

An Analysis of the Motivations for the Spanish Prime Minister's Three Visits to China in Three Years: Based on Neo-Liberal Institutionalism Theory

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of U.S.-EU technological trade restrictions on China and Spain's tension between "strategic autonomy" ("strategic autonomy" defined here as the capacity of a country to act independently of external powers, particularly the United States, in strategic sectors) and "Transatlantic alignment" ("Transatlantic alignment" defined here as the synchronization of a state's geopolitical, security, and technological policies with the strategic priorities and restrictive measures of the United States) Spanish Prime Minister Sánchez's three China visits in three years emerge as a typical case of high-frequency China-Southern Europe interactions. Exploring its core motivations and the explanatory logic of neo-liberal institutionalism is significant. This study uses literature, historical, and qualitative analyses to examine China-Spain cooperation and its theoretical alignment. Results show that China and Spain exhibit strong interdependence in trade and new energy. Sensitivity lies in their complementary linkages (bilateral trade over 50 billion EUR), while vulnerability stems from high decoupling costs. Cooperation mechanisms (since 1992) and agreements from the three visits underpin institutional foundations by cutting transaction costs and standardizing collaboration. Thus, Sánchez's high-frequency visits ("high-frequency visits" defined here as three or more state or official visits by a head or high-level representative of government to a single target country within a single electoral cycle) to China reflect a rational choice co-driven by interdependence and institutional cooperation.

Keywords

Neo-Liberal Institutionalism, Interdependence, Institutional Cooperation

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed volatility in China-EU relations, yet Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has visited China three times over a three-year span: in March 2023, he attended the Boao Forum for Asia and conducted an official visit, renewing the Memorandum of Understanding on Scientific and Technological Cooperation; in September 2024, he participated in the China-Spain Business Forum, inaugurated the Shanghai Cervantes Institute, and signed a Memorandum of Cooperation on Trade in Services and Digital Trade, with bilateral trade volume surpassing 50 billion euros in that year, a leap compared to 32 billion US dollars in 2018 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2025; China.com.cn, 2019); and in April 2025, he signed the 2025-2028 Action Plan for Enhancing the China-Spain Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and advanced the launch of a new energy vehicle joint venture project (Gov.cn, 2025). This renders his engagements a paradigmatic case of high-frequency high-level diplomatic outreach between a European middle power and China, as his intensive diplomatic activities and the rapid advancement of bilateral cooperation constitute a salient empirical phenomenon worthy of scholarly attention.

Existing scholarship primarily scrutinizes China-Spain bilateral relations through the lens of specific domains (e.g., economic and trade cooperation, people-to-people exchanges) or analyzes Spain's policy choices within the parameters of the EU's overarching China strategy. While neo-liberal institutionalism, a core theory in international relations, is widely employed to account for the cooperation motives of major powers within the context of international institutions, few studies have adopted this theoretical framework to systematically unpack the internal logic supporting frequent high-level visits to China by medium European nations. A pronounced disjuncture exists between the existing research landscape and empirical realities. Current works lack both a theoretically grounded explanation of the underlying drivers behind Spain's frequent China visits and a rigorous analysis of the deep-seated rationale for its distinctive diplomatic choices, rooted in the core tenets of neo-liberal institutionalism, including institutionalized interests and cooperative institutional mechanisms.

Accordingly, the core research questions of this study are: What are the key causal drivers behind Spanish Prime Minister Sánchez's three visits to China over three years? How can neo-liberal institutionalism illuminate the institutional calculations and interest-based rationale supporting this high-frequency diplomatic engagement with China?

