

THE SEARCH FOR A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CHINA: OBSTACLES AND PROSPECTS



Massimo Ambrosetti

Magdalene College

Department of Politics and International Studies

University of Cambridge

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Declarations

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University of similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

This dissertation does not exceed the limit of 80,000 words prescribed by the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Human, Social, and Political Science of the University of Cambridge.

The search for a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the European Union and China: obstacles and prospects.

ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding the development of an impressive framework of cooperation – based on regular meetings, initiatives and dialogues – the EU-China “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” seems to be still in search of a truly strategic dimension. In assessing the obstacles and prospects of the Partnership, the thesis offers -through the lens of a pluralist and post-positivist epistemological/hermeneutical approach - an interpretive “fil rouge” which seeks to break the logic that has often insulated the EU-China relations in the “comfort zone” offered by the architecture and institutional logic of their bilateral interaction. On this basis some crucial ideational elements which shape the identity, the historical-cultural background and the actorness of the two strategic partners are analyzed in order to better understand not only the persistent “conceptual gaps” but also an increasing normative divergence affecting the strategic dimension of the relationship. In this perspective the thesis focuses on the degree of convergence/divergence between Brussels and Beijing by considering the influence of these ideational factors in areas - such as human rights and the approach to multilateralism - which are key test beds for evaluating the structural strategic dimension of the EU-China Partnership. In analyzing the conceptual, normative and operational divergence of key components of the EU-China Partnership the thesis assesses its impact also in terms of policy implications, in particular problematizing the traditional EU’s approach of “constructive engagement”. In a complex framework in which European national China policies coexist with new Chinese initiatives aimed at individual European countries, the thesis not only deconstructs key tenets of the Partnership such as “constructive engagement” and “multipolar world” but also problematizes possible new paradigms by underlying that their coherence and sustainability is challenged by the increasingly diverging dynamics affecting the Partnership in the broader process of change which characterizes 21st century international relations. In this context of complex interaction the strategic dimension of the Partnership and its future potential role is thus assessed for its significance in the framework of a “strategic triangle” in which the United States continues to be an inevitable counterpart for both Europe and China in an evolving international system.

There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.

Niccolo' Machiavelli

Foreign Policy is an integral part of culture as a whole and reflects its theory and practice. Hence it is only through the analysis of the general philosophy of a given time that it is possible to understand the foreign policy of this particular time.

Hans Morgenthau

China is the other pole of the human experience, a total contrast and a complete otherness, allowing Europeans to better understand their own identity and to grasp what in Europe's own culture is universal or parochial

Simon Leys

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This thesis is the outcome of a long intellectual journey which has been focused on China as one of the most important and transformative actors in contemporary international relations. The cultural shock – in a positive sense – that I experienced when I lived in China in the mid-1990s as a young diplomat has become a strong research interest that I have tried to develop over the years.

From an academic point of view, I began this journey when I wrote my Cambridge Master's thesis on *The Rise of China: New Nationalisms and Search of Status* which set solid foundations for my further work on this subject. It continued with my dissertations at Georgetown University on *Power and Influence: ideational and material factors of the international posture of China rising as a great power* and at Oxford on *China's ratification of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Challenges and prospects*.

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All the opinions, ideas, evaluations that I have elaborated in my PhD thesis are only personal views expressed in an entirely personal capacity. They do not represent in any way either official or unofficial positions and assessments of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or of officials of the Italian Government. Equally I want to stress that my research has not been based and does not reflect any document, analysis, policy paper elaborated by the Italian Government.

I am grateful to my family, my wife Elena and my children Bianca and Ludovico, for the encouragement that they have shown in their sympathetic relationship with a very mature student. This thesis is dedicated to them.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Rationale and contribution of the research

The subject of the strategic relations between the European Union and the People's Republic of China has been widely researched over the years, in parallel to the development of an increasingly structured and multifaceted interaction between two of the main actors of the 21st century international system. The increasing salience of this interaction led to the establishment in 2003 of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership which has been chosen as the subject of this research in an analytical perspective addressing the key aspects that at present constrain its strategic dimension and its prospects of development.

Even though the Sino-European relations had developed in a significant way also prior to 2003, the specific focus of the thesis on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is motivated by the fact that, with its establishment, The European Union and the PRC have characterized their relationship as a fully strategic one. In this sense the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership formalized the two partners' ambitions of upgrading the complex set of their relations to the level of a "primary relationship" in strategic terms. For this reason a specific focus on the period from the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership onwards seems to be particularly functional in order to investigate this strategic dimension.

The interest for further analyzing a subject whose main aspects have been constantly investigated in Europe and China is motivated by the evolution of the EU-China relationship which has reached an inflection point, driven by unresolved internal dynamics and new external factors of context: this process is bringing about a significant paradigm shift not only in the conceptual and operational interaction between the two partners but also in their assessment of the Partnership's role in an evolving international system. This means that the significance and the future development of the EU-China Partnership as a "primary relationship" is under close scrutiny in a phase of stronger strategic competition, especially given the evolution of the respective "primary" relations that the EU and China have with the United States. This evolving context has accelerated and amplified some crucial existing dynamics within the EU-China Partnership which has been characterized by a degree of substantial divergence between the two strategic partners in several key sectors ranging from economic cooperation to "post-material" issues.

The study of the roots of this increasing divergence has been developed in the thesis by focusing, first and foremost, on the ideational dimension which – through the ramifications stemming from the two partners’ identity, actorness, historical and cultural background – continues to affect the Partnership in a way which could make the premises on which it was established in 2003 a “false promise”.¹

Even though the debate on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has often focused on the need of a “reset”, the thesis argues that the gradual recognition of this divergence has not led so far to a coherent re-conceptualization and re-operationalization of the contentious issues directly affecting the strategic dimension of the EU-China relations, nor has it led the Union to a thorough re-assessment of the perspectives and potential of the Partnership itself, which for Brussels is the most formalized and structured relationship of this kind thus far.

The theoretical and practical perimeter of the subject has been therefore delineated by this research in a way which aims not only at clarifying the main factors which have made the strategic dimension of the EU-China relations “elusive” but also the complex internal and external elements of novelty which are going to influence its further development. In this perspective the thesis addresses the fundamental challenge for the EU and China of defining a new paradigm of interaction in a phase which has increasingly exposed the partial inadequacy of the main tenets on which the partnership was established in 2003. To this end the thesis has developed an interpretive approach which seeks to overcome the basic disconnect between the growing recognition of this conceptual and normative divergence and the paucity of the action taken so far by the two partners to bridge this significant gap.

From a theoretical point of view, the original contribution that the thesis tries to bring to the analysis of the obstacles and prospects of the Partnership in its present phase is based on the need to set the existing material and ideational problems not only in a post-positivist epistemological context but also in a theoretical framework conducive to a hermeneutical approach aimed at linking theory to praxis, interpretation to application.

This approach has been developed within a pluralist perspective which takes into account the theoretical elaboration of thinkers of the Chinese school of International relations - in particular Qin Yaqing’s - which can offer interesting analytical synergies

¹ Pan Chengxin, “Problematizing ‘Constructive Engagement’ in EU-China Policy”, in Roland Vogt (ed.), *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: HK University Press, 2012).

for better understanding some key ideational components of the relationship between Europe and China. In this way the thesis has broadened the interpretive potential of the constructivist epistemological assumptions which have addressed the fundamental underlying problem of “cognitive dissonance” between Europe and China.

By focusing on the “conceptual gaps in China-EU relations” the epistemological approach of the thesis has made possible to inscribe them in the broader framework of both the increasing conceptual and normative divergence between the EU and China and of its practical consequences for the Partnership. In line with these epistemological/hermeneutical premises the analytical approach of the thesis addresses some of the main contentious issues of the Strategic Partnership by linking the ideational disconnect between Europe and China to its practical consequences and implications for the two partners’ policy-making in their reciprocal interaction.

On this basis it has been possible to explore the elements which are at the root of the Partnership’s deficit in terms of a “structural” strategic dimension: by elaborating on a categorization proposed by Giovanni Grevi,² the thesis argues that this strategic dimension necessarily hinges on the ability of the EU-China Partnership to address – without neglecting the “relational” aspects of its interaction – the multilateral/global issues which are central to the present phase of evolution of the international system. For this reason the thesis focuses, as significant case-studies, on the partners’ approach to the crucial issues of human rights and multilateralism as a test-bed of the degree of convergence-divergence between the EU and China on structural strategic sectors.

In order to better understand the paradigm shift taking place in the strategic relations between Europe and China the thesis has also connected its analysis to the revived debate on the systemic implications of the rise of an assertive global China by specifically focusing on the potential asymmetries/symmetries between the American and European approach to this process. Taking into account the implications of this evolving context, the thesis offers a new analytical perspective aimed at better understanding the consequences and the objectives of the process that has begun to problematize the fundamental tenets of the Partnership.

