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# EU-China Discourse on Multipolarity and Multilateralism: Mutual Interaction?

David SCOTT<sup>\*</sup>

*This article looks at the diplomatic rhetoric invoked by the EU and China. Both actors are keenly aware of soft power attractiveness. Both actors are sensitive over the role of public diplomacy – policies and language – in generating soft power profiles. In this domain of public diplomacy language, both actors use the terms ‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’ in their discussion of their relationship in particular, and the international system in general. Yet each side emphasizes one more than another and each side treats the concept differently. This convergence and divergence over relative use of multipolarity and multilateralism indicates the role of strategic language, it indicates some of the limits of norm-based analysis and policies, and perhaps indicates the (soft power) non-traditional security areas where the EU-China strategic partnership can push forward on, as well as indicating (certain hard power) areas that are not particularly meaningful, despite the rhetoric.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This article looks at the diplomatic rhetoric invoked by the European Union (EU) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in their ‘strategic partnership’ proclaimed in 2003. Two public diplomacy terms, ‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’, feature in their strategic discourse on the nature of the international system in general and on their particular relationship within it.<sup>1</sup> Here, questions of what Callahan terms ‘language politics’ are in play not only in Chinese choice of public diplomacy language towards the EU, but also in the EU’s choice of wording towards China.<sup>2</sup> The two terms sound similar but are different.<sup>3</sup> Multipolarity is an elitist classification about how power in the international system is distributed among several (*multi*) significant poles, multipolarization is the process leading to a multipolar system, and multipolarism is the policy trying to bring about that process of multipolarization and end result

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<sup>1</sup> D. Scott, *Multipolarity, Multilateralism...and Beyond? EU-China Understandings of the International System*, 27 *Intl. Rels.* 1, 30–51 (2013).

<sup>2</sup> W. Callahan, *Future Imperfect: The European Union’s Encounter with China (and the United States)*, 30 *J. Strat. Stud.* 4–5, 786 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> X. Zhang, *Multipolarity and Multilateralism as International Norms*, in *Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations* 174 (Z. Pan ed., Palgrave Macmillan 2012).

of multipolarity. Meanwhile, multilateralism indicates a policy of cooperation in the international system between several (*multi*) actors, rather than unilateralism or bilateralism. It can be pointed out that in EU-China relations, each actor potentially and actually affect the other through such language deployment and ongoing formulation of their relationship.

## 2 MULTIPOLAR AVENUES

Since the 1990s, China has openly accepted the inevitability and desirability of 'multipolarity' (*duojihua*), with itself as a rising pole of power, able to reshape US unipolarity. As the former leader Jiang Zemin told European leaders, 'the force of one single polar [i.e., the US] can not achieve balance and only the combination of multi-polars can ensure equilibrium'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in the wake of US economic difficulties in early 2009, the *People's Daily* argued in an article titled 'The U.S. Hegemony Ends, the Era of Global Multipolarity Enters' that 'a new phase of multipolar world power structure will come into being . . . and the international order will be correspondingly reshuffled'.<sup>5</sup> Newly in power, President Xi Jinping announced in April 2013 that China sought to 'actively promote a multipolar world'.<sup>6</sup> Álvaro de Vasconcelos argues that there is 'a normative dimension to multipolarity . . . a multipolar balance of power and resulting alliance building in particular, serves as a counterweight to US power. This is certainly the case from the standpoint of China'.<sup>7</sup> China's policy and norm of 'anti-hegemonism' (*fan ba*) can have soft power attractiveness for other actors.<sup>8</sup>

Given 'the pervasiveness of multipolar thinking' in China, Chinese analysts frequently continue to interpret EU-China links in multipolar frames and balancing outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Although the term 'multipolarity' is not used in joint EU-China declarations, nevertheless (and significantly), the Chinese government continues to use 'multipolarity' in its description of EU-China relationship. In that

<sup>4</sup> *The World Should Be the Multi-polar One*, Jiang, *People's Daily* (21 Feb. 2001). For Hu Jintao's comments in France, see *Multipolarity Plays Key Role in World Peace: Chinese Vice President*, *People's Daily* (6 Nov. 2001).

<sup>5</sup> H. Li, *The U.S. Hegemony Ends, the Era of Global Multipolarity Enters*, *People's Daily* (24 Feb. 2009).

<sup>6</sup> *China, France Vow to Promote 'Multipolar' World*, Associated Press (25 Apr. 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Á. de Vasconcelos, 'Multilateralising' Multipolarity, 109 *Chaillot Paper* 23 (May 2008).

<sup>8</sup> J. Wang, *Multipolarity Versus Hegemonism: Chinese Views of International Politics*, Paper (Weatherhead Center 13 Mar. 2012).

<sup>9</sup> A. Yang, A. Klyueva & M. Taylor, *Beyond a Dyadic Response to Public Diplomacy: Understanding Relations in Multipolar World*, 38 *Pub. Rel. Rev.* 5, 652 (2012). Also, Z. Chen, *Soft Balancing and Reciprocal Engagement: International Structures and China's Foreign Policy Choices*, in *China's Reforms and International Political Economy* 56–57 (S. Breslin & D. Zweig eds., Routledge 2005); D. Shen, *Why China Sees the EU as a Counterweight to America*, *Eur. World* 48–53 (August 2008); J. Clegg, *China Views Europe: A Multi-Polar Perspective*, in *The European Union and China: Interests and Dilemmas* 123–137 (G. Wiessala, J. Wilson & P. Taneja eds., Rodopi 2009).

