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ORIGINAL PAPER

Trust, structures and Track-2 Dialogue in the EU-China relationship: resetting and resettling a 'strategic partnership'?

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Abstract This article looks at matters of trust, of structures and of dialogue in the European Union (EU)-China relations. It argues that EU-China relations need resetting given the increasingly negative perceptions of China in Europe and given Chinese dissatisfaction with what it considers to be a degree of EU incoherence, incompetence and inconsistencies. Their 'strategic partnership' proclaimed in 2003 in many ways is rather empty and lacks much coordination of diplomacy. Their economic relationship while substantial is problematic and asymmetric in nature. However, restructuring the relationship through new dialogue mechanisms and agreements may resettle their relationship along more pragmatic functional grounds. In particular, the creation in 2012 of a third High Level Dialogue, at Track-2 rather than Track-1 level, that of People-to-People (PPD), may reduce the 'trust deficit' in the still longer term. Consequently, the article seeks to contextualize and evaluate the rhetoric and substance surrounding the various dialogue meetings and structures emerging in 2012. It also considers the progress, or perhaps lack of progress, on concluding a *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* (PCA). It concludes that one way forward is to de-politicize the partnership.

Introduction

This article looks at how issues of trust have led to varied forms of structures and dialogues being set up in 2012 between the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). As such, the structure of the article is to first look at matters of trust, a perceptual matter. From there, the article looks at matters of structures, including new dialogue structures set up in 2012 and the ongoing negotiations over a wider comprehensive *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* (PCA). This leads to matters of dialogue through a closer study of the Track-2 *People-to-People Dialogue* mechanism in general and consideration of one specific example of this new mechanism in the shape of the Gonzalez-Zheng 'China-Europe Dialogue'. The article ends by

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standing back again and considering the progress, or perhaps lack of progress, in Sino-European partnership. In looking at examples of EU-China dialogue mechanisms, it asks how far they reflect a meeting of minds, how far they reflect convergence or divergence.

As participants talk, the question can be asked how far they talk at each other, talk with each other, talk to each other or perhaps just talk straight past each other. This is no abstract question, since the very purpose of dialogue is constantly said to be to further 'mutual understanding' and thereby strengthen trust. This article pays close detail to the wording used by European and Chinese participants, even while remembering the contextualization and political image shaping at play within such public diplomacy utterances. The reason for this close scrutiny of the language used is that words matter, particularly given the presence of what Callahan calls 'language politics' (2009, p. 137) in EU-China ongoing discourse and statements.

These related questions of trust, structures and dialogue indicate the paradox in EU-China relations. Their 'strategic partnership' proclaimed in 2003 is a somewhat unsettled partnership, facing various challenges a decade later (Men 2012). The abrupt cancellation, on the grounds of the Dalai Lama's visit to EU countries, of the 11th Annual Summit due to be held in late 2008 'stunned Brussels' (Euractive 2008) and led to talk in the controversial *Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), of China's 'diplomatic contempt' towards the EU (Fox and Godemont 2009, p. 3). One European observer was talking the following year of a 'strategic dissonance' (Holslag 2010) in EU-China relations. He considered it 'a fragile partnership' which is 'a technical partnership and not a strategic alliance' in which both sides have not been able to coordinate their diplomacy and in which 'the absence of a mature strategic dialogue has rendered the China-EU partnership rather ineffective' (cited in Fu 2012). The cancellation of the 14th Annual Summit due in late 2011 may not have been a Brussels tit-for-tat rejoinder to China, as the reason given was the eurozone crisis that the EU needed to focus on, but it still raised eyebrows. Meanwhile, market imbalances, namely China's soaring exports, had produced a China surplus and EU deficit of 155.9 billion euros in 2011. Ongoing EU complaints ('EU-China: will there ever be a level playing field?', Godemont 2012b) about market access and unfair Chinese subsidies were heightened by a sense that simultaneously 'China is buying up Europe' (Godement and Parello-Plesner 2011). This all feeds into what Gungwu Wang (2012a) calls 'the China effect in anxious Europe'.

