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**An Evaluation of the EU-China Political
Relationship: Comparisons with the
Transatlantic Relationship**

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An Evaluation of the EU-China Political Relationship: Comparisons with the Transatlantic Relationship.

Zhao Chen¹

Executive Summary

Chinese President Xi's visit to Europe has focused attention on how to strengthen political ties between China and the EU. The US "pivot" to Asia means Europe also needs to readjust its Chinese policy. It is therefore timely to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the political relationship. To do so the paper contrasts EU-China relations with the US-EU transatlantic relationship. It shows that while in areas of high politics and political values the EU and China do not cooperate as much compared to the US-EU transatlantic relationship, in the areas of low politics and institutional linkages there is the potential for breakthroughs for improving EU-China political relations.

Policy Recommendations

When compared to the transatlantic relationship, the EU-China political relationship can be improved by:

- Focusing cooperation on issues of low politics: there is little prospect for improved relations in areas such as traditional security and human rights, meaning the EU and China should discuss and work on areas that offer more room for feasible political cooperation such as common rules on market regulation and technical matters, explore ways to improve global financial management, and continue to coordinate their positions on climate change.
- Strengthening security dialogues and cooperation about third countries: the EU member states and China should develop specific dialogues designed to improve their approaches to issues connected to third countries and regions such as Africa, and assisting each other on consular matters or protecting overseas interests of both sides in the event of emergencies in a third country.
- Improving cooperation in international institutions: the EU and China should work together more closely in the wide range of international organisations where they are present in order to ensure these organisations function more effectively and to ensure that third countries such as the USA support and respect the work of such organisations and so obey international law.

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1. Introduction

From March to April 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a successful visit to four European countries. He also visited the Brussels headquarters of the EU, the first time any Chinese president had done so. The visit to Europe was noted by international media as a significant step in building China-Europe ties. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described China and the EU as “strategic partners with great potential and development space” and that Europe was to be a priority for Chinese diplomacy.

During his visit, Xi Jinping said China and Europe should view their ties from a strategic perspective, combine their forces, markets and civilizations to build the aforementioned four partnerships so as to add new impetus into bilateral cooperation, and make greater contribution to world development and prosperity. The past nearly 40 years have witnessed the China-EU relationship evolving into a comprehensive one that is highly interdependent, Xi said, noting that bilateral relations not only matter to the two sides, but also have a major impact on the world's political and economic landscape.

China views the EU from a strategic perspective, attaches great importance to it, unwaveringly supports Europe's integration, and is willing to expand and deepen the comprehensive strategic partnership with the EU, Xi said, stressing that it is the important message he has repeatedly expressed during his ongoing Europe tour. He said the China-EU strategic cooperation has a bright future and both sides should not only cooperate at the bilateral level, but also work together within the framework of the Asia-Europe relationship, and join efforts in dealing with global challenges.

First, China and the EU should build a partnership for peace, and take the lead in choosing the path of peaceful development, Xi said, lauding the important strategic consensus reached between the two sides in constructing a multi-polar world.

Both sides should respect the social system independently chosen by each other, take care of each other's core interests and support each other in adhering to the path of peaceful development, he said.

Second, Xi said, China and the EU should build a partnership for growth and provide each other with opportunities of development.

The two sides should conclude the negotiations on an investment accord at an early date, start the feasibility study on a free trade agreement, and jointly improve the quality and level of China-EU trade, he noted. The Chinese president also expressed the hope that the EU can expand its hi-tech trade with China.

Third, China and the EU should form a partnership in carrying out reforms, and learn from and support each other, Xi said. At present, both China's and the EU's reforms have entered the deep-water zone, Xi said, adding that the two sides should enhance exchange, share experiences and deepen cooperation in areas such as macro-economic policies, social management, public policy, agriculture and rural areas, employment and people's livelihood, and environmental protection.

Forth, China and the EU should forge a partnership for civilization, and provide nourishment for each other's progress, Xi said. Through equal dialogue, the two sides should increase mutual understanding, enhance exchange and cooperation in the areas of culture, media and tourism, increase the number of students they send to each other, and jointly support the research work on China-EU ties, Xi said (Xinhua, 2014).