In doing so it underlines, at the same time, the degree of complexity and uncertainty stemming not only from the prospects of an in depth reconsideration of the traditional paradigm of “constructive engagement” but also from the challenge, in terms

² Giovanni Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, *Working Paper 1, European Strategic Partnership- Observatory- FRIDE*, (June 2012).

of policy coherence, sustainability and longer-term implications, of a possible EU “turn to realism”. The assessment of the process underway - based on the analysis of the main documents which have gradually articulated the new European China policy of “principled pragmatism” and complemented by interviews with European officials – also takes necessarily into account the Chinese debate on the volatility of the EU-China relations. In this respect it underlines the clear resistance of the Chinese party-state towards the European aspiration of gradually socializing China into the norms and political values promoted by the EU through the normative project represented by the policy of “constructive engagement.”

In this sense the thesis argues – building upon its epistemological premises – that the symbiotic relationship between the EU’s identity as a transformative normative power and its attempts of influencing the process of change underway in the PRC is challenged by an increasingly assertive “Normative Power China,” whose strategic ambitions make it reluctant to be socialized unless this process can happen on its own terms. For these reasons the thesis’ critique of the EU staple policy of “constructive engagement” problematizes the search of a new paradigm by the EU in light of China’s “stubborn presence as a normative Other:”³ if the PRC is in this sense for the EU also a “systemic rival,” the strategic dimension of the Partnership is going to be put under further pressure by the EU’s need, on the one hand, of preserving its interests-values continuum in the context of a widening ideational gap with Beijing. On the other, by growing tensions which make more complex the interaction with regard to a set of key unresolved issues, ranging from the economic and technological sectors to the global multilateral issues which should constitute the “quid pluris” defining the truly strategic dimension of the Partnership.

In this context the analysis developed by our research tends to underscore that the paradigm shift underway is particularly challenging for the EU because it simply seems not sustainable on the basis of the coexistence of a revised “constructive engagement” policy and a new approach of “managed competition” which risk being two “strange bed-fellows.”⁴ Against this background, the perspectives developed by the thesis are aimed at contributing to the analytical awareness - in terms of theory and praxis – of the challenges

³ Pan Chengxin, “Problematizing ‘Constructive Engagement’ in EU-China Policy”, in Roland Vogt (ed.), *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: HK University Press, 2012), 54.

⁴ Ibid.

related to the search of a new consensus on the Partnership's structural strategic dimension able to make it a truly primary relationship.

In this sense the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can be regarded in the present phase as being a “double mirror”: on the one hand it reflects – beyond its “institutional inertia” and formulaic interaction - the degree of commitment of the two partners to address the structural material and ideational elements which still limit the development of their strategic relations. On the other hand, it reflects the diverging worldviews of two protagonists of the “strategic triangle” and consequently their potential determination to overcome the underlying problems of “cognitive dissonance” and “conceptual and normative divergence” which continue to exist between Europe and China.

Through the lens of a pluralist and post-positivist epistemological/hermeneutical approach the thesis offers an interpretive “fil rouge” which seeks to break the logic that has often insulated the EU-China relations in the “comfort zone” offered by the architecture and institutional logic of their bilateral interaction. At the same time it sets the deconstruction of the tenets on which the Partnership has been based – such as “constructive engagement” and “multipolar world” – in a perspective which problematizes possible new paradigms of interaction by underlying that their coherence and sustainability will depend on the ability of managing intertwined but often diverging dynamics affecting the Partnership in the broader process of change which characterizes the 21st century international system.

1.2. Outline of the thesis structure

The thesis structure is divided, in terms of substance, into two parts, each composed by four chapters. The first part delineates the main theoretical and epistemological assumptions of the research along with the key arguments used in the following analysis. After the rationale of the research, literature review and methodology contained in chapter 1, chapter 2 focuses on the context in which the Strategic Partnership is “located”, namely the evolving dynamics which influence the EU-China-US relations and form the most important “strategic triangle” in a 21st century international system characterized by trends of growing competition.

Chapter 3 is the most important in argumentative terms because it delineates the epistemological/hermeneutical approach of the research by addressing the key theoretical

issues underlying the problems analyzed in the thesis by focusing on the historical, cultural backgrounds, identities, actorness, concepts of sovereignty of the two partners. In this way the chapter sets in a key theoretical context - based on a pluralist approach - the “conceptual gaps” and the increasing ideational and normative divergence between Brussels and Beijing.

Chapter 4 is closely interconnected with chapter 3: it enters “in media res” by defining firstly the strategic premises of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and, secondly, by analyzing its establishment, motivations and evolution. On the basis of this excursus, a preliminary set of relevant conclusions is drawn at the end of chapter 4 on the degree of convergence/divergence of the two strategic partners by assessing, against this background, the EU’s policy of “constructive engagement” and the “turn to realism” in the present phase of development of the Partnership.

The second part of the thesis contains two chapters, the fifth and the sixth, which are conceived as case-studies of the key theoretical and epistemological arguments and assumptions made in the first part of the research. In this sense chapters 5 and 6 represent “acts of application” of the interpretive assumptions delineated in the previous chapters. In this perspective the subjects of these chapters – the European and Chinese approach to human rights and to multilateralism – are two very significant case-studies to verify the structural strategic dimension of the Partnership in light of the diverging positions of Brussels and Beijing on these crucial issues.

Chapter 7, dedicated to the bilateral dimension of the Sino-European relations, addresses this set of issues in terms of the interplay between bilateral economic interests and the promotion of European political values by the EU and its member states against the background of Chinese initiatives such as the Belt and Road and the 17+ 1 format.

The conclusions of the thesis, contained in chapter 8, argue that the strategic relations between the EU and the China have reached an inflection point which requires a new paradigm of interaction based on a set of key elements: the awareness of the increasing ideational and normative divergence between the two partners and the concrete implications of their persistent conceptual gaps; the need, in this perspective, of a reality and ideational check of the European policy of “constructive engagement” which will require a thorough reconsideration not only of the “relational” dimension of the Partnership - mainly focused on trade and investment issues - but also of the “structural” dimension related to the ability of Brussels and Beijing of addressing jointly multilateral questions of global relevance. Finally, the concluding remarks underscore the importance

that this process of paradigm shift can be context-sensitive in light of the phase of global competition which makes extremely challenging the search of a “middle ground” within the “strategic triangle”.

1.3 The analytical debate and the literature devoted to the subject of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The literature which has addressed the issues related to the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is inscribed in a broader framework of analysis centred, since the late 1970s, on the relations between the European Communities/European Community and the People’s Republic of China. As argued in the first section of this chapter, the thesis focuses on the period between the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2003 and its latest developments in order to investigate its strategic dimension in the timeframe in which this strategic character has been formalized from an institutional point of view. Nevertheless, the thesis focuses also on the antecedents and motivations which were conducive to the decision of establishing such a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in order to set in a proper context such key components as the EU policy of “constructive engagement”: for this reason authors who have studied this earlier phase of the EU-China strategic relations have been taken into account.

At the same time the analysis and the use of the secondary sources has been developed in close connection with the theoretical and epistemological assumptions which permeate the research design of the thesis. In this respect an added value that the thesis has tried to offer is the connection, on the one hand, between the literature and analytical debate on the EU-China Partnership and the philosophical and political meta-theories which have influenced it through the prism of IR Theory (IRT); on the other hand the epistemological/hermeneutical approach of the thesis has been developed in a pluralist perspective which has focused - in addition to Western IRT - also on the contributions of such significant scholars of the Chinese School of IR as, in particular, Qin Yaqing, Yan Xuetong and Zhao Tinyang. The theoretical synergies with these Chinese theorists have been elaborated by connecting their political thought to the post-positivist interpretive perspective that – on the basis of the hermeneutical circle elaborated by Heidegger and Gadamer in philosophical terms – has been developed by authors such as Richard Bernstein and, in IR theory, Onuf, Katzenstein, David Campbell, among others.

On the basis of these necessary premises, which hopefully better clarify how the thesis has taken advantage of the more specific literature on its research subject, we can divide it in three main periods, reflecting not only the analytical focus but also the shifting European and Chinese relations within the Partnership.

