

# China's Diplomatic Relations with the States of Europe

Eberhard Sandschneider

## *Introduction*

More than a decade after the end of the Cold War, both the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are usually regarded as important political and economic actors in a globalizing international environment. While the United States as the third important partner is heavily divided in its China policy between proponents of a policy of containment and their opponents favouring engagement, European countries have without exception followed a policy of "constructive engagement" towards China. The PRC in return is strengthening its relations with Europe, seeking not only improved trade relations, but also a deepened political dialogue and intensified co-operation. Apart from policy statements, however, Europe is far from implementing a consolidated and integrated China policy.

At first glance, the EU and China in their respective international outlook are so different that they must expect major problems in bilateral relations. The EU has already made considerable progress in its drive towards economic and political integration, while China is widely expected to become a dominant regional and perhaps even global power within the next decades, overtaking Japan and – as some optimists would argue – even the United States in terms of economic strength and political-military influence. At the same time, China is undergoing internal transformation with uncertain results while the EU is facing the double challenge of deepening integration through internal reforms and of widening by integrating the new market economies in Central and Eastern Europe. For these reasons, the growing academic and political interest in the character of mutual relations is obvious. Given that both the EU and all European nation states are continuously trying to improve their political and economic relations with China, Sino-European relations are of increasing interest in academia and the media. Most of the research so far has, however, concentrated on aspects of EU policies, while little has been written on the coexisting national foreign policies towards China. This article will therefore focus on the more or less neglected aspect of bilateral relations of different European countries towards China for three reasons.

First, diplomatic relations between Europe and China are not as clearly defined as one might expect, especially if the progress of European integration and its supposed consequences for Europe's appearance in the world are taken into account. On the European side, national interests of EU member states are sometimes stronger than the wish to build and follow a functioning common foreign policy. Political and economic

ambitions suffer from tensions between EU-level policies and national foreign policies and their respective impact on bilateral relations with China. In consequence, China may find it difficult to sort out its really important European partners while at the same time drawing advantage from attempts to outmanoeuvre its European partners when it comes to bilateral contacts. Those countries which, for example, try to improve their relations with Taiwan usually meet Chinese resistance when it comes to political contacts and above all to economic contracts. Thus, when the Netherlands strained its relations with China in the early 1980s because the government sold two submarines to Taiwan, Beijing retaliated by downgrading the Dutch ambassadorship to *chargé d'affaires*. China closely watches sensitive activities of single European nation states and whenever possible tries to implement a policy of “stick and carrot.”

Secondly, European diplomatic relations with China are thus characterized by a tension between EU-level policies and the persistence of national foreign policies. Diplomatic relations between member states of the EU and China can only be understood in a triangular relationship between EU policies and competing national interests leading to an unco-ordinated and competitive mixture of China policies based on different national (mainly economic) interests. The overall EU approach of building ever stronger relations with China is hampered by conflicting foreign policy goals of major member states. In the end, national interests still tend to be more important than attempts towards a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Thirdly, in their different positions towards China all European countries share obvious interests in promoting political and diplomatic relations towards the major East Asian power in order to increase and stabilize their economic trade balances.<sup>1</sup> Although sometimes pushed by NGOs like Amnesty International to pursue a policy of strong words especially concerning human rights issues, European countries seem to agree that there is no alternative to a policy of constructive engagement towards China. The predominant strategy of a “silent dialogue” is followed by most countries.

Nevertheless, diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China and the member states of the European Union often differ significantly in intensity, themes of interest and tone.

The following discussion will first concentrate on three major European states: Great Britain, France and Germany. The central questions focus on the origins of obvious differences in dealing with China and how they might affect Europe’s general position in the East Asian region. These considerations will then be contrasted with findings from smaller European countries (both EU and non-EU members) in their respective relations towards China.

1. Current information on EU trade balances with China can be found under [www.ecd.org.cn/trad/index.htm](http://www.ecd.org.cn/trad/index.htm).

*Europe's Big Three: Germany, France and Great Britain*

In economic terms, Germany, France and Great Britain are China's most important trading partners in Europe and they also play important roles in the build-up of China's economy by considerable direct investments. The selection of France, Britain and Germany is also due to the importance these three countries have within the European Union and within the political and economic world order. Considering their global weight and influence, these European nations may also play an important role in transferring international responsibilities to China and binding the Asian nation closer into the world order.

