

The Chinese Perspectives on the EU's Policy towards China

by Jing Men



ABSTRACT

EU–China relations have encountered increasing difficulties in recent years. A group of Chinese experts on European studies have explored in depth the factors that have influenced the EU's reorientation of its China policy, as well as the policies adopted by the EU that affect the most the relationship with China. These analyses offer Europeans a valuable and different perspective, revealing how the Chinese perceive the EU and the dynamics of EU–China relations. To conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the perspectives of Chinese experts, this study has examined the publications on EU–China relations since 2019 by Chinese think tank experts and scholars, with a specific focus on the Chinese interpretation of the EU's label of China as a "systemic rival" and the "securitisation" of EU policies in its engagement with China.

European Union | China | EU–China relations | Chinese perception

keywords

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The Network focuses on this central question: **What are the internal and external constraints and opportunities for the European Union to further its ambitions as an international diplomatic actor?** In dealing with this question, the Network aims to generate a stronger awareness on, and contribute to deeper insights with regard to, the European Union's diplomatic activities throughout the world, in third States as well as at multilateral fora.

Both the European External Action Service and the Union delegations – and hence the European Union's diplomatic institutional machinery – remain largely unknown to the public. Yet, the European Union not only has a worldwide network of more than 140 'embassies', but at the same time it has assumed 'state-like' functions on the basis of the adoption of diplomatic rules that were originally created for states only. Many **challenges** do remain, but the deep and wide legal and policy powers – and the sheer size and universal network – of the European Union also offer **opportunities** that remain as of yet untapped.

Academic and policy analyses have pointed to a great number of **legal and political questions** related to the developing role of the EU in international diplomacy. EUDIPL O brings experts in this area together to focus on these questions in order to make public authorities at all levels (EU institutions, governmental institutions in Member States and in third countries, international organisations, international and national civil servants and diplomats), young professionals and students, as well as the public at large, aware of the challenges and opportunities in this area.



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Introduction

Relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the European Union have always been marked by complexity, and recent years have only intensified this intricacy. The EU, comprising 27 member states and wielding significant normative and trade influence, stands as the world's most integrated regional organisation. Conversely, China's rise to the position of the second-largest global economy, driven by its economic reform and opening-up policies, has propelled it into a central role in international affairs. The dissimilarity between these two players is evident in their political systems, economic development models, cultural backgrounds, and historical trajectories.

Diplomatic relations between the EU and China were established in 1975, but it was not until the late 1990s, following the release of the first EU policy paper on China in 1995, that they began to draw closer. The discussion of a strategic partnership between Beijing and Brussels gained momentum in 2003, especially as Western Europe shared the opinion with China against the US's unilateral action to invade Iraq. However, this period of amicability came to a rapid end due to the improvement of the transatlantic partnership, escalation of EU–China trade disputes (such as the “bra war” in 2005 and the solar panel disputes in 2013), and the EU's failure to lift the arms embargo on China imposed in 1989.

With China's rapid rise and the shifting global landscape, the EU has been periodically updating its China policy – excluding the years between 2006 and 2016. The keywords used in each policy document reveal the EU's evolving perceptions of China: from considering China a partner in the 1990s and early 21st century, to viewing China as a trade challenge in 2006, and eventually seeing China as a systemic rival in 2019, while still acknowledging elements of partnership and legitimate competition simultaneously. The EU has consistently maintained its multifaceted partner-competitor-rival approach towards China, a

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stance reaffirmed by the European Council conclusions at the end of June 2023.¹

In contrast, the Chinese government maintains a relatively static viewpoint regarding its ties with the EU. Throughout the three policy papers on the EU published in 2003, 2014 and 2018, Beijing consistently portrays Brussels as a partner for cooperation. Despite the EU's designation of China as a systemic rival, Chinese officials persistently reject this characterisation.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has consistently emphasised that China and the EU are partners, not rivals. During his visit to France in August 2020, he highlighted that the development of China–EU relations over the past 45 years demonstrated no fundamental conflict of interest. Instead, he emphasised that cooperation outweighs competition and consensus outweighs differences. While acknowledging the different social systems of China and Europe, Wang stressed that they are not systemic rivals but rather all-round strategic partners.² In March 2021, during a press conference on the margins of the National People's Congress, Mr. Wang reaffirmed the extensive common interests shared by China and Europe. He emphasised that China and Europe are not systemic rivals, that win-win cooperation remains the primary tone of their bilateral relationship, and they can make great achievements through collaboration.³ Despite of the deterioration of EU–China relations in 2021 and 2022, marked by the mutual sanctions due to human rights issue in Xinjiang and the trade tension between China and Lithuania, during a meeting with the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in February 2023, Josep Borrell, Wang reiterated the partnership between China and the EU, highlighting that their common ground surpasses any differences they may have. He emphasised the importance of maintaining a collaborative stance, respecting each other's core interests, and cherishing the fruitful outcomes of their cooperation. Looking forward, he called for creating a more open and prosperous bilateral relationship over the next two decades.⁴ Chinese Premier Li Qiang, during his first visit to Europe in June 2023, made significant efforts to strengthen ties with Germany and France, emphasising that the EU and China are "friends" rather than "rivals".⁵ Overall, these statements from high-level Chinese officials illustrate

¹ The multifaceted approach was first introduced by the European Commission in March 2019 and has been approved by the European Council in June. See European Commission, *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook* (JOIN/2019/5), 12 March 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52019JC0005>; European Council. See *European Council meeting (29 and 30 June 2023) – Conclusions*, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7-2023-INIT/en/pdf>.

