



New
Direction

CHINA'S CHANGING PLACE IN THE WORLD



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1

INTRODUCTION

China has been one of the great international surprises of the 21st century in economics, trade, and even culture. From a developing country in the 20th century, China has become an aspiring, if not already leading, global power, striving for economic and political hegemony. This shift presents a new challenge for former strategic powers, including the European Union (EU). Many voices today argue that the global axis is rapidly shifting from the West, led by the U.S., to the East, with China at the forefront.¹

However, focusing solely on China would be a mistake, as India is another rising power that could pose a significant challenge if the West fails to forge closer ties with this “potential power.” What is clear is that the West is losing its hegemony to a strengthening East, whose productive, human, and strategic values differ from those embraced by over 50 Western-culture countries.²

There are, on the other hand, other articles that refer to this change as “oscillating.”³ On one hand, China is achieving economic success and positioning in the global order despite its “ambivalence” and threatening foreign policy techniques. On the other hand, the European Union or the United States, aware of the threat this shift poses to their position on the world stage, do not seem to be successfully repositioning themselves in relation to the East.

In economic terms, China is second only to the U.S. in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and has grown by an average of 10% annually for two decades, while the EU has slowed to 5%. Moreover, China is the world’s largest importer, exporter, and holder of foreign exchange reserves.⁴

These economic facts radiate growth into other spheres, elevating China’s importance in trade policies, cultural influence, and its role in developing countries. These are areas the EU and other global actors must monitor strategically.

Two main positions, which will be exemplified throughout this report, emerge from this situation: one sees China’s rise as a threat to Western values, while the other advocates for strengthening ties and build strategic alliances with a country poised to lead the global economy by 2030.⁵

There remain many uncertainties regarding China’s role in the world, ranging from economic policies to diplomatic relations, cultural influence or productive models, to name a few. The EU, as before, faces a critical choice about its future: Should it form a strategic alliance with China, risking Western values, or strive to maintain its relevance as a global player without such an alliance?

1 Llera, M. (2016).

2 Editorial team, Etecé (2023).

3 Llera, M. (2016).

4 Muñoz, M. (2012).

5 Llera, M. (2016).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the United States faces a decisive election that will shape the future of its 50 states, the European Union grapples with long-standing economic and social instability, and Russia remains entangled in the chaos of war. Meanwhile, China, under the political stability afforded by its totalitarian system, continues to play an increasingly dominant role on the global political map, as well as in trade and economic relations with other countries.

The European Union, the United States, and much of the Western world must not, and cannot, lack the necessary foresight to confront a “giant” that appears intent on absorbing many of the economic, commercial, and even cultural practices embedded within Western borders.

This report, therefore, aims first to provide an introduction that clarifies not only China’s current situation but also its relationships with other countries. It will then delve into the historical context of China’s development during the second half of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century.

As the third point, and with the intention of offering a more thorough understanding of selected aspects, the report will reflect on China’s foreign policies, in order to understand the rationale behind its current relationships. It will also examine China’s participation in major international organizations, as well as its parallel relationships with key world powers.

Continuing with the structure outlined in the table of contents, “China’s economic paradox” is a key focus: illustrating how the country’s production model, despite operating under a communist regime, continues to surpass expectations for economic growth each year. Additionally, it will explore the contradictions between the state’s control over the economy and its efforts to open the Chinese market to the global system, as well as the compatibility between a totalitarian regime and an economic liberalization model. This report aims to explore how China leverages its commercial capacity to shape its policies and relationships with other international actors and how it can influence the internal decisions of many Western countries.

The sixth point will focus on China’s cultural influence, examining how it has exported, and continues to export, its traditions and culture through *soft power*, promoting a favorable international framework for itself.

Finally, the report will draw the most relevant conclusions and review the challenges and opportunities facing China’s economic growth, its role in global issues such as climate change, industrial and productive sustainability, and the impact of China’s policies on the European economy and strategic security.

3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As with every event, circumstance, or situation, nothing can be fully understood without context, without a past, without a preceding situation. The case of China today, as a player on the international stage, is no exception to this reality. It is therefore necessary to explore the intricacies of Chinese history, a history that showcases the strengths of a country which, in a remarkably short time, has challenged the United States for global leadership—a position the U.S. has held for more than a century.

Some authors argue that China's rise as an aspiring world power began during the long process of the Cold War and World War II⁶. This was a time when major economic and political powers like the United States and Russia were locked in conflict and preoccupied with their own struggles. Meanwhile, China was developing a more open model for the international market and diplomatic relations.

Before diving deeper, it is important to consider the statistics that represent China—or, as many now call it, the “Asian giant”⁷—to grasp the complexity of such a vast society. According

to the latest data from Countryeconomy⁸, China covers an area of 9,600,013 km² and is home to more than 1.4 billion inhabitants. This presents a significant challenge for any state, as sociodemographic differences within each region of China vary greatly.

China's gross domestic product (GDP) positions it as the world's second-largest economy, trailing only the United States. In 2023, its GDP reached 16,456,685 million euros, and in the first quarter of 2024, the rising trend continued, with an annual growth of 4.6%, as shown in the graph below. However, on an individual level, the GDP per capita is 11,657 euros—a notable disparity when compared to countries like Spain (30,320 euros) or the United States (75,866 euros).⁹ This highlights a disconnect between China's global economic ranking and the standard of living of its citizens. In other words, there is little correlation between the increase in GDP and the economic well-being of Chinese citizens, as seen in other countries. Indeed, according to the Human Development Index¹⁰ compiled by the United Nations, China ranks 79th out of 196 countries analyzed.

6 Cancelado Franco, H., & Alejo Aristizábal, D. (2021).

7 Merino, G., Billes, J. & Barrenengoa, A. (2022).

8 China: economics and demographics. <https://countryeconomy.com/countries/china>

9 Country comparison Spain vs United States. <https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/spain/usa>

10 HDI: China. <https://countryeconomy.com/hdi/china>

FIGURE 1
Top 10 Countries by Nominal GDP as of Q1 2024.

Top 10 Countries by Nominal GDP as of Q1 2024				
Country	Nominal GDP (in trillions)	PPP Adjusted GDP (in trillions)	Annual Growth (%)	GDP Per Capita
United States	\$28.78	\$28.78	2.7	85,370
China	\$18.53	\$35.29	4.6	13,140
Germany	\$4.59	\$5.69	0.2	54,290
Japan	\$4.11	\$6.72	0.9	33,140
India	\$3.94	\$14.59	6.8	2,730
United Kingdom	\$3.5	\$4.03	0.5	51,070
France	\$3.13	\$3.99	0.7	47,360
Brazil	\$2.33	\$4.27	2.2	11,350
Italy	\$2.33	\$3.35	0.7	39,580
Canada	\$2.24	\$2.47	1.2	54,870

Source: Investopedia 2024.

All this data, as mentioned earlier, is not simply the result of global trends—though their influence is undeniable—but stems from an extensive Chinese political strategy developed over many years and across various sectors. Unlike countries such as Great Britain in the early 20th century, China has pursued its own policies of territorial and demographic sovereignty¹¹, which authors Blackwill and Harris, in their book *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, refer to as “geoeconomics”. This approach has allowed China to establish itself as a leading global actor.

These expansive policies began at the end of the so-called Century of Humiliation,¹² a period lasting over 100 years that continues to shape Chinese political discourse. Key events such as the First Opium War (1839–1842), in which Great Britain played a significant role, and the loss of control over the Yangtze River, were pivotal in reshaping China’s political, strategic, economic, and commercial trajectory.

In 1949, during World War II, the Chinese Civil War concluded, resulting in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gaining power, a position it still holds today. Some authors argue that the CCP has used the Century of Humiliation narrative to legitimize its authoritarian rule,¹³ a narrative that has kept the

Party central to China’s international ambitions and its support among the Chinese populace.

Mao Zedong, leader of the Communist Party at the end of the Chinese Civil War, proclaimed the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Since then, as previously mentioned, the Century of Humiliation has served as a rhetorical tool. With the establishment of the new government, Mao implemented the necessary reforms to achieve the unification and reconstruction that China desperately needed.

As with any totalitarian system, the use of coercive force is fundamental, and the People’s Liberation Army became the primary instrument for consolidating the power of the new communist state. Its institutional presence was so pervasive that China itself was divided into military regions,¹⁴ granting the military significant influence. Essentially, the armed forces acted as an extension of the state government at the regional level, ensuring, among other things, the supremacy of the Communist Party.

While the establishment of any state requires the acquisition and control of territory, it also necessitates the material force to exercise that control. After the Civil War and the Communist

Party’s victory, China had achieved this foundational step. However, as the following section of this report will elaborate, economic recovery was an urgent need for the new government. One of its first actions was to establish diplomatic relations with ideological counterparts in Europe and Asia.

The Soviet Union was one of the first countries with which the Chinese communist government expanded relations. This was largely a consequence of China’s poor relations with most Western countries, stemming from ideological and economic differences.¹⁵

In this context, the Soviet Union provided China with productive models and loans, helping its ideological ally implement the necessary economic and industrial reforms. Among Mao Zedong’s controversial reforms at the time was the well-known land reform of the Republic of China.

The agrarian reform involved a significant degree of confiscation and redistribution of land from large landowners, aiming to give more people access to land for agricultural and livestock production. However, the confiscation was far from peaceful; official data indicates that at least one million landowners died during the reform’s implementation.¹⁶

Many other reforms accompanied the new state Mao Zedong was establishing, such as progressive changes in marriage laws benefiting women and efforts to combat opium addiction. Some of these reforms received societal recognition, while others were met with rejection, leading to the use of force, a characteristic of totalitarian regimes. Expansionist or quasi-colonial policies also became a point of international debate, driven by the Chinese government’s desire to restore its territorial integrity. This included the annexation of Hainan Island, the Tibet region, and aspirations to occupy territories like Mongolia and Taiwan.¹⁷ The latter remains a point of military tension between the two autonomous governments (Taiwan and China) and the broader international community.¹⁸

Tibet was one of the earliest incorporations into China, serving as a demonstration of China’s international ambitions and its determination to reposition itself in global politics. The Seventeen-Point Agreement guaranteed Tibet’s autonomy but imposed Chinese government control similar to that in other Chinese regions¹⁹.

