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How to Make the Strategic Partnership Work: EU Cooperation with China in Security Affairs

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Two major factors for future developments in East Asia will be determined in autumn 2012: China will undertake the power handover to the next generation of leaders; and the United States will elect its next president. Notwithstanding the result, the United States' recalibration of its foreign policy towards Asia is most likely to continue, as will China's expansion of its influence in global affairs and international institutions. The hotspot of global affairs will continue to be Asia. Concurrently, the rhetoric between China and the United States, competing for influence in East Asia, is heating up. The European Union can pursue its interests within its strategic partnership with China if it takes three crucial steps: first, identify and concentrate on its core interests and capabilities in East Asia; second, proactively seek to broaden support by coordinating its policies with major partners in the region beyond China in institutions of the nascent security architecture; and third, take China's concepts of global affairs and instruments into account when formulating its policies.

The Need to Be a Credible Security Actor in East Asia

The European Union has major interests in East Asia as well as in engaging with China on global challenges. As the rules of the game in East Asia are currently being redefined by the United States, its allies and China's policy in the region, strengthening the European Union's strategic partnership with China, ameliorating cooperation with the United States and gaining more influence in the region are therefore in the European Union's utmost interest at this point in time. Not only would the United States ask its European partners to stand at its side in the case of a conflict, but the European Union would also be affected as the biggest trading bloc in the world: 90 per cent of EU trade is seaborne, and a major part of its trade and energy supplies go through the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea. China has also become the second biggest trading partner for the European Union, just after the United States. Any standoff, or even worse a hot conflict between China and the United States, or China and other countries in the region, could lead to a blockage of the maritime routes for trade, the sea lanes of communication, respectively impact upon production and supply lines, and affect European markets and manufacturers far away in Europe as well as the region. Catherine Ashton, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, hence tirelessly emphasizes the importance of East Asia for Europe and the necessity to strengthen the EU's strategic partnership with China. At times of financial constraints, the euro crisis and with the European External Action Service still in the process of being established, this amounts more to declarations than deeds.

On the other hand, in the 'realist' world of East Asia, China's and Asian countries' foreign policy outlook is predominantly shaped by the security situation in East, South-East and South Asia itself—a policy field where neither China nor most other Asian countries in the region see a role for the European Union. An increasingly multilateral security architecture is taking shape, with the Association

of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) having become ever more active in pushing for more regional cooperation on security issues, with ASEAN+3 (including China, South Korea and Japan), the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and relatively new initiatives such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM Plus (including the United States, China, Russia, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand)—with the European Union only being present at the ARF. Only if the European Union becomes a credible actor in the region in security matters will it also be taken seriously by China as a strategic partner. So far, China sees no role for the European Union in East Asia in security affairs.

The EU–China Strategic Partnership

Core interests for the European Union in dealing and cooperating with China on security issues within the EU–China strategic partnership are twofold: on the one hand, to tackle global challenges with China, ranging from non-proliferation to humanitarian disasters and cyber security; on the other hand, to work for keeping peace in the region, for example by contributing to the prevention of a major armed conflict between the United States, the current superpower, and China, the emerging superpower, by promoting multilateral approaches to the hot spot issues in the region. Such a conflict between the United States and China is seen by some observers as inevitable and is underpinned by rising tensions in areas such as the South China Sea, the United States' recent refocusing on Asia (the so-called 'pivot' or 'rebalance') and China's reactions to it.

The European Union can promote multilateral approaches to solving conflicts by actively supporting the emerging security architecture, being present at the respective formal and informal forums and institutions such as the ARF or the Shangri-La Dialogue, offering ideas, contributing its own institutional experiences with regional integration in order to avoid open conflict (such as in the process related to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), exchanges with countries in the region, working with the Chinese government, and coordinating better with the United States. Focus areas for European cooperation with China in foreign and security policy are hereby primarily located in the realm of non-traditional security threats such as maritime security and humanitarian relief, but also conflict prevention, mediation and resolution. Along with better coordination with the United States and by actually becoming more active and more involved, the European Union can hereby complement the United States' hard power in a more coordinated manner with its experiences in non-traditional security issues and civil–military approaches.

How to Proceed

Two basic recommendations for the European Union's policy towards China and the strategic partnership can therefore be proposed. First, the European Union should define its core interests and strengths in this regard. In order to act cohesively and effectively, the EU needs to have a galvanized list of core interests and core capabilities (including possible cross-sector packages such as economic incentives, aid initiatives and security initiatives, for instance training in disaster relief and peacekeeping, etc.) among the member states—for the region and for dealing with China. This list cannot be all-inclusive, but will rather represent the top issues to be dealt with on the EU level. On the European side, this development of a shared paradigm can be facilitated by establishing a closer exchange mechanism of EU member states' officials who deal with China (including those in the services and ministries with Asian careers) and track-two experts to create an EU Asian policy community.

