Navigating the liberal international order: Strategy, identity and diplomacy in China's high-level dialogues with European counterparts (2001–2025)

Xiaosong Ni

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Government

University of Essex

September 2025

Abstract

This thesis examines how China navigates and selectively recalibrates the Liberal International Order (LIO) through three institutionalised high-level dialogues with Europe: the High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (PPD), the High-Level Strategic Dialogue (SD), and the High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogue (EFD). The empirical analysis spans 2001–2025 and draws on 131 dialogue rounds and 147 official documents and outcome statements across these three dialogue mechanisms. The European counterparts examined include the EU, the UK, France, and Germany across all three dialogues, alongside Portugal, Poland, and Switzerland for the SD and Italy for the EFD.

The thesis argues that China is best understood as a Strategist–Reformist Actor (SRA): a rising power that consolidates legitimacy through institutional embedding while incrementally recalibrating norms from within.

It advances a mid-range analytical framework linking strategic identity (SRA), institutional practice (Institutionalisation as Diplomacy), and a patterned outcome (Continuity-with-Recalibration). Together, this framework explains how major powers—rising and established alike—may pursue reform through continuity rather than rupture within the LIO.

Empirically, the thesis provides the first systematic, multi-level, cross-venue, cross-domain, longitudinal analysis of the three institutional pillars of China–Europe relations. Methodologically, it develops a document-driven interpretive design combining grounded-theory coding, abductive reasoning, and complementary interviews, treating official texts as curated artefacts of strategic identity performance. Conceptually, it specifies how institutionalised dialogue mechanisms stabilise cooperation while enabling calibrated normative adjustment.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that China's engagement with Europe is characterised by continuity-with-recalibration: a patterned dynamic through which stability and incremental transformation coexist within dense institutional environments. Beyond the China–Europe case, the framework offers transferable insight into how institutionalised diplomacy functions as a site of strategic reform in a contested yet enduring international order.

Publications derived from this thesis

Ni X (2025) Institutionalised Societal Diplomacy: China's High-Level People-to-People Dialogues with Europe (2012–2025). Chinese Political Science Review.

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms

AIIB – Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CAI – Comprehensive Agreement on Investment

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis

CSP – Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

CwR – Continuity-with-Recalibration

ECOIs – European Countries of Interest

EFD – High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogue

GT – Grounded Theory

GTM – Grounded Theory Method

IaD – Institutionalisation as Diplomacy

IR – International Relations

LIO – Liberal International Order

MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs of P.R.China

PLA – People's Liberation Army

PPD – High-Level People-to-People Dialogue

SD – High-Level Strategic Dialogue

SIT – Social Identity Theory

SRA – Strategist-Reformist Actor

UNSC – UN Security Council

List of Tables

1 Introduction

Is China a status quo or revisionist power? This debate continues to structure discussions in International Relations (IR), particularly concerning China's evolving role within the Liberal International Order (LIO). As a rising but non-liberal power, China's integration into a U.S.-anchored order, reinforced by European counterparts, presents a central puzzle. On the one hand, China benefits from the stability, institutions, and economic opportunities provided by the LIO. On the other hand, it selectively contests and reframes aspects of that same order, seeking to recalibrate contested norms while maintaining broader continuity.

In practice, China's diplomatic practice, especially through its institutionalised high-level dialogues with Europe, reveals neither complete convergence nor outright rupture. Instead, China defends certain LIO principles − multilateralism, sustainability, development − while simultaneously recalibrating contested domains such as sovereignty discourses, multipolarity narratives, and global economic governance practices. This dual behaviour raises the thesis's central question:

How does China navigate and selectively recalibrate the LIO through its three institutionalised high-level dialogues with Europe?

China's rise has already transformed global politics and economics. Since the launch of reform and opening in the late twentieth century, China has become the world's

second-largest economy, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and a key actor in forums such as the WTO and G20. Its foreign policy discourse, articulated through strategic concepts such as the "China Dream" and "Major-Country Diplomacy" (大国外交),[1] signals both its drive for national rejuvenation and a vision for multipolarity. Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Global Development, Security, and Civilisation Initiatives (GDI, GSI, GCI) further demonstrate China's assertiveness – not to reject the international system, but to recalibrate its institutional terms.[2]

More recently, the framing of Major Country has been expanded to include Major Party (大党), presenting China as a Major-Party-Major-Country (大党大国).[3] This

---

[1] Archived speeches on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) website from 2013 onward consistently highlight Major-Country relations, with China, the United States, Russia, and Europe identified as its core components. The regular inclusion of "China-Europe relations," despite Europe not being a single country, underscores its strategic weight in China's foreign policy discourse.

[2] See Wang Yi's speeches: *Advance with the times to promote reform and improvement of the global governance system*, MFA, 22 August 2025. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyjh_673099/202508/t20250822_116943 05.shtml; *Stand at the forefront of the times and demonstrate responsibility and commitment* at the 2024 Symposium on International Situation and China's Diplomacy, MFA, 17 December 2024. https:www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyjh_673099/202412/t20241218_1149698 7.shtml. Accessed 20 September 2025.

[3] For instance, see *Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi answers questions from Chinese and foreign journalists on China's foreign policy and external relations*, 7 March 2025, MFA. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyjh_673099/202503/t20250307_1157044 3.shtml; Wang Yi's speeches: *Hold high the banner of a community with a shared future for mankind and achieve greater accomplishments in major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics*. Qiushi Journal, Issue 2. 17 January 2025, MFA. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyjh_673099/202501/t20250117_1153799 2.shtml; *Stand at the forefront of the times and demonstrate responsibility and commitment* at the 2024 Symposium on International Situation and China's Diplomacy,

rhetorical shift underscores the Party's centrality in shaping foreign policy identity and signals that China's global role is articulated simultaneously through state power and Party leadership. Normatively, the Major-Party-Major-Country framing underscores that rising powers outside the liberal tradition do not seek to exit the LIO; rather, they remain engaged while recalibrating the LIO's norms to reflect alternative political identities and sources of legitimacy.[4] For Europe, this implies that engagement with China also entails engagement with a party-state actor. For this thesis, this logic mirrors the SRA posture: stabilising continuity through structured participation while broadening the normative boundaries of order.

Europe occupies a distinctive place in this process. It features centrally in China's narrative of multipolarity [5] and is embedded in its Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships (CSPs) with the European Union (EU, 2003),[6] the United Kingdom (UK,

---

December 17, 2024, MFA. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyjh_673099/202412/t20241218_1149698 7.shtml. Accessed 20 September 2025.

[4] Here, legitimacy refers to output legitimacy, i.e., the capacity of institutions or actors to justify authority through effective performance and delivery of outcomes rather than participatory or procedural input. China implicitly claims such legitimacy through references to development achievements, effective governance, and the provision of public goods or "China solutions." The credibility of these claims, however, is often questioned in Europe, where legitimacy is more commonly grounded in liberal-democratic input processes.

[5] For instance, see Wang Yi's Keynote speech at the "China Session" of the 61st Munich Security Conference, MFA (2025) *Be a constructive force in a changing world*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyjh_673099/202502/t20250215 _11555652.shtml. Accessed 20 September 2025.

[6] See European Commission Press Corner (2012) *EU relations with China: EU-China Summit factsheet* (Beijing, 14 February 2012) [MEMO/12/85]. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/memo_12_85;

2004),[7] France (2004),[8] and Germany (2014).[9] Each CSP is structured around three dialogues: the High-Level Strategic Dialogue (SD), the High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogue (EFD), and the High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (PPD). These dialogues serve as the political, economic, and societal pillars of China-Europe relations, endorsed in joint declarations and co-chaired at the vice-premier or ministerial level. Beyond these four counterparts, China also holds EFD with Italy and SDs with Poland, Portugal, and Switzerland, all established through joint declarations.

Despite their prominence in official statements, these high-level dialogues remain under-examined in academic research. While commonly viewed as ceremonial rituals

---

Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union (2018) *China's policy paper on the European Union*. 19 December 2018. https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zywj/zywd/201812/t20181219_8301603.htm. Accessed 20 September 2025.

[7] See Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2010) *Overview on China-UK relations.* https://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/ChinaUKRelations/introduction/201005/t20100510_3384299.htm. This partnership was later upgraded to a "Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century", see Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2015) *UK-China Joint Statement on building a global comprehensive strategic partnership for the 21st Century* [News story]. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-china-joint-statement-2015. Accessed 20 September 2025.

[8] Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America (2004) *China, France sign joint declaration* (27/01/04). https://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zt/twwt/200401/t20040127_4912479.htm. Accessed 20 September 2025.

[9] Unlike other partnerships referred to as "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", the China-Germany partnership is officially termed an "All-Round Strategic Partnership". See Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in New York (2014) *China, Germany establish comprehensive strategic partnership.* https://newyork.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/xw/201403/t20140329_4705374.htm; MFA (2024) *Xi Jinping meets with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.* https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11332902.html. Accessed 20 September 2025.

or technical coordination forums, this thesis contends that they are deliberate instruments through which China negotiates identity, asserts roles, and incrementally reshapes elements of the LIO. Far from peripheral supplements, they are institutionalised mechanisms of strategic diplomacy that enable China to stabilise cooperation while advancing selective reform. This gap motivates the thesis's core intervention: to explain how China's dual posture – its simultaneous defense and contestation of LIO norms – operates through structured dialogues with Europe.

1.1 Research Question and Key Findings

As mentioned before, this thesis addresses a single overarching research question: *How does China navigate and selectively recalibrate the LIO through its three institutionalised high-level dialogues with Europe?*

The thesis answers this question by advancing a central argument: China's engagement with Europe is best understood as the behaviour of a Strategist–Reformist Actor (SRA)—an actor that stabilises cooperation and institutional participation while incrementally recalibrating selected norms, roles, and practices from within the existing order. Rather than positioning China as either a status-quo power or a revisionist challenger, the analysis demonstrates that continuity and recalibration coexist as a patterned mode of engagement.

At the core of the thesis lies a mid-range analytical framework linking identity, institutional practice, and patterned outcome. The framework specifies three interrelated components. First, the SRA captures who China is and what posture it performs: consolidating legitimacy, predictability, and recognition as a Strategist, while advancing calibrated adjustment as a Reformist. Second, Institutionalisation as Diplomacy (IaD) captures how China acts: using structured, recurring dialogue mechanisms as diplomatic instruments rather than as neutral backdrops. Third, Continuity-with-Recalibration (CwR) captures what pattern emerges: cooperation is stabilised through institutional continuity, while reformist preferences are introduced incrementally through discursive reframing, procedural adjustment, sequencing, and selective emphasis. Together, these concepts explain how reform is pursued through continuity rather than rupture, and why institutionalised diplomacy can simultaneously stabilise cooperation and enable selective recalibration. In empirical terms, this demonstrates that the dialogues examined are not merely administrative channels; they are repeated, performative, and meaning-producing practices through which legitimacy and norms are negotiated. In this sense, they constitute diplomacy in institutional form.

The overarching question is operationalised through three dialogue-specific research questions, each corresponding to a distinct functional domain of China–Europe engagement:

PPD (societal pillar): *How does China use the PPD to institutionalise societal diplomacy, expand cooperative repertoires, and embed strategic intent within ostensibly low-politics exchanges?*

SD (political pillar): *How does China employ forum shopping and altercasting to sustain structured political consultations while recalibrating expectations around sovereignty and multipolarity?*

EFD (economic pillar): *How does China use the EFDs to leverage identity strategies to perform stakeholder continuity while selectively recalibrating norms of global economic governance?*

These questions allow the thesis to trace how a consistent SRA posture is enacted across domains characterised by different political sensitivities, material stakes, and institutional environments. The PPD demonstrates that societal and low-politics exchanges are not peripheral to diplomacy. Grounded analysis of nineteen dialogue rounds (2012–2025) shows that the PPD institutionalises cooperation through tangible, formalised, symbolic, and normative outcomes. These outcomes function as societal scaffolding: stable programmes, exchanges, and frameworks that sustain engagement even when political relations fluctuate. These outcomes are produced and sustained through institutionalised routines – regularised exchanges, themed programmes, and policy-linked frameworks – that convert societal interaction into a durable mode of

diplomacy. At the same time, the PPD enables normative recalibration through discursive layering, including civilisational and pluralist vocabularies. In this domain, continuity is achieved through institutionalised cooperation, while recalibration operates through narrative innovation. The PPD thus provides the first empirical articulation of the SRA posture and demonstrates how continuity-with-recalibration is enacted in societal settings.

The SD extends the analysis into the political–security domain, where issue sensitivity and role expectations are more explicit. The findings show that China preserves continuity by maintaining stable consultation venues, while recalibrating expectations through forum shopping and altercasting techniques. Through these practices, China manages sovereignty- and multipolarity-related narratives without destabilising the dialogue architecture itself. The SD therefore illustrates how the SRA posture operates under heightened political constraint, with continuity sustained through procedural stability and recalibration enacted through role adaptation and agenda positioning. SDs function as an institutionalised signalling architecture through which interactional expectations and interpretive norms are stabilised and incrementally recalibrated.

The EFD demonstrates that economic diplomacy operates as a site of sustained identity work, extending beyond narrow technical coordination. Integrating grounded analysis with Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Role Theory (recognition, legitimacy, role recalibration), the study shows how China embeds itself as a responsible stakeholder

through dense regulatory, financial, and economic-governance coordination, while advancing reformist vocabularies related to sustainability, inclusivity, and development. Identity strategies associated with social mobility, creativity, and competition enable incremental norm innovation within existing governance frameworks. References to parallel initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI illustrate how stakeholder performance can coexist with calibrated reformist entrepreneurship. The EFD consolidates the SRA posture in global economic governance and shows how CwR operates where material stakes and systemic consequences are most pronounced.

Each dialogue enacts the SRA posture differently—through societal scaffolding (the PPD), institutionalised signalling architecture (the SD), and economic statecraft (EFD)—yet all three converge on the same patterned outcome CwR. Taken together, the three studies reveal a consistent strategic pattern across societal, political, and economic domains.

Continuity refers to China's sustained commitment to institutional participation, procedural replication, and cooperative predictability. Recalibration refers to the incremental adjustment of norms, roles, and discourses through reinterpretation, sequencing, selective emphasis, and strategic ambiguity and omission. Continuity provides the institutional foundation through which recalibration is enacted within existing governance structures.

This pattern explains why cooperation can persist, and even deepen, despite political divergence. It challenges assumptions that practical cooperation mechanically tracks political alignment, showing instead how institutionalised diplomacy embeds stability while enabling calibrated recalibration.

Across the three dialogues, China's self-presentation varies by domain. In the PPD, China foregrounds a civilisational identity, softening strategic intent through societal framing. In the SD, it emphasises sovereign identity, reaffirming political status while managing contestation. In the EFD, it performs a stakeholder identity, embedding itself within global economic governance frameworks. These differentiated identity strategies are not ad hoc; they are calibrated to the institutional environment of each dialogue and collectively demonstrate layered identity management through institutionalised diplomacy, in which identity performance is calibrated to the functional and normative constraints of each dialogue setting. These differentiated self-presentations constitute domain-specific expressions of the SRA posture, through which continuity and recalibration are balanced in ways appropriate to each institutional setting.

The analytical relationship among the thesis's core concepts can therefore be summarised as follows: the SRA defines the actor-level identity logic; IaD specifies the institutional mechanism through which that logic is enacted; and CwR captures the patterned outcome that emerges over time. Institutionalisation supplies the structured

platform on which continuity is stabilised and recalibration is embedded. In this sense, these dialogue venues are not passive containers of diplomacy but active instruments of calibrated change.

By analysing the PPD, SD, and EFD together, the thesis provides the first systematic, multi-decade, cross-dialogue account of China's institutionalised engagement with Europe across societal, political, and economic domains (2001–2025). It demonstrates that China's high-level dialogues are not ceremonial, symbolic, or merely technical, but durable diplomatic infrastructures through which identity performance, role negotiation, and normative recalibration are routinised.

The findings establish that China's engagement with Europe is neither one of simple accommodation nor outright challenge. Instead, it exemplifies a mode of reform-through-continuity, in which cooperation is stabilised and recalibration and pursued in parallel, with the two dynamics mutually reinforcing.

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 synthesise these findings by showing, respectively, how the SRA is enacted across the three dialogues and how (IaD) through societal scaffolding, institutionalised signalling architecture, and economic statecraft. Together, they demonstrate that identity performance and institutional practice are mutually constitutive and form the analytical foundation of the thesis.

Table 1.1 The SRA Across the Three Dialogues[10]

Dialogue	Analytical Lens	Core Argument	Case-Level SRA Definition	Contribution to Overall SRA
PPD (Societal)	Societal Diplomacy (conceptual innovation)	The PPD generates tangible, formalised, symbolic, and normative outcomes, showing that low politics arenas function as strategic sites of identity projection	Continuity through institutional scaffolding; recalibration through discursive layering	Defines societal diplomacy and introduces the first iteration of the SRA, demonstrating identity performance in low-politics settings
SD (Political)	Forum Shopping; Altercasting	The SD preserves dialogue stability while recalibrating	Continuity through stable consultations; recalibration	Extends the SRA into political-security

---

[10] Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent tables in Section 1 and Section 5 are derived from the author's analysis of China-issued PPD, SD, and EFD documents (2001-2025).

		expectations via venue selection and role projection, reframing sovereignty and multipolarity discourses	through venue and role adaptation	domains, highlighting adaptation under high-politics constraints
EFD (Economic)	Social Identity Theory and Role Theory	The EFD embeds China as a stakeholder while enabling reformist entrepreneurship (sustainability, inclusivity, multipolarity). Parallel initiatives amplify but do not rupture engagement	Continuity through embedded participation; recalibration through incremental norm innovation	Consolidates the SRA by modelling identity strategies in global economic governance

| Overall Thesis | Synthesised from the three dialogues | Across societal, political, and economic pillars, China's role is neither status-quo nor revisionist | Rising-power posture blending continuity (institutional embedding, legitimacy, pragmatic cooperation) with recalibration (discursive innovation, selective entrepreneurship, procedural adaptation) | Establishes the SRA as a generalisable framework explaining China's dual posture across domains |

Source: Author's analysis based on ground coding and abductive interpretation of China-issued official PPD, SD, and EFD documents (2001–2025).

Where Table 1.1 synthesises how the SRA manifests across the three dialogues (what China does and performs), Table 1.2 turns to the instrumental medium through which that performance occurs – institutionalisation as diplomacy. In other words, Table 1.1

captures the role logic (Strategist-Reformist) and Table 1.2 maps the organisational

mechanics (scaffolding, signalling, embedded statecraft) that stabilise continuity while

opening calibrated space for reform. Together, they show that identity performance and

institutional design are mutually constitutive.

Table 1.2 IaD Across the Three Dialogues

Dialogue	Institutional Function	How It Operates	Case-Level Definition	Contribution to Overall Argument
PPD	Societal Scaffolding	Themed years, scholarships, and exchanges embed cooperation while legitimising pluralist vocabularies of civilisation, and shared future	Institutionalisation as scaffolding: ritualised exchanges stabilise continuity while enabling normative layering	Shows that even low-politics cooperation constitutes structured diplomacy, not symbolic add-ons
SD	Institutionalised	Regularised venues anchor	Institutionalisation as	Demonstrates how institutional routine

	Signalling Architecture	continuity while practicing forum shopping and altercasting reframe partner roles and expand multipolar narratives	institutionalised signalling architecture: continuity through stable channels; recalibration through discursive recalibration	functions as diplomatic strategy in high-politics domains
EFD	Economic Statecraft	Dense frameworks for trade, finance, and regulation embed stakeholder credibility while institutionalisi	Institutionalisation as statecraft: pragmatic cooperation secures continuity while discursive innovation supports incremental reform	Shows how institutionalisation enables China to act as both stakeholder and reformist in global economic governance

		ng reformist vocabularies	
Overall Thesis	Structured Diplomacy	Across the three dialogues, institutionalisation provides stability (through ritual, density, predictability) while creating scope for recalibration (through layering, adaptation, entrepreneurship)	Institutionalisation as diplomacy: structured dialogue mechanisms that stabilise cooperation while enabling recalibration	Establishes institutionalisation as diplomacy as a generalisable mid-range concept for rising-power strategies

Where Table 1.1 synthesises how the SRA manifests across the three dialogues (what China does and performs), Table 1.2 turns to the instrumental medium through which

that performance occurs – institutionalisation as diplomacy. In other words, Table 1.1 captures the role logic (Strategist-Reformist) and Table 1.2 maps the organisational mechanics (scaffolding, institutionalised signalling architecture, embedded statecraft) that stabilise continuity while opening calibrated space for reform. Together, they show that identity performance and institutional design are mutually constitutive.

Together, the two tables demonstrate the interdependence of the thesis's core contributions. The SRA framework captures what China performs through its dialogues, while institutionalisation as diplomacy explains how those performances are enacted and sustained. Taken in combination, they provide the analytical foundation for the chapters that follow.

The remainder of the thesis proceeds as follows. Section 1 sets out the research question and key findings (1.1), reviews relevant literature (1.2), justifies the research focus and identifies shared patterns across the three dialogues (1.3), and outlines methodology, case logic, and contributions (1.4). Sections 2, 3, and 4 present the three empirical papers: the PPD, SD, and EFD, respectively. Section 5 develops the discussion and policy implications through five subsections: 5.1 synthesises findings across cases to define the SRA and IaD; 5.2 integrates interview insights; 5.3 situates the findings in broader contexts of multipolarity, triangular China-Europe-U.S. dynamics, and global governance; 5.4 reflects on limits and constraints, including trust deficits and contested norms; and 5.5 offers final reflections, situating the thesis's conceptual contributions

within IR, diplomacy studies, and global order debates. Section 6 concludes, distilling the thesis's argument and highlighting its contributions to the study of rising powers and institutionalised diplomacy.

The following section situates this contribution within existing scholarship on China's role in the LIO (Section 1.2), before explaining why the three dialogues provide a distinctive and appropriate lens for addressing the research question (Section 1.3).

1.2 Literature Review: Debates on China's Role in the LIO

This section reviews the main debates on China's role in the LIO. Existing scholarship falls broadly into three perspectives—status quo integration, revisionist challenge, and reform-from-within—while contributions from the English School and non-Western IR theory add further nuance. Together, these literatures frame the central puzzle of China's engagement: whether it is consolidating, contesting, or recalibrating the international order.

Status-quo accounts (e.g. Johnston 2003; Ikenberry 2011) emphasise China's participation in established institutions such as the WTO, G20, and UNSC as evidence of cooperative, rule-abiding behaviour and socialisation into existing norms. Empirical studies (e.g. Kastner and Saunders 2012) further highlight China's generally predictable conduct in multilateral settings. Critics, however, argue that this perspective underestimates China's agency by treating institutional participation as passive

internalisation, overlooking how China selectively adapts, reinterprets, and strategically deploys norms rather than simply accepting them.

Revisionist accounts interpret initiatives such as the BRI and AIIB, and assertive behaviour in the South China Sea as challenges to US-led governance and liberal institutional dominance. While these analyses capture important dimensions of competition and contestation, their zero-sum framing risks reducing complex behaviour to systemic confrontation and neglects sustained evidence of embedded cooperation within existing institutions. More recent scholarship demonstrates that rising and established powers frequently combine institutional participation with contestation, yielding hybrid patterns of cooperation and rivalry rather than abrupt rupture from the existing order (e.g. Hopewell 2016; Cooley and Nexon 2020).

A third strand of scholarship advances a reform-from-within or "change-from-within" perspective (e.g. Schweller and Pu 2011; Jones 2018), arguing that China pragmatically engages existing institutions to reshape norms, rules, and practices from the inside. This literature highlights strategies of incremental reform, norm layering, and selective adaptation, moving beyond binary status-quo versus revisionist classifications. Recent contributions further advance non-binary understandings of order change by emphasising institutional pluralisation, historical layering, and negotiated adjustment within a fragmented international order (Stuenkel 2016; Zarakol 2022). While reform-from-within scholarship usefully highlights incremental adaptation beyond the status-

quo–revisionist binary, it devotes limited attention to the actor-level identity logic and the concrete institutionalised diplomatic practices through which such reform is enacted—gaps that the SRA framework addresses by linking role performance, dialogue mechanisms, and patterned outcomes.

Other perspectives offer additional insights. The English School, for instance, treats China's rise as a case of potential status accommodation, suggesting that negotiated adjustment within international society can integrate rising powers and reduce conflict (Paul 2021). While this approach resonates with China's rhetoric of "win–win cooperation," it risks overestimating the scope for accommodation and underplaying persistent asymmetries in power, norms, and institutional authority.

Non-Western and Chinese IR theories provide important indigenous perspectives on China's conception of order. Yan's (2011; 2019) moral realism (often associated with the Tsinghua school of Chinese IR), Qin's (2018) relationalism, Shih et al's (2019) balance of relationship, and Zhao's (2011; 2021) Tianxia (a concept of world order centred on relational hierarchy and moral authority rather than sovereign equality) offer a rich account of China's normative worldview and relational orientation, enriching understanding of how China imagines global authority beyond the Westphalian sovereignty framework. However, these approaches often remain analytically detached from empirical studies of how such ideas are operationalised in concrete institutional settings, particularly in China's sustained engagement with Western partners.

Across these literatures, two questions dominate: what role does China play in the LIO, and how does it engage with the institutionalised mechanisms through which that order is negotiated? Much of the debate frames China's behaviour defensively— as adaptation, challenge, or pragmatic reform—without sufficiently acknowledging its self-perception as a Major Country and, more recently, a Major-Party–Major-Country, as well as its active role in shaping rules and norms. Moreover, existing scholarship remains heavily US-centric, focusing on great-power rivalry or global multilateral arenas, while paying limited attention to Europe as a distinctive order-anchoring yet normatively plural partner. Finally, although recent scholarship increasingly recognises the fragmentation of global order and the emergence of institutional pluralism and differentiated forms of cooperation (e.g. Acharya 2018; Cooley and Nexon 2020), and more cautiously highlights uneven authority and variation across issue areas within the liberal order (Lake, Martin and Risse 2021), empirical analysis of how rising powers simultaneously stabilise cooperation and pursue calibrated reform through routine, institutionalised dialogue mechanisms remains underdeveloped.

This gap is particularly evident in the under-examined China-Europe context. Despite being repeatedly affirmed in official statements as the three pillars of China-Europe relations, the SD, EFD, and PPD have rarely been analysed as instruments of strategic diplomacy. Existing research often treats them as functional or symbolic supplements to summitry, overlooking their role as arenas of identity performance, role negotiation, and incremental norm recalibration.

To clarify these debates and position the thesis within them, Table 1.3 synthesises the main perspectives on China's role in the LIO. It highlights each perspective's core claims, identifies their limitations, and shows how this thesis responds by situating China's institutionalised dialogues with Europe as arenas of strategic role performance and calibrated reform.

Table 1.3 Competing Perspectives on China's Role in the LIO

Perspective	Core Claims	Limitations	Thesis Response
Status quo integration	China joins established institutions and behaves as a cooperative, rule-abiding power by internalising norms	Underestimates China's agency; treats participation as passive socialisation; overlooks selective adaptation and identity projection	Institutionalised dialogues show that participation is strategic: they secure recognition while creating space for incremental recalibration
Revisionist challenge	Rising powers inevitably challenge existing orders; China disrupts the LIO	Frames behaviour in zero-sum terms; reduces complex strategies to confrontation; neglects evidence of	Institutionalised dialogues reveal a reformist rather than revolutionary posture: China competes and innovates within

	through assertive behaviour	embedded continuity and cooperation	institutions while avoiding rupture
Change-from-within / reformist	China pursues incremental reform from inside institutions, layering preferences without exiting	Blurs the line between adaptive reform and revisionist disruption; pays limited attention to institutional practices	Institutionalised dialogues provide evidence of reformist adaptation, showing how China reframes norms and builds complementary initiatives
English School / peaceful change	Rising powers can be accommodated through negotiated adjustment; China's rise may be peaceful if its status is recognised	Overestimates scope for accommodation; underplays entrenched asymmetries in power and norms	Institutionalised dialogues illustrate negotiated adjustment but also expose persistent asymmetries and identity divides that constrain deeper accommodation
Chinese IR theory	Indigenous frameworks highlight China's alternative visions	Normatively rich but analytically thin; rarely operationalised in	The thesis links China's normative discourse to institutionalised practices in high-level

of order (e.g., moral realism, relationalism, Tianxia)	concrete institutional practices, especially with Europe	dialogues, showing how identity and norms are performed in structured settings

In sum, the existing literature provides valuable insights into China's integration, contestation, and reform strategies, but it leaves underexplored the institutional settings where continuity and recalibration are enacted simultaneously. Much of the debate remains U.S.-centric, focusing on systemic rivalry or global institutions, while overlooking Europe as a distinctive arena where China performs its strategic identity in more calibrated ways. The high-level dialogues with Europe – repeatedly affirmed as the political, economic, and societal pillars of CSPs – have rarely been analysed as instruments of strategic diplomacy. Yet these dialogues matter not because they are ancillary to summitry, but because they reveal how China stabilises cooperation, manages mistrust, and probes for incremental reform within an ostensibly supportive partner context. Rather than deriving its framework deductively from any single theoretical tradition, the thesis engages these literatures as contextual reference points, developing its analytical concepts inductively from primary documents while showing how institutionalised diplomacy functions simultaneously as a stabilising structure and a reformist process within the LIO.

By conceptualising the SD, EFD, and PPD not as ceremonial supplements but as structured arenas of role performance and institutionalised diplomacy, this thesis develops a mid-range analytical framework—centred on the Strategist–Reformist Actor (SRA), Institutionalisation as Diplomacy (IaD), and Continuity with Recalibration (CwR)—that specifies how reform-from-within strategies are enacted through dialogic practice. In doing so, it moves beyond abstract classifications of China as status-quo, revisionist, or reformist and provides an empirically grounded account of how rising powers navigate order transformation from within established institutional architectures. The next section (1.3) develops this justification by showing why China's strategic identity and the triadic dialogue architecture provide an integrated and distinctive lens for analysing its engagement with the LIO.

1.3 Justifying the Focus: China's Strategic Identity and the Triadic Dialogue Architecture with Europe

Building on the debates outlined above, this section justifies the thesis's empirical focus on China's high-level dialogues with Europe. Since Xi Jinping's articulation of Major-Country Relations in 2013, the concept has become central to China's strategic identity. Initially framed in the China-U.S. context through principles of "no conflict or confrontation," "mutual respect," and "win-win cooperation",[11] it has since been

---

[11] See: The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2013) *Remarks by President Obama and President Xi Jinping of P.R.China Before Bilateral Meeting.* Obama White House Archives. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/07/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-jinping-peoples-republic-china-. Accessed 18 December 2023; Wang Yi (2013) *Toward a new model of major-country relations between China and the United States*. Brookings Institution.

extended to other major powers, including Europe and Russia. The concept functions both as a narrative to affirm China's co-equal status and as a policy framework for recalibrating global governance in ways that accommodate China's rise and promote multipolarity.

Within this strategic vision, Europe assumes a particular significance for China's identity construction and order narratives. China's discourse presents the EU as a vital economic and technological partner [12] and, at times, as a potential geopolitical counterweight to U.S. dominance.[13] Europe is not treated as a monolith: the EU and European countries of interest (ECOIs) vary in their alignment with Chinese and American positions, making the region a revealing arena for observing how China balances cooperation, competition, and strategic positioning. Since its first EU policy paper in 2003, and subsequent updates in 2014 and 2018, China has consistently

---

https://www.brookings.edu/articles/wang-yi-toward-a-new-model-of-major-country-relations-between-china-and-the-united-states/.Accessed 20 September 2025.

[12] Highlighted in research discussions and interviews with scholars and official evaluations of China-EU cooperation.

[13] When establishing strategic partnerships with Russia and the EU, China presented these as means to "promote multipolarity and impede hegemonism". See: Wang Yi (2021) *China-Russia strategic cooperation has no limits, no forbidden zones, and no ceiling*. MFA. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202101/t20210102_361922.shtml; MFA (2024) *Joint Statement between the P.R.China and the Russia Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Two Countries*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202405/t20240516_11305860.shtml. Accessed 20 September 2025.

underscored Europe's significance not only for access to markets and technology but also for its normative influence within the LIO.[14]

China's engagement with Europe is anchored in a dense architecture of CSPs. The EU was designated a CSP in 2003,[15] followed by the UK, France, and Italy in 2004, Portugal in 2005, Germany in 2014, and Poland and Switzerland in 2016. These labels range from the standard CSP to more elaborate titles such as "Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century" (UK), "All-Round Strategic Partnership" (Germany), and "Innovative Strategic Partnership" (Switzerland), but operationally

---

[14] See: Mission of the P.R.China to the European Union. (2011) *China and the EU hold the second round of high-level strategic dialogue.* https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/zozyzcwj/20210112/202101/t20210113_8433670.htm; Mission of the P.R.China to the European Union (2014) *China's policy paper on the EU: Deepen the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership for mutual benefit and win-win cooperation.* https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zywj/zywd/201404/t20140402_8301597.htm; Mission of the P.R.China to the European Union. (2018) *China's policy paper on the European Union.* https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zywj/zywd/201812/t20181219_8301603.htm; Wang Yi (2024) *Remarks at the 2024 New Year Reception of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.* MFA. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyjh_673099/202401/t20240131_11237397.shtml. Furthermore, China emphasises the role of individual ECOIs in enhancing China-EU relations. For instance, Xinhua News Agency (2014) *China and Germany hold fourth round of foreign ministers' strategic dialogue.* The Central People's Government of the P.R.China. Https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-04/14/content_2658855.htm; Xinhua News Agency (2017) *Yang Jiechi holds China-France strategic dialogue with French presidential foreign affairs advisor Étienne.* The Central People's Government of the P.R.China. https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-12/19/content_5248664.htm; MFA (2021) *Wang Yi holds first round of foreign ministers' strategic dialogue with Portuguese Minister of State and Foreign Affairs Silva.* China International Development Cooperation Agency. www.cidca.gov.cn/2021-07/23/c_1211254601.htm. Accessed 20 September 2025.

[15] China first established a Long-Term and Stable Constructive Partnership with the EU in 1998, which was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2003, marking the EU's designation as one of China's key strategic partners.

they signal high-priority, multidimensional relationships. Operationally, they signify

high-priority, multidimensional relationships. Officially described by China as "all-

dimensional, wide-ranging, and multi-layered," these CSPs are intended to provide

stable frameworks for long-term cooperation across political, economic, scientific, and

cultural domains.[16] In China's partnership hierarchy, the CSP label signals a high-

priority bilateral relationship aligned with strategic foreign policy objectives.[17]

European counterparts, however, have not articulated a uniform definition of the CSP.

Rather, they have approached CSPs pragmatically, applying them flexibly in response

to shifting geopolitical conditions. This asymmetry highlights both the CSP's utility as

a diplomatic instrument and its contested nature, particularly as Europe's perception of

China has shifted toward that of a "systemic rival." (e.g. French Government 2022;

Federal Government of Germany 2023a, 2023b; HM Government, 2023; European

Commission 2024).

At the operational core of the CSP framework are three institutionalised high-level

dialogues: the SD, the EFD, and the PPD. Explicitly identified in joint declarations of

---

[16] Wen Jiabao (2004) *Vigorously promoting comprehensive strategic partnership between China and the European Union*. Speech at the China-EU Investment and Trade Forum. Mission of the P.R. China to the European Union. https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/more/Topics/200405/t20040512_8303627.htm. Accessed 20 September 2025.

[17] For China's partnership hierarchy, see Xinhua (2014) *Partnering without alliances: China's global network of partnerships*. The Central People's Government of the P.R.China. https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-12/23/content_2795587.htm. Accessed 20 September 2025.

policy papers as the CSP's political, economic, and societal pillars,[18] these dialogues are co-chaired at vice-premier or ministerial level and endorsed by heads of state. They exist with both the EU and ECOIs: SDs with the EU, UK, France, Germany, Poland, Switzerland, and Portugal; EFDs with the EU, UK, France, Germany, and Italy; and PPDs with the EU, UK, France, and Germany. Half of China's globally prioritised EFDs and four of its ten PPDs are with European counterparts, underscoring the region's strategic weight.[19]

These mechanisms are not isolated channels but interlinked pillars of engagement. The SD aims to strengthen trust and coordinates political positions; the EFD anchors trade, financial, and regulatory cooperation; and the PPD institutionalises societal exchanges. Cross-domain interactions illustrate their interconnections: cooperation in one dialogue may intersect with agendas in another, while collectively they serve as structured arenas through which China projects its preferred narratives and seeks to recalibrate normative vocabularies within the LIO.

---

[18] For example, see MFA (2014) *China's policy paper on the EU: Deepen the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership for mutual benefit and win-win cooperation*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjzc/202405/t20240531_11367518.html.Accessed 20 September 2025.

[19] Other high-priority EFD partners: U.S., Canada, Japan, Russia, and emerging economics (e.g., India, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia). See Ministry of Finance (MoC) of P.R.China's 2021 Work Summary: *Actively participating in international financial cooperation, supporting to develop a new development pattern*. https://www.zgcznet.com/fdbnl/dqx/202107/20210722/j_20210722102153000162692 06463990634.html. Accessed 20 September 2025. Other PPD partners: Russia, U.S., Indonesia, South Africa, India, and Japan.

In practice, these dialogues embody China's relational approach to diplomacy. Rather than relying on rigid, treaty-bound outcomes, they prioritise incremental consensus, trust-building, and process-oriented engagement. This relational mode is particularly significant in the current geopolitical climate, where Europe is recalibrating its China strategy and perceptions of rivalry are intensifying. The dialogues thus serve as stabilising platforms: their value lies less in immediate deliverables than in their durability as arenas for expectation management, norm negotiation, and identity projection.

This thesis therefore approaches the SD, EFD, and PPD not as discrete case studies, but as interdependent pillars of China's strategic engagement and identity-building in Europe. Its thematic foundation – strategy, identity, and diplomacy – is embedded in the title *Navigating the Liberal International Order: Strategy, Identity, and Diplomacy in China's High-Level Dialogues with European Counterparts (2001–2025)*. Strategy is foregrounded in the SD, where forum shopping and altercasting reveal how China maintains political-security consultations while incrementally recalibrates sovereignty and multipolarity narratives. Identity is central to the EFD, where SIT and Role Theory illuminate China's role negotiation and normative recalibration through strategies of social mobility, creativity, and competition. Diplomacy emphasises China's preference for relational and non-coercive engagement, most clearly visible in the PPD, where societal diplomacy demonstrates how institutionalised exchanges operate as instruments of soft power and normative projection.

At the same time, these three themes intersect across all dialogues. Strategy, identity, and diplomacy are mutually reinforcing higher-level endorsement and vice-premier co-chairing confer strategic weight; role performance and norm recalibration foreground identity; and routinised institutional formats embody diplomacy as practice. This intersection underpins the thesis's two central conceptual contributions: the SRA framework (identity) and the conceptualisation of IaD (diplomacy/strategy). Collectively, the thematic foundations illuminate how China embeds itself within existing institutions while reshaping them − legitimating its international identity, managing normative recalibration, and advancing sovereignty and multipolarity.

The SD, EFD, and PPD are distinct in scope yet exhibit shared patterns that justify analysing them as a coherent empirical field rather than isolated case studies. Each originated as top-down initiatives, announced during state visits or summits and co-chaired by senior political leaders, usually vice premiers or foreign ministers of vice-premier rank. Some overlap in personnel reinforces continuity and cross-pillar coordination: for instance, Wang Yi has chaired both SD and EFD rounds. Variations, such as the China-Italy EFD co-chaired at ministerial level and the China-Poland SD and PPD at deputy- or vice-ministerial level, reflect tactical flexibility without undermining strategic coherence. This hierarchical anchoring serves two purposes: it secures alignment with national priorities and embeds the dialogues within the broader framework of head-of-state diplomacy.

Regularity is equally important. Most dialogues are designed to convene annually, providing procedural predictability that sustains political contact, signals commitment, and manages fluctuations in bilateral relations. At the same time, their timing is occasionally adjusted in response to political tensions or shifting external circumstances. This duality of predictability and flexibility illustrates how institutionalisation functions not only as a procedural framework but as a diplomatic practice – stabilising engagement while accommodating volatility.

Dialogue rounds are often timed with symbolic moments such as anniversaries of diplomatic relations, CSP milestones, or high-level visits. The China-France EFD, for example, has frequently coincided with anniversaries of bilateral ties, while China-EU EFD rounds have been linked to CSP anniversaries and summit cycles. Similar practices are evident in SDs and PPDs, where cultural years or commemorations frame meetings. Such symbolic linkages reinforce continuity, shared history, and political commitment. Externally, they project stability and constructive intent; internally, they embed the dialogues within China's foreign policy narratives of "peaceful development" and a "community with a shared future for mankind".

Four functional traits underpin their coherence. First, they operate within structured yet flexible frameworks: institutionalisation provides durability through regular formats, stable co-chairing, and established agendas, while flexibility allows adaptation to shifting geopolitical conditions. Second, they are forward-looking, designed to foster

long-term cooperation in strategic domains. A notable example is the China-UK EFD, which pioneered financial innovations such as the London-Shanghai Stock Connect and the establishment of an RMB clearing bank in London. Third, they are incremental and process-orientated: progress builds cumulatively across rounds, as seen in the London-Shanghai Stock Connect, first raised at the fifth China-UK EFD and finalised only after sustained negotiation. Finally, they act as mechanisms of consensus-building and reassurance, aligning expectations and maintaining communication channels even amid political friction.

The China-EU EFD's role in paving the way for Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) negotiations illustrates how these dialogues create space for consensus even when outcomes are shaped elsewhere.

Variation across dialogues underscores both adaptability and institutional consistency. EFDs tend to generate the most measurable outcomes: the China-UK EFD drove RMB internationalisation; the China-France EFD produced extensive but less dynamic deliverables; the China-Italy EFD remained underdeveloped but symbolically reaffirmed; and the China-EU EFD operated with deliberate opacity. SDs and PPDs produced fewer quantifiable deliverables but carried symbolic, procedural, and normative weight. These differences demonstrate adaptability within a shared design.

Taken together, these shared features show that the dialogues function as a triadic architecture: mutually reinforcing pillars that embed China's SRA posture across societal, political, and economic domains. Their regularity, symbolism, and flexibility also illustrate how institutionalisation itself operates as diplomacy, providing structured arenas through which China stabilises cooperation while recalibrating the normative boundaries of order.

This empirical consistency strengthens the rationale for selecting the SD, EFD, and PPD as the core cases for this thesis. They are not ad hoc instruments but institutionalised mechanisms central to the China-Europe CSPs, providing a comparative and interlinked field for analysing China's evolving role within the LIO. The designation of these three dialogues as the pillars of China-Europe relations is explicitly affirmed in China's policy papers and official statements, underscoring their strategic weight within the CSP framework.[20]

While their pillar status is formally acknowledged by China's authorities, this thesis engages with them analytically, as a coherent empirical field defined by shared patterns of institutional anchoring, symbolic framing, and functional complementarity. These characteristics justify their selection as conceptual entry points for examining China's strategic engagement with Europe through both convergent and divergent analytical

---

[20] While official statements at both EU and bilateral levels (e.g. China-EU, China-UK, China-France, China-Germany) each describe these mechanisms as "pillars" of their respective relationships, taken together they constitute a triadic architecture structuring China's broader engagement with Europe.

lenses. In this way, the dialogues reveal how China embeds continuity while probing for selective recalibration across societal, political, and economic domains. Building on this rationale, the next section (1.4) outlines the methodological framework, case logic, and contributions that guide the analysis.

1.4 Methodology, Case Logic, and Contributions

This thesis investigates how China navigates, negotiates, and recalibrates elements of the LIO through three institutionalised high-level dialogue mechanisms with Europe: the PPD, the SD, and the EFD. Each dialogue constitutes a distinct yet complementary arena of engagement—societal, political, and economic—through which China articulates strategic priorities, performs role identities, and recalibrates normative expectations. Taken together, these mechanisms provide the empirical foundation for theorising China as an SRA and for advancing the conceptualisation of IaD.

1.4.1 Methodological Framework

The thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodological framework that integrates the Grounded Theory Method (GTM) with abductive reasoning. This design is deliberately selected to analyse institutionalised high-level dialogues as curated diplomatic artefacts rather than transparent records of negotiation. Public-facing outputs—joint statements where available and, more often, official press releases —are politically selective, strategically framed, and frequently characterised by partial disclosure, ambiguity, and omission. GTM provides the inductive analytical structure

through which patterned meanings are generated from the data, while abduction supplies the interpretive logic through which these patterns are situated within their strategic, institutional, and political context.

Grounded theory, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), enables theory generation through systematic engagement with empirical materials rather than the imposition of prior analytical categories. Subsequent refinements, most notably by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2006), have underscored GTM's suitability for analysing complex social processes in which predefined theoretical frames may obscure emergent dynamics. In this thesis, GTM is operationalised through line-by-line open coding of dialogue texts, followed by focused (axial) coding that clusters recurrent framings, initiatives, and policy issue linkages into higher-order analytic categories.

This inductive structure is particularly appropriate for diplomatic documents that are not designed for analytical transparency. Rather than treating such texts as neutral accounts of cooperation, the analysis approaches them as constructed and performative artefacts through which China publicly articulates priorities, role claims, and institutional preferences. Consistent with constructivist grounded-theory approaches articulated by Charmaz (2006), which treat texts as socially produced and contextually situated, the aim is not to reconstruct an objective account of negotiations but to identify patterned representations, recurring priorities, and stabilised framings through which China publicly articulates its institutional engagement.

Abductive reasoning complements this inductive coding structure by enabling movement between empirical patterns and broader theoretical understanding. Classically associated with Peirce (1931–1958) and further developed in contemporary social-science methodology (e.g. Reichertz 2007; Timmermans and Tavory 2012), abduction refers to the generation of plausible explanatory interpretations when observed patterns cannot be fully accounted for by existing expectations. Recent methodological scholarship emphasises that abduction is not opposed to grounded theory but increasingly central to its contemporary application. As Timmermans and Tavory (2012) argue, grounded analysis in practice involves iterative movement between data and theory, in which surprising or recurrent patterns prompt the refinement of conceptual propositions rather than their simple confirmation.

This understanding is further elaborated by Tavory and Timmermans (2014), who conceptualise abductive analysis as a systematic movement between empirical puzzles, contextual interpretation, and theoretical abstraction. Similarly, Charmaz (2014) situates abductive reasoning within constructivist grounded theory as the stage that enables theorisation without abandoning empirical grounding. More recent work further illustrates how interpretive analysis operates through ongoing engagement with empirical situations and anticipatory understandings rather than discrete inferential steps (e.g. Tavory 2018), a dynamic that is compatible with abductive analytic reasoning as applied in this thesis.

In this thesis, abduction operates by situating inductively derived themes within their strategic, institutional, and political context. Patterns identified through coding—such as persistent references to multilateralism and multipolarity, selective emphasis on reform, and shifting issue salience across dialogue rounds—are interpreted in light of contextual knowledge about China–Europe relations, institutional venue differentiation across dialogue mechanisms, and broader global-governance dynamics. Abduction thus enables the analysis to move beyond description to explanation, without treating diplomatic language as either fully transparent or ideologically deterministic.

Silence, ambiguity, and omissions are analysed as part of this abductive process. These include issues raised in earlier rounds but later dropped, agenda items displaced from one dialogue mechanism (for example, from the SD to the EFD or PPD), and topics reported in European sources but absent from Chinese records. Such absences may signal agenda shifting, strategic avoidance, or compartmentalisation across dialogue tracks and are treated as analytically meaningful rather than as noise. Keyword tallies are used descriptively to gauge relative salience but are never treated as determinative evidence.

The combined use of GTM and abduction is also motivated by the limitations of alternative textual methods in this empirical context. Conventional quantitative content analysis risks misrepresenting political importance when strategically significant issues are omitted or euphemised in official releases; as Krippendorff (2019) cautions,

frequency counts do not automatically reflect salience in curated texts. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by Fairclough (1995) and others, is designed to uncover ideological structures but often presumes relatively stable discursive formations. Applied to high-level diplomatic statements characterised by ambiguity, formulaic language, and intentional vagueness, CDA risks over-interpretation or the imputation of ideological coherence where strategic indeterminacy is intended. By contrast, grounded theory accommodates emergent categories without assuming ideological closure, while abduction explicitly treats ambiguity, silence, and selective disclosure as analytically consequential. This combination is therefore particularly well suited to analysing diplomacy conducted largely behind closed doors and only partially reflected in public texts.

The analytical framework developed in this thesis—the SRA, IaD, and CwR—emerged inductively from sustained engagement with primary documents, with abductive reasoning and interdisciplinary analytical perspectives used interpretively to contextualise and refine, rather than predetermine, empirical categories.

1.4.2 Dataset

The empirical base spans the period 2001–2025 and comprises 131 dialogue rounds and 147 official documents and outcome statements across the three dialogue mechanisms: the PPDs (2012–2025), SDs (2001–2025), and EFDs (2008–2025).

China-issued materials form the core of the dataset, reflecting the research focus on how China articulates and performs its strategic identity through these dialogues. These documents typically summarise policy outcomes, highlight initiatives, and reproduce co-chair remarks; in some cases, they note the signing of joint statements without releasing the full text. European outputs are comparatively sparse, with only a limited number publicly accessible in English and others issued in national languages or withheld under differing disclosure practices. Table 1.4 summarises the dialogue rounds and documents analysed.

Table 1.4 Overview of dialogue rounds and documents analysed

Dialogue	PPD	SD	EFD
Number of rounds	19	75	37
China-issued documents	19	56	41
Joint documents	6	3	22
Total documents analysed	25	59	63

The dataset is deliberately China-centred: it captures the full Chinese public record of the dialogues and reveals how China represents and communicates its engagement, rather than providing a fully bilateral narrative. These texts are treated not as neutral or comprehensive records of negotiation, but as constructed and performative artefacts through which China articulates its intentions, role claims, and strategic preferences.

China-issued documents are triangulated with external sources—including UK government releases, parliamentary debates, and EU communiqués—where available, to verify specific outcomes (such as quantified agreements or procedural deliverables) and to contextualise European responses. To situate the dialogues within China's broader strategic discourse, the analysis is further contextualised through policy texts, including the Five-Year Plans (2001–2025), the Outline of Long-Term Goals for 2035,[21] white papers, and relevant legislative texts.

