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**EU DIPLOMACY AND THE EU-CHINA STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP:  
PARTNERSHIP, CONTAINMENT AND MANAGEMENT**

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# **EU DIPLOMACY AND THE EU-CHINA STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP: PARTNERSHIP, CONTAINMENT AND MANAGEMENT**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the EU's strategic relationship with China, in the light of the EU's attempts to pursue a 'strategic diplomacy' towards Beijing. Strategic diplomacy entails the development of a shared vision, bolstered by a stable institutional base, by appropriate resources and by the ability to adapt actions in the light of changing circumstances. Such a diplomacy on the part of the EU also reflects a balance between three general aims when directed towards key strategic relationships: partnership, containment and management. The paper explores these issues in general, and then applies them to the EU-China strategic relationship. Through an examination of the discourse embodied in key documents, the negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and the evolution of cooperation in sectoral and institutional contexts, the paper explores the fluctuating balance between partnership, containment and management, and concludes that day to day management may in some cases trump both the rhetoric of partnership and the strategic pursuit of containment in EU-China relations.

## **Introduction**

One of the key tests facing the emerging diplomatic system of the European Union is that of developing a strategic diplomacy. By this is meant 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 (Hocking and Smith 2011, Allen and Smith 2012).

Strategic diplomacy, therefore, is not an abstract project. It demands that the EU formulate strategy and pursue it within specific external and internal conditions, and with an eye to specific 'targets'. The most obvious of these targets in the current phase of EU external diplomatic action are the ten or so formally designated 'strategic partners' that have been identified by the Union during the past fifteen or more years (Gratius 2011). Each of these strategic

partnerships has been characterised by the development of an infrastructure of networks and, to varying degrees, by institutionalisation of the partnership itself, as well as by the development of what might be termed a rhetoric of partnership on the part of the EU. Each of them has also embodied, whether formally declared or not, a characteristic array of strategic aims for the EU. It has not always been clear that these strategic aims are realistic or practical, or that they have been embraced by the specific partner which is the subject of any one of the relationships (Renard 2011).

What are these strategic aims? At the broadest level, they have been described as those of 'effective multilateralism', which is often presented as the guiding principle of much EU external action (Grevi and de Vasconcelos 2008). But this is a very broad-brush way of approaching the issue. It is proposed here that three key aims underly almost all of the EU's 'strategic partnerships'. One is the pursuit of partnership itself: the ways in which the EU has set out to form a network of strategic partnerships and to use these in promoting its position as a key strategic actor within the global arena. A second key aim has been containment: in other words, the use of 'strategic partnerships' as a means of addressing a perceived challenge to the EU's position by any given partner, and constructing a framework, based on institutions and norms, which can minimise the threat and enable the EU to regulate the extent and depth of the challenge to its perceived interests. A third key aim has been management: the use of strategic partnerships and strategic diplomacy as a form of day to day problem-solving device that enables the Union (in both the governmental and the private spheres) to go about its business. Attention in the EU literature has often been focused especially on the first of these aims, reflecting the widespread concern with issues of EU 'actorness' in general, but this paper argues that the other two are at least as important, and for practical purposes they may be more important as standards by which to judge the EU's strategic diplomacy.

Perhaps the most consistently challenging of the EU's 'strategic partnerships' has been that with China. This relationship has expanded rapidly over the past twenty years; it has been characterised by often intense perceptions of

threat by EU member states and by specific interest groups within the Union; and it has chimed with wider forces in the global arena, specifically the emergence of the 'rising powers' to create pressure on the EU's conception of its position in the world (Smith 2013, Zaborowski 2006). This means that for sheer scope, scale, dynamism and wider ramifications, the EU-China relationship constitutes perhaps the most salient test of the EU's capacity to frame and pursue strategic diplomacy.

This paper sets out to explore the development of the EU's strategic diplomacy and 'strategic partnership' in respect of China, and specifically to evaluate it in terms of the three key aims set out above: partnership, containment and management. It starts by expanding on the idea of an EU 'strategic diplomacy' and showing how this relates to the pursuit of strategic partnerships. In doing so, it draws attention both to 'internal' institutional and other factors within the EU and to 'external' factors in the global arena and shows how they can shape the balance between partnership, containment and management in the EU's strategic diplomacy.

