

Irrelevant or not? Thoughts on the EU's strategic partnership with China

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There is no need for a crystal ball to get an impression which actors will probably be the main drivers in the process of shaping the 21st century. The contours of international relations are already visible. Many different actors, be they states, non-state actors, regions, multilateral fora etc. need to be considered. Terms like 'power transition' and 'power diffusion' are discussed (Joseph S. Nye: *The future of power*, New York 2011). Referring to states, China and the USA are often used as a point of reference. In this context the development of Sino-American relations and the respective consequences for international relations are of interest. Whether or not these two major powers will be able to "merge efforts to build the world", as Henry Kissinger ends his book "On China" (New York 2011) can be discussed controversially. Controversies do also characterize the debate over the future of the European Union (EU). It is not simply the ongoing search for a solid construction of the European integration project as a whole that matters. Moreover, the global reach of the Union's shaping power is at stake. Against that background it has to be asked how relevant a strategic partnership of the EU with China can be in the years to come. For that purpose, a closer look needs to be taken at the conceptual aspects of the EU-China strategic partnership, the guidelines of the EU's foreign and security policy in East Asia and the debate concerning the EU's global strategy. Based hereupon, the idea of a triangular strategic dialogue will be explained.

Conceptual aspects of the EU-China strategic partnership

Nine years after declaring EU-China relations to be a comprehensive strategic partnership, the EU and China expressed

at the 15th EU-China summit, held in Brussels on 20 September 2012, the common determination to further develop relations "towards a stronger EU-China comprehensive strategic partnership" (Council of the EU, 14022/12, Presse 388). But how is the term 'strategic partnership' to be understood? From 1975 onwards – when official diplomatic relations were established between the EC and China – EU-China relations have developed impressively. Interdependence in different policy fields has been continuously increasing and the whole relationship is highly institutionalized and complex, involving a multitude of different actors at the supranational and national level. Most often, reference is made to impressive trade statistics and dozens of sectoral dialogues between the EU and China, in order to explain the mutual relevance. The EU and China discuss questions relating to trade and investment regimes, disarmament and non-proliferation, regional crisis and conflict management, energy security, maritime security as well as environmental and Arctic matters, to name just a few of the issues of common concern. Taking into account the European Security Strategy of 2003, country specific communications and concepts of the European Commission, statements by the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the positions of the European Parliament or the EU member states relations with China, it is more than obvious that China is of prior interest for Europe.

However, an increasing number of dialogue structures and a constant enlargement of the European-Chinese agenda with a multitude of topics are not necessarily an indicator of a strategic partnership. Setting up more and new institutional formats as well as redefining procedures

will not automatically strengthen the EU-China strategic relationship. On the contrary, such an approach could make the dialogue even more complex and scattered, leading to a more difficult coordination process and may result in an institutional overstretch. In the end, the already contested coherence of the EU's China policy could be further eroded. Furthermore, expectations concerning the impact of the EU on China and vice versa of China on the EU need to be grounded in reality.

What is missing so far is a clear delineation of commonalities and divergences concerning each partner's specific interests in regional and global affairs and in conjunction with the individual foreign, security and defence political concepts. Starting from the assumption that the EU as well as China are rational actors and do follow a strategy of increasing their own power (a) to be sovereign in determining major internal systemic developments, (b) to be capable of influencing the regional neighbourhood in a way to reduce security risks and (c) to shape multilateral fora and cooperation in the international arena with a view to establishing some kind of global architecture, the interplay of these two actors is obviously of interest.

The former US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick talked in 2005 of the need to urge China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. In his understanding responsible stakeholders "recognize that the international system sustains their peaceful prosperity, so they work to sustain that system" (<http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>). At the EU-China summit in September 2012 the EU and China described themselves as "influential

in the world scene of the 21st century" and as "crucial actors in advancing peace, prosperity and stability" (Council of the EU, 14022/12, Presse 388). They also emphasized the commitment to multilateralism and the central role of the United Nations.