setting, the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in a Joint Press Conference with the Commission President Barroso argued in 2010 that ‘we both stand for world multipolarity’, but made no mention of multilateralism.<sup>10</sup> His assertion that ‘we stand’ for world multipolarity is an assumption if not presumption about EU perspectives. Here we find that, significantly in contrast, Barroso’s following speech there made no mention of multipolarity, but instead stressed multilateralism; ‘in our history of diplomatic relations, the EU has always supported a role for China in world affairs and in multilateral institutions’.<sup>11</sup> His successor as Prime Minister, Li Keqiang, similarly affirmed in 2013 how China has always been viewing its ties with Europe in a strategic perspective as an important pole in a multipolar world.<sup>12</sup>

During 2012 and 2013, Song Tao, the Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs with special responsibilities for Europe, frequently invoked multipolarity in connection with the EU and China. In part, Song argued that both actors were both operating in a multi-polar world.<sup>13</sup> In part, he argued that ‘a stable, prosperous and growing Europe is conducive to international multipolarity’.<sup>14</sup> So far, one could argue that this indicated Chinese views about the international system as a whole; but Song also went on to make claims about what the EU was doing and indeed thinking. For example, in August 2012 there was his claim that ‘China and the EU have worked vigorously to promote a multi-polar world’; in December 2012 that ‘advocacy for a multipolar world is the strategic foundation of China-EU relations’, and in April 2013 that ‘as two important forces in the world, both China and Europe advocate a multi-polar world’.<sup>15</sup> However, the EU is not a particular strong advocate of multipolarity in itself nor of the balancing undertones which underpin much of PRC usage of the term.<sup>16</sup> This prompted Franco Algieri to suggest that ‘the problem for China is that the EU and its Member States are

<sup>10</sup> J. Wen, *Remarks by Premier Wen Jiabao at Joint Press Conference*, 29 Apr. 2010, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t689865.htm>, (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>11</sup> J. Barroso, *Press Statement by President Barroso. Joint Press Conference* (29 Apr. 2010), [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-10-197\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-10-197_en.htm), (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Li cited in *Chinese New Leadership Highly Values China-Europe Ties*, People’s Daily (28 May 2013).

<sup>13</sup> T. Song, *Constructive Consultations*, China Daily, 17 Sep. 2012; T. Song, *Creating a Bright Future for China-EU Relations Based on Achievement and Success*, 31 Dec. 2012, [http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2012-12/31/content\\_5638039.htm](http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2012-12/31/content_5638039.htm), (accessed 28 May 2013); T. Song, *Realizing ‘Chinese Dream’ Through Hard and Down-to-Earth Work* (3 Feb. 2013), <http://tz.china-embassy.org/eng/chinanews/t1011810.htm> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>14</sup> T. Song, *The European Sovereign Debt Issue and China-EU Relations*, 106 Foreign Affairs J. (CPIFA) (Winter 2012), <http://cpifa.org/en/q/listQuarterlyArticle.do?articleId=238> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>15</sup> T. Song, *A Changing Europe and its Relations with China*, 16 Aug. 2012, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t961116.shtml> (accessed 28 May 2013); Song, *supra* n. 13; T. Song, *Build a New Type of China-Europe Partnership*, 3 Apr. 2012, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t1035230.shtml> (accessed 22 Oct. 2013).

<sup>16</sup> T. Narramore, *China and Europe: Engagement, Multipolarity and Strategy*, 21.1 Pacific Rev. 96, 88 (2008).

rather hesitant to use the term multipolarity in the context of EU foreign, security and defence policy'.<sup>17</sup>

Admittedly, at the EU-level there has been recognition of the world's multipolar structure. In 2011, multipolarity was a question of objective reality for the EU Commission President, José Barroso; 'the geopolitical context is being revolutionized by . . . the emergence of a multipolar world. These are important issues for the world and for Europe'.<sup>18</sup> At the start of 2013, it was a sense of some urgency for him that 'it is more necessary than ever to have a European pole in the multipolar international system of the future'.<sup>19</sup> However, when EU figures talk about multipolarity they often entwine it with projecting soft power normative values that are very different from hard power anti-hegemonism balancing undertones seen from Chinese figures; for example, Zapatero and Rompuy's sense that 'the EU must reaffirm its role as a leader within a multipolar world, setting itself out as a secure reference point for democracy, human rights and social progress for the world'.<sup>20</sup>

However, EU use of multipolarity language has not been a dominant feature of its public diplomacy language. Not only does the EU generally prefer to use 'multilateralism' (and 'regionalism') in its general foreign policy discourse, it also directly criticizes 'multipolarity' as a norm and as a policy. The hard power balancing associations of multipolarity have made it a rather loaded term for European usage, with the EU perhaps uncertain of itself, and its normative multilateral message, in such a multipolar hard power world.<sup>21</sup> Three clear examples can be seen of reluctance by the EU to tie itself, and the EU-China relationship, into a multipolar framework.

The first example is an interestingly-titled speech in 2005, on *The EU, China and the Quest for a Multilateral World*, by Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy. It had a three-fold structure. She started with the straightforward assertion that 'China

<sup>17</sup> F. Algieri, *Sadly, the ESDP Looks Stronger From the Outside Than It Is*, Eur. World 49, 51 (August 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Barroso, *Welcoming Address*, Global Economic Symposium, 4 Oct. 2011, <http://www.global-economic-symposium.org/review-2011/table-of-contents/welcome-adresses/jose-manuel-barroso>, (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Barroso, *Europe as Solution: Facts and Myths*, SPEECH/13/1 (Europa) (3 Jan. 2013). See also K. Smith, *Can the European Union be a Pole in a Multipolar World?* 48.2 Intl. Spectator: Italian J. Intl. Affairs (2012).

