

Im Fokus

Dashed Hopes – EU-China Relations after the EU's 2006 Communication on China

Enttäuschte Hoffnungen – Die europäisch-chinesischen Beziehungen seit Veröffentlichung des jüngsten Strategiepapiers der EU Ende 2006

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Abstract

The latest EU policy paper on China published in October 2006 reflects European concerns about the ramifications of China's rise in an unvarnished fashion. It therefore aroused widespread discontent in the Chinese academic and diplomatic community. This paper describes the EU's changed perception of its Chinese counterpart. Dissenting from the views of Chinese critics, it will be argued that the EU still only has a vague idea of its role in Asian security and that the EU's strategy towards China is dominated by its economic interests. That means the recent annoyance was primarily induced by economic problems and dashed hopes about the EU's capacities to mould the other side. Consequently, the Chinese side can actively contribute to mending the relationship by taking European concerns seriously and by levelling the economic playing field.

Keywords: EU, policy paper, China, economic relations

Introduction

Since they were first taken up in May 1975, relations between the EU and China have developed to the level of a strategic partnership. In 2005 China became the second-largest trading partner of the EU. In the course of thirty-two years, the EU's policy towards China has been consistently adjusted following changes in China, the EU and in bilateral and international relations. Although far from being problem-free, EU-China relations seemed to improve constantly for a while. This turned out to be a misconception, however.

The latest EU policy paper on China published in October 2006 marks a turning point in relations. In quite an unvarnished manner, it reflects European concerns about the ramifications of China's rise and makes a number of requests

to the Chinese side. This took many observers with an interest in Europe – be it in the West or in China – by surprise and provoked harsh reactions from Chinese diplomats; some shadows have now been cast over bilateral relations.

In the meantime, EU representatives are trying to persuade their counterparts in Beijing that it would be in their own interests to re-balance trade relations with Europe, curb counterfeiting, enforce the protection of intellectual property rights and watch out for product quality. On 28 November 2007, only a day before an EU-China summit took place in Beijing, three high-ranking EU officials – Jean-Claude Juncker, Chairman of the Eurozone Finance Ministers' Group, Joaquín Almunia, Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, and Jean-Claude Trichet, President of the European Central Bank – held talks with Zhou Xiaochuan, China's Central Bank governor, about China's currency policy. While the final statement remained vague,

it constituted progress for the Europeans in that it marked Chinese recognition of their difficulties with an ever-rising euro and an ever-expanding Chinese trade surplus. (FT, 28.11.07)

This paper will first describe the EU's changed attitude as reflected in the 2006 policy paper on the PRC. It will further discuss the Chinese critique as well as Western and Chinese explanations of this change. The Communication aroused widespread discontent in the Chinese academic and diplomatic community. Dissenting from the views of Chinese and European researchers, it will be argued that there is only a vague idea of the EU's role in Asian security and that the EU's strategy on China is still dominated by economic interests. Security considerations do not vitiate economic relations. The recent annoyance was primarily induced by economic problems and dashed hopes about the EU's capacity to mould the other side.

The EU's 2006 Communication on China

China has been playing a prominent role in the EU's Asia strategy for more than three decades now. Despite some setbacks, this not only holds true for economic, but also for political relations. It is reflected in the remarkable number of agreements, policy papers and institutions that exist today.

After the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy in 1992, the EU developed an ambitious new framework for bilateral political dialogue and put its common approach in a nutshell in its first communication on China in 1995. China is not only the first-ever Asian addressee of a policy paper, it is

also the Asian country to which the EU has dedicated the most communications, namely five so far (1995, 1998, 2001, 2003, and 2006a). These five papers, each of which is based on the previous one, indicate a clear evolution towards a better understanding of China and a more comprehensive common policy. Whereas the first paper – issued in 1995 – included a large amount of information in order to provide the EU's administration with some basic background data on China, the ratio of policy (paper) to information (appendices) had been reversed by 2003. Moreover, the quality of the information had increased (Griese 2006).

