

For a Useful Dialogue Between Spain and China



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Spain and China have had diplomatic contacts for hundreds of years. Despite being interrupted in the mid-twentieth century, they formally resumed in 1973. This year we celebrate our 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations with a “Year of Culture and Tourism of Spain in China”. We will organize exhibitions in China of artworks from major Spanish museums, concerts, and events highlighting the history of our friendly relations. We are working on all these projects together with the Chinese authorities.

The pandemic has drastically reduced contacts between China and the rest of the world. We hope that the elimination of the restrictions on mobility imposed by the Chinese authorities will allow the quick resumption of those contacts in many different fields, from the political, to the economic, educational, cultural, scientific, and touristic. It is important that our societies get in touch again. Delinking is not an option. Delinking would not be good for us, and it would not be good for the rest of the world. Not only in terms of trade and the economy, but from many other points of view too. There are many global issues on which China, Spain, and the EU need to work together: global health, the fight against climate change, food security, debt restructuring, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, as well as solutions to crises around the world.

We are not in favour of delinking. We are in favour of better managing existing links. For instance, the chronic imbalance in our trade relations could be in part corrected if Spanish firms enjoyed better access to the Chinese market. We need to establish a level playing field, in which the Spanish companies in China can operate in the same way as the Chinese companies operate in Spain. The current “Special Administrative Measures for Access of Foreign Investments” continue to impose barriers on foreign investment, while national security concerns also impose tight

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limits. As a result, Chinese firms have made investments in Spain in areas such as software, IT, communications, ports, and energy, which are areas in which Spanish firms are not able to invest in China.

Agricultural exports from Spain are also constrained by the requirement to sign specific agreements for each particular product, while the access of industrial goods is limited by the need to obtain a China Compulsory Certification (CCC). China is not part of the WTO Agreement on Government Procurement, which puts foreign firms at a disadvantage in public tenders. There are also problems with public subsidies and intellectual property, although there has been some progress in the latter.

A stronger presence of Spanish companies in the Chinese market could also benefit China. They could be of great help in the development of the service sector and the expansion of consumption in China. Both are important goals of the Chinese authorities. Spanish firms are very strong in sectors like fashion, design, cosmetics, financial services, or high quality food products.

In the industrial sector, we could intensify our cooperation in renewable energies, where China is a world leader and Spain also excels. In 2021, 47% of Spain's electric power was generated using renewable sources. The automobile sector, particularly electric mobility, or biotechnology are other areas in which we already have an important bilateral cooperation.

In this spirit of managing our links better, we would also like to open a practical dialogue on issues in which we do not necessarily agree. In fact, dialogue is particularly important when there are issues in which partners see things differently.

The Ukraine Conflict

One of these issues is Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a flagrant breach of the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter, specifically sovereignty and territorial integrity. These principles are also at the core of China's foreign policy. Tolerating this aggression would mean tolerating the use of raw power.

Respecting a State's sovereignty implies respecting its peaceful decisions when conducting its foreign policy. Those decisions can never serve as an excuse for one State to invade another. The alleged "denazification" of Ukraine's democratically elected government is an insult to our collective intelligence, as well as an affront to the collective memory of the Ukrainian people and their unspeakable suffering under Nazism during World War II.

Russia's invasion is also a violation of the European security architecture, which is the result of relentless efforts spanning over generations, which were in the past actively supported by the Russian Federation. Moreover, Ukraine made a voluntary decision to undergo denuclearization and subsequently received guarantees from the Russian Federation. While only three nuclear powers—the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States—originally signed in 1994 the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, China and France soon joined with individual assurances in separate documents.

Faced with this aggression, the European Union had to react. This is clearly not a “business as usual” moment for us. Remaining passive was not an option. It would have only invited further aggression in the future.

The EU has made a series of difficult decisions in order to face this menace. One of them has been to reinforce our defensive capabilities. NATO has also strengthened its deterrence measures and defence posture. Russia’s attack on Ukraine is proof that countries that chose to join the Alliance after the collapse of the Soviet Union made the right choice. Even countries with a long history of neutrality like Finland and Sweden feel now threatened by the Russian invasion and have also decided to join NATO. All these changes send a strong message about what is happening today in Europe. It is a message which, alas, the Chinese media does not seem to have understood yet. But if China cares about its relations with Europe, which I believe it does, it is important that China understands it properly.

It is evident that NATO has never attacked Russia—such scenario is utterly unthinkable. NATO never considered the possibility of an invasion in Ukraine, nor has it set up a no-fly zone. Neither has NATO considered to extend their Article 5 to Ukraine.

China is not just any country. It is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and has a special relationship with Russia. This closeness can now be used to a positive end. It is essential that we put an end to Russia’s invasion as soon as possible, stopping civilian deaths and ending a war that is threatening the security of us all, including China. Thanks to its relations with Russia, China is in a privileged position to help achieve this goal.

China has clearly expressed its wish for a swift end to the conflict. There are political, economic, and security reasons for that. Chinese leaders have recently declared that the use of nuclear weapons would be utterly unacceptable. The consequences of Russia’s action against Ukraine are far from being constrained to Europe.

China’s attitude towards the war in Ukraine will affect its image in Europe, but also in the rest of the world. China has a chance to send a powerful message to the rest of the international community, as a nation committed to maintaining peace and security. This is also a unique opportunity for China in its relations with Europe.

Human Rights

Another issue on which we should improve our dialogue is the protection of human rights.

Human rights are important, because they defend human dignity.

In 1948, just after the end of World War II, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its purpose was to prevent the widespread violations of human rights that had forever tainted the first half of the twentieth century from happening again.

Human dignity is at the very core of human rights. Every single person's freedom to decide about his or her destiny is precious in its own right. Nobody can be forced against his or her will to be an instrument to achieve other goals.

Human rights are universal because human dignity is an universal value. It must be protected in all places, in all climates, and in all cultures. All major civilizations and religions place human dignity at the core of their doctrines.

Human rights are also indivisible. Social, economic, and cultural rights should never be valued to the detriment of civil and political rights, nor vice versa. This is why the international community has approved two International Covenants, one on social, economic, and cultural rights, and the other on civil and political rights. Both have been signed by the People's Republic of China.

It is, of course, necessary to consider the socio-political and cultural realities of different countries where fundamental human rights and freedoms must be defended. However, those differences must not become a pretext not to defend them. Neither should they relativize their value, nor render them void of meaning. That would render human dignity equally void of meaning. The different conditions existing in each country should be the starting point for a frank, constructive dialogue. The starting point, not the conclusion of the conversation. Nor should they be an insurmountable obstacle to reach common ground.

Human rights should not be considered as a tool to criticise particular countries, but as an instrument for the defence of our citizens worldwide. No country is perfect. No country is free from facing challenges in the defence of human rights in their own territory. The point is not to deny the existence of those challenges, but to join forces in order to look for honest solutions to them.

Form and context matter greatly in this field. Human rights should be discussed both privately and in public forums. Often a discreet exchange will go further than public criticism. In fact, the latter is often an expression of frustration at the lack of results of a quiet approach.

For all those reasons, human rights should be regarded as a normal element in our relations. Spain has strongly advocated on issues where our experience can give added value to the promotion of human rights. Besides civil and political rights, I would like to highlight issues such as the death penalty, the promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities, the fight for gender equality, the right of access to drinkable water and adequate sanitation, and the fight against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. With the advances made in the eradication of poverty, China has important experiences to share in this field.

We must find ways to address all human rights. This will demonstrate that international relations are useful to address not only the main political questions of our times, but also the problems that affect our citizens in their immediate, daily lives.



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