EU foreign and security policy in East Asia

On 15 June 2012 the Council of the EU approved the "Guidelines on the EU's foreign and security policy in East Asia" (Council of the EU, 11492/12). Most of the issues therein were already mentioned in respective guidelines agreed in December 2007 (Council of the EU, 16183/07, Presse 286). The broad approach to security reflects the well-known basic principles of European foreign and security policy. The EU stresses major direct economic interests in East Asia and that regional security and stability is a precondition for the economic success of East Asia. Linked herewith, major East Asian players, i.e. China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and their policies are regarded as important for the EU. The EU supports multilateral cooperation in regional fora such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the involvement of extra-regional partners (e.g. India, Russia or Australia) is welcomed. Emphasizing the role of the USA in East Asia, the EU is strongly interested in cooperating with Washington on foreign and security political challenges that characterize the region. To implement an East Asia policy according to European interests, the mentioned guidelines focus on different dialogue structures on bilateral and multilateral level as well as agreements (such as Free Trade Agreements or Partnership and Cooperation Agreements). Additionally, coordination between the European External Action Service, EU delegations and EU member states is regarded as valuable contribution for implementing a strategic East Asia policy of the EU.

Chapter IV of the guidelines explains issues of relevance for European foreign and

security policy towards East Asia. These comprise the power balance in the region, the link between East Asian development and the EU's global agenda, the regional security architecture, Cross-Strait relations, the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea. For each of these issues China matters and is understood to have regional and global impact. The EU-China strategic partnership is expected "to be one of frankness and transparency, reciprocity, mutual support and enhanced bilateral ties". Whether such an idealistic relationship is possible at all can be challenged. It will be hard to find an adequate example in international relations. Even in transatlantic relations such attributes are at times used more in a rhetoric way than as a description of reality.

Following the guidelines, "the credibility of US defence guarantees" in East Asia "is essential at present for the region's stability". What does this mean for EU-US cooperation on East Asian affairs? Can coordination between the EU and the US on Asian security be established – be it on the margins of multilateral fora like the ARF or the United Nations or in a direct EU-US dialogue on Asian security – in such a way that it will be of relevance for Asian actors? What is the reaction of the EU to the US strategy of "rebalancing", i.e. bringing forces from other regions to Asia and to spread them over the Asia Pacific region?

The EU's strategic partnership with China can be of additional nature to support multilateral efforts for issues of common concern, i.e. European, American and Asian (in particular Chinese) ones. But can the EU become important in terms of security and defence political bargaining processes inside the Asia Pacific region? For example: Could the EU have been included in the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program, enlarging it to Seven-Party talks? Would this have been in the interest of the six parties? What would have been the added value of the EU's participation? In addition, as already mentioned above, concerns about a weak coherence of the EU's China policy (the co-

herence problem characterizes EU foreign and security policy since a long time) and EU member states competing for economic benefits in dealing with China are not new. Similarly, the EU and the US are trade political competitors in Asia.

China and the US are obviously the two key powers in the Asia-Pacific region and it has to be questioned, whether the EU's foreign and security policy towards East Asia can really be considered as relevant in general and whether China and the US seriously take the European approach into consideration. When China talks about great power relations, not the EU but the USA is meant. And when US studies discuss scenarios for future relations between the USA and China, the EU is not even of marginal importance.

Linking strategy to the EU

Almost unnoticed, overshadowed by the European financial crisis, a debate about the European Union's strategic performance as a global actor in the 21st century has started to develop more intensively. Looking at current political and media debates dealing with the EU, the impression cannot be avoided, as if there was only the financial and economic dimension that matters for the future of Europe. Therefore, it is no surprise that considerations about a new European Security Strategy (ESS) were so far a rather marginal topic. But already since the times when the European Security Strategy was negotiated, a European discourse turns around the question what a security strategy means for the EU, or to put it differently, what has to be done in order to call the EU a strategic security political actor.

Since the 1990s political and academic debates dealing with European and international security are looking at the systemic consequences of the end of cold war bipolarity. It turned out that such an exercise is no easy one and it would have been unrealistic to expect a fast and widely accepted explanatory scheme for international relations in the 21st century.

In this context, the term 'polarity' has received increasing attention. It is disputed which form of polarity will ultimately be the one that can be used for describing the world of today. Some authors explained a "unipolar era" (see Charles Krauthammer) with the United States as the decisive actor. Others proposed bipolarity. In such a scenario two different models can be distinguished: one with the USA and China and another with the USA and Europe as the two poles (for the latter see Andrew Moravcsik). Furthermore, looking at the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) in conjunction with the EU and the USA, different settings of multipolarity can be constructed. Finally, even a system of nonpolarity is mentioned (see Richard Haass). No matter which form of polarity will be evaluated in the future as the one that characterised the early 21st century most adequately, the role of actors in a system of polarity is of crucial importance. Looking at such actors, be they states or state-like integration areas like the EU, it is their agendas of interests and their capabilities to shape a global systemic structure.

