

The European Union and China: The Logics of 'Strategic Partnership'

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Abstract

This article argues that three key logics drive the EU's search for a 'strategic partnership' with China. The first part develops an argument about the logics of 'strategic partnerships' in EU external policy. The second part explores the development of EU strategies towards China since the mid-1990s, with reference to key official documents and statements, and examines the motivations for declaration of a 'strategic partnership' with China in 2003. The third part looks at the evidence for such a partnership in EU-China economic and diplomatic relations, and assesses the negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The conclusions revisit and re-assess the arguments, and place them into a broader context.

Keywords

European Union; China; Strategic Partnership

HOW FAR HAS THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) BECOME A STRATEGIC ACTOR IN THE global arena? This key question relates to the continuing debate about the EU's roles in international relations, and to the ways in which the EU might or might not become a 'power' in the international system (Elgström and Smith 2006; Hill and Smith 2005; Sjørusen 2007). It brings into focus a number of the key dilemmas that have been identified by the literature in respect of the EU's international relations: persistent problems of converting resources into power and leverage within international politics, the two-edged sword of the EU's institutional set-up, conferring both institutional strength, but also institutional complexity and rigidity, the pervasiveness of 'capability-expectation gaps' in all areas of the EU's international activity, and the equally pervasive tension between norms, identity and material interests in the EU's international life. Not only this, but it also relates to the ways in which the EU can establish its position in a rapidly changing international system, and adapt its aims and instruments to the rise and fall of actors and issues: can the EU position itself strategically to deal with new developments, and can it adapt its strategies to enable it to manage change and transformation?

The EU is not short of strategies; indeed, it has spent much of the past decade developing and publishing strategies in respect of significant actors, institutions and issues in the

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global arena. The Commission has produced successive Communications dealing with all regions of the world – including Antarctica – and with the changing global agenda, particularly where that agenda raises issues of global governance and the management of global change. During the past decade, it has also identified an increasing range of ‘strategic partnerships’ that can be taken to lie at the heart of its international relations (see for example Grevi and de Vasconcelos 2008). If we take the United States of America (USA) to be in important ways the original ‘strategic partner’ for the EU and indeed the EC before it, it is clear that the EU-US partnership has taken on a more formal and institutionalised shape in the period since the end of the Cold War. More recently, there has been a rush of strategic partners: the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China – but not necessarily in that order or all in the same institutional forms), various world regions or regional organisations, including Africa (especially through the African Union but also through sub-continental partnership agreements), Latin America (especially through the inter-continental summits, but also through links with MERCOSUR and other regional bodies), Asia-Pacific (through the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), but also through links with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)) and South Asia (through links with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and also now with the incorporation of some South Asian countries into the ASEM). And this is only a partial sample of a growing web of strategic links and commitments that seem increasingly to constitute an important element of the EU’s international identity.

But what are we to make of all those strategies? This article represents an attempt to develop some general ideas about the role of strategies, and especially ‘strategic partnerships’, in the EU’s external policies, and to apply them to one of the most fully developed ‘strategic partnerships’, that with China. Since the mid-1990s, the EU has doggedly pursued the development of this partnership, and as noted above declared in 2003 that China was to be a formally designated ‘strategic partner’. The EU-China relationship is thus the most mature of the new-generation ‘strategic partnerships’. It is also one where there is a strong coming together of the economic with the political and of material interests with normative elements; and it is one where the ‘strategic partner’ is itself a very powerful and increasingly prominent global actor. In short, it is a major test of the EU’s search for partnerships and its pursuit of ‘effective multilateralism’ (Odgaard and Biscop 2007).

The systematic evaluation of the forces driving EU policies bears the promise of insight into some of the fluctuations in the EU-China partnership, and some of the apparent contradictions. These have been pointed out by a number of recent studies (for example Balme 2008; Crossick and Reuter 2007; Fox and Godement 2009; Grant and Barysch 2008; Kerr and Liu Fei 2007; Zaborowski 2006). Such fluctuations and contradictions include: the internal divergence of preferences and commitments between EU Member States – a point made especially powerfully in the ‘power audit’ of EU-China relations by Fox and Godement (2009); the problems of integrating and coordinating policies crossing a range of issue areas in Brussels; the difficulties of translating formal institutional commitments into action; and the dilemmas created by the emerging ‘triangle’ of relations between the EU, the USA and China. By interrogating the idea of ‘strategic partnership’, we can hope to gain purchase in analysing and evaluating EU policies towards China in the period since the end of the Cold War and since the declaration of the ‘strategic partnership’ in 2003.

The article approaches the issues in three key stages. First, it develops a general framework for understanding the role of strategy and specifically the logics of ‘strategic partnerships’ in EU external policies. Second, it explores EU-China relations asking the question ‘how much strategy?’ – in other words, examining the EU’s discourse, positions and assumptions about EU-China relations and asking how they link to the logics of ‘strategic partnership’. This part of the argument will rely on a detailed examination of EU strategy papers and

statements. Third, the article re-examines the EU-China relationship in light of another key question: 'how much partnership?', with the aim of establishing how much substance there is to the practices of partnership in the relationship. In pursuing this second question, the argument touches on a range of episodes and issues in EU-China relations during the past ten years, and undertakes a case study of the negotiations for an EU-China Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA).