The first period is comprised of the years between the establishment of the Partnership and 2008: it has been described as the "honeymoon phase" because of the positive undertone on the potential of the Strategic Partnership which had characterized since the late 1990s the development of Sino-European relations. The thesis' focus on the literature and analytical debate of this period has tried to identify the elements of potential divergence rooted in the establishment of the Partnership itself. In particular, the Chinese expectations that Europe could be a partner in the process of multipolarization of the international system, on the one hand, and the European expectations that the cooperation with China could be extended to a set of key multilateral sectors, on the other. In this sense, as it has been argued, this period could be regarded as an "imagined honeymoon" because the development of the EU-China interaction led these positive expectations fading away.

The second timeframe is that between 2008 – when the financial crisis began - and 2016, a year which marks a turning point in the EU's strategic approach, as, *inter alia*, its new Global Strategy underlined. The thesis' focus on the literature of this period is related, in argumentative terms, to the increasingly critical views of the problems and prospects affecting the evolution of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and, in a broader perspective, of the role of the EU on the international scene. The thesis, at the end of chapter 2 and in chapter 4 underlines how this literature reflects the fact that both European and Chinese perceptions and views on the further development of the Partnership underwent a significant change in this phase. In this perspective the thesis, linking the material dimension of the Partnership to its ideational components, takes advantage, in particular, of the analysis of authors - such as Pan Zhongqi's - who have focused on the structural implications of the persistent "conceptual gaps" for the development of the EU-China strategic relations.

It is also important to note that - across these two periods – a significant theoretical and practical period of reflection addressed, on the European side, the subject of the EU's strategic partnerships while, on the Chinese side, a stronger emphasis was placed on the role of the PRC as a strategic actor in an evolving international system.

By referring to the literature of the third period, from 2016 onwards, the thesis develops its arguments by taking into account the growing number of analytical voices, in particular in Europe, which have problematized – on the basis of a decade-long debate – the evolution of the strategic relations between Brussels and Beijing in a systematic way. The thesis, in line with the literature influenced in this period also by the elements of novelty stemming from important primary sources, analyzes the Sino-European increasing divergence on several key issues, notwithstanding the high degree of institutionalization reached by the EU-China interaction within the Partnership. The consideration of the literature and of the analytical debate of the last four years seems to confirm the thesis' fundamental argument that a paradigm shift in the EU-China relationship has been gradually bringing about a reconsideration of the EU strategic approach to China, in particular the policy of "constructive engagement" defined in the mid-1990s and ever since regarded as one of the fundamental tenets of the Strategic Partnership. As we will see, the analysis of the literature of this period underscores that this debate is still open and is being driven not only by the consideration of the internal elements of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership but also by elements stemming from the increasing global competition which characterizes the present trends of evolution of the international system.

1.3.1 "From honeymoon to marriage": 2003–2008

The evaluation of the debate in the literature during this period tends to show how it was influenced by the acknowledgment that the bilateral relationship had constantly progressed for a decade driven mainly by a growing economic interaction, as Chen Zhimin and Reuben Wong have written.⁵ The main focus of analysts and scholars was on the economic and commercial dimension of the strategic relationship between Brussels and Beijing, in line with the developments of the late 1990s which were conducive to the establishment first in 1998 of the EU-China Comprehensive Partnership and then in 2003 of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. As Shambaugh, Yahuda and Zhang have written, this approach was consistent with the key EU policy paper entitled "A long-term

⁵ Chen Zhimin, "Europe as a Global Player: A view from China", *Perspectives*, vol. 20, n° 2 (2012); Reuben Wong, "An Anatomy of European and American Perspectives on China in the International System", in Roland Vogt (ed.), *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

policy for China” which had emphasized the importance of economic relations and the role of China as a "cornerstone" in this regard.⁶ This perspective stemming from the “primacy of trade” is problematized by the thesis in light of the conceptual gaps which already affected some structural elements of the Partnership.

Another theme characterizing this phase that the thesis analyzes is the idea of a EU-China “emerging axis” - as argued by Shambaugh - which could contribute, as a welcome prospect, to an “economic triad” or “economic condominium” with the United States, as Crossick wrote. Shambaugh, elaborating on the notion of an “emerging axis” - which proved to be premature - defined the EU-China-US relations a “strategic triangle”.⁷ By arguing that the main tenets of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership could be regarded - in line with the official European and Chinese statements – as a serious engagement and as the search for a more multipolar international system, optimism on the potential of the strategic partnership and its role as a positive force of change in the 21st century international relations was shared by both Chinese and European scholars. Examples are Jing Men, David Scott, Katinka Barysch, Charles Grant, Mark Leonard and Nicola Casarini, who regarded Brussels and Beijing as headed towards a mature and meaningful relationship.⁸ In this respect the thesis argues that the literature reflects an underlying assessment of the “rise of China” as an opportunity for the process of gradual socialization of the RPC into the international liberal order.

It is also important to note, as Dai Bingran has done, that in this period the Chinese analytical focus and debate on the EU and its relations with China was supported by the significant funds offered by the European Commission to Chinese scholars who wanted to investigate this field of study. In the 1998-2007 period the EU-China Higher Education Cooperation Programme and the EU-China European Studies Centers Programme played an important role in promoting the development of the research related to issues relevant

⁶ David Shambaugh, *China and Europe, 1949-1995* (London: Contemporary China Institute, SOAS, 1996). Michael Yahuda, *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific, 1945-1995* (London and NYC: Routledge, 1996); “China and Europe: The Significance of the Secondary Relationship” in Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh (eds.), *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: OUP, 1994); Zhang Yongjin, *China in International Society since 194. Alienation and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

⁷ David Shambaugh, “China and Europe: The Emerging Axis”, *Current History*, September 2004; David Shambaugh, Eberhard Sandschneider and Zhong Hong (eds.), *China-Europe Relations: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); David Shambaugh, “Coping with a Conflicted China”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 34 (1), 2005, 7-27. Stanley Crossick, “Rise of China and Implications for the European Union”, Singapore, EAI, 2006.

⁸ Katinka Barysch, Charles Grant and Mark Leonard, *Embracing the Dragon: The EU's partnership with China*, (London: Centre for European Reform, 2005).

to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership itself.⁹ The effects of this broader debate were visible in the publishing of books such as *China-Europe Relations: Perceptions, policies and prospects* edited by David Shambaugh, Eberhard Sandschneider and Zhou Hong or *The International Politics of EU-China Relations*, edited by David Kerr and Liu Fei, which offered views on a wide ranging set of issues that tended to underscore the maturity of the EU-China strategic interaction.

It is significant that authors such as Sonia Lucarelli, Richard Youngs, Li Shejun, Liselotte Odgaard, and Sven Biscop addressed key issues such as the strategic identities of the two partners¹⁰ while the China-Europe engagement at regional and global levels and the perspectives of further development of the strategic relations were analyzed by Chinese authors such as Wai Ting.¹¹

The literature of this period reflects the expectations in both the EU and China for a transformation of the global order in which the US no longer played the only leading role as Scott, Casarini, Shen Dingli wrote.¹² The focus on the EU as a key “multipolar partner” was in line with the first ever EU Policy paper released by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2003 and which was mirrored by a detailed analysis in leading Chinese academic and policy journals on international affairs: this focus on the “balancing” role of Europe did not exclude, however, the idea, as Ruan Zongze observed, that it was possible to shape a “constructive future” in EU-China-US relations.¹³

Moreover, the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership redirected the interest of the Chinese analysts away from the individual European states towards the EU as the main counterpart of the Sino-European relations in this potential multipolar, non-hegemonic context of realignment of international relations based on

⁹ Dai Bingran, “European studies in China”, in Shambaugh, Sandschneider and Zhou Hong (eds.), *China-Europe Relations*, 105-126.

¹⁰ Sonia Lucarelli, “European Political Identity and Others’ Images of the EU”, *CFSP Forum* 5, n° 6, (2007), 11-15; Richard Youngs, “Normative Dynamics and Strategic Interests in the EU’S External Identity”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, n° 2 (2004), 415-435.

¹¹ Wai Ting, “China’s Strategic Thinking: The Role of the European Union and China”, in Richard Balme and Brian Bridges (eds.), *Europe-Asia Relations: Building Multilateralisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).

¹² Nicola Casarini “What Role for the European Union in Asia? An Analysis on the EU’s Asia Strategy and Growing significance of EU-China Relations”, *Current Politics and Economics of Asia*, vol.7, n°1, 2008; David Scott, “The EU-China Strategic Dialogue: Pathways in the International System”, in David Kerr and Liu Fei (eds.), *The International Politics of EU-China Relations* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 13; Shen Dingli, “Why China sees the EU as a counterweight to America”, *Europe’s World*, n°10, Autumn 2008, 48-53.

