

# The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU–China Strategic Partnership

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## Abstract

This article evaluates whether the Sino–European partnership can be considered strategic. At the discourse level it is found that both sides fail to identify common interests, joint priorities continue to be concentrated in the business sector, and China and Europe have not been able to determine what the relevance of their relationship is compared to other powers. In practice this is even more problematic. The strategic vacuum renders the partnership vulnerable to setbacks and means that China will be even more tempted to capitalize on Europe’s internal divisions while Member States will feel less inclined to close ranks.

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## Introduction

That diplomatic jargon can be colourful was proved when the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping discussed a joint strategy for the Soviet Union with the visiting European Commission President Roy Jenkins. ‘You hold the bear by its forepaws where he bites and we hold him by the hind paws where he kicks’, Deng suggested.<sup>1</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the Chinese started to dream of a multipolar world in which it would work with the European Union to tame the American superpower. American spectators have warned against the prospect of a strategic Sino–European partnership. David Shambaugh for example cautioned that ‘the United States has been slow to

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Crossick and Reuter (2007, p. xii).

recognize what is transpiring in the EU–China relationship and its significance in the emerging global order’ (Shambaugh, 2004; see also Crossick *et al.*, 2005). In the same vein, Bates Gill and Melissa Murphy argued that improving China–Europe relations could pose important challenges and opportunities for American interests. ‘These developments may not only challenge the US position vis-à-vis China and Europe; they also could contribute to an increasingly competitive, confrontational, and ultimately detrimental deterioration in traditionally strong transatlantic relations, while also further exacerbating persistent mistrust in China–US ties’ (Gill and Murphy, 2008, pp. 30–5; see also Scott, 2007; Dai, 2006; Zaborowski, 2006; Godeмент, 2008; Pan, 2007; Kerr and Liu, 2005; Shambaugh *et al.*, 2007; Casarini, 2009).

For all the expectations, this article argues that the EU could benefit from such a strategic alliance with China, but that it has failed to seize this opportunity. The Sino–European partnership begs for more realism.<sup>2</sup> There are sufficient shared strategic interests to underpin a more realist relationship. Realism will also make relations less prone to setbacks over symbolical issues, permit Europe to reap larger gains from other powers, and form a worthy alternative for the EU’s defective soft power. While realism might help to strengthen EU–China relations, the challenge is to deal with the EU’s internal realpolitik. A supranational European foreign policy is highly unlikely in the near future. Europe’s China policy should therefore depart from a grand bargain that includes the interests of all Member States and allows them to hammer out larger profits than they could have done bilaterally with China. Even when the outcome of this process will not match the coherence of other powers, it will be better than the current strategic window dressing.

This study presents a coherent framework for evaluating the strategic nature of the Sino–European relationship. It applies a set of clear parameters to the development of the partnership on paper and in practice. Therefore, I will first systematically review the priorities in joint statements issued between 2002 and 2008. Their implementation will be tested in eight cases for which new evidence has been drawn from, among others, in-depth interviews and a quantitative review of China and Europe’s behaviour within the UN and WTO. Subsequently, I present a few important explanations for why the relationship is not developing into a strategic partnership. Finally, I elaborate on the options for doing better.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Realism’ is broadly defined here as the foreign policies of states that depart from the interest to amass national capabilities, and in anarchic systems co-operation with other states is possible when interests are congruent and states need each other to achieve them.

## I. The Strategic Partnership on Paper

A strategic partnership is what states make of it. Because international relations theory provides no transparent definition, its significance is limited to the features that its members, rightfully or not, ascribe to it. There are as many definitions as there are partnerships, and this renders it difficult for academic research to add value. They can be propelled by the prospect for absolute gains, relative gains, threats and altering balances of power. They can take the form of balancing, bandwagoning, hedging and so on. Strategic partnerships have more to do with form than with purpose.

In spite of different interpretations, five main features come to the fore. To start with, a strategic partnership requires explicitly identified *common interests and expectations*. Second, these should be formulated for the *long term*. Third, aims need to be *multidimensional* and operationalized in the economic, political and military areas of interest. Fourth, strategic partnerships have a *global* range. Finally, the incentives should be of such a nature that they cannot be achieved without partnership and serve to *distinguish* it from other relationships. In this section, these five variables will be evaluated at the discourse level.

The idea of an ‘all-round strategic partnership’ was uttered for the first time in June 2003, when President Chirac and Jiang Zemin expressed their joint objective of promoting a multipolar world order. London and Beijing started a strategic security consultation mechanism in the same year. Only in October 2003 did the joint statement of the China–EU summit consider ‘the expanded intensity and scope and the multi-layered structure of China–EU relations’ as ‘an indicator of the increasing maturity and growing strategic nature of the partnership’.<sup>3</sup> The European security strategy, launched in December 2003, included China among the EU’s six strategic partners. In May 2004, Wen Jiabao reiterated that China and Europe should aim at a *comprehensive strategic partnership* (Wen, 2004). The December summit concluded that this ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ was already ‘rapidly maturing’.<sup>4</sup> In 2005, European Commission President Barroso stated that ‘the development of a strategic, mutually beneficial and enduring relationship with China’ was ‘one of the EU’s top foreign policy priorities for this century’.<sup>5</sup>

How were the interests and expectations of the partnership formulated, and to what degree are they reciprocal and congruent? There is no agreement

<sup>3</sup> Joint Press Statement of the Fifth Summit, Brussels, 30 October 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Joint Press Statement of the Seventh Summit, The Hague, 8 December 2004.