<sup>20</sup> J. Zapatero & H. van Rompuy, *A Stronger Europe*, Guardian, 3 Jan. 2010.

<sup>21</sup> U. Wissenbach, *The EU's Effective Multilateralism – But With Whom? Functional Multilateralism and the Rise of China*, Intl. Policy Analysis (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung) 3 (May 2007); L. van Langenhove, *The EU as a Global Actor in a Multipolar World and Multilateral 2.0. Environment*, 36 Egmont Paper (March 2010); D. Fiott, *The European Union's Normative Power in a Multipolar World*, EUSA Biennial Conference (6 May 2011), [http://www.academia.edu/450126/The\\_European\\_Unions\\_Normative\\_Power\\_in\\_a\\_Multipolar\\_World](http://www.academia.edu/450126/The_European_Unions_Normative_Power_in_a_Multipolar_World) (accessed 21 Oct. 2013); D. Fiott, *Is Europe Ill at Ease in a Multipolar World?* Diplomatic Courier (12 Aug. 2011).

and the EU are obviously interested in the nature of global politics in the 21st century', and then went on to note that 'some have talked of building a 'multipolar world'. For the EU, however, it is not the number of poles which counts, but rather the basis on which they operate. Our vision is a world governed by *rules* created and monitored by multilateral institutions'; and concluded by saying with regard to such multilateralism that 'I know China shares this [multilateral] approach'.<sup>22</sup> The initial assertion was not controversial, the middle part reference to 'some countries' talking of a multipolar world was aimed at China which used that precise phrase, and which she differentiated from the EU; while her final soothing phrase that China shared this strong multilateral EU vision was doubtful since a sovereignty-sensitive China is adverse to being monitored and imposed on by outside multilateral frameworks.

A second example is from the President of the European Commission, Barroso, who discussed multipolarity thoughtfully in a paper in 2010 on *The European Union and Multilateral Global Governance*. On the one hand, he accepted 'there are, clearly, some virtues in a multipolar international society. It limits "hegemonic" power, which can often be a source of instability'.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, he then went on to warn of the 'the risks associated with multipolarity . . . multipolar strategies in terms of expansion and competition for dominance'.<sup>24</sup> Lessons from history were pointed out by him of how 'attempts to create a multipolar balance of power, in order to avoid the emergence of imperial or hegemonic states, ended up in violent competition between great powers'.<sup>25</sup> He thus felt that a 'global balance of power may limit hegemonic unilateralism, but it does not by itself stop unilateral strategies by the different poles. Multipolarity may be a necessary condition for global multilateralism, but it is not sufficient'.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, 'having delegitimized multipolar power politics in the European continent, the Union must now work to prevent the emergence of this model on a global scale'.<sup>27</sup> This cuts across China's continuing evocation of the inevitability and desirability of the emergence of a multipolar world and China's role in it as one of the major pole of power.

A third example comes from Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. She admitted that 'saying that we live in a multi-polar world is surely correct', but then went on to immediately

<sup>22</sup> B. Ferrero-Waldner, *Closing Speech* (5 Jul. 2005), in *The EU, China and the Quest for a Multilateral World*, 113 (P. Defraigne ed., Ifri 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Barroso, *The European Union and Multilateral Global Governance*, 2010/01 RSCAS Policy Papers 1 (18 Jun. 2010).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



say that ‘multi-polar is not the same as multilateral’, which is correct conceptually.<sup>28</sup> Did she express a preference? She certainly did by stating ‘we Europeans have a strong interest in a strong multilateral system, based on the rule of law’.<sup>29</sup> From a Chinese perspective, this is laced with heavy unwanted triumphalist Western norm undertones: indicated by Ashton’s continuation that ‘in many respects the rise of the new powers is the outcome of a victory of ‘our’ model of open markets and, we hope, of increasingly open societies. It is perhaps in a way the triumph of Western values and principles’.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these reservations over multipolarity, there has been some wider EU deployment of multipolarity language. A degree of hard power logic for multipolarity was seen from Barroso at the start of 2013, where he veered from multipolarity as an objective trend to multipolarity as a subjective policy with his comment that ‘it is more necessary than ever to have a European pole in the multipolar international system of the future. This necessity becomes clear when we talk to our partners in Asia’.<sup>31</sup> China of course was the largest partner in Asia that the EU was talking with, necessitating a clearer stronger EU coherence and multipolar cohesion. The then EU Commissioner for Trade, Peter Mandelson, deployed some multipolar language, pushing the EU’s role in this emerging international system where ‘the EU is an essential component of a multipolar world’.<sup>32</sup> The fact that this was in a speech about EU-China relations makes it all the more telling. Herman van Rompuy, President of the European Council, declared in an interview that with regard to the EU and China ‘we are both attached to a multipolar world’.<sup>33</sup> The significance of these comments is that the challenge of partnering an explicitly multipolar-advocating China may be increasing the force of multipolar logic for the EU.<sup>34</sup>

### 3 MULTILATERAL AVENUES

In contrast to their respective usages of multipolarity, there is more obvious seeming convergence between the EU and China in their use of multilateralism

<sup>28</sup> C. Ashton, *Europe and the World*, SPEECH-10-378 (Europa) (8 Jul. 2010).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Barroso, *Europe as Solution ...*, *supra* n. 19.