In its endeavour to become a major player in Asia, the EU set the goal of strengthening its relations with China. The EU clearly stated its interest in “ensur[ing] that China plays a constructive and co-operative role both in the region and in the world” (Asia Strategy 2001). China is viewed as a key partner concerning the implementation of the EU's security goals (Security Strategy 2003). In the EU, its relations to China were elevated from a “long-term relationship” (1995) to a “comprehensive partnership” (1998), then to a “maturing partnership” (2003) and finally to a “strategic and enduring partnership” (Barroso 2005).

The deeper meaning of “strategic” is still rather nebulous and reality lags far behind political rhetoric (Scott 2007).¹ What is more important in this context, however, is that both the EU and China have been using the term to describe the quality of their relationship and to express the vision of future convergence, collaboration and coordination in international policy since 2003. In view of the steady enhancement of their relationship (at least rhetorically), China seems to have been completely caught off guard by the publication of the 2006 Communication, whose headline quite prosaically refers to “closer partners” (here and in the following cited after Communication 2006a). The agreement on a “strategic partnership” is mentioned, but so are “some differences”, and the partnership is tied down to “growing responsibilities”.

The policy paper takes stock of EU-China relations. It starts with the question: “What is at stake?” and provides an answer to it right away: “China has re-emerged as a major power”, which has “profound impact on global politics and trade”. Consequently, “Europe needs to respond effectively to China's renewed strength” and needs “to leverage the potential of a dynamic relationship with China based on *our* values” (emphasis by GS).

¹ Numerous papers have attempted to delineate the content of this “strategic partnership”. See, e.g., the recent publications by Scott 2007, Berkofsky 2006 or Crossick 2006.

In accordance with its antecedent versions, the communication stresses the great importance that China has for Europe. But in contrast to this, it also points out the competitive challenge of an economically stronger China. A whole list of concerns about this are made explicit that had been smouldering beneath the surface for some time. Not only the wording is more prosaic and far less enthusiastic than before; the EU also makes a number of requests concerning fair trade relations, political reforms and international responsibility. Amongst other things, China is requested in the economic and trade realm

- “to move beyond its WTO commitments in further opening its market to create opportunities for EU companies”,
- to “open its own markets and ensure conditions of fair market competition” and “level the playing field”, i.e. guarantee “better protection of intellectual property rights” and end “forced technology transfer” as well as “stop granting prohibited subsidies”,
- and “to ensure that international commitments on labour and social issues are upheld”.

China is blamed for not having met the EU's expectations in pursuing values like democracy and human rights and is encouraged to develop a full, healthy and independent civil society as well as strengthening the rule of law.

The EU appreciates that China is beginning to recognise its “international responsibilities commensurate to its economic importance and role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council” and stresses the common interest in promoting peace and security through a reformed and effective multilateral system. It requests compliance with all non-proliferation and disarmament treaties as well as strengthened export controls on WMD-related materials. Moreover, the EU claims to have “a significant stake in the maintenance of cross-straits peace and stability” and sets three conditions for lifting the arms embargo:² progress on human rights, the improvement of relations with Taiwan and more transparency concerning military expenditure.

The signals and requests made to China by the 2006 Communication were underlined by an accompanying policy paper on EU-China trade and investment (Commission 2006b) and further ratified by the European Council at its meeting on 11 December 2006. The Council adopted a list of 23 conclusions that contain

² The arms embargo was imposed on China after the abolition of the democracy movement in June 1989.

its observations and concerns about the bilateral relationship. In fairly constructive wording, the Council stated that it “supports the Commission’s strategy of developing the relationship on the basis of open markets, fair competition and compliance with rules” and “underlines the need for reciprocity in the EU-China trade and investment relationship” (Council 2006).

A New Security Perspective or an Adjustment of Economic Policy?

So far, the European Union has not established such an elaborate institutional setting with any other country in Asia other than China.³ The main legal frame for EU-China relations continues to be the EC-China Trade and Co-operation Agreement of 1985. This was complemented in 1994 and 2002. The sectoral agreements cover scientific and technological co-operation (1998, 2004), co-operation in developing the Galileo satellite navigation programme (2003) as well as maritime transport (2002), tourism (2004) and research on the peaceful use of nuclear energy (2004). Further agreements, e.g. in the fields of intellectual property rights, competition policy, textiles or labour and social issues, have also been initiated. Moreover, sectoral dialogues in well over twenty different areas, ranging from environmental protection to science & technology and from industrial policy to education and culture have been added to the political dialogue, economic relations and co-operation programmes. The EU-China dialogue on human rights was initiated in January 1996.