¹³ Ruan Zongze, “China–EU–US relations: Shaping a Constructive Future”, in Shambaugh et al., (eds.) *China–Europe relations*, 287–300; Jing Men, “Chinese Perceptions of the European Union: A Review of leading Chinese journals”, *European Law Journal*, vol 12, n°6, November 2006, 788-806.

cultural diversity and economic interdependence, as authors such Shambaugh, William Callahan, Zhong Yongjin, Deng Yong, Zhang Tuosheng all argued.¹⁴

The overall positive expectations on the recently established Comprehensive Strategic Partnership - expressed in the analysis and research works of these years - began to change after China's setbacks in not removing the EU's arms embargo or obtaining a market economic status (MES) from the Union. Notwithstanding the launch in 2007 of an ambitious negotiation for a Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), the end of this period is marked also in the literature by a "growing uneasiness" in the EU-China interaction, that Shambaugh defined as a "complicated relationship" just a few years after calling it an "emerging axis".¹⁵

This thesis, taking into account the increasing focus of European authors at the end of this period on unresolved issues within the Partnership leading Holslag to talk of a "great disillusion",¹⁶ addresses the key question of the definition of its strategic dimension by focusing on the broader debate about the EU's strategic partnerships of which the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was the most institutionalized example. In doing so the thesis defines the strategic dimension of the Partnership in "relational" and "structural" terms thus elaborating on a conceptualization proposed by Giovanni Grevi in the framework of a analytical debate characterized by the theoretical and practical insights of authors such as Thomas Renard, Rosa Balfour, Michael Smith and Xie Huaixian, Nicola Casarini and Francois Godement¹⁷. From this perspective the

¹⁴ Shambaugh, *ibid.* Zhong Yongjin, "Understanding Chinese views of the emerging Global Order", in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds.), *China and the New International Order* (London: Routledge, 2008). William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, n° 4 (December 2008), 749-761; Deng Yong, *China struggle for status: the realignment of international relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 156-60; Zhang Tuosheng, "On China's concept of the international security order", in Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø and Zhang Tuosheng (eds.) *US-China_EU relations. Managing the new world order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 37.

¹⁵ David Shambaugh, "China-Europe Relations get complicated", *Brookings North East Asia Commentary* n° 9, May 2007.

¹⁶ Jonathan Holslag, "The European Union and China: The Great Disillusion", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 11 (2006), 555-580.

¹⁷ Nicola Casarini, "The evolution of the EU-China Relationship. From Constructive Engagement to Strategic Partnership", *Occasional paper*, n°64 (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, October 2006); Michael Smith and Xie Huaixian, "The EU and China: The logics of Strategic Partnership", Paper presented at the ECPR Standing Group, Porto 24-26 June 2010; Giovanni Grevi, *The Interpolated World: A new Scenario*, (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2009); Sven Biscop and Thomas Renard, "The EU's Strategic Partnerships with the BRIC; where's the strategy?", *BEPA monthly brief*, n°29 (September 2009), 5-8; Giovanni Grevi, "Making the EU Strategic Partnership effective", *FRIDE paper* 105, 2010; Thomas Renard, "EU Strategic Partnerships: Evolution of a Concept, from Amsterdam to Lisbon", *EU-China Observer*, issue5, (2010), 16-22; "A need for strategy in a multipolar world: Recommendations to the EU after Lisbon", *Security Policy Brief*, n° 5, January 2010; François Godement, "Europe- Asia: the historical

thesis analyzes the debate on the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership by inscribing it in a broader theoretical debate on the EU strategic partnerships and their impact on an evolving international order.¹⁸ Thus – by analyzing the related literature – the thesis links the research and analytical perspectives on the EU-China Partnership to broad policy issues such as the partners’ approach to multipolarization/multilateralism, a theme widely addressed by both European and Chinese scholars.¹⁹ At the same time this analytical standpoint has allowed us to further problematize the development of the Partnership on “structural” issues such as human rights and the potential cooperation in the political and security sectors, as the writings of Zhang Chi and Ye Zicheng, Godement, Gompert, Stumbaum have tended to underline.²⁰

In this evolving context the increasing asymmetries, reflected also by the European and Chinese literature on the EU-China Strategic Partnership, were magnified by the effects of the 2008 financial impact and its lasting implications in particular in Europe.

1.3.2 The 2008 crisis: a pivotal inflection point also for the analytical perspectives on the EU-China Partnership

The 2008-09 global financial crisis had a very significant impact on the analytical debate on the development of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and

limits of a Soft Relationship”, in Richard Balme and Brian Bridges, (eds.), *Europe-Asia relations: building multilateralism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Rosa Balfour, “EU Strategic Partnerships: Are they worth the name?”, Commentary, the EPC, 15 September 2010;

¹⁸ Nicola Casarini, *Remaking Global Order: the evolution of Europe-China relations and its implications for East Asia and the United States* (Oxford: OUP, 2003); Charles Grant and Katinka Barysch, *Can Europe and China Shape a New World Order?* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2008). Christopher Griffin and Raffaello Pantucci, “A Treacherous Triangle? China and the Transatlantic Alliance”, *SAIS Review*, vol. 27, n°1, Winter-Spring 2007; William Callahan, “Future imperfect: the EU’S encounter with China (and the United States)”, in Zhao Quansheng and Liu Guoli (eds.), *Managing the China Challenge* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁹ Xu Xin, “A Dialectic of Multipolarity and Multilateralism: China’s Regional Security Practice in the Age of Globalization”, in David Kelly, Rajan Ramkishan and Goh Gillian (eds.), *Managing Globalization: Lessons from China and India* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2006); Wu Guogang and Helen Landsdowne, *China turns to Multilateralism* (London: Routledge, 2007); Alvaro de Vasconcelos, “Multilateralising Multipolarity”, in Giovanni Grevi e Alvaro de Vasconcelos (eds.), *Partnerships for Effective Multilateralism: EU Relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia* (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2008); Karen Smith, “EU Foreign Policy and Asia” in Richard Balme and Brian Bridges (eds.), *Europe-Asia relations: building multilateralism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Gustaf Geeraerts, “China the EU and the New Multipolarity”, *European Review* 19, n° 1, 2011, 57-67.

²⁰ David Gompert, François Godement, *China on the move* (Washington DC: RAND 2005); May Britt U. Stumbaum, “Opportunities and Limits of the EU-China Security Cooperation”, *International Spectator* 42, n° 3, September 2007, 351-70; Zhang Chi and Ye Zicheng, “Difference on Human Rights concepts and China-EU Relations”, *International Review*, n°1, 2008, 57-61.

yielded substantial scholarship in this respect. By acknowledging that the crisis represented a “pivotal turning point”, the thesis focuses on the two distinct strands of analysis that it originated in the EU and China which are still relevant today.

On the Chinese side the analytical debate was driven by the changing perceptions and assessments of the EU after the crisis and its role of strategic partner vis-à-vis China, as the Institute of European Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences underlined.²¹ In the evolution of the Chinese debate and scholarship - which was conducive to diversified positions - a not secondary factor was the fact that, after the Eurozone crisis, funding for research on the EU-China relationship had dwindled, in contrast to the generous funds previously made available by the European Commission, as Vincent Chang, Frank Picke and Li Wang pointed out.²² For the same reason, in parallel to the new approach of a more assertive China both in ideational and analytical terms, in the 2009-2015 period we witness the growing role of those Chinese policy think tanks and research centers active in the field of international relations in addressing the EU-China Partnership. In particular, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ analysts such as Zhou Hong focused on the future of the EU through the lens of its institutional dynamics, its role as a “major pole”, its capacity of reform and structural change. Within the debate on the EU-China Strategic Partnership the influence of these groups of “proxy advisers” was instrumental in redefining some analytical perspectives.²³

Authors such as Feng Zhongping refocused in this new context on the Union-member states interaction by underlining the persistent role of the latter, an issue which, as the thesis underlines in chapter 7, has been of constant relevance in reshaping the Chinese approach to the EU-China Partnership.

Even though a limited number of scholars and analysts - namely the EU specialists and the economists - tended to downplay the structural problems of the EU and maintained a cautious optimism on the prospects for EU-China relations, the post-crisis debate was increasingly characterized by critical views on the future of Europe. Chinese

²¹ Institute of European Studies, *A Survey and Preliminary Analysis of the Chinese Perception of the EU and China-EU Relations*, Working Paper Series on European Studies, vol. 2, n° 1, Institute of European Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing 2008.

²² Vincent K.L. Chang and Franck N. Picke, “Europe’s engagement with China: shifting Chinese views on the EU and the EU-China relationship”, *Asia Europe Journal*, 16, 2018, 317-331; Li Wang, “From Client Status to Strategic Partnership: China’s Changing Perceptions of Europe” in Roland Vogt (ed.), *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 82-93.