1.1. Research Significance

Facing geopolitical risks from allied pressure and energy ties with Russia, the three visits to China in three years are a concentrated manifestation of this contradiction. Thus, this study aims to provide decision-making references for balancing strategic autonomy and ally alignment helping China optimize cooperation mechanisms with European middle powers, helping Spain reduce diplomatic strategy

costs and helping Chinese and Spanish enterprises identify institutional opportunities and policy risks in bilateral cooperation, improve market layout efficiency and cut cross-border cooperation costs. Academically this paper applies neo-liberal institutionalism to the analysis of high-frequency diplomatic behaviors of medium-sized European countries (“medium-sized European countries” defined here as a state possessing significant economic weight in Europe) toward China and fills the gap in the theory’s application to research on such countries’ relations with China while revising the one-dimensional interpretation of the compatibility between national interests and international institutions in traditional theories by analyzing the interactive contradictions between domestic strategies and external institutional constraints and offering a new perspective for research on international cooperation amid complex geopolitical contexts.

1.2. Overview of Neo-Liberal Institutionalism Theory

Liberalism is a core paradigm of international relations theory and neo-liberal institutionalism is its key school. American scholars Keohane and Joseph Nye systematically proposed the ideas of interdependence and the theory of international institutions through two works *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* and *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* laying the theoretical foundation for this school. Like realism, this theory recognizes the anarchy of the international society but denies that anarchy inevitably leads to chaos and holds that both cooperation and conflicts exist between countries and that countries are not the only actors but the core actors in international relations. It assumes that the state is a single rational and selfish actor that can clarify its own interests, independently implement internal and external policies and weigh policy consequences to seek maximum benefits at the minimum cost. While this study adopts this assumption to clarify macro-level state interests, it acknowledges that Spanish diplomatic choices are also shaped by domestic drivers-such as the Socialist Workers’ Party’s (PSOE) electoral calculus, the lobbying power of the Spanish agri-food sector, and internal divisions regarding Spain’s positioning within the EU framework. These micro-variables are addressed in the study’s limitations and future research directions. This rational trait is the possible basis for international cooperation and the essence of international relations lies in cooperation. International institution is the core concept of this theory referring to a system of continuous formal and informal rules covering three forms: international organizations, international regimes and international practices which can reduce transaction costs, regulate the behavior of actors and reduce behavioral uncertainty thus forming the core proposition of institutional cooperation theory (Qin,1998). This theory also innovatively puts forward the interdependence theory which holds that interdependence is a relationship of mutual influence and restriction between countries and other actors and that sensitivity and vulnerability are its core characteristics. Sensitivity refers to the speed and degree of the impact of changes in the dependent object on the actor when

the existing dependence framework remains unchanged which is the country's bearing capacity. Vulnerability refers to the cost and loss that the actor has to pay to break the original dependence framework which is the country's adaptive capacity.

Neo-liberal institutionalism is selected as the most suitable framework for this case because alternative explanations fall short in accounting for Spain's specific behavioral logic. A realist "balancing" perspective would predict that Spain, as a power under U.S. hegemonic pressure, would bandwagon with the United States and restrict China to maximize its security. Conversely, a purely domestic-politics account might reduce Sánchez's visits to internal party strategies or isolated sectoral lobbying, failing to explain the sustained, structural elevation of bilateral ties. Neo-liberal institutionalism uniquely bridges this gap. It explains why Spain does not merely balance against China (due to the high sensitivity and economic vulnerability of their interdependence) and why it relies on formalized state visits to forge institutional mechanisms (MoUs, Action Plans) that lock in cooperation and shield bilateral ties from external hegemonic fluctuations and domestic political uncertainties.