The political dialogue was formally established in 1994. In April 2002, this dialogue grew into a regular, structured series of meetings at several levels (EU Troika,⁴ Political Directors, Heads of Missions, Regional Directors, technical meetings of high officials, etc.). Annual EU-China summits at head-of-government level were initiated in April 1998 in London. The latest EU-China Summit – the ninth to date – was held in Helsinki on 9 September 2006. In order to reflect the new stage of co-operation and their declared strategic partnership, the two sides agreed to launch negotiations on a new Partnership and Co-operation Agreement, which will encompass the full scope of their bilateral relationship. These negotiations commenced in January 2007.

³ For further information, see the EU’s web page entitled “The EU’s relations with China” (http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/china/intro/index.htm).

⁴ EU Presidency, European Commission, Council Secretariat and the incoming EU Presidency.

One would assume that the basis for this prominent role on China's part was a sound analytical one and a clear vision of bilateral relations, its possibilities and limitations. The latest communication, however, has proved this wrong. For many years, expectations concerning the development of bilateral relations had been rather optimistic, and the positive view on China as a vast market with unlimited opportunities had prevailed. Strategic visions had mitigated economic frictions and human rights concerns had been sidelined by commercial needs. The sudden turn in the 2006 document therefore not only took the Chinese government by surprise, but also Western observers of the EU's policy. "China-Europe relations get complicated", wrote David Shambaugh (2007), known for his excellent studies on US-Europe-China relations. "Mutual areas of common interest and cooperation remain substantial and dominant", but "the EU documents do reflect a change in tone, substance, and approach to China from past precedent".⁵

Shambaugh rather vaguely refers to the EU-China relationship passing from its "honeymoon" phase to the "marriage" phase to explain the change: "the lust seems to have begun to wear off more quickly on the European side". More tangibly, Soerensen (2007) holds that the EU became "cognizant of the critical implications that China's rise has for the political and security situation in East Asia". Still principally driven by economic interests, the EU is primarily concerned by China's intensified activities and growing influence in other regions such as Africa.

China's Europe watchers have been predicting drawbacks in bilateral relations for some time. Yang (2006) based his "not so optimistic" expectations about future EU-China relations on the consequences of the EU's enlargement. This would increase intra-European trade and distract the EU from compromises on relations to China. As a consequence, the EU would put more emphasis on the promotion of European values (like democracy and human rights) and the differences between the EU and China would come to the fore. Moreover, the strengthened pro-Atlanticism in the common foreign policy would devalue the strategic partnership between the EU and China.

Yang's view is shared by the Director of the Institute of European Studies, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, Feng Zhongping. Feng

⁵ Dai (2007) also stresses the growing complexities in EU-China relations.

(2006) holds that “the EU seems to be reassessing the impact that a rising Chinese economy would bring to it” and that problems and disputes will crop up since both sides know more about each other.

Thus preset and again disappointed by the EU’s “failure” to lift the arms embargo, Chinese researchers and diplomats reacted harshly to the 2006 Communication. Zhang Zuqian, Deputy Secretary of the Shanghai Institute for European Studies, points out two novelties in the communication:

The first one is that the EU seems to take up the position more similar with America’s China policy [...]. The second is the newly-emerged trend that the EU began to consider about the strategic significance caused by China’s rise. (Zhang 2007)

Besides the frozen lifting of the arms embargo, another concrete reference is the slightly different rhetoric on the Taiwan issue. Zhang ascribes the change mainly to the EU’s enlargement and pressure from the USA (*ibid.*).

According to former Ambassador to Germany Mei Zhaorong, the Communication “is a strong-worded document, which contains more negative elements than before”. Its deep-seated context and the reasons behind the EU’s new policy paper are (1) the many internal and external challenges caused by globalisation and intensified by the enlargement and the problems connected with “digesting” new members, (2) China’s unexpectedly rapid rise and different opinions about it within the EU, (3) pressure from the United States and (4) the need to sign a new co-operation agreement (Mei 2007).

