> China’s Confucius Institutes have had only a limited impact in Sweden. Only one such institution remains, since several have been shut down by their Swedish partners. Taken together, China’s influence on political values in Sweden appears negligible. This might change in the future, however, if lessons are drawn from setbacks, and propaganda tools are adapted to fit the Swedish context.

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# UK-China: Broadening the values agenda

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## Abstract

*This chapter argues that political values remain important to the UK's approach towards China, but the range of values which the UK has been promoting has broadened over recent years, in the context of a greater emphasis on promoting "prosperity" and a "broader and more holistic approach" to China.<sup>1</sup> This approach has had some impact, for example in positive UK-China collaboration in tackling issues such as ivory trading. The traditional human rights agenda remains part of the relationship through annual dialogues and other channels, but traction here is limited. Finally, there is little evidence that the Chinese political model has found adherents in the UK, or had an influence on mainstream British understandings of political values.*

The overall goals of British foreign policy are described by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) as being "to protect our country, our people and our interests; to project our influence and values; and to promote our prosperity". The reference to influence and values is expanded to cover good governance, democracy, rule of law and human rights, the "rules-based international system", and preventing and resolving conflict and building stability overseas.<sup>2</sup> Economic values – from promoting prosperity to ensuring economic security – and normative concepts such as "the rules-based international system" are also important, especially following a greater degree of attention to commercial issues in British foreign policy since the late 1990s,<sup>3</sup> a turn which intensified both after the global financial crisis and the Brexit vote in June 2016.

## Political values and the UK's approach to China

This has been reflected in the UK's approach to China over the last decade. The then Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in 2010 with a more overt commercial agenda towards China, but the freeze in high-level official (though not commercial) ties which followed the prime minister and deputy prime minister's 2012 meeting with the Dalai Lama meant that this approach did not begin to reach fruition until 2014,<sup>4</sup> with the high point around the 2015 announcement of the UK's application to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the "Golden Era" in Sino-British ties declared during Chinese president Xi Jinping's visit to the UK that autumn. Since the global financial crisis, and particularly since the Brexit vote, investment from and trade with China have been touted in the UK as ways of dealing with austerity and creating growth.<sup>5</sup>

The common view is that this turn to the prosperity agenda came at the expense of values diplomacy, in particular the promotion of human rights in China.<sup>6</sup> However, a closer examination of British policy towards China suggests a more nuanced picture.

Theresa May's decision shortly after she became prime minister in 2016 to review the Hinkley Point C nuclear power project, in which a Chinese company will invest one third, was widely interpreted as an attempt to

<sup>1</sup> Shaun Breslin, "UK-China Relations in the Context of Brexit: Economics Still in Command?", *China International Studies* Nov./Dec. 2017, 61-73, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Annual Report and Accounts 2016-17*, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/625651/FCO-annual-report-2017-web-accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/625651/FCO-annual-report-2017-web-accessible.pdf), p. 30. The current government does not use the phrases "political" or "universal" values, but talks about "British" or "European" values.

<sup>3</sup> Jamie Gaskarth, *British Foreign Policy*, 2013, Cambridge, Polity, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Summers, "UK-China relations: navigating a changing world", in: Huotari, Mikko et al. (eds.), *Mapping Europe-China relations: a bottom-up approach*, 2015, Berlin, European think-tank network on China.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Harris, "China in British Politics: Western Unexceptionalism in the Shadow of China's Rise", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2017, pp. 241-267.

<sup>6</sup> Scott A.W. Brown, "Free Trade, Yes; Ideology, Not So Much: The UK's Shifting China Policy 2010-2016", *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies*, 2018, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 92-126.

<sup>7</sup> Francois Godement and Abigail Vasselier, *China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, 2017, London, ECFR.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Summers, "The United Kingdom: A Platform for Commercial Cooperation", in Frans-Paul van der Putten et al. (eds), *Europe and China's New Silk Roads*, 2016, The Hague, European think-tank network on China.

<sup>9</sup> The assumptions behind this concept have come in for well-targeted criticism. Lee Jones and Shahar Haméni, *Written evidence for the Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry on China and the International Rules-Based System*, January 2018, available at <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/foreign-affairs-committee/inquiries1/parliament-2017/china-international-rules-system-17-19/publications>.