At the international level, an EU acceptance of international *responsibility to protect* norm cuts across China's *sovereignty*-inviolability norm and has put them on different sides in recent years with regard to the Sudan, Syria and Libya situations. EU readiness to impose what China called 'unilateral' sanctions against Iran was another focus of divergence in 2012. This is not a total failure of their strategic-security partnership. There has been convergence and some cooperation since 2009 between the EU ATALANTA operation and the Chinese naval operations against piracy in the Gulf of Aden, in part through the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism.

On paper, the EU-China Climate Change Partnership should bode well for diplomatic coordination (Scott 2009; Matteis 2012). EU-China convergence and cooperation in multilateral settings was absent at the 2009 Copenhagen Earth Summit, was in some

evidence at Cancun in 2010 and Durban in 2011, but receded at Rio+20 in 2012 (DGEP 2012). Bilateral environmental cooperation presented a similar mixed picture. On the one hand, throughout 2012, China (like India) rejected any unilateral imposition of the EU carbon tax, levied under its Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) on Chinese airlines operating in European airspace (People's Daily 2012b), with further friction over Chinese solar panel exports leading to EU punitive tariffs voted on in June 2013. On the other hand, a joint financing deal was signed in September 2012 under which the EU pledged 25 million euros over a 4-year period to various carbon-reducing projects within China.

Matters of trust

In recent years, 'trust' as a problematic yet important feature in international relations has become a focus for academic analysis (Hoffman 2002; Paul 2004; Kydd, 2005). The trust issue continued to rumble through China-EU relations, reflecting a 'vicious cycle' (Jian 2009), in which 'a lack of mutual trust stands out as the most obvious obstacle to the strategic partnership becoming a reality' (Zhang 2011a).

The trust issue ran throughout 2012. In May 2012, the former EU ambassador to China, Klaus Ebermann, also brought up the trust issue; 'underneath this sugar coating' of China-EU rhetoric, 'there remains a gaping hole …. This is not yet the relationship of trust where both sides do not shy away from delicate issues, be they controversial, sensitive or new' (Ebermann 2012). That same month, a 'trust gap' (Wang 2012a, b) between the EU and China was acknowledged in the PRC media as something needing to be resolved. In turn, Wu Hailong, China's ambassador to the EU, also stressed the need to 'promote political mutual trust' and that 'we should find ways to build better mutual perception, reduce misunderstanding, increase mutual trust' (Wu 2012). He entwined that with dialogue structures, 'we should stress the political leading role of high-level dialogues' as well as 'promote people-to-people exchange … under the framework of the China-EU high level people-to-people exchange dialogue mechanism' (Wu 2012). In the run up to the 15th Annual China-EU summit in autumn 2012, the Chinese government advised that 'politically, China and the EU should respect and trust each other, and work to increase strategic mutual trust' (Song 2012b). At the 15th Annual Summit, the *Joint Communiqué* had the two parties promising 'to increase mutual trust and understanding' (EU-China Joint Press 2012, p. 3). Following the 15th Annual Summit, other PRC commentators saw its main feature as 'building a trustful partnership' (Ding 2012). In April 2013, Wu Hailong still publicly talked of the need for China and the EU to 'strengthen mutual trust' (cited in Banks 2013), implying that it was still weak.

The issue of trust also brings up the other side of the coin, mistrust. Here, the uncomfortable fact for China is that European distrust has grown noticeably in recent years, as measured by Pew Global Attitudes Survey (PGAS) data through the last decade since the announcement of the strategic partnership in 2003.

This deterioration was partly reflected in concerns about China's growing economic strength. Despite China's talk of 'win-win' economic cooperation, market imbalances, namely China's soaring exports, had produced a China surplus (and EU deficit) of 155.9 billion euros in 2011, with ongoing EU complaints about market access and

unfair Chinese subsidies. The High Level Economic and Trade Dialogue (HED) which met in 2008, 2009 and 2010 did not meet in 2011 or 2012. This deterioration of image reflected, even more so, concerns about China's growing military strength, despite China's stress on its 'defensive' military profile. Minxin Pei noted 'China's trust problem' (Pei 2012), in which its military modernization and diplomatic assertiveness made its protestations of 'peaceful development' rhetoric unconvincing. Quite simply, here China's public diplomacy in Europe faces an ongoing 'credibility gap' (Kudlimay 2012, p. 9; Hooge 2010).