² "Chinese FM Makes Four-Point Proposal on Building China-EU Partnership", in *Xinhua*, 31 August, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/31/c_139331137.htm.

³ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press*, 7 March 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjw_663304/wjwz_663308/2461_663310/202103/t20210308_9889342.html.

⁴ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Wang Yi Meets with High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell*, 19 February 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230221_11028438.html.

⁵ See Li Chengxin, "Chinese Premier Li Qiang Visits Germany and France to Test the EU's Bottom Line of 'De-risking'" (in Chinese), in *BBC News*, 23 June 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/>

China's official adherence to the "strategic partnership" with the EU.

The Chinese government has not revised its policies on China–EU relations so far. However, a group of Chinese experts on European studies have explored in depth the factors that influence the EU's reorientation of its China policy, as well as the significant policies taken by the EU that affect the EU–China relationship. These analyses offer Europeans a valuable and different perspective, revealing how the Chinese perceive the EU and the dynamics of EU–China relations. To conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the views of Chinese experts, this study examines the publications on EU–China relations since 2019 by Chinese think tanks and scholars, with a specific focus on the Chinese interpretation of the EU's label of China as a "systemic rival" and the "securitisation" of EU policies in its engagement with China. Through this endeavour, the author aims to provide a more insightful and up-to-date analysis of the underlying trends shaping China–EU relations, catering those interested in this crucial partnership.

1. The rationale of the EU's construction of China as a strategic rival

The joint communication on the EU's China policy published in March 2019 stated that "there is a growing appreciation in Europe that the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted".⁶ Chinese observers concur on the shifting balance of power between the EU and China. According to Zhao from the China Academy of Social Sciences, the EU is relinquishing the sense of historical superiority, transitioning from a dominant position to an equal footing in its relationship with China. Internally, the EU underscores "resilience" and "unity" due to recent geopolitical challenges that have tested its economic and political integration. Externally, China's ascendance triggers the EU's "strategic anxiety".⁷ Zheng from Tongji University contends that the waning influence of the EU in global affairs contributes to its increasing apprehension about China's rise.⁸

Xie and Zhang from Wuhan University directly attribute the emphasis on "geopolitical Europe" in European leaders' public statements to the fragility of European power. They point out that the reorganisation of the contemporary international structure and the intensification of geopolitical competition among

simp/world-65997546; Yuan Yang, "China's Premier Avoids 'Factional Confrontation' with Europe on Maiden Trip", in *Financial Times*, 24 June 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/5cb629ca-f3e3-4e71-9307-514a2e9d1347>.

⁶ European Commission, *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*, cit., p. 1.

⁷ Zhao Chen, "中欧力量对比变化与中欧政治关系的调整" [Shifts in balance of power and political relations between China and Europe], in *当代世界* [*Contemporary World*], No. 6/2022, p. 37-41, DOI 10.3969/j.issn.1006-4206.2022.06.009.

⁸ Zheng Chunrong, "欧洲政治碎片化与中欧关系走向" [European political fragmentation and China-EU relations' trend], in *当代世界* [*Contemporary World*], No. 6/2020, p. 32-38 at p. 37, DOI 10.19422/j.cnki.ddsj.2020.06.005.

major powers, combined with internal EU crises, fuel concerns in Brussels about being marginalised. This manifests as unpreparedness and powerlessness in handling geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China.⁹

The EU previously accommodated China in bilateral relations, assuming that economic interdependence would align China more closely with EU values and political practices.¹⁰ However, Jin from the China Institutes of International Studies argues that the EU's past pragmatic and economically driven approach was changed because China's adherence to socialism diverged from the Western development model and disappointed the EU. This led to a more assertive EU stance in security, political and economic relations with China, accompanied by proactive measures to address the competitive aspect of the relationship, while highlighting the role of values.¹¹

Shi and Zhao, scholars from Tsinghua University, have highlighted a concerning shift in the perception of China within the EU. This transformation is attributed to fundamental cognitive disparities, including differing notions of human rights, sovereignty, non-interference and international norms. According to the two scholars, the EU's perception of China has become more unfavourable due to China's rise. China's development and advancement challenge the EU's former superiority and dominance. The EU fears being overtaken by China and doubts its intentions and capabilities. The lack of communication between the two sides worsens the situation and leads the EU to view China more negatively. Consequently, trust between the two entities has eroded, while discord in values and strategic perspectives has magnified the spectre of competition and rivalry.¹² Zhao and Zhang from Central China Normal University echo such views by saying that this has led the EU to label China as a "systemic rival", utilising the pillars of democracy, the rule of law and human rights as tools to undermine China's position and safeguard Western-dominated values in the global order.¹³

⁹ Xie Nannan and Zhang Xiaotong, " '地缘政治欧洲': 欧盟力量的地缘政治转向?" ['Geopolitical Europe': A geopolitical shift in EU power?], in 欧洲研究 [Chinese Journal of European Studies], No. 2/2020, p. 1-34 at p. 9.