As mentioned above, China also aimed to extend its political influence over Taiwan, a move that would significantly impact its future international relations. Just as China prepared for an invasion of Taiwan, the Korean War broke out, with North Korea invading South Korea, triggering United Nations protocols.²⁰ At the same time, the United States began deploying troops in support of South Korea, backed by the UN Security Council, which organized a multinational force—including major powers like France, Great Britain, and Canada—to confront North Korea.

The war between North and South Korea heightened U.S. concerns about the spread of communist ideology, policies, and strategic interests from China and the Soviet Union. As a result, the United States decided to “fortify” Taiwan to prevent the expansion of the People’s Liberation Army. Since the mid-20th century, the U.S. has aimed to curb China’s influence or, more precisely, its attempts to influence other international actors.²¹

These events, shaped by the post-World War II needs of various powers, marked a shift in historical developments. China began to experience Western pressure from the U.S., which sought to block its access to new territories like Taiwan to prevent the spread of its ideological influence. Consequently, relations between Mao Zedong’s China and Stalin’s Soviet Union had to become even closer and more cooperative.²²

At this point, Mao Zedong, according to various analysts,²³ seized the perfect opportunity to implement another hallmark of his government. Alongside raising awareness of the need for military readiness, Mao initiated massive social mobilization campaigns. This was crucial for such a totalitarian or authoritarian system, where the regime’s power depends heavily on its security forces and requires a message that resonates with society to maintain public attention.

Mao Zedong became one of the key architects of large-scale social mobilization campaigns, which helped him gain public support for many of his actions and shape citizens’ views on international western actors such as the United States.

The above-mentioned is well illustrated in this poster from the 1950s, where the Chinese government depicts the United States as a child killer while also showing the country being destroyed by missiles. In this instance, the translation of the phrase on the poster is unknown.

11 Merino, G., Bilmes, J. & Barrenengoa, A. (2022).

12 Cancelado Franco, H., & Alejo Aristizábal, D. (2021).

13 Cancelado Franco, H., & Alejo Aristizábal, D. (2021).

14 Tosi, S. J. (2024).

15 Bustelo, P., & Fernández, Y. (1999).

16 Liu, G. (2011).

17 Zedong, M. (1939).

18 BBC News World (2024).

19 Fregenal, M. E. (2020).

20 Musa, M. N. (2024).

21 De Los Reyes, M. (1996).

22 Vergara, J. J. B. (2005).

23 Bech, J. A. (2003), Valiente, M. S. and Evans, H., & Usabiaga, M. (1982).

FIGURE 2
Chinese propaganda poster in 1950-1053, Korean War.



Source: Alpha History (2018).²⁴

From this point onward, the growing discrepancies and distancing from Western powers, led by the U.S., became one of the main discursive strategies of the Chinese government. One of the first steps in advancing this agenda was to produce propaganda aimed at convincing citizens of the dangers posed by the West.

“Resist America, help Korea; protect home and nation” is another example of the messaging that reflected the Chinese administration’s motivations against its enemies—namely, the United States and its Western media sphere.

FIGURE 3
Chinese propaganda poster in 1950-1953, Korean War.



Source: Unknown (n.d.).

The purpose of these actions was also to control the citizenry by identifying possible spies, infiltrators, or counterrevolutionaries who were considered enemies of the Chinese cause—namely, enemies of the new socialist state and the class struggle that, according to Zedong in 1967,²⁵ had already been resolved in industrial matters. As is common in totalitarian regimes,²⁶ control over the governed population was essential, so that citizens would voluntarily become part of the internal surveillance apparatus. Thus, examining the communication strategies used by the Chinese government during Mao Zedong’s rule is crucial.

Chronologically, Mao Zedong, aware of the resistance posed by certain social groups to the broader expansion of revolutionary ideas, initiated three major mass mobilization campaigns in late 1951 and early 1952 to spread Chinese Communist Party ideas throughout all levels of society.

The first of them was the so-called Three-Anti Campaign. This campaign targeted communist cadres who were drifting away from revolutionary ideals and beginning to suggest rapprochement with capitalist tendencies within China and from international actors.²⁷ The name “Three-Anti,” like the later “Five-Anti,” refers to the number of objectives opposed by the campaign. In this case, the campaign focused on anti-corruption, anti-waste, and anti-bureaucracy—key issues that had propelled the Chinese Communist Party to power.

Secondly, the Five-Anti Campaign targeted the wealthy bourgeois class, who were closely associated with capitalism—an ideology in direct opposition to communism. This campaign focused on the following objectives:

- Anti-bribery
- Anti-theft of state property
- Anti-tax evasion
- Anti-cheating in government contracts
- Anti-stealing state economic intelligence

These campaigns, along with others mentioned earlier, led to the total control not only of China’s productive sectors but also of intellectual, social, and media spheres. Chinese society began to understand the government’s harsh approach to disloyalty to revolutionary ideals and to the Chinese Communist Party.

Continuing with the key milestones of Mao Zedong’s presidency, the five-year plans have played, and continue to play, a critical role in shaping China’s economic and social policies. After the Korean War ended in 1953, while mass mobilization campaigns remained prevalent, China found an essential ally in the Soviet Union for its economic and policy development. Chinese leaders sought to model their productive strategies on those already implemented by their Soviet neighbors.

The Chinese government adopted a planned economy, where decisions on what goods and services to produce, in what quantity, and at what price were determined by the central bureaucracy. China focused this model on heavy industries and agriculture, with five-year growth targets. The first of many five-year plans was set for the period from 1953 to 1957, although its full implementation did not begin until 1955.²⁸

Economic stability and strong support from the Soviet Union were key factors that helped China gradually realize its ambitions of economic growth and industrial prominence on the international stage. However, internal tensions within the government and society also demanded the government’s attention.

Mao Zedong initiated a process of centralizing power within the government. In response to the influence of commanders in the six military regions, established after the Communist Revolution, Mao restructured China into 23 regions or provinces, five autonomous regions, and two municipalities (Shanghai and Beijing), removing military control and placing them under the Central Government. Despite minor changes, this model remains in place today.²⁹

It’s worth noting that China has long been an agriculturally focused country, and with the first Five-Year Plan, agriculture was central to the economy. The large estates that had been divided into smaller private units were grouped into cooperatives to distribute resources more equitably.

The success of land collectivization between 1955 and 1957, as mentioned earlier, aimed a strong alliance with the poor and middle peasantry. According to historian Eric Hobsbawm, 84% of small landowners peacefully accepted collectivization in less than a year, avoiding the violent outcomes seen in the Soviet Union’s experience.³⁰

However, this economic progress was short-lived. By the end of the first Five-Year Plan in 1957, the government introduced the second Five-Year Plan, known as the Great Leap Forward. This

25 Muntaner Marqués, M. (2017).

26 Schoenfeld, J. M. G., & Ramos, E. P. R. (2022).

27 Chen, T. H. E., & Chen, W. H. C. (1953).

28 Capilla, H. B., & de Ágreda, Á. G. (2010).

29 IV. State, Political System and Administrative Division (2009).

30 Merino, G. E., Bilmes, J., & Barrenengoa, A. (2021).

24 Alpha History (2018).

plan, in effect from 1958 to 1962, aimed to further industrialize China, emulating the Soviet Union's planned economy. But China lacked the technological and industrial capabilities of the Soviet Union, and societal approval for agricultural cooperatives waned. Even within the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party,³¹ there was no consensus on continuing with these policies.

The implementation of the second Five-Year Plan had disastrous consequences for China, which can be summarized in three major issues. First, relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated as it demanded interest on loans given to China for economic and industrial development. Moreover, after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's rise to power, the Soviet Union shifted toward less revolutionary ideas, further straining relations.³² Second, the reforms implemented between 1958 and 1961 were riddled with errors, including failures in cultivation techniques and the mismanagement of production quotas.³³

Lastly, China's ambition to become an industrial power led to numerous fatalities, both in factories and rural areas. Workers, untrained for industrial labor, died in unsafe working conditions, while agricultural workers were forced into sectors

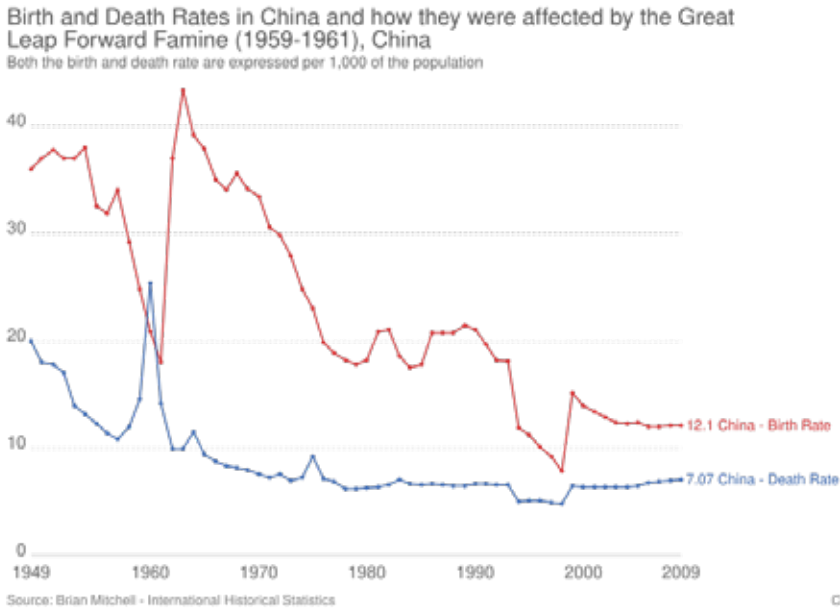
like steel production,³⁴ resulting in widespread death and suffering.