²³ Zhu Liquan, “Chinese Perceptions of the EU and the China-Europe relationship in Shambaugh, Sandschneider, Zhou Hong, op.cit; Zhou Hong, “Chinese Public views towards the EU mid-2008”, *Chinese Journal of European Studies*, n° 5, 2009.

financial analysts and the more ideological political scientists were among who argued that there had been “a lot of wishful thinking about Europe” which in reality was weak and divided. These authors underlined the structural problems which affected the EU and which could have implications for its Partnership with China: economic and political divisions, the EU’s lack of institutional effectiveness and flexibility in reforms and a growing legitimacy gap.²⁴ The view of the EU as a “compromised actor”, while the PCR was a “winner of globalization”, introduced a lasting theme, as the thesis argues, in the debate on the EU-China strategic relations by putting under scrutiny not only the idea that the Union was an emerging super-power but also its traditional ambitions of being a normative power. The Chinese critique of the EU’s “post-sovereign” normative mission - as underlined by Chen Zhimin, Gerrits and Wang - is a key analytical perspective which had and has significant implications, as the thesis argues with regard to the revived debate on “constructive engagement”.²⁵ In this framework the dialectic between interests and values emerged as a significant theme, as Paul Irwin Crookes suggested.²⁶

The idea of Europe’s eroded normative power and of its fading soft power was also a significant reference for the increasingly critical Chinese approach to the crucial issue, within the Partnership, of human rights which were regarded by authors such as Shen Wenwen as an example of Eurocentrism, of double standards and of lack of pragmatism.²⁷ In this period the Chinese analytical contributions reflect an increasing divergence with the EU on human rights particularly in light of the two partners’ different identities, as authors such as Chen Dingding argued.²⁸

In this context of growing critical Chinese voices vis-à-vis the EU, more positive considerations, in addition to the recognition of the outstanding level of trade cooperation, were centered on Europe as a “social power” able to provide various models – as Song Xinning has argued – and on the multidimensional nature of its soft power that Qin

²⁴ Zhu Liqun, “China’s Foreign Policy Debates”, *Chaillot Paper*, n°121, Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, (September 2010).

²⁵ Chen Zhimin, “Europe as a Global Player: A view from China”, *Perspectives*, vol. 20, n° 2 (2012); Andre’ Gerrits (ed.), *Normative Power in a Changing World: A Discussion* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2009), 1-8; Wang Yiwei, “The identity dilemmas of EU normative power: observations from Chinese traditional culture”, in Gerrits (ed.), *Normative Power in a Changing World: A Discussion*.

²⁶ Paul Irwin Crookes, “Resetting EU-China Relations from a values-based to an Interests-based Engagement”, *International Politics*, 50/5 (2013), 639-663.

²⁷ Shen Wenwen, “EU-China Relations on Human Rights in Competing Paradigms: Continuity and Change”, in Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Philomena Murray (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-China Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

²⁸ Chen Dingding, “China’s Participation in the International Human Rights Regime: A State Identity Perspective”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, n°3, 2009, 399-419.

Yaqing has regarded as conducive to a culture of peace, cooperation and community. All these elements, according to these authors, militated in favor of a “win-win policy approach” which constituted a positive factor also in the framework of the EU-China strategic relations.²⁹ The theoretical approach of thinkers of the Chinese School of IR such as Qin Yaqing and their focus on the civilizational elements driving China’s identity and international behaviour has been taken into account in this research’s epistemological approach, as we will see in chapter 3.

Against this multifaceted background, the undertones of the analytical debate and of the scholarship on the EU-China Partnership can be described – as Pan Chengxin has written – as a “transition from honeymoon to marriage”: what is more important to note, however, is that in this phase a fundamental reflection emerged on the meaning and impact for the EU-China strategic interaction of the EU’s policy of “constructive engagement”. In this respect Pan Chengxin’s critical analysis remains particularly meaningful within the debate on the EU-China Strategic Partnership, as the thesis argues.³⁰ Pan Chengxin’s fundamental argument on the structural divergence within the Partnership is related to the EU’s policy of “constructive engagement” as a normative project which aims, explicitly or implicitly, at the transformation of China more or less in the image of the European self. Through different discursive contexts, including the Partnership, Normative Power Europe has tried to transform indirectly the “Chinese other” on the basis of Europe’s own self-image. From this perspective Pan Chengxin’s critique underlined that the “false modesty” of “constructive engagement” has been based on the false premise of the overly ambitious goal of transforming China. According to Pan, the EU’s double standards and the policy inconsistency of Normative Power Europe has led the Partnership to what Christopher Hill has defined, in a different context, as an “expectations-capability gap” in this “battle over norms”.³¹ We can see that in 2012 there

²⁹ Qin Yaqing, “Struggle for Identity: A Political Psychology of China’s Rise”, in Brantly Womack (ed.), *China’s Rise in historical Perspective*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 249-270; Song Xinling, “European ‘Models’ and their implications to China: Internal and External Perspectives” *Review of International Studies* 36, 2010, 755-75; Song Xinling, “The European Union as an International Political and Security Actor” in the *European Union after the Treaty of Lisbon*, European Commission 2011, 237-241.

³⁰ Pan Chengxin, “Problematizing constructive Engagement in EU China Policy” in Roland Vogt, (ed.), *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

³¹ Christopher Hill, “The Capability-Expectations gap, or Conceptualizing Europe’s International Role”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 31, n° 3, (September 1993).

Ayşe Kaya, “The EU’s China Problem: A Battle Over Norms”, *International Politics*, 51(2), 2014, 214-233.

was already present in the Chinese literature a key reflection on a fundamental element of the EU-China relationship which challenged one of the very tenets of the Partnership. This is an analytical perspective that the thesis considers with great interest because this substantial critique of “constructive engagement” as a manifestation of the EU normative project also underlines how the analytical approach of some Chinese scholars - taking advantage of post-positivist interpretive perspectives - had begun to deconstruct this EU staple policy well before the recent paradigm shift in the European policy-making vis-à-vis China.

These analytical perspectives - also in terms of their policy-making implications - have been taken into account here because they underline - in addition to the focus of the literature on trade and economic competition, power transition theories, institutional considerations - the importance of ideology and civilizational differences between Brussels and Beijing. In particular, the thesis argues, the issue of the identity of the two strategic partners is a very relevant element to be considered in the analysis of the Partnership, which has been in fact increasingly researched. In this respect Reuben Wong has developed a useful reflection on the role of identities by referring to the concept elaborated by Qin Yaqing of a “relational identity” which makes sense only when an actor interacts with another and forms an image of the “self” and of the “other”³².

The consideration of these elements is clearly relevant for an evolving Partnership which has increasingly addressed, as Roland Vogt has noted, “post-material issues” - such as environmental protection, climate change, human rights, democratization and good governance - which should constitute a significant part of the “structural” strategic interaction of the two partners, in line with its definition also elaborated in this thesis.

The thesis’s argument on the relevance of the ideational components of the EU-China Partnership and its practical implications has benefitted from the analysis of those authors who have focused on the effects of the “cognitive dissonance” between Europe and China: in this respect Pan Zhongqi has offered a particularly productive contribution with his study of the “conceptual gaps” affecting the development of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,³³ a study that the thesis has used as an interpretive instrument to assess the European debate on a “resetting of the EU-China Partnership”,

³² Reuben Wong, “The issue of identity in the Eu-China relationship” in *Politique Européene*, n° 39, (2013), 158-186.

³³ Pan Zhongqi, “Managing the Conceptual gap on sovereignty in China-EU Relations”, *Asia Europe Journal* 8, n°2, 2010, 227-43; Pan Zhongqi (ed.), *Conceptual gaps in China-EU Relations. Global Governance, Human Rights and Strategic Partnerships* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

which has focused on both the material and ideational factors of increasing divergence between Brussels and Beijing. In this respect Jonathan Holslag contributed in an important way to the clarification of the factors defining the “strategic dissonance” which had made the EU-China strategic relations an “elusive axis”.³⁴

For these reasons the perspective of a “normal relationship” - that Chen and Armstrong had investigated - was increasingly problematized by the Sino-European dynamics influenced by the lasting effects of the 2008-2009 crisis in Europe, as Fox and Godement pointed out in their “power audit of EU-China Relations” and, later on, Casarini, Godement, Grevi, Renard, Lentz and Lee in their analyses of the EU strategic partnerships and the global economic downturn.³⁵ The 2012-2013 literature, beyond the strong focus on economic issues, also addressed the still underdeveloped relations between EU and China in the security sector, as Renner, Van der Putten and Chu Shulong wrote³⁶

At the same time, my research tends to deconstruct those Western analytical perspectives in the phase following the crisis. This continued to focus on the relations of the “strategic triangle” on the basis, as Bates Gill and Andrew Small did, of positive views on an “untapped trilateralism” in the common economic and security interests of the European Union, the United States and China. Expectations for a further positive development of EU-China economic relations were indeed reiterated by both Western

³⁴ Jonathan Holslag, “The Elusive Axis: Evaluating the EU-China Strategic Partnership”, *BICCS Asia Paper* 4, n° 8, 2009; “The Strategic Dissonance between Europe and China”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, n°3, 2010, 325-45; Jonathan Holslag, “Europe’s Convenient Marginalisation”, *The European Voice*, July 5, 2012.

