

**Just Castillo Iglesias | Gaps, Challenges  
and Perspectives on EU-China Political and  
Security Relations**

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# Gaps, Challenges and Perspectives on EU-China Political and Security Relations\*

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## ABSTRACT

The European Union's relevance in East-Asian political and security issues, developed mainly during the last two decades, remains limited and relatively low profile. After these two decades, the persistent gap between rhetoric and materialized joint action remains existent. However, since its formalization, the EU-China 'Strategic Partnership' has achieved a significant deepening and widening in both recognized potential for further cooperation as well as in concrete joint action. Yet, and despite points of tension still exist, mainly coming from disagreements in terms of values and conception of the international system, the significant rise of China and its increasing presence in international affairs has brought about for the EU a significant challenge. On the one hand, strengthening and deepening its relations with China is a necessary condition for the EU to consolidate its role as an international actor, while on the other hand, China's strong demands for respect on national sovereignty and to be regarded in terms of equality, challenge the EU's traditional value-based diplomacy. Paradoxically, China, because of the challenges it presents for the EU alongside with the necessity and determination to strengthen this relation, may be becoming a driving force for the consolidation of the EU's personality as a foreign and security actor.

Thus, this article will first give a historical overview of EU-China relations since the end of the Cold War; secondly, it will review the main challenges and gaps still present in the bilateral relations; and finally, it will evaluate the perspectives and possible future direction of this important 'Strategic Partnership'.

Keywords: EU, China, Strategic Partnership, rhetoric, security, dialogue, Human Rights.

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## 1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been consolidating its emerging role as a global political and security actor with the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, the later formulation of the European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003 and the most recent establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010.

The EU's vision as a political and security actor is based on promoting effective global multilateralism and on providing what the EU considers universal public goods: good governance, promoting integration in myriad international organizations and regimes, and making respect for Human Rights, democracy, peace and development internationally recognized values and goals. In line with such objectives, the EU has primarily adopted what can be considered a value-based diplomacy and has doted itself with a wide array of conditionality mechanisms. For its relations with third countries considered of core importance, the EU has developed so-called 'Strategic Partnerships'. This term, despite not having a fixed definition, it implies an engagement with third countries in terms of equality with the objective of jointly addressing and have close collaboration on issues of common and global interest, developing and maintaining permanent dialogues on all dimensions of foreign policy, policy coordination, among others ([Odgaard & Biscop, 2007, pp. 54, 60](#)). Despite the seeming clarity in defining its goals, the EU's foreign and security policy dimension continues to be formulated through a complex intergovernmental mechanism that makes consensus or agreement among its Member States mandatory. Thus, the EU has been commonly defined as a *sui-generis* international actor.

In addition, the EU's foreign and security policy continues to be motivated by a double objective. The first one, of an internal nature, follows the logic that effectively developing relations with third actors globally contributes to the formation and consolidation of a uniquely European foreign and security policy (speaking with one voice). The second one, of an external nature, obeys to the perceived necessity for the EU to forge and strengthen its international actorness as a response to the global shifts



of power and in sight of a progressive loss of relative weight for Europe in international affairs.

In relation to this latter point, and particularly when considering its relations with China, the EU faces a crucial challenge. On the one hand, the EU-China ‘Strategic Partnership’ has been effectively developed in the course of the last two decades with relative general success. The extent of mutual trust, cooperation and joint initiatives has widened and deepened from an initial situation dominated by commercial ties into an extensive catalogue of common objectives, dialogues and collaboration schemes ([European Union EEAS, 2012a](#), [2012c](#)). At the same time, China’s unprecedented rise and economic dynamism has contributed to raising the country’s profile as a major global and regional power. China stands internationally as a strong advocate for effective multilateralism, equality in international relations and respect for national sovereignty. For the EU, this brings about a new situation, especially if contrasted with its bilateral relations with many other third countries, particularly the US, Canada and Japan. China brings about myriad new challenges, which, taken into account together with its population, economic potential and geopolitical importance, often put in evidence the current limits of the ‘Strategic Partnership’ and the need to reconcile, and find the common denominator between the values and principles vested into this partnership by China and by the EU. Yet, this is not necessarily a negative situation for the European side. China has historically presented itself as a convinced supporter of the European integration process and has recognized the EU as a potential valuable partner in the post-Cold War order with whom it shared the aim of helping effective multilateralism to prevail in the new global order ([Chen, 2010](#); [Pan, 2010](#); [Reinoso, 2012](#)). Likewise, given the challenges it presents for the EU along with the European will to strengthen this relation, it is important to consider that China may become a driving force for the consolidation of the EU’s personality as a foreign and security actor at a steadier path than ever before.