The failed agricultural policies and the lack of proper technology for industrial advancement caused a severe famine, leading to millions of deaths.

In summary, the Great Leap Forward Famine resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian disaster, exacerbated by poor planning, mismanagement, and brutal repression. By the end of the second Five-Year Plan in 1962, Chinese president Liu Shaoqi warned Mao Zedong that “history will record the role you and I played in the starvation of so many people, and cannibalism will also be remembered.”³⁵

The following graph illustrates the disproportionate impact on births and deaths of the second Five-Year Plan compared to the rest of China's 20th-century trend. The graph shows that after the Great Leap Forward Famine of the late 1950s to early 1960s, when birth rates plummeted and death rates soared to a peak, the Chinese population began to grow again. The birth rate reached a peak of over 4% before 1965, while the death rate dropped to its lowest levels.

FIGURE 4
Ratio of births and deaths in China since 1949.



Source: Brian Mitchell - International Historical Statistics³⁶

After these alarming figures were presented to the top government officials, Mao Zedong was forced to resign as China's head of state, although he retained his position as chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. Liu Shaoqi assumed the role of head of state.

The main mission of the new leadership was to restore economic growth. At the well-known 7000 Cadres Conference in 1962,³⁷ the new leaders expressed this intention. However, Mao's diminished influence spurred his followers to launch

campaigns aimed at returning him to power. One such campaign was the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution had special significance for two reasons. First, the People's Liberation Army supported Mao, as its influence depended on his continued power. Second, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, a well-known actress and influential social figure, played a key role in rallying support for the campaign.³⁸ The campaign's goals were twofold: the social, political, and intellectual delegitimization of the new Chinese leadership and the consolidation of Mao's position as the undisputed leader.³⁹

FIGURE 5
Mao Zedong, above a group of soldiers from the People's Liberation Army.



Source: Stefan Landsberger's Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages

The Cultural Revolution also aimed to prevent capitalist interference, both domestic and foreign. Through strict control of art, education, and the media, the Chinese government censored and influenced nearly every aspect of society. As a result, Mao strengthened his connection with and admiration from the Chinese population.

Another important aspect was the creation of the Red Guard, a group of young men tasked with enforcing ideological conformity across all sectors of society, regardless of economic or social status. This period marked one of the most violent phases of Mao's rule, as the Red Guard sought to erase bourgeois influences from history, art, and literature.⁴⁰

While the Cultural Revolution faced growing opposition from within the government, international relations took on new importance - more out of convenience than political sympathies-. In the 1970s, as China emerged as a nuclear power, it established diplomatic ties with countries such as Italy (1970), the United Kingdom (1972), and Spain (1973).⁴¹ In 1971, the U.S. lifted its veto on China's admission to the United Nations⁴², marking a shift in China's global status.

However, Mao Zedong's death in September 1976, and the subsequent imprisonment of his closest allies, including his wife, led to the end of the Cultural Revolution.⁴³

31 García, C. (2023).
32 Kiss, T. (2023).
33 Garcia, C. (2023).
34 Mirsky, J. (2012).
35 Mirsky, J. (2012).
36 Our World in Data (n.d.).

37 MacFarquhar, R. (1974).
38 Smink, V. (2021).
39 BBC News World (2016).
40 The Cultural Revolution: from the 16-point document to the violence of the Red Guards (2020).
41 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation (2023).
42 General Assembly Resolutions 2758 - 26th Session (n.d.). <https://www.un.org/es/documents/ag/res/26/ares26.htm>
43 The Cultural Revolution: from the 16-point document to the violence of the Red Guards (2020).

In summary, mid-20th century China, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, experienced international isolation, widespread famine, and political purges, which had devastating effects on all levels of society. The end of the Cultural Revolution brought the need for a new leader who would either continue Mao's legacy or regenerate a state struggling for survival.

With Mao's death, China had to seek new allies beyond the Soviet Union, strengthening relations with Western nations like the U.S., France, and the U.K.

During this leadership transition, Chinese society knew that significant reforms were necessary, regardless of who succeeded Mao. Deng Xiaoping, a well-known figure in the Chinese Communist Party, gradually built support and was eventually appointed the new leader at the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party.

Deng Xiaoping's leadership marked the beginning of the Boluan Fanzheng, a process aimed at "bringing order out of chaos."⁴⁴ This period was crucial for correcting the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution and dismantling Maoist policies across

economic, agricultural, industrial, cultural, and educational spheres. Social reintegration of victims persecuted during the Cultural Revolution also began.⁴⁵

The Boluan Fanzheng period introduced reforms that modernized and democratized China's political structure, shifting away from ideological extremism toward more rational and pragmatic policies.

This transformative period laid the foundation for the historic economic and political reforms of Deng Xiaoping's leadership, beginning in late 1978. These reforms modernized China and integrated it into the global economy, allowing the country to become a major world power.⁴⁶

At the 11th Party Congress, Deng presented a document titled *"Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China"*⁴⁷, which assessed Mao Zedong's legacy. While the document blamed the top Maoist leadership for the consequences of the Cultural Revolution, it also credited Mao for his contributions to the development of Chinese society, politics, and the economy.



44 Leese, D. (2023).
45 Leese, D. (2023).
46 Wang, X. (2020).
47 Zhongguo, J. (2015).

CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Having traced the path from the mid-20th century to the mid-1970s, it becomes clear that with the arrival of Deng Xiaoping, the Maoist era began to recede, making way for economic, political, and social reforms. In this context, China's foreign policy has become an intriguing subject

of study. Despite significant differences with the West, China developed early diplomatic relations and established prominent positions within international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization, as mentioned earlier.

Context and topicality of China's foreign policy.

This report has aimed to provide a broad and comprehensive context on China's recent history to better understand the rationale behind its diplomatic relations today. Given China's continuous positive development in its economy, politics, and society, this and subsequent sections will summarize the key issues involved in describing China's current actions, characteristics, and relations with other international players.

Before discussing China's relations with major world powers, it is essential to first establish the foundations of China's international relations with other states and organizations.

China has consistently adhered to principles of independence and self-determination. As outlined earlier in this document, China has never subordinated itself to any power or bloc and continues to maintain an independent stance in international affairs, as evidenced by its actions at the United Nations.⁴⁸

Former Chinese Ambassador to Argentina, Li Guoxing, emphasized that China strictly follows the five principles of peaceful coexistence, which include mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-intervention, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.⁴⁹

As a result, China advocates for resolving conflicts internally without external interference and believes that state relations should be based on these principles rather than on social or ideological alignment.

It is also important to note that China remains, to a significant extent, a country with large rural areas, where about 39% of the population still lives.⁵⁰ Unlike the rural populations of Western countries like Spain, France, or Australia, many in China's rural regions live under very low economic conditions, with over 372 million people surviving on less than 2,000 euros per year. These figures indicate that China still has considerable room for growth and development, tying it closely to developing nations or regions that are similarly focused on economic progress.⁵¹

In addition to its guiding principles, other aspects of foreign policy objectives define China's role as an international actor and help explain its actions. One primary objective is territorial reunification, most notably in its ongoing attempts to assert sovereignty over Taiwan, a conflict that has persisted for over 70 years.⁵²

China's foreign policy has also been used by various governments, including the current one, to overcome internal resistance—whether from the conservative side of the Communist Party or the more progressive wing—and to advance the economic development model discussed later. A prime example is China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO),⁵³ which allowed it to integrate more deeply into the global economy while providing a pretext for scaling back policies favoring the public sector.⁵⁴

China's entry into the WTO in 2001 marked a turning point in its economic and foreign policy, as the Asian power opened up

48 Villalón, L. (2024).
49 Guoxing, L (n.d.).
50 Index Mundi (2020).
51 Guoxing, L (n.d.).
52 Padinger, G. (2024).
53 Adhikari, R. (2002).
54 Esteban, M. (2009).

to an organization with a strong Western agenda.⁵⁵ This move was presented as an opportunity to modernize and strengthen the Chinese economy, with the promise that greater openness to international trade would bring substantial benefits.

These reforms included the privatization of numerous state-owned enterprises, such as Air China or China Mobile,⁵⁶ reducing government control over several economic sectors, and opening the Chinese market to foreign competition. The WTO served as the justification for these measures, allowing China to improve labor market efficiency and increase productivity in state-linked companies by 70%.⁵⁷

China's WTO integration also prompted a series of legislative and regulatory changes that facilitated foreign investment and fostered competition in the domestic market, further advancing the openness process that began in the late 1970s under Xiaoping.

As mentioned, diplomatic relations with China have historically been grounded in national sovereignty. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) champions a foreign policy that reflects the values of Chinese nationalism. Anti-imperialism, a key element of China's international stance, has been a consistent and enduring factor in its foreign relations, especially with Southern nations and Japan. China's relations with these countries focus on building alliances based on mutual cooperation and respect for sovereignty, distancing itself from perceived Western interventionism.⁵⁸

This strategy positions China as a leader among developing nations, promoting an image as a defender of countries historically exploited or dominated by foreign powers. By strengthening ties with nations that share a history of colonization or foreign intervention, China creates a network of support that aligns with its geopolitical and economic goals, fostering diplomatic relations that go beyond mere interests.⁵⁹

Additionally, the CCP uses anti-imperialism as a tool to challenge Western interventionist policies. By opposing foreign interference in internal affairs, China seeks to limit Western influence, as seen in recent tensions with the EU over tariffs on Chinese-manufactured electric vehicles.⁶⁰

These guidelines and objectives are crafted by a specialized group that highlights the importance of international relations for the Chinese government. High-ranking officials dominate the formulation of foreign and security policy, and within the CCP, factions represent varying degrees of openness to the West. The so-called leftists⁶¹ remain reluctant to collaborate closely with the West and Japan due to ideological and economic differences, while the technocrats handle technical matters with less ideological bias, including foreign policy. Lastly, the democrats favor more participatory approaches with the West, Taiwan, and Japan.⁶²

Government leadership also plays a significant role in China's foreign policy decisions. President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang ultimately determine the country's stance on international conflicts and relations with global actors.