The EU and its member states have also begun to concentrate on the development of

EU-China political relations. The growth of China's strategic importance in the world and US President Barack Obama's 2012 announcement of a shift or "pivot" towards the Asian region meant the EU could no longer focus on the bilateral economic relationship which has for the past three decades been the base of EU-China relations. In the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, launched at the 16th EU-China Summit in November 2013, the EU and China committed themselves first and foremost to a shared responsibility for promoting peace and global security, this coming ahead of a commitment to prosperity and sustainable development (European Commission and Government of China, 2013).

2. Evaluation

There is a desire by both sides to see the political relationship improve. How to do so effectively is the crucial question. A necessary first step towards finding an answer is to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of EU-China political relations. To do so this paper compares EU-China relations to the transatlantic relationship, which is the largest and most mature relationship the EU has with another large power. Due to the broad range of political issues covered in the transatlantic relationship, the paper breaks down relations into "high politics" and "low politics" as outlined by US political scientist Stanley Hoffman (Hoffman, 1965, 1966), this classification has been respected as classic research approach on bilateral relationship study for developed countries. Meanwhile, considering the big gap existing between China and EU on ideology and the fact that China has no long enough time to develop its institutional linkage with EU since it just established formal diplomatic relationship with EU in 1970's, I will add 'values' and 'institutions' into the comparative categories as "high politics" and "low politics" complement for a comprehensive evaluation that can comprise the characters of both Transatlantic relationship and EU-China relationship.

a. "High politics"

Stanley Hoffmann outlined the concepts of "high politics" and "low politics" in the 1960's. He argued that security and defense belong to the category of "high politics" because they are crucial for the survival of a state, while economic and social matters are "low politics" because they are related to issues such as welfare that cannot endanger the existence of the state. Hoffmann discussed this distinction between high politics and low politics when he examined the possibility of European integration moving forward because of a 'spillover effect' as cooperation on economic matters led to cooperation in other areas such as security.

Military security and defense cooperation is the weakest part of the EU-China relationship, in contrast to the central part it has played in the transatlantic relationship. In the Cold War era, the US had been helping the west European countries to resist the threat from the Soviet Union. Today US still has more than 440 military bases in Europe, which is half of the number it has in the world (Department of Defense, 2009). It is home to both the headquarters of the US military's European Command and its African Command, both based in Stuttgart, Germany. Although the Cold War has been over for more than 20 years, Europe is still protected by a US

nuclear umbrella. The US deploys more than 480 nuclear weapons in Europe (Natural Resources Defense Council, 2005) and anti-ballistic missile systems in some European countries that are strategically important. A large number of European states have also contributed to US led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Overall, European states have looked to the US as the primary partner for issues of global peace and stability. Both sides of the Atlantic also work frequently and closely on tackling terrorism, nuclear proliferation, transnational crimes (including cybersecurity). In comparison, China-EU security cooperation is at the level of policy dialogues, and even these dialogues do not occur very often. The Munich Security Conference is one of only a few multilateral dialogue platforms that the EU and China both participate in. In the sphere of nuclear security, cooperation between China and the EU is about its civilian use and so focuses on scientific research for non-military purposes. For example, in 2004, China and the EU signed a research agreement on the peaceful use of nuclear energy. While overseas military cooperation between the EU and China has developed in recent years, most activities are “soft” issues, such as strategic dialogues, peace keeping training, army diplomacy, education exchange and port calls by naval vessels. There are indications that show the security relationship could become more substantial. Since 2005 there has been regular dialogue at vice-ministerial level between the EU and China over regional and international security matters. Since 2009, China has been actively involved in fleet escort operations in Somali waters with the approval of the UN Security Council and Somalia’s transitional government. This has been conducted in cooperation with the EU’s own military operation in the area.

b. Values

Besides “high politics”, political ideology and values is another area that affects the EU-China relationship. Political culture and political ideology plays a constructive role in the foreign policy of a political entity. Max Weber argued that, “Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct”, “yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracts along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (see Gerth /Wright Mills, 1958: 280). From this perspective there is a huge gap between the China-EU and US-EU relationships. The former is based on national interests, while the latter is built on links such as close ethnic and cultural ties.

Both Europe and the US are parts of Western civilization. Historically, the US was “the daughter of Europe”, a “new Europe” in the “new world” created by European immigrants. However, to quote General De Gaulle, over time the USA changed from being “the daughter of Europe” to “the uncle of Europe”. Nevertheless, the ties between the two continents and their shared political models meant they continued to share similar values on human rights, freedom, democracy and rule of law. During the cold war, the transatlantic partners set up a “security community” to defend their common values and interests against threats from the Soviet Union. This was therefore a relationship based not only on a military alliance, but on common values and “we-feeling” (Deutsch et al. 1957).

