

Nov 04, 2016 by **Michele Acuto**

Urbanizing China-EU Relations? ^[1]

The European Union (EU) has long been one of the leading international actors in recognizing the potential of cities as agents of global governance. Fostering a variety of initiatives through the Committee of Regions, which acts as the EU's assembly of regional and local representatives, Europe has promoted the participation of cities in regional and international governance since its early days.

This has now, interestingly, spread to bilateral relations with the growing giants of 21st century international relations. While the EU has regularly held meetings with China and India for the past decade, these are now extending to include a variety of subnational authorities which might play an essential role not only in strengthening and relaxing political relations between Europe and the Far East, but also in developing joint efforts with real-world applications that directly impact the lives of millions of urban dwellers.

The EU-China Mayors' Forum, held on September 19 and 20, 2012, was the first annual flagship event of a newly-inaugurated "EU-China Urbanisation Partnership" that was in turn launched at the occasion of the 7th China-EU Summit to address urbanization challenges in China through cooperative EU-China efforts between stakeholders at national, regional and local levels. As the Forum's presentation put it: "Given the array of challenges they face in adapting to the "urban century", China and Europe have a strong interest in working together to build better cities."

The meeting included European and Chinese mayors with a variety of delegations of city planners, local business and NGOs, and had been devised to facilitate the sharing of sustainable, integrated and efficient urban solutions. While the meeting remains a purely consultative and peer-to-peer project, it nonetheless holds important potential to promote paradiplomatic exchanges between local governments and urban stakeholders: involving, for instance, the Chinese Association of Mayors and the European Covenant of Mayors in a range of cross-sector activities and a multi-player events open to all relevant actors. The meeting tackled a number of problématiques, including the challenges facing modern cities as they struggle to cope with increasingly mobile urbanites, increased traffic and problems of waste management. Likewise, it has ventilated a set of possible avenues for cooperation with the perspective of China and Europe joining forces to meet the demands of China's urban billion.

The launch of this EU-China partnership has the potential to reinforce relations between the two emerging international actors while actively fostering exchanges of models, expertise, and, possibly, governance arrangements. Certainly, any judgment on the practical effectiveness of the initiative is perhaps, at this stage, a little too far fetched. Besides, the Forum has convened only a handful of city leaders from smaller municipalities in Europe and second-tier cities in China and the participation of major cities like Shanghai or Berlin might be necessary to move this paradiplomatic effort to the proverbial 'next level' and impact EU and Chinese citizens at large. Yet, this tentative urbanization of EU-China relations holds some

interesting promises for city leadership which, after all, might be a key component in producing truly innovative transnational responses to global challenges.