These two elements of China's political system—factions within the CCP and the central leadership—have established a foreign policy that has produced significant milestones, such as the 2014 U.S.-China agreement on climate change⁶³ and China's recent veto of a U.S.-drafted resolution at the UN Security Council.⁶⁴

As seen throughout this document and various sources⁶⁵ China's foreign policy is guided by two main objectives. The first is to recover territories that China has historically considered its own since the era of Mao Zedong. The second is to reposition itself as a major economic and industrial power on the global stage.⁶⁶

During Deng Xiaoping's leadership, China had already emerged as one of the strongest economies globally, reaching the second-largest position, just behind the United States. This achievement not only improved domestic economic indicators but also solidified China's role in major international organizations, increasing its global influence. This development has been crucial in enabling China to pursue its foreign policy objectives. Now, as a world power with an extensive network of diplomatic and economic relations, Xi Jinping faces a very different reality from his predecessors.

While previous leaders adopted policies of openness and dialogue, Xi Jinping has used China's current position to further its goals of reaching the top global rank and expanding sovereignty.⁶⁷ China has regained confidence in its global standing, which is reflected in Xi's policies.

Long-standing issues, such as the disputes over Taiwan and Tibet, remain central to China's foreign policy. In Tibet, China has justified its control over religious and cultural minorities as part of its sovereignty claims.⁶⁸ Regarding Taiwan, Xi Jinping has repeatedly expressed his intention to regain sovereignty over the island⁶⁹ and insists that any dialogue with Taiwan's government must focus exclusively on reunification. Through a clear foreign policy, China has increased pressure on governments, institutions, and companies to withdraw recognition of Taiwan as an independent state, threatening economic and even military consequences for non-compliance.⁷⁰

This strategy has yielded positive results for China's government. Since 2016, major corporations like Inditex and Delta Airlines⁷¹ have stopped recognizing Taiwan as an independent country, succumbing to Chinese pressure. Additionally, five countries, including Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador,

China and international organizations

China is a full member of key international organizations that play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy relations for international actors.

Regarding the United Nations, China holds membership in all institutional bodies and has a permanent seat on the Security Council, one of the most influential branches of the UN. Despite early disputes after the Communist victory in China over legitimate representation at the UN, the CCP secured recognition of the People's Republic of China as the legitimate representative through United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, also known as the Resolution on Admitting Peking. Within the UN, China has frequently used its veto power to promote its national and international interests, while also supporting numerous initiatives related to development, cooperation, and peace-building.⁷⁴

have severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Xi's approach has been clear and effective.

These actions demonstrate how China leverages its economic power to shape the international stance on Taiwan. Through a combination of threats and diplomacy, China has advanced its agenda, isolating Taiwan both diplomatically and economically.⁷²

This section illustrates how China's foreign policy is driven by two primary objectives, supported by well-defined principles and values that have yielded favorable results for the country. Moreover, with the apparent retreat of the United States from its role as a global hegemon, China is positioning itself as the main proponent of globalization. Xi Jinping seeks to lead major international projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to establish a new infrastructure network connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe. Launched in 2013, this project has significant geopolitical implications, potentially shifting the balance away from the dominant transatlantic alliance and positioning China at the center of international dynamics.⁷³ This is a critical issue for international organizations, including the European Union, which will have to assume a pivotal role in shaping the future of its Member States in this scenario.

There are several examples that reflect China's commitment to certain UN objectives:

- The China-UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, established in 2016, where China pledged \$200 million over ten years. In 2020, President Xi Jinping announced the fund's extension beyond 2025 for an additional five years.⁷⁵
- China has also become a significant contributor to UN peacekeeping missions. In 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the UN, China became the second-largest contributor to the peacekeeping budget, further supporting a new UN Peace and Development Fund.

55 Adhikari, R. (2002).

56 Liy, M. V. (2015).

57 De La Cruz, D. S. (2024).

58 Esteban, M. (2009).

59 Esteban, M. (2009).

60 De La Cal, L. (2024).

61 Esteban, M. (2009).

62 Esteban, M. (2009).

63 Redacción El Mundo (2014).

64 Sánchez-Vallejo, M. A. (2024).

65 Ballesteros, A. (2023).

66 Ballesteros, A. (2023).

67 Ballesteros, A. (2023).

68 Sánchez, R. (2021).

69 Reuters (2024).

70 De La Cal, L. (2022).

71 Fontdeglòria, X. (2018).

72 Ballesteros, A. (2023).

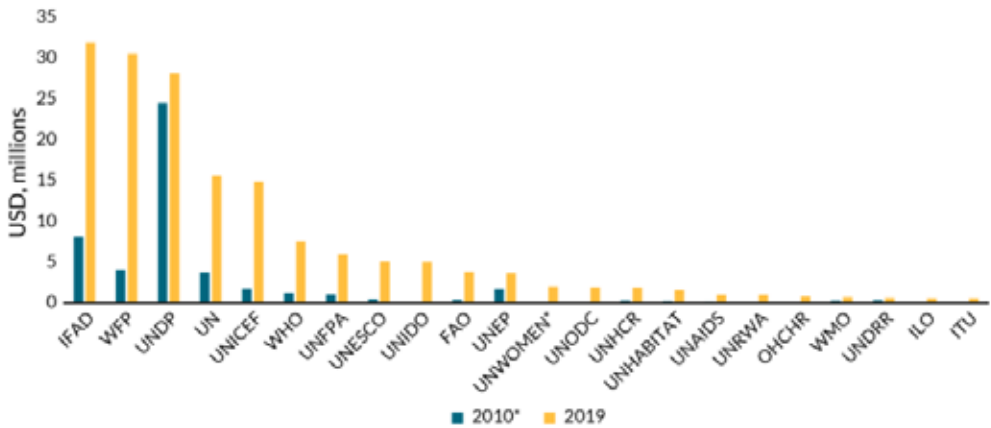
73 Ballesteros, A. (2023).

74 Bureau of Diplomatic Information (2024).

75 United Nations (n.d.).

Thus, China’s voluntary funding to United Nations entities dedicated to development increased by 250% between 2010 and 2019. Particularly noteworthy are the increases in China’s contributions to IFAD and WFP, as can be seen in the chart.

FIGURE 6
China increased its voluntary UN contributions, almost across the board but notably to agriculture-oriented entities.



Source: Center For Global Development.⁷⁶

In this sense, there are some examples that reflect China’s commitment to the different objectives of the United Nations⁷⁷.

While China’s involvement in peacekeeping and its promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) suggest an apparent commitment to multilateralism, it is crucial to note the contradictions. China’s economic model, which has driven its rise, has also made it the world’s largest emitter of CO2, according to the latest data from Countryeconomy. This raises questions about its genuine dedication to sustainability and environmental goals⁷⁸.

China has also been a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2001, as mentioned above. This membership has an important relevance as it includes among its competencies the facilitation of the negotiation of trade agreements, as well as the resolution of trade disputes. This factor is important for a China that has as a recurrent tool the application of trade sanctions against different countries. Thus, a recent case that the WTO is seeking to resolve is the case of the sanctions applied to Lithuania by the Chinese government.

Therefore, the international community should pay close attention to China’s actions in the coming years, as this increase reflects the growing interest among Chinese policymakers in the role of food and agriculture worldwide.

China has been a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2001, as mentioned earlier. This membership is significant because the WTO facilitates trade agreements and resolves disputes—key tools for China, which frequently imposes trade sanctions on other countries. A recent example is the sanctions applied by China against Lithuania, currently under WTO review.⁷⁹

China is also a member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), joining officially in the 1970s with a low quota, but has since increased its influence as its economy has grown.⁸⁰

While China is represented in many other organizations, its membership in the World Health Organization (WHO) is noteworthy. Within WHO, China has historically played an important role. In April 1945, during the Constitutive Conference of the United Nations held in San Francisco, Chinese representatives, accompanied by those of Brazil, proposed the creation of an international organization in the field of health and the convening of a conference to draft its constitution⁸¹. Since that time, China has had an important link with the actions of this organization. However, over the past few years, given the COVID-19 landscape and its relationship with

the United States under Donald Trump, China’s performance in terms of transparency in providing rigorous health data and updates on the COVID-19 Pandemic has been highly questioned, an issue that raised the Trump Administration’s criticism of the Asian country.⁸²

Finally, China is part of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which promotes economic, political, and cultural cooperation among its members. Originally coined as BRIC in 2001 by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O’Neill, the term described economies with the potential for rapid growth that could contribute significantly to global economic development.⁸³

China played a key role in the creation of the New Development Bank, established in 2004 and headquartered in China. This bank focuses on financing various projects in BRICS countries and other developing economies.⁸⁴

While these are the main international organizations where China exerts its economic and political influence, it is also a member of many others, where it is expected to further expand its power at the expense of other global powers. Examples include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the G20, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In conclusion, China’s role in the multilateral arena has evolved, necessitating a reconsideration of the criteria used to assess the scale and scope of its participation. Indeed, through the collection and comparison of financial data, acquisitions, voting records, and other reports provided by major multilateral institutions and development-focused funds, as shown in the previous paragraphs, a clear and cross-institutional comparative view of China’s role in these organizations and how it has changed over the past decade is presented.