<sup>10</sup> Government of the UK, *Prime Minister's speech in China*, 31 January 2018, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/thegovernmentsays-files/content/150/1501669.html>.

<sup>11</sup> David Lidington, *Writing a new chapter in the global era*, 11 April 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/writing-a-new-chapter-in-the-global-era>.

<sup>12</sup> Government of the United Kingdom, *British Embassy launches National Wildlife Protection Themed Campaign in China*, 10 August 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-embassy-launches-national-wildlife-protection-themed-campaign-in-china>.

<sup>13</sup> Government of the UK, *Matt Hancock speaking at the CBI annual Chinese New Year dinner*, 22 February 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/matt-hancock-speaking-at-the-annual-cbi-chinese-dinner>.

<sup>14</sup> Government of the UK, *Mark Field welcomes continued UK-China dialogue on human rights*, 28 June 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mark-field-welcomes-continued-uk-china-dialogue-on-human-rights>.

rebalance relations with China to ensure that Britain's security was not being compromised for economic benefit. The project was subsequently approved (again), suggesting that May's review represented a temporary "strategic pause" rather than a fundamental change in approach.<sup>7</sup> But the backdrop to this was debate over whether a company from a country with different "values" – including a political system in which the state was a powerful economic actor – should be permitted to hold a stake in essential national infrastructure. The implications of deepening economic engagement with China's different system of political economy have remained part of the British debate about the approach to China. The UK government and business community have generally sought to intensify commercial engagement, including under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),<sup>8</sup> but to balance this with the promotion of liberal international economic values in relations with China, centered mostly on stressing the importance of "the rules-based international order",<sup>9</sup> and the importance of "international standards" in the implementation of the BRI.<sup>10</sup> These concerns prompted Theresa May not to sign a memorandum of understanding on BRI during her January 2018 visit to China.

The broadening of engagement with China over the recent years reflects a diversification of the values agenda. British officials have sought a pragmatic approach where resources are put into issues with realistic chances of concrete progress. For example, work with the Chinese authorities to tackle the ivory trade was promoted through a joint advertising campaign, and given profile by the 2015 visit to China of Prince William (third in line to the throne). In 2018, the UK has promoted working with China against modern slavery and human trafficking, serious organized crime, and the trade in illegal wildlife products;<sup>11</sup> the latter was the subject of a new campaign launched in August 2018 at the British Embassy.<sup>12</sup> Other issues, such as data protection,<sup>13</sup> have also been addressed.

This diversification of the values agenda has not done away with the traditional human rights agenda and China is still listed as one of 30 countries of concern in the FCO's annual Human Rights and Democracy Report. The most recent report highlights further tightening of the space for civil society, further reductions on freedom of speech and assembly, trials of human rights lawyers and activists, lack of judicial process and transparency, and the apparent increase in restrictions on religious freedom. The report cites new laws – the Foreign NGO, National Intelligence and Cyber Security Laws – as restricting the scope for freedom of expression and association, and expresses concern over the situations in Tibet and Xinjiang.

Alongside public statements, the British government raises these issues with Chinese counterparts privately, including when senior British ministers hold bilateral meetings with Chinese counterparts. They are also addressed at the regular (non-public) official human rights dialogue with China; the 24<sup>th</sup> dialogue was in June 2017.<sup>14</sup> The agenda of these meetings has shifted to reflect changing concerns and sometimes concentrated on particular themes – for example, the 2015 dialogue focused on the role of the judiciary.<sup>15</sup>

Another mechanism through which the FCO engages on values is the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy, which funds projects to promoting "democratic values and enabling prosperity".<sup>16</sup> In China, the most recent call for projects focuses on supporting a more effective criminal justice system and improving access to justice, strengthening bilateral cooperation on modern slavery, social equity, corporate social responsibility, the rights of women and children, effective operation of non-governmental organisations in China,

enhancing the media environment, and public information transparency.<sup>17</sup> This scheme is relatively new (following the celebration of the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Magna Carta in 2015), but builds on similar programmes operated in the past.