At the same time, it is important to keep in sight that any analysis of EU-China relations is not complete without addressing the historical difficulties that this partnership has had to match discourse with outcomes. The EU-China ‘Strategic Partnership’, and similarly the EU-Japan, has been recurrently characterized by the



presence of gaps between rhetoric, i.e. the objectives defined for cooperation and the official discourse; and action, i.e. the outcomes actually achieved in contrast with the defined objectives, either in terms of joint policy or in any form of actual collaboration.

Hence, this article will first briefly review the history of EU-China relations and, secondly, will analyze the scope and challenges posted by the rhetoric-action gaps, with the objective of drafting some perspectives on the near future of this EU-China ‘Strategic Partnership’.

## **2. China-EU Political and Security Relations**

The EU (then EEC) and China initiated their bilateral relations over three decades ago. At that time, contacts were motivated by a growing interest in enhancing bilateral trade and economic ties, while political and security-related aspects were left out of the incipient bilateral dialogue. In the post-Cold War context, the EU had more interest in deepening its relations with other Western countries or Japan than in forging a true Partnership with China. However, with the progressively increasing global importance and presence of China in international affairs, alongside with a growing interest in multilateralism resulting from the perception of ‘multipolar moment’ that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the optimism that followed, the EU initiated the move towards a more comprehensive, deep and far-reaching collaboration with China that in turn, helped easing out China’s international isolation.

In general terms, the first decade of EU-China relations was dominated by commercial and economic issues under the framework of the 1978 and 1985 trade agreements ([European Commission, 2001](#); [European Union, 1985](#)). In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square events of 1989 the relations cooled considerably, leading to significant political stalemates that would repeat with the Taiwan Strait crisis of the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, in such a crisis context, the EU sought a new opportunity to engage with China, deciding to reinforce and emphasize on the diplomatic dimension of the bilateral relations, outlined in the EC’s Communications “A long-term policy for China-Europe relations” of 1995 and “Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China” in 1998 (ibid.). These steps on the EU side led to a significant development of



the political relations and ultimately meant a functional expansion of the policy-areas and issues covered in EU-China relations, from merely commercial and business issues to political and security areas. It allowed the start of the annual Bilateral Summit, triggered subsequent diplomatic visits, the Ministerial Troika<sup>1</sup> meetings, the Human Rights Dialogue framework as well as the establishment of sectorial working groups and dialogues in over 60 subject areas ([European Union EEAS, 2012b](#)). After this new bilateral engagement, the punitive measures against China initially adopted by the EU in the aftermath of the Tiananmen events were soon deemed temporary and eventually lifted, with the exception of the arms embargo that remains in place to date. Nevertheless, despite the positive impact that this turn has had in the overall course of EU-China relations, the renewed EU diplomatic assertiveness has not been free from disagreements. On the Chinese side, the official line has considered the EU's approach to be, in some occasions, interfering excessively in Chinese internal affairs and, thus, undermining its national sovereignty. From the EU's perspective, on the other hand, issues related with the conceptualization of democracy and respect for human rights, among others, have been interpreted as the major source of disagreements.