<sup>32</sup> P. Mandelson, ‘The Larger Trend’: China, Britain and Europe, 8 Sep. 2009, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>33</sup> H. van Rompuy, *Written Interview with President Herman Van Rompuy President of the European Council*, 13 Feb. 2012, [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press\\_corner/all\\_news/news/2012/20120213\\_1\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2012/20120213_1_en.htm) (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>34</sup> H. Cuyckens, *The EU and China: Emerging Global Powers Capable of Countering US Hegemony and Shaping a Multipolar World Order?* in, *China, the European Union and the Restructuring of Global Governance* 297–310 (J. Wouter ed., Edward Elgar 2012).

language. It is no coincidence that multipolarity has never appeared in their Annual Summit Joint Declarations, whereas multilateralism frequently does. Typical was the 2012 *Joint Declaration* following their Annual Summit, in which ‘both sides emphasized multilateralism’, with multipolarity absent from the statement.<sup>35</sup>

The EU has long stressed multilateralism. Europe’s ‘compulsive multilateralist’ orientation that Michael Smith talks about has deep roots going back to its very foundation in which ‘the Union is itself a multilateral construction’.<sup>36</sup> John Groom talks of ‘multilateralism as a way of life in Europe’, in which the various EU members constantly negotiate between each other (and with the EU institutions), through a process of internal multilateralism in the flow of EU policy making and adjustments which generates Mario Telo’s sense of ‘the EU kind of multilateral culture’.<sup>37</sup> Such internal multilateralism generates external multilateralism.<sup>38</sup> In such a vein, the *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*), in other words *Treaty of Lisbon*, which came into effect in 2009, affirmed in its Article 21.h that the EU sought to ‘promote an international system based on stronger multilateral cooperation’. Various projects like EU4Seas, EU-GRASP and MERCURY, all funded by the EU during 2009–2012, included their finding that ‘the essence of multilateralism is very close to the *raison d’être* of the European project’ and that ‘multilateral instincts are deeply rooted in the EU’s identity as an international actor, almost a part of its DNA’.<sup>39</sup>

EU officials frequently stress the importance of multilateralism. In his 2010 paper *The European Union and Multilateral Global Governance*, Barroso argued for ‘the EU’s role in reinforcing multilateral rules and institutions at the global level. Multilateralism is the right mechanism to build order and governance in a multipolar world, and the European Union is well-placed to make a decisive contribution’ to the debate.<sup>40</sup> Even more pithily, he argued at the United Nations (UN) in 2013 that ‘most importantly, we need multilateral structures that can

<sup>35</sup> EU-China, *Towards a Stronger EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, Joint Press Communiqué, 20 Sep. 2012, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/132507.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/132507.pdf) (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>36</sup> M. Smith, *Beyond the Comfort Zone: Internal Crisis and External Challenge in the European Union Response to Rising Power*, 89.3 *Intl. Affairs* 658 (2013); C. Grant, *Europe, China and the Multilateral World Order*, *Global Times*, 8 Jul. 2008.

<sup>37</sup> J. Groom, *Multilateralism as a Way of Life in Europe*, in *Multilateralism Under Challenge: Power, International Order and Structural Change* 460–480 (E. Newman, R. Thakur & J. Tirman eds., United Nations University Press 2006); M. Telo, *State and Multilateralism: Past, Present and Future*, 12 Working Papers (GEM) 20 (September 2011).

<sup>38</sup> *Multilateralism in the 21st Century. Europe’s Quest for Effectiveness* (C. Bouchard, J. Peterson & Nathalie Tocci eds., Routledge 2013).

<sup>39</sup> EU4SEAS, EU-GRASP & MERCURY, *The EU and Multilateralism. Nine Recommendation*, Policy Brief (UNU) 1 (November 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Barroso, *supra* n. 23, at 1.

manage our interdependence and today's multi-polarity'.<sup>41</sup> Barroso has compared multipolarity with multilateralism and found multipolarity wanting. He argued in 2008 that a 'key trend in international relations today is the emergence of new powers . . . multipolar systems are based on rivalry and competition . . . In international relations, partnerships and a multilateral approach can achieve so much more'.<sup>42</sup> The only problem here is that the most obvious emerging new power China sees a multipolar system structurally arising as a fact of life and objective trend.

The question of normative values runs through debate on European advocacy of multilateralism. Barroso has asserted that his goal was 'to create a normative framework' and 'stimulate the reinforcement of multilateral institutions' and shape 'multilateral global governance'.<sup>43</sup> The then High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy for the EU, Javier Solana, stressed the EU's position as a normative, values-fostering and multilateralism-orientated actor in 2006: 'Europe is a new form of [soft] power. A force for good around the world. A promoter of multilateralism, international law and justice'.<sup>44</sup> Such EU assertions exemplify the Normative Power Europe (NPE) thesis advanced by Ian Manners in 2002, and echoed in Richard Higgott's sense of the EU having a 'normative disposition for multilateralism'.<sup>45</sup> From a European perspective, Miloš Balabán argued that EU normative values 'based on respect for international law, democratic principles and human rights, together with the maximum respect and use of multilateral institutions such as the UN, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), sets it apart from the other main actors in international relations' and enables 'the "Europeanization" of international relations as a positive alternative of the functioning of a multipolar world'.<sup>46</sup>

Two things can be commented on here. First, with regard to multilateral institutions, China is happy enough with maximum respect and use of multilateral institutions like the United Nations Security Council, where it has a veto as a Permanent Member, and where the EU has no seat. It has also embraced the WTO participation including defending and launching actions with other

<sup>41</sup> Barroso, *Economic Governance in the age of Interdependence*, 15 Apr. 2013, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/president/67/issues/governance/european\\_commission.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/ga/president/67/issues/governance/european_commission.pdf) (accessed 21 Sep. 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Barroso, *Letter from Brussels to the Next President of the United States*, 24 Sep. 2008, <http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/lectureships/spaak/2008/transcript> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Barroso, *supra* n. 23, at 2.