According to Zhang (2007), the EU’s changed approach to European-Chinese relations, which was reflected in the tone and substance of the 2006 Communication, “shocked” Chinese diplomats and researchers. China’s mission to the EU published a short rebuke on its official website. A closer look reveals that China’s Europe watchers had actually expected that change. Nevertheless, their harsh reaction was not just for show;⁶ it was prompted by a deep disappointment in Europe.

For quite some time, the high importance China had gained in the EU’s official rhetoric had been matched by an enthusiasm on the Chinese side. China courted the EU as a possible counterweight to the US in economic and strategic terms. When Europe – in the wake of the dispute about lifting the arms embargo

⁶ According to Shambaugh (2007), the Chinese Foreign Ministry was not overly alarmed.

and as a means of striving for a level playing field in economic competition – re-adopted the transatlantic approach to Asia, China finally became aware that it could not disassociate Europe from the USA after all.

Mei (2007) links the negative elements in the EU's new paper to the sudden emergence of the "China threat" theory in Europe since the latter half of 2005 and the studies of the impact of China's rise on world order by some European think tanks. Zhang (2007) points at certain European experts who advise the EU to develop a security perspective on China and joint efforts by the EU and the USA to develop a transatlantic security approach to Asia. These views overvalue security concerns in the EU's Asia and China policy. Europe is not a security actor in Asia as yet (Nabers & Schucher 2007). I agree with Holslag, who believes that the EU does not consider China's rise as a threat to its own security:

Because Europe outsourced high politics to a large extent to Washington, it can lean back without bothering too much about the several geostrategic questions related to China's development. (Holslag 2006:568)

Instead of security considerations, economic concerns have caused the adjustments in Europe's China policy. Mei seems to know this since he mentions China's economic rise among other reasons while explicating the background of the new paper. Rather cryptically and euphemistically, he writes:

The competitiveness of Chinese products has aroused a fear in European enterprises, and they are especially worried that *China's extremely strong capability of imitation* would strip them of their technological edge. (Mei 2007:20) (Emphasis by G.S.)

By accentuating security considerations and playing economic concerns down, Chinese commentators are able to let China off the hook and give the sole responsibility for EU-China relations to the European side.

The EU and Asian Security

Without any doubt, the EU has a declared ambition of being a global security actor. In its Asia Strategy Paper of 2001, it committed itself to the maintenance of stability and promotion of economic growth across the entire East Asian region. The latest enlargements have further strengthened this aspiration. Apart from issuing statements, however, the EU is only minimally involved in security issues in East Asia even though its economic and diplomatic presence in the region is quite strong.

Initially, the founding fathers of the European Union had a vision of a Europe

capable of speaking on world affairs with one voice. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 was the first agreement to incorporate the objective of “assert[ing] its identity on the international scene, in particular through the implementation of a common foreign and security policy” (EU 1992:Art.B).

In its 2003 European Security Strategy and its Asia Strategy Papers, the EU took a broad approach to regional and global security. As a global security actor – “the European Union is inevitably a global player” (EU 2003:1) – it aims to preserve peace and security. In Asia, the EU strives to strengthen its political and economic presence across the region and to raise this “to a level commensurate with the growing global weight of an enlarged EU” (Commission 2001:3). Thus it will work “to contribute to peace and security in the region and globally, through a broadening of our engagement with the region” (EU 2003).

The regional conflict on the Korean Peninsula has been identified by the EU as being one of the “key threats” to security, a danger that not only affects European interests directly and indirectly, but that is one of the “common threats, shared with all our closest partners” – in other words, with Japan, China and India (EU 2003:13f.). Other “long-standing sources of tension or conflict” exist in Kashmir, Sri Lanka, on the borders of Afghanistan, in Aceh and Mindanao, across the Taiwan Straits and in the South China Sea (Commission 2001:6).

Considering the policy papers, one might expect the European Union to be strongly engaged in the development of the political and security situation in East Asia, but in actual fact the EU is only minimally involved; Europe is still playing the role of an external observer and is not in a position to have an impact on the agenda of the main actors: the USA and China. The EU supports the six-party talks regarding North Korea, and as for the Taiwan issue, it restricts itself to making repeated calls on both China and Taiwan to solve the tangle by means of dialogue. It’s only in Indonesia’s Aceh province that the EU has been able to play an active role in world politics: the first-ever European peace mission in Asia seems to be a success (Nabers & Schucher 2007).