Since 2003, after setting up an agenda for pushing forward and deepening their political relations, the EU and China mutually recognized each other as 'comprehensive strategic partners'. From the EU perspective, the envisaged objectives for the Strategic Partnership with China were defined in the following five points:

1. engaging China further in the international community through an upgraded political dialogue;
2. supporting China's transition to an open society based upon the rule of law and respect for human rights and democracy;

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<sup>1</sup> The Troika Meeting is generally attended on the EU side by the President of the EU General Affairs and Foreign Relations Council (Foreign Minister of the Member State holding the rotating Council Presidency), the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy; and by the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs.



3. integrating China further in the world economy by bringing it more fully into the world trading system and by supporting the process of economic and social reform under way in the country;
4. making better use of existing European financial resources;
5. raising the EU's profile in China ([European Commission, 2003](#)).

In its updated Communication of 2003, the European Commission focused its action towards China in developing ‘shared responsibilities in promoting global governance’, since, according to the Commission, China could play a fundamental role in reconciling the interests of developing and developed countries, and in promoting peace and stability in Asia ([ibid.](#)).

At the same time, the so-called strategic dialogues have become a significant part of EU-China relations, through which there has been a substantial amount of consultation, talking and coordination. Recently in 2012, the third round of dialogues was launched. Concerning these dialogues, the EU has designated as well a series of ambitious core areas in which it aims to develop joint action with China. Such issue areas are:

1. human rights concerns;
2. combating illegal immigration and trafficking in human beings;
3. combating organized crime;
4. regional issues (reconciliation between the two Koreas, cooperation with regard to Burma, negotiated solution to the territorial claims in the South China Sea, the Taiwan issue);
5. disarmament and limiting arms proliferation and exports;
6. promoting multilateral dialogue on security (preventing conflicts at regional and international level).

Arguably, while this gives the Strategic Partnership a solid basis to develop, by listing a range of issues in which there are shared interests, some of these issues are far beyond the acting capacity and interest of the EU in Asia (case of the Taiwan Straits and of the Korean Peninsula), and beyond the interest of China in its foreign action,





which is strongly positioned against intervention in what it considers other countries' internal affairs (cases of Burma and Korea).

From the EU perspective, the engagement with China is generally seen with positive eyes. China is not perceived as a threat given that there are no opposed strategic interests between both ([Scott, 2007, p. 18](#)). However, arguably, the relations with China pose for the EU a notable dual challenge. On the one hand, given its geopolitical and economic importance, and as a major global player, particularly taking into account China's Permanent Membership at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), a core institution for the effective multilateralism and rule-based global order that the EU aims at promoting, China is not only another third-country partner for the EU, but one with whom a fully functional 'Strategic Partnership' is a *conditio sine qua non* for consolidating the EU's global actorness and for the achievement of the EU's foreign policy vision of effective multilateralism ([Odgaard & Biscop, 2007, p. 61](#)). On the other hand, among the Strategic Partners, China is the one that most directly challenges the EU's norm-based diplomacy and questions whether the values the EU promotes are essentially European or have universal validity and applicability.

The existing divergences along these points and, to a further extent, the core differences existing in regards to some fundamental values give place to misperceptions, gaps of mutual understanding, and ultimately become obstacles for moving the Strategic Partnership towards more action-oriented collaboration. On the Chinese side, this problem is widely recognized by the country's academic community, which in numerous occasions have determined that the EU should 'give up its ambition to influence Chinese domestic action or behavior'<sup>2</sup>, stop aiming at imposing European political values and system to China, and that the EU must "stop clinging to its Eurocentric concepts on ideological and political issues such as human rights, humanitarianism and 'universal values'" ([Cui, 2010, p. 397](#); [Ding, 2009](#)). On the other hand, the EU's diplomatic mission to China welcomes what it recognizes as Chinese advances in areas such as human rights or environmental protection, but maintaining the

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<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of such sentiments, which are widely gathered in the Chinese literature regarding EU-China relations was commented and acknowledged to the author in an interview at the Department of European Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing in March 2012.



commitment to encourage and pressure the Chinese administration for further advances. In this sense, the EU acknowledges that there are still significant differences in regards to many issue areas, but it welcomes Chinese advances and progress towards its acceptance of the values that the EU aims at spreading<sup>3</sup>.

