

Jean Monnet Lecture Series on EU-Asia Connectivity

China-EU Relations and EU-Asia Connectivity: Beyond or below Classic Geopolitics?

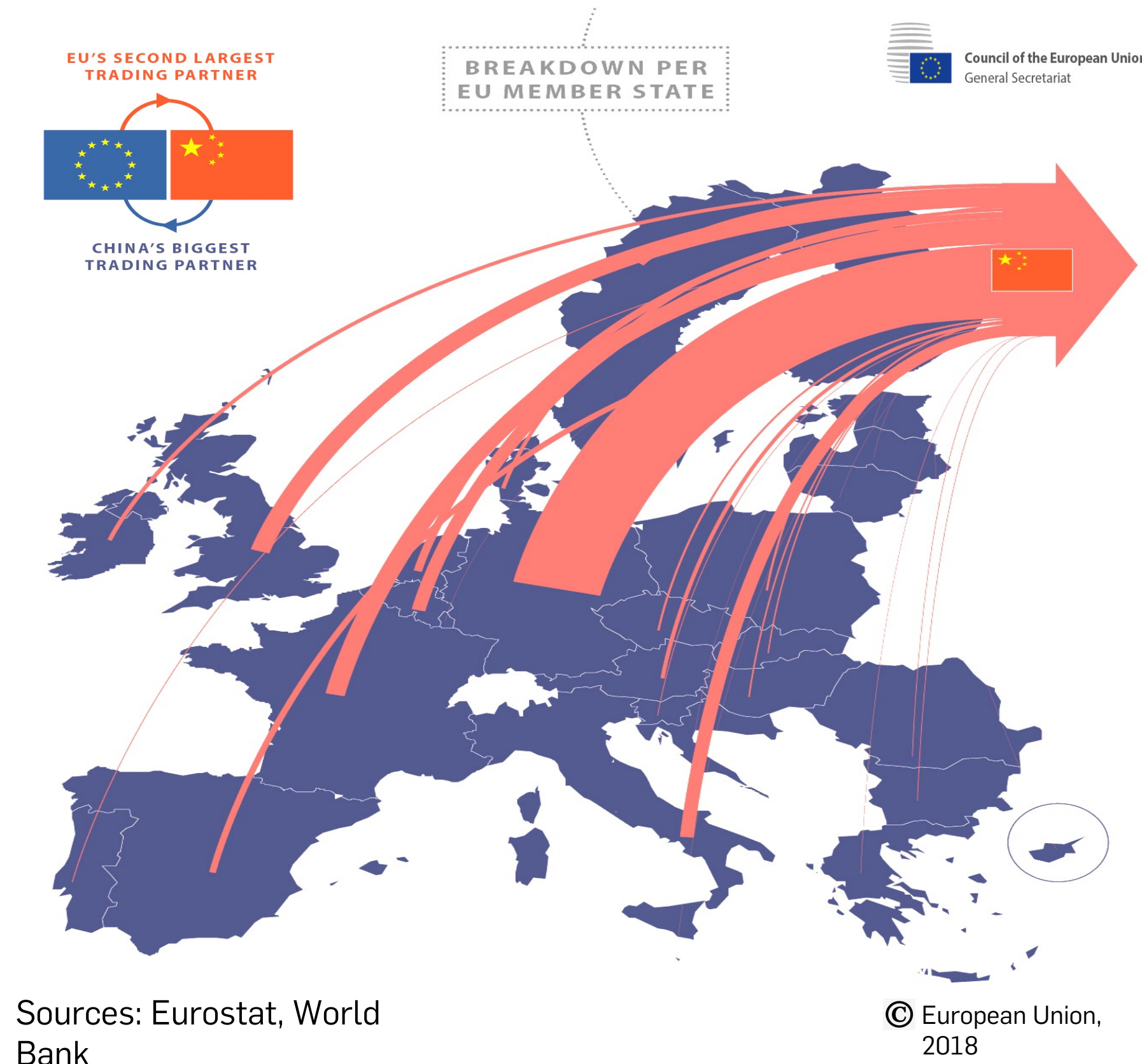
Prof. Dr. Zhang Xiaotong, Fudan University

Moderator: Prof. Dr. Sebastian Bersick, Jean Monnet Chair, RUB

April 28th, 2020

EU-China Relationship

- The EU-China relationship has undergone different periods: a comprehensive strategic partnership was negotiated, and it experienced a honeymoon period. Currently, however, it is experiencing uncertainties after sanctions were imposed in relation to the topic of Xinjiang.

