

Introduction

Commentary and analysis of the current state of relations between Spain and China have almost made it a cliché to emphasize their exceptional nature and positive direction. Many pages have already been devoted to documenting this recent evolution, diagnosing it with data or historical analysis. Simultaneously, the focus has almost invariably been on explaining and even criticizing the Spanish position and rationale in this regard, both from a bilateral and a more European perspective¹.

However, comparatively less attention has been paid to discussing the nature of the relationship—in other words, its strategic significance—and even less to considering the Chinese perspective. Thus, the question of whether China has a “Spanish strategy” or anything resembling one has not been considered. This relative lack of attention may be due to several reasons. For example, in an environment where relations with China are increasingly politicized both nationally and internationally, such an effort may be uncomfortable. It may also be due to the fact that strategic thinking in foreign policy, although on the rise, remains an area with considerable room for development in civil society, academia, and political circles. Whatever the case may be, this article aims to analyze China's view of current relations with Spain and present its potential implications at the bilateral, business, and European levels. First, given that the object of study is language, the article explores the critical importance and idiosyncratic nature of language use in Chinese diplomacy. In general, it argues that Chinese diplomacy pays particular attention to defining and characterizing relations to indicate not only their current state but also their future projection and, therefore, China's perspective on them. Nothing is accidental or improvised.

Second, the article presents Chinese commentary on current relations with Spain since 2017, particularly, but not limited to, official and state visits. It analyzes both official sources and positions, as well as commentary in semi-official sources such as the People's Daily (人民日报) and Global Times (环球时报). Specifically, the focus is on the

¹ See, for example LÓPEZ PLANAS, Marc, “Spain facing Xi Jinping's objective: Europe's break with the United States”, *Agenda Pública*, available at: <https://agendapublica.es/noticia/20242/spain-facing-xi-jinping-objective-europe-break-with-united-states>. Accessed: 05.02.2026; GÓMEZ-HERNÁNDEZ, Unai, “What's behind Spain's pivot to China”, *CEIAS Insights*, available at: <https://ceias.eu/whats-behind-spains-pivot-to-china/>. Accessed: 05.02.2026; HERRERO-MARTÍNEZ, María and MESSINGSCHLAGER, Stefan, “The EU's China Fault Line Runs Through Spain”, *The Diplomat*, december 2025, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/the-eus-china-fault-line-runs-through-spain/>. Accessed: 05.02.2026.

specific characterization of the relationship with Spain given first by Foreign Minister Wang Yi on February 18, 2024, and then by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian on April 8, 2025, in anticipation of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's visit: “Our bilateral relations are at the forefront of China's relations with European countries”². As will be seen, this statement constitutes a turning point in the Chinese conception of relations with Spain: the discursive culmination of its recent evolution and the crystallization of its strategic significance from the Chinese perspective.

Finally, the strategic implications of this conception are presented, as well as its implications for businesses and for Europe. It is crucial to understand that none of this implies an assessment of the state of relations between Spain and China or of the aforementioned implications. On the contrary, the object of study and presentation is the Chinese conception of the relationship, its use, and strategy, which, whatever one may evaluate, exist.

Frame and method

This article adopts an approach based on diplomatic discourse analysis and strategic narratives. It starts from the premise that language, particularly in Chinese diplomacy, is performative as well as descriptive; in other words, it produces and reflects political realities and hierarchizes and institutionalizes them through the use of categories.

Methodologically, the article is based on a qualitative longitudinal analysis of official (statements by leaders, communiqués from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, speeches, joint declarations) and semi-official (People's Daily, Global Times) sources, covering the period 2017–2025. The objective is to identify recurrent semantic patterns and, more importantly, the processes of discursive shift, the establishment of new categories, their crystallization over time, and the introduction of their content. Particular attention is paid to changes in verbs (for example, from “establish” to “consolidate” or “deepen”) that indicate changes in the diagnosis of the relationship or the introduction of new adjectives that characterize it. The introduction of discursive categories that project the relationship beyond the

² The specific description in Chinese is: “双边关系走在同欧洲国家关系前列。” Semantically, in this case, the expression “走在...前列” can be translated as “at the forefront,” “in a prominent position,” or “among the most advanced.” The first option is used as it is the most relevant from a political and strategic point of view. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “2025年4月8日外交部发言人林剑主持例行记者会” [“Regular Press Conference of Spokesperson Lin Jian on April 8, 2025”], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202504/t20250408_11590221.shtml. Accessed: February 6, 2026.

bilateral plane into regional or global frameworks is defined as “strategic elevation.” The institutional stabilization of the message and its categories is defined as “consolidation,” while its integration into the standard political language of the entire Chinese apparatus (measured by its appearance in the semi-official press) refers to its “doctrinal normalization.” The article organizes the state of its object of study (the Chinese vision of the relationship) into five phases according to these criteria.

