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***The EU, China and Climate Action:
Time to “Turn Up the Heat” on
Climate Cooperation***

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Abstract

As a challenge that knows no borders, climate change cannot be confronted without global cooperation and action. Since the early 1990s, the international community has engaged in efforts to establish a global framework for climate cooperation, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and to pursue joint climate action, even though the willingness, resources and approaches among countries differ significantly. In particular, as the world lacks a clear leader in the field of climate change, eyes have been pointed at the European Union (EU) and China as potential partners in guiding global climate cooperation. Despite some positive developments in EU-China climate cooperation, the two parties should strive to enhance their cooperation in the field. The question is how?

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Executive Summary

Since the US announced their withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017, the world has lacked a clear leader in the field of climate change. Eyes have been pointed at the European Union (EU) and China as potential partners in guiding global climate cooperation. On the one hand, the EU is considered a pioneer in climate action, with policies in the field since the early 1990s. On the other hand, from being a reactive participant in global climate governance in the 1990s, China has become a more active contributor. Despite still being the world's largest coal consumer and greenhouse gas emitter, China is now also the world's leading developer of renewable energy. Together, the EU and China are now responsible for about one third of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. As a result, their climate and energy policies are crucial as they have a strong impact on present and future GHG emissions, as well as on other countries' policy making processes.

Since the early stages of the international joint climate cooperation under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in the 1990s, EU-China climate relations in bilateral and multilateral settings have shifted from being nearly inexistent to become an important part of the talks at the EU-China Summits and a starting point for joint bilateral projects. Some concrete projects with tangible outcomes have already been realised. For example, the EU has assisted China in the creation of its own national emissions trading system. Pilot programmes have been in place since 2013 in the municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongqing, the city of Shenzhen and in the provinces of Guangdong and Hubei (GIZ). The countrywide programme's launch is also expected soon. Cooperation at subnational level on urbanisation and climate resilience has also taken place, for example with European Member States assisting China's sustainable and low-carbon city projects (Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019).

However, official documents for bilateral cooperation remain highly rhetorical, and the relationship's potential has not yet been fully exploited at bilateral level. Some of the announced projects were eventually not realised or completed. For example, after years of joint research, the China-EU Near Zero Emission Coal project saw a slowdown due to funding-related disagreements and is unlikely to reach success by the end of 2020 (Teffer, 2017). Besides this, rivalry and disagreements on specific topics such as trade liberalisation, economic openness, cybersecurity and reducing financial aid for state-owned enterprises, have on occasion stalled the dialogue on climate change or moved it to the background (Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019). EU-China bilateral relations on climate change have also not yet turned into consistent interests and evident collaboration in global climate governance.

Nevertheless, addressing the global climate emergency is becoming an increasingly compelling issue, both due to the rising frequency of environmental crises, as well as the growing awareness among civil society that has led to the creation of more assertive movements, such as Friday for Future. In this regard 2020 will be a very important year. In global climate governance, 2020 is the year in which the Paris Agreement fully moves to the forefront as the key driver of global climate governance. Adhering countries are expected to evaluate whether (and to what extent) they have been able to implement their first Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and to submit their short-term 2030 and long-term 2050 goals. These are required to be communicated before COP26 in Glasgow, which was originally to take place in November 2020 and recently postponed to 2021 due to Covid-19 (Doyle & Farand, 2020). Furthermore, COP26 will take place few weeks after the Presidential election

in the US, the world's second-largest emitter, whose outcome might bring the US back into the Paris Agreement.

This year, the EU and China are both also discussing important domestic planning issues. The EU is still undergoing negotiations for its 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the EU's long-term budget, which will determine the amount of money the EU will be able to attribute to support its policies and programmes, as well as their specific allocation. The practicalities of the Green Deal, presented by the new European Commission (EC) in December 2019, are also under consideration. China, instead, will finalise its 14th five-year-plan by the end of 2020, which will determine the national social and economic development agenda for 2021-2025. The Ministry of Ecology and Environment intends to include climate-related targets, such as putting the national carbon market in operation, improving climate change laws and strengthening local governments' commitments, advancing grid parity projects, supporting global climate governance and developing countries (Kuo, 2020). The Plan will also unveil the importance given by China to coal, which, as we have seen, still plays a far too big role in the Chinese economy.

Despite unexpected challenges, 2020 will also provide numerous opportunities for the EU and China to come to terms and promote concrete joint climate action. On the occasion of the Leipzig Summit, where Xi Jinping will meet all 27 EU leaders, and possibly the upcoming 22nd EU-China Summit, which has been temporarily put on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic, China is coming back to the negotiation table with the EU. On the agenda of both gatherings is the signing of the investment agreement still under negotiation. However, the two meetings represent an opportunity the two parties should grasp with both hands to discuss climate-related (joint) commitments. As the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation expires this year, the EU and China are also to formulate their new Agenda for Cooperation. The two parties should strive to enhance their cooperation in the field both in view of COP26 and for the long-term.

It might not be possible to fully separate climate cooperation from other aspects of EU-China relations. In order to bridge the gap between design on paper and implementation, limiting the interference of sensitive topics in the climate dialogue, the following aspects should be taken into account:

- In accordance with the developments of EU-China relations in the past few years, the new Agenda for Cooperation should recognise essential differences between China and the EU, thereby individuating areas of their bilateral relations with higher and lower degree of disagreement and potential conflicting interests. Those areas in which the two parties share common goals should be shielded from tensions persisting or rising in other areas to avoid inertia, through the careful monitoring of domestic and foreign policy changes.
- A functioning independent climate dialogue platform separated from the EU-China Summit, science-based but with high-level representativeness, should be created, expanding the scope of instruments and dialogues already in place.
- An EU-China joint financing and investment mechanism specifically attributed to clean energy, low carbon, and sustainable infrastructure projects should be established to incentivise business endeavours and create a level playing field also in this market segment.
- Cooperation in the research and education sectors should be further pursued to remain at the forefront of innovation easing climate action.

- Trilateral projects with third countries, involving local, European and Chinese institutions and/or companies should also be promoted to enhance mutual understanding, the sharing of knowledge and technology and the spread of sustainable norms and standards.
- Climate cooperation at Member State and subnational levels should be fostered, provided that agreements between them are along the same line of those at EU-China level.

Improved bilateral climate dialogue will be essential in terms of producing positive effects on the planet and in limiting the occurrence of phenomena, such as the spread of virus and natural disasters, while also building greater resilience. It can also enhance the two parties' dialogue within the UNFCCC and set an example for other large emitters, thereby promoting the efforts of global climate governance. Successful cooperation might also be conducive to bridge the gap between the Global North and the Global South, both in climate change as well as in other fields of shared interest. Finally, it might improve bilateral EU-China relations in other more sensitive fields too.