The Great Britain China Centre, an executive non-departmental public body supported by the FCO, engages in projects and discussions with Chinese counterparts on good governance, the rule of law and sustainable development.<sup>18</sup> As well as meeting political objectives, all of these projects could improve the business environment; in this context it is worth noting that the FCO's current overseas business risk document for China refers to child labour, issues relating to migrant workers, and limited trade union representation.

When new Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt visited China at the end of July 2018, he met family members of detained or previously detained human rights lawyers.<sup>19</sup> In his joint press conference with the Chinese foreign minister, Hunt referenced “areas where we have different views such as human rights”.<sup>20</sup> This has become familiar language, with numerous ministers explicitly noting that the two countries do not view all issues in the same way, but that the “Golden Era” of bilateral relations allows open and frank discussion of differences, while continuing to develop cooperation where possible.

The impact of British government engagement on political values is difficult to gauge, but the UK government has said that it assesses cooperation to have contributed to a “reduction in the number of crimes subject to the death penalty” and “greater legal protection for victims of domestic violence and rape”.<sup>21</sup> At the margins, therefore, it might be possible to influence Chinese policy or practice, especially on issues (such as the wildlife trade) where there are sympathetic constituencies in China. However traction is limited on more systemic political rights.

The question of values remains the most contentious part of the UK-China relationship and there is domestic political debate within both of the main political parties (not along party lines) over the best approach to promoting political values. When in government all parties have sought some sort of balance between the promotion of values and interests and commercial goals. Non-governmental organizations which focus on human rights issues also lobby the British government and produce reports critical of developments in China. Much of the reporting in the British media describes a deterioration in human rights in China, and all of these developments increase political pressure on the UK government to continue to prioritise values in its diplomacy with China.

Finally, the growing politicisation of issues relating to Hong Kong has become a more prominent part of the UK-China bilateral agenda since 2014, and was raised by the UK side during the most recent prime ministerial and foreign ministerial discussions. Here the tone in the UK has become more critical, with several parliamentary debates and active lobbying by political grandees, including former governor of Hong Kong, Lord Patten. A new NGO, Hong Kong Watch, pressures the government to take a tougher line in the reports on Hong Kong which the FCO submits to parliament every six months.<sup>22</sup> The dynamics of British policy on these issues are, however, somewhat divorced from the rest of its China policy.<sup>23</sup>

### China's impact on political values in the UK

China may have become a more prominent feature of political debate in the UK over the last decade,<sup>24</sup> but there is little evidence of admiration in the UK for China's political system or of any “China model” having an impact on British

<sup>15</sup> Government of the UK, *China – Human Rights Priority Country*, 8 February 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/china-human-rights-priority-country/china-human-rights-priority-country>.

<sup>16</sup> FCO, (note 2), p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Government of the UK, *Calling for bids in China: Magna Carta Fund 2018/19*, 19 April 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/201819-magna-carta-fund-call-for-bids>.

<sup>18</sup> Great Britain China Centre, [www.gbccc.org.uk](http://www.gbccc.org.uk).

<sup>19</sup> Hong Kong Free Press, *UK's new foreign sec. Jeremy Hunt meets with families of detained lawyers during China visit*, 31 July 2018, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2018/07/31/uks-new-foreign-sec-jeremy-hunt-meets-families-detained-lawyers-china-visit>.

<sup>20</sup> Government of the UK, *Foreign Secretary remarks during press conference in Beijing*, 30 July 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-remarks-during-press-conference-in-beijing-30-july-2018>.

<sup>21</sup> Government of the UK, *China – Human Rights Priority Country*, 8 February 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/china-human-rights-priority-country/china-human-rights-priority-country>.

<sup>22</sup> Government of the UK, *Six-monthly reports on Hong Kong*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/six-monthly-reports-on-hong-kong>.

<sup>23</sup> Tim Summers, “British policy towards Hong Kong and its political reform”, *Issues and Studies*, 2016, Vol. 52, No.4.

<sup>24</sup> Harris, (note 4).

<sup>25</sup>Thorsten Benner et al., *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe*, 2018, Berlin, Global Public Policy Institute and Mercator Institute for China Studies, p. 5. The examples discussed in this section are based on the issues raised in this report, pp. 22-33.

