

## **EU-China Relations:**

### **Between Strategic Cooperation & Competing Views**

On July 8, 2021, the **European Union's (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell**, held a video conference with his counterpart, the **Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi**. It was on the same date that the **European Parliament** adopted a resolution on Hong Kong, calling the EU member states to decline invitations for government officials to attend the Beijing Winter Olympics and condemning China for her actions with regard to freedom of the press. Indeed, the quick succession of events **vividly illustrates the intricacies of the complex EU-China relations**; on one hand, 2020 marks the year when **China might have become EU's largest trading partner** (according to non-official research studies), on the other, 2021 witnessed the **frozen ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI)**, following in-kind diplomatic sanctions between the two parties.

According to a press release of the **EU External Action Service** (taken out in the meanwhile), the EU High Representative "stressed the EU's concerns about developments in Hong Kong and Xinjiang" and "expressed his conviction that EU-China engagement remains essential and that channels of communication need to remain open". Following media reports from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Josep Borrell stated that the EU "does not intend to start an institutional confrontation nor to destabilize its relations with China", while disassociating from "small circles" or "new Cold War". The same source indicated that Borrell referred to the Brussels – Beijing cooperation as "not an option but a necessity", reason for which both parties need to manage their differences. Furthermore, with regard to CAI, the EU High Representative commented that it "represents the interests of both parties" and manifested his hope that both parties will cooperate to this end. The Chinese Foreign Ministry reported Josep Borrell having declared that the "EU respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China and does not support the independence of Hong Kong".

Based on a media release of the **Chinese Foreign Ministry**, Wang Yi stated that besides global strategic partners, the two parties are also "great independent powers" in the global arena. In this regard, the parties need to establish a "correct reciprocal understanding and eliminate interferences" in order to "develop healthy and stable China-EU relations". In his statement, Minister Wang expressed his view that "there are neither major conflicts of interest nor geopolitical conflicts between China and Europe" and "the only proper positioning that the two parties should adhere to is a comprehensive strategic partner." Indeed, as expressed in the **EU-China 2020 Strategic**

**Agenda for Cooperation**, the two parties are committed to a “*comprehensive strategic partnership*”. Wang Yi affirmed the Chinese side’s support for EU’s “*strategic autonomy and truly independent and independent development of relations and cooperation with China*”. Finally, the Chinese Minister stated that “*all countries should jointly maintain an international system with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter as the core, and should jointly uphold an international order based on international law*”, while elaborating on China’s position on Xinjiang, Hong Kong and human rights in the key of “*national sovereignty and national dignity*”.

**The video conference between the two high-level dignitaries came in a background of relative effervescence between Brussels and Beijing**, following the *March 22* in-kind Chinese sanctions imposed against EU institutions, policy-makers and academics in a manner that many deemed disproportionate. A month later, on *June 15*, the **EU-US** launched the **Trade and Technology Council (TTC)** as a forum for the two parties to coordinate their respective approach to key global trade, economic and technology issues in order to “*deepen transatlantic trade and economic relations based on shared democratic values.*” In fact, the initiative has arisen immediately after the **G7 and NATO summits** (*July 13 and 14, respectively*), which, according to some analysts, approached several aspects related to China as an increasingly assertive international actor. Moreover, in the NATO Summit communique, China has been designated as a “*systemic challenge*”.

One may comment that **such a significant meeting as the two leaders’ conference coming after certain tense moments signals reciprocal good-will and readiness to head forward**. Indeed, the intention to manage existing disputes represents **a step toward a closer cooperation**. Naturally, the **EU-China Strategic Dialogue** which might take place later on in autumn could represent another milestone. Equally, resuming the **EU-China Human Rights Dialogue**, pending since 2019, might constitute a venue of potential cooperation. Clearly, reciprocal visits of the two leaders could serve well the development of bilateral cooperation, especially if disproportional measures were withdrawn. Until then, **EU-China relations continue to showcase features of strategic cooperation, yet displaying certain areas of competing views**. It is, indeed, desirable that the forthcoming developments will – as the Chinese saying goes – add a flower to a bouquet (锦上添花).

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*The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy, position or view of IRSEA.*