Introduction

As a challenge that knows no borders, **climate change cannot be confronted without global cooperation and action**. Since the early 1990s, the international community has engaged in efforts to establish a global framework for climate cooperation, namely the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and to pursue joint climate action, even though the willingness, resources and approaches among countries differ significantly. In particular, **as the world lacks a clear leader in the field of climate change, eyes have been pointed at the European Union (EU) and China as potential partners in guiding global climate cooperation** (Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019). On the one hand, the EU is considered one of the leading powers in climate action, with policies in the field since the early 1990s. On the other hand, over the past fifty years, China has evolved from a poor agrarian economy to the world's second largest economy. From being a reactive participant in global climate governance in the 1990s, today China has become a more active contributor. Together, **the EU and China are now responsible for about one third of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions**. As a result, **their climate and energy policies are crucial as they have a strong impact on present and future GHG emissions, as well as on other countries' policy making processes**.

Against this background, this paper explores the EU's and China's domestic policy-making processes and commitments in addressing climate change. Following, it also looks at the development of the EU-China high-level dialogue on climate change in both multilateral UN-led and bilateral contexts, as well as its relevance in 2020 and for the future of global climate governance. This paper argues that **climate relations have shifted from being nearly inexistent in the 1990s to become an important part of the talks at the EU-China Summits** and a starting point for joint bilateral projects. **However**, it also emerges that official documents remain highly rhetorical, and **the relationship's potential has not yet been fully exploited**. EU-China bilateral relations on climate change, furthermore, have thus far not turned into consistent interests and evident collaboration in global climate governance. **Challenges both between and within the EU and China are, for instance, posing obstacles to successful and effective dialogue**.

2020 is a tipping point. It has posed unexpected challenges, but will also provide numerous opportunities for the two parties to come to terms and promote concrete joint climate action. This will be essential, in terms of producing positive effects on the planet and setting an example for other large emitters, thereby promoting the efforts of global climate governance. Successful cooperation might also be conducive to bridge the gap between the Global North and the Global South, both in climate change as well as in other fields of shared interest.

EU policies and commitments

The European Union is considered a pioneer in addressing climate change. Policies in the field have been introduced and developed since the early 1990s, providing EU-wide common measures and monitoring mechanisms (i) to tackle greenhouse gas emissions, (ii) to advance renewable energies (RE) and (iii) to improve energy efficiency.

For example, in 1991 the European programme "Specific Actions for Vigorous Energy Efficiency" (SAVE) was already in place to incentivise the implementation of energy efficiency programmes. In 1992, a European CO₂ and energy tax was already being discussed, even though at that time disagreements among Member States (MS) prevented an actual

officialization. In 1993, through the ALTENER programme, the EU encouraged its MS to set targets for renewables.

After adhering to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the EU intensified its engagement in climate policy making, launching the European Climate Change Programme (ECCP) in 2000. The European Emission Trading Scheme (ETS), the world's first and largest international carbon market, was set up in 2005, introducing national limits for CO₂ emissions from heavy industry and power stations in each MS. The scheme was revised in 2018 and enlarged to include Switzerland in 2019.

2020, 2030 and long-term targets

In 2007, the 20-20-20 by 2020 targets were agreed upon by EU leaders, who aimed at a 20 percent reduction of GHG emissions, a 20 percent increase in renewable energy in final energy consumption, and a 20 percent decrease in total EU primary energy consumption by 2020, compared to the 1990 levels. The 20-20-20 targets were followed by the 2030 climate & energy framework in 2014, which further pushed for a reduction of at least 40 percent in GHG emissions below the 1990 levels, an improvement of at least 32.5 percent in energy efficiency and an increase of at least 32 percent of the share of RE by 2030.

All signing parties to the 2015 Paris Agreement were expected to communicate their mid-century, long-term low greenhouse gas emission targets and strategies by 2020. The EU did so in 2018, laying out its vision for achieving climate-neutrality by 2050. This entails reaching net zero CO₂ emissions by complementing carbon emissions with carbon removal, for example through carbon offsetting¹, or by eradicating carbon emissions altogether. This principle is also enshrined in the Green Deal, presented by the new European Commission (EC) in December 2019 and in the consequent EU Climate Law proposed in March 2020. The Green Deal is aimed at drastically cutting GHG emissions by 2050, investing in research and innovation and preserving Europe's natural environment. The goal is expected to be reached while providing a socially balanced and fair transition to climate neutrality that considers diverse national circumstances and ensures the EU's energy security and competitiveness. In order to reach its climate and environmental ambitions, the European Commission is also expected to present its 2030 Biodiversity Strategy soon.

The EU as a leader

This is just an initial presentation of the EU's policies in place to tackle climate change. Thanks to these policies, GHG emissions in the EU were decreased by 23 percent between 1990 and 2018, while the economy grew by 50 percent during the same period (CAT, 2019a). Given these efforts, there are great expectations on the EU to fulfil its self-given role as a leader in combating climate change, especially after the US announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017. The EU is also considered a more natural partner for China, whose decisions heavily impact the rest of the world as its largest emitter, compared to the more erratic US in this sense (Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019).

At the same time, some fear the EU Green Deal's ambitious objectives came too late (Friends of Europe, 2020), are still not ambitious enough (European Parliament, 2020) or, worse,

¹ Carbon offsetting refers to actions or processes enabling individual companies or organizations to compensate for CO₂ and other GHG emissions deriving from their industrial or other activities. For example, by funding environment-friendly projects in other locations, introducing clean energy technologies, planting trees or capturing and storing waste CO₂, or participating in schemes devised to make reductions of equal value, such as emissions trading schemes.

actually unfeasible (Heymann, 2019). Without doubt, the EU's actions alone will not be enough to effectively tackle climate change. The EU will be able to fulfil a leadership role only if it is able to bring other countries on board (Friends of Europe, 2020)

China's policies and commitments

In about five decades, China transformed from an agrarian society to the world's second largest economy, accounting for around 16 percent of global GDP, reaching the status of a global superpower (Gosh, 2019). China's unprecedented economic success, however, has been accompanied by energy security concerns, severe air pollution and widespread environmental damage, among other issues. For these reasons – combined with the rising awareness of the possible negative effects of climate change on the country's development - **China has shifted from a rather reactive stance to a more engaged and dynamic approach** toward domestic climate policies and, to some extent, in its participation in global climate governance (Averchenkova, et al., 2016). Today, China is the **world's leading developer of renewable energy** and, yet, also **the world's largest coal consumer and greenhouse gas emitter** (CAT, 2019b). Many eyes are therefore fixed on China, as the choices its leaders make, domestically and abroad, have sizeable and long-lasting global effects, raising concerns worldwide.

The 1990s and Poverty Eradication

Since the early days of the international dialogue on climate change in the 1990s, China has experienced great transformations in the economic and policy realms. In the view of Chinese leaders in the 1990s, **lifting people out of poverty** was the primary concern. China's large-scale poverty reduction was realised through *ad hoc* government reform policies, such as the National “8-7” Poverty-Reduction Programme², and through rapid economic growth (Wang, Li & Ren, 2004). In particular, China's economic development was achieved through export-oriented resource-intensive manufacturing and abundant and inexpensive labour. As a result, being perceived in contrast to the pursuit of the country's modernisation, **environmental protection was not considered a top priority and carbon emission cuts were not envisaged** (Li, 2016). In fact, developed countries were expected to take bigger steps in the control of CO₂ emissions and assist developing countries through technology transfer. Finally, China's leaders were also wary of Western powers' intentions to interfere in China's internal affairs disguised as environmental protection (Ibid.).