Admittedly, PGAS 'favorability' findings for 2011 showed some improvements in West European perceptions of China, probably because of the growing economic-financial crises affecting the EU and generating the desirability of cooperation with China (Table 1). However, by 2012, opinions had deteriorated again in the UK, France, Germany and Spain. If one looks at the figures for 2005–2012, these show downward slides in favorability figures for China in the UK (from 65 % down to 49 %, a 16-point drop), in France (from 58 % down to 40 %, an 18-point drop), in Germany (from 46 % down to 29 %, a 17-point drop) and in Spain (from 57 % down to 49 %, an 8-point drop). Italian figures had not been collected during most of the 2005–2012 period, but it can be noted that the 2012 figure from Italy was a lowly 30 % (PGAS 2012a, p. 38). In contrast, images of China among the newer EU states might have a different dynamic, if Poland is anything to go by, with a 13-point favorability rise seen in Poland from 37 to 50 % in the 2005–2012 period. It may be no coincidence that Poland and China signed a formal strategic partnership agreement in December 2011.

Chinese perceptions of Europe have not been tracked in such methodological fashion. The general impression is of positive enough Chinese perceptions of Europe, particularly in terms of cultural issues and regional integration practices. Indeed, the *Chinese Views of Europe* survey carried out in 2010 found a 'huge reservoir of goodwill towards European countries and the EU', in which over 80 % of government officials interviewed had a 'good impression of the EU and its citizens', though 'a fairly large number of them said they were unhappy about the EU's China policy' (Dong 2011; Vergeron 2011). However, urban Chinese presented ambiguous findings: 'we find that 92 % of urban Chinese have a favorable overall image of Europeans', but a lower '66 % of the respondents view the prospects of China-EU relations as being positive. What is more, China-EU current relations and the friendliness of current relations are positively evaluated by as little as 54 % and 32 % of the respondents' (Delhey and Graf 2011). This converged with the PGAS (2012b, p. 11) Survey's 50 % 'unfavorable' to

Table 1 China's overall favorability trends (%)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
UK	65	65	49	47	52	46	59	49
France	58	60	47	28	41	41	51	40
Germany	46	56	34	26	29	30	34	29
Spain	57	45	39	31	40	47	55	49
Poland	37	–	39	33	43	46	51	50

Source: PGAS 2012a

33 % 'favorable' score in Chinese perceptions of the EU, rather than of Europe or Europeans in general.

Chinese unhappiness about the EU revolves around issues of EU competency and intentions in five areas. First, there is some Chinese sense of the weakness of the EU project, such that China might despair of a common coherent EU partner to conduct its relationship with. As Song Tao lamented 'the integration process has come to a standstill …. Cohesion within the EU is on the decrease …. Europe's ability to act on the global stage [alongside China] has been constrained' (Song 2012a). An alternative for China is to build up other frameworks. April 2012 saw China setting up an Economic Forum with various central and eastern European states. The launch in September 2012 of the *Secretariat for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries* may have been described by Song Tao as promoting 'all round development of China-EU relations' (Song 2012c). However, such sub-EU-level frameworks were read by some European commentators (Godemont 2012a) as strengthening China's hand and correspondingly weakening EU-level solidarity and bargaining power. The 2010 *Chinese Views of Europe* survey noticed 'the low importance the Chinese government officials give to the cooperation with the EU institutions but high importance to the cooperation with the key EU member states' (Dong 2011, p. 1). A particularly re-emphasized strategic partnership with Germany emerged in 2012 as a further focus of China in Europe, with an unusual joint Cabinet held between German and Chinese ministers in August 2012. Some European commentators noted that 'as a result, the Chinese are increasingly dealing with Europe through Germany rather than through the foreign-policy institutions created by the Lisbon Treaty' (Kundnani and Parello-Plesner 2012, p. 2; People's Daily 2012c).