Also from the Chinese perspective, the Strategic Partnership with the EU is an important element to implement the Chinese vision of effective multilateralism, aimed at creating a peaceful, stable and prosperous environment for China to develop, update its capabilities, reap the benefits of globalization and ultimately realize its potential as global power ([Odgaard & Biscop, 2007, p. 68](#); [Zhang, 2009](#)). For China, the EU is seen as an attractive alternative to the US, and a valuable partner with whom to counterbalance American hegemony in East-Asoa ([Reinoso, 2012](#); [Zhou, 2009](#)). Moreover, as China remains a developing country, the Strategic Partnership with the EU is seen as a beneficial partner in the fields of scientific and technological collaboration, as well as a model of regional development and convergence.

In terms of security and political relations, the 2003 ‘EU Policy Paper’ of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs states China’s high regard of the collaboration with the EU and its future potential:

*“The common ground between China and the EU far outweighs their disagreements. Both China and the EU stand for democracy in international relations and an enhanced role of the UN. Both are committed to combating international terrorism and promoting sustainable development through poverty elimination and environmental protection endeavors”* ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2003](#)).

At the same time, developing the Strategic Partnership with the EU, is seen by China as an opportunity to project the image of a peaceful ‘civilian power’ that advocates for dialogue, consultation and rule-based mechanisms for conflict resolution rather than making use of power politics. However, the meaning attached to the concept of multilateralism in Europe and in China is substantially different. While from a

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<sup>3</sup> As recognized by a High-Level EU official at the European Commission’s Delegation to China, in an interview in March 2012.



European perspective, ‘multilateralism’ emphasizes the role of intuitions, laws and norms to govern the international system, the Chinese concept is based upon a fervid and absolute defense of the sovereignty of the State and of non-intervention in third countries’ internal affairs. This Chinese understanding of multilateralism, preeminent role of the UN and non-intervention is still strongly determined by its historical and current context as an international actor, to a greater extent than its official rhetoric tends to convey (Li, 2007, pp. 48-52). This fact reveals itself very clearly in the Chinese disregard of conditionality policies towards authoritarian regimes in Africa and Asia in the name of non-intervention and absolute respect for sovereignty. China has come a long way in order to be gradually accepted as a responsible global player, and this is an image it aims at maintaining and improving. At the same time, China does not yet possess today the necessary technology and military capabilities to present effective opposition to the US preeminent position in Asia, which justifies its firm opposition to hegemonic stands. Moreover, the historical memories of humiliation dating back to the Unequal Treaties with Western powers and the wars with Japan still play an important role in Chinese domestic discourse, nationalism and foreign policy.

In any case, according to this vision as a valuable partner in multilateralism, China has long supported the process of European integration and development of the EU’s personality as a global actor (Zhang, 2009). China aims at the EU to develop a genuinely European foreign and common security policy that is essentially independent from the transatlantic relations and from the US (Reinoso, 2012). This fact has revealed itself most clearly during the proposal in 2004-05 to lift the EU arms embargo imposed on China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square events of 1989 in exchange for recognized advancements by China in matter of human rights<sup>4</sup>. Despite that no internal EU consensus was reached at that time, with the UK and France as major Member States in favor of lifting the ban and Germany among others, opposing it; the concerns arisen in Washington and Tokyo ultimately played a significant role in motivating the continuation of the ban. This gave place to a certain Chinese disenchantment with the EU, which was perceived as unable to maintain an independent stand from the US interests, or to effectively reach a consensus among its Member States within the

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<sup>4</sup> Including the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1976.



complex intergovernmental system of decision-making in the EU's CFSP ([Liu, 2007, p. 121](#)), what China has categorized as 'the flaws' of the EU as a foreign policy actor ([Ding, 2009](#)).