*Sino-British relations.* Even though Britain was one of the first Western countries to recognize the PRC in 1950, ambassadors were not exchanged between Beijing and London until March 1972. In the 15 years prior to 1997, political ties between the United Kingdom and China were largely influenced by the debate about Hong Kong and the return of sovereignty of the last British crown colony to China. In December 1984, both sides signed a joint declaration to mark the hand-over of Hong Kong on 1 July 1997. Even though China guaranteed to allow the city to continue to exercise its way of life until 2047, diplomatic tensions about Hong Kong tended to disrupt the relatively smooth relationship Britain and China had before Hong Kong was set on the agenda in 1982. A major issue of contention concentrated on the construction of a new airport for more than €10 billion at Chek Lap Kok which was finally and after long and complicated negotiations approved by both sides in a memorandum of understanding signed in 1991. The new airport opened in July 1998.

Another argument concerning the future citizenship of Hong Kong residents that was also the subject of lively discussion in Britain. In this case, no agreement could be reached between Britain and China. The United Kingdom issued about 3 million British Dependent Territory passports to Hong Kong citizens that are not recognized by China and not fully accepted even by the United Kingdom because holders of these passports were not granted the right of abode there. One of the most serious conflicts arose when the last British Governor Chris Patten (who is now European Commissioner for foreign relationships of the EU) introduced political reforms to improve the right of political freedom within the framework of the Basic Law, Hong Kong's new constitution that came into effect after the handover in 1997. For China, Patten's reforms were unacceptable as they interfered in Hong Kong's domestic politics after 1997. Thus, many plans were cancelled as soon as China resumed sovereignty over the territory.

Indeed, the year 1997 brought some incisive changes in Sino-British relationships. Beside Hong Kong's return to China, the British people voted out the Conservative administration after 18 years in office and elected Tony Blair's Labour party into government. In these new circumstances, relationships between the PRC and the UK seem to have become smoother and characterized by a friendlier atmosphere. In April

1998, China's Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visited Britain, and President Jiang Zemin followed in October 1999. Tony Blair paid a visit to Beijing in October 1998 just after Britain's Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott was in China in July 1998. Queen Elizabeth II was also in China in 1999.

This new diplomatic climate was formed and is influenced by the conclusion that both countries, as permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations, have similar international interests and responsibilities and should therefore step up bilateral and multilateral co-operation. As a result, China and the UK agreed in 1998 to intensify their political and military dialogues and work together towards a more peaceful and secure world. Both countries also share common global interests in issues such as environmental protection, fighting crime and corruption, drugs and AIDS. Furthermore, the two sides enjoy close bilateral ties in areas like education, science, finance, academic exchanges, health and culture.

In addition, Britain is China's second most important trading partner in Europe, sharing a trade volume of €14.07 billion of imports and €2.3 billion of exports in 2000.<sup>2</sup> The UK is also by far the largest European investor in the PRC with investments in 261 projects with a contractual capital of US\$834.18 million in 2000,<sup>3</sup> while China puts the largest share of its investments in Europe into the British market, with more than 100 Chinese companies listed in the UK. It is in the interest of both countries to maintain and intensify close economic ties in order to keep trade and investments at a high level.

Even though the UK no longer had any formal responsibilities in Hong Kong after 1997, the SAR is still a strong issue in Sino-British relationships, possibly, however, of decreasing importance.<sup>4</sup> Britain closely observes Hong Kong's continuing autonomy under the "one country, two systems" formula. For the UK, the SAR is still of interest as it is the most important gateway for British trade with and investments in the PRC. There are also strong economic, academic, social, educational and cultural ties between Britain and its former crown colony. In a joint statement signed in October 1998, both the UK and China expressed their confidence that the current status will ensure stability and prosperity for Hong Kong in the future. The British interest in Hong Kong is perhaps best shown by the fact that its Consulate-General in the territory is the largest world-wide.

Today, the UK as well as the PRC stress the importance of growing partnership between the two countries. Britain has just opened a new Consulate-General in Chongqing, its fifth diplomatic mission in China, as a consequence of intensified bilateral activities. And both sides seem to be determined to deepen further their diplomatic ties.

2. Eurostat. EU Commission delegation in China, [www.ecd.org.cn/trad/data2000.htm](http://www.ecd.org.cn/trad/data2000.htm).