In other words, the EU has a low political profile. Since it doesn’t have a security presence, the EU is less feared than the United States and it is also taken less seriously (Shambaugh 2005). Its security approach is dominated by economic interests that would be affected by any major military incident or internal instability in the states of the region.

The controversy over lifting the EU’s arms embargo on China and the delaying of a final decision on the matter reveal most of the problems as clearly as if they

were under a magnifying glass: the lack of a coherent European strategy on Asia, the lack of awareness of the security implications of China's rise and the neglect of transatlantic relations. Driven by what were mainly economic interests, Germany and France rushed ahead, with the result that the EU summit in Rome in November 2003 declared its intention to "work towards lifting" the embargo without considering its implications. Consequently, the EU strengthened the impression it had already made of being incoherent, inconsistent and bending under the weight of American pressure.

The EU is far from being a strong actor in East Asian security. There is a general uncertainty in the EU about its security role in Asia. Ideas of bringing its "soft power" resources to bear are still quite vague. Despite its ambitions concerning global security, the EU's strategy in the region is still dominated by bilateral relations and economic interests.

Economic Competition

While the EU has a low political profile, it also has a formidable economic presence in Asia. For several years now, political issues have been sidelined by the imperatives of economics. Business opportunities were usually sketched in bright colours. The German-French venture to lift the arms embargo not only symbolised this policy, its failure also marked a certain turning point in the perception of EU-China economic relations. The positive view of China as a major engine of growth was increasingly complemented, not to say overshadowed, by its rather negative perception as a competitor in a number of markets and sectors – a competitor that doesn't play according to the rules.

Accordingly, three main factors may have induced the new approach in the EU's 2006 Communication: (1) China's economic success has led to a re-evaluation and adjustment of EU-China trade and business relations. (2) Triggered by transatlantic irritation about lifting the arms embargo, the European governments became aware that economic relations do not exist in a vacuum and cannot be separated from outside factors. (3) But most importantly, the EU's disillusionment with China is the result of a short-sighted overestimation of Europe's economic power.

(1) The old members of the EU like Germany and France have been particularly feeling the "China factor" (see van Kemenade 2007 or Weske 2007). The public believed low-cost production in China was responsible for the tense labour market, and trading companies exerted pressure on the governments to create

a level playing field in China. Counterfeiting, forced technology transfer, price-dumping and Chinese government subsidies for textile and shoe manufacturers were particularly attacked (Andreosso-O'Callaghan & Nicolas 2007).

European complaints about the growing trade deficit in China's favour and about violations of intellectual property rights tended to make it to the top of the agenda of EU-China encounters. In 1999 the EU enjoyed an overall trade surplus of 61.9 billion USD. After China's accession to the WTO, however, the picture changed. In 2006, China's trade surplus with the European Union reached 91.7 billion USD – according to Chinese statistics. EU statistics reveal an even higher deficit for the EU25: 117.1 billion EUR in January-November 2006 compared with 97.4 billion EUR in the respective period in 2005. For 2007, the EU estimates the deficit will climb to 170 billion EUR (HB, 28.11.07). Since the EU25's largest trade deficit is now with China, its complaints about China's trade policy now rival those of the USA. As a consequence, European complaints about China's currency policy have also increased. Reciprocity has become a key term in bilateral economic relations (see also Wan 2007):

In Europe there is a growing perception that China's as yet incomplete implementation of WTO obligations and new barriers to market access are preventing a genuinely reciprocal trading relationship. (Commission 2006a)

Being the largest source of technology for China, the EU became increasingly sensitive as regards counterfeiting, forced technology transfer and other forms of "unfair" competition. Since around 80% of the counterfeit goods confiscated by European customs authorities originate from China, counterfeiting and the protection of intellectual property rights will remain major points of contention for years to come (FAZ, 26.11.07). The EU will continue to pressurise China to enforce WTO-compatible rights and regulations. During its EU-presidency in the first half of 2007, Germany put piracy and unauthorised technology transfer high on the agenda. The problems were discussed with other EU members, the economic sector and academia the year before. Problems in technology transfer were also the topic of a scientific conference held in Helsinki in September 2006, parallel to the EU-China Summit. And at the G8 Summit in Heiligendamm in June 2007, IPR protection became a central topic. Moreover, Germany stipulated it to be the motto of the German-Chinese rule of law dialogue in 2007, which was later cancelled by the Chinese side because of Chancellor Merkel hosting the Dalai Lama (see Levy 2007 on the dialogue).

