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Sino-European Relations in the 1980s: Increasing Engagement in the Shadow of the United States

Laurens Hemminga

INTRODUCTION

In 1945, Europe found itself devastated by the Second World War and divided geographically between a U.S.-dominated Western zone and a Soviet-dominated Eastern zone. These divisions constrained the ability of the states in Western Europe (hereafter Europe) to develop relations with countries outside the Western alliance. Despite this geopolitical reality, both the European states and China shared a mutual history bound by colonial and, later, post-colonial legacies. While some countries (such as the United Kingdom or France) were relatively quick to initiate ties with the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC or China), most others

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delayed formalizing their modern ties until the 1970s. While the establishment of diplomatic relations with China was a significant step toward a modern reset, not until the 1980s would the potential for this reset begin to be recognized. Although such recognition was uneven at first, the potential of the Chinese market for European goods made diplomatic relations attractive across the region. Geopolitical separation coupled with an (initially) overwhelmingly commercial focus to relations meant, however, that engagement was undertaken without full understanding on either side of the governing dynamics. Hence, even as European countries opened up to China throughout the 1980s, they did so without fully appreciating the political differences between the two sides. Developments in Europe-China relations in this period, including the anchoring role of economic ties, the emergence in 1989 of human rights as a divisive issue, and the influence on both sides of relations with the United States, foreshadowed dynamics which have remained important to the relationship up to the present.

Complicating any rapprochement between Europe and China in the early Cold War was the fact that European states remained dependent on the United States as both an economic and a security guarantor. European economies, even those of countries which had escaped German occupation, had been severely damaged. The American economy, by contrast, was dynamic, modern, and larger than all European economies combined. Washington introduced the Marshall Plan to facilitate economic reconstruction in Europe, spending \$14 billion in sixteen countries between 1948 and 1952.¹ In addition, the United States played an important role in stimulating regional integration and trade liberalization by encouraging the formation in 1958 of the European Economic Community (EEC).² In all six EEC countries, West Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, the 1950s and 1960s saw strong economic growth and modernization, enabling European economies to develop their internal capacities even as the United States remained their key market. Yet, even as their economies revived, Western Europe remained in

¹ Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 195.

² *Ibid.*, 204.

the geopolitical orbit of the United States, critically dependent on American military protection against the Soviet Union for the duration of the Cold War.

China was facing its own challenges, with the proclamation of the PRC in 1949 and the retreat to Taiwan of the Kuomintang ushering in a period of isolation from Western countries. During the Chinese Civil War, the Soviet Union had backed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and at the outset China's new leaders were determined to prioritize relations with the Soviet Union and its communist allies over those with the United States.³ The break between China and the United States, as well as its European allies, was compounded when Chinese troops fought American and European troops⁴ during the Korean War. In retaliation, the United States intensified the embargo it had already imposed on trade with China. Washington subsequently pressed its allies into accepting its trade restrictions against China, which went further than equivalent restrictions on trading with the Soviet Union.⁵ Isolated from the American-led West and ideologically committed to communism, Beijing aligned itself with the Soviet Union, signing the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance in 1950 and receiving Soviet and East European technological assistance throughout the 1950s.⁶ The alliance with the Soviet Union, however, proved disappointing to Beijing. Even during the Korean War, once Chinese intervention was underway, Soviet leader Josef Stalin showed himself less willing to provide tangible assistance than Beijing had been led to expect beforehand.⁷ When Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, publicly criticized his predecessor in February 1956, an ideological fissure opened between Moscow and Beijing, with an

³ Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 48.

⁴ The United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg contributed combat troops to the American-led United Nations effort. Italy, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway sent medical support teams.

⁵ Shu Guang Zhang, *Beijing's Economic Statecraft During the Cold War, 1949–1991* (Baltimore, MD, and Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press and Wilson Center Press, 2014), 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷ Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 59.

ensuing contestation of leadership within the communist world.⁸ Eventually, by 1964, these disagreements culminated in a complete breakdown of relations.⁹ By the mid-1960s the PRC found itself isolated from capitalist and communist worlds alike. In response to its dire international position, in 1969 the PRC leadership made the momentous decision to reach out to the United States,¹⁰ which soon cleared the way for closer relations with its European allies.

This chapter discusses the development of Europe's relationship with China from 1978 to 1990. It begins by surveying relations prior to this period, highlighting both the restrictive presence of the United States as well as the economic potential that existed on both sides. It proceeds to review the development of a series of bilateral relationships between European countries—West Germany, France, and the Netherlands¹¹—and China, and discusses the role played by the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the European Union (EU), in supporting these ties. The anticipated developmental pathway of these relations was truncated by the crackdown in Tiananmen Square. The penultimate section of this chapter discusses how the EEC states reacted to this event, drawing conclusions on the state of the relationship circa 1990. Throughout this chapter, it will be apparent that, France's early opening notwithstanding, during the entire period from 1949 to 1990, the United States acted as a restraining factor setting the bounds to how far European states could go when dealing with China. In the 1980s, however, economic ties started to form between Western Europe and China that would soon introduce a dynamic independent of the United States into the relationship. The effect of these ties was visible in late 1989 and early 1990, when some EEC members tussled with the diplomatic and partial economic freeze that they themselves had imposed on China following 4 June 1989.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹¹ Any text quoted in this chapter that was originally in French, German, or Dutch has been translated by the author.

BACKGROUND: EUROPE AND CHINA, 1949–1978

Europe and China began limited diplomatic relations in 1950, when the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and the Netherlands recognized the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China.¹² Though Beijing prioritized relations with the communist world, it also saw a need to develop relations with non-communist states to break through the trade embargo imposed on it by the United States and (largely) followed by its allies. The Chinese leadership inferred that European states (among others) were reluctantly applying a near-total commercial embargo and from 1950 onward sought to induce them to increase trade and sell China sanctioned strategic goods.¹³ In 1954, Beijing set up trade offices in Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, and Britain and negotiated with Rome and Bonn to establish similar offices in West Germany and Italy, though under pressure from Washington these latter governments ultimately backtracked.¹⁴

Chinese leaders were correct in believing that interest in trade with China existed in Europe. In 1952 and 1953, business groups in West Germany, France, and the United Kingdom successively concluded their own unofficial trade agreements with the Chinese government, promising to sell industrial goods and chemicals, each being anxious to avoid ceding the mythical Chinese markets to competitors.¹⁵ These agreements involved embargoed goods and were therefore not implemented, but between 1954 and 1958, trade between China and the three largest West European states nonetheless almost tripled.¹⁶ Beijing's diplomacy appeared to have some effect, as the United Kingdom, France, and West Germany opted in 1957 to break with Washington's rigid interpretation

¹² Harish Kapur, *Distant Neighbours: China and Europe* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), 8. For the Netherlands see Duco Hellema, *Nederland in de Wereld: Buitenlandse Politiek van Nederland* [The Netherlands in the World: Foreign Policy of the Netherlands] (Amsterdam: Het Spectrum, 2010), 157–158.

¹³ Zhang, *Beijing's Economic Statecraft*, 46–47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 19.

¹⁶ Author's calculations based on data quoted in Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 20–21; see also Zhang, *Beijing's Economic Statecraft*, 53.

of trade restrictions and instead lowered their controls to the level applied to the Soviet Union.¹⁷

The Chinese leadership hoped that trade relations with Europe would serve as the precursor to diplomatic relations,¹⁸ but apart from France, with which China established diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level on January 27, 1964, their expectations proved unavailing.¹⁹ On the French side, one trigger for recognition was the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty by the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom in August 1963. Though the agreement did not affect France, which was developing its own nuclear arsenal at that time, French President Charles de Gaulle perceived the agreement as yet another attempt to cement Anglo-American dominance within the Western world, thereby reducing France to a second-rate player.²⁰ The PRC, which tested its first nuclear device in October 1964, viewed the treaty in a similar light and believed the superpowers wished to use it to restrict China's nuclear arsenal.²¹ France and China resembled each other in ranking as secondary powers in the Cold War system, with each seeking to escape superpower domination. Moreover, France's direct involvement in Indochina had ended. In the early 1950s, China had supported and advised Viet Minh forces fighting the French army in Vietnam.²² By 1963, however, France had withdrawn from Vietnam, and both Paris and Beijing believed that the United States should likewise disengage from the country.²³

One vexed issue in the establishment of relations was how the two sides would deal with the question of the Republic of China (hereafter Taiwan), with which France had diplomatic relations as the government of China.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹ As noted above, several European countries had recognized the PRC in the 1950s, but in most cases this did not lead to the exchange of diplomatic representatives. The United Kingdom assigned a chargé d'affaires to Beijing following recognition in 1950.

