

Europe - China Forum

Strengthening cooperation: EU- China relations as a source of stability and certainty



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Context

This report reflects statements and questions made during the latest Europe-China Forum hosted by Friends of Europe, online and in Brussels, Belgium.

2025 marks the 50th anniversary of EU-China diplomatic relations. Participants took stock of the past half-century of diplomatic relations and the global and geopolitical need for a new EU-China strategy for the next 50 years, addressing critical issues on sustainable development, security and strategic partnerships.

The Europe-China Forum has for years been the platform to discuss the past, present and future of EU-China trade, cooperation and political relations. The 2025 Forum was held at a moment when the EU and China should reassess their mutual interests to cooperate more proactively, particularly given the turbulence and unpredictability experienced across the world this year.

Speakers and participants considered questions including:

- How can China and the EU strengthen strategic alignment and trust built upon shared global responsibility?
- What measures can be taken to ensure that climate diplomacy continues?
- Based on the commitments resulting from the latest EU-China Summit, which factors can facilitate closer collaboration on research and innovation in shared priority sectors, and what are the obstacles?
- To what extent can the EU and China cooperate to maintain resilient and reliable supply chains for trade in goods and services?
- To what extent could joint ventures, especially in areas like electric mobility and green technology, offer a pragmatic pathway for Europe to import and adapt Chinese technologies while safeguarding its strategic autonomy?

Ideas to take forward

- **Consider made “with”, not “in” Europe.** Partnerships with China and other markets, including smaller emerging economies, could better protect jobs and growth than a “made-in” label.
- **Agree on Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships (CTIPs).** Develop new, secure EU-China supply chains for green technologies through the flagship Clean Industrial Deal initiative.
- **Invest in people-to-people diplomacy.** Europe should address a deficit in its understanding of China through in-person diplomatic meetings.
- **Revitalise science, technology and innovation (STI) cooperation.** Build on successful STI research partnerships agreed since 2019 with better a focus on innovation.
- **Prioritise the level playing field.** Ensure that European and Chinese industrial competitors are treated equally, including through enforcement of intellectual property protection.
- **Address technology transfer and data collection action barriers.** Promote the ability of EU and Chinese scientists and companies to collaborate across borders, while respecting Chinese and European data security laws. This may be particularly relevant for partnerships in AI and Quantum computing.
- **Identify sectors facing increased challenges.** Prioritise ways to preserve the competitiveness of sectors – such as steel – facing capacity challenges, not only in relation to China.
- **De-risk raw materials.** Europe should lead the way in developing new strategies and de-risking economies for raw materials to avoid further shocks to industry, in partnership with China.
- **Ensure clarity for investors.** Consider when it makes most sense for Europe or China to have a competitive product, providing clarity for EU, Chinese and international investors.
- **Present and debate new world alternatives.** Encourage ideas for structuring dialogue and cooperation for multilateralism and global diplomacy, grounded in EU-China common challenges.
- **Embrace the Industrial Accelerator Act.** Prepare for and follow up the presentation of this upcoming EU initiative, as it could affect EU-China investment and strategic sectors such as automotives.

Event summary

Valued partners and changing values

The Europe-China Forum on 13 November 2025 marked not just five decades of EU-China diplomatic relations but 80 years since the end of the Second World War. The decades since Armistice Day in 1945 have brought a safer, more just and peaceful world for millions of people in both hemispheres, based on multilateral rules and international institutions.

“There is no cement if there is no sense of common understanding.

Bruno Angelet, Ambassador of Belgium in China

China and Europe now need to think carefully and consciously about how to use diplomacy to continue promoting the common good in the face of challenges from unstable and unpredictable world leaders, apparently intent on calling into question long-held values.

“We have five decades of valuable experience [and] no fundamental clash of interest,” said **Bruno Angelet**, Ambassador of Belgium in China. To date, much of this shared interest has been built around multinational institutions like the UN, but it cannot be taken for granted that these institutions will hold. “There is no cement if there is no sense of common understanding.”

The “two great civilisations” of Europe and China can bring stability in a world of turmoil, said **Biwei Liu**, Vice President of the China Public Diplomacy Association. As we advance towards the next 50 years, the two powers must stay true to their original aspirations, with a “shared sense of historical responsibility.”

About \$2bn in trade passes between the EU and China every day: up from about \$2bn a year in 1975. Today’s trade includes solar panels and rare earths, as well as cars, chemicals and consumer goods.