In the post-cold war era, links between Europe and the US have remained strong

despite the absence of a security risk from the East. These links, however, can be fragile and vary according to the occupant of the White House. Bill Clinton (1993-2001) was a “pro-European” US President. He was granted the International Charlemagne Prize by Aachen, Germany, making him the first US President to earn this honor. In his remarks on receiving the prize, he said “yes, we’ve always had our differences, and being human and imperfect, we always will. But the simple fact is, since Europe is an idea as much as a place, America also is a part of Europe, bound by ties of family, history and values”. After emphasizing the importance of transatlantic economic interdependence, he said “Lord Palmerston’s rule that countries have no permanent alliances, only permanent interests, simply does not apply to our relationship. For America has a permanent interest in a permanent alliance with Europe. Our shared future is deeply rooted in our shared history”(Clinton, 2000). Relations have not always been so congenial. The administration of George W. Bush (2001-2009) was not so committed to maintaining harmonious relations and shared values with Europe, differences becoming apparent over the Iraq war in 2003. European states placed a greater emphasis on the UN as the authority and source of legitimacy for solving large security problems and therefore the institution through which problems were to be addressed. The USA has tended more towards emphasising US power - especially military advantage - as the better approach to securing security than through negotiation and treaties. Only in his second term did the Bush administration adjust US foreign policy to take into account European outlooks, and in large part as a result of a pragmatic need. This trend became clear with the election of Barack Obama in 2009. The Libyan War of 2011 and the crisis in Syria from 2012 have seen both the US and the EU’s positions guided by shared values, although some differences have been evident. Despite tensions, especially during the Bush years, the USA have long had commonalities in values, especially in the area of humanitarian intervention.

Despite China and Europe being two civilizations with centuries of communication and links, the modern political relationship between the People’s Republic of China and the European Union only dates back to the 1970s. China is very different to the EU in some key ideological categories such as political values and political economy. On the relations between sovereignty and human rights in the governance approaches, China is the active defender of the sovereignty equality principle of traditional international law, disagreeing human rights beyond sovereignty which is different with Europe. There are following reasons for China to emphasize on the overwhelming position of sovereignty. Firstly, different from the European countries in the background of the birth of state sovereignty, Chinese state sovereignty concept was generated from the escalating national crisis (Zhang 2002). Same as many developing countries who had gone through the experience of being colonized, China values national independence and the sovereignty integrity in high degree . Secondly, China’s non-violating principle of sovereignty also has the realistic concerns of protecting China’s Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and human rights issue from western interference. Thirdly, in terms of the dominating power of western countries in the agenda setting process of present international system, no matter in economy, military power or ideology aspect, the West is superior to China and other developing countries, China needs the protection of state sovereignty to shield from the erosion of mighty international market power and rhetoric power. The Laissez-faire policy in international relations is an abdication of responsibility to its country and the people.

Fourthly, the sovereignty principle is also the natural extension of Chinese Confucian thoughts of “family-country-world” order, which means one should first manage its family affairs, then state affairs and finally world affairs. Chinese believe in themselves, and also believe the other countries can manage their own internal affairs. With family affairs managed and state affairs governed, the world will be bound peaceful and get harmony. China disagrees to name losers the countries who have governance problems. As for the regions in conflict, upholding the non-interference principle, China has been encouraging the countries to conduct peaceful consultations internally to reach mediation by themselves. China’s global governance logic lies that all countries being able to take the responsibility in managing their economic, political and social affairs, as well China believe this is the foundation for a harmonious world.

There is one influential viewpoint in Europe that believe China does not abide by the rules made by the West, and instead views world affairs from its own strategic interests. These arguments, which can be popular in Europe, portray China as a poor student at respecting human rights or at becoming democratic. Some authors have argued that as a major rising power China is challenging Western models, values and interests and so gain more global influence after a century and a half of humiliation (Sandschneider, 2008: 27). However, these differences are only one side of the coin. On the other side, Europe and China share many common values. For instance, both recognize the importance of international institutions and multilateralism, both insist on the UN’s core position in the international system, are against the US approach to international terrorism symbolised by the Guantanamo Bay Prison, and worry about the global effects of climate change. Nevertheless, the differences in values between China and the EU remains much bigger than that between the EU and US.

c. Low politics

Military security and political values are the “hardcore” of any political relationship and so will be stubborn to change in the short term. But the passing of the Cold War means the possibility of a large scale military conflict has been minimized. The importance of military security has therefore been reduced somewhat. Instead economic globalization and the interdependence it brings means political differences over economic issues have become the main topic of international negotiation and bargaining.