<sup>5</sup> New Phases of China–EU Friendly Co-operation, 12 October 2004. Available at <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbj/zjzg/xos/dqzzywt/t174793.htm>>.

in which the Sino–European strategic partnership is codified. Joint statements made after each annual Sino–European summit are the most reliable source. Statements do not guarantee implementation, and summit organizers might inflate the aims on paper compared to the ambitions in reality. These caveats notwithstanding, priorities are only adopted in joint statements if there is a consensus between both sides, and if they are deemed to be useful for the development of bilateral relations. In addition, the availability of statements with a consistent organization in clauses over a period of seven years (2001–2007) allows us to analyse the evolution of the priorities and areas of co-operation. The variables that lend themselves to such examination are: the number of joint interests that are identified for evaluating the potential of the Sino–European partnership, the number of priorities with an either bilateral or international range for monitoring how much the co-operation is becoming global, the degree of dispersion of priorities over different areas of interest for measuring the scope of the partnership, and the number of priorities with regard to other powers for evaluating how much the relationship is distinguished from others.

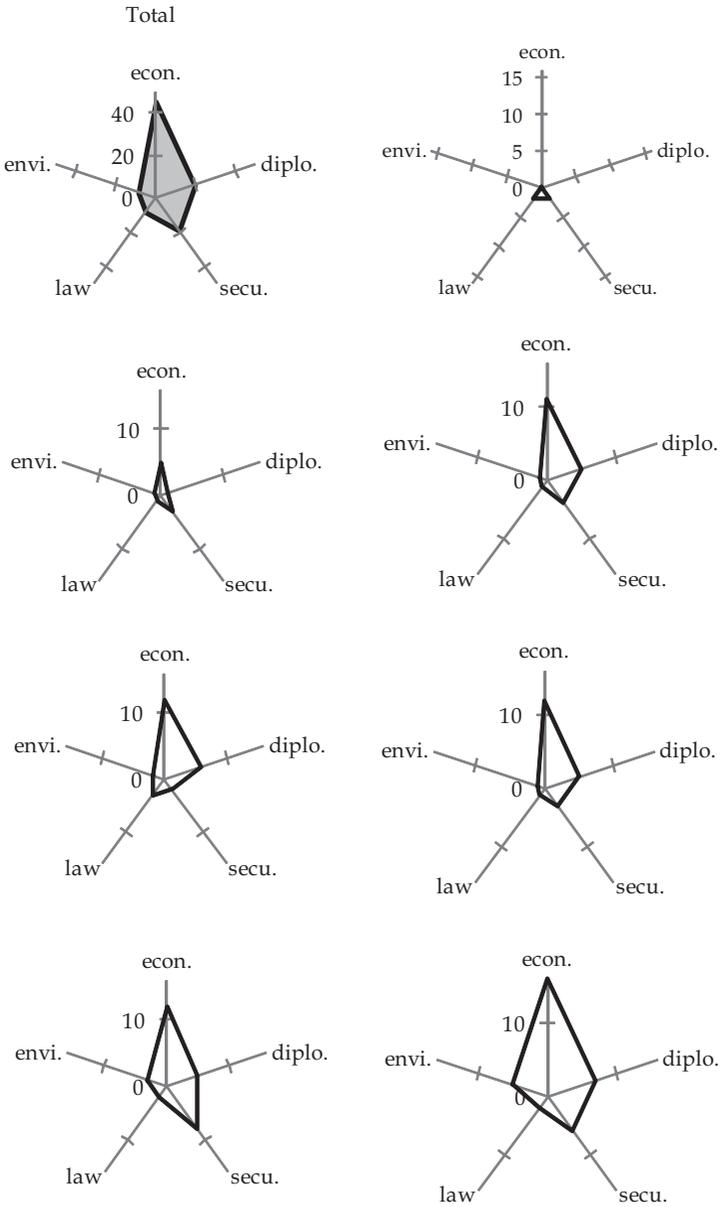
As a first observation, it is striking that the number of identified interests has stayed remarkably low compared to the proposals for interaction. On average, a statement highlights 8.3 joint ‘interests’, ‘needs’ or ‘necessities’, whereas it flags the need for ‘dialogues’ and ‘exchanges’ 28.2 times, often even in areas where common interests were not clarified. In determining whether China should be considered a strategic partner, the EU’s main parameter is that it has annual summits with Beijing.<sup>6</sup> Interaction is thus taken for granted, while the needs and interests that ought to underpin the partnership are hardly defined.