The 2000s and Scientific Development

In the early 2000s the Chinese government began to acknowledge and address the high environmental, health and social costs resulting from China's rapid economic development. Fast and sustained industrialisation and urbanisation had been accompanied by **severe environmental pollution**, which, in return, sparked **public dissent** (Goebel & Ong, 2012). At the same time, China had also launched its **going out policy** and joined the **World Trade Organisation (WTO)** in 2001, **acquiring greater bargaining power and weight in the international arena, but also gaining greater international visibility and creating increasing international expectations**. As a result, President Hu Jintao proposed the concept of **Scientific Development in 2003**, a “people-oriented,

² The Plan, introduced in 1994, aimed at alleviating the country's large-scale poverty by 2000. The main instruments were land improvement, infrastructure development, which would provide electricity and drinking water to poor villages, universal primary education and basic preventive and curative health care (Wang, Li & Ren, 2004).

comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development which aims at protecting the environmental and livelihood security of China's citizenry" (Tan-Mullins, 2014, p. 22), showing willingness to promote and enforce social responsibility in many aspects, while still prioritising economic growth. It is in this period that China and the EU formalised their partnership in combating climate change, while China became more proactive in international dialogue schemes.

Given the growing presence of Chinese activities outside China, **Regulations on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) for overseas operations**, including environmental guidelines and monitoring, have also been issued by the State Council and different Ministries since 2007 (Liu & Zhang, 2018). In the following year, the State Environmental Protection Administration, an affiliated institution of the State Council responsible for environmental protection effort, was upgraded to Ministry of Environmental Protection³, as an integral department of the State Council, acquiring a more prominent role (Ministry of Ecology and Environment, n.d.).

2012 and the Ecological Civilisation

In 2012, during the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the concept of **Ecological Civilisation** was officially added to the Party's Constitution. The concept had, in fact, been introduced at the previous CCP Congress by former President Hu Jintao, who suggested China "build an ecological civilisation and a model of growth and consumption, as well as industries, which are frugal in their use of energy and resources and protect the environment" (Parr & Henry, 2016). Yet, it was **under Xi Jinping that the principle became an integral part of the Party's political discourse and a starting point for various environmental policies** and climate action⁴. Efforts have been undertaken also in compliance with the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Despite the controversial fact that between 2014 and 2017, 91 percent of financing by key Chinese banks involved in the Belt and Road Initiative were related to fossil fuel projects, and coal power plants in particular, **reducing coal consumption, increasing investments and the use of renewable energies** seemed to be a clear objective of the Party's domestic policies. In an attempt to decrease the country's overreliance on the coal industry, China's National Action Plan on Climate Change and the Energy Development Strategy Action Plan (2014–2020), as well as the Action Plan on the Efficient Use of Coal (2015–2020) were put in place. An Industrial Green Development Plan (2016–2020), which encourages green manufacturing and green supply chains, was also introduced. In the 13th Five Year Plan in 2016, China pledged that coal would account for a maximum of 58 percent of national energy consumption by 2020 – against 62 percent in 2016 (Lin, 2017)-, an objective that was already reached in 2019 (Reuters, 2020)⁵. Additional coal-related objectives were also announced, such as a – temporary - ban on the construction of new coal-fired power plants (CAT, 2019b). Investments in renewable energy, accompanied by feed-in-tariffs for RE producers (Gallagher & Zhang, 2019), reached about USD 127 billion in 2017, almost 45 percent of total global investment in the sector. In 2018, the renewables target was set to reach 35 percent of national energy consumption by 2030 (CAT, 2019b). China also introduced subsidies and tax

³ Later renamed Ministry of Ecology and Environment in 2018.

⁴ "Coexist well with nature with 'energy conservation and environmental protection' policies and 'contribute to global ecological safety'" is also point n.9 of Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.

⁵ In fact, given that the country's total energy consumption had been raising, coal consumption slightly increased in absolute terms, as well (Reuters, 2020).

exemptions to boost the use of **new energy vehicles** (NEVs)⁶, which already reached one million in 2018. In order to prevent global temperature from increasing over 1.5 °C and to limit the emission of atmospheric pollutants, as set by the Paris Agreement, China will also implement stricter fuel standards both for passenger and commercial vehicles, starting from respectively July 2020 and 2021 (CAT, 2019b).

Efforts have been made in other sectors, too. For example, since the early 2000s, **Forest Conservation policies** have been introduced, initially focusing on native forest recovery and lately even proscribing logging for commercial use in native forests.

With regards to China's international engagement, Xi Jinping suggested and promoted the creation of the **Global Energy Interconnection (GEI) initiative** in 2015 at the UN Sustainable Development Summit, with the aim of speeding up the transition to green and low-carbon development, as well as boosting scientific research in the field. In 2016, China also pledged USD 5.1 billion to assist developing countries in tackling climate change and development problems in the framework of South-South cooperation within **the “10-100-1000” scheme**. Despite initial issues related to financing and communication between the responsible National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and recipient countries, China has aimed at funding 10 low-carbon demonstration projects, 100 climate change adaptation and mitigation projects, and 1,000 training places in developing countries (Wang, 2018). In 2017, official documents were published encouraging Chinese overseas investment projects to comply with the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, as well as to “share the ecological civilization philosophy and achieve sustainable development” (Belt and Road Portal, 2017), such as the **“Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road”**, the “Belt and Road Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan” and the “Vision and Actions on Energy Cooperation in Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” (Chen, Norris, Hartzell, & Xiaochang, 2019).

What Role for China?

Especially after the US' announcement of withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, many eyes have been pointed at China, wondering if it could **take up the US' role as a genuine leader in combating climate change** (Gallagher & Zhang, 2019; CSR Europe, 2018). Opinions vary, but tend to be decreasingly optimistic in later years (Lehr, 2019; Nyabiage, 2020). As mentioned, China is a major developer of renewable energy, while at the same time financing coal plants along the BRI and being the world's major coal consumer. Furthermore, after 2017 showed an unprecedented growth for photovoltaic (PV) installations, **subsidies for solar equipment have been reduced** by the government since 2018, in order to reach zero-subsidy levels in 2021 (Kuo, 2020). This is not necessarily bad news, since the lack of high domestic demand has made PV panels' price fall, thereby stimulating international demand. Besides, as a result of technological innovation of wind installations, accompanied by increased cost-competitiveness, the wind power market is expected to continue growing (REVE, 2019). The implementation of a **national emission trading system** is also on its way in 2020, as well as a **binding renewable energy certificate system setting targets for individual Chinese provinces**. Nonetheless, the **removal of the ban on new coal-fired power plants** in 2018, the **increasing demand for coal and oil** in the last years, and the **rebound of CO₂ emissions** in 2018 and 2019 (CAT, 2019b) have raised many eyebrows.