¹⁰ For two decades from the 1990s to 2000s, the EU carried out a pragmatic China policy in order to promote in China political transformation towards a civil society based on the rule of law, with respect to human rights and democracy, and economic integration into global market. Please see the policy papers published in 1995, 1998 and 2003 by the European Commission.

¹¹ Jin Ling, "欧盟对外战略转型与中欧关系重塑" [Transformation of the EU's external strategy and the reshaping of China-EU relations], in 外交评论 [Foreign Affairs Review], No. 4/2022, p. 28-51 at p. 36 and 49, DOI 10.13569/j.cnki.far.2022.04.028. Published also in English: "European Union's External Strategic Transformation and the Reshaping of China-EU Relations", in *China International Studies*, No. 95 (July/August 2022), p. 112-143.

¹² Shi Zhiqin and Zhao Anqing, "欧盟对华认知变化: 从伙伴到对手" [Changes in the EU's perception of China: from partner to rival], in 辽宁大学学报 [Journal of Liaoning University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)], No. 3/2022, p. 148-151 at p. 150, DOI 10.16197/j.cnki.lnupse.2022.03.013.

¹³ Zhao Ningning and Zhang Yangshan, "欧盟 '印太战略' 对华政策取向及地缘政治影响" [The orientation of EU's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' towards China and its geopolitical impact], in 印度洋经济体研究 [Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review], No. 1/2023, p. 50-65 at p. 54, DOI 10.16717/j.cnki.53-1227/f.2023.01.004, <http://politics.ccnu.edu.cn/info/1347/9740.htm>.

According to Chinese experts, a pivotal driver behind the EU's policy re-evaluation regarding China is thus the perception of an imminent power shift favouring China. This shift raises concerns about the EU's future security. Cui, affiliated with the China Institutes of International Studies, argues that the EU presents itself as a "loser of globalisation" and a "victim" of "unfair competition" in the great power game. As a result, the EU feels compelled to adopt more realistic and "tough" policies towards China.¹⁴

The influence of the United States on the EU's China policy is undeniable. Under the US's pressure, the Dutch decision of March 2023 to establish an export control of chip technology serves as a good example.¹⁵ Ding and Luo from Fudan University emphasise the significant role the United States plays in shaping the EU's stance on China. Given that many EU member states are traditional allies of the United States, Washington often seeks alignment with the EU on China-related matters.¹⁶ This influence has grown even more pronounced, particularly since the Biden Administration took office, as observed by Yan from Fudan University. The EU and the United States have deepened their strategic coordination in various realms, including ideology, economics, trade, investment, technological innovation and geopolitics.¹⁷

Although the Chinese government adamantly rejects the EU's new characterisation of China as a "systemic rival", Chinese experts closely monitor this policy shift and offer valuable insights. When dissecting the EU's policy adjustments in 2020, Dai, a scholar from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, highlights that EU leaders perceive China–EU relations as among the most strategically significant and complex partnerships. In response to China's burgeoning international influence, the EU tends to pursue balance and reciprocity in the framework of China–EU relations.¹⁸

¹⁴ Cui Hongjian, "中欧关系应变之道" [Contingency in EU-China relations], in 辽宁大学学报 [Journal of Liaoning University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)], No. 3/2022, p. 151-153 at p. 151, DOI 10.16197/j.cnki.lnupse.2022.03.013.

¹⁵ See Sara Poli, "Reinforcing Europe's Technological Sovereignty Through Trade Measures: The EU and Member States' Shared Sovereignty", in *European Papers*, Vol. 8, No. 2, European Forum, Insight of 27 July 2023, p. 429-445, <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/665>.

¹⁶ Ding Chun and Luo Tianyu, "从亚洲战略到'印太战略': 欧盟全球战略重心的转移及逻辑" [From Asia Strategy to 'Indo-Pacific Strategy': the logic of changing EU's Global Strategy], in 太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal], No. 11/2022, p. 12-24 at p. 20, DOI 10.14015/j.cnki.1004-8049.2022.11.002.

¹⁷ Yan Shaohua, "2022年欧盟对华政策" [EU's China policy in 2022], in Jian Junbo and Yang Haifeng (eds), 欧洲对华政策报告(2022) [Europe's China Policy Report in 2021], Center for China-Europe Relations of Fudan University and Shanghai Institute for European Studies, February 2023, p. 6-10, <https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/5d/f7/c6840a482807/page.htm>.

¹⁸ Dai Yichen, "2020年欧盟对华政策" [EU's China policy in 2020], in Jian Junbo and Yang Haifeng (eds), 欧洲对华政策报告(2020) [Europe's China Policy Report in 2020], Center for China-Europe Relations of Fudan University and Shanghai Institute for European Studies, March 2021, p. 4-8 at p. 5, <https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/4e/ed/c6840a282349/page.htm>.

