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UNDERSTANDING THE EU–CHINA RELATIONS: EVOLUTION, INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND THE KEY AREAS OF COOPERATION

This article examines the development of EU–China relations through the institutionalization of three key areas of cooperation: political dialogue, economic interaction, and cultural exchanges. The analysis traces the emergence of structured political dialogue beginning in the late 1990s to mid-2010s, when the European Commission introduced policy frameworks aimed at strengthening cooperation with China. Subsequent strategic documents and high-level dialogues contributed to the establishment of a more coordinated and institutionalized partnership. In the economic sphere, the study highlights the rapid expansion of trade and investment relations between the EU and China, demonstrating how economic interdependence has become one of the defining characteristics of bilateral relations despite periodic tensions regarding market access, regulatory standards, and trade imbalances. In addition to political and economic cooperation, the article emphasizes the growing importance of cultural and educational exchanges. Programs promoting academic mobility, cultural interaction, and civil society cooperation have gradually strengthened the social foundations of the partnership. Initiatives such as the EU–China High-Level People-to-People Dialogue and educational mobility programs have played a significant role in fostering mutual understanding and supporting long-term cooperation between the two actors. Overall, the article argues that EU–China relations have developed into a complex and multi-dimensional partnership shaped by both cooperation and competition. The institutionalization of political dialogue, economic engagement, and cultural exchange has created a framework that allows both sides to manage differences while maintaining areas of mutually beneficial collaboration.

Key words: EU–China relations; European Union; China; strategic partnership; political dialogue; economic cooperation; cultural exchange; people-to-people dialogue; international cooperation.

Introduction. The relationship between the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has evolved significantly over the past decades, transforming from limited economic engagement into a comprehensive strategic partnership encompassing political, economic, and cultural dimensions. China and the European Union declared their “*Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*” in 2003, marking an important stage in the evolution of bilateral relations. The intention behind this framework was to elevate cooperation beyond trade and investment issues toward addressing global political and security challenges. From China's perspective, the EU represented a valuable partner for several reasons. First, Europe's geopolitical position was perceived as relatively independent, not being directly shaped by communist ideology or by American strategic dominance. Second, the strong economic growth and technological development of European countries were viewed by Chinese leaders as highly attractive and promising for cooperation and modernization efforts (Casarini, 2006; Brown & Crossick, 2008).

The origins of EU–China relations can be traced to the early 1970s, when the visit of European Commission Vice-President Christopher Soames to Beijing in 1970 initiated official contacts between the European Economic Community (EEC) and the People's Republic of China (Smith, 2013).

However, the institutional and legal framework of the relationship developed gradually. The institutional foundations of EU–China economic relations were established through the 1978

Trade Agreement between the European Economic Community (EEC) and China, followed by the 1985 Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which remains the principal legal framework governing bilateral trade and economic cooperation.

A new phase in the EU–China relations began after signing the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which established the European Union and strengthened its role as an international political actor. In the following years, the European Commission issued several policy documents aimed at strengthening Europe's engagement with Asia and China in particular, including *Towards a New Asia Strategy* (European Commission, 1994) and *A Long-Term Policy for China–Europe Relations* (European Commission, 1995). These documents laid the foundations for a more coherent EU policy toward China and signaled the growing strategic importance of Asia in European external relations.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the core areas of the EU–China cooperation included political dialogue (including human rights dialogue), trade and economic cooperation, collaboration in science and technology, and the development of people-to-people contacts and cultural exchange (European Commission, 2003; Casarini, 2006).

The aim of the article is to examine the development of EU–China relations through the institutionalization of three key areas of cooperation: political dialogue, economic interaction, and people-to-people exchanges during the period of the 1990s through the mid-2010s.

Political Dialogue

Institutionalized political dialogue between the European Union and China began to take shape in the late 1990s. A key milestone was the European Commission communication "*Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China*" adopted in 1998, which laid the foundation for a more structured and strategic engagement between the two actors (European Commission, 1998). The document aimed to strengthen political dialogue, expand economic cooperation, and promote mutual understanding between the EU and China. Importantly, it facilitated the development of direct high-level political communication between Chinese and European leaders. Analytically, the 1998 communication marked the EU's first attempt to approach China not merely as a trade partner but as an emerging geopolitical actor whose growing influence required a coordinated European policy response (Smith, 2013). Further institutionalization of the EU policy toward China occurred with the adoption of the European Commission document "*EU Strategy towards China: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a More Effective EU Policy*" in 2001 (European Commission, 2001). This strategy reaffirmed the EU's commitment to deepening political and economic relations and coincided with the EU's strong support for China's accession to the World Trade Organization in December 2001. China's entry into the WTO accelerated domestic economic reforms and further integration into the global economy. From a strategic perspective, the EU's support for China's WTO membership reflected a broader expectation that economic integration would gradually encourage regulatory convergence and promote China's integration into the liberal international order (Shambaugh, 2004).