The article establishes that in exploring 'strategic partnerships' it is important to understand the underlying logics of EU external policies, and the ways in which these condition the union's external actions. It re-evaluates three key logics, which can serve as the foundation for further analysis of 'strategic partnerships' in EU external policy, as well as the basis for analysis of EU-China relations more generally. And it finally concludes that the EU-China 'strategic partnership' is at best a partial rather than a comprehensive one, understood in different ways at different times and among the key stakeholders.

'Strategy' and 'partnerships' in EU external policies

In order to pursue the analysis of the EU-China 'strategic partnership', it is necessary to clarify some key concepts and to develop some central questions. Essentially, there are three concepts that demand attention: first the idea of the EU as a strategic actor, second the notion of 'partnership' in EU external policies, and finally the logics of 'strategic partnership'.

First, let us explore the notion of the EU as a strategic actor. We have seen that the EU, through the Commission and other channels, has developed a large number of strategies. But this in itself does not make the EU a strategic actor. In order to be recognised as such, the EU needs to fulfil a number of criteria: the capacity to extract and mobilise resources, to relate them to its objectives and to a general strategic narrative, and to adapt its strategy in light of changes in the global arena.

The second idea that demands exploration here is that of partnership. As noted in the introduction, the EU is an inveterate (if not compulsive) seeker of partnerships in the world arena. In many ways, this is also seen as a sub-set or consequence of a fundamental commitment to multilateralism, which leads the EU into the construction of a series of overlapping partnership arrangements expressed in a wide variety of forms: association, economic cooperation, political dialogue, sectoral and other arrangements with governments, civil society and non-governmental organisations. In evaluating these arrangements, we need to use a variety of criteria: the level of material commitments and activities they reflect, the commitments undertaken, the relationship between partnerships and the EU's broader international commitments, the overall symmetry or asymmetry of the arrangements, and the ways in which they can be adapted or renegotiated to take account of changing interests and experiences.

Drawing on this discussion, it might be assumed that the notion of 'strategic partnerships' would be self-explanatory in EU external policies: these are partnerships that embody or express the general interest of the EU as a strategic actor, that form relationships with key interlocutors and that contribute to the realisation of the EU's strategic ambitions within the context of an agreed narrative. But what are the logics that drive partnerships in general and 'strategic partnerships' in particular?

Three logics of 'strategic partnership'

We propose that the EU's 'strategic partnerships' can be analysed through the exploration of their underlying logics, and that the fluctuations and unevenness of the 'strategic partnerships' can equally be accounted for by the operation of these logics. The three core logics that we propose are (1) the integration logic, (2) the logic of the external opportunity structure and (3) the logic of the EU's search for identity through external policy (Smith 2009).

In brief, these three logics enable us to argue as follows. The 'integration' logic bears on the ways in which the demands of the European integration project make themselves felt in the development of the EU's external policies. Amongst other effects, this logic creates a situation in which external policy is the spillover or the projection of internal needs, and in which external policy can be seen as a means of providing a 'safety valve' for the pressures built up by the progress (or lack of progress) of the integration project. The 'external' logic can be seen as a reflection of the pressures and opportunities arising from broader international structures, such as the effects of the end of the Cold War and the 'gaps' created for European external policies by the post-Cold War search for a new international order. The 'identity' logic sees the external policies of the EU as bound up with the search for a 'European' international identity, and thus with the generation of images and understandings of the EU itself, both within and outside the Union. Each of the logics generates its own characteristic patterns of activity and criteria for 'effectiveness' in the context of the EU's external policies.

How does this discussion of the logics driving EU external policies help us to understand and evaluate the EU's 'strategic partnerships'? First, the 'internal logic' gives leverage to the analysis of the ways in which the EU's institutional structures and internal politics might shape the search for 'strategic partnerships'. We can expect this search to be conditioned by the internal distribution of preferences, by the broader institutional development and capacities of the Union, and by the ways in which Member States are prepared to commit themselves. But we should also expect it to be governed by the 'disintegration logic' by which the divergence of internal preferences disables or dilutes the EU's external policy capacity. Second, we can expect that 'strategic partnerships' will be a reflection of the external opportunity structure and the EU's collective capacity to take advantage of it. Thus, the post-Cold War period and the rise of new international 'powers' has created new openings for the EU as well as new challenges, to which one response is the search for 'strategic partnerships'. There is another aspect to this: the external opportunity structure also embodies the prevalence of EU-US relations and the search by the EU for ways of balancing the USA's predominant power within the world arena. So we should expect this to be a factor in the search for and conclusion of 'strategic partnerships'. Third, we would anticipate that each and any 'strategic partnership' would be in some way a response to the 'identity logic', expressing the EU's search for identity within the world arena and also projecting formally or informally the values on which the EU is taken to be founded. So 'strategic partnerships' are in part an external projection of the notion that the EU is a 'force for good' and a contributor to world order through the use of its 'normative power' and more generally its 'soft power' (Smith 2007) as well as a means of projecting the EU's growing need to assert itself within that arena. Finally, we would also expect that 'strategic partnerships' would express the interaction of the three logics and the fluctuating balance between them, and that as a result they would be subject to consequential contradictions and unevenness. The needs of European integration, the opportunities or challenges presented by the world arena, and the less tangible but often equally powerful search for an EU identity should all be evident in the development of any 'strategic partnership'.

