Shifting Paradigms

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Understanding policy trends

Over the last ten years, the multilayered relationship between the EU and China has become increasingly complicated. The EU's latest policy document on China, the 2019 Strategic Outlook, hinted at a changing balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China. The document noted that China's economic power and political influence had grown at an unprecedented rate, and that the country now bore greater responsibility for upholding the rule-based international order. Furthermore, the EU began to view China not only as a negotiating and collaborative partner,

but also as an economic competitor and a systemic rival (European Commission, 2019). This European perspective reflects an underlying trend that became increasingly visible since 2016, when European views of China have shifted, with growing concerns over Chinese investments, trade disputes, human rights issues, and diplomatic tensions, intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic, mutual sanctions, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The EU consistently communicates its China policy through documents and speeches, making it relatively easy to comprehend how and why this policy is developing. In contrast, China's government rarely does the same. It has only issued three white papers on EU-China relations, the latest of which was published in late 2018, just months before the EU's Strategic Outlook. While the Chinese government provides transcripts of speeches and meetings with European dignitaries, the content is often repetitive and the positions taken are remarkably consistent. Therefore, observing discussions among Chinese think tank experts on EU-China relations is crucial to understanding shifting Chinese perspectives and identifying emerging policy trends. As Abb (2015) has highlighted, Chinese think tanks and experts play an important role in connecting policymakers and academia. They can provide ideas and policy suggestions, but also provide contextualization and interpretations of Chinese government policies. The following text will therefore analyze recently published discussions by Chinese experts about the EU-China relationship. They can offer ideas and policy suggestions as well as contextualize and interpret Chinese government policies. In terms of the timeframe, it mainly analyses texts published since the beginning of this year, coinciding with Donald Trump's return to the White House, and the subsequent new dynamics it initiated internationally. In terms of content, the text summarizes Chinese experts' perspectives on the EU's role in an increasingly challenging international landscape and analyzes their assessment of the future trajectory of the EU-China relationship. The guiding question is whether long-held paradigmatic positions about the EU are starting to change among Chinese experts.

Europe in decline

The Chinese expert literature reviewed for this article generally reflects a negative or pessimistic view of current EU developments. Experts describe a state of stagnation or decline. They are concerned about political trends, such as fragmentation due to political polarization – meaning an increasing division between left- and right-wing extremism – which, in their view, is starting to dominate discussions in Europe. This trend is leading to an EU that is increasingly inward-looking, both politically and economically, and to growing disagreements at the European level, making it harder for the European Council to make decisions (Feng et al, 2025). Some observers have pointed out that Europeans have tried to solve these problems through different means, for example by addressing the democratic deficit or by

introducing a Europe of two speeds. However, they conclude that the potential for a way out of this situation is limited since the "EU only talks and doesn't act" (Guanchazhewang, 2025). This situation also influences the EU's policy on China, since domestic fragmentation in European politics suppresses voices in favor of rational and pragmatic cooperation with China (Feng et al, 2025).

The second issue on which Chinese experts are becoming increasingly pessimistic is economic development in the EU. They point out that successive crises have impacted the European economy, including the global financial crisis and the European debt crisis. These crises have brought about a decline in European competitiveness and stagnating EU integration (Feng et al, 2025; Zhang, Xin, Jian, Yan, 2025; Sun, 2025). Furthermore, some experts highlight internal fragmentation as a factor that has caused the EU to miss out on major technological advances, such as the "fourth industrial revolution" (Guanchazhewang, 2025). Sun (2025) notes that the EU has been trying to address its declining competitiveness since the early 1990s, but without success:

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, the EU's share of the global economy has been steadily declining. Not only has it failed to achieve "reindustrialization", but its industrial structure has not seen significant optimization. This is evident in the continued consolidation of traditional strengths like machinery, chemicals, and motor vehicles, while high-tech sectors such as information technology have developed slowly, and the competitiveness of emerging industries has declined rather than improved.