The multidimensional character of the Sino–European partnership can be examined by categorizing the different clauses into the five main sectors that are present throughout the statements: economic-commercial, international security, the rule of law and human rights, environment, and international political-diplomatic issues. Out of the 186 clauses that were counted in the seven statements together, 150 could be tagged in this way. The top left part of Figure 1 shows the dispersion of clauses over the five sectors: 45.3 per cent relate to the economic sector, 19.3 per cent to the political-diplomatic sector, 18.6 per cent to the security sector, 8.6 per cent to the rule of law and 8 per cent to environmental issues. Joint statements are thus significantly dominated by economic and commercial priorities.

The rest of Figure 1 categorizes the clauses on an annual basis. A first observation is the growing scope of the joint statements: since 2001 more

<sup>6</sup> Interview with EU official, Brussels, 12 March 2009.

Figure 1: From the Upper Left to the Lower Right. *Chart 1*: The Total Number of Clauses in the Eight Joint Statements Categorized in Five Sectors (Percentage). *Charts 2–8*: The Number of Clauses in the Eight Joint Statements Categorized in Five Sectors for 2002–2007



Source: Authors' calculations based on original statements.

priorities have been identified. Second, economic issues have dominated all consecutive statements except for 2001. In 2003, the political-diplomatic agenda expanded, but did not grow much afterwards. A closer look shows that the new priorities mainly related to multilateralism, UN reform and advancing the WTO framework. Security issues became more important in 2006 and 2007, but apart from the Cross-Strait relations, Iran and the Middle East, these were dominated by non-traditional security concerns. Environment followed to a lesser extent. Human rights and the rule of law remain remarkably marginal. The number of priorities in the Sino–European joint statements has thus been increasing, but the trade bias has persisted. In addition, while trade priorities tend to be translated into clear policy objectives, the wording in international security and policy clauses remains limited to ‘observing’ and ‘welcoming’ rather than that co-operation is agreed. Even in the case of Sino–EU–African co-operation where joint action is considered, a new dialogue is the only noticeable step forward.

In total, 78.8 per cent of all clauses over the seven statements pertain to bilateral issues, compared to 21.1 international priorities. The increase in the number of bilateral priorities has been larger than the growth in international objectives. A slight increase in global issues occurred in 2003, the year of the American-led invasion of Iraq, but only in 2006 and 2007 did a more substantial augmentation follow. In the area of security, the traditional emphasis is on Iran and the Korean Peninsula, but throughout the seven years the EU and China have underlined the importance they attach to the situations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Myanmar and Africa.

The extent to which China and Europe share priorities that might distinguish their partnership from other key relationships is harder to measure. Other powers such as the United States, Russia and India are not mentioned by name. Nevertheless, it is clear that both parties have sought to emphasize various features that set their ties apart from the EU–US or Sino–US axis. The pledge for a multipolar world order in the joint statements of 2003 and 2004 is certainly one of them, as well as the subsequent joint support for multilateral co-operation, the International Criminal Court, an efficient reorganized UN framework, a leading role for the UN in the war against terrorism, and a central responsibility for the Security Council in the Israel–Palestine conflict. Yet what is missing, for example, is a common position towards Russia. It can be argued that compared to the United States, Europe and China do not have overlapping spheres of influence. Russia, however, is one of the rare countries that tie both parts of the Eurasian continent geopolitically and geo-economically together (see, for example, Lo, 2008).

At the top of the discourse level there is a move towards a strategic partnership. Since 2003, China and Europe recognize each other as strategic

partners, and in 2005 it was indicated that a strategic partnership was achieved. A close examination of the joint statements reveals that this has not been the case. First and foremost, while there has been a proliferation of dialogues and exchanges, joint statements lack well-defined common interests. Second, joint priorities are located predominantly in the economic and commercial sectors. Only recently, international political and security issues have received more attention, but this has not translated into clear objectives. Third, bilateral issues, again mainly in the commercial sector, continue to outweigh international areas of interest. Fourth, the United States seems to be the only other power that allows China and Europe to implicitly distinguish their partnership from others. Already at the discourse level, the realm of statements and declarations, there is thus a marked gap between the proclaimed strategic nature of the Sino–European partnership and the extent to which strategic objectives are defined or translated into concrete policies. The slightly expanded range of priorities in the statements of 2006 and 2007 could herald growing ambitions, but the vague language rather indicates that this is a matter of joint awareness instead of joint interest.

## II. The Strategic Partnership in Practice

This section evaluates the policy outputs of the Sino–European partnership. Because the priorities in the fields of security, international politics, environment and the rule of law are already kept modest on paper, it is particularly relevant to examine to what extent they are implemented. Is there follow-up in the form of regular exchanges or dialogues? Are Chinese and European independent policy initiatives congruent? Are joint priorities translated into enduring joint policies and programmes? Do both sides recognize the other as their main partner? To answer these questions, I will draw from open sources and interviews with both EU and Chinese officials. The eight cases that will be studied have been endorsed as joint priorities in joint statements – notably, Africa, Iran, North Korea, Myanmar, Afghanistan, UN reform, the conclusion of a world trade agreement and climate change.