<sup>26</sup>The need to manage the campuses of British universities in China might bring more challenges. Financial Times, *China tightens party control of foreign university ventures*, 2 July 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/4b885540-7b6d-11e8-8e67-1e1a0846c475>.

conceptions of values. In some parts of the business and political world there is a certain jealousy at the speed with which Chinese infrastructure projects can be completed, but this does not go much beyond complaints about inefficient bureaucracy in the UK.

The Chinese government is attempting to shape perceptions of its system and economy (as other countries do through their public diplomacy), and as China's global influence has spread, these efforts have become more evident in countries such as the UK. It has been suggested that this means China is a "direct challenge to liberal democracy and Europe's values and interests". But there is scant evidence of such an "authoritarian advance" in the case of the UK.<sup>25</sup>

First, reporting about China in the UK remains dominated by the mainstream media, most of which is critical (the BBC is a good example). Chinese efforts at public diplomacy, including through newspaper supplements, pale into insignificance when compared to the influence of these media outlets and the debates on social media.

Second, Chinese efforts to influence often result in pushback which strengthens the attachment to "British" values and weakens Chinese public diplomacy. As the response to the furore over the initial decision in 2017 by *The China Quarterly* not to make certain academic articles available in China showed (all articles were always available in the UK), mainstream values in the UK remain very different from those in China, and Cambridge University Press reversed its original decision.

Third, although UK institutions host the largest number of Confucius Institutes in Europe, there is little evidence that these have strong voices in their host institutions.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the UK is home to some two thirds of Chinese students in the EU, but they are a diverse group, and it is unwise to assume loyalties are based on place of birth. Chinese students in the UK are more likely to be influenced by Western ideas than to persuade their British counterparts of the benefits of China's system. In short, European influence on Chinese society remains much stronger than China's influence on the UK.

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# Political values in EU-China relations: Towards a “principled” or a “pragmatic” approach?

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## Abstract

*The European Union is reconsidering its relations with China, aiming for “principled pragmatism”. Based on field research in Brussels involving over 50 interviews, I argue that this faces a threefold challenge. First, even though member states have “outsourced” contentious issues regarding political values to the EU as a supranational organization, EU foreign and security policy remains an intergovernmental competence. This principled approach requires unity among the 28 member states, most of which prioritize their own economic interests. Second, the European Commission’s China policy is fragmented and lacks strategic decision-making. Third, increased Chinese confidence restricts China’s willingness to cooperate on issues linked to political values. Despite these obstacles, the EU can take pride in some, albeit limited, successes. In addition, China’s impact on the EU’s internal debate on political values is very limited.*

The European Union (EU) sees itself as a normative power founded on the fundamental political values enshrined in its treaties: democracy, human dignity, human rights, freedom, equality and the rule of law. According to its treaties, the main aim of EU foreign policy is to promote these values externally.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the EU is an international institution founded to facilitate peaceful cooperation based on rules-based multilateralism. Hence, these values shape its institutional identity.

More recently, however, internal crises have raised the question of whether the EU is a community of solidarity based on common values or – at the other extreme – should be reduced to the Single Market. This comes at a time when the long-standing values-based transatlantic alliance is being challenged by the presidency of Donald J. Trump in the United States. The EU is required to rethink its global role, including its relations with non-democratic powers such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In the light of Trump’s disregard for human rights, the EU sees itself as the last defender of liberal values in world affairs. At the same time, it is increasingly having to seek out issue-specific alliances to promote political principles ranging from human rights to international law and rules-based multilateralism. In some of these contexts, China is a partner; in others, it is the EU’s adversary. Having lost the previously reliable support of the USA on liberal values, the EU must remain even more committed but also find new strategic pathways to defend such values in a changing environment.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, the EU is reassessing and realigning its China policy. For a long time, the EU’s approach was inspired by the idea of constructive engagement hoping China would ultimately liberalize. This turned out to be ineffective. Although China rhetorically refers to democracy, human right and the rule of law, it interprets these values in a different way – and under Xi Jinping the PRC is becoming even more authoritarian.