²⁰ Lorenz M. Lüthi, "Rearranging International Relations? How Mao's China and De Gaulle's France Recognized Each Other," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16: 1 (Winter 2014): 115–116.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²² Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 123.

²³ Lüthi, "Rearranging International Relations?," 117.

Beijing insisted that France should end relations with Taiwan and recognize the PRC as the sole representative of all China.²⁴ Paris, however, made clear it would refuse to break off relations with Taiwan, though it was willing to support the PRC's entry into the United Nations (UN) Security Council as China's representative.²⁵ France's apparent wish to maintain relations with "two Chinas" might have become a major sticking point, but Taipei itself resolved the situation, as the French government hoped, by adhering to its own "one China" policy and breaking relations with France shortly after the establishment of French-PRC relations.²⁶ As pledged, the French government subsequently supported the PRC's admission to the UN and the UN Security Council, but the replacement of Taiwan by the PRC was ultimately deferred until October 1971, after the United States had dropped its opposition to the PRC's entry.

In other European countries, the initiation by France of diplomatic relations with China generated political pressure from some business groups to follow suit, in order to prevent French business from gaining an undue advantage in China. Yet the governments involved found American opposition to such a move too intense to defy.²⁷ Meanwhile, in China the opening in 1966 of the Cultural Revolution halted further moves to establish relations with European states. Instead, the next few years were marked by assorted ideologically fueled but generally petty disputes with France, Denmark, Italy, Sweden,²⁸ the Netherlands,²⁹ and above all the United Kingdom, which saw its diplomatic mission in Beijing burned by angry demonstrators.³⁰

²⁴ Ibid., 129.

²⁵ Ibid., 127.

²⁶ Ibid., 139.

²⁷ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 69–70; on Italy, see Valter Coralluzzo, "Italy's Foreign Policy Toward China: Missed Opportunities and New Chances," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 13: 1 (2008): 7.

²⁸ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 92–93.

²⁹ Yvonne Van der Heijden, *De Dans van de Leeuw en de Draak: Verleden, Heden en Toekomst van de Nederlands-Chinese Handelsbetrekkingen* [Dance of the Lion and the Dragon: Past, Present, and Future of Dutch-Chinese Trade Relations] (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Business Contact, 2008), 29.

³⁰ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 69.

A critical event for Chinese-European relations was the beginning of normalization of U.S.–China relations. The two trips by National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger in July and October 1971, followed by the historic visit to Beijing and Shanghai by U.S. President Richard Nixon and Kissinger in February 1972, signaled to the world that the United States and China were committed to fundamental changes in their relationship. In the wake of this normalization, most European allies of the United States moved quickly to establish full diplomatic relations themselves with China: Belgium in October 1971, the Netherlands in May 1972,³¹ West Germany in October 1972, Luxembourg in November 1972, and Spain in March 1973.³² Italy did so even earlier, establishing relations in November 1970.³³ In most cases, a solution to the existing relationship between these countries and Taiwan had to be reached. The exception was West Germany. The Federal Republic of Germany, itself founded in 1949 with Western backing, had never established diplomatic relations with Taiwan.³⁴ Where the others were concerned, Beijing insisted that they make a clear statement that they acknowledged the PRC's position that Taiwan was a province of the People's Republic of China and that they recognized the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China.³⁵ The joint communiqué whereby the Netherlands and China established relations read³⁶:

The Chinese government reaffirms that Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic of China. The government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands respects this position of the Chinese government and reaffirms that she recognizes the government of the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate government of China.

³¹ Van der Heijden, *De Dans van de Leeuw en de Draak*, 38.

³² Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 120.

³³ Coralluzzo, "Italy's Foreign Policy Toward China," 8.

³⁴ Kay Möller, "Germany and China: A Continental Temptation," *China Quarterly* 147 (September 2014): 707.

³⁵ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 120.

³⁶ The communiqué was released in Dutch and in Chinese. The Dutch version, translated here by myself, is quoted in Van der Heijden, *De Dans van de Leeuw en de Draak*, 38.

Such a declaration would naturally be followed by the breaking of official relations with Taiwan and the closure or downgrading to unofficial status of any existing diplomatic missions.

The end of the Cultural Revolution and the passing of paramount leader Mao Zedong in 1976 opened the way for new thinking on foreign policy in Beijing. The post-Mao leadership believed that confrontation between the ideological camps was receding and that in years to come, “peace” and “development” would define the international environment. They saw an opportunity to pursue the economic development of their country by obtaining technology from the developed world through an “independent” foreign policy unconstrained by the bipolar logic of the international system.³⁷ Sinologist Ezra F. Vogel noted the impact on the Chinese leadership of a study tour in June 1978, led by Vice-Premier Gu Mu, that encompassed France, Switzerland, West Germany, Denmark, and Belgium, focusing on modern production and transport facilities. The delegation left overwhelmed by the continent’s modernity, and also surprised by how willing Europeans were to offer China loans and aid in technological development. Once the delegation returned, its report made a powerful impression on the Politburo, which decided to move quickly to expand ties with capitalist countries.³⁸ At the time, China viewed Europe as an attractive potential partner, as it could assist China’s modernization by providing technology and investments, while serving as a market for Chinese products.³⁹ In addition, at the start of the reform period, Beijing saw in Europe a useful partner in confronting the Soviet Union, from which it was still estranged.⁴⁰

The above account clearly demonstrates that the United States played a decisive role in first impeding and then allowing European countries to build relations with China. The effective American veto over extensive dealings between the two sides rather obscured the degree to

³⁷ Zhang, *Beijing’s Economic Statecraft*, 262–263.

³⁸ Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 221–224.

³⁹ Odd Arne Westad, “China and the End of the Cold War in Europe,” *Cold War History* 17: 2 (May 2017): 111; and Martin Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People’s Republic of China, 1969–1982: The European Dimension of China’s Great Transition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 173.

⁴⁰ Martin Albers and Zhong Zhong Chen, “Socialism, Capitalism and Sino-European Relations in the Deng Xiaoping Era,” *Cold War History* 17: 2 (May 2017): 117.

which, in certain portions of the private sector, there existed in Europe a real—if still embryonic—interest in trading with China. The United Kingdom boasted a British-China Friendship Association, whose secretary argued in a 1952 article that trade with China’s “ever-expanding market” was the solution to overcoming Britain’s unemployment problem.⁴¹ In Belgium in 1954, the Fédération des Industries Belges (Federation of Belgian Industries) invited a Chinese delegation to tour factories and meet industrial leaders. In the early 1960s the Association Belgique-Chine (Belgium-China Association), founded in 1957, launched several initiatives aimed at marketing Belgian industrial products to China.⁴² According to Harish Kapur, in Germany a “network of pressure groups which favored trade with China” existed and enjoyed significant influence, so that prominent politicians such as Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s Minister for Transport and the President of the Senate of Bremen openly supported expanding commercial ties.⁴³ In 1957, the government of Denmark signed a Trade and Payment Agreement with China, whereupon bilateral trade increased from 8.2 million Kroner in 1957 to 140.5 million Kroner in 1959.⁴⁴ The PRC leadership recognized European commercial interest and took advantage of it to induce the Europeans to moderate the American-initiated embargo against China. Once full diplomatic contacts between the two sides had been initiated in the 1970s, the beginning of Reform in China in 1978 enabled European economic interests to develop a growing stake in this relationship during the 1980s.

In short, Sino-European relations in the period from 1949 to 1978 were stifled as both sides initially found themselves on opposing sides of the bipolar international system. Once China’s geopolitical alignment had shifted, on the European side commercial interest was often instrumental in driving European governments to follow an energetic engagement policy. Yet building relations with China after a protracted

⁴¹ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 23.

⁴² Maurice Piraux, “Relations entre la Belgique et la République Populaire de la Chine” [Relations between Belgium and the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1979], *Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP* 13: 338–339 (1979), <https://www.cairn.info/revue-courrier-hebdomadaire-du-crisp-1979-13-page-1.htm>, accessed 1 August 2021.

⁴³ Quoted in Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 20.

⁴⁴ Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, “Trade and Economic Relations Between Denmark and China,” in *China and Denmark: Relations Since 1674*, eds. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Mads Kirkebaek (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2001), 246.

period without substantial contacts proved challenging for European governments; consequently, as the following section demonstrates, their efforts were not always successful.