Language, hierarchy, and diplomacy

Language is crucial in diplomacy; it is, in fact, its vehicle and, in some instances, its currency. Chinese diplomacy pays even more attention to language in general and to defining its relationships in particular. For example, the concept of “partnership” (伙伴关系) is ubiquitous in Chinese diplomacy. It is a term created specifically to reflect what China calls “great power diplomacy (大国外交) with Chinese characteristics,” which, in the case of defining relationships, signifies its explicit rejection of alliances and its need for a different kind of relationship³. Furthermore, within the partnership category, there are three subcategories depending on the degree of cooperation: “partnership,” “strategic partnership,” and “comprehensive strategic partnership.” Within each subcategory are other designations, some used only for a single relationship, reflecting the epithets that Beijing considers appropriate to define it, such as the “comprehensive strategic partnership for coordination for the new era” with Russia.⁴

This emphasis on defining relationships stems from aspects inherent in China's strategic mindset and tradition. The Chinese mindset could be defined as relational, in which “every individual subject or object must exist within a specific context, woven together by diverse relationships, without which they cannot even be identified”⁵. Under this mindset, establishing a relationship comes first, and transactions follow. Consequently, defining the relationship is crucial because it determines which transactions are possible, whereas

³ LU, Ding y SUN, Xuefeng, “Seeking Support Beyond Alliance? Rethinking great power partner politics after the Cold War,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 21, 2021. doi: 10.1093/irap/lcaa005 (Accessed: 09.02.2026).

⁴ ABU-HALTAM, Dana, “Where to Throw the Hook? Chinese Strategic Partnership Selection and Its Effectiveness in Achieving Influence,” *Chinese Political Science Review*, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-025-00297-z> (Accessed: 09.02.2026).

⁵ PAN, Zhongqi, “Guanxi, Weiqi and Chinese Strategic Thinking,” *Chinese Political Science Review*, 1, 2016. DOI 10.1007/s41111-016-0015-1 (Accessed: 09.02.2026).

in the Western (and particularly American) mindset, the practical aspect takes precedence over pure relationality.

Thus, the relationship between China and Spain is defined by the former as a comprehensive strategic partnership (without additions) and this definition has not been altered since its establishment in 2005. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the importance of language in Chinese diplomacy from a broader perspective.

While China prioritizes definition in its relations, strategic concepts are dominated by slogans. Widespread and analyzed concepts like the Belt and Road Initiative are now considered master plans or visions for a new world order, but in their inception within the Chinese system and their international promotion, they are merely slogans. "The primary function of a foreign policy concept is to serve as a slogan to declare intention in order to attract attention and urge to action," and "In the global arena, Chinese slogans also function in similar ways. Key foreign policy concepts function as slogans to signal not only China's new vision but also their implied power relations"⁶. Thus, phrases and concepts in Chinese diplomacy are like invitations to domestic and international discussion, which, in the course of that discussion, imbue the concept with content. They are also, as we have seen, general diagnoses by China regarding the subject of the slogan. In this sense, characterizing a relationship using a concept or slogan has great strategic relevance.

Another element to consider is the specificity of Chinese as a language and its consequences for foreign policy. For example, the moral values implicit in some words are distinct in Chinese. The word “hegemony” (霸权) has negative implications and is not considered merely descriptive of a position of international leadership. Similarly, the distinction between “power” (权力) and “authority” (权威) is also one of a moral nature. Thus, grasping the meaning of strategically relevant concepts or phrases in Chinese is, in itself, a politically charged and technically complex act with far-reaching implications⁷.

⁶ ZENG, Jinghan, “Slogan Politics: Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy Concepts,” *Palgrave Macmillan*, Singapore, 2020.

⁷ SEMENOV, Alexander y TSVYK, Anatoly, “The Approach to the Chinese Diplomatic Discourse,” *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 14(4), 2021, doi: [10.1007/s40647-021-00321-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-021-00321-x) (Accessed: 09.02.2026); HALL, Todd y PU Xiaoyu, “Dare to Fight or Dare to Struggle? Translation of a Chinese Political Concept,” *Interpret: China*, Center for Strategic and International Studies. Accessed: 05.02.2026.

