

Belgium's multilayered China policy: A case of principled pragmatism?

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Abstract

Belgium is a small power and a pragmatic trading nation. It is also host to several multilateral and international institutions and committed to the defence of liberal values. Its relationship with China reflects both dimensions – Belgium merges an interest-based foreign policy with a strong emphasis on values. As a federal state with limited resources, it relies on and supports multilateral institutions in its engagement with China as it does in its other relationships. When it comes to values, Belgium prefers dialogue over confrontation and avoids acting alone. Recent developments, however, highlight a growing unease with what is perceived as Chinese intransigence – and sometimes even undue pressure – over values. An important factor in the shaping of the country's future China policy will be the differences in perception and priorities among and between Belgium's regions and communities.

Belgium prides itself on having a foreign policy that is at the same time both pragmatic and principled. Its diplomacy regularly emphasises its commitment to “the country's fundamental values”, such as “democracy, human dignity, human rights and gender equality”.¹ This ambition runs through every international partnership Belgium enters into, even when, as is the case with China, economic interests are a clear priority.²

Before examining the specifics of Belgium's China policy, it is important to keep the broader picture in mind. Belgium is a staunch sponsor of European unity and solidarity, and it sees multilateral institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which it hosts, as well as the United Nations (UN) system as indispensable pillars of a stable, rules-based international order. It believes in multilateralism not just as a diplomatic tool, but also as a structuring principle of international life and, in a context marked by a rising tide of populism and mounting protectionist trends, a value to defend. As a trading nation, Belgium is also very much focused on upholding a free, open and rules-based trading system, and on defending the interests of its companies.

Belgium's China policy

This overall perspective unambiguously frames the country's relationship with China. The federal government aims for both a principled commitment to liberal political values and economic pragmatism. To achieve these, it seeks to make the best use of multilateral settings in which to engage with China. However, the fragmented nature of Belgium's political and administrative landscape also means that there is no single China policy. Initiatives taken at the federal level are only part of a wider and more complex equation featuring decentralised authorities. By implication, there is no clear hierarchy of economic interests, political engagement and political values. Belgium tends to address issues as they arise on a case-by-case basis and to favour dialogue and consultation over confrontation.

An interest-based China policy is not peculiar to Belgium. Nor is the country's emphasis on the transcendental importance of political values. Rather, Belgium's specificity in regard to its China policy is linked to three separate elements: (a) its

¹ These are the first of the Foreign Ministry's six “fundamental tasks”. Belgium has highlighted a number of priorities with regard to its Human Rights agenda: “the abolition of the death penalty, the protection of the rights of women, children and defenders of human rights, the fight against all forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on sexual orientation, and the fight against impunity”. Kingdom of Belgium, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, *Belgium and human rights*, https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy_areas/human_rights.

² Kingdom of Belgium, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, *Asie et Océanie*, https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/politique/regions_mondiales/asia_et_oceanie.

interests and self-reflection as host to international institutions; (b) its complex institutional set-up; and (c) its pragmatic and creative approach to the defence of values, which is mostly reliant on multilateral channels and informal settings.

The primacy of economic relations

How has this played out in recent years? Belgium considers that “it is China that determines the Asian policy of our country in all its dimensions: economic, military and bilateral”.³ It recognises that developing (and regulating) trade with China is a major task, and challenge, for the country’s diplomacy. Economic interests have undoubtedly been the main concern on landmark occasions such as the state visit by President Xi Jinping in 2014, the royal mission to China in 2015, Prime Minister Charles Michel’s visit to China in 2016 and the visit of Prime Minister Li Keqiang in 2017. When in 2017 Charles Michel hosted Li Keqiang in order to conclude several important – mostly economic – agreements, he was flanked by his four deputies, making clear that the relationship is a clear political priority for Belgium.⁴

This economic diplomacy relies on a diplomatic and political relationship that is deftly managed. Managing power asymmetry in bilateral relations is acknowledged to require creativity and skill. The Ministry of Foreign affairs presents itself as playing a key role in “harmonising our interests and developing policy options (*“étouffement des dossiers”*) in order to present a substantial counter-offer to Chinese dominance in our bilateral relationship”.⁵

As part of this pragmatic approach, the Belgian Government carefully addresses issues around political values. In 2018, for instance, Foreign Minister Reynders noted that the death penalty was a priority for his diplomacy, but one that would be pursued as part of a positive dialogue: “since in the short term, its abolition or a moratorium do not seem to be a realistic option, our efforts will focus on obtaining at least greater transparency and limiting as much as possible the application of capital punishment”.⁶ Chinese sensitivity over other issues and values is taken very seriously and constructive dialogue is in all cases preferred to confrontation. Nonetheless, Chinese pressure over invitations to the Dalai Lama or with regard to Taiwan have resulted in occasional hiccups in the relationship.⁷