While China has been re-establishing its presence in *Africa* since the 1990s, the EU only recognized it as a policy issue in 2005. At that stage, the economic impact of Beijing's charm offensive started to become visible. It also ended up as a forefront player during the humanitarian crises in Sudan and Zimbabwe (Holslag, 2008b; Holslag *et al.*, 2007). While the EU had imposed sanctions on these two countries' governments, it needed to persuade Beijing to denounce its business-as-usual attitude. Both sides recognized the need for peace and stability.

China showed itself prepared to discuss the matters with the European Commission, the Council Secretariat, the EU delegation in Beijing and European diplomats in New York. In 2007, Special Envoy for Darfur, Liu Guijin, travelled to Brussels and participated in a meeting of the contact group on Darfur in Paris. However, he was restrained from acceding to Europe's demands because of the economic stakes, genuine concern that sanctions would be counter productive, and the non-interference principle pivotal in China's relationship with Africa. Elsewhere I have elaborated on how China sought to secure its interests via partial adaptation (Holslag, 2008b). On the one hand, it resisted intervention without state consent and sanctions. On the other hand, its silent diplomacy made the Sudanese government accept a hybrid UN–AU force in Darfur (Holslag, 2008a; see also Large, 2007). China moved from opposing, abstaining and playing a go-between role, to a more active approach, albeit it one of carrots rather than sticks.

The Darfur question is informative as a case of EU–China interaction with regard to African security challenges. EU officials are appreciative of China's intermediary role, but now hope that it recognizes the need to go further. From China's perspective, however, the partial policy shift was not a matter of giving in to European expectations. It responded to African demands – notably of the African Union and Chad – to help prevent the Darfur crisis spilling over into the entire region, and to American pressure (Holslag, 2008a). Second, China's policy was more of a pragmatic balance between its posture as a responsible power, needing to ward off essentially western suspicion, and the enduring primacy of non-interference, which continues to form a useful principle for enhancing economic and diplomatic south–south co-operation. Third, Chinese diplomats believed that the EU was bluffing.<sup>7</sup> While pushing for sanctions and the deployment of UN peacekeepers in Darfur, Beijing assumed that it would not deliver because of a lack of capacity and commercial stakes of a few Member States. Fourth, China's manoeuvrability was constrained because of the fact that countries like India and Malaysia continued to push for energy deals with the Sudanese government, which in turn allowed playing these partners off against China. Beijing's response to the Darfur crisis was thus certainly not a matter of strategic convergence with the EU.

Neither was there much convergence with regard to co-operation in other sectors asked for by the EU at the Helsinki summit and in the communication of the European Commission of 2006. China and Europe do have a joint interest in keeping Africa stable and thus to ensure that conflicts are

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Chinese official of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Beijing, 8 July 2008; Interview with Chinese expert at the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Beijing, 9 July 2008.

efficiently prevented, economic growth benefits the well-being of all Africans and governments develop into well-functioning bodies.<sup>8</sup> China knows that if it does not take the interests of African societies into account, its long-term presence will be at risk, and is already starting to modify its policies regarding corporate social responsibility and environment (Holslag, 2008b). Yet this adaptation happens country by country, depending on ad hoc challenges and the amount of local political pressure. There is no overall shift in the direction of the standards that the EU promotes. China is in dialogue with international organizations like the OECD, the World Bank and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), but it refuses to commit itself to binding multilateral rules. Beijing is also not keen on a high-level institutional dialogue with the European Commission on African Affairs to co-ordinate policies.<sup>9</sup> The dialogues between the European delegations and the Chinese embassies in Africa did not produce the expected co-operation. Beijing only approved three small-scale development projects in Rwanda, Burundi and Mauritania.

European officials are divided over the prospects for future co-operation. Some attribute China's reluctance to the fact that it is still learning and developing the institutional capacity to execute aid projects in a more efficient way. While these observations are certainly valid, Beijing doubts whether close co-operation with the EU is in its interest. Chinese officials argue that African partners would get suspicious and African nations themselves or the AU should decide how they wish to work with external players.<sup>10</sup> However, because the AU is not able to formulate coherent policies, individual states will inevitably continue to be China's focal point. In terms of economic and development co-operation, Beijing is much more concerned with competition with the United States and peers like India. In trying to bolster its African influence, China hardly recognizes Europe as a united challenger, so it is not foreseeable that it will become a united partner. This would essentially result in a continuation of ad hoc pragmatism rather than long-term co-operation.

*Iran* has seemed to be an important area of co-operation. Since 2003, both sides have systematically fine-tuned their positions at bilateral summits, and in exchanges between the Council Secretariat and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>11</sup> China and the EU recognized the joint interest in preventing Teheran from developing nuclear arms and avoiding a diplomatic collision

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Chinese official (1), Brussels, 7 March 2009; Interview with EU official, Brussels, 11 March 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Chinese official (1), Brussels, 7 March 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Chinese official, Beijing, 7 July 2008; Interview with Chinese official (2), Brussels, 7 March 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with EU official, 10 March 2009.

with Washington, on the one hand, and continuing to trade with the central Asian country, on the other. By keeping talks backed by the UN Security Council, both sides seek to discourage American unilateralism (F. Zhu, 2006; He, 2008). This has fostered support for a strategy that is cautious with sanctions and generous with incentives. China overtly backed the EU when, in October 2004, it proposed offering Iran more economic co-operation and delivering light-water reactors in return for the suspension of uranium enrichment and full access for the IAEA. In 2005 it also summoned the Iranian government to pick up the stalled talks with Europe.