Since the establishment of the EU-China Strategic Partnership in 2003, however, progress has certainly been made. The Strategic Dialogue framework has given place to some concrete results, such as the 2004 Joint Declaration on Non-Proliferation and Arms Control, and also upon the basis of the existing dialogue, joint anti-piracy actions in Somali waters are being carried out successfully under the framework laid by the growing common interest in enhancing cooperation in maritime security issues ([Larik & Weiler, 2011](#)). Nevertheless, evidence supports that, besides the healthy trade and economic relations, the most significant outcomes of this Strategic Partnership continue to be mainly manifested in paper rather than in concrete action ([Berkofsky, 2005](#)). A turn towards pragmatism based on the dialogues and policy adjustments must be undertaken in order to be able to call this bilateral relation a true Strategic Partnership. At the same time, fundamental differences between China and the EU remain in place. Besides the most problematic and obvious differences of understanding regarding human rights and democracy, not only in the international arena but also in their application to China properly, fundamental differences still exist in the way that both the EU and China conceive multilateralism, the preeminence of the UN System, and the rule of law. In other words, the Chinese conceptualization does not necessarily concur with the Western or European one, in which Western values are interpreted as having universal validity as the moral core of the UN System to rule the conduct of States<sup>5</sup> ([Li, 2007](#)).

In any case, the EU and China have taken steps towards the consolidation of their Strategic Partnership, which is manifested primarily in a well-developed and extensive framework of political dialogues in over 50 issue areas ([European Union EEAS, 2012b](#)). Some more discreet advances have been made in terms of policy materialization or joint action, although the need for a pragmatic turn is recognized in

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<sup>5</sup> This fact reveals its evidence in the certain competition that has emerged in the African continent between EU and Chinese aid. Although Chinese aid has a recognized high degree of efficiency in delivering tangible results, it raises certain criticisms among Western powers due to its non-conditionality under the umbrella of respect for national sovereignty.



both sides ([Berkofsky, 2005](#); [Chen, 2010](#); [Zhang, 2009](#)). Nevertheless, considering that China and the EU do not have any directly opposed strategic interest, and that both have mutually recognized the other as a key partner for the consolidation of their role as global players, further advancements in EU-China bilateral relations should be expected to come.

### **3. Challenges, the Rhetoric-Action Gap and Future Perspectives:**

The EU's involvement in East-Asian political and security issues has remained low profile since its formalization about two decades ago. In this case, the Strategic Partnership between China and the EU has been characterized by a recurrent gap between rhetoric and policy materialization, the causes of which are complex and mutually interdependent. Such gaps are often related to the EU's limited capacity as a foreign and security policy actor as a result of its intergovernmental decision-making mechanisms and *sui generis* structure, although the disparity of values and expectations between China and the EU is a core element for understanding how such gaps come into existence and the necessary steps that have to be accomplished in order to close the gap ([Berkofsky, 2005](#); [El-Agraa, 2007](#)).

Arguably, it is on the perceptions or conceptual levels (see table 1) where the most significant differences exist between the EU and China. On one hand side, the EU's official rhetoric identifies China as an influential and non-threatening global power, with whom cooperation is desirable and actively sought. This obeys to the fact that the EU perceives the potential of China as a key partner to support European aims of effective multilateralism, something that acquires a special relevance when considering China's condition as a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council. On the other hand, European perceptions of China's democratic deficits and the need for improvement in Human Rights issues motivate the prevalence of a value-based approach on the EU side. Nevertheless, and despite there might be different understandings in their respective worldviews or in the meaning attached to the concept of effective multilateralism, the EU identifies myriad shared interests with China, especially when it comes to terms of global stability and shared responsibility. EU



officials recognize today that important steps have been achieved for the consolidation of this partnership, and express the hope that with time, existing differences will minimize<sup>6</sup>.

