

The Emerging EU-China Defence and Security Relationship

David Fouquet
Senior Associate

The European Institute for Asian Studies, Brussels, Luxembourg

The European Union and China in summits and other high-level meetings during 2012 committed themselves to transforming their largely economically-driven relations into one with substantial strategic and security interaction and dialogue.

These plans by the Chinese leadership under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao to deal with the EU cross a broad range of new strategic and security issues, and could represent a significant enlargement in relations and an important test for the EU and the incoming team in Beijing to carry out these bold promises.

EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and State Councillor Dai Binguo in July 2012 agreed to a regular dialogue on defence and security policy, a High Level Seminar on the subject in 2013, as well as regular contacts between special representatives and special envoys¹. In addition, regular consultations at expert level on non-proliferation and conventional arms exports, small arms and light weapons have been established. They have also new joint efforts in fighting piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Both sides committed to increasing training exchanges, continuing good cooperation in crisis management, counter-piracy and maritime security. The first meeting of the EU-China Cyber Task-Force was held, and more exchanges on cyber issues to increase mutual trust and understanding have been planned.²

Coming at an emotional period of tension in Asia over historic maritime sovereignty disputes involving other EU strategic partners, including the United States, and major Asian military modernisation programs, the evolution of this EU-China relationship will be watched by others in the international community for its wider potential impact on the EU arms embargo and other issues.

Another major factor in 2012, a joint commitment by the EU and the United States to consult and coordinate their positions and strategies in the Asia-Pacific³, could also raise questions of balancing these with the EU-China contacts.

After years during which the EU was dismissed as having no role as a security actor in the Asia-Pacific, is it being lured unprepared into a distant security power dilemma? Are China, the US, Japan and others also seeking EU support in their rivalries and confrontations? Or can the EU use its experience at peace-building for which it received the Nobel Peace Prize to assist in creating an operational Asian security architecture instead of the current bipolar rivalry? It has often seemed in the past as if the major Asia-Pacific security debates and development passed by the consciousness of Europe. The dialogue with China could at least partly restore Europe in the midst, if not at the centre of such situations.

¹ Joint Press Communiqué, 15th EU-China Summit: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-693_en.htm#PR_metaPressRelease_bottom

² EU-China current dialogues: http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/eu_china_dialogues_en.pdf

³ Joint EU-US statement on the Asia-Pacific region http://www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_12417_en.htm

At a time when China and many of the states in the region and elsewhere are in the grips of a major controversy, the management of these international relationships will prove to be a major challenge. The EU will be challenged to avoid becoming too closely identified with one or other parties to international disputes and tensions in the Asian regions but to seek a singular role as a positive intermediary in such situations to the extent possible within its mandate. For China, it is an opportunity to similarly obtain major benefit and exposure with a significant second-tier power of different political and strategic culture and establish that it is capable of doing so despite obvious impediments and limitations. States in the region, whether implicated directly in the disputes or not, may also harbour conflicted or even ambiguous attitudes regarding their relationships, seeking also simultaneously to maintain ties to both major powers, while maintaining some margin of manoeuvre to reconcile themselves to accept a balance of power rivalry between these two powers. The failure to maintain such balance could mean the region could fall into one dominated by one power or into conflict.

This emerging aspect of the EU-China relationship will be a potentially historic challenge and test for the new Chinese leadership and Europe at both the central EU level and in the EU Member States.

Giving substance to Strategic Partnership

The official EU-China relationship that began following the initial visit of Commissioner Sir Christopher Soames in 1973 has expanded significantly⁴, especially since the entry of China into the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and its subsequent emergence as a global economic force.

Following an early period of development largely along economic and trade issues, the two sides enlarged their contacts to a strategic partnership in 2003. But as Giovanni Grevi noted in 2012 these “remain legally anchored to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement concluded in 1985.”⁵

In fact, the existence of a major economic and trade relationship and interdependence may also lead to converging interests in securing and defending such relations, as was illustrated in the cooperation between China, the EU, NATO and others in the international community in recent years in the anti-piracy missions deployed by several countries and organisations in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia.