However, within this seemingly co-operative framework the situation was that the EU sought to work with Iran while prioritizing staying best friends with Washington, whereas China sought to work with the EU while staying Teheran's best friend.<sup>12</sup> This meant that Beijing did not refrain from resisting Europe, for instance, in 2004 when it blocked the request for Iran to voluntarily cease enrichment. While it did not veto the three other UN resolutions providing for sanctions, it always tried to dilute their impact and to explain that such measures would not harm 'the economic and financial activities between Iran and other countries' as well as organizing a concessionary official visit to Iran afterwards.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Beijing was well aware of the fact that the E3 was often more a matter of an E1+1+1, as the United Kingdom, France and Germany interpreted their interest not always in the same way. In July 2007 and during the Geneva talks in June 2008, for instance, China successfully reached out to Berlin to deflect new sanctions backed by the UK and the US.<sup>14</sup>

The matter is whether China's persistent pork barrelling towards Teheran and its attempts to water down sanctions are a matter of tactical manoeuvring or strategic conflict. Most officials in Brussels think that China is creating the scope to continue to do business, but will side with Europe to keep Iran free from nuclear arms in the end.<sup>15</sup> Yet there are Chinese realists who claim that a nuclear Iran is unavoidable or should not be a threat to China, and that the problem is mainly one with Israel, way beyond the influence of China (He, 2007). Others hint that Europe will inevitably yield to American pressure and scale down their economic co-operation so that China can continue to increase its economic influence (Van der Putten and Van der Meulen, 2009; L. Zhu, 2008). It is also argued that for China it matters more what Russia

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Chinese official (2), Brussels, 7 March 2009; Interview with European official, Brussels, 10 March 2009.

<sup>13</sup> 'Iran Nuclear Impasse Likely to Persist', *China Daily*, 5 March 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with EU official, Brussels, 4 March 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with EU official, Brussels, 4 March 2009; Interview with European official, Brussels, 11 March 2009.

does because of their overlapping spheres of influence in Central Asia (Zhao, 2007a). For most Chinese experts, however, the most important factor is what America will do. In case of harsher pressure and eventual unilateral military action, China will seek to side with Europe (Zhao, 2007a; L. Zhu, 2008, p. 62). If the new administration goes softer on Iran, partnering with Europe will become less important. It is thus uncertain that the EU and China will continue to work together as China sees Europe's intermediary role as a function of what other powers do.

Contrarily to Iran, where China and Europe can claim a degree of leverage and geopolitical proximity, Europe remains a marginal player in the *North Korean* nuclear conundrum, and is not even a member of the six-party talks. Interaction between the EU and China is limited to frequent briefings by Beijing on the status of the negotiations with Pyongyang. In return, the EU has recognized China's leading role in the international community's attempt to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear arms.<sup>16</sup> The EU has promised to increase aid in case of positive developments, but it has not co-ordinated aid strategies with China. While Europe is working through the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), China prefers direct bilateral co-operation. In the UN Security Council, the European permanent and temporary members hardly play a role.<sup>17</sup> Bargaining on the important Resolution 1718 (14 October 2006) was solely a matter between China, the US, Russia and Japan. The only direct attempt of the EU to engage China was with regard to the situation of North Korean refugees in the border area, but it failed to get Beijing's green light for admitting the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>18</sup> Sino-European co-operation on the North Korean nuclear issue can thus not be considered strategic. Europe is useful to China as a source of legitimacy for its pragmatic go-between diplomacy, but it needs the EU even less than in the case of Iran. While jointly endorsing the importance of non-proliferation, China's strategy towards the DPRK is more an approach of regional balancing, and it does not need the EU for that, even as an honest broker (see, for example, Fernandez, 2007).

In the case of *Myanmar*, China considers Europe to be a marginal player (Guo, 2008; Haacke, 2007). The issue has been discussed at policy consultations during which China explained its concern and its attempts to persuade

<sup>16</sup> 'EU Reiterates Support to Six-Party Talks', *China Daily*, 23 December 2008; 'EU Presidency Declaration on the Six Party Talks', CL07-046EN, Brussels, 14 February 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with European official, Brussels, 10 March 2009; Interview with Chinese official (2), Brussels, 7 March 2009.

<sup>18</sup> The European Commission (EC) also issues an EU annual report on human rights in the world.

the Burmese junta to show restraint in repressing opposition.<sup>19</sup> When the special envoy Piero Fassino visited Beijing in December 2007, he received the same message. China is merely aware of the attempts of Europe to play a role, for example via the ‘three diseases fund’. It has lamented the EU’s ‘unconstructive isolation policy’ and complains about Europe’s criticism of Myanmar during ASEM meetings. There is no co-ordination, let alone co-operation.

