

Fighting plastics pollution: An opportunity for EU-China cooperation

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Summary

- UN negotiations on a global plastics treaty have stalled due to gridlock between high-ambition states, including the EU, and plastics-producing states, notably China. The continued non-negotiation of a treaty calls for alternative strategies for collaboration on tackling plastic pollution.
- China is the world's largest plastics producer and consumer. It has a key influence over potential plastics governance. Beijing has enacted a series of domestic policies and initiatives to tackle plastics pollution. Despite its ambitious environmental goals, China is continuing to grow its petrochemical industry for economic growth and must balance its dual priorities.
- The EU can leverage China's dual priorities to promote cooperation in areas of mutual concern, including bioplastics, chemical recycling and digital platforms for waste management. Engagement could take the form of institutionalized high-level and subnational dialogues, joint research, technical knowledge exchange and trilateral projects with the Global South.
- Sweden can add value by sharing technical expertise in advanced recycling and low-carbon technologies, and by convening Nordic actors to support broader EU coordination.

Introduction

Plastics pollution is a growing global crisis. Over [460 million tonnes of plastic is produced globally each year](#), and only nine percent is recycled. Plastics harm ecosystems and human health, and contribute to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. China is the world's largest producer and consumer of plastics. Its domestic waste policies and industrial plans shape global plastics flows and pollution. This makes China a central player in efforts to develop a global approach to plastics governance. As negotiations on a UN Global Plastics treaty remain stalled, the European Union (EU) and Sweden should consider alternative engagement with China on plastics pollution.

This brief is aimed at EU and Swedish officials engaged in environmental governance and international relations with China. It contextualizes China's policies on managing plastics pollution and analyses how these domestic priorities inform China's tactics in international negotiations. It also makes recommendations on strategies for the EU and Sweden to promote cooperative China relations on tackling global plastics pollution.

Global plastics treaty negotiations and China's role

Launched by the UN Environment Assembly in 2022, the [Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee \(INC\)](#) aimed to create a legally binding agreement by 2024 on tackling plastics pollution across its lifecycle. A year after this deadline, parties concluded another unsuccessful round of negotiations in August (INC 5.2). Key issues facing deadlock include language on plastics production, on financial support for developing countries and on “common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR)”, which provides for leniency for developing countries. Major petrochemical and plastics-producing countries (notably China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, India and Iran) oppose binding limits on plastics production, and instead emphasize voluntary language focused on waste-management.

Furthermore, [China](#) emphasizes preventing plastic leakage into the environment, respecting national circumstances through nuanced requirements and sufficient financial, technological and capacity building support, as well as flexible, staged solutions that maximize the balance of ambition and feasibility. This negotiating stance reflects China's interests as a leading plastics manufacturer seeking continued growth in its domestic industry.

Meanwhile, the [“High Ambition” coalition](#) of over 100 countries, which includes the EU, demands concrete measures to reduce production levels, address problematic plastic products and chemicals of concern, and implement Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes, where producers are responsible for end-of-life management of their products. This continued divergence in INC negotiations indicates a need for innovative strategies outside of a global treaty.

China's domestic strategy on plastic pollution

China's domestic approach to plastics pollution reflects an unresolved tension between environmental protection and industrial growth. Since the early 2010s, the Chinese leadership has framed plastics waste – popularly termed “white pollution” – as a visible symbol of environmental mismanagement and a threat to so-called national ecological civilization.

A series of high-profile interventions since has reshaped not only domestic plastic governance, but also global waste markets.

The most consequential of these interventions came in 2017 with the launch of the [National Sword](#) campaign, which banned the import of most foreign plastic waste. This policy reflected a confluence of domestic and international aims: at home, it sought to reduce environmental degradation and health hazards from informal recycling sectors; abroad, it asserted China's intention to no longer serve as a dumping ground for wealthier economies. The ban forced the EU, the US and others to drastically adjust their waste management systems. [EU exports of plastic waste to China fell by 95 percent in one year](#). According to the European Commission, the reduction in overseas waste transport saved the EU [over €2 billion \(26 billion SEK\)](#) in [eco-costs](#) linked to global warming, freshwater ecotoxicity, fine particulate matter formation and human carcinogenic toxicity, underscoring the environmental and financial impact of National Sword. These global shifts demonstrate how China's national environmental policies can reshape global markets.

Domestically, China has reinforced its anti-plastic posture through increasingly ambitious regulatory efforts. The [2021–2025 Plastics Pollution Control Action Plan](#) outlines phased restrictions on single-use plastics, complemented by sectoral targets and recycling mandates. The roadmap included [staged bans on thin plastic bags, utensils and packaging to 2025](#). These policies are nested within China's broader **circular economy** agenda, which positions waste prevention and resource efficiency as key levers for reducing environmental harm and supporting industrial upgrading. Legal reforms to the [Solid Waste Law](#) and the [Marine Environmental Protection Law](#) have institutionalized local government responsibility for enforcement, while [national targets](#) such as recovering 85 percent of agricultural film by 2025 indicate a growing emphasis on systemic recycling capacity.