Second, there is a divergence between the EU emphasis on multilateralism and China's advocacy of multipolarity (Scott 2013). China's stress on multipolarity and balancing nuances continued through 2012. In this vein, Song Tao, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs with main responsibilities for EU policy, reckoned in August 2012 that 'China and the EU have worked vigorously to promote a multi-polar world' (Song 2012a). In a speech peppered with references to multipolarization and multipolarity, Song Tao reckoned in December 2012 that 'advocacy for a multipolar world is the strategic foundation of China-EU relations' (Song 2012d). However, the EU continues to stress multilateralism norms and values and has been reluctant to balance in any clear way against the USA, despite Chinese hopes of Europe serving as 'a counterweight against America' (Shen 2008).

Third, there are doubts over European financial competency, with concerns over the euro-crisis potentially dragging Chinese euro-assets down. There has been some Chinese exasperation over what have been considered as overly high European expectations of being bailed out by China. As the *People's Daily* explained of the trip of Premier Wen Jiabao in 2012, 'Wen's European tour did not focus on how China will "save" Europe, his visits have [instead?] promoted bilateral economic and trade relations between China and Iceland, Sweden, Poland and Germany' (People's Daily 2012a).

Fourth, the EU inability or unwillingness to lift the arms embargo on China, despite their proclaimed strategic partnership, continues to rankle China as at best showing EU weakness and inconsistency and at worst showing ill intent on the part of the EU towards what is officially a 'strategic partner'.

Fifth, there is a degree of unspoken distrust of the EU as a longer-term disruptive force on China's own political stability. Chinese criticism has been that 'to many Chinese, Europeans have a sense of political superiority based on Eurocentrism. They always try to bring others into alignment of their own set of values and political system' (Mei 2011). Domestic stability, 'regime survival' one might say, continues to be a political imperative for Beijing and with it a distrust of intervention or 'interference' from outside, be it explicitly by Washington or more circumspectly by Brussels.

Given this trust deficit issue in EU-China relations, one answer, or at least a response, has been the advocacy of more Dialogue frameworks, as potentially valuable 'trust-building instruments' (Borght and Zhang 2010, p. 61). Matters of trust involve matters of structure, exemplified with the setting up in 2012 of a new High Level People-to-People Dialogue (PPD) mechanism.

Matters of structure

Into these changed and unsettling times of global recession and eurozone financial instability, new EU-China structures are being set up which may resettle the relationship.

With the High Level PPD in place, the EU-China institutional arrangements have a three-pillar structure. These are three High Level Dialogues, which include the Strategic Dialogue running since 2005 and upgraded since 2010 (with 15 further more specialized dialogues under its umbrella), the Trade and Economic Dialogue (HED) running since 2008 (with 32 more specialized dialogues under its umbrella) and the People-to-People Dialogue (PPD) established in 2012 (with three more specialized dialogues under its umbrella). In effect, Track-1 channels (the High Level Strategic Dialogue and the HED) have now been supplemented by Track-2 channels represented by the PDD.

Such structures have developed in a gradual piecemeal fashion since the initial *Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement* (TECA) drawn up in 1985. This has generated earlier movement to frame a new comprehensive settlement for EU-China relations. However, a curious feature of 2012 was that both Annual Summits made no mention of the progress on the negotiations for such a new *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* (PCA), which is supposed to replace the 1985 TCA and thereby to regularize the plethora of multilevel and multisector bilateral mechanisms that have evolved between the EU and China.

