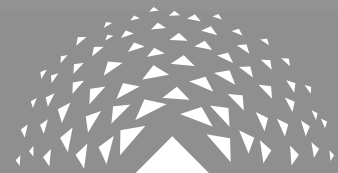




THE STATE OF EU-CHINA RELATIONS

**A QUARTERLY COMMENTARY FROM IFAT'S
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DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF AT THE APRIL FOOLS' DAY SUMMIT

The online China-EU summit on 1 April demonstrated the growing differences and increasing lack of understanding between China and the EU. China-EU summits used to be platforms to set the agenda for further cooperation and manage the differences between the parties, but in recent years they have served more to list grievances, launch complaints, and clarify differing positions. This was the case with the 2022 summit as well, which ended with no deliverables or joint statement. The Chinese and European readouts of the meeting give the impression as if the leaders had taken part in different events.

The main point of difference this time was how the two sides look at the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Europeans, understandably, have treated the Ukrainian crisis as a top priority, to which all other practical issues are of secondary importance. They wanted to talk about how China could help in stopping the war. The Chinese, on the other hand, tried to discuss what, in their eyes, should be the topic of China-EU talks, namely, China-EU relations. The Chinese leaders failed to notice how important the Ukrainian issue was for Europeans; the European leaders failed to understand that the Ukrainian crisis is not as important and is not a part of China-EU relations as seen from Beijing. One side focusing on normative-ideological considerations, and the other on narrow economic and trade issues could not lead to anything but complete failure. No wonder Joseph Borrell called the meeting a “dialogue of the deaf”.

This year's summit, despite the special circumstances, was not exceptional, as the divergence of the paths of the two sides has been clear at previous summits as well, and the 2022 summit was a logical continuation of this trend. The main reason for the mounting differences is that while the EU has been treating China with increasing suspicion and, in some cases, animosity in the past half decade, China has not adjusted to the new realities, and, as Xi Jinping stressed at the summit, it has the same vision on China-EU relations as eight years ago. China has also failed to realize the real nature and depth of European-American ties and still called on the EU to be independent of the US at a time when Europe's dependency on Washington has become clearer than ever during the past thirty years. The only achievement related to the summit is that it actually took place, and that the sides agreed on the continuation of the dialogue.

THE UKRAINE WAR — ANOTHER REASON FOR DISTANCING

Although the European Union and China are not engaged in a direct confrontation regarding the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the crisis certainly has some implications for Sino-EU relations. No doubt, a war raging in the neighbourhood suddenly makes military security an eminent priority for politicians and the entire society, and the countries of the European Union are no exception to that. However, the current crisis has only

reminded them that in practice they are still dependent on the security umbrella of the US-led NATO. This gives extra motivation and impetus for EU members to stay in the same camp with the United States, which considers China to be its main strategic rival, despite Russia temporarily gaining the number one ‘public enemy’ title with its invasion in Ukraine. All this has the potential to bring transatlantic perspectives on China even closer in the near future, making the world more bipolarised and widening the gap between the EU and China.

The crisis has cruelly revealed the exposure of EU member states to energy supply from Russia, and it has triggered a rush to cut off dependency. There are signs that some EU member states like Germany would move beyond decoupling from Russia and will take steps to decrease supply chain exposure to other individual countries as well, which refers to China in most cases. This tendency could be another nail in the coffin of a pragmatic EU-policy towards China that prioritises economic gains over security concerns.

In the early days of the Ukraine war, China took a somewhat “neutral” position, which was already considered hidden support of Russia by the West, including several EU members. Since then, China has gradually shifted towards a rather critical rhetoric regarding Western sanctions, which will possibly reinforce the attitude in Washington and European capitals to put Beijing and Moscow in the same box. This may fuel the US-China confrontation and underline the differences between the Asian country and the leading EU member states. The emergence of blocs of like-minded countries could accelerate, as shown by the EU-Japan summit in May, when the two parties agreed to deepen exchanges on China, especially regarding security issues. This could easily motivate China to also seek cooperation with like-minded countries, again pushing the world towards a more bipolarised global order.

From Beijing’s perspective it is an interesting lesson that sanctions on Russia are causing serious problems for European economies. In case of a confrontation between the West and China, a similar economic war could have a destructive effect on European economies, which means that they would think twice before implementing such actions against Beijing. In addition, the Ukraine war has once again revealed that the EU is divided, so in the future Beijing could still count on this lack of unity in case of an escalating West-China confrontation.

CHINESE DIPLOMATIC DELEGATIONS TO ENGAGE EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION

China sent two delegations led by senior diplomats, [Huo Yuzhen](#) and [Wu Hongbo](#), on a tour of Europe in April and May 2022. The visits were prompted by the Chinese government’s perception that China’s image in Europe had deteriorated dramatically as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war. China refuses to support the sanctions policy of

Western countries, which is seen by the political leadership and public opinion in European countries as support for Russia. The growing criticism of Beijing is especially harsh in the Central and Eastern European countries that are more determined to support Ukraine. This is particularly unpleasant for China, since it includes member states of the 16+1 cooperation mechanism launched by Beijing a decade ago. During the meetings, the Chinese diplomats placed great emphasis on face-to-face meetings, recognizing that diplomatic relations based on personal contacts had faded due to the COVID-19 closures. The message of the delegations was clear: China does not support Russia and even denounces the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. It is in China's interest that the war should end as soon as possible because the war is seriously damaging the global economic environment of both China and Europe. China is committed to improving China-Europe relations and is willing to make small gestures to this end. Despite the efforts, the achievements of the delegations during their visit were poor. On the one hand, European countries are in "war mode", dividing the world into allies and enemies. This dichotomy does not allow European countries to take an understanding stance on the subtleties of the Chinese position. Nevertheless, it is a positive sign for EU-China relations that the Chinese leadership seems to be increasingly concerned about developments in Europe, which suggests that Beijing is ready to move away from its previous confrontational course.

EU-CHINA RELATIONS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE FRENCH EU PRESIDENCY

Following the EU-China Summit on 1 April, the Chinese side made several unsuccessful attempts to improve relations, like the adoption of two International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, sending two delegations to Europe to mend fences, and reaching out to France. Meanwhile, the European Parliament reinforced its critical stance towards Beijing.

China's legislature approved the ratification of the two International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions against the use of forced labour in April. This means that China has already adopted six of the eight ILO Fundamental Conventions. The significance of the move is that China has been accused of coercing members of its Uyghur minority into forced labour. The move was a gesture to the European partners, but the question remains how the ILO can verify that these conventions are indeed observed by China.

On 26 May, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi initiated a phone conversation with the newly appointed French Foreign Minister, Catherine Colonna. Wang emphasized that China and the EU are each other's partners, not rivals. Colonna

said France cherishes its tradition of independent diplomacy and is committed to deepening EU-China cooperation and jointly tackling global challenges. China's outreach to France is logical given that President Macron is the main champion for Europe's strategic autonomy, and in Beijing's perception more Europe implies less dependence on America. They have the hope that bolstering relations with France may generate more cracks in transatlantic cooperation in the long run. As for the French side, the fact that France became the first country to establish the third-party market intergovernmental cooperation mechanism with China by taking part in joint infrastructure projects worth over USD 1.7 billion in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe, indicates that Paris is ready to enhance its bilateral cooperation with Beijing. However, it is unlikely that a warming relationship between the two countries would have any positive impact on EU-China relations. The fact that the two Chinese delegations' tour in Europe brought no results and that the European Parliament has reinforced its critical stance by adopting a resolution condemning the repression of the Uyghur minority in June demonstrates that the EU-China relations will remain frosty for the time being.