

## Flourishing Sino-Belgian trade

### Diamonds, cars and tech fueling bilateral business

By SUN YONGFU  
For China Daily

China-Belgium trade and investment has followed a sound track of development due to the lasting efforts by governments from both sides over the years.

Over the past decade, trade between the two countries has registered an annual growth of more than 16 percent, rising to almost \$30 billion in 2011 from some \$10 billion in 2005.

China has maintained healthy bilateral relations with Belgium for nearly half a century and considers this economic partnership one of the most important highlights in the relationship.

Belgium is now China's sixth-largest trade partner in the European Union, while China has been the second biggest trade partner — excluding EU members — to Belgium for years.

Last year, bilateral trade exceeded \$25 billion, the third highest in history, despite the weak demand in Europe.

Transactions in mechanical and electrical products accounted for the largest proportion of 35 percent among China's exports to Belgium. Of China's imports, diamonds and automobiles are the main focuses, making up nearly one-third of the total products.

Also, the two sides have maintained strong cooperation in bilateral investment.

Drawing on its convenient financial policies, healthy legal system as well as open and fair commercial environment, Belgium has become one of the top destinations in Europe for Chinese companies to invest.

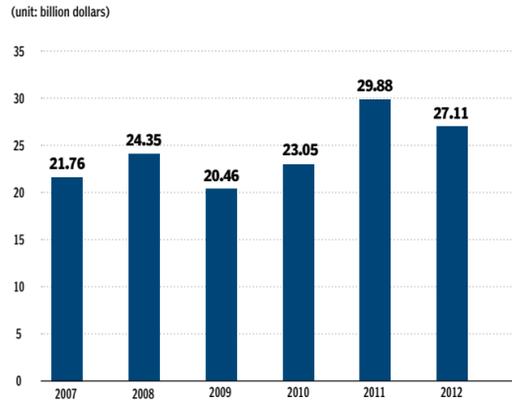
Data shows that Chinese companies have made a total of \$3 billion investment in the EU country covering a wide range of sectors including finance, agriculture, hotels, ports and telecommunications.

On the other hand, China is a popular destination for Belgian investors. Total Belgian-funded projects numbered 912 by the end of last year. The combined \$1.33 billion in investment involves such fields as construction materials, energy, food and chemicals.

In addition, Belgium has also consistently been one of China's most important sources of technology. By the end of last year, 774 of its technologies involving \$3.5 billion in contractual value were in use in China.

Belgium has technological expertise in an array of domains such as microelectronics, chemicals, biomedicine, nuclear power and the circular economy. That offers enormous potential for further partnering between the

#### BILATERAL TRADE



Source: European Union statistics

ZHOUYANG / CHINA DAILY



Sun Yongfu

two countries and will become a new growth spot in bilateral trade and investment.

China is currently devoted to economic transformation and industrial restructuring. It will further deepen the reform by establishing a new open-economy system that features

balance, safety, mutual benefit and high efficiency.

Given the circumstances, the trade and economic partnership between China and Belgium will see more fruitful results.

To this end, the two countries need to promote cooperation in emerging industries including environmental protection, logistics and the green economy while increasing the cooperation in traditional sectors to advance the development of bilateral economic ties.

They should also oppose trade protectionism and encourage more bilateral investment and cooperation between cities in the two countries.

The author is director-general of the European Department of the Ministry of Commerce.



ERIC LALMAND / AFP / BELGA

President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan arrive at Brussels National Airport on Sunday.

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# Connecting with the Flanders-China chamber

## Chairman: Keys to doing business in both cultures

*Editor's note: As Chinese President Xi Jinping visits Belgium from Mar 30 to Apr 1, Bert De Graeve, chairman of the Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce and also CEO of Bekaert Group, talked with China Daily reporter Zhang Zhao about the latest development in business cooperation between the two countries.*

### What are the major achievements in economic and trade cooperation between China and Belgium in the recent years?

Economic and trade relations between Belgium and China have been constantly expanding.