THREE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIPS

West Germany

The decade after 1978 witnessed the relatively problem-free development of a substantial economic and technological relationship between China and West Germany. The only political obstacle to developing relations with China for the social-liberal government of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (1976–1982) was the importance it attached to maintaining workable relations with the Soviet Union. Until Beijing began to tone down its anti-Soviet rhetoric following the Twelfth Party Congress of 1982,⁴⁵ West Germany exercised caution when engaging with China, so as to avoid any impression of working with China against Moscow. Yet Bonn undoubtedly wished to expand relations with China, a country that Schmidt himself considered an important rising power.⁴⁶ China attracted the attention of Germany's industrial export sector in 1978 with a short-lived industrial expansion program consisting of 120 major projects.⁴⁷ While the program ended abruptly in early 1979, due to a foreign exchange shortage in China,⁴⁸ the Chinese government had sought to buy billions of Deutschmarks worth of industrial equipment from West Germany, prompting "euphoria"⁴⁹ among German industrialists over the seemingly limitless opportunities promised by China's industrial modernization.

Corporate interest placed additional pressure on Bonn to devise means of expanding China ties despite the potential sensitivities of Moscow. In response, Schmidt's government focused in its remaining years on

⁴⁵ Tim Trampedach, *Bonn und Peking: Die Wechselseitige Einbindung in Aussenpolitische Strategien 1949–1990* [Bonn and Peking: Mutual Ties in Foreign Policy Strategies, 1949–1990] (Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1997), 181.

⁴⁶ Martin Albers, "Business with Beijing, Détente with Moscow: West Germany's China Policy in a Global Context, 1969–1982," *Cold War History* 14: 2 (April 2014): 244.

⁴⁷ Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People's Republic of China*, 191; Markus Taube, "Economic Relations Between the PRC and the States of Europe," *China Quarterly* 169 (March 2002): 83.

⁴⁸ Taube, "Economic Relations," 83.

⁴⁹ Albers, "Business with Beijing, Détente with Moscow," 247.

building pragmatic, depoliticized ties with China consisting of industrial and economic cooperation, technology transfers, and incipient people-to-people contacts, as well as cooperation between subnational regions.⁵⁰ West Germany and China signed several agreements around the turn of the decade that would frame expanding and sustained cooperation between companies and other societal actors on each side. These included an agreement for scientific and technological cooperation in October 1978⁵¹ and a broad economic cooperation agreement in October 1979.⁵² These arrangements were intended to structure further development of the bilateral relationship and extend cooperation into new fields. In the interest of protecting its relationship with Moscow, Bonn nonetheless declined to entertain some Chinese requests: despite Chinese prodding, West Germany categorically refused either to sell armaments or to offer subsidized loans to China.⁵³

Following the 1982 federal elections, the Christian-Democrat-led government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl replaced Schmidt's social-liberal administration. Within Kohl's CDU-CSU party, relations with China were increasingly viewed as primarily an economic opportunity rather than an issue of Cold War politics.⁵⁴ In terms of focusing on expanding trade and investment ties with China, Kohl outdid his predecessor.⁵⁵ Addressing the Bundestag shortly after he visited China in October 1984, Kohl declared that "there are no pressing problems that separate our two countries" and that "the modernization will open an enormous market and offer a wide range [of possibilities for] cooperation between companies of the Federal Republic of Germany and China." Reflecting on his trip, the Chancellor described how he and Chinese Prime Minister Zhao

⁵⁰ Ibid., 252; Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People's Republic of China*, 193.

⁵¹ Mechthild Leutner and Tim Trampedach, *Bundesrepublik Deutschland und China 1949 bis 1995: Politik—Wirtschaft—Wissenschaft—Kultur: Eine Quellensammlung* [The German Federal Republic and China from 1949 to 1995: Politics—Economics—Science—Culture: A Collection of Sources] (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 212.

⁵² Ibid., 225.

⁵³ Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People's Republic of China*, 163, 165, 192.

⁵⁴ Trampedach, *Bonn und Peking*, 184.

⁵⁵ Möller, "Germany and China," 710.

Ziyang had agreed on the need to form a “stable, long-term partnership” of political, economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation.⁵⁶

Thanks to these political commitments, economic ties between the two states expanded significantly, especially in the second half of the 1980s. For many other European states, exports to China stagnated toward the end of the decade while imports increased,⁵⁷ but right up to 1988, West Germany registered an export surplus with China.⁵⁸ In 1988, its exports to China stood at 2,371 million ECU,⁵⁹ more than twice the figure for Italy, the next most successful EEC exporter, and almost three times France’s exports.⁶⁰ Some of Germany’s large industrial companies established a presence in China through investments and joint ventures. The automobile company Volkswagen signed a joint venture agreement in 1984 and invested \$160 million in a plant in Shanghai to produce the Volkswagen Santana. The (now defunct) aerospace company Messerschmitt-Bolkow-Blon agreed to a joint venture in 1987 to design a new plane for regional flights, anticipating strong demand in the 1990s. Other major German projects from 1984 onward included a steel mill, an aircraft maintenance center, a nuclear reactor, and a steel pipe plant. Due to these and many other deals, West Germany became one of China’s leading suppliers of technology, with over 200 technology-centered contracts signed by German entities by mid-1987.⁶¹ The German side also sought to expand scientific and cultural exchanges, in part because this was seen as one more means to build a relationship with China without offending the Soviet Union.⁶² In this area, Germans often found Beijing less willing to engage, owing to the reality of CCP

⁵⁶ Chancellor Kohl, speech in the Bundestag, 19 October 1984, printed in Leutner and Trampedach, *Bundesrepublik Deutschland und China 1949 bis 1995*, 238.

⁵⁷ Taube, “Economic Relations,” 97.

⁵⁸ Leutner and Trampedach, *Bundesrepublik Deutschland und China 1949 bis 1995*, 259.

⁵⁹ The European Currency Unit (ECU) was a unit of account based on a basket of European currencies. Its value was equivalent to today’s Euro, which replaced it.

⁶⁰ Eurostat, *External and Intra-European Union Trade: Statistical Yearbook 1958–1996* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1997), 129, 141, 149.

⁶¹ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 182–184.

⁶² Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People’s Republic of China*, 197.

control over the arts and academia.⁶³ One notable achievement, however, was the establishment in 1988 in Beijing of a Goethe Institute for German language education.⁶⁴

In short, one can conclude that West Germany—which had taken the lead as Europe’s biggest exporter to China back in the 1950s⁶⁵—cemented that advantage in the 1980s, with its sales to China surpassing by several orders of magnitude those of its closest European competitors. With China seeking to modernize its economy, the advanced industrial technologies the Federal Republic offered were in high demand. The pragmatic, business-oriented approach that Bonn applied to the relationship proved well suited to dealings with Beijing, which was itself steering its foreign policy in a less ideological direction.

France

As described earlier, France established diplomatic relations and exchanged ambassadors with China in 1964, well before other West European states. Until China entered the Reform period, these bilateral ties led to little substantive engagement beyond a political dialogue, but were nevertheless valued on both sides as a mechanism for making greater impact in an international system dominated by two superpowers. The start of the Reform period in China opened the possibility of deepening the relationship through economic and other activities. In 1975, France had briefly been one of China’s most important trading partners, thanks to contracts signed during a 1973 visit to China by French President Georges Pompidou.⁶⁶ When Beijing announced the beginning of reforms in 1978, the French hoped to build on their diplomatic head start to launch new cooperative initiatives in trade and culture.⁶⁷ France and China signed two accords in 1978: an agreement on cultural and scientific cooperation in January, and one on economic cooperation in

⁶³ Leutner and Trampedach, *Bundesrepublik Deutschland und China 1949 bis 1995*, 275.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁶⁵ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 19.

⁶⁶ Kaixuan Liu, “Les Relations Politiques Franco-chinoises de 1949 à 1983: Entre Mythe et Réalité” [Sino-French political relations from 1949 to 1983: Between Myth and Reality], *Monde Chinois Nouvelle Asie* 59: 3 (September 2019): 20.

⁶⁷ Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People’s Republic of China*, 175.

