

UACES 42nd Annual Conference

Passau, 3-5 September 2012

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**THE EU'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH CHINA: THE RHETORIC
AND REALITY OF DIPLOMACY IN THE NEW 'GREAT POWER POLITICS'**

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Paper presented at the UACES Annual Conference, Passau, Germany
3-5 September 2012

The research and preparation for this paper was supported by the European Union Jean Monnet Programme through the Multilateral Research Network 'The Diplomatic System of the European Union: Evolution, Change and Challenges' (<http://dseu.lboro.ac.uk>)

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the rhetoric of 'strategic partnership' in the EU's diplomacy towards China and the reality of EU-China relations in an increasingly multi-polar world. These two aspects of 'strategic diplomacy' are seen as reflecting a combination of internal forces and external opportunities or constraints. In this context, the paper deals with four issues: (1) The evolution of strategic diplomacy in the post-Lisbon EU; (2) Strategic diplomacy and strategic partnerships in EU external policy post-Lisbon; (3) The prospects for an EU strategic diplomacy in a world of 'great powers'; (4) The EU-China strategic partnership and the diplomatic challenges to which it has been subject. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the extent to which the EU's new diplomatic machinery has met the challenges posed by EU-China relations in an increasingly multi-polar world arena. A major conclusion is that in EU-China relations there is a two-level diplomatic process: strategic rhetoric may provide a broad framework and discourse with which to characterize relations, but strategic management is the key to the maintenance and development of the relationship.

Introduction

One of the key tests facing the emerging diplomatic system of the European Union is that of developing a strategic diplomacy. By this we mean a diplomacy that focuses on the pursuit of a strategic vision for the Union, and that provides principles and guidelines to shape the positioning of the EU both in the global arena more generally and in relation to key strategic partners.

Such a diplomacy is demanding and must by implication be underpinned by a number of key elements: a stable institutional base, a means of extracting and coordinating the relevant resources both at the European level and from the Member States, a unified strategic narrative or vision, the capacity to adapt this narrative in the face of major international trends, and the capacity to both prioritise and target EU actions in a coordinated fashion on key relationships, partners or activities.

Each of the key aspects of this formulation will be explored in the paper. First, it will explore the nature and development of an EU strategic diplomacy, drawing attention to the ways in which the developments of the past two post-Lisbon years can be seen as contributing to the development of such a diplomacy and an underpinning strategic narrative. The emphasis here will be on the institutional base and the resources available for EU diplomacy, but also on the rhetoric that has accompanied the development of the new structures and practices. Second the paper will explore the implications of these developments for the EU's pursuit of strategic partnerships and strategic relationships. Third, it will look at the impact of systemic change in the global arena, and especially the emergence of new powers in an increasingly (but not completely) multipolar system. Finally, it will explore the relationship between the EU and China, and especially the fate of the EU's strategic partnership with Beijing, in order to test the ways in which the combination of change within the EU and change in the global arena have supported or hindered the development of a strategic approach towards EU-China diplomacy.

The conclusion to the paper is that in effect two levels of diplomatic activity can be seen in the EU's approach to China. The first is strategic in the sense that the EU has developed and sustained a strategic rhetoric in dealing not only with China but with other strategic partners. The second level embodies strategy as management, with a focus on the ways in which the EU has attempted to deal with Beijing on a day to day and month to month basis. The problem for the EU is that this multi-level approach, which is not unknown in other (national) diplomacies, has not yet effectively been linked and crystallised in a way that creates mutual reinforcement between the two levels. The question is whether this can be done at all, and thus whether the EU can ever aspire to exercise the diplomatic influence appropriate to a 'great power'.

Towards a Strategic Diplomacy for the European Union?

As noted above, there is a set of characteristics or key elements that must be provided in order for a diplomacy to deserve the label 'strategic'. Here, we

evaluate the extent to which the EU's emerging system of diplomacy can provide these elements, and the ways in which such a diplomacy might in general be directed (this and the following sections draw on Allen and Smith 2012).

In the first place, strategic diplomacy requires a stable *institutional base*. The Lisbon Treaty sets out a new framework for EU diplomacy, centred on the interaction of several key institutions or services: the External Action Service (EEAS) led by the High Representative (also a Vice-President of the Commission) (HRVP), the President of the European Council (PEC), the Commission and the European Parliament. This new framework has actually been the source of considerable flux and potential disruption in its first year of existence, since its construction and operationalisation has entailed complex negotiations about financing and conditions of service, substantial transfers of personnel – especially from the Commission and the Council Secretariat – to the EEAS, the need to recruit significant numbers of diplomats from national services, and the challenge of establishing a new diplomatic culture in conditions where existing cultures and organisations need to be merged or re-engineered.

Not surprisingly, this process has engendered significant uncertainties and often suspicions among those involved. Despite the consistent effort to create new working habits and mechanisms of coordination, there has been a constant threat of fragmentation, and of competition for 'turf' among both new and existing institutions. A sustained effort of 'internal diplomacy' has been needed to keep the machine moving, and there remain areas of instability within the overall framework. There is the danger or the reality of fragmentation, and this is especially challenging in the face of external turbulence such as that created by the 'Arab Spring' and conflicts within the EU's 'southern neighbourhood'. The uncertainties have often centred on the EEAS, since on the one hand it has needed to create a 'space' for itself in the midst of competition and (sometimes) predation by other agencies and on the other hand it has been seen by them either as 'DG RELEX continued' or as an essentially subservient arm of the President of the European Council.

This uncertainty clearly affects the capacity of the EEAS to contribute its full voice to the development of a strategic vision, and it is compounded by issues relating to *the capacity to extract resources* with which to support such a strategic vision. We have already noted the problems of coordination that have become apparent within the first year and a half of the new machine's operation, and it is clear that these relate in substantial degree to the perceptions that different groups have of the role to be played by the EEAS. Is it the potential leader of an integrated and strategic EU foreign policy, or is it no more and no less than a 'service', with the role of supporting other institutions (primarily the Commission and the Council/European Council) through analysis, briefing and the preparation of negotiations?