1.3. Literature Review

Regarding the interpretation of the drivers of Spain-China bilateral relations existing research mainly focuses on digital cooperation and public diplomacy and points out that as a key node country of the Belt and Road and the fourth largest economy in the EU Spain's strategic value lies in its radiating influence on North Africa and Latin America and its economic status within the EU while public diplomacy plays a key role in promoting exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese and Spanish civilizations (Pan, 2023; Wang & Yu, 2024). In terms of research methods existing literature mostly adopts historical evolution analysis, case studies and policy text interpretation such as examining the evolution of bilateral relations by sorting out three historical periods of China-Spain relations and providing evidence with cases such as the smart city co-construction between Shanghai and Barcelona policy documents such as Spain's Digital Spain 2025 strategy and economic and trade data such as China being Spain's largest trading partner outside the EU (Chen, 2021). Existing literature generally holds that the core drivers of China-Spain cooperation lie in economic interdependence, institutional framework alignment and common interest expansion which are embodied in mutual benefits in areas such as cross-border e-commerce and digital infrastructure construction in third-party markets and high-level exchanges are a manifestation of the deepening strategic partnership. The limitations of existing research are that most existing literature is descriptive analysis lacking a unified theoretical framework for systematic interpretation of drivers focusing on macro economic trade and institutional factors and insufficiently examining micro-level factors such as Spain's domestic politics and policymakers' perceptions. Future research can introduce international relations theories such as neoliberal institutionalism

for integrated analysis, combine domestic political variables and conduct comparative case studies with other major EU countries to more comprehensively reveal the deep logic of Spain's high-frequency interactions with China.

1.4. Research Methods and Thesis Structure

1.4.1. Research Methods

1) Document Analysis Method

This paper adopts the document analysis method to deeply review relevant papers published in academia to grasp the main views theoretical frameworks and existing research findings in this field which helps lay a theoretical foundation for subsequent analysis. To ensure rigor, this analysis targets specific document types: (a) Government texts, including official joint communiqués, action plans, and white papers sourced from the databases of Gov.cn, Spain's La Moncloa, covering the time span from 2018 to April 2025; (b) Academic literature, sourced from CNKI, and Web of Science, selected based on criteria of direct relevance to Sino-Spanish relations or neo-liberal institutionalism; (c) News reports and corporate data from official media including China.com.cn, Tianjin Municipal Commerce Commission, Guangming online, etc. used to ensure the reliability of trade figures and investment flows.

2) Historical Analysis Method

This paper uses the historical analysis method to systematically examine the cooperation process between China and Spain. It sorts out the historical background of bilateral exchanges and reviews key historical events important agreements and policy changes to reveal the construction track of the cooperation framework. This analysis helps identify the basic conditions for cooperation the basic positions of both sides in interactions and the evolution logic and structural characteristics of the cooperative relationship in different stages.

3) Qualitative Analysis Method

This paper applies the qualitative analysis method to systematically analyze the motives and considerations of Spain's high emphasis on diplomacy with China and based on existing research and accumulated experience it deeply explores the essential characteristics of bilateral cooperation and the basis of common interests so as to provide reference for the development of other similar cooperation models.

1.4.2. Thesis Structure

This paper first uses the introduction section to clarify the research question, sort out the research significance, summarize existing research findings, point out limitations and explain research methods and overall ideas to lay a foundation for the full text. It also outlines the core content of neo-liberal institutionalism including the sensitivity and vulnerability characteristics of interdependence theory, the core role of institutional cooperation theory and the definition and forms of international institutions to build the analytical framework of the paper. It then sorts out the background of the Spanish Prime Minister's three visits to China in three

years combining changes in the global situation including relevant measures of the US and the EU and the respective development and diplomatic strategy adjustments of China and Spain to present the evolution process of bilateral cooperation from initial alignment to deepened interests. Based on neo-liberal institutionalism it then conducts an in-depth analysis of the motives and considerations for the high-frequency visits from two dimensions highlighting the sensitivity and vulnerability of interdependence theory and the core role of institutional cooperation theory such as reducing transaction costs by combining the specific purposes and outcomes of the three visits. Finally, it summarizes the research findings through the conclusion section clarifying the practical value and theoretical contribution of the research and provides references for research and practice in relevant fields.