This establishes the ground for our more detailed empirical study of the EU-China 'strategic partnership'. We have argued that there is a need for clear specification of the criteria for judging both the search for and the development of 'strategic partnerships'. We have argued further that it is possible to analyse the logics driving such partnerships against a set of explicit criteria. This should help us to explore the two key questions set in this article: how much does the EU-China 'strategic partnership' express a coherent EU strategy, and how much does it demonstrate the development of a practical partnership in specific areas of EU-China relations?

The EU and China: strategy

As argued above, in assessing the extent to which the EU has a 'China strategy', it is necessary to consider not only the public record and statements of a strategic nature, but also the underlying coherence and operational effects of the EU's policies. Thus, in this section, we will explore first of all the 'public record' of EU strategic declarations in order to uncover key themes in the EU's presentation of its positions and aims (see also Cameron 2009). One key element in this assessment will be the ways in which the EU's efforts have chimed or not with China's strategic objectives; thus, we will briefly consider the nature of China's international strategy and the ways in which this 'fits' with the EU's aims and objectives.

The EU-China diplomatic relationship was first formally established in 1975, and the first EEC-China trade agreement was concluded in 1978. The initial bilateral ties were 'explicitly economic, though implicitly (especially for China) strategic' (Scott 2007: 23). With the growth of EU-China trade during the early 1980s, the need for a new and more comprehensive agreement was met with the EU-China Trade and Cooperation Agreement of 1985. This established a legal framework for the bilateral relationship and for the next twenty years it reflected an EC/EU approach in which trade was the top priority. Ironically, in the view of later developments, part of its purpose was to redress a trade imbalance in which the EC ran a surplus with China (Fox and Godement 2009: 19; EEC-China 1985, chapter 1). The key aim of the agreement was to "intensify and diversify their [EC/China] trade and actively develop economic and technical cooperation in line with their mutual interests" (EEC-China 1985). The agreement also established an EC-China Joint Committee to manage the relationship – a body which remains significant in the evolution of EU-China relations. It appears that while the EC had rather broad ambitions for the agreement, the Chinese saw it as primarily about increasing their economic ties with Europe (Griese 2006; Gosset 2002). Notably, the agreement was explicit in allowing EC Member States freely to "engage in bilateral activities in the field of economic cooperation and to conclude new economic cooperation agreements with China where appropriate" (Europa 2007).

The year 1989 saw further important developments in the EC's approach to China, catalysed by the Tiananmen Square incident, but also more generally by the end of the Cold War. Although Tiananmen did not interfere fundamentally with the development of the EC-China economic relationship (Algieri 2002: 64), it forced European policy-makers to put the economic relationship into the broader context of social, political and humanitarian concerns – a context that resonated in all subsequent EC/EU policy papers. In addition, European policy-makers increasingly shaped their approach in the realisation that China's emerging role in the global community should be shaped by "coordinated commitment from governments worldwide" (European Commission 1995) and thus that China's integration into the global community and global institutions should be a key aspect of any EU position.

The 1995 Communication *A Long Term Policy for China-Europe Relations* thus occupies a key place in the development of EU thinking about the relationship. For one commentator it was “the first important signal that Brussels had started to anticipate a growing political influence” (Holslag 2009: 3) and to set long-term objectives in this light. The Communication set out to establish a new market-based relationship with China “for the future competitiveness of European business” (Barysch *et al.* 2005: 7), to further the integration of China into the international community and particularly to push for China’s membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and to contribute practically to China’s internal economic, political and social reform so that the Chinese economy would continue to grow and to open itself to European business. The aim of the approach was to focus on problem-solving and to do this within the context of common ground and mutual interests (European Commission 1995; Möller 2002: 22). It was clear that the development of the EU-China relationship was seen in a global context: “Europe’s relations with China are bound to be a cornerstone in Europe’s external relations, both with Asia and globally” (European Commission 1995).

Given the development of the EU’s broader foreign and security policy structures during the early and mid-1990s, it was also clear that the development of policies towards key interlocutors such as China was a key part of the EU’s emerging international role. But this contained a number of actual or potential contradictions, especially since the EU was more generally concerned to position itself as a ‘normative power’ with a particular emphasis on human rights and connected issues – issues that were less comfortably dealt with in the EU-China context. When this was combined with the need to make progress on a number of pressing economic issues, the concern of the 1995 Communication to reconcile normative and material interests seems clear. It was also clear that the ‘European’ position contained a number of tensions between European institutions and the interests of Member States, although the Communication talked confidently about synergies between Member States and EU activities (European Commission 1995, D1).