Second, the strategic dialogue should be placed in a multilateral context. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and the EU's strategic partnership with China operate in an international environment that is becoming more multi-polar and more volatile, but also that sees increasing tensions between the United States and China. The European Union can benefit from the strategic partnership if it perceives it to be one building bloc among many in a broader multilateral institutional arrangement of a nascent Asian security architecture that aims to harness the region's growing security dilemmas. Being an actor in this architecture will also determine influence in Asian affairs in general. As noted above, the European Union can build a role for itself by attending the existing multilateral institutions and forums in the region, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) or the Shangri-La Dialogue, and making the EU visible as an actor that takes a vivid and credible interest in the region. Moreover, the EU can also proactively coordinate its policy initiatives with the United States, other countries in the region such as Japan, South Korea and

ASEAN states, as well as with China. Finally, the EU can share its expertise of containing lingering conflict that it has gained in forums such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and through European integration. This sharing can happen through training sessions and seminars.

The European Union to date has been seen as a distant, uninvolved actor that issues ambitious statements, but that follows with less action—such as claiming that Asia is the new gravity point for European foreign policy and then not showing up on the adequate level at security-related meetings. If the European Union manages to achieve an image as a proactive actor that has no territorial claims in the region but that can offer experience in conflict management and mediation, it might be able to assume a role as a neutral arbiter in negotiations among the states concerned in the territorial dispute in the South China Sea and related issues.

Coordination with the United States

With declining resources and influence in international institutions and affairs, neither the United States nor the European Union can successfully pursue their foreign policy goals on their own today. While sharing interests in many issues—such as maintaining stability in the region, keeping sea lanes of communication open or addressing cyber security—the US and European strengths are complementary, with a more hard-power approach from the United States and on the European side more experience and tools in non-traditional security threats—such as post-conflict reconstruction, conflict mediation and human disasters, etc. More coordination between the United States and the European Union and its member states, based on a serious interest in exchange and cooperation on East Asia, will therefore enlarge the portfolio that both sides can bring to the table in terms of tools and bargaining sets. In this regard, European policy-makers need a better understanding of the US perspective on the region (and translate both paradigms back and forth), the differences from the European perspective and the reasons for these differences—and vice versa. This can be achieved by turning, for instance, the European Union's strategic dialogue with the United States on East Asia into an institutionalized channel, which meets regularly, for coordination and identification of possible cooperation.

With the enhanced position of a proactive policy that is backed by other partners in the region, the European Union can address crucial challenges in bilateral dialogues with China, such as cyber security and maritime security. Models for these dialogues exist and there is, for instance, a vivid interest on both sides in managing the sea lanes that are crucial to both sides' trade and energy supplies and hence prosperity. These dialogues will experience new meaning if backed by support from other states, a clear definition of the expected results and a growing level of familiarity of the interlocutors with each other.

Filling Conceptual Gaps

In order to formulate effective policies within the strategic partnership with China, the Europeans need to address the conceptual gaps between China and the European Union: both sides apply different connotations to commonly used concepts such as sovereignty, global governance and strategic partnership. As for strategic partnerships, China seems to focus on personalities with whom to build long-term relations of mutual trust (that supersede common basic values) in order to reduce uncertainty in common decision-making, while the European focus seems to be on solving specific tasks with exchangeable interlocutors of fixed partner states on the basis of generally shared values. One measure for addressing these gaps can be to assign fixed interlocutors for central negotiations who remain in this position for a longer period of time. Another measure is to establish 'Asian career tracks' in the national diplomatic and military services as well as for the European External Action Service. Today, most EU member states adhere to the principle of having officers and diplomats as 'generalists' who can serve in Beijing today and Budapest tomorrow. Given that there is no overlap between predecessors and incoming diplomats and officers for a certain position, not only does a substantial amount of institutional and operational knowledge get lost, but newcomers to a position also often have to familiarize themselves quickly with the characteristics of dealing with an Asian country, with its history, culture and political realities. All of these contribute to an in-built, structural disadvantage when interacting with Chinese counterparts who have been trained on their region (such as Chinese specialists on the German-speaking countries) or Asian specialists on the US side. There is thus not only a strong need but also ample scope for the European Union to be a more credible security partner for China.

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