

Narrative – 50 years of diplomatic relations
01/02/2020

The diplomatic relations between Belgium and China rely on dialogue and cooperation. 50 years later, they have reached a level of mutual respect which makes it possible to frankly discuss any aspect of our bilateral relations. They are intended to be balanced and based on reciprocity. They have been nurtured by multiple links between our people, by investments and important trade exchanges, as well as by cooperation at multilateral level.

Frequent bilateral contacts in many sectors

In 1971, when Belgium and China established their diplomatic relations, China was slowly opening up to the world. From the late 70s onwards, Belgium accompanied the country in the opening up of its economy – with some Belgian companies playing a pioneering role, notably in telecommunications through the Shanghai Bell investments. The strength of Sino-Belgian relations were then forged through important investments and commercial operations (see box hereunder). The opening up of China and its market thus benefited not only the Chinese population, but also international economic actors, including Belgian and European ones. The many Belgian companies present in China who contributed to the country's economic development in various sectors, illustrate the abundance of these contacts.

China's economy is now undergoing a transformation: driven by technology and innovation, the country is heading towards an economy of high quality products. The significant development plans and the resulting Chinese industrial policies aim at making China a global player with companies seeking to become global leaders by 2030. Belgium (Federal government and Federated entities) reacts to this ascension in a pragmatic manner, by identifying domains of mutual interest and by working towards a better access to the Chinese market and a level playing field for its companies. The country notably has logistic strengths: Belgian seaports and airports present an ideal location and are equipped to ensure transportation of Chinese products to the European market. Belgium attaches great importance to the sustainability of its projects and to the respect of international standards. The promotion of our economic relations with China falls into the context of a structurally trade deficit for Belgium. This calls for supporting our companies to establish a business presence in China, whose consumption market is steadily growing. ???

The world has seen spectacular transformation in the last 50 years. This anniversary takes place in a very different setting than the one we knew in 1971: the world is globalised, digitalised, with constant technological progress. In this respect, the innovation and technology sectors, in full swing in China, shows great opportunities for Belgium as well. Synergies can be created thanks to the dynamism of Belgian and Chinese players in this field. To this end, commemorating the 50 year anniversary of diplomatic relations between our countries will be an opportunity to organise an ambitious and mutually satisfying bilateral dialog on innovation. Technology development opens a world of possibilities that will drastically change our economies and societies. This development is unfurling at a speed never seen before and is also accompanied by a set of challenges that Belgium takes very seriously. The respect of fundamental rights and privacy are pillars on which it must rely. Belgium wants to

explore these new paths of cooperation with China and create opportunities for companies and scientific cooperation, in line with its values and international standards.

The public health sector is also a solid foundation for cooperation. Belgium is a renowned player in the field. Janssen Pharmaceutica was the first pharmaceuticals company to set up a presence in China. Its expertise has, among others, allowed to protect Xi'an's Terracotta Army from mould. However, several challenges remain and Belgian actors such as UCB and GSK have made important investments and launched initiatives to tackle them. The 2019 economic mission also aimed at addressing these challenges and we hope to see cooperation projects increase in intensity in the future. The COVID19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of the public health,. The need for international cooperation in this field is obvious.

Our health is intimately linked to our planet's health as well. Today, the consequences of the loss of ecosystems are clear. Ecological awareness and our responsibility in the preservation of the environment and biodiversity must be a part of our lives in 2021. This year will also be important for environmental issues with China organising the COP15 for biodiversity. Belgium will be present to support strong commitments in this area. The ecological transition opens new windows of opportunities for bilateral cooperation. The Belgian expertise in clean-tech, low-emission infrastructures and water treatment is already renowned in China. It can support the Chinese commitment to its fight against global warming. Sustainability and respect for international environment standards take on a particular importance in Belgium. The construction of a new Belgian Chancellery in Beijing that will be at the forefront of sustainability bears witness to the interest of Belgium in that regard.

Contacts at multiple levels

Relations between our two countries are characterized by regular official contacts, including at high political level (see table of state visits below). In particular, one will remember the visits of our Belgian Sovereigns to China and those of Chinese leaders to Belgium. More recently, the economic and trade mission led by HRH Princess Astrid in November 2019, the largest ever organized by Belgium, was again an opportunity to show the interest that the two countries devote to each other. Belgium wishes to intensify its political contacts by ensuring more regular visits of Belgian leaders to China. A normalised access to the territory will enable the resumption of official visits to China and direct contacts between our political counterparts.

