

Why China sees the EU as a counterweight to America



China is keeping a careful watch on EU integration and the development of its security and defence policy.

Dingli Shen says the ESDP is already earning Beijing's general approval, and explains that because China seeks a multipolar world rather than one dominated by the US it views the EU as a means to achieve that

China sees the European Union as a possible balance to the United States. The last rival superpower to the US, the Soviet Union, collapsed at the end of the Cold War, and quite apart from its military strength, was in any case never powerful enough in other ways to counterbalance US influence. Japan had in the late 1980s seemed capable of challenging America's industrial leadership, but by the 1990s it had lost its competitive edge. China might itself wish to be a major force in a multipolar world, but has been plagued by its lack of overall strength. Given these realities, Beijing sees the expanding EU as a likely counter to United States' unchecked power.

In terms of total economic output, the EU of 27 member states today generates the same amount of wealth as the United States. In recent decades the EU has made tremendous efforts to integrate its legal, economic and monetary systems. It is the

first continent-wide inter-state system based on political and legal cognition. It continues to grow while retaining its quality because the Union insists on a minimum economic standing by an applicant state before it can be admitted. But the EU has yet to build a strong integrated defence system that can respond promptly and effectively either to a regional contingency or to global needs. What would be the strength of such a system when developed, and how would it compare with that of the United States?

In assessing the current strength of the United States, Beijing follows with keen interest the debate in Washington on the merits of a unipolar or a multipolar world. Some Americans obviously favour a unipolar system in which the US dominates. Such a Pax Americana system would surely cost the country less to sustain, but the world would worry if America adapts a wrong course, as has been the case with the US-led intrusion into Iraq. The US certainly has a right to curb

the terrorists who staged the 9/11 attack on New York and the Pentagon, but the “war on terror” did not warrant the decision to attack a sovereign state and topple its government on the presumption, flawed as it turned out, that it housed weapons of mass destruction and was linked to the 9/11 attacks.

The United States went ahead with the war despite strong opposition from France, Germany, Russia, China and others in the United Nations Security Council. It has been a war that has resulted in many thousands of casualties, both military and civilian, and widespread destruction. France and Germany have since sought to restore their good relations with the US, but continue to disapprove of the war. The Middle East, always a region of concern for Europe, has become even less stable as a result of the war. American leadership has been one of the war’s casualties.

The notion of a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) was first formulated in 1999 at an EU summit in Cologne. The EU formed a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) and various police missions, to carry out operations involving humanitarian rescue, crisis management and peacekeeping, as well as to restore peace in areas of conflict. The EU has made it clear that its ESDP will operate under the auspices of both the UN and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

In China, the concept of an independent European defence is generally seen to suit its preferred notion of a multipolar world rather than a unipolar one dominated by

COMMENTARY

By Franco Algieri

Sadly, the ESDP looks stronger from the outside than it is

What a wonderfully harmonious world it would be – at least from a Chinese perspective – if the EU were to develop in the way described by Dingli Shen. He correctly explains China’s view of the world and international relations, and at the same time he is also right in saying that the EU has in just a decade developed the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in a remarkable way. But from a European perspective things look a little different.

Two misperceptions need to be clarified. The first concerns what might be called the emerging new international order. Looking back at the history of Sino-European relations during the second half of the 20th century, China has always interpreted Europe’s integration process in the context of different theoretical concepts of Chinese foreign policy. At one time, the European integration process was observed rather sceptically by China, and then at another time it was seen as something positive. Today, Beijing views the whole concept of multipolarity in which the EU is so deeply embedded from a very Chinese perspective.

The problem for China is that the EU and its member states are rather hesitant to use the term multipolarity in the context of EU foreign, security and defence policy. With the possible

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the United States. China accepts that on most security matters, the ESDP will in the near future coincide with American security interests because they share fundamental values of human rights and democracy. A number of EU member states have at the same time pledged their defence capabilities to NATO, which has been led by the United States since its creation at the outset of the Cold War, and it continues to operate under strong American influence. The US was the prime mover of NATO's activity in Kosovo in 1999 and it has shouldered some 80% of the operational work. In Afghanistan, Americans and Europeans are together in the NATO coalition of forces fighting the Taliban.

