

## **The Paper Partnership: Security in the Sino-European Relations**

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The political dimension of the Sino-European relationship develops rapidly on paper, slowly in practice. An interesting recent evolution is that China has become more eager to add security issues to the bilateral agenda. In 2013, for example, China conveyed to the institutions in Brussels a long note with proposals to strengthen the partnership in the next six years. Security figured as a top priority in that note. This paper first evaluates to what degree Europe and China managed to cooperate on security affairs since the establishment of their strategic partnership in 2003.<sup>1</sup> While exchanges have multiplied and a few first concrete steps are evaluated positively, the overall balance remains disappointing, in Beijing's view. In spite of many common interests, there is no evidence that security is becoming a solid pillar of the partnership. The second part of the paper discusses the prospects for closer cooperation with a particular focus on what China expects from its European partner. It discerns many reservations towards Europe as a security actor and its recent problems have only strengthened that skepticism.

This is an empirical paper. It does not seek to contribute to the major theoretical debates about international relations. Instead, its primary goal is to add to the rich debate about the Sino-European relations and to provide some specific insights to the general observation that, for all the dialogues and exchanges, the partnership is in rather bad shape and does not weigh a lot on the course of international events. In this way, it could also be of use to understand better how China is responding to a more challenging strategic environment and to what extent the partnership with Europe could give it more maneuverability at times of growing tensions in Asia. I will draw from a series of conversations that took place in the previous five years. Most of these were informal conversations with experts whom I met in Brussels or Beijing. The paper also reviews a broad range of articles from Chinese experts. I choose articles mostly from experts with access to policy makers or published in outlets close to the government.

### **The state of cooperation**

From a Chinese viewpoint, it is clear why Europe matters to its security. A united Europe could be a more independent Europe, less inclined to trail in the wake of the United States, and abler to help China diversify its relationships at a time of growing geopolitical claustrophobia in the Pacific. This was the calculus present in the Three Worlds Theory of Mao Zedong, the ideals of a New World Order of Deng Xiaoping, the fixation with multipolarity of Jiang Zemin, and the eagerness of the following political generations to continue to invest in a strategic partnership that has had steep ups and downs. Even in the absence of strong political cooperation, Europe remained crucial to keep China's growth on track and thus also for maintaining domestic stability and regime security. In 1990, Europe purchased about 10 per cent of China's exports. By 2000, this was 16 per cent.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, after the passing of the ravaging Eurozone Crisis, Europe still absorbed 17 per cent of China's total exports. Since the turn of the century, the trade surplus with Europe stood for about 3 per cent of China's economic output.<sup>3</sup> Europe also remained the most important provider of technology – ranging from knowhow in the pharmaceutical and car industry to technology to build planes, turbines for ships, and satellites. This way, Europe has contributed a great deal to both China's industrial policies and its military modernization.

From a European viewpoint, it is much less obvious how China contributes to its security. Some European leaders did echo China's pledges for a multipolar world, but that was at the time of America's blatant excess of unilateralism during the confusing episode of Operation

Iraqi Freedom. Those noises faded soon afterward. China's rise now makes European leaders rather nervous about the reticence of the United States to maintain its presence in the Middle East, as Washington prioritizes its Pacific security interests. This not only makes it less certain whether the comfortable security umbrella of the United States will be there when the next crisis breaks out, but also makes politicians fret about what to do in case the Pacific dilemma between China and the United States turns violent. The rise of China does not herald the end of the treasured transatlantic security partnership, but implies that it will come with a greater price tag. Meanwhile, China has not been very helpful in alleviating Europe's economic uncertainty, uncertainty that increasingly nourishes political fragmentation and undermines the very fundamentals of the European project. The persistent trade deficit means that China is not creating external demand. The gesture of Beijing to buy government debt is barely a quick fix that saddles Europe with more external debt and helps Chinese exporters more than European industries. If that were not enough, China is also seen as a spoiler of Europe's aspirations as a normative power, defying many of its norms bilaterally and in international organizations.