December.⁶⁸ The French government intended these arrangements to extend and deepen cooperation and to pave the way to increase exports.⁶⁹

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, certain frictions nonetheless characterized the political relationship between the two sides. Like the West Germans, the French sought to avoid undermining their links with the Soviet Union, leaving them somewhat inhibited in developing their relationship with Beijing. Initially, they seemed less cautious in this area than the Germans, and in 1978 contemplated selling anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to China. Following a personal appeal from Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, however, this project was shelved and Paris decided for the moment to prioritize relations with Moscow.⁷⁰ Furthermore, France and China also clashed over Southeast Asia, when France strongly criticized China's 1979 invasion of Vietnam.⁷¹ Two years later, in 1981, France further irritated Beijing by extending a loan of 2 billion Francs to Hanoi.⁷²

Relations between the two countries improved after President François Mitterand visited Beijing in 1983.⁷³ This set the pattern for the political relationship in the following years, characterized by regular high-level visits and a similar view of the international order. France and China alike desired to conduct an independent foreign policy that escaped the dictates of bipolar politics.⁷⁴ Both countries were nuclear powers with comparatively small arsenals, in agreement that nuclear disarmament should be encouraged but that the two superpowers should take the lead in this

⁶⁸ Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes [Center for Diplomatic Archives in Nantes], France (hereafter CADN), "Chronologie des relations franco-chinoises" [Chronology of French-Chinese relations], undated document, 513PO 2004 038, box 13, FR II.1.

⁶⁹ Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People's Republic of China*, 193.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 149–150.

⁷¹ Bhagwan Sahai Bunkar, "Sino-French Diplomatic Relations, 1964–81," *China Report* 20: 1 (February 1984): 48.

⁷² Qibin Hou, "Quarante Ans de Dialogue: Evolution des Relations Politico-Diplomatiques Entre la France et la Chine, 1964–2007" [Forty Years of Dialogue: Evolution of Political-Diplomatic Relations Between France and China, 1964–2007] (Unpublished PhD thesis, Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier III, 2014), 214, <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01077902>, accessed 19 October 2020.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁷⁴ CADN, Note 1788 on French-Chinese relations by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directory of Asia and Oceania, 29 December 1988, 513PO 2004 038, box 20, FR II.6.

by substantially cutting their own stockpiles.⁷⁵ After disagreeing over China's attack on Vietnam, both France and China envisioned a solution to the long-running Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia involving a Vietnamese withdrawal and the subsequent return of Prince Sihanouk to lead a transitional government in Cambodia.⁷⁶ Furthermore, both countries strongly opposed the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.⁷⁷

The French government also invested in promoting cultural ties between the two countries. One major project in this field was a French-financed university in Wuhan, a project that won the backing of top French leaders, with Paris hopeful that French would serve as the language of instruction in a university training China's future elites.⁷⁸ The Chinese government, however, was unfavorably disposed toward French-language instruction and decided that the university would instead use English-language instruction. Despite this setback, significant cultural exchanges between the two countries took place throughout the 1980s, mainly involving performances in China by French artists. Singers such as Jean Michel Jarré and Mireille Mathieu made concert tours; French operas including *Don Quichotte* and *The Three Musketeers* were performed in Shanghai and Beijing; French painters held expositions; and in 1984, the prestigious Centre Pompidou in Paris hosted a major event on Chinese television.⁷⁹

Economic ties, by contrast, failed to meet French expectations. Throughout the second half of the 1980s, France consistently ran trade deficits with China.⁸⁰ While French imports from China increased, exports were generally lackluster and subject to fluctuations because much of the total consisted of *grands contrats*, single large deals agreed between

⁷⁵ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Diplomatie 18,175, 9 April 1984; CADN, Diplomatic telegram New York 1419, 24 September 1984; and CADN, Diplomatic telegram DFRA New York 994, 2 June 1988, all in 513PO 2000 042, box 31.

⁷⁶ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Diplomatie 18,737, 22 September 1988; and CADN, Diplomatic telegram DFRA New York 994, 2 June 1988, both in 513PO 2000 042, box 31.

⁷⁷ Bunkar, "Sino-French Diplomatic Relations," 48; and CADN, Diplomatic telegram DFRA New York 1514, 24 September 1987, 513PO 2000 042, box 31.

⁷⁸ Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People's Republic of China*, 181.

⁷⁹ CADN, "Chronologie des relations franco-chinoises," undated document, 513PO 2004 038, box 13, FR II.1.

⁸⁰ Hou, "Quarante Ans de Dialogue," 222.

the two governments, often aided on the French side by export credits.⁸¹ One notable example was the construction of a nuclear power plant at Daya Bay in Guangzhou by the French state-owned company Franatom, agreed between the two countries in 1986.⁸² Besides nuclear energy, Paris pursued major deals with Beijing in telecommunications, transportation, and basic food products including sugar and cereals, with the last category dominating French exports in the first half of the 1980s.⁸³ The French private sector demonstrated relatively weak interest in trade with China. Simultaneously, as early as 1979, when it fought hard at the behest of its vulnerable textile sector to keep the EEC's import quota for Chinese textiles low, France perceived dangers from China's export competitiveness.⁸⁴

By the mid-1980s, a pattern had become established in France-China relations, whereby the two countries tended to share a worldview predisposing them to perceive major international political issues in the same light.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, their economic dealings remained by comparison disappointing, especially from the French perspective, with the Chinese apparently less troubled by the discrepancy; indeed, on two occasions they simply reminded the French that all developed countries now sought to expand economic ties with China, admonishing them to make more

⁸¹ CADN, Unnamed note on economic and trade relations between France and China by Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Budget, Directory of External Economic Relations, 2 January 1989, 513PO 2004 038, box 20, FR II.6.

⁸² CADN, Diplomatic telegram Peking 3565, 7 November 1986, 513PO 2000 042, box 32.

⁸³ CADN, Unnamed Note, 2 January 1989, 4.

⁸⁴ Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People's Republic of China*, 179.

⁸⁵ French diplomatic sources from the period 1984 to 1989 regularly noted just how similar French and Chinese analyses of international issues were, suggesting that this reflected a close political relationship. See, for instance, CADN, Diplomatic telegram Diplomatic 18,175, 9 April 1984; CADN, Diplomatic telegram New York 1419, 24 September 1984; CADN, Note 999 briefing for French Ambassador's meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister, 17 December 1986; CADN, "Compte Rendu d'Entretien 7803" [Report of an Interview Between the Prime Minister of China and the President of France], 18 November 1987; CADN, Diplomatic telegram DFRA New York 994, 2 June 1988, all in 513PO 2000 042, box 31; and CADN, Diplomatic telegram Peking 093, 11 January 1988, 513PO 2000 042, box 32.

competitive offers.⁸⁶ One key goal for France in the bilateral relationship during this period—that of deepening economic and commercial ties—therefore remained largely unrealized, with French companies failing to establish a position in China independent of French government support. Concurrently, France remained highly protective of its local industries against any perceived threat from more cheaply produced Chinese goods. In this respect, despite France’s earlier establishment of diplomatic ties, in the 1980s its relationship with China was less solid than that of West Germany.

Netherlands

The relationship between the Netherlands and China in this period is notable because the Netherlands was the only West European country to run afoul of Beijing over Taiwan. The first official visit between China and the Netherlands took place in 1978, when Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua was received in The Hague by his Dutch counterpart Chris van der Klaauw. The atmosphere was cordial. Huang praised the Netherlands for contributing to the unity and common defense of Europe. Van der Klaauw reciprocated by stating that a stable and prosperous China encouraged peace and prosperity in Asia and the world.⁸⁷ In October 1980, Van der Klaauw accompanied the Dutch Prime Minister, Dries van Agt, on a return visit to China.⁸⁸ During this trip they signed two agreements, one covering cultural exchanges, the other economic and technological collaboration.⁸⁹ Like similar accords China reached with France and West Germany, these arrangements were intended to deepen and extend bilateral cooperation.

Within months, in early 1981, these initial high points swiftly gave way to a drastic downturn in bilateral relations, when the Dutch government decided to grant an export license for the sale to Taiwan of two

⁸⁶ See CADN, “Compte Rendu D’entretien 7803,” 18 November 1987, 513PO 2000 042, box 31; and CADN, Diplomatic telegram Pekin 093, 11 January 1988, 513PO 2000 042, box 32.

⁸⁷ “Huang Hua prijst ons land” [Huang Hua praises our Country], *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 9 June 1978.

⁸⁸ Van der Heijden, *De Dans van de Leeuw en de Draak*, 38.