The ‘long term policy’ set out in the 1995 Communication lasted for three years (although many of its principles are still extant in EU policies). In 1998, the Commission produced a second Communication, *Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China* (European Commission 1998). A change of EU position was rationalised on the one hand by the potential impact of Economic and Monetary Union and of the eastern enlargement of the EU, and on the other hand by the pace of change in China itself: “the EU must be ready at short notice to adapt its policy to any unforeseen changes promoted by the speed and scope of China’s transition” (European Commission 1998: 25). As Griesse notes, “from 1998 onwards the Commission is very careful in giving precise time references – at least in the title – for the permanence of its China policy” (Griesse 2006: 550). In 1998, the EU was worried that China might slow down or even reverse its reform process in the wake of the death of Deng Hsiao Ping, the Asian financial crisis and the reversion of Hong Kong. The Communication also responded to issues arising in the negotiation of China’s WTO entry, which had begun in 1997. As a result, the Communication proposed a ‘renewed’ and ‘upgraded’ approach in which China would be further engaged bilaterally and multilaterally, whilst further support would be given to its transition process (European Commission 1998: 5).

One of the essential elements of the policies proposed in the 1998 Communication is their comprehensive nature, covering political, economic, social and regional security issues and encompassing contacts at several levels: bilateral, regional and multilateral (and thus linking with the EU’s inter-regional approaches to Asia-Pacific, most obviously the Asia-Europe Meeting established in 1996). The Communication proposed annual summits between the EU and China, like those already established between Beijing and other partners such as Japan, Russia and the USA. Dialogue with China would in turn benefit the

inter-regional dialogue with Asia-Pacific and increase the EU's "overall influence in the region" (European Commission 1998: 7). In accord with the request of the European Council, the Communication also pursued the aim of establishing a constructive dialogue with China on the issues of human rights and the rule of law. The general intention was to work towards a situation in which China would be a "strong, stable and open partner" (European Commission 1998: 11), but not to increase the pressure on Beijing in sensitive areas of domestic policy. In the realm of global economic relations, the EU's support for China's WTO accession remained strong – not least because it was also seen as linking closely with potential domestic reform in China itself, in the cause of removing obstacles to trade and improving China's adherence to the rule-based multilateral order.

By 2001, the Commission felt it necessary to follow up the 1998 Communication with another, this time explicitly building on the framework established three years earlier. The 2001 Communication *EU Strategy Towards China: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a More Effective EU Policy* (European Commission 2001) was framed most obviously by the impending entry of China into the WTO, and by the linked need to provide "a comprehensive and forward-looking review" of the 1998 policy (European Commission 2001: 3). Notably, the title of the Communication for the first time referred to this in terms of EU strategy, defining this as including both short-term and long-term action points and recalling the long-term objectives set out in 1998. Notably also, the paper pointed out a number of difficulties in EU-China relations, referring to China as "both part of the problem and the solution" and as "not always an easy partner for the EU" (European Commission 2001: 7). So the issue was not just one of dialogue and accommodation – or at least, so it seemed.

Only two years after the 2001 Communication, the Commission was back in action on the EU-China partnership, this time with the Communication *A Maturing Partnership – Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China Relations* (European Commission 2003). According to at least one analysis, this Communication represented an effort to "mark a shift (...) from traditional state-to-state relations up to the European level" (Fox and Godement 2009: 33). Its other, explicit aim was to initiate an upgrading of the bilateral EU-China relationship to a 'strategic partnership' across a broad range of issue areas, anticipating developments not only in the EU (especially the 2004 enlargement and institutional reform), but also in China (for example, the installation of a 'successor generation' of leaders and China's increasing assertiveness in world affairs). The Communication also referred to a host of more immediate problems that demanded coordinated action, such as the threat of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The 2003 Communication was later paralleled (but not mirrored) by China's only formal 'communication' on this subject, the 2003 *EU Policy Paper* (Chinese Government 2003), which echoed the perception of the partnership as strategic in nature. As William Callahan has pointed out, the Chinese *Policy Paper* can also be seen as an exercise in 'refracting' the language used by the EU in its Communications, and as setting an agenda that carefully kept the developing relationship on ground that was comfortable for Beijing (Callahan 2007).

The 2003 Communication is not only notable for its 'European' focus and its emphasis on strategic changes; it also goes much further than its predecessors in setting out the infrastructure of EU-China relations. Its implicit benchmark for 'maturity' seems to be the quantity of EU-China dialogues, especially sectoral processes and agreements. There is no doubt that by 2003 there was such a growing infrastructure (see the following section), but questions remained about its efficiency and effectiveness. And crucially in terms of the discussion here, the question arises as to whether the strategic quality of a relationship can be measured by quantity rather than by quality of exchanges. As one critique put it, "the proliferation of programmes, dialogues and agreements created the danger of loss of focus and strategic vision: there is little linkage between the various dialogues, their short-

term objectives sometimes clash, and they do not always serve the EU's overall objectives as defined in its strategy papers" (Barysch *et al.* 2005: 8-9). The description of the relationship as 'mature' in the title of the 2003 Communication thus raises as many questions as it answered.

As it happened, the 30th anniversary of the establishment of EC/EU-China relations took place at a time when the relationship was anything but harmonious, and when trade and diplomatic disputes were notable (Smith and Xie 2009). But by 2006, the Commission was again ready to launch another Communication, this time entitled *EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities* (European Commission 2006a). Alongside this paper was issued a working paper on EU-China trade and investment (*A Policy Paper on EU-China Trade and Investment: Competition and Partnership*) (European Commission 2006b) which picked up what had become a central theme of the Commission's approach to global trade and investment issues: the need for the EU to assert its competitiveness and to hold others to their commitments (see for example Mandelson 2006).