*Table 1. Overview of security priorities in the joint Statements following Sino-European summits. The summit of 2011 was postponed to 2012.*

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2012	2012	2013
North-Korea	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1
Non-proliferation	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1
Terrorism		1	1	1			1	1				1	1
Middle East	1	1	1			1	1						1
Africa						1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Myanmar			1	1					1			1	1
Piracy											1	1	1
Balkans	1						1						
South Asia		1							1				
Iraq				1									
Asian regional security							1						

Sources: Joint Statements 2001-2013.

The result of this chasm is a kind of partnership in which Europe and China exchange more and more, but seem to become less and less able to identify which specific common security interests it serves in the long run.

To be sure, talks have resulted in a series of broadly defined common interests, of the kind that one could insert in any bilateral partnership without committing too much. So, what are these interests? The best way to identify them is to glance through the joint statements that China and Europe customarily issue after each annual summit meeting (table 1). Between 2001 and 2013, 13 such statements have been released. The security concern highlighted most frequently was the nuclear program of North Korea, followed by non-proliferation and disarmament, terrorism, the situation in the Middle East, Africa, and Iran. Piracy became prominent in the statement of 2009. So far the interests are on paper, but what does this mean in practice? In general, it implies that Chinese and European leaders often clarify their positions during summit meetings and discuss the issues during the more focused strategic dialogues, which were elevated to state counsellor and commission vice-president level in 2010. But even in that high-level strategic dialogue, most of the interaction remains limited to the clarification of interests and interpretations.<sup>4</sup> That is also true at the working level. Chinese officials in Brussels come to visit their counterparts much more frequently, to solicit information about the European take on security issues and to share their concerns. Yet, again, this usually has no direct consequences on the ground. Let us go through the common security priorities one by one.

Even though North Korea is at the top of common security concerns, China hardly considers Europe an interlocutor. When North Korea withdrew from the Non Proliferation Treaty in

2003, China briefly took an interest in European encouragement for the Six-Party Talks, but that ended when some member states, like France and the United Kingdom, started repeating and backing American calls for more sanctions and a stronger response to new missile launches. In general, Chinese officials are appreciative of Europe's support for the Six-Party Talks, its financial contribution to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) until that organization was shut down in 2013, its aid to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in its efforts to verify the North Korean nuclear dismantlement, and the implementation of measures decided by the six.<sup>5</sup> In the UN Security Council, the European permanent and temporary members hardly play a role. The bargaining on the important Resolution 1718 (14 October 2006), which first imposed sanctions on North Korea following its first nuclear test, was solely a matter between China, the US, Russia, and Japan. The only direct attempt of the European Union to engage China occurred 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 into the area.

China and Europe have made it routine to flag non-proliferation and disarmament as a joint security priority. For China, Europe is a partner to strengthen multilateral cooperation on the matter and a more forthcoming interlocutor than the United States.<sup>6</sup> In 2004, the two sides agreed on a lengthy bilateral statement. This document was significant for China, not the least because Europe backed China's accession to the Missile Technology Control Regime, against the wishes of the United States.<sup>7</sup> China for its part recognized Europe's role in the Asian Regional Forum and vowed to support European initiatives within the forum in the field of non-proliferation. Europe did participate in the Inter-Sessional Meetings on Non-Proliferation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), but its role was modest at best.<sup>8</sup> For China, the main focus was on the competition with the United States for leadership in these meetings. Chinese officials have largely been unaware of the European Strategy against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction of 2013 and the millions of Euros of European support for non-proliferation and arms control initiatives in Southeast, South, and Central Asian Countries.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2003, both sides have fine-tuned their positions on Iran at bilateral summits, as well as in exchanges between the Council Secretariat and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>10</sup> China and the European Union recognized the double joint interest in preventing Teheran from developing nuclear arms and avoiding a diplomatic collision with Washington on the one hand, and continuing to trade with the Central Asian country on the other. This fostered Chinese support for an initial strategy that was cautious about sanctions and generous with incentives. China overtly backed Europe in October 2004, when it proposed to offer Iran more economic cooperation and to deliver 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. But within this seemingly cooperative framework, the situation was that Europe sought to work with Iran while prioritizing staying the best friend of Washington, whereas China sought to work with the EU while staying Teheran's best friend.<sup>11</sup> This meant that Beijing did not refrain from resisting Europe, for instance in 2004, when it blocked a resolution requesting Iran to voluntarily cease enrichment, or in 2006, when it opposed tough sanctions in a Chapter VII-based Resolution that was backed by France and the UK. Moreover, Beijing was well aware of the fact that the E3, referring to the exchanges between France, the United Kingdom and Germany on Iran, was often more a matter of and E1+1+1, as the UK, France and Germany interpreted their interest not always in the same way. In July 2007, China successfully reached out to Berlin to deflect new sanctions backed by the UK and the US.<sup>12</sup> Those sanctions did get through in 2008, though, and were followed by even harder European measures at the beginning of 2009. China opposed both of them. "Europe's approach is not conducive to a peaceful solution," the China Institutes of International Studies' Cui Hongjian wrote, "Even if its policy is not exactly the same as the American position, it tends to follow the United States on the issue of sanctions."<sup>13</sup> The rift remained after Catherine Ashton was appointed lead negotiator on behalf of the permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) and Germany, which was added as an important non-Security Council stakeholder. In 2010, China disapproved of