According to her, this has happened because the underlying framework conditions of the European development model have changed, which was based on peace in Europe and US security guarantees, good relations with Russia and access to cheap energy, a deepening of the EU single markets, the rise of emerging economies in Asia, and certain demographic trends. According to Sun:

These favorable factors allowed Europe to enjoy a "comfort zone" for over 30 years. Although economic growth remained modest, the issue of "competitiveness" did not spark significant concern in European political and economic circles until the COVID-19 pandemic.

A third point that has been identified in the literature is a decline of European attraction – of its "normative power identity". According to this view, after the end of the Cold War, the EU leveraged globalization to export its European model, thereby expanding its trade rules and establishing its identity as a normative power. However, due to the EU's declining relative strength, its status as a normative power has weakened, leading to "unprecedented strategic anxieties" when facing "shifts in the international balance of power and geopolitical changes". (Jin, 2025).

Shifting paradigms?

Against the background described above, the assessment is that many of the EU policies are, in one way or another, driven by European anxieties. Nevertheless, Chinese researchers believe that, due to Europe's mounting problems, it needs to cooperate with China to drive economic development (Zhang, Xin, Jian, Yan, 2025). Others think that, despite existing problems, there are currently favorable conditions for EU-China rapprochement. These conditions are primarily related to the changing dynamics between the EU and the US following Donald Trump's return to the White House. In this context, some researchers have noticed a potential change to the trilogy of definitions of partner, competitor and rival (Feng et al, 2025). Most of the reviewed literature asserts that the EU-China relationship is globally significant due to its contribution to global economic growth and prosperity, as well as its political importance in preventing a new Cold War. They believe that, as long as the EU and China work together, bloc confrontation will not occur. This is often combined with the desire for the creation of a multipolar world order in which the EU acts as an independent pole (in this context, 'independent' means 'independent of the US-EU alliance') (Feng, Lin, Men, Li, Song, 2025).

Underlying these observations are two paradigmatic assessments of the relationship. The first refers to its economic and trade dimensions. This dimension has been referred to as the 'ballast stone', a term which refers to the counterweight placed at the bottom of ships to maintain stability by lowering the center of gravity. Therefore, the economic and trade relationship is regarded as a stabilizer, somewhat independent of fluctuating political or diplomatic relations. One could argue that, regardless of the state of political relations, as long as the economic and trade relationship remains strong, the overall relationship will not be negatively impacted. The second long-held paradigm is that there is "no fundamental conflict of interest" between the EU and China. This refers mainly to the geopolitical level, describing how, unlike the United States, the EU does not play a political or security-related role in China's neighborhood. These two paradigmatic views could be seen as the more conservative or traditional views of EU-China relations. For many years, this has been the mainstream position in the expert community in China.

Over the last five years, and particularly since the onset of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, tensions in almost all areas of EU-China relations have increased. Leading European EU-China experts have described the EU's China policy as having shifted towards a "robust and realistic" approach to China (García-Herrero, Vasselier, 2024). This shift included the adoption of trade defense instruments to address unfair Chinese trade practices. This has not gone unnoticed in China, although the current mainstream opinion has not changed significantly. However, over the course of the last years, subtle changes have emerged in the two key paradigms.

Firstly, some of the reviewed articles describe EU's trade policies as becoming more protectionist, politicized and securitized. According to this view, the European Commission has altered its perception of trade and competitiveness, linking it to security concerns. In this context, researchers often point out that this shift has "anti-China connotations". Chinese researchers describe the EU moving away from openness towards strategic autonomy, with protectionism at its core. De-risking and economic security are viewed as targeting China, and this has become a political consensus in Europe (Jin, 2025; Cheng, 2025). Another researcher points out that strategic autonomy should not only be viewed as an attempt to become more independent of the US, but also as a means of self-protection in the economic arena. The main goal is therefore to protect the EU's strategic industries and prevent over-dependence on China (Song, 2025). Current developments within the EU with regard to its competitiveness agenda are seen as being driven by European anxieties (Sun, 2025). Zhao (2025) goes further:

The EU's competition with, and even confrontation toward, China will not only hinder the future development of China-EU cooperation but may also jeopardize existing cooperative achievements. If this trend continues, it could undermine the foundation of the economic ballast that has long stabilized China-EU relations.