Jin, from the China Institutes of International Studies, asserts that by branding China as a “systemic rival”, the EU interprets differing political systems and values through a zero-sum perspective. The EU appears sceptical about the compatibility or coexistence of divergent systems and prefers to prioritise systemic competition as a focal point in China–EU relations.¹⁹

Yan notes a notable shift in the EU's stance on China in 2021, with increased emphasis on viewing China as a “systemic rival”. This shift is evident in significant documents like the European Parliament's “New EU–China Strategy” and the recently published strategy by the German coalition government, both of which underscore the rivalry aspect of the China–EU relationship.²⁰ The Russia–Ukraine conflict in 2022 brought about interconnected changes in the EU's China policy. It has disrupted the equilibrium in the EU's multifaceted approach to China, leading to a pronounced leaning toward the perception of China as a “systemic rival”. Competition has thus become the central consensus in the EU's China policy. This shift has manifested itself in two ways: first, the EU's inclination to politically link China and Russia in official discourse has become more evident; second, the EU interprets China's balanced stance on the conflict as “pro-Russian neutrality”.²¹

Long, from the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, observes that the EU tends to view its relationship with China through the lens of great power dynamics, adopting a realistic approach. This approach involves EU interference in Chinese internal affairs, criticism of China's political system, and regarding China as a competitor in the realms of economy, science, and technology.²²

Echoing Long's perspective, Jin highlights that the EU politicises China's economic behaviour, elevating economic competition and friction to the level of systemic rivalry. This politicisation is evident in various aspects, including the 5G debate involving Huawei in Europe, newly implemented regulations and restrictions targeting China's state-owned enterprises, a focus on strategic infrastructure control and heightened concerns about China's “divide and rule” strategies. These developments represent manifestations of the EU's policy, driven by its recently developed consensus on viewing China as a “systemic rival”.²³

¹⁹ Jin Ling, “‘主权欧洲’、新冠疫情与中欧关系” [‘Sovereign Europe’, Covid-19 and China-EU relations], in 外交评论 [Foreign Affairs Review], No. 4/2020, p. 71-94 at p. 84, DOI 10.13569/j.cnki.far.2020.04.071.

²⁰ Yan Shaohua, “2021年欧盟对华政策” [EU's China policy in 2021], in Jian Junbo and Yang Haifeng (eds), 欧洲对华政策报告(2021) [Europe's China Policy Report in 2021], Center for China-Europe Relations of Fudan University and Shanghai Institute of European Studies, May 2022, p. 5-8 at p. 5, <https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/c6/65/c6840a444005/page.htm>.

²¹ Yan Shaohua, “2022年欧盟对华政策” [EU's China policy in 2022], cit., p. 6.

²² Long Jing, “欧盟对华政策回顾与展望” [Review and prospect of EU's China policy], in 时评 [SIIS Commentaries], 31 March 2022, <https://www.siis.org.cn/sp/13764.jhtml>.

²³ Jin Ling, “‘主权欧洲’、新冠疫情与中欧关系” [‘Sovereign Europe’, Covid-19 and China-EU relations], cit., p. 84-85.

2. Discussions among Chinese experts on the EU's policies

Researchers from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations underscore that security concerns hold paramount importance for the EU in its overarching relationship with China. The EU's intent is to bolster its security on multiple fronts, spanning strategic, political, economic, trade, supply chain and technological dimensions, in response to the challenges posed by China.²⁴

In recent years, the EU has issued a range of documents, encompassing global strategies and internal legislation, collectively outlining the EU's developmental direction and elucidating the means to achieve these objectives. Zou, affiliated with the Shanghai Municipal Government Party School, notes that while these documents may appear to address distinct concerns, they form a cohesive framework with interconnected elements. While not explicitly targeting individual countries, it is clear that China is the primary focus concerning regulation, deterrence and rivalry. The evolving dynamics between China and the EU, coupled with the EU's redefined stance, have positioned China as a central concern in the formulation of numerous EU regulations.²⁵

In September 2018, the EU published "Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy"; in September 2021, the EU adopted the strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific; three months later, the EU launched the Global Gateway strategy.²⁶ Liu from China Academy of Social Sciences maintains that the EU's sequence of strategies reflects its intentions to establish connectivity with the world, primarily aimed at China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EU accentuates security concerns and links connectivity to values, ideology and rules competition. The EU consistently expands the list of vital assets in connectivity projects to bolster its power discourse, emphasising normative rules and practices, and highlighting security risks associated with connectivity to China. Additionally, the EU collaborates more closely with "like-minded" countries to counter China's

²⁴ Liu Lanfen and Liu Mingli, "欧盟对华经济合作中的'安全顾虑'" [EU's 'security concerns' in its economic cooperation with China], in 现代国际关系 [Contemporary International Relations], No. 10/2020, p. 27-35. Published also in English: "EU's Security Concerns in Its Economic Cooperation with China", in *Contemporary International Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (January/February 2021), p. 57-69, <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/UpFiles/file/20210415/6375408172737952953418219.pdf>.

²⁵ Zou Lei, "欧盟经贸立法: 动向、特点与对华影响" [The EU's economic and trade legislation: new developments and implications for China], in 国际问题研究 [International Studies], No. 3/2023, p. 97-116 at p. 98-99, <https://www.ciis.org.cn/gjwtyj/dqqk/202307/P020230731536439710822.pdf>. Published also in English: "The European Union's Economic and Trade Legislation: New Developments and Implications for China", in *China International Studies*, No. 100 (May/June 2023).