European unilateral sanctions. In 2011, it brushed aside the criticism of Catherine Ashton that Chinese companies were circumventing sanctions. In 2012, it accused Europe of intensifying confrontation when it imposed new measures. The divide only narrowed when Iran itself opted for concessions, after the elections of 2013.

Other Middle Eastern issues were also marked by frequent exchanges, but limited cooperation. The region has been present on the agenda throughout almost all high-level bilateral talks. In the region itself, there are regular exchanges between embassies and delegations. In Lebanon, Chinese and peacekeepers from European member states have worked side by side. Still, differences remained. With regard to Lebanon, China and the European permanent members of the United Nations Security Council coordinated well in the preparation of Resolution 1701, which called on Lebanon and Israel to respect a ceasefire, and vowed to send troops to monitor the cessation of hostilities between Israel and the Hezbollah. In the following years, however, a rift emerged over the Hezbollah. In 1999, as the United States had already put the grouping on its own list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Member states like the United Kingdom and the Netherlands followed suit and spearheaded an internal European agreement on labeling Hezbollah as a terrorist group. The Chinese government openly criticized this decision, with Chinese experts explaining that Hezbollah was not the root cause of the conflict and that European countries were yielding to pressure from the United States and Israel without facing the complexity of the situation.

Similar differences existed with regard to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Even if China has maintained close relations with Tel-Aviv, it has been a more energetic supporter of the Palestinian cause. It was one of the first to support Palestine's bid for membership of the United Nations and also resisted the calls of Israel and the United States to consider Hamas a terrorist group. Since the turn of the century, China has largely maintained its line of pragmatism and restraint. Since 2013, however, it signaled that it wanted to become more involved, by proposing its own, albeit vague, four-point proposal and soliciting membership of the Middle East Quartet, formed by the United States, Russia, Europe, and the United Nations, with former British Premier Tony Blair serving as its special envoy. The four-point proposal called for an independent Palestinian state, to accelerate negotiations, to uphold the principle of land for peace, and for a greater involvement of the international community to support talks and to increase assistance to Palestine.<sup>14</sup> It is not clear what the intentions are behind this shift, whether it concerns a genuine attempt to broker a deal, an effort to put the policy of "building new great power relations" into practice by become more active engaged in world affairs, a consequence of pressure by other countries in the region, or a combination of these elements.