The Treaty is not much help in deciding this question, since it implies a complex and issue-specific division of labour between the major institutions and agencies. It is clear that the EEAS is the major repository of diplomatic expertise within the system, and thus that it claims the key human resources; but the development of 'foreign relations' groups within the Commission, both generally and by specific DGs, and the claim by the PEC to be the key external representative of the EU at the level of heads of State or government, are both important qualifications to this position. So is the brute fact that for many of the EU's external links, the key policy base is within the Commission, accompanied by much of the relevant expertise and by funding that sometimes dwarfs that available to the EEAS. A particular problem is posed by the persistent if muted contest for control of resources at the level of EU delegations in third countries, where the requirements of policies (for example development) still largely controlled by the Commission are at odds with the needs of effective diplomatic representation in specific areas. If the EEAS is to establish a firm identity as the 'foreign ministry' of the EU then the person delegated to be foreign minister (HRVP), in practice if not formally in name, needs to be able to extract the necessary resources. However the capacity to extract resources for the conduct of diplomacy is contested – and that reflects the position just in Brussels, without taking into consideration the diplomatic resources and efforts of EU Member States.

This latter factor is important not only in resource terms but also when it comes to the *development of a strategic narrative or vision* by the EU system. The Treaty seems clear that this is the responsibility of the PEC and the EEAS, directed by the HRVP, working together – the PEC having the responsibility for representation and communication at the highest levels, and the EEAS the task of supporting this and then of implementing the relevant actions. There is an ambiguity here, in that the PEC seems to have the responsibility primarily for representation, whereas three other key facets of any diplomacy – preparatory briefing, communication and negotiation – lie with the EEAS or (on ‘pillar one’ issues) with the Commission.

This uneasy division of labour means that the development of any EU strategic narrative is a complex exercise embodying both competition for ‘voice’ and the coordination of the ‘voices’ that are involved. Such problems are not unique to the EU, of course, but they take a particular form where the diplomatic machine itself is in the process of gestation and where the growth of an agreed division of labour is as much a political as it is an administrative process. There is also a potential for tension in the fact that the new diplomatic system calls for the addition of ‘politics’ to long-standing areas of EU external policy which have proceeded on the basis of technocracy or functional expertise; putting these elements together in a strategic narrative is likely to be costly both in terms of the coordination process and in terms of the resulting adjustment of standard operating procedures in (for example) the Commission.

As a result, and also as a reflection of the demands placed on various participants by the combined impact of the Arab Spring and the global financial crisis, there has been no significant development of an EU strategic narrative during the first years of the system. At some stage, there will have to be an overt debate about this, however. For example, the need to review the European Security Strategy in 2013 is one constraint. But it is also the case that the ESS is no longer – if it ever was – the appropriate basis for development of a comprehensive narrative for the EU’s external relations. So

there is a bigger and more challenging task to undertake, and it is close at hand, relating to *adaptation of existing strategies to changing demands*.

This in turn links to issues of resourcing already discussed. The PEC has very limited resources with which to undertake such a review and adaptation, and thus it is likely to call upon the EEAS for major inputs into the discussion. This was the case in September 2010 when the European Council, chaired by the PEC, directed the HRVP and the EEAS to “evaluate the prospects of relations with all strategic partners, setting out in particular EU interests and possible leverage to achieve them” (European Council 2010). Within the EEAS, the Strategic Planning Office was only fully established in September 2011, and it in turn has strictly limited resources with which to address the issues. Clearly, there is a major need for the kind of creative coordination that will take advantage of expertise in national diplomatic services, in the Commission and elsewhere to build a wide-ranging strategic vision. But this will come up against the plurality of ‘voices’ and the issues of competition already outlined in this paper. Since there is no realistic prospect of greatly increased resourcing for the EEAS in the next two or three years, it is legitimate to wonder how much in the way of strategic thinking will emerge over that period. The initiative to rethink summitry and the EU’s approach to strategic partners and their demands was interrupted by the crisis in the Eurozone but the HRVP’s reports delivered in late 2010 and mid 2011 served mainly to illustrate the resource problems that she and the EEAS faced in trying to ‘think strategically’.

The upshot of this discussion is that two key elements exist in an uneasy balance within the framing of strategic diplomacy by the EU. The first is the institutional divisions, tensions and ‘gaps’ that have been noted in this part of the paper, and that constitute a key constraint on the development of a unified narrative, the effective deployment of resources and the adaptation of strategic positions to a changing world. The second is the shifting balance of preferences between EU Member States, who remain diplomatically active (if not hyper-active in some cases and some situations), and the resulting alignments and de-alignments that equally constrain the development of a

unified narrative, the availability of resources and the adaptation of strategy. This is a very general conclusion, and the next section of the paper explores the ways in which it feeds through into a major area of EU diplomatic activity: the pursuit of strategic partnerships and the management of strategic relationships.

The EU's strategic partners and strategic relationships

If there is not likely to be a revolution in strategic thinking within the EU's system of diplomacy – and there are very good reasons not to expect it, and to be cautious about any attempt to set an EU strategic vision in concrete at this time especially – then this is likely to affect the EU's approach to its key *strategic partners and strategic relationships*. One potential pay-off from an effective strategic diplomacy is in the capacity it creates for management of key partners and relationships within a framework that indicates priorities and preferences.

The EU has over the past twenty years set a lot of store by the designation of 'strategic partners' and the identification of key requirements for their management. Thus for example there are four designated 'strategic partners' in the Americas alone, among them the most important of all, the USA. But simply to state this indicates one of the problems that has emerged with the concept of 'strategic partnerships': they are not all created equal and they certainly have not converged on a single template or set of essential elements for their construction and maintenance (for a detailed critical review see Renard 2011). The concept has been stretched, in some cases almost beyond recognition, and this was recognised by the PEC when he organised the special European Council meeting referred to above

One of the more positive results of the strategic partnership review has been – inevitably – a recognition that differentiation, prioritisation and a focus on issues as well as on partners is an appropriate way forward. A baseline definition of 'strategic partners' would be those countries with which regular summits at Head of State/Government level are held, and thus with which the PEC has a continuing relationship. With these countries or groupings, the

issue for the EU is that of focusing and prioritising the relations embodied in the summit, and also of maintaining what might be described as the 'infrastructure' of the partnerships. This 'infrastructure' varies substantially in depth and scope between key partners, but it is rightly the preserve either of the EEAS or of the Commission, depending on the nature of the dialogues and negotiations that are taking place at any given point, rather than of the PEC.