²⁶ European Commission and European External Action Service (EEAS), *Connecting Europe and Asia - Building Blocks for an EU Strategy* (JOIN/2018/31), 19 September 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52018JC0031>; European Commission and EEAS, *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* (JOIN/2021/24), 16 September 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52021JC0024>; European Commission, *The Global Gateway* (JOIN/2021/30), 1 December 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52021JC0030>.

global influence, effectively securitising the concept of connectivity.²⁷

Han, from the University of International Business and Economy, observes that China's BRI has expanded rapidly, penetrating what the EU considers its "traditional spheres of influence", such as the Western Balkans. While it is challenging for the EU to completely eliminate China's involvement in Europe, it has introduced an Indo-Pacific strategy to compete with China.²⁸

Zhao and Zhang, from Central China Normal University, contend that the EU perceives China's BRI as a challenge to its norms and practices. They argue that the EU exaggerates the "China threat" and the "debt trap" to highlight the negative impacts of the BRI. In response, the EU has launched its Global Gateway infrastructure plan as a hedge against the BRI and to counter China's international influence. Following this rationale, the EU actively advocates the adoption of various economic and trade measures to reduce dependence on China and address economic security threats emanating from China.²⁹

According to Shi and Di from Tsinghua University, the Global Gateway strategy serves as both a geoeconomic and geopolitical tool for the EU to extend its global reach while also countering China's influence. This strategy has largely emerged as a response to China's BRI. The numerous project agreements between China and other countries for infrastructure development have raised concerns among European nations, creating a sense that the EU is falling behind. The EU perceives the BRI as a challenge to its own development, affecting its global market share, rule and standard promotion.³⁰

Shi and Di note that although China is not explicitly mentioned in the official text of the Global Gateway strategy, it is evident from the relevant statements that the strategy carries a clear political implication of contending with China. This strategy can be viewed as an extension of the EU's newly defined China policy and is a concrete manifestation of the EU's response to its "systemic rival".³¹

While the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy does not categorise China as a threat, Chinese observers believe that China is a significant factor motivating the EU to release this

²⁷ Liu Zuokui, "欧盟互联互通政策的'泛安全化' 及中欧合作" [The pan-securitization of the EU connectivity policy and China-EU cooperation], in 理论学刊 [Theory Journal], No. 1/2022, p. 72-81 at p. 74-75, DOI 10.14110/j.cnki.cn-37-1059/d.2022.01.008.

²⁸ Han Ding, "欧盟新亚洲战略与'一带一路'倡议" [The EU New Asia Strategy and the 'Belt and Road' Initiative], in 区域与全球发展 [Area Studies and Global Development], No. 1/2020, p. 20-30 at p. 28.

²⁹ Zhao Ningning and Zhang Yangfan, "欧盟'印太战略'对华政策取向及地缘政治影响" [The orientation of EU's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' towards China], cit., p. 55-56.

³⁰ Shi Zhiqin and Di Chongguang, "欧盟'全球门户'战略: 动因、局限及其对中国的潜在影响" [The EU's 'Global Gateway' Strategy: motivation, contraits and potential impact on China], in 当代世界社会主义问题 [Issues of Contemporary World Socialism], No. 3/2022, p. 156-163 at p. 159, DOI 10.16012/j.cnki.88375471.2022.03.008.

³¹ Ibid., p. 162.

strategy. Fang and Wang from Renmin University argue that the strategy, to some extent, results from the EU's strategic re-evaluation of the Indo-Pacific region and policy adjustments to China's recent rise.³²

Zhao and Zhang highlight that the strategy reveals the EU's deep commitment to the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical player. The EU primarily positions China as a competitor and intensifies confrontational aspects within this relationship. They believe this approach will negatively impact the evolution of EU-China relations and the security environment around China. According to them, the EU's fundamental purpose in issuing this strategy is to balance China's geopolitical and geoeconomic influence in the region and carve out new space for its own strategic interests. The strategy also indicates the EU's toughening stance on China.³³

Ding and Luo from Fudan University analyse how the EU's Asia strategy evolved into the Indo-Pacific Strategy, taking the US factor into consideration. They contend that the EU's focus on political security in Asia aligns with the US's global strategy. The term "Indo-Pacific" only appeared in the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union address in 2020, showing that the EU's efforts to promote a rule-based multilateral order faced challenges due to the superpower rivalry between the United States and China. The newly developed Indo-Pacific strategy reflects a shift in the EU's global strategic focus, directs the EU to manage China's rise and to align with the United States, while adhering to its interpretation of global norms and values.³⁴

Zhao echoes this idea, stating that the competition between the United States and China as a major global challenge is inevitable. In this context, the EU has adopted the Indo-Pacific strategy to minimise risks and maximise its own interests in the region.³⁵ Zhao and Zhang argue that the EU forms security partnerships in the region with Japan, India, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and others, but intentionally avoids any connection with China. The EU deliberately excludes China from security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region while actively targeting China in security operations, based on the understanding of China as a "systemic rival".³⁶

³² Fang Lexian and Wang Yujing, "欧盟印太战略构想: 动因、内涵及意义" [The EU's strategic vision in the Indo-Pacific: motivations, connotations and implications], in 欧洲研究 [Chinese Journal of European Studies], No. 2/2022, p. 51-71 at p. 55.

³³ Zhao Ningning and Zhang Yangfan, "欧盟 '印太战略' 对华政策取向及地缘政治影响" [The orientation of EU's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' towards China], cit., p. 60.