Similarly, mutual concerns regarding the impact that international criminality, trafficking, narcotics, corruption, arms smuggling and other disruptive and unlawful behaviour that can adversely affect normal trade activity, may also spawn bilateral or multilateral security planning and cooperation.

Although only declaratory and still awaiting the possible incorporation into a more formal Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) still under negotiation, the 2012 joint EU-China declarations appear to anticipate the substance of this strategic relationship into the new domain of defence and security relations.

⁴ Chronology of EU-China relations: http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/chronology_2012_en.pdf

⁵ GREVI, G. (2012, June) ‘Why EU strategic partnerships matter’ ESP working paper No 1, p.8. Available from: <http://www.frider.org/publication/1031/why-eu-strategic-partnerships-matter>

Benign Threat Perceptions

Basic assumptions on both the European and Chinese sides that influence their mutual perceptions and their prospect for development of such a more profound relationship include their conclusion that neither is a direct military or even strategic threat to the other and that despite some misgiving about the independence of Europe, it is nevertheless regarded by China as having a different strategic culture and even a different geopolitical agenda than the United States.

A legacy of the post-colonial era from the end of World War II to the retrocession of both Hong Kong and Macau has been the steady military and strategic disengagement of European states from Asia from India and Indochina to Indonesia and other historic far-flung vestiges of past centuries.

Despite occasional involvements in Asian security issues, from Korea to Afghanistan, the European presence has for all intense and purposes been replaced by the United States. From Japan to Korea and Vietnam, the post-war and post-colonial security dominance has been exercised by the US as a great power through its extended nuclear deterrence, sixth Fleet and system of military alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. This contrasts to the presence and vision of Europe as a “middle power” only capable of projecting an influence in trade, economic and financial power rather a military capability.

François Godement, in May 2008 in a Chailiot Paper by the European Institute, notes "Europe is not a major strategic actor in East Asia because it does not share military responsibilities in the region's hot spots. This sometimes leads to the notion of a European policy that would be complementary to US policy, focused on 'soft power' and multilateral action."⁶

In more recent years, in reaction to the perceived rise of China and the widespread belief that the US had reduced its strategic interest and involvement in the region because of its preoccupation with the Middle East and Central Asia, the US has dramatically refocused some of its strategic attention toward China and the entire region by revitalising its alliances relationships in the Asia-Pacific region.

This differing perception of the strategic roles of the US and Europe was perhaps most notably caricaturised by US analyst and strategist Robert Kagan as the “Mars-Venus” dichotomy in 2002-03.⁷

This was even given more practical and political substance during the 2007-08 US Presidential campaign when Kagan and Republican Presidential candidate John McCain championed the concept of a “league of democracies” in the Asia-Pacific as a response to the increased presence of China. Despite the defeat of Senator McCain by Barack Obama and an early effort by the new US Administration in 2009 at engaging with the Chinese leadership, the subsequent US ‘pivot’ to the region has in effect rejuvenated the US system of military and strategic alliances in the region, largely focalised on the regional maritime sovereignty rivalries between China and numerous other states in the region.⁸

⁶ European Union Institute for Strategic Studies, Paris, Chailiot Paper No 109, "Partnerships for Effective Multilateralism: EU Relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia," p. 61-78. May 2008. Available from: http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/cp109_01.pdf

⁷ KAGAN, R. (June and July 2002) 'Power and Weakness'. Policy Review, No. 113. Available from: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/kagan.htm> ; KAGAN, R. (2003) OF PARADISE AND POWER. America and Europe in the New World Order, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

⁸ CLINTON-RODHAM, H. (2011) <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/10/175215.htm>

Another major stimulus for the renewed American emphasis on reaffirming its system of post-war security alliances in the region, was its concern in 2008-09 that a dramatic political shift might be underway in Japan and perhaps elsewhere with the election of the Democratic Party of Japan, its Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama and their announced intention of developing Asian solidarity and more 'balanced' international relationships that included a commitment to renegotiating the American military presence on Okinawa.