The paper then goes on to review the EU's strategic partnership with China, and especially the contrast between the development of a formal rhetoric of partnership, the search for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement as a formal expression of partnership and the development of an infrastructure of cooperation at the level of day to day interaction. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the balance between partnership, containment and management in EU-China relations, and argues that the essence of a successful approach to strategic partnerships, and especially that with China, lies in the recognition of the complex interplay between the aims of partnership, containment and management. One implication of this evaluation is that EU activities should recognise the importance of day to day management as well as the large-scale attempts at containment or partnership that have tended to be associated with the notion of 'strategic partnership'.

## **Strategic Diplomacy, Strategic Relationships and ‘Strategic Partnerships’ in EU External Action**

As noted above, an effective strategic diplomacy entails a number of key elements. The first is a stable institutional base; the second, the capacity to extract and mobilise appropriate resources; the third is the development of an agreed strategic narrative; the fourth, the capacity to adapt strategy in the light of changing circumstances; and the fifth, the ability to coordinate and prioritise actions in a complex and demanding environment. The EU has made consistent efforts to enhance the extent to which it can achieve this balance of qualities in its diplomacy, but has had varying degrees of success in doing so. During the past twenty years, effectively since the Maastricht Treaty, successive institutional and other reforms have been aimed at the pursuit of what the Union describes as ‘coherent and effective external action’; the most recent of these attempts was the Lisbon Treaty, which created the European External Action Service headed by the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy (HR) and a new framework for coordination between the Commission, the Council and the EEAS in pursuit of diplomatic effectiveness.

The problem is that these successive efforts have not fully – or in some cases, even partly – met the requirements of an effective strategic diplomacy. In this, they have reflected the hybrid nature of EU external action and the tensions to which hybridity gives rise (Smith 2012). The institutional base for EU diplomacy has been consolidated, but remains contested, particularly where the diplomatic activities of the EEAS overlap or clash with those of the Commission. Not only this, but the way in which the EEAS was established means that it has meagre institutional or other resources on which to draw in trying to produce coordinated and coherent external action. Because the EEAS was confronted immediately after its initial establishment with dramatic external challenges – especially the ‘Arab Spring’ – and with the continuing external ramifications of the sovereign debt crisis within the EU, it has so far been unable to establish a compelling and agreed narrative for EU diplomacy, including strategic diplomacy. And because of the ways in which external challenges presented themselves to the new institutional structures, the challenge of effective adaptation was extremely difficult to meet. This set of

challenges to EU diplomacy was not a new one – it had been around since the end of the Cold War – but it was intensified by a challenging international context and by increasing linkages between economic, diplomatic and security issues in EU external relations more generally (Hemra, Whitman and Raines 2011, Lehne 2011, Balfour, Bailes and Kenna 2012, Duke 2012).

Within the framework of strategic diplomacy, as noted above, there has been a consistent focus since the end of the 1990s on the identification of strategic partners. But there has been no overarching or comprehensive set of requirements for the construction or the pursuit of these relationships, despite the attempt to review them in a systematic way during 2010-11. 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).

This leads – inevitably – to a recognition that differentiation, prioritisation and a focus on issues as well as on partners is likely to characterise the 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 President of the European Council (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 regular summit meetings, of meeting and containing specific challenges arising within the relationship and also of maintaining what might be described as the ‘infrastructure’ of the partnerships. The range of challenges, and the depth and scope of the ‘infrastructure’ vary substantially between key partners, but they are 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. In the same way, relationships with different strategic partners will embody different ‘balances’ between the key aims of partnership, containment and management

discussed earlier in the paper. It is these considerations that are likely to be central to the framing of EU strategic diplomacy towards China.

### **The EU-China Strategic Relationship**

In this part of the paper, the focus is on the development of the EU's strategic diplomacy towards China since the mid-1980s. Three aspects are considered: first, the development of a discourse of strategic partnership as expressed primarily in key documents and public statements; second, the ongoing negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and China; and third, the evolution of more detailed processes of cooperation within the broad partnership framework. This part of the paper effectively provides the empirical base from which evaluation of the EU's strategic diplomacy can then be undertaken.

#### *Discourses of Partnership*

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, Smith and Xie 2011, Geeraerts 2013). 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 at appropriate points consider the nature of China's international strategy and the ways in which this 'fits' with the EU's aims and objectives.