If we accept that this is the baseline from which the EU can work on its range of strategic partnerships, and that this is the emerging pattern, then it becomes possible to envisage other elements of what might be seen as a strategic framework for managing relationships or issues. Other key partners are to be dealt with at different levels and often in relation to specific issues where they are particularly engaged or significant; thus the EU's group of emerging power partners could be extended considerably beyond the BRICs and distinguished from the three 'traditional' or cold war strategic partners (the US, Japan and Canada) whose long established relationships with the EU would also benefit from a strategic reconsideration to take account of changing economic and political circumstances. Specific issues will thus often entail the construction of appropriate coalitions or networks of partners who can be involved in the defence or the promotion of EU positions (or who might be used as sounding boards on which to test the practicality of EU positions). In this process, it seems inevitable that EU Member States will, also be engaged, given their own existing and often long-standing strategic relationships with a very wide range of partners. Here the role of the EEAS as a 'diplomatic entrepreneur' might be seen as a key part of the development of a diplomatic strategy (as opposed to a more centralised strategic diplomacy) (Hemra, Whitman and Raines 2011).

As already noted, one of the key elements in this rather pragmatic version of strategic diplomacy is the process of summit diplomacy. Summits can be characterised as strategic occasions, since they bring together the key elements of diplomacy – representation, communication and negotiation – in specific combinations and at specific times. They also throw into sharp relief

the division of labour entailed in the practice – as opposed to the theory – of strategic diplomacy in the EU context.

The primary representation role in the context of summits lies with the PEC, whose cabinet is also the key focus for the conduct of the summit process. The PEC is also responsible for communication – getting the EU's message across, often in conjunction with the President of the Commission (who inevitably will represent many of the key concrete policy concerns entailed in a given relationship). The EEAS has a major responsibility for the preparation of summits and for the execution of commitments undertaken at the summit, including implementation of agreements and the negotiation of agreements that are set in train at summits, but here they have to share responsibility with the Commission, especially on 'pillar one' issues.

One important possibility that emerges from this discussion of strategic partnerships, strategic relationships and the summit process is that a *de facto* strategic diplomacy is emerging or will emerge from the need to service, to conduct and to manage the consequences of summits. This is rather different from the notion of strategic diplomacy as the setting of an explicit and comprehensive framework which then serves as the point of orientation for all subsequent diplomatic activities. Rather, it goes with the grain of what is already there, and takes the EU's emerging diplomatic system as the means by which the conduct of summits in its broadest sense can be enhanced. The jury is obviously out on the extent to which this version of strategic diplomacy has come into existence, but it provides us with one intriguing way of following the development of the EU's diplomacy more generally, within a framework of understanding about the requirements of strategic diplomacy. In particular, it raises a key question: what is the relationship between (on the one side) strategic diplomacy in its most ambitious sense and (on the other side) what might be described as strategic management of relations with key partners?

The EU, Strategic Diplomacy and a World of 'Great Powers'

The next step in the argument is to relate the discussion of 'internal' EU forces shaping the nature of its strategic diplomacy with the changing nature of the

external context within which such a diplomacy must be pursued, and particularly with the emergence of an incompletely multipolar system in which there appear to be a number of actual or potential 'great powers'. We have already noted that this raises questions of selection and differentiation in the development of the EU's strategic partnerships and relationships, but here the emphasis is on the ways in which it affects the potential for EU diplomatic leverage in the world arena more broadly.

Since the end of the Cold War, we have seen a transformation of the diplomatic context. Put simply in terms of system structure, there has been a transition – still not complete by any means – from an apparently unipolar system in which the USA held the whip hand particularly on issues of 'hard security' in the early post-Cold War years. This was followed by a period of considerable disorder in which the structure appeared segmented if not fragmented, and in which power and leverage seemed more and more situationally determined – even in cases where the USA tried to assert its ongoing dominance. In turn, this has been succeeded by a period in which the discussion has centred on the emergence of multipolarity, but that in itself raises a number of important questions. First, how does emergent multipolarity relate to multilateralism – the former being an issue of system structure, the latter a question of the organising principles and predominant practices within the system? Second, how pervasive is the influence of multipolarity itself? Is it a sweeping transformation of the system, or a creeping one in which large areas of international activity remain outside the influence of the broader changes? Third, within this partially transformed context, how does diplomacy take place? If we see diplomacy as the pursuit of representation, communication and negotiation by parties engaged in the global arena, what does it matter (and how does it matter) that there is an increasing element of polarity surrounding the assumptions, institutions and practices of diplomacy itself? One thing is clear in terms of the EU's emerging system of diplomacy: the loss of unchallenged primacy on the part of the USA means that the 'US factor' has become if anything even more pervasive in key areas of the EU's international activity, but has changed in character and become more complex and questionable.

One partial answer to these questions is to be found in the notion of international opportunity structures and the patterns of incentives they create or obstruct (See Smith 2009; also Bretherton and Vogler 2006). During the Cold War, it might be argued that the opportunity structure for many actors was effectively closed, providing little incentive and few openings for self-assertion and constraining even the most powerful diplomatic actors. This did not mean there were no opportunities (consider West German *Ostpolitik* for example) but it did mean that opportunities were very hard-won and could be choked off in short order. In the immediate post-Cold War period, diplomatic opportunities were much more frequent, but so were the risks of miscalculation and the potential costs of failure. With the emergence of an incompletely multipolar world, the opportunity structure for many diplomatic actors has shifted again – it has become more complex, with openings and closings difficult to predict and increasing influence from regional powers as well as global actors. Whilst this discussion has been cast largely in terms of what might be described as ‘high politics’. It is important to note that in the emerging global arena there is a strong and sometimes dominant element of diplomacy centred on sectoral or technical issues, in which the overall distribution of power and institutions can be markedly different, and in which the occurrence or denial of opportunities can follow different patterns from those that characterise the overall power structure.

