

# CONNECTING EURASIA

## EUROPE AND CHINA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Relations between Europe and China could shape the decades to come if backed by political will and unity. As China looks outwards, EU-Asia expert Clémence Lizé imagines a future relationship built around cooperation on environmental challenges and technological innovation, as well as the delicate navigation of profound political differences.

**M**arch 4 2049, Justus Lipsius building, Brussels. The European Council awaits as the Chinese delegation of senior officials arrives to discuss the future of the two governments' partnership, with a view to enhance collaboration and strengthen the world order. On the agenda, the establishment of a guaranteed minimum income shared between the European Union and China, sustainable development policies in mega-urban spaces, and negotiations for a common platform on shared digitalisation and data resources. A century has passed since the Chinese Communist Party established the 'New China'. Over this century, a relationship between China and Europe, built around a joint commitment to a world order, has developed progressively.

### **A WORLD WITHOUT A HEGEMON**

To be fair, few outside the Brussels bubble had expected the world to move in this direction at the beginning of the century. After the 2019 European Parliament elections and the complete failure to resolve the Brexit crisis, the EU had lost much of its soft power across the world. Democracy, and national referendums especially, lost credibility with the Chinese. The EU became absorbed in the restructuring of its own political model as it sought to ensure institutional efficiency and to enhance dialogue between local actors and the political sphere.

This required utmost attention and energy, as populist parties across the continent were advocating for greater independence from the EU, shrewdly manipulating new technologies to disseminate false information and disrupt the smooth functioning of European politics. To make things worse, Russia found great amusement in deploying its cybersecurity expertise against pro-EU political campaigns during the 2020s. China, on the other hand, had taken the lead in new big data technologies and had developed sophisticated tools to curb the spread of false information. This capability enabled China to implement its policies for economic development with greater efficiency.

After an intense trade war between the United States and China throughout the 2020s, the former superpower accepted that it should retreat and accept greater Chinese involvement in world affairs. The US had already been pursuing a sustained isolationist direction since Donald Trump's election. It withdrew from multilateral organisations and openly declared the US's gradual withdrawal from world geopolitics. Removing military troops from Afghanistan was first on the list, and became symbolic of its reluctance to interfere in affairs outside its borders. Meanwhile, China had strongly encouraged its youth to pursue careers in international organisations. By 2030, the percentage of Chinese nationals in international organisations had surpassed that of Americans, as the Chinese became the major

donors, and thus the ultimate decision-makers, in the institutions the world had inherited after the Second World War.

China continued to advance on the world scene, offering aid and investments across Eurasia and Africa and promoting its economic development model. Its experience of 19th-century colonialism made it all the easier for China to gain trust in Africa and beyond. China was also massively investing in its traditional philosophical and literary culture. After the ferocious eviction of traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, sustained efforts across at least three generations were necessary to understand and integrate Chinese thinking beyond the Communist framework. Ancient legal norms were re-embraced and integrated in the once purely Western international legal system. Western individualism was no longer promoted, and more space was given to consider new concepts such as 'harmony' and 'economic development as a vector of peace'.

The rise of China over the first quarter of the 21st century had put an end to the hegemony of the Western model. With its sustainable alternative to liberal democracy, China not only challenged the military and diplomatic supremacy of Western powers, but the principles of market economy. China had begun to set standards for the rest of the world and Western norms were no longer necessarily considered

as universal. The global stage was now fully multipolar, leaving its leading actors (the US, China, the EU, Russia, and other emerging powers like India) competing for influence and the preservation of their value systems.

The moment when EU members decided to finally get their act together was not until well into the century's third decade. In the second half of the 2020s and throughout the 2030s, a multi-speed Europe permitted cooperation between those EU countries that wished to do so, circumventing the reservations of members operating on a more nationalist basis. Large-scale projects in the military, energy, telecommunication, industrial, and digital sectors, which required investments too onerous for any one country, finally started seeing the light of day, and super-projects eventually made the EU industry competitive again on international markets, challenging its Chinese and American counterparts.

Meanwhile, the Chinese regime actively sought cooperation with other powers. Its ambition to acquire greater respect across the world and receive attention on the international stage proportionate to its population and economic weight was reached. It did not seek to dominate the world on its own. It was well aware of the complexity implied in sustaining power and stability within its own borders, let alone globally. As such, China actively reached out to the EU for a Renewed Global Balance Policy.