The 'raw material' for the analysis conducted here is the succession of formal agreements and EU position papers or statements that have come to act as the discursive base for the EU-China relationship as seen from Brussels. These start with the EU-China Trade and Cooperation Agreement of 1985 (EEC/China 1985), which remains the formal expression of EU-China relations in the absence of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (see following section). From the mid-1990s onwards, this was supplemented from the EU perspective by a series of Commission Communications and related

position papers: in 1995, the Communication *A Long-Term Policy for EU-China Relations* (European Commission 1995); in 1998 a further Communication, *Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China* (European Commission 1998); in 2001 yet another Communication, *EU Strategy Towards China: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a More Effective EU Policy* (European Commission 2001); in 2003 the Communication *A Maturing Partnership – Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China Relations* (European Commission 2003); and in 2006 the most recent Communication, *EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities* (European Commission 2006b), which was accompanied by a working paper on trade and investment entitled *A Policy Paper on EU-China Trade and Investment: Competition and Partnership* (European Commission 2006c). Alongside these key statements of EU positions and policies, the communiqués issued at the end of EU-China summit meetings and as a result of the two key EU-China dialogues (the Economic and Trade Dialogue and the Strategic Dialogue) which have taken place since 2008 are also important indicators of the ways in which the EU conceives of EU-China relations.

The 1985 Trade and Cooperation Agreement established what remains a central – if not the dominant – discourse in EU-China relations: that of trade, commercial relations more broadly defined and competition. At that stage, the bilateral relationship is seen by one observer as ‘explicitly economic, though implicitly (especially for China) strategic’ (Scott 2007, 23); others have stressed the broader aims implicit in the EC position compared with the Chinese ambition to access European markets more effectively (Griese 2006). 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). At the same time as establishing an EC-China relationship, it was notable that the Agreement also allowed Member States 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); this tension between the economic interests of the Member States and the ‘European’ interest has not gone away and arguably is more powerful in 2013

than it has been for a while. The Agreement also put in place an EC-China Joint Committee to manage the relationship – a body that remains significant.

The dominant position of economic relations having been established in 1985, it is not surprising that although the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 shook EC-China relations and saw the inception of economic measures including an arms embargo on Beijing, the economic logic could not be resisted for long; but the incident did have resonance in the development of wider concerns on the part of the EU (see below). Subsequent Commission Communications have continued to place economic priorities at the centre of the overall EU-China relationship and have also reflected some important trends in the economic positions of the EU. One is that from the mid-1990s onwards, a key element in EU policies has been the integration of China into the world economy and world economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). A second major trend has been towards the language of competition and competitiveness rather than that of partnership as an end in itself. Thus the 1995 Communication emphasized a concern ‘for the future competitiveness of European business (Barysch et al 2005, 7) and coupled this with the drive to foster economic reform in China and to promote Chinese membership of the WTO. At the same time, it was envisaged that EU relations with Asia more generally would also provide part of the framework within which EU-China economic relations could evolve, and this in turn linked with the inception of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 2006.

Between 1995 and 2003, the language of EU policy positions expressed the range of internal tensions noted above. The predominant concern with economic and commercial relations translated into a number of economic priorities which were increasingly expressed in terms of competition and the need for the EU to defend itself against the burgeoning growth in Chinese exports as well as to promote reform in China as a means of increasing market access for EU producers. The drive to get China into the WTO continued, with the eventual entry of Beijing in 2002 crowning what was a considerable effort on the part of Brussels. Alongside this, and despite the optimistic talk of ‘synergies’ between EU and Member State policies

expressed in the 1996 Communication (European Commission 1995, D1), there was a continuing tension between the search for European strategy and for national advantage, in which some Member States – notably Germany – held a key position. These tensions were exacerbated by the pace of change in China itself, and not surprisingly the 1998 Communication dwelt on the need for the Union to adapt rapidly and effectively to these changes. In the words of the Communication, ‘...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).

With the entry of China into the WTO, the EU’s language changed to emphasize the need for China to live up to its obligations under the various agreements and commitments assumed on entry. From 2002 onwards, in fact, this became a dominant strand in the EU’s official discourse, accompanied by a growing emphasis on competitiveness. The growing evidence that EU-China trade relations could give rise to major imbalances and that these could disrupt particular sectors was crystallised especially by the textiles dispute with Beijing during 2005-2006 (Smith and Xie 2009) – this was the first instance in which threats of ‘trade war’ could be discerned, and this language has never really gone away since 2006, with its latest manifestation being the dispute in 2012-13 about imports of solar panels. It is possible, of course, to see such episodes as evidence of intensifying economic interdependence and thus a deepening of EU-China economic relations, but it is also possible to see them as indicative of a need for ‘trade defence’ and competitiveness policies in a globalising world. This set of contradictions was evident in the 2006 Commission Communication, which coincided with an explicit shift in EU external commercial policies towards policies aimed at promoting competitiveness and market access most obviously expressed in the *Global Europe* position papers of 2006 (European Commission 2006a). In this situation, it was perfectly logical for the 2006 Communication to be accompanied by a paper on trade and investment and for that paper to prefigure the *Global Europe* themes of holding competitors to their commitments and promoting EU industries (see for example Mandelson 2006). The WTO in this context could be presented as source of ‘discipline’,