In its most recent China strategy, the EU reacted to this development by introducing what it calls a “pragmatic” approach, without giving up on all of its normative aspirations. The EU states that its policy “should be principled, practical and pragmatic”.<sup>3</sup> What a principled and effective foreign policy should

<sup>1</sup> European Union, *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, 2012, Brussels, EU, paragraphs 2 and 21. While human dignity, freedom and equality are fairly abstract concepts, the EU’s foreign policy focuses on the promotion of human rights and the rule of law. Democracy promotion is also an important component, but not in the context of the EU’s China policy.

<sup>2</sup> The term “strategic” or “strategy” refers to a planned action to achieve a long-term goal in relation to another actor (in this case China). This implies careful analysis of Chinese preferences and its likely reaction to EU policies in order to reduce uncertainty regarding the outcome of EU policies.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. Elements for a New EU Strategy on China*, [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/joint\\_communication\\_to\\_the\\_european\\_parliament\\_and\\_the\\_council\\_-\\_elements\\_for\\_a\\_new\\_eu\\_strategy\\_on\\_china.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/joint_communication_to_the_european_parliament_and_the_council_-_elements_for_a_new_eu_strategy_on_china.pdf).

look like, however, remains open to debate. I argue that a truly principled EU foreign policy on China would require the singling out of issues that the EU could link to political values. To this day, however, even the first step in such an approach – identifying the goals of a principled EU policy on China – remains controversial. Suggestions range from purely fending off authoritarian Chinese influences on the EU, through working on issues of common concern, such as focusing on improving social and economic rights;<sup>4</sup> to focusing on international political values, such as the preservation of rules-based multilateralism and a liberal trade regime; containing the impact of Chinese political values globally; or continuing to put pressure on China regarding civil liberties and civil rights.<sup>5</sup> Whichever approach the EU decides to take, the realignment of its China policy will provide a chance to devise a more effective promotion of the EU’s political values. However, my analysis, based on more than 50 interviews with EU policymakers and officials, suggests that this new strategy faces three obstacles: (a) member states’ prioritization of their own economic interests; (b) the EU’s fragmented polity; and (c) the growing confidence of PRC decision makers. All three obstacles are discussed separately below.

### Member states’ prioritisation of economic interests

Foreign and security policy falls under the intergovernmental competence of member states and is decided by unanimous vote in the *European Council*. However, the country chapters in this report demonstrate the significant differences among the EU member states linked for example to their divergent historical backgrounds and economic circumstances. When trade-offs between economic interests and political values arise, states tend to prioritize economics.<sup>6</sup> Hungary goes a step further in taking issue with the EU’s values themselves.<sup>7</sup>

This leaves the EU in an awkward position. Most EU member states have “outsourced” contentious issues touching on human rights and the rule of law to the EU.<sup>8</sup> In general, this outsourcing makes sense because a unitary EU has more leverage vis-à-vis China than a single member state. Even within the European Council, the more powerful member states bear the main responsibility because small states fear Chinese punishment if they were to take the lead.<sup>9</sup> However, outsourcing political values is only effective when the EU acts in unison. The representatives in the European Council, however, receive their mandates from the same European capitals that tend to prioritize their divergent economic interests. Hence, outsourcing is not an effective European strategy but rather serves as an excuse for member state inaction. In fact, with the notable exception of Sweden, member states do not even publish the EU’s press releases on the Human Rights Dialogue (HRD) on the websites of their foreign ministries – a minimal step to demonstrate support.

In addition, the requirement for a unanimous vote provides a gateway for Chinese influence. In 2017, for the first time in EU history, Greece prevented the passage of a critical item 4 statement<sup>10</sup> by the EU on China in the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>11</sup> China did not ask Greece to vote no but the Greek veto can be seen as anticipatory obedience. At the same time, it provided the Greek Government with an opportunity to showcase its political leverage within the EU, having suffered the imposition of austerity measures in part at the insistence of the EU. Similar considerations may contribute to Hungary emphasising its potential to cooperate with China.<sup>12</sup>

Despite all these obstacles, which stem from the influence of EU member states, constant cooperation within the European Council facilitates compromise as

<sup>4</sup> Some see this suggestion as giving up on a principled EU foreign policy altogether. Others argue that improving, e.g., workers’ rights constitute a desirable and values-based goal for the EU that is more likely to prove fruitful in China.