Beyond these official visits, bilateral relations are nurtured by people-to-people contacts. These contacts have significantly increased over time, contributing to a better mutual understanding. Twin cities relations and cooperation between Belgian and Chinese provinces also contribute to developing bonds between people.

Strengthening these bonds through student, journalist, entrepreneur and tourist exchanges is one of our ambitions. The COVID-19 pandemic has admittedly put a stop to international mobility. Our countries have a lot to offer one another in interpersonal exchanges. Belgium's touristic assets are becoming discoveries that Chinese tourists appreciate. Brussels, the heart of Europe and capital city of 500 million Europeans, is part of the must visit destinations on our continent. Belgium, both international and coloured by its local culture, enchants its visitors, residents and companies by its

dynamism and its resolutely human dimension. China, with its innovation and its abundant historic and cultural heritage is also attractive for Belgian tourists, students and young entrepreneurs who wish to discover the country. It should be possible to offer better access possibilities.

Commitments at multilateral and European level

The deepening of our bilateral relations has been accompanied by growing commitments of our two countries on the international scene and in multilateral instances. Belgium is in favour of a strong and resilient multilateral framework. As a member of the United Nations, our country is committed to multilateralism and the definition of international standards mutually consented between states. In this framework we can take on the great challenges of the 21st century, such as peace and security, climate change and sustainable development, the promotion and defence of human rights, disarmament, sanitary crises or gender equality. China and Belgium have become partners in many fields, illustrated by our countries' good cooperation during Belgium's mandate as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2019 and 2020. Belgium wants to continue these fruitful cooperation projects and expects China to assume its responsibilities on the international level in the current multilateral framework.

Belgium attaches great importance to the strengthening of the relations between the European Union and China. The *EU-China Strategic Outlook* of March 2019 forms a cornerstone in our approach of China as a "strategic partner, economic competitor and systemic rival". Our country wishes, as usual, to build bridges to spaces where we can cooperate in this relationship. Belgium has been working for a long time on strengthening the role and the activity of the Union on the international scene, with a now increased attention to the development of an European strategic autonomy. The European Union is lead to redefine its role on the global scene, in the perspective to become a global player, faithful to its interests and values. The rule of law, human rights, political freedoms, free competition and economic opening up are essential parts of our politics and values. Belgium will continue to put them forward and to reach out to raise these issues in a firm but constructive way with all its partners, including China, like it has been doing for many years.

Activities to make Belgium and China stand out

Throughout this year, our diplomatic posts in China will coordinate activities to put forward the richness of our common history and our own characteristics. This commemoration is to be inclusive: partners at Federal and Federated level have been invited to submit suggestions for activities that can take place in the framework of our "50 years of diplomatic relations". Various exhibitions and events will bring our diplomatic relations jubilee into being. In terms of music notably, the knowhow of the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel, who contributed to the training of multiple talented Chinese artists, will be put in the limelight. The encounter between cultures will be embodied by poetry works from artists Ariane LOZE and Wenchao ZHANG, in an exhibition called "Chambre d'Amis". These events will take place in the magnificent setting of a Buddhist temple restored by one of our compatriots, at the bend of a traditional Beijing neighbourhood or "hutong".

Belgian comics and their emblematic characters will also get their turn in the spotlight. The first large scale exhibition dedicated to TINTIN and Hergé will be organised in the Power Station of Arts Museum of Shanghai. The Smurfs, for their part, will be present at this anniversary as ambassadors for the *Sustainable Development Goals* of the United Nations (SDGs) with an activity in cooperation with the very first “Smurfs Park” in Shanghai. Personalities like the Sino-Belgian chemist QIAN Xiuling de Perlinghi, who intervened by helping Belgian members of the resistance movement during the Second World War or the renowned writer Marguerite Yourcenar will be presented to the Chinese public too.

Our companies and their knowhow will for their part be put forward during multiple trade fairs and trips throughout the country. Initiatives in the framework of twinned cities relationships and provincial diplomacy will enable exchanges covering more ground while also offering more proximity between actors. An ambitious digital section will also be set up to make a large public know Belgium better and to deal with the challenges posed by the sanitary situation.

Balanced relationships built on mutual respect

During these five decades, relations between Belgium and China on the bilateral and EU level have evolved with mutual respect. We can congratulate ourselves for this. This respect ought to let us address any topic with complete honesty in our contacts with China, even those where our views diverge. It forms the base for a resolutely constructive and balanced commitment, and provides the framework for raising questions that are essential for our country, notably in terms of reciprocity, values, rights and liberties, that we consider fundamental. The sought after balance ought to also enable a continuous dialogue on the opening of the Chinese market and the processing of investments, to enable commercial exchanges to become more and more sustainable. Our values of transparency and fair and unbiased treatment will continue to be the centre of our commercial policy activities. We can also tackle the many challenges of the 21st century together in a strong multilateral framework. In a balanced relationship, future possibilities of cooperation are abundant.