In addition, semi-structured interviews conducted in late 2024 with a senior EU official and diplomat, alongside academic and policy experts based in China, the UK, and Europe who specialise in China-Europe relations, provide practice-based insights that complement the documentary record and enrich interpretive depth (Ethics Approval: ETH2324-1444).

Three limitations are acknowledged. First, while many dialogue rounds include parallel events and selectively open segments, vice-premier-level negotiations remain largely closed; publicly available joint statements and press releases therefore capture only a curated subset of the discussions. Second, documentary transparency is uneven: joint statements are not always reached or published, and the level of detail in official

---

[21] The analysis begins with the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-2005), as previous plans primarily focused on domestic economic development. Although the 9th Plan (1996-2000) introduced external engagement - particularly in trade and investment - the 10th Plan institutionalised internationalisation as a core strategy, coinciding with China's accession to the WTO in 2001. This marked a pivotal shift towards global integration and diplomatic expansion, justifying its use as the starting point for this study.

releases varies across rounds and partners. Third, European documentation is less systematically available than Chinese sources, creating an asymmetry in the public record and limiting the extent to which European framing can be traced with the same consistency over time.

These constraints are addressed analytically rather than treated as defects. Public texts are analysed as strategic artefacts rather than exhaustive records of negotiation, and patterns are interpreted through cross-reference across dialogue mechanisms (PPD, SD, and EFD) and summit-level outputs such as China–EU communiqués and head-of-state joint statements. This cross-dialogue reading allows recurrent framings, issue displacement, and strategic continuity to be identified even where individual records are partial. Conceptually, this attention to variation and differentiation across dialogue tracks resonates with scholarship on China's differentiated partnership strategies in pursuing influence (e.g. Abu-Haltam 2025). Finally, access constraints are intrinsic to the study of high-level diplomacy. While elite interviews provided valuable contextual and interpretive insight, attempts to secure interviews with officials directly involved in specific PPD and SD negotiations did not materialise. This underscores both the restricted accessibility of such processes and the analytical value of official texts as a consistent and longitudinally comparable evidence base.

1.4.3 Case Logic and Analytical Sequencing

Each paper applies a shared methodological architecture to a distinct institutional domain, while contributing cumulatively to the thesis's overarching analytical framework. The sequencing of cases—from the societal domain (PPD), through the political–security domain (SD), to the economic governance domain (EFD)—reflects an analytic progression across issue areas characterised by different configurations of political sensitivity, material stakes, and systemic consequence. This progression enables inductive grounding, interactional specification, and examination of role performance under systemic constraint to be developed cumulatively rather than in isolation.

The PPD provides the most inductively open empirical terrain, allowing grounded-theory coding to identify recurrent patterns through which strategic intent, institutional practice, and reformist signalling are embedded in societally oriented dialogue. The PPD analysis serves as the primary inductive site through which patterned outcomes of institutionalised societal engagement are identified. These patterns underpin the initial articulation of China's SRA posture, clarify how institutionalised dialogue itself functions as diplomacy (IaD), and reveal how CwR is enacted in lower-politics institutional settings.

The SD study builds on this foundation by shifting the analysis into the political–security domain, where strategic interaction is more explicitly conditioned by issue

sensitivity and role expectations. In this case, abductive analysis foregrounds how China mobilises institutionalised dialogue to manage agenda positioning, script partner roles, and recalibrate normative expectations without disrupting institutional continuity. Forum shopping and altercasting are employed as analytical lenses to interpret how interactional practices within the SD instantiate IaD, demonstrating how the SRA posture sustains continuity while enabling calibrated normative adjustment under heightened political constraints.

The EFD further advances the analysis into economic governance, where material stakes and regulatory consequences sharpen the implications of engagement. Integrating grounded-theory coding with abductive reasoning and insights from SIT and Role Theory, the EFD analysis examines how China performs and manages its economic role identity through institutionalised dialogue, illustrating how CwR is sustained under conditions of heightened systemic consequences.

Taken together, the three dialogue studies are deliberately sequenced to support cumulative theory building rather than functional compartmentalisation. Across all three cases, China is analysed as a SRA operating through IaD to produce a patterned dynamic of CwR within the LIO. Collectively, the cases advance a mid-range analytical framework linking strategic identity (the SRA), institutional practice (IaD), and patterned outcome (CwR), demonstrating how rising powers stabilise cooperation

while selectively recalibrating norms from within existing institutional architecture—pursuing reform through continuity rather than rupture.

1.4.4 Contributions

This thesis advances an original, mid-range analytical framework that explains how major powers—rising and established alike—may pursue reform from within the LIO without rupture. By linking strategic identity (the Strategist–Reformist Actor, SRA), institutional practice (Institutionalisation as Diplomacy, IaD), and a patterned outcome (Continuity-with-Recalibration, CwR), it provides a coherent explanation of how cooperation is stabilised while norms are selectively recalibrated through structured diplomatic engagement. The framework is particularly applicable in contexts characterised by institutional density combined with sustained political rivalry.

Rather than framing institutional participation as either passive socialisation or outright revisionism, the thesis demonstrates how institutionalised diplomacy functions as an active mode of order management. China's high-level dialogues with Europe are shown to be neither ceremonial nor merely technical, but structured arenas in which identity is performed, roles are negotiated, and reformist preferences are advanced incrementally through procedural continuity and calibrated public signalling.

Empirically, the thesis provides the first systematic, multi-decade, cross-dialogue analysis of China's institutionalised high-level engagement with Europe across societal,

political, and economic domains (2001–2025). Analysing the PPD, SD, and EFD together reveals patterned forms of engagement, role performance, and norm negotiation that are difficult to capture through single-dialogue, episodic, or purely event-driven analyses. The findings show that institutionalised dialogues can operate as durable diplomatic infrastructures that sustain engagement even amid political tension and normative divergence, complicating expectations that cooperation deepens in any linear way with political convergence.

Conceptually, the thesis develops three interlinked contributions. First, the SRA framework reconceptualises China's international posture as a dual orientation in which legitimacy and recognition are pursued through institutional embedding while selective reform is advanced through agenda reframing, vocabulary layering, and calibrated adjustment of contested interpretations; in doing so, it refines–and moves beyond–a simple status-quo/revisionist framing of major-power behaviour. Second, the thesis develops IaD, showing that structured dialogue mechanisms are not neutral containers of interaction but diplomatic practices that shape expectations, sequence agendas, and stabilise engagement over time, while still enabling selective recalibration. Third, it specifies CwR as a patterned outcome through which cooperation is maintained alongside incremental adjustment of norms and practices, with order adaptation enacted through reinterpretation, ambiguity, sequencing, selective emphasis, and strategic omission rather than through rupture or convergence.

The thesis also contributes analytically by demonstrating how interdisciplinary concepts can be deployed through dialogue-specific applications to illuminate distinct dimensions of institutionalised diplomacy. The PPD study extends debates on soft power by developing societal diplomacy as a lens for analysing institutionalised societal engagement. The SD case applies forum shopping and altercasting as interactional strategies to examine how institutionalised political consultation is used to position agendas and script role expectations under higher political sensitivity. The EFD analysis integrates SIT and Role Theory to analyse how economic role identity is performed and managed through institutionalised engagement in economic governance. Together, these applications clarify how identity performance and norm work vary across domains while remaining anchored in a shared documentary evidence base.

Methodologically, the thesis demonstrates the value of document-driven concept formation combined with abductive, theory-informed interpretation for studying high-level diplomacy conducted largely behind closed doors and reflected only partially in curated public texts. Treating official statements as strategic artefacts enables omissions, ambiguity, sequencing, and formulaic language to be analysed as analytically consequential features of diplomatic practice rather than as deficiencies of transparency, providing a rigorous approach under conditions of constrained access.

Finally, the thesis has direct policy relevance and broader analytical applicability. It demonstrates how institutionalised high-level dialogues function as structured

mechanisms through which strategic actors manage cooperation under conditions of rivalry, mistrust, and normative divergence. Through the SRA–IaD–CwR framework, the study specifies how strategic identity (the SRA) is enacted through routinised institutional practice (IaD), producing a patterned dynamic of continuity with recalibration (CwR). In doing so, it identifies how engagement is stabilised, where normative adjustment is pursued and signalled, and how institutional participation can accommodate selective reform without systemic rupture.

The analytical framework is transferable beyond the China–Europe setting. It can be applied to other institutionalised dialogue architectures, to rising–established power relationships, and to cases in which established powers themselves pursue selective recalibration from within the LIO, across both bilateral and multilateral contexts. By specifying the institutional and interactional pathways through which continuity and recalibration unfold in practice, the thesis contributes to wider debates on institutional pluralism, international order navigation, and the evolving behaviour of major powers within contested international settings.

To consolidate these contributions, Table 1.5 summarises the case logic, analytical lenses, and distinct contributions of each dialogue to the overarching framework of the thesis.

Table 1.5 Case Logic, Analytical Lens, and Contributions

Dialogue	Analytical Lens	Function in Thesis	Contributions to SRA and IaD
PPD (societal pillar)	Societal diplomacy	Inductively generates categories of outcomes (tangible, formalised, symbolic, normative)	Defines societal diplomacy as a conceptual lens; introduces continuity-with-recalibration; develops the first iteration of the SRA; demonstrates institutionalisation as societal scaffolding
SD (political pillar)	Forum shopping; altercasting	Tests on how roles are negotiated in high-politics contexts under conditions of contestation	Demonstrates strategic adaptation and incremental normative recalibration; illustrates institutionalisation as institutionalised signalling architecture; extends the SRA posture into the political-security domain
EFD (economic pillar)	Social Identity Theory; Role Theory	Links micro-level identity strategies to systemic debates on order adaptation	Consolidates the SRA framework; illustrates institutionalisation as economic statecraft; generalises identity strategies within global economic governance

The next section turns to the empirical analysis, beginning with the PPD. As the societal

pillar of China-Europe relations, the PPD provides the entry point for developing the

concept of societal diplomacy and for advancing the first iteration of the SRA

framework.

2 Case Study One. Influence and diplomacy: China's High-Level People-to-People Dialogues with European counterparts (2012–2025)[22]

Abstract

This study examines how China employs High-Level People-to-People Dialogues (PPDs) with European counterparts as institutionalised mechanisms of societal diplomacy. It addresses the question of how China uses these dialogues to advance its foreign policy objectives within the Liberal International Order (LIO). Whilst often regarded as peripheral cultural exchanges, PPDs function as structured platforms through which China embeds cooperation, manages international identity, and projects normative narratives.

The analysis covers 19 PPD rounds with the European Union, United Kingdom, France, and Germany between 2012 and 2025. Using grounded theory coding and abductive reasoning, it identifies outcomes across four dimensions: tangible (projects and exchanges), formalised (institutional procedures and continuity), symbolic (rituals and representational practises), and normative (discursive reframing of values).

---

[22] This section is based on the article published under the title "Institutionalised Societal Diplomacy: China's High-Level People-to-People Dialogues with Europe (2012–2025)" in *Chinese Political Science Review* on 18 November 2025 (https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-025-00322-1). An earlier version was presented at the International Political Science Association (IPSA) Work in Progress Sessions (December 2024) and at the 28th IPSA World Congress, Seoul (July 2025).

Findings show that the PPDs advance China's dual posture as a strategist-reformist actor. As a strategist, China stabilises cooperation and consolidates legitimacy through institutional embedding. As a reformist, it incrementally recalibrates liberal vocabularies, layering emphases on civilisation, pluralism, and development within shared principles of peace, inclusivity, and sustainability.

The study contributes to scholarship on major powers—rising and established alike—and global order by conceptualising institutionalised societal diplomacy as a model through which China pursues continuity with recalibration, reforming elements of the LIO from within through structured, low-politics diplomacy.

Keywords: China-Europe relations, High-Level People-to-People Dialogue, institutionalised societal diplomacy, Strategist-Reformist Actor, global governance

2.1 Introduction

China's rise is typically analysed through the lenses of power transition, security competition, and economic statecraft, yet an equally consequential dimension lies in the domain of societal diplomacy. Over the past two decades, China has institutionalised a network of ten High-Level People-to-People Dialogues (PPDs) with major partners—beginning with Russia and expanding to the United States (2010), the EU and the UK (2012), France (2014), Germany and South Africa (2017), India (2018),

Japan (2019), and Indonesia (2021)[23]—to embed cooperation and project legitimacy through structured societal interaction across the fields of education, science, culture, youth, sports, media, women, and subnational cooperation. These dialogues represent an emerging form of institutionalised societal diplomacy, a mechanism through which China stabilises engagement, builds relational capital, and conveys normative intent across diverse partners.

Within this framework, Europe occupies a central place. The PPDs with the EU, the UK, France, and Germany are consistently framed as the "third pillar" of bilateral relations, complementing the High-Level Strategic Dialogues (SDs) and the High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogues (EFDs). Their prominence reflects Europe's dual function as both a partner and a site of recalibration, where legitimacy, societal trust, and normative alignment are central to diplomacy. In particular, recent scholarship underscores that these dynamics have intensified amidst the broader remaking of China-Europe relations under China-U.S. antagonism (Li and He 2022).

Despite their strategic salience, the PPDs remain underexplored in mainstream international relations scholarship. Much of the existing literature focuses on soft power, cultural diplomacy, or public diplomacy but pays limited attention to how attraction and legitimacy are structured through institutional design. The PPDs address this gap: though occasionally suspended in moments of political friction, their tiered structure—

---

[23] China and Indonesia introduced the deputy-prime ministerial-level mechanism in 2015.

summit endorsement, vice-premier chairing, and societal implementation—demonstrates how China embeds societal cooperation within a formalised framework. These dialogues also unfold within a broader European context marked by growing securitisation of Chinese investment and influence debates (Schubert 2025), making them a stabilising yet adaptive instrument of engagement.

The analysis covers 19 dialogue rounds with the EU, UK, France, and Germany between 2012 and 2025, drawing on China-issued records and joint statements. Given asymmetries in disclosure, the analysis is explicitly framed as China's PPD engagement with Europe, focusing on how China represents and communicates these dialogues. Using grounded theory coding and abductive reasoning, the study identifies and categorises outcomes across four analytical dimensions: tangible (projects and exchanges), formalised (procedures and continuity), symbolic (rituals and commemorations), and normative (discursive reframing of values).

In classical international relations scholarship, high politics refers to issues of security, sovereignty, and state survival, whereas low politics encompasses areas such as culture, education, and social cooperation. Although conventionally regarded as secondary, these low-politics arenas have become crucial spaces for legitimacy building and norm negotiation, particularly as rising powers seek to consolidate recognition through non-security cooperation.

Taken together, this analysis situates the PPDs as expressions of institutionalised societal diplomacy: structured, low-politics mechanisms through which China pursues continuity with recalibration, reforming elements of the liberal international order (LIO) from within rather than challenging it from without.

The contribution is twofold. Empirically, this is the first comparative analysis of all four China-Europe PPDs across 13 years of practice. Conceptually, it refines soft power debates by advancing institutionalised societal diplomacy as an analytical category and developing the Strategist-Reformist Actor (SRA) framework to explain how China adapts to and recalibrates elements of the LIO through structured low-politics mechanisms.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2.2 examines the institutional design, thematic scope, and strategic layering of the PPDs. Section 2.3 situates the concept of societal diplomacy within existing soft power debates. Section 2.4 outlines the methodology. Section 2.5 analyses outcomes across the four dimensions, showing how they operationalise China's SRA posture. Section 2.6 concludes with conceptual and policy implications, highlighting how PPDs illuminate China's evolving role in global governance.

2.2 Institutional Design, Thematic Scope, and Strategic Layering of the PPD

The China-Europe PPD was launched in the early 2010s as part of China's effort to institutionalise societal cooperation as an equal pillar alongside the SD and EFD.[24] The first initiative took shape with the UK, following consensus between then-Premier Wen Jiabao and then-Prime Minister David Cameron in 2011, and was formally launched in London on 16 April 2012. The inaugural meeting, co-chaired by Vice-Premier Liu Yandong and then-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport Jeremy Hunt, produced a Memorandum of Understanding on Establishing the China-UK High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism and established six cooperation areas spanning education, science and technology, culture, media, sport, and youth (Xinhua 2012).

A parallel initiative with the EU emerged from a 2011 agreement between then-President Hu Jintao, then-Premier Wen Jiabao, and then-European Council President Herman Van Rompuy to establish a "third pillar" of cooperation comparable to the SD and EFD (European Commission 2012). This was formalised at the 14th China-EU Summit (14 February 2012), which launched the PPD to "deepen understanding and mutual trust between the two peoples". The first China-EU PPD occurred on 18 April 2012 in Brussels and addressed four domains: education and multilingualism, culture, researcher mobility, and youth (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2012). The China-France PPD was formally proposed during the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties in

---

[24] Joint Press Communiqué of the 14th EU-China Summit, February 14, 2012, Brussels, European External Action Service (EEAS).

2014 and launched on 18 September in Paris, identifying eight cooperation fields (Xinhua 2014). Meanwhile, China and Germany convened their first, and thus far only, round in 2017, coinciding with the 45th anniversary of bilateral relations and resulting in seven cooperation agreements and an annual projects list (Xinhua 2017).

These launches signalled that PPDs were not only functional innovations but also symbolic markers of China's comprehensive strategic partnerships (CSPs) with European counterparts: with the EU (2003), the UK (2004, elevated in 2015 to a "Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century"), France (2004), and Germany (2014, All-Round Strategic Partnership). In official discourse, the PPD is consistently described as the third pillar of China-Europe relations, complementing political and economic channels with a structured societal dimension.

The PPDs are state-led mechanisms and co-chaired at the senior government level. On the Chinese side, this responsibility has fallen to a Vice-Premier of the State Council (国务院副总理) or, in later rounds, a State Councillor (国务院委员), underscoring the mechanisms' political salience. Liu Yandong co-chaired all initial rounds of the EU, UK, France, and Germany PPDs until 2017, reflecting her broad ministerial remit across education, culture, and science and highlighting China's emphasis on continuity in the formative stages of these dialogues. Subsequent diversification of Chinese co-chairs—to Sun Chunlan, Shen Yiqin, and Wang Yi—illustrates both adaptation to personnel changes and the embedding of societal exchanges into broader portfolios. In

particular, Wang Yi's sustained role in the China-France PPD rounds after 2017 shows how societal exchanges were integrated into China's broader foreign policy machinery. On the European side, co-chairs have varied according to domestic governance structures: Commissioners responsible for education and culture at the EU level, Cabinet Ministers in the UK, Foreign Ministers in France, and the Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister in Germany. This variation underscores the adaptive design of the PPDs, anchored in parity of status but flexible in accommodating counterpart institutions. Between 2012 and 2025, a total of 19 rounds were convened: six with the EU, five with the UK, seven with France, and one with Germany. Between 2012 and 2025, 19 rounds were convened: six with the EU, five with the UK, seven with France, and one with Germany. Table 2.1 summarises the rounds and co-chairs.

Table 2.1 Summary of PPD Rounds and Co-Chairs[25]

PPD Partner	Round(s)	Chinese Co-Chair(s)	European Co-Chair(s)
EU	1st & 2nd (2012, 2014)	Liu Yandong, Vice-Premier	Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth

---

[25] Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent tables in this paper are based on the author's analysis of official China-issued PPD documents (2012-2025).

EU	3rd & 4th (2015, 2017)	Liu Yandong	Tibor Navracsics, Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport
EU	5th (2020)	Sun Chunlan, Vice-Premier	Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth
EU	6th (2024)	Shen Yiqin, State Councillor (SC)	Iliana Ivanova, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth
UK	1st–5th (2012–2017)	Liu Yandong	Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State (Culture/Health)
France	1st & 2nd (2014, 2015)	Liu Yandong	Laurent Fabius, Foreign Minister (FM)
France	3rd (2016)	Liu Yandong	Jean-Marc Ayrault, FM
France	4th (2017)	Liu Yandong	Jean-Yves Le Drian, FM
France	5th (2019)	Wang Yi, SC & FM	Jean-Yves Le Drian, FM
France	6th (2023)	Wang Yi	Catherine Colonna, FM
France	7th (2025)	Wang Yi	Jean-Noël Barrot, FM
Germany	1st (2017)	Liu Yandong	Sigmar Gabriel, Vice-Premier & FM

Source: Author's analysis of China-issued PPD documents (2012–2025).

The thematic scope of the PPDs is extensive and multidimensional. Cooperation has spanned education and academic mobility, including higher education partnerships, joint degree programmes, and qualification recognition; culture and creative industries, such as major exhibitions, heritage cooperation, translation projects, and cultural years; media and communication, including journalist exchanges and audio-visual co-productions; and science, technology, and innovation, with collaborative research funds and technology transfer initiatives. Youth and sports have been recurrent priorities, from student exchanges to football cooperation; health and gender have been added in more recent rounds, whilst region-to-region cooperation has produced sister-city agreements and subnational partnerships. This breadth distinguishes the PPDs from narrower cultural diplomacy formats and situates them as comprehensive platforms of societal diplomacy.

Over time, the agenda has evolved through a process of strategic layering. Early rounds of the China-EU PPD, for example, emphasised mutual understanding and trust as the foundation of exchange. Subsequent rounds broadened scope into gender equality, sustainable development, and the green transition, as illustrated by the 2024 PPD meeting on education for sustainability. This gradual infusion of policy-relevant themes demonstrates how dialogues which began as cultural and educational initiatives have been recalibrated to address global challenges and embed China's discourses such as "pragmatic cooperation", "harmony in differences", and "the community of a shared future for mankind" within cooperative frameworks. Similar layering can be seen

across other partnerships, where initially symbolic cultural exchanges have expanded into multidomain cooperation.

The PPDs operate through a three-tiered model. At the top, head-of-state summits endorse the mechanism politically, framing it as a formal pillar of China-Europe relations. At the second tier, vice-premier sessions serve as the central forum for agenda negotiation and outcome formulation. These sessions are primarily restricted to high-ranking officials, ministers, and selected institutional representatives, where agendas are negotiated and outcomes formalised in joint statements or press releases. They are often accompanied, however, by parallel events, workshops, and selectively open segments which allow broader participation and media access. At the third tier, implementation is delegated to societal actors, such as universities, cultural institutions, sports federations, and professional associations, which carry projects forward in education, culture, science, and youth exchange. This layered design links elite endorsement with operational delivery, embedding societal cooperation in political commitment whilst sustaining it through institutionalised and social networks. Taken together, the PPDs institutionalise societal exchanges within distinct CSP frameworks, elevating low-politics cooperation into structured diplomacy. Their broad thematic scope, evolving agendas, and adaptive leadership reveal how China uses societal dialogues not as peripheral add-ons but as embedded mechanisms aligned with its strategist-reformist posture.

This three-tiered institutional design underscores why the PPDs cannot be adequately captured by conventional notions of cultural or public diplomacy. Instead, they demand a new conceptual lens—institutionalised societal diplomacy, developed in the following section.

2.3 From Soft Power to Institutionalised Societal Diplomacy

The concept of soft power, first articulated by Nye (1990; 2004; 2011), refers to a state's ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or inducement. Nye identified three primary sources—cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy—when perceived as legitimate and credible. His framework broadened the field of international relations by showing how ideational influence complements material capabilities, yet the tripartite model was conceived to assess state-level reputation and conduct, not the functioning of specific dialogue mechanisms. Direct application to the PPD risks misspecification since two of Nye's pillars, political values and foreign policy, lie largely outside the remit of structured societal exchanges.

Subsequent scholarship refined soft power into more targeted practices. Public diplomacy highlights state communication with foreign publics, whilst cultural diplomacy projects national heritage and identity abroad. Both, however, remain largely episodic and one-directional. Recent research on Chinese digital diplomacy further reveals the limits of assertive narrative projection on platforms such as Twitter (Guo and Qin 2024), underscoring the need for institutionalised, multidomain

cooperation such as the PPDs. In China's case, early practices relied heavily on message management and propaganda (Wang 2008; Wang 2011) before shifting towards more image-conscious outreach. Critics note that state dominance undermines credibility in democratic societies which prize autonomy of societal actors (Hartig 2014; Zubair 2023). Confucius institutes exemplify both China's cultural reach and the dilemmas of centralised management (Shambaugh 2015; Hubbert 2019). Comparative studies further highlight normative frictions: China's top-down model contrasts with Europe's decentralised, participatory one (Moroz 2019). Surveys confirm the challenge; trust in China remains persistently low across Europe (Silver et al. 2023; Huang et al. 2025), illustrating the limits of attraction when skepticism towards state-led narratives endures.

Whilst Nye's later work (2015; 2022; 2023; 2024) situates soft power in a multipolar order shaped by China-US rivalry, his framework remains state-centric and ill-suited to explaining the institutional dynamics of sectoral dialogues. This gap has produced a mechanism-level blind spot. Much of the literature evaluates soft power in aggregating or examines individual cultural projects but rarely analyses how institutionalised design itself structures attraction and cooperation. The PPDs are particularly revealing in this regard. Though occasionally suspended during political frictions, their very design demonstrates how China has sought to embed societal cooperation within structured, recurring mechanisms rather than leaving it to ad hoc initiatives. Convened at vice-premier level, endorsed by heads of state, and implemented by a wide spectrum of societal actors, the PPDs convert what might otherwise be symbolic gestures into

durable frameworks of interaction. In this way, they stabilise engagement, build relational capital, and embed low-politics domains within comprehensive strategic partnerships (CSPs). To capture that, this study advances the concept of societal diplomacy: sustained, multidirectional exchanges between state and societal actors across borders, institutionally anchored and policy-embedded within recurring, state-supported diplomatic mechanisms, and aimed at cultivating trust, visibility, relational capital, and discursive legitimacy. In this sense, societal diplomacy formalises multi-sector cooperation by linking societal exchange directly to diplomatic strategy.

Societal diplomacy extends beyond cultural and public diplomacy in both scope and structure. It mobilises a wide range of societal actors — including universities, research institutes, cultural organisations, subnational governments, and professional associations — across domains such as education, science, health, culture, youth, sports, tourism, media, gender, and regional cooperation. Unlike cultural diplomacy's symbolic exchanges or public diplomacy's audience messaging, societal diplomacy emphasises sustained, multidomain cooperation organised through structured dialogue frameworks. When institutionalised, as in the PPDs, these exchanges become predictable and policy-linked rather than episodic or ad hoc.

To clarify this conceptual distinction, Table 2.2 contrasts societal diplomacy with the two dominant categories in literature: public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. These are chosen as comparators because they remain the primary analytical frames in

international relations scholarship. Other sectoral forms, such as science, health, or sports diplomacy, are better understood as subfields which typically operate through cultural or public diplomacy logics. They remain narrower in scope, lack the same level of political anchoring, and do not provide the institutional breadth of societal diplomacy. By contrast, societal diplomacy encompasses these sectoral initiatives but embeds them in a multi-issue, politically mandated framework. This broader design highlights its dual character: functional in generating practical cooperation and strategic in reinforcing legitimacy, projecting values, and managing long-term relationships.

Table 2.2 Comparison of Diplomatic Modalities

Modality	Core Features	Limitations
Public Diplomacy	State communication with foreign publics; media and PR-driven	One-directional; episodic; credibility concerns when perceived as propaganda
Cultural Diplomacy	Promotion of arts, heritage, language, and identity through cultural exchange	Narrow scope; often symbolic rather than strategic
Societal Diplomacy	Sustained, multidirectional cooperation involving state and non-state actors across borders; institutionally anchored, policy-embedded mechanisms	State framing may constrain dialogic credibility; contested reception

Hence, societal diplomacy reflects the layered operation of the PPDs as both functional cooperation mechanisms and instruments of strategic diplomacy. In their institutionalised form, the PPDs generate outcomes across four analytically distinct dimensions. Tangible outcomes refer to practical deliverables such as exchange programmes and cooperative projects. Formalised outcomes capture the procedural scaffolding which sustains dialogue rounds, co-chairing arrangements, and integration into comprehensive strategic partnerships. Symbolic outcomes emphasise ritualised visibility and continuity through commemorations and branding initiatives. Normative outcomes focus on discursive content and value framing, encompassing both widely shared LIO vocabularies (peace, inclusivity, sustainability) and China's preferred emphases (civilisational diversity, pluralism, development, community of shared future).

Taken together, these dimensions show that attraction in international relations is not derived from cultural resources alone but is structured through institutional design, which regularises interaction, consolidates relational capital, and embeds preferred discourses within broader cooperative frameworks. This conceptualisation of institutionalised societal diplomacy therefore provides the analytical foundation for the study.

The next section sets out the methodology, explaining how grounded theory coding and abductive reasoning are employed to operationalise these four dimensions across the China-Europe PPD corpus.

2.4 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, inductive research design centred on grounded theory (GT) and abductive reasoning. The approach is well-suited to analysing curated diplomatic artefacts such as PPD joint statements and press releases, which are selective and strategic rather than transparent records. GT enables patterns and categories to emerge directly from texts, whilst abduction situates these findings within wider debates on China-Europe relations, soft power, and role performance. This design allows the analysis to extract insights from partial and curated records without overstating what such texts disclose.

The dataset comprises 25 primary documents corresponding to the 19 PPD rounds held between China and its European counterparts from 2012 to 2025: China-EU (2012–2024, six rounds), China-UK (2012–2017, five rounds), China-France (2014–2025, seven rounds), and China-Germany (2017, one round). These include 19 China-issued press releases, three policy outcome joint statements (China-UK 2016 and 2017; China-France 2025), one China-EU joint press statement (2020), and two press releases issued by the European Commission (2017 and 2024).

China-issued press releases form the core of the dataset. They typically summarise policy outcomes, highlight initiatives, and reproduce co-chair remarks. In several cases, they state that a joint statement was signed, though the statement itself was not released. By contrast, only a handful of European outputs are publicly accessible in English, with others possibly issued in national languages or unpublished altogether due to divergent disclosure practices. The dataset, therefore, captures how China represents and communicates the PPDs, rather than offering a fully bilateral narrative.

Where joint statements have been published, they present a detailed list of policy outcomes which reflect the breadth of cooperation. The corpus encompasses a range of documentary forms. Some statements enumerate dozens of specific outcomes; for instance, the fifth China-UK PPD (2017) recorded 63 items, whereas the seventh China-France PPD (2025) listed 28, spanning domains such as education, science, health, gender, and culture. In contrast, the fifth China-EU joint press statement (2020) articulated deliverables in a more concise format. These cases underscore the variation in documentary practises, ranging from extensive outcome lists comprising thousands of words to succinct narrative summaries. Such variation demonstrates how the PPD mechanism has generated both technically dense records and broader symbolic texts. The documents are treated not as neutral records of cooperation but as performative artefacts: texts which project agendas, signal priorities, and frame role identities. Silence and ambiguity are read as strategic, recognising that absence from public record does not imply absence from negotiation. To avoid the pitfalls of frequency counts or

over-interpretation, the study combines inductive coding with abductive contextualisation.

The outcomes were categorised into four interrelated but analytically distinct dimensions: tangible (practical deliverables), formalised (institutional rules, procedures, and continuity mechanisms which scaffold the dialogues), symbolic (rituals, commemorations, and branding which perform visibility and legitimacy), and normative (discursive framings of values, ranging from mainstream LIO vocabularies such as peace, inclusivity, and sustainability to China's emphases on civilisation, pluralism, development, and shared future). Whilst overlaps occur (e.g. symbolic gestures often carry normative messaging), each dimension serves a distinct function. Formalisation structures the dialogue, tangibility generates outputs, symbolism performs the relationship, and normativity articulates values.

A three-stage strategy was used. First, open coding of verbatim text segments identified recurrent terms and references to cooperation, symbolism, or values. Second, axial coding clustered these into the four analytical dimensions, ensuring institutional, material, performative, and normative aspects were systematically distinguished. Third, selective coding linked the categories to the broader conceptual framework of societal diplomacy and role performance. This iterative process allowed the analysis to remain grounded in textual evidence while illuminating broader conceptual debates concerning China's strategic identity performance.

This design provides analytical clarity by showing how the PPDs generate practical outputs, embed institutional structures, perform symbolic rituals, and articulate normative visions. At the same time, three limitations are acknowledged. First, whilst the PPDs include parallel events, workshops, and selectively open segments, the vice-premier-level negotiations remain largely closed. Publicly available joint statements and press releases therefore capture only a curated subset of the discussions, which this study necessarily analyses as strategic representations rather than full records of negotiation. Second, documentary transparency is uneven: Joint statements are not always published, and the detail of releases varies. Third, European documentation is far less visible than Chinese, so the dataset reflects China's discursive intent more fully than Europe's.

These limits were partly mitigated by triangulating PPD sources with China-EU summit communiqués, head-of-state joint statements, and related outputs from the SD and EFD. Conceptually, this attention to variation across dialogues also resonates with studies of China's differentiated partnership selection strategies in pursuing influence (Abu-Haltam 2025). Attempts to secure elite interviews with figures directly involved in PPD negotiations did not materialise, underscoring the restricted access to high-level diplomacy and the value of textual artefacts as consistent, comparable evidence.

This study makes three contributions. First, it introduces the concept of societal diplomacy as an original analytical category. By theorising societal diplomacy and

operationalising it through four dimensions—tangible, formalised, symbolic, and normative—this article demonstrates that such dialogues are not ancillary "soft power add-ons" but structured arenas for role performance and identity management.

Second, it advances conceptual innovation by developing the SRA framework. Derived inductively from the analysis of PPD outcomes, the SRA captures China's dual posture of strategic adaptation and reformist recalibration: as a strategist, consolidating legitimacy through cooperation and institutional embedding; as a reformist, incrementally recalibrating select mainstream values to broaden interpretive space within the LIO.

Third, the study contributes to broader debates on major powers and global order. By showing how China's societal diplomacy combines institutional adaptation and selective normative recalibration, the analysis enriches discussions on soft power, role theory, and the status quo / revisionist spectrum. It demonstrates that major powers—rising and established alike—may pursue reform from within, using institutionalised low-politics mechanisms to stabilise relationships, negotiate legitimacy, and cautiously expand the boundaries of shared values.

2.5 Outcomes of the PPDs: Tangible, Formalised, Symbolic, and Normative Dimensions

This section analyses the outcomes of China's PPDs with its European counterparts across four analytically distinct dimensions: formalised, tangible, symbolic, and normative. Each dimension captures a different layer of how the dialogues function, from institutional scaffolding to concrete outputs, ritualised performance, and value articulation.

Tangible outcomes denote the substantive deliverables generated through the PPDs, including agreements, exchange programmes, and cooperative projects which can be observed and measured. They demonstrate the practical utility of the dialogue and provide material benchmarks of progress.

Formalised outcomes capture the institutional structuring of the mechanism itself, such as the regularity of rounds, co-chairing arrangements, and integration with comprehensive strategic partnerships. Formalisation provides the procedural scaffolding which sustains the dialogue over time and enables other dimensions to function.

Symbolic outcomes refer to the performative and ritualised elements of the PPDs. These include branding initiatives (such as "Years of…" programmes), commemorative

events, and civilisational references. Symbolic gestures reinforce continuity, legitimacy, and the representational function of the dialogue by publicly staging the relationship.

Normative outcomes encompass the articulation of values and principles. This includes both mainstream LIO vocabularies (e.g. peace, inclusivity, sustainability) and China's preferred reframing (civilisational diversity, harmony in difference, the community of a shared future). Normative outcomes indicate how PPDs serve as arenas for value negotiation and discursive projection.

Whilst these dimensions intersect in practice (e.g. symbolic events often carry normative messaging), they are analytically distinguishable by their primary functions: formalisation structures the dialogue, tangibility delivers output, symbolism performs the relationship, and normativity frames values. Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for analysing the PPDs as mechanisms of cooperation, institutionalisation, identity performance, and normative projection. Table 2.3 outlines the four analytical dimensions, providing the framework for subsequent analysis.

Table 2.3 Analytical Dimensions of PPD Outcomes

Dimension	Analytical / Function	Description	Distinctive Feature
Tangible	Practical / Output	Concrete deliverables and measurable projects	Focusing on what was done (observable outcomes)
Formalised	Institutional / Structuring	Procedural embedding and continuity of the mechanism	Capturing how the dialogue is organised
Symbolic	Performative / Ritual	Ceremonial and representational gestures which reinforce ties	Concerning how the relationship is represented
Normative	Value / Discursive	Articulation of shared principles and value framing	Addresses what values are promoted and hybridised

2.5.1 Tangible Outcomes: Substantive Deliverables

The PPDs have consistently generated practical outcomes which demonstrate their utility as mechanisms of cooperation.

Since 2012, the China-EU PPD has produced steady but relatively low-profile deliverables, anchored in education, multilingualism, youth, and researcher mobility.

Early initiatives such as the mutual recognition of higher-education qualifications (first round, 2012) and Erasmus+ mobility actions (third round, 2015, MFA 2015) gave the dialogue a strong education base. The dialogue also produced initiatives on higher-education mobility (e.g. Erasmus+ cooperation) and cultural heritage exchanges. Though sometimes small in scale, these tangible projects contribute to the consolidation of mutual goodwill and the institutionalisation of cooperation within everyday sociocultural practices, thereby signalling continuity beyond episodic political frictions. Later rounds broadened the scope of science, media, sports, tourism, gender, and sustainability. By the fourth round (Xinhua 2017b), Erasmus+ mobility had benefited over 4,000 students and staff. The sixth round (Xinhua 2024) explicitly tied education to climate adaptation and the socially responsible organisation of major sporting events. Compared with bilateral mechanisms, the China-EU PPD has been less project-heavy but more consistent, embedding cooperation into broader EU programmes rather than generating high-profile bilateral showcases.

The China-UK PPD produced some of the most visible deliverables before its suspension in 2017. Highlights included the £200 million China-UK Research and Innovation Partnership Fund (2013), supporting 37 programmes and over 220 institutional partnerships; the 2015 Year of Cultural Exchange, which reached over two million people in both countries; and landmark exhibitions such as *A History of the World in 100 Objects,* jointly curated by the National Museum of China and the British Museum. The fifth round (Xinhua 2017c) produced 63 policy outcomes, including a

£26 million joint research fund and the launch of the China-UK Engineering Education Alliance. These initiatives combined cultural visibility with scientific cooperation, drawing on both British and Chinese institutions. Nonetheless, the dialogue's suspension after 2017 illustrates the vulnerability of tangible cooperation to political headwinds, particularly in the post-Brexit context and amidst worsening China-UK relations.

The China-France PPD has hosted the broadest and most sustained PPDs, spanning 10 domains including education, culture, science, audio-visual cooperation, health, and regional partnerships. The second round (Xinhua 2015) alone generated over 800 commemorative events linked to the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties, while the third round (Xinhua 2016) expanded cooperation fields from eight to 10. The fourth round (MoE 2017) delivered more than 180 outcomes across sectors, and the seventh round (MFA 2025) renewed the Memorandum of Understanding on health cooperation, identifying seven priority areas for collaboration. With repeated large-scale events and consistent follow-up, the China-France mechanism demonstrates the highest continuity amongst China's European PPDs, reinforcing the symbolic third pillar of the China-France CSP.

China and Germany's sole PPD round in 2017 was narrower in scope but still produced tangible results. More than 200 participants participated in initiatives spanning education, culture, youth, and media. Outcomes included a memorandum of

understanding on university sports exchanges, academic workshops, and youth programmes, with football cooperation highlighted as a long-term area for engagement. However, no further rounds were convened, leaving the PPD secondary to the more developed China-Germany SD and EFD. Table 2.4 summarises the tangible outcomes across the China–Europe PPDs between 2012 and 2025, highlighting concrete projects, exchanges, and institutional initiatives achieved over 2012–2025.

Table 2.4 Comparative Tangible Outcomes of China-Europe PPDs

Partner	Scope	Key Outcomes	Continuity
EU	Education, youth, multilingualism, science, culture, sports, sustainability	Degree recognition (2012); Erasmus+ (> 4,000 by 2017); green skills & sustainable sport (2024)	Steady, less project-heavy
UK	Health, education, culture and creative industries, science and innovation, tourism, sport, youth, regional cooperation, women and social equity	£200m Research and Innovation Fund (2013); 2015 Cultural Year (2m reached); 63 outcomes incl. £26m research fund (2017)	High outputs, suspended post–2017

France	Education, science, women, culture, health, media, sports, youth, tourism, regional cooperation	800+ anniversary events (2015); > 180 outcomes (2017); renewed health Memorandum of Understanding, 7 priority areas (2025)	Broadest, most sustained
Germany	Education, sports, youth, media, culture	MoU on university sports; youth/football exchanges; follow-up workshops (2017)	Narrow, no follow-up

The comparative overview shows distinct patterns. The China-UK and China-France mechanisms generated the most visible and diverse deliverables, ranging from major cultural showcases to large-scale research funds, though only France sustained continuity beyond 2017. The China-EU mechanism delivered fewer headline projects but remained steady, embedding cooperation in education, mobility, and sustainability within a multilateral framework. China-Germany PPD produced modest but symbolically notable initiatives, yet no subsequent meetings followed. These contrasts underscore how PPDs adapt to partner-specific contexts: Bilateral dialogues privilege visibility and sectoral breadth, while the China-EU mechanism institutionalises functional cooperation within collective frameworks. The variation reveals both the scope and limits of tangible outcomes, highlighting the flexibility of the PPD model but also its dependence on political prioritisation.

Building on these concrete projects, the next section turns to formalised outcomes—the institutional frameworks and agreements which transform one-off initiatives into durable commitments.

2.5.2 Formalised Outcomes: Institutional Structuring

Beyond individual projects, the PPDs established institutionalised mechanisms which structure continuity and coordination. Regularised meetings at the vice-premier level, supported by thematic sub-forums on youth, education, culture, and health, provide predictable architecture for cooperation. These structures ensure that even when political relations are strained, as during the China-UK "golden era" downturn or the EU's systemic rival framing, dialogue mechanisms remain operational.

The structural anchoring of PPDs was reinforced through action plans, memoranda of understanding, and joint communiqués, which embedded cooperation in formal documents. This formalisation demonstrates how PPDs function as institutional backbones for societal diplomacy, enabling both partners to compartmentalise disagreements whilst maintaining dialogue.

The China-EU PPD has been the most consistent supranational anchor. Endorsed at the 14th Summit (2012) to "deepen understanding and mutual trust", it was reaffirmed at the 15th Summit as a pillar of China-EU relations. By the 21st Summit (2019), its remit encompassed education, tourism, researcher mobility, culture, media, youth, and sport.

The sixth round (2024), themed "working together for a greener and more sustainable future", placed sustainability and green transition skills at its centre, priorities later echoed in the 25th Summit (2025). The trajectory demonstrates how the China-EU mechanism consistently linked people-to-people cooperation with evolving summit agendas, embedding it firmly within the long-term China-EU CSP.

The China-UK PPD was amongst the most formally productive, generating 125 outcomes across five rounds, including 50 agreements and 72 deliverables in the first four rounds and 63 in the fifth (2017) alone. Framed within the China-UK CSP (2004; upgraded to a "Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century" in 2015), it produced detailed action plans encompassing education, science, and creative industries. However, its suspension after 2017 underscores the fragility of even highly institutionalised dialogues when relations deteriorated. Unlike the PPD, the China-UK's SD (10 rounds, 2010–2025) and EFD (11 rounds, 2008–2025) continued through political strain, showing that whilst people-to-people cooperation had once been strongly institutionalised, it was more exposed to political headwinds. Notably, however, both the 10th SD (MFA 2025b) and 11th EFD (MoF 2025) called for renewed people-to-people exchanges, with the latter incorporating initiatives such as the Chevening Financial Fellowship programme, demonstrating that societal linkages were partly absorbed into other high-level tracks even whilst the PPD channel was dormant.

The China-France PPD represents the most continuous bilateral formalisation. Since its launch in 2014, each round has produced structured outcome lists within an institutionalised format, consistently reinforced by presidential and summit-level endorsement. The mechanism was inaugurated during the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties, framed by head-of-state commitments, and subsequent rounds have been embedded in summit communiqués and high-level visits. Whilst joint statements are issued at the vice-premier tier, they typically reflect mandates or consensus articulated at the presidential level, underscoring how the dialogue operates within a framework of sustained top-level political commitment. The seventh round (2025) concluded with 28 outcomes across education, audio-visual cooperation, health, gender, cultural heritage, and regional partnerships. This breadth and continuity underline the enduring salience of cultural and civilisational diplomacy in the China-France CSP, embedding societal cooperation as a recurring fixture resilient across political cycles.

The China-Germany PPD, by contrast, was only convened once in 2017. It followed the standard format—co-chairing at the vice-premier level and producing an outcome list—including a memorandum on university sports cooperation and the formal establishment of the PPD. Compared with China and Germany's other dialogue channels, including three rounds of the EFD (2014–2023, yielding 80 outcomes) and 12 of the SD between 2011 and 2025, societal diplomacy remained marginal. The rebranding of the SD into the Strategic Dialogue on Diplomacy and Security from 2015 further illustrates how political-security concerns dominated the bilateral agenda within

their All-Round Strategic Partnership (2014), contrasting with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships which frame China's ties with the EU, UK, and France. Statements at the fifth SD (MFA 2020) that both sides should "view differences in social systems and development models objectively" and "make China and Germany genuine partners beyond ideology", and at the seventh SD (MFA 2024) that "differences should not become obstacles to cooperation", signalled that China channelled reassurance through high-politics mechanisms rather than societal dialogues. This reliance on the SD rather than the PPD illustrates the contingent limits of formalisation: Where political reassurance is prioritised, China prefers to channel it through strategic and security dialogues, leaving societal exchanges marginal within the partnership architecture. Table 2.5 summarises comparative patterns of formalisation across the four dialogues, highlighting variation in durability and institutional anchoring within their respective partnership frameworks.

Table 2.5 Formalised Outcomes of China-Europe PPDs

Partner	Policy Outcomes	Endorsement Frequency	Partnership Type	Formalisation Pattern
EU	Dozens	Reaffirmed at China-EU summits	CSP (2003)	Most consistent supranational anchor

UK	125	Referenced in joint statements and summits until 2017	CSP (2004; upgraded 2015)	Deep but fragile; some elements absorbed into EFD
France	28 (2025 round)	Consistent head-of-state endorsement	CSP (2004)	Strong bilateral embedding; resilient across political cycles
Germany	Limited	Head-of-state endorsement at launch	All-Round Strategic (2014)	Minimal institutionalisation; reassurance channelled through SD

A cross-dialogue study shows both commonalities and divergence. All four PPDs share a core institutionalised format—senior-level co-chairs, outcome lists, and anchoring in CSP frameworks—demonstrating China's intent to institutionalise societal diplomacy across Europe. However, their durability sharply diverges. The China-EU and China-France mechanisms have displayed sustained continuity, repeatedly reaffirmed at summits. The China-UK mechanism was deeply institutionalised but proved fragile under political rupture, whilst the China-Germany mechanism remained marginal, convened only once and overshadowed by other dialogues. These contrasts reflect not

flaws in design but differences in political will and strategic prioritisation across partnerships.

Analytically, formalised outcomes highlight the strategist dimension of China's role: institutionalising societal cooperation as a diplomatic pillar, consolidating relational capital, and embedding it in CSP frameworks. At the same time, their uneven durability underscores that institutionalisation alone cannot sustain societal diplomacy; it depends on political will and shifting priorities. This variation, between the continuity of the China-EU and China-France PPDs and the fragility or marginalisation of the China-UK and China-Germany PPDs, underscores that whilst institutionalisation provides structure, its political durability ultimately depends on the narratives and symbols which sustain legitimacy, a theme developed in the next section on symbolic outcomes.

2.5.3 Symbolic Outcomes: Representational Performances

The PPDs carry significant symbolic weight, with many rounds deliberately scheduled to coincide with diplomatic anniversaries, thematic "Years of…" campaigns, or milestone commemorations which visibly stage the partnership. Ceremonial language, cultural showcases, and repeated references to friendship, mutual understanding, and shared future reinforce continuity and legitimacy. Symbolism thus consolidates the status of the PPDs as the third pillar of China-Europe relations, alongside political/security and economic/financial dialogues, embedding societal diplomacy within rituals of high-level commitment.

The China-EU PPD consistently foregrounded symbolic themes of mutual understanding, trust, intercultural dialogue, and partnership. The inaugural 2012 round coincided with the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, framing the PPD as constitutive of partnership legitimacy. Later rounds reinforced this symbolic function: The 2014 round invoked the "China Dream", "Europe Dream", and "World Dream" within the rubric of the "four partnerships" (peace, growth, reform, and civilisation; MFA 2014); the 2015 round emphasised pragmatic cooperation and harmony in difference; and the 2017 round explicitly linked the PPD to the "community of shared future for mankind". The fifth (MoE 2020) and sixth (2024) rounds expanded the symbolic repertoire to include sustainability, cultural heritage, and youth mobility, aligning with summit-level discourses. The China-EU PPD therefore demonstrates how symbolism embeds China's civilisational narratives within a multilateral framework, reinforcing legitimacy and projecting continuity through shared and aspirational themes.

The China-UK PPD illustrates the high visibility but fragility of symbolic outcomes. From 2012, it was framed as a bridge to "eliminate misunderstanding, increase trust, and handle differences prudently". During the Golden Era (2015–2017), symbolism reached its peak: The PPD was tied to discourses of world peace, pragmatic cooperation, and mutual respect, amplified by cultural exhibitions and tourism years. Nevertheless, the suspension after 2017 was itself symbolically charged, marking the collapse of the Golden Era narrative and exposing the vulnerability of symbolic diplomacy to geopolitical realignment. Still, some symbolic elements persisted elsewhere: The 2025

EFD referred to "people-to-people financial links", showing that symbolism can migrate to other channels even when a dedicated PPD track stalls.

The China-France PPD provided the richest terrain for civilisational symbolism. Launched in 2014 during the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties, it cast China and France as "two great civilisations" jointly responsible for peace. Subsequent rounds consistently layered civilisational discourse onto anniversaries: the 2015 round spoke of weaving the "China Dream" and "French Dream" into a shared project of pragmatic cooperation and pluralistic and harmonious coexistence of civilisations; the 2017 round invoked harmony in difference and a shared future; and the fifth round marked the centenary of the work-study movement as a legacy of joint intellectual heritage (Xinhua News Agency 2019). The 2025 round, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of relations, projected the strongest symbolic framing: China-France ties were presented as a model against "civilisational clash" and as "two great lights" offering wisdom for global cultural governance and a community of shared future. The China-France PPD thus represents the clearest case of symbolic capital being mobilised to elevate civilisational dialogue as a defining feature of the bilateral relationship.

