



China's regional forum diplomacy

by Alice Ekman

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has developed cooperation mechanisms with groups of countries as a complement to existing bilateral mechanisms. These plurilateral cooperation mechanisms usually take the shape of regional forums created at China's behest. They include the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, created in 2000), the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (2004), the China-Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation Forum – known as 16+1 (2012), the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum (2015), and the Lancang Mekong Cooperation Framework (2015), among others. China has also established cooperation mechanisms with the EU (1998) and ASEAN (1996), but they are of a different nature as they are based on existing regional cooperation structures. Although often analysed individually, the true significance of these mechanisms only be put into perspective if the wider global context is taken into account.

Efficiency and balancing

Creating regional cooperation mechanisms is not a new aspect of China's diplomacy – it already emerged during the Hu Jintao era (2002-2012). But it is currently being consolidated under President Xi Jinping. In Beijing, diplomats claim that this is efficiency driven: Chinese representatives can save precious time during visits to a region by meeting all the relevant countries at once. It also allows for the signing of group joint statements, or the organisation of side meetings with various government or business actors.

But China's push for regional cooperation mechanisms is also related to China's "new type of major power relations" (*xinxing daguo guanxi*), a key concept of Beijing's diplomacy under Xi Jinping. This concept shapes the way China selects the countries that will form part of its new regional cooperation structures: in Europe, for example, China's priority is not to include 'major powers' (as far as they are concerned, China seeks to consolidate existing bilateral cooperation mechanisms in which China can position itself as an equal partner). Instead, Beijing's focus is on comparatively smaller countries: once grouped, they are then deemed to be interlocutors of sufficient weight. China is therefore developing its 'group cooperation diplomacy' for reasons of both efficiency and power balance. The latter is in line with the traditional tendency of China's diplomacy to classify countries and label them accordingly ('strategic partnership', 'comprehensive strategic partnership', 'comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership', etc.).

Forum diplomacy in Europe

Although China's group cooperation diplomacy activism is not specific to Europe, initiatives there have proliferated in recent years. Following the establishment of the 16+1 in central and eastern Europe, Beijing is now considering the creation of a cooperation mechanism in southern Europe and a similar one in northern Europe. Yet it is the southern European project which seems most advanced to date. In February 2013 in Rome, Beijing organised for the first time a conference gathering representatives of ministries of agriculture

of six southern European countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) with the aim to reinforce agricultural cooperation. In November 2015 in Xiamen (southeast China), China's State Oceanic Administration and Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised another ministerial-level conference with representatives from the same six countries, this time focused on maritime cooperation. So far, these forums have been relatively low profile events, and their outcomes were modest – although on the occasion of the 2015 forum, China signed 'overall maritime cooperation' partnerships (which include plans to construct or develop ports, industrial parks, transport, tourism and fishing infrastructure) with several countries.

China's rapid push to reinforce maritime cooperation with southern Europe is related to the 'Maritime Silk Road' – the sea route of its 'One Belt' One Road initiative' (OBOR). Maritime cooperation with these European countries would constitute the 'European extension' of the Maritime Silk Road, according to Chinese officials. To date, cooperation has been the deepest with Greece, but since the first investments in the port of Piraeus in 2008, Chinese companies have also invested in port facilities of other Mediterranean countries.

By building on such sectoral group cooperation (e.g. maritime, agricultural), Beijing hopes to reinforce also economic and political cooperation. Chinese researchers are now considering the creation of a China-Southern Europe Forum which could include '1+N' countries (China plus a non-limited number of countries, starting with a minimum of six), which could remain flexible. Indeed, conscious of the scepticism of several southern European countries (as well as Brussels) regarding the potential institutionalisation of such frameworks, Chinese diplomats are now prioritising flexible cooperation mechanisms, such as high-level track 1.5 forums, including the participation of business and civil society representatives (universities, think tanks, NGOs) – which are easier to gather than government representatives. Although the list of countries remain open, this forum, if it were to be created, would remain initially restricted to southern European countries. For the time being, Beijing is not considering the creation of a Mediterranean-wide regional cooperation mechanism.

A global pattern?

The creation of a formal institution – or semi-institutionalised mechanisms such as the 16+1 – is apparently not being considered by Chinese diplomats in the short term, although this format remains an interesting experience and a source of influence to fine-tune the new initiative in southern Europe. Yet the best way to anticipate how China may develop its regional mechanisms within Europe is to look at how it has developed

other mechanisms in other parts of the world. The general trend is that in addition – or sometimes prior – to creating the main regional forums, China promotes a number of associated frameworks focusing on specific policy areas, as well as bilateral ones – which eventually lead to broader structures. By doing so, China seeks also to catch up with the influence of well-established foreign powers in the region, which themselves had previously organised similar gatherings. In essence, a forum is often the first step towards creating an international organisation.

Lately, China is increasingly calling for more cooperation with Europe on global governance reform, hoping to collect EU member states' support for its various new multilateral initiatives – as happened with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – and building on potential differences between US and European approaches. China's new cooperation initiatives in Europe should be understood also in this context.

In Europe, the deployment of China's forum diplomacy is likely to have an impact on the shaping of the regional agenda. This is particularly evident as Beijing is increasingly combining its existing regional forums with new OBOR forums. OBOR was at the top of the agenda of the fourth 16+1 summit held in Suzhou in November 2015. This public diplomacy approach has led to a propagation of key official concepts and priorities: since China put infrastructure development at the core of its foreign and domestic policy, its diplomacy is moving infrastructure development to the top of the agenda of as many international summits and frameworks as possible. Infrastructure development is not only at the core of the BRICS agenda, but also of the G20 – let alone all the OBOR-related initiatives in Europe and beyond.

In addition to the propagation of key official concepts and priorities, international forums are also opportunities for the Chinese government to promote a specific model of development, and explicitly underline the perceived limits of other models. It places particular emphasis on the so-called 'Western decline', notably the alleged inability of liberal democracies to recover from the global economic crisis, bolster growth or take quick decisions. Beijing has reinforced this message in recent years, in particular towards developing countries or developed countries facing economic difficulties. In Europe, more specifically, this combination of investments and infrastructure development, forum-building and political messaging – increasingly presenting China as an alternative market and governance model – could potentially challenge the role of the EU itself in the long term.

Alice Ekman is the Head of China Research at IFRI and a Senior Associate Fellow at the EUISS.