A consequence was a perpetuation of the conventional wisdom that while Europe was not a major security presence in the region and could at most only be counted on as a 'soft' security actor, such in low-intensity tensions as Aceh, Mindanao or other civil-political missions, and that only the US could respond with 'boots on the ground', aircraft carriers, military assistance and other symbolic or concrete manifestations of military power.

EU-China Security Dialogues-Phase I

Proliferation issues, both global strategic concerns and bilateral conventional ones, had already become an important element in the expanding strategic dialogue between the European Union and China.

The EU-China dialogue on nuclear and missile arms control emerged as part of the agenda at the bilateral summit in Brussels in September 2001⁹ and has been said to have been conducted on a quiet but regular basis since. While details have been sketchy, they appear to have revolved around global concerns and constraints in the realm of weapons of mass destruction, including possibly the difficult issue of missile defence systems.

Discussions regarding conventional weapons and technology are the more recent manifestation of an issue which emerged in 1989 when the European Union imposed an embargo on shipments of such military equipment to China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square liberalisation demonstration and the turmoil that rocked China that year.

Both point to the increased complexity and range of the agenda items between Europe and China. They also underline their discreet search for similarities or compromise on these significant global concerns. And these issues illustrate some of the growth of the EU common foreign and security policy in recent years, as well as its relations with China. While the EU as such is not directly involved or a party to arms control treaties, it has active programmes on the control of small arms and has been actively and financially engaged in programmes of destruction of strategic and other weapons in Russia.

At other levels, EU and Chinese experts have been regularly for the past several years discussing proliferation, arms control and disarmament issues each semester either in Beijing, Brussels or Geneva.¹⁰

In addition, another area where progress and real "enhancement" may be said to have developed over proposals to have a dialogue over such issues as conflict prevention in other regional zones of tension,

⁹ FOUQUET, D. (2001) 'China PLA delegation in European study tour'. Available from: <http://www.eias.org/conferences/plasecurity/plasecurityfouquet.pdf>

¹⁰ Joint declaration of the People's Republic of China and the European Union on Non-proliferation and Arms Control. http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/83002.pdf

including security sector reform, demobilisation, disarmament and retraining. An initial meeting was said to have taken place in early in 2009. This dialogue was said by European officials to be in part a recognition of the growing role of China in peacekeeping and other preventive diplomacy missions. In the latter category were mentioned the Chinese diplomatic efforts in Iran and the Middle East, as recently as in January 2009 during the hostilities in the Gaza Strip, when a Chinese envoy to Egypt and other states presented a five-point plan.¹¹

But regional issues are often and regularly discussed including at the so-called Troika level, in New York, or in the margins of the ASEM Foreign Ministers' meetings. Such meetings have and will continue to discuss issues as the possible Chinese interests and role in Afghanistan, where the country has become a major investor in copper extraction.

Burma-Myanmar was another country often raised in such dialogues because of the special relationship said to exist between the two neighbours. On occasion, however, these discussions apparently enter into delicate and controversial territory, as illustrated by the reports that Foreign Minister Yang was angered and reacted vocally during one such session in 2008 when a European participant suggested China was not using all the influence it had on the Burmese government.

Special EU Role in the Current Security Environment

The EU presence and role in Asian security has been quietly and prudently shaped by internal negotiations and policy-making in recent years, that include the 2008 Strategic Policy Guidelines on East Asia, and their updating in 2012¹², both events by the EU Council of Ministers that obtained little attention and analysis either from the public, media or international relations community.

Somewhat general and obscure in language and intent, the texts appear as broad repetition of EU foreign policy values and objectives, and created some surprise surrounding the selection of the distant region as a priority objective rather more immediate strategic and security regions such as the Balkans, Middle East or Africa.