The China-Germany PPD, by contrast, produced limited symbolism. Its inaugural 2017 round coincided with the 45th anniversary of diplomatic ties, invoking pragmatic cooperation, mutual understanding, world peace and development, and football as a cultural bridge, yet with no follow-up rounds, symbolism remained episodic. Instead,

societal reassurance was channelled through high-politics dialogues. At the fifth SD (2020), China urged both sides to "view differences in social systems and development models objectively" and "make China and Germany genuine partners beyond ideology". At the seventh SD (2024), it stressed that "differences should not become obstacles to cooperation". These statements indicate that symbolic reassurance was pursued through the SD mechanism rather than through the PPD, leaving the societal pillar with limited symbolic resonance.

Across all cases, symbolism is not decorative but foundational. It represents the performative layer through which China anchors societal diplomacy in public visibility and continuity. By ritualising cooperation, symbolism functions as representational infrastructure which sustains legitimacy even under volatile political conditions. Table 2.6 identifies symbolic outcomes that reinforce recognition, mutual visibility, and ceremonial affirmation within the PPD framework, illustrating the forms and functions of symbolic practice in sustaining long-term engagement.

Table 2.6 Symbolic Outcomes Across PPD Channels

Partner	Symbolic Anchors	Discursive Themes	Symbolic Significance
EU	Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2012);	Mutual understanding; trust; pragmatic cooperation; "four partnerships";	Aligns China's symbolism with

	40th anniversary (2015); Tourism Year (2018)	China/Europe/World Dream; harmony in difference; shared future	multilateral legitimacy
UK	"Golden Era" branding (2015–2017), anniversaries (2012, 2017)	World peace and development; eliminating misunderstanding; mutual respect; pragmatic cooperation; shared future	High-visibility symbolic branding; fragile under strain
France	Diplomatic anniversaries (50th in 2014; 55th in 2019; 60th in 2025)	Two great civilisations; China/France Dreams; pragmatic cooperation; harmony in difference; shared future; pluralism	Deep civilisational framing; model for intercivilisational dialogue
Germany	45th anniversary (2017)	Win-win; mutual understanding; pragmatic cooperation; world peace and development	Episodic symbolism; overshadowed by SD mechanism

Nevertheless, many symbolic terms also carry normative weight. References such as harmony in difference, community of shared future, and civilisational dialogue extend beyond representational performance into explicit value claims. The next section

therefore turns to normative outcomes, where symbolism intersects with value articulation and normative recalibration within the LIO.

2.5.4 Normative Outcomes: Value Discourses and Hybridisation

The normative dimension of the PPDs underlines how values and principles are articulated through dialogue texts. Across all four mechanisms, official statements consistently foreground values such as peace, cooperation, inclusivity, mutual trust, and sustainability. These resonate with mainstream vocabularies of the LIO, situating China within widely shared repertoires of international legitimacy. Alongside these, however, China repeatedly introduces additional emphases on civilisation, development, pluralism, and a "community of shared future". These are not presented as alternatives to liberal values but as reframing devices which embed shared principles in sovereignty-sensitive, culturally pluralist, and developmental contexts.

This reframing clarifies the distinct discursive weight of these terms. Civilisation invokes cultural depth and mutual respect, anchoring inclusivity in a civilisational register. Development frames collective prosperity as a prerequisite for broader rights fulfilment, extending sustainability concerns to economic justice. Pluralism underscores recognition of multiple modernities and diverse governance models, reinforcing China's emphasis on cultural diversity. A shared future projects global cooperation as grounded in common destiny. Together, these emphases signal continuity with the LIO's normative foundations whilst simultaneously broadening

interpretive space to accommodate China's preferences. At a broader level, such pluralist articulations mirror wider shifts in UN and global order debates which emphasise multipolar rebalancing (de Oliveira, Geiger & Ugar 2025).

The China-EU PPDs provide the clearest illustration of this hybridisation. The third round (2015) called for mutual trust and pragmatic cooperation, with references to harmony in difference. The fourth (2017) and fifth (2020) rounds embedded the "community of shared future for mankind" into multilateral cooperation frameworks, whilst the sixth round (2024) combined European priorities on sustainability with Chinese language on pragmatic cooperation and mutual benefit. These rounds demonstrate how mainstream principles were layered with discursive insertions, creating overlapping vocabularies rather than dichotomous alternatives.

The China-UK PPD projected shared values most visibly during the Golden Era (2015–2017). Joint outcomes emphasised mutual respect, cultural complementarity, and world peace and development, aligning with liberal values whilst highlighting reciprocal friendship. However, the suspension of the mechanism after 2017 curtailed continuity in normative messaging, revealing the vulnerability of symbolic and normative branding to wider political frictions.

The China-France PPD demonstrates the most consistent expansion of normative space. From its launch in 2014 during the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations, the

mechanism repeatedly advanced civilisational narratives. The 2015 round stressed pluralistic and harmonious coexistence of civilisations, the 2019 round invoked the shared intellectual legacy of the work-study movement, and the 2025 round cast China and France as two great civilisations contributing wisdom to world order and rejecting the notion of a clash of civilisations. These examples show how the PPD served not only as a diplomatic anchor but also as a platform for discursive innovation.

By contrast, the China-Germany PPD exhibited minimal normative articulation. Its single round in 2017 focused primarily on win-win cooperation and world peace and development, with little evidence of new discursive framing. Subsequent normative reassurance was channelled instead through the SD, where China urged both sides to act as "partners beyond ideology". The absence of follow-up PPD rounds limited the development of sustained value narratives.

Taken together, these cases show that normative outcomes vary significantly by partner context. With the EU and France, discursive vocabularies were broadened and hybridised; with the UK, values were visible but fragile; and with Germany, normative expression was marginal. These variations underline that China's capacity to reframe values through PPDs depends on political receptivity and institutional continuity. Table 2.7 summarises normative outcomes observable across the dialogues, focusing on how discursive framings reflect China's evolving norm-negotiation strategy within the LIO.

Table 2.7 Normative Outcomes Across China-Europe PPDs

Partner	Shared LIO Vocabularies (Convergence)	China's Discursive Reframings (Layering)	Outcome / Implications
EU	Mutual trust, pragmatic cooperation, peace, growth, sustainability	Harmony in difference, community of shared future	Hybrid vocabulary: inclusivity and sustainability layered with civilisational terms; discursive overlap rather than dichotomy
UK	Mutual respect, understanding, pragmatic cooperation, world peace and development	"Golden Era" symbolism	Visible but fragile; normative branding collapsed after 2017 under political stain
France	Pragmatic cooperation, mutual respect, world peace and development	Civilisational pluralism, harmony in difference, shared future	Most expansive; accepted civilisational framing, making PPD a platform for inter-civilisational dialogue

Germany	Win-win cooperation, mutual understanding, world peace and development	Limited, no sustained insertions	Episodic and shallow; normative debates shifted to SD mechanism

Normative outcomes therefore reveal how China employs the PPDs not to contest but to recalibrate international values. Peace, inclusivity, cooperation, and sustainability anchor China within mainstream LIO repertoires, whilst civilisation, pluralism, development, and shared future extend these principles into sovereignty-based and culturally pluralist contexts. The result is discursive hybridisation: Shared norms are reiterated whilst simultaneously reframed to reflect China's priorities. Variation across cases underscores the contingent and negotiated character of normative projection in China-Europe societal diplomacy.

2.5.5 SRA in Practise: China's Role Through the PPDs

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the PPDs are not peripheral cultural add-ons but institutionalised arenas through which China performs elements of its international role. Outcomes across four analytically distinct layers—tangible, formalised, symbolic, and normative—reveal a dual logic. On the one hand, China works to stabilise cooperation through institutional routines and practical deliverables; on the other, it incrementally broadens the discursive space of cooperation by layering emphases such

as civilisation, pluralism, and development onto widely shared LIO vocabularies of peace, cooperation, inclusivity, mutual trust, and sustainability.

Inductively derived from this four-dimensional analysis, the study develops the concept of the SRA. The SRA captures China's dual posture of continuity with recalibration: operating within the prevailing order whilst pursuing two interlocking aims: stabilising relations through institutionalised cooperation and cautiously reframing values and agendas to expand interpretive space without rupture. Table 2.8 maps the four categories of PPD outcomes onto China's SRA posture, demonstrating how institutionalised societal diplomacy operationalises the dual logic of continuity and recalibration in practice.

Table 2.8 Mapping PPD Outcomes onto the SRA Posture

PPD Outcome	Mechanism	SRA Posture
Tangible	Anchoring constituencies through exchanges, projects, and joint funds	Strategist with selective reformist emphases
Formalised	Structuring conditions via co-chairing, communiqués, MoUs	Strategist, with reformist-enabling extensions
Symbolic	Legitimacy signalling through anniversaries, thematic years, rituals	Strategist and reformist in tandem

Normative	Discursive recalibration of values	Reformist, echoing strategist continuity

At the tangible level, PPDs yield concrete initiatives such as student exchanges, research funds, and cultural festivals. These outcomes primarily reflect the strategist dimension by embedding cooperation in practise and cultivating constituencies for long-term ties. Occasionally, however, deliverables also carried discursive framings (e.g. sustainability projects linked with phrases such as "pragmatic cooperation" or "world peace and development"). These do not represent reformist departures but rather modest recalibrations: operational initiatives framed in ways which connect practical cooperation to broader narratives of stability, reciprocity, and shared progress. In this sense, even tangible outcomes subtly extend China's preferred vocabulary whilst remaining anchored in widely accepted principles.

At the formalised level, PPDs are structured mechanisms co-chaired at vice-premier rank and endorsed in summit communiqués. These arrangements elevated societal exchanges into the architecture of CSPs. Here the strategist function is most visible: Institutional anchoring provides predictability, continuity, and legitimacy. However, the same routines created space to extend agendas—adding streams on health, gender, or sustainability—thereby enabling gradual reformist recalibration within established structures.

The symbolic dimension projected identity and legitimacy. Through anniversaries, thematic years, and civilisational narratives, China framed its rise as cooperative and future oriented. Symbolic practises reinforced continuity and recognition (strategist) whilst also broadening the symbolic grammar of partnership through terms such as "harmony in difference" or "community of shared future for mankind" (reformist /recalibration). These dual logics illustrate how symbolism functioned as both reassurance and experimentation.

The normative dimension revealed the clearest reformist moves. Mainstream LIO vocabularies of peace, inclusivity, and sustainability were consistently affirmed but layered with emphases on pluralism, civilisation, development, and shared future. These were not posed as oppositional or illiberal values but as recalibrations which embedded sovereignty-sensitive and culturally pluralist inflections within shared principles. Reception varied: France proved most receptive to civilisational framings, and the EU selectively accommodated hybrid vocabularies, whereas the UK and Germany provided a narrower normative space, highlighting that reformist elements are advanced selectively, depending on partner receptivity. Strategist functions of sustaining dialogue continued even where reformist space was constrained.

Taken together, the four dimensions show how the PPDs operationalise China's SRA posture. Strategist functions appear in the consolidation of trust through concrete projects, the institutionalisation of societal diplomacy as a third pillar of CSPs, and the

projection of continuity across political cycles. Reformist elements emerge through discursive layering and agenda extension, cautiously stretching normative boundaries whilst affirming order membership. The SRA is therefore calibrational rather than confrontational: It uses low-politics, institutionalised channels to test, diffuse, and normalise reframings, adjusting emphasis to partner receptivity and political context.

Expression of the SRA is forum- and partner-contingent. It is most visible where formalisation is dense and partners are norm-receptive (e.g. France, EU), yielding sustained symbolic capital and deeper normative layering. It is constrained where mechanisms are suspended (UK post-2017) or under-prioritised (Germany), in which case reassurance migrates to other dialogues such as the SD. These variations situate the SRA within a wider debate on China's relationship to the LIO.

The rise of China has long been framed through the binary of status-quo integration versus revisionist disruption. Status-quo accounts (e.g. Johnston 2003; Ikenberry 2011) emphasise China's participation in institutions such as the WTO, G20, and UNSC as evidence of cooperative, rule-abiding behaviour, whereas empirical studies (e.g. Kastner and Saunders 2012) highlight its predictable conduct in multilateral settings. Revisionist accounts interpret initiatives like the BRI and AIIB, or assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, as challenges to US-led governance. A third strand, the "change-from-within" school (e.g. Schweller and Pu 2011; Jones 2018), argues that China pragmatically engages existing institutions to reshape them from the inside yet

often without clearly distinguishing incremental reform from disruptive revision. Other perspectives, from the English School (Paul 2021) to non-Western international relations approaches such as Xuetong Yan's rationalism (also known as the Tsinghua approach), Yaqing Qin's relationalism, or Chih-yu Shih and Chiung-chiu Huang's balance of relationship, emphasise peaceful accommodation or cultural specificity but have rarely been applied to institutionalised practises in the China-Europe context. The PPD analysis therefore enriches these debates by providing empirical evidence of how ideas are operationalised through structured dialogues.

The PPD findings advance an alternative conceptualisation. China consistently affirms liberal values such as peace, inclusivity, and sustainability whilst cautiously reframing them through sovereignty-sensitive, civilisational, and pluralist emphases. This is neither passive convergence nor disruptive rupture. This finding aligns with research showing that China increasingly shapes normative outcomes from within existing institutional frameworks (Kim and Park 2025). The SRA framework therefore theorises a "continuity-with-recalibration" pathway: stabilising relations through institutional design and tangible cooperation whilst gradually broadening the discursive boundaries of order.

Conceptually, this framework makes three contributions. First, it advances debates on major powers—rising and established alike—by moving beyond the binary of status quo versus revisionist, theorising recalibration as an incremental, embedded process

distinct from both assimilation and rupture. Second, it expands analytical scope by showing how societal diplomacy functions as a laboratory for identity performance and normative negotiation, where strategic reassurance and reformist signalling are enacted simultaneously. Third, it offers a portable mid-range framework of calibrational agency which extends beyond China-Europe relations, applicable to other contexts where major powers pursue continuity with recalibration through institutionalised, low-politics mechanisms. Unlike strands of change-from-within scholarship, which often emphasise eventual convergence with liberal norms or structural accommodation, the SRA foregrounds role performance, calibrated contestation, and relational diplomacy. It highlights how major powers can reconfigure selected normative structures from within, not through assimilation or passive compliance but through selective engagement, discursive reframing, and role adaptation in institutionalised settings.

In this sense, the SRA framework highlights how China positions itself neither as a status-quo power converging fully with liberal norms nor as a revisionist challenger seeking rupture but as an actor pursuing continuity with recalibration: consolidating stability whilst cautiously adjusting the boundaries of international order. In sum, the PPDs reveal China's dual movement as an SRA: stabilising cooperation through institutionalised societal diplomacy whilst simultaneously probing the boundaries of normative adaptation within the LIO. Framed as continuity with recalibration, the SRA provides a distinctive lens for analysing major powers' strategies of order engagement,

with implications extending beyond China-Europe relations to wider debates on contested global governance.

2.6 Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study has examined China's PPDs with Europe through a four-dimensional framework of tangible, formalised, symbolic, and normative outcomes. The analysis shows that PPDs are not peripheral soft-power add-ons but institutionalised arenas of societal diplomacy which function as the third pillar of China-Europe relations within the CSPs, complementing political and economic tracks by embedding cooperation in the societal sphere.

The findings highlight that the four outcome dimensions, though interconnected, are analytically distinct. Tangible outcomes deliver measurable cooperation through programmes, exchanges, and joint projects. Formalised outcomes provide the scaffolding of continuity via co-chairing arrangements, declarations, and action plans. Symbolic outcomes stage the relationship through rituals, anniversaries, and representational gestures. Normative outcomes articulate shared liberal values of peace, cooperation, inclusivity, and sustainability whilst layering discursive emphases on civilisation, pluralism, development, and a shared future. Together, these dimensions show how the PPDs operate simultaneously as mechanisms of cooperation, institutionalisation, symbolic performance, and normative projection.

Three main conclusions follow. First, the PPDs illustrate both the resilience and fragility of societal diplomacy. Tangible projects such as student exchanges and joint research often persist operationally, but the suspension of the China-UK PPD after 2017 shows the vulnerability of high-level mechanisms to political rupture. By contrast, formalised outcomes in the EU and France cases demonstrate how institutionalisation can embed exchanges as durable diplomatic pillars, whereas Germany's single round highlights the dependence of continuity on political prioritisation. Symbolic and normative outcomes, particularly with the EU and France, provide the clearest evidence of China's discursive ambition—embedding civilisational pluralism, harmony in difference, and shared futures into partnership language—though receptivity varies.

Second, the PPDs reveal how China manages the tension between order maintenance and order reform. Strategically, they anchor dialogue even when higher-stakes negotiations falter, sustaining cooperation in less politicised domains. Reformist elements are introduced incrementally, through hybrid vocabularies which reaffirm mainstream liberal principles whilst broadening their scope to include sovereignty-sensitive and culturally pluralist framings. This approach signals continuity with the LIO's normative foundations whilst cautiously recalibrating their meaning. Rather than rejecting the order, China leverages the PPDs to pursue continuity with recalibration. Similar patterns of pragmatic adaptation and incremental reform are evident in China's peacekeeping participation within the UN system (Chen 2025).

Third, variation across the four dialogues underscores the importance of political context and partner receptivity. With France and the EU, China expanded agendas and discourses where conditions were favourable. With the UK, symbolic diplomacy peaked during the Golden Era but collapsed under political strain, exposing fragility. With Germany, societal diplomacy remained marginal, with normative reassurance shifted to high-politics dialogues such as the SD. These contrasts show China's adaptive calibration: embedding or downplaying societal diplomacy depending on opportunities and constraints.

Conceptually, the findings contribute in three ways. First, they establish societal diplomacy as an original analytical category, demonstrating how institutional design and discursive framing matter as much as cultural resources. Second, they develop the SRA framework as a conceptual innovation. Emerging inductively from the four-dimensional analysis, the SRA captures China's dual posture: as a strategist, consolidating legitimacy through tangible cooperation and institutional embedding; as a reformist, cautiously broadening discursive agendas by reframing mainstream values. Third, the study enriches debates on major-power behaviour and global order, showing how China recalibrates rather than rejects liberal norms, pluralising their content whilst affirming its stakeholder role.

For China, the PPDs highlight the value of societal diplomacy as a structured yet flexible complement to political and economic dialogues. They generate continuity

through lower-stakes cooperation and create space for discursive experimentation beyond the confines of high politics. Their institutional design already spans three tiers: endorsement at the head-of-state level, co-chairing by vice premiers or ministers, and implementation by societal actors across education, culture, health, and other sectors. This multi-layered structure distinguishes the PPDs from ad hoc public or cultural diplomacy, embedding them directly into the architecture of CSPs.

At the same time, the design entails vulnerabilities. The top-tier anchoring gives the mechanism visibility and political weight, but it also means that deteriorating political trust can suspend or delay high-level rounds, even when societal initiatives at the operational level continue. The challenge, therefore, lies less in a lack of institutional embedding than in the limited autonomy of societal projects from political cycles. Strengthening the resilience of these bottom-up initiatives would help ensure that the PPDs function not merely as symbolic extensions of summitry but as durable platforms of societal diplomacy, capable of sustaining dialogue even during periods of political tension.

For Europe, the PPDs offer tangible benefits in education, culture, and scientific cooperation and create channels to promote priorities such as sustainability and inclusivity. At the same time, they serve as vehicles for China's discursive projection. Policymakers should therefore treat PPDs both as opportunities for cooperation and as

arenas of normative negotiation, where symbolic and discursive capital are embedded alongside practical outcomes.

The PPDs illustrate how major powers enact strategic identity through institutionalised low-politics engagement, using societal diplomacy to negotiate legitimacy and recalibrate normative expectations. In doing so, they show that order transformation unfolds not only in security or economic arenas but also through institutionalised interaction.

In conclusion, the PPDs exemplify how China employs institutionalised societal diplomacy to pursue its SRA posture of continuity with recalibration: stabilising relations through strategic continuity whilst cautiously expanding normative agendas. As global governance becomes increasingly fragmented, the PPDs illustrate how major powers may adapt not by confrontation but by incremental reform through institutional innovation. Whether these mechanisms evolve from fragile supplements into durable platforms for mutual accommodation will be a key test of both China's SRA role and Europe's capacity to engage with pluralised forms of international order.

3 Case Two. Strategy and diplomacy in a changing world: China's High-Level Strategic Dialogues with European counterparts (2001-2025)[26]

Abstract

High-level Strategic Dialogues (SDs) constitute a central political pillar of China–Europe relations, yet their strategic functioning as institutionalised dialogue mechanisms remains under-examined. This paper investigates how China employs the SD mechanism to engage with Europe and pursue its foreign-policy objectives within the liberal international order (LIO).

The study adopts a document-driven qualitative design combining grounded-theory coding with abductive reasoning. The dataset comprises 59 China-issued SD records corresponding to 75 dialogue rounds between 2001 and 2025. Using the complementary analytical lenses of forum shopping and altercasting, the analysis examines how differentiated dialogue venues and signalling repertoires structure expectations of cooperation, responsibility, disagreement management, and systemic roles within institutionalised interaction.

The findings show that China's SD engagement operates through a differentiated dialogue architecture combined with recurring signalling practices that stabilise

_____

[26] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference in Dublin (August 2024). A revised version has been submitted for journal publication.

participation across institutional settings while enabling incremental reinterpretation of governance vocabularies and role expectations. Building on these empirical patterns, the paper advances a mid-range interpretive framework linking strategic identity (the Strategist–Reformist Actor), institutional practice (Institutionalisation as Diplomacy), and the patterned outcome of continuity with recalibration. The analysis demonstrates how routinised diplomatic engagement within institutionalised dialogue mechanisms can simultaneously sustain interactional continuity and facilitate incremental normative recalibration, contributing to broader debates on major-power behaviour toward the LIO.

3.1 Introduction

Since the early 2000s, China has established a network of High-Level Strategic Dialogues (SDs) with the European Union (EU, 2010) and six European countries of interest (ECOIs), including France (2001), the United Kingdom (UK, 2010), Germany (2011), Poland (2012), Switzerland (2018), and Portugal (2019).

Endorsed in their respective joint declarations, these dialogues constitute the political pillar of China–Europe relations, providing recurring venues for agenda coordination, strategic communication, and the management of bilateral, regional, and global issues.

Despite growing geopolitical tensions in China–Europe relations, the SD mechanisms have persisted as routinised platforms of high-level engagement, indicating their institutional resilience and continuing diplomatic relevance.

While official accounts portray SDs primarily as consultation platforms, their repeated institutionalisation suggests a broader strategic function. The dialogues provide structured settings through which China engages multiple layers of the European institutional landscape simultaneously, allowing interaction to be sustained even under conditions of political disagreement. Yet, despite their institutional longevity and strategic salience, China–Europe SDs remain comparatively under-examined in systematic empirical research, particularly across multiple dialogue venues and over extended time periods.

This paper addresses this gap by asking: How does China employ the SD mechanism to engage with Europe and pursue its foreign-policy objectives within the liberal international order (LIO)?

This paper argues that China's SD engagement is structured through the differentiated selection of dialogue venues across supranational and bilateral levels and through a patterned repertoire of diplomatic signalling practices observable in dialogue discourse. Interpreted through the analytical lenses of forum shopping and altercasting, these institutional and interactional patterns reveal how China simultaneously stabilises

participation in existing institutional frameworks while incrementally adjusting interpretive emphases concerning sovereignty, UN-centred multilateralism, multipolarity, and differentiated governance roles.

Building on this empirical analysis, the paper advances a mid-range interpretive framework linking strategic identity (the Strategist–Reformist Actor, SRA), institutional practice (Institutionalisation as Diplomacy, IaD), and the patterned outcome of continuity with recalibration (CwR). Together, this framework explains how institutionalised dialogue mechanisms function as diplomatic infrastructures through which engagement continuity is maintained while interpretive recalibration is incrementally enacted through routinised diplomatic practice.

The analysis is document-driven and focuses primarily on China-issued SD records, examining how China articulates strategic intent and diplomatic expectations through official dialogue discourse rather than assessing negotiation outcomes or partner responses. This scope allows the study to capture the signalling logic embedded in institutionalised diplomatic communication.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 3.2 reviews the literature on China's SDs and introduces the analytical lenses of forum shopping and altercasting. Section 3.3 outlines the methodological framework and dataset. Section 3.4 presents the empirical patterns of forum differentiation across the China–Europe SD architecture, while Section 3.5

identifies the repertoire of signalling practices observable within dialogue discourse. Section 3.6 discusses how these institutional and interactional patterns together provide the empirical basis for the SRA–IaD–CwR framework developed in this study, demonstrating how institutionalised dialogue practices simultaneously sustain engagement continuity and enable incremental normative recalibration. Section 3.7 concludes by outlining the paper's conceptual and empirical contributions to research on institutionalised diplomacy and major-power behaviour toward the LIO.

3.2 Literature Review and Analytical Framework

SDs have become a regularised feature of China–Europe relations, yet their analytical treatment remains limited. Official descriptions portray SDs as high-level venues for consultation, trust-building, and agenda management. Existing research, however, tends to describe such mechanisms rather than theorise how they function as diplomatic practice across different partners and institutional levels.

The literature on China's SDs has focused predominantly on the China–United States case. Studies commonly examine strategic stability, crisis management, or selected rounds of the dialogue process (e.g. Lu and Lv 2008; Zhang 2010; Glosny and Twomey 2010; Cossa, Glosserman and Santoro 2013; Glosny, Twomey, and Jacobs 2013; Twomey et al. 2016; Radzinsky, Peczeli and Williams 2022). Earlier accounts also provide broad characterisations of China's SDs as institutional innovations in major-power diplomacy, often emphasising their stabilising intent and forward-looking

coordination function (e.g. Wang 2008; Chen 2010). In the China–Europe context, scholarship is comparatively sparse and tends to be episodic, focusing on individual rounds, selected issue areas, or specific policy outcomes (e.g. Master, Bugnar, and Bodog 2010; Beneyto et al. 2011). As a result, China–Europe SDs remain under-examined relative to their institutional longevity and political salience.

Two limitations follow from this pattern. First, SDs are rarely studied systematically across venues—that is, across the EU-level dialogue and multiple bilateral SDs—despite Europe's multi-layered institutional landscape and China's simultaneous engagement with supranational and state actors. Second, existing accounts often treat SD documents as straightforward summaries of "what happened", whereas the public record largely comprises curated diplomatic artefacts whose formulae, sequencing, ambiguity and omission, and repetition can themselves be analytically consequential. These gaps matter as China's SD engagement with Europe is not a single bilateral process but a differentiated set of institutionalised interactions unfolding over time.

A systematic, cross-venue and longitudinal analysis is therefore necessary, as spatially differentiated and temporally repeated dialogues may reveal patterned diplomatic practices that remain difficult to identify in single-dialogue or episodic studies. As SDs constitute a recurrent venue in which China articulates sovereignty, multilateralism, and governance language in interaction with European partners, they also provide a useful empirical site for observing how China navigates broader international-order debates in practice.

To address this under-theorisation of SDs as a mechanism, the paper employs two complementary analytical lenses—forum shopping and altercasting—to examine both the institutional and interactional dimensions of China's SD practice: where engagement occurs, with whom, and how expectations are structured within dialogue discourse. The study is document-driven: these lenses are used to organise interpretation of patterns emerging from the SD corpus rather than as theories under direct hypothesis test.

Forum shopping, originally developed in legal scholarship, refers to the strategic selection of venues to maximise leverage, shape agendas, or manage constraints (Rüland 2012; Murphy and Kellow 2013; Hofmann 2018; Celik 2023). In international relations, it has been applied to institutional choice across trade governance (e.g. Busch 2007; Capling and Low 2010), security cooperation (e.g. Mondré 2015), and crisis governance (e.g. Hofmann 2018). Applied to China–Europe SDs, forum shopping provides an analytical approach for analysing how China distributes engagement across supranational and bilateral settings, and how different venues offer different opportunities for agenda positioning, level targeting, and issue–forum matching. It therefore illuminates the institutional–spatial dimension of SD practice: the structured differentiation of where engagement is routed and with whom.

Complementing this, altercasting captures the interactional work performed within these venues. Originating in social psychology, altercasting refers to projecting role expectations onto others to shape interaction (Goffman 1959; Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963). In diplomatic settings, such projection involves framing interlocutors through role-relevant cues—such as co-leadership, partnership, responsibility, or principled boundary markers—while simultaneously performing one's own role identity within the same interaction. Recent scholarship has also examined how role expectations and socialisation dynamics shape China's interactions with Western partners (e.g. Ai and Thies 2023), highlighting the interaction between externally projected expectations and domestic role interpretation.

In this study, altercasting is used in a relational sense to track how SD discourse projects behavioural, interpretive, and role expectations toward interlocutors and structures the permissibility of agreement and disagreement across dialogue rounds, encompassing both expectation projection and China's own identity performance, consistent with relational role-theoretical approaches that treat role enactment as interactionally constituted (e.g. Holsti 1970; Thies 2017; Breuning 2019). Altercasting thus illuminates the communicative–relational dimension of SD practice: how expectations and role claims are articulated within routinised dialogue discourse.

Together, forum shopping and altercasting link institutional venue selection with communicative role framing and expectation-projection, enabling a systematic account of China–Europe SDs as an institutionalised diplomatic practice rather than a set of

isolated meetings. This framing establishes the analytical groundwork for the empirical sections that follow.

3.3 Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, document-driven research design to examine how China employs SDs in its engagement with Europe. Rather than treating dialogue outcomes as the primary object of analysis, the study analyses SDs as institutionalised diplomatic practices observable through official dialogue records. These curated texts provide systematic evidence of how agendas, interactional expectations, and diplomatic role framings are articulated across dialogue rounds and venues.

3.3.1 Methodological Framework

The analysis combines the GTM with abductive reasoning. Grounded coding enables the inductive identification of recurrent diplomatic framings, signalling practices, and agenda patterns across the SD corpus, while abductive interpretation provides the inferential logic linking these empirically observed regularities to broader debates on diplomatic practice, institutional engagement, role enactment, and international-order dynamics. This design allows analytical categories to emerge from the empirical record while remaining theoretically informed rather than mechanically theory-testing, ensuring that theorisation remains empirically grounded and attentive to the performative and strategic character of high-level diplomatic communication.

The research design is particularly suited to curated diplomatic artefacts. Official dialogue documents are treated simultaneously as empirical data and strategic performances rather than transparent records of negotiation processes. Repetition, ambiguity, omission, sequencing, and formulaic language are therefore analysed as analytically meaningful features reflecting agenda management, signalling priorities, and interactional boundary-setting rather than as limitations of the documentary record.

The analysis followed an abductive grounded-theory procedure. First, open coding was conducted line-by-line to identify recurrent framings, initiatives, issue linkages, and signalling practices. Second, focused (axial) coding grouped these elements into higher-order analytical themes capturing patterns of venue differentiation, diplomatic signalling, responsibility narratives, and sovereignty articulation. Third, abductive interpretation connected these recurring patterns to the analytical lenses of forum shopping and altercasting, enabling the identification of systematic relationships between venue selection and communicative role construction across dialogue rounds.

Silence, ambiguity, and omission are treated as analytically consequential. Issues raised in earlier rounds but subsequently dropped, agenda items shifted to other dialogue mechanisms such as the EFD or the PPD, and topics present in European sources but absent from Chinese records are analysed as indicators of agenda management and strategic avoidance. Keyword frequencies are used descriptively to gauge issue salience but are not treated as determinative evidence.

To illustrate the coding process, the following excerpt from the Tenth China–EU SD was analysed as an example:

"Both sides welcome the trend toward a multipolar world, support economic globalisation and the democratisation of international relations, uphold the concept of multilateralism, and are committed to safeguarding an international system with the United Nations at its core, an international order based on international law, and a multilateral trading system with the WTO as its cornerstone."

This was initially coded as: multipolarity; economic globalisation; democratisation of international relations; multilateralism; UN-centred order; international law-based order; WTO-based multilateral trade system; institutional legitimacy. Through focused coding, these were grouped into the higher-order theme of strategic support for multilateral order. Abductively, the recurrence of this theme across SD rounds prompted refinement of the SRA framework to capture China's simultaneous defence of existing institutions and its effort to recalibrate associated norms. Table 3.1 illustrates this process by tracing an example from raw text through open coding and focused coding to thematic abstraction and abductive interpretation.

Table 3.1 Example of coding procedure: from raw text to abductive interpretation[27]

Stage	Example from the Tenth China–EU SD
Raw text excerpt	"Both sides welcome the trend toward a multipolar world, support economic globalisation and the democratisation of international relations, uphold the concept of multilateralism, and are committed to safeguarding an international system with the United Nations at its core, an international order based on international law, and a multilateral trading system with the WTO as its cornerstone."
Open codes (line-by-line)	Multipolarity; economic globalisation; democratisation of international relations; multilateralism; UN-centred order; international-law-based order; WTO-centred trade regime; institutional legitimacy
Focused / axial codes	Defence of multilateral institutions; reformist framing of global governance; role as co-manager of international order
Core theme	Strategic support for multilateral order
Abductive interpretation	China performs a SRA role by simultaneously defending existing institutions while seeking to recalibrate associated norms and practices

---

[27] Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent tables in this paper are based on the author's analysis of official SD documents, 2001-2025.

Source: Author's analysis based on grounded coding and abductive interpretation of China-issued SD documents (2001–2025).

The full coding architecture is presented in Appendix Tables B and C. Appendix Tables B1–B7 provide partner-specific grounded-theory themes derived from the SD corpus. For each dialogue, they specify the central analytic theme, a concise inductive description, and illustrative textual evidence, thereby mapping how recurrent framings and issue linkages were clustered into higher-order categories through open and focused coding. Appendix Table B8 provides a cross-case synthesis based on the same document corpus, identifying thematic convergence across China's SDs with European counterparts without introducing new data.

B8 operates as a cross-case analytic abstraction: themes are merged at a higher level of generality to identify recurring diplomatic functions and issue framings that appear across multiple SD partners, while preserving traceability by specifying which partner-round clusters underpin each synthetic illustration. This separation between within-case tables (B1–B7) and cross-case synthesis (B8) allows the empirical materials to "speak" at two levels—partner-specific configuration and Europe-wide patterning—without overstating causal effects or external outcomes. In sum, B1–B7 operationalise within-case inductive thematisation, while B8 operationalises cross-case convergence mapping based on the same document set.

Appendix Tables C1–C7 then present verbatim excerpts anchoring these themes and demonstrate the abductive step through which they were interpreted in relation to the SRA framework. Appendix Table C8 provides a cross-case synthesis of SRA-relevant textual anchors across the SD corpus, consolidating recurring SRA-relevant role patterns at a higher level of abstraction and mapping convergence in strategic identity construction without introducing new evidence. Taken together, these tables enhance transparency by distinguishing between inductive theme generation and analytical interpretation while preserving full traceability to the primary texts.

3.3.2 Dataset

The dataset covers the full population of European partners with whom China has established SDs, rather than a pre-selected subset, enabling analysis of the complete dialogue architecture across institutional levels. Between 2001 and 2025, China conducted 75 rounds of SDs, including China–EU SD (13 rounds), China–UK (10 rounds), China–France (27 rounds), China–Germany (12 rounds, of which eight rounds have been held under the High-Level Strategic Dialogue on Diplomacy and Security, SDDS, since 2015), China–Portugal (2 rounds), China–Poland (7 rounds), and China–Switzerland (4 rounds). The dataset comprises 59 publicly available primary documents corresponding to these rounds, including 56 official records and narrative summaries, two joint press releases, and one joint statement. China-issued records form the core of corpus, reflecting the study's focus on how China articulates and performs diplomatic

engagement through institutionalised dialogue mechanisms. Table 3.2 summarises the distribution of dialogue rounds and available documentation.

Table 3.2 China–Europe SDs: Rounds, Duration and Primary Documents Analysed

Dialogue	Total Number of Rounds / Duration	Available Primary Documents for Analysis
China-EU SD	13 / 2010-2025	13 + 1 Joint Press Release
China-UK SD	10 / 2010-2025	7
China-France SD	27 / 2001-2025	11
China-Germany SD	12 / 2011-2025	12 + 1 Joint Press Release
China-Portugal SD	2 / 2021-2025	2
China-Poland SD	7 / 2012-2023	7
China-Switzerland SD	4 / 2018-2025	4 + 1 Joint Statement
Total	75	59

The corpus includes material issued by government agencies and state media. Of the 59 primary documents, 45 are issued as MFA – Official News, five as Embassy – Official News, one as Consulate-General – Official News, two as Mission to the EU – Official News, and six as Xinhua – News Reports. White papers and policy reports are consulted for contextualisation but are not included in the coded dataset.

China-issued texts are triangulated with external sources—including UK government releases, parliamentary debates, and EU communiqués—where available, to verify procedural outcomes and contextualise partner responses. Additional contextualisation draws on China's policy documents such as Five-Year Plans (2001–2025), the Outline of Long-Term Goals for 2035, white papers, and relevent legislative texts. Semi-structured interviews conducted in late 2024 with a senior EU official and academic experts based in China, the UK, and Europe further informed contextual interpretation (Ethics Approval: ETH2324-1444).

Three limitations are acknowledged. First, many high-level negotiations occur behind closed doors, and public documents capture only a curated subset of discussions. Second, documentation availability varies across dialogue partners and rounds. Third, European records are less systematically available than Chinese sources. These constraints are addressed analytically rather than treated as defects: public texts are analysed as strategic diplomatic artefacts, and recurring patterns are identified through longitudinal consistency and cross-dialogue comparison rather than isolated statements.

Appendix Table A list all primary documents analysed in this paper. For each SD round, it specifies the document title, issuing body, document type, publication date, URL, and date of access. This presentation ensures transparency, traceability, and analytical replicability of the data-collection process.

3.3.3 Analytical Lenses

The empirical analysis is guided by two complementary analytical lenses introduced in Section 3.2. Forum shopping is used to interpret patterns of venue differentiation across supranational and bilateral dialogue settings, while altercasting captures the projection of behavioural, interpretive, and role expectations toward interaction partners alongside the performance of China's own role identity within dialogue discourse. Together, these lenses enable simultaneous examination of the institutional and interactional dimensions of China's SD engagement. These lenses structure the interpretation of empirically observed mechanisms—forum differentiation and a repertoire of altercasting techniques—identified through document analysis. Table 3.3summarises the relationship between analytical lenses, their empirical operationalisation in the SD corpus, and the interpretive constructs developed through abductive analysis.

Table 3.3 Analytical Structure of the Study: Lenses, Empirical Operationalisation, and Interpretive Outcomes

Analytical component	Role in the analysis	Empirical operationalisation
Forum shopping (analytical lens)	Interprets how dialogue venues are strategically distributed across partners and institutional levels	Forum differentiation

Altercasting (analytical lens)	Interprets how behavioural, interpretive, and role expectations are articulated within dialogue discourse while enacting role identities	Signalling repertoire / Clustered signalling practices
SRA (interpretive outcome)	Explains China's dual strategic identity posture across SD engagement	Derived from combined patterns of forum differentiation and signalling practices
IaD (interpretive outcome)	Institutional mechanism explaining how dialogue routines structure diplomatic interaction	Regularised dialogue rounds, routinised signalling formats, continuity of institutional engagement
CwR (interpretive outcome)	System-level outcome explaining stability combined with incremental normative reinterpretation	Longitudinal shifts in interpretive vocabularies and signalling emphases across SD rounds

Within the altercasting lens, the SD corpus is analysed as a structured signalling environment. Rather than treating signalling as undifferentiated diplomatic language, the analysis clusters recurrent communicative practices into analytically distinct signalling repertoires. Each signalling cluster simultaneously projects behavioural and

interpretive expectations onto partners and performs China's role identity within dialogue discourse. Table 3.4 specifies this operational mapping.

Table 3.4 Operationalisation of Altercasting: Signalling Clusters and Role Performance

Signalling repertoire /Signalling cluster	Primary communicative practices	Expectations projected onto European Partners	China's role identity performed
Strategic-oriented signalling	Agenda positioning; procedural reaffirmation	Participation in structured dialogue routines; recognition of procedural continuity; issue-specific cooperation roles	Reliable institutional participant; long-term governance stakeholder
Responsible-oriented signalling	Self-presentation; normative framing	Recognition of shared governance responsibilities; cooperative development and stability narratives	Responsible major-country actor; contributor to global governance

| Principle-oriented signalling | Sovereignty signalling; boundary-setting | Respect for core interests; adherence to One-China commitments; limits on interference-related positioning | Sovereignty-defending state actor |
| Declarative signalling | Role framing; value-driven messaging | Alignment with multipolarity, UN-centred multilateralism, and collective global-governance roles | Reform-oriented systemic actor; advocate of multipolar and UN-centred order narratives |

Together, these signalling clusters constitute the altercasting repertoire through which SDs operate as an institutionalised signalling architecture, enabling the simultaneous stabilisation of interactional expectations and incremental recalibration of interpretive norms across dialogue venues.

3.4 Analysing China's SDs through Forum Shopping

This section and the following one (Altercasting) present empirical findings from the primary document analysis of the seven SD datasets, examined through the dual

analytical lenses of forum shopping and altercasting. Together, these lenses structure

the analysis of how China differentiates, sequences, and deploys institutionalised

dialogue venues in its engagement with Europe.

Across the SD corpus, three interrelated patterns of forum differentiation emerge. First,

a dual-channel engagement structure differentiates between a supranational dialogue

with the EU (SD1) and a set of bilateral dialogues with ECOIs (SD2). Second, a pattern

of level targeting differentiates system-level, major-power, and functionally specialised

forums. Third, a pattern of issue–forum matching aligns particular policy agendas with

specific dialogue venues. Together, these patterns indicate that China's SDs are not ad

hoc or episodic exchanges but institutionalised arenas through which diplomatic

engagement is regularised across differentiated platforms. Forum shopping is employed

as an analytical lens to examine how these patterns of differentiation operate across

levels, partners, and issue areas, based on systematic analysis of the SD document

corpus.

3.4.1 Dual-Channel Engagement

Central to China's forum shopping practice is the parallel configuration of SD1 and

SD2. The two channels are institutionally distinct and oriented towards different levels

of engagement. The China–EU SD functions as a system-level venue focused on broad

strategic signalling and multilateral positioning, while bilateral SDs provide more

flexible platforms for contextualised engagement and selective experimentation.

Deployed concurrently, these channels enable China to anchor relations at the supranational level while simultaneously cultivating differentiated bilateral ties across Europe.

Since its elevation to State Councillor level in 2010, building on four earlier vice-ministerial rounds (2005–2009), the China–EU SD has consistently foregrounded themes of multilateralism, global governance, and comprehensive partnership. Official press releases frequently situate the dialogue within UN-, WTO-, and G20-centred frameworks, discursively framing China–EU relations in terms of shared responsibility for addressing global challenges and sustaining the multilateral order. Through this framing, the SD positions China as participating in shared stewardship of multilateral governance alongside the EU. Empirically, this situates the China–EU SD as a venue for systemic signalling rather than transactional coordination. While persistent structural tensions — including those related to human rights, Ukraine-Russia conflict, and divergent security visions, as interviewees note — constrain trust-based cooperation, the SD1's primary function lies in maintaining continuity, visibility, and symbolic engagement at the system level.

By contrast, SD2 has proliferated since the early 2000s, encompassing dialogues with France (from 2001), the UK (formally institutionalised in 2010, following two vice-ministerial rounds from 2005–2007), Germany (from 2011, following three vice-ministerial rounds from 2006–2009), Poland (2012), Switzerland (2018), and Portugal

(2021). These bilateral SDs allow for greater adaptation to national contexts, enabling differentiated agenda-setting and issue prioritisation. Viewed at the level of individual bilateral dialogues, such diversification can be read as dispersion across multiple bilateral tracks. However, in conjunction with SD1, SD2 constitutes a layered architecture of engagement in which supranational anchoring and bilateral differentiation operate in parallel, enhancing resilience by providing multiple, context-specific entry points into Europe's fragmented institutional landscape.

Across both EU-level and bilateral SDs, China-issued documents articulate a recurring set of foreign policy priorities. These priorities appear consistently across different dialogue formats and partner types, indicating a degree of thematic convergence despite institutional variation. Rather than signalling forum-specific agendas, the repetition of these priorities suggests that China treats SDs as a coherent diplomatic repertoire within which similar objectives are reiterated across differentiated venues. Table 3.5 summarises these recurring priorities as they are presented in official SD documents.

Table 3.5 China's Foreign Policy Objectives and Aligned Dialogue Priorities across SD1 and SD2

Foreign policy orientation	Aligned dialogue priorities
Strategic-oriented	Political mutual trust; multilateral coordination
Responsible-oriented	Practical cooperation; global stability
Principle-oriented	Core interests; major concerns

Declarative	Multilateralism; multipolarity

The presence of these priorities across the China–EU SD and across individual bilateral SDs underscores that China's forum shopping is not simply a matter of issue allocation but a reinforcing design. Instead, similar thematic pillars—such as great-power responsibility, sovereign equality (including adherence to the One-China principle), political mutual trust, and "true multilateralism"—are reiterated across these dialogue settings.

As shown in Sections 4 and 5, these recurring priorities acquire identity-relevant significance through the combined operation of forum differentiation and altercasting repertoire forming the empirical basis for the Strategist–Reformist Actor (SRA) framework developed in the concluding analysis.

3.4.2 Level Targeting and Issue-Forum Matching

Forum shopping also operates through level targeting and issue–forum matching. While the China–EU SD, ministerial level (Foreign Minister/State Councillor rank-EU High Representative), functions as a system-level venue oriented towards multilateral governance narratives, differentiation is also evident among bilateral dialogues. Held at ministerial level (Foreign Minister/State Councilor), the China–Germany SD occupies a distinctive position following its renaming in 2015 as the Strategic Dialogue on Diplomacy and Security (SDDS), a change that coincided with the 2014

establishment of the China–Germany All-Round Strategic Partnership. Although the precise distinctions between partnership categories remain loosely specified in official discourse, the introduction of this partnership designation, together with the dialogue's subsequent security-oriented renaming, signalled the differentiated scope of bilateral engagement.

Unlike most other SDs, the inaugural round of the SDDS (2015) produced a joint communiqué outlining agreed areas of cooperation. It included an explicit reference to enhancing NATO–China exchanges on non-traditional security issues "within existing frameworks". It also recorded Germany's invitation for China to participate in the 2016 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) High-Level Economic Meeting, linked to Germany's OSCE Chairmanship at the time. While subsequent rounds did not reproduce this level of joint documentation, the 2015 communiqué nonetheless indicates that the SDDS served as a cautiously framed venue through which China could address Euro-Atlantic-adjacent security and security-economic agendas (NATO exchanges; OSCE-related participation) without implying institutional alignment. Empirically, this positions the China–Germany SD as a forum for probing sensitive security-related issues under tightly bounded language.

The China–France SD, co-chaired at ministerial (Foreign Minister/State Councilor) and presidential adviser levels, exhibits a different form of level targeting. Drawing on France's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and its

advocacy of European strategic autonomy, the dialogue consistently emphasises UN-centred multilateralism and multipolarity. Compared to the China–Germany SD, the China–France SD functions primarily as a signalling forum rather than an outcome-oriented mechanism, reinforcing its role as a venue for strategic coordination among major powers.

Across multiple rounds, China has used the China–UK SD, ministerial (Foreign Minister/State Councilor)-foreign secretary level, to situate engagement with the UK within the context of responsibilities associated with UNSC permanent membership. Notably, the eighth round (2016) produced an issue-specific joint statement on Afghanistan, which explicitly noted that both sides, as P5 members, reaffirmed support for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led political settlement, cooperation with UN-mandated international security efforts, and trilateral development cooperation involving Afghanistan. This episode illustrates how the China–UK SD serves as a venue for issue–forum matching around UN-centred conflict management and international security coordination. Furthermore, the trajectory of the dialogue reveals the conditional stability of bilateral mechanisms: the seven-year hiatus between the ninth round (2018) and the dialogue's resumption in 2025 underscores the susceptibility of bilateral forums to political turbulence, while the eventual renewal indicates the persistence and resilience of institutionalised diplomatic channels. This persistence also suggests China's preference for maintaining high-level institutional mechanisms even under strained political conditions.

Beyond the major-power tier, China has cultivated complementary niches through SDs with Portugal, Poland, and Switzerland. The China–Portugal SD, a ministerial-level dialogue co-chaired by the Chinese Foreign Minister (at times concurrently serving as State Councillor) and the Portuguese Foreign Minister, illustrates how smaller EU member states function as lower-salience yet symbolically relevant partners within China's bilateral SD network. While some commentary associates Portugal primarily with a Lusophone bridge role linking China to Brazil and Africa, SD documents instead situate Portugal more explicitly within the context of China–EU relations, emphasising Portugal's EU membership, its constructive role in supporting China–EU cooperation, and its profile as a stable and pragmatic interlocutor. The dialogue texts also reference Macao as a historical and institutional linkage supporting bilateral exchanges, reinforcing the continuity dimension of the relationship. In this configuration, the China–Portugal SD operates as a bilateral channel that complements EU-level engagement by reinforcing the relational foundations of China–EU cooperation.

The China–Poland SD, conducted at the vice-ministerial level, is closely linked to agendas associated with Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including the China–CEE "14+1" cooperation framework. SD documents consistently frame Poland as a bridge between China and the CEE, a partner in economic modernisation, and a gateway to the wider EU market. Although some Western commentary has portrayed China's engagement with Poland as a "Trojan horse" strategy aimed at fragmenting EU cohesion (e.g. Turcsányi 2014; Butler 2018; Robinson 2020; Zeng 2023), interview

insights and document trajectories suggest a more adaptive pattern of engagement that operates through, rather than against, Europe's institutional pluralism. In this sense, the China–Poland SD functions as a complementary bilateral venue alongside SD1, illustrating how bilateral dialogues can be used to engage sub-regional agendas within a differentiated architecture of China's engagement with Europe.

Held at ministerial level (Foreign Minister/State Councillor–Federal Councillor/Foreign Minister), the China–Switzerland SD extends China's bilateral SD network beyond EU institutional structures while remaining situated within the broader European diplomatic landscape. Switzerland's status as a non-EU liberal European state, together with the establishment of the China–Switzerland Innovative Strategic Partnership (2016), provides institutional background that differentiates this dialogue from EU-member bilateral SDs. China-issued SD documents consistently portray China–Switzerland relations as a demonstrative example for the international community of peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation between countries with different political and institutional systems, a formulation presented not merely as a bilateral description but as a model of cross-system interaction. Recent joint documents (4th round, 2025) further record Swiss endorse China-proposed International Governance Initiative and support the work of China-initiated International Organisation for Mediation.