Low politics covers trade, investment, social issues and non-traditional security issues. Security in high politics refers to traditional ideas of security such as defense, territorial disputes and sovereignty. In the past two decades, non-traditional security concerns such as economic security (especially financial security), terrorism, transnational crime, contagious disease, cyber security and even the security in cultural products, which means traditional culture should be protected by national governments, have become more important issues in official and informal exchanges between governments. This process of interdependence began amongst developed states in the 1960s, something Keohane and Nye (2011) pointed out in 1970s. This led to intensive communication and exchanges between both sides of the Atlantic. The result is that US and European governments and non-governmental organizations, have increasingly coordinated their work in order to offer solutions on low politics issues such as economic, social, environmental and non-traditional security concerns.

China opened its economy to the world in the 1980s and has rapidly industrialized. By the 1990s China's economy had become a globalized one, with its economy highly interdependent with those of Europe, the US and other areas of the world. The scale of economic links means China-EU relations today are an important part of global interdependence. Since 2003, China-EU trade has witnessed an average annual growth of 20.8%, with the value of two-way trade reaching a record high of US\$567.2 billion in 2011. The EU has been China's largest trading partner for eight consecutive years and China has emerged as the EU's second largest trading partner. In 2011, over 5 million people engaged in mutual exchanges between Europe and China (Tao, 2012). Such large scale economic and social linkages require multi-level consultation and cooperation between both societal actors and governmental ones.

The increasing scale of relations led the EU and China to engage in a wide range of discussions to develop political links. By 2003 the EU-China relationship was defined as "a maturing partnership" by the European Commission (European Commission, 2003). Relations soon expanded beyond the areas of trade and investment and financial/technical assistance. As a result a wide range of topics have appeared on the agendas of dialogues between Europe and China. These have ranged from science to market regulation, education to information society, anti-terrorism to sustainable development. In expanding to include a multitude of sectors, relations have led to more robust and regular political dialogues, with the establishment of institutionalized exchanges. A number of sectoral agreements have been developed in areas ranging from global challenges such as the environment and illegal migration through to basic and applied scientific research and technological co-operation.

It should be noted that the agenda of US-EU relations has also been globalized. Discussions often involve crises and circumstances outside of Europe, for example over Iran, Sudan (Darfur), Africa, Israel-Palestine, North Korea, China, nonproliferation and a broad range of non-traditional security issues. These have occurred despite the tensions over the Iraq War in 2003. David Shambaugh and Gudrun Wacker concluded that the internationalization of transatlantic relations has ironically added new "glue" to the relationship.

China's increasing overseas interests and influence in the world mean it has begun to take measures to strengthen cooperation with Europe on international matters. As the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Song (2012) said, China-EU relations have gone beyond the bilateral scope and acquired important international influence. The key to driving forward the relationship is to build the appropriate mechanisms that allow the two sides to find consensus on international matters.

d. Institutions

Institutions are the approaches put in place to support cooperation between countries. The institutionalization of foreign relations has been a trend of international politics since the end of the Second World War. Developed countries have established various intergovernmental and transnational networks in addition to intensive cooperation in international organizations, all aimed at speeding up solutions to problems and consolidating their bilateral political relationships. Through long-term dialogues, discussions and negotiations, the representatives, either from governments or other

groups such as from civil society, have grown to understand each other. This has allowed them to develop better and more constructive relations.

The institutionalization of the EU-Chinese relationship has greatly accelerated in the past ten years. The two sides have put in place a cooperative framework, led by an annual summit and supported by a high-level strategic dialogue, a high-level economic and trade dialogue and a high-level people-to-people dialogue. These dialogues and consultation mechanisms in various fields have increased from 19 to more than 60.