For instance, in 2015, at the initiative of Amnesty International, Foreign minister Reynders submitted a list of Tibetan prisoners to the Chinese authorities, asking for an update on their status.⁸ By voicing such concerns, Belgium was not trying to set an example or force China to change its course of action. This was instead a way of displaying solidarity with fellow European countries that were making the same case, and maintaining the relationship within the framework of the China-EU strategic partnership. On values as well as key policy interests such as reciprocity, market access and a level playing field for the private sector, Belgium relies on and supports the EU institutions, where power discrepancies can be evened out.⁹ This last point is important in that the Federal Government does not seek to simply “outsource” sensitive discussions. The Belgian Premier made clear that in Europe, defending political values is an important endeavour and a precondition for a principled foreign policy: “We are committed to democracy and the rule of law at all costs [and] for this reason, Belgium proposes setting up a peer review mechanism on the rule of law” (within Europe).¹⁰

³ Ibid.

⁴Knack, *België en China sluiten acht handelsakkoorden*, 2 June 2017, www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/belgie-en-china-sluiten-acht-handelsakkoorden/article-normal-861133.html.

⁵Kingdom of Belgium, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, *Rapport annuel, 2016*, https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/sur_lorganisation/rapport_dactivite.

⁶Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, Débats Parlementaires (5th session), *CRIV 54 COM 819*, 7 February 2018, [www.lchambre.be/doc/CCRI/pdf/54/ic819.pdf](http://lchambre.be/doc/CCRI/pdf/54/ic819.pdf).

⁷François Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, “China at the gates: A new power audit of EU-China relations”, *ECFR*, 1 December 2017, www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china_eu_power_audit7242#.

⁸7sur7, *Reynders évoque le cas d’un Belge retenu en Chine*, 24 June 2015, www.7sur7.be/7s7/fr/1502/Belgique/article/detail/2374596/2015/06/24/Reynders-evoque-le-cas-d-un-Belge-retenu-en-Chine.dhtml.

⁹Author interview with a Belgian official, Brussels, March 2018.

¹⁰Charles Michel, *Debate on the Future of Europe*, 4 May 2018, <https://premier.fgov.be/en/debate-future-europe>.

Belgium's multilateral approach

When Belgium seeks to make a difference, it tries to do so tactfully. In June 2018, when he met his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Reynders did more than just mention the importance of human rights for Belgium – he invited Wang Yi to the 7th World Congress Against the Death Penalty, a conference on capital punishment to be organised by Together Against the Death Penalty (Ensemble contre la peine de mort, ECPM) in Brussels in 2019.¹¹ Importantly, Belgium will co-host this Congress with the European External Action Service (EEAS). On the same occasion, the two ministers discussed areas of cooperation within UN institutions and agreed “to take a common initiative on the rights of children”, Belgium having been elected a non-permanent member of the Security Council for 2019–2020.¹²

One reason for Belgium to rely on multilateral institutions and pragmatic diplomacy is that it lacks resources. It is a small, federal state where a number of competences and budgetary means have been devolved to regional entities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has only limited resources for managing its China policy, while the decentralised authorities have their own mandate for several domains of cooperation, such as trade, investment, cultural affairs and academic exchanges. Parliamentary questions in the Flemish and Walloon hemicycles exhibit a shared preoccupation with the economy, linked to the status of the Chinese economy, market access, the protection of investments and participation in joint projects, not least the “Belt and Road Initiative”, but also with values. Diverse legislative proposals have been considered from the issue of relations with Taiwan to the situation in Tibet. Nonetheless, it is difficult to argue that these debates, and the criticisms that are occasionally voiced by non-governmental organisations, fundamentally affect Belgium’s pragmatic, two-tiered approach.

Chinese influence in Brussels

With regard to Chinese pressure, Belgium is in a peculiar position by virtue of it being host to EU and NATO institutions. When President Xi visited Brussels in 2014, demonstrations against human rights abuses were forbidden by the city authorities.¹³ The idiosyncratic position of Brussels is further reinforced by the weight of Chinese funding and connections for think tanks, cultural institutions and lobbyists, all of which contribute to a positive narrative on China.¹⁴

Meanwhile, there is a lingering fracture between the other two regional entities: Flanders (where Chinese investments are considerably higher) and Wallonia. In Flanders, Chinese investment and suspected attempts at influence, for instance through cultural and academic cooperation, are viewed more critically than has been the case in the past. For instance, in 2018 Chinese activities at the Confucius Institute of the Free University Brussels (VUB) were audited following a negative report by the Belgian State Security Service, which was issued in 2015 and had initially been ignored.¹⁵ There is little indication that similar questions are being asked in Wallonia. Worse, there is apparently little to no dialogue between regions on the implications of growing Chinese investment in the country, not only in economic terms but also in terms of its impact on values and influence.