Alongside major shifts in global opportunity structures, there are occurring important changes to what might be described as diplomatic spaces. The traditional pattern of diplomatic activity, with a specialised diplomatic class operating as a kind of international elite according to a well-recognised set of principles has been replaced by one in which diversity is a key quality, in which there may be widely contrasting approaches to international norms and conventions, and in which the nature of representation, communication and negotiation has both broadened and become subject to significant challenges (Hocking and Smith 2011). This trend produces what has been termed ‘multi-stakeholder diplomacy’ in which established practices and discourses are subverted, and in which new patterns of communication and influence have

been developed. The new diplomatic spaces are hybrid in nature, drawing on multiple sources of expectations, values and institutional forms. Increasingly, they relate to or intersect with established and emergent sets of regimes and institutions – which have themselves long been a major focus of EU international activity (Elgström and Smith forthcoming). When this is combined with an increasingly multipolar overall structure of the world arena, it is clear that the development and pursuit of diplomatic strategies is more open to challenge in the current period than at almost any time in the history of diplomacy.

Where does this leave the EU? As we have seen, the Union has aspired to the establishment of an increasingly integrated diplomatic machine, under the rubric of ‘external action’ – a concept that suits the qualities of the Union, but which also chimes in important ways with the development of the broader context for diplomacy. We have already seen that this emergent EU system of diplomacy is challenged in important ways from within, by the fragmentation of institutions and working practices, in ways that mean it is difficult to generate consistent and authoritative diplomatic positions or strategies. Now it is clear that the EU’s system of diplomacy is challenged from without, by the changing structure of the world arena, by consequential shifts in opportunity structures and by the pressures created as a result of the changing nature of diplomatic spaces. It is clear from the rhetoric of EU diplomacy that the EU wishes to create a manageable space for itself in the midst of this shifting constellation of forces, but it is not clear that the EU has the resources or the leverage with which to achieve this objective. In particular, it is unclear whether the EU has the capacity to formulate meaningful strategic objectives and to deploy the resources with which to pursue and achieve them in the face of resistance.

If it turns out that the EU does not have this capacity, then new light is thrown on the EU’s claim to be a ‘power’ in the emerging multipolar system, alongside other ‘great powers’. As a number of commentators have noted, the EU’s system of diplomacy has the characteristics and resources in many areas of a ‘medium power’ (Hemra, Whitman and Raines 2011) – others have argued that the EU is in effect a ‘small power’ (Toje 2012) and that EU

diplomacy should recognise and respond to that fact of international life. But this is arguably to ignore at least some of the areas in which the EU has a claim to be a significant force within the world arena, and in which there is both a need and a capacity to maintain or develop diplomatic weight. In the next part of this paper, a detailed study of the EU's strategic partnership with China will provide evidence against which both of these positions can be tested.

The EU-China Strategic Partnership

In this part of the paper, the focus is on the development of the EU's strategic diplomacy towards China since the mid-1990s. Three aspects are considered: first, the development of an EU strategy as expressed primarily in key documents and public statements; second, the notion of 'strategic partnership' and the extent to which this reflects the deployment of diplomatic resources and activities by the EU; finally, the ongoing negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and China. This part of the paper effectively provides the empirical base from which evaluation of the EU's strategic diplomacy can then be undertaken. The material in this part of the paper draws upon previous work by the author and by Huaixian Xie (Smith and Xie 2011).

Strategy

In assessing the extent to which the EU has a 'China strategy' it is necessary to consider not only the public record and statements of a strategic nature but also the underlying coherence and operational effects of the EU's policies. Thus this section explores first of all the 'public record' of EU strategic declarations in order to uncover key themes in the EU's presentation of its positions and aims (see also Cameron 2009). One key element in this assessment will be the ways in which the EU's efforts have chimed or not with China's strategic objectives; thus this section will briefly consider the nature of China's international strategy and the ways in which this 'fits' with the EU's aims and objectives.

The EU-China diplomatic relationship was first formally established in 1975, and the first EEC-China trade agreement was concluded in 1978. The initial bilateral ties were 'explicitly economic, though implicitly (especially for China) strategic' (Scott 2007: 23). With the growth of EU-China trade during the early 1980s, the need for a new and more comprehensive agreement was met with the EU-China Trade and Cooperation Agreement of 1985. This established a legal framework for the bilateral relationship and for the next twenty years it reflected an EC/EU approach in which trade was the top priority. Ironically, in the view of later developments, part of its purpose was to redress a trade imbalance in which the EC ran a surplus with China (Fox and Godement 2009: 19, EEC-China 1985, chapter 1). The key aim of the agreement was to 'intensify and diversify their [EC/China] trade and actively develop economic and technical cooperation in line with their mutual interests' (EEC-China 1985). The agreement also established an EC-China Joint Committee to manage the relationship – a body that remains significant in the evolution of EU-China relations. It appears that while the EC had rather broad ambitions for the agreement, the Chinese saw it as primarily about increasing their economic ties with Europe (Griese 2006, Gosset 2002). Notably, the agreement was explicit in allowing EC Member States freely to 'engage in bilateral activities in the field of economic cooperation and to conclude new economic cooperation agreements with China where appropriate' (European Council 2007).

The year 1989 saw further important developments in the EC's approach to China, catalysed by the Tiananmen Square incident but also more generally by the end of the Cold War. Although Tiananmen did not interfere fundamentally with the development of the EC-China economic relationship (Algieri 2002: 64), it forced European policy-makers to put the economic relationship into the broader context of social, political and humanitarian concerns – a context that resonated in all subsequent EC/EU policy papers. In addition, European policy-makers increasingly shaped their approach in the realisation that China's emerging role in the global community should be shaped by 'coordinated commitment from governments worldwide' (European

Commission 1995) and thus that China's integration into the global community and global institutions should be a key aspect of any EU position.

The 1995 Communication *A Long Term Policy for China-Europe Relations* thus occupies a key place in the development of EU thinking about the relationship. For one commentator it was 'the first important signal that Brussels had started to anticipate a growing political influence' (Holslag 2009: 3) and to set long term objectives in this light. The Communication set out to establish a new market based relationship with China 'for the future competitiveness of European business' (Barysch et al 2005: 7), to further the integration of China into the international community and particularly to push for China's membership of the WTO, and to contribute practically to China's internal economic, political and social reform so that the Chinese economy would continue to grow and to open itself to European business. The aim of the approach was to focus on problem solving and to do this within the context of common ground and mutual interests (European Commission 1995, Möller 2002: 22). It was clear that the development of the EU-China relationship was seen in a global context: 'Europe's relations with China are bound to be a cornerstone in Europe's external relations, both with Asia and globally' (European Commission 1995).