In this regard, China’s significant presence in multilateral development organizations today is reflected in five six dimensions:

- China’s economy influences its position in certain areas, with multilateral rules linking shareholding participation and “assessed” contributions primarily to the size of its economy.
- China’s voluntary contributions to these institutions have increased considerably over the past ten years, although this growth has benefited some institutions more than others, as seen in its active and voluntary participation in the BRICs compared to the UN. However, compared to

other major donor countries, China’s overall voluntary contributions still have considerable room for growth.

- Chinese companies have stood out for their ability to secure contracts from multilateral development banks, achieving contracts worth \$7.4 billion in 2019, equivalent to 14% of the total. This success is attributed to institutional rules that favor the lowest bids and their strong presence in the infrastructure sector. However, despite reports of corruption in some contracts, Chinese companies have faced exclusions in certain cases. On the other hand, this situation reflects that their participation in these contracts is carried out within the legal frameworks that include other international actors, as well as within a transparent and rule-based system. In this chart, the detailed figures can be observed:

FIGURE 7
China’s Rank (Contracts Awarded by Value).

China's Rank (Contracts Awarded by Value)										
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
World Bank	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
AfDB	*	*	*	*	*	1	1	1	1	1
IDB	20	30	43	16	3	+	4	15	6	1
ADB	*	*	*	*	*	*	1	1	1	2
ERRD	9	+	12	16	4	4	11	4	18	1

Source: Center For Global Development.⁸⁵

- Along with its growth as a donor and shareholder, the Chinese government has continued to be one of the main clients of multilateral institutions and, until recently, one of the largest borrowers from multilateral development banks (MDBs).
- China has reaped commercial benefits from these institutions, within its broader economic expansion strategy, with its companies (both state-owned and private) ranking among the top beneficiaries of procurement contracts from MDBs each year.
- Additionally, in line with the practices of other influential countries, China has sought to occupy key leadership positions within the multilateral system, which has enhanced its institutional visibility and prominence in its role as the world’s second-largest power.

76 Center For Global Development

77 Fung, C. J. (2023).

78 Countryeconomy.com (n.d.).

79 Ministry of Economy, Trade and Enterprise - China (2023).

80 Muñoz García, D. (2016).

81 World Health Organization. (n.d.).

82 Pardo, P. (2020).

83 Learn about BRICS (n.d.).

84 Murillo Herrera, J. M. (2023).

85 Center For Global Development,

China’s relation with the EU and the US.

European Union – China

The European Union and China established official diplomatic relations in 1975, but they were severed in 1989 following the Tiananmen Square repression.⁸⁶ Relations were re-established in 1994. Today, there is growing economic and geopolitical interdependence, as seen in the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, which covers areas like humanitarian aid, foreign policy, and multilateral trade.

However, relations have deteriorated since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with China adopting a stance that displeased the EU. China’s countermeasures to EU human rights sanctions and differing views on trade have strained the relationship.⁸⁷ Despite these tensions, EU Foreign Ministers and leaders reaffirmed a multifaceted approach to China, identifying it as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival.⁸⁸

The 24th EU-China Summit in December 2023 addressed key issues like bilateral relations, the war in Ukraine, and climate change. The EU focused on trade balance, as China is the EU’s third-largest trading partner. Additionally, the EU has expressed concern over human rights issues in China, particularly regarding arbitrary detentions, labor camps, the death penalty, and the treatment of Uyghur minorities.

One of the latest major events in international diplomacy was the 24th EU-China Summit in December 2023, which addressed key issues such as bilateral relations, the war in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East. Prior to that, high-level sectoral dialogues were held on environment, economy, digitalization and human rights. The EU focused the summit on balancing trade relations, as China ranks as the EU’s third largest trading partner, as well as on other issues such as climate change, and supporting the rules-based international order, while China focused on trade and investment.⁸⁹

On the other hand, the Union, doing justice to the reasons on which its birth, growth and existence are based, has issued up to ten Resolutions and Recommendations to make public its concern about human rights in China. Specifically, several resolutions of the European Parliament refer to arbitrary detentions, the existence of labor camps and the legalization and maintenance of the death penalty, as well as the treatment by government authorities of the Uyghur

minorities.⁹⁰ In the same vein, it has also passed resolutions on Tibet, specifically on the situation of religious and ethnic minorities.

In trade, China is the second largest trading partner of the EU in goods, following the United States, with bilateral trade reaching 739 billion euros in 2023, which represents a significant asset for the Union’s economy. However, these figures indicate a decrease of 14% compared to 2022.

China ranks third as a partner for the EU in exports and is the primary partner in imports. Consequently, the trade balance between the EU and China has consistently favored China, with a deficit of 292 billion euros for the EU in 2023. EU exports to China amounted to 223.6 billion euros, while imports from China totaled 515.9 billion euros, reflecting year-on-year declines of 3.1% and 18%, respectively⁹¹.

However, the dynamic between the challenges and opportunities presented by China has evolved over time. Currently, the economic relationship is notably unbalanced, both in terms of trade flows and investments, due to significant differences in how both countries open their markets. Thus, recent trade disputes have been reflected in tariffs on electric vehicles imported from China.

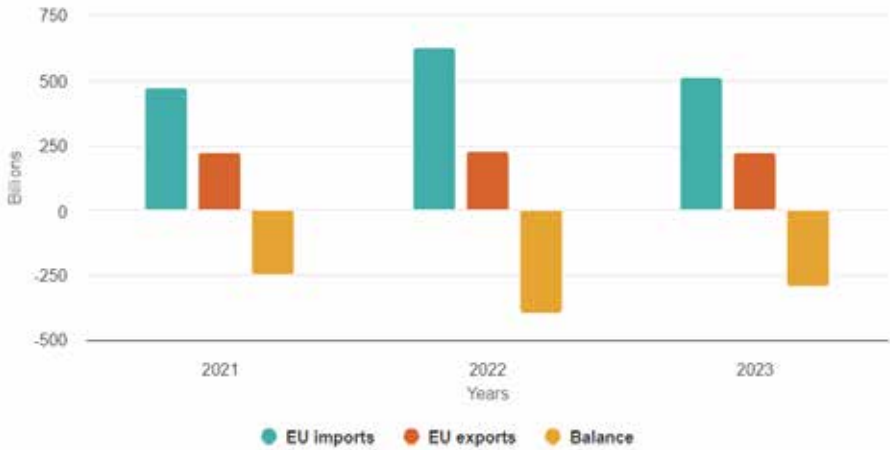
This imbalance results in a situation where China enjoys advantages that are not always available to its trading partners. Additionally, the economic model adopted by China has created market distortions, leading to indirect negative effects for those who trade with it. In fact, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the industrial policies implemented by China, particularly its support for priority sectors, have a considerable impact on its trading partners, further complicating the economic relationship.

Focusing on each of the three trade sectors with China: goods, services, and investments. It should be specified that the EU has had a significant trade deficit with China for a long time, reaching a record of 396 billion euros in 2022. Although this deficit decreased to 292 billion euros in 2023, it remains the second largest in the history of their bilateral relations. While the value of imports from China has declined, the volume has reportedly increased. In 2023, the main goods imported by the EU from China included telecommunications equipment,

electrical machinery, and automatic data processing machines. Conversely, the top exports from the EU to China that year

were cars and vehicles, pharmaceuticals, and other types of machinery⁹².

FIGURE 8
Trade in goods, in billions of euros.

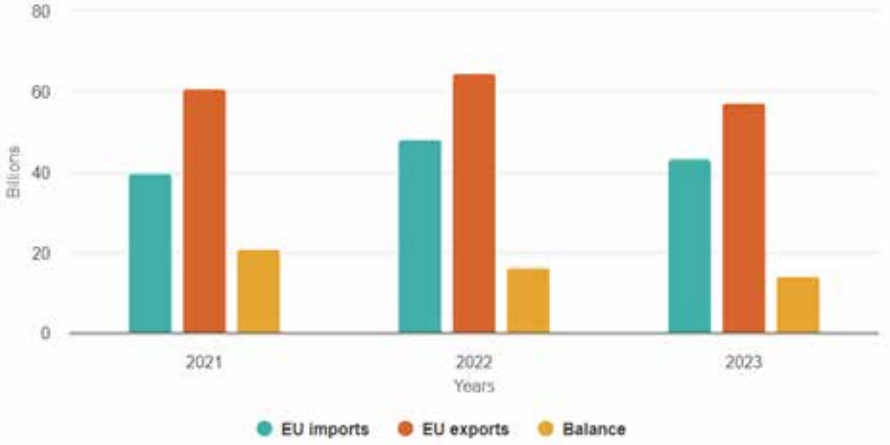


Source: EU trade relations with China. Facts, figures and latest developments, European Commission (2024).

Regarding services trade, the EU has maintained a trade surplus with China for a considerable time. In 2023, this surplus reached 14.1 billion euros. China is the EU’s fourth-largest

services trading partner, following the United States, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland.

FIGURE 9
Trade in services, in billions of euros.



Source: EU trade relations with China. Facts, figures and latest developments, European Commission (2024).

Finally, the cumulative value of EU foreign direct investment (FDI) stocks in China reached 177 billion euros in the first quarter of 2024. In 2023, EU FDI flows to China amounted to 6.4 billion euros, representing a 29% decrease compared to 2022. The main sectors of investment included automotive, basic materials, and machinery.