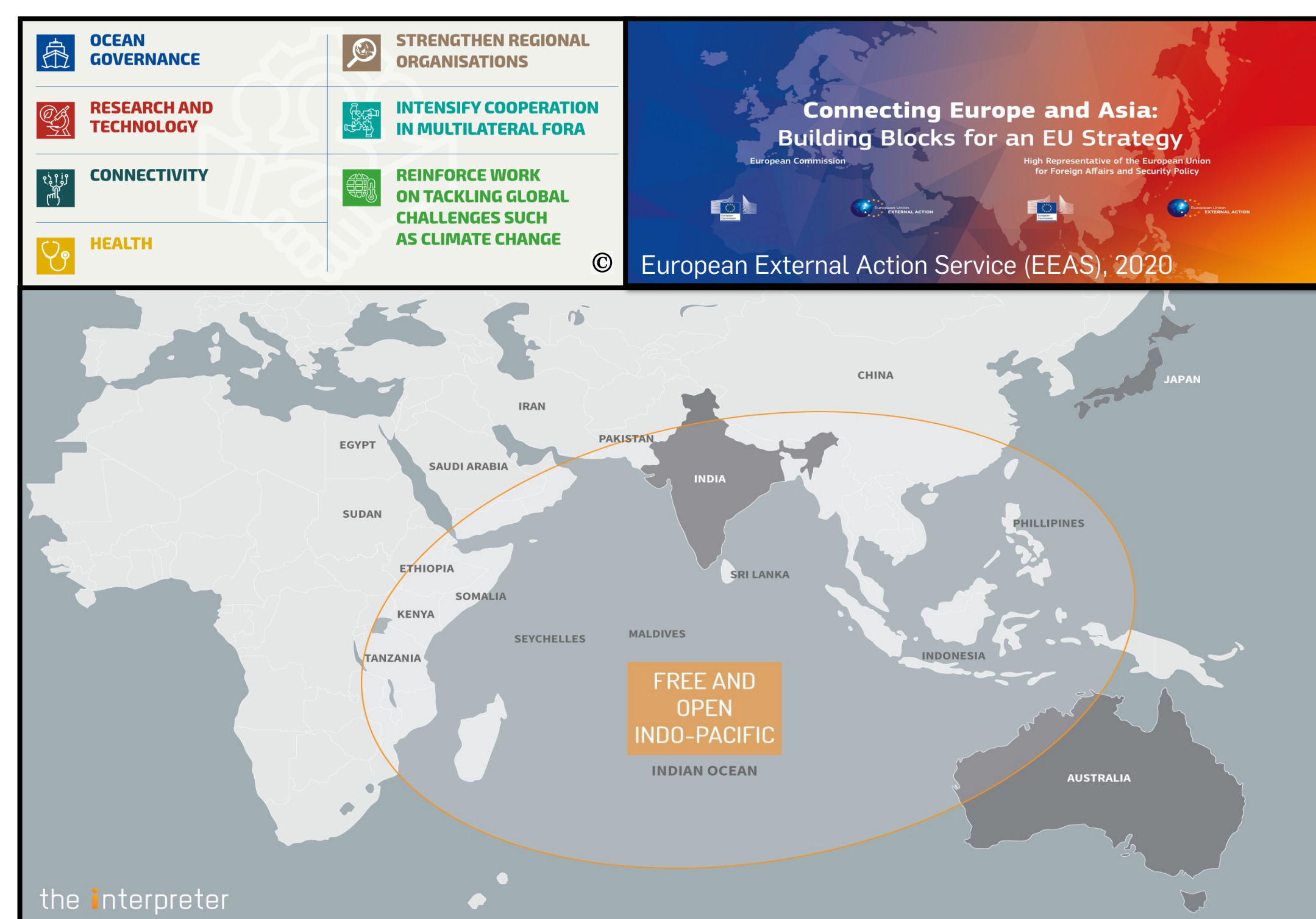


EU-China Relations (1975-2020)			
Year	Phases of EU Integration	EU Power and its China Policy	EU-China Relations
1965-1985	Patience: "Empty Chair Crisis", economic stagnation in 70s, EC Enlargement (UK, Ireland, Denmark and Greece)	"Civilian Power Europe": ice-breaking and engagement	EEC-China Diplomatic Relations established in 1975, Trade Agreement in 1978, Textiles Agreement, President Jenkins Visits Beijing in 1979
1986-1992	Relaunch: Single European Act, Delors' Plan, EC Enlargement (Spain and Portugal), End of Cold War, Dissolution of USSR, Birth of EU in 1992, Maastricht Treaty	"Normative Power Europe" 1.0: "Peaceful Evolution", Linkage btw human rights and trade	"June 4 Incident"
1993-2004	Rising: Euro launch, EU Enlargement (Austria, Finland, Sweden)	"Normative Power Europe" 2.0: Wandel durch Handel (Change Through Trade)	EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, China's accession to WTO, EU-China Galileo Cooperation
2005-2009	Setback: Global Financial Crisis, Euro Debt Crisis	"Linkage Power Europe" 1.0: Grand Bargain and Reciprocity	EU-China Textile Dispute, Trade Deficit, German Chancellor and French President Meeting Dalai
2010-Today	Crisis: refugee, populism, Ukraine, Brexit Crises, Covid-19	"Europa Geopolitica": partner, competitor and systemic rival	Xinjiang sanction, EU-Asia Connectivity, EU Indo-Pacific Strategy of Cooperation, Reducing strategic dependencies

Source: Prof. Zhang, April 2021

Europa Geopolitica

- The EU and China fall prey to some larger force with which the rise and fall of great powers and cyclical evolution of the world economy can be explained.
- The EU's identity has shifted from that of a civilian to that of a normative power. This has also been reflected in EU-China relations. Lately, its identity seems to have shifted towards that of a geopolitical power, which can be called "Europa Geopolitica" and it has forged a relationship of competitive interdependence with China.



EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, a Neo-Realist era

- The world is entering a Neo-Realist era, which features strategic competition and competing connectivity projects.
- With classic geopolitical beliefs, the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy can be perceived as part of sea power collusion to contain a land power. The EU's original intention might not be to join the geopolitical chessboard in Eurasia, neither is China's Belt and Road Initiative.

EU-Asia Connectivity

- The EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative and the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy of Cooperation are litmus tests, testing whether these relationships can go beyond or go under this invisible larger force of geopolitics.

Li Keqiang, Xi Jinping, Charles Michel, Ursula von der Leyen:

Prime Minister, People's Republic of China; President, People's Republic of China; President, European Council; President, European Commission



Outlooks

- 3 puzzles:
 - The European Commission labelling itself as a geopolitical commission might be counterproductive because it reminds people of classical geopolitics.
 - The European Union is still rising, the driving force is not trade anymore, but an emerging political-strategic complex (Lisbon Treaty, CFSP, geopolitical commission) within the EU. Yet, there are tensions between European strategic and economic interests.
 - Whether "Europa Geopolitica" can take off depends on the type of connectivity logic that the EU will pursue to practice its Asia Connectivity and Indo-Pacific Strategy.

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1st Question

Question: Does not geopolitics detract from the real, much more important, issues?

Answer: Geopolitics provides a good framework for understanding many factors that drive society. The real question is whether to go beyond or under geopolitics.

2nd Question

Question: What impact do narrower state actions (eg. as can be observed in China-Australia relations) have on the room for manoeuvre of states?

Answer: Geopolitically, China needs to be understood as a fragile power and to ensure its protection. Southeast Asian nations and Australia are also located in a geopolitically sensitive area and must work on making themselves corridor zones rather than tension zones. The EU-Asia Connectivity should aim at turning these regions into corridors of economic and people-to-people exchanges and not into a new iron curtain.

3rd Question

Question: Should EU-Asia relations be understood from a global interest rather than a geopolitical perspective? How realistic is it to think that major shared challenges could catalyse a move beyond the paradigm of geopolitics?

Answer: Geographical or historical determinism must be avoided. There are numerous issues, e.g. climate change, where cooperation is possible, even though there is competition on other topics. This can be described by the aforementioned term neo-realist era. Academia and think-tanks should identify areas of cooperation and put them on the agenda of policy makers and turn them into regimes. Policy makers who are under domestic pressure need to turn the division into cooperation and should be guided into areas where cooperation is possible. We are currently in a transitional phase: we must convert sensitive issues into benign ones.

4th Question

4th Question: Have views of the EU in China, both in the general public and expert community, shifted in light of the recent sanctions and countersanctions?

Answer Prof. Zhang: The EU sanctions over the alleged forced labour, which China denies, and the countersanctions by China were unexpected. Under the Trump presidency, institutions for managing cooperation built under the Obama administration have been severely damaged. At this precise moment, when China is internally and externally under pressure, the EU has imposed sanctions that China perceives as an "arbitrary judgement on domestic issues:" crossing a red line and leaving little room for manoeuvre. Chinese policymakers felt then cornered and imposed countersanctions. With the Biden administration, there is again potential margin for cooperation with both the EU and the US. We should recognise strategic differences but focus on identifying opportunities for cooperation.

Answer Prof. Bersick: Countersanctions were perceived as disproportionate in the EU. The sanctions against e.g. scholars, parliamentarians – and their families – can be viewed as a form of escalation, which makes cooperation even more difficult. As the centre of gravity of the world economy shifts to the Asia-Pacific region, the EU needs to re-define its role and also new theory building is needed to avoid falling into old traps. "Whether we focus on co-existence or interdependence, in the end the welfare of people should guide our thinking".

Answer Prof. Zhang: The countersanctions were imposed due to the EU's complex structure. They were a new approach for Chinese policy makers. How can a single-sovereign system sanction a multi-sovereign system? Over time, experience on how to respond to the EU's actions will be gained. One has to adapt to this new phenomenon and, at the same time, keep possibilities of cooperation open. The CAI is an important example of cooperation and a necessary link to EU-Asia connectivity that needs to be ratified, just as the China-US BIT needs to be relaunched.