Across all 75 SD rounds, joint documents remain limited in number based on available official records: three dialogue-level texts—a joint press release from the third round of the China–EU SD (2012), a joint communiqué from the inaugural China–Germany SDDS (2015), and a joint document from the fourth round of the China–Switzerland SD (2025)—and an issue-specific joint statement issued during the eighth round of the China–UK SD (2016). While caution is warranted against over-interpretation, the presence of these joint documents indicates moments of stronger institutionalisation and discursive convergence between China and its European counterparts.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that forum shopping through the SDs is neither ad hoc nor purely opportunistic. Instead, it reflects a structured practice of venue differentiation across levels, partners, and issue areas. SD1 and SD2 operate as complementary channels, while bilateral SDs are further differentiated through level targeting and issue–forum matching. This architecture allows China to maintain systemic continuity while adapting engagement to diverse European contexts. The implications of these patterns for role performance and identity construction are examined in the following section through the lens of altercasting. Table 3.6 synthesises the seven SD datasets by mapping each dialogue to its channel position, level-targeting pattern, and primary issue–forum matching logic, illustrating how forum differentiation structures China's SD engagement with Europe.

Table 3.6 Forum Differentiation Across China's Strategic Dialogues with European Counterparts

Dialogue	Channel position	Level targeting	Primary issue–forum matching logic	Differentiation function within SD architecture
China–EU SD	SD1 (supranational)	System-level	Multilateral governance, global order narratives, comprehensive partnership signalling	System-level anchoring venue for strategic signalling and multilateral positioning
China–France SD	SD2 (bilateral)	Major-power / UNSC-P5 tier	UN-centred multilateral coordination, multipolarity discourse	Major-power strategic signalling venue within bilateral channel
China–UK SD	SD2 (bilateral)	Major-power / UNSC-P5 tier	UN-centred coordination	P5-coordination
China–Germany SD	SD2 (bilateral)	Major-power	Security cooperation	Security-policy probing venue

		security- policy tier		under bounded diplomatic framing
China– Poland SD	SD2 (bilateral)	Vice- ministerial / sub-regional tier	CEE cooperation agendas	Sub-regional engagement linking bilateral dialogue to CEE frameworks
China– Portugal SD	SD2 (bilateral)	Ministerial / smaller EU- member tier	Bilateral cooperation embedded within broader China–EU relational context	China–EU relational reinforcement venue supporting broader partnership continuity
China– Switzerland SD	SD2 (bilateral)	Ministerial / non-EU European tier	Cross-system cooperation narratives, Support for China's initiatives	Cross-system demonstration venue extending SD engagement beyond EU institutional structures

These patterns of forum differentiation establish the institutional conditions through which institutionalised dialogue venues operate as structured diplomatic settings, forming the institutional foundation for the signalling practices examined in the following section.

3.5 Altercasting in China-Europe SDs

This section analyses the communicative practices embedded in China's SDs with European counterparts through the analytical lens of an altercasting repertoire. Whereas Section 3.4 examined how differentiated dialogue venues are selected and structured (forum shopping), the present section focuses on how diplomatic interaction within these venues is shaped through recurrent signalling practices that frame expectations of cooperation, responsibility, permissible disagreement, and systemic roles.

Across the SD document corpus, a consistent set of altercasting techniques—diplomatic signalling, self-presentation and normative framing, sovereignty signalling and boundary-setting, and role framing with value-driven messaging—constitutes the empirical mechanisms through which foreign-policy objectives are articulated in official discourse. Examining these patterned practices across both supranational (SD1) and bilateral (SD2) channels reveals how signalling routines interact with forum differentiation to structure expectations of engagement across China–Europe diplomatic interaction.

Together with the forum-differentiation patterns identified in Section 3.4, these signalling practices provide the empirical basis for the Strategist–Reformist Actor (SRA) interpretation developed in the discussion section. While forum shopping explains where interaction occurs, the altercasting repertoire explains how expectations of cooperation, responsibility, sovereignty parameters, and systemic roles are communicatively enacted within those venues. In this sense, signalling practices operate simultaneously as mechanisms of interactional stabilisation—reinforcing continuity in diplomatic expectations—and as channels through which incremental normative recalibration is pursued through the routinised diffusion of interpretive frames and role expectations.

Within China's SD practice, this signalling repertoire operates at two interrelated analytical levels. First, it institutionalises a recurring set of foreign-policy objectives across SD1 and SD2 through the repeated articulation of shared diplomatic vocabularies. Second, it adapts communicative emphases across partner contexts, allowing role expectations and interpretive frames to be adjusted to differentiated interactional settings while maintaining overall discursive coherence. The analysis therefore proceeds by examining four recurring clusters of foreign-policy objectives—strategic-oriented, responsible-oriented, principle-oriented, and declarative—together with the signalling techniques through which each cluster is operationalised across the SD network.

3.5.1 Altercasting and Foreign-Policy Objectives across SD Channels

China's engagement in SDs reflects a structured diplomatic practice in which role expectations are consistently articulated across dialogue settings. Document analysis and interview insights indicate that official diplomatic messaging follows highly standardised communicative patterns, in which centrally formulated political priorities are reiterated across bilateral and supranational engagements. Within this communicative structure, altercasting functions as a mechanism through which China projects role expectations onto interlocutors, inviting counterparts to assume responsibilities aligned with China's stated foreign-policy priorities.

Altercasting is therefore not limited to scripting distinct roles for individual partners; it also institutionalises a recurring set of foreign-policy objectives across SD1 and SD2. These objectives include safeguarding multilateralism, reinforcing sovereignty principles, promoting multipolarity, and reaffirming positions related to core interests such as the One-China principle. The repetition of these priorities across dialogue settings indicates that altercasting operates as an integrative mechanism linking the dual-channel SD1–SD2 architecture identified in Section 3.4. Across both channels, similar normative priorities are reiterated in differentiated interactional settings, enabling continuity and incremental recalibration to occur simultaneously.

The empirical record shows that China's altercasting converges around four recurring foreign-policy orientations articulated across SDs: strategic-oriented objectives

emphasising political trust and multilateralism; responsible-oriented objectives projecting stability and practical cooperation; principle-oriented objectives defending sovereignty and core interests; and declarative objectives foregrounding multipolarity and a UN-centred international order. These orientations are embedded consistently across both the China–EU SD and individual bilateral SDs, indicating that altercasting operates not as partner-specific improvisation but as a patterned discursive practice embedded in China's diplomatic repertoire. Table 3.7 illustrates China's recurring foreign-policy objectives, aligned priorities across SD1 and SD2, and the repertoire of signalling practices.

Table 3.7 China's Foreign Policy Objectives, Dialogue Priorities, and Altercasting Techniques across SD1 and SD2

Foreign Policy Objectives	Aligned Priorities	Altercasting Techniques
Strategic-oriented	Political mutual trust & multilateralism	Diplomatic signalling
Responsible-oriented	Practical cooperation & global stability	Self-presentation & Normative framing
Principle-oriented	Core interests & major Concerns	Boundary-setting & sovereignty signalling
Declarative	Multilateralism & multipolarity	Role framing & value-driven messaging

This mapping indicates that altercasting is not ad hoc but structurally embedded within China's diplomatic discourse. Across dialogues, even where substantive outcomes vary across partners, role-attribution techniques are consistently aligned with specific foreign policy objectives, demonstrating how role expectations are articulated through patterned diplomatic language. By discursively positioning European counterparts within these role frameworks, China embeds its policy priorities within dialogue practice, providing interpretive grounding for the Strategist–Reformist Actor (SRA) interpretation developed in the concluding section.

The following subsections examine how these recurring objectives are operationalised through partner-specific altercasting techniques across the seven SD partners.

3.5.2 Strategic-Oriented Objectives: Diplomatic Signalling Patterns

Strategic-oriented foreign-policy objectives refer to China's long-term aims of consolidating political mutual trust, sustaining engagement in multilateral governance processes, and maintaining a stable systemic presence in international governance arenas. Across the SD document corpus, these objectives are consistently articulated through diplomatic signalling practices that communicate commitment to continued engagement, multilateral cooperation, and strategic continuity.

In both SD1 and SD2 settings, diplomatic signalling operates through the repeated invocation of themes such as political mutual trust, comprehensive strategic partnership,

and support for the UN-centred international order alongside broader commitments to multilateralism. China–EU SD documents regularly situate their engagement within wider global governance contexts—including references to the United Nations, G20 coordination, and cooperation in addressing global challenges—thereby signalling China's intention to sustain participation in multilateral governance processes together with European counterparts. Comparable signalling patterns are observable across SDs with ECOIs, where dialogue texts consistently emphasise long-term partnership continuity, mutual strategic trust, and coordination on issues such as climate governance, international security, and global economic stability.

Partner-specific dialogues demonstrate how diplomatic signalling is adapted to differentiated interactional contexts while retaining common strategic themes. In the China–France SD, recurrent references to both countries' status as UNSC permanent members signal shared responsibilities in addressing global security and governance challenges. In the China–UK SD, engagement has likewise been framed in the context of responsibilities associated with permanent membership of the UN Security Council; the joint statement issued during the eighth round (2016) on Afghanistan—reaffirming support for an Afghan-owned political settlement and cooperation with UN-mandated international security efforts — illustrates issue-specific signalling linking bilateral dialogue to multilateral conflict-management frameworks. Across the China–Germany SD and SDDS, signalling has frequently centred on maintaining continuity in economic and institutional cooperation, including references to investment cooperation and

broader China–EU economic engagement. Similar patterns are visible in SDs with Poland, Portugal, and Switzerland, where dialogue statements emphasise partnership continuity, multilateral coordination, and long-term cooperative engagement despite differences in partner profile and dialogue level.

Although the substantive policy outcomes associated with these dialogues vary across issue areas, the persistence of these communicative patterns highlights the stabilising function of diplomatic signalling within China's SD practice. Institutionalised dialogues thus operate not only as venues for negotiation but also as signalling arenas in which long-term strategic orientations are reiterated and routinised through recurring diplomatic language, reinforcing expectations of sustained interaction across both supranational and bilateral dialogue channels.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that diplomatic signalling constitutes a core operational mechanism through which China advances strategic-oriented foreign-policy objectives within the SD architecture, supporting the continuity dimension of its broader SRA posture.

3.5.3 Responsible-Oriented Objectives: Self-Presentation and Normative Framing

Responsible-oriented foreign-policy objectives refer to China's efforts to project itself as a stabilising and constructive actor in international affairs, emphasising practical cooperation, global stability, and contributions to collective problem-solving. Across

the SD document corpus, these objectives are articulated through two closely related altercasting techniques: self-presentation, through which China portrays itself as a responsible major country, and normative framing, through which this role is embedded within internationally recognised diplomatic discourses such as multilateralism, sustainable development, and global governance.

Self-presentation involves presenting oneself in a specific way to elicit desired responses from others (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963; Oppermann, 2024). Within both SD1 and SD2 settings, self-presentation operates through recurring diplomatic language emphasising China's commitment to international stability, peaceful conflict resolution, and the provision of international public goods. Dialogue documents frequently situate engagement within SD venues in broader global contexts—including climate governance, global health cooperation, development initiatives, and regional security challenges—thereby presenting China as an active actor in addressing transnational issues. For example, China–EU and China–France SDs regularly highlight cooperation on climate governance and global challenges, while China–Switzerland SD documents emphasise innovation cooperation and mediation-related engagement. Such statements position China not merely as a negotiating counterpart but as a contributor to international governance processes. Interview insights further suggest that SD engagements are highly choreographed diplomatic settings in which messaging is calibrated to project reliability, long-term commitment, and interactional continuity.

Normative framing involves presenting actions and policies in alignment with shared values or norms to gain support and legitimacy (Nunes, 2006; Petrova, 2016). Normative framing complements this self-presentation by linking China's responsible-major-country narrative to internationally recognised diplomatic vocabularies while simultaneously broadening their interpretive scope. Across SD documents, China repeatedly invokes themes such as jointly addressing global challenges, maintaining world peace and stability, and supporting multilateralism, thereby presenting its diplomatic engagement as aligned with shared international responsibilities. At the same time, these references subtly recalibrate the meaning of responsibility by associating it with principles such as sovereign equality, non-interference, respect for diverse development paths, and inclusive global governance. This reformist recalibration does not reject prevailing diplomatic language but reinterprets it in ways that embed China's preferred normative principles within established discourse. For instance, during the 2023 China–Germany SDDS, China emphasised that resolving the Ukraine crisis required "promoting peace talks" while stressing the indivisibility of both sovereignty and security, signalling its diplomatic stance as a constructive contribution to conflict management grounded in sovereignty-based principles.

China's interpretation of international responsibility differs from Western "responsible stakeholder" formulations, which emphasise conformity with liberal institutional norms (Zoellick 2005; 2020). In China's diplomatic discourse, responsibility is more frequently associated with the obligations of major countries to contribute to world

peace, development, and systemic stability. Official statements repeatedly emphasise that major powers should "shoulder greater responsibilities for regional and world peace and development," framing responsibility primarily in terms of maintaining stability and addressing global challenges.[28]

Within the SD context, this understanding is reflected in recurring references to China–Europe relations as a source of global stability and as cooperation between "two major forces" jointly contributing to peace, development, and stability. For example, China–EU dialogue statements emphasise that both sides should "stand on the side of historical progress," strengthen cooperation within the United Nations and other multilateral frameworks, and jointly address global challenges such as climate change and public health governance. Similar language appears across SDs with the UK, Germany, and France, where both sides are described as countries bearing "important international responsibilities" for maintaining peace, promoting development, and contributing to global stability. Interview insights indicate that European actors often associate responsibility with liberal governance norms (democracy, human rights, and rule of law), creating a persistent gap between China's self-presentation and European expectations. Despite this interpretive divergence between the Western "responsible

---

[28] Xi Jinping, "Toward a Community of Shared Future and Creating a New Future for Asia," keynote speech at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, March 28 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/201503/t20150328_9869508.shtml. Accessed February 4 2026. In China's diplomatic discourse, "major countries" (daguo) commonly refers to globally influential actors—frequently identified in official foreign-policy speeches as China, the United States, Russia, and the EU.

stakeholder" expectation and China's "responsible major country" formulation, the repeated articulation of responsibility in SD documents—as stability provision, development contribution, and multilateral cooperation—situates China–Europe engagement within a framework of shared responsibilities for addressing global challenges while simultaneously advancing China's preferred interpretation of major-power responsibility.

Partner-specific dialogues illustrate how these communicative practices adapt to differentiated interactional contexts while retaining common thematic orientations. In the China–France and China–UK SDs, references to China and the respective counterparts as permanent members of the UN Security Council frequently emphasise shared responsibilities for maintaining international peace and security. In the China–Portugal and China–Poland SDs, responsible-oriented discourse more often centres on development cooperation, connectivity initiatives, and economic modernisation, whereas China–Switzerland SD documents highlight innovation cooperation, mediation initiatives, and support for global governance initiatives. Despite variation in policy focus across partners, the underlying communicative logic remains consistent across dialogue settings.

Taken together, self-presentation and normative framing operate as practical diplomatic mechanisms through which China advances responsible-oriented foreign-policy objectives across SD venues. By repeatedly emphasising contributions to global

stability, development cooperation, and multilateral cooperation, SD discourse presents China as a participant in addressing shared international challenges while embedding its preferred interpretations of responsibility within ongoing diplomatic interaction. At the same time, the articulation of responsibility in these dialogues is closely linked to recurring references to sovereignty, non-interference, and respect for core interests. These linkages indicate that responsible-oriented signalling does not operate independently but interacts with principle-oriented objectives, a dynamic examined in the following section.

3.5.4 Principle-Oriented Objectives: Boundary-Setting and Sovereignty Signalling

Principle-oriented foreign-policy objectives centre on safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference—longstanding foundations of China's diplomatic practice. Within the SD framework, these objectives are operationalised through two recurring altercasting techniques: sovereignty signalling, which reiterates baseline parameters of engagement, and boundary-setting, which sharpens expectations and structures the permissibility of disagreement within dialogue practice.

Across SD1 and SD2, sovereignty signalling is most clearly encoded in a recurring triad: the routinised formula of mutual respect for core interests and major concerns as a baseline condition for engagement; affirmations of the One-China principle as a political foundation of relations; and assertions opposing "external interference",

increasingly linked to human rights, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Over time, the corpus shows a discursive tightening in register. Earlier rounds foregrounded general commitments to sovereignty and territorial integrity (e.g., the EU's reaffirmation in 2012) and repeated invocations of "core interests" (e.g., France 2014/2017/2019; Germany 2012/2020; Switzerland 2019), whereas from 2021 onward One-China is articulated more explicitly, often with partner-side affirmations recorded as stable policy positions (e.g., EU 2021; France 2024–2025; Germany 2024–2025; Portugal 2025; Poland 2023; Switzerland 2024–2025). This pattern indicates that sovereignty language is not confined to crisis episodes but forms part of the standardised communicative repertoire of SD engagement, embedding "core interests" as a routine reference point and clarifying the baseline terms on which dialogue is conducted. Interview insights suggest that European interlocutors do not necessarily treat these references as normative alignment; rather, they read them as boundary markers that structure the permissibility of disagreement.

Boundary-setting is visible in how SD texts record reciprocal scripting with asymmetrical content. China-side formulations emphasise "core interests", non-interference, and at times specific dossiers (Hong Kong, Taiwan), while partner-side lines are typically recorded as reaffirmations of an established One-China policy framed as consistent and unchanged ("will continue", "no change", "no wavering").[29] In some

---

[29] For example, EU 2019 ("no change", 9th round), EU 2021 ("important cornerstone", 11th round), Switzerland 2025 ("no wavering", 4th round), France 2024–2025 ("continue/strictly adhere", 24th–27th rounds), Germany 2024–2025 ("firmly", 7th and 8th rounds of SDDS).

cases, modality tightens further: China-side language shifts from general "mutual respect" to expectation-setting (for example, "hope" and "believe") that partners will "strictly" adhere to One-China, while partner responses are recorded as categorical policy commitments ("will continue", "no change"), a pattern visible in the late China-France SD (27th, 2025). These interactional patterns suggest that boundary-setting functions less by producing normative convergence than by repeatedly specifying the terms under which disagreement is permissible.

When perceived violations of core interests occur, boundary-setting can extend beyond language to include conditional interruption of dialogue routines. The suspension of high-level exchanges—including summits, SDs, and EFDs—with the UK and France following official meetings with the Dalai Lama in 2008–2009 illustrates how sovereignty-related expectations may be enforced through temporary suspension of engagement, a signalling practice comparable to forms of calibrated diplomatic disengagement discussed in recent scholarship (Wu 2025). Later episodes of calibrated punitive measures (such as sanctions on individual European parliamentarians) similarly indicate that sovereignty signalling is not merely declaratory but can be coupled with targeted costs while avoiding full rupture. At the same time, the subsequent resumption of SD rounds underscores a parallel commitment to preserving institutionalised channels even amid political disagreement.

Within the SD corpus, Taiwan concentrates these boundary-setting dynamics. In the China–EU SD, human rights dialogue is framed as permissible only on "equality and mutual respect" terms and explicitly rejects "lecturing" or interference (11th round, 2021), while Hong Kong is treated as an issue on which China "clarifies its principled position" (10th round, 2020), and Taiwan is elevated as a political foundation of relations (2021). Outside the SD texts, the EU frames Taiwan as "a major security issue in EU–China relations" and states that it "believes that the status quo should be maintained", while calling on both sides to avoid unilateral actions and rejecting coercion or force.[30] The later China–EU SD record (13th round, 2025) shows firmer legalistic anchoring, with Taiwan linked to UNGA Resolution 2758 and framed as a sovereignty question rather than solely a "core interest", indicating an effort to harden justificatory foundations within the dialogue routine; similar references appear in contemporaneous official documents, including the 2025 national security white paper, which also invokes UNGA Resolution 2758 and treats Taiwan as part of China's sovereign territory.

This late-period shift towards more explicit legal and security language is consistent with China's broader sovereignty-first policy discourse. For example, the 2023 Law on Foreign Relations formalises sovereignty and non-interference as core parameters of external engagement, while the 2025 national security white paper articulates "core interests" in expansive terms and situates Taiwan-related questions within the broader

---

[30] See *EU-China relations: A candid exchange on our differences*, October 20, 2023.

framework of sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity. Read alongside the 2025 China–EU SD record, these texts suggest a discursive environment in which routine sovereignty formulae are increasingly accompanied by legalistic anchoring. Importantly, this sovereignty signalling operates less as a partner-specific negotiating instrument than as a system-wide communicative baseline.

Unlike strategic-oriented signalling or responsible-oriented self-presentation, principle-oriented signalling operates largely as a system-wide communicative baseline rather than a partner-differentiated practice. Sovereignty-related language appears with notable consistency across SD1 and SD2, performing a stabilising function by repeatedly clarifying the normative boundaries within which cooperation is expected to occur.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that boundary-setting and sovereignty signalling constitute a core operational mechanism through which China advances principle-oriented objectives within the SD architecture. By routinising references to sovereignty, non-interference, and core interests across dialogue rounds, SD practice reinforces continuity in interactional expectations and stabilises the procedural foundations of engagement. At the same time, the increasing use of explicit legal and security-anchored language in later dialogue records suggests an incremental recalibration of how these principles are articulated, strengthening their justificatory grounding without altering the institutional framework of dialogue itself. In this sense, principle-oriented

signalling contributes simultaneously to the continuity and recalibration dimensions of China's broader SRA posture: continuity is maintained through the repeated institutional embedding of sovereignty parameters, while recalibration occurs through the incremental hardening and legalisation of the discursive foundations underpinning those parameters.

3.5.5 Declarative Objectives: Role Framing and Value-Driven Messaging

Declarative foreign-policy objectives articulate systemic values, signal long-term diplomatic intent, and frame role expectations within China–Europe relations. Rather than functioning merely as rhetorical statements, these declarative elements operate as altercasting practices that project preferred systemic narratives and associated role expectations—most prominently multipolarity, UN-centred multilateralism, sovereign equality, and opposition to unilateralism—into both supranational and bilateral dialogue settings. Through repeated articulation across SD rounds, such value-driven messaging embeds China's preferred order principles into the routine language of diplomatic interaction, constituting an important reformist dimension of its SRA posture.

Across the SD corpus, declarative objectives are most visibly operationalised through two closely related communicative practices: role framing, through which both China and its European interlocutors are discursively framed as contributors to shared governance responsibilities, and value-driven messaging, through which cooperation is

situated within broader systemic narratives emphasising multipolarity, "true multilateralism", and collective responsibility for maintaining global stability. These practices do not primarily aim to negotiate immediate policy outcomes; rather, they shape the discursive environment within which policy interaction occurs by repeatedly situating China–Europe engagement within shared systemic roles. Multipolarity refers to the diffusion of global power across multiple major actors (Scott, 2013), while multilateralism denotes cooperative engagement through international institutions; China's discourse of "true multilateralism" emphasises UN-centred governance, sovereign equality, and inclusive cooperation. References to these concepts appeared in the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) and gained prominence in subsequent plans, culminating in the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) and the 2035 Long-Term Goals, which call for a "more just and reasonable international order". SD venues institutionalise these messages by repeatedly articulating them in interaction with European counterparts.

Role-framing practices vary across partner contexts while maintaining a consistent underlying logic. In China–France and China–UK SDs, both sides are frequently framed as countries bearing "important international responsibilities" for international peace and security, reflecting their shared status as UN Security Council permanent members. China–EU SD documents often frame the EU as an "important pole" in an emerging multipolar order and as a key partner in global governance reform and multilateral cooperation. China–Germany SD and SDDS documents tend to portray

Germany as a leading European interlocutor in diplomacy-and-security dialogue and as a pivotal partner in security–economic coordination, particularly in areas linked to non-traditional security cooperation and broader Euro-Atlantic-adjacent governance discussions. In engagements with smaller European partners, role framing is adapted to functional niches—Poland as a bridge to CEE and a partner in regional connectivity and economic modernisation, Portugal as a pragmatic EU member reinforcing the relational foundations of China–EU cooperation, and Switzerland as a cross-system cooperation exemplar and participant in mediation-related institutional initiatives—thereby extending China's systemic narratives across differentiated institutional settings. These differentiated role framings mirror the forum-differentiation patterns identified in Section 3.4, indicating that venue selection and role projection operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms within the SD architecture. Through SD discourse, China consistently frames Europe as a key pole in an emerging multipolar order, encouraging complementary roles in multilateral governance reform. Table 3.8 summarises partner-specific role framing in China's SD declarative messaging, illustrating the differentiated yet coherent role-construction logic embedded across dialogue settings.

Table 3.8 Partner-Specific Role Framing in China's SD Declarative Messaging

Partner	Role framing in SD discourse	Declarative function	Illustrative textual cue
EU	Multilateral governance partner	Co-stewardship of UN-centred multilateral order	References to jointly supporting multilateralism and the UN-centred international system
France	Major-power coordination partner	Multipolar and UNSC-based strategic coordination	References to shared responsibilities as UNSC permanent members
UK	P5 coordination partner	Conflict-management and global-security cooperation	Joint Afghanistan statement referencing P5 responsibilities
Germany	Security–economic coordination partner	Dialogue on diplomacy and security issues	NATO/OSCE-related cooperation references (2015 communiqué)
Poland	CEE bridge partner	Sub-regional connectivity and market linkage	Poland framed as bridge between China and CEE

Portugal	EU-cooperation stabilising partner	Reinforcing China–EU partnership foundations	References to Portugal's constructive role in supporting China–EU cooperation
Switzerland	Cross-system cooperation exemplar	Demonstrative model of cooperation across institutional systems	Language presenting bilateral relations as a "model" of cooperation

Value-driven messaging reinforces these role expectations by repeatedly embedding SD interactions within systemic normative frames. Dialogue records frequently emphasise maintaining world peace and stability, supporting multilateral cooperation, upholding the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and jointly addressing global challenges such as climate change, global health, and economic governance. Through repeated articulation across dialogue rounds, these themes contribute to the institutionalisation of a shared discursive repertoire that situates dialogue engagement within broader global governance narratives, presenting China–Europe cooperation as part of a collective effort to address systemic challenges.

Declarative altercasting performs several strategic functions: it reinforces China's identity performance as a stabilising yet reform-oriented actor, mobilises European

partners into complementary governance roles, and embeds preferred order principles—multipolarity, UN-centred multilateralism, and sovereign equality—into the routine language of SDs. SD documents also frequently invoke themes such as the "democratisation of international relations" and an "international order based on international law" (e.g., 1st round of China-Germany SDDS in 2015; 19th round of China-France SD, 2019; 10th round of China-EU SD, 2020; 11th China-EU SD and 1st round of China-Portugal SD in 2021; 24th round of China-France, 2023; 13th round of China-EU SD, 8th round of China-Germany SDDS, and joint statement of 4th round of China-Switzerland SD in 2025), signalling a preference for UN-centred legal-institutional legitimacy over narrower "rules-based order" formulations.

At the same time, the declarative dimension reflects incremental recalibration of systemic discourse rather than wholesale normative replacement. Concepts such as multipolarity and "true multilateralism" are articulated not as alternatives to the existing institutional framework but as interpretive reframings that emphasise sovereign equality, inclusiveness, and UN-centred governance. SD venues provide a structured environment in which these systemic narratives can be repeatedly rehearsed, stabilised, and diffused across diplomatic channels.

However, the resonance of these declarative messages is conditioned by enduring value divergences, as European actors continue to emphasise democracy, human rights, and rule-of-law norms in their external identity constructions. Interview insights suggest

that European interlocutors often interpret multipolarity and sovereignty-centred narratives through existing liberal normative frameworks, producing procedural cooperation alongside continued divergence in normative interpretation. Declarative altercasting therefore functions less as a mechanism of normative convergence than as a means of sustaining discursive coexistence: shared language enables continued cooperation even when underlying normative preferences differ.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that declarative objectives constitute the macro-discursive layer of China's SD engagement. Through repeated role framing and value-driven messaging, China situates both itself and its European counterparts within a narrative of cooperative multipolar governance, routinising shared language that sustains dialogue continuity while incrementally broadening the interpretive boundaries of multilateral cooperation and global-governance legitimacy. Declarative signalling therefore operates simultaneously along the two dimensions of continuity with recalibration: it stabilises interaction by embedding common systemic vocabularies into dialogue practice, while incrementally advancing alternative interpretive emphases—such as sovereign equality, UN-centred governance, and inclusive multilateralism—within existing institutional frameworks. In this sense, declarative objectives complement the strategic, responsible-oriented, and principle-oriented practices analysed in preceding sections, collectively illustrating how SDs function not only as policy-coordination mechanisms but also as structured arenas for the incremental renegotiation of systemic roles and normative interpretations in China–Europe relations.

Taken together across Sections 3.5.1–3.5.5, these signalling practices illustrate the interactional mechanisms through which routinised dialogue venues sustain continuity of engagement while enabling incremental recalibration of interpretive vocabularies and role expectations, preparing the basis for the integrative discussion that follows.

3.6 Discussion: Institutionalised Signalling, Role Negotiation, and Continuity-with-Recalibration

The preceding analysis demonstrates that China's SDs with Europe operate as an institutionalised signalling architecture through which interaction is simultaneously stabilised and recalibrated. Section 3.4 showed how forum differentiation produces a layered dialogue architecture enabling engagement across multiple institutional levels of the European system, while Section 3.5 demonstrated that within these venues a patterned repertoire of signalling practices structures expectations of cooperation, responsibility, permissible disagreement, and systemic roles. Venue differentiation and communicative signalling therefore function as mutually reinforcing institutional and interactional mechanisms shaping the operational logic of China–Europe SD engagement.

Viewed through the perspective of IaD, these findings indicate that institutionalised dialogue mechanisms should be understood not as neutral coordination platforms but as diplomatic instruments that organise recurring interactional routines, stabilise expectations of engagement, and provide structured settings within which interpretive

adjustments can be incrementally introduced. Institutionalisation thus performs an active diplomatic function: routinised participation, repeated communicative formats, and stable venue structures sustain continuity of engagement while simultaneously creating space for incremental recalibration of interpretive vocabularies, role expectations, and normative emphases within ongoing diplomatic interaction. Together, forum differentiation and signalling repertoires operate as mutually reinforcing institutional and interactional mechanisms that constitute Institutionalisation as Diplomacy (IaD), enabling the enactment of China's SRA posture and producing the patterned outcome of continuity with recalibration (CwR).

Within this institutionalised signalling environment, the empirical patterns identified in this study illustrate the dual operational logic of the SRA posture. As a strategist, China reinforces continuity by maintaining participation across differentiated dialogue venues, cultivating predictable signalling routines, and embedding cooperation within established institutional frameworks. As a reformist, it utilises the same institutional settings to incrementally expand interpretive space through role framing, responsibility narratives, sovereignty articulation, and systemic discourse emphasising multipolarity and UN-centred multilateralism. Stabilisation and recalibration therefore unfold concurrently through routinised diplomatic practice rather than sequentially, producing the patterned outcome conceptualised in this study as CwR.

The coordinated operation of forum differentiation and signalling repertoires further clarifies how institutional design and communicative practice function as mutually reinforcing layers of diplomatic strategy. Forum differentiation structures where engagement occurs by distributing interaction across system-level and bilateral venues, enabling differentiated agenda positioning, level targeting, and issue–forum matching. The signalling repertoire shapes how engagement unfolds within those venues by organising expectations of cooperation, responsibility, disagreement management, and systemic positioning. As multiple dialogue venues coexist, interaction can be recalibrated across forums without requiring institutional withdrawal, while routinised signalling practices provide flexible communicative tools through which actors adjust emphasis and framing without altering the formal structure of engagement. The resulting pattern is one of managed institutional continuity combined with communicative recalibration.

Together, these dynamics produce the patterned outcome conceptualised in this study as CwR. Institutionalised dialogue participation sustains systemic engagement and interactional stability, while repeated signalling practices incrementally reshape interpretive vocabularies, role expectations, and normative emphases within those same institutional settings. Rather than representing contradictory strategies, continuity and recalibration operate dialectically, each reinforcing the effectiveness of the other through sustained institutional engagement.

The analysis therefore advances a mid-range framework linking strategic identity (the SRA), institutional practice (Institutionalisation as Diplomacy, IaD), and the patterned outcome of CwR). More broadly, the findings contribute to debates on major-power behaviour toward the LIO by showing how institutionalised diplomatic practices function as mechanisms of incremental normative recalibration rather than abrupt institutional rupture. The SD evidence suggests that rising and established powers alike may advance reform not primarily through institutional exit or institutional replacement, but through sustained participation combined with the incremental reinterpretation of normative vocabularies, governance roles, and interactional expectations within existing institutional settings. Institutionalised strategic dialogues thus function as structured arenas of role negotiation and interpretive adjustment through which long-term processes of order evolution proceed via routinised diplomatic engagement.

3.7 Conclusion

This paper has examined China's engagement in China–Europe SDs as a form of institutionalised diplomatic practice through which interaction is simultaneously stabilised and recalibrated. Using a qualitative, document-driven analysis guided by the complementary analytical lenses of forum shopping and altercasting, the study investigated how differentiated dialogue venues and routinised signalling practices jointly structure China's engagement with European partners across the SD architecture.

The analysis demonstrates that China's SD engagement operates through the coordinated interaction of institutional venue differentiation and a patterned repertoire of signalling practices. Forum differentiation distributes engagement across supranational and bilateral dialogue settings, enabling strategic agenda positioning, level targeting, and issue–forum matching, while signalling practices—strategic diplomatic signalling, responsibility-oriented framing, sovereignty boundary-setting, and declarative role messaging—structure expectations of cooperation, responsibility, permissible disagreement, and systemic positioning within dialogue interaction. Together, these mechanisms sustain continuity of diplomatic engagement even under conditions of political tension while enabling incremental normative recalibration through the gradual reinterpretation of roles, expectations, and governance vocabularies.

Building on these findings, the study advances a mid-range interpretive framework linking strategic identity (the SRA), institutional practice (IaD), and the patterned outcome of CwR, offering transferable insights into how major powers may advance reform through continuity rather than systemic rupture. Within this framework, institutionalised dialogue mechanisms operate as signalling architectures that stabilise participation through routinised interaction while simultaneously providing structured arenas in which interpretive vocabularies, governance roles, and normative emphases are progressively rearticulated. Continuity and recalibration therefore emerge not as sequential phases but as mutually reinforcing dynamics embedded in sustained diplomatic practice.

The paper contributes in three principal ways. Empirically, it provides a systematic, multi-venue, longitudinal analysis of China–Europe SDs across both EU-level and bilateral settings. Methodologically, it demonstrates how curated diplomatic artefacts can be analysed simultaneously as empirical records and strategic performances, enabling the identification of signalling patterns, agenda sequencing, and discursive emphasis under conditions of limited transparency. Conceptually, it contributes to debates on major-power behaviour toward the LIO by showing how reform-oriented objectives may be advanced through sustained institutional participation and incremental normative recalibration within existing institutional settings rather than through institutional withdrawal or systemic rupture.

More broadly, the findings suggest that institutionalised strategic dialogues function as structured arenas of role negotiation and interpretive adjustment through which long-term processes of order evolution proceed via routinised diplomatic engagement. The SD evidence indicates that rising and established powers alike may pursue reform not primarily through institutional exit or institutional replacement, but through sustained participation combined with the incremental recalibration of governance vocabularies, role expectations, and interactional practices within the evolving international order.

Future research may extend the SRA–IaD–CwR framework through applications to SD mechanisms and other high-level dialogue frameworks beyond the China–Europe case, as well as through comparative analysis across different dialogue architectures and

regional settings. Such work may further examine how institutionalised diplomatic engagement evolves across shifting geopolitical environments and institutional configurations. Related applications of the framework to China–Europe EFDs and PPDs, using domain-specific analytical lenses within a shared document-driven research design, further suggest its applicability across the political, economic, and societal domains of structured engagement and its broader analytical portability across institutionalised dialogue architectures.

4 Case Study Three. Identity and diplomacy: China's High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogues with European counterparts (2008-2025)[31]

Abstract

This paper examines China's High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogues (EFDs) with Europe as institutionalised mechanisms of economic statecraft, identity performance, and norm negotiation. It addresses the central research question: *How does China use the EFDs to leverage identity strategies to perform stakeholder continuity while selectively recalibrating norms of global economic governance?*

The study employs qualitative, interpretive design combining Grounded Theory Method with abductive reasoning. The dataset consists of 63 China-issued documents from five EFDs (Chin-EU, Chin-UK, China-France, China-Germany, and China-Italy) between 2008 and 2025, complemented by targeted triangulation with external sources, including UK government statements, parliamentary debates and EU communiqués. Social Identity Theory - with its dimensions of social mobility, social creativity, and social competition - together with Role Theory provides the analytical framework.

Findings show that the EFDs are not narrow technical consultations but institutionalised arenas of role performance and incremental reform. Through social mobility, China embeds itself as a recognised stakeholder via regulatory cooperation, trade facilitation,

---

[31] A revised version of this section has been submitted for journal publication.

and green finance. Through social creativity, it layers reformist vocabularies - sustainable finance, WTO reform, inclusive development - onto shared norms of openness and multilateralism. Through social competition, it juxtaposes EFD engagement with initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI, projecting co-equality and institutional innovation without rupture. Cross-case variation demonstrates scope conditions: reformist elements gained traction where institutionalisation was dense and counterparts receptive (EU, France, Germany), while strategist functions dominated in episodic or strained settings (UK, Italy).

The EFDs exemplify China's posture as a Strategist-Reformist Actor, engaging in continuity-with-recalibration: stabilising relations through institutionalised participation while probing normative space within the LIO. Conceptually, the study advances two contributions: the SRA framework as an alternative to the status quo-revisionist binary, and the conceputuralisation of Institutionalisation as Diplomacy (IaD)- a process through which rising powers negotiate legitimacy and recalibrate norms.

4.1 Introduction

Co-chaired by vice premiers and endorsed at the heads-of-state level, China's High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogues (EFDs) with the EU and key European countries of interest (UK, France, Germany, and Italy) have become strategically significant mechanisms for advancing foreign policy objectives through institutional engagement and economic statecraft. Since their launch in 2008, the EFDs have expanded beyond technical coordination to encompass questions of role negotiation, identity performance, and norm contestation. Despite recurring disruptions - from disagreements over human rights, economic security, or China's position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict - the dialogues remain central to China's approach to institutionalised engagement with Europe.

This paper asks: *How does China use the EFDs to leverage identity strategies to perform stakeholder continuity while selectively recalibrating norms of global economic governance?*

It argues that China uses the EFDs as institutionalised arenas to stabilise recognition as a responsible stakeholder while simultaneously recalibrating the normative boundaries of global economic governance, thereby performing a dual posture best captured by the Strategist-Reformist Actor (SRA) concept. Through these dialogues, China seeks legitimacy as a responsible stakeholder while simultaneously broadening normative space around sovereignty, multipolarity, and inclusive development. This dual practice

is conceptualised as the posture of a SRA: a state that embeds continuity through institutional participation while pursuing recalibration of governance norms from within the Liberal International Order (LIO).

The evolution of the EFDs illustrates this duality. The China-UK EFD has convened eleven rounds since 2008, expanding from three initial consensus points to more than 630 concrete policy deliverables by 2025, an evolution from symbolic consensus to a dense structure of actionable commitments. By contrast, the China-France EFD has produced a comparable number of outcomes (475 across ten rounds) but with less dynamism, exemplified by the absence of a joint statement in 2025. The China-Italy EFD remains episodic, with only two completed rounds (2019, 2020) but renewed intent expressed in the 2024-2027 Action Plan. The China-Germany EFD has held four rounds (2015-2025), producing steady, moderate engagement. The China-EU EFD, held ten times (2008-2023), remains the opaquest: no joint statements are issued due to confidentiality constrains (Hu and Pelkmans 2020), reflecting institutional asymmetry and deliberate political caution, with press releases signalling selective alignment on trade, finance, and investment. Together, these cases reveal both the diversity and the common logic of China's institutionalised economic diplomacy.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, interpretive design that combines the Grounded Theory Method (GTM) with abductive reasoning. The dataset includes 63 China-issued documents from all EFD rounds between 2008 and 2025. These texts

are treated not as neutral transcripts but as curated artefacts that perform identity, signal roles, and negotiate norms. Analytical leverage is gained by linking Social Identity Theory (SIT) - with its mechanisms of social mobility, creativity, and competition - to Role Theory, which explains how recognition, legitimacy, and role recalibration occur in practice.

The paper makes four contributions. Conceptually, it advances a mid-range analytical framework linking strategic identity (the SRA), institutional practice (Institutionalisation as Diplomacy, IaD), and a patterned outcome (Continuity-with-Recalibration, CwR). Analytically, it demonstrates how SIT and Role Theory illuminate the mechanisms by which rising powers manage recognition, perform roles, and test normative space through institutionalised engagement. Empirically, it provides a systematic, comparative analysis of five EFD cases, showing how China tailors its strategies to partner-specific contexts while enacting a consistent dual posture. Methodologically, it demonstrates how GTM and abductive reasoning bridge inductive coding and conceptual development, generating a grounded mid-range analytical framework from structured dialogue outcomes.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 4.2 reviews the literature on China's EFDs with Europe and the U.S. and introduced its two analytical lenses SIT and Role Theory. Section 4.3 details the methodology and dataset. Section 4.4 presents the empirical analysis of the five EFD cases, identifying patterns of institutional design, outcomes,

and partner-specific dynamics. Section 4.5 applies SIT and Role Theory to examine how China uses identity strategies to navigate continuity and recalibration, culminating in the synthesis of the SRA framework. Section 4.6 concludes by reflecting on the implications of China's SRA posture for China-Europe relations, the evolution of global economic governance, and international relations (IR) debates on major powers—rising and established alike—behaviour and order transformation.

4.2 Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Despite more than a decade of practice, China's EFDs with European counterparts remain under-examined compared with the more extensively studied China-U.S. Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) (e.g., Lu and Lv 2008; Ning 2009; Zhang 2010). Analyses of the SED highlighted its function as a flexible, high-level channel for economic management and confidence-building, but largely framed it in technocratic or defensive terms, with limited attention to broader strategic or normative implications.

Research on China-Europe EFDs has been narrower in scope. Most studies focus on the China-EU case, emphasising technical issues such as trade balances, market access, financial regulation, or sectoral cooperation. Dreyer and Erixon (2008) provided an early Eurocentric reading of structural constraints; Luigi (2013) examined trade imbalance and FDI flows through political economy perspectives; and Hu and Pelkmans (2020) mapped the proliferation of China-EU dialogues, including the EFD, as pragmatic instruments for addressing technical barriers. Bilateral EFDs with

individual European states are even less developed in literature. Joseph (2022), for instance, treated the UK and France dialogues primarily as adjuncts to BRI financing and sectoral deals. Collectively, this scholarship has clarified the institutional density, economic scope, and practical functions of the dialogues, but it has paid less attention to their identity, strategic, and normative dimensions.

Yet the EFDs are not only technical coordination mechanisms. Co-chaired by vice premiers and endorsed at the heads-of-state level, they serve as arenas for identity performance and normative negotiation. Analysing these dimensions is essential for three reasons. First, it situates the EFD within China's broader grand strategy, where economic diplomacy is inseparable from role-seeking and legitimacy-building. Second, it highlights how economic deliverables are accompanied by discursive framings - such as WTO reform, open world economy, and global economic governance - that gradually recalibrate the normative boundaries of cooperation. Third, it underscores the political significance of institutionalised dialogues themselves: by routinising engagement with Europe, China consolidates recognition as a major power while probing opportunities to shape the rules of economic governance.

To capture these dynamics, this paper introduces an analytical approach that combines SIT and Role Theory to examine China's EFDs with its European counterparts. Role Theory emphasises that state behaviour is shaped not only by material interests but also by the enactment of self-ascribed and externally expected roles (Thies 2016). Concepts

such as role performance (how states act out roles in practice), role consonance (alignment between self-perception and others' expectations), and role dissonance (friction between them) help explain how states stabilise or adjust their role identities in relation to institutional and external expectations. SIT, originally developed by social psychologist Tajfel (1978) and further developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) (Trepte and Loy, 2017), complements this lens by analysing how actors pursue recognition, manage status, and negotiate belonging through strategies of social mobility (aligning with higher-status groups), social creativity (redefining hierarchies or excelling in alternative domains), and social competition (challenging dominant groups) (Larson 2015; Larson 2017; Mladenov 2021).

Applied to IR, Role Theory has been widely used to explore China's foreign policy identity but has rarely been operationalised in institutionalised, dialogue-based settings. The EFD case provides a valuable site to bridge this gap. It is neither purely rhetorical nor purely technical: it is a structured platform where identity performance and role negotiation are enacted through concrete economic diplomacy. Similarly, SIT has illuminated how China seeks recognition as a major power while advancing alternative governance discourses (e.g., Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Yang 2021). Yet applications have mostly remained at the level of discourse or grand strategy rather than being extended into institutionalised practices. Forsby (2016) has shown how China deploys economic and diplomatic resources as identity-driven instruments of grand strategy, but little attention has been paid to how such strategies materialise within high-

level dialogues. Likewise, Hymans's (2002) elaboration of SIT suggests that role assertion intensifies during periods of systemic realignment, but this has rarely been examined through bilateral economic mechanisms such as the EFD.

Bringing Role Theory and SIT together sharpens analytical contribution of this study. Role theory explains how China enacts, adapts, and negotiates roles within the EFD, while SIT reveals the status dynamics that underpin those performances. Role theory highlights interactional processes - performance, consonance, dissonance - while SIT captures identity strategies - mobility, creativity, competition - that inform them. Taken together, they move analysis beyond technical problem-solving or abstract discourse to show how identity and role dynamics are operationalised in institutionalised diplomacy. The EFD thus demonstrates how rising powers stablise continuity and recalibration within the LIO, not through rupture or assimilation, but through structured practices of role performance and normative recalibration.

4.3 Research Methodology and Contributions

This study analyses how China uses the EFDs to perform and negotiate its international roles within the LIO. Capturing this dynamic requires a methodology capable of extracting patterned agendas from curated diplomatic records while situating them within broader strategic context. Accordingly, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in the Grounded Theory Method (GTM) and guided by abductive reasoning. GTM provides the inductive structure for coding and categorising

outcomes, allowing initiatives and framings to emerge directly from texts. Abductive reasoning supplies the interpretive logic that links these emergent categories to analytical insights from SIT and Role Theory. This combined design enables the analysis to remain anchored in primary documents while avoiding over-interpretation, treating EFD texts simultaneously as empirical data and as strategic performances.

China has held a total of 37 rounds of EFDs with its European counterparts. For this study, 63 available primary documents were analysed. These comprise 37 China-issued records and narrative summaries of dialogue meetings, 13 joint statements on consensus, 7 joint statements on policy outcomes, 2 summaries of policy outcomes, 2 joint statements on policy outcomes and consensus, 1 summary of outcome and consensus, and 1 news sommuniqué. Table 4.1 summarises the total number of EFD rounds and the number of available documents included in the dataset for each dialogue.

Table 4.1 China–Europe EFDs: Rounds and Primary Documents Analysed

Partner	Total Number of Rounds	Available Primary Documents for Analysis
EU	10	10 + 1 Summary of Outcome and Consensus
UK	11	11 + 1 News Communiqué + 2 Summary of Policy Outcomes + 7 Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes
France	10	10 + 7 Joint Statement on Consensus + 2 Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes and Consensus

Germany	4	4 + 4 Joint Statement on Consensus
Italy	2	2 + 2 Joint Statement on Consensus
Total	37	63

Source: Author's compilation based on China-issued EFD documents (2008-2025).

The corpus includes documents issued by government agencies as well as state media reports. Specifically, 8 documents were issued as MFA – Official News, 24 as MoF, 1 as Ministry of Commerce, 1 as Central Peope's Government – Official News, 3 as Embassy – Official News, 3 as Mission to the EU – Official News, 22 as Xinhua – News Reports, and 1 as China News Service–Overseas Chinese Network – Media Report. Background materials such as white papers and policy reports were consulted where necessary for contextualisation but were not part of the coded dataset and are therefore excluded from this count.

Appendix Tables D list the primary documents analysed in this paper. For each EFD round, the tables provide the document title, issuing body, document type, date of publication, online location (URL), and date of access. These texts constitute the empirical corpus used for qualitative coding and abductive–grounded analysis and are presented to ensure transparency, traceability, and analytical transpatency of the study's data collection and analytical procedures.

China's policy texts - including Five-Year Plans, the 2035 Long-Term Goals Outline, and white papers - situate EFDs within evolving national priorities. Additionally, semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 with a senior EU official and academic and policy experts based in China, the UK, and Europe, who specialise in China-Europe relations added interpretive depth, contextualising the curated documents within broader patterns of China-Europe engagement (Ethics Approval: ETH2324-1444).

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, initial open coding of EFD documents generated a broad set of codes relating to macroeconomic coordination, market access, financial regulation, global governance and green finance. In the focused/axial coding phase, conceptually related codes were aggregated into core analytical themes that captured how actors articulate interests, roles and policy priorities through the EFD mechanism. Third, abductive reasoning linked these patterns to SIT and Role Theory, generating plausible interpretations of observed shifts while ensuring that claims remained anchored in the documented dialogue texts. Silence, ambiguity, and omissions were also treated analytically, recognising that absence may reflect strategic omission rather than lack of engagement.

Appendix Tables E details the analytic process through which themes and analytical interpretations were derived from the EFD materials. Tables E1–E5 present the core analytic themes generated through grounded-theory coding of the dialogue corpus. They specify the central theme, a concise analytic description, and an illustrative example from the primary texts, mapping how recurrent framings, priorities, and issue

linkages identified through open and focused coding were clustered into higher-order categories. Appendix Table E6 provides a cross-dialogue interpretive thematic synthesis based on the same EFD corpus, consolidating recurring themes at a higher level of abstraction without introducing additional data. These descriptions remain inductive and non-theoretical; interpretive and role-based analysis is undertaken separately in Appendix Tables F, which trace how the inductively derived themes are connected to the SRA framework.