In the Belgian media, questions of political values have begun to surface in recent years as a consequence of China’s growing presence and influence. When the Charter of the Chinese Communist Party was amended to abolish presidential term limits, the Belgian media portrayed this as a power grab and a return to Maoist times,¹⁶ a “great step backwards”,¹⁷ a hollowing out of democracy,¹⁸ and the making of a new emperor.¹⁹ A couple months later, it was reported that

¹¹ Kingdom of Belgium, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, *Didier Reynders rencontre son collègue chinois WANG Yi*, Press Release, 1 June 2018, https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/newsroom/nouvelles/2018/didier_reynders_rencontre_son_collegue_chinois_wang_yi.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jean-Pierre Stroobants, “En visite en Belgique, le président chinois fixe ses conditions”, *Le Monde*, 30 March 2014, www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2014/03/30/en-visite-en-belgique-le-president-chinois-fixe-ses-conditions_4392279_3214.html.

¹⁴ Thorsten Benner and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, “Europe needs to step up vigilance on China’s influence”, *Financial Times*, 16 February 2018, www.ft.com/content/a58b0a0c-127b-11e8-940e-08320fc2a277. Harold Thibault and Cécile Ducourtieux, “Pékin tisse discrètement sa toile à Bruxelles”, *Le Monde*, 9 January 2018, www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/01/09/pekin-tisse-discretion-sa-toile-a-bruxelles_5239124_3214.html.

¹⁵ Roland Legrand (Belga), “VUB voert onderzoek naar samenwerkingen met China”, *De Tijd*, 10 July 2018, www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/vlaanderen/vub-voert-onderzoek-naar-samenwerkingen-met-china/10030139.html. Jan Lippens, “Big Brothertechnologie: rector Pauwels onderzoekt samenwerking VUB-prof en China”, *Knack*, 10 July 2018, www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/big-brothertechnologie-rector-pauwels-onderzoekt-samenwerking-vub-prof-en-china/article-longread-1171655.html.

¹⁶ *De Tijd*, “Xi Jinping gaat Mao achterna”, *De Tijd*, 26 February 2018, www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/internationaal/azie/xi-jinping-gaat-mao-achterna/9986488.html.

¹⁷ Philippe Paquet, “Édito: le grand pas en arrière de la Chine”, *La Libre*, 28 February 2018, www.lalibre.be/debats/edito/edito-le-grand-pas-en-arriere-de-la-chine-5a95bbe8cd70f0681dd7a195.

¹⁸ Giselle Nath, “Waarom democratie in China holler klinkt dan Xi?”, *De Standaard*, 27 February 2018, www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180226_03379514.

¹⁹ L’Echo, “Xi Jinping, le nouvel empereur”, *L’Echo*, 17 March 2018, www.lecho.be/economie-politique/international/asiexi-jinping-le-nouvel-empereur/9993346.html.

²⁰ Sabine Verhest, “Comment la Chine menace les musulmans ouïghours jusqu’en Belgique”, *La Libre*, 27 April 2018, www.lalibre.be/actu/international/comment-la-chine-menace-les-musulmans-ouighours-jusqu-en-belgique-enquete-5ae1e2cd702e6324ea9b37.

²¹ Lars Bové, “België maakt vuist tegen economische spionnen”, *De Tijd*, 5 May 2018, www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/algemeen/belgie-maakt-vuist-tegen-economische-spionnen/10009095.html.

the Chinese security services had been actively threatening Uighur migrants in Belgium, emphasising the scope of the crackdown in Xinjiang. In addition, an inquiry exposed the ongoing practice of persuading Chinese citizens living abroad to collect information, using coercion if necessary.²⁰

An important development in 2018 was the setting up of a federal platform, led by the State Security Service, with a mission to protect the country’s “economic and scientific potential” from foreign interference.²¹ This came about as a result of the arrest of a Chinese citizen on charges of industrial espionage. While not itself a charge on values, industrial espionage may prompt greater attention and criticism toward Chinese activities in Belgium, but the major hindrance to a major policy shift will remain the lack of cooperation across authorities and sectors.

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