⁸⁹ “Kroon op contacten Nederland-China” [Crowning of Netherlands-China Contacts], *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 22 October 1980.

diesel-electric submarines.⁹⁰ In 1980, Taiwan was anxious to buy six non-nuclear attack submarines from the Dutch shipbuilding company RSV, a purchase that required an export license from the government. Previously, The Hague had blocked an attempt by Taiwan's government to obtain German jet fighters through a Dutch intermediary, refusing to extend an export license on the grounds that Taiwan was not a state recognized by the Netherlands. The prospects that it would authorize a starting order of two submarines nonetheless seemed more encouraging. RSV's naval shipyard near Rotterdam, Wilton Fijenoord, was threatened with bankruptcy, from which the submarine order promised to rescue it.⁹¹ The proposed order therefore won the backing of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, which sought to preserve the increasingly troubled Dutch shipbuilding industry. Economic Affairs Minister Gijs van Aardenne dismissed the obvious political implications of such a deal, stating "Taiwan is not a country, but it is a customer."⁹² Despite this verbal nicety, the Foreign Ministry, led by Van der Klaauw, recognized the implications for relations with the PRC and opposed the deal. On 28 November, after a vigorous debate within the cabinet, The Hague decided to grant an export license for two submarines.⁹³

Beijing responded angrily to what it termed an "act undermining our friendly Sino-Dutch relations." In February 1981, the Chinese government announced the withdrawal of its ambassador to The Hague, downgrading relations with the Dutch to the level of chargé d'affaires. It also canceled the implementation of a bilateral air transport agreement signed in 1979 and froze orders from Dutch electronics company Philips.⁹⁴ Following the Chinese announcement, the Dutch Prime Minister and Foreign Minister commented that the downgrading of bilateral relations was fully expected.⁹⁵ The Vice-Minister for Economic Affairs stated that a "decisive factor" in the cabinet's decision had been that short-term export

⁹⁰ Van der Heijden, *De Dans van de Leeuw en de Draak*, 39.

⁹¹ Philip Everts, *Controversies at Home: Domestic Factors in the Foreign Policy of the Netherlands* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), 270.

⁹² Quoted in Dierikx and Petit, "Het Dossier 'Urk'," 180. Translation by author.

⁹³ Everts, *Controversies at Home*, 273.

⁹⁴ Dierikx and Petit, "Het Dossier 'Urk'," 180–181, quotation from 180.

⁹⁵ "V.D. Klaauw niet verrast door besluit Chinezen" [V.D. Klaauw Not Surprised by Decision of Chinese], *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 28 February 1981.

prospects to Taiwan were far better than those to China.⁹⁶ After a period of optimism in 1978–1979, the Foreign Minister had revised downward his expectations for trade with China. Beijing was facing an acute shortage of funds after disappointing results from oil explorations in China. By 1980, the Foreign Ministry had become pessimistic over the prospects for Dutch exports to China unless The Hague was willing to grant generous export credits, which it was not.⁹⁷

The issue of further submarine sales emerged in 1983, when Wilton Fijenoord requested an export license for two more submarines to be built for Taiwan, by which time the Dutch authorities had resolved that the previous license was a one-time arrangement.⁹⁸ In an effort to persuade the government to broaden their defense relationship, Taiwan offered substantial economic inducements: The Taiwanese navy had signed a letter of intent with another Dutch shipyard for the construction of four minesweepers and expressed interest in acquiring military radar equipment from yet another Dutch company.⁹⁹ According to a contemporary newspaper report, Taiwan was also interested in purchasing “four container ships, dredging ships, cranes, agricultural equipment, and industrial kettles” from the Netherlands.¹⁰⁰

Even so, no export license was given, a decision that Philip Everts concludes was due to “international political considerations,” dominated by the fact that the Netherlands did not recognize Taiwan, while considering China a major power.¹⁰¹ Expectations of future economic ties with the PRC also seem to have played a role. Despite their diplomatic conflict, Dutch trade with China had grown between 1981 and 1983, strengthening the hand of those who argued against further submarine sales.¹⁰² Sino-Dutch diplomatic relations were restored to ambassadorial level on 1 February 1984, following The Hague’s denial of a second export

⁹⁶ “Taiwan-besluit mag niet worden herzien” [Taiwan-Decision Must Not be Rescinded], *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 7 February 1981.

⁹⁷ “Geen droefenis over breuk met Peking” [No Sadness Over Break with Peking], *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 28 February 1981.

⁹⁸ Everts, *Controversies at Home*, 276.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁰⁰ “Bonden breken lans voor duikboot-order” [Unions Are Fighting for Submarine Order], *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 29 October 1983.

¹⁰¹ Everts, *Controversies at Home*, 286.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 283.

license.¹⁰³ On the same day, the Dutch Foreign Ministry announced it was preparing for several visits to China, with two trade delegations slated to depart in March, and a visit by the Minister for Foreign Trade scheduled later that year.¹⁰⁴ The Dutch government believed China's rapid growth offered major opportunities for Dutch industrial and agricultural exports and felt it must make up for previous lost time.¹⁰⁵

After The Hague's turnaround, economic and political interactions between China and the Netherlands expanded. Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang came to the Netherlands in 1985, confirming the revival of the relationship.¹⁰⁶ In 1987, the Dutch Prime Minister and Foreign Minister made a return visit to China.¹⁰⁷ Bilateral trade in goods grew from 691 million Guilders in 1982 (the lowest figure in the decade) to 1,451 million Guilders in 1988.¹⁰⁸ This increase was mostly due to rising Chinese exports, as Dutch exports to China declined to 528 million Guilders in 1988, after peaking at 811 million Guilders in 1985. In the second half of the decade, several major Dutch companies showed interest in China. Philips began a joint venture in 1985 to produce video and audio equipment. Other investors in these years included Akzo and DSM (both in chemicals), IHC Merwede (dredging), and Heineken (brewing).¹⁰⁹ In late March 1989, a report from the Dutch Embassy in Beijing described bilateral ties as "developing steadily in a positive direction," crediting this development to successful reciprocal visits and a clear disavowal by the Dutch government (restated in 1988) of further arms sales to Taiwan.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Ingrid D'Hooghe, "The 1991/1992 Dutch Debate on the Sale of Submarines to Taiwan," *China Information* 6: 4 (Spring 1992): 42.

¹⁰⁴ "Relatie Nederland-China weer goed" [Netherlands-China Relations Good Again], *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, 2 February 1984.

¹⁰⁵ "Bolkestein bezoekt binnenkort China" [Bolkestein Will Visit China Soon], *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, 2 August 1984.

¹⁰⁶ Van der Heijden, *De Dans van de Leeuw en de Draak*, 41.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰⁸ Data quoted from D'Hooghe, "The 1991/1992 Dutch debate," 47. One Guilder was worth about 0.55 US Dollars.

¹⁰⁹ Van der Heijden, *De Dans van de Leeuw en de Draak*, 42–43.

¹¹⁰ Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (hereafter AMFANL), Annual report Netherlands Embassy in Beijing for 1988, 21 March 1989, p. 11, Inventory number 00055, China PZ, algemeen [general files], Year 1989–1996.

On the Chinese side, the 1980 submarine sale left a legacy of significant distrust over the Dutch attitude toward Taiwan, which would cloud diplomatic relations throughout the 1980s. The most visible consequence was a continuing refusal by Beijing to honor the 1979 air transport agreement, because the Dutch national airline KLM had started operating a route to Taipei in 1983.¹¹¹ Not until 1996 was an agreement implemented allowing Dutch airlines to establish routes to the PRC.¹¹² China's gradual opening nonetheless intrigued the Dutch government and private sector just as much as was the case elsewhere in Europe, laying the groundwork for steadily growing ties in the second half of the 1980s.

THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY (EEC)

In addition to the individual European states, China also built a relationship with the Brussels-based EEC institutions. The foreign affairs role of the EEC was limited, but its executive agency, the European Commission, had one important responsibility: It was charged with implementing the collective trade policy of the member states, including negotiating trade agreements with external parties. It did (and does) not do so autonomously but was delegated by the heads of state and government of the member states meeting in the European Council. The European Council was responsible for the political decision to enter into negotiations with an external party. It also formulated the mandate within which the Commission was permitted to negotiate with an external party. Foreign policy programs under the Commissioner for External Relations were likewise undertaken at the behest of the Council. The EEC's external trade policy and foreign policy initiatives in this period can therefore be considered an expression of the collective will of the EEC member states. The European Parliament, whose members were from 1979 onward directly elected by voters in the member states, was autonomous in the sense that it was not directed by the member states, but at the time it had no formal authority in foreign affairs.