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

The necessity for a comprehensive PCA was first mooted at the 7th EU-China Summit in 2004 and announced at the 9th Summit in 2006. Negotiations were formally launched in January 2007 but with no deadline set for them (People's 2007). Nevertheless, at the 10th Summit in November 2007, the leaders 'expressed their mutual satisfaction on the successful launch and start of negotiations on a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which will encompass the full scope of their bilateral relationship, including enhanced co-operation on political matters' and 'taking into consideration the global objectives of the EU China strategic partnership' (EU-China Joint Statement of

the 10th China-EU Summit 2007). One part concerned the upgrading of the limited 1985 TECA; the other part would be a much broader PCA, providing the legal basis for wider political, social and cultural cooperation (Zeng 2009). However, when the Summit was resumed in 2009, following the cancellation of the 2008 Summit, the PCA seemed to have disappeared from the public agenda. None of the Annual Summits in 2009, 2010 and 2012 made any mention of conclusion or even progress on the PCA (Colin 2010; Mendes 2010; Zhang 2011b). In part, this reflects structural hindrances; any PCA will have to be not only negotiated and approved at the EU level but also approved at the national level of each of the 28 Member States. In part, it reflects differences over potential content of a new PCA.

Problems arise over embedding human rights provisions into any new PCA agreement, something done in other PCAs drawn up by the EU with other third countries. The initial 1994 *Cooperation Agreement* between the then EEC and India provided for 'the respect of human rights and democratic principles as the basis for bilateral cooperation'. Such democracy-human rights clauses were inserted, at the EU's insistence, into their PCAs negotiated with China's Central Asian neighbours. They also appear in the 2009 PCA between the EU and Indonesia in which 'human rights instruments applicable to both Parties underpin the internal and international policies of both Parties and constitute an essential element of this Agreement' (Article 1). This pattern of EU advocacy of democracy-human rights planks in its PCAs lay behind Geeraerts' view of 'the EU's conditional policy towards China, based on the assumption that China can be socialized and persuaded to incorporate Europe's post-modern values' (2012, p. 57).

EU leaders insist on the universality of liberal democracy and associated human rights, linking them into the EU's relationship with China because 'China and the EU have both signed up to the international instruments that enshrine the universal values of human rights, and we have a shared responsibility to uphold them' (Rompuy and Barroso 2012). European doubts on whether China really intends to uphold such universal human rights affect trust levels between them. Consequently, Rompuy's and Barroso's stress that 'this work is among the core values the European Union is built on' represents a point of divergence rather than convergence with China. In effect, they threw down a challenge for Beijing: 'China's contribution to implementing the universal principles of Human Rights and Rule of Law will be an important element shaping its global public reputation' (Rompuy and Barroso 2012), an important consideration for an image-conscious China sensitive to its international reputation.

In contrast to the EU, China's take on human rights continues to be that they are not universal, but relative, and in which different criteria and different emphasis and priorities are propounded by Beijing whereby socio-economic rights are more important or urgent than political rights, and group rights may override individual rights. As pointed out by Chinese commentators, 'personal rights is one of the important differences they have to solve; EU did and will continue to press on China only to the dislike of the latter' (Zhang and Ye 2008, p. 50). Such pressures on the part of the EU and the reactions by China have become part of the features of the dialogue frameworks that have evolved in EU-China relations.

Matters of dialogue

Almost by definition, dialogue almost always seems a good thing in principle. Yet, with regard to EU-China dialogue, we can note Gustaaf Geeraerts' caution that 'one of the

main setbacks in the EU-China partnership has always been the obsession with dialogues without a common view on how the new world order actually binds them together' (2012, p. 65). There is a continuing challenge of discerning which of the EU-China dialogues are actually functioning, given that they are not generally recorded or publicly released. The early rhetoric about the High Level Strategic Dialogue mechanism (Scott 2007) has subsequently shown little signs of substance. The Dialogue on Human Rights shows some convergence on the 'rule of law' but little converge on Human Rights and democracy norms. The problem in measuring or even discerning the impact of dialogues on actions and policies generates doubts on the effectiveness of such dialogue mechanisms—being all form and no substance.