On the other hand, the cumulative value of Chinese FDI stocks in the EU-27 was 143 billion euros in the first quarter of

2024. Chinese FDI flows to the EU totaled 4.7 billion euros in 2023, a 10% decline from 2022. The primary sectors for these investments included automotive, healthcare, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, as well as information and communication technologies, which is highly relevant to the EU’s new legislative strategy. While mergers and acquisitions accounted for the majority of Chinese investments until 2021, in 2022 and 2023, investments in new projects represented the majority of Chinese FDI in the EU⁹³.

86 The 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, referred to by the Chinese government as the June 4 incident, consisted of a series of demonstrations led by Chinese students, which occurred between April 15 and June 4, 1989, and their subsequent crackdown, ordered by the authorities of the People’s Republic of China.

87 East Asia | Factsheets on the European Union | European Parliament (n.d.).

88 East Asia | Factsheets on the European Union | European Parliament (n.d.).

89 East Asia | Factsheets on the European Union | European Parliament (n.d.).

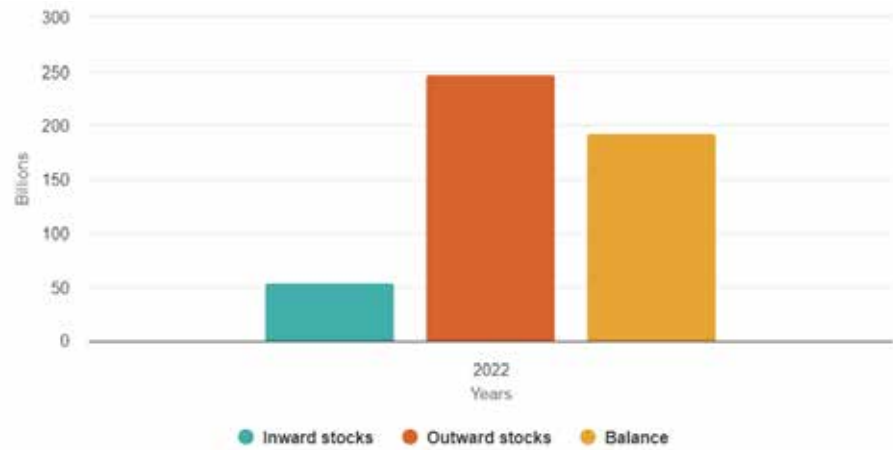
90 East Asia | Factsheets on the European Union | European Parliament (n.d.).

91 EU trade relations with China. Facts, figures and latest developments, European Commission (2024).

92 EU trade relations with China. Facts, figures and latest developments, European Commission (2024).

93 EU trade relations with China. Facts, figures and latest developments, European Commission (2024).

FIGURE 10
Trade in investments, in billions of euros.



Source: EU trade relations with China. Facts, figures and latest developments, European Commission (2024).

While this document will present the main conclusions, it's essential to acknowledge the challenges the EU faces in its future bilateral relations with China. Strategic alliances are needed to ensure the EU can maintain its global standing, as China continues to rise as a dominant economic, political, and military power.

United States – China

After World War II, China and the United States ended their relations, particularly trade, due to U.S. support for South Korea and opposition to the People’s Republic of China. However, in February 1972, former U.S. President Richard Nixon visited China, leading to the Shanghai Communiqué, which began the normalization of diplomatic relations.⁹⁴ Although the People’s Republic of China was not immediately recognized, liaison offices were established between Beijing and Washington. The communiqué acknowledged the U.S. acceptance of China’s

position regarding Taiwan, ultimately leading to the U.S. switching recognition from Taipei to Beijing in January 1979, formalizing diplomatic relations.⁹⁵

Since then, relations have stabilized, though the U.S., like the EU, has consistently raised concerns about human rights in China. Over the years, these issues, along with Taiwan, have affected diplomatic, commercial, and economic relations. The situation intensified under President Donald Trump, whose administration labeled China a “strategic competitor” and implemented trade restrictions, including limiting visas for Chinese citizens.⁹⁶⁹⁷

Economically, China has not yet overtaken the United States, but it remains close to becoming the world’s largest economy. As such, ongoing efforts to improve relations between the two global powers continue. Both China and the United States recognize the necessity of maintaining a responsible relationship to ensure global prosperity and security.⁹⁸

CHINA’S ECONOMIC POLICY PARADOX

Perhaps economic policy, or more specifically, China’s economic situation, is one of the most significant and complex topics to analyze. As we have seen, China’s economic growth did not truly begin until the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, which many consider “the greatest economic revolution in the history of mankind.”⁹⁹

These reforms were driven by two major strategies. First, economic reform began with the liberalization of the political and economic systems, granting a greater role to market forces, enhancing the autonomy of businesses and economic agents, and introducing private property, thus reducing the bureaucratic control that had dominated under the ruling of Mao Zedong. Before the end of the 1970s, China’s economy was entirely submerged under socialist ideology, with centralized planning and complete state control. However, from that point forward, China began to pivot toward an economic model in which markets played a larger role, despite the lingering presence of legislative and governmental control. This transition allowed China’s economy to emerge as an anomaly among the failed economic policies of other socialist and communist regimes. In other words, China shifted from a centralist, totalitarian economic state to one with broader openness and immense growth potential.¹⁰⁰

Opening up to the outside world was the second critical pillar that explains China’s rapid growth over the past forty

years. This strategy aimed to attract foreign investment and advanced technologies from developed capitalist countries. As mentioned earlier, China initially pursued a strategy of international isolation, focusing on ideological goals, while the Western world made significant social and economic progress. However, since 1978, opening to the global economy became a reality and the strategy adopted by China’s new leadership was fully in place.

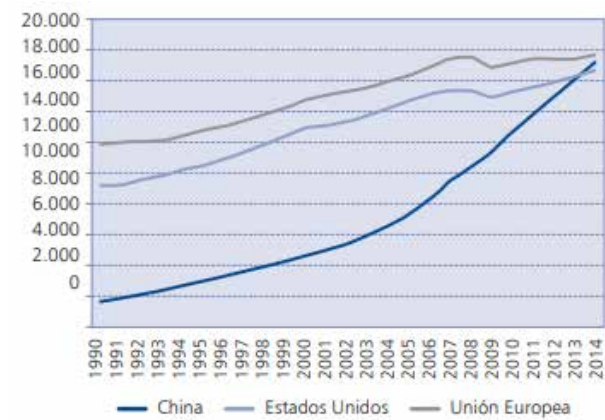
China’s reform process has been marked by a gradual, experimental approach, quite different from the experience of other countries, such as the Soviet Union. In China, the well-known Special Economic Zones (SEZs)¹⁰¹ were created to test new economic models, where private and public enterprises collaborated for regional or local growth. Once these SEZs demonstrated positive results, their practices were expanded across the country, facilitating a broader economic transition that increasingly resembled Western models.¹⁰²

The data, graphs, and economic indicators clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of these policies for Chinese economy. As an illustrative example, the following graph shows the evolution of gross domestic product (GDP) among major world powers from the 1990s to 2014. While the U.S. and the EU maintained reasonable growth trajectories typical of capitalist economies, China experienced exponential growth, further emphasizing the paradox of the Chinese economy.

94 Spanish Xinhuanet. (2015).
95 Dunbabin, J. P. D. (1996).
96 Brown, A. (2019).
97 McMahon, L. (2024).
98 EFE News (2024).

99 Fanjul, E. (2022).
100 Fanjul, E. (2022).
101 Plascencia, J. M. O. (2009).
102 Fanjul, E. (2022).

FIGURE 11
Evolution of gross domestic product between 1990 and 2014.



Source: World Development Indicators (World Bank)¹⁰³

Another fundamental aspect of China's economy is how, unlike the United States, where private consumption drives the economy, China's economic strength lies in industry and services. According to the 2017 U.S. intelligence World Factbook, industry accounted for 40.5% of China's GDP, while services reached 51.6%. China has positioned itself as the global factory. In addition to industrial growth, the service sector—particularly in technology, trade, and financial services—has expanded. Projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, previously analyzed in this report, have played a key role in expanding China's economic influence.¹⁰⁴

One more characteristic of China's economy is its export-import dynamics. In the 1980s, China consolidated its role as a global manufacturing hub, supplying a wide range of goods internationally. However, this has created imbalances. For example, China exports to the United States twice as much as it imports. While reciprocity might seem logical, the trade imbalance has caused economic and political tensions.¹⁰⁵

These tensions have not been infrequent between the two powers. However, this trade dynamic highlights that economic interdependence between China and the United States is necessary for global balance and stability.

FIGURE 12
2024: U.S. trade in goods with China

2024 : U.S. trade in goods with China			
NOTE: All figures are in millions of U.S. dollars on a nominal basis, not seasonally adjusted unless otherwise specified. Details may not equal totals due to rounding. Table reflects only those months for which there was trade.			
Month	Exports	Imports	Balance
January 2024	12,073.1	35,793.6	-23,720.5
February 2024	12,010.9	31,894.8	-19,883.9
March 2024	12,771.7	29,940.6	-17,168.9
April 2024	11,520.7	31,630.4	-20,109.7
May 2024	11,061.4	35,037.0	-23,975.6
TOTAL 2024	59,437.8	164,296.3	-104,858.5

Source: United States Census Bureau¹⁰⁶

This graph shows data illustrating the trade relations between the United States and China. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, China exports significantly more to the United

States than it imports, with a difference of over 20 billion dollars. Despite this imbalance, as noted earlier, these trade relations are essential for the smooth functioning of

international society. Trade benefits all intermediaries, helping them progress in areas such as technology, environmental sustainability, and even political development.

The main characteristics or pillars of China's complex economic system should be recognized. As research shows, China's vast supply of low-wage labor, high savings and investment rates, robust exports, and foreign capital influx, such as foreign direct investment, as key factors driving its economy.¹⁰⁷

The first pillar, China's enormous labor force, is possible due to its massive population, with 782 million people of working age.¹⁰⁸ Since 1980, China's labor force has grown by 2.5% annually, making it one of the world's largest productive economies. When combined with low production costs, China creates a powerful formula for exponential growth. However, urban centers like Beijing and Shanghai have less competitive wages, while much of the rural population depends on agriculture, livestock, and fishing, which keeps wages lower in those regions.