The development of EU–China relations gained additional impetus in the early 2000s. The European Commission adopted the policy papers "*EU–China: A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*" (European Commission, 2002) and "*A Maturing Partnership – Shared Interests and Challenges in EU–China Relations*" (European Commission, 2003). These documents reaffirmed the goals of the 1998 communication while further specifying priority areas of cooperation. Notably, the 2003 policy paper marked an important shift in the EU's perception of China, describing it as a "key global actor" with whom the EU should share responsibilities in global governance (European Commission, 2003; Sajdak, 2013).

In this context, EU–China relations gradually evolved from a framework primarily focused on bilateral economic cooperation toward broader engagement in global governance and international policy coordination (Casarini, 2006; Smith, 2013).

This conceptual shift signaled a transition in EU policy from viewing China primarily

through the lens of economic engagement toward recognizing its growing political and strategic significance in global governance structures.

Despite these developments, significant disagreements persisted. Among the most sensitive issues were the EU arms embargo imposed on China following the events of 1989 and the question of China's market economy status in EU anti-dumping investigations. These tensions contributed to political debates within EU institutions, particularly between the European Parliament and the European Council, leading to a reassessment of EU policy toward China.

These disagreements illustrated the structural tension within the EU–China relations between economic pragmatism and the EU's normative commitments regarding human rights and regulatory standards (Cassarini, 2016).

In response, the European Commission issued the communication *“EU–China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities”* in 2006 (European Commission, 2006). The document reaffirmed the strategic partnership while also highlighting challenges in trade relations, including concerns about transparency, fair competition, and intellectual property protection. It also emphasized the need to update the outdated 1985 Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Community and China. This policy adjustment reflected a more cautious and pragmatic phase in the EU–China relations, where cooperation was increasingly accompanied by calls for reciprocity and regulatory alignment.

Since the late 2000s, the EU–China relations have continued to evolve through the expansion of institutional dialogue mechanisms, including annual EU–China summits, high-level strategic dialogues, ministerial meetings, and numerous sectoral cooperation platforms. The global financial crisis of 2008 further intensified interaction between the two actors, strengthening cooperation in economic governance, science and technology, and people-to-people exchanges. China's interest in Europe began to grow after the global financial crisis of 2008, which is associated with the spread of the Chinese concept to the European region (Rolland, 2017). The practical implementation of this concept is characterized by a gradual increase in the number of Chinese companies, investments and projects in Europe. The coming to power of the fifth generation of Chinese leadership in 2012 marked the beginning of a new stage in China's foreign policy. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the concept of the *“One Belt, One Road”* initiative — later known as the *“Belt and Road Initiative”* — aimed at strengthening economic connectivity and cooperation between countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The initiative was first articulated in a series of speeches by Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013, where he proposed the creation of the *“Silk Road Economic Belt”* and the *“21st Century Maritime Silk Road”* (Xi, 2013; National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). Consequently, the EU–China relations have gradually transformed into a complex and multi-layered partnership combining strategic cooperation, economic interdependence, and persistent political tensions.

Economic Engagement

Trade and economic relations between China and the European Union represent one of the most dynamic and resilient dimensions of their overall partnership. Over the past decades, bilateral trade has expanded significantly, despite temporary fluctuations caused by exchange rate volatility during the global financial crisis and the European sovereign debt crisis. Following the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2003, trade between China and the European Union expanded rapidly during the early 2000s. Between 2003 and 2008, bilateral trade more than doubled, with China becoming one of the EU's largest trading partners (European Commission, 2006; Eurostat, 2010).