These policies and reforms signal a growing attempt to align environmental regulation with China's dual carbon goals – [peaking emissions by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060](#). As petrochemical derivatives, plastics pollute the environment not only through inadequate waste management, but also through industrial emissions from production. Controlling plastics pollution is aligned with broader efforts on green supply chains, modernizing heavy industry and meeting climate pledges.

At the same time, China's industrial plans continue to prioritize petrochemicals and plastics production. The petrochemical sector remains a pillar of national industrial policy. Ethylene (a key plastic feedstock) and plastic resin production continue to expand. State-owned firms such as Sinopec are driving a [projected 50–60 percent increase in ethylene capacity by 2025](#). These expansions serve domestic industry growth aims – securing feedstock supply and export revenue – but pose environmental risks.

China therefore faces a trade-off. While its policies can curb “white pollution”, continued expansion of plastic production risks exacerbating pollution unless paired with green innovation. In sum, China's **domestic priorities are two-fold**: strengthen waste management and recycling to meet environmental and climate goals, while sustaining petrochemical growth for economic reasons. These dual priorities create an opportunity for the EU to engage with China on shared concerns around plastics pollution.

A balancing act: EU-China cooperation on plastics and the circular economy

The failure to conclude a global plastics treaty highlights the need for progress at a smaller scale. China's domestic complexity – ambitious waste policies alongside rapid petrochemical expansion – creates both constraints on and opportunities for cooperation. For the EU, this means focusing on practical, mutually beneficial initiatives rather than waiting for breakthroughs in multilateral negotiations.

- **High-level dialogue and policy coordination.** Plastics should remain a standing item in EU-China high-level meetings, such as the [High-Level Dialogue on Climate and Environment](#). Building on the [2025 EU-China Environment Policy Dialogue](#), the EU should institutionalize a plastics task force within existing EU-China cooperation frameworks. In UN Environment Programme (UNEP) forums, the EU should continue to stress shared interests such as marine health and climate impacts while encouraging China's constructive role.
- **Technical knowledge exchange and joint research.** The EU has gained useful experience from its [2018 EU Plastics Strategy](#) and [Single-Use Plastics Directive](#). Expanding technical exchange with China could include pilot projects on circular packaging, deposit-return systems and construction material recycling. Joint research on bioplastics, chemical recycling and eco-design standards would help China operationalize its 2021–2025 plan, while aligning EU and Chinese priorities.
- **Mobilize Multilateral Initiatives.** Multilateral cooperation can mitigate political friction between the EU and China while advancing sustainable development goals. Trilateral “South-South-North” projects (e.g. with Kenya or Indonesia) would provide three-way benefits. China could extend its Green Belt and Road Initiative, the EU could strengthen its diplomacy with the Global South, and partner countries would increase their capacity to tackle plastics pollution. The [EU-China Connectivity Platform](#), a framework signed in 2015 to promote transport cooperation, could serve as a model for promoting cooperation on plastics management. These efforts would mitigate political friction through increased transparency between the EU and China, and advance sustainable development goals.

Together, these approaches can turn the current deadlock into an opportunity to advance shared innovation, reduce political friction and embed plastics in the wider circular economy agenda of both the EU and China, thereby promoting cooperation.

Sweden's role

Sweden's direct leverage with China is limited, but it can play an influential role by working through the EU and multilateral channels while showcasing Nordic leadership and expertise.

- **Promote Nordic/EU leadership.** Sweden has long championed high-ambition climate and environment goals. As part of the EU, Sweden can ensure that plastics remain a priority in EU–China dialogues. For example, Sweden's Environment Commissioner and Foreign Ministry can continue to engage with counterparts in Beijing, highlighting Nordic circular economy initiatives as models. Joint Nordic statements (e.g. at the United Nations Environment Assembly) can also signal to China that Northern Europe expects strong

action. China's support for the [Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework](#) demonstrates Beijing's willingness to collaborate when agreements are attractive. Sweden should similarly press for ambitious plastics action as part of the global environment agenda.

- **Facilitate technical knowledge exchange and cooperation.** Swedish research and industry have relevant expertise, from advanced recycling to low-carbon technologies. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and others can engage through existing programmes such as the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED). For instance, joint projects under CCICED could focus on China's plastics recycling infrastructure and "green cities" projects. Swedish universities and institutes could partner with Chinese counterparts to develop low-plastic materials or improve waste-to-energy processes.
- **Foster business-to-business links.** Swedish companies in retail, packaging and waste management could model circular practices in China. A Swedish-Chinese business forum on plastics could showcase innovations such as biodegradable packaging and advanced sorting technologies, encouraging voluntary commitments from Chinese industry.
- **Strengthen science and monitoring cooperation.** Sweden is active in Arctic and Baltic environmental initiatives, where plastic litter is a concern. Through forums such as the Arctic Council and the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM), Sweden could invite Chinese observers or experts to share data on marine plastics and study transboundary flows. Such engagement is aligned with China's interest in Arctic affairs and would raise awareness in China of the transboundary impacts of plastics pollution.

By combining EU engagement, technical expertise and Nordic leadership, Sweden can help to anchor EU-China collaboration on plastics in practical, forward-looking action.

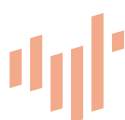


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