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Xi's debut visit will 'open a new chapter' in Sino-European relations

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By Li Hongmei

President Xi Jinping will make his debut trip as head of state to Europe - "a priority on China's diplomatic agenda this year" - later in March to "open a new chapter" in Sino-European relations, China's top diplomat said during the just-concluded NPC and CPPCC annual sessions.

Xi will visit Brussels on 31 March, the European Commission has also confirmed.

The possibility of a trip has been on the cards for some time, as Xi will be making a tour of Europe, but the timing of his stopover in Brussels had been uncertain, said the commission.

The visit will not be a full-blown summit, with but will instead feature a number of small meetings, chiefly with the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, and Herman Van Rompuy, president of the European Council, the body that brings together the European Union's 28 member states, according to the European Commission.

The next EU-China summit will be held in the autumn, said the commission.

Xi will also meet Belgian leaders and, on 1 April, will speak at the College of Europe, a partially EU-funded postgraduate college that has historically given an education to many future EU officials.

Xi's visit will be one of three top-level meetings in Brussels in the space of a week, said the European Commission.

Observers said Xi's visit underscores Beijing's traditional attention to the world's largest economy, and is expected to yield more opportunities for cooperation by linking China's ongoing reform with Europe's economic recovery.

"Cooperation' is the key word in relations between China and Europe, and both sides will work to align their respective developmental strategies during Xi's visit," Foreign Minister Wang Yi said.

"This is especially the case when China's development-model transition gains momentum, and has embarked on comprehensive and in-depth reforms," Wang said at a news conference of the China's annual parliamentary session.

Wang highlighted priorities such as science and technological innovation, energy and environmental conservation, a new type of urbanization, connectivity, and people-to-people and cultural exchanges.

Wang also called for ramping up negotiations on a Sino-EU investment agreement, with a view to future free trade arrangements between China and Europe. In November's China-EU summit, both sides unveiled the China-Europe 2020 plan, a road map for China-Europe cooperation for the rest of the decade; began negotiations on a free trade agreement; and set a goal of \$1 trillion in trade by 2020.

Zhao Jinjun, former Chinese ambassador to France, said both sides are keen on deepening cooperation as well as pushing the investment and free-trade agreements forward.

"China can learn from Europe's leading experience in fields such as science and technology, while China's fast-paced economy could contribute to the bloc's recovering but still-sluggish economy," he said.

A free trade deal would increase both sides' interdependence and potentially reduce the risk of new trade disputes, he said.

"Although such disputes are inevitable due to increasingly larger trade, neither side will ever let those disputes affect the movement toward greater cooperation," Zhao added.

The EU is China's most important trading partner, and in Europe, China is second only to the United States in terms of trade. In 2012, Sino-EU bilateral trade was more than \$546 billion.

The two sides reached an agreement last year over the price of Chinese solar panels sold in the EU, ending a row over the issue.

Jia Xiudong, a senior research fellow at the China Institute of International Studies, said there are no fundamental conflicts of interest between China and Europe, but Europe needs to resort less to trade protectionism.

China's flagship newspaper the People's Daily said in a commentary on Wednesday:

The visit will be yet another diplomatic event of great significance for China to carry forward the new model of major power relationship. Xi's upcoming Europe trip will deepen the Sino-European relations, enhance the comprehensive and strategic cooperation between two major civilizations, and also two big markets, and promote mutual benefit and win-win. It will open a new chapter in Sino-European relations.

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