COMMENT

China and the World Roundtable | China-EU relations

Editor's note: *The 25th China-EU Summit was held in Beijing on Thursday. As each other's second-largest trade partner, the two still stand for cooperation across sectors. Three experts share their views on this issue with China Daily.*

Ioannis E. Kotoulas

Transcontinental railway integrating Asia and Europe

Since its inauguration in 2011, the China-Europe Railway Express has been a beacon of innovation and economic connectivity. Originally conceived as a trade land bridge between China and Europe, the China-Europe Railway Express has become a key driver of inter-state economic relations, regional integration and geopolitical stability.

After China proposed the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the China-Europe Railway Express was incorporated into its structure, providing an essential logistics corridor between Asia and Europe.

The China-Europe Railway Express is an important infrastructure of the Eurasian economic nexus. The intercontinental railway network has effectively advanced transcontinental transportation and logistics between China and Europe, helped develop regional economies, while upgrading human capital and infrastructure along its route, and introduced the concept of economic complementarity and collaborative advancement of joint goals across borders. The economic integration of Eurasia is based to a large extent on the development of this railway.

The China-Europe Railway Express has proven its worth by addressing geopolitical challenges, optimizing routes and connectivity, offering diverse freight solutions, and reducing delivery time compared with sea transport.

The positive spillover effects involve not just national economies, but also cities along the route, which are evolving into major economic hubs and industrial agglomerations, attracting experts and contributing to technological innovation. Enterprises involved in the railway have also improved their production system and economic output.

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The recent geopolitical turmoil in different regions affecting maritime transport, on routes such as the Red Sea, has only increased the importance of the China-Europe Railway Express for Eurasia's economic stability. With the soaring cost of sea freight through the Red Sea, the railway has been a key option for maintaining the supply chain between Asia and Europe.

In this sense, the railway has been functioning as a "land stabilizer" during the Red Sea crisis, ensuring the continuous vitality of the European economy. The record-breaking departure frequency from Xi'an and other Chinese cities shows the effectiveness of a "land-sea parallel" method.

The increasing potential of land transportation is redefining the geopolitical value of the Eurasian economic passage, which materializes the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative. The railway continues to steadily increase the numbers of trains and twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) transported every year, proving its reliability.

The sustainable development of the railway is very important for promoting the growth of trade between China and Europe and meeting the ever-increasing demand for freight transport in Asia and Europe. The railway has the potential to become the most sustainable mode of long-distance transport for Eurasian connectivity, complementing maritime and air transport. The expansion of the railway would make it more effective.

China-European Union economic relations are the bedrock of the Eurasian economic order and a major component of the global equilibrium. In terms of trade scale, China and the EU are the world's top and second-largest trading economies in goods respectively, and together account for almost 30 percent of global trade in goods and services and more than one-third of global GDP.

China-EU economic and trade relations have made great progress since the two sides established diplomatic relations in 1975, with two-way trade seeing a meteoric rise in the early 21st century. In this context, the China-Europe Railway Express is a focal part of their economic relationship, which remains steadfast and resilient. Indeed, China and the EU are natural economic partners, sharing a high degree of complementarity.

The two economies should be able to manage their industrial capacities and capitalize on their economic complementarity, rather than antagonizing each other, by carefully identifying areas of potential overlap in production and exports. China and the EU, through cooperation, can improve global economic governance and contribute to a stable and equitable global economic order.

Closer cooperation between the EU and China amid the growing global economic challenges can help safeguard the economic interests of both the EU and China, restore the credibility of the global economic system, ensure long-term global economic growth and stability, and turn the China-Europe Railway Express into the most lucrative and mutually beneficial trade route in the world.

The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

David Gosset

Turning challenges into opportunities

The China-European Union Summit in Beijing on Thursday carried the historical weight of the moment. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of China-EU diplomatic relations. Yet this landmark is tempered by the growing gap between what the EU and China could achieve through constructive collaboration and the reality of the challenges that now define their relationship. This calls for reflection on the opportunities they could still seize despite the constraints.

The author, a specialist in global affairs and sinology, is the founder of the China-Europe-America Global Initiative.

When it comes to trade, the EU and China are both partners and competitors, with a complex web of interdependence. For decades, China has been an engine of growth for Europe, while Europe has served as a key market for Chinese exports. But what was once seen as a mutually beneficial relationship is now marked by tensions, and what appears to be structural challenges.

China is quietly undergoing a transformative shift in its economic model — a move toward high-quality development. As China excels in industries such as electric vehicles and green technologies, Chinese companies are becoming increasingly strong competitors for EU companies that once thrived in some of these sectors.

The rising protectionist sentiment in the EU only adds to the difficulty. On the EU side, there is growing apprehension about China's industrial policy and the "lack of a level playing field" for European enterprises in the Chinese market. On the Chinese side, there is unease over the EU's actions, such as tighter investment screening mechanisms and the push for "de-risking" from China, which threatens to sever the ties that both sides have worked so hard to build.

These trade tensions are compounded by wider concerns about the global economic landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict has only exacerbated the situation. In essence, trade is no longer a neutral space, but one fraught with strategic calculations.

The differences between China and the EU over the Russia-Ukraine conflict have injected a significant level of suspicion, if not outright mistrust, into their relationship. These geopolitical differences must not become a wedge that irreparably fractures the China-EU relationship. The two sides therefore need to carefully navigate this sensitive issue, maintaining dialogue on global security and finding common ground on issues such as arms control, non-proliferation and artificial intelligence.

