

GLOBAL VIEWS



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

BERNARD DEWIT

Nuanced reality

Engagement and cooperation remain the backbone of EU-China relations and mandate forward-looking action

The relationship between Europe and China currently stands at a critical juncture, defined by both immense potential and complex challenges. The decision taken by the Chinese authorities on April 30 to lift



sanctions against members of the European Parliament marked an important step toward restoring political dialogue with the European Union. This move, long awaited since China first expressed interest in resuming communication in September 2024, culminated after a series of multilevel meetings throughout the autumn and early 2025. European Parliament President Roberta Metsola called the EU's relationship with China "complex and multifaceted", emphasizing that "the best way to approach it is through engagement and dialogue".

This political thaw, however, coincides with a deeply fragmented European Parliament following the 2024 elections. The growing diversity of views across the EU's political landscape makes it increasingly difficult for the bloc to shape a cohesive strategy toward China. For European, Chinese and global businesses operating across borders, this fragmentation contributes to regulatory uncertainty and complicates long-term planning.

Despite China's recent diplomatic overtures, including the removal of sanctions, the EU has ruled out reviving the shelved Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. Speaking at a forum in Beijing, EU trade official Marjot Hannonen said there was "absolutely no intention" to resume negotiations, citing persistent concerns around market access barriers and industrial "overcapacity". The EU is instead intensifying efforts to address imbalances in sensitive sectors such as electric vehicles and solar panels, with trade rebalancing taking precedence over investment liberalization.

As chairman of the Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, I have been privileged to witness the EU-China relationship evolve into one of the world's most consequential economic partnerships. Beneath this impressive outcome lies a more nuanced reality — a relationship that must constantly balance cooperation with competition, openness with strategic autonomy, and global ambitions with regional priorities.

EU perceptions of China

For EU-China relations, the 50th anniversary is not only a celebration — but a good opportunity to redefine cooperation in an era of global uncertainty.

remain shaped by a triadic framework, viewing China simultaneously as a partner, competitor and systemic rival. This framework reflects both strategic realism and economic pragmatism. On the one hand, the EU is alarmed by China's growing trade surplus and "state-driven" subsidies, prompting countervailing investigations, particularly into Chinese EVs. On the other, both sides acknowledge that their mutual needs outweigh the logic of exclusion. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975, engagement and cooperation have remained the backbone of EU policy toward China.

The mutual benefits of this relationship are grounded in decades of economic interdependence, even as geopolitical tensions have risen. In areas such as digital innovation, supply chains and climate policy, competition has intensified. Yet cooperation remains essential. The return to in-person diplomatic exchanges after the COVID-19 pandemic — particularly the 10th China-EU High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue held in September 2023 — signaled a renewed commitment. That dialogue produced agreements on macroeconomic coordination, industrial cooperation, business environment reforms, World Trade Organization modernization and regulatory collaboration. Notable outcomes included a proposed early-warning system for raw material supply chains and the launch of an export control dialogue mechanism.

Meanwhile, global developments continue to reshape the context in which EU-China relations unfold. The intensifying US-China rivalry now spans not only economic and technological domains, but also security, ideology and international norms. The re-election of Donald Trump as US president has brought significant policy shifts, highlighting the importance of looking beyond short-term cycles and considering the medium- to long-term evolution of transatlantic

atlantic dynamics.

Frequent high-level diplomatic engagements between China and EU member states have helped dispel misunderstandings, align positions and deepen consensus. These efforts are especially critical as the international order grows more complex and multipolar. In this regard, continued dialogue and people-to-people contacts are indispensable.

Climate change remains a defining challenge — and opportunity — for EU-China cooperation. China's dominance in solar panel manufacturing and the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism could serve as catalysts for innovation, and do not need to generate more friction. In the digital realm, reconciling governance frameworks such as China's Personal Information Protection Law and the EU's General Data Protection Regulation is crucial to foster secure cross-border flows.

The 50th anniversary of EU-China diplomatic relations in 2025 provides an opportunity to reflect on past achievements and confront emerging challenges. Trade tensions, supply chain realignments and the lingering effects of the US administration's tariffs — which targeted both Chinese and European exports — continue to ripple through global commerce. Both Beijing and Brussels recognize that unilateralism undermines the rules-based system. They share a vested interest in multilateralism and reforming trade governance rather than dismantling it.

The anniversary should serve not merely as a symbolic occasion, but as a mandate for forward-looking action. The EU and China are not destined to be adversaries; rather, they are indispensable partners in revitalizing the global trade order. Brussels and Beijing could lead by example, showing that principled, rules-based engagement and multilateral cooperation can prevail and result in global improvements.

The coming decade will test the resilience of economic diplomacy. For EU-China relations, the 50th anniversary is not only a celebration — but a good opportunity to redefine cooperation in an era of global uncertainty.

The author is chairman of the Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and senior partner of Dewit Law Office. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

FABIEN PACORY

Oceans of hope

France, China and the EU share points of convergence on protection of the environment, biodiversity and marine ecosystems

The 2025 United Nations Ocean Conference, the largest conference on the oceans slated for June 9 to 13 in Nice, France, has a clear mission: to support the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14; and conserve and sustainably use the



oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. The conference is set to endorse an action-oriented declaration — the Nice

Ocean Action Plan.

It will involve all relevant stakeholders, bringing together governments, the UN system, intergovernmental organizations, international financial institutions, other interested international bodies, nongovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, academic institutions, the scientific community, the private sector and delegations from various cities around the world to assess challenges and opportunities relating to, as well as actions taken toward, the implementation of Goal 14. Among the cities, five are from China: Shenzhen, Shanghai, Xiamen, Qingdao and Zhanjiang.