⁶ Intended as battery electric vehicles (BEVs), plug-in hybrid vehicles (PHEVs) and fuel cell electric vehicles (FCEVs) (CAT, 2019b; CAT, 2019a).

One needs to consider that, despite the state government's announced targets, **carbon-intensive manufacturers and coal producers** in China are **mostly concentrated** in a few regions **in north-eastern China**, the so-called "rust belt".

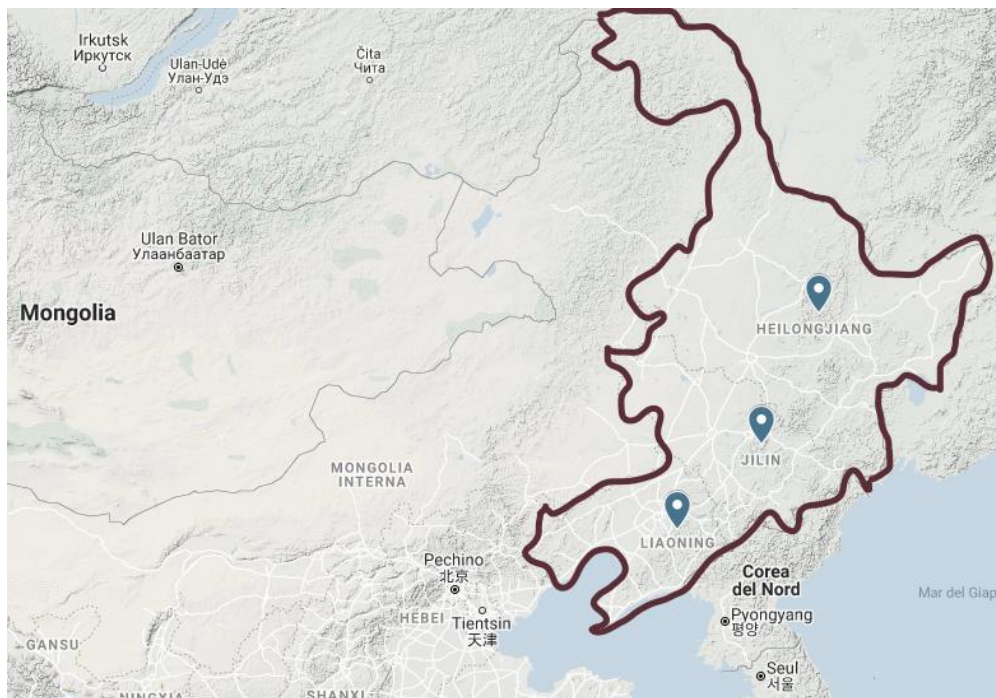


Figure 1 China's "Rust Belt"

Once the beacon of China's industrialisation, coal-rich regions have been suffering from the exhaustion of local natural resources and China's shifting focus on quality development. The prospect of additional financial and job losses has sparked **resistance from the sector** and provincial and municipal governments (Averchenkova, et al., 2016), creating occasional social unrest (Hornby, 2016). On the other hand, they **tend to be State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs)**. During the SOE reform in the late 1990s, under the slogan "grasping the large, letting go of the small", a number of big SOEs turned into economically and hence politically powerful firms. Thanks to their political clout they have been able to advance their corporate interests and **slow down unfavourable reforms** to some extent. Furthermore, (in)effective implementation of environmental policies also depends to a degree on China's bureaucratic structure and on sub-national governments' action. As a result of the **power and fiscal decentralisation** and the **cadres' evaluation system**, that determines officials' career path based on their performance, local governments often still **prioritise short-term quantitative economic growth** over long-term quality development and environmental standards (Albert & Xu, 2016). Broader reforms might need to take place within China in order to pursue a more successful sustainable development. As for Chinese companies' international engagement, despite CSR guidelines, it is not always easily monitored. The activities' compliance with environmental and other standards is also dependent on the host countries' ability to enforce their rules and regulations (Liu & Zhang, 2018).

Surely, it is hoped that China will add more and more ambitious targets in the imminent 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), even though it is expected to maintain some coal capacity objectives (CAT, 2019b).

EU-China Cooperation on Climate Change

This chapter illustrates the development of EU-China interactions on Climate Change in the multilateral setting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the primary institutional venue where Global Climate Governance takes place, as well as in the bilateral setting.

The evolution of China and EU-China Interactions under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

Rio, Kyoto and the Annex I/non-Annex I divide

Together with the UN Conventions on Biological Diversity and to Combat Desertification, the **UNFCCC was adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992**. With the ultimate objective of stabilising greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and preventing “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (United Nations, 1992), the **principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR)** was formalised. Being climate change a problematic that cannot be delimited to specific countries’ borders, this principle recognised the need for global cooperation and action. Yet, it also identified the historical link between few countries’ higher industrial development levels and their corresponding bigger role in the consumption or degradation of global environmental resources. OECD countries and countries that were undergoing the transition to a market economy - the so-called Annex I countries - were, therefore, attributed greater responsibilities. On the one hand, they were held accountable for most of past and current greenhouse gas emissions and, on the other hand, they were accredited greater ability to address these problems as a result of their higher level of economic development. In sum, **while accepting that all states were to take responsibility for global environmental problems, the CBDR principle was formulated as a compromise between the developed and developing countries**. It also represented the foundation of climate agreements struck in later years.

While the European countries and the European Union – then still known as the European Economic Community (EEC) - were understandably included in the Annex I list, China was at the time still at the early stages of its economic development. The EEC and most developed countries accepted their essential role in climate action and the necessity to be the first introducing binding targets. However, **this original different attribution of responsibility is at the basis of the different approaches and occasional frictions within the UNFCCC between the EU, as well as other developed countries, and China, along with other emerging economies**. Sticking to the principle, during the Rio Earth Summit, China adopted a defensive approach with regards to the responsibilities attributed to non-Annex I countries. It insisted developed countries were to carry out extensive emission cuts and provide financial and technological aid to developing countries (Belis & Schunz, 2013). Furthermore, China was, and still is, a historical advocate of the principle of non-interference and state sovereignty, which has influenced the global climate negotiations on different occasions. As China perceived climate resolutions as a potential violation of its own sovereignty, the **CBDR norm became a functional instrument to reinforce China’s defensive environmental diplomacy in the years to come** (Ibid.).

In line with the outcomes of the Rio Earth Summit, the Kyoto Protocol was signed in 1997. The signing Parties committed to set emission reduction targets. However, following the CDBR principle, developed countries were again acknowledged greater accountability for the high

levels of GHG emissions in the atmosphere and were consequently demanded higher targets, to be reached through mechanisms such as the Emissions Trading Mechanism⁷, the Clean Development Mechanism⁸ and joint implementation⁹. As a result, the strict division between Annex I countries and non-Annex I countries was further institutionalised (Rajamani, 2000). **The exemption of China and other key developing countries from giving meaningful contributions was a major reason for the United States to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001.** While the European Union had endorsed the CBDR principle in the early Conferences of the Parties (COP), after Kyoto it also started encouraging developing countries' greater participation in climate efforts.