³⁴ Ding Chun and Luo Tianyu, "从亚洲战略到 '印太战略': 欧盟全球战略重心的转移及逻辑" [From Asia Strategy to 'Indo-Pacific Strategy'], cit., p. 16-18.

³⁵ Zhao Huaipu, "欧盟应对中美博弈的策略选择与美欧对华政策协调" [Brussels' strategic choices amid China-U.S. competition and EU-U.S. policy coordination on China], in 国际展望 [Global Review], No. 5/2021, p. 25-46, DOI 10.13851/j.cnki.gjzw.202105002.

³⁶ Zhao Ningning and Zhang Yangfan, "欧盟 '印太战略' 对华政策取向及地缘政治影响" [The orientation of EU's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' towards China], cit., p. 57.

Zhao and Zhang underscore that the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy accentuates the disparities in values between the EU and China. This emphasis serves as a justification for the EU's actions, including the instrumentalisation of the human rights issue and the external projection of its own value system, with the aim of exerting dominance over global governance. When China advocates for a new paradigm of international relations characterised by mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation, along with the creation of a "community of common destiny", the European Union views China as a challenger to the existing international system and a competitor vying for leadership in global governance.³⁷

Zhang from Foreign Affairs University extends the argument that the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region adds complexity to the rivalry between the United States and China. While serving its own interests, the primary aim of the EU is to collaborate with Washington to counterbalance China's political and economic influence in the region. Zhang asserts that the EU is exploring partnerships with Indo-Pacific countries to establish a more stable and sustainable supply chain for itself, reducing reliance on China and countering the impact of the BRI. The Indo-Pacific strategy encompasses security, economic, and connectivity elements, such as the EU's Global Gateway and the broader connectivity strategy.³⁸

Bilateral relations between China and the EU are deeply rooted in economic and trade cooperation, serving as a pivotal foundation for both parties. However, the EU perceives this interdependence as a vulnerability, viewing bilateral relations as lacking reciprocity and a level playing field, disappointed at slow steps the Chinese government takes to open its market. Since 2020, the EU has proactively taken measures to enhance its competitiveness in industrial and technological development, while placing a stronger emphasis on values and norms in economic activities. Aimed at safeguarding European interests in the face of external competition, these policies cover various aspects, including foreign direct investment (FDI) screening, management of foreign subsidies, supply chain due diligence, a carbon border adjustment mechanism, strategic management of crucial raw materials and comprehensive strategic planning for security and defence.

Analysing these policies, Zou categorises them based on their objectives: FDI screening regulations prioritise security and public order, legislation on foreign subsidies aims to promote fair competition, and supply chain due diligence, as well as the carbon border adjustment mechanism, seek to advance human rights and environmental protection. Despite their diverse goals, these policies share a common focus on safeguarding and enhancing the competitiveness of EU

³⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

³⁸ Zhang Xuxu, "欧盟的印太战略及对中国的启示" [EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and its enlightenment to China], in 重庆交通大学学报 [Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)], No. 1/2023, p. 42-50 at p. 43-47, <http://www.cssm.org.cn/view.php?id=33716>.

industries, while also taking into account the political and ideological aspects.³⁹

Chinese experts emphasise the longstanding significance of China and the EU as economic and trade partners, with economic and trade relations consistently serving as a stabilising force in China–EU relations.⁴⁰ The EU remains China's largest trading partner and a primary technology supplier. Both sides closely cooperate within the global value chain. High-end manufacturing industries in Western Europe, such as Germany and France, occupy the upstream segment of the value chain, while China primarily operates in the middle segment. Kou from Beijing Foreign Languages University contends that the strong trade relations, coupled with increased trade volume during the pandemic, highlight the resilience of China–EU economic cooperation and value chain integration. However, the EU feels uneasy about its dependence on China, leading to a sense of economic insecurity. In recent years, this relationship has encountered heightened uncertainty. The EU's security concerns have grown significantly, resulting in a more protective stance against China, and its overall attitude toward China has become increasingly assertive.⁴¹

Liu and Liu's research reveals a notable disparity: among the EU's foreign trade partners, China's share has experienced a noticeable rise. In 2000, China–EU trade comprised only 5 per cent of the EU's foreign trade, yet this figure surged to 15 per cent by 2018. Moreover, EU member states engage extensively with China in terms of intermediate products, progressively integrating the industrial supply chain with China. Simultaneously, the EU, while exporting various products, increasingly imports more intermediate goods from China. This implies, to some extent, growing dependence of the EU's exports on imports from China. These shifts have raised concerns within the EU about its economic prospects and overall economic security. As a result, the EU's security apprehensions have become significantly influential in shaping its economic relations with China. This policy adjustment has had a negative impact on China's direct investment in Europe, as evident from the continuous decline in recent years, with no foreseeable rebound on the horizon.⁴²

Dai emphasises that by designating China as a "systemic rival", the EU legitimises its adoption of protectionist economic policies, positioning itself more favourably

³⁹ Zou Lei, "欧盟经贸立法: 动向、特点与对华影响" [The EU's economic and trade legislation], cit., p. 97-113.

⁴⁰ Yang Fengmin, Sun Dingdong and Cheng Kai, "‘双重影响’下的中欧经贸关系发展路径研究" [Research on the development path of Sino-EU economic and trade relations under the 'dual impact'], in 国际关系研究 [Journal of International Relations], No. 3/2023, p. 107-131 at p. 108, <https://iir.sass.org.cn/2023/0710/c7261a550985/page.htm>.