Appendix Tables F1–F5 provide verbatim excerpts that empirically anchor these themes and illustrate the abductive step through which they are interpreted in relation to the SRA framework. Appendix Table F6 provides a cross-dialogue synthesis of SRA-relevant textual anchors across the EFD corpus, mapping convergence in strategic identity construction without introducing new evidence. These tables make explicit how textual patterns are read as performances of role claims, institutional practice, and strategic recalibration within the LIO.

Taken together, these tables E and F enhance transparency and traceability across the analytic process. Tables E demonstrates how themes were derived inductively from the data, while Tables F shows how these themes were analytically interpreted and traced to specific textual evidence. Appendix Table G (a) provides a cross-dialogue synthesis of the EFD corpus, linking system-role interpretation, institutional function, normative positioning, and temporal evolution to the specific dialogue rounds underpinning each dimension. It consolidates the cross-partner and longitudinal patterns identified in

Tables E and F and documents the empirical grounding in G (b) of each analytical dimension by specifying the dialogue tracks and rounds on which the synthesis is based.

Methodologically, the contribution of this study is twofold. First, the study demonstrates how GTM and abductive reasoning can be applied to curated diplomatic texts to generate strategic insights while resisting over-interpretation. It treats official statements not only as empirical data but also as artefacts of diplomatic performance. Second, the approach operationalises SIT and Role Theory within a structured institutional setting, showing how identity construction and role performance occur in routine high-level dialogues.

Analytically, the analysis of the EFD demonstrates how China combines social mobility, social creativity, and social competition within a single institutionalised mechanism. Social mobility consolidates recognition through rule-based engagement (e.g., regulatory alignment with Germany, green finance with the UK). Social creativity reinterprets shared norms by layering sovereignty-sensitive and developmental emphases onto liberal principles (e.g., mutual benefit, win–win, sustainable finance). Social competition asserts China's role as a co-equal rule-maker through initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI, which broaden its institutional footprint while testing the boundaries of Western-led governance.

Synthesised, these strategies reveal a broader logic of Continuity-with-Recalibration (CwR). China stabilises relations through institutional design and tangible deliverables, while gradually expanding normative space and institutional alternatives. This dual-track posture, strategic continuity combined with incremental recalibration, demonstrates that rising powers need not be understood through the binary of status-quo convergence or revisionist rupture. Instead, the EFD shows how identity innovation and role performance are negotiated in low-politics but high-visibility settings that link bilateral diplomacy with systemic order change.

More broadly, the study enriches SIT and Role Theory by showing how identity-management strategies (mobility, creativity, competition) operate simultaneously rather than sequentially, and how their expression is conditioned by partner receptivity and institutional design (e.g., dense and receptive in France and Germany; contested in the EU; fragile in the UK). It also refines how scholars approach diplomatic texts: not as transparent reflections of negotiation, but as curated performances that nonetheless encode patterned agendas and strategic identities.

4.4 Empirical Findings

The EFD represents a sophisticated channel of China-Europe bilateral engagement, integrating high-level economic diplomacy with broader strategic considerations. While formally framed as an economic and financial dialogue, the EFD operates as a politically embedded mechanism for advancing China's foreign policy objectives,

reflecting a relational diplomacy strategy that prioritises stability, recognition, and long-term influence.

At the institutional level, the EFDs are anchored in top-level political signalling, typically initiated during state visits or summits by heads of state and institutionalised under vice-premier-level leadership. This vertical design ensures alignment with national strategic priorities and demonstrates political authority. Tactical flexibility is occasionally displayed, as in the China-Italy EFD, where ministerial-level co-chairing allowed continuity without diluting strategic coherence. Beyond their institutional configuration, the dialogues are frequently embedded in symbolic frames. Anniversaries of diplomatic recognition, the launch of comprehensive strategic partnerships, or milestone summits often coincide with EFD rounds, reinforcing their visibility and normative resonance. For example, in the China-EU EFD, key events such as the anniversary of diplomatic relations, the launch of the CSP, and major summits are prominently referenced. Similarly, the China-UK EFD was tied to the "Golden Era" discourse, while the China-France EFD often coincided with milestones celebrating the bilateral relationship. These symbolic associations elevate the EFD above a technocratic forum, projecting it instead as an instrument of constructive and long-term engagement.

Despite variation in frequency - annual with the UK, France, Italy, and the EU, but only quadrennial with Germany - the dialogues share a goal-driven, adaptive character. They

privilege continuity over immediate breakthroughs, using issue-specific cooperation to sustain relations even in periods of broader political tension. Investment facilitation, macroeconomic coordination, and regulatory dialogue recur as core themes, while the emphasis within these categories shifts in line with partner priorities and wider geopolitical conditions. This adaptability has allowed the EFD to align with flagship Chinese initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI, which serve as complementary platforms for advancing China's economic diplomacy while remaining formally compatible with existing governance frameworks.

At the procedural level, the dialogues follow an incremental, process-oriented logic. Initiatives such as the China-UK Stock Connect illustrate how consensus was built step by step across multiple rounds, reflecting China's long-term planning horizon and preference for iterative convergence. In this way, the EFD exceeds the boundaries of a narrow economic coordination forum, functioning instead as a strategic platform for relational diplomacy. It combines institutionalised structure, adaptive modality, and symbolic framing to embed China's long-term presence in Europe's economic governance.

These strategic patterns manifested differently across individual cases. The China–UK EFD initially centred on trust-building through financial cooperation, with London positioned as a hub for offshore renminbi business. Early rounds delivered tangible agreements and projected mutual pragmatism, but from 2016 onwards, political

tensions, Brexit, and security concerns eroded the cooperative framing. Later statements shifted to emphasising "fair competition" and "reciprocal openness" (e.g. 8th round, 2016; 9th round, 2017; 10th round, 2019; 11th round, 2025), reflecting a discursive recalibration in which China sought to defend its stakeholder identity while responding to partner concerns. By contrast, the China-EU EFD consistently underscored systemic negotiations, focusing on trade balance, market access, and the CAI. This forum reflected both sides' recognition of interdependence but also recurring friction over regulatory standards and subsidies, marking the EU as China's primary counterpart for contesting and adjusting the rules of economic governance.

 The China-France dialogue retained a pragmatic, sectoral orientation. Cooperation in energy transition, aviation, agriculture, and third-market projects illustrated a shared preference for practical achievements over abstract principles. The China-Germany EFD demonstrated the deepest industrial and financial cooperation. Joint statements featured detailed agreements spanning automotive partnerships, green finance, and regulatory alignment, reflecting the institutional density of bilateral economic ties. Germany thus emerged as China's anchor partner in Europe, where macroeconomic dialogue intersected with highly technical industrial collaboration. The China-Italy EFD has only been held twice, in 2019 and 2020, and has not resumed since. As a result, bilateral engagement remains limited. Yet, the dialogue provided a pragmatic entry point into Europe's economic landscape, with a focus on infrastructure, energy, and

finance - often tied to BRI themes. While episodic, it enabled China to diffuse its preferences and gain selective endorsement of reform-oriented economic governance.

A comparative reading of the five cases reveals variation shaped by partner status, economic weight, and political positioning. With the UK, earlier rounds centred on trust-building and financial innovation, but later rounds displayed role recalibration rather than outright rupture. The 2025 dialogue, for instance, combined candid acknowledgement of political frictions with substantial economic deliverables, including sixty-nine agreed outcomes worth up to £1 billion. This dual character shows how the EFD can sustain pragmatic cooperation even amid divergence. By contrast, the EU, France, and Germany exemplify role consonance, where systemic or sectoral cooperation reinforced China's positioning as a reform-oriented stakeholder. The China-EU dialogue anchored systemic negotiations, the China-Germany EFD embodied deep industrial alignment, and the China–France EFD pursued pragmatic sectoral cooperation. Italy stands out as a case of pragmatic insertion. While lacking the density of Germany or the systemic scope of the EU, it provided China with a supplementary channel to diffuse preferences, albeit episodically.

Across cases, the EFD emerges not as a uniform mechanism but as a differentiated framework. With systemic actors (EU) and major economies (Germany, France), China has emphasised responsibility and reform-oriented cooperation. With the UK, alignment gave way to discursive recalibration, exposing the vulnerability of EFDs to

political shocks. With Italy, China employed pragmatic framing to integrate a smaller partner into its economic narratives. These findings suggest that the EFD serves simultaneously as a stabilising anchor and as a platform for incremental recalibration within Europe's complex institutional landscape, embedding continuity while probing space for reformist adaptation.

4.5 Analytical Interpretation: Role Strategies and the SRA in the EFD

Section 4.4 provided the empirical foundation, tracing China's engagement in the EFD across specific cases with the EU, UK, France, Germany, and Italy. It demonstrated how the dialogues produced concrete deliverables in trade, finance, and investment, while simultaneously projecting reformist discourses. These findings revealed that the EFD is not merely a technical forum but an institutionalised arena in which China performs roles, negotiates recognition, and introduces normative inflections.

Building on this foundation, Section 4.5 advances analytical interpretation through the combined lenses of SIT and Role Theory. Whereas Section 4.4 asked what the dialogues produced, Section 4.5 asks how these patterns can be explained as strategies of identity management and role negotiation. SIT provides the mechanisms of social mobility, social creativity, and social competition; Role Theory explains why these moves matter for recognition, legitimacy, and role recalibration. Together, these perspectives conceptualise China's conduct in the EFD as CwR rather than either passive convergence or outright revisionism.

The subsections are structured accordingly. Section 4.5.1 examines social mobility, showing how China uses institutionalised engagement to gain recognition and consolidate its role as a responsible economic stakeholder. Section 4.5.2 analyses social creativity, highlighting how China reinterprets dominant economic vocabularies to foreground sovereignty-sensitive openness and inclusive development while remaining anchored in the LIO. Section 4.5.3 explores social competition, where China juxtaposes its EFD participation with initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI, projecting co-equality and expanding its institutional footprint without rupturing the order. Each subsection culminates in an interpretive conclusion that situates the empirical findings within the SRA framework: Strategist-forward in mobility, mixed in creativity, and Reformist-leaning but calibrated in competition.

In doing so, Section 4.5 bridges micro-level textual evidence and macro-level analytical interpretation. The synthesis in Section 4.5.4 then develops the SRA framework in full, situating China's evolving role in the EFD within broader debates on rising powers and the LIO. By moving from concrete cases (what the dialogues produce), to SIT mechanisms (how identity strategies function), to Role Theory (why they matter for recognition and role transformation), Section 4.5 connects empirical and conceptual layers of the thesis. This design demonstrates that China's participation in the EFD cannot be reduced to technocratic coordination or bilateral bargaining; rather, it is best understood as structured role performance within an evolving order.

To guide the analysis, Table 4.2 maps how the three SIT mechanisms - mobility, creativity, and competition - intersect with Role Theory lenses of recognition, legitimacy, and role recalibration. It also anticipates how each mechanism contributes to the evolving SRA posture in the EFD. This framework provides the conceptual scaffolding for Sections 4.5.1-4.5.3, which examine each strategy in turn through detailed empirical evidence.

Table 4.2 Linking SIT, Role Theory, and the SRA in the EFD

Analytical Dimension	SIT Mechanism	Role Theory Lens	SRA Posture
Mobility	China leverages EFD participation to enhance its recognised standing within global economic governance	Institutionalised engagement: participation and performance within prestigious venues to gain legitimacy and credibility	Institutional social mobility - role legitimacy as a "responsible economic stakeholder." Strategist forward: continuity (institutional embedding, predictability) with only light recalibration (e.g., green finance, regulatory alignment) framed as within-system enhancement
Creativity	China reinterprets rules without	Reframing the rules without	Creative re-labelling and issue-linkage expand the repertoire of

	dominant economic vocabularies to foreground sovereignty-sensitive openness and development priorities	breaking them: redefining what counts as "responsible finance," "open markets," or "sustainability" to improve in-group positioning	acceptable cooperation under the same institutional umbrella. Mixed posture with reformist inflection: recalibration of meanings (development, pluralism, connectivity) layered onto mainstream norms (openness, sustainability). Reform emerges within continuity
Competition	China juxtaposes EFD engagement with parallel initiatives (AIIB, BRI) to increase agenda-setting leverage	Parallel platforms, bounded contestation: status signalling and out-group differentiation through institutional entrepreneurship	Competitive signalling remains audience-cost aware; it pressures norms while keeping dialogue central. Reformist-leaning but calibrated: competition functions as incremental recalibration (agenda setting, norm promotion), bounded by the strategic need to preserve institutional ties

Source: Author's analysis based on EFD documents (2008-2025).

The following subsections examine each strategy – mobility, creativity, and competition – through detailed empirical evidence. This staged analysis then culminates in Section 4.5.4, which synthesises these dimensions into the overarching SRA framework.

4.5.1 Strategic Ascent through Institutionalised Engagement: Social Mobility in the EFD

China's engagement in the EFD reflects a calibrated strategy of institutional social mobility: embedding itself within established frameworks to gain recognition, consolidate legitimacy, and elevate its status within global economic governance. Rather than functioning as a narrow consultation mechanism, the EFD operates as a structured arena in which China performs the role of a responsible stakeholder as a major economy, signalling commitment to multilateral financial norms while incrementally consolidating its position within existing institutional hierarchies.

Social mobility in this context operates through disciplined institutional embedding rather than rhetorical contestation. China repeatedly affirms the legitimacy of core multilateral structures while positioning itself as a co-steward of their stability. The 2019 China–Germany EFD, for example, affirmed joint commitment to "upholding multilateralism and a rules-based multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core," alongside strengthened coordination within the G20 and cooperation under multilateral frameworks such as the AIIB. Such language situates China within recognised centres

of global economic governance and reinforces its claim to major-power co-responsibility.

Early dialogues further emphasised access, learning, and integration. The China–UK EFD positioned London as a hub for offshore renminbi trading, projecting China as a cooperative market integrator, while agreements on Stock Connect illustrated alignment with advanced financial markets. Similarly, the China–Germany EFD advanced detailed technical cooperation in banking regulation, central bank coordination, and green finance, embedding China within Europe's most industrially dense economy. Participation within these established frameworks conferred procedural legitimacy and institutional recognition, consistent with the observation (e.g. Ikenberry 2011) that rising powers often leverage existing institutions to maximise strategic advantage while consolidating status.

Over time, however, China's role evolved from a rule-following participant to a competent rule-shaper. The China-EU dialogue revolved increasingly around systemic issues such as subsidies, market access, and the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), which positioned China as an indispensable actor in resolving structural disputes. The China-France EFD's focus on third-country cooperation in Africa and on energy transition projects further highlighted China's pragmatism and adaptability. France's discourse on "strategic autonomy" provided space for China to demonstrate convergence with European priorities, while reinforcing its own multipolar

vision. Even episodic cases, such as the short-lived China-Italy EFD, served symbolic functions: they provided recognition that further embedded China in Europe's institutional landscape, even if substantive outcomes remained limited.

The 2025 resumption of the China-UK EFD after years of suspension illustrates how social mobility extends beyond initial access to sustaining recognition under pressure. Although framed by candid political disagreements over Ukraine, human rights, and economic security, the dialogue nonetheless produced 69 deliverables worth up to £1 billion. This outcome, noted in interview insights, demonstrates the resilience of institutional routines: cooperation could continue even amid political friction, reinforcing China's credibility as a pragmatic actor able to manage tensions without abandoning engagement. This adaptability illustrates a key strategist function of social mobility: maintaining recognition through institutionalised interaction even in adverse conditions.

This trajectory reflects a broader pattern. Through repeated engagement, China shifted from a learner to a stakeholder and co-shaper. Social mobility here is not passive integration but calibrated ascent: China consolidated legitimacy by embedding itself in established dialogues while simultaneously layering reform-sensitive themes such as sustainable finance, regulatory credibility, and pragmatic cooperation. This echoes Forsby's (2016) argument that China deploys economic and diplomatic resources as

identity-driven instruments of grand strategy, but the EFD demonstrates how such strategies are enacted in institutional practice.

Beyond Europe, the EFD also enabled China to extend influence into third-country arenas. Cooperation with the UK and France on African development demonstrates how China leveraged Europe's historical networks to expand its own reach in the Global South. Germany's acknowledgement of China's growing role in Africa (Stahl 2018) underscores the geostrategic logic: the EFD is both a bilateral platform and a springboard for projecting influence into broader multilateral and regional contexts. Strüver's (2017) emphasis on geopolitical positioning and diplomatic access helps explain this pattern of partnership selection.

At the multilateral level, China's EFD partners - the UK, France, Germany, and Italy - hold significant weight in governance institutions such as the IMF, G20, and UN Security Council. China's collaboration with these actors through the EFD therefore amplifies its capacity for consensus-building and issue-linkage diplomacy, strengthening its claim to stakeholder status in global economic governance.

In sum, analysis of the EFD through the lens of social mobility highlights the Strategist dimension of China's SRA posture. By embedding itself in Europe's economic governance architecture, China stabilises relations, secures recognition, and demonstrates competence.

At the same time, incremental reformist elements are evident. China's EFD discourse highlights themes such as sustainable finance, WTO reform, the promotion of an open world economy, and global economic governance. While these agendas overlap with European priorities, China reframes them to emphasise anti-protectionism, sovereignty-based openness, UN-centred coordination, inclusivity, and greater voice for developing countries. In this sense, social mobility is not only about gaining recognition within the existing hierarchy but also about subtly recalibrating its contours. Through the EFD, China demonstrates a posture of cooperation without conformity and integration without submission, consolidating its legitimacy as a major power while laying the groundwork for the recalibration of global economic norms and signalling reformist preferences within global economic governance.

4.5.2 Strategic Identity Innovation: Social Creativity in the EFD

China's engagement in the EFDs also illustrates a deliberate strategy of social creativity within SIT: reframing governance priorities and projecting alternative interpretive emphases while remaining embedded within established institutions. Rather than pursuing reform through rupture, China uses the EFD as a platform to broaden the parameters of international economic legitimacy and to recalibrate institutional practices from within. This reflects the SRA posture: systemic integration is preserved even as reformist preferences are layered into the institutional grammar of global economic governance.

Beyond stabilising participation, the EFDs function as sites of incremental governance recalibration. Reform-oriented proposals are articulated not through institutional replacement but through adjustments to representation, procedural fairness, and mandate scope within existing frameworks. The 9th China–France EFD Joint Statement (2023), for example, records agreement to "reform the governance of the international financial architecture to make it more efficient, more equitable, and better suited to today's world," including reference to advancing IMF quota reform and strengthening coordination among multilateral development banks. Commitments to restore the full functioning of the WTO dispute-settlement mechanism and to enhance its negotiating and review functions further illustrate how institutional engagement becomes a mechanism for updating governance procedures. These proposals do not reject the Bretton Woods architecture; rather, they reinterpret its distributive and operational foundations. Social creativity thus unfolds through calibrated institutional adjustment embedded within routine dialogue practice, enabling normative expansion while preserving systemic continuity.

EFD discourse therefore demonstrates how reform agendas are layered onto shared liberal vocabularies. Alongside references to rules-based multilateralism and WTO-centred globalisation, Chinese sources emphasise WTO reform, sustainable finance, inclusivity, UN-centred coordination, and greater voice for developing economies. While these themes overlap with European priorities, they are reframed to stress anti-protectionism, sovereignty-sensitive openness, and developmental equity. Identity innovation is thus operationalised through reinterpretation rather than confrontation:

China positions itself not as an outsider to global economic governance but as a co-author engaged in recalibrating its evolving norms.

This recalibration is evident in the promotion of complementary institutions such as the AIIB and the BRI. Both have featured in EFD outcomes: early rounds with the UK referenced AIIB cooperation, while China-France statements linked BRI projects to energy transition and third-country markets. The AIIB broadly adheres to international financial standards yet grants China disproportionate influence, while the BRI evolved from an outlet for domestic overcapacity into a multilateral connectivity platform. In the EFD context, these initiatives are not presented as replacements for existing structures but as pragmatic innovations aligned with global agendas such as the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. An interviewee stressed that China's limited influence within Bretton Woods institutions pushed it to develop such mechanisms, which nonetheless retain formal adherence to global rules. This pattern reflects what SIT scholars call social creativity: redefining the criteria for status and legitimacy by excelling in alternative domains.

Discursive innovation also extends to responsibility. U.S.-led narratives long defined China's proper role as a "responsible stakeholder", implying normative conformity. EFD discourse reframes this expectation by emphasising that China acts as a "responsible global power" through pragmatic contributions in green finance, climate governance, and infrastructure cooperation, rather than by assimilating to Western

liberal prescriptions. Official Chinese press releases frequently invoke phrases such as "democratisation of global governance", "shared human values", and "a community with a shared future for mankind", signalling that responsibility is claimed through co-authorship of norms rather than compliance. This discursive strategy exemplifies identity innovation - broadening the definition of responsibility to include sovereignty-sensitive and developmental framings.

Concrete examples across Europe reinforce this reformist creativity. The China-France EFD emphasised joint projects in Africa, dovetailing with France's strategic autonomy narrative while expanding China's presence in third-country markets. The China-Germany dialogue institutionalised cooperation on green finance and central bank coordination, allowing China to demonstrate regulatory credibility while embedding sovereignty-sensitive concerns within shared governance practices. The China-UK EFD, particularly in its resumed 2025 round, pivoted from earlier focus on BRI to themes such as sustainable finance and capital market connectivity, illustrating China's ability to adjust identity framings to shifting political climates. Even the episodic Italy dialogue, though modest in outcomes, provided symbolic recognition of China's reformist agenda within Europe's institutional landscape.

These practices align with theories of "change from within" (Schweller and Pu 2011; Paul 2021), which suggest that rising powers reshape order incrementally via institutional participation. Yet the EFD case demonstrates how this process is identity-

driven: by layering reformist emphases onto existing norms, China broadens the interpretive space of global governance while avoiding overt rupture. Through the EFD, social creativity thus functions as both discursive and institutional innovation, advancing reformist preferences while preserving strategic continuity.

In sum, China's EFD engagement illustrates how social creativity underpins the Reformist dimension of its SRA posture. By reframing legitimacy, redefining responsibility, and cultivating institutional alternatives, China uses the EFD not to dismantle the LIO but to stretch its boundaries. The dialogue becomes an arena of identity innovation, where continuity and recalibration are enacted simultaneously. This dual-track strategy, continuity with recalibration, underscores how institutionalised economic dialogues serve as laboratories of reformist identity construction.

4.5.3 Strategic Role Assertion and Institutional Innovation: Social Competition in the EFD

The EFDs also provide a revealing lens on social competition, the third dimension of SIT. China does not merely seek recognition within established institutions (mobility) or reinterpret shared norms (creativity); it also competes to elevate its status and expand structural influence relative to dominant powers. This competitive logic is pursued not through overt institutional disruption but through calibrated role assertion and strategic deepening of economic interdependence, reflecting the Reformist dimension of the SRA posture.

The 2019 China–UK EFD Policy Outcomes joint statement highlights concrete outcomes including the establishment of RMB clearing arrangements in London, the issuance of China's sovereign bonds, the launch of the Shanghai–London Stock Connect, and joint investment in projects such as Hinkley Point C and offshore wind energy. These initiatives illustrate how economic statecraft operates through financial integration and regulatory cooperation, expanding China's structural presence within advanced financial markets. Competitive positioning is thus channelled through institutional participation rather than systemic exit. Social competition in this context does not destabilise engagement; instead, it leverages existing governance frameworks to advance strategic influence while maintaining procedural continuity.

In addition to financial integration, China's expanding institutional footprint is visible in EFD references to the AIIB and the BRI. Framed as complementary to existing multilateral development finance, these mechanisms enhance China's agenda-setting capacity and infrastructural reach across regions. While broadly adhering to international standards, they subtly shift the distribution of influence within global economic governance by increasing China's role in financing, coordination, and institutional design. Social competition in this context therefore unfolds through influence expansion within institutional frameworks, reinforcing continuity even as relative positioning evolves.

Competition also unfolds in issue-specific negotiations with European partners, shaped by distinct national and institutional patterns. With the EU, China pressed for

reciprocity and reform on subsidies, market access, and dispute settlement - core arenas of systemic contestation. With Germany, competition centred on industrial issues: cooperation in automotive technology and green finance coexisted with European anxieties about overcapacity and dependence on Chinese inputs. With France, competition was partially softened by discursive overlap: Paris's emphasis on "strategic autonomy" dovetailed with China's multilateral framing, allowing sectoral cooperation in areas such as sustainable finance and third-country projects in Africa.

The UK trajectory highlights fragility: the EFD initially positioned London as a hub for RMB internationalisation, but after 2016 geopolitical divergence and securitisation eroded this cooperative framing, culminating in suspension until the dialogue's recalibrated resumption in 2025. Italy's episodic EFDs showed the limits of China's competitive strategy: while providing entry points for infrastructure cooperation linked to the BRI, the lack of continuity curtailed China's ability to institutionalise influence.

A further layer of competition lies in narratives of responsibility and order. China contests U.S.-centric framings of "responsible stakeholder" by projecting itself instead as a responsible major power, contributing through sustainable finance, third-country projects, and advocacy for institutional reform. In EFD discourse, calls for WTO reform, G20 strengthening, and promotion of an "open world economy" exemplify this role assertion: China competes not by rejecting norms but by reframing the criteria of legitimate order-building. Statements by Foreign Minister Wang Yi repeatedly stress

China's role in promoting "shared human values" and a "community of shared future for mankind", signalling a shift from compliance to co-authorship of global norms. Interviewees reinforced this interpretation, noting that China's promotion of AIIB and BRI was motivated not only by developmental logic but also by the ambition to demonstrate competence and pragmatic responsibility in global governance.

Europe's responses underscore the contested nature of this strategy. The EU's 2019 designation of China as a "partner, competitor, and systemic rival" crystallised this ambivalence: while reformist initiatives were welcomed in areas such as climate governance, they were simultaneously read as expressions of strategic rivalry. Germany's tightening of investment screening, France's guarded pragmatism, and the UK's securitisation of economic relations after 2017 illustrate how European actors recalibrated policy in response to perceived competition. From the perspective of SIT and Role Theory, this reflects entrenched in-group/out-group dynamics: Europe remains anchored to the transatlantic alliance as its identity reference point, limiting receptivity to China's reformist posture.

China articulates this dual worldview explicitly. Consistent statements by China's president and foreign ministers portray two overlapping orders: a status-quo system led by the United States, rooted in Western values and seen as resistant to reform, and a UN-centred multilateral framework, where China claims legitimate stakeholder status. Drawing on UN Charter principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and territorial

integrity, China advances the "democratisation of global governance" as a rationale for rebalancing authority within international institutions. This worldview both informs China's competitive discourse and deepens identity divides with Europe, where normative commitments remain closely tied to the U.S.

Analytically, the EFD demonstrates how social competition drives role transformation. By juxtaposing reformist initiatives with systemic criticisms, China positions itself as both stakeholder and challenger - asserting co-equality while recalibrating governance norms. Role Theory clarifies this duality: China uses the EFD to perform the role of responsible stakeholder while simultaneously advancing role innovation through parallel institutions and discursive reframings. This balance between continuity and recalibration defines the competitive dimension of the SRA: China embeds itself in LIO governance structures yet seeks to alter the normative and institutional distribution of authority.

In addition to demonstrating role innovation in global economic governance, the EFD also illustrates how institutional density embeds China's economic engagement within stable routines. This embedding aligns with the thesis's broader conceptualisation of institutionalisation as diplomacy, highlighting how structured dialogues operate as instruments of economic statecraft as well as identity performance.

In sum, the EFD illustrates how competition is institutionalised through parallel initiatives, role assertion, and normative reframing. While this strategy enhances China's visibility and influence, it also sharpens European perceptions of rivalry, constraining receptivity to China's reformist preferences. Social competition therefore emerges as both the most assertive and the most contested dimension of China's SRA posture. It allows China to expand its agency within the LIO but at the cost of intensifying identity divides with European counterparts.

4.5.4 Continuity-with-Recalibration: The SRA in the EFD

The preceding analysis of China's engagement in the EFD demonstrates how the three dimensions of SIT together generate a distinctive strategic posture. Taken in isolation, each highlights different aspects of China's role adaptation; taken together, they reveal a coherent pattern best conceptualised through the SRA framework. This section synthesises these findings to theorise China's evolving role in the EFD and situates it within wider debates on rising-power behaviour and global order.

China's engagement in the EFD embodies a dual logic of CwR. As a Strategist, China consolidates its role as a cooperative stakeholder, embedding itself in Europe's economic governance architecture. As a Reformist, it probes opportunities to reshape the normative and institutional contours of global governance without rupturing the order itself. This dual-track logic reflects how China manages role performance under conditions of both opportunity and constraint.

First, social mobility underscores the Strategist dimension. Through repeated participation in structured dialogues with the EU, UK, France, Germany, and Italy, China has gained recognition as a legitimate interlocutor. Deliverables such as RMB internationalisation with the UK, regulatory cooperation with Germany, and trade facilitation with France reveal how China leveraged existing frameworks to consolidate credibility and cultivate long-term partnerships. These outcomes exemplify institutional social mobility: China embeds itself within established institutions and secures recognition from advanced economies by performing the role of a responsible partner. Yet mobility is not passive; it enables China to accrue legitimacy while simultaneously opening space for gradual recalibration.

Second, social creativity demonstrates how China innovates within the LIO. Rather than rejecting liberal economic norms, China layers reformist emphases - calls for WTO reform, strengthening of the G20, the promotion of an open world economy, and alignment with the UN 2030 Agenda - onto shared vocabularies of multilateralism and sustainability. Initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI illustrate this reformist layering. While broadly conforming to international standards, they introduce complementary mechanisms that expand China's institutional footprint, particularly when linked to EFD outcomes such as joint commitments on sustainable finance or African development projects. In this sense, creativity lies not in outright norm-breaking but in subtly reinterpreting multilateral principles to include sovereignty-sensitive openness, anti-protectionism, and enhanced voice for developing countries.

Third, social competition highlights the Reformist edge of China's identity. Dissatisfied with its limited influence in Bretton Woods institutions, China has advanced parallel initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI - both repeatedly linked to EFD discussions. Interview insights confirm that this push stemmed from perceptions of marginalisation within Western-led institutions, motivating institutional entrepreneurship as a form of identity assertion. While the AIIB broadly adheres to international lending standards, its governance structure grants China disproportionate influence, thereby recalibrating the distribution of voice in development finance. The BRI, initially designed to absorb domestic overcapacity, has evolved into a global platform for infrastructure cooperation, extending China's reach into Africa, Asia, and Europe. Both initiatives intersect with EFD dialogues, for example in China-France coordination on African development and in Italy's episodic alignment with BRI projects. These examples illustrate how institutional innovation amplifies China's reformist preferences within bilateral and multilateral economic governance.

Synthesised, these patterns show that the EFD is not simply an economic coordination forum but a laboratory of role performance and norm recalibration. Through social mobility, China stabilises cooperation and secures recognition. Through creativity, it layers reformist inflections onto shared norms. Through competition, it asserts itself as a co-equal rule-shaper. Taken together, these dimensions illustrate a dual-track SRA posture: embedding continuity while probing recalibration.

The evolution of China's role is visible across time. From 2008 to 2019, EFDs prioritised volume-driven growth, institutional embedding, and infrastructure-led narratives. In this phase, China performed as a rule-following participant, consolidating legitimacy through trade and investment expansion - for instance, the 2019 China-Germany agreements on central bank cooperation and securities regulation. By 2025, however, China's role had shifted. The resumption of the China-UK EFD, despite political strains, marked a thematic pivot towards green finance, regulatory alignment, and capital market connectivity. This evolution reflects a transition from participation for legitimacy to participation for norm-shaping: China seeks not only to embed itself within existing frameworks but also to project regulatory competence and normative alignment with European priorities.

Yet this duality is contested. European counterparts frequently interpret China's reformist initiatives as rivalry rather than cooperation. The EU's 2019 designation of China as "partner, competitor, and systemic rival" crystallises this ambivalence. France and Germany have accommodated selective reformist narratives - for instance, France's receptivity to multipolar discourses and Germany's pragmatic cooperation on green finance - while the UK and EU have often responded with scepticism, securitisation, and investment screening. From a SIT perspective, this reflects entrenched in-group/out-group dynamics: Europe's transatlantic orientation sustains the United States as its primary identity reference point, which constrains receptivity to China's reformist postures.

Conceptually, the EFD illustrates how rising powers engage not through rupture or assimilation but through CwR. China consolidates continuity via institutionalised participation and pragmatic deliverables, while recalibration unfolds through norm reinterpretation, institutional innovation, and role assertion. Unlike "change from within" approaches that assume convergence tendencies, the SRA framework highlights calibrated contestation and relational diplomacy: China does not assimilate or break away, but incrementally adapts, reframes, and innovates from within.

In sum, the EFD reveals how China performs as a SRA: embedding cooperation, cultivating recognition, and consolidating trust while simultaneously probing normative space and advancing institutional alternatives. This dual-track posture enriches debates on rising powers by demonstrating how change is enacted not through confrontation or systemic rupture but through institutionalised, low-friction platforms. Through the EFDs with Europe, China exemplifies how continuity and recalibration can operate in tandem, reinforcing stability while expanding the interpretive boundaries of global economic governance.

4.6 Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study has examined China's engagement in the EFDs with Europe, situating them within a comparative framework that also includes the SD and the PPD. By applying SIT and Role Theory to a large body of primary material and integrating insights from expert interviews, the thesis has shown that these dialogues are not narrow forums for

technical exchange but institutionalised arenas of strategic diplomacy. In these arenas, China performs roles, negotiates recognition, and recalibrates norms.

Two conceptual contributions stand out. First, the thesis advances the concept of the SRA, a role posture that blends continuity with incremental recalibration. Rather than assimilating wholesale into the LIO or rejecting it outright, China embeds itself in existing structures to gain recognition while selectively reinterpreting and contesting norms to widen its strategic space. The three SIT strategies illustrate this duality: *social mobility* consolidates China's legitimacy through institutional participation; *social creativity* reinterprets shared vocabularies such as "openness" and "sustainability" to foreground Chinese preferences like sovereignty-sensitive development; and *social competition* projects agency through parallel platforms such as the AIIB and BRI. Together, these mechanisms reveal that China's conduct in the EFDs - and more broadly in its dialogues with Europe - fits neither passive convergence nor revisionist rupture but a distinct logic of CwR.

Second, the thesis conceptualises Institutionalisation as Diplomacy (IaD). Across the three dialogues, institutionalisation emerges not as a procedural backdrop but as a diplomatic practice in its own right: *societal scaffolding* in the PPD, *strategic signalling* in the SD, and *economic statecraft* in the EFD. These differentiated functions illustrate how China leverages structured mechanisms to stabilise relations, project legitimacy, and layer reformist preferences in ways that extend beyond formal outcomes. Institutionalisation thus operates as a strategic resource, allowing China to sustain

engagement even amid geopolitical turbulence while subtly testing the boundaries of order change.

Empirically, the analysis demonstrates that China's EFD engagement varies across cases, reflecting scope conditions shaped by partner receptivity and institutional density. With systemic actors such as the EU and major economies like Germany and France, dense institutionalisation enabled both stability and discursive layering, giving reformist preferences greater space. With the UK, political rupture curtailed continuity, though the resumption in 2025 revealed the resilience of institutional routines once high-level endorsement was restored. Italy's episodic dialogue illustrated the limits of institutional thinness: China could project pragmatic reformist narratives, but without regularity, this lacked traction. These variations confirm that China's SRA posture is contingent and adaptive, modulated by the opportunities and constraints presented by different European partners.

Analytically, the thesis contributes in three ways. First, it specifies how rising powers engage international order through role performance, showing that recognition, legitimacy, and normative recalibration are mediated by structured institutional practices rather than abstract systemic logics. Second, it extends SIT and Role Theory by demonstrating how identity strategies (mobility, creativity, competition) intersect with role dynamics (recognition, legitimacy, role recalibration) in concrete diplomatic mechanisms. Third, it advances debates on "change from within" by conceptualising CwR as a distinct order-navigation strategy - calibrational rather than confrontational,

reformist rather than revisionist.

Policy implications follow for both China and Europe. For China, the EFDs confirm the utility of institutionalised dialogues as instruments of economic statecraft and identity management. They provide structured platforms to project credibility, diffuse reformist ideas, and stabilise ties with multiple European counterparts. Yet the mechanisms remain vulnerable to political cycles and trust deficits, as seen in the UK suspension after 2017. To mitigate this fragility, China may insulate technical and second-track cooperation from political turbulence and strengthen clarity in foreign policy signalling to reduce interpretive dissonance.

For Europe, the EFDs underscore the need to treat dialogues not merely as technical consultations but as arenas of identity negotiation. While they generate tangible benefits, ranging from regulatory cooperation to green finance, they also function as vehicles for China's normative projection. Policymakers should therefore invest in discursive statecraft: the ability to respond to, reinterpret, and shape China's rhetorical framings in ways that assert European priorities of reciprocity, sustainability, and economic security. Developing institutional memory and coherence across dialogues will be critical to ensuring that Europe does not engage from a position of reactive fragmentation.

For international relations scholarship, the findings demonstrate that institutionalised dialogues constitute laboratories of order negotiation. The EFDs show how norm contestation and role innovation occur not only in high-politics arenas but also in

economic diplomacy, where pragmatic deliverables coexist with symbolic recognition and reformist projection. More broadly, they reveal how rising powers navigate a fragmented order marked by multipolarity, interdependence, and contested institutional pluralism.

In conclusion, China's conduct in the EFDs - and across its high-level dialogues with Europe - illustrates the posture of a SRA. By embedding cooperation while expanding normative space, China engages in reform without rupture, advancing institutionalised adaptation as its preferred mode of order engagement. The dual contributions of this thesis - the SRA framework and the conceptualisation of IaD - offer new tools for understanding how rising powers negotiate continuity and change. In an era of rivalry, interdependence, and negotiated multipolarity, these findings illuminate not only China's evolving strategy but also the broader dynamics of order transformation in the contemporary geopolitical moment.

5 Discussion, Implications, and Reflections

The preceding case studies developed the Strategist-Reformist Actor (SRA) concept in dialogue-specific contexts and, in doing so, pointed toward a second conceptual contribution: Institutionalisation as Diplomacy (IaD). Each dialogue illustrates how continuity and recalibration are enacted through structured mechanisms, while also revealing how institutionalisation itself operates as a form of diplomacy. This section builds on those observations, synthesising them into a broader conceptualisation of IaD and provide a mid-range framework that captures how structured dialogue mechanisms stabilise continuity while enabling recalibration within the LIO.

Building on this dual contribution, Section 5 develops the thesis's broader implications in five stages. Section 5.1 elaborates the two central conceptual contributions, the SRA and IaD, drawing on comparative evidence across the three dialogues. Section 5.2 incorporates interview evidence to corroborate and nuance these conceptual claims. Section 5.3 situates the findings within broader debates concerning major-power behaviour toward the LIO. Section 5.4 turns to the constraints and limits of engagement. Finally, Section 5.5 reflects on the broader significance of the thesis's contributions.

5.1 Strategist-Reformist Actor and Institutionalisation as Diplomacy

This thesis advances two interlinked conceptual contributions: the framework of the SRA and the conceptualisation of IaD. Together, these contributions explain how China engages Europe not through binary logics of assimilation or rupture, but through

Continuity-with-Recalibration (CwR) enacted across the three officially designated pillars of the CSP (societal, political, and economic). China has repeatedly affirmed that the PPD, the SD, and the EFD constitute the three pillars of their relationship. This thesis supports and strengthens that framing both empirically and conceptually, demonstrating that these dialogues are not ceremonial supplements but laboratories where identity, legitimacy, and order adaptation are performed and negotiated.

The SRA captures China's dual posture within the LIO. As a Strategist, China embeds cooperation within existing institutions and norms, drawing credibility from predictable processes and pragmatic deliverables. As a Reformist, it incrementally recalibrates agendas, procedures, and discourses, layering sovereignty-sensitive and pluralist vocabularies onto liberal ones. This posture is not a midpoint between "status quo" and "revisionist," but a distinct mode of CwR: stabilising relations while broadening boundaries from within.

Each of the three papers develops this framework in a domain-specific way. In the PPD, it introduces societal diplomacy as a conceptual innovation distinct from cultural or public diplomacy. Inductive analysis of nineteen rounds (2012-2025) shows how China consolidates continuity through a three-tier design (summit endorsement-vice-premier dialogue-societal implementation) and formalised programmes such as scholarships, themed years, and exchange platforms. Recalibration occurs through discursive layering, with pluralist, civilisational, and developmental vocabularies, such as "a

community of a shared future", placed alongside liberal discourses of peace, inclusivity, and sustainability. The PPD thus develops the first iteration of the SRA and extends the vocabulary of diplomacy studies.

The SD illustrates how continuity is preserved through regularised venues that insulate communication during periods of tension. Recalibration proceeds via forum shopping and altercasting: choosing venues that maximise agenda control and projecting roles onto European partners such as "pragmatic partner" or "non-ideological interlocutor." These practices stretch multipolar and sovereignty framings while maintaining stability through institutionalised dialogue.

The EFD embeds the SRA most clearly in terms of global economic governance. Continuity is secured through institutional social mobility - embedded participation, regulatory cooperation, and recognition as a responsible stakeholder. Recalibration operates through social creativity (reframing norms around inclusivity, sustainability, and multipolarity) and competition (advancing parallel but complementary platforms such as the AIIB and BRI). Here, SIT and Role Theory provide analytical precision, modelling how identity strategies function within structured economic diplomacy.

Each dialogue enacts the SRA posture differently—through societal scaffolding (the PPD), institutionalised signalling architecture (the SD), and economic statecraft (the EFD)—yet all three converge on the same patterned outcome CwR. By synthesising

these strands, the SRA framework establishes a coherent conceptual foundation. The PPD, through inductive analysis, advances the development of both the SRA and societal diplomacy; the SD specifies adaptation through role and venue calibration; and the EFD consolidates the framework by applying identity-management strategies to global economic governance. Taken together, they demonstrate that China's SRA posture is cumulative, portable, and observable across the societal, political, and economic pillars of its European partnerships. Table 5.1 shows case-level definition of the SRA and conceptual synthesis.

Table 5.1 The Strategist-Reformist Actor: Case-Level Definitions and Conceptual Synthesis

Level	Tools / Theory	Strategist (Continuity)	Reformist (Recalibration)	Case-Level SRA Definition
PPD (Societal)	Grounded theory; Societal diplomacy (conceptual innovation)	Three-tier design; ritualised programmes; institutional scaffolding	Discursive layering of civilisational pluralism, development rights, and "shared future" alongside liberal norms	Continuity-with-recalibration in societal diplomacy

SD (Political)	Forum shopping; Altercasting	Regularised high-level venues; continuity under strain	Forum choice and role projection expand sovereignty and multipolar discourses	Strategic adaptation with incremental recalibration in political-security dialogue
EFD (Economic)	Social Identity Theory (mobility, creativity, competition); Role Theory	Embedded participation; regulatory cooperation; stakeholder recognition	Creativity in reframing norms (sustainability, inclusivity); competition via AIIB and BRI	Continuity-with-recalibration in global economic governance
Conceptual Synthesis	Cumulative integration across domains	Order-preserving embedding through structured, routinised mechanisms	Incremental expansion of agendas, vocabulary, and institutional practices	A portable SRA posture observable across the three pillars

The dialogues also show that institutionalisation itself functions as diplomacy. It is not a neutral backdrop, but a medium through which the SRA posture is enacted. Routines, density, and ritual stabilise continuity, while structured formats create scope for gradual recalibration.

In the PPD, institutionalisation functions as societal scaffolding: themed years, scholarships, and cultural platforms embed cooperation and legitimise pluralist vocabularies. What appear as low-politics initiatives emerge as strategic sites of identity projection, institutionalising continuity while layering reformist discourses.

In the SD, institutionalisation operates as institutionalised signalling architecture. Regularised consultations project sovereignty consistency and reliability, while embedded practices of forum shopping and altercasting reframe discursive boundaries and partner roles within multipolar framings. This extended the SRA framework into contested high-politics domains.

In the EFD, institutionalisation acts as economic statecraft, consolidating continuity while embedding incremental norm innovation. Dense frameworks for trade, finance, and regulation consolidate stakeholder credibility, while identity strategies enable selective reform. References to parallel platforms such as the AIIB and BRI illustrate how cooperative stakeholder performance coexists with reformist entrepreneurship.

From these cases, a generalisable definition emerge: IaD is the strategic use of structured dialogue mechanisms to stabilise cooperation while creating incremental opportunities for norm recalibration.

Table 1.2 in the Introduction Section previewed these functions; the case studies and this discussion substantiate them. Across the three pillars, continuity is anchored in institutional routine and credibility, while recalibration proceeds through discursive layering, procedural adaptation, and selective entrepreneurship. Variation reflects partner receptivity, issue-area politicisation, and institutional density. Collectively, the dialogues show that institutionalisation is not passive procedure but active diplomatic practice: a structured process through which China performs its SRA posture, stabilises cooperation, and advances reformist recalibration.

While this section has demonstrated how these dynamics unfold within the institutionalised dialogues, the following sections broaden the analysis in two complementary directions: first, by drawing on interviewee insights that test and refine these conceptual claims (5.2), and second, by situating the SRA logic within wider forms of statecraft and debates on global order (5.3).

Before turning to these broader debates, it is important to examine how the thesis's conceptual contributions resonate with those directly engaged in diplomacy. Textual and institutional analysis can illuminate patterns of continuity and recalibration, but

they cannot by themselves reveal how expert interviewees interpret and experience these dynamics in real time. Interview evidence provides this complementary lens, allowing the findings to be triangulated and assessed against the lived perspectives of officials and experts. Section 5.2 therefore incorporates practitioner voices, which both corroborate and complicate the patterns identified in the dialogues, strengthening the robustness and reflexivity of the SRA framework and the conceptualisation of institutionalisation as diplomacy.

5.2 Interview Insights: Reinforcing the SRA Framework through Expert Perspectives

The interviews conducted for this thesis provide essential insights into how China's engagement with Europe and the wider LIO is perceived from multiple vantage points. The interviewees - a senior EU official and diplomat, academic scholars, and policy researchers based in China, the UK, and Europe - are referred to collectively here as experts, as they combine practitioner experience with analytical interpretation. Their reflections complement the document and institutional analysis, allowing the thesis's conceptual contributions to be tested and refined against lived interpretations of diplomacy. By triangulating textual evidence with expert perspectives, this section both corroborates and complicates the patterns identified in the PPD, SD, and EFD, thereby strengthening the robustness and reflexivity of the SRA framework and the conceptualisation of IaD.

The notion of a "new Cold War" has gained traction in policy and academic debates, often as a shorthand for intensifying rivalry between China and the West, particularly the United States. Yet experts caution against uncritical analogies, emphasising instead a more complex landscape marked by rivalry, interdependence, and institutional pluralism. One interviewee noted that while competition between China and the West, particularly the United States, is undeniable, today's environment is "not bloc politics but fragmented globalisation," in which supply chains, finance, and technology continue to bind rivals together even as security concerns intensify. Another stressed that Cold War framings obscure the layered realities of diplomacy, where competition and cooperation are deeply entangled.

Across these perspectives, three interrelated themes emerge. First, great-power competition has not disappeared but transformed: rivalry now unfolds through overlapping economic, technological, and normative channels rather than along a single military axis. Second, interdependence persists despite escalating tensions. As one expert observed, "decoupling is structurally limited," since supply chains, finance, and technology continue to bind China and the United States together. The tariff standoff of early 2025 illustrates this dynamic: U.S. duties peaked at 145-245% on Chinese goods, China responded with tariffs averaging 125%, yet high-level talks in Geneva quickly scaled these measures back, underlining both the intensity of rivalry and the structural necessity of engagement. Third, unlike the ideologically driven expansionism of the original Cold War, current tensions lack a unifying ideological project. Experts

emphasised that China does not seek to export its political model but frames its diplomacy in sovereignty-sensitive and pragmatic terms, underscoring a competitive environment that is entangled with, rather than detached from, ongoing cooperation.

For Europe, this shifting environment creates both challenges and opportunities. Experts described the EU as caught between structural dependence on the U.S. for security and deep economic interdependence with China. This duality has generated a pursuit of "strategic autonomy," operationalised through selective de-risking, investment screening, and interest-driven engagement. In practice, this means tightening controls in sensitive sectors such as semiconductors and artificial intelligence while sustaining cooperation in domains like climate governance, sustainable finance, and societal exchange. One interviewee characterised this approach as "calibrated coexistence," a strategy that mirrors China's own Strategist-Reformist duality by combining protective hedging with pragmatic collaboration.

A further theme concerned perception gaps and procedural frictions. Several experts noted that asymmetries in governance models, China's centralised system and the EU's multi-layered machinery, generate mistrust and misinterpretation. Initiatives such as Made in China 2025, seen domestically as industrial policy, are often read ideologically in Brussels, while EU regulatory measures are frequently interpreted in Beijing as containment. These mutual misreadings amplify suspicion, even when underlying intentions are technical rather than strategic. Yet experts also observed that

institutionalised engagement helps buffer these tensions: dialogues preserve habits of cooperation and provide forums in which role expectations can be renegotiated, even if structural differences remain.

Against this backdrop, China's institutionalised dialogues with Europe assume heightened significance. Experts highlighted their dual function: as practical channels for advancing cooperation in areas such as green finance, education, and cultural exchange, and as symbolic anchors of continuity in turbulent times. One interviewee described these mechanisms as exerting a "pulling force" within bureaucracies, ensuring sustained engagement even when political atmospherics sour. The EFD, for instance, translates high-level commitments into operational negotiations on regulatory alignment and sustainable finance. The SD and PPD, while less weighty in economic terms, nonetheless provide agenda-setting and trust-building value. Taken together, these dialogues were described as "the architecture of conflict management," stabilising expectations, pacing escalation, and institutionalising communication that might otherwise break down in periods of mistrust.

These insights also situate China's SRA posture within a broader trajectory of adaptation and selective reform. Several interviewees pointed to the shift away from Deng Xiaoping's dictum of taoguang yanghui (hide capabilities, bide time) toward a more assertive global presence, while emphasising underlying continuities: security, regime stability, economic resilience, and influence in global governance remain core

objectives. What has changed is the toolkit. Economic strategy exemplifies this recalibration: early 2000s policies emphasised trade liberalisation and financial diversification, while today's priorities emphasise resilience and self-reliance in high-tech sectors vulnerable to external restriction. Parallel institutional strategies reflect the same duality. Continued participation in the UN, WTO, and G20 consolidates credibility, while initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI expand influence by layering sovereignty-sensitive and developmental vocabularies ("open world economy," "community with a shared future") onto liberal discourses of openness, sustainability, and multilateralism. As one expert summarised, this is "reform without rupture."