**“Can China leave the EU? Will China leave the EU?
My personal response is no.**

Biwei Liu, Vice President of the China Public Diplomacy Association

China has invested more than \$100bn in the EU, and trade reaches over US \$800bn yearly, Liu highlighted. “Can China leave the EU? Will China leave the EU? My personal

response is no,” he said, stressing that neither of the two global powers can decouple from one another. From this understanding, a new common-ground framework for cooperation can be developed.

“This is a mutually important relationship,” said **Bernd Biervert**, Head of Cabinet to Maroš Šefčovič, European Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, Interinstitutional Relations and Transparency.

Agreeing on shared diplomatic values and reaching a common understanding does not mean ignoring differences and disputes, even though it should mean taking care not to escalate them.

Building up the “positive ying” of EU-China relations can lead to a decline in the “negative yang”, through the identification of shared values and commonalities, suggested **Jiemian Yang**, Senior Fellow and Chairman of Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) Academic Consultative Council.

The EU’s trade deficit with China, exceeding €300bn and largely driven by the large volume of Chinese imports to Europe, represents a significant challenge.

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Meanwhile, a survey of over 200 Chinese companies found a decline in the perception of Europe as a place for Chinese businesses to operate, for the sixth year in a row. Most companies reported that EU strategies on derisking and economic security had had a negative impact on them. “This is a wakeup call,” said **Linlin Liang**, Director of Communication and Research at the China Chamber of Commerce to the EU (CCCEU). “We welcome European Commission work to find a balance.”

Europe, at the same time, wants to see a level playing field for its industries competing with China and is looking for ways to promote EU products and services without distorting trade.

Turbulent times

The US seems to be on a crusade against globalisation and trade opening. This protectionist stance has to be contained before it contaminates the rest of the world. The US may well pay for its protectionism, but other countries should not have to.

At the same time, the tariffs US President Donald Trump is “indiscriminately slapping on everyone” are symptomatic of a broader shift to “geopolitical polarisation,” said **Sebastian Schward**, Chief Strategy Officer at the Global Solutions Initiative.

“If the US wants to go protectionist, let the US go protectionist. [...] We should not have to pay for that.

Pascal Lamy, Coordinator of the Jacques Delors Institutes and Trustee of Friends of Europe

Pascal Lamy, Coordinator of the Jacques Delors Institutes and Trustee of Friends of Europe, agreed that four decades after the EU started “massive investment” in China, there is a need for “principles to guide the way. We both will benefit.” Similarly, he affirmed that “if the US wants to go protectionist, let the US go protectionist. They’ll probably pay for that, but we should not have to pay for that”, connecting it to the need for the EU and China to support the multilateral system based on institutions like the WTO.

“We are living in a world full of turbulence and transformation,” said **Cai Run**, Head of Mission and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the People’s Republic of China to the European Union.

Current global tensions will continue, added **Hai Zhao**, Director of International Political Studies at the National Institute for Global Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, particularly considering US turbulence in its relations with Japan and others besides the EU and China.

From an EU perspective, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is inexcusable. China, meanwhile, is continuing to trade with both Ukraine and Russia. Chinese underestimation of the “existential” shock caused by the war risks destabilising diplomatic efforts and damaging public opinion of China.

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At the same time, Europe says it will continue to respect the “one-China policy,” acknowledging China’s claim that Taiwan is a part of China, while choosing to maintain separate relations with Taiwan.

The Chinese economic surge is a miracle that brought benefits to all. Europe is, however, still adapting to the reality that China is a very important industrial player, after years seeing the EU and US as twin dominant forces on the world stage.

Soon India may join the Europe-US-China trio of economic powerhouses. Middle-sized emerging economies like South Africa and Morocco further complicate the picture and show the need for creative solutions, moving forward.



1. **Cai Run**, Head of Mission and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the People's Republic of China to the European Union

2. **Yiwei Wang**, Jean Monnet Chair Professor, Director of the Institute of International Affairs and of the Center for European Union Studies at Renmin University of China; **Sebastian Schward**, Chief Strategy Officer at the Global Solutions Initiative; **Linlin Liang**, Director of Communication and Research at the China Chamber of Commerce to the EU (CCCEU); **Bernd Biervert**, Head of Cabinet to Maroš Šefčovič, European Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, Interinstitutional Relations and Transparency

3. **Signe Ratso**, Deputy Director-General at the European Commission Directorate General for Research and Innovation; **Jiemian Yang**, Chairman of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies Academic Affairs Council; **Jos Delbeke**, EIB Chair on Climate Policy and International Carbon Markets at the European University Institute, and former European Commission's Director-General for Climate Action



Future-proofing diplomacy

“The world has changed,” said **Signe Ratsø**, European Commission Deputy Director-General for Research and Innovation. In 2019, the EU saw China as a “partner, competitor and rival”: a definition that is still relevant but too simplistic to reflect new diplomatic realities.