On the other hand, China is experiencing a phenomenon familiar to many Western nations: rural-urban migration. At the beginning of the Xiaoping reforms, urban employment in China accounted for only 24% of the total. However, in just over 30 years, by 2009, this figure had increased to almost 40%,¹⁰⁹ indicating a significant shift from rural areas to urban centers.

These figures must also be analyzed through the lens of China's distinctive labor culture. According to the same article, China is a country where work constitutes a large part of life, and job insecurity is a common characteristic. This reality contrasts sharply with many global powers, such as the United States or the European Union, where workers' rights, work-life balance, and labor policies are more comprehensively regulated and well-established.

The second pillar is the high investment and savings rates that have come to define Chinese society. In recent years, Chinese authorities have aimed to transform their economic model by placing greater emphasis on domestic consumption, thereby reducing dependence on external investment and exports. This shift has yielded positive results, as demonstrated in Figure 5. However, it is essential to recognize that China is undergoing a transition—from being a purely productive country to also becoming a consumer-driven one, positioning it as the second-largest consumer market in Asia, after Japan. On the one hand, this shift has been driven by government measures to promote consumption and reduce reliance on foreign investment,

creating a more balanced growth model compared to the pre-1978 era. On the other hand, China has been attracting consumers similar to those in the United States and other capitalist cultures, characterized by high purchasing power and significant predispositions toward consumption.¹¹⁰

Similarly, saving rates have been increasing among Chinese citizens in the last decades. In the face of rising wages and uncertainties stemming from the lack of a comprehensive social security system, saving has become the dominant strategy for personal financial security. However, the government's policies diverge from this trend, as China seeks to encourage its citizens to save less and consume more domestically to further strengthen its internal market.¹¹¹

Thirdly, the intention to reduce reliance on foreign exports and investment is another key factor underlying China's exponential growth, despite being under a nominally communist regime. As mentioned earlier, China, in addition to being the world's largest producer, has gradually developed the capacity to meet both its export needs and its citizens' material demands through domestic production.

China's economy cannot be viewed in isolation. It must be studied and understood in the context of other major global economies, given its inevitable influence on the global stage. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) regularly conducts studies on China's economic position and situation. In a report released at the end of 2023, the IMF noted that China has been the primary driver of global economic growth, contributing 35% of global nominal GDP growth over the past 15 years, compared to 27% from the United States.

The IMF has succinctly summarized the findings of this chapter. It highlights how China has achieved exponential growth over the past few decades despite lacking several elements traditionally deemed crucial for such development. For instance, China does not have an efficient financial system or a robust institutional framework capable of implementing sound economic policies. Furthermore, it lacks an open and democratic governance system that would provide checks and balances to ensure proper evaluation of these public policies.¹¹²

The IMF also notes that China's economic development has historically depended on investment growth, much of which has been financed by an inefficient banking system. Despite China's abundant labor force and low capital/labor ratio, much of this investment has come from the public sector, which is characterized as inefficient, rather than from the private sector.

103 https://www.funcas.es/wp-content/uploads/Migracion/Articulos/FUNCAS_PEE/150art04.pdf

104 Tosas, G. (2022).

105 Tosas, G. (2022).

106 <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html>

107 Quiroga, G. C. (2009).

108 Roa, M. M. (2021).

109 Quiroga, G. C. (2009).

110 Quiroga, G. C. (2009).

111 Quiroga, G. C. (2009).

112 Prasad, E. (2023).

CHINESE CULTURAL INFLUENCE AND IMPACT

The IMF points out that these dynamics have failed to generate the expected momentum in China's economy. As a result, the Chinese government has recognized the inefficiencies and financial risks of this model and implemented measures to rebalance the economy. These include reducing economic dependence on investment and increasing reliance on consumption, as well as promoting the growth of the services sector over the manufacturing sector.¹¹³

The IMF further highlights that China's working-age population, those between 15 and 64 years of age, is declining and is expected to shrink by approximately 1% annually by 2030. According to the IMF,¹¹⁴ foreign investment could help mitigate this problem. However, policies aimed at reducing dependence on foreign investment, combined with rising uncertainty and distrust of China's financial, legal, and political environment, are deterring external investors. Moreover, China's average total factor productivity growth, which had averaged 3% over the past few decades, has slowed to about 1% per year in the last decade. This slowdown threatens to stagnate China's economic growth, posing a challenge to President Xi Jinping's economic policies.

In an effort to counter these challenges and avoid displaying economic weakness to international actors, China has introduced a "domestic-international dual circulation" growth strategy. This policy seeks to combine increased participation of Chinese players in international finance and trade with a greater focus on domestic demand, technological self-sufficiency, and local innovation. However, as noted, China remains reliant on foreign technology to modernize its industries, which establishes a degree of dependency on external partners. This is an important dynamic, as it suggests a form of mutual dependence, especially between China and Western economies like the European Union, which should recognize the strategic leverage this situation provides.¹¹⁵

It is important, on the other hand, to pause in this more theoretical journey to come back and deepen into a key initiative that underscores China's growing economic and diplomatic influence: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI is a massive global project aimed at creating six economic corridors, which, according to the University of Cambridge, will cost up to \$8 trillion, involve 140 countries, and impact more than 65% of the world's population.¹¹⁶ Its primary objective is to establish connectivity that transforms cities into hubs of finance, tourism, and trade while forging new links between urban areas, improving rural regions, and building entirely new cities, thus reshaping the global urban landscape.¹¹⁷

This initiative, often referred to as the new Silk Road, is one of Xi Jinping's most ambitious plans since he took power in 2012. Some studies suggest that this initiative may not be solely about infrastructure, but rather part of a broader international strategy.¹¹⁸ While interpretations vary, one thing is clear: China's repositioning on the global stage in terms of strategic dominance and influence is unmistakable. Through this initiative, China is strengthening not only its economic and trade networks with Asia and the rest of the world, but also its political, cultural, and security ties, positioning itself as the key guarantor of these relations.¹¹⁹

These developments give China two distinct roles in international affairs and economics. First, its status as the fastest-growing economy makes it a crucial and influential player in any global organization. Second, as previously discussed, China faces internal challenges that the international community could leverage, providing an opportunity for other global actors to engage with a China that shows no signs of slowing down in its growth.

In conclusion, it is worth considering the perspective of Eswar Prasad, a professor at Cornell University, on China's future economic trajectory. Prasad argues that "historically and analytically, China's growth fundamentals appear fragile. Even without a crisis, unfavorable demographics, high debt levels, and an inefficient financial system will slow China's growth." However, he adds that "if the government plays its cards right, there is potential for a more favorable future for China's economy, characterized by moderate growth that is more sustainable economically, socially, and environmentally."¹²⁰

The culture of this Asian country is one of the most admired in the world for preserving features, traditions, and elements from immemorial time, making it one of the oldest civilizations in history. China, given this cultural significance, wields another form of power that merits reflection and analysis: its influence through cultural diplomacy, a tool increasingly recognized in international relations. Before continuing, however, it is important to delve into the concept of cultural diplomacy to better understand the following discussion. According to Badillo, public diplomacy is "a form of external communication by states where culture plays a central, but instrumental, role, subordinate to the country's external image goals."¹²¹

Some studies suggest that China has skillfully combined cultural diplomacy, aware of its traditionalist appeal, with its process of economic transformation, positioning itself favorably for international influence despite the constraints previously discussed.

It is also true that, while China's enduring cultural legacy is a key factor today, in the early years of the People's Republic of China, cultural policies were entirely subordinated to the goals of its first president, Mao Zedong, and his successor, Deng Xiaoping. Two major cultural milestones occurred under their leadership: the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square repression, both previously mentioned, which served as turning points in the expansion of China's influence across political, economic, social, and, of course, cultural domains.

From 2004 onward, China and the international community began to experience the effects discussed in this chapter. With the rise of Hu Jintao, China entered a new political phase by embracing the concept of *soft power*, a term widely known in academic circles, as a complement to the traditional hard power of economic and military strength. This was part of a broader strategy to move away from the international isolation that marked previous leaderships and to shift towards projecting an attractive image, allowing China to strategically compete with other global players.

Following this path of openness, China, since Hu Jintao's government, has developed what is known as the theory of "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development."¹²² The central aim of this theory is to present China as an emerging, non-threatening actor committed to contributing to global prosperity, stability, and harmony. This strategy has allowed China to rebuild its external image through the neutral medium of culture, avoiding initial judgments of either positivity or negativity.

