

Mediations on the Values-Based Nature of EU-China Relations Following the Re-Connect China Conference

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The Limits of Values-Based Foreign Policy

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, a belief spread that the world had arrived at [“The End of History”](#), that liberal democracy and western values would naturally disseminate across the globe and create a universal, final form of governance. More than thirty years later, this post-Cold War optimism has collapsed, and the rules-based international order is increasingly threatened– Israel’s [war crimes](#), Russia’s onslaught, and democratic [backsliding](#) across the globe all contributing to elevated instability. The U.S. has begun to systematically [depart](#) from shared goals that once, if only nominally, unified the West. As the U.S.’s retreat coincides with the rise of China, the European Union’s strategic environment is rapidly evolving and foreign policy must evolve alongside it.

Strategic autonomy for the EU over the course of the last decade has become an incredibly important issue and often intersects with deeply intertwined economic, technological, and security considerations. No relationship illustrates this tension better than that between the EU and China. EU-China relations have come to encapsulate the question of whether Europe can pursue strategic autonomy without sacrificing economic gains or the principles on which it claims to base its policy. This tension is actively playing out in the EU’s evolving approach towards China. De-risking from China first officially [entered](#) the Union’s political zeitgeist in 2023, and has since been pursued as the primary policy– consisting of attempting to cut the EU’s dependence on Chinese supply chains, investment, and manufacturing.

However, de-risking from China is fundamentally different for each member of the EU in the way that it affects their economic outlook. It could disproportionately [harm](#) small economies that have less of a mechanism to subsidize domestic industries or absorb the costs of negotiating alternative supply chains. Even in the much referenced Draghi report itself, there is an implicit concession of this asymmetry: its [warning](#) that Europe faces an annual investment shortfall of €750–800 [billion](#) to close the innovation gap with China and the US is not a warning equally shared by every member state. It is one that falls hardest on the economies most integrated with Chinese supply chains and capital. Given this uneven distribution of costs, the EU cannot rely on economic self-interest alone to unify its members behind de-risking. Instead, it has leaned on its long-standing identity as a “normative power”– a term Ian Manners famously used to [describe](#) the EU’s tendency to shape international politics through the diffusion of values– creating a moral grounding as the lynchpin of its policy towards China.

Normative Power and the China Challenge

The EU continuously invokes its characteristic values-based foreign policy when attempting to disengage and de-risk from China. In 2021, the European Parliament abruptly [suspended](#) its ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, a decision predicated on disagreements over crackdowns in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. In the following years, across different speeches and statements the EU’s relationship to China is always first [grounded](#) in disagreements on Beijing’s continued support for Russia and human rights abuses within the country. Not long ago, when speaking to an Estonian ambassador to China, he made it explicitly clear that at the top of their foreign policy agenda in Beijing was nothing but

concerns surrounding Beijing's relationship to Moscow. Similar sentiment to this was expressed at Re-Connect EU-China 2026 conference— particularly from those representing smaller European nations geographically close to Russia. When pushing for the rebalancing of the EU's trade dynamic with China, EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen makes constant reference to human rights rhetoric, deliberately entangling the economic policy with values-based pretenses. She [wants](#) a “clear line” in investment and trade when “dual-use purposes cannot be excluded or human rights might be implicated.”

At this same 2026 conference discussing EU-China relations under Chatham House rules, various representatives from different member states expressed an increasingly uncomfortable position regarding their engagement with China. The discomfort was articulated twofold. The first perspective being that while the EU now *needs* to continue relations with China for the sake of green technological advancement, they cannot afford to become too reliant on Chinese capabilities. The other primary tension to engagement was more values-based: China's unchanging stance on Taiwan, closeness to Russia, and harmful human rights record. There was no discussion of China absent from a moral lens. These concerns are not incidental to the EU's hesitation but at the core of what the EU claims to be. Unlike the United States or China the EU has staked its identity on the normative dimension in all of its rhetoric. Now, if the EU engages openly and uncritically with a state whose conduct on Taiwan, Russia, and human rights runs counter to their self-designated values this undermines a real source of legitimacy.

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Yet this conceptualization of the dilemma that the EU is caught between its values and security concerns versus its economic interests is too simple. The EU's track record suggests that there is no real dilemma or compromise being made, as there is not a consistent values-based policy to compromise in the first place. At the heart of this China policy balancing act— between the EU's autonomy, values-based foreign policy, and economic benefits— is that despite highfalutin ideas, the EU has consistently acted contrary to its norms and engaged with states across the spectrum of morality.

