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*Event Report:*

**Economic Worlds: A Cosmolab Dialogue on Transformation in  
China and Europe**

*Strategic Economic Governance, Competitiveness and EU-China  
Dialogue*

*10 June 2026, EIAS Brussels*

The European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS), in cooperation with European Guanxi and the China Knowledge Network (CKN), convened an expert panel discussion on Strategic Economic Governance, Competitiveness and EU-China Dialogue on 10 June 2026 in Brussels. Against a backdrop of mounting geopolitical tensions, technological competition and shifting models of economic governance, the event brought together policy analysts, researchers, diplomats and practitioners. They examined how Europe and China are approaching their respective economic transformations, and what each side understands, or misunderstands, about the other.

The discussion opened with welcome remarks from Ms. Hannah Preuss, Vice President of European Guanxi, who framed the event within her organisation's commitment to developing a network of young European professionals and scholars engaged with EU-China relations. European Guanxi was presented as both a connective platform for emerging voices and a broader forum for debate and analysis of the bilateral relationship.

The conceptual foundation for the discussion was laid by Mr. Simon van Oortmerssen, also of the CKN. Their presentation introduced the Cosmolab framework as a response to what they identified as a structural problem in how policymakers and diplomats approach international relations: the tendency to reduce complex, interdependent realities to manageable categories, and to treat those categories as objective rather than constructed.

Van Oortmerssen opened with a provocation: what if the world is different from our assumptions? The way we learn to see the world, he argued, is just one among many possible ways of seeing it. Knowledge tells us what we know about the world; awareness tells us where we stand in it. Both matter, and the gap between them is particularly consequential in the current context of EU-China tensions. The governing frameworks inherited from the European eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries – Enlightenment principles, state-centric legal institutions, industrial management logic – are poorly equipped for a world characterised by genuine complexity, branching from different historical and philosophical foundations. The Cosmolab response is not to abandon reductionist tools but to add to them: to place the observer back into the equation, and to accept complexity as a condition to engage rather than a problem to eliminate.



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This is the foundation for the CKN's model of epistemic diplomacy: a mode of international engagement that asks not only what different actors want, but how they understand reality, what histories shape their interpretations, and what concepts organise their thinking. Conventional international diplomacy, he noted, focuses on interests; epistemic diplomacy focuses on the worldviews within which those interests are formed. Several structural shifts were identified as making this approach timely: the emergence of a multipolar world as US-led unipolarity fades; the movement in contemporary science from reductionist to complex systems thinking; and a parallel shift in philosophy from classical to new realism, which integrates the human observer into the picture of reality rather than treating it as external. Van Oortmerssen also drew attention to the psychological dimension of geopolitical tension, noting that fear contracts knowledge — once something becomes a source of threat, the impulse is to stop learning about it, which in turn deepens the fear.

The panel discussion that followed applied these frameworks to concrete questions of economic governance and EU-China relations. Speakers included Mr. Kjeld van Wieringen, Policy Analyst at the European Parliamentary Research Service; Ms. Alessia Caruso, Research Analyst for China Projects at the Rhodium Group; Dr. Huanyu Zhao, Horizon Europe Researcher and Vice-Head of the Marie Curie China Chapter; Mr. Marc Moquette, Special Envoy for Knowledge on China at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and van Oortmerssen.

On the question of what economic assumptions each side treats as objective fact, Caruso offered a structurally clarifying distinction. Europe's economic system is organised around individuals and firms, with fairness defined as equal access to a level playing field. China's economic history — shaped by decades of isolation, the experience of the century of humiliation, and a late entry into the international system in the 1970s — produces a different unit of analysis: not the individual firm, but China as a state entity, pursuing its restoration to what it understands as its rightful place in the international order. From this perspective, state subsidies are not market distortions but instruments through which firms serve national objectives. The same policy environment, Caruso noted, is genuinely perceived differently on each side, which is precisely where new realism becomes analytically useful. Moquette added that the international rules-based order, which Europe tends to treat as the natural state of interstate collaboration, is itself a particular historical construction, not a neutral baseline. Economists' assumption of an underlying equilibrium toward which markets tend — and the related assumption that states exist to restore that equilibrium when it is disrupted — was identified as a worldview, when observed through the lens of complexity science.

The panel then turned to how each side perceives the other's industrial policies. Caruso noted that China's industrial strategy, particularly Made in China 2025, was poorly received by European policymakers when it emerged, in part because Europe has generally been slower to understand Chinese strategic logic than China has been to understand European institutional complexity. She also highlighted that China remains largely absent from European public debate, which shapes the terms on which policymakers engage with it. Zhao



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reflected on China's approach as one of learning by doing; as a country embedded in an unfamiliar global system, China adapts through practice rather than from a position of established confidence. Van Wieringen observed that European leaders often articulate their strategic intentions clearly but lack the political will to follow through on them, and suggested that tapping into both Chinese and European intellectual traditions could open more productive avenues for engagement.

On the question of where cooperation remains possible despite geopolitical pressure, Caruso was measured. The current moment is not propitious for EU-China cooperation, she argued, and conflicting interests should be acknowledged honestly rather than papered over. That said, shared challenges, such as the governance of AI and the risks of deepfake technology, present cases where a prisoner's dilemma logic could prompt both sides to step back from competition and engage on common problems. Critical raw materials were also identified as an area where cooperation is not merely desirable but structurally necessary. Zhao called for moving beyond dominant narratives and repeating stereotypes, proposing that a new framing that better reflects the complexity of the current reality could help both sides orient toward a shared future rather than a zero-sum contest.

Audience questions pressed further on the structural and historical dimensions of the discussion. One participant raised the relationship between the concept of a rules-based international order and European colonial history, noting that many of the norms underpinning that order were written by European powers and have been selectively enforced. Moquette acknowledged this, arguing that Europe needs to be frank about where it comes from, and that the same candour it asks of Chinese counterparts must apply to its own past. Collaborative engagement with China, on this account, requires shifting the conversation from one of rivalry to one of cooperation as we move into the future. A second question asked whether cooperation with China, given the current level of divergence, might be better motivated by making explicit what Europe stands to lose from non-engagement rather than what it stands to gain. Caruso was direct: there is little economic cooperation with China at present precisely because cooperation as currently framed threatens European interests, and that tension should be named. Moquette framed the cost of non-collaboration in systemic terms – the loss of collective capacity to co-adapt to biophysical and mental system changes – and called for greater involvement of civil society in generating the European public consciousness that could, in turn, create demand for diplomatic engagement.

Closing reflections drew the discussion together without resolving it. Van Oortmerssen cautioned against reducing the current moment to the trade war framing that dominates public discourse, noting that there is considerably more context and more at stake. Van Wieringen argued that avoiding a neocolonial dynamic in EU-China engagement requires genuinely stepping into the Chinese intellectual framework, including the body of Chinese international relations theory that has developed in recent decades. Caruso offered a clarifying distinction: conflicting interests do not make parties enemies – they simply make them entities with different values, and policymaking begins with acknowledging that



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difference rather than wishing it away. Zhao closed with a reflection drawn from Marie Curie: nothing is to be feared, only to be understood; understanding, in the current moment, is the condition for moving beyond the trap. Moquette concluded by zooming out from the bilateral frame entirely: Europe has its own adaptation challenge, independent of China, and reconnecting with China across fields beyond the political and systemic will require confronting that challenge first.