The start of EEC-China ties can be dated to a visit in May 1975 by Christopher Soames, the Vice-President of the European Commission, a trip that established diplomatic relations between the EEC and

¹¹¹ Dierikx and Petit, "Het Dossier 'Urk'," 186.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 191.

China.¹¹³ In September 1977, the two sides began negotiations on a trade agreement.¹¹⁴ The China-EEC Trade Agreement, signed in 1978, would establish the ground rules for trade ties between the two in years to come.¹¹⁵ The agreement, while relatively limited and rather vague in its formulation,¹¹⁶ was nonetheless important because it signaled a commitment on both sides to increase bilateral trade and was therefore an indirect political statement of intent on forging a closer relationship.¹¹⁷ It paved the way, moreover, for measures on the European side that encouraged a rapid (if lopsided) expansion of trade over the following years. In 1979, the Commission signed an agreement on textile imports with China that—despite, as mentioned above, generating some controversy within Europe—doubled the quota for textile exports, then one of China’s most competitive industrial sectors.¹¹⁸ By the start of the 1980s, China was included in the EEC’s Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), granting certain industrial goods from China tariff-free access equivalent to that accorded non-Communist developing countries.¹¹⁹ The terms of the 1978 agreement were implemented dependent on the satisfaction of both sides. The increasing volume and complexity of bilateral trade soon required the updating of this treaty.¹²⁰ This revision came with the signing of the 1985 Sino-European Community Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which included trade provisions “virtually identical” to those of its 1978 predecessor.¹²¹ The new version also added a commitment to expand economic and technological cooperation to almost every sector of the economy.¹²²

¹¹³ Harish Kapur, *China and the EEC: The New Connection* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1986), 34–35.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁵ Zhi Yue Xiao, “EEC-China: Ten Years After the First Trade Agreement,” *Journal of World Trade* 22: 2 (April 1988): 6.

¹¹⁶ Jon Redmond and Zou Lan, “The European Community and China: New Horizons,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 25: 2 (December 1986): 140.

¹¹⁷ Kapur, *China and the EEC*, 51.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁹ Redmond and Lan, “The European Community and China,” 140.

¹²⁰ Xiao, “EEC-China,” 13; and Redmond and Lan, “The European Community and China,” 141.

¹²¹ Redmond and Lan, “The European Community and China,” 152.

¹²² Xiao, “EEC-China,” 14.

Besides providing the basic framework for trade relations, the EC also had an auxiliary role in developing the sinews of a cooperative relationship between the EEC countries and China. As early as 1978, European Commissioner for External Relations Wilhelm Haferkamp led a delegation of business leaders, including the CEO of Royal Dutch Shell and the Chairman of the London Chamber of Commerce, on a trip to China.¹²³ In 1981, 1985, and 1988, the Commission organized three Sino-EC business weeks in Brussels to stimulate networking between business-people from both sides. It also implemented education programs in China, including an MBA program for Chinese economic cadres launched in 1985.¹²⁴ Other Commission initiatives included technological cooperation programs in agriculture, energy, and medicine. In October 1988, the Commission opened a representative office in Beijing.¹²⁵ Meanwhile, the European Parliament—despite having no formal role in foreign affairs—consistently encouraged the Commission and EEC member states to expand links with China. Throughout the 1980s, it passed assorted resolutions urging the EEC, among other things, to promote China’s accession to the GATT; establish working groups to enable European SMEs to associate with Chinese enterprises; and establish a representative office in Beijing.¹²⁶

With the EEC and its component institutions developing meta-forms of engagement between the two sides, an enabling environment was created that spurred national and subnational connections between China and European states. Toward the end of the decade, a narrative had been established that supported broader engagement with China for the economic benefit of both sides. Deepening U.S.–China relations and a perception that Europe would miss out on opportunities if it did not expand bilateral ties stimulated this engagement. Then came the Tiananmen crackdown of 4 June 1989.

¹²³ Kapur, *China and the EEC*, 54.

¹²⁴ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 173.

¹²⁵ EEC/China Joint Committee, Memo 89/31, European Commission, 2 June 1989, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_89_31, accessed 10 March 2021.

¹²⁶ Kapur, *Distant Neighbours*, 173–174.

TIANANMEN AND ITS AFTERMATH

When the People's Liberation Army (PLA) violently dispersed protestors in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, reactions from European countries and the EEC were swift and unanimous in condemnation. In a press release, the German government stated that it "condemns the serious violations of human rights" perpetrated by the army, while Chancellor Helmut Kohl deplored the "barbaric use of brute force" and appealed to the Chinese government to return to the road of opening and democratization.¹²⁷ In France, Foreign Minister Roland Dumas said he was "dismayed by the bloody repression" of "an unarmed crowd of protestors."¹²⁸ In The Hague, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the Chinese chargé d'affaires of its government's "shock, sadness and revulsion" and of its cancellation of a planned visit by the chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.¹²⁹ The European Commission issued a statement "deplor[ing] the brutal repression of the people of Beijing." The Commission President, Jacques Delors, also canceled a meeting with Chinese Foreign Economic Relations and Trade Minister Zheng Tuobin scheduled for 5 June.¹³⁰ Within twenty-four hours, the governments of the United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Luxembourg all issued statements denouncing the crackdown.¹³¹

The next question the Europeans faced was whether and to what extent to follow up with concrete action. Condemnation of the bloodshed and the subsequent purges and arrests in China came from around

¹²⁷ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Bonn 1245, 7 June 1989, 513PO 2004 038, box 6, RPC VII 3.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Robert D. McFadden, "The West Condemns the Crackdown," *New York Times*, 5 June 1989.

¹²⁹ AMFANL, Diplomatic telegram Van den Broek 129, 5 June 1989, Inventory number 00085, China PZ, binnenlandse aangelegenheden [internal affairs], Year 1989–1989, part 2.

¹³⁰ John Palmer, "End Killings or Trade May Suffer, Europe Warns," *Guardian*, 6 June 1989.

¹³¹ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Stockholm 280, 5 June 1989; CADN, Diplomatic telegram Lisbonne 372, 6 June 1989; CADN, Diplomatic telegram Luxembourg 162, 6 June 1989; and CADN, Diplomatic telegram Rome 670, 5 June 1989, all in 513PO 2004 038, box 6, RPC VII 3.

the world.¹³² In Europe, protests occurred at Chinese embassies and other locations in the United Kingdom,¹³³ Norway,¹³⁴ Sweden, Switzerland,¹³⁵ Portugal,¹³⁶ the Netherlands,¹³⁷ France,¹³⁸ and Germany.¹³⁹ In this atmosphere, EEC governments set about composing a definitive response to the crisis within the framework of European Political Cooperation.¹⁴⁰ Outrage over the crackdown was real, but would not in isolation determine European governments' reactions. In the United States, despite facing similar outrage in the American press and Congress, President George H. W. Bush attempted most of all to take a measured stance. U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker III later wrote: "In considering our response to the massacre, there was simply no dispute that we had to strike a delicate balance between the need for decisive steps and the need to safeguard the underlying strategic relationship to the extent possible."¹⁴¹

In Germany, Horst Teltschik, the foreign affairs adviser to Chancellor Kohl, expressed skepticism over taking a confrontational approach on the

¹³² "Réactions à travers le monde... Washington baisse pavillon" [Reactions Around the World... Washington Strikes the Colors], *Le Monde*, 23 June 1989; "Les États-Unis et le Japon annoncent de nouvelles sanctions contre Pékin" [United States and Japan Announce New Sanctions Against Peking], *Le Monde*, 22 June 1989; and "Les réactions à travers le monde" [Reactions Around the World], *Le Monde*, 7 June 1989.

¹³³ Stephen Cook, "Outrage Builds a Shrine at the Chinese Embassy," *Guardian*, 6 June 1989.

¹³⁴ "Demonstrationen auf der ganzen Welt" [Demonstrations All Over the World], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 June 1989.

¹³⁵ "Dans les autres capitales" [In the Other Capitals], *Le Monde*, 6 June 1989.

¹³⁶ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Lisbonne 372, 6 June 1989, 513PO 2004 038, box 6, RPC VII 3.

¹³⁷ "'Leger-optreden is barbaars'" ['The Army's Actions Are Barbaric'], *De Volkskrant*, 6 June 1989.

¹³⁸ "L'angoisse et la haine" [The Anguish and the Hate], *Le Monde*, 6 June 1989.