With these elements firmly in place since the early 21st century, China has experienced a growth in its cultural influence. However, it is important to note that this influence has not reached the same level as its economic or political impact on the global stage. Nonetheless, China's cultural diplomacy has allowed it to position itself above the United States in some aspects. A Pew Global Attitudes Survey, published in June 2005, interviewed 17,000 people from countries including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Spain, and Turkey. The results were more favorable for China than for the United States, although caution is advised when interpreting responses related to China. This suggests that while China remains somewhat opaque in government transparency, its soft power efforts are improving its global projections.¹²³

One of the most prominent aspects of China's cultural diplomacy is its focus on language. China has concentrated efforts on fostering a positive international reception of its culture and language through the Confucius Institutes.¹²⁴ By 2016, these institutes had become integral parts of American universities and were well-received by the public, with Mandarin-language schools established in many countries. These institutes reflect China's desire to spread its traditions and language through institutions it controls in strategic locations. Mandarin, China's official language, has also been a key tool of cultural diplomacy. Since the early 21st century, China has invested substantial resources into expanding the use of Mandarin abroad, with the HSK (Mandarin proficiency test) growing to be comparable

113 Prasad, E. (2023).
114 <https://www.imf.org/es/Publications/fandd/issues/2023/12/China-bumpy-path-Eswar-Prasad>
115 Prasad, E. (2023).
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118 Busilli, V. S. (2020).
119 Sun, Y. (2023).
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121 Badillo, A. (2014).
122 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Uruguay (n.d.).
123 Miranda, E. (2023).
124 Pan, S. (2013).

to the TOEFL in the United States within its first decade.¹²⁵ As a result, over 200 million non-native speakers now speak Mandarin, making it the second most spoken language globally, after English.¹²⁶

In terms of *soft power*, China has also developed the concept of a national “country brand.” This relatively new term refers to the intangible values, reputation, and brand image of a country, valuing it as one would a commercial brand.¹²⁷

In this context, the “China brand” is characterized by a combination of factors that shape global perception. Its ancient history and rich culture contribute to the image of an ancient civilization that has made significant contributions to the world. Additionally, China’s economic and technological progress have

positioned it as a progressive and innovative power, albeit with the challenges previously noted. However, this brand is also influenced by international concerns, such as issues related to human rights, media censorship, and territorial disputes, all of which impact and sometimes undermine China’s global image.

These characteristics, combined with economic factors and technological advances, have enabled China to establish its brand in a comprehensive manner, positioning itself as a significant player among the international community. The fusion of historical, economic, cultural, and diplomatic elements is essential for shaping the international identity of any state, particularly for a nation seeking to cement its status as an influential and respected power on the global stage.



125 Gill, B., & Huang, Y. (2006).
126 Berlitz (2024).
127 Dircomfidencial (2024).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION IN ITS RELATIONS WITH CHINA

This report should not conclude without addressing the challenges and opportunities that the historical relationship between the European Union and China presents, especially in the context where China is positioned as the future leading global power and one of the main drivers of economic and trade routes. As mentioned earlier, the European Union cannot afford to overlook the opportunities that come from maintaining relations with a country experiencing constant growth.

Despite the historically strong or stable relations between the EU and China, recent years have seen increased pressure from the EU on China’s actions. In 2023, the European Commission began investigating the surge of Chinese green technology in the EU, primarily due to its negative impact on European competitors. Chinese manufacturers, benefiting from substantial government subsidies, are able to keep artificially low production costs. In response, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen asserted that the EU could not and should not accept the overproduction of Chinese industrial goods, as this creates unfair competition for EU producers.¹²⁸ She also warned that during her new five-year term, which begins in December 2024, she would take measures to protect European markets from Chinese interference.

In the final stage of the ninth legislature, the European Commission increased customs duties on Chinese vehicles, although the measures were provisional and not immediately applicable. This decision was aimed at counteracting the subsidies that were seen as distorting normal trade relations. The then Vice President of the European Commission and Trade Commissioner, Valdis Dombrovskis, stated, “Our goal is not to close the EU market to Chinese electric vehicles, but to ensure fair competition.”¹²⁹ While these actions demonstrate the EU’s resolve in confronting China, it is crucial to recognize that China’s economic and commercial position remains strong.

The new European legislature has started with this issue back on the table. At the time of writing this report, Europe finds

itself in a dilemma regarding the best strategy to adopt in relation to tariffs on electric vehicles imported from China. On one side, a bloc led by France advocates for imposing tariffs to level the playing field in commercial competition with Chinese manufacturers. On the other side, Germany, the EU’s largest economy, leads a group that argues that starting a trade war with China would bring more costs than benefits.

Finally, in a vote held on October 4th, the French position prevailed. Another 12 countries, including Spain and Belgium, which had openly opposed the tariffs due to fears of retaliations in other strategic sectors in their respective countries, abstained, allowing the tariff measures to be approved and implemented for the coming 5 years.¹³⁰

China had previously taken significant actions against key sectors of the European market, such as dairy and pork exports from Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark.¹³¹ The recent imposition of hefty tariffs on China-made electric vehicles will undoubtedly provoke a response from Beijing. The key issue will be how much this trade war escalates and the strategies both sides adopt. The European Commission will have to navigate the divided positions of the EU’s two leading economies, Germany and France, for whom the automotive industry is crucial. Nevertheless, the EU’s administration has stated that negotiations with Beijing on this matter are not closed, and further adjustments may be considered as the situation continues to evolve.¹³²

These developments illustrate the complex situation the EU faces in defending its internal market and member states while striving to maintain a stable and prosperous relationship with a rapidly growing economic giant.

In response to China’s growing influence, the EU issued 10 concrete actions through the European Commission and the then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security

128 Butler, E. (2024).
129 Gómez, M. V., Abril, G. (2024).
130 European Commission (2024).
131 Abril, G. (2024).
132 European Commission (2024).

CONCLUSIONS

Policy, which continue to serve as a roadmap for EU-China relations.¹³³

First, the EU sought to foster a partnership with China in order to collaborate on key UN pillars: human rights, peace and security, and development. Second, invoking the Paris Agreement, the EU pledged to assist China in reducing emissions by 2030, reinforcing their commitment to global climate action.

Additionally, with the shared goal of maintaining stability, sustainable economic development, and good governance in partner countries, the EU decided to implement bilateral agreements more effectively and improve its Strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia. However, the EU has urged China to honor mutual commitments, including reforming the World Trade Organization, particularly concerning the abovementioned technology subsidies.

While collaboration has been a focus, the EU has also worked to adapt to the opportunities presented by China's exponential growth. Yet, the relationship extends beyond economics, as China must also be engaged in combating climate change, a field in which the EU has been, and still is, a leading actor.

China has played a key role in the signing and continuity of the Paris Agreement, reaffirming its commitment even after the U.S. withdrew in 2020. However, as a developing country, China has fewer financial obligations in this realm than other entities like the EU. China often cites the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in climate change

efforts, yet it remains one of the largest CO2 emitters globally, responsible for about 33% of total emissions.¹³⁴ The EU, as a leader in reducing emissions and boosting a green future, has the opportunity to strengthen ties with the Asian giant in this area and build strategic alliances that position the Union as a model for China.¹³⁵

Another challenge, and potential opportunity, lies in shaping a world order where human rights are respected, particularly among the world's major powers. On this issue, China and the EU have markedly different positions. The EU has passed multiple resolutions criticizing China's breaches of human rights, and it seems clear that the EU's foundation is built on values such as democracy, fundamental rights, public freedoms, and an independent and reliable legal system. In contrast, China continues to maintain a political regime where democracy, pluralism and freedom of thought are absent and authoritarianism is entrenched. The protection of civil rights, according to international standards, is lacking, and China's legal system remains opaque, undermining both domestic and international legal security.¹³⁶

It is, therefore, urgent for the EU to fill the gap with democratic values to establish fruitful and stable relations. From the perspective of EU liberalism, it would be ideal for China to evolve into a liberal-democratic regime, thereby ensuring its success, as Fukuyama suggested,¹³⁷ and prioritizing the protection of fundamental rights and public freedoms. However, China maintains a firm stance against external interference in areas such as governance, dissent, or human rights and freedoms, as previously discussed, so a democratic and free horizon seems to be very far away from current positions.

Having analyzed the factors that have most characterized China and continue to define its uniqueness within a multipolar and increasingly interconnected world, it is time to clarify the main conclusions drawn from this document.

First, China's modern history has been marked by its recovery from civil war and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, where authoritarianism, control, and economic growth have been its most defining features. The reforms initiated by Mao Zedong, such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), were turning points for a nation deeply tied to a declining Russia that required social, political, and economic transformation. Although Zedong's leadership plunged China into chaos, poverty, and intense social unrest, these events paved the way for economic reforms and the country's disengagement from the Soviet Union, the long-standing rival of the United States.

Second, in terms of foreign policy, China has transitioned from being isolated from the Western world to becoming a key player whose economic strength makes isolation impossible. Its growing involvement in major international organizations illustrates this shift. However, China's foreign policy faces challenges, such as the pervasive distrust from other states regarding its practices, and the need to balance its economic ambitions with its stances on human rights and trade if it wants to position itself as a leading and respected global actor.

Another key conclusion from this report is China's remarkable economic growth over recent decades, positioning it on the verge of surpassing the United States as the world's leading economic power. China has evolved from a fully centralized, controlled economy to a more open system, which is atypical for a political regime like China's. This has allowed China to secure second place in global economic rankings. Interestingly, China's system presents a paradox: despite adhering to a

socialist model, its economy has avoided the stagnation seen in other countries that follow similar ideologies. However, China's economic future will depend on its ability to handle mounting pressure from nations like the United States and the European Union, as well as to adapt to the constant shifts in global dynamics.

Culturally, while there is little international doubt about China's hard power—bolstered by a growing military and a political system deeply rooted in personalism—its ability to project *soft power* remains crucial. China's authoritarian political model remains a critical point of contention for the Western world, limiting its potential influence on the global stage. Nonetheless, China has developed a strong and growing country brand, positioning itself as an essential actor in the global political balance.

The European Union, as a fifth conclusion, holds a politically, geographically, regulatory, and culturally advantageous position in its relationship with China. One of the EU's tasks is to uphold its leadership in promoting human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy, environmental sustainability, and cooperation. In the coming years, the EU will need to solidify its role in ensuring fair trade practices and fostering healthy competition while positioning itself as a leader in the green transition and in protecting consumers in the technological field.

Lastly, China faces a future filled with both challenges and opportunities on the international stage. While it will undoubtedly remain one of the world's foremost economic powers, as demonstrated by the data presented in this report, its repositioning will not be driven solely by economic considerations. To be recognized as a leader in a world where every player strives to be first, China will need to transform its approach toward defending sustainability, human rights, and fundamental freedoms.



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