Yet privately, some former EU officials have suggested that the intent and motivation was less a broad formulation of EU strategy than to assure that individual EU member states were not enticed to break European solidarity and join support for one side or another in Asian rivalries and disputes, such as the arms embargo issue, Taiwan independence or maritime sovereignty issues.

Overcoming its generally passive inclination, the EU has recently issued a number of cautious declarations on the subject and has to an undefined degree aligned with the US on the issue.

¹¹ <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/131059#.UR0ItvIhTIU>

¹² http://eeas.europa.eu/asia/docs/guidelines_eu_foreign_sec_pol_east_asia_en.pdf

When the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, issued a terse, prudent policy statement on the mounting tensions in Asia over maritime sovereignty disputes in September 25, 2012, it marked the first direct hesitant such European entry into the controversies which have raged for months.

The EU Council of Ministers' declaration stated that "with its significant interests in the region," the EU was "following with concern developments in East Asia's maritime regions," and carefully called on the parties "to seek peaceful and cooperative solutions in accordance with international law" underlining the UN Law of Sea convention. Finally, the last sentence in the short declaration called on all parties to "clarify the basis of their claims" to the various islands, rocks and seas subject to endless disputes between several Asian partners, and further asked them to "take steps to calm the situation."¹³

The statements were largely unnoticed in public, media and academic discussions but could be generally regarded as addressing the more immediate and specific tensions between China, the Philippines and Vietnam over their rival claims of sovereignty in parts of the South China Sea. The pronouncement in September was issued at a time of intense tension between Japan and China over their own bilateral sovereignty dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands between Okinawa and Taiwan, in which Taiwan has also become embroiled.

Negotiate with all Strategic Partners

Modern international relations and strategies, whether formulated by the US or Europe, are complex multi-level architectures in which economic and political interests are intertwined. Even as the US pursues its pivot to Asia launched in recent years, it must balance this policy with continuing realities in the Middle East or Central Asia, and its significant economic interdependent relationship with China.

The EU for its part has also structured a series of 'Strategic Partnerships' with a number of states in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁴ While China has galvanised considerable EU priority and engagement in recent years, building up to the pronouncement of the Strategic Partnership in 2003 and its concretisation in 2012, it must also prudently and adroitly calibrate this effort with comparable Strategic Partnerships with the United States, Japan, India, Russia, South Korea or ASEAN states, some of whom have aligned closer to the US orbit and into limited rivalry against China.

In 2012, it also became apparent that the US, Japan and other regional players were deploying considerable diplomatic and political effort to obtain European support for their positions in the maritime sovereignty disputes with China.

US Partnership

Economically and politically, the EU-US strategic partnership, more than 50 years after the end of World War II and the Marshall Plan, remains the dominant international relationship for Europe.

¹³ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/132566.pdf

¹⁴ On the EU's strategic partnerships see: GREVI, G., Khandekar, G. (2011) 'Mapping EU Strategic Partnerships' FRIDE.

As such, the transatlantic relationship has sometimes weighed heavily to influence the course of EU relations with China, as so dramatically displayed in the 2003-04 European consideration to suspend the arms embargo, which it had imposed against China in 1989 in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square uprising and repression. At that time, heavy US pressure, along with that of Taiwan, Japan, Australia and others, brought to an abrupt halt the European discussions on lifting the embargo on China.¹⁵

But there has also been over that period and since, as David Shambaugh¹⁶ and many others¹⁷ have illustrated, a new international 'Power Shift' that has had a bearing, influence, if not a threat to that relationship. The rising economic presence of China as an economic and trade partner for the EU in the past decade has led to both a strong bilateral relationship and a greater degree of interdependence between the EU and China.

The EU-US relationship in Asia-Pacific security affairs has also been a sputtering, intermittent one since 2004-2005 which appears to have become more systematic in more recent years and has been codified with the Ashton-Clinton Phnom Penh declaration in July 2012.¹⁸

The joint message by the EU's Catherine Ashton and America's Hillary Clinton on the margins of the ASEAN meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012 was a broad declaration of bilateral cooperation on a number of broad global and regional issues, and its content devoted to strategic and security issues and the geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific region were relatively prudent and limited.