1- State visits

BE → CN	HRH King Baudouin	25 May until 5 June	1981
BE → CN	HRH King Albert II	4 until 12 June	2005
CN → BE	HE President Xi Jinping	30 March until 1 April	2014
BE → CN	HRH King Philip	20 until 28 June	2015

2- Major investments by sector

Sector	Belgian in China	Chinese in Belgium
Pharma/Chemics & medical material	Janssens, Agfa Imaging, Solvay, UCB, Galactic	United Investment Group (CBTC)
Industry (machines and equipment)	Umicore, Bekaert, Barco, Schröder, Hamon,	CMPC, Volvo-Geely (takeover), Yinyi Group

	Vandewiele, John Cockerill, Sonaca	(takeover), Haoneng Packaging (takeover)
Food & beverage	AB Inbev	
Telecommunications	Shanghai Bell	Huawei
Banks	BNP Paribas, KBC	
Transport/logistics		Hainan Airlines, Alibaba/Cainiao, Lingang Group, Air Belgium
Construction	Etex Group	Jinjiang (takeover)
Finance / non greenfield		CIC , League Global

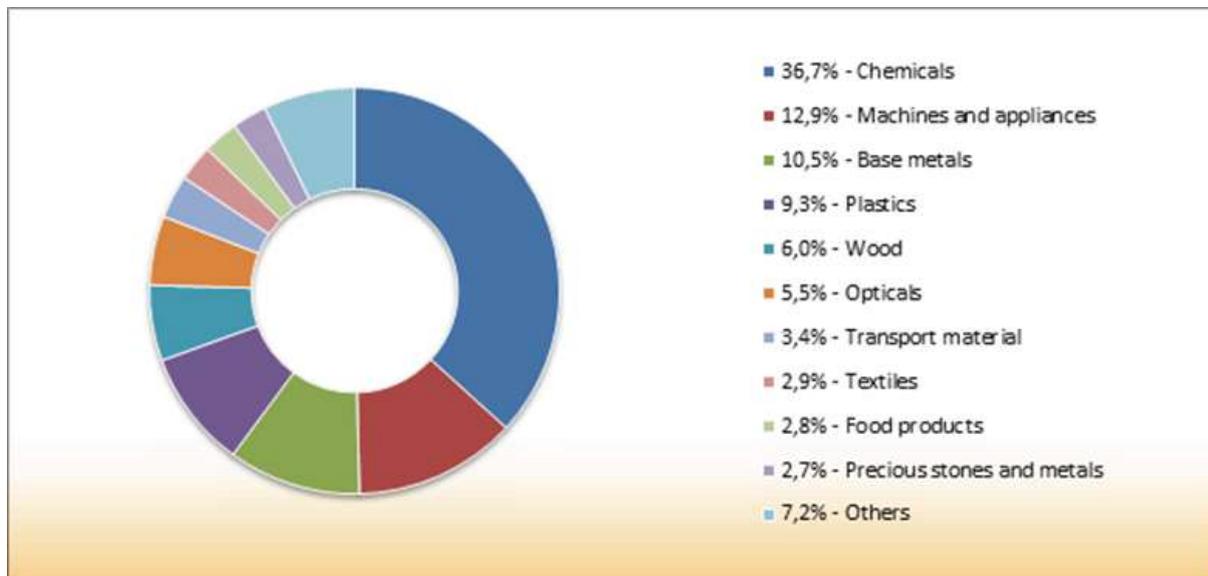
3- Evolution of bilateral trade

	Belgian exports to China	Chinese exports to Belgium	Trade Balance
1999	0,89 billion €	2,95 billion €	-2,06 billion €
2015	6,28 billion €	14,61 billion €	-8,33 billion €
2016	6,99 billion €	14,73 billion €	-7,74 billion €
2017	8,07 billion €	15,16 billion €	-7,09 billion €
2018	6,99 billion €	15,13 billion €	-8,14 billion €
2019	7,07 billion €	16,82 billion €	-9,74 billion €
2020	8,54 billion €	18,16 billion €	-9,62 billion €

Source : Agency of Foreign Trade <https://www.abh-ace.be/>

4- Distribution of trade flows by sector

Belgian exports to China 2020



Chinese exports to Belgium 2020