Nevertheless, some analysts like Kim van der Borght and Lei Zhang see the EU-China dialogue formats as useful 'soft law' mechanisms, of value since 'attempting to codify often highly sensitive political issues would have a debilitating effect. The EU and China have therefore adopted a different path that allows for more flexibility, which is needed to reach common ground. The instruments are called dialogues' (Borght and Zhang 2010, p. 61). They argued that 'dialogues offer a platform to the parties to discuss sensitive topics without committing themselves to legal clauses in international agreements' (Borght and Zhang 2010, p. 61). The new PPD structure introduced in 2012 represented a particular softer dialogue format, revealing further the strengths and weaknesses of such 'soft' mechanisms.

The People-to-People Dialogue process

The PPD emerged in the year already designated as the Year of Intercultural Dialogue (YICD) in the EU-China relationship. The YICD ended on a high note. From the Chinese side, the Chinese Culture Minister Cai Wu announced that 'the China-EU Year has rightly left its mark as a standout highlight in the history of China-EU cultural exchange. It is fair to say that cultural interaction between China and the EU is embracing its most favourable environment, with even greater potential lying ahead for exploration' (People's Daily 2012d). Similarly, from the EU side, the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism, Youth and Sport, Androulla Vassiliou, concurred that 'we are not so much drawing this special year to a close, rather, we are confirming our common wish to engage in long-term cooperation, as culture has now become a permanent component of our partnership' (People's Daily 2012d). The ambiguities, and for some, the pretense surrounding such talk of cultural interactions, and in turn people-to-people dialogue remain. In the international system, relationships are between political actors (the EU and the PRC) rather than between cultures, and that such talk of intercultural dialogue, and in turn of people-to-people dialogue, is at best irrelevant and at worst misleading. Admittedly, some might argue that in a globalizing world, where national sovereignties are being softened by transnational trends and linkages, and in which the world is made up of international society as much as of international system, such people-to-people dialogue and inter-cultural issues are important.

The first meeting of the PPD was held during April 2012 in Brussels. Its potential was trust-related, with official PRC comments being that the PPD's purpose was to enhance 'mutual trust' (FMPRC 2012). The meetings were introduced by EU Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou and the PRC State Councilor Liu Yandong. Their

speeches can be looked at in detail, to discern the message and discourse behind the speech-making generalities. They reflected not only some of the promise but also limitations of this new structure.

Vassiliou's speech was open and welcoming but underpinned by wider reflections, 'the EU and China are strategic partners on the global stage', in which 'as we launch this dialogue … I am comforted in my hopes for a stronger relationship between the EU and China by the fact that – faced with shared problems – we are making similar policy choices' (Vassilious 2012). While the potential role played by intercultural dialogue was considered as high and regarded as 'an extraordinary opportunity for leaving behind the old world of power politics, cultural stereotypes and misperception, and ultimately ignorance and isolation' (Vassilious 2012). Vassilou's use of language and choice of words admitted as much the existence of cultural stereotypes and misperceptions but did not pinpoint what exactly they were and on whose part they were being held.

Liu's address was similarly positive and also stressed the wider significance of this Dialogue mechanism which 'opens a new chapter in the people-to-people and cultural exchanges between the two sides and will have a far-reaching impact on the future of China-Europe relationship' (Liu 2012). Her self-avowed hope was that the mechanism would 'help the European people gain a truthful understanding of China' (Liu 2012), with the implication being that current images were distorted and erroneous.

The basic question remained for the outside observer of how much impact such people-to-people dialogue structures really have on the inter-governmental relationship between the EU and China, in which the basic point remains that this strategic partnership is a relationship between two political actors, rather than between two cultures or two peoples. Helping European people gain a 'truthful understanding of China' through the People-to-People Dialogue may point to a better European appreciation of Chinese culture, but does not necessarily point to a more positive European appreciation of the Chinese government and of Chinese policies.