Given the development of the EU's broader foreign and security policy structures during the early and mid-1990s, it was also clear that the development of policies towards key interlocutors such as China was a key part of the EU's emerging international role. But this contained a number of actual or potential contradictions, especially since the EU was more generally concerned to position itself as a 'normative power' with a particular emphasis on human rights and connected issues – issues that were less comfortably dealt with in the EU-China context. When this was combined with the need to make progress on a number of pressing economic issues, the concern of the 1995 Communication to reconcile normative and material interests seems clear. It was also clear that the 'European' position contained a number of tensions between European institutions and the interests of Member States,

although the Communication talked confidently about synergies between Member States and EU activities (European Commission 1995, D1).

The 'long term policy' set out in the 1995 Communication lasted for three years (although many of its principles are still extant in EU policies). In 1998, the Commission produced a second Communication, *Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China* (European Commission 1998). A change of EU position was rationalised on the one hand by the potential impact of Economic and Monetary Union and of the eastern enlargement of the EU, and on the other hand by the pace of change in China itself: 'the EU must be ready at short notice to adapt its policy to any unforeseen changes promoted by the speed and scope of China's transition' (European Commission 1998: 25). As Griese notes, 'from 1998 onwards the Commission is very careful in giving precise time references – at least in the title – for the permanence of its China policy' (Griese 2006: 550). In 1998, the EU was worried that China might slow down or even reverse its reform process in the wake of the death of Deng Hsiao Ping, the Asian financial crisis and the reversion of Hong Kong. The Communication also responded to issues arising in the negotiation of China's WTO entry, which had begun in 1997. As a result, the Communication proposed a 'renewed' and 'upgraded' approach in which China would be further engaged bilaterally and multilaterally whilst further support would be given to its transition process (European Commission 1998: 5).

One of the essential elements of the policies proposed in the 1998 Communication is their comprehensive nature, covering political, economic, social and regional security issues and encompassing contacts at several levels: bilateral, regional and multilateral (and thus linking with the EU's inter-regional approaches to Asia-Pacific, most obviously the Asia-Europe Meeting established in 1996). The Communication proposed annual summits between the EU and China, like those already established between Beijing and other partners such as Japan, Russia and the US. Dialogue with China would in turn benefit the inter-regional dialogue with Asia-Pacific and increase the EU's 'overall influence in the region' (European Commission 1998: 7). In accord

with the request of the European Council, the Communication also pursued the aim of establishing a constructive dialogue with China on the issues of human rights and the rule of law. The general intention was to work towards a situation in which China would be a 'strong, stable and open partner' (European Commission 1998: 11), but not to increase the pressure on Beijing in sensitive areas of domestic policy. In the realm of global economic relations, the EU's support for China's WTO accession remained strong – not least because it was also seen as linking closely with potential domestic reform in China itself, in the cause of removing obstacles to trade and improving China's adherence to the rule-based multilateral order.

By 2001, the Commission felt it necessary to follow up the 1998 Communication with another, this time explicitly building on the framework established three years earlier. The 2001 Communication *EU Strategy Towards China: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a More Effective EU Policy* (European Commission 2001) was framed most obviously by the impending entry of China into the WTO, and by the linked need to provide 'a comprehensive and forward-looking review' of the 1998 policy (European Commission 2001: 3). Notably, the title of the Communication for the first time referred to this in terms of EU strategy, defining this as including both short term and long term action points and recalling the long term objectives set out in 1998. Notably also, the paper pointed out a number of difficulties in EU-China relations, referring to China as 'both part of the problem and the solution' and as 'not always an easy partner for the EU' (European Commission 2001: 7). So the issue was not just one of dialogue and accommodation – or at least, so it seemed.

Only two years after the 2001 Communication, the Commission was back in action on the EU-China partnership, this time with the Communication *A Maturing Partnership – Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China Relations* (European Commission 2003). According to at least one analysis, this Communication represented an effort to 'mark a shift...from traditional state-to-state relations up to the European level' (Fox and Godement 2009: 33). Its other, explicit aim was to initiate an upgrading of the bilateral EU-

China relationship to a 'strategic partnership' across a broad range of issue areas, anticipating developments not only in the EU (especially the 2004 enlargement and institutional reform) but also in China (for example, the installation of a 'successor generation' of leaders and China's increasing assertiveness in world affairs). The Communication also referred to a host of more immediate problems that demanded coordinated action, such as the threat of SARS. The 2003 Communication was later paralleled (but not mirrored) by China's only formal 'communication' on this subject, the 2003 *EU Policy Paper* (Chinese Government 2003), which echoed the perception of the partnership as strategic in nature. As William Callahan has pointed out, the Chinese *Policy Paper* can also be seen as an exercise in 'refracting' the language used by the EU in its Communications, and as setting an agenda that carefully kept the developing relationship on ground that was comfortable for Beijing (Callahan 2007).

The 2003 Communication is not only notable for its 'European' focus and its emphasis on strategic changes; it also goes much further than its predecessors in setting out the infrastructure of EU-China relations. Its implicit benchmark for 'maturity' seems to be the quantity of EU-China dialogues, especially sectoral processes and agreements. There is no doubt that by 2003 there was such a growing infrastructure (see the following section), but questions remained about its efficiency and effectiveness. And crucially in terms of the discussion here, the question arises as to whether the strategic quality of a relationship can be measured by quantity rather than by quality of exchanges. As one critique put it, 'the proliferation of programmes, dialogues and agreements created the danger of loss of focus and strategic vision: there is little linkage between the various dialogues, their short-term objectives sometimes clash, and they do not always serve the EU's overall objectives as defined in its strategy papers' (Barysch et al 2005: 8-9). The description of the relationship as 'mature' in the title of the 2003 Communication thus raises as many questions as it answered.

As it happened, the 30th anniversary of the establishment of EC/EU-China relations took place at a time when the relationship was anything but

harmonious, and when trade and diplomatic disputes were notable (Smith and Xie 2009). But by 2006, the Commission was again ready to launch another Communication, this time entitled *EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities* (European Commission 2006a). Alongside this paper was issued a working paper on EU-China trade and investment (*A policy paper on EU-China Trade and Investment: Competition and Partnership*) (European Commission 2006b) which picked up what had become a central theme of the Commission's approach to global trade and investment issues: the need for the EU to assert its competitiveness and to hold others to their commitments (see for example Mandelson 2006).

