

Closed door webinar

Europe-China Table: Changing dynamics in state-society relations in the PRC

Wednesday, 15 April 2026

15:00 – 16:30 CEST

Working language: English

In the last two decades, especially since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China's increasingly assertive posture on the international stage has coincided with the consolidation of state authority and centralisation of power on Xi himself. These domestic transformations have reshaped governance practices, expanded the role of the state in regulating social life, and redefined the boundaries between state and society. As a result, China's state-society relations are not only evolving internally but are also being reinterpreted, and often mischaracterised, in international debates.

Abroad — and particularly in the West — discussions of China's governance model have become highly polarised. On the one hand, some observers highlight the perceived efficiency, coherence and capacity of the Chinese system to mobilise resources and implement large-scale policies, especially in areas such as infrastructure development, environmental regulation and domestic crisis management, such as natural disasters. On the other hand, critics portray China's governance practices as increasingly intrusive and coercive, emphasising the expansion of surveillance technologies, the tightening of political control, and the emergence of what is often described as a dystopian model of state domination over society. These opposing narratives simplify a far more complex reality, obscuring internal variations, local experimentation and the adaptive nature of governance practices in China.

Starting with this puzzle, the roundtable aims to move beyond binary interpretations and provide a more nuanced, empirically grounded perspective on contemporary Chinese governance. Drawing on research conducted within the ReConnect China project, the discussion will focus on recent developments in social governance and examine how these, in turn, shape, and are shaped by, state-society relations. The roundtable will use environmental governance and grid management as analytical entry points. These two domains offer especially sharp lenses through which the evolving relationship between the state and society can be examined.

By situating these practices within their broader political and institutional context, the roundtable will contribute to a balanced understanding of Chinese governance and its international implications. It will also reflect on the meaning of these developments for China-EU relations, particularly in terms of dialogue, cooperation and mutual perceptions.

Previous roundtables in the annual Europe-China Table series were focused on answering China's narrative challenge to Europe, European export controls and de-risking from China, and the evolving US-China trade landscape. More information can be found [here](#).



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PROGRAMME

15:00 – 15:05

Introduction

RICCARDO ALCARO

Istituto Affari Internazionali-IAI

15:05 – 15:35

Input Papers

BEATRICE GALLELLI

Istituto Affari Internazionali-IAI & Ca' Foscari University

RUNYA QIAOAN

Palacky University

15:35 – 16:20

Roundtable discussion

Moderator:

ANNA LISA AHLERS

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science

16:20 – 16:30

Wrap-up



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