and the continuing stand-off over the granting of Market Economy Status to China as a means by which the EU could hope to exercise some leverage on a continuing basis (Smith and Xie 2009).

The 2006 Communication stands as the most recent comprehensive statement of the framework for EU-China economic relations, although during the financial crisis from 2008 onwards there has been no shortage of pressure to clarify and in some cases redefine the basis for the economic relationship. The tensions persist, between seeing China as a key source of cheap manufactured products and wanting to defend EU producers, and between seeing EU-China economic relations as a challenge or an opportunity. The financial crisis itself has underlined some of the key tensions, with language describing the threat of Chinese investment in the EU coexisting with attempts by both the EU and national governments to obtain support for financial rescue plans from Beijing (Parello-Plesner 2013). It is evident that the discourse of EU-China economic relations remains conflicted and riven by a number of important tensions.

Alongside the discourse of trade, commercial and broader economic relations in EU-China relations, there have developed two other important elements. The first of these, apparent from the late 1990s onwards, is the desire to extend the relationship into a 'comprehensive partnership', whilst the second is the desire to 'Europeanise' the EU's China policies by reducing the space available for Member States' bilateral initiatives. The 1995 Communication refers to the fact that 'Europe's relations with China are bound to be a cornerstone in Europe's external relations both with Asia and globally' (European Commission 1995), thereby neatly linking both themes, and this has been a central aspect of the relationship ever since. But the discourse of comprehensiveness contains the seeds of important tensions. In particular, it raises the contrast between the EU's self-designation as a 'normative power' with strong positions on issues such as human rights and its material economic interests. The 1998 Communication went further in designating the building of a comprehensive partnership as a core aim of EU policies, and in tying EU positions to the furthering of economic and social reform in China

(remembering that even today, China is designated by the EU as in need of development assistance in some areas). Since the 1998 Communication, the pursuit of 'deepening' and 'broadening' of the partnership has been evident not only in the range of issues considered to be relevant (including not only humanitarian and social but also regional and global security issues) but also in the attempt to develop the 'infrastructure' of the relationship through the proliferation of dialogues, working groups and specific projects. Notably, the EU was readier in the 2001 Communication to refer to China as 'both part of the problem and the solution' and 'not always an easy partner for the EU' (European Commission 2001, 7).

It was in the 2003 Communication that the EU effectively presented China as a 'strategic partner', with calls for the upgrading of relations across a very wide spectrum of issues and problems. In part, this might be seen as a reflection of the need to respond to and channel continuing rapid change in China itself. It was also according to some analysts an attempt to upgrade the nature of the EU's China policy within the Union itself, representing an effort to 'mark a shift...from traditional state-to-state relations up to the European level' (Fox and Godement 2009, 33), and thus to promote the second element of discourse noted above. In effect, therefore, we can see the Communication as serving a dual purpose – of both consolidating and extending China policy, and of 'Europeanising' it. The Commission and others promoting this line met resistance on both counts. In the case of China, the most obvious response was the publication of what remains the only formal policy paper on relations with the EU (Chinese Government 2003), which echoed the 'strategic' nature of the partnership. But as William Callahan has pointed out, this can also be seen as a means of 'refracting' the EU's discourse, and as thereby defining the agenda in a way that kept the relationship within comfortable limits for the Chinese (Callahan 2007).

At the same time, the 2003 Communication placed great store by the proliferation of exchanges through the channels provided by the growing 'infrastructure' of EU-China relations, but in doing so begged the question as to whether simple quantity of exchanges could be a measure of 'partnership'

in the way that was implied, or of the 'Europeanisation' of China policy. This way of presenting the relationship was challenged by observers who commented that '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). Not only this, but such a plethora of activities did not in itself constitute the 'Europeanisation' of policy, either at the discursive or at the practical level; indeed, the past decade has shown that Member State perspectives on the need for bilateral 'strategic partnerships' with China have remained an important element of the debate about EU-China relations.