Yet interviewees also underscored the limits of this strategy. Deep-rooted mistrust, securitisation of economic policy in Europe, and persistent identity asymmetries constrain the transformative potential of dialogue. As one interviewee observed, "China speaks the language of win-win, but Europe increasingly hears competition." Another noted that symbolic commitments to "mutual trust" in joint statements often mask enduring divergences in role expectations and normative orientations. Institutionalised engagement can mitigate friction but cannot eliminate deeper asymmetries in governance models and strategic cultures.

Taken together, the interview evidence reinforces the thesis's core claim: China is best understood not as a status-quo or revisionist power, but as a SRA. Experts highlighted how China consolidates continuity through institutional participation and pragmatic

deliverables, while incrementally recalibrating discourses and practices in ways that reflect sovereignty-sensitive and developmental preferences. The interviews confirm both the utility and the limits of this posture: institutionalised dialogues stabilise ties and preserve diplomatic space, but they cannot resolve entrenched mistrust. In sum, expert perspectives sharpen the analysis by framing these dynamics as a form of "managed disequilibrium," in which interdependence and institutional routines prevent breakdown even as mistrust deepens. They also underscore the resilience of institutionalised engagement as a conflict-management device, consistent with the Strategist-Reformist duality outlined in Section 5.1.

The following section (5.3) extends this discussion outward, situating the findings within broader geopolitical debates on multipolarity, triangular China-Europe-U.S. dynamics, and the role of institutionalised diplomacy in a fragmented global order.

5.3 Broader Implications: Strategic Navigation in a Fragmented Order

The interview findings discussed in Section 5.2 underscore that neither Cold War analogies nor simplistic binaries adequately capture the complexity of contemporary great-power politics. Rather than bloc confrontation, the current order is characterised by multipolarity, interdependence, and institutional pluralism. Rivalry is undeniable, particularly between China and the United States, but it unfolds within dense economic ties and shared governance forums that make full decoupling structurally unlikely. This condition of "managed disequilibrium", as one interviewee described it, forms the

environment within which China performs its SRA posture: embedding continuity while probing reformist recalibration through institutionalised mechanisms.

The implication is that major powers may avoid both assimilation and rupture. The record of the PPD, SD, and EFD shows that China embeds itself in institutions while recalibrating normative practices. This CwR represents a distinct mode of adaptation in a fragmented order: expanding agency through institutionalised dialogue mechanisms while steering clear of systemic fracture.

Europe illustrates both the tensions and opportunities of this environment. As a longstanding U.S. ally and a key economic partner for China, it embodies what several interviewees termed "calibrated coexistence." EU strategies of de-risking, investment screening, and selective decoupling aim to contain vulnerabilities without severing cooperation in shared areas such as climate governance, green finance, and societal exchange. Against this backdrop, institutionalised dialogues serve as laboratories of negotiated multipolarity - arenas where cooperation and contestation coexist, and where reformist initiatives can be probed within routinised settings.

IaD acquires greater significance when examined in relation to China's symbolic statecraft. The commemorative speeches delivered in August-September 2025 for the *80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War* reflected the same SRA logic

evident in the dialogues. Across military, diplomatic, and multilateral venues, China underscored continuity through historical memory, peace discourse, and UN centrality, while simultaneously layering reformist vocabularies of sovereignty, multipolarity, and governance reform. These speeches illustrate how symbolic performances operate in tandem with institutionalised dialogues to project China's SRA posture.

At the symposium on August 26, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Zhang Youxia underscored the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) dual mission of "safeguarding sovereignty and development interests while contributing to world peace" (Xinhua, 2025). His remarks exemplified the same Strategist-Reformist logic seen in the institutionalised dialogues: defending sovereignty while signalling responsibility.

President Xi Jinping addressed the "SCO Plus" meeting on September 1, linking historical memory with forward-looking governance reform by urging the international community to "improve global governance" and build "a community with a shared future for mankind" (MFA, 2025c). Two days later, at Tiananmen Square, Xi emphasised both continuity and recalibration - asserting that China "will always be a builder of world peace and a defender of international order," while simultaneously advocating for "new security frameworks that reflect equality and inclusivity" (MFA, 2025d). Later that evening, at a commemorative reception, Xi reinforced this theme, declaring that China "will remain a force for peace, stability, and progress" through Chinese-style modernisation (MFA, 2025e).

Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed and reinforced these themes across diplomatic platforms. At the 8th round of China-Germany SD in July, he urged both sides to act as "advocates of multilateralism, defenders of free trade, and contributors to open development" (FMA, 2025f). Later, in August, Wang linked these principles to the 80th anniversary of the UN's founding, calling for reforms to global governance that ensure "fairness and justice" while resisting hegemonism (FMA, 2025g). At a symposium in September, he reiterated that China made "one of the earliest and most sustained contributions to Allied victory" and stressed that China's intent is not to replace others but to "reform and improve global governance to meet the needs of a new era" (Sina, 2025).

As summarised in Table 5.2, commemorative statecraft reinforced the thesis's argument that China projects its SRA posture not only through institutionalised dialogues with Europe but also through ritualised performances of legitimacy and reformist intent. These findings underscore the immediate policy relevance of institutionalisation as diplomacy in the China-Europe context. Section 5.5 will return to the broader significance of this dual logic for major powers and the evolution of global order.

Table 5.2 Commemorative Statecraft and the Projection of SRA Logic

Venue / Platform	Core Themes	Link to SRA Logic
PLA academic symposium (26 August 2025)	Sovereignty while contributing to world peace	Continuity through peace discourse and sovereignty defence; reformist signalling of global responsibility
SCO Plus Summit (1 September 2025)	Strengthening multipolarity; resisting Cold War thinking; improving governance	Continuity via multilateral engagement; reformist reframing of governance vocabularies and multipolarity
Tiananmen Commemorative Assembly (3 September 2025, AM)	China as builder of peace and defender of order; inclusive security	Continuity through historical memory and peace discourse; reformist layering via inclusive security and sovereignty
State Reception (3 September 2025, PM)	WWII victory as turning point; China as force for peace and progress via modernisation	Continuity via historical memory and peace/order discourse; reformist projection of modernisation as peaceful reform
MFA symposiums & anniversary events	Reforming UN-centred governance; fairness, justice, multilateralism	Continuity via UN centrality; reformist layering through calls

(August-September 2025)		for governance reform and justice
WWII 80th Anniversary Symposium (4 September 2025)	Linking 1945 victory to today's transformation; equality as new order basis	Continuity through historical memory and UN legitimacy; reformist analogy embedding sovereignty and multipolarity

Taken together, the commemorative speeches and institutionalised dialogues show how China performs CwR across both ritual and routine. Yet their impact is not unconstrained. While these practices stabilise interaction and project legitimacy, their ability to transform relations is circumscribed by deeper dynamics of rivalry, mistrust, and asymmetry. Section 5.4 therefore examines the structural constraints and limits of engagement, clarifying the conditions under which the SRA posture tends to operate effectively - and where it encounters resistance.

5.4 Constraints and Limits of Engagement

While China's high-level dialogues with Europe illustrate the value of IaD, they remain bounded by enduring structural constraints. Interview evidence consistently highlighted three mutually reinforcing limits: intensifying strategic rivalry, persistent political trust deficits, and deep ideational and institutional asymmetries. These constraints do not negate cooperation - trade, climate coordination, and sectoral projects continue - but they narrow the scope for transformation. They therefore qualify the reach of the SRA:

dialogue mechanisms buffer and manage frictions, yet they cannot, on their own, dissolve structural mistrust.

Strategic rivalry is the first and most pervasive constraint. Several interviewees described China-U.S. relations as "structured competition with floorboards": rivalry across trade, technology, and influence, bounded by residual crisis-management and shared macro-financial interests. Technology has become the primary arena, with semiconductors, AI, and digital infrastructures at the centre. Measures framed in the U.S. and allied capitals as "defensive de-risking" are often interpreted in China as strategic containment. One expert argued that China's push for self-reliance in critical technologies is reactive and long-horizon, aimed at insulating national development pathways from external chokepoints.

For Europe, rivalry plays out in more ambivalent terms. The EU's triadic framing - partner, competitor, systemic rival - has tilted toward competition since 2019, particularly through industrial policy, investment screening, and economic security instruments. Yet, as one interviewee noted, "the EU cannot afford a binary choice": climate goals, supply-chain resilience, and financial stability require managed interdependence with China. This yields what another expert called "calibrated coexistence," where cooperation in select domains is ring-fenced even as risk controls tighten elsewhere. The findings show how the SD, EFD, and PPD become the

operational architecture for this coexistence: they institutionalise communication, pace escalation, and keep technical tracks moving even when political atmospherics sour.

Trust deficits represent the second major constraint. Interviewees were near-unanimous that political trust is shallow and brittle. Although joint communiqués repeatedly stress "mutual confidence," one interviewee described such declarations as "necessary but not self-executing." The Russia-Ukraine conflict crystallises this dilemma. Europe expects China to align more closely with EU positions on sovereignty and sanctions, while interviewees framed China's cautious stance as strategic non-alignment consistent with sovereignty and multipolarity. The result is persistent role dissonance: both China and its European counterparts present themselves as responsible actors, yet each interprets the other's behaviour through a lens of suspicion. This dissonance is reinforced in the economic domain. An interviewee highlighted disputes over market access, subsidies, and overcapacity in sectors such as EVs and green tech. China portrayed Europe's economic-security toolbox as discriminatory, while European counterparts framed it as proportionate risk management. As one expert concluded, "China speaks the language of win–win, but Europe increasingly hears competition."

Ideational and institutional asymmetries form the third constraint. Several experts pointed to the ideational divide between Europe's liberal-democratic governance model and China's party-led system, cautioning that values-based framings risk crowding out issue-specific problem-solving. At the institutional level, an expert described "two-way

opacity": China's centralised decision-making appears impenetrable from Brussels, while the EU's multi-level machinery (Commission-Council-Parliament-Member States) appears fragmented and slow from China. Misread signals follow. China's industrial strategies, such as Made in China 2025, are routinely interpreted ideologically in Europe, whereas EU regulatory moves are interpreted strategically in China. These schema gaps harden narratives and reduce space for accommodation.

The role of institutionalisation therefore should be understood in light of these limits. The three cases show that dialogue mechanisms do real diplomatic work. In the SD, regularised high-level contact functions as institutionalised signalling architecture and expectation management; in the EFD, financial and regulatory density sustains economic statecraft and technical cooperation; in the PPD, layered programmes maintain societal connectivity even when elite ties are strained. Interviewees described these mechanisms as exerting a "pulling force" within bureaucracies, compelling working-level engagement and preserving a rhythm of interaction during crises. But experts also cautioned against over-claiming. Dialogue routines mitigate misperception; they do not resolve role dissonance or dissolve ideological and institutional fault lines. Formulaic reaffirmations of "mutual trust" risk becoming counterproductive if not matched by visible reciprocity on the issues that matter most to the other side - market access, transparency, export controls, and third-country security spillovers.

Placing these constraints alongside the findings of Sections 5.1 and 5.2 refine the scope conditions of the SRA framework. The Strategist track - embedded participation, predictable processes, and pragmatic deliverables - travel best in domains with high technocratic overlap and clear joint gains, as in many EFD and PPD items. The Reformist track -incremental reinterpretation of norms and procedures - advances where partners tolerate discursive layering and institutional complementarity, such as selected SD framings or green-finance language in the EFD. Yet when rivalry hardens and trust thins, reformist cues risk being read as assertion rather than innovation. That is precisely when IaD earns its keep: it slows deterioration, preserves coordination habits, and keeps channels open for re-entry when political conditions allow.

The interview record suggests neither imminent rupture nor easy convergence. One interviewee described the present moment as "managed disequilibrium": rivalry intensifies, but interdependence and institutional routines prevent free fall. Institutionalised dialogues are therefore necessary to manage this disequilibrium and to provide arenas where China performs its Strategist-Reformist identity. Yet they are insufficient to erase structural mistrust rooted in ideological divides, institutional asymmetries, and security externalities. Recognising both continuity and constraints clarifies why the SRA framework is portable across domains, while also identifying the conditions that delimit its operation. These scope conditions provide the basis for broader reflections on the conceptual and policy significance of the thesis's contributions.

5.5 Final Reflections: Conceptual Contributions and Policy Implications in an Era of Negotiated Multipolarity

Building on the scope conditions outlined in Section 5.4, this section reflects on the broader conceptual and policy implications of the thesis. It situates the SRA framework and the conceptualisation of IaD within wider debates on major-power behaviour, negotiated multipolarity, and the contested evolution of the LIO. Across the PPD, SD, and EFD, a consistent pattern emerges: China engages as a SRA, consolidating legitimacy through institutional embeddedness while incrementally recalibrating norms to widen its strategic space. This mid-range framework moves beyond binary classifications of status quo versus revisionist power by specifying the institutional mechanisms through which calibrated reform unfolds.

The thesis also advances a second contribution: institutionalisation as diplomacy. The SD, EFD, and PPD demonstrate that institutionalisation is not a procedural backdrop but an active diplomatic practice. It operates as societal scaffolding in the PPD, institutionalised signalling architecture in the SD, and economic statecraft in the EFD. Through these mechanisms, China embeds cooperation in structured routines that sustains continuity while creating space for incremental recalibration, thereby performing its Strategist-Reformist identity in practice.

These findings hold important implications that extend to both policy and theory. For China, sustainable credibility in Europe cannot be achieved through performance

multilateralism or rhetorical flexibility alone. Strategic ambiguity may offer flexibility, but it increasingly generates interpretive dissonance in Europe's pluralistic environment. A more sustainable strategic presence would likely require greater clarity in signalling, demonstrate responsiveness to regulatory and normative concerns, and builds institutional familiarity beyond elite channels. While China has shown adaptability in domestic governance, whether this capacity can be effectively extended to external engagement remains uncertain. In the European context, reducing mistrust and consolidating a more durable strategic presence will depend less on rhetorical flexibility and more on consistent responsiveness to regulatory, normative, and procedural expectations.

For Europe, the findings suggest that seeking a singular, "cohesive" China policy may prove counterproductive. This is not because cohesion is inherently misguided, but because China's foreign policy is dynamic - shaped by active role construction, flexible negotiation, and differentiated engagement across issue areas and partners. Attempting to impose coherence on such a fluid counterpart risks rigidity, misalignment, or strategic ineffectiveness. Europe would benefit more from cultivating institutional learning and discursive statecraft: decoding China's rhetorically shifting vocabularies, developing its own role-shaping capacities, and sustaining institutional memory across dialogues.

The EFD, SD, and PPD also demonstrate that institutionalised engagement yields not only symbolic benefits but also tangible outcomes, especially in macroeconomic coordination, societal, and climate governance. Their value lies in combining recognition with deliverables, amplifying both legitimacy and resilience. They should therefore be recognised not as ornamental rituals but as adaptive infrastructures for managing a complex relationship in an unsettled order. Both sides would benefit from further depoliticising technical cooperation and compartmentalising disputes, thereby safeguarding collaboration on transnational challenges such as climate change, digital governance, and global health that cannot be addressed through zero-sum logics.

Beyond China-Europe relations, this thesis contributes to wider debates on global order. It suggests that international politics is not simply moving toward hegemonic rupture or liberal convergence, but toward contested institutional pluralism, where multiple actors recalibrate norms within overlapping frameworks. Major powers—rising and established alike—are not locked into a binary of status quo versus revisionist strategies; rather, they pursue calibrated reforms without rupture: a posture of CwR that embeds them within existing institutions while probing boundaries. The broader relevance of this pattern extends beyond China–Europe high-level dialogues to symbolic and commemorative arenas in which narratives of peace, sovereignty, and multipolarity are articulated alongside calls for reform (as discussed in Section 5.3). A similar dynamic is visible in China's engagement through the SCO and emerging multilateral banks

where institutional pluralism provides both stability and opportunities for normative experimentation.

These findings refine understanding of China's SRA posture within the LIO and open avenues for comparative and forward-looking research on major-power behaviour and institutional pluralism. Future research may extend this analysis in three directions. First, comparative applications of the SRA framework to China's engagement with Africa, ASEAN, and the United States, as well as to reform trajectories within multilateral platforms such as the G20, could assess how both rising and established powers navigate continuity and recalibration across diverse institutional settings. Second, longitudinal analyses of elite discourse and institutional practice could trace how role performance evolves under shifting geopolitical pressures. Third, as China expands its participation in platforms such as BRICS+ and the Ministerial Meeting (MM) of the Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations (GoFDefenseUNCharter), further research could investigate how institutional pluralism enables both stability and normative experimentation, reshaping the rules and practices of global governance.

In conclusion, China's structured engagement with Europe through the SD, EFD, and PPD reflects not the erosion of the current order but its ongoing transformation. These dialogues function as arenas of negotiated multipolarity: institutionalised laboratories where rivalry is managed, roles are performed, and norms are selectively recalibrated

(e.g., sovereignty and economic governance). Their continued relevance will depend

not only on diplomatic continuity and institutional design but also on the willingness of

both sides to adapt, learn, and invest in institutionalised cooperation. In this sense, the

SRA framework and the conceptualisation of IaD provide a dual lens for understanding

how rising powers pursue legitimacy while enacting CwR - offering insights that extend

beyond China-Europe relations to wider debates on multipolarity, sovereignty, and the

contested evolution of the LIO.

6 Conclusion

This thesis has examined how China engages with Europe through three institutionalised high-level dialogues—the PPD, the SD, and the EFD—to address a central question: *How does China navigate and selectively recalibrate the Liberal International Order (LIO) through structured diplomatic engagement?*

The analysis demonstrates that China cannot be adequately categorised as either a status-quo power or a revisionist challenger. Across the societal, political, and economic pillars of its Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with Europe, China exhibits a dual posture: stabilising cooperation through sustained institutional participation while incrementally recalibrating selected norms, roles, and practices from within the existing order. This duality is captured through a mid-range analytical framework linking strategic identity (the Strategist–Reformist Actor, SRA), institutional practice (Institutionalisation as Diplomacy, IaD), and patterned outcome (Continuity-with-Recalibration, CwR).

Within this triadic framework, continuity and recalibration do not unfold sequentially. Rather, they operate as mutually reinforcing dynamics embedded in routinised diplomatic practice. Institutional participation supplies stability, predictability, and legitimacy; discursive layering, agenda sequencing, and calibrated reinterpretation enable incremental adjustment. Reform is thus pursued through continuity rather than rupture.

Each empirical study provides distinct analytical leverage. The PPD demonstrates how societal diplomacy institutionalises identity projection and norm negotiation within structured dialogue formats. The SD reveals how political–security dialogues operate as stabilising infrastructures while enabling recalibrated role articulation under heightened constraint. The EFD illustrates how economic diplomacy embeds China within global governance structures while creating space for reformist innovation in sustainability, inclusivity, and development agendas. Taken together, these cases show that high-level dialogues are not ceremonial supplements to foreign policy but structured arenas in which identity, institutional practice, and normative adjustment interact systematically.

The thesis makes four principal contributions. Empirically, it provides the first systematic, multi-level, cross-venue, cross-domain, longitudinal analysis of China–Europe high-level dialogues, spanning the three institutional pillars of the relationship—the PPD, the SD, and the EFD—revealing patterned strategic behaviour that would remain obscured in single-dialogue or episodic studies.

Methodologically, it demonstrates how curated diplomatic artefacts can be analysed simultaneously as empirical records and strategic performances. By treating official texts as performative yet institutionally embedded communications, the study identifies signalling patterns, agenda structuring, discursive emphasis, and strategic ambiguity and omission under conditions of limited transparency.

Analytically, the thesis bridges interdisciplinary insights from international relations, legal studies, sociopsychology, diplomacy studies, and institutional analysis. It shows that identity performance, role negotiation, and norm recalibration operate not only at the level of grand strategy but through routinised diplomatic infrastructures. Institutionalised high-level dialogues function as structured arenas of role negotiation and interpretive adjustment through which long-term processes of order evolution unfold via sustained diplomatic engagement.

Conceptually, the thesis advances a mid-range framework demonstrating that China's engagement with Europe embodies a coherent international order-navigating strategy linking strategic identity (the SRA), institutional practice (IaD), and patterned outcome (CwR). The SRA specifies the actor-level logic; IaD captures the institutional mechanism through which that logic is enacted; CwR describes the resulting patterned dynamic through which continuity and recalibration are simultaneously produced.

The framework operates most clearly under conditions of institutional density combined with sustained political rivalry—where exit is costly but contestation persists. In such contexts, structured dialogue mechanisms provide arenas in which actors can stabilise engagement while incrementally adjusting interpretive boundaries. Where institutional density is weak, or where strategic mistrust escalates into systematic disengagement, recalibration may stall. Under conditions of acute securitisation or institutional fragmentation, dialogue infrastructures may preserve procedural continuity without generating substantive normative adjustment. The SRA–IaD–CwR dynamic

therefore depends on the continued functionality of institutional venues and the strategic calculation that reform-through-engagement remains preferable to rupture.

The findings challenge binary narratives of assimilation versus disruption. Contemporary international politics is increasingly characterised by contested institutional pluralism. China's approach illustrates how a rising power can remain embedded within the LIO while selectively recalibrating its interpretive boundaries. This logic is visible not only in high-level dialogues but also in evolving discursive formulations such as the Major-Party-Major-Country framing, which intertwines state and Party identities in articulating China's global role and reframes the normative terms of engagement within the LIO. The analysis therefore moves beyond static classifications of China as status-quo or revisionist by specifying the institutional mechanisms through which calibrated reform unfolds. By demonstrating how diplomacy and institutionalisation fuse into an evolving mode of statecraft, the thesis offers a mid-range explanation of how global order can be stabilised and incrementally transformed through structured engagement rather than systemic breakdown.

The SRA–IaD–CwR framework therefore carries policy relevance and offers practical insight for policy communities. Engagement strategies should recognise institutional participation as a site of calibrated agency, where continuity is deliberately stabilised to create space for selective normative adjustment. Misreading such participation as passive compliance or covert revisionism risks obscuring the strategic logic through which reform is pursued.

Beyond the China–Europe case, the SRA–IaD–CwR framework offers transferable insight into how both rising and established powers may pursue calibrated reform from within dense institutional environments. It is applicable to other institutionalised dialogue architectures, to regional partnerships characterised by managed rivalry, and to cases in which established powers themselves seek selective recalibration without abandoning existing institutions. By specifying the institutional and interactional pathways through which continuity and reform coexist, the framework contributes to broader debates on institutional pluralism and major-power behaviour in a contested yet enduring order.

Future research may extend this framework to other institutionalised dialogue architectures, comparative dialogue contexts, shifting regional settings, and evolving geopolitical configurations, thereby refining understanding of how institutional density, rivalry intensity, and governance complexity condition the interaction between continuity and recalibration.

7 References

Abu-Haltam D (2025) Where to throw the hook? Chinese strategic partnership selection and its effectiveness in achieving influence. *Chinese Political Science Review*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-025-00297-z

Acharya A (2018) The End of American World Order (2nd ed.) Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ai W, Thies CG (2023) Perception, interest constitution, and the efficacy of socialisation: EU and US socialisation efforts with China. J Int Relat Dev 26: 131–158. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-022-00283-x

Beneyto JM, Sorroza A, Hurtado I, and Corti J (2011). Political Dialogue in EU-China Relations. In: Serie Unión Europea. Instituto Universitario de Estudios Europeos.

Breuning M (2019) Role theory in politics and international relations. In: Mintz A, Terris LG (eds) The Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science. Oxford University Press, pp. 233–252. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190634131.013.29

Busch ML (2007) Overlapping institutions, forum shopping, and dispute settlement in international trade. Int Organ 61 (4): 735–761. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818307070257

Butler E (2018) 16+1: The EU's concerns of a Chinese "Trojan horse". EuropeNow

Capling A, Low P (2010) Governments, non-state actors and trade policy–making: negotiating preferentially or multilaterally? Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511687082

Celik FB (2023) Virtues and perils of forum shopping in European security. European Security 33 (1): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/096628392023.2222666

Charmaz K (2006) Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis. London: Sage.

Charmaz K (2014) Constructing Grounded Theory (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Chen X (2010) Understanding China's new strategic dialogue. China Int Stud 25: 16-36

Chen J (2025) Factors influencing China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations. Journal of Chinese Political Science 30: 289–321. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-024-09891-5

Cooley A, Nexon DH (2020) Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cossa R, Glosserman B, and Santoro D (2013) Conference Report: Progress Continues, but Disagreements Remain-The Seventh China-US Strategic Dialogue on Strategic Nuclear Dynamics & The Inaugural China-US Dialogue on Space Security. Issues & Insights, 13 (6).

de Oliveira ANC, Geiger LM, and Ugar ET (2025) The United Nations General Assembly in a multipolar world order: An analysis of roll call votes on UNGA resolutions addressing Russia's military actions in Ukraine. *Chinese Political Science Review*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-025-00292-4

European Commission (2012) EU-China Summit factsheet [Memo/12/85]. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/det. Accessed 8 September 2025.

European Commission (2024) *China-International Partnerships*. Directorate-General for International Partnerships. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/china_en. Accessed 20 September 2025.

Fairclough N (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language. London: Longman.

Federal Government of Germany. National security strategy: Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany (2023a), https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf; Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany (2023b), https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2608580/49d50fecc479304c3da2e2079c55e106/china-strategie-en-data.pdf. Berlin: Federal Foreign Office. Accessed 18 September 2024.

Forsby AB (2016) The logic of social identity in IR: China's identity and grand strategy in the 21st century. Thesis, University of Copenhagen.

French Government (2022) National strategic review 2022. Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security (SGDSN). https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/rns-uk-20221202.pdf. Accessed 18 September 2024.

Glaser B G, Strauss A L (1967) The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. Chicago: Aldine. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203793206

Glosny M, Twomey C (2010) U.S.-China strategic dialogue, phase V. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA.

Glosny M, Twomey C, Jacobs R (2013) U.S.-China strategic dialogue, phase VII report. Naval Postgraduate School Center on Contemporary Conflict.

Goffman E (1959) The presentation of self in everyday life. Peter Smith Pub Inc, June 1999.

Guo L, and Qin Q (2024) Wolf warrior spreads superior: The narrative and effectiveness of Chinese public diplomacy behaviours on Twitter. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-024-09889-z

Hartig F (2014) New public diplomacy meets old public diplomacy - the Case of China and its Confucius Institutes. *New Global Studies*, 2014-8 (3): 331-352. https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2014-0029

HM Government (2023) Integrated review refresh 2023: responding to a more contested and volatile world. London: Cabinet Office.

Hofmann SC (2018) The politics of overlapping organizations: hostage taking, forum shopping and brokering. J Eur Public Policy 26 (6): 883–905. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2018.1512644

Holsti KJ (1970) National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy. International Studies Quarterly 14 (3): 233–309. https://doi.org/10.2307/3013584

Hopewell K (2016) Breaking the WTO: How Emerging Powers Disrupted the Neoliberal Project. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hu W, Pelkmans J (2020) Can dialogues advance EU-China trade relations? CEPS Research Report, RP2020-05.

Huang C, Silver L, Clancy L (2025). Negative views of China have softened slightly among Americans.

Hubbert J (2019) China in the world - An anthropology of Confucius Institutes, soft power, and globalization. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Hymans JEC (2002) Applying social identity theory to the study of international politics: A caution and an agenda. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228956532 Accessed 4 July 2025.

Dreyer I, Erxon F (2008) *An EU-China trade dialogue: a new policy framework to contain deteriorating trade relations.* ECIPE (European Centre for International Political Economy) Policy Briefs, No. 03/2008. ISSN 1653-8994.

Ikenberry JG (2011) The future of the liberal world order: Internationalism after America. Foreign Affairs, 2011-03 (90): 56-68. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23039408

Johnston AL (2003). Is China a status quo power? April 2003. International Security 27 (4): 5-56. https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951081

Jones C (2018) China's challenge to liberal norms - The durability of international order. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-42761-8

Joseph C (2022) *The Diplomatic and Legal Arrangements under which China Cooperates with European Trade Partners on BRI Deals and Financing*. Research Brief No. 5/2022, China-Britain Business Council, May 24, 2022.

Kastner SL, Saunders PC (2012) Is China a status quo or revisionist state? Leadership travel as an empirical indicator of foreign policy priorities. International Studies Quarterly, 2012-1 (56): 163-177. https://doi.org/10.2307/41409829

Kim H, and Park S (2025) Expanding China's influence via membership: Examining the influence of Chinese-led international institutions on responses to human rights issues in China. Journal of Chinese Political Science 30: 267–288. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-024-09886-2

Krippendorff K (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781

Lake DA, Martin LL, Risse T (2021) Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization. International Organization, 75 (2): 225–257. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636

Larson DW (2015) Will China be a new type of great power? The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2015-4 (8): 323-348. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48615942

Larson DW (2017) Social identity theory: Status and identity in international relations. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.290

Larson DW, Shevchenko A (2010) Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to U.S. primacy. International Security, 2010-04 (34): 63-95. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40784562

Lu C, Lv X (2008) *An analysis of China-US Strategic Economic Dialogue Mechanism.* World Economic and Politics Forum, 1007-1369 (2008) 3-0032-06. https://www.docin.com/p-1664110741/html. Accessed: 20/03/2023.

Luigi B (2013) *China and the EU through an IR framework: the High Level Economic*

and Trade Dialogue. University of Twente Essay (Master). https://essay.utwente.nl/63636/1/CH-EU_HLETD_Luigi_Barella.pdf. Accessed: 13/03/2023.

Master L, Bugnar N, Bodog S (2010) The strategic dialogue: EU-China. Ann Oradea Univ Fasc Manag Technol Eng 9 (2).

MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the P.R.C., 2014) Liu Yandong chairs the second meeting of the China-EU High-Level People-to-People Dialogue Mechanism. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/xos_673625/dqzz_673633/oumeng/xgxw_673641/201409/t20140907_10412300.shtml. Accessed 8 September 2025.

MFA (2015) The third meeting of the China-EU High-Level People-to-People Dialogue Mechanism held in Brussels: Liu Yandong presides and delivers remarks. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/xos_673625/dqzz_673633/oumeng/xgxw_673641/201509/t20150916_10412332.shtml. Accessed 10 September 2025.

MFA (2020) Wang Yi holds the fifth round of China-Germany Foreign and Security Strategic Dialogue with German Foreign Minister Maas. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679086/xgxw_679092/202002/t20200214_9334788.shtml. Accessed 10 September 2025.

MFA (2024) Wang Yi holds the seventh round of China-Germany Foreign and Security Strategic Dialogue with German Foreign Minister Baerbock. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202412/t20241202_11536694.shtml. Accessed 8 September 2025.

MFA (2025a) The seventh meeting of the China-France High-Level People-to-People Dialogue Mechanism held in Paris. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202507/t20250705_11665858.shtml. Accessed 10 September 2025.

MFA (2025b) The 10th China-UK Strategic Dialogue held in London. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202502/t20250214_11554859.shtml. Accessed 8 September 2025.

MFA (2025c) Xi Jinping's speech at the "SCO Plus" meeting: Pooling strength to improve global governance. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202509/t20250901_11699539.shtml. Accessed 16 September 2025.

MFA (2025d) Xi Jinping's speech at the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202509/t20250903_11701068.shtml. Accessed 16 September 2025.

MFA (2025e) Xi Jinping's speech at the reception commemorating the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202509/t20250903_11701263.shtml. Accessed 16 September 2025.

MFA (2025f) Wang Yi: China and Germany should jointly act as advocates of multilateralism, defenders of free trade, and contributors to open development. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202507/t20250704_116 64872.shtml. Accessed 16 September 2025.

MFA (2025g) Keeping pace with the times to advance reform and improvement of the global governance system. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202508/t20250822_116943 05.shtml. Accessed 16 September 2025.

MoE (Ministry of Education of the P.R.C., 2012) Liu Yandong presides over the first meeting of the China-EU High-Level People-to-People Dialogue Mechanism. https://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/201204. Accessed 10 September 2025.

MoE (2017) The fourth meeting of the China-France High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism held: Vice Premier Liu Yandong and French Foreign Minister Le Drian jointly preside. www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/201711/t20171128_320122.html. Accessed 10 September 2025.

MoE (2020) Joint press statement of the fifth meeting of the China-EU High-Level People-to-People Dialogue Mechanism. www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_1946/fj_2020/202011/t20201110_499245.html. Accessed 8 September 2025.

MoF (Ministry of Finance of the P.R.C., 2025) Policy outcomes of the 11th China-UK Economic and Financial Dialogue. The State Council of the People's Republic of China.

https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202501/content_6998409.htm. Accessed 8 September 2025.

Mondré A (2015) Forum shopping in international disputes. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137466655

Mladenov NS (2021) China's Rise to Power in the Global Order: Grand Strategic Implications. ISBN 978-3-030-66452-7 (eBook). https://www.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66452-7

Moroz I (2019) The role of state and non-State actors in the EU-China High-Level People-to-People Dialogue. Thesis, Aalborg University and University of International Relations.

Murphy H, Kellow A (2013) Forum shopping in global governance: understanding states, business and NGOs in multiple arenas. Glob Policy 4 (2): May 2013. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-5899.2012.00195.x

Ning J (2009) *U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue Mechanism and its impact on contemporary U.S.-China relations*. https://www.docin.com/p-749693334.html?docfrom=rrela. Accessed: 26 November 26 2022

Nye JS (1990) Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power. New York: Basic Books.

Nye JS (2004) Soft power: The means to success in world politics. New York: Public Affairs.

Nye JS (2011) The future of power. New York: Public Affairs.

Nye JS (2015) The limits of Chinese soft power. Project Syndicate. https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-07. Accessed 10 July 2025

Nye JS (2022) How not to deal with a rising China: a US perspective. International Affairs, 2022-5 (98): 1635-1651. https://doi.org/0.1093/ia/iiac117

Nye JS (2023) Soft power and great-power competition - shifting sands in the balance of power between the United States and China. Springer.

Nye JS (2024) INTERVIEW with Joseph Nye: Cooperative rivalry can move relations forward. China-US Focus. https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/interview-with-joseph-nye-cooperative-rivalry-can-move-relations-forward. Accessed 10 July 2025.

Nunes IS (2006) Multilevel Role Prescriptions -Portugal, NATO and The CFSP. University of Twente (Doctoral).

Oppermann K (2024) Unpacking Altercasting in Role Theory: The Biden Administration's Policy of Altercasting Germany into a Faithful Ally Role in Relations with China. Foreign Policy Analysis, 20 (2): 1.

Paul TV (2021) The study of peaceful change in world politics. In: The Oxford handbook of peaceful change in international relations. New York: Oxford University Press.

Peirce C S (1931–1958) Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Vols. 1–8). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Petrova MH (2016) Rhetorical Entrapment and Normative Enticement: How the United

[Kingdom Turned From Spoiler Into Champion of the Cluster Munition Ban](#). International Studies Quarterly 60 (3): 387-399.

Qin Y (2018) A Relational Theory of World Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316869505

Radzinsky B, Peczeli A, Williams B (2022) Towards strategic dialogue with China. Workshop summary, 8 April. Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

Reichertz J (2007) Abduction: The Logic of Discovery of Grounded Theory. In The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory, eds. Bryant & Charmaz. London: Sage, pp. 214–228. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607941.n10

Robinson W (2020) The Trojan Dragon comes to the Balkans. The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs 44 (2): 29-44. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48599308

Rüland J (2012) The rise of "diminished multilateralism": East Asian and European forum shopping in global governance. Asia Eur J 9:255-270.

Schweller RL, Pu X (2011) After unipolarity: China's visions of international order in an era of U.S. decline. International Security, 2011-01 (36): 41-72. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00044

Shambaugh D (2015) China's soft-power push: The search for respect. Foreign Affairs, 2015-4 (94): 99-107. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483821

Shih C-Y, Huang C-C, et al (2019) China and International Theory: The Balance of Relationships. London: Routledge. 10.4324/9780429423130

Silver L, Huang C, Clancy L (2023) China's approach to foreign policy gets largely negative review in 24-country survey. Pew Research Center, 27 July 2023.

Sina (2025) Wang Yi: China made an important contribution to the final victory of World War II. Sina Finance. https://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2025-09-14/doc-infqmitt5932826.shtml. Accessed 16 September 2025.

State Council Information Office, P.R.China. The human rights situation in China (1991); Seeking happiness for people: 70 years of progress on human rights in China (2019); China's national security in the new era (2025).

Strauss A, Corbin J (1998) Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/basics-of-qualitative-research/book235578

Strüver G (2017) China's partnership diplomacy: international alignment based on interests or ideology. Chin J Int Polit 10 (1): 31–65. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pow015

Stuenkel O (2016) Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order. Malden: Polity Press.

Tavory I (2018) Between situations: Anticipation, rhythms, and the theory of interaction. Sociological Theory, 36 (2), 117–133. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275118777007

Tavory I, Timmermans S (2014) Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Thies C (2016) The US and China altercast roles and changing power in the 20th century. In China's International Roles-Challenging or supporting international order? Harnisch, Sebastian, Bersick, Sebastian, and Gottwald, Jörn-Carsten (eds). New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315692708

Thies CG (2017) Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis in Latin America. Foreign Policy Analysis 13 (3): 662–681. https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12072

Timmermans S, Tavory I (2012) Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis. Sociological Theory, 30(3): 167–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914

Trepte S, Loy LS (2017) *Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory*

Turcsányi R (2014) Central and Eastern Europe's courtship with China: Trojan horse within the EU? European Institute for Asian Studies.

Twomey C, Glosny M, Wueger D, Jacobs R (2016) U.S.-China strategic dialogue, phase IX report. Naval Postgraduate School Center on Contemporary Conflict.

Wang J (2011) Soft power in China public diplomacy through communication. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wang Y (2008) Public diplomacy and the rise of Chinese soft power. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 616 (1): 257–273. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207312757

Weinstein EA, Deutschberger P (1963) Some dimensions of altercasting. Sociometry 26 (4): 454-466. https://doi.org/10.2307/2786148

Wu L (2025) Ghosting diplomacy: China's silent treatment amid great power competition, International Affairs, 101 (5): 1793–1813, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf056

Xinhua (2012) Liu Yandong presides over the first meeting of the China-UK High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism. Central Government Portal of the P.R.C. https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2012-04/17/content_2114968.htm. Accessed 10 September 2025.

Xinhua (2014) Liu Yandong presides over the launch ceremony of the China-France High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism. Central Government Portal of the P.R.C. https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2014-09/19/content_2752976.htm. Accessed 10 September 2025.

Xinhua (2015) Liu Yandong presides over the second meeting of the China-France High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism. Central Government Portal of the P.R.C. https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2015-05/15/content_2862918.htm. Accessed 10 September 2025.

Xinhua (2016) The third meeting of the China-France High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism held in Paris. Central Government Portal of the P.R.C. https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-07/01/content_5087387.htm. Accessed 10 September 2025.

Xinhua (2017a) Liu Yandong presides over the first meeting of the China-Germany High-Level People-to-People Dialogue Mechanism. Central Government Portal of the

P.R.C. https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2017-05/24/content_5196552.htm. Accessed 10 September 2025.

Xinhua (2017b) Liu Yandong and Navracsics jointly preside over the fourth meeting of the China-EU High-Level People-to-People Dialogue Mechanism. Central Government Portal of the P.R.C. https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2017-11/14/content_5239698.htm. Accessed 10 September 2025.

Xinhua (2017c) The fifth meeting of the China-UK High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism held in London. Central Government Portal of the P.R.C. https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2017-12/08/content_5245192.htm. Accessed 10 September 2025.

Xinhua (2019) Wang Yi and French Foreign Minister Le Drian co-chair the fifth meeting of the China-France High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism. https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2019-10/22/content_5443106.htm. Accessed 8 September 2025.

Xinhua (2024) The sixth meeting of the China-EU High-Level People-to-People Dialogue Mechanism held: Shen Yiqin and Ivanova jointly attended. Central Government Portal of the P.R.C. https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202403/content_6942370.htm. Accessed 10 September 2025.

Xinhua (2025) PLA symposium commemorating the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War held: Zhang Youxia delivers speech. Ministry of National Defense of

the People's Republic of China. http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16405041.html. Accessed 16 September 2025.

Yan X (2011) Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Yan X (2019) Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Yang YE (2021) China's strategic narratives in global governance reform under Xi Jinping. Journal of Contemporary China, 2020-30 (128): 299-313. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1790904

Zarakol A (2022) Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108975377

Zeng Y (2023) Riding the Trojan horse? EU accession and Chinese investment in CEE countries. Journal of Contemporary China. 33 (147): 486-501. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2023.2196507

Zhang H (2010) China-US strategic economic dialogue and China-US relations. Thesis, University of International Business and Economics

Zhao T (2011) The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of World Institution. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.

Zhao T (2021) All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order. Translated by Joseph E. Harroff. Berkeley: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1n9dkth

Zoellick RB (2005) Whither China: From membership to responsibility? Speech delivered 21 September. U.S. Department of State

Zoellick RB (2020) The China challenge. The National Interest, 166: 10-20. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27157173

Zubair B (2023) Chinese soft power and public diplomacy in the United States. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-7576-1

8 Appendices

Appendix Table A: China-Europe SD: Primary Documents Analysed

Dialogue	Type of Document	English Title (Translated)	Date of Document	Source	Date Accessed
1st China–EU SD	Embassy – Official News	Dai Bingguo and Catherine Ashton Hold the First China–EU High-Level SD	01/09/2010	https://jo.china-embassy.gov.cn/zgyw/201009/t20100901_1980919.htm	04/01/2026
2nd China–EU SD	MFA – Official News[32]	China and the EU Hold the Second High-Level SD	12/05/2011	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201105/t20110513_313269.shtml	04/01/2026
3rd China–EU SD	MFA – Official News	The Third China–EU High-Level SD Held in Beijing	10/07/2012	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201207/t201	04/01/2026

---

[32] For MFA materials, the label "MFA Official News" is used throughout to denote MFA-issued online communications, irrespective of website subcategory—such as "Important News", "Relevant News", and "Foreign Minister's Activities"—as these distinctions do not affect the analytical status of the texts as official MFA communications.

				20710_319689.s html	
3rd China–EU SD Joint Press Release	Consulate–General – Official News	Joint Press Release of the Third China–EU High-Level SD	10/07/2012	https://saintpetersburg.china-consulate.gov.cn/chn/zgxw/201207/t20120711_3856443.htm	04/01/2026
4th China–EU SD	MFA – Official News	China and the EU Hold the Fourth High-Level SD	28/01/2014	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201401/t20140128_326417.shtml	04/01/2026
5th China–EU SD	MFA – Official News	China and the EU Hold the Fifth High-Level SD	06/05/2015	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/1206_679930/xgxw_679936/201505/t20150506_9389098.shtml	04/01/2026

6th China–EU SD	Xinhua – News Report	The Sixth China–EU High-Level SD Held in Brussels	11/06/2016	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-06/11/content_5080961.htm	04/01/2026
7th China–EU SD	MFA Official News	The Seventh China–EU High-Level SD Held in Beijing	19/04/2017	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/xos_673625/xwlb_673627/201704/t20170419_7638803.shtml	04/01/2026
8th China–EU SD	Xinhua – News Report	China and the EU Hold the Eighth High-Level SD	01/06/2018	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-06/01/content_5295626.htm	04/01/2026
9th China–EU SD	Mission to the EU –	China and the EU Hold the Ninth High-Level SD	18/03/2019	https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/zozyzcwj/20210112/202101/t20	04/01/2026

		Official News			210112_8433677.htm	
10th China–EU SD	MFA – Official News	China and the EU Hold the Tenth High-Level SD	09/06/2020	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202006/t20200609_361006.shtml	04/01/2026	
11th China–EU SD	Mission to the EU – Official News	Wang Yi and Josep Borrell Co-chair the Eleventh China–EU High-Level SD	29/09/2021	https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/zozyzcwj/20210112/202109/t20210929_9593771.htm	04/01/2026	
12th China–EU SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Josep Borrell Hold the China–EU High-Level SD	13/10/2023	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/1206_679930/xgxw_679936/202310/t20231013_11160767.shtml	04/01/2026	

13th China–EU SD	MFA – Official News	China and the EU Hold the Thirteenth High-Level SD	03/07/2025	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202507/t20250703_11664024.shtml	04/01/2026
1st China–UK SD	Embassy – Official News	China–UK SD Held in Beijing	14/07/2010	https://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/zgwj/201007/t20100715_1522056.htm	04/01/2026
2nd China–UK SD	MFA – Official News	Dai Bingguo and William Hague Hold China–UK SD	27/09/2011	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679906/xgxw_679912/201109/t20110927_9353262.shtml	04/01/2026
6th China–UK SD	MFA – Official News	Yang Jiechi and William Hague	28/02/2014	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/g	04/01/2026

			Hold China–UK SD		j_676203/oz_67 8770/1206_679 906/xgxw_6799 12/201402/t201 40228_9353312 .shtml	
7th China–UK SD	Xinhua – News Report	Yang Jiechi and Philip Hammond Co-chair China–UK SD	13/08/2015	https://www.gov .cn/guowuyuan/ 2015-08/13/content_2 912439.htm	04/01/2026
8th China–UK SD	Xinhua – News Report	The Eighth China–UK SD Held in London	21/12/2016	https://www.gov .cn/guowuyuan/ 2016-12/21/content_5 150828.htm	04/01/2026
9th China–UK SD	Embass y News	Wang Yi and Jeremy Hunt Hold the Ninth China–UK SD	30/07/2018	https://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/ zgyw/201807/t2 0180730_32954 67.htm	04/01/2026

10th China–UK SD	MFA – Official News	The Tenth China–UK SD Held in London	14/02/2025	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202502/t20250214_11554859.shtml	04/01/2026
16th China–France SD	MFA – Official News	Yang Jiechi and French Presidential Diplomatic Adviser Jean-Paul Hold China–France SD	27/02/2014	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679134/xgxw_679140/201402/t20140227_9338562.shtml	04/01/2026
17th China–France SD	MFA – Official News	Yang Jiechi and Étienne Hold China–France SD	19/12/2017	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679134/xgxw_679140/201712/t20171219_9338748.shtml	04/01/2026

18th China–France SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Étienne Hold Consultations	24/01/2019	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679134/xgxw_679140/201901/t20190124_9338778.shtml	04/01/2026
19th China–France SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Bonne Hold Lead Representatives' Consultations of the China–France SD	19/07/2019	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679134/xgxw_679140/201907/t20190719_9338810.shtml	04/01/2026
20th China–France SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Bonne Co-chair the 20th China–France SD	15/07/2020	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web//wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202007/t20200715_7587860.shtml	04/01/2026

21st China–France SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Bonne Co-chair China–France SD	29/01/2021	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202101/t20210129_7478330.shtml	04/01/2026
22nd China–France SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Bonne Co-chair China–France SD	13/01/2022	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202201/t20220113_10495310.shtml	04/01/2026
23rd China–France SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Bonne Co-chair China–France SD	17/02/2023	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202302/t20230217_11026300.shtml	04/01/2026
24th China–France SD	MFA Official News	Wang Yi and Bonne Hold China–France SD	30/10/2023	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679134/xgxw_679140	04/01/2026

				/202310/t20231030_11170775.shtml	
25th China–France SD	MFA – Official News	China–France SD Held in Paris	21/02/2024	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202402/t20240221_11247709.shtml	04/01/2026
26th China–France SD	MFA – Official News	China–France SD Held in Beijing	14/12/2024	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202412/t20241218_11496875.shtml	04/01/2026
1st China–Germany SD	MFA – Official News	Chinese and German Foreign Ministers Hold the First Ministerial-level SD	01/04/2011	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679086/xgxw_679092/201104/t20110401_9334411.shtml	04/01/2026

2nd China–Germany SD	MFA – Official News	China and Germany Hold the Second Ministerial-level SD	08/12/2011	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/ywzt_675099/2011nzt_675363/yjcwzbfhwtdwzh_675383/201112/t20111208_9284756.shtml	04/01/2026
3rd China–Germany SD	Embassy – Official News	The Third China–Germany Ministerial-level SD Held in Beijing	11/10/2012	https://ro.china-embassy.gov.cn/zgyw/201210/t20121011_2545744.htm	04/01/2026
4th China–Germany SD	MFA – Official News	China and Germany Hold the Fourth Ministerial-level SD	14/04/2014	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679086/xgxw_679092/201404/t201	04/01/2026

				40414_9334513 .shtml	
1ˢᵗ China– Germany SDDS	MFA – Official News	First China– Germany SDDS Held in Berlin	19/12/2015	https://www.fm prc.gov.cn/web/ wjbz_673089/xg hd_673097/201 512/t20151219_ 7583611.shtml	04/01/2026
1ˢᵗ China– Germany SDDS Joint Press Release	MFA – Official News	Joint Press Release of the First China– Germany SDDS	19/12/2015	https://www.fm prc.gov.cn/wjbz _673089/zyhd_6 73091/201512/t 20151219_7469 913.shtml	04/01/2026
2ⁿᵈ China– Germany SDDS	MFA – Official News	Second China– Germany SDDS Held in Beijing	08/04/2016	https://www.fm prc.gov.cn/web/ wjbz_673089/zy hd_673091/201 604/t20160408_ 7576182.shtml	04/01/2026

3rd China–Germany SDDS	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Vice Chancellor/Foreign Minister Gabriel Hold the Third China–Germany SDDS	27/04/2017	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679086/xgxw_679092/201704/t20170427_9334670.shtml	04/01/2026
4th China–Germany SDDS	Xinhua – News Report	Wang Yi and German Foreign Minister Hold China–Germany SDDS	13/11/2018	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-11/13/content_5339989.htm	04/01/2026
5th China–Germany SDDS	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and German Foreign Minister Maas Hold the Fifth China–Germany SDDS	14/02/2020	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679086/xgxw_679092/202002/t20200214_9334788.shtml	04/01/2026

6th China–Germany SDDS	MFA – Official News	Qin Gang and German Foreign Minister Baerbock Hold the Sixth China–Germany SDDS	14/04/2023	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202304/t20230414_11059531.shtml	04/01/2026
7th China–Germany DSSD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and German Foreign Minister Baerbock Hold the Seventh China–Germany DSSD	02/12/2024	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202412/t20241202_11536694.shtml	04/01/2026
8th China–Germany SDDS	MFA – Official News	China and Germany Hold the Eighth SDDS	04/07/2025	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202507/t20250704_11664854.shtml	04/01/2026
1st China–Portugal SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Portuguese State Minister and Foreign Minister Silva Hold the First	22/07/2021	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web//wjbzhd/202107/t20210722_9137687.shtml	04/01/2026