This rapid expansion of trade illustrates the growing economic interdependence between the EU and China, which gradually became one of the defining features of their bilateral relationship (Eurostat, 2010). Despite the launch of the EU–China High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue in 2008, bilateral trade experienced a temporary slowdown as a result of the global

financial crisis. According to Eurostat data, EU exports to China amounted to approximately €78.4 billion in 2008, while imports from China reached around €247 billion (Eurostat, 2010). Nevertheless, trade relations recovered quickly in the following years.

The crisis revealed both the vulnerability and resilience of EU–China economic relations, highlighting their deep integration within global value chains.

By the early 2010s, China had emerged as one of the European Union's most important trading partners. While the United States remained China's largest export market for many years, the European Union also became a major destination for Chinese exports. In the mid-2010s, Chinese exports to the United States amounted to approximately \$430 billion, while exports to EU member states together reached nearly \$480 billion (World Bank, 2018; UN Comtrade, 2018). However, economic cooperation has not been free from tensions. Disagreements have periodically emerged regarding market access, investment conditions, state subsidies, dumping practices, and regulatory transparency. Many of these issues stem from structural differences between the economic models of China and the European Union. These disagreements illustrate the complex balance between economic cooperation and economic competition that characterizes contemporary EU–China relations. At the same time, both sides have continued to expand cooperation in new sectors. In September **2015**, the European Union and China signed a **Joint Declaration on 5G Cooperation**, aimed at strengthening collaboration in the development of next-generation telecommunications technologies (European Commission, 2015). Cooperation in science, technology, and innovation has increasingly become a mutually beneficial and complementary aspect of bilateral relations. As two of the world's largest economic actors, the European Union and China play a significant role in shaping the stability and development of the global economy. Their continued cooperation contributes to the functioning of global economic governance and supports the expansion of international trade. The current configuration of EU–China economic relations has been shaped by decades of negotiations, policy adjustments, and periodic economic and political tensions. The evolution of EU–China economic cooperation demonstrates that, despite recurring disagreements and structural differences, both sides remain interested in maintaining a pragmatic partnership based on mutual economic interests and interdependence.

Cultural Exchange

Alongside the deepening of economic relations, the “social dimension” of EU–China cooperation gradually gained increasing importance and eventually became one of the key areas of bilateral relations. By the early 2000s, particularly after the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, social and cultural interaction had become an increasingly structured component of EU–China engagement. As noted in EU policy discourse, people-to-people exchanges were increasingly viewed as an important pillar of bilateral relations, strengthening “mutual understanding and trust between societies” (European Commission, 2003).

The first step toward developing structured cultural cooperation between the European Union and China occurred in December 2003 during a meeting between European Commissioner Viviane Reding and Chinese Minister of Culture Sun Jiazheng. Since then, the dialogue has developed through regular meetings and consultations between the two sides. The importance of strengthening cooperation in education and culture was further emphasized in the Joint Statement of the EU–China Summit in September 2006, which described educational and cultural exchanges as the “social and cultural foundation for the sustainable development of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the EU and China” (Council of the European Union, 2006).

Further progress was achieved in October 2007 during the visit of European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth Jan Figel' and Chinese Minister of Education Zhou Ji to Beijing. During this visit, the Joint Declaration on Education, Training and Culture was signed, highlighting “the growing importance of cultural diversity for sustainable development” and calling for stronger support for “expanding cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and

the European Union” (European Commission & Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2007).

Shortly thereafter, cooperation in education and culture was further strengthened through the *Joint Declaration on Multilingualism* signed in January 2009, which recognized multilingualism as “a key component of intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding” (European Commission, 2009).

In November 2009, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso agreed to establish the EU–China Cultural Forum. The forum, first held in 2010, focused on issues related to cultural exchanges, cooperation between cultural institutions, and exchanges among cultural professionals.

An important milestone in strengthening the social dimension of EU–China relations occurred in 2012, when the EU–China High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD) was established at the EU–China Summit. The initiative was designed to promote cooperation in education, culture, youth policy, and multilingualism, with the aim of strengthening mutual understanding between European and Chinese societies (European Commission, 2012). The HPPD complemented the already existing High-Level Strategic Dialogue and High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue, forming the third pillar of the EU–China institutional dialogue framework. In other words, EU–China cooperation created a new platform of interaction in which not only political and economic actors, but also universities, cultural institutions, and representatives of civil society could exchange ideas and experiences. The importance of this dimension was reaffirmed in the Joint Communication: Elements for a New EU Strategy on China, adopted in 2016, which emphasized the need to strengthen cooperation in “education, culture, youth, research and people-to-people exchanges” (European Commission & High Representative, 2016).