3. *Ibid.*

4. See Miguel Santos Neves and Brian Bridges (eds.), *Europe, China and the Two SARs. Towards a New Era* (Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan, 2000).

*Sino-French relations.* Diplomatic relationships on ambassadorial level between the PRC and the Republic of France were already set up in January 1964, eight years earlier than those between China and the UK and Germany. For some time, Sino-French relations developed smoothly but then had to suffer some severe setbacks in the early 1990s, mainly related to the sale of French military equipment to Taiwan.

France has been one of the European countries repeatedly challenging China by weapon sales to Taiwan. In the early 1990s Mirage 2000–5s and La Fayette-class frigates were sold to Taiwan and, in retaliation, the French Consulate-General in Guangzhou was closed down. Full diplomatic ties were restored in early 1994 when France agreed to prohibit local companies from participating in arms sales to Taiwan.

In recent years, diplomatic relations focused on a number of high-level visits between the two countries. China's President travelled to France in September 1994 and in October 1999, while Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visited Paris in April 1998 and his predecessor, Li Peng, came to France in April 1996. On the other side, French President Jacques Chirac paid a state visit to China in May 1997.<sup>5</sup> He was followed by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in September 1998.

Relations between France and China mainly concentrate on intensifying economic ties, although cultural ties have been growing in importance as well.<sup>6</sup> The French diplomatic success is best documented by China's decision to buy a considerable number of Airbus aircraft for its national airlines. In 2000, bilateral trade reached a volume of €11.5 billion with an increase of 37.8 per cent in imports and 6.4 per cent in exports as compared to 1999.<sup>7</sup> Thus, France is China's third most important trading partner in Europe. French direct investments in the People's Republic reached a total amount of US\$853.1 million in 2000 which were invested in 137 projects.<sup>8</sup> Other fields of co-operation mostly cover the two nation's economies and in addition technological co-operation in sectors such as atomic energy, wind generation of electricity and artificial intelligence. Compared to the relations between China and the UK and Germany, ties in the fields of culture, education, environment and social issues are underrepresented in Sino-French relationships although France tries further to improve cultural contacts. Obviously, relations between China and France are more orientated towards economic benefits for the two countries rather than towards far-reaching exchanges.

*Sino-German relations.* Diplomatic relations between China and (then West) Germany were officially established in October 1972 and developed relatively smoothly until 1989. The Chinese government's crack-down on students on Beijing's Tiananmen Square in June 1989 caused

5. See Wang Yi, "Sino-French relations more mature and stable," *Beijing Review*, 26 May–1 June 1997, pp. 8–11.

6. See the respective contributions in this volume, especially Meissner.

7. Eurostat. EU Commission delegation in China, [www.ecd.org.cn/trad/data2000.htm](http://www.ecd.org.cn/trad/data2000.htm).

8. *Ibid.*

the German government to impose sanctions against China and to reduce diplomatic ties to routine contacts. The relationship improved in 1990 when the Foreign Secretaries of Germany and China met at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York and agreed fully to restore diplomatic contacts. In 1993, Germany refused to approve the sale of submarines to Taiwan and reaffirmed China on its "One China" stance. Both decisions helped further to improve bilateral ties. On the other hand, relationships between the two countries are from time to time hampered by different opinions on human rights.

In recent years, Sino-German diplomatic relations saw a lively exchange of state visits. In July 1995, China's President Jiang Zemin travelled to Germany. Chancellor Helmut Kohl came to China in November 1995 for his fourth visit. In November 1996, Germany's President Roman Herzog also visited China. After the journey of China's Foreign Secretary Tang Jiaxuan to Germany in March 1999, the new Chancellor Gerhard Schröder paid a working visit to the PRC in May 1999, followed by an official visit in November 1999.

Already in 1993, Germany developed a new political concept towards the Asia-Pacific region in which it made China the centre of its Asia policy. For China, Germany is considered an important co-operating partner in Europe. Over international issues both countries work closely together in many fields such as the prevention of proliferation of nuclear and chemical weapons, disarmament, environmental protection and drug-trafficking. On the other hand, a comprehensive partnership as it has been inaugurated between China and Britain still has to be established.

The inauguration of the new government of Germany in late 1998 did not affect Sino-German ties, nor did it have any effect on German policy towards the PRC. The Schröder government expressed its wish for continuity and emphasized its "One China" stance which was taken over from the former Kohl administration.