³⁵ Chen Zhimin and John Armstrong, “China relation with Europe: towards a more ‘normal’ relationship?” in Shaun Breslin (ed.), *Handbook of China’s International Relations* (London and NYC: Routledge, 2010), 156-165; John Fox and François Godement, “A Power Audit of EU-China Relations”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, London 2009; François Godement, “China at the Crossroads”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, London 2012; Nicola Casarini, “The EU and China: Investing in a Troubled Partnership”, in Giovanni Grevi and Thomas Renard (eds.) *Partners in Crisis: EU Strategic Partnerships and the Global Economic Downturn*, *European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Report 1*, (November 2012); Giovanni Grevi and Thomas Renard (eds.), “EU Strategic Partnerships and the Global Economic Downturn”, *European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Report 1*, (November 2012); Mattias Lentz, “The View from the EU”, in Nicola Casarini (ed.), *Brussels-Beijing. Changing the Game?*, *European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Report 14*, (February 2013), 59-60; Bernice Lee, “The EU and China: Time for a Strategic Renewal?” in Giovanni Grevi and Thomas Renard (eds.), *Hot Issues, Cold Shoulders, Lukewarm Partners: EU Strategic Partnerships and Climate Change*, *European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Report 2*, (November 2012), 23-34.

³⁶ Martin Renner, “The EU’s Security Policy Towards China: A Liberal-Relational Approach to hard Security Issues”, *Studia Diplomatica*, LXV-3 (2012), 59-75; Frans-Paul van der Putten and Chu Shulong, “Conclusion” in Frans-Paul van der Putten and Chu Shulong (eds.), *China, Europe and International Security: Interests, Roles and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2012); Frans-Paul van der Putten, “The Security Dimension in EU-China Relations” in Nicola Casarini (ed.), *Brussels-Beijing. Changing the Game?*, *European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Report 14*, (February 2013), 53-59.

and Chinese analysts such as Alicia García-Guerrero, K.C. Kwok, Lin Xianglong, Tim Summers and Zhang Yanshang, even though trilateralism was an issue which, from a Chinese and US point of view, was also addressed in the context of doubts about a future European role as an independent pole in the international system (as, in different ways Ye Jiang, Gill and Murphy have argued).³⁷

Despite a certain analytical inertia related to the potential and salience of the EU-China economic cooperation, a growing consensus on the internal and external limits of the Partnership is evident both in the contributions of the academic literature and of the think tanks of this period, with a revised approach to the strategic objectives of both Brussels and Beijing, as authors such as Renard, Grant and Zhang Feng underlined also in the light of the two partners' evolving strategic interests and ideas.³⁸

The reflection on the PRC's strategic aims developed by a prominent IR theorist such as Yang Xuetong and the revived neo-realist considerations on the "Thucydides trap" between China and the West proposed by authors such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt are two meaningful examples of theoretical positions which have underlined the increasingly complex relationship with Beijing, in contrast to the more reassuring view of Henry Kissinger.³⁹ In this sense, it is meaningful that two of the most prolific and eminent scholars of the Europe-China relations - Jing Mei and David Shambaugh - who in the past had held positive views on the potential of the Partnership, in this period increasingly focused on the many problems of a strategic relationship which seemed "mismatched" and under pressure because of the strategic implications of a global China⁴⁰.

³⁷ Alicia García-Herrero et al. *EU-China Economic Relations to 2005. Building a Common Future*, joint report by Bruegel, Chatham House, China Center for International Economic Exchanges and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, September 2017; Ye Jiang, "New Developments in China-EU Relations: Concurrently Analyzing the Trilateral Relations Between China, EU and US", paper presented at the Track Dialogue on EU-China Relations, London LSE, 29-31, May 2009; Bates Gill and Melissa Murphy, *China-Europe relations: Implications and Policy Responses for the United States* (Washington: CSIS Press, 2008).

³⁸ Robert G. Sutter, *Foreign Relations of the PRC* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); Thomas Renard, "The EU Strategic Partnerships Review: Ten Guiding Principles", *European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Brief* (April 2012); A. Soutenet, "The EU's Strategic Partnerships with Emerging Powers: Institutional, Legal, economic and Political Perspectives", in Thomas Renard and Sven Biscop (eds.), *The EU and Emerging Powers in the 21st Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Zhang Feng, "Rethinking China's Grand Strategy: Beijing's Evolving National Interests and Strategic Ideas in the Reform Era", *International Politics* 49/3 (2012), 318-345; Charles Grant, "How can the EU influence China?", *Centre for European Reform*, January 7 2013.

³⁹ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011).

⁴⁰ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of the Great Power Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014); Jing Men, "The EU and China: mismatched partners?", *Journal of Contemporary*

In the second half of the 2010s the academic literature and the analytical debate on the EU-China strategic relationship has reflected a phase increasingly characterized by a multifaceted reflection on a paradigm shift affecting the development of the Partnership.

This reconsideration, which has been focused on the conceptual and operational aspects of the relationship, has been influenced, on the one hand, by the new leadership of Xi Jinping and its theoretical and ideological approach, itself centered on approaches such as the “new type of great power relationships” and the “rejuvenation” of the Chinese party-state which were the sources of the PRC international “offensive” and assertiveness, described by Le Corre, Sepulchre, Wissenbach and Chang Liao.⁴¹ On the other hand, the growing divergence between the two partners on key issues has been conducive, in particular on the European front, to a gradual paradigm shift which has been called a “turn to realism” in the strategic interconnection with China.

In 2016 Richard Maher in his analysis devoted to the “elusive partnership” provided a convincing survey of the elements of structure which have made the strategic interests, respective world-views and value-systems a crucial factor of divergence within the Partnership.⁴² While Maher underlines the clashing views between Brussels and Beijing on the main security issues, Salvatore Finamore, by acknowledging the normative differences in the Chinese and European discourses on Global Security, has argued in favor of realistic engagement based on the awareness of the acute sensitivities of a global China in the field of security, in particular vis-à-vis the United States. The growing importance of the EU role as a global actor in a “(un)holy trinity encompassing economy, diplomacy and security” has been underscored by Pomorska and Vanhoonacker, while Christiansen, Wang Jiwei and Song Weiqing have set it in an interaction with China which impinges on the “politics of global governance”.⁴³

China, 21:74,(2012), 333-349; David Shambaugh, *China goes Global. The Partial Power*, (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

⁴¹ Philippe Le Corre and Alain Sepulchre, *China's offensive in Europe* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2016). Uwe Wissenbach, “The Role of (New) Leadership in EU-China Relations”, *International Relations and Diplomacy*, 2(2), 2014, 133-143; Nien-Chung Chang Liao, “The Sources of China's Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?” *International Affairs*, 92 (2016), 817-833.

⁴² Richard Maher, “The elusive EU-China Strategic Partnership”, *International Affairs*, 92:4, 2016, 954-976.

⁴³ Salvatore Finamore, “Normative Differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security: Obstacles and opportunities for Cooperation”, *Chinese Political Science Review*, 2017; Karolina Pomorska and Sophie Vanhoonacker, “Europe as a Global Actor: the (Un)Holy Trinity of Economy, Diplomacy and Security”, *JCMS Annual Review* (2015), 216-229; Thomas Christiansen, “A Liberal Institutional Perspective on China-EU Relations”, in Wang Jianwei and Song Weiqing (eds.), *China, the*

The focus of this thesis on the elusive “structural strategic dimension” of the Partnership does not neglect the literature which convincingly has addressed the shortcomings of its “relational” strategic dimension. The understandable, persistent attention to the US as a primary factor of influence on EU-China relations - “the elephant in the room” - is pointed out in the comprehensive analysis of the Sino-European economic relations developed by Farnell and Irwin Crookes. This “complex triangulation” in the evolution of the Partnership is an important theme recognized also by Godement and Vasselier in their 2017 “new power audit of EU-China relations” which – compared to the 2009 version – argues for a more realistic European approach in order to try to make more concrete the strategic aspirations of the two partners in the context of a “fragile world order”, as Chen Zhimin has written.⁴⁴

The thesis’ analytical interest in connecting Sino-European dynamics to an evolving international context has benefitted by Scott A.W. Brown’s interesting scholarly contribution which sets the Partnership in the broader perspective of the EU and US responses to the rise of China. The role of perceptions in this context has been reinforced by the fact that this is a theme addressed in depth by the authors who have studied the increasing role of ideational elements in the evolution of the Partnership. In this framework Chang and Picke have analyzed how the “dramatic recent shifts” in Chinese policy perspectives on EU-China relations confirm the need to rethink the basic assumptions underlying the Strategic Partnership, including “constructive engagement”.