<sup>44</sup> J. Solana, *Speech*, Conference (The Sound of Europe), 27 Jan. 2006, 3 [http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/discours/88179.pdf](http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/discours/88179.pdf) (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>45</sup> I. Manners, *Normative Power Europe*, 40 J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 2, 235–58 (2002); R. Higgott, *Multi-Polarity and Trans-Atlantic Relations: Normative Aspirations and Practical Limits of EU Foreign Policy*, 76 GARNET Working Paper 10, 15 (2010).

<sup>46</sup> M. Balabán, *The Conflicting Rebirth of Multipolarity in International Relations*, 2 C. European J. Intl. & Sec. Stud. 1, 68 (2008).

countries. However, it has strongly rejected any ICJ involvement in disputes where it is a party, most recently in 2013 with regard to the South China Sea where China ruled out international legal arbitration either by the *ICJ* or by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). Second, the other norms like ‘democratic principles and human rights’ are areas of disagreement rather than agreement between the EU and China. The question then arises of how far these normative values are being pushed by the EU or accepted by China within the EU-China relationship.

There is ongoing debate over whether this normative emphasis should be pushed. On the one hand, European voices argue that ‘norm-based contexts which produce multilateral policies constitute a better environment for the EU than crude power politics, which test its cohesion and almost invariably put the EU at a disadvantage’.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, it is precisely (Western-orientated) norms that China remains suspicious of in its bilateral relationship with the EU and in its general international behaviour. Consequently, Fiott argues that ‘serious thought and negotiation will need to be had over the nature of multilateralism itself’; in which he asked ‘should it [multilateralism] be used to impose and enforce binding rules on the participants of any multipolar order’, or ‘should it be conceived in a more pragmatic manner by responding to the prevailing needs at any given time’, a manner in which ‘ideology and mores will play less of a role’.<sup>48</sup> Uwe Wissenbach talks of ‘functionalism multilateralism’ as a way forward in EU-China relations.<sup>49</sup> A functional-pragmatic rather than normative role for multilateralism is one that China can better work with. The EU may have long term hopes of fostering norm change in China, but that is precisely what China is resistant to. As one Chinese commentator warned: ‘the EU’s attempt to spread European norms and values through the concept of unilateral socialization will, from the Chinese government’s point of view, only undermine China’s willingness to cooperate with the EU’.<sup>50</sup> There is also a practical limitation, ‘the EU lacks sufficient leverage, i.e. hard power or real power, to persuade China to embrace European norms and values’, on which ‘China has little interest in internalizing European values and norms and even less incentive to do so’.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> L. van Langenhove, A. Abass, F. Baert & E. Fanta, *The EU as a Global regional Actor in Security and Peace* 32 (United Nations University 2012).

<sup>48</sup> D. Fiott, *The Fault Lines and Virtues of Multipolarity*, 4 Madariaga Paper 4, 8 (January 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Wissenbach, *supra* n. 21.

<sup>50</sup> L. Liu, *The EU and China’s Engagement in Africa: the Dilemma of Socialisation*, 93 Occ. Paper (ISS) 6, 39 (August 2011).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Europe's emphasis on multilateralism has led it to stress what it calls 'effective multilateralism', as, for example, in the 2003 *European Security Strategy* (ESS).<sup>52</sup> Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy from 2004–2009, argued in 2009 that 'never has the world needed effective multilateralism more than today . . . multilateralism is the only effective approach'.<sup>53</sup> However, one could ask whether the continuing reiteration of the need for 'effective multilateralism' implies that multilateralism so far has been rather ineffective? There can be a sense from Europe's experience that 'multilateralism is inevitably unwieldy'.<sup>54</sup> Given that powers like China operate on strong national grounds, Uwe Wissenbach argues that with regard to the European Security Strategy (ESS), 'the ESS offers no concept for effective multilateralism in relation to Asia and the rising powers there'.<sup>55</sup> Michael Smith points out that 'the commitment to 'effective multilateralism' does not mean that the [European] Union is an effective multilateralist'; since 'it can act as a practical unilateralist', holding firm to previously negotiated internal positions and prone to push its own self conception as a different sort of normative power'.<sup>56</sup>

By its nature, multilateralism involves sovereignty-impinging constraints. In this connection De Vasconcelos contrasts 'effective multilateralism' (EU) and 'conservative multilateralism' (China). On the one hand, 'the EU view is that effective multilateralism involves limits on state sovereignty and that the international community should intervene to protect the fundamental rights of citizens everywhere'; on the other hand, China is a state 'with a "strong sovereignty" posture, and a much more conservative concept of multilateralism', which leaves the EU much readier than China to accept multilateral interventionism in the world.<sup>57</sup> The EU has graphically pooled sovereignty in its own very formation and ongoing political processes, while China remains hyper-sensitive on maintaining its state sovereignty within the international system. As the debate carries on over how to achieve 'effective multilateralism', European integration is under threat from calls for looser linkages within the EU. Consequently, 'the future debate on the European project might well envisage a

<sup>52</sup> Council of the European Union, *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy*, 9, 12 Dec. 2003, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Ferrero-Waldner, *Effective Multilateralism: Building for a Better Tomorrow*, SPEECH/09/179 (Europa) 14 Apr. 2009.