Germany is China's main trading partner in Europe. In 2000, trade volume between the two countries reached €25.5 billion and saw an increase of 33.8 per cent in exports and 35.3 per cent in imports compared to the previous year. By the end of 2000, Germany ranked in second place among European countries, just after the UK, in direct investments.

The PRC and Germany furthermore have an intensive co-operation in the technology sector. Both countries set up a high-technology forum in 1995, and the Sino-Germany Joint Committee on Scientific and Technological Co-operation met for the fifteenth time in December 1999. The last few years also saw the establishment of several co-operative partnerships between Chinese and German research institutes, involving such well-known institutions as the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Social Sciences and the Max Planck Institute. The increased frequency of recent bilateral contacts, especially the two visits of Gerhard Schröder in China in 1999, may be a first sign of the development of a more comprehensive co-operation or even partnership between the two countries.

From a comparative point of view, the three major European countries, Britain, France and Germany, have common interests and policy objectives, but also different methods and practices in dealing with China. This observation also implies a different weight that each attaches to the influence of the official EU policy towards the PRC.

The United Kingdom's policy is characterized by a striving for a comprehensive partnership with China which has been intensified by the new government under Prime Minister Tony Blair. It is expected that this partnership should prove to be beneficial for both sides as well as for the relationships between Europe and Asia in general and, last but not least, for Hong Kong. Britain still has strong interests in its former territory which are no doubt a major factor influencing the UK's policy. Britain's ties with China are thus probably deeper and more far reaching than those of France and Germany.

On the other hand, France seems to be concentrating on specific fields and aspects in its moves towards greater co-operation with China. France considers the PRC an important economic partner and expects positive results for prosperous investments within the whole East Asian region. But while those ties are deep and beneficial to both sides, most other topics seem to be of relatively minor importance and are thus handled very restrictively and left to EU institutions especially if they could lead to potential diplomatic conflicts.

Germany's policy towards the PRC at first glance seems to be widely compatible with general EU approaches. The government of Gerhard Schröder continues to concentrate on deepening economic ties while at the same time stressing poor records in fields such as human rights or environmental protection that some other countries clearly leave to the EU to take care of. Germany's China policy covers a broad range of single issues and even unpleasant aspects are put on the agenda. But Germany also understands the need not to humiliate China so that the Sino-German relationships are expected to continue to improve in order to foster mutual economic benefit.

#### *Smaller Members of the European Union: Denmark and Portugal*

Already in the 1950s, some smaller West European countries managed to avoid the polarization of the Cold War and pushed ahead in establishing diplomatic relations with the young PRC.

Among the first European countries which formally recognized the PRC was Denmark<sup>9</sup> which established diplomatic relations on 11 May 1950, and exchanged ambassadors in February 1956. Apart from disturbances due to domestic convulsions in China (the Cultural Revolution, student protests in 1989) bilateral co-operation between Denmark and China developed gradually and gained momentum after China's policy of opening and reform was put into effect after 1978. Denmark

9. For a more detailed analysis of Sino-Danish relations see Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, "Nordic recognition of the PRC," *Nordic Newsletter of Asian Studies*, Vol. 2 (2000).

started direct investments in 1982 and in the same year was one of the first Western countries to grant China government loans.

Although a smaller partner of China in quantitative terms, Sino-Danish co-operation has reached a considerable level of trade (€1.8 billion in 2000), growing direct investment (US\$ 110.2 million in 2000, an increase of 36 per cent compared to 1999), expanding joint venture partnerships and a broad spectrum of cultural exchanges. From the 1950s on, Denmark had established a trend of building continuously improving relations with China, which was, if not copied, still followed by most other smaller European nations. However, Sino-Danish relations in recent years also demonstrate another principle of relations towards China by following a policy of “active internationalism” in which economic interests were downgraded while policy objectives such as human rights, environmental protection and respect for international law grew in importance. Danish initiatives in criticizing China for its continuous poor human rights record have consequently led to a reduction of economic exchanges. In 2000, utilized capital in FDI in China fell by 41.75 per cent.<sup>10</sup>