The 2006 Communication can be seen as a more realistic and pragmatic response to the growing range and scope of EU-China relations, and especially to the rapidly increasing trade deficit which had already led to some sharp disputes (see following section). The emphasis was as much on competition as on partnership, and on the use of 'sticks' in the form of WTO rules and other devices, as well as on 'carrots'. Amongst other issues, the Communication identified "a range of obstacles to market access and skewed conditions of competition" that limited the benefits to the EU from the growing economic relationship, and failure by Beijing to fulfil all of its WTO obligations. The result was that in crucial sectors such as telecommunications, financial services and manufacturing, EU companies found it difficult to invest in or export to China (European Commission 2006a: 7; 2006b: 9). The anticipated dynamic effects of WTO accession had not been realised, and in some ways it appeared that WTO accession marked the end of China's reform process rather than its beginning (Interview with EU official, Beijing, April 2009). Key issues such as intellectual property rights and the investment climate were particularly identified as areas of concern (*ibid.*). In consequence, the Communication set out a range of potential remedies that might be sought by the EU, including not only dialogue and bilateral negotiation, but also use of the WTO dispute settlement mechanism (European Commission 2006b: 13). One symptom of the problems was the continuing refusal of the EU to grant China Market Economy Status in the context of the WTO (Smith and Xie 2009).

The 2006 Communication also set out a range of areas in which the EU would pursue continued dialogue with China: human rights and democracy promotion, and a range of sectors in which there were established dialogue arrangements (European Commission 2006a: 4). Not only this, but it presented a long list of areas in which cooperation with China is vital to key EU global objectives: sustainable energy supplies, environment and climate change, employment and social issues, international development and governance especially in Africa. Africa in particular has claimed increasing attention as an arena for EU-China cooperation (and implicitly, competition), and in 2008 the Commission was moved to present a Communication on the subject (European Commission 2008). One area of security policy remained especially neuralgic in the relationship: the debate over whether to modify or lift the arms embargo imposed on China in the wake of the Tiananmen Square events in 1989 (see next section); the 2006 Communication promised only continued dialogue on this issue. There was, however, a clear bottom line to the Communication: it proposed the start of negotiations for a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which "should encompass the full scope of the bilateral relationship" and update the 1985 Trade and Cooperation Agreement. This was presented as "the practical basis for the comprehensive strategic partnership" (European Commission

2006a: 9), but it was apparent that both the political and the economic dimensions of such an agreement would be full of potential pitfalls.

We will withhold judgement on the significance of the developments described here until the general conclusions to the article, and now turn our attention to the 'partnership' aspects of EU-China relations. The following section looks at both the issue of partnership in general and the specific case of the EU-China Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, with the aim of establishing the basis for an evaluation of the nature, extent and impact of the EU-China partnership.

The EU and China: partnership

As noted in the introduction, the EU is engaged in a ceaseless search for partners in the global arena: simply put, this is part of the essence of the EU, and links very strongly with embedded multilateralism and the EU's self-image as a 'force for good' in the world. In respect of China, this search has so far extended over at least twenty and possibly thirty years. What can we say about the ways in which the partnership has been developed, and its key characteristics, not only in general but also as revealed in key episodes of EU-China relations?

One approach to the general problem of partnership between the EU and China is to examine the changing scope and scale of the partnership. This is not the same as examining the scope and scale of EU-China relations as a whole; rather it entails an assessment of the ways in which formal partnership activities have arisen, been institutionalised and spread. One clear trend in this context is the increasing scope and scale of partnership activities. From the initial stages where the concern was very largely with trade promotion and trade defence (on both sides), we can now discern a relationship which is formalised over a wide variety of sectors and at a number of levels (Crossick and Reuter 2007). We shall look below at the key institutional elements of this growth, but here it is possible to note that both the scope and scale of the partnership has been growing, that it has also been encapsulated in successive EU strategy papers, and that EU institutions have given their support to this expansion. The partnership is pursued at the bilateral level, within a variety of 'mini-lateral' and multilateral inter-regional contexts, and at the level of global multilateral organisations such as the United Nations (UN) and the WTO. Most recently, the partnership has been expanded (at least on the EU side) to encompass 'third party' issues such as the mutual engagement of the EU and China in Africa, and to explore the possibilities of cooperation and/or dialogue at the local or regional level in that continent.