In comparison with the US-EU dialogues, the China-EU dialogues are not specific and prospective enough in many sectors. The US-EU dialogues even include a semi-annual official dialogue on Asia. This is in fact largely about China and owes its existence to the failed attempt by the EU to lift its arms embargo against China in 2005. Meanwhile, China and the EU have no similar mechanism for discussing the US. In addition, the US and the EU have committed themselves to sharing responsibility for other regions of the world as a means by which to reduce the risk of regional conflict in areas such as the Korean peninsula, Taiwan and the South China Sea (European Council, 2006). Neither China or the EU has ever clearly committed to working together in such a way, although the '2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation' included commitments that they should enhance consultations on Africa, Central Asia, Latin America and the respective neighborhoods of the EU and China (European Commission and Government of China, 2013). One area where progress has been made is on African issues where the EU, China and African countries have developed trilateral cooperation and dialogues in large part thanks to the rapid development of relations between China and Africa (European Council, 2008: 7). Nevertheless, wider efforts at building such relations remain weak. Even the academic or quasi-official dialogues between China and the EU – known as Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogues – lack substance as they do not drill down into the substance and detail as happens with analysis of China within the Europe-US dialogues.

3. How to strengthen the political ties between the EU and China

Analysis of developments in the areas of high politics, low politics, political values and institutions shows a clear difference in scale and intensity between the China-EU political relationship and that of the transatlantic relationship. This is in no small part because of US involvement in the battles in Europe during the two World Wars and its role in providing Marshall Plan aid to Western Europe in the immediate years after 1945. The US continues to protect Europe's security with its nuclear umbrella, and through NATO ties European countries closely to the US. Traditional security has been the cornerstone of their political relationship. On the other side, China adheres to a "non-alignment" foreign policy principle, it is geographically far from Europe, which means that on high politics matters EU-Chinese relations could not, for the foreseeable future, be deeper than the US-EU one. The disparity in values between the EU and China also seems unlikely to change anytime soon. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama showed that controversies and conflicts over human rights issues are likely to remain.

However, on matters of low politics and institutions there is the potential for a breakthrough in the EU-China political relationship. As we have seen, the increasing scale of economic exchanges between the two sides combined with deepening contacts and communication on matters of low politics have been greatly strengthened. The institutions and mechanisms that allow for dialogue have also grown and matured. China is dedicated to rising peacefully and hopes to build “communities of interests” by enlarging and deepening shared interests with Western countries, Europe in particular (Bijia, 2012). As a result of the intensive communication between the EU and China, many detailed economic, social and non-traditional security problems have been addressed or processed through an institutionalized approach. Positive experiences from such cooperation can lead to spill-over into the high politics and value categories, thus comprehensively widening and improving the bilateral political relationship. This would mirror some of the experience of European integration.

It is clear that the EU and China cannot simply work as strategic partners bilaterally. They will need to work together in multilateral settings because the interests of the EU and China converge on many issues of global governance. Within a globalized economic system, the range of low politics issues covered in negotiations between the EU and China has been of the same width as that in the transatlantic relationship.² However, there are still some gaps. Firstly, the depth of cooperation between the USA and EU is more substantial and interdependent, in no small part as a result of the longer period of time the two have been engaged in close relations. The EU and US are the top 2 economic entities making up nearly half of the world’s GDP and 30% of its trade. Though the trade and mutual investment between the EU and China is growing rapidly, there is still a long way to go before it matches that between the EU and USA. Secondly, on international matters the transatlantic relationship is a truly global partnership. Former President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso stated in 2011 that he hoped to make the EU-US relationship more outward-looking, engaging more with third parties including powers such as Brazil, Russia, India and China (Delegation of the EU to the USA, 2011). In the meantime, the EU and China have developed a regional partnership that allows them to discuss common bilateral issues between themselves.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Comparing and analyzing the transatlantic and China-EU political relationships lead to the following three suggestions.

- Focusing cooperation on issues of low politics: there is little prospect for improved relations on areas such as traditional security and human rights issues, meaning the EU and China should discuss and work on areas that offer more room for feasible political cooperation such as common rules on market regulation and technical matters, explore ways to improve global financial management, and continue to coordinate their positions on climate change.

² The EU-US cooperation by sector focus on justice and home affairs, energy and energy security, environment cooperation, science and technology cooperation, education and training, transport and aviation, development cooperation and non proliferation. For further details see: http://eeas.europa.eu/us/sector_en.htm.

- Strengthening security dialogues and cooperation about third countries: the EU member states and China should develop specific dialogues designed to improve their approaches to issues connected to third countries and regions such as Africa, and assisting each other on consular matters or protecting overseas interests of both sides in the event of emergencies in a third country.
- Improving cooperation in international institutions: the EU and China should work together more closely in the wide range of international organisations where they are present in order to ensure these organisations function more effectively and to ensure that third countries such as the USA support and respect the work of such organisations and so obey international law.

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