Secondly, in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, Chinese experts have noted that the EU views China and Russia as intertwined, although they believe this perception is based on a misjudgment of China's policy towards Russia and unrealistic expectations of China (Jin, 2025). Moreover, they believe that the EU is treating China's position on the war in Ukraine as a prerequisite for developing EU-China relations. This means that the Ukraine 'crisis', as Chinese researchers refer to it, is the primary factor disrupting the development of healthy EU-China relations (Jin, 2025). Zhao (2025) notes that, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the EU's perception of China might shift towards viewing it as a comprehensive rival or security threat, and "the EU's increasingly tough stance and actions in handling security matters related to China have undoubtedly made China-EU relations more complex". This trend could lead to competition and confrontation. However, according to him, although the EU's China policy is hardening, the process of readjustment is not yet complete, which opens up the possibility of reversal or delay. But, as Jin (2025) highlights:

The EU's shift toward geopolitical competition in its perception of China poses a serious challenge to the long-standing strategic consensus that "China and the EU have no geopolitical conflicts"

Song (2025) notes that Chinese experts generally believe there is no fundamental conflict of interest between the EU and China. However, in his view the introduction of "systemic rivalry" of 2019 into EU discourse marks a "substantive shift in bilateral relations at the factual level". According to Song, this term highlights a fundamental shift in the nature of the

bilateral relationship, reflecting concrete policy differences and systemic differences.

Making the correct choice

Europe is seen as an actor grappling with severe problems after several years of crisis. It is unable to reform its economic model, and strong political divisions have led to stagnation in the process of EU integration. In response to this situation, which has sparked concerns about Europe's declining international standing, Europeans have taken actions that have severely impacted EU-China relations. According to the expert literature reviewed for this article, the EU's policy adjustments are the result of a misjudgment based on a misunderstanding of China's policies and intentions. This reflects the underlying sentiment that China is not responsible for the deterioration of its relationship with Europe. In fact, there is hardly any acknowledgement of legitimate European concerns in the area of trade or with regard to European security. Any such concerns are usually dismissed as 'anti-China' narratives. Therefore, the responsibility to improve the relationship lies with the Europeans. In response to a question about the EU's announcement to rebalance its trade relationship with China, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson stated that the Europeans should rebalance their mindset instead. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). With Trump's return to the White House and Europe increasingly under pressure, it is, therefore, up to the Europeans to grasp the "China opportunity" to benefit from each other's development (Cui, 2025).

The EU's hardening policy toward China has sparked discussions about the validity of the economic stabilizer and the "no fundamental conflicts of interest" paradigm. For the time being, no broad consensus has been reached among Chinese EU experts on these issues. Prominent experts in China continue to support these paradigms. It remains to be seen how this discussion will develop over the next month, especially if the Commission proposes new measures to rebalance the economic relationship, and whether more experts will engage with it. A comprehensive change in understanding these two paradigms could affect China's future policies and possibly lead to an intensification of existing frictions in areas such as trade and geopolitics.

During the last EU-China summit in July, Chinese President Xi Jinping reminded both sides to "firmly grasp the correct direction of the development of China-Europe relations" (Xinhuashe, 2025 a). During China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Slovenia in September, the minister stated that "amid great changes unseen in a century, one needs to make the correct choice" (Xinhuashe, 2025 b). Given the ideological worldview of the Chinese leadership that it correctly understands the historical trends – that amid "great changes unseen in a century" the "East is rising and the West

is declining" – and the unwillingness to accept positions, such as European concerns, which may deviate from this "correct" understanding, one could assume that the responsibility for making the correct choice lies only with the Europeans. The time may come to ask what could happen if one side does not make the correct choice.

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