Whilst the 2006 Communication presented a view of EU-China economic relations increasingly characterised by competition and even confrontation, it also maintained the pattern of aspiring to a comprehensive partnership. But even that aspiration was now qualified, not least by the listing of specific areas in which the EU and China must pursue dialogue and the inclusion of hopes for dialogue on some especially sensitive areas such as the perpetuation of the arms embargo established after the Tienanmen incident. In these as in other areas, the aim seemed to be to get the Chinese to live up to international obligations and for the EU to exercise leverage in a number of political and security issues. Alongside these areas, during the period 2006-9 the EU and China came into collision on a number of potentially important political and security matters, including the increasing Chinese presence in Africa (where the EU produced a Communication in 2008 on the need for collaboration, but also pointing out areas of competition) (European Commission 2008), and also Chinese rule in Tibet, where a number of EU Member States have strong views.

Nonetheless, the discourse of cooperation and 'strategic partnership' was and is a persistent theme in EU policy positions – and is still echoed in the conclusions of EU-China summits and the reports of both the Economic and Trade Dialogue and the Strategic dialogue (see for example The Conclusions

of the September 2012 EU-China Summit, European Commission 2012). To this extent, the 2006 Communication had a clear bottom line: 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 2006b, 9), but it was apparent that the political and economic dimensions of such an agreement would be full of potential pitfalls. Not least, as William Shambaugh has pointed out, the Chinese were surprised by the change in the tone of EU policies embodied in the 2006 Communication and accompanying documents, and this meant that their readiness to negotiate would be subject to a reappraisal of the relationship as a whole and of the priority accorded to EU-China relations (Shambaugh 2013: 90-94).

#### *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 equally clearly connected with the aspiration to consolidate 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.

It was clear from the outset that whilst both the EU and China saw value in a comprehensive PCA, 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, 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; Shen 2013). 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. In contrast, the Chinese approach focused strongly on trade and cooperation in the traditional sense, and separated 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 undertaken during 2005, but a formal declaration on negotiations was not made until the 9<sup>th</sup> 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 exposing 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 later the EEAS) and of the Chinese government, and linking with the broader architecture of EU-China relations: thus on trade issues, DG Trade leads with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, and this is linked to the EU-China High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue, while on political issues the lead was initially with DG RELEX and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Men 2008, 18), and later with the EEAS and linked with the High-Level Strategic Dialogue. 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). Not only this, but the impact of the global financial crisis and then the more specifically European sovereign debt crisis from 2008 onwards created a new set of contextual pressures that were bound to affect the credibility and the effectiveness of EU negotiating positions (Casarini 2012).

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 2013, there has been little indication that the PCA will soon be concluded. From an early stage, there was 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 made its voice heard especially on the need to link trade agreements with matters of human rights, environment, sustainable development and social issues, and there was marked disagreement 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. The fact that China will gain MES in 2015 as part of the evolution of its WTO membership means that for Beijing there is decreasing incentive to negotiate substantively on this issue.

Thus 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 have already been 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. In this context, with the PCA negotiations, making minimal progress, it is not surprising that a number of key sectoral and policy challenges have preoccupied EU policy-makers (Men 2012).

#### *The Evolution of Cooperation*

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 cooperation has evolved within the partnership, 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.

It has already been noted that there is a sometimes uneasy mixture of cooperation and competition in EU-China relations at the big-picture level; but it is also important to undertake a more detailed assessment of the ways in which activities have arisen, been institutionalised and spread, and in which disputes have been handled. One clear trend in this context is the increasing scope and scale of EU-China 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;

for an indication of the current 'official' agenda, see European Commission 2012). The key institutional elements of this growth will be examined below, but here it is possible to note that both the breadth and the depth of the relationship have been growing, and that EU institutions as well as a wide range of other public and private actors have given their support to this expansion. The relationship 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. Alongside this, there has arisen a wide range of processes aimed at the day to day management of EU-China relations in specific sectors and in relation to specific issues.

The relationship 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 in the current period would need to cover the following institutional elements (among others): the annual summits and accompanying political dialogues; meetings of the troika (President of the Commission, President of the European Council, Presidency of the Council of Ministers) 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 (now including not only the High-level Economic and Trade Dialogue and Strategic Dialogue, but also the High-Level People-to-People Dialogue and a projected Innovation Cooperation Dialogue); 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 fifty 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; European External Action Service 2012). 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 in strategic terms.

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 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. A further question that arises concerns 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).