Among Southern European member states of the EU, Portugal – joining late – established diplomatic relations with China only in 1979. Co-operation between both countries in diplomatic, economic, cultural and scientific aspects has since seen constant and steady improvements, although Portugal and China had to solve the tricky issue of Macau’s return to China. However, since the regulations for Macau were more or less identical with those negotiated with Great Britain concerning Hong Kong, the last post-colonial conflict between China and a European country could be solved relatively smoothly.<sup>11</sup> In April 1987, the Joint Declaration on the Question of Macau was signed and Macau was handed back to Chinese administration on 20 December 1999.<sup>12</sup> In all other aspects of political and diplomatic relations, a process of continuous improvement characterized bilateral relations. On a bilateral diplomatic level, high-ranking delegations were exchanged on a more or less regular basis, bringing all of China’s top leaders to visit Portugal over the last decade. Major agreements were signed on cultural, science and technology co-operation (in 1982), on sports exchange (in 1991) and again on science and technology co-operation (in 1993). The Sino-Portuguese trade balance shows definite signs of improvement, increasing by 36.3 per cent in imports and 72.9 per cent in exports in 2000 as compared to 1999. However, in comparison to other European countries Portugal ranks second last among the 15 member states of the EU.

As the examples of Denmark and Portugal show, smaller EU members obviously follow their bigger partner states in improving relations with China on all levels of co-operation in agreement with the EU’s overall approach of a policy of constructive engagement. They share the

10. Eurostat. EU Commission delegation in China, [www.ecd.org.cn/trad/data2000.htm](http://www.ecd.org.cn/trad/data2000.htm).

11. For details see the paper by Brian Hook and Miguel Santos Neves in this issue.

12. The text of the declaration is at [www.imprensa.macau.gov.mo/dc/declconj\\_e.htm](http://www.imprensa.macau.gov.mo/dc/declconj_e.htm).

widespread interest in China's growing market economy perspectives, and try to develop economic relations as far as possible. In their foreign policy initiatives on more sensitive issues like human rights, however, they are either reluctant to choose a strategy of their own or too small to effect any changes in the overall approach of the EU and its member states.

*East European Countries: Hungary and Poland*

Between 1949 and 1989, East European countries conducted their respective foreign policies towards China in accordance with the development of Sino-Soviet relations. Hungary was one of the first states to recognize the PRC on 3 October 1949, two days after its official foundation, followed by Poland on 5 October. Intensified co-operation during the 1950s was followed by a freezing of bilateral contacts in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet schism in 1960 and the following decade. Although China watched developments in Eastern Europe with much attention and obvious reservations, given the possible impacts on its own political development, Beijing continuously stressed the principle of sovereignty and national self-determination as the sole basis for bilateral relations with former communist countries in Eastern Europe. Thus after 1989, bilateral relations entered a new stage and basically followed the paths of other European nations in continuously building better relations with China. After a slowdown in official relations between 1989 and 1991, both Hungary and Poland established a network of formal and informal working relations with China on all levels of diplomacy and also in the fields of economic, technological and cultural co-operation. Major aspects of these relations are based on a principle of bilateral agreements which allows China to follow its preferred strategy of foreign policy while the future member states of the enlarged EU are not yet bound into the networks of multilateral co-operation with China. Although both Poland and Hungary primarily focus on Western Europe for obvious reasons (EU enlargement, NATO and security issues), China ranks prominent in their attention concerning diplomatic relations and economic exchange outside Europe. After slow and tentative beginnings, bilateral relations between China and Poland started to improve substantially in the second half of the 1990s after a series of diplomatic exchanges at high governmental level. From a Chinese perspective, trade relations are slowly improving.

In 2000, China's trade surplus with Poland was US\$0.76 billion. Up to the end of 1999, China's total investment in Poland was about US\$45 million, ranking the 26th among the countries which had investment in Poland, and Poland's total investment under the agreements was US\$39.21 million and the actual amount invested was US\$35.04 million, ranking the 42nd among the countries having investment in China. Poland had 69 investment projects in China. In terms of actual investment Poland ranked the first among the countries in central and east Europe.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to economic contacts, co-operation in the fields of culture,

13. See [www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/4413.html](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/4413.html).

science and technology and education have also seen a slow but steady increase.