One of the most dynamic instruments supporting these exchanges has been the Erasmus+ Programme. Over the years, thousands of students and academic staff have benefited from EU–China mobility schemes according to the Erasmus+ Programme statistics. With numerous Chinese universities participating in Erasmus+ and Erasmus Mundus projects, China has become an important partner country contributing to the modernization and internationalization of higher education systems.

Conclusion

The evolution of relations between the European Union and the People’s Republic of China demonstrates the gradual transformation of bilateral interaction into a comprehensive and multi-layered partnership. Initially grounded primarily in trade and economic cooperation, the EU–China relations have expanded over time to include structured political dialogue and an increasingly significant social and cultural dimension. These three pillars — political, economic, and cultural cooperation — together form the institutional architecture of contemporary EU–China relations.

Political dialogue has played a crucial role in establishing a framework for strategic communication and coordination on global issues. Through regular summits, strategic dialogues, and institutional mechanisms, both sides have sought to manage differences while promoting cooperation in areas of shared interest, including global governance, sustainable development, and international stability.

At the same time, economic cooperation has remained the most dynamic component of the partnership. The EU and China have become deeply interconnected through trade, investment, and participation in global trade chains. Despite recurring disagreements related to market access, regulatory standards, and trade practices, both sides continue to recognize the mutual benefits of economic engagement.

Finally, the growing importance of cultural and educational exchanges reflects an understanding that sustainable international partnerships require broader societal interaction beyond governmental and economic actors. Educational cooperation, academic mobility, cultural exchanges, and civil society engagement contribute to strengthening mutual understanding and building long-term trust between European and Chinese societies.

Taken together, the development of these three dimensions illustrates the complexity and adaptability of the EU–China relations. While tensions and competing interests persist, the institutionalized mechanisms of political dialogue, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange provide a framework through which both actors continue to navigate challenges and pursue areas of mutually beneficial collaboration.

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РОЗУМІННЯ ВІДНОСИН МІЖ ЄС І КИТАЄМ: ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ, ІНСТИТУЦІЙНІ ЗАСАДИ ТА КЛЮЧОВІ НАПРЯМИ СПІВПРАЦІ

У статті досліджується розвиток відносин між Європейським Союзом і Китаєм через інституціоналізацію трьох ключових напрямів співпраці: політичного діалогу, економічної взаємодії та культурних обмінів. У роботі простежується формування структурованого політичного діалогу, що розпочалося наприкінці 1990-х років до середини 2010-х, коли Європейська Комісія запропонувала політичні рамки, спрямовані на посилення співпраці з Китаєм. Подальші стратегічні документи та діалоги на високому рівні сприяли становленню більш узгодженого та інституціоналізованого партнерства. В економічній сфері дослідження підкреслює швидке зростання торговельно-інвестиційних відносин між ЄС і Китаєм, демонструючи, як економічна взаємозалежність стала однією з визначальних характеристик двосторонніх відносин, незважаючи на періодичні напруження, пов'язані з доступом до ринків, регуляторними стандартами та торговельними дисбалансами. Окрім політичної та економічної співпраці, у статті наголошується на зростаючій важливості культурних та освітніх обмінів. Програми, спрямовані на академічну мобільність, культурну взаємодію та співпрацю громадянського суспільства, поступово зміцнили соціальні основи партнерства. Такі ініціативи, як Діалог на високому рівні між ЄС і Китаєм у сфері міжлюдських контактів та програми освітньої мобільності, відіграли важливу роль у поглибленні взаєморозуміння та підтримці довгострокової співпраці між двома сторонами. Загалом у статті стверджується, що відносини між ЄС і Китаєм еволюціонували у складне й багатовимірне партнерство, сформоване як співпрацею, так і конкуренцією. Інституціоналізація політичного діалогу, економічної взаємодії та культурних обмінів створила рамки, які дозволяють обом сторонам управляти розбіжностями, водночас зберігаючи сфери взаємовигідної співпраці.

Ключові слова: відносини ЄС–Китай; Європейський Союз; Китай; стратегічне партнерство; політичний діалог; економічна співпраця; культурний обмін; міжлюдські контакти; міжнародне співробітництво