Hai-EU Dialogue Series – Part I

Institutional Opening Up: Advancing Free Trade Port Governance and Connectivity

Webinar Report

September 3, 2026

Institute for Security & Development Policy
ICES
華陽海洋研究中心
Huayang Center for Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance

About ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

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LIST OF SPEAKERS



Dr. Joost Hintjens is a researcher at the University of Antwerp's Department of Transport and Regional Economics, where he focuses on the role of ports in supply chains. His research interests include logistics in medium-sized companies, customer and supplier relationships in supply-chain management, hinterland connectivity, and the threats and opportunities presented by the New Silk Road. He received his PhD in November 2019 with a dissertation on port cooperation, which won the Ferdinand Suykens Prize for Port Studies from the Royal Academy for Overseas Studies. Beyond his academic work, he brings extensive real-world experience in international marketing and logistics, including senior management roles across several European countries.



Guo Wenqin is the Deputy Dean of Hainan Free Trade Port Research Institute. Her research focuses on Hainan's reform and development, and the Hainan Free Trade Port. She has contributed to six projects under the National Social Science Fund of China and over ten commissioned research projects by national ministries and commissions. She has led and completed two projects funded by the Hainan Provincial Social Science Foundation. She has participated in more than 60 policy advisory studies and submitted over 60 policy recommendations. She is the author or co-author of three edited volumes and has published more than ten academic articles.



Dr Daniel Balazs is a Senior Research Analyst at the Institute for China-Europe Studies (ICES) and an Adjunct Fellow with the China Program at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He specializes in Chinese foreign policy and China–EU relations, with a focus on the strategic dynamics shaping Asia and Europe. His work has been published in Asian Security and Political Science Quarterly, and his commentary has appeared in outlets including The Diplomat, Foreign Policy, and The Interpreter. The views expressed are his own and do not represent the views of his affiliated institutions.

Moderator

Dr. Yifei Zhu, Research Fellow, Institute for Security & Development Policy

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Institutional Opening Up: Advancing Free Trade Port Governance and Connectivity

Contextual Background

September 3, 2026 marked the launch of the series of Hai-Eu Dialogue: Europe-China Perspectives on Ocean Governance and Sustainable Development in the Era of the Hainan Free Trade Port / “海欧”传声：海南自贸港时代下的中欧海洋治理与可持续发展对话. The series is a joint initiative of the Stockholm China Center at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), the Hainan-based Huayang Center for Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance (Huayang Center), and the Institute for China-Europe Studies (ICES) in Brussels.

The series provides a forum for dialogue among experts, practitioners, and the wider public on maritime issues, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding, facilitating policy exchange, and identifying areas for closer EU–China cooperation.

The inaugural webinar focused on port governance and connectivity. Ports have long served as vital gateways for trade and economic exchange, but their role today extends well beyond the movement of goods. Effective port development increasingly depends on governance, hinterland and market connectivity, and cooperation across different institutional and regional contexts. These issues have become even more salient amid shifts in global trade, supply chains, and the wider economic and geopolitical environment.

Against this background, the webinar brought together three speakers who approached the topic from distinct but complementary perspectives.

The webinar was recorded and is available on YouTube.

This report summarizes the main points raised by the three speakers and highlights the key takeaways from the discussion. Relevant responses from the Q&A session are incorporated into the respective speaker sections rather than presented separately.

KEY TAKEAWAY 1:

The Importance of Hinterland Connectivity

Dr. Joost Hintjens



"So there is a problem that everybody wants to receive data, but nobody wants to share data... We have the technology, we just have to be willing to share information."

– Joost Hintjens

The two largest ports in the EU, Antwerp and Rotterdam, are not supercities by any means yet are very important ports for both the EU and on a global scale. Their massive throughput comes down to two factors, the first being their position in the middle of the so-called "blue banana," the area of the EU with the highest GDP per capita.

The second is their hinterland connectivity. This includes well-developed infrastructure, such as highways, waterways, railways and pipelines, as well as services along these routes which connect Antwerp and Rotterdam with the rest of the continent and positions them as some of the biggest hubs for EU trade.

Hintjens highlighted one aspect which up until recently has been largely understudied and constitutes one of the biggest challenges for good hinterland connectivity – that of data sharing. Companies possess substantial data on cargo values, arrival times and onward modes of transportation, but are often reluctant to share this with other parties.

Therefore, coming up with a way of valorizing data, creating incentive for parties to share their data in exchange for other data would greatly facilitate the effectiveness of port operations and their hinterland connectivity.

In response to a question regarding the hinterland connectivity of the Hainan Free Trade Port, given that it presents very different geographical locations than the largest EU ports, Hintjens noted that short sea shipping can serve as an effective hinterland transportation mode. Thus, through good deep-sea connectivity to the global markets, short-sea connections to the domestic markets – as well as efficient turnover between the two – Hainan could function as a hub to the hinterland.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2

The Hainan Free Trade Port as a Hub for China-Asean Maritime Cooperation

Guo Wenqin

China and ASEAN hold a shared interest in maritime development, as seen in both the 2023 ASEAN Blue Economy Framework and in China's 15th 5-year plan. China's import of seafood from ASEAN, as well as investment in ASEAN's primary industry remains relatively low, but estimates show that every percentage point increase in China-ASEAN sea trade would unlock nearly 10 billion USD in new market value.