Through subsequent initiatives, such as the 2023 Green Industrial Deal and the 2025 Competitiveness Compass, Europe is looking to foster a new, reciprocal partnership, reflected in clear, bold policy and investment decisions.

A fair, just and non-discriminatory environment means avoiding over-dependence on one country, as Europe learned to its cost after struggling to escape from energy-dependence on Russia.

Both Europe and China can offer investment opportunities. Investment agreements have to be managed to ensure both sides are able to take part. Chinese leadership in sectors such as solar panel manufacturing and access to rare minerals presents opportunities for technology transfer in the areas of both AI and quantum mechanics.

China and Europe must continue to join forces to promote international rules on climate change and biodiversity loss, in the face of US indifference.

The most vulnerable populations are the most likely to be hurt if other world powers do not cooperate to defend the liberal order and human rights. This is particularly evident in addressing climate change and regulating the emerging challenges of AI, two areas in which the EU and China are well positioned to demonstrate cooperative leadership.

Europe and China know that the technologies of the future will be green technologies. “That’s where we differ from the leadership in the White House,” said **Jos Delbeke**, EIB Chair on Climate Policy and International Carbon Markets at the European University Institute, and former European Commission director-general for Climate Action.

Trump has taken the US out of the Paris Climate Deal, meaning that climate leadership from the EU and China is more vital than ever for the sake of the world. China’s new nationally determined contribution (NDC), as announced in September, will cover all economic sectors and all greenhouse gases. “The fact that greenhouse gas reduction is now the official policy of China is critical,” Delbeke added.

For the automotive market, both sides have expertise, but there is a need for clarity on “who is producing what.” China has, for many years, looked to the EU for an expert market. This has greatly benefited consumers but also resulted in over-capacity, harming the capability of European companies to compete.

This raises the question of introducing “Made in Europe” criteria for strategic sectors – as suggested in the EU Clean Industrial Deal and perhaps to be taken further in the upcoming Industrial Accelerator Act. Any such label could protect European

jobs and industry from unfair competition, but may not be in line with the EU's free trade principles.

In this regard, Delbeke emphasised to “work on the ‘Made with Europe’ kind of slogan in terms of cooperating with China in particular, but also with a lot of other countries in the world”. Instead of ‘Made in Europe’, this slogan might send a better message to our partners and reassure them that the political agenda of the EU is about derisking only.

“Work on the ‘Made with Europe’ slogan in terms of cooperating with China in particular.

Jos Delbeke, EIB Chair on Climate Policy and International Carbon Markets at the European University Institute

New opportunities in a changing world market

The EU and China must keep investing in “next generation” technologies. This means keeping an open mind and being prepared to learn from mistakes. Green hydrogen, for instance, has not been the successful clean investment many had hoped, but wind energy and heat pumps have shown what can be achieved when Europe and China work together.

Rather than focusing only on trade and industry, Europe and China should also look to population and demographic opportunities for new collaboration opportunities. For instance, deeper EU tourism links can emerge alongside any active engagement in emerging fields like AI and the digital economy.

China’s ageing population also offers major new potential for healthcare cooperation. The EU is already the second market for Chinese medicines after the US.

According to the most recent five-year plan, China will try to increase life expectancy to 80 years. “We will need a lot of cooperation with the EU in this regard,” suggested **Hongjian Cui**, Director at the Center for the European Union and Regional Development Studies, and Professor of the Academy of Regional and Global Governance at Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). “Almost everything is on the table.”

“We should have more opportunities to work together to make dreams come true,” agreed **Yiwei Wang**, Jean Monnet Chair Professor, Director of the Institute of International Affairs and of the Center for European Union Studies at Renmin University of China.

As well as increased life expectancy, over the next ten years, China hopes to double the size of its middle class. “That’s remarkable,” he said. “It’s never been achieved even in Europe or America.”

Differences and friction are inevitable when major world powers search for consensus in a turbulent world. China and the EU must work to implement actions agreed by leaders and reach a consensus on outstanding issues through diplomacy.

“China stands ready to work with the EU to uphold the international system with the EU,” added Cai Run. This includes today’s greatest diplomatic challenges, such as Ukraine and Israel. “Together we need to advocate for world peace and development.”

Or, as **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson of Friends of Europe put it: “We need to poke received wisdom with a sharp stick. We need to reinvent diplomacy.”

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Cai Run, Head of Mission and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the People’s Republic of China to the European Union



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