Belgian companies — especially Flemish companies — are very flexible and are very accommodating in working with Chinese partners. Both sides have a pragmatic way of working. Our companies are good at analyzing problems and formulating workable solutions. In working together with Chinese partners one should not be patronizing but rather listen and work toward a common approach that will result in a win-win situation favorable to all concerned.

Belgian companies such as Bekaert, Barco, Agfa, Umicore and Picanol have their feet on the ground. They have brought world-class technologies to China in many areas that have contributed to the further development of China's economy and society.

### What advantages do both sides have in the bilateral

### business relationship?

Although our countries are very much different in size and population, we are capable of working very well together because China is very respectful of smaller partners. Belgium tends to focus on getting business done rather than trying to score political points. Moreover, Belgium has unique access to the European market.

### In what areas the business environment in China has improved and in what areas difficulties still remain?

The investment climate in China is constantly improving. More and more sectors are being opened up to private Chinese investment and also foreign investment.

Of course, China is a very competitive market as all of the world's companies worth their mettle in their sector are trying to grab a piece of the Chinese market. There is also a problem of overcapacity in many sectors, often caused by the abundant availability of financing and other stimuli.

For some companies it might be very difficult to succeed, but to have a fighting chance you need to have a unique product, continue innovating by investing in R&D and keep ahead of the competition by listening to your customers.

Some difficulties remain, such as corruption and the enforcement of intellectual property rights, but the Chinese authorities are aware of those issues and are proactively fighting to solve them.



Bert De Graeve

As Premier Li Keqiang has emphasized, China will provide a level playing field for domestic and foreign companies. We cannot ask for more. With a level playing field it is up to every company to work to the best of its ability to come out on top of the competition. However, missed business opportunities owing to market access and regulatory barriers have been reported by half of all European companies doing business in China.

### In which sectors do you see new partnership potential in the future?

The sectors of the Internet and mobile communications are advancing very fast in China, but up to now Belgian companies have not been very active in this field. No doubt there are also many opportunities to explore in sectors including healthcare, environmental protection, clean energy, new materials and electric vehicles.

Closer cooperation in the field of higher education is also a possibility, and from our side we should promote more English-language courses, which would make higher education in Belgium more

accessible to Chinese students.

### What is the role of the FCCC in promoting the China-Belgium relationship? What methods will you use to encourage Belgian companies to invest in China?

The Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce is set up by the largest Belgian investors in China. Our aim is to assist Belgian companies to do business in China and to support Chinese companies to invest in Belgium, the heart of Europe. We do this through the exchange of knowledge, experience and our network that we have built up in China.

We serve as a powerful information platform while at the same time giving Chinese delegations an opportunity to meet our members and the relevant Belgian authorities. That way, the Chinese can also learn about the opportunities we offer as a dynamic region at the very heart of Europe. We will continue to do this with the support of the Flemish government and acting in conjunction with the Belgian federal government.

Although information is becoming more and more accessible we try to make it more convenient for businesspeople in our country to get reliable economic and business news from China by e-mailing weekly newsletters to our members.

We also try to encourage Belgian companies to invest in China by documenting and popularizing the positive stories of those who have gone before them. We have already published two volumes of FCCC Member Portraits in China showing newcomers how obstacles have been over-

come and success achieved step by step. Besides that, we regularly organize conferences and briefings on topics that companies need to know when they invest in China.

Belgian companies can also benefit from the activities organized on a European level as the Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce also holds the secretariat general of the EU-China Business Association. And of course we develop and maintain the best possible relations with the Chinese diplomatic presence in Belgium.

### What suggestions do you have for Chinese companies that plan to invest in Belgium?

When Chinese companies plan to invest in Belgium

it is important to get a good insight on the investment climate, investment funds, the local regulations, tax advantages, the culture and other aspects to build up a network with authorities, our chamber of commerce and our member companies.

They also need to share experiences and learn from other Chinese companies that have invested here and exchange views with Belgian companies about how they work. As the Chinese saying goes, "crossing the river by feeling the stones" is the best way to move forward.

Belgian companies investing in China should do their homework well to avoid disappointments. Chinese companies planning to invest in Belgium should do likewise.