These diverging dynamics affecting the ideational strategic dimension of the Partnership are at play - the thesis argues - in particular with regard to the contrasting political values expressed by the PRC and the EU, as Nicholas Rühlig, van der Putten, Seamen, Otero-Iglesias and Ekman have argued in a comprehensive study of this problematique. In this respect the thesis has taken into consideration the equally important contributions of Anna Michalski and Pan Zhongqi on the “role dynamics” in the Strategic Partnership, of Zeng Jinghen on the role of Europe in Chinese narratives of the “One Belt One Road” and of the “new type of great power relations”, of Swaine, Keukeleire,

European Union and the International Politics of Global Governance (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2016), 29-50.

⁴⁴ John Farnell, Paul Irwin Crookes, *The Politics of EU-China Economic Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); François Godement and Abigaïl Vasselier, “China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China Relations”, *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 2017; Chen Zhimin, “China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* (February 2015), 1-18.

Debreux and Wang Zheng on the EU and Chinese views in terms of foreign policy and security environment.⁴⁵

1.3.3 In search of a new paradigm: 2016-2020

In this phase, the analytical debate has been influenced, on the Chinese side, by an in-depth reassessment of the strategic priorities on the basis of Xi Jinping's "new era" objectives⁴⁶; on the European side, by a paradigm shift which has found an important confirmation in the key 2019 EU policy document which, in delineating the Union's strategy outlook on China, has defined the PRC for the first time as a "systemic rival". This new approach has been investigated so far mainly by think tankers who have regarded it as significantly novel putting under scrutiny the concept of Strategic Partnership from a perspective which could end the European "Chinese dream", as Mark Leonard, François Godement, Andrew Small, Alex Berkofsky and Fraser Cameron have written.⁴⁷ At the same time the questioning of a new Chinese "grand strategy" and its origins - as Angela Stanzel, Agata Kratz, Justyna Szczudlik, Dragan Pavlicevic and Howard French have done⁴⁸ - has addressed the historical and cultural background of this

⁴⁵ Scott. A.W. Brown, *Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking. US and EU responses to the rise of China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018); Vincent Chang, Frank Pieke, "Europe's engagement with China: shifting Chinese views of the EU-China relationship", *Asia Europe Journal*, (2018), 317-331; Nicholas Rülig et alii, *Political values in Europe-China relations, ETNC Report*, December 2018; Zeng Jinghan, "Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese narratives of 'One Belt One Road' and 'New Type of Great Power Relations'", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol.55, n° 3, 2017, 611-627; Michael D. Swaine, "How China's Defense Establishment views China's Security Environment: A comparison between the 2019 PRC Defense White Paper and Earlier Defense White Papers", *Carnegie Endowment China Leadership Monitor*, December 4, 2019; "Chinese views on Foreign Policy in the 19th Party Congress", *Carnegie Endowment China Leadership Monitor*, n°55, January 11, 2018; Stephen Keukeleire and Tom Debreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Wang Zheng, *Bad Memories, Good Dream: The Legacy of Historical Memory and China's Foreign Policy*, Seoul: The AsanForum, July 25, 2014.

⁴⁶ Yevgen Sautin, "A 'new type of great power relation' revisited", in China's "new era" with Xi Jinping's characteristics, *European Council on Foreign Relations China Analysis*, December 2017; Heike Holbig, "The 19th party congress: its place in history", in China's "new era" with Xi Jinping's characteristics, *European Council on Foreign Relations China Analysis*, December 2017, 3;

⁴⁷ Mark Leonard, "The end of Europe's Chinese dream", *The Project Syndicate*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/europe-new-strategy-toward-china-by-mark-leonard-2020-05>; François Godement, Andrew Small, "The meaning of systemic rivalry: Europe and China beyond the pandemic", *Policy Brief European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 19, 2020. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_meaning_of_systemic_rivalry_europe_and_china_beyond_the_pandemic. Fraser Cameron, "2020: critical year for EU-China relations", Euractiv, December 26, 2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/opinion/2020-critical-year-for-eu-china-relations/>; Alex Berkofsky, "EU-China Relations: Strategic Partners?. No More", *Institute for Security and Development Policy Issue Brief*, December 4, 2019.

⁴⁸ Angela Stanzel, Agata Kratz, Justyna Szczudlik, Dragan Pavlicevic, *China's Investment in Influence: The Future of 16+1 Cooperation* (London: European Council on Foreign relations, 2016);

approach and the recent key initiatives of China's power projection, such as the 16+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative. Positive narratives on the new Chinese strategic objectives have been disseminated by think tankers and academics close to the party-state, such as, inter alios, Jiang Shixue Chu Yin and Wang Wenwen.⁴⁹ On the active role of the Chinese think tanks the contributions of Silvia Menegazzi have been helpful.⁵⁰

The dynamics underway within the Strategic Partnership have been amplified by the effects of the pandemic crisis and the analytical debate in 2019 has reflected an increasing polarization of the interpretative views: in contrast to "proxy analysts" there have been some critical Chinese voices which have problematized the present trends, as underlined in the writings of Pei Minxin, Bao Huaying and Wu Xiangning.⁵¹ Since 2019 the debate on the Partnership has developed to include a set of key issues addressed in light of the stronger strategic competition which seems to characterize the Western approach to China, as suggested by Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, Ian Bremmer, Frank Kempe, Silvia Menegazzi, Michelguglielmo Torri, Nicola Mocci and Filippo Boni.⁵²

In this evolving context the implications for the EU-China Strategic Partnership have been analyzed along the lines of three main perspectives: the EU's reconsideration of the policy of "constructive engagement" and the challenge of implementing a "turn to realism" in the interaction with Beijing on a basis of a new consensus as Fischer, Garton Ash, Oertel have argued;⁵³ the implications of China's "new course" for the EU and its

Howard W. French, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).

⁴⁹ Jiang Shixue, "One more boost for EU-China relations", Charhar Institute, April 10, 2019, <http://en.charhar.org.cn/index.php?a=shows&catid=30&id=50091294>; Wang Wenwen, "West feels challenged by China's new 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy", *Global Times*, 16 April 2020, based on an interview with Chu Yin, a professor at the University of International Relations, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185776.shtml>.

⁵⁰ Silvia Menegazzi, "What's the matter with Chinese Think Tanks?", *CPI Analysis*, China Policy Institute, 2016; *Rethinking Think tanks in Contemporary China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁵¹ Minxin Pei, "How Has the Coronavirus Crisis Affected Xi's Power: A Preliminary Assessment", *China Leadership Monitor* n° 64, Summer 2020, Monday June 1, 2020; "Ideological Indoctrination under Xi Jinping", *China Leadership Monitor*, December 1, 2019, at <https://www.prclleader.org/minxin-pei>; "Rewriting the Rules of the Chinese Party-State: Xi's Progress in Reinvigorating the CCP," *China Leadership Monitor*, n° 60 (June 2019), at <https://www.prclleader.org/peiclm60>; Bao Huaying, "China's daunting post-Covid challenges", *The Diplomat*, May 8, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/chinas-daunting-post-covid-challenges/>; Wu Xiangning, "L'incertezza e l'unica certezza della Cina", in *Il mondo Virato, Limes*, n° 3/2020.

⁵² Silvia Menegazzi, "China 2019: Xi Jinping's new era and the CPC's agenda" in Michelguglielmo Torri Nicola Mocci Filippo Boni (eds.), in "Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution", *Asia Major*, vol. XXX/2019, 25.

⁵³ Joschka Fischer, "The end of Western Opportunism", *The Project Syndicate*, August 24, 2020; <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/us-china-conflict-values-must-trump-economic-interests-by-joschka-fischer-2020-08>; Janka Oertel, "The new China consensus: how Europe is growing wary of

member states on which Casarini and Stanzel have written; and the role of the EU-China Partnership in a phase of evolution and competition within the international system (Ikenberry, Walt, Nye, Breslin and Zeng, Christiansen, Bremmer, Burns Campbell and Sullivan).⁵⁴ We can say that the recent events have opened a renewed multifaceted analytical and academic debate on the structural implications of a “risen China” for the evolution of the Global Order. In this context the focus on the strategic relationship between Brussels and Beijing - also in the light of the paradigm shifts underway - are seen as an important component of a broader process of realignment of contemporary international relations.