<sup>5</sup> Author interviews with EU officials and policymakers, Brussels, April–July 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Author interviews with representatives of the EU member states in the European Council, Brussels, April–July 2018.

<sup>7</sup> For evidence see the chapter on Hungary in this report.

<sup>8</sup> For concrete examples see the country chapters in this report.

<sup>9</sup> Author interviews with representatives of the EU member states in the European Council, Brussels, April–July 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Item 4 statements in the UN Human Rights Council address human rights situations that require the Council’s attention.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Christiansen, et al., *The European Union and China*, forthcoming, Basingstoke, Palgrave, pp. 115–116.

<sup>12</sup> Author interviews with EU officials and policymakers, Brussels, April–July 2018. See also the chapter on Hungary in this report.

part of a system of classical bargaining.<sup>13</sup> While this enables the adoption of values-based policies, such bargaining is not conducive to a unitary strategic and principled approach.

### The EU's fragmented polity

In addition to the European Council, the EU's China policy is shaped by the highly fragmented polity of the *European Commission*. The EU-China Summit<sup>14</sup> is supplemented not only by the high-level strategic and the high-level economic dialogues, but also by no less than 60–70 sectoral dialogues.<sup>15</sup> These sectoral dialogues are issue-specific, highly technical and carried out by different Directorate-Generals (DGs) of the European Commission or the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Human rights and the rule of law are addressed in the HRD and the Legal Affairs Dialogue (LAD). Interviews with EU officials indicate that concerns over political values implicitly hamper cooperation in many dialogues beyond the HRD and the LAD.<sup>16</sup> Diverging political convictions fuel a lack of trust, impeding cooperation on matters from economic affairs to cybersecurity. This is an expression of the European Commission's deep-rooted institutional interest in promoting its constitutive political principles. In addition, personal commitment to these values among officials is also widespread.

At the same time, the fragmented character of EU-China cooperation in more than 60 dialogues hampers a unitary and strategic promotion of political values. The highly technical mandates of most dialogues rarely mention political values. This allows the PRC to contain sensitive issues in the HRD and the LAD. Strategic issue linkages are difficult to make even though the EEAS serves a coordinative function by regularly organizing “country team meetings” to facilitate the exchange of information among DGs. Participation in these meetings is voluntary and some DGs seldom show up. Institutional rivalries and a system of constant rotation of officials further complicate a strategic approach.<sup>17</sup>

Another track is EU-financed projects, such as those undertaken within the framework of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Such projects aim to facilitate mutual understanding, capacity building and consciousness raising in the field of political values.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from trade-related issues, the *European Parliament* has no formal decision-making power in foreign affairs. It takes the most principled stance of all the EU institutions and serves an important watchdog function, insisting on a more principled approach to EU-China relations. Even though watered down during the course of negotiations, the most recent report on the state of EU-China relations adopted in September 2018, is more critical of China than the joint strategy of the European Council and the European Commission.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to resolutions in the plenary or in committees, the European Parliament conveys its stance on China by means of public statements and discreet communications as part of inter-party consultations, its inter-parliamentary China delegation, and informal exchanges such as the “China friendship group”. Twice in its history, the European Parliament has awarded its Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Chinese activists.<sup>20</sup> Even though the European Parliament remains the most principled institution within the EU framework, my interviews found evidence of a recent downgrading of political values.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Author interviews with representatives of EU member states in the European Council, Brussels, April–July 2018.

<sup>14</sup> The EU-China summit is jointly organised with their Chinese counterparts by the European Commission and the European Council.

<sup>15</sup> For a general but incomplete overview see European Union, *EU-China Dialogue Architecture* [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/2015\\_november\\_eu-china\\_dialogue\\_architecture.jpg](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/2015_november_eu-china_dialogue_architecture.jpg)

<sup>16</sup> Author interviews with officials of the European Commission, Brussels, April–July 2018.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* While this presents a challenge for EU foreign policymaking generally, it is even more serious in the context of multilayered relations such as those with China.

<sup>18</sup> The EIDHR contains China-specific as well as global funding streams that are awarded on application to, mostly local, civil society organisations. The budgets for China-specific programmes is €4–5 million over a 3-year period. In 2014–15, this sum was invested in six projects in two different funding streams. In addition to these funds, global calls are also available for China-related projects.