Copenhagen and the dispute over legally binding targets

Despite frictions between developed and developing countries, the EU's and China's views started converging around various issues, such as the introduction of emission trading mechanisms in the climate regime. The EU launched the world's first Emissions Trading System (ETS) in 2005 and China accepted the development of the Clean Development Mechanism. This represented the begin of a closer – but still vacillating - relationship between China and the EU, both in the bilateral and multilateral contexts.

China's more proactive attitude did not emerge in a vacuum. Since the Rio Earth Summit, China had undergone great domestic changes due to its fast economic growth. Especially since its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, China's international trade had also expanded significantly. China's successful development, nonetheless, had exacerbated heavy domestic pollution and environmental degradation. Internationally, China had become one of the biggest – and the biggest since 2007 (Vidal & Adam, 2007) - CO₂ emitters, hence, heavily affecting global CO₂ and GHG emission levels. In view of these developments, **China necessarily started to actively participate in global climate governance, in order to address its domestic problematics as well as to respond to the EU's and other actors' call on it to act as a more responsible stakeholder.**

Nonetheless, clear tensions between the EU and China emerged again at the UN talks preceding the 2009 Summit in Copenhagen (COP15). Long-lasting contrasting views regarded, for example, legally binding targets for emission reductions and international monitoring mechanisms. Eventually, at the Copenhagen Summit, China and other major emitters prevented the introduction of legally binding targets for developing economies unless developed countries increased their commitments in terms of finance and emission reductions, thereby hindering the EU's ambitious objectives as well as damaging its “self-image as a global climate leader” (Belis & Schunz, 2013).

The Copenhagen Summit showed that despite bilateral agreements, the differences between the EU and China were still too big to be united on the same

⁷ In the Emission Trading Mechanism, commitments for restricting emissions are expressed as levels of allowed or assigned emissions. Countries that have “unused” allowed emission units are allowed to sell the excess capacity to countries that are over their targets (United Nations Climate Change).

⁸ The Clean Development Mechanism enables developed countries with emission-reduction targets to develop emission-reduction projects in developing countries. These projects can be rewarded with marketable certified emission reduction (CER) credits, each equivalent to one tonne of CO₂, which count towards meeting Kyoto targets (United Nations Climate Change).

⁹ The Joint Implementation mechanism enables developed countries with emission-reduction targets to earn emission reduction units (ERUs) from an emission-reduction or removal project in other developed countries, each equivalent to one tonne of CO₂, which counts towards meeting its Kyoto target (United Nations Climate Change).

front. Nonetheless, despite the Copenhagen Summit's failure in scaling up countries' climate action, it laid the foundations for upcoming negotiations and treaties, for example by introducing the 2°C limit for global warming as a political consensus, which was formally institutionalised at the consequent Summit in Cancun in 2010. China adhered to the Copenhagen Accord and committed to decrease its CO₂ emissions per unit of GDP by 40–45 percent below 2005 levels by 2020 (CAT, 2019b). It also pursued green targets domestically, as emission reduction and energy efficiency goals, and announced trial emissions trading systems throughout the country and increasing investment in wind and solar energy generation and technology production in its 12th Five-Year Plan in 2011 (Lewis, 2011). Finally, **during COP17 in Durban in 2011 China accepted to support for the first time a document that did not explicitly reinforce the clear division between Annex I and non-Annex countries and the CBDR norm** (Belis & Schunz, 2013).

The Paris Agreement and China's active engagement

In the years preceding COP21 in Paris, the divide between Annex I and non-Annex I countries remained a highly disputed matter, with some developing countries, notably China and India unwilling to give up the strict distinction between the two and claiming the right to develop through cheap and abundant fossil fuels.

Nonetheless, China also signed various bilateral agreements on clean energy and climate change with developed countries such as France, Germany and the US. **In November 2014, China and the Obama administration also issued a Joint Announcement on Climate Change, acknowledging the two countries' critical role to play in combating global climate change and the need to work jointly, and with other countries, to reach an agreed outcome with legal force at COP21 in Paris the following year** (Office of the Press Secretary, 2014). In September 2015, they also released the Joint Presidential Statement on Climate Change reiterating their commitments. China's more active and constructive role contributed to the successful outcomes of the legally binding Paris Agreement in December 2015. **With the Paris Agreement, the Annex I vs non-Annex I distinction was dropped. However, the CBDR principle were maintained,** as it is reflected in the newly introduced Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), which would become the cornerstone of the new global climate governance beyond 2020¹⁰. In order to reinforce the global response to climate change and to limit global temperature increase “well below 2°C” and possibly 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels, signing parties were to commit to self-imposed climate targets based on their national priorities, circumstances and capabilities. The new system also expected countries to “ratchet up” their ambitions and increase their actions every five years. A pledge-and-review instrument to “assess the collective progress towards achieving the purpose of this Agreement” (United Nations, 2015) was also formulated, which would supposedly enable a domestic and international naming-blaming-shaming mechanism to encourage countries' efforts. However, the NDCs' bottom-up and non-binding nature recall the CBDR principle and countries' autonomy and sovereign decisions. Despite criticisms on its effectiveness in combating climate change (Gustin, 2019), the Paris Agreement represented a steppingstone for Global Climate Governance, which saw China, the US and other great emitters come to terms.

¹⁰ In the pre-COP21 period, the international community took some important decisions under the climate regime. For example, it was decided that a new global and legally binding agreement had to be negotiated by 2015. In this perspective, all parties were encouraged to communicate their Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), or the targets they proposed for themselves, to be finalised at the Paris Agreement

The US' withdrawal announcement and the new leadership

In June 2017, the newly elected President Donald Trump announced that the US – the world's second largest carbon emitter – would withdraw from the Paris Agreement¹¹. Not only did this event have consequences to the financing of the climate change regime, it also left it without a leader. As a result, the EU, as well as some MS, have committed to get back in the driving seat and seek for deeper cooperation with large emerging economies, especially with China (Walsh, 2017). As we will discuss below, the EU and China expressed on different occasions during this period their wish to further their cooperation in bilateral and multilateral settings. However, different opinions and priorities still caused slowdowns in global climate cooperation. The 2019 COP25 in Madrid was the last resort for the international community to settle disputed areas of the Paris Agreement, which officially takes effect in 2020, when signing parties are also required to update their NDCs. In particular, as large emitters, such as **the US, Australia and Brazil have been resistant to participate in international climate action, much depended and still depends on the EU and China to be on the same page in order to preserve the Paris Agreement's momentum.**

However, COP25 let down the great hopes and expectations of the international community and civil societies (Evans & Gabbatiss, 2019). Contested matters by the COP participants included rules for carbon markets, reporting requirements for transparency, common timeframes for climate pledges and other issues related to Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. For example, while China, the African group and other negotiating blocks deemed essential ensuring funding for adaptation through Article 6 trading, a number of developed countries were reluctant to the idea, fearing restrictions on trade. China also insisted on postponing negotiations on reporting until 2020 and was, together with Brazil and India, blamed for impeding ambitious outcomes (Evans & Gabbatiss, 2019).