With the politicians having said their piece, this first PDD was then organized along the themes of education, culture and the media and with the role of mutual perceptions being a common theme for the panels assembled. Commentators like Shada Islam, who chaired the PDD dialogue session Culture, Perception and Media in EU-China Relations, considered this new High Level framework as 'soft power … soft diplomacy' (Islam 2012) on the part of the two actors. From a practical point of view, one could comment that this is very much the soft end of soft power, in which it is difficult to see hard tangible effects in terms of policies and actions by the respective political partners. Such themes of education, media and culture might affect mutual perceptions of European and Chinese culture, but are unlikely to affect mutual perceptions of each other as political partners.

Since the inaugural PDD meeting in 2012, further more specialized dialogues are emerging. The first meeting of the Higher Education Platform for Cooperation and Exchanges (HEPCE) in April 2013 was attended by officials from China's Ministry of Education and was presented in China as 'a flagship event in the framework of the high-level people-to-people dialogue' in which 'dozens of universities' presidents from China and Europe were brought together on Thursday to share their success stories and concerns in establishing cooperation projects' … 'so as to provide policy suggestions and enhance compatibility between the two's higher education systems' (CCTV 2013).

However, it remains unclear how such policy suggestions are to be fed in and how far they will be accepted and acted on by the EU and China.

The Gonzalez-Zheng China-Europe Dialogue

One further example of the PPD was the China-Europe Dialogue, organized by the *China Daily* and the Guan Tong Foundation in August 2012. This resulted in the former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez's visit to China and his formal discussions with the chairman of the China Institute of Innovation and Development Strategy, Zheng Bijian. Their comments, carried in the *China Daily*, serve as platforms for considering the ongoing role of dialogue and structures in EU-China relations. Both participants carried unofficial political clout with them, but it still leaves the question unresolved of measuring their impact, a challenge faced with evaluating the whole PPD and Track-2 processes. Their comments are significant for showing divergence as well as convergence, and to some extent each talking past the other to reflect their own European or Chinese concerns.

Gonzalez pointed out the different international forces and processes affecting both sides. On the one hand, 'reflecting the new world situation, China has already emerged with unusual strength' (Gonzalez 2012). On the other hand, 'Europeans of the Union – fight to avoid sinking, without finding the way. Set against an ascending process, that appears unstoppable, is a descending one, a loss of relevance, which we are unable to stop, much less reverse' (Gonzalez 2012). This was a blunt admission of a potentially asymmetric relationship in which a rising China faces a declining Europe. This imbalance was exacerbated by European disunity, Gonzalez asserting that 'the EU does not have a true common strategy with China. Beyond what the treaties say, member states prioritize their bilateral and direct relationship with China, according to national, and not common, interests,' so that 'it is very difficult, under the circumstances, for China to regard the EU as a true speaker for the whole of the European area' (Gonzalez 2012). This readiness of EU Member States to pursue national policies towards China rather than following an integrated EU approach was pinpointed in the *Power Audit of EU-China Relations* and was seen (Fox and Godemont 2009, p. 3, p. 21) as enabling China to exploit internal divisions within the EU.

Zheng Bijian, Gonzalez' dialogue partner, is the long-time influential foreign policy advisor under Hu Jintao's Presidency and the architect of China's concept of 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi*). Stability was stressed by Zheng: 'in non-traditional security areas, we also have common interests in maintaining stability in regions such as the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia and combating terrorism' (Zheng 2012). The subtext for this was Islamist jihadist groups operating in the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, as well as potentially in China's own province of Xinjiang, but where the EU is not so ready to equate regional separatism with such jihadist terrorism. Zheng's focus on the need for stability in the Middle East and Central Asia was also made with reference to the calls for democratization sweeping through the region during 2011–2012 in the 'Arab Spring', which the EU had responded to positively and which the PRC was visibly discomforted by, in part because of potential repercussions for democracy calls within China. Zheng's point that democracy 'cannot be imposed from outside, nor can it be achieved through turmoil' was a caution against external encouragement by the EU of internal democracy forces in China.