The partnership has also become increasingly institutionalised. We noted earlier that the EU has typically tried to develop a dense institutional network around its key international partnerships, with the aim of stabilising them and of making them manageable. In the case of EU-China relations, we are dealing with the partnership that (apart from that with the USA) has had the longest and most extensive history of institutionalisation (Algieri 2002; 2008). As a result, a map of the relationship would need to cover the following institutional elements (among others): the annual summits and accompanying political dialogues; meetings of the 'troika' with the Chinese leadership on an annual or biannual basis; meetings in the context of successive presidencies of the Council of the EU; meetings in Beijing between EU Heads of Mission and the Chinese Foreign Minister; strategic dialogue meetings; meetings of political directors and regional directors; a host of expert level meetings covering such issues as human rights, migration and trafficking, non-proliferation and arms exports and more general Asian affairs; Joint Committee Meetings in the context of the 1985 Trade and Cooperation Agreement; Working groups on economic issues involving officials at a variety of levels; and more than twenty sectoral

dialogues covering both highly technical areas and those which are much more heavily politicised (the latter including energy and environmental issues) (Algieri 2008: 70; see also Cameron 2009). This is a formidable 'menu', but it is subject to the criticism already mentioned that there is no clear strategic direction or linkage of the many activities listed. So, the partnership has become more institutionalised, but it is not clear whether it is more effectively institutionalised.

For this, there might be a variety of explanations. One is that the institutionalisation process is essentially responsive to new issues arising on the EU-China agenda. Another might be that in some areas of partnership, the interests and presence of the EU Member States are inevitably more obtrusive, and that this lends a different tone and direction to the activities undertaken. An unanswered question (at least in the context of this article) is whether the pattern that has emerged reflects consensus and a process of 'social learning' among the EU and Chinese leadership, or essentially the application of mechanisms that the EU has developed elsewhere, such as dialogues and sectoral working groups. Another question that arises is the relationship between this framework and other EU-China encounters. A brief listing of these might include inter-regional encounters within the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and in the context of such Asia-Pacific bodies as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the UN system in general and especially the General Assembly, and a range of multilateral bodies of which the most prominent might be the WTO and global climate change negotiations (Balme and Bridges 2008; Laatikainen and Smith 2006).

This raises the issue of differential commitment within the partnership framework. If (maybe) we are witnessing the application of established EU 'fixes' for the EU-China relationship, how much can we infer that the EU and the Chinese are equally committed to the partnership and its component activities? And to what extent is that commitment subject to 'external' forces (for example, the gravitational pull of EU-US and EU-China relations, which is always likely to be strong, or EU-Russia and China-Russia relations)? In this context, it is relevant to note that Chinese views of the changing global arena gave seeming priority to EU-China relations during 2003-2004, but since then appear to have reverted quite strongly to a fixation on the USA (Barber 2009; Zaborowski 2006). The USA not only takes a different and more assertive line than the EU on a number of US-China issues (for example, Taiwan, Tibet), but also has a great deal more to offer and threaten in areas related to 'hard power' than the EU. According to Fox and Godement (2009), the Chinese are well aware of the divisions within the EU about a range of sensitive issues, and thus tend to pursue 'divide and rule' policies where they can, whilst their relationship to the USA is far more demanding and concentrated. In particular, the closer the relationship gets to issues of 'hard security', the more the Chinese see no cohesive EU position; rather they can see a 'strategic gap' (Wissenbach 2007). This set of arguments is given an additional dimension in the close reading of EU-China dialogues by William Callahan; he interprets the EU-China dialogue in its broadest terms as inscribing new understandings of security onto both their mutual relations and onto international relations more generally, reflecting the EU's self-understanding of its role as that of a 'civilian power' and Chinese self-understandings of their role as a 'non-hegemonic superpower' (Callahan 2007). One of the key implications of this process of 'writing security' in EU-China relations is that the USA can be seen as a hostile 'Other' by both parties. Almost all interpretations of EU-China relations agree on the cooling of the relationship after 2005, perhaps as a reflection of the fact that the EU could not deliver on areas such as its arms embargo (partly at least because of US pressure), and partly because of a linked Chinese perception that the EU was incapable of providing a broader balancing force against the USA in general.

The general texture of the partnership thus raises important questions about scope and scale, institutionalisation and levels of commitment, and mutual learning among the partners. But how does it work when specific issues are involved? In the remainder of this

section, the article deals with the recent negotiating history of the EU-China Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. As noted earlier, this is in many ways an acid test of the progress that has been made towards a working 'strategic partnership' in EU-China relations.

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

As we have already noted, the major formal expression of partnership between the EU and China remains the Trade and Cooperation Agreement of 1985. In the wake of the calls for a 'strategic partnership' during 2003, and in the context of the thirtieth anniversary of the 1985 agreement, it was therefore no surprise that there were calls for a new and more comprehensive framework agreement. As Benito Ferrero-Waldner, EU Commissioner for External Relations, said in May 2005:

Both the EU and China have changed beyond recognition in 30 years and so has our relationship. Our existing Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement simply doesn't live up to the dynamism of today's partnership. It's time to reflect the vibrancy of our relations with an ambitious new Agreement that will help us move to a fully-fledged strategic partnership. (Press Releases, RAPID, 2005)

For the Commission, this was thus clearly a strategic priority, and one that from the point of view of this paper was clearly connected with the aspiration of a 'strategic partnership'. This general aim was clearly supplemented by the desire to put EU-China relations on a firmer legal footing, and to bring together the range of activities and mechanisms referred to in preceding sections. The process of negotiating such an agreement, designed not only to link a wide range of activities but also to encompass political and even security issues, was bound to be less than straightforward.