COP25 showed that despite the dropping of the Annex I – non-Annex I distinction, the North-South divide has not been resolved and continues to be a caveat in negotiations. It also showed that despite both the EU and China evolving in their role, weight and action within the UNFCCC, the EU-China climate relationship might not yet have reached the desired level of maturity.

Bilateral EU-China Dialogue on Climate Change

Early steps and the focus on energy

The bilateral dialogue on climate change between the EU and China originally developed in the **context of energy cooperation**, one of the first areas of overall EU-China relations, to be institutionalised in 1981. At the early stages the focus of cooperation was mainly driven by **energy management and efficiency**.

It is only in the early 2000s that attention started to shift towards sustainability. As mentioned, both the EU and China had become signatory parties to the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol. They both also adhered to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, which included “Ensure Environmental Sustainability” as Goal 7. Furthermore, China had undergone incredible domestic changes.

¹¹ In accordance with Article 28 of the Paris Agreement, the withdrawal will effectively take place in November 2020.

In China's **2003 EU Policy Paper**, it affirmed its intention to **expand collaboration** with the EU in various sectors, such as **energy structure, efficiency and saving, as well as clean energy and renewable energy** (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 2003). It also committed to further promote exchanges on energy development policies and technology transfer.

2005 and the EU-China partnership on climate change

Increasing clean and renewable energy sources and energy efficiency was reiterated at the 8th **EU-China Summit in 2005**, which produced the **EU-China partnership on climate change** and the EU–China Dialogue on Energy and Transport Strategies Memorandum of Understanding. The initiatives aimed at providing a “high-level political framework that will further strengthen this cooperation and which sets out concrete new actions” (European Commission, 2005). In particular, the EU and China wished to jointly develop the first advanced near-zero emission coal (NZEC) technology by 2020 to capture CO₂ from coal-fired power plants and store it underground.

The two parties also committed to advance the execution of the **Clean Development Mechanism (CDM)**. In this view, the European Commission (EC) invested € 2.3 million and started the EU-China CDM Facilitation Project. It is believed that the initiative was pivotal in China's GHG emission decrease (Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019). Following another agreement at the 2009 EU-China Summit to improve coordination and cooperation on climate change, the China-EU Institute for Clean and Renewable Energy (CE-ICARE) was established in Wuhan in 2010. This education and research institute, involving various higher education institutions from EU Member States, the UK and China¹², focuses on energy efficiency and renewable energy in China. The EU and China also issued a Joint Statement on Dialogue and Cooperation on Climate Change in April 2010. The two parties decided to **create a regular dialogue on climate change and to launch a Climate Change Hotline** to ease and quicken the exchange of information and new developments regarding climate change (European Commission, 2010). The five-year **Europe-China Clean Energy Centre (EC2)** cooperation project was also launched by the European Commission in cooperation with the National Energy Administration (NEA) of China, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and the Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea. The EC2 project aimed at contributing to China's transition to a low-carbon economy and a more efficient and sustainable energy sector through technology cooperation, capacity building and knowledge dissemination (European Commission, 2014). Managed by an independent group of European and Chinese energy, environment and climate change experts, EC2 contributed to the setting of cooperation goals with the Concept Note on China-EU Energy Cooperation Roadmap 2020 (EC2, 2015).

EU-China energy-related trade and disputes

At this time, China was already becoming the world's largest manufacturer of solar panels and wind turbines. As a result, **EU-China economic relations also revolved more and more around clean energy-related trade**, with China importing materials and equipment to produce photovoltaic panels from the EU and exporting the end-product back

¹² The consortium involves institutions from: France (ParisTech, University of Perpignan, French International Office for Water), Spain (Zaragoza University), the United Kingdom (Northumbria University), Greece (National Technical University of Athens), Italy (La Sapienza University), China (Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, Wuhan University of Technology in Wuhan, Southeast University in Nanjing).

(Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019). By 2012, the **EU imported 75 percent of its solar power components and 40 percent of its wind energy components from China**. However, the Chinese products' cheap price led some European producers, who struggled because of the competition, to turn to the European Commission. After an **investigation into China's alleged unfair practices**, the EU imposed tariffs on Chinese solar panels. In response, China started an anti-dumping probe on wine imported from Europe. Being China the EU's second biggest trading partner and being the EU China's largest one, the two parties decided to settle the dispute in 2013 (Chen, 2015). However, this episode showed that **competing interests and disagreements on different issues could negatively affect climate cooperation**.

The EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, the Paris Agreement and the US' withdrawal

In 2013, the EU and China launched **the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation**, setting goals in fields of 'peace and security', 'prosperity', 'sustainable development', and 'people-to-people exchanges'. In the chapter on sustainable development, a section was specifically devoted to cooperation in climate change and environmental protection. The two parties recognised their **common responsibility in advancing global development** and again committed to take full advantage of the synergies between China's ecological civilisation and the EU's resource efficiency agenda (European Commission, 2013). Besides jointly pursuing the objectives of the UNFCCC, they also committed to promote complementary initiatives. As a follow-up, China and the EU initiated **a carbon emissions trading (CET) cooperation project** in 2014 to guide China's development of a national emissions trading system.

In June 2015, with the **EU-China Joint Statement on Climate Change, the two parties promised to collaborate to "reach an ambitious and legally binding agreement" at the Paris Climate Conference** later that year (European Council, 2015), which was finally realised.

Later on, in 2017, the EU and China, together with Canada, established a **Ministerial for Climate Action (MoCA)**, offering a comprehensive approach to climate action. Since 2017, annual Ministerial meetings have brought together ministers and representatives from major economies and climate change leaders to enhance action in order to reach the Paris Agreement's goals. They have also provided a forum to address economic opportunities with business leaders (Government of Canada, 2019).

At the 20th EU-China Summit in 2018 both parties expressed their wish to make their **collaboration on climate change and clean energy a core pillar of their bilateral partnership and economic relations**. In the Joint Statement on Climate Action and Clean Energy signed by Li Keqiang, Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker, they again agreed on stepping up their respective efforts by 2020 and to **formulate a long-term strategy for low-carbon development strategies**. The intention to explore options for **trilateral cooperation with developing countries**, in particular the Least Developed Countries, Small Islands and African countries, to increase their capacity to combat climate change and build clean energy was also for the first time formally stated (EEAS, 2018).

