

EXPERTS TAKE

'Critical to understand internal dynamics of China'

An Interview with **FATOUMATA DIALLO**

Fatoumata Diallo currently serves as the Acting Head of the Stockholm China Center and is a Research Fellow. With a background that includes working at the EU delegation to China in Beijing, Ms. Diallo brings a wealth of experience in international conflict studies and China-related research. She holds degrees from Leiden University in the Netherlands and the Institut National des Langues et Civilization Orientales (INALCO) in Paris, with a specialization in International Conflict Studies, International Relations, and Chinese Studies. Additionally, she has studied Chinese language at the Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU). Her research areas encompass Chinese domestic politics and governance, EU-China relations, defence and security policies, and the political economy of China.

In this interview, conducted by China Center interns Ms. Celine Hedin and Mr. Tony Su, the role of ISDP's China Center and Ms. Diallo's direction as the new Acting Head and her perspectives on China-related (EU-China) developments is further explored.



Celine Hedin: As you are now taking on the role of Acting Head of the China Center, how do you view your career trajectory, new role and visions for the center?

Fatoumata Diallo: I have been working at ISDP for the past six years. I started out as Junior Research

Fellow in the China Center in 2019, focusing on research and analysis of Chinese domestic political developments and China's relations with the EU. Over time, I assumed additional responsibilities, transitioning to the roles of Research Fellow and Project Manager for ISDP's Strategic Consultancy. In this capacity, I have contributed to a variety of projects designed to deliver tailored analysis on Chinese foreign policy and defense strategy to both policy and corporate actors.

This year, I became Acting Head of the China Center. My key responsibilities in this new role is to set the vision and goals for the center's future direction. One of ISDP's overarching missions is to serve as a platform for constructive dialogue between key stakeholders in the political, military and civil society spheres. We also strive to foster deeper understanding of geostrategic developments related to China and the wider Asia-Pacific region, and their implications for EU nations. I aim to help the center achieve a greater and more meaningful impact in these endeavors, both in Sweden and across the EU.

While I have a strong interest in China-Europe relations, my core expertise and focus lie in China's domestic politics and governance. I believe it is critical to understand how these internal dynamics translate into the country's foreign policy. I hope to make these linkages more visible and understood in both research and policy discussions. I also aim to

raise greater awareness on these complex dynamics among business actors as part of the institute's Strategy Consultancy, contributing to inform their understanding of the geopolitical and strategic implications of engaging with China.

Additionally, I would envision expanding our overall connections and networks on a wider scale. One key goal is to develop a network for early-career researchers in Europe who are interested in specializing in China and related fields. Since it can often prove challenging to find platforms and networks to connect with peers, I believe it is crucial to create more resources and opportunities for young professionals, especially as we strive to foster innovative approaches to understanding and engaging with an evolving China.

Hedin: **Having spent considerable time living and working in China, including your role at the EU Delegation in Beijing, how have these experiences shaped your understanding of China?**

Diallo: My first experience of China was when I spent a year in Beijing at the age of 19, which was a very enriching and valuable learning experience. From then on, my interest in China and its political situation deepened. During my studies I returned to China twice on study exchanges, which allowed me to become more familiar with the cultural context, the people, and the language.

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EU Delegation, I had quite a good understanding of the country and its internal dynamics. However, it was my first experience working for a European institution. Unlike individual country embassies, the EU Delegation encompasses the collective perspective of all member-states, which can sometime result in conflicting approaches to China depending on the issue. These experiences taught me that even when there is a shared will to craft policies with a united approach, it can be quite challenging to achieve consensus. Through participating in meetings and interacting with EU diplomats and Chinese officials, I gained valuable insights of both sides' perspectives and interests.

Hedin: What do you think are the assets of ISDP being a European/Swedish think-tank monitoring, researching and engaging with developments in China?

Diallo: I believe one of our core strength lies in the diverse backgrounds of ISDP's researchers, who bring in a wide range of perspectives to inform our understanding of China. Our team has researchers from European countries with in-depth knowledge of EU politics and interests, as well as strong expertise on China and the wider Asia-Pacific region. We also have staff and networks in the regions we cover, allowing us to gather more nuanced insights. The combination of EU perspectives and in-country expertise we provide offers valuable added context for European policymakers seeking to understand the country and regional dynamics.

Additionally, Sweden is a country that has longstanding and relatively stable ties with China, despite some moderate frictions. As a Swedish think-tank and smaller-scale institution, we have a lot more leeway to engage with Chinese counterparts, compared to organizations in some other countries. We also have partners in Asia, including Japanese and Korean institutions, who specifically seek out our insights because of the longstanding

collaborations we have established with key Chinese institutions.