<sup>54</sup> C. Hill, J. Peterson & W. Wessels, *Unwieldy Multilateralism: Lessons From Europe's International Experience*, Paper (Twelfth Biennial Conference of the European Union Studies Association, Boston) 19 (3–5 Mar. 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Wissenbach, *supra* n. 21, at 1.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *supra* n. 34, at 658.

<sup>57</sup> De Vasconcelos, *An Open Europe in a Multipolar World*, 60 *Stud. & Research (Notre Europe)* 13–14 (October 2007); Z. Zhong, *Multiple Principles for Multilateral Interventions: The Ideational Divergences between EU and China*, 31 *Working Papers (GEM)* (December 2012).

shift towards a more intergovernmental EU and a lighter version of EU multilateralism', in which 'at the end of such a process, the EU might look more like a loose and informal grouping of European states than a Union as such, and reflect interest- rather than norms-based multilateralism'.<sup>58</sup> This, ironically, would represent convergence with China's sense, or rather usage, of multilateralism.

One paradox is that despite their use of multilateralism language, the EU's relationship with China is a bilateral relationship between two actors. In practice, the EU's relationship with China has been steered through their bilateral strategic partnership and bilateral mechanisms within that, rather than through multilateral mechanisms like the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). As such, some scholars have commented that the EU's bilateral 'strategic partnerships [with China and other significant powers] . . . might be viewed as betraying the spirit of the effort to build a more multilateralized, rules-based, law-binding international order'.<sup>59</sup> In contrast though, Thomas Renard's response is that 'strategic partnerships, albeit a bilateral instrument, can be used as a pragmatic tool to reconcile this trend with the overall objective of effective multilateralism, through closer cooperation with pivotal players within international organizations'.<sup>60</sup> The strategic partnership proclaimed between the EU and China comes into view in which 'strategic partnerships could then be defined as omni-enmeshment of selected players [like China] in a smart web of bargaining, agreements and structural connections, with a view to strengthen the multilateral system'.<sup>61</sup> However, the comment can immediately be made that as a 'selected player', it is questionable whether China wishes to be enmeshed by the EU, particularly given Chinese sensitivities over sovereignty issues.

With regard to China, it was for some time extremely wary of multilateralism. Mao's emphasis on China as 'beacon of revolution' gave a push away from ongoing general inter-state cooperation; while China's ongoing sensitivity over 'sovereignty' has meant it has been generally reluctant to tie itself down in binding multilateral frameworks. Matters of territorial and maritime claims around its periphery have been one key area where multilateral involvement was consistently rejected. This was so with regard to territorial disputes with India in the late 1950s, and with regard to the South China Sea issue from the 1980s onwards. Nevertheless, while the 1990s saw frequent use of multipolarity in China's diplomatic lexicon, the 2000s saw more frequent use of multilateralism instead.

<sup>58</sup> J. Jokela, *The G-20: A Pathway to Effective Multilateralism?* 125 Chaillot Papers 68 (April 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Hill, Peterson & Wessels, *supra* n. 54.

<sup>60</sup> T. Renard, *A Strategic Union to Cope with the Multipolar Challenge*, June 2012, <http://esharp.eu/big-debates/external-action/50-a-strategic-union-to-cope-with-the-multipolar-challenge/> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

EU sources have been more than ready to see multilateralism at play in China's foreign policy. In part, this may be an objective recognition of multilateralism's presence; in part, it may be a way for the EU of strengthening such emerging tendencies within China. Thus, in 2005, Solana stressed how 'multilateralism and respect for international law are fundamental tenets of the EU's foreign policy. And I know the same is true for China'.<sup>62</sup> Ferrero-Waldner's sense, or perhaps hope, was that 'our vision is a world governed by rules created and monitored by multilateral institutions. And I know China shares this approach'.<sup>63</sup> The same year, 2005, the EU Commission President Barroso similarly asserted a 'shared belief in multilateralism' between the EU and China.<sup>64</sup> Romano Prodi, his predecessor, repeated this claim in a piece carried by the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), that China and the EU had 'a common vision of the principle of multilateralism'.<sup>65</sup> Such multilateral attributions to China may, or perhaps may not be accurate in terms of China's own imperatives and self-perceptions, but it certainly indicates something of the EU's own continuing interest in China as a 'multilateral' partner.

China's adoption of multilateralism language in the 2000s went alongside deployment of other public diplomacy terms like 'responsible great power', 'peaceful rise', 'peaceful development', 'win-win', 'good neighbourhood policy' and 'harmonious world'. In turn, such reassurance language benefited China's 'international image', and in turn its soft power attractiveness. This is admitted by many Chinese sources. PRC scholars like Chen Dongxiao pinpoint the 'strategic value of multilateral diplomacy, which has served [an instrumental choice of word] as a new stage to improve China's national image'.<sup>66</sup> His choice of the word 'stage' is interesting but ambiguous: 'stage' as a process or as a theatrical arena? Similarly for Pan Zhongqi, 'the transformation of China's diplomacy . . . from bilateral engagement to multilateral engagement . . . is closely related to China's image of world order and the dynamic change of its image gap'.<sup>67</sup> Image is related to soft power, and with it Xu Xin's sense that 'to be sure, the newly found *utility* of multilateralism largely lies in the growing importance of *soft power* in international relations, of which the Chinese have become increasingly conscious and

<sup>62</sup> Solana, *Driving Forwards the EU-China Strategic Partnership*, 6 Sep. 2005, 2, [http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/en/discours/86125.pdf](http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/discours/86125.pdf) (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Ferrero-Waldner, *supra* n. 22, at 113.