The joint July EU-US declaration could also be seen as presenting another complex dimension to the already complex Asian maritime issue. It might be seen as a joint Western position of some solidarity or coordination without the engaging too visibly and directly. It was overtly conciliatory and in keeping with the more traditional softer EU diplomacy, but for the EU to join with the US could also be regarded as a linkage with a more strident American role. It might represent an American outreach for the more detached European role as mediator in difficult international challenges and negotiations, such as with the lengthy Iranian nuclear negotiations which have been chaired by the EU foreign and security representative.

While European officials have cast the Joint Declaration as an open invitation to others in the Asia-Pacific region to collaborate on a trilateral basis and not to be regarded as the Western powers 'ganging up' in the

¹⁵ For more information see: DAI, X. (2006) Understanding EU-China Relations: An Uncertain Partnership in the Making'. Centre for European Union Studies, The University of Hull, UK. Available from: <<http://www2.hull.ac.uk/FASS/PDF/Politics-Daipaper.pdf>

¹⁶ SHAMBAUGH, D. (2004) 'China and Europe: The Emerging Axis', *Current History*, September, pp. 243-50; SHAMBAUGH, D. (2005) 'The New Strategic Triangle: U.S. and European Reactions to China's Rise' *The Washington Quarterly*, No 28, Vol. 3 pp. 7-25; SHAMBAUGH, D. (2005) *Power Shift*, London: university of California Press.

¹⁷ For example: CALLAHAN, W.A. (2007) 'Future imperfect: The European Union's encounter with China (and the United States)'. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4-5, pp.777-807.

DAVID, S. (2007) 'China and the EU: A Strategic Axis for the Twenty-First Century?' *International Relations*, No.21, Vol. 1, pp. 23-45.

¹⁸ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131709.pdf

region, other analysts and academics have perceived an alignment with the US that the EU should strive to 'rebalance' or risk being identified as the 'deputy sheriff'.¹⁹

On the other hand, the EU's soft power can be seen as a 'complement' to the US hard power but still others saw the EU's most important contribution to Asia-Pacific security dilemmas and challenges as being its post-war example of peaceful reconciliation and collaboration.

The EU positions were taking place during the same time frame as the US policy pronouncements variously described as a 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' of Washington's relations with the Asia-Pacific region from the previous decade of intense concentration on the Middle East and Afghanistan.

The EU bilateral engagement with China and its intensification, as well as other activities involving other Asian partners was occasionally regarded by analysts as demonstrating Europe's counterpart of the US 'pivot' toward Asia by strengthening its relations with major Asian partners, including China, Japan, India and others, and in a civilian variant. Commenting largely on transatlantic relations, Philip Stephens remarked in the Financial Times, that it was about time for Europe to break out of its "suffocating introversion," adding "Why cannot Europe pivot to Asia alongside the US?"²⁰

If, as some analysts believe, there is an inevitable clash between Beijing's revisionist nationalism with America's allied containment of China, the EU relationship with both protagonists could provide a useful conduit or safety valve to mitigate some, if not all, tensions.

Other EU Partnerships and Pressures

More recently in 2012, several Asian powers, as well as the US, sought to persuade the EU to involve itself more resolutely in the divisive disputes over competing maritime sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas. Beijing's rivals have sought to internationalise the issue by appealing for US support, and later European involvement. China, on the other hand, sought to convince Europe to pledge itself to a path of 'non-interference'.²¹

The numerous disputes have been punctuated by dramatic demonstrations by ship borne activists, fishing, and patrol boats, heated exchange of diplomatic protests and media invective, mass public violence and economic and industrial disruption.

The debate and engagement has also spread to other states and regions, with the Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) member states and most prominently United States urging caution and also participating in high-profile military exercises in the region.

During that period, the EU has become the subject of considerable attention on the part of Japan and others in the region to either play an increased role in the security affairs of the region or in a general to develop a closer, more intense and interdependent relations.