In this context the role of states and their diverging understanding of a strategic foreign policy is controversially discussed as well as the question concerning the EU's global aspirations. While the academic debate is intensifying, the member states of the EU rather seem to shy away from this topic. Looking for example at the so-called 'big three' of the EU, i.e. France, Germany and the UK, it soon becomes clear that specific experiences of history do characterize each of these countries' position towards a global foreign policy.

Even if an updated or a new European Security Strategy could be agreed upon by the EU member states in the near future, this would probably be of less importance for China and the US, unless concrete steps will be taken by EU member states (not necessarily all together) to operationalize such a conceptual approach. A future European Security Strategy ought to be more than another vague document.

In fact, it should help to close what Christopher Hill already in 1993 has defined as the "capability-expectations gap" (Journal of Common Market Studies (31) 3). A lot depends on the governments of EU member states to critically consider their own foreign policy strategies, to compare them with each other and to commonly work out the EU's global strategy. The work of research institutions and think tanks is just one way of contributing to such an effort. Additionally it will be essential to involve parliaments, the civil society, media and many non-state actors, because a global strategy of the EU needs a broad support inside the EU. Finally, it will be interesting to observe how the foreseen debate on defence issues in the European Council framework will develop in 2013.

A triangular strategic dialogue

Article 2(5) of the Lisbon Treaty reads as follows: „In its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values and interests and contribute to the protection of its citizens. It shall contribute to peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child, as well as to the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter.“ European foreign and security policy, being based on such an ambitious approach, needs to take into consideration the above-mentioned aspects of power transition and power diffusion and find adequate ways how to perform in such an environment.

The reduction of US troops in Europe and the Asia policy of the US implies that the EU has (a) to further develop its role as a security provider in the European neighbourhood and (b) to develop a strong Asia policy. These are two essential cornerstones for the credibility of the EU as a global actor, which are also important for China's perception of the EU. Since the

once visible euphoria concerning a strategic partnership between the EU and China has disappeared on both sides, it is even more difficult to avoid EU-China relations slipping into irrelevance in a global context. Generally it needs to be taken into consideration that the EU's attraction as a unique model of regional integration and as global actor is fading.

To counter such a development, it is necessary to first compare how China's foreign and security policy (and Asian security in a broader context) matter to the EU and, vice versa, how European foreign and security policy matter to China (and Asia). Second, diverging interests (be it the human rights debate or the arms embargo) need to be addressed in a way that allows it to end deadlocks, i.e. not taking them as arguments for explaining why further common steps cannot be achieved. Third, some EU member states certainly do not want to harm transatlantic links with a more sovereign China policy. Yet, a European China policy that is at times not moving out of the shadow of transatlantic considerations will always remain restraint.

If the EU wants to contribute to peace and security in a global context then a European debate about the possible emergence of a security dilemma in Asia is urgent. For this purpose the EU should use its multiple dialogue instruments to address not only China and the USA but also other states of the Asia-Pacific region. This could be a starting topic for building-up a strategic EU-China-US dialogue. Those European states which do share a greater degree of interdependence with China (and Asia) than others, should be the drivers, in close cooperation and coordination with the European External Action Service. Already in times of European Political Cooperation (EPC) single member states were associated with specific foreign policy interests towards third countries and regions. Likewise it can be thought of a core group for EU-China relations today. If, however, such a dialogue is not moving beyond the routine



of repeating the importance of Asia and Asian security and recalling common responsibilities for cooperation to handle global challenges, then it will soon be losing importance.

The internal development of the EU is a fundamental precondition for the future of EU-China relations as well as for other strategic partnerships of the EU. Though, the EU does not need to reinvent itself: overcoming long-lasting shortcomings of European foreign and security policy such as the incoherence of policies or divergences amongst member states, coupled with steps to fulfil the foreign, security and defence political goals that can be found in the Lisbon Treaty as well as in the European Security Strategy of 2003 (including the Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy of 2008) and making use of the existing instruments will be essential in order to turn the EU into a strategic global actor, improve its power and consequently increase the relevance of the Union for China, other Asian actors and the USA. Mutual trust between the parties involved in this setting is then expected to grow. And trust is the most essential component for global stability. In case the described triangular dialogue worked, Kissinger's above-mentioned two actors relationship that could merge efforts to build the world would have to be enlarged.

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