All of this may seem arcane, but it is necessary for a correct understanding of Chinese diplomacy.

“At the forefront”?

Phase 1: signaling (2017-2019)

The starting point for relations between China and Spain (for this article, from 2017 onwards) was already promising. During an initial signaling phase, China expressed its willingness to deepen, improve, and expand relations after a period of trust-building. On May 13, 2017, in a meeting with the then Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, Xi Jinping stated that “China is willing to work with Spain to strengthen exchanges [...] enhance mutual understanding, broaden consensus, understand and support each other on issues related to each other’s core interests and major concerns, and conduct consultation and cooperation in international and regional hotspot issues.” Regarding Spain’s international role, Xi “hopes that Spain will play an active role in the EU”⁸. This was continued and “agreed” on November 28, 2018, on the occasion of Xi’s visit to Spain and his meeting with the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, and the issuance of a joint statement⁹.

In this same vein, on November 30, Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang stated that “we are willing to work with Spain to follow through on the joint statement and scale our bilateral ties to a new height in the new era.”¹⁰. On December 3, Shuang emphasized the point: “China-Spain relations are now facing new historical opportunities”¹¹.

During this phase, China views its relations with Spain as those of cooperative partners, primarily bilaterally, with an interest in exploring further potential. However, it emphasizes the need to establish consensus and political trust before taking further steps.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Meets with King Felipe VI of Spain”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/xos_664404/xwlb_664406/202406/t20240606_11401519.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “China, Spain agree to advance ties during Xi's visit”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11327479.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on November 30, 2018”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11346444.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on December 3, 2018”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202405/t20240530_11346445.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

Phase 2: latency (2020-2022)

The COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted both Spain and China, forced a pause in the process of interaction and, consequently, in the evolution of perspectives. Meanwhile, China continued to communicate its intentions.

On March 17, 2020, Xi declared by telephone to the President of the Government that “Once the epidemic is over, our two countries may step up exchanges in a wide range of fields”¹². On September 3, 2020, Yang Jiechi, director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party, stated that “China stands ready to work with Spain to follow through on the important consensus reached between the leaders of the two countries”¹³.

On July 8, 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his Spanish counterpart, José Manuel Albares, during the G20 ministerial summit in Bali. Wang spoke positively about the relations and their development. He also stated that “values the mutual trust and friendship established by the leaders of the two countries and is willing to take next year's 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries as an opportunity to sort out and summarize the experience of cooperation and plan for future development, so as to make bilateral relations more healthy, stable and dynamic”¹⁴. Therefore, Wang considers the required political trust to have been established during the first phase.

Nevertheless, on November 15, 2022, Xi met with Sánchez at the G20 summit and stated that “senior leaders of the two countries should keep regular communication, strengthen top-level design and political guidance, and build stronger mutual trust [...] It is hoped that Spain will play a positive role in promoting the healthy and steady growth of China-Europe relations”¹⁵. In other words, although this trust has been established, constant contact

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “President Xi Speaks with Spanish Prime Minister on the Phone”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3356_664772/3358_664776/202406/t20240611_114236_45.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi Visits Spain”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3356_664772/3358_664776/202406/t20240611_114236_50.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Wang Yi Meets with Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares Bueno”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/xos_664404/xwlb_664406/202207/t20220709_10718028.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Meets with President of the

and planning are necessary to strengthen it. Crucially, Xi already projects the relationship as one of importance within the EU, albeit without emphasis or concrete details.

Phase 3: strategic activation (2023-2024)

The strategic activation phase of the relationship coincides with the relaxation of “zero COVID” measures in China, the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Spain, and the beginning of official visits.

On the occasion of the anniversary, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning announced that “we stand ready to work with Spain to take the 50th anniversary as a new starting point to consolidate political mutual trust, enhance exchange across the board, expand practical cooperation, step up exchange and coordination in international and regional affairs”¹⁶. Mao reiterated the message on March 27, 2023, on the occasion of the first official visit of the Prime Minister¹⁷. Note the inclusion of an international perspective in the areas of coordination and the use of “consolidate” as a verb, in contrast to “build,” “improve,” or “expand” in most previous statements. Chinese Premier Li Qiang also used this expression in his meeting with Sánchez on March 31¹⁸.