⁴¹ Kou Kou, "中欧经贸依赖关系的变化及未来走向" [Changes and trend of the economic interdependence between China and EU], in 欧洲研究 [Chinese Journal of European Studies], No. 1/2022, p. 85-108 at p. 86.

⁴² Liu Lanfen and Liu Mingli, "欧盟对华经济合作中的‘安全顾虑’" [EU's 'security concerns' in its economic cooperation with China], cit., p. 27-30.

in economic competition with China.⁴³ Zhao and Zhang observe that, aiming to reduce economic reliance on China, the EU has implemented trade protection measures since 2021, including intensified anti-dumping inspections on Chinese products, resulting in the imposition of more anti-dumping duties.⁴⁴

Correspondingly, Zhao, from the National Academy of Governance, and Li, from Wuhan University, assert that the EU often employs confrontational political logic in its handling of economic and trade relations with China, accentuating “geostrategy” to magnify China’s perceived threat to the West, ultimately “politicising” economic and trade issues. This approach serves as a significant obstacle in China–EU economic and trade relations. As ideology, human rights and economic factors converge, supply chain due diligence introduces an uncertain element affecting China–EU supply chain cooperation.⁴⁵

Yu, from East China Normal University, states that the EU’s policies aim to diversify the supply chain and diminish excessive dependence on essential raw materials from China. Through supply chain reshaping, the EU bolsters supply security and increases investments in cutting-edge technology.⁴⁶ Kou remarks that these regulations intend to restrict Chinese investments in critical infrastructure and key technologies.⁴⁷

Zhao and Zhang expand on the EU’s recent investment screening and export control policies, characterising them as an attempt to impede China’s further development of high technology. These trade protection measures, especially in the technology sector, create market access barriers for Chinese technology companies, inhibiting their entry into the European market. In its quest to maintain a leading position in science and technology, the EU appears willing to employ unfair economic practices, disrupting the principles of free competition. Such behaviour from the EU raises significant concerns about the future development of amicable relations between China and the EU.⁴⁸

Wang, from the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, contends that although the European supply chain resilience strategy was initially triggered

⁴³ Dai Yichen, “2020年欧盟对华政策” [EU’s China policy in 2020], cit., p. 8.

⁴⁴ Zhao Ningning and Zhang Yangfan, “欧盟‘印太战略’对华政策取向及地缘政治影响” [The orientation of EU’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ towards China], cit., p. 56.

⁴⁵ Zhao Ke and Li Gang, “欧盟产业结构变化对中欧经贸关系的影响” [Impact of EU industrial structure changes on China-EU economic and trade relations], in 国际贸易 [Intertrade], No. 4/2020, p. 72-79 at p. 77, DOI 10.14114/j.cnki.itrade.2020.04.010.

⁴⁶ Yu Nanping, “欧洲强化经济主权与全球价值链的重构” [An analysis on Europe’s strengthening of economic sovereignty and the reconstruction of global value chains], in 欧洲研究 [Chinese Journal of European Studies], No. 1/2021, p. 75-101 at p. 84-91.

⁴⁷ Kou Kou, “中欧经贸依赖关系的变化及未来走向” [Changes and trend of the economic interdependence between China and EU], cit., p. 86.

⁴⁸ Zhao Ningning and Zhang Yangfan, “欧盟‘印太战略’对华政策取向及地缘政治影响” [The orientation of EU’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ towards China], cit., p. 62.

by concerns of supply chain disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, its underlying intention to exclude and contain China is evident. This strategy, in itself, represents a choice that distorts the market. The process of changing and reshaping supply chains can be costly, and an excessive emphasis on political risk is highly detrimental. Wang argues that, regardless of the EU's actions, China's current industrial foundation, geographical specificity, consumer market and other advantages remain resilient, making them not easily undermined.⁴⁹

Kou also emphasises that China and the EU's interdependence extends beyond traditional import and export trade, integrating them more deeply within the supply chain. This interdependence has created an ever-expanding network of shared interests, where any actions that undermine bilateral cooperation may result in significant costs to production, consumption, and overall social welfare for both parties.⁵⁰

Xu and Zhang from the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation assert that the introduction of the proposed Critical Raw Materials Act⁵¹ is another policy indicating the rise of protectionism within the EU. China currently dominates the supply chain for many resources on the European strategic raw materials list. For instance, 97 per cent of magnesium in Europe is presently supplied by China, and 100 per cent of heavy rare earths and graphite undergo processing in China. Additionally, China holds an 85 per cent market share in the EU's solar energy sector. Supply security concerns are driving the EU to restrict imports of critical raw materials from China, potentially presenting challenges for China's continued participation in the raw material supply chain for Western economies.⁵²

Zhao and Zhang also observe that as the political and economic relationship between China and the EU has cooled and the United States has retaken a more active role in global governance issues under President Joe Biden, China-EU cooperation on environmental matters has been negatively impacted, leading to the gradual politicisation of environmental issues and visible tension in the relationship between China and the EU.⁵³

⁴⁹ Wang Zhongmei, “欧美供应链韧性战略的悖论与中国应对” [The paradox of resilient supply chain strategy and China's policy responses], in 太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal], No. 1/2022, p. 36-50 at p. 37, 45, 46, DOI 10.14015/j.cnki.1004-8049.2022.01.004.