2. Background of the Spanish Prime Minister's Three Visits to China in Three Years

Amid profound global changes the United States advances the CHIPS, Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act to build technological and trade barriers (Tianjin Municipal Commerce Commission, 2022). The European Union released the European Council conclusions on China (30 June 2023) to define the competitive and cooperative relationship and pushed forward the European Chips Act to tighten technological control (The Paper, 2022). China adjusted its development and diplomatic strategies accordingly from deepening the Belt and Road Initiative to proposing the new development pattern of domestic and international dual circulation to counter protectionism through open cooperation and expand diversified cooperation space. Affected by policy adjustments of the US and the EU, the core goals of economic diversification and green and digital transformation are in the national plan (La Moncloa, 2021). Spain pursues a balance between the Transatlantic alliance and strategic autonomy and seeks to lessen dependence on US and European markets and open up new cooperation paths with Asia. The overlapping of common interests between the two countries stems from the natural alignment of strategic demands in the early phase of Belt and Road cooperation. While China leverages Spain's EU location advantage to deepen its foothold in the European market, Spain relies on China's super-sized market to ease reliance on the US and Europe and hopes to take the lead in forming a complementary pattern in areas like agricultural and food product trade making China Spain's largest trading partner outside the EU. As pressure from the US and Europe such as supply chain decoupling from China and technological restrictions mounts, the interest overlap between China and Spain keeps deepening. Bilateral trade volume topped 50 billion euros in 2024 and cooperation extends from traditional economic and trade ties to strategic sectors including new energy and high-end manufacturing. The China Three Gorges Corporation is investing in Spain's renewable energy projects and Chinese enterprises are setting up joint venture factories in Spain forming a deep match between technology and market (China Three Gorges

Corporation, 2025). The high-frequency interactions of the Spanish Prime Minister's three visits to China in three years are an institutional practice for both sides to consolidate cooperation and address risks through high-level dialogue under external constraints moving the bilateral relationship from single trade complementarity to an all-round community of interests.

3. Motives and Considerations of the Spanish Prime Minister's Three Visits to China in Three Years

As for why the Spanish Prime Minister has visited China frequently, the theory of neo-liberal institutionalism reveals that actors in international relations have interdependent relationships. Such interdependence stems from the imbalance in the distribution of power and wealth among countries, and has two characteristics: sensitivity and vulnerability.

Prime Minister Sánchez's three visits to China can be understood as a strategic trajectory driven by the evolving asymmetries of interdependence, transitioning from a passive response to immediate risks to an active hedge against structural vulnerabilities. During his first visit to China in March 2023, the immediate policy objective was to stabilize bilateral relations and build political goodwill for green and technological cooperation. While this visit officially yielded agreements in education, agriculture, and sports, its underlying driver was the high degree of sensitivity inherent in Sino-Spanish relations (La Moncloa, 2023). Sensitivity represents the immediate, direct, and passive transmission effect of external shocks without altering existing policies. Given the deep industrial correlation between the two sides, with Chinese electromechanical products holding a significant share of Spain's imports and Spain's pork and food exports to China reaching historic, multi-billion-euro highs, any market fluctuation would instantly and passively disrupt the stability of the other's industrial chain (Guangming Online, 2021). Therefore, the 2023 visit was not only "operated" by a sensitivity mechanism, but also driven by the urgent need to manage this short-term shock speed and immediate cost, ensuring basic cooperative continuity amid rising geopolitical turbulence.

During his second visit to China in September 2024, the focus shifted to addressing the initial, transitional stage of vulnerability, where persistent external pressures necessitated proactive policy adjustments to mitigate accumulating risks. The agreements reached included a package of eight documents, featuring a cooperation framework for trade in services and the digital economy, as well as a permanent dialogue mechanism for trade and investment. The immediate policy objective was to make economic relations more balanced and provide continued momentum for agricultural market access, such as cherries and pork. Unlike the response to immediate shocks in 2023, this visit reflected an early recognition of adaptation costs—the realization that maintaining the status quo was insufficient against U.S. tariff pressures and EU technology controls. By establishing these formalized dialogue frameworks, Spain began to actively utilize institutional tools to

standardize market access and lower transaction costs, aiming to buffer the transition from short-term market fluctuations to long-term structural friction through proactive regulatory adjustments.