<sup>64</sup> Barroso, *Letter* (to Wen Jiabao), 4 May 2005, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/zt/gh/t195308.htm>.

<sup>65</sup> R. Prodi, *EU-China Relations: A Common Future*, For. Affairs J. (CPIFA), November 2009, <http://cpifa.org/en/q/listQuarterlyArticle.do?articleId=38> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>66</sup> D. Chen, *Contemporary Challenges to China's Multilateral Diplomacy and Global Governance – a Chinese Perspective*, 4 Intl. Rev. (SIIS) 34 (2008).

<sup>67</sup> Z. Pan, *China's Changing Image of and Engagement in World Order*, in *Harmonious World and China's New Foreign Policy* 48 (S. Gao & J. Blanchard eds., Lexington Books 2008).



appreciative'.<sup>68</sup> If European multilateralists hear comments from PRC figures like Song Xinning that 'Chinese multilateralism is a tool and a tactic, not an intergovernmental mechanism or institutional arrangement', then distrust is perhaps heightened not reduced.<sup>69</sup> As the debate continues over how far China's adoption of terms like multilateralism, as well as other reassurance diplomatic terms, are a short-term pragmatic functionalist tool, or how far they represent long-term deeper normative values, such explanations from PRC figures end up reassuring less and damaging more China's image, through being seen as misleading propaganda. There remains a running debate on 'the hollowness of China's ostensible and much-touted commitment to multilateralism', not only in Asia, but also in Europe.<sup>70</sup>

Tactically, adoption of multilateralism rhetoric by China could also be seen as a tactical balancing response to US unilateralism, a unilateralism that the EU had some similar concerns under the Bush administration. Hence official Chinese headlines like 'FM slams unilateralism, favors multilateralism'.<sup>71</sup> China's adoption of multilateralism posed an alternative to US unilateralism, in effect a 'soft balancing' similar to the way in which advocacy of multipolarity posed an alternative to US unipolarity.<sup>72</sup> This fear about Chinese anti-US balancing motives lies behind Frank Umbach's caution that 'Europeans . . . are worried that China might support multilateral organizations but subject its support for tactical reasons to global order-policy concepts of strategic multipolarity, the result being more political and economic rivalry and less multilateral cooperation'.<sup>73</sup>

Criticisms have been made in Europe of China's adoption of multilateralism language with regard to the EU's dealing with China. Odgaard and Biscop argue that 'the EU's ambition to enmesh China in a system of effective multilateralism' comes up against what they call China's '*contingent multilateralism*', in which 'China favours these engagements and goals to the extent that they restrain and commit others, but is much more conservative if they require restraint or commitment on its own part'.<sup>74</sup> Their pessimistic conclusion is that consequently 'China's commitment to multilateralism cannot form a reliable basis for long-term EU

<sup>68</sup> X. Xu, *A Dialectic of Multipolarity and Multilateralism*, in *Managing Globalization: Lessons from China and India* 261 (D. Kelly, R. Rajan & G. Goh eds., World Scientific Publishing 2006).

<sup>69</sup> Cited in D. Shambaugh, *Coping with a Conflicted China*, 34 Washington Q. 1, 19 (2011).

<sup>70</sup> G. Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thinking on Multilateral Regional Security in Northeast Asia*, 55 Orbis 2, 298 (Spring 2011).

<sup>71</sup> *FM Slams Unilateralism, Favors Multilateralism*, People's Daily, 7 Mar. 2004.

<sup>72</sup> N. Contessi, *Experiments in Soft Balancing: China-led Multilateralism in Africa and the Arab World*, 3 Caucasian Rev. Intl. Affairs 4, 404–34 (2009).

<sup>73</sup> F. Umbach, *Shaping Multipolarity? Critical Remarks on the Asian and European Debate and the Necessity to Strengthen 'Effective Multilateralism'*, 7 Intl. Rep. (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung) 3 (2006).

<sup>74</sup> L. Odgaard & S. Biscop, *The EU and China: Partners in Effective Multilateralism?* in *The International Politics of EU-China Relations* 54 (F. Liu & D. Kerr eds., British Academy 2007).



policy planning towards China'.<sup>75</sup> However, rather than criticizing China for such tactical multilateralism, one could argue that it would be better for the EU policy planning to base itself on China's ongoing commitment to multipolarity, and so operate towards China as a multipolar Great Power partner?

Here it is relevant to consider an explanation that the EU's stress on multilateralism reflects a degree of EU failure in grasping the nettle of hard power multipolarity game playing. Thomas Renard argues that faced with 'this rising multipolarity . . . it is in the interest of the EU . . . to promote an international order based on systemic and rule-based multilateralism because the EU is simply unable to play [multipolar] *realpolitik* with other global players'.<sup>76</sup> The EU has no developed Great Power military presence; so a focus on multilateralism can be seen as in the EU's interests, because it offers an alternative non-military avenue for its presence in multilateral negotiation, for which it is better equipped. However, rather than criticizing China for half-hearted or limited multilateralism, the EU could simply play China at its own game, i.e. strengthen its security and foreign policy capacities so as to act and react as another Great Power in a multipolar system.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Questions remain from these convergent and divergent patterns of public diplomacy language use by the EU and by China. If 'for China, multilateralism is more like a kind of diplomatic tool rather than a mechanism for international order', will continued interaction with the EU generate a move towards seeing it in more structural terms?<sup>77</sup> How far does China's adoption of multilateralism language reflect normative change on the part of the PRC, or does it reflect a 'conditional multilateralism' that operates as an image-shaping tool or tactic? How does China's emphasis on multilateralism (and other assurance diplomacy terms) affect the 'trust deficit' issues pinpointed by both sides of the EU-China relationship? What does the *zhizhu* (pillars) formulation of Chinese foreign policy that 'great powers are the key, multilateralism is the stage' imply for Chinese advocacy of multilateralism? The word *wutai* can be translated as 'stage' in the sense of platform or venue and outlet, but stage can also have the sense of a temporary provisional moment rather than permanent feature of policy. It can also point to something being staged, with the implication that China's adoption of

