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Europe and China: long distance, close partners?

By Matthias Stephan

If we have a look at Europe and China, at first sight we do not observe too much the two entities have in common. First of all, they share no geographical borders -this applies equally to the EU- US relations- but second and more important we share not the same cultural roots, the language and belief are completely different. So what is the interest, on which the cooperation is build on? Is it more than the accumulated trade interest the single European nation states have in China already for centuries? And what are the roles of the two entities in this cooperation?

A relationship built on trade interests

When we have a look at the history, it seems that the interest of Europeans in China -to learn more about China and to set-up close relations with it- did not change substantially in the last 750 years: Marco Polo travelling along the Silk Road in the middle of the 13th century, the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16th century, which have been followed by all other European seafaring and trading nations, and the arrival of the Europeans shortly after the opening-up of the country to the West in 1978. This interest was in business and trade.

The new stage of relation: the EU and China

The establishment of EU-China relations in 1975 also had their roots in trade. Not only due to the question of the unclear status of the EC as an international actor and its competences in face of the various member states interests, but also China finding itself in a phase of a new beginning after the years of the Cultural Revolution the development of bilateral relations was rather slow.

The opening of the delegation of the European Commission in Beijing 1988 should mark a major breakthrough in the relations, but the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 caused a set-back in the relations. As a reaction to the crackdown

of student protest, the European Community decided to freeze all bilateral relations with China to set-up an arms embargo against it. Although the EU-China relations were normalized in 1992 - only three years later- it was no earlier than the mid-1990s that the relationship grew in intensity outside of trade issues in economic, political and security political terms (cf. Algieri, 2008:64).

From the mid-1990s to present the EU has published several EU China policy papers. This fact does not only underline the growing importance of China to the EU, but also the "accelerating and deepening institutionalization" (Mergenthaler, 2007) of the cooperation.

"For the Chinese side the EU is an equally important trading partner and a supporter for its international standing"

Currently the relationship is labeled as a "strategic partnership" which is made up of various components that can be summarized in two fields. The main political and strategic elements of the cooperation are framed in the Political Dialogue, consisting not only of annual EU-China summits at the heads of Government

level, but also of regular and structured meetings at lower political levels dealing with the subjects Asian Affairs, illegal migration and trafficking, Human Rights, non proliferation and conventional arms exports. Besides or better to say below this Political Dialogue there do exist more than 20 functional areas, in which sectoral agreements or dialogues are set-up between the two entities. Especially in the field of functional cooperation, there is continuous cooperation.

Last but not least independent of politics the opportunities for so called "transsocietal connections and people to people links" (Mergenthaler, 2007) are strongly supported. Academic exchange, scholarships and research programs are financed by both sides and the interest in it is very high.

Since the European Union and the Peoples Republic of China have developed into two of the most influential actors on international stage, which can decisively shape the future global governance a research of their relationship is an interesting field of studies.

In respect of global governance in general the EU same as the P.R.C share common positions. As far as the United Nations are concerned, both entities

want to see a stronger role of the UN and its bodies and a more equal distribution of power and influence, which is translated in their support for a multipolar system in contrast to a system, that is unilaterally dominated by a single major power. The cooperation between the two is seen as counterbalance to

the relations that both are keeping up to the US.

Since this is a completely different ankle, I want to focus in the following part of the article on the mutual influence the EU and China do have on respective domestic policies and what is the balance in this relation.

EU and China relations in practice

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the cooperation between the two entities can be regarded as increasingly institutionalized. Starting with trade relations, with the evolution of the EU as international actor and the growing importance of China it developed into other policy fields as well. For the Chinese side the EU is an equally important trading partner and a supporter for its international standing.

After an overview on the structure and development of the relationship has been given in the, it is an interesting question, what kind of cooperation takes place within this framework. There are many examples in the different policy fields the cooperation comprises, that would be worth to look into. At this point I want to elaborate in brief on two of them, one from the level of political dialogue – Human Rights, the other from the field of functional cooperation.