Despite its ‘hands off’ approach, Beijing is following the situation in *Afghanistan* closely.<sup>20</sup> The stability in the south-central Asian region is key to the development of China’s far west. ‘Europe’s role in Afghanistan is perceived from the perspective of NATO, and NATO remains a tool of America’s security policy’, a Chinese official has argued.<sup>21</sup> China has been working with Czech troops to protect its mining project in the south, but the EU was not involved as facilitator. Thus far both sides have only stated their mutual concern, but no official exchange of views has taken place with regard to long-term solutions. China and Europe are important sources of aid, but apart from a few EU-funded projects expected by Chinese workers, assistance programmes are implemented without the least co-ordination (Zhao, 2007b).

China and Europe claim to have good consultation and co-ordination on *UN reform*.<sup>22</sup> Yet, there is no evidence whatsoever that they have gone beyond consultation at bilateral summits. Over the main issues related to the restructuring of the UN, no common European position exists because Spain and Italy oppose the support of London, Paris and Berlin of the G4 proposal that provides permanent seats for Germany, along with Japan, Brazil, India and two others. It is difficult to achieve co-operation between the EU and China when no consensus exists among European states. Even regarding the position of Europe’s ‘big three’, Beijing has slammed on the brakes. In 2005, it made clear that it would block reforms in which Brazil, Germany, India and Japan received a permanent seat. Officially it was explained that the G4 plans were damaging for the Council’s ‘authority and effectiveness’, that it would lead to ‘dividing the members just because of the reform of the UNSC’, and that instead of only the large players, priority should be given to ‘developing countries, particularly small and medium-sized countries’.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Chinese official (2), Brussels, 7 March 2009; Interview with European official, Brussels, 10 March 2009; Interview with European official, Brussels, 11 March 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Kellner, 2009; Interview with Chinese official (3), Washington, 6 December 2008; Interview with official at NATO, 23 February 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Chinese official (3), Brussels, 7 March 2009.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Chinese FM Vows to Elevate China–EU Strategic Partnership to New High’, *China Daily*, 6 December 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Position paper of the PRC on UN Reform, Beijing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 June 2005.

For France and the United Kingdom, the G4 scenario is most suitable in their fight against redundancy in terms of legitimizing their own position as weakening powers, maintaining the Security Council as a platform for inter-state realpolitik and boosting the representation of western Europe.<sup>24</sup> For China, however, India is hard to accept because of its alliance with Pakistan, and Japan for alleged 'historical revisionism' (Xie, 2004; J. Liu, 2006). Beijing also sought to seize the discussion in order to step up its position as Third World champion. However, the main difference is that as a rising great power China does not need reform of the Council to legitimize its current membership. This explains why it tends to keep silent, to take for granted that rivalry between pretenders will suffice to have no reforms at all, and side more with the United States and Russia instead of a divided Europe.

Other differences exist concerning the role of the UN General Secretariat. Whereas the EU favours a stronger mandate, China rejects this idea.<sup>25</sup> The EU has argued that the recruiting of staff members should be subject to stringent requirements, whereas China prefers to spend attention on geographical representation first. Beijing has also rejected a European proposal to revise the discounts that developing countries enjoy in contributing to the UN budget (Ariyork and Hsu, 2007).

Within the existing UN structures Sino-European collaboration is at best incomplete and irregular. In the Human Rights Council, China's voting matched that of the EU members in only two of 21 resolutions.<sup>26</sup> Differences became most prominent concerning procedural matters and specific cases like Darfur, Myanmar and North Korea. Out of 661 resolutions voted upon between 2000 and 2008 in the General Assembly, only 45 per cent of China and Europe's votes match, and this share has not increased. Europe's voting behaviour lies between the United States, on the one hand, and the BRIC countries, on the other. European diplomats explain that developing countries are actively using General Assembly sessions to target the United States.<sup>27</sup> China, it is said, joins these attempts, whereas European countries pragmatically maintain a middle ground. Regarding the United Nations Security Council, voting behaviour is less useful as an indicator of diplomatic convergence. Recently, China has invoked its veto right twice to ward off sanctions on Myanmar and Zimbabwe that involved two draft resolutions backed by the European members. More important is what happens behind the scenes, and

<sup>24</sup> 'China Opposes UN Reform Plan', *Reuters*, 5 April 2005.

<sup>25</sup> H. Zhu, 2006; Interview with European official, Brussels, 9 March 2009; Interview with former representative to the UN, Brussels, 10 March 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Votes cast in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with former representative to the UN, Brussels, 10 March 2009; see also Kent, 1999.

here European representatives have noticed a more active Chinese presence with more self-confidence and growing knowledge.<sup>28</sup> In the past few years, China has actively worked with Russia and temporary members from Asia or Africa to add weight to decision-making.