And so it has proved. It was clear from the outset that, whilst both the EU and China saw value in such an agreement, both hoped that they would be able to extract concessions by linkage between disparate agenda items, to "create linkages between different areas [so that] they will get the other side to make concession on the issue they care most about" (Barysch *et al.* 2005: 10). The EU, represented by the Commission, clearly wanted the agreement to be as comprehensive as possible, dealing with all issue areas of EU-China relations (International Herald Tribune 2007), including those the Chinese have historically found most difficult, relating to norms, values and dialogues on such areas as human rights (Barysch *et al.* 2005: 10; Fox and Godement 2009: 31; Weske 2007: 4). They also wanted to base the agreement on the principle of "reciprocal engagement" (Fox and Godement 2009: 12), implying a less unconditional approach to the acceptance of Chinese positions on a range of sensitive issues. This seems to contrast with the Chinese approach, which focuses strongly on trade and cooperation in the traditional sense, and separates the trade and economic issues from the political agreement (European Report 2006; 2007). The Chinese would also wish to link the negotiations with progress on the issues of market economy status and the arms embargo (see above), a move resisted by the EU (Weske 2007: 4).

Preparations for the negotiations were set in motion during 2005, but a formal declaration on negotiations was not made until the 9th EU-China summit in December 2006, at which point it was noted that the agreement "will encompass the full scope of [the] bilateral relationship, including enhanced cooperation in political matters" (Council of the EU 2006: 2). But it was also noted that the negotiation of the trade and economic aspects "will be administered in a relatively independent manner" (*ibid.*), thus bearing out the problems of linkage between the political and the economic aspects of the process. Negotiations were expected to begin in early 2007, and some hopes were expressed that they would be

concluded in two to three years (Wu 2006). The negotiations were duly launched by Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner and Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing in Beijing on 17 January 2007, with much talk of their being concluded by January 2009.

As suggested by the pre-negotiations, the discussions on economic and political aspects of the PCA have been conducted in relatively independent ways, involving different parts of the Commission and of the Chinese government: thus on trade issues, DG Trade leads with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, while on political issues, the lead has been with DG RELEX (and post-Lisbon with the External Action Service) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Men 2008: 18). Almost immediately, the two parallel sets of talks began to operate to different rhythms, with the political discussions more easily set in motion than the trade negotiations. Predictably, negotiations envisaged as extending over two or three years have also been subject to important fluctuations created by external events: in this case, specifically the Tibet disturbances of Spring and Summer 2008, the demands for a boycott of the Olympic Games in August 2008, and the frostiness caused by Nicolas Sarkozy's meeting with the Dalai Lama in Autumn 2008 (which itself led to the postponement of the scheduled EU-China summit from December 2008 to May 2009).

As noted above, negotiations spread across a wide range of linked issues and over a long period of time are subject to external forces and to political or other changes in the negotiating parties. Thus it is no real surprise that as of November 2010, there has been little indication that the PCA will soon be concluded. There has though been significant progress on a range of political issues, whilst the economic aspects (perhaps because more specific and entailing real financial costs or benefits) have been more difficult throughout (Crossick 2009a). On the political front within the EU, the European Parliament has made its voice heard especially on the need to link trade agreements with matters of human rights, environment, sustainable development and social issues (Wortmann-Kool 2009: 11), and outstanding clauses to be agreed as of September 2009 include those on Taiwan and human rights (Crossick 2009b). In the economic field, a range of thorny issues remain open: market access and investment, intellectual property rights, government procurement, environmental and energy clauses, and of course market economy status in the WTO.

This means that although agreement has been reached on a wide range of political clauses and on some economic aspects, there are major aspects of the PCA that remain open to agreement (and disagreement). Many of these issues involve not only the EU and China themselves but also interested 'outsiders' such as the USA, and some of them relate to parts of the world such as Africa that we have already noted as part of the new dynamic of EU-China relations. From the EU perspective, it is important to note that both the negotiations and any subsequent agreement involve all three pillars (to use 'pre-Lisbon' terminology) of the European structure, and also allow for interventions from a variety of organisations and institutions both in Brussels and elsewhere. At all stages – pre-negotiation, negotiation itself, agreement and ratification – this agreement thus poses distinctive problems of scope, scale and complexity.

Conclusion: reassessing the logics of 'strategic partnership'

What are the key elements in an overall appraisal of the EU-China 'strategic partnership' as it stands in late 2010? It is an incomplete partnership, which expresses fragmentation and fluctuation, but which also reflects a set of key imperatives for the EU. Thus it will not lightly be discarded, although it may well be pushed around by events and by the pressures of international life. It seems to us that this situation can be explained to a significant degree by applying the three logics of 'strategic partnership' that were set out in the early part of this article. As we argued then, the 'internal logic' encourages analysis

of the ways in which the EU's institutional structures and internal politics might shape the search for 'strategic partnerships'. We expected this search to be conditioned by the internal distribution of preferences, by the broader institutional development and capacities of the Union, and by the ways in which Member States are prepared to commit themselves. But we also expected it to be governed by the 'disintegration logic' by which the divergence of internal preferences disables or dilutes the EU's external policy capacity. Ample evidence to support these conjectures is provided by the empirical study in this article, which shows that the interplay of internal commitments, Member State and other interests, and external initiatives is key to understanding the course of EU policy development.