The EU-China strategic outlook and the EU's new multifaceted approach to China

2019 marked a turning point in the EU's design of its relations with China. In March 2019 the EC issued its Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and

the Council titled “**EU-China – A strategic outlook**” (European Commission, 2019a). The document was aimed at **reviewing the 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation**, as the EU acknowledged the impressive growth China’s economic power and political clout had undergone. In the communication, the EU acknowledged **China** as a “key global actor and leading technological power”. As such, it should **no longer be regarded as a developing country and excused for refuting responsibilities corresponding to its role**. Despite China’s commitment to a rules-based multilateral order, the EU also denounced the country’s selective engagement with the principle. As a result, the EU recognised the need to develop a multi-faceted approach to China, which is, at the same time, a cooperation partner (to pursue common goals with), a negotiating partner (to develop a balanced relationship with), an economic competitor (above all in the field of technology), and a systemic rival (promoting different models of governance). According to the document, the EU still sees **China as a cooperating and strategic partner in climate change**. However, it highlights that China is the world’s main investor in renewable energy and at the same time a major carbon emitter, while it also engages in the construction of coal power plants around the world. As an essential player in global climate action, **the EU demands China to peak its emissions by 2030, as planned by the Paris Agreement while hoping to reinforce the cooperation on sustainable finance**.

The following month, at the 21st EU-China Summit in Brussels, the EU and Chinese leaders again reiterated the importance of increasing their joint effort in implementing the Paris Agreement. They agreed to expand their collaboration on other environmental issues, such as maritime pollution, biodiversity and green finance, with the aim of directing private capital towards a more environmentally sustainable economy (European Council, 2019). They also released a Joint Statement, where both sides agreed on advancing renewables, converting to lower-carbon fuels and improving energy efficiency (European Commission, 2019b).

In November, as the Trump administration officially started the US withdrawal process from the Paris Agreement, French president Emmanuel Macron was visiting China, where 40 contracts in the fields of aviation, energy and sustainable development, tourism, health, finance and digital technology were signed. With the **US formally leaving the climate regime, Macron communicated the EU’s wish to lead global efforts to cut emissions together with China as to assure climate actions to be effective even without US participation** (Farand, 2019).

The new European Commission’s Green Deal and bid to reach carbon neutrality by 2050 shows the EU’s intention to take the lead and motivate other countries to rise their targets. However, **formulating more ambitious plans and realising concrete and effective joint projects, will be crucial for the future of climate talks and climate action**, especially in view of COP26. This Summit will be particularly important. **Addressing the global climate emergency is becoming an increasingly compelling issue**, both due to the **rising frequency of environmental crises** as well as the **growing awareness among civil society** that has led to the creation of more assertive movements, such as Friday for Future. After the inconclusive outcomes of COP25, countries will be expected also to agree on rules for carbon markets and other mechanisms of international cooperation.

EU-China cooperation on climate change with third countries

The EU and China have at times explored options for trilateral cooperation on climate change, as for example on the occasion of the aforementioned 20th EU-China

Summit in 2018, when the EU and China envisaged “possibilities for triangular cooperation on promoting sustainable energy access, energy efficiency and low greenhouse gas emission development *in* other developing countries and assist them to increase the capacities in combating climate change, with particular focus on least developed countries, small island developing states and African countries” (EEAS, 2018). As an example, African countries are highly vulnerable to the world's changing weather patterns, with increasing temperatures and less frequent but more intense rainfalls (Shepard, 2019). **Increasing African people’s access to clean and affordable electricity, improving livelihoods and ensuring environmental sustainability**, are among the objectives of the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and African regional organisations. Both the EU and China are also engaged in sustainable development and in climate change efforts on the African continent, for example with European and Chinese companies involved in the production of clean energy. However, **the proposal of a triangular partnership is still limited to a dialogue *with* China on Africa and, even so, still only exists on paper.**

The EU and China, in fact, use different platforms to develop their relations and cooperation with Africa. The EU is currently revising its approach to Africa, which has been insofar characterised by multiple continental and regional “competing frameworks” and dialogue venues (Barana, 2020). The new European Commission is now seeking to build a more balanced relationship, moving away from the sole focus on migration and aid. Following the 6th EU-African Union (AU) Summit in January 2020 the proposal for a new comprehensive Strategy with Africa was issued. In the document the EC acknowledges the climate and environmental challenges Africa has to face and envisages a partnership for green transition and energy access, promoting circular economy, sustainable value-chains and food systems, renewable energy, emission reductions, biodiversity and ecosystems protection, as well as green and sustainable models of urbanisation (European Commission, 2020). In light of this, such a partnership is seen to be in line with the Green Deal’s objectives. China, on the other hand, established objectives regarding environmental protection and climate change with Africa, for example, under the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), where the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), African foreign ministers and AU officials, as well as members of the civil society are involved in negotiations on climate challenges. Since 2012 the FOCAC three-year action plans have included objectives in the field, the last one being the 2019-2021 Beijing Action Plan, committing to establish joint research centres, develop green production techniques and projects for ecological protection (Herman, 2018; MFA, 2018).

There are various reasons why Africa-EU-China trilateral cooperation has not yet taken off, among which the distrust among the parties and the absence of a common dialogue platform (Bertucci & Locatelli, 2020). However, **joining forces and boosting action would, on the one hand, support the development of African countries, many of which are growing fast and have great interests in successfully tackling climate change and offsetting its effects. On the other hand, it would prove that the EU and China are able to set aside their differences for the common good and be leaders in climate negotiations and action.**

Reflections on EU-China Cooperation on climate change

So far, some concrete joint projects with tangible outcomes between the EU and China have already been realised. For example, as a result of the carbon emissions trading cooperation project, China is expected to launch its national emissions trading system soon. Pilot

programmes have been in place since 2013 in the municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongqing, the city of Shenzhen and in the provinces of Guangdong and Hubei (GIZ). Cooperation at subnational level on urbanisation and climate resilience has also taken place, for example with EU MS assisting China's sustainable and low-carbon city projects (Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019). However, official documents are still **highly rhetorical**, and **the relationship's potential has not yet been fully exploited** at bilateral level. Some of the announced projects were eventually not realised or completed. For example, after years of joint research, the China-EU Near Zero Emission Coal project saw a slowdown due to funding-related disagreements and is unlikely to reach success by the end of 2020 (Teffer, 2017). Besides, **EU-China bilateral relations on climate change have not yet turned into consistent interests and evident collaboration in global climate governance**.

Challenges both between and within the EU and China are nevertheless posing obstacles. By reviewing its role as a global leader, the EU has become more assertive, more "geopolitical", and has a more **multifaceted** agenda toward China. **The EU's and China's competing ambitions in some sectors might intentionally or unintentionally hinder the dialogue on climate change**. Rivalry and disagreements on specific topics, such as trade liberalisation, economic openness, cybersecurity and reducing financial aid for state-owned enterprises, have on occasion stalled the dialogue on climate change or moved it to the background (Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019; College of Europe, 2019). China also opposes the EU's plan to introduce tariffs on products from countries that fail to reduce their carbon emissions, the so-called "carbon tax", and warns the EU not to exploit the Green Deal as a pretext for protectionist measures (Farand, EU plots climate deal with China , 2019).