The 2006 Communication can be seen as a more realistic and pragmatic response to the growing range and scope of EU-China relations, and especially to the rapidly increasing trade deficit which had already led to some sharp disputes (see following section). The emphasis was as much on competition as on partnership, and on the use of 'sticks' in the form of WTO rules and other devices as well as on 'carrots'. Amongst other issues, the Communication identified 'a range of obstacles to market access and skewed conditions of competition' that limited the benefits to the EU from the growing economic relationship, and failure by Beijing to fulfil all of its WTO obligations. The result was that in crucial sectors such as telecommunications, financial services and manufacturing, EU companies found it difficult to invest in or export to China (European Commission 2006a: 7, 2006b: 9). The anticipated dynamic effects of WTO accession had not been realised, and in some ways it appeared that WTO accession marked the end of China's reform process rather than its beginning (Interview with EU official, Beijing, April 2009). Key issues such as intellectual property rights and the investment climate were particularly identified as areas of concern (ibid). In consequence, the Communication sets out a range of potential remedies that might be sought by the EU, including not only dialogue and bilateral negotiation but also use of the WTO dispute settlement mechanism (European Commission 2006b: 13). One symptom of the problems was the continuing refusal of the EU to grant China Market Economy Status in the context of the WTO (Smith and Xie 2009).

The 2006 Communication also set out a range of areas in which the EU would pursue continued dialogue with China: human rights and democracy promotion, and a range of sectors in which there were established dialogue arrangements (European Commission 2006a: 4). Not only this, but it presents a long list of areas in which cooperation with China is vital to key EU global objectives: sustainable energy supplies, environment and climate change, employment and social issues, international development and governance especially in Africa. Africa in particular has claimed increasing attention as an arena for EU-China cooperation (and implicitly, competition), and in 2008 the Commission was moved to present a Communication on the subject (European Commission 2008). One area of security policy remained especially neuralgic in the relationship: the debate over whether to modify or lift the arms embargo imposed on China in the wake of the Tienanmen Square events in 1989 (see next section); the 2006 Communication promised only continued dialogue on this issue. There was, though a clear bottom line to the Communication: it proposed the start of negotiations for a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which 'should encompass the full scope of the bilateral relationship' and update the 1985 Trade and Cooperation Agreement. This was presented as 'the practical basis for the comprehensive strategic partnership' (European Commission 2006a: 9), but it was apparent that both the political and the economic dimensions of such an agreement would be full of potential pitfalls.

Partnership

As noted earlier, the EU is engaged in a ceaseless search for partners in the global arena: simply put, this is part of the essence of the EU, and links very strongly with embedded multilateralism and the EU's self-image as a 'force for good' in the world. In respect of China, this search has so far extended over at least twenty and possibly thirty years. What can be said about the ways in which the partnership has been developed, and its key characteristics, not only in general but also as revealed in key episodes of EU-China relations? Judgements on these issues will provide further evidence for analysis of the

extent to which the EU's China policies reflect the practice of strategic diplomacy.

One approach to the general problem of partnership between EU and China is to examine the changing scope and scale of the partnership. This is not the same as examining the scope and scale of EU-China relations as a whole; rather it entails an assessment of the ways in which formal partnership activities have arisen, been institutionalised and spread. One clear trend in this context is the increasing scope and scale of partnership activities. From the initial stages where the concern was very largely with trade promotion and trade defence (on both sides), it is possible now to discern a relationship which is formalised over a wide variety of sectors and at a number of levels (Crossick and Reuter 2007). The key institutional elements of this growth will be examined below, but here it is possible to note that both the scope and scale of the partnership has been growing, that it has also been encapsulated in successive EU strategy papers, and that EU institutions have given their support to this expansion. The partnership is pursued at the bilateral level, within a variety of 'mini-lateral' and multilateral inter-regional contexts, and at the level of global multilateral organisations such as the UN and the WTO. Most recently, the partnership has been expanded (at least on the EU side) to encompass 'third party' issues such as the mutual engagement of the EU and China in Africa, and to explore the possibilities of cooperation and/or dialogue at the local or regional level in that continent.

The partnership has also become increasingly institutionalised. The EU has typically tried to develop a dense institutional network around its key international partnerships, with the aim of stabilising them and of making them manageable. EU-China relations constitute the partnership that (apart from that with the US) has had the longest and most extensive history of institutionalisation (Algieri 2002, 2008). As a result, a map of the relationship would need to cover the following institutional elements (among others): the annual summits and accompanying political dialogues; meetings of the troika with the Chinese leadership on an annual or biannual basis; meetings in the context of successive presidencies of the Council of the EU; meetings in

Beijing between EU Heads of Mission and the Chinese Foreign Minister; strategic dialogue meetings; meetings of political directors and regional directors; a host of expert level meetings covering such issues as human rights, migration and trafficking, non-proliferation and arms exports and more general Asian affairs; Joint Committee Meetings in the context of the 1985 Trade and Cooperation Agreement; Working groups on economic issues involving officials at a variety of levels; and more than twenty sectoral dialogues covering both highly technical areas and those which are much more heavily politicised (the latter including energy and environmental issues) (Algieri 2008: 70. See also Cameron 2009). This is a formidable 'menu', but it is subject to the criticism already mentioned, that there is no clear strategic direction or linkage of the many activities listed. So the partnership has become more institutionalised, but it is not clear that it is more effectively institutionalised.

For this there might be a variety of explanations. One is that the institutionalisation process is essentially responsive to new issues arising on the EU-China agenda. Another might be that in some areas of partnership, the interests and presence of the EU Member States are inevitably more obtrusive, and that this lends a different tone and direction to the activities undertaken. An unanswered question (at least in the context of this paper) is whether the pattern that has emerged reflects consensus and a process of 'social learning' among the EU and Chinese leadership, or essentially the application of mechanisms that the EU has developed elsewhere, such as dialogues and sectoral working groups. Another question that arises is the relationship between this framework and other EU-China encounters. A brief listing of these might include inter-regional encounters within the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and in the context of such Asia-Pacific bodies as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the UN system in general and especially the General Assembly, and a range of multilateral bodies of which the most prominent might be the World Trade Organisation and global climate change negotiations (Balme and Bridges 2008, Laatikainen and Smith 2006).