Clear is that China does not reckon Europe to be of much importance. "The solution for the Middle East passes through Washington, no longer through the European capitals," an official stated.<sup>15</sup> Officials and experts point to the deep divisions between European member states. Jiaotong University's Zhang Xuekun in this regard spoke of a growing expectations-capabilities gap. "It now merely provides economic assistance to American policies in the Middle East... The EU can often not speak with one voice. Consider Ireland, which has a traditional fixation on the fate of the Palestinians because of its own colonial experience. The Netherlands traditionally has a pro-Israel stance, while Greece and Sweden are in the pro-Arab faction mostly because of domestic politics. Germany, Austria, and Poland too are concerned about the Palestinian question, but the legacy of World War II has made them also sensitive to the fate of the Jews."<sup>16</sup> Chen Shuangqing, Director of Middle East Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, called Europe's policy towards the Middle East inconsistent, sluggish and opportunistic.<sup>17</sup>

Then there was Syria. Chinese officials and experts consider Europe's response to the Syrian pandemonium a mess and do not deem Europe an interlocutor of interest. "Even though the unrest in Syria directly affects the economic and security interests of Europe's southern flank, the European countries generally did not got any further than the ineffective quick fix to overthrow the Assad regime as quickly as possible."<sup>18</sup> Europe's impotence is attributed to a

lack of interest, a lack of internal coordination, a lack of a vision for Iraq, and the absence of a solid relationship with regional powers like Turkey.<sup>19</sup> The failure to broker a consensus between the member states on arming Syrian rebels in 2013 only confirmed these perceptions. Chinese officials have explained their government's four-point proposal for Syria to senior European counterparts, but that was about the farthest dialogue got. At the same time, Beijing obdurately declined resolutions in the Security Council that paved the way for an armed intervention and watered down sanctions. It explained to European officials that this would aggravate regional insecurity and would make religious extremism uncontrollable.

Security in Africa was added to the agenda in 2006 as a result mostly of China's growing visibility as an investor and the crises in Darfur and Zimbabwe. While the European Union had imposed sanctions on these two countries' governments, it also sought to persuade Beijing to exert pressure. 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 European Delegation in Beijing, and European diplomats in New York. In 2007, Special Envoy for Darfur, Liu Guijin called on Brussels. He also participated in a meeting of the contact group on Darfur in Paris. But cooperation on Darfur and Zimbabwe did not take off. Even today, in the context of growing tensions in South Sudan, China does not consider Europe an important partner. China is the largest investor in the oil sector in South Sudan and relies on a pipeline to neighboring Sudan to transport its oil to the Red Sea. On the one hand, it finds that the United States is having a much greater say in the juvenile country. "South Sudan is America's baby," one official told me. On the other hand, it finds that Europe has no proper strategy towards the security problems in Sudan. This is somewhat different in cases of Mali and the Central African Republic. In 2012, China took the initiative to consult with France on the problems in Mali and quickly offered to send peacekeepers. In 2014, China also kept close contacts with France in the run-up to its intervention in the Central African Republic and also pledged peacekeepers. A senior Chinese official was very critical, though, of the fact that the rest of Europe struggled to provide the 600 promised troops in support of the French Mission.<sup>20</sup> In general, Chinese officials and experts blamed Europe for trying to outmaneuver China, using human rights and good governance as a pretext. They insisted that Europe's formula of democracy and transparency does not work in an African context.<sup>21</sup> As usual they were also well aware of the internal divisions and the tension between norms and commercial interests. More importantly, Beijing insisted that the policy proposals to promote security and peace ought to come from Africa and not from Europe. Said an important official: "I think Europe should first treat Africa as an equal partner, not as its backyard. It should stop emphasizing that it contributed to Africa, and recognize what Africa contributed to Europe. This attitude prevents you from building trust in Africa. It really requires a mentality change. In the triangular relationship, your confidence in cooperation with Europe depends on the confidence that Africa has in Europe."<sup>22</sup>

Regarding terrorism, the European Union and China both supported the preparation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2006 and the United Nations Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force. Leaders continued to back the drafting of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism and to highlight the need for multilateral cooperation in the fight against terrorism. There have been sporadic meetings with the European anti-terrorism coordinator, but without concrete outcomes. China has approached individual member states, like France and the United Kingdom, for information about the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al Shabaab in the Horn of Africa.