What is clear, however, is that in many respects the processes surrounding EU-China relations have become more differentiated and issue-specific. Whilst at the level of strategic engagement and 'big-picture' negotiations there has been little progress in recent years, the real dynamism of the relationship lies in the development of sectoral and specialised mechanisms of

cooperation and dispute-management. Some of the sectors covered are of course broad and to a greater or lesser degree politicised, as for example in the area of climate change and related disputes over emissions trading or defence and security questions (Men 2012, Casarini 2013), and here it might be felt that the processes are more likely to be those of confrontation and high-political positioning. Others, however, are significant because of the ways in which management processes have emerged, either within the framework of multilateral or inter-regional institutions or on a bilateral basis. Such processes often apply in issues of trade and regulatory policy, or in matters relating to economic and social development where a range of public and private interests are engaged. Often, they can modify the big-picture level of EU-China relations by providing practical solutions to shared problems, and thus arguably contribute to the evolution of cooperation on a day to day level within the relationship. Thus, even whilst there have been apparently basic differences over such issues as climate change, or over key areas of EU-China trade, this has not prevented the continuation of cooperation at the level of practical programmes or of dispute resolution. This version of EU-China partnership arguably promises more than the concept of a comprehensive 'strategic partnership' or of strategic positioning alone, and the relationship should be seen in the light of all these dimensions.

### **Conclusions: Partnership, Containment and Management in a Changing Context**

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, the desire to contain and if possible neutralise threats to EU interests, and the management of relationships through continuous incremental adjustment to changing demands and opportunities. In the 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 is 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. But it is difficult to see the ways in which this discourse has been translated into strategic action; indeed, one is tempted to agree with Jonathan Holslag that the EU has developed its relationship with China in a 'strategic vacuum' and that lack of a firm definition of mutual interests and areas of common action is a key gap in the relationship (Holslag 2009). One possible reason for this, as indicated earlier in this paper, is that the embedded discourse itself contains a number of areas of contradiction and friction, for example between different approaches to commercial relations, between the language of 'comprehensive' partnership and the desire on both sides to defend sensitive areas, and between

'European' and Member State perspectives, that become disabling when projected in to the search for concrete agreements such as those envisaged in the PCA.

A second observation is that this rhetoric of partnership and the pursuit of a comprehensive relationship framed by multilateral principles has been accompanied at almost every turn by a growing desire to contain and 'discipline' the challenges posed by China. For example, EU support for Chinese entry into the WTO was explicitly couched (as was US policy at the same time) in terms of the need to subject Beijing to WTO disciplines and to use the WTO as a means of regulating the Chinese threat. This was accompanied in successive formal EU statements of China policy by the requirement for China to be a responsible stakeholder in the world economy, and by an increasing appeal – as in the *Global Europe* strategy – for the EU to defend its competitive position. The pursuit of the PCA itself, on the evidence reviewed above, can also be seen as an attempt to embed a form of containment in the bilateral relationship between the EU and China – an effort stoutly resisted by the Chinese. Specific EU-China disputes, such as that over textile imports in 2005-7, and fears of the influence of Chinese sovereign wealth funds especially after the onset of the financial crisis, provide further evidence of the tendency towards containment. At the same time, this was at least partly undermined by evidence of some EU Member States' search for Chinese financial assistance as the crisis unfolded, and by evidence of divergent approaches between Member States to Chinese investment more generally.

A final observation is that despite the embedding of a consistent partnership discourse in EU policy statements, and the simultaneous infiltration of a discourse and policy of containment, there is often 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 with representation from a wide variety of organisations both in the governmental and in the private sector, 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 Strategic Dialogue) has not been an obstacle to the development of effective EU diplomacy at ground level or in mixed public-private environments. For one observer, this betokens the emergence of a pattern of ‘functional multilateralism’ in EU-China relations, focused on the joint completion of tasks and functional mechanisms of cooperation (Wissenbach 2007) To this extent, it seems that the image of diplomacy as the promotion of a strategic rhetoric is trumped for some purposes by that of diplomacy as a day to day 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 has been noted by many commentators (Hocking and Smith 2011). 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 relations at the level of grand strategy, 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. Such an argument would place more emphasis on the capacity of the EU to adjust its position than on the other elements of strategic diplomacy outlined at the beginning of this paper, such

as the development of an agreed 'grand narrative' or the deployment of major resources. 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 the pursuit of partnership, containment and management in the field of EU diplomacy.

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