On its side, **China has been facing an economic slowdown and month-long protests in Hong Kong. It has also been engaged in a trade war with the US**. At the same time, **the EU is affected by internal divisions among its Member States**. For example, in June 2019 the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary and Poland blocked an agreement on net zero carbon targets for 2030 (Farand, EU plots climate deal with China , 2019).The **spread of COVID-19 is another challenge** that first hit China, and then spread to Europe and the rest of the world over the last few months. If for all these reasons, climate change seems not to represent a top priority in governments' minds, the propagation of the virus is an alarm bell that should not go unheard. The crisis caused by the virus is not only a matter of health. Scholars in the scientific community have pointed out that the high risk of such pandemics to spread is originated from the unrestrained development and spread of anthropic activities, which has reduced the distance between humans and wild natural environments and raised the probabilities of virus of animal origin to transmit to humans (Shaikh, 2020). For this reason, and as the virus is also affecting countries' long-term ability to respond to future crises, governments and financial institutions are called on to guarantee long-term climate action as a condition for relief programmes. Therefore, greater efforts in tackling climate change and the pursuit of sustainable human activities should be vastly encouraged.

Finally, **Climate is still considered by the EU as an area of strategic cooperation with China** (European Commission, 2019a) and a topic of relatively open dialogue **in EU-China relations** (Farand, 2019) – at least as long as it does not intersect with more sensitive matters, such as economic openness and reciprocity. Therefore, the two parties should strive to enhance their cooperation in the field both in quantitative and qualitative terms, which might be conducive to improved relations in other aspects too.

Conclusions: 2020 and the way ahead

This paper assessed the EU's and China's climate cooperation in both the bilateral and the UN-led multilateral settings since the early 1990s. It emerged that China has evolved from being a reactive participant in global climate governance to an active contributor, especially on the occasion of the signing of the Paris Agreement. The country's fast paced economic growth, on the one hand, has been responsible for the large increase of GHG emissions domestically, and globally, requiring a more active engagement. On the other hand, it has led to shifting power relations and responsibilities at the global level, redefining the role of China in the global climate regime. In this context also the EU-China climate relations have shifted from being nearly inexistent in the 1990s to become an important part of the EU-China Summits, a starting point for concrete joint bilateral projects, as well as a key element for the future of global climate governance.

The EU and China have been described by some as natural partners in leading climate action and global climate cooperation into the future (Liu, Wu, & Wan, 2019; Ming, 2019). Nonetheless, it also emerges that **the potential of the two parties' dialogue has not been fully exploited and has not yet turned into converging interests and concrete collaboration at the UNFCCC. EU-China climate relations have not yet matured enough and remain vulnerable to core differences and necessities, rival interests and disagreements in other fields of perceived major importance** (College of Europe, 2019). For example, the EU's call on China to fully open up its economy and provide a level playing field to foreign enterprises, on the one hand, and China's fear of external interference in domestic politics, on the other hand, have fuelled mutual distrust (Zhang, 2017). The unmet expectations by the West that China would eventually shift to a fully-fledged market economy and the perception that China is promoting an alternative development and governance model are also at the basis of the EU's recent multifaceted, more assertive and confrontational approach towards China.

Distressing scientific evidence of global warming and the failure of COP25 in Madrid toughened expectations for 2020. In global climate governance, 2020 is the year in which countries are expected to **evaluate whether (and to what extent) they have been able to implement their first NDCs and to submit their short-term 2030 and long-term 2050 goals.** These are expected to be communicated before COP26 in Glasgow, which was originally to take place in November 2020 and recently postponed to 2021 due to Covid-19 (Doyle & Farand, 2020). 2020 is also the year in which the Paris Agreement fully becomes the key driver of global climate governance. Furthermore, COP26 will take place few weeks after the Presidential election in the US, the world's second-largest emitter, whose outcome could potentially bring the US back into the Paris Agreement.

In view of COP26, the European Commission expressed its intention to present its increased 2030 targets and measures by September 2020 (Farand, 2020). Some EU member states, political groups and activists had hoped the Commission would communicate its 2030 proposal by June 2020 in order to be able to convince other countries to take up ambitious targets too. In particular, China, which in 2020, or probably early 2021, is coming back to the negotiation table with the EU on the occasion of **the Leipzig Summit**, where Xi Jinping will meet all 27 EU leaders, and possibly the 22nd EU-China Summit, which has been temporarily put on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic. On the agenda is the signing of the investment agreement still under negotiation. However, the two meetings represent an opportunity the two parties should grasp with both hands to discuss climate-related (joint) commitments. **As**

the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation expires this year, the EU and China are also to formulate their new Agenda for Cooperation.

Furthermore, both are discussing important domestic planning issues. **The EU is still undergoing negotiations for the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**, the EU's long-term budget, which will determine the amount of money the EU will be enabled to use to support its policies and programmes and their specific allocation. **China, instead, will finalise its 14th five-year-plan by the end of 2020, which will determine its national social and economic development agenda for 2021-2025.** The Ministry of Ecology and Environment intends to include climate-related targets, such as putting the national carbon market in operation, improving climate change laws and strengthening local governments' commitments, advancing grid parity projects, supporting global climate governance and developing countries (Kuo, 2020). The Plan will also unveil the importance given by China to coal, which, as we have seen, still plays a far too big role.

To conclude, it might not be possible to fully separate climate cooperation from other aspects of EU-China relations. In order to bridge the gap between design on paper and implementation, limiting the interference of sensitive topics in the climate dialogue, the following aspects should be taken into account:

- In accordance with the developments of EU-China relations in the past few years, the new Agenda for Cooperation should recognise essential differences between China and the EU, thereby individuating areas of their bilateral relations with higher and lower degree of disagreement and potential conflicting interests. Those areas in which the two parties share common goals should be shielded from tensions persisting or rising in other areas to avoid inertia, through the careful monitoring of domestic and foreign policy changes.
- A functioning independent climate dialogue platform separated from the EU-China Summit, science-based but with high-level representativeness, should be created, expanding the scope of instruments and dialogues already in place.
- An EU-China joint financing and investment mechanism specifically attributed to clean energy, low carbon, and sustainable infrastructure projects should be established to incentivise business endeavours and create a level playing field also in this market segment.
- Cooperation in the research and education sectors should be further pursued to remain at the forefront of innovation easing climate action.
- Trilateral projects with third countries, involving local, European and Chinese institutions and/or companies should also be promoted to enhance mutual understanding, the sharing of knowledge and technology and the spread of sustainable norms and standards.
- Climate cooperation at Member State and subnational levels should be fostered, provided that agreements between them are along the same line of those at EU-China level.

Improved bilateral climate dialogue will be essential in terms of producing positive effects on the planet and in limiting the occurrence of phenomena, such as the spread of virus and natural disasters, while also building greater resilience. It can also enhance the two parties' dialogue within the UNFCCC and set an example for other large emitters, thereby promoting the efforts of global climate governance. Successful cooperation might also be conducive to bridge the gap between the Global North and the Global South, both in climate change as well

as in other fields of shared interest. Finally, it might improve bilateral EU-China relations in other more sensitive fields too.

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