Exchanges in the field of anti-piracy were more operational. Since its arrival in the Gulf of Aden in 2008, Chinese navy officers have frequently visited European vessels and vice versa. For the EUNAVFOR, the European Naval Force, it was important from the start to try to engage China, but China refused to participate in the so-called International Recognized Transit Corridor, a stretch of water where merchant ships would be protected by a multilateral naval force, and the Group Transit System. Instead, and frustrating European participants, the Chinese navy chose to protect civilian ships separately by forming convoys.

These were primarily meant for Chinese flagged ships, but open to others if they registered their transit with the Chinese government. Europe was also disgruntled because China initially remained reluctant to escort ships of the World Food Program and did not want to participate in Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE), an initiative to enhance coordination in anti-piracy. That changed. In 2009, a Chinese delegation was invited to discuss communication at the Operation Headquarters in Northwood, UK. A few months later, the EUNAVFOR provided support to the Chinese flotilla in the investigation of a suspicious vessel. The Chinese commander also paid several visits to the flagship of the European mission and exchanged experiences with the Commander of EUNAVFOR. In October, European patrol aircraft helped to track a hijacked Chinese bulk carrier that was not registered with the Maritime Security Center Horn of Africa, based at Northwood. China also accepted to communicate via MERCURY, an alert system operated by the Maritime Security Center Horn of Africa of the European Union. During one of the exchanges that year the European force commander also proposed that it would consider China as a co-chair or chair of the SHADE. In January 2010, it indeed became the SHADE's chair. In 2012, after prodding by the EU, it assumed the protection of some World Food Program shipments. To date, four such ships were escorted between Mombassa and Somalian ports.<sup>23</sup> Exchanges became ever more frequent. Helicopters were used to transfer officers between Chinese and European ships. A Chinese and European warship worked together to protect a freighter of the World Food Program between Mombasa and Somali ports.. Boarding teams held joint exercises.

Six years after the debut of China's deployment in the Indian Ocean, its ships still do not participate in the Recognized Transit Corridor, but European officials and senior military officers that participated in EUNAVFOR are generally positive about the growing confidence. "It is clear that China is still testing the water, that its commanders in the Gulf of Aden have not much autonomy, and that they struggle with communication, but they are very eager to reach out to us," said one officer that was in command of the EUNAVFOR, "We were always received very well and these limited forms of cooperation have certainly allowed us to explain what Europe's role in international security is about."<sup>24</sup> Explained another commanding officer: "They always work very carefully and are afraid to loose face. They take time and only accept a proposal if they are sure that it will work."<sup>25</sup> Other European officers reported eavesdropping, ranging from radar scanning to communication taps. Chinese officials are also appreciative of Europe's willingness to reach out to China and recognize it as an important partner. Experts are more critical though. One the one hand, they state that Europe is perhaps too eager to show its flag, but reluctant to tackle the roots of the piracy problem. "As long as the economy remains in tatters, the piracy problem will never be solved."<sup>26</sup> "It is the meddling of Western countries in the internal affairs of Somalia that has caused the civil war and the chaos of today," writes another academic, "sending warships can only be a temporary solution."<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, it is argued that especially the United States and India use the piracy problem as a pretext to strengthen their naval presence along strategic choke points. In that power play, Europe plays much less of a role.<sup>28</sup>