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>76</sup> Renard, *From the New G20 to a Multilateral Order*, European Geostrategy, 14 Jan. 2010, 14, <http://europeangeostrategy.ideason europe.eu/2010/01/14/from-the-new-g20-to-a-multilateral-order/> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>77</sup> X. Song & W. Huang, *China and the Global Political Economy*, in *China and the European Union: Future Directions* 83 (J. Beneyto, X. Song & C. Ding eds., CEU Ediciones 2013).

multilateralism in its dealings with the EU represents tactical soft power 'opportunism' in play. Even if China's adoption of multilateralism language has been tactical, continuing reiteration of it may root it as a belief and norm, perhaps reflecting some international socialization impact of the EU on China. However, counter-intuitively, if China's multilateral behaviour is indeed a mixture of initial watching and engaging followed by circumventing and shaping, then the arguments of international socialization via multilateralism are diminished the longer China engages in such avenues.<sup>78</sup>

Equally well, how far does China's readiness to use and evoke multipolar language challenge the EU to develop hard power 'effective multipolarity' rather than soft power 'effective multilateralism'? Some European criticisms of China can be turned on their heads. Álvaro de Vasconcelos' argument that 'multipolarity can weaken multilateralism', given the ability and readiness of Great Powers, like China, to push their own unilateral national interests, is true; as is Paul van Hooft's argument that 'at present China does not seem to have the ability or interest to play a supporting role to current multilateral structures'.<sup>79</sup> However, this weakening of multilateralism can be used to argue that the EU could also operate in terms of its own multipolar interests. Theresa Fallon's point is also valid, when commenting on Chinese visits to Europe, that 'the EU has seen the growth of a multipolar world but this development has not been on its terms. A strong advocate of unilateralism, it has instead seen an evolving multipolar world based on bilateral relationships'.<sup>80</sup> Yet that could serve as a spur for the EU to drop its multilateralism emphasis and instead concentrate on extending its bilateral relationships with other significant powers like China. Here we can invoke Hyde-Price's study on the *European Security in the Twenty-First Century: The Challenge of Multipolarity*. He pinpointed the present 'dominant political discourse in the heartlands of the EU, the goal of a Kantian peace order . . . in this Kantian idyll, great powers are no longer preoccupied by the balance of power'.<sup>81</sup> From this came a stress in which 'Europe today is steadily building a Kantian (*foedus pacificum* 'pacific union') in which soft power, multilateralism and shared interest with ensure peace, security and prosperity for all'.<sup>82</sup> However, Hyde-Price saw this as flawed, as ignoring the real world and needing to be replaced by adoption of IR

<sup>78</sup> J. Wuthnow, X. Li & L. Qi, *Diverse Multilateralism: Four Strategies in China's Multilateral Diplomacy*, 17 J. Chin. Pol. Sci. 274 (2012).

<sup>79</sup> De Vasconcelos, *supra* n. 54, at 14; P. van Hooft, *Multipolarity, Multilateralism, and Strategic Competition*, 32 Working Papers (GEM) 19 (December 2012).

<sup>80</sup> T. Fallon, *Wen's Farewell to Europe*, The Diplomat, 19 Sep. 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/china-power/wens-farewell-to-europe/> (accessed 28 May 2013).

<sup>81</sup> A. Hyde-Price, *European Security in the Twenty-First Century: The Challenge of Multipolarity* 19–20 (Routledge 2007).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

*realism* imperatives, and with it multipolarity language and balancing policies.<sup>83</sup> This would represent a more hard-headed approach, but one that IR realism advocates would recognize as practical politics in action. One way for the EU to meet Barroso's call in May 2012 that the eurocrisis 'has opened our eyes to a fast-growing multi-polar world and reinforced our view that we need to do things differently if we are to compete on an equal footing with our global partners' would be for the EU to adopt a more explicit multipolarism alongside China.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, in a fashion that China would recognize, Catherine Ashton noted in her Final Report to the European Council on Security and Defence, held in December 2013, that 'a multipolar and interconnected international system' pointed to the EU 'projecting power' through appropriate 'military capabilities'.<sup>85</sup>

To conclude, the EU may be socializing China with regard to multilateralism, but equally well China may end up socializing the EU with regard to multipolarity. China's own continuing embrace of multipolarity suggests a model for the EU. Thus, even as the EU socializes China into deeper multilateralism outlooks, China may be socializing or at least spurring the EU into greater multipolar outlooks. This represents multipolar-multilateral divergence, convergence and mutual interaction in EU-China relations. This also suggests a convergence between multipolarity and multilateralism, conceptually but also politically.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>84</sup> Barroso, *Simply Innovation*, SPEECH/12/343 (Europa) (8 May 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Ashton, *Final Report*, 15 Oct. 2013, [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131015\\_02\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131015_02_en.pdf) (accessed 5 Jan. 2014).

<sup>86</sup> G. Grevi, *The Interpolar World: A New Scenario*, 79 Occ. Paper (EU-ISS) (2009); J. Howorth, *The EU as a Global Actor*, 48 J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 3, 235–258 (2010).

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