(2) Trade between the EU and China has expanded at an impressive pace. In 2005, China became the second-largest trading partner of the EU, displacing the USA as the largest source of EU imports. The EU overtook both the USA and Japan in 2005 and is now China's biggest trading partner. This relationship, however, "is far from an exclusive partnership in which common strategic goals dominate decisions on current affairs", as Klenner (2005:346) concluded from his analysis of economic relations even before the lifting of the arms embargo was postponed:

Whenever important trade issues have been on the agenda, the costs and benefits as well as the impacts on relations with other nations, mainly the US, have been carefully taken into account by both partners. (Ibid.)

(3) Up until 2005, Europe seemed convinced that by fostering economic co-operation, it would have the weight to steer China's development in a favourable direction, but its attempt to create a like-minded partner turned out to be unsuccessful. China neither fitted itself into economic co-operation as a permanent junior partner, nor did it democratise its political system. Moreover, China became a strong economic and political competitor in Africa, where it challenged Europe's post-colonial achievements. Instead of being moulded as Europe would have liked, China actually started to influence its Western partners' course of development (Holslag 2006).

From Disillusionment to Realism?

Aware of the growing competition it was facing from an ascending China, alarmed by increasing imbalances in bilateral trade relations and unfair practices, and disillusioned with the hope of creating a like-minded partner prepared to take more steps in the direction of democracy, the EU finally modified its policy and published the 2006 Communication. An exaggerated strategic rhetoric sidelined economic friction for quite some time. Now, economic problems and disillusionment with its own capability as a "soft" power provided space for other issues like human rights to come to the front. The hosting of the Dalai Lama can be seen in this context.

However, this should not distract observers from the fact that the EU's partnership with China is still primarily driven by economic interests; the EU mainly stresses the competitive challenge it faces in a China that is developing economically at a fast pace. Consequently, the EU – while trying to ensure a balance regarding co-operation – is trying to maintain good political relations with

the East Asian nation at the same time. Offers to co-operate within the framework of effective multilateralism abound. China's policy constitutes a vital element of regional stability. The EU and China have everything to gain by deepening their ties. Irritation caused by the 2006 Communication is accompanied by private and open assertions to strengthen co-operation and become a "closer partner" sharing "growing responsibilities" (Commission 2006a).

This means that Chinese critics are wrong to put the blame for current tensions solely on the European side. Even though not all of the EU's allegations are justifiable, it would be a mistake to follow advice like Zhang's "to wait and see whether the EU would resume its commercially-driven policy to China" (Zhang 2007). Instead, China should take European trade concerns seriously and contribute to levelling the playing field. The "honeymoon" in EU-China relations was, indeed, ended by the EU, but China will play an important part in arranging the "marriage" phase. Disillusionment on both sides about their unrealistic expectations will not only help them to gain a more realistic view of the situation. It could, in fact, be the basis of a better and constructive co-operation in an increasingly complex environment.

At the 9th EU-China Summit held in Helsinki in September 2006, the two sides agreed to open negotiations for a new framework agreement (EU 2006). In addition to trade, the agreement will provide the framework for the 22 sectors in which the EU and China are already holding dialogues, such as energy, the environment, science and technology, or international challenges. The process commenced on 17 January 2007 with the visit of Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner to China, but it does not seem to have yielded many results so far. The fact that Beijing – on the eve of the EU-Chinese Summit – "has expressed public understanding for the eurozone's discomfort" (FT, 28.11.07) may be regarded as a flicker of hope, and the willingness to "strengthen dialogue", as expressed by Qin Gang, a Foreign Ministry spokesman (*ibid.*), is certainly a promising signal, but basic changes cannot be expected in the short term. There have never been as many conflicts and disputes on economic matters between China and the EU as there are now. Although already announced many times, the moment seems to be drawing near when the EU will take China to the WTO (HB, 28.11.07).

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