Hedin: ISDP is committed to fostering research on global security and strategic policy issues, with a focus on regions undergoing significant change, like China and the EU. Given this context, could you share some of the recent initiatives or events undertaken by the Stockholm China Center to enhance understanding and engagement between Europe and China?

Diallo: The latest event we hosted was a workshop in Brussels as part of the EU-funded Eurohub4Sino project. The initiative brings our institute together with several other prominent European institutions under a consortium aiming to strengthen the knowledge base on China within Europe. The aim is to create a centralized digital platform regrouping key insights from European experts to inform policymakers' engagement and strategy towards China. As part of this project, we have published several issue briefs and policy papers on critical topics, as well hosted events to foster dialogue between China experts and policymakers. It has been quite rewarding to see the impact we can have in informing EU-China relations and providing more nuanced insights to the debate.

Tony Su: With geopolitical dynamics changing rapidly, especially between China and Western nations, research on China within institutions like ISDP is facing various challenges. What have you found to be some of the most pressing obstacles in maintaining research connections and collaborations, especially with Chinese institutions?

Diallo: While our institute has had long-standing cooperation with several Chinese academic institutions, the changing political environment in China has made our work more challenging in some aspects. The Chinese government has imposed more restrictions on researchers' cooperation with

foreign institutions, which complicates our efforts to bring in guest researchers from China. There is also decreasing incentives from the Chinese side to actively engage with academic institutions in Europe, given the increased tensions with the EU on a variety of strategic issues. Despite these obstacles, we recognize the importance of continued engagement with Chinese institutions and scholars, and we therefore work hard to maintain these connections.

Su: *The global perception of China as both a vital partner and a strategic competitor has brought considerable debate within Europe. Furthermore, given the pandemic's significant impact on China and its global relations, how might its post-pandemic economic challenges shape its foreign policy, particularly toward the EU?*

Diallo: The relationship is increasingly competitive, particularly in critical sectors like technology, supply chains, and trade. The EU is pursuing a “de-risking” approach, which seeks to reduce dependency on China, especially in semiconductors, AI, and areas linked to national security. At the same time, since EU member-states have varying levels of dependence on China, it will remain difficult to reach a unified policy. Meanwhile, China has responded to this more restrictive environment by bolstering efforts to achieve self-reliance in technology. On the trade front, the China-EU investment agreement has been

stalled for years, and trade tensions have escalated with the introduction of tariffs, such as on Chinese electric vehicles.

Another factor impacting the bilateral relationship is the United States. President Donald Trump's return to the White house is likely to complicate the EU's relations with China, especially if pressure mounts for more tariffs and sanctions in Washington. Despite these challenges, it is important to continue engaging with Beijing and seeking opportunities for cooperation on issues of common concern - such as climate change or sustainable development or green energy, as both sides recognize the critical need to jointly address these issues.

While China's economic decline might not directly alter EU-China relations, it does pose a challenge to the CCP's domestic legitimacy, traditionally closely tied to economic growth. Xi Jinping has tried to redirect legitimacy towards areas beyond growth, but economic stagnation may still provoke unrest. Xi Jinping needs to project a narrative of success at home, and it is crucial to prove that the self-reliance strategy is working. Therefore, there might be heightened competition with the EU and intensified efforts to bolster innovation to achieve key breakthroughs in technology.

Su: *For an institute like ISDP that is dedicated to understanding the inner workings of foreign*

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governments, what are some misconceptions or underappreciated aspects of Chinese governance that you believe Europe should better understand to effectively navigate this relationship?

Diallo: A critical aspect often overlooked is the internal dynamics within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Foreign observers tend to see the CCP as a monolithic entity, but the party operates through intricate power structures shaped by factional struggles that influence governance. Observing leadership appointments, promotions, or expulsions can reveal key underlying dynamics within the party. These dynamics have also

undergone significant changes under President Xi Jinping's leadership. Understanding the nuances is critical in providing a more accurate assessment of China's foreign policies and strategic goals. For instance, my colleague Maud Descamps and I have recently been working on research addressing misconceptions in China-Africa relations, aiming to offer a more nuanced understanding of China's security involvement on the continent, as well as to dispel reductive narratives, particularly related to the Global South. Our research goal at the Stockholm China Center is to promote a balanced and nuanced understanding of China's role globally.