¹⁹ CASARINI, N. (2012) EU foreign policy in the Asia Pacific: striking the right balance between the US, China and ASEAN <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/eu-foreign-policy-in-the-asia-pacific-striking-the-right-balance-between-the-us-china-and-asean/>

²⁰ PAWLAK, P. EKMEKTSIGLOU, E. (2012) America's and Europe's Pacific Partnership <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4d6b5e00-5b18-11e2-8d06-00144feab49a.html#axzz2KtQGbjxH>

²¹ http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/news_details.php?news_id=41

This has especially been the case with Japan, another strategic partner of the EU, which in the past nevertheless displayed little interest in a European security interest in the region in view of Tokyo complete reliance on the relationship with the United States. Despite the existence of a strategic partnership adopted by Brussels and Tokyo in 2003, their bilateral engagement in security issues has been limited and largely constrained by the Japanese reliance on the US and the EU's general lack of competence and experience in this sector until more recent years. This has been the case despite many shared approaches and assumptions on such issues, especially their mutual emphasis on a comprehensive approach on security that also includes the root causes of insecurity and their general adoption of a broader notion of 'human security' and non-traditional security.

Yet in 2012, Japanese leaders, officials and diplomats increasingly also appealed on the EU to take a more active interest and role in security issues and developments in the Asia-Pacific region. This accompanied a major diplomatic effort by Japan to elevate the bilateral trade and economic relationship into a more formal free trade agreement on economic partnership.

To emphasise the security dimension of such a closer relationship, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in January called specifically on two EU member states, France and the UK, along with NATO, to assist in countering the rise of China.²² NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen initially reacted by stressing the unlikelihood of NATO engaging directly in Asia.

Two of the claimants in the South China Sea disputes with China, the Philippines and Vietnam, were also said privately by European member state diplomats to have also sought European interest in the regional debates.

The New Phase in EU-China Security Relations

While most of the Asian requests would seem unlikely in view of the EU's general hesitation and lack of experience in the region, as well as the apparent discipline in adhering to the Asia strategic policy guidelines adopted previously, there may be steps that the EU could undertake in both bilateral and more open dialogues to seek to influence or mitigate the tensions in the region.

Even within the confines of the Lisbon Treaty limitations and perhaps because of the still vague EU identity in Defence and Security Policy, the EU might in fact be regarded as a more benign intermediary in such disputes and rivalries, rather than have no role to play.

The past and existing security dialogue between the EU and China has already opened numerous doors to potential useful and productive discussions and cooperation. And beyond such bilateral action, the EU also has the lengthy experience of leading the major negotiations between the five UN Security Council members, plus Germany, in their difficult efforts to control the Iranian nuclear program.

More determined and effective political will not only accelerate the on-going contacts but, as visualised in the 2012 declarations, open up new paths.

²² <http://euroasiasecurityforum.com/2013/01/09/japan-invites-european-comeback-to-asian-security-role-and-seeks-to-join-fpda/>
<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>

In addition to traditional non-proliferation, anti-terrorism, anti-piracy, or peace-keeping or conflict prevention missions and techniques, there exist some obvious and some innovative areas of contact between the EU and China.

Among the more obvious could be the future of security in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, where both the EU and China are heavily engaged, possible initiatives in the Southeast Asian or Central Asia, again region where both have interests, or in more global challenges ranging from the Middle East to the newly-opened Arctic.

But there also exist a new agenda of arms control and disarmament issues, which are or should be of mutual interest. These include the already-mentioned cyber security issue, international accords on arms control and peaceful uses of outer space where both have contrasting proposals, the impact of ballistic missile defences in both regions, and the growing used of drone unmanned aerial or underwater vehicles.

EU-China Perceptions

Such progress or breakthroughs on both limited security areas or major global challenges because of a unique relationship that either already exists or which could be developed in a realistic time frame.

An important factor in such development could be the historical background and perceptions on both sides that the other is no an existential threat. Despite important and obvious differences in governance and institutional models and traditions, and disappointment regarding the behavioural results of such difference, a broad base for cooperation may also exist.