¹³⁹ "Demonstrationen auf der ganzen Welt," [Demonstrations All Over the World], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 June 1989.

¹⁴⁰ European Political Cooperation was a loose framework of cooperation in foreign affairs among EEC member states. It was associated with the EEC but deliberately made a separate institution from the EEC. It was the predecessor to the present-day foreign policy framework of the EU, the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

¹⁴¹ James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 104.

crackdown with the Chinese government. The newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* paraphrased him as recommending that “world public opinion” should be mobilized to make it clear to the leadership of China that it could not revoke human rights. He added that experience showed that economic sanctions did not prompt political change.¹⁴² The German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, quickly excluded the possibility of economic sanctions, calling them “at best ineffective, at worst counterproductive.”¹⁴³ The Netherlands Ambassador to China, writing to the Minister for Foreign Affairs on 6 June, also counseled moderation:

I assume that, given the shocking manner in which military violence was used against peaceful protestors and the elaborate media coverage of this, there is a strong public and political pressure to not only issue a strong condemnation but to also announce ‘measures’ [quotation marks in original]. Though many Chinese supporters of reform, more democracy and liberalization wish to be supported by foreign countries, every immoderate attempt from abroad to influence matters here will be automatically rejected. Furthermore, the situation here has not yet fully settled. [We should therefore] take into account the factor of time, meaning we had better think of cancelling, freezing, and postponing rather than make decisions which will preclude cooperation in the longer term.¹⁴⁴

EEC ministers for foreign affairs met on 12 June to discuss a joint response to the crackdown. The ministers decided to freeze high-level bilateral contacts and to ban arms sales to China, measures the United States had also taken.¹⁴⁵ Any further measures would be announced

¹⁴² “Kohl: barbarischer Einsatz brutaler Gewalt” [Kohl: Barbaric Use of Brute Violence], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June 1989.

¹⁴³ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Bonn 1245, 7 June 1989, 513PO 2004 038, box 6, RPC VII 3.

¹⁴⁴ AMFANL, Diplomatic telegram Van den Berg 179, 6 June 1989, Inventory number 00085, China PZ, binnenlandse aangelegenheden [internal affairs], Year 1989–1989, part 2. Translation by the author.

¹⁴⁵ “EG ziet af van sancties tegen bewind in Beijing” [EC Refrains from Sanctions Against Regime in Beijing], *De Volkskrant*, 13 June 1989; and “EG will vorerst keine normalen Beziehungen zu Peking unterhalten” [EC Does Not Want to Maintain Normal Relations with Peking for the Time Being], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 June 1989.

at a scheduled meeting in Madrid of the organization's highest political body, the European Council, the combined heads of government or heads of state of the EEC (later EU) countries, who were responsible for deciding on its overall collective political priorities. Already on 12 June, economic sanctions and further diplomatic moves such as recalling ambassadors or breaking diplomatic relations were ruled out, with none of the foreign ministers pressing for further measures. They were, reported Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, adopting a "wait-and-see attitude [...], looking closely at decisions taken in Washington and seeming to hope for a quick leadership change in China."¹⁴⁶

As anticipated, the EEC's response was finalized at the European Council meeting of 26–27 June. On the urging of Germany and Spain, two more economic sanctions were added.¹⁴⁷ Firstly, the EEC countries would not extend export credits to their companies to finance trade with China. Secondly, like the United States, the EEC countries would ask the World Bank not to extend new loans to China. Other measures on which top EEC leaders agreed included the "suspension of bilateral ministerial and high-level contacts"; "interruption [...] of military cooperation and an embargo on trade in arms"; "the raising of the issue of human rights in China in the appropriate international fora"; and "prolongation by member states of visas to the Chinese students who wish it."¹⁴⁸ One or more member states had already taken or at least contemplated each of these measures, and none was out of step with policies adopted by non-EEC countries, most importantly the United States.¹⁴⁹ What the Madrid summit added was a stated commitment at the highest political level that all EEC countries would adopt a uniform attitude toward China.

As time passed following the Madrid summit, it soon became clear that the political situation in China was stabilizing and that the Chinese government was too big a stakeholder in the international system to be left isolated for long, meaning that the measures imposed after 4 June were gradually rescinded. In December 1989, the twelve EEC countries

¹⁴⁶ "EG ziet af van sancties tegen bewind in Beijing," 13 June 1989.

¹⁴⁷ "EG schort kredieten voor export naar China op" [EC Suspends Export Credits to China], *De Volkskrant*, 27 June 1989.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted from Presidency Conclusions of the European Council of June 26–27, available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/20589/1989_june_-_madrid_eng_.pdf, accessed 7 March 2021.

¹⁴⁹ Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 105, 107.

agreed to end the ban on export credits, introduced due to the economic uncertainties following the crackdown.¹⁵⁰ In January 1990, the Chinese government announced the lifting of martial law. In response, the Political Committee¹⁵¹ decided in January to relax the “freeze” of relations with China and allow visits by high-level civil servants, while leaving in place the ban on ministerial-level visits.¹⁵² By late March, all member states—with the exception of Germany, where this change of course required a parliamentary vote—were again preparing export credits and other forms of financial cooperation.¹⁵³

In addition, it appears that by next summer the remaining ban on ministerial-level visits was no longer faithfully observed. On 12 July 1990, the French ambassador sent a telegram complaining that, “under one pretext or the other,” such visits between the PRC and EEC states were in fact taking place. On an ostensibly private and non-official trip to Italy, the Chinese Minister for Defense had nevertheless been received by the secretary-general of the Italian Ministry of Defense. On 2 July, the German Minister for Development Cooperation had arrived in Beijing on a six-day visit, where he held talks with his counterpart, Minister of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade Zheng Tuobin, Premier Li Peng, and others. In early July, the Chinese Vice-Minister for Chemical Industry likewise visited the Netherlands, where he met the Dutch Vice-Minister of Economic Affairs.¹⁵⁴

While some European governments were apparently stretching the rules of the diplomatic embargo to maintain contacts with China, Sino-French relations were only just emerging from an even deeper freeze. On 14 July 1989, the French government caused major offense to Beijing when it decided to invite Chinese dissidents to join the annual Bastille

¹⁵⁰ “Sancties tegen China steeds verder uitgehold” [Sanctions Against China Increasingly Hollowed Out], *Trouw*, 22 February 1990.

¹⁵¹ The Political Committee brings together the Political Directors of each member state’s foreign ministry and represents the level immediately below the foreign ministers. It undertakes much of the preparatory work for ministerial discussions and decisions.

¹⁵² CADN, Diplomatic telegram *Diplomatie* 177, 21 January 1990, 513PO 2004 038, box 31, EU III 3.

¹⁵³ CADN, Diplomatic telegram *Bruxelles* 414, 27 March 1990, 513PO 2004 038, box 31, EU III 2.2.

¹⁵⁴ CADN, Diplomatic telegram *Pekin* 2071, 12 July 1990, 513PO 2004 038, box 31, EU III 2.1.

Day parade in Paris on France's national holiday, an event attended by political leaders from France and abroad and broadcast on national television. In a protest to the French government, China described this as "an open attack" and "gross interference."¹⁵⁵ The PRC government further objected to "persistent rumors" that France was planning to sell arms to Taiwan and deplored the presence at the same parade of the island's Minister for Foreign Affairs.¹⁵⁶ For the rest of 1989 and well into 1990, the activities of Chinese dissidents in France provoked successive truculent protests from the Chinese Embassy to the Quai d'Orsay.¹⁵⁷ Relations recovered somewhat after March 1990, when France lifted its block on export credits, leading the Chinese government to express its appreciation.¹⁵⁸ Later, however, in 1992, the arms sales to Taiwan of which the Chinese had heard rumors back in 1989 materialized, prompting another crisis in Sino-French relations.¹⁵⁹

The eventual lifting of the ban on ministerial visits came after President Saddam Hussein of Iraq launched an invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. The UN Security Council adopted a series of resolutions condemning the invasion, which Iraq ignored, resulting in the tabling on 29 November of SC Resolution 678, empowering other UN members to use "all necessary means" to ensure the removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait.¹⁶⁰ The United States and its allies sought the passage of this resolution to authorize military action against Iraqi forces. As a veto-wielding Security Council member, China had to be persuaded to refrain from blocking passage of the resolution. The United States promised

¹⁵⁵ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Pekin 3082, 17 July 1989, 513PO 2004 038, box 13, FR II 2.