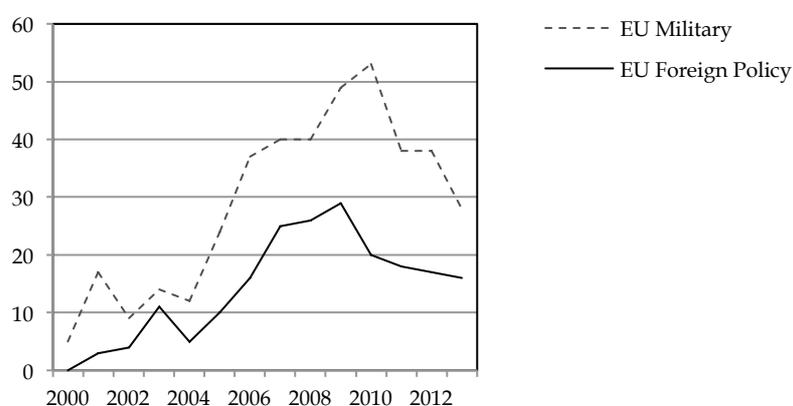
## **Future**

The Sino-European partnership looks impressive on paper, but is modest in reality. That observation is not new. But could the two parties do better? What does China expect from its security cooperation with Europe? In 2013, the Chinese government submitted to the European Commission a long list with proposals to strengthen the partnership. That was a rather new phenomenon. Until then, it was the European side that usually made proposals, with China being reluctant to accept them. What made this feat even more particular was the fact that Beijing put security upfront. After a long time of deliberation, the result was a joint agenda with 16 pages of priorities and proposals for making strategic cooperation stronger by 2020. Again, security emerged at the beginning of the paper. Most of the 13 priorities in the security sections were nothing new. They related to the strengthening of existing dialogues or the identification of shared principles: multilateralism, a rules-based global economic order, and counter-proliferation. The paragraph on cyber-security did not go beyond the existing and rather unproductive dialogue. More concrete were the proposals to organize joint police

training, to conduct more counter-piracy exercises, to conduct joint research in the Arctic, to share expertise in international law with regard to maritime safety, and to assist each other in providing humanitarian aid. As regards military cooperation, the only commitment was to “hold regular dialogues on defense and security policy, increase training exchanges, and gradually raise the level of EU-China dialogue and cooperation on defense and security, advancing towards more practical cooperation.”<sup>29</sup>

This is thus an agenda of small steps. It was the result of China’s wish for progress, but gradual progress and to circumvent sensitive security issues in Asia, as well as of the reluctance of several European member states to give China too much credence for its peaceful intentions. But will that be enough to reduce mutual doubts and distrust? On China’s side there remains a very pronounced lack of confidence when it comes to Europe’s role as an international actor. When the Lisbon Reform Treaty, which gave more responsibilities to the European institutions, entered into force in 2009, many Chinese officials and spectators gave it the benefit of the doubt.<sup>30</sup> Today, these doubts have only become more pronounced. There is skepticism about the extent to which some of the efforts to improve the governance of the internal market and the monetary union will be sufficient to ward off a new crisis. Zhou Hong, one of China’s most prominent students of European affairs, asserted that the supranational way of decision making was again making place for intergovernmental negotiations and that this would probably not address the “lack of an effective mechanism or authority to solve new problems”.<sup>31</sup> Others assume that Europe’s economic weakness and social uncertainty would strengthen Eurosceptic and nationalist parties and make it even harder to get its act together. Professors Pang Zhongying and Bo Yongguang, for example, argue that the return to sovereign states in Europe could lead to the collapse of the Union and “a Balkanization” of the region.<sup>32</sup> Economic problems and debt have reduced the attention to international issues, increased the differences between the member states, and made it harder to sustain defense spending, asserted Xu Long, a Europe expert at the China Institute of International Studies, in a very incisive paper about the impact of the Eurozone crisis on its foreign policy.<sup>33</sup> But there is more. Europe’s economic problems have also made its leaders more concerned about the structural trade deficit with China. Trade has been the main pillar of the Sino-European relationship, but that pillar is now showing cracks. After the European Commission started to investigate alleged dumping practices of Chinese producers of solar panels and telecommunication equipment in 2012, Chinese officials accused Europe of protectionism and experts argued that more protectionism was to follow if Europe remained stuck in its economic trouble.