Because the EU does not have the capacity to directly challenge or threaten China's core interests in the Asia-Pacific, the EU is not regarded as a 'peer rival' or 'strategic competitor' and could therefore develop into an alternate partner or intermediary.

One such major mutual perception and objective is the shared belief in multilateral or multipolar approaches to resolving global or major challenges. In addition, to its relatively limited agreements with Central Asian and Southeast Asian neighbours, for China the EU could represent an indispensable pole to this multilateral approach and narrative.

A more balanced relationship between the EU and China could become an essential bridge of the 'strategic triangle' between the major political and economic powers.

The EU, despite limitations and disappointments, is often portrayed in China as a positive illustration of regional cooperation, integration and conciliation.

A Reality Check against Unrealistic Expectations

To anticipate, plan, analyse and discuss such a concept, however necessary at both the official and unofficial level, should not be construed as arousing exaggerated expectations.

On the EU side, this exercise should not be unrealistically regarded as fitting into the EU's perception as an international "norm-setter."

The EU has already engaged with China in Economic, Trade, Environmental, Energy, Social sectorial dialogues without major breakthroughs and these have generally been regarded useful in reaching some understanding and raising awareness among specialists involved. A new strategic and security dialogue and relationship would in all probability wind up along similar lines.

One object lesson could be the EU-China Human Rights dialogue underway for more than a decade, with limited or ambiguous concrete outcomes.

It is also essential to place the EU-China strategic relationship in a broader context that also includes the fact that China has some 40 such relationships and therefore has perhaps a different perception of their significance or singularity.

It would also be imperative to acknowledge the limitations of the EU's capacity and authority to be a major interlocutor for China or any other major political entity in the domain of strategic and security issues in view of the incomplete and still relatively ill-defined EU common foreign and security policy. Its inability or unwillingness to play a significant role in a number of specific security situations, ranging from Libya, Syria to Mali, underlines the obvious limits of the EU.

Likewise, it may be apparent that China has had mixed feelings about the ability of the EU to act as a meaningful and autonomous participant in such issues and situations.

Even limited Chinese objectives, such as the lifting of the EU arms embargo on China, which Beijing regards as contradictory and insincere to the achievement of a strategic partnership, are unlikely to be fulfilled. This is due to the fact that international geopolitical realities place the EU in a dependent role to the United States on such issues.

It is also clear that the EU's other close partners, such as the US, Japan or India would also monitor closely its relations with China for any indication of unacceptable concessions to China they perceived as contrary to their own national interests.

For China the simple notion of striving to achieve a counterbalance to US hegemony through a relationship with the EU should be also moderated.

It has been also obvious that China was both disappointed and convinced that, although on occasions the EU or some of its Member States can disassociate themselves from the US and the constraint of the Transatlantic Alliance as some did during the 2003 Iraq intervention, in the end they remain Western in views, behaviour and discipline, as proven when the EU refused to lift the arms embargo in 2004-5.

For these and other reasons, the new dialogue could offer potential but would be unlikely to achieve dramatic results.

Conclusion

Any analysis of this emerging exercise between the EU and China must logically conclude with a number of pending questions and issues, as well other comments.

First of all: Does the development mark a turning point in European foreign and diplomatic policy-making? What implication does it have for Europe's position in the global balance of powers? Will or

should the EU surrender its limited 'soft power' neutral role in Asia in order to ensure its political relevance in the new global order?

This paper will conclude that If there is a significant European contribution to Asian security and stability in general and the Asia-Pacific region's troubling maritime disputes in particular, it is probably not by taking one side or another in the sovereignty debates as some of Europe's Asian partners would like, but it may lie more in providing a long-term illustration of the kind of regional cooperation and dialogue for which it was awarded the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize recently.

This paper benefitted greatly from the contribution and advice of Maria Chiara Zannini, Junior Researcher, European Institute for Asian Studies.