<sup>19</sup> European Parliament, *State of EU-China Relations. European Parliament Resolution of 12 September 2018 on the State of EU-China Relations. P8\_TA-PROV(2018)0343*, 2018, Brussels, European Parliament.

<sup>20</sup> Wei Jingsheng was awarded the prize in 1996; Hu Jia received it in 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Author interviews with officials and members of the European Parliament, Brussels, June 2018. Author interviews with human rights NGOs, Brussels, June and July 2018.

<sup>22</sup> John Seaman, et al. (eds.), *Chinese Investment in Europe. A Country-Level Approach*, 2017, Paris, European Think Tank Network on China.

<sup>23</sup> Matthieu Burnay, et al., „Bridging the EU-China’s Gap on the Rule of Law“, *Asia Europe Journal*, 2016, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 95-106.

<sup>24</sup> Roger Hood, *Enhancing EU Action on the Death Penalty in Asia, Policy Paper DG B External Policies of the Union*, 2012, Brussels, European Parliament.

<sup>25</sup> Liu Xia is an intellectual and the wife of the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Liu Xiaobo.

<sup>26</sup> Katrin Kinzelbach, *The EU’s Human Rights Dialogue with China. Quiet Diplomacy and Its Limits*, 2015, New York, Routledge. Author interviews with senior officials of the European Commission and the European External Action Service, Brussels, June and July 2018.

<sup>27</sup> While some are critical that such projects contribute to the capacity of the repressive Chinese state apparatus, such claims overlook the fact that China’s party-state is strong enough to comprehensively control the country without European cooperation.

<sup>28</sup> Yifan Yang, “How do EU Norms Diffuse? Rule of Law Promotion in EU-China Cooperation on Environmental Governance?”, *Journal of European Integration*, 2017, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 63-78.

<sup>29</sup> EU-funded projects are regularly evaluated. For example, projects under the EIDHR undergo a general evaluation as well as a local one led by the EU’s representatives in Beijing.

<sup>30</sup> Author interviews with representatives of the EU members states, Brussels, July 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Apart from general resistance to giving up sovereignty rights, it is likely that states such as Greece would be less attractive destinations for Chinese investment without EU membership because it provides access to the European Single Market and greater political leverage.

## Chinese confidence and limited EU successes

In addition to institutional obstacles, China’s growing confidence in its own political system impedes the promotion of political values. China’s international influence is increasing, and so are its investments in the critical technology and infrastructure of EU member states.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the EU’s successes room for manoeuvre is scarce and are mostly limited to fields in which the PRC has an interest in learning from European experience. Issues related to legal affairs with economic implications resonate more with Chinese decision makers than human rights and democracy.<sup>23</sup> A notable exception is the reduction in the use of the death penalty in China.<sup>24</sup>

It is also reasonable to assume that the EU’s interventions contribute significantly to assisting individual human rights activists in China. European efforts sometimes facilitate exit permits. Most recently, joint German-EU efforts enabled Liu Xia to leave China.<sup>25</sup> There are also clear indications that raising the individual fate of imprisoned human rights activists correlates with improved conditions in detention. Such limited achievements are an argument against termination of the HRD. Even though China demonstrates its disdain for the HRD,<sup>26</sup> disbanding it would not only signal a downgrading of human rights, but also make it more difficult to raise concerns and help individual human rights activists.

In the absence of diplomatic breakthroughs, low-key projects can have greater potential to induce some change.<sup>27</sup> One example is the EU-China Environmental Governance Programme, which aims to increase expertise and capacity in environmental law in China as well as public awareness of citizens’ rights in this field.<sup>28</sup> At first glance, this might appear to be just an issue of environmental policy, but it showcases the benefits of functioning rule of law in a specific field. Another project is the EU-China Law School in Beijing, which aims to familiarise a future generation of Chinese lawyers with the rule of law.<sup>29</sup>