For his part, on the same day, Xi stressed the now regional character and more significant strategic potential of the relationship: “the two sides should adhere to planning bilateral relations from a strategic and long-term perspective” and “the sound development of China-EU relations requires the EU to uphold strategic independence”¹⁹.

February 18, 2024, marked the first manifestation, or at least a tentative manifestation, of China's new vision for relations with Spain. During a visit to Spain, Wang Yi stated that “China is ready to work with Spain to view bilateral relations with a global vision and from

Government of Spain Pedro Sánchez”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2022/cxesqjtyjhtg/202211/t20221115_10975852.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on March 9, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347480.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on March 27, 2023”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347491.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Li Qiang Holds Talks with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez Pérez-Castejón”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/xos_664404/xwlb_664406/202304/t20230402_11053172.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Meets with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez Pérez Castejón”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/qjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3356_664772/3358_664776/202304/t20230402_11053174.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

a long-term perspective, strengthen the foundation of mutual trust and mutual benefit, highlight the characteristics of strategic stability and practical cooperation, and keep China-Spain relations at the forefront of China-Europe relations”²⁰. This was underscored by a lengthy response and assessment of China-Spain relations by the Foreign Ministry spokesperson on February 20²¹.

The evolution is clear; the use of the expression “at the forefront” is linked to a global and long-term vision of the relationship. Furthermore, Wang’s tentative use of the expression (which would not be used until more than a year later) is significant. First, as has been seen, the launching of slogans by Chinese officials calls for action within the domestic planning apparatus and for discussions with international actors (Spain, in this case) to flesh them out. Second, Wang, in particular, and the Foreign Ministry have acquired a novel position within China’s foreign policy formulation. While in the past the positions of Foreign Minister and Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission were held by two different officials, Wang has held both (with a brief interlude) since 2023²².

The upgrade and elevation were reflected by Xi on September 9, 2024, during the Prime Minister's second official visit: “The two sides should [...] take a holistic and long-term view [...] with strategic resolve. [...] China appreciates Spain's active promotion of China-EU exchanges and cooperation during its EU rotating presidency and is ready to expand cooperation with Spain in third-party markets in the Global South and strengthen communication and coordination in the United Nations, the G20 and other international organizations”²³. It is not surprising that the expression “at the forefront” is not used in this context. After all, Xi is head of state, while the Prime Minister is head of government, and this is neither a major diplomatic initiative nor a bilateral undertaking of paramount importance. Nevertheless, it is still significant.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Wang Yi Holds Talks with Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares Bueno”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/wjbz/hd/202402/t20240220_11247529.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on February 20, 2024”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202405/t20240530_11347699.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

²² LOH, Dylan M.H., “China’s Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy,” *Stanford University Press*, Redwood City, 2024.

²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Meets with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202409/t20240911_11488697.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

This period also marks the emergence of editorials about Spain in the semi-official press, which had been absent until now. As this new perspective is still in its preliminary stages, the commentary is superficial and does not yet extend to the relationship as a whole. On September 13, 2024, the Global Times commented solely on Spain's decision to change its position on imposing tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, lacking strategic depth: “This realistic and rational perspective deserves to be heard more widely around the world.”²⁴.

During the strategic activation phase, China ceased to conceive of its relationship with Spain solely as a bilateral cooperative one and began to imbue it with a strategic, regional, and forward-looking dimension. The relationship shifted from a logic of functional expansion to one of political consolidation and strategic planning. In this period, Chinese diplomatic language systematically introduced new categories that indicated a qualitative change in the conception of the relationship. Spain began to be progressively integrated into the broader framework of the China-EU relationship, culminating in the explicit formulation of a new hierarchy within the relationship, characterizing China-Spain ties as being "at the forefront."

Phase 4: strategic consolidation (2025)

On April 7, 2025, China's ambassador to Spain, Yao Jing, outlined some of the key elements of China's new vision and "Spanish strategy" in an interview: "We consider Spain an important country in Europe and the world, and thus we can exchange views on the current international situation through dialogue, consultation, and perhaps coordination to address any global challenges or problems. [...] Spain is a special partner for us, and there are many issues to discuss, including the relationship between China and the EU, between China and Latin America, between China and Africa... Spain has considerable influence in these areas: Europe, Latin America, and Africa. And beyond the bilateral relationship, Europe is very important to China.