Hungary has similarly tried dynamically to develop its bilateral relations with China within a framework of sincere and constructive partnership. While acknowledging existing differences in their countries' respective positions towards social and political rights, as well as concerning human rights, bilateral contacts, and economic and trade relations have continuously improved over the last decade. Sino-Hungarian trade increased from US\$120 million in 1993 to US\$979.4 million in 2000. According to Chinese statistics,

state companies of the People's Republic of China have made more than US\$60 million worth of capital investments in Hungary, and this figure for private enterprises is US\$50 million. Firms registered in Hungary have invested US\$40 million in China.<sup>14</sup>

In a comparative perspective, both Hungary and Poland may be regarded as typical examples of East European countries' foreign policies towards China. Based on an evolutionary approach to improving diplomatic relations, furthering economic exchange and gradually developing relations in the fields of culture and education, they agree to avoid sensitive issues like the question of Taiwan and human rights.

#### *National Interests versus a Common EU China Policy?*

Most Western European states take advantage of the confusing situation that there are de facto two different policies towards China, one formulated by single nation states and one promulgated by the European Commission and other European institutions. In principle, this situation is of course as beneficial to China as it is for the European countries. On the European side, national governments are able to implement a China policy that completely supports its national interests while leaving unpopular topics for the EU to handle. For instance, reflecting on China's problematic human rights record is increasingly left to the EU while national governments concentrate on promoting investments or exchanges in favour of their economies or specific large companies. The Airbus deals in recent years which were solely negotiated by France are just one example of this.

In addition, some countries have vital and long lasting interests in China or in the Asia Pacific region and consequently pay much attention to formulating their own specific policies towards that region. Until 1997 and 1999 respectively, Britain and Portugal for instance were colonial powers and had to deal with China on the basis of their colonial past. The fact that their interests and responsibilities were much more comprehensive than those of other European states and of EU institutions forced them into a strong engagement with China in order to follow their specific national interests, while also benefiting Hong Kong and Macau.

China on the other hand takes advantage of the obvious competi-

14. See [www.fmprc.gov.cn/engl/4357.html](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/engl/4357.html).

tion between EU members that is still strong in the economic sector and in direct investments despite closer economic co-ordination within the Union. Every European country may face diplomatic isolation or the loss of important economic contracts if the Chinese government concludes that an action of a country was intended to humiliate the PRC. Denmark had to face such problems in 1997-98 in the aftermath of a UN resolution to blame China for its poor human rights record that was rejected earlier in the EU and was finally also defeated in the UN Security Council. Interestingly, France played an important role in spoiling the resolution that was at first planned by all EU members and became a complete failure for Denmark and the Netherlands. The benefit for France was an Airbus deal worth billions of euros that was even extended after the UN failed to pass the resolution.

Finally, Germany's stance on China under the new government of Social Democrats and Greens might be described as a miniature of the model of different policies of the EU and its members towards the PRC that are shown by the examples of Britain's special responsibilities for Hong Kong, the diplomatic failure of Denmark and the Netherlands in 1997, and the Airbus deals of France. In Germany's case, it seems that a separation of responsibilities has been established between Foreign Secretary Joschka Fischer, who concentrates on matters such as environmental protection or human rights records, while Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in his two visits to China tried to appease his Chinese partners (after the NATO bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade), while at the same time doing his best to promote trade, economic co-operation, and investment.

Smaller European nations states are obviously trying to avoid the typical pitfalls in relations with China in order, first, to promote their economic relations with an interesting but difficult market for most of their companies. While they have on average been able to stabilize diplomatic relations and increase their trade balances, they have obviously been reluctant to challenge China over political issues. It may thus be expected that they will more or less smoothly follow the general outlines of the EU's China policy in the years to come.

### *Conclusion*

No matter what specific roles different European countries play within Europe, they all share the notion of China's growing importance in international relations. They thus accept that China is a necessary partner if it comes to problems of managing global problems such as arms proliferation, environmental protection, technological development, immigration, drug trafficking and sustainable economic stability. Above all, however, China is regarded as a major partner in helping Europe become more competitive towards both the United States and Japan.

But the diplomatic relations of major European countries towards China are characterized by the lesson that even the most studied policy of

treading softly to win business can backfire if China decides that it has been offended. Almost all European countries have experiences, frustrations and fears of this kind. Their inability to co-ordinate more closely their respective foreign policy towards China gives Chinese reactions much leeway and renders European countries an easy catch – easy to read, easy to manipulate and difficult to take seriously in the long run.

While the EU has been consolidating and strengthening its common China policy, different and important national policies do exist and allow China an ever more active policy of trade-offs with different European partners. Europe still has a long way to go before the vision of a common foreign and security policy becomes a reality.