¹⁵⁶ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Diplomatie 14,877, 20 July 1989, 513PO 2004 038, box 13, FR II 2.

¹⁵⁷ See CADN, Diplomatic telegram Diplomatie 18,223, 8 September 1989; CADN, Diplomatic telegram Diplomatie 22,148, 25 October 1989; CADN, Diplomatic telegram Pekin 4880, 7 December 1989, all in 513PO 2004 038, box 13, FR II 2; and CADN, Diplomatic telegram Pekin 4049, 27 February 1990, 513PO 2004 038, box 13, FR II 4.

¹⁵⁸ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Pekin 778, 20 March 1990, 513PO 2004 038, box 13, FR II 4.

¹⁵⁹ Hou, "Quarante Ans de Dialogue," 230.

¹⁶⁰ UN Security Council Resolution 678 of 29 November 1990, available at [https://undocs.org/S/RES/678\(1990\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/678(1990)), accessed 8 March 2021.

the Chinese government to ease sanctions and invite the Chinese foreign ministers to visit the White House.¹⁶¹

The EEC states, too, incentivized China to cooperate on the resolution by offering a resumption of relations. Italy played a key role in the European decision to normalize relations. The Italians had steadily built up ties with China in the second half of the 1980s, signing a consular agreement and a defense agreement with Beijing and becoming China's second-largest trading partner in Europe, after West Germany. Rome assumed the rotating Presidency of the EEC on 1 July 1990, thereby holding an important agenda-setting role in the second half of 1990. With encouragement from Washington, the Italians pushed for the re-establishment of dialogue with China in the EEC.¹⁶² On 28 September, the foreign ministers of the Troika¹⁶³ (Ireland, Italy, and Luxembourg) met with Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen at the UN in New York, an encounter during which the three "expressed appreciation for the constructive role so far played by China [in regard to the Gulf crisis]." The President-in-exercise (Italy) "noted that the Presidency would soon discuss with the partners how to strengthen political dialogue and improve relations with China."¹⁶⁴ On 22 October, the foreign ministers of the twelve EEC states decided to lift the ban on ministerial- and high-level visits.¹⁶⁵ Secondary sanctions, including the bans on cultural, scientific, and technological exchanges, were also removed. Only the arms embargo and a policy of raising human rights issues in multilateral fora remained in place.¹⁶⁶

In conclusion, the response by EEC states to the Tiananmen crackdown dovetailed with that of the United States, with EEC sanctions

¹⁶¹ Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 324.

¹⁶² Coralluzzo, "Italy's Foreign Policy Toward China," 9–10.

¹⁶³ The Troika was the unified representation to third parties of the twelve EEC-members. The three foreign ministers represented the member states holding the previous, present, and next-in-line future EEC presidency.

¹⁶⁴ CADN, COREU telegram TA Local 2276, 2 October 1990, 513PO 2004 038, box 31, EU III 2.1.

¹⁶⁵ CADN, Diplomatic telegram Diplomatic 21,955, 24 October 1990, 513PO 2004 038, box 31, EU III 3.2.

¹⁶⁶ The policy of criticizing China in multilateral fora, meaning in practice the UN Commission on Human Rights, was abandoned in 1998. For further discussion of this issue, see Philip Baker, "Human Rights, Europe and the People's Republic of China," *China Quarterly* 169 (March 2002): 45–63.

mirroring those of the United States. The most important measure, the freeze on high-level diplomatic contacts, was dropped to win Chinese support for the essentially American Gulf War endeavor of military action against Saddam Hussein's regime. Though Europe was developing its own foreign policy agenda with respect to China, it still did so under a broader U.S. aegis that restricted the scope of independent European action, even as it provided for renewed ties in the aftermath of Tiananmen.

CONCLUSION

Martin Albers and Zhong Zhong Chen note how dealings between China and Europe in the 1980s were shaped by the bipolar framework of the Cold War, as "relations with the Cold War hegemony in Moscow and Washington, rather than connections with each other, were paramount."¹⁶⁷ In the late 1970s, China's antagonism toward the Soviet Union and its resulting isolation within the communist sphere was a key reason for reaching out to Europe. Concurrently, this hostility motivated France and especially West Germany to be cautious in developing ties with China until Beijing moderated its stance toward Moscow. More than the Soviet Union, however, the United States played a truly decisive role in setting the overarching terms of Europe's relationship with China.

Within the American-dictated boundaries of the relationship, the two sides were nonetheless constructing economic links which by 1989 were a contributory cause of the failure of sanctions. The direct trigger for the end of the diplomatic freeze was the Gulf crisis, but it is clear that by the mid-1990s the willingness to execute these restrictions faithfully was starting to fracture. The reason for this is clear: the Communist Party had weathered the storm and was stabilizing its grip on power. European governments realized that the CCP was set to govern China for the foreseeable future, and the economic allurements of China were too great for some of the twelve EEC countries to resist indefinitely engagement with the Chinese government. Once the unified approach to China began to break down, the remaining states were under pressure to follow suit, so as not to find themselves at a comparative economic disadvantage.

¹⁶⁷ Albers and Chen, "Socialism, Capitalism and Sino-European Relations in the Deng Xiaoping Era," 116.

All three countries discussed here wished to expand their trade and investment ties with China. West Germany was most successful in doing so, particularly in terms of exports, that developed vigorously under the umbrella of a pragmatic political relationship between Bonn and Beijing. The Netherlands was likewise eager to develop economic ties, but found itself at a temporary disadvantage of its own making through selling submarines to Taiwan. The Dutch Foreign Ministry understood the risk and opposed the sale, but lost out in 1981 to the Economics Ministry. Taiwan's signaling that additional large-scale orders would follow the submarine purchase suggests it employed a deliberate strategy to incentivize the Dutch government to grant further export licenses. Lastly, throughout the decade, Paris found France's exports to China disappointing. Overreliance on *grands contrats* meant that French exports were too often an extension of political deals rather than offers that the Chinese found genuinely competitive.

It is interesting to note that the French government was less restrained than its European peers when responding to the Tiananmen crackdown and its aftermath, which probably contributed to its approval of a major arms deal with Taiwan in 1992. The Dutch experience of the early 1980s must have made Paris aware that a strong negative response from Beijing would undoubtedly follow any such sales, even if France, a larger power, probably considered itself less vulnerable than the Netherlands to Chinese retaliation. France's relatively underdeveloped economic relationship with China could be one reason why the French government was willing to tolerate a deeper crisis in its dealings with Beijing. Ultimately, the main pillar of its relationship with Beijing in the 1980s had been a shared political alignment on major world events. This rapport between the two governments was thoroughly shaken by the events of June 1989.

The crisis in the relationship due to the Tiananmen crackdown would, it transpired, be merely a temporary interruption in the progressive development of ties between China and EEC countries. Indeed, trade and investment between the two sides were not simply maintained, but skyrocketed once it became clear in 1992 that economic reforms were set to continue in China. The events of June 1989 did nonetheless have two lasting consequences for Sino-European relations. Firstly and most importantly, from then onward, in some form or other, the issue of human rights in China would remain part of the relationship. While European foreign ministries were at times reluctant to approach the subject, and even though the Chinese government rejected the issue almost entirely,

in most European countries pressure from NGOs and parliamentarians meant that it could not be banished from the agenda. Secondly, one post-Tiananmen sanction was never rescinded and in fact survives until today: the embargo on arms sales to China. Whereas in the 1980s some European governments did agree to (relatively limited) arms sales, in the 1990s such transactions became unthinkable, even though relations had been normalized.

The 1980s were the decade that opened Europe up to China. It was a decade of naïve promise where neither side properly understood the other but, in the interests of furthering their own agendas, each wished to engage. For Europe, China represented mostly an economic opportunity. Many corporate leaders had an inflated sense of the opportunities awaiting them in the mythical Chinese market, meaning that the private sectors in many European countries were clamoring to do business with China. For France, the relationship with China was an opportunity to assert its independence from the bipolar international system. For China, Europe was a natural trading partner—one less ideologically challenging than the United States—as well as a source of technical and human capacities that could support its modernization program. The policy and normative challenges created by the engagement of and efforts to reconcile two very different social and political systems were less fully appreciated, however. The aftermath of Tiananmen demonstrated the still unresolved challenge Europe faced, of balancing its norms and policy objectives with its economic and commercial ambitions in China, a dilemma that even today remains a rich source of political quandaries and conundrums.

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