## A more strategic EU approach: Towards a more principled future?

More recently, the EU has taken concrete steps to devise a more strategic China policy that addresses its most apparent weaknesses: disunity and fragmentation. At the initiative of Germany and the Netherlands, in mid-2018 the European Council received a comprehensive overview of the European Commission’s China policies. The next step will be more detailed debriefings.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, a debate has begun on eliminating the need for unanimous voting in some fields of foreign and security policy decision-making. While this would ease the development of a more strategic foreign policy, it will be difficult to convince member states to give up their veto power.<sup>31</sup>

The European Commission decided in July 2018 to set up a high-level strategic decision-making body chaired by its Secretary-General, Martin Selmayr. It convened for the first time in September 2018. In contrast to the country team meetings, this body has enough weight to take strategic decisions.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the European Parliament’s most recent China strategy is far more detailed and comprehensive than the 2015 version, reflecting an increased awareness of China’s importance.

This more strategic turn does not necessarily come with a more principled approach – the rifts in the transatlantic alliance have increased goodwill on both sides. In July 2018, the EU-China Summit was the first in three years to result in a joint statement. Although the EU succeeded in integrating human rights into the second paragraph, the references remained vague and there was no improvement over previous joint statements.<sup>33</sup> Progress was limited to the economic sphere.



In sum, the EU's introduction of a more pragmatic and strategic policy is a change from the previous constructive engagement approach, which did not result in any strengthening of liberal values in China. The EU is acknowledging the need to cooperate economically and geopolitically with China without giving up its normative aspirations altogether. However, while the challenge of the EU's fragmentation is being tackled, the rise of populist parties in EU member states and – very likely – after the elections to the European Parliament in 2019 could signal a turn to less principled EU policies. First, these parties could harm EU unity by prioritizing national interests. Second, even though liberal principles can be part of national interests, these values are constitutive of the EU as an international institution. A weakening of the EU institutions would be likely to reduce Europe's commitment to liberal political values.

### Chinese attempts to influence the EU's political values debate

An understanding of the political values that underlie the Chinese party-state is rare within EU institutions, where China-sceptic if not anti-Chinese sentiment dominates. This is not only a deep-rooted rejection of Chinese authoritarianism, but also a reaction to growing fears that China's increasing political, economic, technological and ideological strength is challenging Western dominance.<sup>34</sup> Xi Jinping's more personalised and centralised authority, including the abolition of presidential term limits, has further fuelled concerns.<sup>35</sup> Only a small minority of EU officials disregard concerns over political values and advocate purely economic cooperation.<sup>36</sup>

China's Mission to the EU, in turn, seeks to influence perceptions of the country within EU institutions and in their surroundings, including Brussels-based think tanks.<sup>37</sup> My field research in Brussels does not support recent concerns,<sup>38</sup> but instead identifies only limited successes as a result of Chinese efforts. For example, following an official visit by the Dalai Lama to the European Parliament in September 2016, China put a halt all official interparliamentary relations for a substantial period of time. However, when resuming the relations the European Parliament offered a face-saving way out for Chinese representatives without conceding on substance. Aggressive Chinese lobbying in the European Commission and the EEAS appears to be particularly counterproductive. Nonetheless, the EU should consider a registration system alongside its existing counterespionage provisions. In the absence of such an EU registration scheme, some EU officials report Chinese outreach to their home country intelligence services.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Author interviews with EU officials, Brussels, July 2018.

<sup>33</sup> European Union, *Joint Statement of the 20th EU-China Summit*, 2018, Brussels, European External Action Service.

<sup>34</sup> Author interviews with EU officials and policy-makers, Brussels, April–July 2018.

<sup>35</sup> EPSC, “Geopolitical Outlook for Europe. Confrontation vs Cooperation”, *EPSC Brief*, European Policy Strategy Centre, 8 June 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Some Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), particularly those from economically weaker countries, agree with this minority position that seek a competitive advantage for their home constituencies. Author interviews with MEPs and staff at the European Parliament, Brussels, April–July 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Francois Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, *China at the Gates. A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, 2017, London, ECFR, p. 78.

<sup>38</sup> Thorsten Benner, et al., *Authoritarian Advance. Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe*, 2018, Berlin, Global Public Policy Institute and Mercator Institute for China Studies.

<sup>39</sup> Author interviews with EU officials, Brussels, May–July 2018.

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**Imprint**

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