The 'external' logic of the EU's search for 'strategic partnerships' is also apparent. Earlier, we suggested that 'strategic partnerships' will be a reflection of the external opportunity structure and the EU's collective capacity to take advantage of it, and in particular that the effects of post-Cold War change and the continuing influence of the USA would be significant. It is clear that these factors and forces have been crucial both to the generation of the EU's search for a 'strategic partnership' with China, and to the unevenness of the results. A further element that needs to be built into our framework is also suggested by our empirical analysis: the effects of change and development in China itself, which have clearly influenced the Chinese response to the EU's successive initiatives.

On the basis of the evidence here, we can conclude that the EU's search for a 'strategic partnership' with China also expresses the 'identity' logic of the EU's external policies. We argued earlier that each and any 'strategic partnership' would be in some way a response to the 'identity logic', expressing the EU's search for identity within the world arena and also projecting formally or informally the values on which the EU is taken to be founded. 'Strategic partnerships' are thus in part an external projection of the notion that the EU is a 'force for good' and a contributor to world order, as well as a means of projecting the EU's growing need to assert itself within the world arena. The evidence on this point seems compelling: the search for an EU-China 'strategic partnership' reflects the perception in key EU institutions that the Union has a role in introducing China to the global order and ensuring that the Chinese play by the rules of global society (as interpreted by the EU). We should of course also note that this perception has often been met by an equally firm Chinese perception that they will do things their own way, and by their capacity to resist or reject the EU's presumption.

Finally, we also argued that 'strategic partnerships' would express the interaction of the three logics and the fluctuating balance between them, and that as a result they would be subject to consequential contradictions and unevenness. The needs of European integration, the opportunities or challenges presented by the world arena, and the less tangible but often equally powerful search for an EU identity should all be evident in the development of any 'strategic partnership'. Our empirical study has clearly shown the pervasiveness of this set of linkages. The course of the PCA negotiations demonstrates very clearly the ways in which internal political pressures linked with the integration process can combine with the changing external climate and with the normative component of EU policies to enhance or undermine the prospects of success. Whether the EU can prevail in its search for an EU-China 'strategic partnership' over the limitations this seems to imply remains an open question.

A review of the position faced by the EU in late 2010 provides additional strength to the argument. First, it is evident that, in principle, the 'post-Lisbon Treaty' EU should be better equipped to pursue some forms of 'strategic diplomacy', given the ways in which the treaty promises to overcome the institutional divisions that we have seen as characterising (for example) the PCA negotiations. But the tortuous process of implementing the treaty provisions relating to the European External Action Service, and the continuing division of

responsibilities between the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the President of the European Council (not forgetting the continuing influence of both the Commission and the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU) means that the impact as of late 2010 has been severely limited. Perhaps symbolically, the meeting of the European Council in October 2010 that was supposed to focus on relations with 'strategic partners' in general was hijacked by issues such as the expulsion of Roma from France, and there has been a cooling of European public opinion on relations with China and other 'strategic partners'. During November 2010, in the run-up to the G20 meeting in Seoul, South Korea, the leaders of several EU Member States made it quite apparent that they placed a high priority on developing national economic and diplomatic links with China, rather than on pursuing an EU-led diplomatic strategy (thus, it might be concluded, bearing out Fox and Godement's argument that the membership of the Union is hopelessly divided over how to deal with Beijing).

Second, it is clear that all of the EU's attempts to pursue 'strategic partnerships' face a series of difficulties arising from the changing structure of the global arena more generally. In particular, the impact of the global financial crisis has created new tensions between the USA and China, as well as more broadly between the USA, the EU and emerging economies. These tensions have been expressed not only in financial diplomacy, but also in areas such as environmental policy, where the EU has found it difficult to maintain its self-ascribed status as a leader in areas such as climate change negotiations. Over a wide range, the EU has found it progressively more difficult to maintain the momentum of 'strategic partnership' negotiations: in fact, seen against the slow progress in EU-India, EU-Brazil and EU-Russia relations, the EU-China partnership seems to be at the upper end of the achievement scale, since it has established some firm institutional foundations and to have provided mechanisms through which at least some of the issues between the two partners can be addressed.

Finally, it is apparent that the rather unpropitious conditions of the current period have undermined some of the confidence generated by the EU's self-perception of its status as a 'normative power' capable of deploying its 'soft power' in building strategic positions within the global arena. To put it simply, the squeeze on the EU's room for manoeuvre and its ability to project its norms either as the basis for broader world order or as a weapon to use in bilateral or inter-regional negotiations has created new questions about the extent to which the Union can be projected as a 'force for good'. This in turn has meant that potential 'strategic partners' are less ready to respond to the EU's normative claims, and readier to assert the validity of their own normative positions – as indeed, we can see from the example of China explored in this article. The combination of internal institutional competition, external shifts in the global balance of power and preferences, and pressure on the EU's capacity to assert its normative distinctiveness creates important analytical and policy questions about the EU's pursuit of 'strategic partnerships' in general and the partnership with China in particular.

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