**Table 1: Causes of gaps in EU-China relations (self-elaboration).**

	EU-CHINA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP
Perception (from EU side)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• China is seen as a major power / very influential partner</li><li>• China a peaceful and non-threatening partner</li><li>• China as a key partner to fulfill the EU's multilateralism aspirations (e.g. the PRC is a Permanent Member at the UNSC)</li><li>• Acknowledgement of many shared interests</li><li>• China has deficits in democracy/human rights: should converge towards European values</li><li>• EU aims at further integrate China as a responsible partner globally</li><li>• Often emphasis is put on different values</li><li>• Growing importance of China for Europe (e.g. EU/Eurozone crisis)</li></ul>
Perception (from Chinese side)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The EU is a valuable partner for China's ambitions of effective multilateralism, and to a certain extent for counterbalancing the US position in Asia and globally</li><li>• Myriad common objectives identified</li><li>• China has supported strongly the European integration process (interest in EU becoming a balancing independent player)</li><li>• EU as a complex entity / many issues preferred to be addressed bilaterally with Member States</li><li>• Perception that the EU's policy of value-diplomacy is counterproductive. EU postulates itself as a high-moral bearer.</li></ul>
Cooperation outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A comprehensive network of bilateral dialogue on myriad issues: including Human Rights and climate</li><li>• Problems have also occurs within multilateral fora</li><li>• Relatively limited joint policy (notable exception Joint Anti-Piracy operations in Somali waters)</li></ul>

<sup>6</sup> As recognized by a High-Level EU official at the European Commission's Delegation to China, in an interview in March 2012, "China is progressively moving towards the acceptance of what we consider universal values, despite a long road is still ahead".



Interestingly, Chinese official rhetoric towards the EU often grants the Union the status of a ‘Superpower’. While perhaps this is an overstatement, it reveals that China regards the EU as an influential global power and as a potential key partner. In this sense, it can be argued that China would expect the EU to consolidate further its Foreign and Security actorness and capabilities, and adopt a truly independent stand from the Transatlantic Alliance, thereby the EU becoming another counterbalancing actor in the international system, and specially towards the US preeminent position in East-Asia. At the same time, Chinese official speech identifies that myriad common objectives are shared with the EU and manifests its will to continue strengthening bonds, as the EU discourse does, although a common understanding in sensitive issues such as Human Rights, Democracy and the universal validity of Western values is far less clear ([Petchsiri, 2004](#); [Tian, 2009](#)).

Chinese academic writings as well as official rhetoric often regard the EU’s value diplomacy as an interference with Chinese domestic affairs and calls upon the EU ‘not to lecture China how to behave’ or ‘stop imposing European political values and system into China’; arguing that if the EU considers the Strategic Partnership with China a framework for collaboration among equals, the EU should avoid identifying itself as a bearer of higher moral values. Besides that, the EU is perceived on the Chinese side as a complex and bureaucratized actor, with whom cooperation requires a process of learning and socialization<sup>7</sup>. Despite this complexity, the EU is perceived by the Chinese as having an added-value parallel to the relations with the Member States although the bilateral relations between these and China continue to be considered of great importance.

Despite these differences in worldviews and at the perceptions level, it is important to notice the relevance of the structural environment and external events that have shaped the course of EU-China relations, in order to understand better the perpetuation of the rhetoric-action gaps ([Pan, 2010](#)). Alongside with the mentioned limited actorness of the EU as a foreign and security policy actor, those cooperation objectives that have

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<sup>7</sup> As recognized by Chinese scholars at the Department of European Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing in a series of interviews with the author in March 2012.



effectively been transformed into joint action or joint policy are, generally speaking, those in which a direct common interest for all the involved parties is identified and where consensuses on the EU side are easier to reach. This is, issues where there is a common direct interest for China, the EU as well as for the most influential EU Member States. An illustrative example of this is the ongoing negotiations for mutual support in environmental issues within multilateral fora, the joint anti-piracy actions conducted in Somali waters or the incipient cooperation on new security threats such as human trafficking or cyber-security. However, when it comes to more complex issues, such as the recurring proposals for lifting the EU-imposed arms embargo on China, the European side fails to reach a common position through the intergovernmental decision-making system, given the disparity of opinions of the most influential Member States. In such case, the UK, France, Italy among other countries with relevant military industry, argue in favor of lifting the ban and thus, of regarding China as a mature responsible international actor. On the other hand, Germany and the Nordic states, among others, generally adopt a position favoring the imposition of conditionality, and thus oppose the lifting of the ban without ensuring that certain conditions will be guaranteed ([Fox & Godement, 2009, pp. 3-5](#)). Self-evidently, in a complex case such as the lifting of the arms embargo, external pressures also play a significant role, as it is in this case the concerns expressed by the US and Japan. This example can also be extended to former projects, such as the Euro-Chinese cooperation on the Galileo Satellite Navigation System, which raised some American concerns about a possible technology transfer to China that could be applicable to the development of military technology.