His third visit to China in April 2025 was ultimately driven by the deepened, structural stage of vulnerability, characterized by the need for long-term institutional lock-in to hedge against ultimate dependence risks. The primary agreement reached was the 2025-2028 Action Plan for Strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which outlined policy support for two-way investment in strategic sectors like electric vehicles, industrial technology, and supply chain integration (La Moncloa, 2025). The immediate policy objective was to consolidate long-term cooperation to serve Spain's strategic vision of building a geopolitical hub connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa, thereby avoiding marginalization in global value chain restructuring. At this stage, vulnerability was fully exposed as the long-term, structural adaptation costs that would still be incurred even after actively changing policies; if Spain radically aligned with U.S. and EU restrictions, it would face a severe contraction of its non-EU market space, while losing Spain as a deep cooperation partner would permanently elevate institutional and operational barriers for China entering Southern Europe. Consequently, unlike the passive reaction to short-term sensitivity in 2023, the 2025 Action Plan served as a proactive institutional mechanism to offset these profound structural risks, locking cooperation results into a formalized, multi-year framework to prevent permanent economic marginalization.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this study analyzes the core motivations and theoretical interpretation logic behind the Spanish Prime Minister's three visits to China in three years from the perspective of neo-liberal institutionalism. The fundamental motivation lies in the deep interdependence between China and Spain in economic and strategic fields, as well as the urgent demand of both sides for institutional cooperation.

The core findings are reflected in two aspects: interdependence and institutional cooperation. On one hand, the strong sensitivity correlation formed between China and Spain in fields such as economy, trade and new energy, along with the high vulnerability risks that need to be borne if the existing dependence relationship is broken, together they shape and direct deepened peace and cooperation between China and Spain. On the other hand, the existing institutional arrangements such as the Agreement on the Reciprocal Encouragement and Protection of Investments of 1992 and the new achievements from the three visits, including the Memorandum of Understanding on Scientific and Technological Cooperation, the Service Trade Agreement, and the Action Plan for Strengthening the China-Spain Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025-2028), complement each other. These arrangements not only effectively reduce cross-border transaction costs and standardize the cooperation behaviors of both sides, but also reduce

the uncertainty caused by policy fluctuations from the US and the EU. Combined with the strategic concept of the Sánchez administration of Building a Geopolitical Hub Connecting Europe, Asia and Africa, China-Spain cooperation has been further deepened into an all-round community of interests.

At the theoretical level, this study not only innovatively applies the neo-liberal institutionalism theory to the analysis of high-frequency diplomatic behaviors of medium-sized European countries toward China, filling the application gap of this theory in relevant research fields, but also revises the one-sided interpretation of the adaptability between national interests and international institutions in traditional theories by analyzing the interactive contradictions between Spain's domestic strategy and external institutional constraints, providing a new analytical perspective for the research on international cooperation in complex geopolitical environments.

At the practical level, its value is reflected in two aspects: it provides a feasible decision-making reference for Chinese and Spanish policymakers to balance strategic autonomy and Transatlantic alignment, and helps Chinese and Spanish enterprises in fields such as new energy and digital economy clarify cooperation opportunities and potential risks, thereby improving the efficiency of market layout and reducing cross-border cooperation costs.

However, this study still has certain limitations. On one hand, it focuses on macro-level theoretical interpretation and policy analysis, and insufficiently examines variables affecting diplomatic decision-making such as Spain's domestic political dynamics and the micro-perceptions of decision-makers. On the other hand, it fails to conduct a comparative study of Spain's diplomatic behaviors toward China with those of other medium-sized EU countries, resulting in an incomplete analytical dimension. Based on this, future research can further incorporate micro variables such as domestic politics and decision-makers' perceptions, and conduct comparative case studies with EU countries such as Portugal and Greece to more deeply reveal the common logic and individual differences in the high-frequency diplomatic behaviors of medium-sized European countries toward China, so as to provide more targeted theoretical support and practical references for the sustained and stable development of China-EU bilateral relations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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