The interaction between China and Europe in the context of the UN confirms two different interpretations of 'effective multilateralism'. Both parties confirm that the UN should be harnessed for addressing new challenges in a more efficient way. Both parties have also recognized the importance of the UN Security Council in curbing destabilizing unilateralism. Yet while the EU's expectation is to turn bodies like the UN into channels for exerting normative power, China considers them to be theatres for discussing international norms on an equal footing. China's alleged compliance with multilateral frameworks is rather a matter of recognizing them as a useful platform to discuss the rules of the game and to deflect western criticism. China's posture in the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council proves that the 'democratization of international relations' to which Beijing aspires means in reality that the majority of developing countries should be able to protect their interests against the minority of developed countries. In the Security Council, China once more remains focused on the US as its main opponent, and on Russia as its main ally.

China is lauded as an example of how accession to the *World Trade Organization* (WTO) works in tandem with national market-based reforms. It duly complied with the stringent measures that the EU, the US and Japan imposed. Since its membership, China is considered one of the main stakeholders of the WTO framework. Its delegation in Geneva is praised as one of the most specialized and efficient in applying WTO rules and institutions to defend its interests. Obviously, the PRC and the EU have been launching cases against each other, but in light of their preference for free trade even the adoption of these procedural rules is a major contribution to the defence of free trade. Since 2002, the EU has filed two disputes against China, while the US has filed seven, and China three against the US. Such cases indicated how the parties use *existing* rules.

Equally important is how they see the development of *new* trade rules. Whether Europe and China's positions match can be deduced from the communications or proposals submitted to the WTO's negotiating group on rules. In this regard it is telling that in 2008 China only made three submissions together with the EU, while there were 17 submissions with other countries. These separate submissions related to issues like fishery subsidies, forest products, anti-dumping procedures and market access for

<sup>28</sup> Interview with former representative to the UN, Brussels, 10 March 2009.

non-agricultural products (Choi, 2007). In these cases, China allied mainly with developing countries. These cleavages were also prominent in the Doha trade round and are caused by both direct differences in interests and political ambition. China faces European reluctance when it pressures for more market access for non-agricultural products or Chinese workers. Europe runs into Chinese opposition when it pushes for more liberalized services and government procurement (Singapore issues).

That in the end agriculture ended up as the main fomenter can be attributed to some extent to interests – namely China's concern for its food security – but was mainly due to Beijing's preference for keeping ranks with other developing countries. This also explains the rhetorical attacks from Beijing towards the EU. It is also argued that Beijing did not foresee an outcome that would be positive to its own stakes, particularly not with the perspective of automatically obtaining market economy status in 2015. Thus it is said to prefer to maintain the current rules instead of making new concessions. The Third World alliance is conducive to China's overall diplomatic leverage as it contributes to co-ordination in other multilateral forums and helps to deflect western demands concerning climate change and so on.

China's accession to the WTO in 2001 is the most important signal that it supports an open international trade order. Yet its behaviour as a member shows different opinions about what this 'open' order should look like. If there will be a revision of rules, Beijing tries to adapt them to its interests as a growing but incompletely developed trading state, as opposed to the mainly developed status quo countries from Europe. It is evident that Third World countries form a more useful ally in comparison to First World Europe. Once again, multilateralism proves to be an arena of contest rather than a guarantee for more effective global governance, and even less of compliance to Europe's expectations.

In 2005, China and Europe announced a *climate change* action plan. At the EU–China summit in 2007, clean energy was heralded as a key new area of co-operation. Since then, consultations and exchanges on environmental issues have been booming. Among the many initiatives, the EU funnels €2.8 million into a project that needs to facilitate research and training. Climate change is indeed an issue with the potential to develop into a vital area of collaboration. China recognizes that in order to maintain domestic stability, its industrialization needs to become more efficient and cleaner. Elsewhere, I examine at greater length how the Chinese government has made headway in issuing new regulations and in expanding clean energy production (Holslag, 2010). There is thus a convergence of interests.

Yet co-operation remains problematic. Europe and China disagree over the extent to which new international rules on emissions should be binding,

Table 1: Evaluating the Partnership in Practice

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Stated as joint priority</i>	<i>Formal dialogue</i>	<i>Congruence</i>	<i>Co-ordination and joint programmes</i>	<i>Mutual recognition as key player</i>
Africa	Yes	Partial	Minimal	Minimal	No
Iran	Yes	No	Partial	Partial	No
DPRK	Yes	No	Partial	No	No
Afghanistan	Yes	No	Partial	No	No
Myanmar	Yes	No	No	No	No
UN reform	Yes	Partial	No	No	No
WTO	Yes	Partial	Partial	No	No
Climate	Yes	Yes	Partial	Partial	Partial

*Source:* This overview is built on the previous section.

how fast they should be implemented, and who should pay for it. Beijing finds that it cannot be evaluated with the same standards as the EU, and if Europe wants to accelerate China's 'greening' it should provide the technology to do so. Once again, the idea of a green partnership has made room for a balancing strategy. It is playing Europe off against Japan and Canada to get know-how and environment-friendly technologies. During the Bali Conference in 2007, China capitalized on the divisions between Europe and the United States in negotiations for international rules. The recent easing of its disinclination to consider binding rules was more a consequence of shifts in Washington's stance – notably Congress initiatives in mid-2008 and the election of a new administration – than of European pressure.