Also, the shadow of US policy looms large over EU-China relations, especially because the United States has adopted a more adversarial approach toward both China and the EU, imposing tariffs on their goods and disrupting long-standing trade ties. For both Brussels and Beijing, Washington's unpredictable foreign policy presents a challenge.

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Hence, the priority for both sides should be to calibrate their responses to the US in a way that does not jeopardize their own long-term interests.

Despite the complexities, there is one thing that the EU and China share: the recognition that they must find ways to deepen cooperation however difficult. Chinese President Xi Jinping, to EU leaders, rightly emphasized the importance for China and the EU, both constructive forces for multilateralism and openness and cooperation, to strengthen communication, enhance trust and deepen cooperation in a more challenging and complex international landscape.

While there is no denying the mounting challenges, there is much to gain from collaboration. Both sides converge on issues like multilateralism and climate change, with these commonalities providing the foundation for a more cooperative future.

On the occasion of the Beijing summit, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to deepen engagement with China and enhance cooperation to address shared global challenges. In this context, the two sides issued a joint press statement on climate change, underscoring a commitment that should not be underestimated. In an increasingly fragmented world, where geopolitical and economic divisions are widening, the EU and China must lead by example, as their partnership can help build a more stable, connected and prosperous world.

The two sides must send a signal of pragmatic cooperation, and realize that diplomacy is about finding common ground even amid differences. The EU and China should balance ideals with reality, embrace strategic autonomy, and focus on what they can achieve together. This will not only strengthen their relationship but also help bridge the divides between other economies and regions, promoting progress rather than regression.

The 50th anniversary of the China-EU diplomatic relations is not just a moment for reflection, but a call to action — a reminder that the future is shaped by the choices we make today. Leadership finds its true meaning not in times of ease, but in moments of complexity, when true leaders have the opportunity to demonstrate their character and long-term vision by finding innovative solutions that unlock opportunities and set us on a trajectory of progress.

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Thomas Hoeren

China and Spain bridge data worlds, build trust

In a quiet district of Barcelona, far from the tourist crowds admiring Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí's architectural marvels, another kind of structure is taking shape — one not made of steel and concrete, but of code, bandwidth and trust. Here, Spanish and Chinese engineers, working at the Beijing-Barcelona digital service center, are quietly redefining the contours of global digital governance.

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Huawei's 5G initiative in Spain is not just a technological roll-out; it is a geopolitical experiment in building a new digital architecture, one that might just bridge two very different regulatory philosophies.

Huawei's investment in Spain is a strategic choice. Spain, a member of the European Union with a strong commitment to digital modernization and relatively open regulatory stance, offers fertile ground for experimentation. The move is politically pragmatic, too, with the Spanish authorities adopting a more nuanced approach to Chinese high-tech compared with some of their northern EU neighbors. Against this backdrop, Huawei's infrastructure, combined with local partnerships, has enabled Spain to become a sandbox for testing how Chinese and European companies can cooperate on complex digital issues.

At the heart of this experiment lies a regulatory paradox. The EU's Digital Markets Act, a flagship piece of legislation aimed at reining in Big Tech, promotes openness, interoperability and user-empowerment. On the other hand, China's Data Security Law places emphasis on national security considerations and a more cautious approach to cross-border data flows. On paper, the two frameworks appear irreconcilable. One seeks to ensure data move freely across digital borders, while the other emphasizes greater oversight over outbound data transfers.

Yet it is precisely in these tensions that cooperation begins to take form. For small and medium-sized enterprises, the implications are particularly stark. SMEs often lack the legal and technical resources to navigate parallel regulatory systems. If digital infrastructure providers, such as Huawei, can help harmonize or at least streamline compliance processes across jurisdictions, the cost and complexity of innovation decreases dramatically.

A Barcelona-based AI start-up, for instance, may benefit from Huawei's cutting-edge computing capabilities while also needing to reassure EU clients that their data remains fully protected under European privacy regulations. Without clear standards for mutual trust, such companies risk being paralyzed by uncertainty.

The Beijing-Barcelona partnership is therefore more than a symbolic gesture. It provides a rare real-world case study of how two systems can learn from each other — not by imposing one model over the other, but by identifying zones of compatibility. For example, both China and the EU have developed national AI ethics frameworks. While their language and philosophical foundations may differ, both stress transparency, non-discrimination and accountability. These shared goals can form the basis for interoperability, even without formal legal alignment.

Trust, in this context, becomes the true infrastructure. Not the fiber-optic cables or 5G towers, but the protocols, auditing tools and personal relationships that enable cooperation under regulatory divergence. This is not about harmonization in the traditional sense. Rather, it is about developing what might be called regulatory translation, allowing different systems to interpret each other's standards without demanding absolute equivalence.

Of course, risks remain. Critics argue that Huawei's involvement in European digital infrastructure raises "national security concerns". These worries must not be dismissed. Yet outright rejection of cooperation risks missing an opportunity to shape global high-tech governance. Building walls is easy, but building standards everyone can trust is harder.

The EU and China will not arrive at a single unified data law anytime soon. But what they can do, starting with partnerships like the one in Barcelona, is show that coexistence, as well as cooperation, in the digital domain is possible, even beneficial — one pilot project, one joint protocol, one successful SME at a time. In a fragmented digital world, learning to speak across regulatory dialects may be the most important skill of all. After all, trust isn't built only through treaties; it's built through use too.

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