*Chart 1. Chinese academic interest in EU military and EU foreign policy. Number of academic papers responding to “EU military” (oumeng junshi) and “EU foreign policy” (oumeng wajiao zhengce) in the largest database of Chinese papers: www.wanfangdata.com.cn*



Source: Wanfang database: : [www.wanfangdata.com.cn](http://www.wanfangdata.com.cn)

A related question is whether the economic distress is encouraging a stronger integration of Europe’s defense capabilities. Chinese experts have identified many problems with European

defense cooperation. The previous enlargement has led to even more complex decision making and operational planning.<sup>34</sup> Many opportunities were missed to integrate European defense industries and to produce equipment more efficiently. It also remains difficult to overcome the different geopolitical orientations between the main member states. The Lisbon Reform Treaty has not changed that. European countries are also slow to learn from humiliating military power gaps in previous operations on the Balkans, in Libya, in Mali, and so forth. Even the measures that were prepared ahead of the European Defence Summit in December 2013 and the ones that were ultimately approved were widely considered insufficient.<sup>35</sup> Writes a commentator in a popular current affairs review: “The Summit did make some progress on capability, but not on mission and strategy... that leaves France often alone to secure the European periphery.”<sup>36</sup> But even with regard to military capabilities, experts question whether Europe can fill the gaps, in cyber security, in space, and in airlift.<sup>37</sup>

As a result, China finds it difficult to decide whom to engage. Dialogues with the European institutions are useful, but it is often hard to anticipate what they can deliver.<sup>38</sup> China has interacted with the European Military Staff, responsible for coordinating CFSP missions, but that Staff is small and has limited capacity to develop cooperation. It has also interacted with the command structures of the European anti-piracy mission in the Indian Ocean, to its satisfaction, but for other operations, like in Mali, it deems it more relevant to approach the lead nation, in this case France, or individual contributors. France has become a central and respected interlocutor for China. There are frequent exchanges on concrete hotspots between the capitals and on the ground, in Africa. NATO also remains important. NATO itself has set up an outreach program to China, but Chinese officials and military officers in general are much more intrigued by NATO than by the EU’s defence policy. The military section in the Chinese Mission to the European Union often spends more time following NATO than interacting with Europe. Incoming delegations of officials and think tankers are often hardly interested in visiting European institutions, but very eager to call on the NATO headquarters.

This is not without reason. It is NATO that is perceived as the hard power part of Europe and it is NATO also that shows how important the United States remains in Europe’s strategic orientation. China does not find it likely that Europe will choose a more independent course from the United States. The Transatlantic Free Trade agreement is considered an indication of Europe’s inclination to balance against China, at least in economic terms. Many scholars and experts have referred to it as an attempt of the United States to create a block against China, a block that allows it to reindustrialize, to shape the new global economic regime, and to set the standards for new technologies.<sup>39</sup> Chinese experts find it unlikely that Europe will successfully develop its own, autonomous foreign and security policy. They notice how, despite the challenges in its neighborhood, European countries seem to be very keen on joining the United States in its so-called pivot to Asia. In 2011, Zhao Junjie, an expert at the China Academy of Social Sciences, published a book titled: “Is the Wolf Coming? The Strategic Adjustment of NATO and the EU Common Defense and their Impact on China’s Security Environment”. The monograph, with an introduction of a Vice-Minister of the International Department of the Central Committee, argued that America was using both NATO and the European Union to prepare a containment strategy.<sup>40</sup> A paper written by Zhang Jian, the director of European studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, argued that Europe has no chance to play a role of importance in Asian security affairs, but that the fact that it seems to believe that it can play such role alongside the United States, shows how backward its strategic thinking is. The United States’ policy of entering Asia united with Europe (联欧入亚, *lan Ou ru Ya*) will end in misery, he concludes, because Europe will be completely powerless as soon as major conflicts break out in the Middle East or Russia becomes more aggressive. This was said before the annexation of the Crimea.<sup>41</sup> Europe’s inclination to follow the United States is also mocked in the context of the arms embargo. The embargo was imposed in 1989, in the wake of the Tiananmen Crisis, and has been maintained since, even though it has been less and less clear why. Europe insists that China has to improve its human rights record, but fails to explain what exactly that entails, apart from initial statements that it related to China’s signing of the UN Human and Civil Rights Convention. More recently, Europe has informally signaled that the lifting of

the arms embargo is related to transparency in military affairs and restraint in regional disputes. But China knows very well that the main stumbling block is the American veto and that that several member states are willing to let the embargo go.