The Belgian and European markets are also very complicated for Chinese businesspeople accustomed to the Chinese market. But many tools are available — including our Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce — to guide them and help them along. I can assure you that Chinese investors will be warmly welcomed in Flanders and will quickly start to like doing business here.

### Do you have any other topics that you want to share with our readers?

We are delighted that President Xi Jinping is visiting Belgium and hope his visit will be a complete success, marking another milestone in the development of our fruitful bilateral relations.



Belgium-developed solar-energy equipment on display at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Business leaders see great potential for clean energy technology in China.

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# Brussels: Gateway to govt and investment

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**International companies coming to Brussels can also benefit from a variety of subsidies including tax breaks.**

MATTIAS DEBROYERD  
ECONOMIC AND COMMERCIAL  
COUNSELLOR

sidies including tax breaks," Debroyerd said.

He said that the city has introduced a series of tax reforms for Belgian companies and Belgian branches of non-resident companies.

Certain foreign executives in management positions, specialists and researchers residing temporarily in Belgium are eligible for a special tax regime that treats them as non-residents.

The city provides other subsidies to support investment, management consulting, R&D, employment and exports, he said.

Brussels' location and transportation also add to its appeal.

It has the second-largest inland port in Belgium and the



PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Headquarters city for many multinationals and diplomatic missions, Brussels offers enormous potential for further growth in trade with China, analysts say.

An attractive investment destination for the world's entrepreneurs, Brussels is home to more than 1,300 foreign companies, according to a report from the foreign trade and investment agency Brussels Invest & Export.

The majority of foreign companies based in the city are from the United States, France, UK, Germany, Japan and China, including big names like General Motors, ICBC, Microsoft and Coca-Cola.

The capital city also hosts most headquarters of Belgian companies, the report said.

Among the city's appeal to businesses around the world, its influence on European policy-making is the most important.

Brussels houses some major EU institutions and the headquarters of 1,750 international organizations including NATO, the Western European Union, the World Customs Organization and Eurocontrol.

Mattias Debroyerd, economic and commercial counsellor for Brussels-Capital Region in China, said the important institutions and organizations employ or attract a large international sector of diplomatic corps, worldwide press, lobby agencies, law firms, NGOs and consulting companies.

"Brussels is second only to New York in the number of diplomats and is also the second-most important conference center," he said.

This international presence allows companies and organizations in the city to have a direct access to decision-making processes affecting businesses around the world, as well as the most updated information.

"International companies coming to Brussels can also benefit from a variety of sub-

sixth-biggest in Europe. It is at the center of the European high-speed rail network.

Paris is 1.2 hours away and London 1.55 hours by Eurostar.

The city is also a logistic hub for distribution activities in Europe. It also has an ideal test market at the crossroads of the southern European Latin and northern European Germanic cultures.

Some 25 percent of US export to Europe transit through Benelux — a union of three neigh-

boring countries Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

And it has four research parks and 30 industrial zones.

The living cost and real estate prices are relatively low in Brussels.

According to a survey from the global real estate company Cushman & Wakefield, office rent in Brussels in 2012 was the cheapest in Europe at 435 euros per sq m annually.

The city also has many top universities and a highly educat-

ed workforce. People in the city speak both French and Dutch, and English is widely spoken.

Key industrial sectors in Brussels include IT, healthcare, autos, lobbying, NGOs and finances, according to the report.

The report said that there are about 1,100 IT companies in the city that provide employment for some 32,500 employees and generate annual revenues of 3.2 billion euros.

The city has more than 600 companies with 74,000 jobs in the health sector.

It is also home to 47 hospitals, four university hospitals and public research centers, according to the report.

The main economic players in the sector are the large multinational drug companies and small high-tech companies in biotechnology and medical equipment.

The auto industry in Belgium produced around

500,000 cars in 2007, about 10 percent of them from Brussels production lines, according to the report.

The report said that Brussels is the world's second-largest center for NGOs and lobbyists — activists seeking to persuade members of government.

In the finance sector, the Brussels Stock Exchange is one of the top 10 stock exchanges in the world, according to the report. The city also has a strong expertise in transaction processing.

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