

COMMENTS FOR THE BALANCE OF COMPETENCES REVIEW

Relations between the UK and China are an area where it is increasingly important to understand how Britain's role in the EU is viewed from outside the North Atlantic world.

China's engagement with different countries is dependent, in part, on those countries' importance in China's eyes. At one extreme, the relationship with United States has many difficulties and sensitivities, but it is hard to imagine that there would be a fundamental rift between the two sides because they are both so dependent on each other in everything from economics to geostrategic planning. At the other, small countries that have acted in ways that the Chinese government finds exceptionable have found that their diplomatic relations with China have suffered. Following the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo in 2010, Norway's diplomats have encountered significant difficulties in relations with Beijing, even though the prize was awarded by the Nobel committee rather than the Oslo government. It is notable that Norway is not part of the EU. For reasons of convenience as well as solidarity, some smaller EU nations consider their own foreign policy toward China to be part of a wider EU-China engagement, even though this engagement is sometimes rather vague in definition and in practice.

The UK, like France and Germany, is a significant medium-sized power with its own distinct relationship with China, both historical and in the present day. In a whole variety of areas, including higher education, manufacturing, and technology transfer, the two sides have deep and important relations. However, on the scale of global significance to China, Britain needs to consider carefully where along the spectrum it lies. Britain is less important in terms of economic investment in China than Germany by some measure. It is still considered a political and economic actor of some real significance, but a major part of that significance derives from Britain's presence within the EU. (Even here, there is lack of clarity in aims: China's policymakers, business community, higher education professionals and increasingly rich tourists find it hard to understand why a major EU member does not take part in the Schengen agreement, making cross-border access easier for Chinese visitors among others.)

Relations between China and the UK are generally smooth but not always trouble-free. It is worth considering whether (perhaps counter-intuitively in the eyes of some), a full and positive engagement with the European Union is in fact a mechanism which enables British bilateral relations with China to be simultaneously respectful where appropriate and robust where necessary.

Rana Mitter

Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China

University of Oxford