Hence, considering the eight issues, what is left from the strategic partnership in practice (Table 1)? To start with, is there follow-up in regular exchanges or dialogues? Yes. In all eight cases, China and Europe have continued to discuss them and even established specialized dialogues, such as on Africa and climate change. Are Chinese and European independent policy initiatives congruent? Partially, at best. Regarding problem states, China has not followed the EU's more punitive approach. Within multilateral organizations like the UN and the WTO, initiatives tend to move in opposite directions. Are joint priorities translated into endurable joint policies and programmes? No. Co-ordination proves to be impossible and projects even more difficult. The joint programmes that occur from time to time are too small to make a difference. Do both sides recognize each other as the main partner? Not at all. On the one hand, Beijing continues to engage Europe as a function of its own relationship with the United States and works with the EU as an intermediate player. On the other hand, it tends to counterbalance

western initiatives by siding with Russia, India and other developing countries. Europe recognizes China as a main actor, but continues to see America as its main partner. Rather than a strategic convergence, Europe remains of secondary importance in China's foreign policy. The most striking observation is that while the EU has been expecting that an emerging multipolar order would give way to effective multilateral co-operation, China clearly sees multilateral bodies as a means of defending its own interests. Multilateralism for Beijing is a continuation of *realpolitik* by other means. While China has gone through a period that can be seen as obedience to the west – notably in the framework of the WTO – nowadays we discern a new phenomenon: reverse socialization. China is using international institutions to project its own standards, often at the expense of Europe's.

### Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that a strategic partnership between the EU and China is not materializing – either on paper, or in practice. The Sino-European relationship is by no means an endurable strategic axis. A first explanation is Europe's stubborn belief that it can socialize China. It still assumes that by entangling the Asian power into a web of international institutions and rules, Beijing will adopt the norms that Europe has enshrined in its own political charters (Manners, 2002; Diez, 2005). This convergence is not taking place. The contrary is true. China more assertively defends the idea that it has the right to adhere to its own principles in conceiving its future policies. There exists a clear gap between China's belief that co-operation should depart from normative diversity and joint interest and Europe's assumption that differences in interests can be resolved by a consensus over universal political rules.

This leads us to a second misunderstanding. The EU tends to assume that the emergence of a multipolar world order will bring about effective multilateral co-operation, and that powers such as China would subsequently relinquish their preference for *sovereignism* or non-interference. This assumption proves to be problematic, too, as Beijing is throwing its weight onto the scale to uphold these standards in international institutions like the United Nations. The normative premises of international co-operation are thus a key source of misunderstanding and impede a consensus over the basic principles for co-operation. This division has been exacerbated by the development of a new security dilemma that coincides with the erosion of the unipolar world order. China's behaviour in Africa has illustrated that different political norms are actively used as a source of influence in competition with

other powers. In the quest for new political friends and commercial partners, the fear to lose out from other strong developing countries that apply similar interpretations of *sovereignism* means that China will be even less able to make concessions towards Europe.

This situation also has its consequences for both sides' *modus operandi* in international relations. Europe and China recognize the need for stability and peaceful co-operation. Yet, China's involvement with multilateralism and its diplomatic manoeuvring on problem states prove its preference for realism. It shuns the costs of confronting the United States, but it subtly looks for alliances to counterbalance its power. Europe's role also continues to be defined as a function of the relationship with Washington (Shen, 2008). Not that it is considered an ally. The cases of Africa and the UN have showed that Europe at best can act as a go-between or a cushion against American pressure. Its long-term strategizing towards the US concentrates on great power pretenders like Russia and the colourful panoply of developing countries. Whereas China defines its interests in terms of alliances, Europe is not able to do so. It has not determined how it should position itself between China and the US, or what the significance of closer co-operation with China can be in relation to Russia and other giants. Its penchant towards Washington seems to be more habitual than the result of strategic thinking, and this is perhaps the main proof that it has not outgrown its diplomatic infancy.

The basic definition of an 'international actor' is an entity that is capable of formulating purposes and making decisions, and thus engaging in some form of purposive action.<sup>29</sup> The Chinese government has always assumed that the EU has the potential to become one, but after its undetermined response during the American-led invasion of Iraq, its back-and-forth moving on the arms embargo, failing attempts to reform its institutions and poor economic performance, the EU has moved further down in China's ranking (Chen, 2006; Yu, 2008). The idea that Europe will continue to fail to deliver as a strategic player is becoming more and more common among Chinese experts and officials (Feng, 2006; Zhang, 2007; Deng, 2007). Several of them even emphasize the fact that the EU is facing a severe internal and external legitimacy crisis (Y. Liu, 2006; see also Chen, 2006; Pan, 2007). Thus one cannot expect Europe to foster a strategic partnership if it is hardly considered to be a strategic actor.

<sup>29</sup> Bretherton and Vogler (2006, p. 20). Bretherton and Vogler propose five requirements for *actorness* in the international sphere, including shared commitment to a set of overarching values, domestic legitimation of decision processes and priorities for external policies, the ability to identify interests, priorities and formulate policies, and availability of and capacity to use policy instruments (see also Wendt, 1987, p. 337; Tonra, 2006, p. 128).

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