⁵⁰ Kou Kou, “中欧经贸依赖关系的变化及未来走向” [Changes and trend of the economic interdependence between China and EU], cit., p. 107.

⁵¹ European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation Establishing a Framework for Ensuring a Secure and Sustainable Supply of Critical Raw Materials* (COM/2023/160), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52023PC0160>.

⁵² Xu Deshun and Zhang Yuyan, “欧洲关键性原材料法案的外溢效应及中国启示” [The spillover effects of the European Critical Raw Materials Act and its implications for China], in 对外经贸实务 [Practice in Foreign Economic Relations and Trade], No. 6/2023, p. 4-10 at p. 9.

⁵³ Zhao Ningning and Zhang Yangfan, “欧盟‘印太战略’对华政策取向及地缘政治影响” [The orientation of EU's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' towards China], cit., p. 59.

Overall, Chinese experts tend to concur that the EU is becoming more protective and assertive. The EU's China policy has been adjusted to be more competitive and defensive.⁵⁴ Cui identifies three issues that hinder EU–China relations: the clash between global multipolarity and normative bipolarity between liberalism and authoritarianism; the tension between economic interdependence and political rivalry; the struggle to balance competition and cooperation.⁵⁵ The EU's China policy exhibits two facets: on one hand, it displays concerns about China's rise, viewing China as a "competitor" and categorising it as a "systemic rival"; on the other hand, the EU is reluctant to abandon the Chinese market. Yet, as the EU places a significant focus on security in its relationship with China and intertwines human rights and other values into international technological competition, the competition between the two sides is expected to intensify.⁵⁶

Concluding remarks

The review and analysis above reveal a large discrepancy between the European and Chinese views on EU–China relations. China and the EU are becoming more competitive and less cooperative. The Chinese experts are aware of the EU's insecurity in facing China. They also recognise the various challenges in EU–China relations, but have different interpretations.

The EU's label of China as a "systemic rival" has triggered a strategic shift that involves three key approaches: "cooperate where possible; compete where needed; confront where necessary".⁵⁷ The challenge is to determine the boundaries between partnership, competition and rivalry. The EU's nuanced definition reflects the complexity of the relationship between Beijing and Brussels. However, the EU decisionmakers have not explained how this threefold definition will be implemented in daily interactions with China. The EU needs to assess the feasibility and implications of defining China as a "systemic rival". Simply calling China a

⁵⁴ See, for example, Cui Hongjian, "百年变局下的欧洲之变与中欧关系的起承转合" [Europe under a century of changes and the transformation of China-EU relations], in 欧洲研究 [*Chinese Journal of European Studies*], No. 1/2023, p. 17-27; Zhang Lei, "欧洲议会对华强硬态势的动因及影响" [European Parliament's aggressive position on China], in 现代国际关系 [*Contemporary International Relations*], No. 7/2021, p. 52-61.

⁵⁵ Cui Hongjian, "百年变局下的欧洲之变与中欧关系的起承转合" [Europe under a century of changes and the transformation of China-EU relations], cit., p. 21-23.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Feng Zhongping, "欧洲对华政策变化与中欧关系的强大韧性" [Changes in Europe's China policy and the strong resilience of China-EU relations], in 国际论坛公众平台 [*International Forum*], 25 March 2022, http://caes.cass.cn/yjdt/202203/t20220331_5401599.shtml; Zhou Hong, "中欧关系进入复杂发展阶段" [China-EU relations have entered a complex stage of development], in 爱思想 [*Thinking*], 16 July 2023, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/144527.html>; Huang Zhengliang, "新冠疫情下欧盟对全球价值链参与路径的调整与结构重塑" [The EU's adjustment and structural reshaping of the path of participation in the global value chain under the Covid-19 pandemic], in 国际关系研究 [*Journal of International Relations*], No. 1/2021, p. 40-53.

⁵⁷ EPP Group, *EU-China Relations - Towards a Fair and Reciprocal Partnership*, 10 March 2021, <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/publications/eu-china-relations-towards-a-fair-and-reciprocal-partnership>.

“systemic rival” may eventually provoke China to act as a real rival. Definition and reality may reinforce each other.

The Chinese experts have a point when they identify the EU’s “strategic anxiety” in response to the rise of China, the challenges from the US–China rivalry and the Russia-Ukraine war. They recognise that the EU does not fully align with Washington in the US–China rivalry. Although the EU claims it wants to pursue a strategy of “de-risking” from China, it will take some time to achieve this goal. On the other hand, the resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war may require China’s coordination. As China maintains a close relationship with Russia, it may have a positive role in restoring peace in Europe.

Unlike the EU’s comprehensive strategic review of its relations with China and active adjustment of related policies towards China, the Chinese government has not updated its EU policy, which was last issued in 2018. Beijing should release a new EU policy as soon as possible, not only to respond to the EU’s label of China as a rival, but also to show a comprehensive evaluation of the changing international order and China’s readiness to face the challenges arising from the reconfiguration of international relations. Despite the huge differences in their views, Brussels and Beijing share at least one common understanding that EU–China relations are important and indispensable. A well-handled bilateral relationship benefits both sides.

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