Normative power can only function as an instrument of strategic autonomy if there is credibility. Once the EU applies its principles selectively, the legitimacy that distinguishes it from other great powers begins to erode. China is not a *new* issue that has cleaved a uniform EU policy, there was never uniformity to begin with. This pattern of selective principle predates the current China debate by decades. In 1996, when China was beginning its journey as a production powerhouse, countries such as France and Germany [overlooked](#) criticisms of China's human rights record as they were in the midst of deepening their economic ties to China. Nordic countries who at the time had far fewer business involvements with China were much more willing to castigate the nation. In 2017, following significant Chinese investment in Greek ports, the country [vetoed](#) an EU statement condemning China's human rights record at the UN. More recently, at the same conference on EU-China relations held under Chatham House rules, one speaker highlighted this same tension with Spain who has as of late [boosted](#) relations with China in the hopes of developing a more robust energy sector. In response, it was acknowledged that while Spain harbours genuine concerns over China's human rights record and its illiberal tendencies, it similarly holds reservations regarding the United States— on issues like climate policy and Gaza. Yet, the EU maintains robust relations with Washington without equivalent scrutiny. This history of divergent EU thinking on

China demonstrates how the member state's selective appliance of its values in regards to China align less with their founding principles and more with whatever is actively economically beneficial.

Selective Ethics and National Interests

This inconsistent framework extends far past the EU's policies on China alone, and each contradiction only weakens the union's legitimacy and in turn its autonomy and security. Take, for example, Ursula von der Leyen again. She has repeatedly emphasized how important relations are with Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that the state is an infamous human rights abuser and autocracy. Another useful precedent is the Iraq War. EU states alongside the UK [joined](#) a coalition of the willing. Many were post-communist states cementing a relationship with Washington at a moment when their NATO and EU integration was still being finalized. Despite mounting evidence of the [illegitimacy](#), many EU member states nonetheless continued to prioritize their own economic or security interests over any collective ethical stance. The Iraq War exposed a pattern that has since reappeared across successive crises: when ethical commitments collide with perceived strategic interests, EU member states frequently abandon a common normative position in favour of national priorities.

The same lens of selective and differentiating ethical boundaries appears in the case of Israel. At the EU-China conference, mentions of Israel were introduced to point out hypocrisy within the EU— a speaker noted that the Union's willingness to criticize China's human rights record sits awkwardly alongside its reluctance to [apply](#) comparable pressure on Israel. Spain has consistently [been](#) one of the most critical states of Israel and also one of the most welcoming to China. It is difficult to ask states to absorb the costs of economic de-risking on the basis of human rights, when these same member states have seen the dismissal of comparable violations time and time again. How can Spain be expected to forgo economically beneficial trade with China for the sake of a commitment to democracy and EU security, when no such precedent has ever been set in the EU's relations with any other state?

Rebuilding Credibility Through Consistency

Until the Union defines its place within an increasingly multipolar international order, efforts to frame relations with China primarily through the lens of ethics are likely to remain selective and inconsistently applied. In this vein, criticism of members' engagement with China is similarly going to fall flat, as it is simply a continuation of its longstanding practice of balancing normative aspirations against strategic and economic realities. The EU has never reached a consensus among its member states about practice, about what principles should truly guide its foreign policy. Consensus on where to consider values-based foreign policy should be of paramount importance to the EU as a whole, or else they risk undermining themselves on the world stage. The EU cannot hope to condemn and disentangle themselves with China on the basis of human rights while overlooking those same standards and values across the globe whenever it benefits them.

When Beijing, or others, can count on a standing bloc of member states— whether out of economic dependency, material interest, or domestic politics— to block collective action, they learn that EU normative pressure is negotiable rather than principled. The result is that the very instrument the EU has built its post-Cold War identity around becomes, in practice, a patchwork of national exceptions that great

powers can route around. If rival powers can reliably count on certain member states to break ranks for national benefit, the EU's capacity for autonomy is significantly weakened. This is why consensus and solidarity within the EU on moral applications of foreign policy is of the utmost importance.

The path forward requires the EU to stop treating values as a rhetorical backdrop to policy and start treating them as a resource that must be deliberately maintained. A first step would be an honest internal reckoning: rather than issuing statements that imply unanimity where none exists, the EU could formalize a system of foreign policy commitments, distinguishing between positions that require full consensus and binding compliance, and areas where member states retain flexibility to pursue independent relationships. This would not eliminate national divergence, but it would at least stop the Union from claiming a moral authority it cannot enforce, which is arguably more corrosive to its credibility than open disagreement would be.

The EU will need to accept that credibility is built through consistency across cases, not through the intensity of rhetoric in any single one. A Union that scrutinizes Beijing's human rights record while quietly excusing comparable conduct from Washington, Riyadh, or Jerusalem will continue to invite the charge of hypocrisy, and that charge will continue to be a strategic vulnerability that rivals can exploit. The choice facing the EU is not between values and interests, since the essay has shown that framing to be false. The real choice is between an honest, if narrower, normative policy applied consistently, and a sweeping one applied selectively that ultimately serves no one's interests, least of all the Union's own claim to autonomy. Three decades after the End of History was declared, the EU's credibility will not rest on the values it proclaims, but on whether it is willing to apply them consistently.