Spain can play a very important role in fostering better understanding between China and the European Union and better cooperation in the economic, cultural, social, and other

²⁴ Global Times, “Sánchez’s ‘significant turnaround’ is not surprising: Global Times editorial”, *Global Times*, 13 September 2024, Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202409/1319754.shtml>. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

sectors. We hope that Spain will continue to play this constructive or enabling role in improving China-EU relations." Yao characterized the relationship as one of "trust."²⁵.

Along the same lines, on the occasion of Sánchez's third official visit on April 8, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian reiterated that "Spain is an important cooperative partner for China within the EU. Our bilateral relations are at the forefront of China's ties with European countries. China hopes to take this visit as an opportunity to deepen strategic mutual trust between the two sides, expand open cooperation, jointly address global challenges, and achieve new progress for the China-Spain comprehensive strategic partnership"²⁶. On April 10, he characterized the relationship as "vital" for relations between China and the EU²⁷, and on April 14 as contributing "to world peace, stability and development"²⁸.

The same global perspective was discussed by Wang Yi and Albares on October 15, 2025 (the relationship "will contribute to safeguarding international peace, injecting new momentum into promoting global economic development, and building greater consensus in addressing global challenges"). Wang expressed "hope that Spain will play a more active role in promoting the sound and stable development of China-EU relations"²⁹. The spokesman, Lin Jian, repeated these same perspectives³⁰.

Semi-official media coverage is beginning to reflect some of these characteristics, indicating a gradual solidification of the "at the forefront" concept, although it is not yet widespread. This is understandable given the time required to disseminate new perspectives through bureaucratic processes and the very emergence of the vision itself.

²⁵ SEGOVIA, Carlos, "Yao Jing, embajador chino en España: "El presidente Xi tiene química con Pedro Sánchez, puede ser un facilitador entre China y la UE"" *El Mundo*, 7 April 2025, Available at <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2025/04/06/67f27c2321efa0a1438b4571.html>. Accessed: 10.02.2026.

²⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on April 8, 2025", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202504/t20250408_11590199.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on April 10, 2025", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202504/t20250410_11592730.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on April 14, 2025", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202504/t20250414_11594362.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi Holds Talks with Minister for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation of Spain José Manuel Albares Bueno", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzd/202510/t20251016_11734555.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on October 16, 2025", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202510/t20251016_11734774.html. Accessed: February 7, 2026.

For example, on April 11, the Global Times merely commented that the "visit has pressed the "accelerator" on deepening China-EU cooperation".³¹ And the People's Daily on April 13 said that Spain is "China's best friend in Europe" and that "political trust has been consolidated"; the visit "consolidates Spain's position as a geopolitical bridge between China, Europe and Latin America" and that "Spain is an important partner of China in the EU"³².

During the strategic consolidation phase, China's conception of relations with Spain stabilized and became institutionalized as an articulated structural vision. Spain definitively ceased to be treated merely as a relevant bilateral partner and came to be conceptualized as a functional actor within China's strategic architecture, with a defined role on three simultaneous levels: European, interregional, and global. The characterization of the relationship as being "at the forefront" ceased to be an emerging formulation and became a stable framework for interpretation and political action. The parallel emergence of this framework in semi-official discourse confirms its bureaucratic and doctrinal diffusion, signaling the transformation of the China-Spain relationship into a strategic vector integrated into China's European and global projection.

Phase 5: doctrinal normalization (end of 2025 onwards)

This process culminates with the official visit of King Felipe VI in November 2025.

On November 12, Xi Jinping stated that the relationship “has set a model of pursuing amicable ties and common development [...] and has played an important role in promoting openness and cooperation in the world and upholding international fairness and justice.” Therefore, “stands ready to work with Spain to forge a comprehensive strategic partnership with greater strategic determination, dynamism and global influence,” in which “two sides could also tap into complementarity and jointly explore third-party markets such as Latin America and the Caribbean³³”.

³¹ Global Times, “What signals does Spanish Prime Minister’s visit to China send?: Global Times editorial”, *Global Times*, 11 April 2025, Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202504/1331958.shtml>. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

³² People's Daily, “联播+ | 三年三访 西班牙首相为何如此重视中国?” *People's Daily*, 13 April 2025, Available at <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2025/0413/c1001-40458702.html>. Accessed: 10.02.2026.