The Human rights dialogue between the EU and China has started in 1997 and comprises a broad scope of issues and “aims at improving the human rights situation by encouraging China to respect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms and to co-operate with international human rights mechanisms that does apply on personal freedoms, but equally on the autonomy of minorities” (European Commission, 2008b). The dialogue includes in-depth discussions among officials and experts and therefore offers the opportunity to clarify respective views and positions, next to it, there are EU funded programs in the field legal and judicial cooperation, that are also intended to support China on its way to improve its human right record. In this situation the EU uses its so called “civilian” or also known as “normative power” that was a decisive force in the European integration. The EU names itself as a model and cradle of Human Rights, and the European media likes to contrast the Chinese conduct to the European to underline the necessity for change in China. Nonetheless, there is some critique on the applicability of the Human Rights



Mr Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council, People's Republic of China at a EU-China Business summit



José Sócrates, Prime-Minister of Portugal and President of the European Council, Head of the Chinese government, Wen Jiabao, and José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission

on Chinese side, which claims that the Human Rights as established in the West are based on Western value and belief systems and therefore cannot be regarded as universally applicable in other cultures, at least not with modifications.

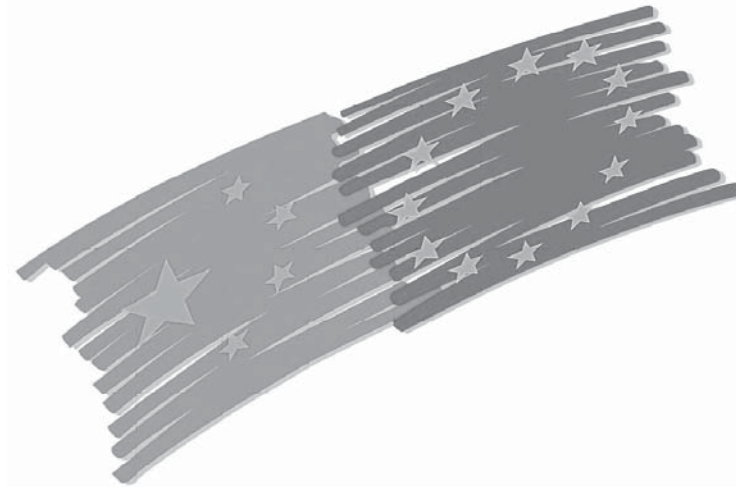
It can be stated that China has made progress in general and there is an increased degree of freedom and self-determination for the individual. On the other hand, the latest developments in Tibet question if there has been any progress. The final outcome of the dialogue is unclear, but one thing we can

be sure of, for an application of Western Standards on Human rights not only in China, but a number of countries in Asia and other World regions, we will have to wait yet a long time. Still the EU and China have an interest in the continuation of the dialogue, whereas the EU wants to promote its norms, China can also make its point in the current development it makes in this field.

The second example concerns social and employment policy, a policy where a Dialogue is in place between the two entities. This dialogue was institutionalized with the signature of a Memorandum

dum of understanding (MoU) between the European Commission and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security of the Peoples Republic of China signed on 5 September 2005 in Beijing (cf. European Commission, 2005). It consists of a structured dialogue on labour, employment, human resources development, social protection, labour legislation, labour relations and social dialogue. In practice there is political exchange on these points, same as biannual meetings of experts and officials, who do exchange on opinion, instruments and best practice in that field. Whereas the level of socio-economic development in the two entities and respective institutions (this is even the case within the EU) are very different from each other, this field of cooperation has the advantage of being more technical than the Dialogue on Human rights. For both entities the EU -with its member states, which kind of form a system of semi-sovereign welfare states- and China- in the need to set-up a modern system of a welfare state- it is decisive to cope with the upcoming challenges of a new stage of socio-economic developments and find the means to implement these on local level. Having meetings on this level can be a fruitful experience to both sides, not only knowing about the domestic challenges and possible answers, but also the situation of the partner.

Taken the results of the two examples together we can state, that the co-operation in these policy fields have different levels of political sensitivity and therefore to come to results is unequally feasible. Nonetheless, none of these co-operations might be seen as



top priority to any side, the main linkage and interdependence stems from trade.

Conclusion

The cooperation of the EU and China has developed in many areas outside of simple trade and business relations. Still this cooperation cannot be compared with the cooperation that has developed within the European boundaries in the last 50 years. Harmonization and convergence cannot be achieved as easily and above all, we as Europeans have to accept the cultural differences and historical path that makes China a country much different from the European countries. Whereas within Europe the EU can act as a "normative actor" and make member states working towards common goals and values, this role cannot be assumed in the relationship with China. We as Europeans have to realize and accept that we

meet here an old culture, with unique history and cultural background, which after more than 150 years has regained its role as international power. We have a partner at equal footing and in order to establish a stable and successful relation in the future, we should act in that way and leave room for unique developments instead of trying to impose any European model on China. The set-up of epistemic communities through the regular contacts and exchange between officials and experts, same as the improving "transsocietal links" seems the best means for an ever improving mutual understanding and cooperation results. ■

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