This year has seen active dialogue on climate change between France and China. In March, the two countries issued a joint statement to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Paris Agreement, reaffirming their commitment to multilateralism and cooperation in addressing global challenges. The statement emphasized the need for appropriate solutions to significant issues within a multilateral framework. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and France are seen as responsible for demonstrating leadership and enhancing strategic coordination.

Recently, I had the chance in the French embassy in Beijing to talk with Agnès Pannier-Runacher, France's minister for ecological transition. Pannier-Runacher said Chinese officials reaffirmed that China would continue to uphold the objectives outlined in the Paris Agreement and collaborate with all parties to achieve positive outcomes at the 30th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change later this year in Brazil. In line with the joint statement from China and France on enhancing biodiversity and ocean cooperation — from Kunming-Montreal to Nice — China will assist France in hosting a successful UN Ocean Conference with the utmost ambition.

China has solidified its status as a global leader in biodiversity conservation through decisive and impactful actions. By enhancing the protection of endangered species and ecosystems, as well as contributing to significant global environmental agreements — including those related to biodiversity — China's accomplishments highlight its steadfast commitment to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and its vision of fostering an ecological civilization.

A key factor in China's success is its

crucial role in bringing together over 190 parties to endorse the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework at the 2022 UN Biodiversity Conference. Domestically, China's ecological conservation redlines (ECRs) — an innovative spatial planning mechanism — have become a transformative model for balancing ecological protection with sustainable development. This initiative designates over 30 percent of the country's terrestrial territory as ecologically critical zones.

The ECRs' emphasis on real-time monitoring via satellite remote sensing and artificial intelligence-driven governance platforms sets a new standard for transparency and enforcement, narrowing the gaps in global ecological conservation. It not only propels China's progress toward the "30×30" target (a worldwide initiative for governments to designate 30 percent of the Earth's land and ocean area as protected areas by 2030) but also positions the country as a leader in redefining ecological governance.

Besides, China has turned its ecological commitments into concrete results through extensive, science-based initiatives.

With the 2030 deadline for global biodiversity targets on the horizon, China's vision of an ecological civilization — emphasizing harmony between humans and nature — serves as a beacon of hope. From restoring forests that buffer against climate disasters to helping revive once endangered species' populations, China's contributions to global environmental protection and biodiversity conservation demonstrate that environmental stewardship and sustainable development are not competing goals but mutually reinforcing imperatives. In a time of rising ecological crises, China's experience demonstrates that collective action, driven by policy and a scientific approach, can pave the way for a flourishing planet.

Safeguarding fragile ecosystems requires urgent action, and China's commitment to an ecological civilization has led to significant progress in resources management and conservation during the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25), with protected areas now covering 18 percent of its land. Leveraging technologies such as AI is crucial for addressing biodiversity challenges, as it can analyze ecological data to enhance conservation efforts. The UN Development Programme has helped over 50 countries use AI to align national policies with global biodiversity goals.

In January, China updated its National Biodiversity Conservation Strategy (2023-30) to align with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. For example, China's promotion of marine ecosystem protection has led to a net increase in mangrove coverage to 29,200 hectares. In Zhanjiang, local and municipal efforts in mangrove conservation and the protection of Chinese white dolphins have successfully enhanced biodiversity and coastal ecosystems.

China and the European Union are also aligned in tackling climate change challenges. On May 6, Presi-

dent Xi Jinping congratulated EU leaders on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, emphasizing cooperation in addressing global issues. The China-EU green partnership could exemplify their shared vision for ecological sustainability. As key players in global climate governance, both sides must demonstrate ambition in renewable energy development this year. Looking ahead to COP30, greater coordination and collaboration on carbon markets and green projects are anticipated. Innovations in life sciences with AI enable the processing of extensive environmental data, revealing critical patterns and overcoming silos and barriers to conservation.

However, challenges such as protectionism could threaten China-EU green cooperation. Constructive dialogue is essential to address mutual concerns and promote economic development.

Innovative finance is crucial for addressing ocean crises and enhancing resilience. An estimated \$175 billion annually is needed for a sustainable marine economy, requiring cooperation among various stakeholders. The Blue Economy and Finance Forum at UN Ocean Conference 2025 will focus on attracting investments for ocean sustainability. Protecting the ocean is a global responsibility that supports livelihoods and economies while promoting a sustainable blue economy through innovative investment and policies.

The ocean, covering over 70 percent of the Earth's surface, remains uncharted. It is crucial for our future, and together we can make the third UN Ocean Conference a significant milestone. Ten years after the Paris Agreement, countries must reaffirm multilateral cooperation to meet climate objectives and tackle climate change with real actions.

As leading G20 nations, France and China can uphold global climate governance and advance collective commitments by defining ambitious decarbonization plans supported by credible implementation strategies. Immediate and collective action is essential to safeguard our planet and transform ambition into tangible results for a sustainable future.

The scale of the global crisis shows that no nation can act alone. France and China's commitment to an ecological civilization offers vision and opportunities to assist developing countries in adopting nature-positive strategies through shared experiences, biodiversity conservation, knowledge, low-carbon technologies, and funding via international collaboration.

The author is executive vice-president of the French Chamber of Commerce and Industry in China, co-founder and director of the board of the Zhanjiang Chinese White Dolphin Foundation and a member of the board of the Zhanjiang Mangrove Protection Foundation. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



WANG XIAOYING / CHINA DAILY