		China–Portugal SD			
2ⁿᵈ China–Portugal SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Portuguese Foreign Minister Rangel Hold the China–Portugal SD	25/03/2025	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web//wjbzhd/202503/t20250325_11581500.shtml	04/01/2026
1ˢᵗ China–Poland SD	Embassy – Official News	Vice Minister Song Tao and Polish Undersecretary of State Hold the First China–Poland SD	22/03/2012	https://pl.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/zbgx/201203/t20120322_2174597.htm	04/01/2026
2ⁿᵈ China–Poland SD	MFA – Official News	Vice Foreign Minister Wang Chao and Polish Undersecretary of State Far Hold the Second China–Poland Vice-	11/05/2014	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679012/xgxw_679018/201405/t20140511_9333204.shtml	04/01/2026

		Foreign-Minister SD			
3rd China–Poland SD	MFA – Official News	Vice Foreign Minister Wang Chao Visits Poland to Hold the Third China–Poland Vice-Foreign-Minister SD	19/04/2015	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679012/xgxw_679018/201504/t20150419_9333205.shtml	04/01/2026
4th China–Poland SD	MFA – Official News	Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Haixing and Polish Side Hold the Fourth China–Poland Vice-Foreign-Minister SD	14/05/2016	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679012/xgxw_679018/201605/t20160514_9333226.shtml	04/01/2026
5th China–Poland SD	MFA – Official News	Vice Foreign Minister Wang Chao and Polish Undersecretary of	28/09/2017	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web//wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/xos_6	04/01/2026

		State Magierowski Hold the China–Poland Vice-Foreign-Minister SD		73625/xwlb_673627/201709/t20170928_7639395.shtml	
6th China–Poland SD	MFA – Official News	Vice Foreign Minister Wang Chao Visits Poland	04/03/2019	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/xos_673625/xwlb_673627/201903/t20190304_7640237.shtml	04/01/2026
7th China–Poland SD	MFA – Official News	Vice Foreign Minister Deng Li and Polish Undersecretary of State Gierwiel Hold the China–Poland SD	18/04/2023	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/wjbxw_674885/202304/t20230418_11061196.shtml	04/01/2026

1st China–Switzerland SD	Xinhua – News Report	Wang Yi and Swiss Federal Councillor and Foreign Minister Cassis Hold the First China–Switzerland Foreign Ministers' SD	03/04/2018	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-04/03/content_5279606.htm	04/01/2026
2nd China–Switzerland SD	MFA – Official News	Wang Yi and Swiss Federal Councillor and Foreign Minister Cassis Co-chair the Second China–Switzerland Foreign Ministers' SD	23/10/2019	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbz_673089/zyhd_673091/201910/t20191023_7472471.shtml	04/01/2026
3rd China–Switzerland SD	MFA – Official News	China and Switzerland Hold the Third Foreign Ministers' SD	07/02/2024	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202402/t2	04/01/2026

				0240207_11242 328.shtml	
4th China–Switzerland SD	MFA – Official News	China and Switzerland Hold the Fourth Foreign Ministers' SD	11/10/2025	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202510/t20251011_11730556.shtml	04/01/2026
4th China–Switzerland SD Joint Statement	MFA – Official News	Joint Document of the Fourth China–Switzerland Foreign Ministers' SD	10/10/2025	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/202510/t20251010_11729502.shtml	04/01/2026

Appendix Tables B1-B8 – Interpretive Thematic Summaries

Appendix Table B1 – China–EU SD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data
Strategic partnership positioning	The SD consistently frames China–EU relations as a comprehensive strategic partnership, establishing	"China and the EU are comprehensive strategic partners… cooperation is the main tone and ballast of the

	partnership—not rivalry—as the baseline for interaction and insulating the relationship from short-term political fluctuations.	relationship." (9th round, 18 March 2019, MFA)
Peaceful development and non-hegemonic self-presentation	China repeatedly articulates its development trajectory as peaceful and non-hegemonic, positioning its rise as compatible with European interests and global stability.	"China does not seek hegemony in the past, present, or future, and always adheres to the path of peaceful development. China's development is an opportunity for the world and also an opportunity for the European Union." (1st round, 1 September 2010, MFA)
Management of differences through dialogue and consultation	Differences are acknowledged but explicitly channelled into dialogue and consultation mechanisms, reinforcing engagement while limiting escalation or rupture.	"The two sides agreed to handle differences and concerns in a constructive manner, through dialogue and consultation, on the basis of mutual respect and equality." (3rd round Joint Press Release, 10 July 2012, Consulate-General)
Support for multilateralism and	The SD consistently links bilateral engagement to shared	"Both sides support multilateralism, uphold the authority of the United

the UN-centred international system	commitments to multilateralism, the UN, and rules-based global governance, situating China–EU relations within a broader systemic role.	Nations, and are committed to maintaining an international order based on international law." (10th round, 9 June 2020, MFA)
Strategic coordination on global and regional issues	The dialogue serves as a platform for coordinating positions on major international and regional issues, reinforcing the global scope of China–EU strategic engagement.	"The two sides agreed to strengthen communication and coordination on major international and regional issues, including climate change, non-proliferation, and regional hotspot issues." (6th round, 10 June 2016, MFA)
Economic openness and opposition to protectionism and decoupling	Later SD rounds increasingly emphasise openness, opposition to protectionism and decoupling, and the preservation of economic interdependence as shared strategic interests.	"The two sides should adhere to openness and cooperation, oppose "decoupling and breaking chains", and promote trade and investment cooperation." (12th round, 13 October 2023, MFA)

Institutional continuity and dialogue regularisation	The SD is repeatedly reaffirmed as a standing mechanism whose regularisation itself is treated as politically meaningful and confidence-building.	"Both sides agreed to continue to hold the China–EU High-Level Strategic Dialogue on a regular basis to enhance understanding and mutual trust." (2nd round, 12 May 2011, MFA)

Appendix Table B2 – China–UK SD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data
Strategic partnership framing and continuity	The SD consistently positions China–UK relations within a strategic partnership framework, emphasising continuity, stability, and long-term orientation across political cycles.	"The UK is willing to regard China's development as an opportunity and is prepared to become a strong strategic partner of China, further strengthening the strategic partnership between the two countries." (1st round, 14 July 2010, MFA)
Peaceful development and non-threat reassurance	China repeatedly articulates its development path as peaceful and cooperative, framing its rise as compatible with UK and global interests.	"China is a developing country and will remain focused on development, firmly following the path of peaceful development." (1st round, 14 July 2010, MFA)

Dialogue as a mechanism for managing differences	Differences are acknowledged as normal and are explicitly channelled into dialogue and communication, reinforcing engagement while limiting escalation.	"It is normal that China and the UK have some differences and disagreements. The key is to strengthen dialogue and communication based on mutual respect." (10th round, 13 February 2025, MFA)
Shared commitment to multilateralism and global governance	The SD repeatedly links bilateral engagement to shared responsibilities in multilateral institutions and global governance processes.	"China and the UK, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, should demonstrate major-country responsibility, practise multilateralism, and support free trade." (10th round, 13 February 2025, MFA)
Economic openness and mutual benefit	Economic cooperation and openness are framed as core pillars of the relationship, supporting growth, prosperity, and confidence-building.	"The two sides should further expand cooperation in trade, investment, finance, and other areas, and promote common growth for both countries and the world." (8th round, 20 December 2016, Xinhua)

Strategic dialogue as an institutional stabiliser	The SD is treated as a standing institutional mechanism that sustains communication and trust during periods of uncertainty or transition.	"Through strategic dialogue and candid exchanges, the two sides can enhance mutual understanding and trust, expand common interests, reduce frictions, and promote cooperation." (1st round, 14 July 2010, MFA)
Coordination on international and regional issues	The dialogue provides a platform for exchanging views and coordinating positions on international and regional hotspot issues.	"The two sides exchanged views on international and regional hotspot issues including climate change, the Iranian nuclear issue, and the Korean Peninsula." (9th round, 30 July 2018, MFA)

Appendix Table B3 – China–France SD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data
Strategic anchoring within a comprehensive strategic partnership	The SD is consistently framed as a stabilising, long-term mechanism embedded in the China–France comprehensive strategic partnership, emphasising continuity,	"China–France relations have long been at the forefront of China's relations with Western countries… China is willing to work with France to further consolidate political mutual trust and push the China–France

	maturity, and political reassurance across leadership cycles and systemic change.	comprehensive strategic partnership to a new level." (17th round, 19 Dec 2017, Xinhua)
Mutual respect for core interests and political foundations	Dialogue repeatedly reaffirms respect for sovereignty, core interests, and non-interference as the political foundation enabling sustained strategic engagement despite differences.	"The two sides should continue to respect and accommodate each other's core interests and major concerns, consolidate strategic mutual trust, and enhance the stability and predictability of bilateral relations." (21st round, 29 Jan 2021, Xinhua)
Multilateralism and great-power responsibility	The SD positions China and France as responsible major powers committed to multilateralism, UN-centred order, and coordinated responses to global challenges, projecting joint stewardship rather than bloc alignment.	"China and France both advocate multilateralism and oppose unilateralism… As permanent members of the UN Security Council, the two countries should strengthen strategic coordination and jointly respond to global challenges." (19th round, 19 Jul 2019, MFA)
Strategic dialogue as an instrument for managing global uncertainty	Dialogue is explicitly framed as a tool to inject stability and predictability into a volatile international environment,	"In a world full of uncertainty, China and France should become important stabilising forces… cooperation should be the main tone and driving force of

	elevating the SD beyond bilateral management to systemic reassurance.	China–France relations." (20th round, 15 Jul 2020, Xinhua)
Linkage between strategic dialogue and practical cooperation	The SD functions as a coordinating platform that provides political guidance for sectoral cooperation (nuclear, aerospace, economy, climate, third-party markets), integrating strategy with implementation.	"China is willing to deepen cooperation with France in nuclear energy, aviation, aerospace and third-party markets, and to strengthen policy and development-strategy alignment." (18th round, 24 Jan 2019, Xinhua)
China–France dialogue as a pillar shaping China–Europe relations	France is repeatedly framed as a key interlocutor within Europe, with the SD positioned as contributing to the broader stability and direction of China–EU relations.	"China hopes France will continue to play a positive and constructive role in promoting the healthy and stable development of China–EU relations." (22nd round, 13 Jan 2022, Xinhua)
Institutional continuity and regularised strategic communication	Recurrent references to the longevity and institutionalisation of the SD underline its role as a routinised diplomatic	"Over the past 20 years since its establishment, the China–France Strategic Dialogue mechanism has directly served the two heads of state and played a positive role in

	infrastructure serving leaders and buffering bilateral relations against shocks.	maintaining the healthy development of bilateral relations." (21st round, 29 Jan 2021, Xinhua)

Appendix Table B4 – China–Germany SD and SDDS: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data
Strategic anchoring within an all-round strategic partnership	The SD is consistently framed as a high-level mechanism consolidating and upgrading the bilateral relationship (from "strategic partnership" to "all-round strategic partnership"), signalling continuity, elevated positioning, and long-horizon cooperation beyond economics.	"The leaders of the two countries decided to elevate the bilateral relationship to an "all-round strategic partnership", setting the direction and goals for future China–Germany cooperation." (4th round, 14 Apr 2014, Xinhua)
Mutual respect, political trust, and accommodation of major interests	Dialogue discourse repeatedly foregrounds political trust as the foundation of stable ties, emphasising mutual respect, understanding on	"Mutual respect and mutual trust are the foundation for the development of bilateral relations; common interests are an important

	sovereignty/core interests, and constructive handling of differences as a condition for sustained cooperation.	driving force for cooperation." (2nd round, 7 Dec 2011, MFA)
Economic complementarity and openness as the "foundational basis"	SD narratives strongly prioritise openness, reciprocity, and complementarity—explicitly portraying win–win cooperation as the baseline logic and rejecting protectionism/decoupling, while requesting fair treatment for firms and investment.	"Complementarity and win–win cooperation are the "basic foundation" of China–Germany relations… the two sides will adhere to the path of open, win–win cooperation." (5th SDDS round, 13 Feb 2020, Xinhua)
Linkage between strategic dialogue and cross-domain mechanisms	The SD is positioned as a coordinating platform that activates and aligns multiple institutional tracks (government consultations, people-to-people, finance, security), turning strategic signalling into routinised, multi-channel cooperation.	"The two sides agreed to… implement arrangements for the three high-level dialogue mechanisms in people-to-people, finance, and security." (3rd SDDS round, 26 Apr 2017, MFA)

Multilateralism and global governance coordination	Dialogue regularly frames China–Germany cooperation as a joint contribution to multilateral governance (UN, G20, WTO), presenting the pair as system-stabilising actors and emphasising coordination under global uncertainty.	"China and Germany should deepen all-round strategic cooperation, jointly uphold multilateralism, and safeguard the global free trade system." (4th SDDS round, 13 Nov 2018, Xinhua)
China–Europe linkage and Germany's leading role in Europe	Germany is repeatedly cast as a pivotal European actor, with the SD used to project influence into China–EU agenda-setting (investment agreement, Europe's integration, trade disputes), positioning Germany as an interlocutor shaping broader China–Europe relations.	"China attaches importance to Germany's important position within the EU and is willing to work with Germany to push China–EU relations to a new level." (3rd round, 11 Oct 2012, Xinhua)
Managing strategic differences through dialogue and de-ideologised framing	Across later rounds, the SD increasingly institutionalises "partners not rivals" signalling— explicitly rejecting Cold War binaries, stressing non-targeting	"Differences and disagreements exist between China and Germany, but differences should not become obstacles to cooperation, and disagreements should even less be

	of third parties, and normalising differences as manageable through dialogue.	reasons for confrontation." (7th SDDS round, 2 Dec 2024, MFA China)

Appendix Table B5 – China–Portugal SD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data
Strategic anchoring in a comprehensive strategic partnership	The SD is framed as a strategic, long-horizon channel to consolidate a "comprehensive strategic partnership", foregrounding continuity, traditional friendship, and relationship resilience under external shocks.	"China and Portugal have established a comprehensive strategic partnership, and friendly exchanges and cooperation have always been the main theme of China–Portugal relations." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, MFA)
Mutual respect and political trust as the relationship's political guarantee	The dialogue repeatedly presents mutual respect/support as the foundational political condition for stability, explicitly elevating it as the guarantee for long-term	"China and Portugal have a good tradition of mutual respect and mutual support; this is the fundamental reason for the long-term stable development of China–Portugal relations, and also the political guarantee for the steady and sustained progress of the bilateral

	cooperation and orderly management of sensitive issues.	relationship." (2nd round, 25 Mar 2025, MFA)
Macau as a model of negotiated settlement and an institutional bridge	Macau is mobilised both as legitimacy evidence (peaceful settlement of historical issues) and as an enabling mechanism for future cooperation, functioning as a distinctive bilateral "success story" and bridging asset.	"The two sides used political wisdom to properly resolve the Macao issue, setting a model for resolving historical issues through friendly consultations." (2nd round, 25 Mar 2025, MFA)
Openness, investment facilitation, and sectoral cooperation as visible outcomes	The SD foregrounds investment and practical cooperation (energy/finance/infrastructure/ health, plus green and digital transition) and uses "open" market language to stabilise expectations and encourage project-based continuity.	"Portugal's market will always be open to Chinese enterprises." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, MFA)

Multilateralism and UN-centred order as shared positioning	Both rounds explicitly script China and Portugal as aligned defenders of multilateralism and a UN-centred international system, positioning coordination as a core function of the SD beyond bilateral management.	"Both sides are firm supporters of multilateralism and both advocates safeguarding the international system with the United Nations at its core." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, MFA)
China–EU linkage and support for "European strategic autonomy"	The SD embeds bilateral cooperation within a wider China–Europe frame, repeatedly calling for Europe's strategic autonomy and for Portugal to play a constructive role in steering China–EU relations back onto a "healthy" track.	"China has always supported European integration and supports Europe in upholding a position of strategic autonomy." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, MFA)
Contesting politicisation and reinforcing "science/professio nal boundaries"	Particularly in 2021, the SD operationalises de-politicisation language (public health, origins tracing) as a procedural containment	"Science and politics should each have their own boundary." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, MFA)

device—rejecting "political manipulation" and asserting a science–politics boundary to protect cooperation.	

Appendix Table B6 – China–Poland SD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data
Strategic anchoring through institutionalised dialogue mechanisms	The SD is consistently framed as a platform mechanism to stabilise and advance China–Poland relations, with emphasis on the dialogue itself as an enabling institutional infrastructure rather than on discrete outcomes.	"Both sides positively assessed the good momentum of China–Poland relations and agreed that full use should be made of platforms such as the strategic dialogue to enhance understanding and mutual trust and to promote exchanges and cooperation." (1st round, 21 Mar 2012, MFA)
Partnership consolidation under principles of mutual respect and equality	Official statements repeatedly invoke mutual respect, equality, and reciprocity as governing principles, anchoring bilateral cooperation within a	"China is willing, in accordance with the principles of mutual respect and equality, to work with Poland to promote the comprehensive and in-depth development of the China–Poland

	normatively balanced partnership framework.	strategic partnership." (1st round, 21 Mar 2012, MFA)
Poland positioned as a key EU and Central–Eastern European interlocutor	Poland is regularly identified as an important EU and Central–Eastern European state, situating the SD within a broader regional and China–Europe diplomatic architecture.	"Poland is an important country in the European Union and in Central and Eastern Europe." (1st round, 21 Mar 2012, MFA)
Embedding bilateral dialogue within China–EU and China–CEE cooperation frameworks	The SD systematically links bilateral engagement to wider China–EU relations and China–Central and Eastern Europe cooperation, indicating deliberate agenda nesting rather than isolated bilateralism.	"The two sides exchanged views on bilateral relations, China–Central and Eastern European countries cooperation, China–EU relations, and other issues of common concern." (2nd round, 10 May 2014, MFA)
Economic cooperation framed as pragmatic	Trade, finance, technology, and people-to-people exchanges are repeatedly referenced as practical cooperation areas,	"The Polish side expressed willingness to work with China to expand practical cooperation in trade, finance, technology and people-to-people exchanges." (4th round, 13 May 2016, MFA)

expansion across sectors	reinforcing the SD's role in enabling incremental, sector-based engagement.	
Participation in Belt and Road and China–CEE cooperation as cooperative alignment	References to the Belt and Road Initiative and China–CEE cooperation appear as alignment signals, framing Poland as a cooperative participant rather than a policy challenger.	"Poland highly values and actively participates in the Belt and Road Initiative and China–Central and Eastern European countries cooperation." (4th round, 13 May 2016, MFA)
Dialogue as a stabilising channel amid international and regional uncertainty	In later rounds, the SD is explicitly framed as contributing stability under conditions of international volatility, highlighting continuity of engagement rather than escalation or divergence.	"Under the current complex and turbulent international situation, developing China–Poland relations is conducive to injecting more stability into the world." (7th round, 18 Apr 2023, MFA)

Appendix Table B7 – China–Switzerland SD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data
Strategic anchoring of dialogue within an innovation-oriented partnership	The SD is framed as an institutional mechanism to implement leaders' consensus and to advance the China–Switzerland innovative strategic partnership, emphasising continuity and forward momentum.	"Holding the China–Switzerland foreign ministers' strategic dialogue and promoting the establishment of a high-level innovation platform is an important measure to implement the important consensus reached by the two heads of state and to advance the China–Switzerland innovative strategic partnership." (1st round, 3 Apr 2018, Xinhua)
Bilateral relationship framed as a model of equality and mutual respect	Official discourse repeatedly presents China–Switzerland relations as an exemplar of equal treatment, mutual respect, and cooperation across differences in size, system, and culture.	"Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, China and Switzerland have upheld the spirit of equality, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation, and have built an innovative strategic partnership, becoming a model for friendly exchanges between countries of different social systems, historical cultures, and sizes." (2nd round, 22 Oct 2019, Xinhua)

Innovation and economic cooperation as central pillars of engagement	Innovation, investment, finance, and technology cooperation are consistently highlighted as core substantive pillars, linking strategic dialogue to long-term economic complementarities.	"The two sides should firmly grasp the main line of win-win cooperation and deepen cooperation in areas such as investment, science and technology, and finance." (2nd round, 22 Oct 2019, Xinhua)
Commitment to free trade and opposition to protectionism	The SD repeatedly situates bilateral cooperation within a shared commitment to free trade, market openness, and resistance to unilateralism and protectionism.	"China and Switzerland should jointly uphold multilateralism, adhere to free trade, oppose unilateralism and protectionism, and continue to expand mutual market openness." (2nd round, 22 Oct 2019, Xinhua)
Dialogue embedded in multilateralism and UN-centred international order	Strategic exchanges consistently reaffirm support for multilateralism and the UN-centred international system, positioning the SD within broader global governance norms.	"The two sides will continue to support the United Nations in playing a core role in international affairs and further strengthen multilateral communication and coordination." (3rd round, 7 Feb 2024, MFA)

| Institutionalised cooperation across multiple sectoral mechanisms | The SD emphasises the use of multiple dialogue and cooperation mechanisms to sustain dense, routinised engagement across policy areas. | "The two sides will continue to make good use of multiple intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation mechanisms and deepen cooperation in finance, innovation, education, intellectual property, climate response, and green development." (3rd round, 7 Feb 2024, MFA) |
| People-to-people exchange and symbolic anniversaries as relational stabilisers | Anniversaries, cultural exchanges, and mobility facilitation are highlighted as instruments for consolidating societal foundations and long-term relational stability. | "The two sides will jointly prepare activities for the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and the "China–Switzerland Year of Culture and Tourism" to enhance people-to-people connectivity." (3rd round, 7 Feb 2024, MFA) |

Appendix Table B8 – China–Europe SD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data (synthetic summary)
Strategic anchoring through	Across European counterparts, SDs are consistently framed as regularised, leader-mandated mechanisms designed to stabilise	Summary based on: China–EU SD (multiple rounds); China–UK SD (1st–10th

routinised high-level dialogue	political relations, maintain high-level communication, and provide continuity irrespective of bilateral or regional fluctuations.	rounds); China–France SD (16th–27th rounds); China–Germany SD (1st–8th rounds); China–Portugal SD (1st–2nd rounds); China–Poland SD (1st–7th rounds); China–Switzerland SD (1st–4th rounds).
Partnership framing and political reassurance	China's SDs with European partners recurrently employ partnership vocabularies (strategic partner, comprehensive partner, innovative partner) to signal political reassurance, relational continuity, and mutual recognition, even when acknowledging differences.	Summary based on: China–UK SD (esp. 6th–10th rounds); China–France SD (18th–26th rounds); China–Germany SD (post-2014 rounds); China–Portugal SD (both rounds); China–Switzerland SD (all rounds).
Embedding bilateral SDs within broader China–Europe and EU contexts	Bilateral SDs are frequently linked explicitly to China–Europe relations, EU dynamics, and Europe's role in global affairs, positioning individual European partners as nodes	Summary based on: China–France SD (22nd–26th rounds, EU presidency references); China–Germany SD (multiple rounds referencing EU leadership); China–Poland SD (CEE

	within a wider regional relationship rather than isolated bilateral actors.	and EU linkages); China–Portugal SD (EU coordination emphasis).
Commitment to multilateralism and global governance coordination	SD agendas across Europe consistently prioritise multilateralism, UN-centred international order, and coordination on global challenges (economic governance, climate, security), framing dialogue as a tool for systemic engagement rather than dispute settlement.	Summary based on: China–EU SD; China–France SD; China–Germany SD; China–UK SD; China–Switzerland SD (nearly all rounds referencing UN, G20, WTO, climate, global governance).
Managed articulation of differences through dialogue	Differences (political systems, values, specific disputes) are acknowledged across SDs but are consistently embedded within procedural language emphasising dialogue, consultation, and mutual respect, rather than confrontation or conditionality.	Summary based on: China–UK SD (9th–10th rounds); China–Germany SD (5th–8th rounds); China–France SD (post-2020 rounds); China–Poland SD (multiple rounds); China–Switzerland SD (3rd–4th rounds).

Linkage between SDs and sectoral or parallel dialogue architectures	SDs are routinely presented as providing strategic guidance for parallel mechanisms (economic, financial, people-to-people, security dialogues), reinforcing a layered and coordinated dialogue infrastructure with Europe.	Summary based on: China–EU SD; China–UK SD (references to financial and people-to-people mechanisms); China–France SD (three-pillar dialogue references); China–Germany SD (government consultations, financial dialogue); China–Switzerland SD (sectoral mechanisms).
People-to-people exchange and symbolic diplomacy as stabilising elements	Cultural exchange, anniversaries, mobility facilitation, and historical narratives are recurrently mobilised to reinforce societal foundations and long-term relational stability alongside strategic dialogue.	Summary based on: China–France SD (anniversaries, cultural years); China–Germany SD (youth and cultural exchanges); China–Portugal SD (Macau linkage); China–Switzerland SD (culture and tourism years).

Appendix Tables C1-C7 - Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

Appendix C1 – China–EU SD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
Procedural stabiliser within the LIO	"Both sides welcome the trend toward a multipolar world, support economic globalisation and the democratisation of international relations, uphold multilateralism, and are committed to safeguarding an international system with the United Nations at its core and an international order based on international law." (10th round, 2 July 2014, MFA)	China performs a strategist-reformist role by reaffirming core institutional principles while embedding alternative emphases (multipolarity, democratisation). This reflects IaD as continuity-preserving signalling rather than substantive norm convergence.
Reformist insider role in multilateral governance	"China supports the reform and improvement of the international system, not its replacement, and stands ready to work with the EU to make global governance more	The excerpt positions China as a reformist insider, legitimising recalibration through participation rather than disruption. This supports the CwR logic of incremental

	just and reasonable." (12th round, 16 July 2018, MFA)	adjustment within existing institutional boundaries.
Agenda management through multilateral anchoring	"The two sides agreed to strengthen coordination within the UN, G20 and other multilateral frameworks, and jointly address global challenges." (13th round, 1 Dec 2020, MFA)	Repeated multilateral anchoring functions as agenda containment, stabilising dialogue despite rising bilateral tension. This demonstrates IaD as a mechanism for managing disequilibrium without resolving substantive disagreement.
Boundary-setting on sovereignty and political difference	"China emphasised respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs as fundamental principles guiding China–EU relations." (11th round, 24 May 2016, MFA)	Here China enacts a boundary-setting strategist role, signalling limits to normative engagement while remaining procedurally embedded. This illustrates SRA as calibrated coexistence rather than accommodation.

Appendix C2 – China–UK SD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)

Procedural stabiliser amid systemic change	"In today's interdependent world, especially against the backdrop of the international financial crisis, major countries need to pursue strategic dialogue and candid exchanges to enhance mutual understanding, expand common interests, reduce friction and develop cooperation." (1st round, 14 July 2010, Xinhua)	China performs a procedural stabiliser role, framing strategic dialogue as a necessity of interdependence rather than ideological alignment. This reflects IaD as a continuity-preserving infrastructure under conditions of uncertainty.
Strategist– Reformist framing of multipolar transition	"Economic globalisation and multipolarity are irreversible trends. Countries should adapt to changes of the times and pursue forward-looking foreign policies through strategic dialogue." (2nd round, 26 Sept 2011, Xinhua)	The excerpt situates China as a strategist–reformist actor that normalises systemic transition while rejecting rupture. This supports CwR logic: recalibration through adaptation rather than revisionism.
Agenda containment through partnership vocabulary	"Both sides agreed to expand common ground, properly handle differences and continuously strengthen cooperation." (2nd round, 26 Sept 2011, Xinhua)	Partnership language functions as agenda containment, allowing differences to be acknowledged but bracketed within procedural continuity. This illustrates IaD as

		a means of managing dissonance rather than resolving it.
Boundary-setting on political difference	"China will unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development and respects the diversity of development models." (6th round, 28 Feb 2014, MFA)	China asserts a boundary-setting role, reaffirming sovereign choice while remaining institutionally engaged. This demonstrates SRA role performance without presuming normative convergence.
Stabilisation signalling under deteriorating context	"China and the UK should strengthen strategic communication, enhance mutual understanding, and promote the healthy and stable development of bilateral relations." (10th round, 13 Feb 2025, MFA)	Reiterated stabilisation language signals managed coexistence under strained conditions. Dialogue here functions as IaD—a mechanism to prevent escalation rather than to deepen alignment.

Appendix C3 – China–France SD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)

Partnership consolidation through long-horizon vocabulary	"China is willing to work with France to continue viewing and handling bilateral relations from a strategic and long-term perspective, respect and accommodate each other's core interests and major concerns, and deepen strategic mutual trust." (16th round, 26 Feb 2014, Xinhua)	Signals SRA as a strategic partner-manager: emphasises durability, mutual trust, and bounded cooperation (not alignment).
Institutional thickening via high-level exchanges	"China is willing to maintain high-level dialogue and exchanges at all levels with France and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation." (16th round, 26 Feb 2014, Xinhua)	Performs SRA as an institutional engager: elevates process, continuity, and routinised mechanisms as the vehicle of cooperation.
Multilateral anchoring within the UN-centred order	"China is willing to strengthen communication and coordination with France within the United Nations, the G20, and the WTO frameworks, jointly uphold multilateralism, and maintain the	Frames China as a reformist-stabiliser within the LIO: supports multilateralism and institutional rules rather than rejecting them.

	multilateral trading system." (18th round lead-consultations, 24 Jan 2019, Xinhua)	
Order-reform positioning (global governance improvement)	"Facing the current international situation full of uncertainty and instability, China and France both advocate safeguarding multilateralism and opposing unilateralism… and should further strengthen strategic communication and coordination." (19th round, 19 Jul 2019, MFA)	SRA posture as strategic coordinator: reform language stays inside multilateral frames; no claim of overturning order.
EU linkage via France as a bridge (role-as-interlocutor)	"They agreed to give play to the exemplary role of China–France relations for China–Europe relations, and, taking France's presidency of the EU as an opportunity, promote the healthy and stable development of China–France and China–Europe relations." (22nd round, 13 Jan 2022, Xinhua)	Positions France as a channel into Europe and agenda-shaping venue, consistent with SRA's forum-based engagement.

Boundary signalling on sovereignty-sensitive issues	"France understands the importance and sensitivity of the Taiwan issue and will abide by the one-China principle." (22nd round, 13 Jan 2022, Xinhua)	Role performance combines engagement + boundary-setting: cooperation is conditioned by reaffirmed sovereignty red lines.

Appendix C4 – China–Germany SD / SDDS: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
Procedural stabilisation through partnership framing	"China and Germany are partners, not rivals. Both sides should independently develop their relationship." (5th SDDS round, 13 Feb 2020, Xinhua)	Frames Germany as a partner category rather than an adversary, signalling China's strategist-reformist role in containing rivalry through relational classification rather than alignment or confrontation.

Agenda containment through procedural dialogue	"Both sides should uphold mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs, view differences in social systems and development paths objectively, and properly handle divergences through constructive dialogue." (5th SDDS round, 13 Feb 2020, Xinhua)	Differences are acknowledged but disciplined within dialogue procedures, reinforcing China's role as a rule-aware actor managing divergence without seeking normative convergence.
European centrality and indirect mediation logic	"China values Germany's important and constructive role in European affairs and global governance." (3rd SDDS round, 26 Apr 2017, Xinhua)	Positions Germany as a European anchor, enabling China's indirect engagement with European order debates without direct EU-level norm confrontation.
Economic governance continuity with	"Both sides should uphold openness and win-win cooperation, advance	Reinforces continuity with existing market norms while embedding China's reformist identity through

reformist upgrading	higher-level and higher-quality mutually beneficial cooperation, and ensure that "1+1 > 2" remains the constant model of China–Germany cooperation." (5th SDDS round, 13 Feb 2020, Xinhua)	upgrading cooperation rather than replacing institutional arrangements.
Embedded multilateralism with recalibration	"Both sides should jointly uphold multilateralism and make greater contributions to world peace and development." (4th SDDS round, 13 Nov 2018, Xinhua)	Signals China's embeddedness within the LIO, projecting a reform-from-within posture rather than systemic challenge.
Strategic reassurance under systemic pressure	"China–Germany relations are not directed at any third party and should not be affected by third parties." (7th SDDS	Functions as reassurance signalling, resisting bloc logic while preserving bilateral procedural stability under conditions of systemic rivalry.

	round, 2 Dec 2024, Xinhua)	
Dialogue as diplomatic infrastructure	"The holding of the diplomatic and security strategic dialogue reflects the comprehensive scope and high level of China–Germany relations." (1st SDDS round, 19 Dec 2015, Xinhua)	Treats dialogue itself as statecraft infrastructure, consistent with Institutionalisation-as-Diplomacy and China's strategist-reformist self-positioning.

Appendix C5 – China–Portugal SD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
Partnership stabilisation through strategic continuity	"China has always viewed China–Portugal relations from a strategic and long-term perspective and cherishes the traditional friendship between the two	Frames the relationship as historically grounded and strategically continuous, reinforcing China's strategist posture through stability rather than revisionism.

	countries." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, Xinhua)	
Agenda containment through comprehensive partnership vocabulary	"China and Portugal have established a comprehensive strategic partnership, and friendly exchange and cooperation have always been the main theme of bilateral relations." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, Xinhua)	Uses partnership vocabulary to bound the agenda, signalling role discipline and limiting scope for escalation or norm confrontation.
Embedded multilateralism within the LIO	"China is willing to work with Portugal to jointly uphold and practise multilateralism, safeguard the international system with the United Nations at its core, and uphold the international order based on international law." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, Xinhua)	Positions China as an embedded actor within existing institutional structures, consistent with a reform-from-within identity.

European mediation logic and indirect engagement	"China views Europe as an important pole in a multipolar world and supports Europe in maintaining strategic autonomy." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, Xinhua)	Uses Portugal as a mediating interlocutor for Europe-wide signalling, enabling indirect engagement with European order debates without direct norm contestation.
Economic cooperation as non-ideological anchor	"China supports Chinese enterprises in investing and operating in Portugal and is willing to expand mutually beneficial cooperation in energy, finance, infrastructure and other fields." (1st round, 22 Jul 2021, Xinhua)	Anchors the relationship in pragmatic economic cooperation, reinforcing China's reformist role through functional delivery rather than ideological alignment.
Historical precedent as legitimacy resource	"China and Portugal resolved the Macao issue through political wisdom and friendly consultation, setting an example for resolving historical issues through	Draws on historical precedent to legitimise China's role as a rule-respecting, consultative actor, reinforcing identity consistency across time.

	peaceful means." (2nd round, 25 Mar 2025, Xinhua)	
Strategic reassurance under systemic uncertainty	"China is willing to work with Portugal to build a more stable, more fruitful and more dynamic China–Portugal relationship." (2nd round, 25 Mar 2025, Xinhua)	Projects reassurance and predictability, signalling China's strategist-reformist identity under conditions of wider systemic strain.

Appendix C6 – China–Poland SD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
Partnership stabilisation through dialogue institutionalisation	"Both sides agreed that the strategic dialogue mechanism should be fully utilised as a platform to enhance understanding and mutual trust and to promote exchanges and cooperation." (1st round, 21 Mar 2012, MFA)	Positions dialogue itself as a stabilising instrument, consistent with China's strategist role of managing relations through institutionalised process rather than outcomes.
Agenda containment	"China attaches importance to its relations with Poland and is	Uses partnership framing to delimit the agenda and pre-empt

through strategic partnership framing	willing to work with Poland, in accordance with the principles of mutual respect and equality, to advance the comprehensive development of the China–Poland strategic partnership." (1st round, 21 Mar 2012, MFA)	escalation, reinforcing a reformist posture grounded in continuity rather than confrontation.
Embedded Europe-facing signalling via CEE linkage	"China–Poland cooperation is an important component of China–Central and Eastern European countries cooperation and of China–Europe relations." (2nd round, 10 May 2014, MFA)	Treats Poland as a relay node linking bilateral engagement to broader European frameworks, enabling indirect engagement within the LIO.
Pragmatic multilateral embeddedness	"China is willing to work with Poland to strengthen coordination on China–EU relations and on international and regional issues of common concern." (3rd round, 17 Apr 2015, MFA)	Signals embedded multilateralism, reinforcing China's role as a system-participating actor rather than a norm-challenger.

Economic cooperation as depoliticised anchor	"China and Poland should deepen practical cooperation in trade, investment, finance and infrastructure, and continue to expand mutually beneficial cooperation." (4th round, 13 May 2016, MFA)	Anchors the relationship in functional cooperation, consistent with the SRA logic of insulating economic domains from political volatility.
Procedural continuity under external strain	"China is willing to maintain dialogue with Poland at all levels, deepen mutual understanding, and promote the steady development of bilateral relations." (7th round, 18 Apr 2023, MFA)	Emphasises continuity and predictability, reflecting a strategist-reformist identity under conditions of wider geopolitical tension.

Appendix C7 – China–Switzerland SD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)

Innovation-partnership positioning within continuity	"Holding the foreign-minister-level strategic dialogue and promoting the establishment of a high-level innovation platform are important measures to implement the important consensus reached by the two heads of state and to advance the China–Switzerland innovative strategic partnership." (1st round, 3 Apr 2018, Xinhua)	Frames the relationship as reformist-modernising (innovation) while anchoring it in leader-level consensus, signalling calibrated adaptation without rupture.
Model relationships claim across difference	"Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, China and Switzerland have upheld the spirit of equality, mutual respect and win–win cooperation, establishing an innovative strategic partnership and becoming a model for friendly exchanges between countries with different social systems, histories, cultures and sizes." (2nd round, 22 Oct 2019, Xinhua)	Performs a strategist claim of "difference-management" through proceduralised partnership, casting China as a system-compatible actor able to cooperate across ideological variance.

Rule-based multilateralism signalling	"China and Switzerland should jointly uphold multilateralism and free trade, oppose unilateralism and protectionism." (2nd round, 22 Oct 2019, Xinhua)	Enacts embeddedness in the LIO's economic-order vocabulary (trade openness) while positioning China as a defender of system rules when instrumentally aligned.
Market-access fairness as boundary/reciprocity vocabulary	"China and Switzerland should … uphold mutual market opening and create a fair and open business environment for enterprises to invest and operate in each other's countries." (2nd round, 22 Oct 2019, Xinhua)	Uses fairness/reciprocity language to manage potential friction; role performance emphasises reformist credibility through "level playing field" signalling rather than confrontational bargaining.
Institutional deepening via dense mechanism-use	"The two sides agreed to actively make good use of multiple intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation mechanisms, and to deepen cooperation in finance, science and innovation, education, intellectual property, climate response, and green development,	Demonstrates institutionalisation-as-diplomacy: China performs strategist capacity through mechanism density and issue expansion, while keeping cooperation framed as technical/functional.

	among others." (3rd round, 7 Feb 2024, MFA)	
Order-trajectory claim: "more just and reasonable" without rupture	"China appreciates and welcomes Switzerland's continued "bridge-builder" role and is willing to work with Switzerland to promote the international order towards greater fairness and reasonableness." (3rd round, 7 Feb 2024, MFA)	Reformist identity claim: seeks order-adjustment (fairer/more reasonable) while remaining embedded in existing institutions—recalibration rather than rejection.
Trade regime anchoring through FTA upgrading	"The two sides expressed satisfaction with the completion of the joint study on upgrading the free trade agreement and are willing to start the upgrading negotiations as soon as possible." (3rd round, 7 Feb 2024, MFA)	Positions economic rules as a stabilising anchor; signals reformist pragmatism by upgrading institutionalised economic ties rather than politicising differences.
High-level anniversary diplomacy as continuity device	"This year marks the 75th anniversary of China–Switzerland diplomatic relations… China is willing to… adhere to dialogue, enhance mutual trust, deepen cooperation, and set an example of	Uses commemorative temporality to reaffirm continuity and predictability; SRA performance stresses stable coexistence and

	peaceful coexistence and win–win cooperation between countries with different national conditions and social systems." (4th round, 10 Oct 2025, MFA)	institutional learning across difference.
Formalisation into a written joint document	"After the meeting, the two sides issued the 'Common Document of the Fourth Round of the China–Switzerland Foreign-Minister-Level Strategic Dialogue'." (4th round, 10 Oct 2025, MFA)	Elevates procedural credibility and traceability; supports the strategist role by converting dialogue into a durable textual artefact, strengthening institutionalised signalling.

Appendix C8 – China–Europe SD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative example from SD data (aggregated illustration)	Identity / role significance (the SRA)

| Strategic reassurance through institutional continuity | Across China's SDs with the EU, UK, France, Germany, Portugal, Poland, and Switzerland, the dialogue is repeatedly framed as a regularised, high-level mechanism sustaining engagement despite political shifts. Official releases consistently emphasise "continuing strategic dialogue", "using dialogue mechanisms well", and "maintaining high-level communication", including during periods of systemic stress (e.g. China–EU SD leadership consultations; China–UK SD rounds 6–10; China–France SD rounds 16–27; China–Germany SD ministerial and security dialogue rounds; China–Portugal SD rounds 1–2; China–Poland SD rounds 1–7; China–Switzerland SD rounds 1–4). | Positions China as a procedural stabiliser within the existing order: an actor that prioritises continuity and predictability over rupture, reinforcing its strategist identity while signalling reform through engagement rather than confrontation. |

Agenda containment through partnership vocabulary	In all partner SDs, differences are acknowledged but embedded within partnership language—"strategic partner", "comprehensive strategic partnership", "innovation strategic partnership", or "important partner". Even when contentious issues are present (e.g. EU sanctions context, Ukraine, trade frictions), releases emphasise dialogue, mutual respect, and managing differences through communication (e.g. China–EU SD consultations; China–UK SD 9th–10th rounds; China–France SD 19th–27th rounds; China–Germany SD 5th–8th rounds).	Demonstrates China's reformist containment strategy: disagreement is not denied but procedurally neutralised, allowing China to remain embedded in European diplomatic infrastructures without conceding normative authority.
Multilateral responsibility framing	Across SD partners, China consistently frames bilateral dialogue within multilateral responsibilities—UN, G20, WTO, climate governance, peace and security— highlighting shared duties of "major countries" or "responsible actors" (e.g. China–France SD emphasis on UNSC responsibility; China–Germany SD focus	Anchors China's system-inside identity: not a challenger to the LIO's existence, but a reform-oriented participant seeking recognition as a co-manager of global order.

	on multilateralism and global governance; China–UK SD references to UN and G20; China–Switzerland SD support for UN-centred order).	
Sovereignty reassurance paired with respect narratives	Recurrent across SDs is explicit emphasis on "mutual respect", "respect for core interests", and non-interference, often paired with acknowledgement of systemic or cultural differences (e.g. China–UK SD references to respecting development paths; China–Germany SD emphasis on systems difference without antagonism; China–Portugal and China–Poland SD stress equality and sovereignty).	Reinforces China's boundary-setting role: engagement is conditional on sovereignty recognition, allowing China to participate deeply while drawing clear limits around normative intrusion.
Selective openness and pragmatic cooperation signalling	SDs repeatedly highlight openness to cooperation—economic, technological, financial, innovation, green transition—without committing to unconditional liberalisation. Cooperation is framed as pragmatic, reciprocal, and interest-based (e.g. China–Germany SD linking Industry 4.0 with Made in China 2025; China–	Illustrates China's SRA posture: reform is pursued instrumentally and selectively, reinforcing agency within institutional constraints rather than

	France SD third-party markets; China–Switzerland SD innovation and FTA upgrading).	convergence for its own sake.
Dialogue as coordination hub across diplomatic architectures	Several SDs explicitly position the Strategic Dialogue as providing guidance or coordination for other dialogue tracks (economic, financial, people-to-people, security), indicating vertical integration across China–Europe dialogue architecture (e.g. China–UK SD references to linkage with economic and financial dialogues; China–France SD coordination with EFD and PPD; China–Germany SD expansion into diplomatic and security dialogue).	Shows China acting as an institutional architect, using SDs to structure and sequence engagement rather than treating dialogues as isolated diplomatic events.
Europe as a differentiated but collective interlocutor	While tailored bilaterally, China's SD language increasingly situates European partners within a shared European or Eurasian context—EU integration, Europe's strategic autonomy, China–EU relations—while still respecting national specificities (e.g. Germany and France as EU anchors; Portugal and Poland as	Constructs Europe as a plural but coherent engagement space, enabling China to practice calibrated forum-specific role performance while

bridges; Switzerland as system-compatible sustaining a Europe-
non-EU partner). wide strategist identity.