³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Meets with King Felipe VI of Spain”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3356_664772/3358_664776/202511/t20251112_117516_98.html. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

On November 11, the People's Daily commented that the visit "injects new impetus into the high-level development of bilateral relations." It called the relationship a "model of friendly coexistence" with "deep political trust" and stated that "the strategic importance of China-Spain relations has become increasingly relevant." The editorial already contained all the characteristics of the "forward-looking" vision for the relationship: "The continued deepening of China-Spain cooperation will not only become an important driving force for the development of China-EU relations, but will also bring more positive energy to upholding multilateralism and promoting world peace and development³⁴".

Similarly, on November 13, the Global Times commented that "the China-Spain relationship has become a model of international interaction" and that "China values the traditional friendship with Spain and its unique role in international and regional affairs." It reiterates Xi Jinping's call to "build a more strategically resilient and dynamic comprehensive strategic partnership with greater international influence." Spain, it says, has "a clear understanding of a multipolar world and is consciously pursuing strategic autonomy amid global transformation." And "the healthy development of China-Spain relations holds significant importance that transcends bilateral ties³⁵".

In conclusion, China has transformed its view of its relationship with Spain and formulated a discreet "Spanish strategy." This has definitively consolidated the relationship as one of systemic character and global importance. The relationship has become explicitly a model of international interaction with structural functions. Spain is now presented as a geopolitical actor with interregional influence, capable of acting as a bridge between strategic spaces (Europe, Latin America, the Global South) and as a vector of Chinese projection within the international architecture. This vision has been systematically incorporated into China's conception of the emerging world order, completing the cycle from cooperative bilateralism to a structural strategic functionalization within the global framework of Chinese foreign policy.

³⁴ People's Daily Online, "专栏 | 中国西班牙·‘双向奔赴’正当时", 人民网, 11 November 2025, Available at <https://world.people.com.cn/n1/2025/1111/c1002-40600960.html>. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

³⁵ Global Times, "Why China-Spain relationship has become a model of international interaction: Global Times editorial", *Global Times*, 13 November 2025, Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202511/1348064.shtml>. Accessed: 07.02.2026.

Conclusion

China's formulation of a strategic vision for relations with Spain has implications at the bilateral, business, and European levels. First, from the Spanish perspective, this conceptualization offers specific opportunities and responsibilities. Spain is considered an important partner within the EU and an actor capable of acting as a bridge to other strategic areas such as Latin America, Africa, and the Global South. This privileged position entails a potential increase in Spain's political influence in multilateral forums where China has interests. However, it also implies the need for careful diplomatic and strategic planning: Spain must calibrate its foreign policy decisions in accordance with this expectation, while preserving its autonomy. From the Chinese perspective, there will be an expectation of a certain alignment that may not always be, or should not always be, fulfilled. This also entails a responsibility to communicate with other partners besides China and to be careful in communicating precisely the potential scope of alignment or mediation.

In business terms, the "at the forefront" vision presents concrete opportunities for collaboration and expansion in strategic sectors. China identifies Spain as a partner for cooperation in technological innovation, infrastructure, renewable energy, transportation, and digitalization, while also positioning it as a platform for accessing European and Latin American markets. For Spanish companies, this implies a potential increase in trade and investment through discussions with Chinese firms. It also implies the need to understand the priorities and sensitivities of the Chinese counterpart, given that the strategic characterization of the relationship is accompanied by implicit expectations of trust and coordination. Similarly, the Chinese conceptualization reinforces the importance of long-term planning, geopolitical risk management, and cooperation on standards, regulation, and sustainability, all of which form part of China's strategic projection framework.

Finally, within the context of the European Union, China's new vision of Spain has systemic effects. The interpretation of Spain as an actor that can facilitate China-EU interaction introduces an element of internal hierarchy into the European relationship with China: Spain's relevance is not only bilateral but also has a multiplier effect on Beijing's relations with the European bloc. This could create opportunities for Spanish mediation and leadership in joint initiatives, but it also entails coordination challenges with European partners who might perceive a “special strategic weight” assigned by China. Overall, the

Chinese conceptualization of the relationship reinforces the need for Spain to integrate this perspective into its foreign and economic strategy, without compromising its national interests or EU principles, while leveraging its position to strengthen its role in the European and global architecture. It is necessary to harmonize the concept of being “at the forefront” with a high degree of common European policy, or at least one that is not contradictory.

*Álvaro Tejero García**
Analyst at the Observatory of Asia at UFV