Nevertheless, and without denying the complexities involved in finding a mutual understanding and a solution to these points, EU-China relations have been maturing and forging a better mutual understanding. Proof of that is that political stalemates of the scale of the aftermath of the Tiananmen events of 1989 have not occurred again, despite some minor ups and downs in the bilateral relations.

On the other hand, and somehow paradoxically, the challenges that are posted to the EU by the growing relevance of China in both economic, political and security aspects and as an international actor, may be progressively becoming a catalyzer and a driving





force for a faster European integration on the fields of Common Foreign and Security Policy. I.e. the challenges posed by China, in terms of revealing the EU's weaknesses and the need for a more coherent policy formation mechanisms that can bridge the inefficiencies of the current intergovernmental system, may increase the sense of urgency in European governments to grant the Union a stronger personality and capacities as a global player in order to be an effective player in today's world. As an example of this, in the last decade, with the consolidation of the post-Cold War international system and the emergence of new international threats that operate transnationally and are of global concern, the range of issues urging for international shared responsibility such as climate change, terrorism, international crime or cyber-terrorism, has grown. Thus, developing joint action and effective cooperation from the already existing extensive framework of bilateral dialogues is a possible and necessary step. Moreover, the increased trade ties between Europe and China, and the relevance of China as a partner in the context of the current Eurozone crisis make only more evident the necessity for the EU to gain further capacity to act in a coordinated and capable manner in the relations with third countries.

To a certain extent, it can be argued that EU-China relations remain stuck in the past ([Fox & Godement, 2009, pp. 1-3](#)). The EU's value-based diplomacy towards China remains largely driven by the perhaps naïve idea that effective engagement with China will eventually bring this country towards the acceptance and assimilation of Western or European values that the EU regards as universal. However, further debates about such issues are arguably infertile when it comes to fostering and deepening cooperation and mutual understanding. Given the myriad existing common challenges and tangible objectives for cooperation, which have already been recognized on both parties, political commitment will have to concentrate from now on finding the common grounds and on establishing effective cooperation in those regimes where benefits are most directly beneficial and where there is a lower potential for disagreements. The acceptance of common values as well as the respect for those that differ will only come with time, better mutual understanding and strong political will.



#### **4. Concluding remarks**

This article has reviewed the development of EU-China relations since its formalization over two decades ago. The EU's low-profile engagement in East-Asia in terms of political and security issues is explained by a series of existing gaps between the objectives set for cooperation and its actual materialization in joint action or policy. Such gaps have its origins both in the EU's complex and often limited capacity as a foreign and security policy actor, as well as in difference in values, perceptions and worldviews. Nevertheless, through the recognition of the existence of such gaps, the need for a pragmatic turn and a more positive engagement is recognized. Although the acceptance of different viewpoints and values will be necessary, the common interests and challenges are myriad, and thus, there is place for a successful deepening and widening of cooperation, given that there is enough political will. At the same time, effectively engaging in cooperation in those regimes where mutual gains are easily recognized may trigger a spillover effect and help palliating the negative effects of the differing perceptions and values. Conclusively, gaining better mutual understanding and political commitment will be necessary to make the EU-China Strategic Partnership more fruitful. Nevertheless, both the EU and China are to gain from further cooperation: the EU has a unique chance to boost its political integration process in terms of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, while for China, a more coherent and strong EU is to become a more valuable partner in pursuing effective multilateralism and addressing global challenges.



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