Appendix Table D: China-Europe EFD: Primary Documents Analysed

Dialogue	Type of Document	English Title (Translated)	Date of Document	Source	Date Accessed
1st China–EU EFD	Xinhua – News Report	First China–EU EFD Held; Co-chaired by Wang Qishan and Mandelson	26/04/2008	http://www.taiwan.cn/sy/rdxw/200804/t20080426_631825.htm	06/01/2026
2nd China–EU EFD	MFA – Official News	China and the EU Hold the Second High-Level EFD; Co-chaired by Wang Qishan and EU Trade Commissioner Ashton	08/05/2009	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/1206_679930/xgxw_679936/200905/t20090508_302367.shtml	06/01/2026

3rd China–EU EFD	Mission to the EU – Official News	Third China–EU EFD Held in Beijing	21/12/2010	https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/chn/zozyzcwj/202101/t20210122_8433664.htm	06/01/2026
4th China–EU EFD	MFA – Official News	Ma Kai and EU Representatives Co-chair the Fourth China–EU EFD	25/10/2013	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201310/t20131025_325232.shtml	06/01/2026
5th China–EU EFD	MFA – Official News	Fifth China–EU EFD Held in Beijing; Co-chaired by Ma Kai and European Commission Vice President Katainen	28/09/2015	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/1206_679930/xgxw_679936/201509/t20150928_9389117.shtml	06/01/2026

6th China–EU EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Ma Kai and the European Side Co-chair the Sixth China–EU EFD and Meet EC President Juncker	19/10/2016	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-10/19/content_5121855.htm	06/01/2026
7th China–EU EFD	Mission to the EU – Official News	Seventh China–EU EFD Held in Beijing	25/06/2018	https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/chn/zozyzcwj/20210112whc/202101/t20210122_8433668.htm	06/01/2026
8th China–EU EFD	Mission to the EU – Official News	Eighth China–EU EFD Held	28/07/2020	https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/chn/zozyzcwj/20210112whc/202101/t20210122_8433669.htm	06/01/2026

9th China–EU EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Liu He and EC Executive Vice President Dombrovskis Co-chair the Ninth China–EU EFD	19/07/2022	https://www.news.cn/politics/2022-07/19/c_1128846191.htm	06/01/2026
10th China–EU EFD	Xinhua – News Report	He Lifeng and Dombrovskis Co-chair the Tenth China–EU EFD	25/09/2023	https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202309/content_6906293.htm	06/01/2026
10th China–EU EFD Summary of Outcomes and Consensus	Xinhua – News Report	Tenth China–EU EFD Achieves a Series of Outcomes and Consensus	26/09/2023	https://www.news.cn/fortune/2023-09/26/c_1129886053.htm	06/01/2026
1st China–UK EFD	MoF – Official News	First China–UK EFD Held in Beijing	15/04/2008	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/200903/	06/01/2026

				t20090319_124435.htm	
2ⁿᵈ China–UK EFD	MFA – Official News	Second China–UK EFD Held in London	12/05/2009	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web//gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679906/xgxw_679912/200905/t20090512_9353176.shtml	06/01/2026
2ⁿᵈ China–UK EFD News Communiqué	Ministry of Commerce – Official News	News Communiqué of the Second China–UK EFD	11/05/2009	https://policy.mofcom.gov.cn/pact/pactContent.shtml?id=1298	06/01/2026
3ʳᵈ China–UK EFD	Embassy – Official News	Third China–UK EFD Held in Beijing; Attended by	09/11/2010	https://jo.china-embassy.gov.cn/zgyw/201011/t20101109_1982069.htm	06/01/2026

		Wang Qishan and Osborne			
3rd China–UK EFD Summary of Policy Outcomes	MoF – Official News	Consolidated Policy Outcomes of the Third China–UK EFD	10/11/2010	https://www.mof.gov.cn/zhengwuxinxi/caizhengxinwen/201011/t20101110_348192.htm	06/01/2026
4th China–UK EFD	Embassy – Official News	Fourth China–UK EFD Held in London	09/09/2011	https://bs.china-embassy.gov.cn/zgxw/201109/t20110909_3830459.htm	06/01/2026
4th China–UK EFD Summmary of Policy Outcomes	Xinhua – News Report	Policy Outcomes of the Fourth China–UK EFD	09/09/2011	http://news.cntv.cn/world/20110909/100169.shtml	06/01/2026
5th China–UK EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Fifth China–UK EFD Held; Co-chaired by	15/10/2013	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2013-	06/01/2026

		Ma Kai and Osborne		10/15/content_2587045.htm	
5th China–UK EFD Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes	MoF – Official News	Policy Outcomes of the Fifth China–UK EFD	16/10/2013	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/201310/t20131016_999856.htm	06/01/2026
6th China–UK EFD	Embassy – Official News	Sixth China–UK EFD Held in London	13/09/2014	https://mz.china-embassy.gov.cn/zgyw/201409/t20140913_6552312.htm	06/01/2026
6th China–UK EFD Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes	MoF – Official News	Policy Outcomes of the Sixth China–UK EFD	15/09/2014	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/201409/t20140915_1139391.htm	06/01/2026
7th China–UK EFD	MFA – Official News	Seventh China–UK EFD Held in Beijing; Co-	21/09/2015	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/g	06/01/2026

		chaired by Ma Kai and UK Chancellor Osborne		j_676203/oz_67 8770/1206_679 906/xgxw_6799 12/201509/t201 50921_9353376. shtml	
7th China– UK EFD Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes	MoF – Official News	Policy Outcomes of the Seventh China–UK EFD	21/09/20 15	https://wjb.mof. gov.cn/gongzuo dongtai/201509/ t20150921_146 9104.htm	06/01/2026
8th China– UK EFD	MFA – Official News	Ma Kai and UK Chancellor Hammond Co-chair the Eighth China–UK EFD	11/11/20 16	https://www.fm prc.gov.cn/web/ wjb_673085/zzj g_673183/xos_6 73625/xwlb_67 3627/201611/t2 0161111_76382 68.shtml	06/01/2026
8th China– UK EFD	MoF –	Policy Outcomes of	11/11/20 16	https://www.mo f.gov.cn/zhengw	06/01/2026

Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes	Official News	the Eighth China–UK EFD		uxinxi/caizheng xinwen/201611/ t20161111_245 6130.htm	
9th China–UK EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Ninth China–UK EFD Held in Beijing	16/12/2017	https://www.gov .cn/guowuyuan/ 2017- 12/16/content_5 247753.htm	06/01/2026
9th China–UK EFD Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes	MoF – Official News	Policy Outcomes of the Ninth China–UK EFD	16/12/2017	https://wjb.mof. gov.cn/gongzuo dongtai/201712/ t20171216_277 7910.htm	06/01/2026
10th China–UK EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Hu Chunhua and UK Chancellor Hammond Co-chair the Tenth China–UK EFD	18/06/2019	https://www.gov .cn/guowuyuan/ 2019- 06/18/content_5 401101.htm	06/01/2026

10th China–UK EFD Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes	MoF – Official News	Policy Outcomes of the Tenth China–UK EFD	17/06/2019	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuo dongtai/201906/t20190617_327 9622.htm	06/01/2026
11th China–UK EFD	Xinhua – News Report	He Lifeng and UK Chancellor Reeves Co-chair the Eleventh China–UK EFD	11/01/2025	https://www.ne ws.cn/20250111 /621d88670b8d 41ef9153fb42c5 38c64c/c.html	06/01/2026
11th China–UK EFD Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes	MoF – Official News	Policy Outcomes of the Eleventh China–UK EFD	13/01/2025	https://www.mo f.gov.cn/zhengw uxinxi/caizheng xinwen/202501/t20250113_395 1652.htm	06/01/2026
1st China–France EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Ma Kai and Moscovici Co-chair the First	26/11/2013	https://www.gov .cn/guowuyuan/2013-	06/01/2026

		China–France High-Level EFD		[11/26/content_2 587024.htm](11/26/content_2587024.htm)	
1st China–France EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the First China–France High-Level EFD	26/11/2013	[https://wjb.mof. gov.cn/gongzuo dongtai/201311/ t20131127_101 7180.htm](https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/201311/t20131127_1017180.htm)	06/01/2026
2nd China–France EFD	MFA – Official News	Second China–France High-Level EFD Held in Paris	16/09/2014	[https://www.fm prc.gov.cn/web/ zyxw/201409/t2 0140916_32951 2.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201409/t20140916_329512.shtml)	06/01/2026
2nd China–France EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Second China–France High-Level EFD	17/09/2014	[https://wjb.mof. gov.cn/gongzuo dongtai/201409/ t20140917_114 0585.htm](https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/201409/t20140917_1140585.htm)	06/01/2026

3rd China–France EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Third China–France High-Level EFD Held in Beijing; Co-chaired by Ma Kai and French Finance Minister Sapin	18/09/2015	https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/18/c_111661 0826.htm	06/01/2026
3rd China–France EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Third China–France High-Level EFD	18/09/2015	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuo dongtai/201509/ t20150918_146 5900.htm	06/01/2026
4th China–France EFD	MFA – Official News	Ma Kai and French Finance Minister Sapin Co-chair the Fourth China–France High-Level EFD	15/11/2016	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/gjhd q_676201/gj_67 6203/oz_678770 /1206_679134/x gxw_679140/20 1611/t20161115 _9338720.shtml	06/01/2026

4th China–France EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Fourth China–France High-Level EFD	15/11/2016	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/201611/t20161115_2458172.htm	06/01/2026
5th China–France EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Fifth China–France High-Level EFD Held in Beijing	01/12/2017	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2017-12/01/content_5243760.htm	06/01/2026
5th China–France EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Fifth China–France High-Level EFD	01/12/2017	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/201712/t20171201_2763970.htm	06/01/2026
6th China–France EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Hu Chunhua and French Finance Minister Le Maire Co-chair	07/12/2018	https://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-12/07/c_1123823834.htm	06/01/2026

		the Sixth China–France High-Level EFD			
6th China–France EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Sixth China–France High-Level EFD	07/12/2018	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/201812/t20181207_3086472.htm	06/01/2026
7th China–France EFD	Central People's Government – Official News	Hu Chunhua and Le Maire Co-chair the Seventh China–France High-Level EFD	21/07/2020	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2020-07/21/content_5528783.htm	06/01/2026
7th China–France EFD Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Seventh China–France High-Level EFD	21/07/2020	https://www.mof.gov.cn/zhengwuxinxi/caizhengxinwen/202007/t20200721_3554025.htm	06/01/2026

and Consensus					
8th China–France EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Hu Chunhua and Le Maire Co-chair the Eighth China–France High-Level EFD	13/12/2021	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2021-12/13/content_5660598.htm	06/01/2026
8th China–France EFD Joint Statement on Policy Outcomes and Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Eighth China–France High-Level EFD	13/12/2021	https://www.mof.gov.cn/zhengwuxinxi/caizhengxinwen/202112/t20211213_3774278.htm	06/01/2026
9th China–France EFD	Xinhua – News Report	He Lifeng and French Economy and Finance Minister Le Maire Co-chair	29/07/2023	https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202307/content_6895425.htm	06/01/2026

		the Ninth China–France High-Level EFD			
9th China–France EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Ninth China–France High-Level EFD	02/08/2023	https://czj.panjin.gov.cn/2023_08/02_12/content-420484.html	06/01/2026
10th China–France EFD	Xinhua – News Report	He Lifeng and Lombard Co-chair the Tenth China–France High-Level EFD	15/05/2025	https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202505/content_7023912.htm	06/01/2026
1st China–Germany EFD	Xinhua – News Report	First China–Germany High-Level Financial and Economic Dialogue Held in Berlin	18/03/2015	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2015-03/18/content_2835579.htm	06/01/2026

1st China–Germany EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	China News Service–Overseas Chinese Network – Media Report	Joint Statement of the First China–Germany High-Level Financial and Economic Dialogue; 21-point Consensus Reached	19/03/2015	http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0319/c70731-26718476.html	06/01/2026
2nd China–Germany EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Second China–Germany High-Level Financial and Economic Dialogue Held in Beijing	18/01/2019	https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2019-01/18/content_5359145.htm	06/01/2026
2nd China–Germany EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Second China–Germany High-Level Financial	18/01/2019	https://wjb.mof.gov.cn/gongzuodongtai/201901/t20190118_3125667.htm	06/01/2026

		and Economic Dialogue			
3rd China–Germany EFD	Xinhua – News Report	He Lifeng and Lindner Co-chair the Third China–Germany High-Level Financial and Economic Dialogue	01/10/2023	https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202310/content_6907261.htm	06/01/2026
3rd China–Germany EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the Third China–Germany High-Level Financial and Economic Dialogue	01/10/2023	https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202310/content_6907266.htm	06/01/2026
4th China–Germany EFD	Xinhua – News Report	He Lifeng and German Vice Chancellor and Finance Minister	17/11/2025	https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202511/content_7048814.htm	06/01/2026

		Klingbeil Co-chair the Fourth China–Germany High-Level Financial and Economic Dialogue			
4th China–Germany EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News Statement	Joint Statement of the Fourth China–Germany High-Level Financial and Economic Dialogue	17/11/2025	https://www.mof.gov.cn/zhengwuxinxi/caizhengxinwen/202511/t20251117_3976568.htm	06/01/2026
1st China–Italy EFD	Xinhua – News Report	Liu Kun and Italian Finance Minister Tria Co-chair the First China–Italy Finance Ministers' Dialogue	17/07/2019	https://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2019-07/11/c_1124736722.htm	06/01/2026

1st China–Italy EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Statement of the First China–Italy Finance Ministers' Dialogue	17/07/2019	https://www.mof.gov.cn/zhengwuxinxi/caizhengxinwen/201907/t20190711_3293913.htm	06/01/2026
2nd China–Italy EFD	MoF – Official News	Liu Kun and Italian Finance Minister Gualtieri Co-chair the Second China–Italy Finance Ministers' Dialogue	11/11/2020	https://bgt.mof.gov.cn/zhuantilanmu/rdwyh/czyw/202011/t20201111_3621165.htm	06/01/2026
2nd China–Italy EFD Joint Statement on Consensus	MoF – Official News	Joint Outcomes Statement of the Second China–Italy Finance Ministers' Dialogue	11/11/2020	https://bgt.mof.gov.cn/zhuantilanmu/rdwyh/czyw/202011/t20201111_3621167.htm	06/01/2026

Appendix Tables E1-E6 - Interpretive Thematic Summaries

Appendix Table E1 – China–EU EFD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example
Institutionalisation of high-level economic coordination	The EFD is repeatedly framed as a formalised, recurring mechanism designed to structure strategic-level economic coordination beyond ad hoc engagement, signalling durability and agenda continuity.	"The establishment of the China–EU High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue mechanism has injected new momentum into the development of the China–EU comprehensive strategic partnership." (1st round, 25 Apr 2008, Xinhua)
Macroeconomic policy coordination under global challenge	Dialogue consistently foregrounds macroeconomic coordination as a shared responsibility, especially during periods of crisis or systemic uncertainty, linking bilateral cooperation to global stability.	"In the face of the international financial crisis, China and the EU should strengthen cooperation and actively implement the G20 London Summit consensus to promote global economic recovery." (2nd round, 8 May 2009, Xinhua)

Opposition to protectionism and defense of multilateral trade	Recurrent emphasis on resisting protectionism and safeguarding the WTO-centred trade system positions the dialogue as a forum for rule-based economic alignment.	"Both sides committed to opposing unilateralism and trade protectionism, and to jointly safeguarding the multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core." (7th round, 25 Jun 2018, Xinhua)
Market access, openness, and reciprocal investment	The EFD repeatedly addresses market openness, investment facilitation, and fair business environments, often framed in reciprocal and non-discriminatory terms.	"Both sides agreed to expand market opening, promote trade and investment liberalisation and facilitation, and create a fair, open and non-discriminatory business environment." (9th round, 19 Jul 2022, Xinhua)
Linking bilateral cooperation to global economic governance	The dialogue consistently situates China–EU economic cooperation within broader global governance platforms, especially the G20 and IMF, reinforcing the external	"China and the EU agreed to strengthen coordination within the G20 and other global economic governance platforms to advance international financial reform."

	relevance of bilateral coordination.	(3rd round, 21 Dec 2010, Xinhua)
Expanding sectoral scope and functional cooperation	Over time, the EFD broadens from trade and macroeconomics to include innovation, digital economy, climate, supply chains, and financial regulation, reflecting functional deepening.	"Both sides held in-depth discussions on digital economy, industrial and supply chain cooperation, financial cooperation, and climate-related issues." (8th round, 28 Jul 2020, Xinhua)
Crisis responsiveness and continuity of dialogue	Later rounds emphasise continuity of engagement during crises (financial crisis, pandemic), presenting the EFD as a stabilising channel under adverse conditions.	"Under the special circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, holding the China–EU High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue is of great significance." (8th round, 28 Jul 2020, Xinhua)

Appendix Table E2 – China–UK EFD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example
Institutionalisation of economic–financial dialogue	The EFD is framed as a formal, recurring mechanism created by top leaders to structure long-term economic and financial engagement beyond episodic cooperation.	"The China–UK Economic and Financial Dialogue was jointly decided by the two prime ministers during Prime Minister Brown's visit to China." (1st round, 15 Apr 2008, Xinhua)
Macroeconomic coordination amid global volatility	Recurrent emphasis on macroeconomic policy coordination reflects shared concern over systemic instability and global economic adjustment.	"Strengthening macroeconomic policy coordination is the primary task to promote strong, sustainable and balanced global growth." (3rd round, 9 Nov 2010, Xinhua)
Opposition to protectionism and support for open markets	Dialogue rounds consistently reject trade and investment protectionism, linking bilateral cooperation to an open global economic order.	"Both sides firmly opposed all forms of trade and investment protectionism and committed to advancing the Doha Round negotiations." (2nd round, 11 May 2009, Xinhua)

Financial sector cooperation and regulatory dialogue	Financial services, regulation, and market connectivity are persistent focal points, positioning the EFD as a hub for financial governance coordination.	"Both sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in financial regulation, capital markets and financial services, and to promote financial stability." (4th round, 8 Sep 2011, Xinhua)
Investment facilitation and market access	The dialogue repeatedly addresses mutual investment, market access, and business facilitation, often framed in reciprocal terms.	"The UK side reaffirmed its support for Chinese enterprises investing in the UK and for expanding bilateral trade and investment." (5th round, 15 Oct 2013, Xinhua)
Linking bilateral dialogue to global governance forums	China–UK EFD discussions are regularly connected to G20 processes and global financial governance reform, extending the dialogue's external relevance.	"As important G20 members, China and the UK will continue to strengthen coordination to advance international financial governance reform." (8th round, 10 Nov 2016, Xinhua)
Expansion into strategic and	Over time, the EFD expands to cover infrastructure, green finance, RMB	"Both sides reached extensive agreements on infrastructure cooperation, green finance,

emerging cooperation areas	internationalisation, and third-party market cooperation, indicating functional deepening.	RMB internationalisation and third-party market cooperation." (7th round, 21 Sep 2015, Xinhua)
Continuity under political and economic transition	Later rounds stress stability and continuity of the dialogue despite leadership changes and shifting global conditions.	"Both sides agreed to further expand economic and financial cooperation to provide momentum for the stable development of China–UK relations." (11th round, 11 Jan 2025, Xinhua)

Appendix Table E3 – China–France EFD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example from data
Institutionalisation of high-level economic–financial dialogue	The EFD is framed as a leader-mandated, standing mechanism to organise strategic economic and financial coordination.	"Establishing the China–France High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogue is a decision jointly made by the two heads of state, providing a new platform for deepening cooperation." (1st round, 26 Nov 2013, Xinhua)

Macroeconomic policy coordination and structural reform	Recurrent emphasis on aligning macroeconomic policies and managing economic transition in both countries.	"Both sides should strengthen macroeconomic and fiscal–financial policy coordination amid economic transformation." (2nd round, 15 Sep 2014, Xinhua)
Embedding bilateral cooperation within global economic governance	Dialogue discussions are consistently linked to G20 processes, IMF reform, and broader global economic governance.	"China and France should enhance coordination under the G20 framework and jointly promote reform of the international economic governance system." (3rd round, 18 Sep 2015, Xinhua)
Expansion of sectoral cooperation beyond traditional pillars	The EFD broadens from core finance into agriculture, urbanisation, digital economy, healthcare, and green development.	"Both sides agreed to expand cooperation into agriculture, healthcare, digital economy, and other emerging fields." (2nd round, 15 Sep 2014, Xinhua)
Financial market openness and regulatory cooperation	Financial openness, regulatory coordination, and RMB-related cooperation recur as stable agenda items.	"The two sides will deepen cooperation in financial markets, financial regulation, and support wider use of the renminbi." (4th round, 14 Nov 2016, Xinhua)

Third-party market cooperation and project-based collaboration	Repeated references to third-party market cooperation signal a shift toward outward-facing, project-oriented collaboration.	"China and France agreed to advance third-party market cooperation and establish related cooperation mechanisms." (4th round, 14 Nov 2016, Xinhua)
Opposition to protectionism and support for open economic order	The dialogue repeatedly affirms commitment to openness, free trade, and resistance to protectionist responses.	"Both sides opposed trade protectionism and committed to promoting an open and inclusive global economy." (5th round, 1 Dec 2017, Xinhua)
Continuity and deepening under changing global conditions	Later rounds stress continuity of cooperation and resilience of the dialogue amid pandemic and global uncertainty.	"The two sides agreed to deepen economic and financial cooperation and jointly respond to global challenges under the current international situation." (7th round, 21 Jul 2020, Xinhua)
Linking bilateral EFD to broader China–Europe cooperation	Recent rounds situate China–France EFD as contributing to wider China–Europe economic coordination.	"The dialogue will inject new momentum into China–France comprehensive strategic partnership and help lead China–Europe cooperation." (10th round, 15 May 2025, Xinhua)

Appendix Table E4 – China–Germany EFD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example
Institutionalisation of a standing high-level financial dialogue	The EFD is framed as a leader-mandated, permanent mechanism for strategic financial and macroeconomic coordination.	"Establishing the China–Germany High-Level Financial Dialogue is a decision jointly made by the two leaders, serving as an important platform for strategic communication." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)
Macroeconomic policy coordination under global uncertainty	Recurrent emphasis on policy coordination between two major economies amid volatile global conditions.	"As major economies, China and Germany should strengthen policy coordination to support global economic stability and growth." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)
Embedding bilateral cooperation within multilateral economic governance	Dialogue agendas are consistently linked to G20 cooperation and reform of global economic governance.	"Both sides committed to enhancing coordination under the G20 framework and improving international economic governance." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)

Financial market openness and regulatory cooperation	Financial openness, supervisory coordination, and market access recur as core agenda items.	"The two sides agreed to expand financial cooperation, strengthen regulatory coordination, and promote market openness." (2nd round, 18 Jan 2019, Xinhua)
Support for RMB internationalisation and financial infrastructure connectivity	Cooperation on RMB usage, clearing, and market infrastructure features prominently.	"Germany expressed support for renminbi internationalisation and for developing offshore RMB business in Frankfurt." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)
Third-party market cooperation and outward economic engagement	The EFD extends beyond bilateral issues to cooperation in third-party markets.	"The two sides reached consensus on conducting investment cooperation in third-party markets." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)
Commitment to multilateralism and rules-based trade	Strong, repeated opposition to protectionism and support for rules-based multilateral trade.	"Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and to a rules-based trading system centred on the WTO." (2nd round, 18 Jan 2019, Xinhua)

Continuity and upgrading of dialogue amid systemic change	Later rounds stress continuity of cooperation and upgrading of the dialogue under changing international conditions.	"The two sides agreed to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation and inject new momentum into the comprehensive strategic partnership." (3rd round, 1 Oct 2023, Xinhua)

Appendix Table E5 – China–Italy EFD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytic description	Indicative example
Establishment of a bilateral financial dialogue mechanism	The EFD is framed as a newly established, regularised channel for macroeconomic and financial coordination.	"The first China–Italy Finance Ministers' Dialogue was held in Milan." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)
Macroeconomic policy coordination and global governance	Recurrent emphasis on coordination in response to global economic conditions and shared governance responsibilities.	"The two sides exchanged views on the global macroeconomic situation and global economic governance." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)

Commitment to multilateralism and free trade	Strong and explicit reaffirmation of multilateralism and opposition to protectionism.	"Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to free trade and multilateralism." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)
Integration of bilateral cooperation with Belt and Road cooperation	Financial dialogue is explicitly linked to financing BRI and third-party market projects.	"The two sides agreed to actively implement the memorandum of understanding on jointly building the Belt and Road through financing cooperation." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)
Financial cooperation and regulatory coordination	Emphasis on deepening cooperation in financial markets, supervision, and institutional access.	"The two sides agreed to further strengthen cooperation on financial markets and financial regulation." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)
Crisis coordination and public-health context	The dialogue adapts to crisis conditions, integrating pandemic response with economic coordination.	"In the context of COVID-19, both sides agreed to strengthen macroeconomic policy coordination and

		international anti-pandemic cooperation." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, MOF)
Support for international financial institutions and WTO reform	Continued support for multilateral financial institutions and trade rules is reiterated.	"Both sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in international financial institutions and support WTO reform." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, MOF)
Practical, project-oriented financial cooperation	Focus on concrete instruments such as green finance, financial technology, and joint working groups.	"The two sides agreed to deepen cooperation in green finance, financial technology, and establish a joint working group on financial regulation." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, MOF)

Appendix Table E6 – China–Europe EFD: Interpretive Thematic Summary

Core theme	Brief analytical description	Indicative example from data
Macroeconomic policy coordination under global uncertainty	EFDs consistently frame China–Europe engagement as a mechanism for coordinating macroeconomic policy responses during periods of global instability, positioning both sides as system-stabilising actors rather than bilateral negotiators.	"In the face of the severe challenges posed by the current international financial crisis, China and the EU should strengthen cooperation … to promote the early recovery of the world economy." (China–EU EFD, 2nd round, 8 May 2009)
Defense and reform of the multilateral economic order	Dialogues reaffirm commitment to multilateral institutions while advancing incremental reform agendas, normalising China's role as a reform-oriented participant within existing global economic governance frameworks.	"The two sides committed to jointly upholding a multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization at its core and based on rules." (China–EU EFD, 7th round, 25 June 2018)

Opposition to protectionism and "decoupling"	Anti-protectionism functions as a shared normative anchor, increasingly articulated in response to emerging discourses of unilateralism, supply-chain fragmentation, and strategic decoupling.	"The two sides agreed to jointly maintain the stability and resilience of global industrial and supply chains and oppose 'decoupling and supply chain disruption'." (China–EU EFD, 9th round, 19 July 2022)
Financial cooperation, regulation, and market connectivity	Financial dialogue evolves from confidence-building toward technical institutional linkage, including regulatory cooperation, market access, and renminbi internationalisation, without overt political conditionality.	"The two sides support the development of the Frankfurt offshore renminbi market and the establishment and operation of a local renminbi clearing bank." (China–Germany EFD, 1st round, 17 March 2015)
Investment liberalisation and business-environment signalling	EFDs operate as reassurance mechanisms for investors, repeatedly stressing openness, fairness, and non-discrimination to stabilise expectations amid	"Both sides committed to maintaining two-way openness and providing a fair and non-discriminatory business environment for enterprises from the other side." (China–

	political and strategic uncertainty.	EU EFD, 10th round, 25 September 2023)
Strategic connectivity and third-party market cooperation	Infrastructure and connectivity cooperation is framed as development-oriented and system-complementary, often linked to the Belt and Road Initiative while emphasising alignment and third-party cooperation.	"The two sides agreed to identify points of convergence between the Belt and Road Initiative and the European Investment Plan." (China–EU EFD, 5th round, 28 September 2015)
Crisis governance and global public goods provision	Later EFDs increasingly position economic dialogue as a crisis-management infrastructure addressing global public goods such as health security, climate change, and supply-chain resilience.	"China and the EU should enhance mutual understanding and inclusiveness, create certainty amid uncertainty, and boost market confidence." (China–EU EFD, 8th round, 28 July 2020)

Appendix Tables F1-F5 - Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

Appendix F1 – China–EU EFD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)

Institution-building and procedural anchoring for long-horizon cooperation	"Leaders on both sides… decided to establish the China–EU High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogue mechanism… [to] inject new momentum into the China–EU comprehensive strategic partnership… The two sides decided that the Dialogue would be held once a year, alternately in China and Europe." (1st round, 25 Apr 2008, Xinhua)	Performs Institutionalisation as Diplomacy: China claims a strategist role by creating a regularised venue that stabilises expectations and routinises engagement, projecting predictability rather than episodic bargaining.
Rule-based global trade order signalling and anti-protectionism	"Both sides agreed to uphold the principle of fairness and openness, oppose all forms of trade protectionism, strengthen dialogue and consultation… and achieve mutual benefit and win–win outcomes." (1st round, 25 Apr 2008, Xinhua)	Enacts embeddedness in prevailing trade-governance vocabulary (openness, anti-protectionism), positioning China as a system-participating actor that defends rules when they support stability and market access.

Crisis-management coordination as responsible major-economy posture	"In the face of the severe international financial crisis… China and the EU should strengthen cooperation, actively implement the consensus of the G20 London Financial Summit, and promote the earliest possible recovery of the world economy." (2nd round, 8 May 2009, Xinhua)	Performs the steward/responsible stakeholder role dimension: China frames itself as a cooperative stabiliser in global economic governance, using crisis coordination to legitimise voice and standing.
Market opening and investment facilitation with non-discrimination framing	"Strengthen investment cooperation… encourage enterprises… on the basis of equality and non-discrimination… [to] participate in each other's economic revitalisation plans." (2nd round, 8 May 2009, Xinhua)	Signals reformist credentials through reciprocity and non-discrimination vocabulry; frames China's demands and offers as rule-consistent rather than exceptionalist, supporting SRA's reform-through-institution posture.

Friction-management through consultation and "differences within cooperation"	"Properly handle differences and frictions in economic and trade relations on the basis of mutual respect and equal consultation, and in a pragmatic and innovative spirit." (1st round, 25 Apr 2008, Xinhua)	Role performance emphasises managed disequilibrium: disputes are contained procedurally (consultation, pragmatism), enabling continued cooperation without conceding core preferences.
Status/recognition claims via "market economy status" and technology controls	"China hopes the EU will recognise China's full market economy status as soon as possible and lift restrictions on exports of civilian high-tech products to China." (1st round, 25 Apr 2008, Xinhua)	Shows SRA's status-seeking within rules: China pursues recognition and constraint-relief (tech controls) as boundary adjustments to LIO practice, framed as reasonable and system-consistent.
Macro-policy coordination and global governance venues as leverage	"Both sides reiterated… strengthen coordination and cooperation in global economic governance platforms such as the G20… jointly promote reform of international financial rules and standards."	Performs a strategist role by using multilateral venues to scale bilateral dialogue into rule-shaping participation, framing reform as incremental and institutional rather than disruptive.

	(3rd round, 21 Dec 2010, Xinhua)	
Connectivity and development-strategy alignment (BRI–EU linkage)	"Through this Dialogue, both sides made new progress in advancing the connectivity platform… aligning the BRI initiative with Europe's development strategy…" (6th round, 18 Oct 2016, Xinhua)	Enacts reformist agenda-setting through strategic alignment: China positions BRI as compatible with European strategy, seeking to normalise its initiatives within accepted cooperation frameworks.
Supply-chain stability framing and rejection of decoupling logic	"Both sides agreed to build stable and mutually trusting industrial and supply chains… maintain global supply-chain resilience and stability and oppose 'decoupling and chain-breaking'." (10th round outcomes summary, 25–26 Sep 2023, Xinhua / MOF)	Positions China as a stabiliser of globalisation against fragmentation; role claim emphasises system maintenance with recalibration (protecting openness while resisting restrictive practices).
Regulatory dialogue expansion (export controls, standards) as	"Both sides agreed to establish an export control dialogue mechanism… [and] strengthen dialogue and cooperation in	Shows institutional thickening: China accepts expanded rule- and regulation-centric engagement (export controls,

institutional thickening	intellectual property… and green finance and sustainable finance." (10th round outcomes summary, 25–26 Sep 2023, Xinhua / MOF)	IPR, green finance) to manage asymmetries and contestation via process rather than confrontation.

Appendix F2 – China–UK EFD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
Institution-building to routinise economic statecraft	"The China–UK Economic and Financial Dialogue was decided and established by the two premiers during Prime Minister Brown's visit to China… The next Dialogue is scheduled to be held next year in the UK." (1st round, 15 Apr 2008, Xinhua)	Performs institutionalised strategic engagement: China frames the EFD as a standing high-level mechanism that regularises coordination and signals long-horizon commitment under a CSP frame.

Reform-and-opening identity claim as credibility foundation	"China is the largest developing country… China remains steadfast in pursuing reform and opening-up; we are willing to strengthen dialogue… expand consensus… deepen cooperation…" (1st round, 15 Apr 2008, Xinhua)	Enacts the reformist side of SRA: China anchors its role claim in continuity of reform/opening, presenting itself as a system-compatible moderniser rather than a revisionist disruptor.
Rule-consistent global trade posture: openness + anti-protectionism	"In favour of market opening and trade and investment liberalisation; oppose protectionism… jointly push forward the WTO Doha Development Round…" (1st round, 15 Apr 2008, Xinhua)	Performs embeddedness in LIO trade norms (openness, liberalisation, WTO-centred governance), using rule vocabulary to legitimise cooperation and resist discriminatory barriers.
Status/recognition bargaining within the trade regime (market economy status; high-tech controls)	"The UK side committed to continue working to promote the EU's early recognition of China's full market economy status… [and] expand trade in civilian high-tech products."	Shows SRA's boundary-recalibration logic: China pursues upgraded recognition and constraint-relief (technology trade) framed as

	(1ˢᵗ round, 15 Apr 2008, Xinhua)	normalisation within existing regimes, not rupture.
Global crisis coordination and confidence signalling	"Together with the international community… implement the outcomes of the G20 London Summit… take all necessary measures to restore market confidence and promote world economic growth." (2ⁿᵈ round, 11 May 2009, Xinhua)	Performs a responsible major-economy role: China positions itself as a cooperative crisis manager in global economic governance, reinforcing legitimacy through burden-sharing language.
Voice-and-representation reform in international financial governance	"Promote reform of the international financial system… set a timetable and roadmap… increase the voice and representation of emerging markets and developing countries in the international financial system." (2ⁿᵈ round, 11 May 2009, Xinhua)	Enacts SRA's reformist strategist stance: China pushes representation/voice reform as system improvement, seeking redistribution of influence through institutional reform rather than rejection.

Macro-policy coordination + depoliticisation of economic issues	"The top priority is to strengthen macroeconomic policy coordination, oppose all forms of protectionism, avoid politicising economic issues, and promote comprehensive recovery of the world economy." (3rd round, 9 Nov 2010, Xinhua)	Performs the SRA role of stability management: China frames coordination and depoliticisation as necessary for recovery, legitimising its preference for technocratic handling of sensitive economic frictions.
G20/WTO anchoring as multilateral extension of bilateral dialogue	"As important members of the G20… continue to strengthen cooperation and coordination… advance international financial regulatory reform… promote the Doha Round to an early, comprehensive, and balanced outcome." (3rd round, 9 Nov 2010, Xinhua)	Signals multi-level institutional leverage: China uses the bilateral EFD to reinforce multilateral roles (G20/WTO), projecting itself as a rule-shaping participant operating through established venues.

Infrastructure/strategic projects as deliverables logic	"Deepen trade and investment cooperation… build new cooperation highlights such as infrastructure… strive to realise the target of bilateral trade reaching USD 100 billion by 2015." (4th round, 8 Sep 2011, Xinhua)	Performs SRA as a delivery-oriented economic partner: role claim emphasises tangible cooperation and project pipelines, reinforcing credibility through measurable outcomes and cooperation highlights.
RMB internationalisation and financial hub linkage	"The UK side supports the renminbi's timely inclusion in the SDR… welcomes Chinese financial institutions to operate in the UK…" (4th round, 8 Sep 2011, Xinhua)	Shows selective recalibration within monetary governance: China advances RMB internationalisation through recognised institutions (SDR) and market infrastructure (UK), aligning reform with existing frameworks.
Strategic alignment framing: BRI + UK regional/industrial strategy	"Both sides agreed to further promote the strategic alignment between the UK regional development plan and China's Belt and Road	Enacts SRA's agenda expansion under partnership: China frames its initiatives (BRI, Made in China 2025 links appear later) as

	Initiative… [and] deepen cooperation in new areas such as green finance, inclusive finance and fintech." (8th round, 10 Nov 2016, Xinhua)	compatible 'strategic docking', extending influence via cooperative alignment rather than confrontation.
"Golden era" partnership vocabulary to stabilise political environment for economic cooperation	"This year marked the opening year of the 'golden era'… China is willing to… promote the China–UK global comprehensive strategic partnership for the 21st century to a new level." (8th round, 10 Nov 2016, Xinhua)	Performs relationship management as enabling condition: China uses affirmative partnership vocabulary to sustain cooperation amid wider political shifts, protecting the EFD as a stable diplomatic-economic infrastructure.
Continuity/restart signal and strategic-partner framing in late-stage dialogue	"China is willing to… uphold the positioning as strategic partners, strengthen communication and dialogue, and further expand economic and financial cooperation to provide more momentum for developing stable and	Performs resilience and recalibration: China reasserts partner positioning and mechanism utility, signalling continuity of engagement and selective cooperation even when the broader environment may be more constrained.

mutually beneficial China–
UK relations." (11th round, 11
Jan 2025, Xinhua)

Appendix F3 – China–France EFD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
Mechanism-building as strategic economic infrastructure	"Establishing the China–France High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogue mechanism was a decision jointly made by President Xi Jinping and President Hollande… [it] builds a new platform for deepening China–France economic and financial cooperation." (1st round, 26 Nov 2013, gXinhua)	Performs institutionalisation-as-diplomacy: China frames the EFD as leader-mandated infrastructure that stabilises and upgrades cooperation within a CSP register.
From leader consensus to implementation discipline	"This Dialogue is to earnestly implement the consensus reached by the two heads of state, ensure a good start…	Enacts SRA as a strategic implementer: China presents itself as capable of translating top-level consensus into routinised policy

	[and] strengthen cooperation under multilateral frameworks such as the G20." (1st round, 26 Nov 2013, gXinhua)	coordination, signalling reliability and long-horizon intent.
Global economic governance reform through G20/IMF pathways	"Strengthen cooperation under multilateral frameworks such as the G20… jointly promote the parties to implement as soon as possible the IMF quota and governance reform plan." (1st round, 26 Nov 2013, Xinhua)	Performs the reformist component of SRA: reform is pursued through recognised institutions (G20/IMF), implying system-improvement rather than systemic disruption.
Issue-bundling: traditional big projects + new cooperation frontiers	"Continue to deepen cooperation in traditional areas such as nuclear energy and aerospace… build new cooperation highlights in modern agriculture, urbanisation, new energy, digitalisation, and the ocean." (1st round, 26 Nov 2013, Xinhua)	Signals SRA's portfolio strategy: China performs a pragmatic, developmental role by expanding the agenda while keeping high-value incumbents (nuclear/aerospace) as anchors.

Market access + facilitation requests framed as normal economic cooperation	"The French side should provide facilitation for Chinese financial institutions to establish presence and conduct business in France, and for Chinese enterprises to invest in France." (1st round, 26 Nov 2013, Xinhua)	Shows boundary-recalibration within an openness frame: China pursues deeper access and presence in a rule-consistent, facilitation-oriented vocabulary.
Strategic partnership language in economic governance terms ("strategic, long-term, overarching")	"The Dialogue mechanism is an important platform for strategic, long-term and overarching exchanges in the economic and financial field." (2nd round, 15 Sep 2014, MFA)	Performs SRA's strategic management claim: China marks economic coordination as strategic and structural, not merely transactional, supporting the SRA posture of calibrated engagement.
Consensus → action conversion as role performance	"The main task… is to jointly implement the consensus reached by the two heads of state, turn consensus into action, and turn action into reality." (2nd round, 15 Sep 2014, MFA)	Enacts delivery credibility: China positions itself as an actor that operationalises commitmentsur.

Monetary/financial governance and RMB internationalisation through recognised channels	"The French side welcomes the RMB to play a greater role internationally… authorised Bank of China to undertake RMB clearing business in Paris… [and] approved RQFII qualifications…" (2nd round, 15 Sep 2014, MFA)	Performs SRA as selective reformer: China advances RMB-related institutional embedding via market infrastructure and regulatory recognitions rather than confrontational monetary politics.
Financial regulatory cooperation and mutual recognition	"Banking regulators committed to recognise each other's regulatory capabilities… [and] promote regulatory mutual recognition… for qualified central counterparties for OTC derivatives." (2nd round, 15 Sep 2014, MFA)	Signals rule-compatibility and technocratic co-production: China is positioned as able to operate within advanced regulatory logics, reinforcing the reformist competence side of SRA.
SDR + third-party market cooperation as strategic agenda extension	"Both sides reached important consensus on the RMB joining the SDR currency basket… [and] setting up a third-party market joint fund." (3rd round, 18 Sep 2015, Xinhua)	Performs SRA as system participant and agenda extender: China pursues global monetary status (SDR) and outward cooperation (third markets) in an institutionally legible form.

Legal obligation framing via WTO Accession Protocol Article 15	"Hope France will… urge the EU to… fully and cleanly fulfil the obligations under Article 15 of China's WTO Accession Protocol." (4th round, 14 Nov 2016, MFA)	Demonstrates norm-legal contestation through rule language: China presses for compliance using treaty/obligation vocabulary, consistent with SRA's approach of contesting within institutional rules rather than exiting them.
Third-party market institutionalisation	"Open up third-party market cooperation… establish a third-party market cooperation steering committee, [and] set up a jointly-funded third-party market cooperation fund." (4th round, 14 Nov 2016, MFA)	Performs role innovation: China builds outward-facing cooperation instruments, projecting a capacity to shape development cooperation formats while remaining within partnership rhetoric.
Post-19th Party Congress "opening-up" pledge as identity signal	"China's door to opening-up will not close; it will only open wider… jointly oppose trade protectionism… improve global economic governance." (5th round, 1 Dec 2017, Xinhua)	Anchors SRA's reformist identity: explicit opening-up pledge and anti-protectionism framing reinforce a system-compatible posture while justifying deeper engagement.

Rules-based multilateral trade and governance coordination under conditions of systemic shock	"Maintain a rules-based multilateral trading system… improve global economic governance… respond to global challenges… create a fair, transparent, non-discriminatory business environment." (7th round, 21 Jul 2020, Central People's Government)	Performs SRA as a stability-through-rules actor: under crisis conditions, China reiterates rule-based trade and governance reform as the legitimate pathway—useful anecdotal context for negotiations environment.
Recent-cycle continuity and open cooperation signalling	"Maintain an open, cooperative international economic and trade environment… create a good trade and investment environment… inject new vitality into the China–France comprehensive strategic partnership, while driving China–EU cooperation." (10th round, 15 May 2025, Xinhua)	Shows continuity under recalibration: China links bilateral EFD to wider China–EU economic relations, framing itself as a constructive, open actor even in a more constrained external environment.

Appendix F4 – China–Germany EFD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
Leader-mandated mechanism-building as economic–financial infrastructure	"Establishing the China–Germany High-Level Financial Dialogue mechanism was a decision jointly made by the two countries' leaders during President Xi Jinping's visit to Germany last year. Implementing the consensus reached by the two leaders is the main task of this Dialogue. (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)	Performs SRA's institutionalisation-as-diplomacy: China frames the mechanism as leader-authorised infrastructure for sustained coordination, projecting reliability and long-horizon intent.
Macroeconomic policy coordination as a stability contribution	"In the current complex global economic situation… China and Germany, as important economies, should strengthen policy coordination… and	Enacts SRA as a stability provider: China claims a constructive role in global economic steadiness through

	continue to play a positive role for stable global economic growth." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)	coordination rather than unilateral disruption.
Strategic / overall / long-term framing of the dialogue	"Both sides emphasised that this dialogue mechanism is an important platform for communication and policy coordination on strategic, overall, and long-term issues in China–Germany economic and financial fields." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)	Signals SRA's strategic competence: China performs itself as a planner/manager of long-cycle economic governance issues, not merely transactional bargaining.
Multilateral governance positioning via G20	"Both sides committed to strengthen macroeconomic policy coordination under the G20 framework… jointly support global economic growth and the improvement of international economic governance." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)	Performs the reformist component of SRA: reform is articulated through recognised multilateral frameworks, implying system-improvement from within.

RMB internationalisation through institutional pathways (SDR, offshore RMB, RQFII)	"Germany will actively support… RMB joining the SDR basket… support the Frankfurt offshore RMB market… support German financial institutions using RQFII quota to enter China's market… China has approved Deutsche Asset & Wealth Management Investment Co. for RQFII qualification." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)	Shows SRA as a status-seeking reformer: China advances RMB embedding via IMF standards and market infrastructure rather than confrontational monetary revisionism.
Regulatory/market connectivity and reciprocal access for financial institutions	"Both sides welcome each other's banking institutions to set up branches… plan to consult on banking regulation… cooperate to establish an offshore RMB financial instruments trading platform in Frankfurt." (1st round, 17 Mar 2015, Xinhua)	Performs SRA as a rule-compatible market integrator: China positions itself as capable of reciprocal institutional linkage and regulatory consultation.

Rules-based multilateralism and WTO-centred trade order	"Both sides committed to jointly uphold multilateralism and the rules of free trade, firmly support a rules-based multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core." (2nd round, 18 Jan 2019, Xinhua)	Anchors SRA's system-legibility claim: China self-presents as defender of a rules-based trade architecture, consistent with strategist–reformist signalling rather than rupture.
Linkage diplomacy: BRI–Europe connectivity alignment	"Both sides agreed to strengthen cooperation under multilateral frameworks such as the G20 and AIIB, and support aligning the Belt and Road Initiative with the Eurasian connectivity strategy and European infrastructure planning." (2nd round, 18 Jan 2019, Xinhua)	Shows SRA as a connectivity broker: China frames its initiatives as alignable with European strategies— recalibration through alignment vocabulary.
Domestic openness + deliverability emphasis	"China and Germany should… expand two-way opening-up in the financial sector… promote capital market connectivity… attach importance to forming	Performs SRA as a pragmatic implementer: not just consensus-making but execution—useful for the minor-corrections

	consensus and truly implementing it." (2nd round, 18 Jan 2019, Xinhua)	requirement on contextualising negotiation dynamics.
Documented institutional outputs (MOUs / regulatory cooperation)	"During the Dialogue, the two sides signed three cooperation documents: MOU on China–Germany central bank cooperation; Letter of intent on banking regulatory cooperation; MOU on securities and futures regulatory cooperation." (2nd round, 18 Jan 2019, Xinhua)	Provides concrete evidence of institutional practice: China's role performance is anchored in formalised, technocratic deliverables.
Positive-sum partnership narrative	"China is willing to… deepen mutually beneficial win–win cooperation and inject more positive energy into the development of the China–Germany all-round strategic partnership." (3rd round, 1 Oct 2023, Xinhua)	Signals SRA as a non-ideological, pragmatic partner: continuity language that sustains engagement while avoiding escalation rhetoric.

| Continuity of leader-consensus framing in a later cycle | "China is willing to… implement the important consensus reached by the two countries' leaders… open a new chapter of the all-round strategic partnership… contribute anew to stable world economic growth." (4th round, 17 Nov 2025, Xinhua) | Performs SRA's continuity-with-recalibration posture: repeated leader-consensus anchoring legitimises ongoing engagement even as external conditions become more constrained. |

Appendix F5 – China–Italy EFD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
Mechanism initiation as pragmatic financial diplomacy	"The first China–Italy Finance Ministers' Dialogue was held in Milan… Minister of Finance Liu Kun and Italian Finance Minister Tria jointly chaired the dialogue… The two sides exchanged views on the global macroeconomic situation and global economic governance, China–Italy	Performs SRA's institutionalisation-as-diplomacy: China frames a bilateral finance dialogue as a functional, technocratic channel embedded in global governance concerns

	strategic cooperation, financial cooperation and regulation." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)	rather than political signalling.
Multilateralism and free-trade affirmation	"Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to upholding free trade and multilateralism, and to promoting the improvement of global economic governance." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)	Anchors China's system-compatible reformist identity: reform is articulated through preservation and improvement of multilateral economic order, not rejection of it.
BRI framed through financing cooperation and third-party markets	"The two sides agreed to actively implement the memorandum of understanding on jointly building the Belt and Road, and to support Belt and Road and third-party market projects through financing cooperation." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)	Shows SRA's connectivity broker role: China positions BRI as finance-enabled, cooperative, and compatible with European participation.
Financial market openness and	"The two sides will further strengthen cooperation in financial markets and financial regulation and encourage financial institutions of both countries to	Performs SRA as a rule-aware market integrator, emphasising reciprocity and regulatory dialogue

regulatory cooperation	operate and expand in each other's markets." (1st round, 10 Jul 2019, Xinhua)	rather than unilateral access demands.
Leader-consensus anchoring under crisis conditions	"To implement the consensus reached by the leaders of China and Italy, the second China–Italy Finance Ministers' Dialogue was held by video… Both sides highly affirmed the implementation progress of the outcomes of the first dialogue." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, Xinhua)	Enacts SRA's continuity under constraint: leader-level legitimacy sustains cooperation despite pandemic disruption.
Macroeconomic coordination and supply-chain stability	"Both sides agreed to strengthen macroeconomic policy coordination… maintain open, stable and secure global industrial and supply chains, and promote global economic recovery and high-quality development." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, Xinhua)	Positions China as a stability-seeking coordinator, linking domestic recovery to global systemic resilience.
G20 and global economic governance reform	"The two sides exchanged views on the G20 finance track agenda… China supported Italy in assuming the G20 presidency… and agreed to continue	Performs the reformist dimension of SRA through recognised governance forums, reinforcing

	advancing cooperation in the World Bank, IMF and AIIB, and to support WTO reform." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, Xinhua)	system-internal change claims.
Rule-based openness and non-discriminatory business environment	"Both sides agreed to create a fair, open and non-discriminatory business environment for enterprises investing and operating in each other's countries." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, Xinhua)	Reinforces China's procedural legitimacy signalling: openness is framed in rule-based, reciprocal terms.
Deepening financial cooperation and RMB-related integration	"China supports more eligible Italian financial institutions and enterprises to invest and operate in China… including issuing panda bonds… welcomes Italian banks and financial market infrastructures to apply for access to the RMB Cross-Border Interbank Payment System." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, Xinhua)	Shows the SRA as a status-seeking but system-legible actor, advancing RMB usage through existing financial infrastructures.

Operationalisation through joint mechanisms and green standards	"The two sides agreed to establish a joint working group on financial regulatory cooperation… and to continue advancing Belt and Road and third-party market cooperation, including encouraging financial institutions to sign the Green Investment Principles for the Belt and Road." (2nd round, 11 Nov 2020, Xinhua)	Anchors the SRA's role performance in institutional deliverables, linking connectivity to sustainability norms rather than geopolitical alignment.

Appendix F6 – China–Europe EFD: Textual Evidence and SRA-Relevant Anchors

SRA role-dimension / theme	Indicative excerpt	Identity / role significance (the SRA)
System stabiliser through macroeconomic coordination	"China and the EU should strengthen cooperation and actively implement the consensus of the G20 London Financial Summit to promote the early recovery of the world economy." (China–EU EFD, 2nd round, 2009)	Positions China as a stabilising macroeconomic actor acting within existing global coordination frameworks rather than outside them, reinforcing reform-through-participation.

Embedded defender of multilateral economic institutions	"The two sides committed to jointly upholding a multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization at its core and based on rules." (China–EU EFD, 7th round, 2018)	Anchors China's SRA identity as system-embedded: legitimacy is derived from rule-based institutions even while advocating their improvement.
Anti-protectionist norm entrepreneur	"The two sides must resolutely oppose unilateralism and trade protectionism and prevent such actions from impacting and dragging down the world economy." (China–EU EFD, 7th round, 2018)	Casts China as a normative counterweight to protectionism, projecting reformist leadership without rejecting the liberal trading order itself.
Strategic reform advocate in global economic governance	"The two sides agreed to strengthen coordination under the G20 framework and jointly promote reform of international financial rules and standards." (China–EU EFD, 3rd round, 2010)	Demonstrates reformist intent directed at procedural adjustment of global governance rather than systemic replacement.

Responsible stakeholder in crisis governance	"China and the EU should enhance mutual understanding and inclusiveness, create certainty amid uncertainty, and boost market confidence." (China–EU EFD, 8th round, 2020)	Reflects SRA crisis-role performance: managing uncertainty and signalling responsibility during systemic shocks rather than exploiting disruption.
Opponent of decoupling and supply-chain fragmentation	"The two sides agreed to jointly maintain the stability and resilience of global industrial and supply chains and oppose 'decoupling and supply chain disruption'." (China–EU EFD, 9th round, 2022)	Signals reformist resistance to exclusionary economic practices while reaffirming interdependence as a stabilising principle.
Financial integration partner rather than challenger	"The two sides support the development of the Frankfurt offshore renminbi market and the establishment and operation of a local renminbi clearing bank." (China–	Shows China advancing monetary and financial interests through integration into European financial infrastructure, consistent with SRA incrementalism.

	Germany EFD, 1st round, 2015)	
Market-access reformer under non-confrontational framing	"Both sides committed to maintaining two-way openness and providing a fair and non-discriminatory business environment for enterprises from the other side." (China–EU EFD, 10th round, 2023)	Frames reform demands (market access, fairness) as reciprocal and rules-based, avoiding coercive or revisionist signalling.
Connectivity-oriented development partner	"The two sides agreed to identify points of convergence between the Belt and Road Initiative and the European Investment Plan." (China–EU EFD, 5th round, 2015)	Illustrates SRA behaviour through alignment and compatibility framing, mitigating perceptions of parallel-order construction.
Multilateral crisis co-manager beyond Europe	"The two sides agreed to jointly support the G20 as the primary platform for international economic	Extends SRA identity beyond bilateralism, reinforcing China's claim to global responsibility through recognised governance hubs.

cooperation." (China–Italy

EFD, 2nd round, 2020)

Appendix Tables G – China–Europe EFD: Cross-Dialogue Analytical Synthesis and Empirical Grounding

G (a) Analytical synthesis

Synthesis dimension	Integrated analytical assessment
System role	Across EU-level and bilateral EFDs, China consistently performs a strategist–reformist role: defending multilateral economic structures while advocating calibrated reform and resisting systemic rupture.
Institutional function	The EFD operates as a stabilising diplomatic infrastructure that sustains macroeconomic coordination, financial cooperation, and investment signalling even when political relations experience strain.
Normative positioning	China's discourse combines firm opposition to protectionism and decoupling with repeated affirmations of openness, fairness, and shared responsibility for global economic stability.
Evolution over time	The dialogue evolves from growth-oriented cooperation (2008–2013) toward crisis governance and global public-goods provision (post-2018), without abandoning earlier multilateral commitments.

G (b) Empirical grounding: dialogue partners and rounds used

Analytical pillar	EFD tracks and rounds underpinning the synthesis
Macroeconomic coordination & crisis response	China–EU EFD (2nd 2009; 8th 2020; 9th 2022; 10th 2023); China–UK EFD (3rd 2010; 4th 2011); China–Italy EFD (2nd 2020)
Multilateral governance (WTO, G20, IMF)	China–EU EFD (7th 2018; 9th 2022; 10th 2023); China–France EFD (2nd 2014; 4th 2016); China–Germany EFD (1st 2015; 2nd 2019)
Financial cooperation & RMB internationalisation	China–UK EFD (6th 2014; 8th 2016); China–Germany EFD (1st 2015); China–Italy EFD (2nd 2020)
Connectivity & third-party market cooperation	China–EU EFD (5th 2015; 6th 2016); China–UK EFD (6th 2014; 7th 2015); China–Italy EFD (1st 2019; 2nd 2020)
Crisis governance & global public goods	China–EU EFD (8th 2020; 10th 2023); China–France EFD (7th 2020); China–Italy EFD (2nd 2020)