Guo discussed several ways the Hainan Free Trade Port could support the development of the China-ASEAN blue economy; its geographical location serves as a connector between the large Chinese and Southeast-Asian markets, and the over 2 million square kilometers of sea area under Hainan's jurisdiction are rich in tropical marine biological resources, ocean tourism resources, gas, oil, and offshore wind energy.

Additionally, the recently implemented special customs operations of the Hainan Free Trade Port, including reforms such as tariff exemptions, a simplified tax system and increased regulatory transparency are expected to facilitate open and lower-cost China-ASEAN trade.



"Hainan FTP as the key gateway for China's opening up should... make the most of independent and unilateral opening up policies. That means pushing more mutual recognition with other economic and/or customer standards and regulatory rules and working together to create a shared blue economy market."

– Guo Wenqin

Guo also provides a few directions for future development of the Hainan Free Trade Port. First, promoting port connectivity between Hainan and ASEAN, e.g. through port alliances, alignment of customs regulations and implementing the Authorized Economic Operator (AEO) program.

Second, expanding import of seafood from ASEAN, as well as supporting ASEAN investment in fishery industrialization projects for import to the mainland or onwards to global markets. Third, establishing a service base for renewable energy development, by facilitating both export of and overseas investment in renewable energy equipment and components along with the import of such equipment and materials.

In response to a question about the environmental impact of expanded China-ASEAN maritime trade, Guo commented that conservation, energy transition and port greenization remains a priority in Hainan Free Trade Port development strategy.

The bilateral interest in green maritime and port economies also serves as a basis for China-ASEAN collaboration. She also stressed that regulatory alignment is the main challenge for deepening connectivity beyond physical infrastructure.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

Potential Synergies in EU-China Port Policy

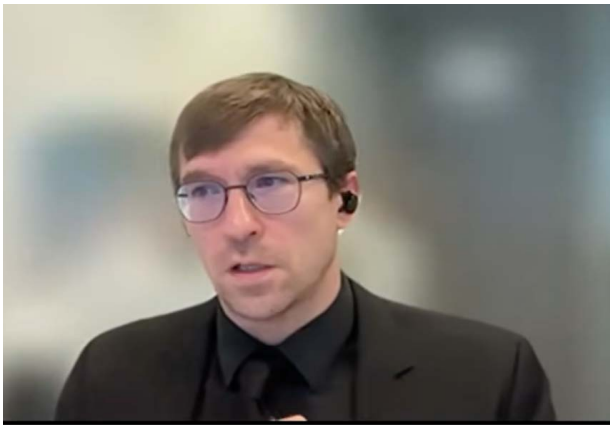
Dr. Daniel Balazs

The tension between EU and China's current trade policy narratives, with EU on one hand pursuing defensive policy measures with the purpose of economic security and de-risking, and China on the other pursuing connectivity and reliable access to overseas markets, has manifested in poor cooperation between the two parties.

However, Balazs outlines four areas where the EU and China's shared interest pave the way for technical and working level cooperation.

First, EU and China have been pioneers in green shipping, such as green methanol bunkering in Gothenburg or using locally produced methanol to fuel ships in Hainan, making space for regulatory exchanges when it comes to e-fuel standards.

Second, both EU and China have taken measures against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. For example, the port of Vigo uses advanced digital tracing and pre-arrival reporting systems, while Hainan has shifted from wild catches toward aquaculture.



"We need to have a clear and coherent idea of where the EU-China economic and trade relations are headed. The large trade deficit the EU has vis-à-vis China is currently one of its biggest concerns, and the Hainan Free Trade Port presents an opportunity for EU companies to find an alternative way into the Chinese market."

– Daniel Balazs

Third, Balazs added to the topic of data governance that although there is a commercial interest in facilitating the flow of trade through data exchanges, there is also a national security interest in making sure that sensitive data remains secure. He highlighted that the EU has approached this though initiatives like PortGuard at Rotterdam, adding that the two custom lines in Hainan's special customs setting poses many questions about data exchanges and data governance.

Finally, these custom lines equally demand good hinterland connectivity and smooth transfer between transport modalities to avoid port congestion, where there is also space for EU-China exchange.

The main caveat for cooperation in these areas, Balazs points out, is that we need to have a clear and coherent idea of where the EU-China economic and trade relations are headed. The large trade deficit the EU has vis-à-vis China is currently one of its biggest concerns, and the Hainan Free Trade Port presents an opportunity for EU companies to find an alternative way into the Chinese market.

Here policy stability and transparency become an important factor; that the reforms currently being implemented in Hainan, their implications and how they facilitate export to China are made clear to EU companies and policymakers.

Conclusion

The main takeaway of the webinar was that despite current geopolitical sensitivities, common interests in areas such as green maritime development, efficiency of port and hinterland operations and data governance which balances security with transparency provide a basis for future cooperation between China and the EU, as well as between China and ASEAN.

Key areas for future work include improving clarity in the state of trade relations and advancing regulatory alignment. Addressing these will be important for strengthening the role of ports in global trade and economic integration.

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