China's assessment of Europe's response to the recent security crises in its neighborhood is merciless. Officials just do not understand why Europe is trying to be recognized as a global actor while it cannot secure its own backyard. The response to the Arab Spring, as we have seen before, confirmed that skepticism. "In the wake of the crisis in the Middle East and Northern Africa," writes one expert, "Europe tried to show the world its hard power and its diplomatic position... but this was all bereft of any strategic vision."<sup>42</sup> Posited another academic: "From the current unrest in North Africa and the Middle East, we can conclude that it will take a huge cost and effort to achieve some basic goals... Europe's policy is still, to a large extent, influenced by the United States because the latter retains its traditional political and military dominance."<sup>43</sup> Similar comments were made on Europe's relations with Eastern Europe. In regard to the Ukrainian crisis, Chinese observers noticed that, once again, America was taking the lead in sanctions, but that Europe would face most of the consequences. "Once the situation gets out of hand," an article in *Beijing Youth Daily* argued, "Europe will bear the consequences, while the United States has no such burden."<sup>44</sup> A review published by the International Department of the Communist Party called Europe's response embarrassing and inconsistent.<sup>45</sup> Europe is riding a tiger, *Xinhua News Agency* stated, its sanctions will only reduce its influence further and make Russia turn to other influential economies, Asian economies?<sup>46</sup> Experts trace the causes of the Ukrainian crisis to a dysfunctional neighborhood policy: too many conditions and not enough engagement. "200 Laws had to be changed, to get what?"<sup>47</sup> The Eurocrisis has only made that problem worse. It has reduced trade and investment. "By contrast, Russia could be more generous in its economic concessions."<sup>48</sup>

But it is not just the negative perception of the role of Europe that will limit cooperation. Chinese officials also acknowledge that their own government is not yet very keen on expanding its role in security affairs beyond its neighborhood. It is true that the leadership has acknowledged the importance of protecting overseas interest and that this is not even part of the main mission of the People's Liberation Army. Yet, by and large, the attention for the Middle East and Africa remains very limited. Officials report that the leaders tend to give the following instruction: maintain our economic presence, prevent damage to our image and avoid casualties at the lowest cost. In practice that means evacuating expatriates whenever unrest breaks out. "At the moment there is not much of a security policy towards Africa that fills the gap between advancing our economic interests and dispatching peacekeepers," explained a senior official, "and even those peacekeepers are often sent to show the international community that we are responsible. There is no real strategy behind it."<sup>49</sup> The 2020 Agenda shows that there is some awareness of the common Eurasian crossroads between Europe and China. There cannot be a new Silk Road between Europe and China without making it a secure road first. But that geopolitical interface, for now, remains thus largely a zone of oblivion, which on its turn will complicate strategic cooperation.

## Conclusion

The case for a security partnership between China and Europe is strong. A strong strategic partnership would contribute to the two parties' international status and influence. With hundreds of billions of trade flowing from the one end to Eurasia to the other, there is a strong necessity to secure this geopolitical interface that stretches from the Strait of Malacca to Bab el Mandeb. This interface connects, but it also buffers. It makes it less likely that China and Europe will be locked in the same security dilemma as the Pacific conundrum that exists between China and the United States. The two sides are aware of all of this. They have written it down in policy papers and included it in joint statements. A new agenda was rolled out that had security at the top. Still, after about a decade of dialoguing and interacting, security cooperation remains feeble. What is more, Europe and China not only failed to turn many of their priorities into tangible synergy; they also competed in their geopolitical interface with irreconcilable policies. There is not much chance that this reality will change. It

just suffices to reconstruct China's perceptions of Europe as a security actor to understand that there is, for now, not enough trust and appreciation for Europe's capabilities to try to build the strong security pillar that is needed to shrug a true strategic partnership.

#### Notes and references:

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- <sup>3</sup> The accumulated trade balance (US\$ 1,360 billion) divided by the accumulated GDP (US\$ 46,975 billion). Period: 2000-2012. Source: UNCTAD Statistical Database.
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