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## **#9 COVID-19 and Europe-China relations**

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### **Key Takeaways**

- The Covid-19 crisis has hit at a time when debates over the need to adopt more coherent strategies towards China have been emerging across Europe.
- COVID-19 accelerated Europe's shift towards viewing China as not only a partner, but also a strategic competitor and systemic rival.
- In many ways, the current crisis has become a catalyst for a number of trends that have been shaping Europe-China relations in recent years, while in other ways it has turned the tables. It has simultaneously brought Europe and China into closer cooperation, pushed them further apart, and seemingly underlined the fractures that exist within Europe on how to approach an increasingly influential China.
- China's pandemic diplomacy generated both goodwill and criticism, prompting European countries to reassess their dependence on China and the future of Europe-China relations.

## **Executive Summary**

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in Europe–China relations, as China became central to an issue of immediate importance to European governments, societies and economies. The crisis accelerated existing debates about China’s role in Europe and reinforced perceptions of China as simultaneously a partner, competitor and systemic rival. Across Europe, the pandemic triggered reassessments of strategic dependence on China, especially regarding medical supplies, supply chains and critical infrastructure.

During the pandemic, China combined medical assistance with an increasingly proactive diplomatic and media strategy. Chinese authorities, companies and local actors provided masks, ventilators and other medical equipment to many European countries. In countries such as Serbia and Hungary, Chinese assistance was publicly welcomed and presented as evidence of strong bilateral relations. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić openly praised China and criticized insufficient European solidarity during the early stages of the crisis. Hungary also maintained a cooperative stance towards China and emphasized pragmatic relations.

In contrast, several Western and Northern European countries adopted a more critical approach. In France, the Netherlands and Germany, concerns grew over Chinese disinformation, lack of transparency and the increasingly assertive behavior of Chinese diplomats. French officials publicly rejected narratives promoted by the Chinese embassy regarding the handling of the pandemic in Europe. In Sweden, where relations with China had already deteriorated before COVID-19, criticism of China intensified further during the crisis.

Italy became a particularly important case because it was one of the first European countries severely affected by the pandemic and received extensive Chinese medical aid and publicity. Chinese “mask diplomacy” initially generated goodwill and significant media attention in Italy, although skepticism later increased regarding the political motivations behind Chinese assistance. Similar debates emerged in Spain and the Czech Republic, where concerns developed about the quality of some Chinese medical equipment and about China’s broader political messaging.

The report finds that European responses to China were strongly shaped by pre-existing political relations, economic ties and domestic debates. Although China’s pandemic diplomacy increased its visibility across Europe, it did not fundamentally improve China’s image in a consistent way. In several countries, public and political skepticism towards China increased during the crisis because of concerns about propaganda, political pressure and strategic dependence.

Overall, the pandemic accelerated broader geopolitical trends already underway in Europe–China relations. The crisis strengthened calls for greater European coordination, strategic autonomy and the protection of democratic institutions, while also reinforcing the view that cooperation with China remains necessary in areas such as public health, trade and global economic recovery.