This raises the issue of differential commitment within the partnership framework. If (maybe) we are witnessing the application of established EU 'fixes' for the EU-China relationship, how much can we infer that the EU and the Chinese are equally committed to the partnership and its component activities? And to what extent is that commitment subject to 'external' forces (for example, the gravitational pull of EU-US and EU-China relations, which is always likely to be strong, or EU-Russia and China-Russia relations)? In this context, it is relevant to note that Chinese views of the changing global arena gave seeming priority to EU-China relations during 2003-2004, but since then appear to have reverted quite strongly to a fixation on the USA (Barber 2009, Zaborowski 2006). The US not only takes a different and more assertive line than the EU on a number of US-China issues (for example, Taiwan, Tibet), but also has a great deal more to offer and threaten in areas related to 'hard power' than the EU. According to Fox and Godement, the Chinese are well aware of the divisions within the EU about a range of sensitive issues, and thus tend to pursue divide and rule policies where they can, whilst their relationship to the US is far more demanding and concentrated (Fox and Godement 2009). In particular, the closer the relationship gets to issues of 'hard security', the more the Chinese see no cohesive EU position; rather they can see a 'strategic gap' (Wissenbach 2007). This set of arguments is given an additional dimension in the close reading of EU-China dialogues by William Callahan; he interprets the EU-China dialogue in its broadest terms as inscribing new understandings of security onto both their mutual relations and onto international relations more generally, reflecting the EU's self-understanding of its role as that of a 'civilian power' and Chinese self-understandings of their role as a 'non-hegemonic superpower' (Callahan 2007). One of the key implications of this process of 'writing security' in EU-China relations is that the USA can be seen as a hostile Other by both parties. Almost all interpretations of EU-China relations agree on the cooling of the relationship after 2005, perhaps as a reflection of the fact that the EU could not deliver on areas such as its arms embargo (partly at least because of US pressure), and partly because of a linked Chinese perception that the EU was incapable of providing a broader balancing force against the USA in general.

The general texture of the partnership thus raises important questions about scope and scale, institutionalisation and levels of commitment, and mutual learning among the partners. But how does it work when specific issues are involved? In the remainder of this section, the paper deals with the recent negotiating history of the EU-China Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. As noted earlier, this is in many ways an acid test of the progress that has been made towards a working 'strategic partnership' in EU-China relations.

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

As already noted, the major formal expression of partnership between the EU and China remains the Trade and Cooperation Agreement of 1985. In the wake of the calls for a 'strategic partnership' during 2003, and in the context of the thirtieth anniversary of the 1985 agreement, it was therefore no surprise that there were calls for a new and more comprehensive framework agreement. As Benito Ferrero-Waldner, EU Commissioner for External Relations, said in May 2005:

'Both the EU and China have changed beyond recognition in 30 years and so has our relationship. Our existing Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement simply doesn't live up to the dynamism of today's partnership. It's time to reflect the vibrancy of our relations with an ambitious new Agreement that will help us move to a fully-fledged strategic partnership.'

(Press Releases, RAPID, 2005)

For the Commission, this was thus clearly a strategic priority, and one that from the point of view of this paper was clearly connected with the aspiration of a 'strategic partnership'. This general aim was clearly supplemented by the desire to put EU-China relations on a firmer legal footing, and to bring together the range of activities and mechanisms referred to in preceding sections. The process of negotiating such an agreement, designed not only to link a wide range of activities but also to encompass political and even security issues, was bound to be less than straightforward.

And so it has proved. It was clear from the outset that whilst both the EU and China saw value in such an agreement, both hoped that they would be able to extract concessions by linkage between disparate agenda items, to 'create linkages between different areas [so that] they will get the other side to make concession on the issue they care most about' (Barysch et al 2005: 10). The EU, represented by the Commission, clearly wanted the agreement to be as comprehensive as possible, dealing with all issue areas of EU-China relations (International Herald Tribune 2007), including those the Chinese have historically found most difficult, relating to norms, values and dialogues on such areas as human rights (Barysch et al 2005: 10, Fox and Godement 2009: 31, Weske 2007: 4). They also wanted to base the agreement on the principle of 'reciprocal engagement' (Fox and Godement 2009: 12), implying a less unconditional approach to the acceptance of Chinese positions on a range of sensitive issues. This seems to contrast with the Chinese approach, which focuses strongly on trade and cooperation in the traditional sense, and separates the trade and economic issues from the political agreement. The Chinese would also wish to link the negotiations with progress on the issues of market economy status and the arms embargo (see above), a move resisted by the EU (Weske 2007: 4).

Preparations for the negotiations were set in motion during 2005, but a formal declaration on negotiations was not made until the 9th EU-China summit in December 2006, at which point it was noted that the agreement 'will encompass the full scope of [the] bilateral relationship, including enhanced cooperation in political matters' (Council of the EU 2006: 2). But it was also noted that the negotiation of the trade and economic aspects 'will be administered in a relatively independent manner' (ibid), thus bearing out the problems of linkage between the political and the economic aspects of the process. Negotiations were expected to begin in early 2007, and some hopes were expressed that they would be concluded in two to three years (Wu 2006). The negotiations were duly launched by Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner and Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing in Beijing on 17th January 2007, with much talk of their being concluded by January 2009.

As suggested by pre-negotiations, the discussions on economic and political aspects of the PCA have been conducted in relatively independent ways, involving different parts of the Commission and of the Chinese government: thus on trade issues, DG Trade leads with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, while on political issues the lead is with DG RELEX and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Men 2008: 18). Almost immediately, the two parallel sets of talks began to operate to different rhythms, with the political discussions more easily set in motion than the trade negotiations. Predictably, negotiations envisaged as extending over two or three years have also been subject to important fluctuations created by external events: in this case, specifically the Tibet disturbances of Spring and Summer 2008, the demands for a boycott of the Olympic Games in August 2008, and the frostiness caused by Nicolas Sarkozy's meeting with the Dalai Lama in Autumn 2008 (which itself led to the postponement of the scheduled EU-China summit from December 2008 to May 2009).