## **SAMARKAND AS THE NEW HUB**

The previous meeting between the two governments' high officials was held in 2048 in Samarkand, capital of the Central Asian Union and at the crossroads of Europe and China. The high-level summit celebrated the 20th anniversary of the EU and China's joint collaboration on the Connectivity and Silk Road projects.

During the 2048 meeting, the EU and China listened to the Central Asian Union's position on the results achieved through this joint collaboration and considered strategies for the future. Although all partners agreed that it was necessary to promote the Universal Charter for the Protection of the Environment, differences remained on how environmental responsibility should be delegated, whether at state, city or citizen level. China was reluctant to have this under the sole responsibility of its citizens, and believed that the State should have the final say on environmental protection criteria. Whereas the EU, supported by some Central Asian Union states, considered that the State should interfere less, and let citizens assume the sole responsibility. As a means of regulation, the EU offered to put forward a strict mechanism of surveillance through new carbon-footprint technologies held in people's mobile devices. Further negotiations would resume at the next summit between the EU, China, and the Central Asian Union.

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## BACK TO BRUSSELS

As part of the now traditional rotation between political capitals, in 2049 the EU and Chinese leaders were to meet in Brussels. The next summit would be in Beijing, 2050, a crucial year for China as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) would share its African Development Project, putting forward its new Development Action Plan for the African Continent. The EU had considered increasing its shares within the AIIB, but remained reluctant to make a final decision at this stage. Much would depend on the outcome of the 2049 summit. The leaders took their official virtual-reality photo in the Europa Building and the picture was immediately projected in all capital cities, creating a greater sense of inclusion for people in these critical political events. A couple minutes later, all the heads of states and state officials were sitting in the multi-coloured, oval meeting room on the fifth floor. Leaders and their official translators gathered in small groups, sharing friendly greetings to ease the atmosphere before the meeting. Back to the formal topics, one of the most important elements on the agenda was the development of a guaranteed minimum income, to be set at the same, moderately high level in Europe and China.

## GUARANTEED MINIMUM INCOME

China had started the implementation of this guaranteed minimum income for its inhabitants within certain provinces, under the format of experimental regions, building on Western Europe's successful experience with high minimum incomes. With the expansion of artificial intelligence and robotics in industrial sectors, millions of jobs were replaced in the 2020s, both in Europe and in China. Because of the mutual problems the governments were facing and the increasing interdependence of the Chinese and European economies, the Chinese Labour Ministry, the EU's Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs, along with the International Labour Organization, started cooperating to find solutions for public wellbeing. Economists and social policy-makers

agreed that guaranteeing a minimum income, with no means testing beyond income, was necessary for everyone affected. The new robots introduced into the production chain were still creating value and generating wealth for businesses, but without drawing monthly salaries. Now the value generated by the robots would be heavily taxed, and redistributed to the general population.

By 2049, other economies in the world were considering the development of such a policy in their economies, particularly in Africa and in Latin America. Populist governments in Latin America and their ill-considered policies had distorted economies and provoked social unrest. As Europe and China had showed their ability to develop a guaranteed minimum income that was both high and sustainable, world leaders and their experts were increasingly open to adopting such models. Europe was eager to participate in expanding minimum income too, as it could well be a way to reduce the numbers of people migrating to its continent. China remained more reluctant, hesitant because of the potential costs its enterprises with plants in Africa may incur. The low cost of local labour remained essential to the successful completion of its infrastructure projects. Rumour also had it that certain Chinese enterprises were afraid that the export of its robotic industries to Africa, which would facilitate the financing of a guaranteed

minimum income in the region, would lead to it losing its technological edge over its rivals. It was rather ironic that just 50 years ago it was the West that feared that China's investments in strategic technologies in Europe would too lead to its industrial knowhow being copied. Time has a funny way of changing roles, and reversing situations.

## **URBAN PLANNING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON GEOPOLITICS**

Next on the agenda was urban planning. The industrial revolution had led to continuous rural desertification in the last centuries and new technological developments had further strengthened urban migration. The urban reality that emerged required innovative thinking to be made healthy and liveable.

