



Institutionalised Societal Diplomacy: China's High-Level People-to-People Dialogues with Europe (2012–2025)

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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). 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 rising powers 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

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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 10 high-level people-to-people dialogues (PPDs) with major partners—beginning with Russia and expanding to the United States (2010), the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK; 2012), France (2014), Germany and South Africa (2017), India (2018), Japan (2019), and Indonesia (2021)¹—to embed cooperation and project legitimacy through structured societal interaction across the fields of education, science, culture, youth, sports, media, women, and sub-national 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-US antagonism (Li and He 2022).

Despite their strategic salience, PPDs remain underexplored in mainstream international relations scholarship. Much of the existing literature focusses on soft power, cultural diplomacy, or public diplomacy but pays limited attention to how attraction and legitimacy are organised through institutional design. The PPDs address this gap: Though occasionally suspended in moments of political friction, their tiered structure—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 Chinese press releases, joint statements, and available European documents. Given asymmetries in disclosure, the analysis is explicitly framed as China's PPD engagement with Europe, focussing 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

¹ China and Indonesia introduced the deputy-prime ministerial-level mechanism in 2015.

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 practise. Conceptually, it refines soft power debates by advancing institutionalised societal diplomacy as an analytical category and developing the SRA framework to explain how China adapts to and recalibrates elements of the LIO through structured low-politics mechanisms.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines the institutional design, thematic scope, and strategic layering of the PPDs. Section 3 situates the concept of societal diplomacy within existing soft power debates. Section 4 outlines the methodology. Section 5 analyses outcomes across the four dimensions, showing how they operationalise China’s SRA posture. Section 6 concludes with theoretical and policy implications, highlighting how PPDs illuminate China’s evolving role in global governance.

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.² 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 News Agency 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

² Joint Press Communiqué of the 14th EU–China Summit, February 14, 2012, Brussels, European External Action Service (EEAS).

ties in 2014 and launched on 18 September in Paris, identifying eight cooperation fields (Xinhua News Agency 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 News Agency 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 1 summarises the rounds and co-chairs.

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 audiovisual 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

Table 1 Summary of PPD rounds and co-chairs

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
EU	3rd & 4th (2015, 2017)	Liu Yandong	Tibor Navracsecs, 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

Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent tables are based on the author's compilation from official press releases and joint statements (2012–2025)

Source: Author's compilation from official press releases and joint statements (2012–2025)

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.

3 From Soft Power to Institutionalised Societal Diplomacy

The concept of soft power, first articulated by Joseph 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 mis-specification 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 practises. 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 practises relied heavily on message management and propaganda (Wang 2008, 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 scepticism 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 aggregate 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, embedded in formal diplomatic mechanisms, and aimed at cultivating trust, visibility, relational capital, and discursive legitimacy.

Societal diplomacy extends beyond cultural and public diplomacy. It mobilises a wide range of societal actors such as universities, research institutes, cultural organisations, subnational governments, and professional associations under state-led frameworks, covering education, science, health, culture, youth, sports, tourism, media, women, and regional cooperation. Unlike cultural diplomacy's symbolic exchanges or public diplomacy's audience messaging, societal diplomacy highlights structured, multidomain cooperation which is both politically endorsed and strategically guided. When institutionalised, as in the PPD, it transforms episodic initiatives into predictable frameworks anchored in political commitment.

To clarify this conceptual distinction, Table 2 contrasts societal diplomacy with the two dominant categories in the literature: public diplomacy and cultural diplo-

Table 2 Comparing 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; institutionalised mechanisms	State framing may constrain dialogic credibility; contested reception

macy. 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.

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.

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 Chinese-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).

Chinese-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 practises. 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 whilst illuminating theoretical questions about China's SRA posture.

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 a conceptual innovation by developing the strategist-reformist actor (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 rising 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 rising powers may pursue reform from within, using institutionalised low-politics mechanisms to stabilise relationships, negotiate legitimacy, and cautiously expand the boundaries of shared values.

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 reframings (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 practise (e.g. symbolic events often carry normative messaging), they are analytically distinguishable by their primary functions: formalisation structures the dialogue, tangibility delivers outputs, 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 3 outlines the four analytical dimensions, providing the framework for subsequent analysis.

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, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 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

Table 3 Analytical dimensions of PPD outcomes

Dimension	Analytical/function	Description	Distinctive feature
Tangible	Practical/output	Concrete deliverables and measurable projects	Focus on what was done (observable outcomes)
Formalised	Institutional/structuring	Procedural embedding and continuity of the mechanism	Capture how the dialogue is organised
Symbolic	Performative/ritual	Ceremonial and representational gestures which reinforce ties	Concerns how the relationship is represented
Normative	Value/discursive	Articulation of shared principles and value framing	Addresses what values are promoted and hybridised

tangible projects contribute to the consolidation of mutual goodwill and the institutionalisation of cooperation within everyday sociocultural practises, thereby signalling continuity beyond episodic political frictions. Later rounds broadened the scope to science, media, sports, tourism, gender, and sustainability. By the fourth round (Xinhua News Agency 2017b), Erasmus + mobility had benefited over 4,000 students and staff. The sixth round (Xinhua News Agency 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 News Agency 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 News Agency 2015) alone generated over 800 commemorative events linked to the 50th anniversary of

diplomatic ties, while the third round (Xinhua News Agency 2016) expanded cooperation fields from eight to 10. The fourth round (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2017) delivered more than 180 outcomes across sectors, and the seventh round (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 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 partook 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 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 4 Comparative tangible outcomes of China–Europe PPDs (2012–2025)

Partner	Scope	Key Outcomes	Continuity
EU	Education, youth, multilingualism, science, culture, sports, sustainability	Degree recognition (2012); Erasmus+ (> 4000 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	£200 m Research and Innovation Fund (2013); 2015 Cultural Year (2 m reached); 63 outcomes incl. £26 m 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; 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.

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 a 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 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2025b) and 11th EFD (Ministry of Finance of the PRC 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 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 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 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 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 5 summarises comparative patterns of formalisation across the four dialogues, highlighting variation in durability and institutional anchoring within their respective partnership frameworks.

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 institution-

Table 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 supra-national anchor
UK	125	Referenced in joint statements and summits until 2017	CSP (2004; up-graded 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

alise 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.

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; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 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 (Ministry of Education of the PRC 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 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 6 Symbolic outcomes across PPD channels

Partner	Symbolic Anchors	Discursive Themes	Symbolic Significance
EU	Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2012); 40th anniversary (2015); Tourism Year (2018)	Mutual understanding; trust; pragmatic cooperation; ‘four partnerships’; China/Europe/World Dream; harmony in difference; shared future	Aligns China’s symbolism with 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 interciv- ilisation- al 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.

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 7 summarises normative outcomes observable across the dialogues, focusing on how discursive framings reflect China’s evolving norm-negotiation strategy within the LIO.

Table 7 Normative outcomes across China–Europe PPDs (2012–2025)

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

Table 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

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.

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 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.

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 stud-

ies (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 rising powers 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 rising 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 rising 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 a 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 rising powers’ strategies of order

engagement, with implications extending beyond China–Europe relations to wider debates on contested global governance.

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.

Theoretically, 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 rising powers 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.

For scholars, the PPDs highlight how rising powers innovate in low-politics domains to manage identity, negotiate legitimacy, and recalibrate norms. They show that order change is not confined to security or economic spheres but is also enacted through societal diplomacy.

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 rising 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.

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Declarations

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