However, with political issues sidelined, Zheng argued that mutually beneficial economic projects could be developed to 'reduce and remove trade and investment barriers and facilitate Chinese companies to invest in Europe, they will help create many jobs in the host countries' (Zheng 2012). A problem with this is that such Chinese focus on European investment, especially noticeable among the Mediterranean countries, can be seen as asset acquisition, as a buying up of Europe through penetration of weaker EU states like Greece and the suchlike (Sorroza 2011; Godement and Parello-Plesner 2011). Zheng argued that such a process was a mutual process; 'likewise, there are a lot of opportunities for European companies to invest in China' (Zheng 2012), but the EU continues to complain about barriers on access to the Chinese market.

Finally, Zheng argued that 'other areas where our interests converge include the cyberspace, the outer space and maritime security' (Zheng 2012). However, this is a mixed picture. With regard to cyberspace, the EU and China have divergent perceptions, given European perceptions of state-sponsored hacking (for commercial and strategic purposes) emanating from China, and also unease with the domestic constraints imposed by the so-called Great Firewall of China by the Chinese government. With regard to outer space, there has been Chinese participation in the EU's Galileo satellite navigation system, although American observers had seen it as a 'geotechnological balancer' (Johnson-Freese and Erickson 2006). A *Joint Statement on Space Technology Cooperation* was made in September 2012 which included setting up a new dialogue on space technology cooperation mechanism. Finally, with regard to maritime security, the EU and China share similar concerns over stopping pirate disruption of the sea lanes crossing the Indian Ocean, with parallel operations taking place between Chinese and EU naval forces in the Gulf of Aden.

Did this particular dialogue format achieve mutual understanding? It is difficult to say. Gonzalez's shorter comments brought out potentially diverging and asymmetric aspects to the EU-China relationship, while Zheng's lengthier refrain of common shared interest was questionable on closer inspection, often pointing to areas of friction. What impact did this particular dialogue forum have? Each participant had a degree of political weight to feed back to the political elites of each actor, yet neither was likely to have a decisive voice. Their speeches and contributions to the dialogue were disseminated through the *China Daily*, including its online website. However, how widely these were accessed by the general public and how these may shape opinions or impact policy makers are difficult to assess.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from such dialogue? It is perhaps time for the EU and China to downplay its strategic-political rhetoric and instead work towards more pragmatic immediate short-term areas of economic readjustment, medium-term environmental cooperation and long-term ongoing dialogues. The agreement in September 2012 to open negotiations on an investment pact may be a good example of a more specific subject with potentially practical outcomes. Similar promise but uncertainty came with the agreement to start an Innovation Cooperation Dialogue in 2013. The EU's push against China for normative human rights may be a dead end. This was

starkly put forward by Mattlin's overview, in which he argued that 'as China's relative strength – in economic, military and political terms – has increased,' both 'the EU collectively and individual member states have grown increasingly reluctant and timid in pushing for China's acceptance of universal values of human rights and democracy as China has also grown increasingly more insistent in its rejection of such uncalled-for "assistance"' (Mattlin 2012, p. 182). In that setting, 'for better or worse, relative power sensitivities and concrete material interests still dominate EU-China relations' (Mattlin 2012, p. 182).

The EU-China relations may not yet be a strategic partnership despite all the rhetoric, but pragmatic and more specific Track-1 cooperation between the EU and Chinese political leadership might still be feasible in these immediate (short-term) economically turbulent and long-term environmentally challenging times. Track-2 People-to-People Dialogue, on the other hand, may gradually shape more positive grass-roots perceptions among the wider publics, but this will inherently take time to translate or percolate upwards to the official (policy) level, a slowness of impact which is further complicated in a relatively closed political system like the People's Republic of China where the political elite is less accountable to the wider public. This political point relates to issues of trust and to the role of dialogue structures in EU-China relations. Quite simply as Casarini (2013, p. 3) noted, 'China continues to be viewed with suspicion across Europe due to the non-democratic nature of the Chinese regime, raising questions as to what use the new leaders will make of their country's increased capabilities'. People-to-People Dialogue and more positive appreciation of culture are not likely to affect these politically related perceptions. Ironically, perhaps the EU-China relationship will make most progress by becoming less political in its focus.

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