As noted above, negotiations spread across a wide range of linked issues and over a long period of time are subject to external forces and to political or other changes in the negotiating parties. Thus it is no real surprise that as of Summer 2012, there has been little indication that the PCA will soon be concluded. There has though been significant progress on a range of political issues, whilst the economic aspects (perhaps because more specific and entailing real financial costs or benefits) have been more difficult throughout (Crossick 2009a). On the political front within the EU, the European Parliament has made its voice heard especially on the need to link trade agreements with matters of human rights, environment, sustainable development and social issues (Wortmann-Kool 2009: 11), and outstanding clauses to be agreed as of September 2009 include those on Taiwan and human rights (Crossick 2009b). In the economic field, a range of thorny issues remains open: market access and investment, intellectual property rights, government procurement, environmental and energy clauses, and of course market economy status in the WTO.

This means that although agreement has been reached on a wide range of political clauses and on some economic aspects, there are major aspects of the PCA that remain open to agreement (and disagreement). Many of these issues involve not only the EU and China themselves but also interested 'outsiders' such as the USA, and some of them relate to parts of the world such as Africa that we have already noted as part of the new dynamic of EU-China relations. From the EU perspective, it is important to note that both the negotiations and any subsequent agreement involve all three pillars (to use 'pre-Lisbon' terminology) of the European structure, and also allow for interventions from a variety of organizations and institutions both in Brussels and elsewhere. At all stages – pre-negotiation, negotiation itself, agreement and ratification – this agreement thus poses distinctive problems of scope, scale and complexity. In doing so, it raises important questions about the extent to which the EU has deployed a strategic diplomatic approach towards China.

These questions are given added point by developments during the period since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. In effect, the PCA has been on hold since mid-2009, although the strategic commitment to its conclusion has been maintained. As already noted, the efforts to conduct a strategic review of all of the EU's strategic partnerships have been obscured by more pressing demands, although there has been attention to a number of the relationships on the part of the EEAS and the HR. In effect, the relationship with China has continued to be handled on a multi-agency basis, with the Commission leading the trade effort and coordinating the High Level Economic and Trade Dialogue established in 2008-2009, whilst the HR has assumed responsibility for the High Level Strategic Dialogue which covers foreign and security policy issues. At the same time, Herman Van Rompuy as President of the European Council has represented the Union in the EU-China Summit process along with Commission President Barroso, and has also engaged in high level contacts with Chinese leaders in the context of other international meetings.

Conclusions: From Strategy to Management?

In the early sections of this paper, it was suggested that two key strands run through the development of the EU's strategic diplomacy and strategic relationships. On the one hand, there is the 'internal' strand of institutional development and Member State manoeuvrings, which creates an uneasy balance in the framing of major international initiatives and the management of key relationships. At the same time, and on the other hand, the projection of EU positions and actions takes place in a dynamic international setting, in which changing system structure combines with the emergence of new powers and issues to create or to close off opportunities, and in which the EU's status and role can come into question. This two-fold set of internal and external factors then feeds into the conduct of the EU's strategic partnerships and strategic relationships; in particular, it feeds into the balance between the setting of ambitious frameworks and development of a rhetoric of partnerships on the one side and the strategic management of relationships through continuous incremental adjustment to changing demands and opportunities on the other side. In the detailed empirical study of EU-China relations that followed, these arguments were an implicit guiding influence, and the time has come for them to be made more explicit in terms of the evidence that has been reviewed.

A first observation must be that the EU has clearly developed a rhetoric of strategic partnership in relation to China (and indeed, this rhetoric has been generalised to a wide range of strategic partners in recent years). This is embodied in a series of documents now spanning two decades, and is a major shaping force in the framing of EU diplomacy towards China in the post-Lisbon context. The rhetoric is largely consistent, but has also responded to key shifts in the broader EU international position, for example in trade policy towards the pursuit of competitiveness and in such areas as environment or human rights towards the pursuit of 'effective multilateralism' as well as the specifically EU position on normative issues. As a result, there is an embedded discourse about the ends of EU diplomacy towards China that has gained legitimacy by being pronounced over an extended period and with considerable consistency. There is also some evidence that it has responded to changes in international conditions and to the availability of resources

through the post-Lisbon institutions, for example through the development of new channels of diplomatic dialogue.

A second observation is that despite this embedding of a consistent discourse in EU policy statements, there is a disconnect between large statements and rhetorical commitments and the pragmatic management of the relationship. To take a concrete example: as we have seen, the progress towards an EU-China PCA has been glacial and often non-existent. But what does this matter in terms of the pragmatic and day to day management of the relationship? There is evidence that the infrastructure of relations – often involving key elements of ‘multi-stakeholder’ diplomatic practices, such as is the case in sectoral dialogues – has deepened and become more robust, and that the duality of dialogues at the highest level (embodied in the Economic and Financial Dialogue and the Political and Security Dialogue) has not been an obstacle to the development of effective EU diplomacy. To this extent, it seems that the image of diplomacy as the promotion of a strategic rhetoric is trumped for most purposes by that of diplomacy as a strategic management process, although the broad context is undoubtedly shaped by the desire for strategic statements and elements of vision that are embedded in EU-China relations as they are in other strategic relationships.

Is this surprising? Many would argue that it is not, given the broadening and diversification of diplomacy that was noted in the early parts of the paper. Some might argue that it is disappointing that the EU has not been able consistently to work towards the strengthening of strategic partnership in EU-China as in other relations with emerging powers, but that could be interpreted more as a reflection of disappointment with the EU’s ability to establish itself as a major international actor across the full spectrum of activities than as a disillusionment with the practices of EU diplomacy. Others might argue that in EU-China relations the EU has made a pragmatic diplomatic adjustment to what is possible, especially in light of the relatively contested status of the European project as a whole in the post-Lisbon, post-financial crisis era. To this extent, it might be concluded that the ‘end of history’ has arrived in diplomacy as in other areas of European integration,

and that it has been succeeded by a more modest and pragmatic adjustment to international and European realities. But that is the start of a very long argument – in particular, about the extent to which the EU's claim to status as a major international actor demands a more explicit and continuous linkage between 'strategy as rhetoric' and 'strategy as management' in the field of EU diplomacy.

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