On a more positive note, certain European technologies had been tentatively exported to China, such as wind energy infrastructure and solar panels designed for mass usage. The Shanghai Maglev train, built on German industrial knowledge at the beginning of the century for passengers from Pudong International Airport, was envisaged as the new way of getting around for city-dwellers. One could go from one part of the city to another in 20 minutes instead of two to three hours, saving time and energy for commuters. Although the development of new urban routes had just started in China, policy-makers in the

meeting were negotiating which companies would take the lead in each other's markets to develop these infrastructures on a broader scale. This was a critical step in the EU-China relationship: the outcome would condition the new world transport system and determine the likely monopolists which would control future transport infrastructure across other continents. Africa's population continued to increase at phenomenal speed, a trend which would require more sophisticated urban planning in the next decades based on experiences in China and the EU. While the US had long promoted personal vehicles, to the detriment of public transport, there was now heightening public demand across the Americas for developing infrastructure emulating the EU-China model.

By 2040, the EU and China had managed to cooperate on the integration of renewable energies into new urban designs. Energy infrastructures were modernised at the upstream and downstream levels, so that solar and wind became the main source of energy for households. Both Europe and China had massively invested in renewable energies to ensure that their reliance on fossil fuels would fall close to nil.

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As the Silk Roads and the Connectivity projects were developed across the Eurasian land mass, they became all the more vital to peace and stability in the regions that they spanned. The US had retreated a couple decades ago from its war zones. It now contributed only modestly to peace-building ventures and had lost its former weight in global diplomacy. China and the EU stepped in, engaging with local leaders in mediation processes.

China promoted investing in sustainable infrastructure to develop regional economies. By decreasing the EU and China's dependence on fossil fuels, a core industry within the Russian economy, it became easier to put pressure on Russia, as well as other petrostates, in conflict situations. This change in the balance of power had resulted in noticeable progress towards lasting peace across Eurasia.

## **DATA AND DIGITALISATION**

One of the most anticipated topics of the talks remained data and digital governance. Public funding had sponsored progress in sophisticated communication technologies and there were also negotiations on the development of virtual reality technology. It was hoped that distance could be transcended by allowing people to

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communicate in person across space through projecting themselves via screen. The virtual-reality picture taken prior to the official meeting was all the more symbolic in that it conveyed a message of political support for bringing forward these new technologies.

China's 'app for everything', WeChat, had surpassed European competition in terms of functionality in the 2030s, but the EU had been a pioneer in ensuring that all functionalities respected legislation to safeguard sustainable use. In other words, China produced the software, whereas the EU provided the law. For the future, the two governments were still negotiating to establish shared control over computers able to integrate the two continents' data. The EU had proposed an independent mechanism to adjudicate over control of the computers, based on its traditional political theories. This seemed ideal, but was difficult to implement. Chinese leaders were still reluctant to accept the principles behind Montesquieu's theory of the separation of the three powers.<sup>1</sup> This remained the major impediment to the implementation of a control mechanism over the computers. However, China understood the necessity to ensure shared control with the EU over data flows between Europe and China. The crux of the disagreement laid in how it should be achieved.

China had developed a social security platform by collecting data on its population. Bank information, national identification, data on communication with family members, and other information were easily collected through governmental agencies to verify a person's request for social aid. It made social security allocation much easier and effective. For Europeans, such a concentration of information was an invasion of privacy. For Chinese officials dealing with huge amounts of people, its system had proven its merits to ensure fair redistribution of wealth.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'the separation of the three powers', coined by 18th-century French philosopher Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, refers to the political authority of the State being divided into legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

The EU and the Chinese government's major political differences made it ever more difficult to find consensus on how to distribute access to data and curb abuses in practice. Further time was required, and perhaps more trust as well, for any effective action to be made. Negotiations would resume at the next summit, jointly with the outcome of the decade's joint report on human rights.

Chairman Mao's speech in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1949 declared that, after a century of decadence and tumult, China had finally "stood up" to Western imperialism. A century after this speech, China was now sharing the helm of the global order, working jointly with the European Union for a Renewed Global Balance. There was substance in China's approach, and its true victory lays in its ability to demonstrate the essence and reality of the 'Chinese model'. For the next summit, further considerations would be given not only to digitalisation, but also migration and the usage of big data to control human flows more effectively across the world, along with a collaborative consideration on universal political values. Beijing was already preparing the logistics, and was debating whether the venue should be within the historical Forbidden City to mark a further milestone in the EU-China relationship.



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