But an independent European security and defence policy, once it is fully developed, will not necessarily equate with that of the United States, especially if American policy significantly deviates from the norm of international law, as was the case of the Iraq war. The Europeans are, as a result of acquiring a pan-European defensive capacity, likely to play a more independent role than at present in managing intra-European security relations and carrying out its missions globally.

Between 2003-07 there have been 19 ESDP interventions that involved conflict, four of them were military missions, two of

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them of a quasi-military nature and eight were police missions. All have conformed to normal legal requirements.

Beijing welcomes an expanded security role for the EU. Although it may be still wary of international intervention by the EU, the substances and pattern of ESDP operations are likely to win Beijing's respect. Firstly, the Chinese leadership takes particular note of the fact that the ESDP attaches high importance to the legitimacy of its missions. So far, all ESDP missions have respected international law and governmental arrangements among disputing parties. Most of its military or police missions have been based on UN Security Council resolutions, and ESDP missions outside Europe have been at the invitation of local authorities. Subsequently, the EU's actions have thus been a helpful addition to UN Security Council decisions.

It should be noted that ESDP security missions, even those in accordance with UNSC resolutions, may not operate within the UN system – the EU prefers its own independent leadership. The ESDP doesn't necessarily require a UNSC authorisation as a condition for its action. However, in Chinese eyes, the ESDP when compared with the US cares far more for international legitimacy through the authority of the UN. But the Europeans still have room to play with when taking an independent role in executing their missions.

Secondly, the ESDP is concerned with good governance and sustainable institution building. The EU is keen to either restore or install human rights, stability and

exception of France, the multipolarity debate is not a European one. The term isn't to be found in the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003, and when the ESS talks about an international order based on effective multilateralism this should not be confused with multipolarity. It also seems a kind of wishful thinking that the EU and the US might be separated that easily. Transatlantic relations have certainly been undergoing difficulties, but the general interest on both sides of the Atlantic in keeping up the relationship remains strong.

The second misperception is linked to the nature and the potential of the ESDP. From the early days of ESDP in late 1998 until today, security and defence policy has become one of the most dynamic and fast developing policies of the European integration process. But not everything that glitters is gold. Apart from specific practical details concerning the implementation of this policy, one should be aware that it is far from being a common policy. It was never conceptualised as one, even though the wording of the Lisbon treaty might give the impression that there will be a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The whole project is an intergovernmental one. When reading the respective provisions in the Treaty on European Union, they underline the fact that the EU's member states remain firmly in control of security and defence policy. And even if the ESS refers to the "need to develop a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid and when necessary, robust intervention", the EU is still in search of such a strategic culture, while there are diverging views amongst EU member states when it comes to the level and intensity of military engagement in any given conflict. A strategic culture, or a strategically guided foreign

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prosperity as well as governance. Within Europe, the ESDP aspires to the promotion of regional stability and to preparing for further EU expansion on the premise of good governance. But outside Europe, the ESDP acts to enhance governance rather than promote regime change, and the EU has often assisted governments' efforts to improve security matters.

Thirdly, the ESDP is open to international cooperation. The EU either works with non-EU states, such as NATO members like Canada, Norway and Turkey, or with applicants for EU membership such as a number of former Warsaw Pact states. The ESDP cooperates with the UN and other regional organisations such as African Union and ASEAN. When the EU reaches out, it tends to play a leading role in these collaborations.

There are good reasons to expect Beijing's acceptance of an independent European security mechanism. There is little concern, if any, about the ESDP affecting Chinese internal affairs, such as the Taiwan problem. In any case, the temperature across the Taiwan Strait is cooling. Beijing can see the constructive ramification of a strong and independent Europe, and from that vantage point it is not too early for China to envisage a multipolar global system as already on the horizon. □

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policy as in the case of China, is far from a reality in the case of Europe.

Expectations that the EU might develop into a "true security alliance" as Dingli Shen calls it seem to be higher outside the EU, than inside it. Even if the Lisbon treaty – or the parts that concern foreign, security and defence policy – eventually becomes a reality, the EU will remain a restrained security actor. Nevertheless, when looking at EU-China relations it would be worthwhile to start a concrete dialogue on global interests and to find out, where a common denominator might be developed. □

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