



Strategy and diplomacy in a changing world: China's high-level strategic dialogues with European counterparts (2001–2025)

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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 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.

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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 UK (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 [“Literature review and analytical framework”](#) reviews the literature on SD and introduces the analytical lenses of

forum shopping and altercasting. Section “[Research design and methodology](#)” outlines the methodological framework and dataset. Section “[Analysing China’s SDs through forum shopping](#)” presents the empirical patterns of forum differentiation across the China–Europe SD architecture, while Section “[Altercasting in China–Europe SDs](#)” identifies the repertoire of signalling practices observable within dialogue discourse. Section “[Discussion: institutionalised signalling, role negotiation, and continuity-with-recalibration](#)” 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 “[Conclusion](#)” concludes by outlining the paper’s conceptual and empirical contributions to research on institutionalised diplomacy and major-power behaviour toward the LIO.

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–USA 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 et al. 2013; Glosny et al. 2013; Twomey et al. 2016; Radzinsky et al. 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 et al. 2010). As a result, China–Europe SDs remain underexamined 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.

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.

Methodological framework

The analysis combines the grounded theory method (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.

Silences, 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 high-level economic and financial dialogue (EFD) or the high-level people-to-people dialogue (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.

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), China–France (27), China–Germany (12), China–Portugal (2), China–Poland (7), and China–Switzerland (4). 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 the corpus, reflecting the study’s focus on how China articulates and performs diplomatic engagement through institutionalised dialogue mechanisms. Table 1 summarises the distribution of dialogue rounds and available documentation.

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 relevant 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.

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.

Table 1 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 (incl. 8 held under the Strategic Dialogue on Diplomacy and Security (SDDS) since 2015)	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

Source: Author’s compilation based on SD documents (2001–2025)

Analytical Lenses

The empirical analysis is guided by two complementary analytical lenses introduced in Section “[Literature review and analytical framework](#)”. 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 2 summarises the relationship between analytical lenses, their empirical operationalisation in the SD corpus, and the interpretive constructs developed through abductive analysis.

Analysing China's SDs through forum shopping

This section and the following one (altercasting) present the 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.

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 toward 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.

Table 2 Analytical structure of the study: lenses, empirical operationalisation, and interpretive outcomes^a

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

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

^aUnless otherwise stated, all subsequent tables in this paper are based on the author’s analysis of official SD documents, 2001–2025

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 vice-ministerial rounds from 2005–2007), Germany (from 2011, following 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 summarises these recurring priorities as they are presented in official SD documents.

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.

Table 3 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

As shown in Sections “[Analysing China’s SDs through forum shopping](#)” and “[Altercasting in China–Europe SDs](#)”, 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.

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 toward multilateral governance narratives, differentiation is also evident among bilateral dialogues. Held at ministerial level (foreign minister/state councillor), 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 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 councillor) 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 councillor)-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 7-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 evidence 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. The 2025 joint document further records Swiss support for the China-proposed Global Governance Initiative and for the work of the China-initiated International Organization 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 4 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.

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.

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 “[Analysing China’s SDs through forum shopping](#)” 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

Table 4 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 (SDDS)	SD2 (bilateral)	Major-power security-policy tier	Security cooperation	Security-policy probing venue under bounded diplomatic framing
China-Poland SD	SD2 (bilateral)	Vice-ministerial/sub-regional tier	CEE cooperation agendas	Sub-regional engagement venue 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

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 “[Analysing China’s SDs through forum shopping](#)”, these signalling practices provide the empirical basis for the strategist–reformist actor (SRA) interpretation developed in the “[Discussion: institutionalised signalling, role negotiation, and continuity-with-recalibration](#)” 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.

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 evidence 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 “[Analysing China’s SDs through forum shopping](#)”. 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 5 illustrates China's recurring foreign-policy objectives, aligned priorities across SD1 and SD2, and the repertoire of signalling practices.

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 overlapping objectives are operationalised through partner-specific altercasting techniques across the seven SD partners.

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.

Table 5 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 and multilateralism	Diplomatic signalling
Responsible-oriented	Practical cooperation and global stability	Self-presentation and normative framing
Principle-oriented	Core interests and major Concerns	Boundary-setting and sovereignty signalling
Declarative	Multilateralism and multipolarity	Role framing and value-driven messaging

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 UN Security Council 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.

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.¹

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 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

¹ 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 USA, Russia, and the EU.

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.

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”).² In some 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

² 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).

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.³ 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 toward 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 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

³ EU-China relations: A candid exchange on our differences, October 20, 2023.

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.

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 “[Analysing China’s SDs through forum shopping](#)”, 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 6 summarises partner-specific role framing in China’s SD declarative messaging, illustrating the differentiated yet coherent role-construction logic embedded across dialogue settings.

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

Table 6 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 Afghanistation 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

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 “[Altercasting and foreign-policy objectives across SD channels](#)” and “[Declarative objectives: role framing and value-driven messaging](#)”, 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.

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 "Analysing China's SDs through forum shopping" showed how forum differentiation produces a layered dialogue architecture enabling engagement across multiple institutional levels of the European system, while Section "Altercasting in China–Europe SDs" 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 strategist–reformist actor (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 continuity with recalibration (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 continuity with recalibration (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 strategist–reformist actor, SRA), institutional practice (institutionalisation as diplomacy, IaD), and the patterned outcome of continuity-with-recalibration (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.

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 strategist–reformist actor, SRA), institutional practice (institutionalisation as diplomacy, IaD), and the patterned outcome of continuity with recalibration (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 economic and financial dialogues (EFD) and people-to-people dialogues (PPD), 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.

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Data availability This study draws on publicly accessible materials, including joint statements, press releases, and government reports retrieved via open web searches. These documents were systematically organised into a qualitative dataset categorised by year, actors involved, and key themes, supporting analysis based on Grounded Theory Method and abductive reasoning. Additional interpretive insights were derived from expert interviews conducted in November-December 2024 under approved ethical protocols. Due to confidentiality agreements, interview data are not publicly available. The structured dataset derived from public sources may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to review for third-party copyright or sensitivity considerations.

Declarations

Ethics approval This study was approved by the University of Essex Research Ethics Committee (reference no. ETH2324-1444) and complies with all ethical regulations.

Consent to participate All interview participants gave informed consent to participate in this research.

Consent for publication The author gives consent for publication.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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