This evolving debate seems to confirm some fundamental arguments of my research: the need to reconsider some key tenets of the Partnership which have not been conducive to the development of a truly structural strategic dimension between Brussels and Beijing. At the heart of the present increasing divergence, the thesis argues, there is an unresolved underlying “ideational dissonance” between the two strategic partners which manifests itself through clashing “normative positions” on several issues which are essential for their cooperation within the Partnership. The diverging interests-values continuums of the EU and PRC have been rightly identified as the main factor which prevents the development of the structural strategic dimension of the Partnership because it impinges on those issues of global cooperation which should be key components of the relationship between Brussels and Beijing. The maturity and depth of the analytical debate on the Partnership can offer all the interpretive instruments to link theory to praxis and thus influence the necessary policy-planning and policy-making which is being required by the paradigm-shift affecting the European and Chinese approach to the Partnership. This process will be - as the thesis argues in line with the evolution of the literature and the analytical debate - a trilateral dynamic involving the United States which is the major strategic counterpart for both the EU and China particularly in a phase of changing equilibria within the international system.

Beijing”, *ECFR policy brief*, September 7, 2020.

https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_new_china_consensus_how_europe_is_growing_wary_of_beijing; Timothy Garton-Ash, “The US and China are entering a new cold war. Where does that leave the rest of us?”, *The Guardian*, June 20, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/20/us-china-cold-war-liberal-de>

⁵⁴ Shaun Breslin and Zeng Jinghan, “China’s ‘new type of Great Power relations’: a G2 with Chinese characteristics?”, *International Affairs* 92: 4 (2016) , 773–794; Zeng Jinghan, “Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of ‘One Belt One Road’ and ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, volume 55, n 5, (2017), 1162–1176.

1.4 Research Methodology

The research methodology of the thesis is entirely qualitative and is aimed at supporting the investigation and better understanding of the ideational and material dimension of the subject of research in its development through processes of change, relational dynamics and institutional interaction.

To this end, the methodology chosen has been used to research the EU-China strategic interaction and better analyse its background, its evolving context, its multidimensionality and complexity.

On this basis the analytical approach has tried to develop its objectives in a way which is necessarily context-sensitive and coherent with the epistemological assumptions of the thesis. The post-positivist theoretical perspective of the research – reinforced by a hermeneutical dimension – has taken advantage of the methodological tools offered by discourse analysis to examine how the language contained in the primary sources (official statements, documents, leader's declarations) has “generated meaning” at the level of policy-making and in the analytical debate.

From a methodological point of view, the analysis of the primary and secondary sources has been “tested” through a limited set of interviews with decision-makers, policy-planners and policy-makers who have been involved in the development of the Partnership and of the context influencing it.

In a field already widely researched the stratification of meaning is often a challenge for the analyst who needs to explore it especially in a phase of paradigm shifts: in this respect the methodological approach of the thesis has been functional for addressing in a critical way issues which have been influenced by such a highly institutionalized framework as that of the EU-China Strategic Partnership.

In this sense, the methodology of the thesis has contributed to drawing interpretative elements from the “archaeology of knowledge” related to the strategic relations between Europe and China. This methodological approach has hopefully produced useful synergies with the epistemological/hermeneutical premises of the research aimed at connecting the theoretical dimension of the issues investigated with their practical implications, the ideational with the material constitutive elements defining and affecting the development of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

CHAPTER 2

The EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the context of the EU-US-China “strategic triangle”: a context of growing strategic competition.

International Relations Theory is always influenced, as Robert W. Cox argued⁵⁵, by the specific perspective in time and space, in particular by the political and social contexts from which it derives. For this reason it is important to consider the contexts in which the analytical perspectives and implications of the current research have been defined. The aim of this chapter is therefore to identify the “strategic space” in which the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is “located”. It is a space specifically represented, we will argue, by the broader context of an evolving international system characterized by growing trends of strategic competition. The consideration of context is important because it is a factor making for structural influence on the development of the EU-China relationship through, in particular, the key strategic interaction that both Brussels and Beijing have with Washington. Even though the strategic relations between Europe and China cannot be defined as, prior to 1992, “secondary relationship”, it is still true that the future of the EU-China partnership is going to be affected – in parallel to its internal dynamics - by the evolution of the relationship of the two partners with the United States.

In this perspective the further development of the Strategic Partnership cannot take place, in an international system whose evolution is driven by trends of complex global competition, on a sort of “neutral field” mainly centred on the bilateral institutional architecture so far developed. The dynamics between Brussels, Beijing and Washington represent what Shambaugh defined a “strategic triangle” to which the Partnership is closely interconnected.

While acknowledging the structural importance and complexity of this trilateral interaction, it is useful, at the same time, to deconstruct this notion. Even though the “strategic triangle” represents, as a matter of fact, the sum of the three most important strategic bilateral relations in terms of comprehensive power and influence, it cannot be regarded as the manifestation of a “trilateralism” at work in the international system. We

⁵⁵ Robert W. Cox’s canonical 1981 essay “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory” is quoted by Reuben Wong, “An anatomy of European and American Perspectives on China in the International System” in Roland Vogt (ed.), *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong 2012), 96.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ettixw9fk.12>.

could say in this sense that the image of the “strategic triangle” describes the international system more from an ontological than from a teleological viewpoint: it is based on the acknowledgement that these actors represent the most important components of the international system as it is but it does not indicate a common “telos”, a strategic direction shared by all the three major powers. Within a process of gradual redistribution of the international hierarchy of power, this “trilateral” set of relationships is key for re-defining the international order also vis-à-vis other dynamics and actors which can contribute to this process. This preliminary analysis will set in a needed updated context the analytical perspectives that we are going to elaborate in the next chapters.

2.1 The EU-US-China triangle: evolving dynamics

The importance of the set of relations which are centred on the three main actors of the international system at the end of the second decade of the 21st century derives from the comprehensive power and influence which, in different ways, emanates from these two national global powers and from the “post-national” EU. The “strategic triangle” image acknowledges not only the prominence of these powers – based on the sum of their populations, economies, overall military and civilian capabilities and resources - but also the fact that each of them plays a major role with regard to the world’s main global issues. However, the concept needs, as we have argued, to be deconstructed because it does not reflect either a potential convergence in terms of strategic vision and approaches between the EU, the US and China or their willingness to act on the basis of some common economic and security interests in the framework of a trilateral format. For this reason, in the present phase of evolution of the international system, the “untapped trilateralism”⁵⁶ which was, at the beginning of this decade, considered as a possible way forward for collective action of the three global powers now seems a very unrealistic perspective.

If it is true that, on the one hand, “the most important - and obvious - dynamic at work” in the transformation of the international system over the last two decades has been “the rapid shift of the balance of power between the West and China”,⁵⁷ it is also true, on

⁵⁶ Bates Gill and Andrew Small, *Untapped Trilateralism: Common Economic and Security interests of the European Union, the United States and China*, EuropeChina Research and Advice Network report, London 2012.

⁵⁷ Minxin Pei, “An Assertive China the ‘New Normal’?,” *The Diplomat*, November 24, 2010.

the other, that recent international trends have seen a proactive and increasingly more assertive role on the part of the United States, with both the Obama and Trump administrations aiming, through different approaches, at confirming America's influence and leadership worldwide.

At the same time, we have witnessed a resilience on the part of the EU in the face of the long economic recession and the Brexit crisis, coupled with its ability of re-launching the process of integration through significant initiatives in the sector of European defence. Moreover, the EU's response to the key challenge of the Covid-19 crisis has shown the ability of the European institutions and of its main member states to broker a difficult consensus in order to define an ambitious plan to support the continent's economies in the wake of the disruptive impact of the pandemic.

In this context in Washington and Brussels one of the main - if not the main - strategic concerns continues to be focused on whether China wants to ultimately establish a post-Western international order offering an alternative to existing models and norms,⁵⁸ as Xi Jinping's assertive "new era" ideology and theoretical elaboration seem to indicate. A vision of international relations "with Chinese characteristics" has indeed been part of the strategic reflection of the Chinese leadership in the last two decades. A confident and assertive view of the role of China aimed at being "a major driver of the current transformation of the international system"⁵⁹ has been conceptualized through subsequent formulas which have tried to present the rise of China as conducive to "peaceful development" and "harmonious society", until Xi Jinping's more assertive vision - enunciated at the 19th congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) - of a new era which will bring about not only "national rejuvenation" but the creation of a "new type of great power relations."⁶⁰ In this sense Xi Jinping's approach has, to some extent, overcome the traditional concern of the Chinese authorities to minimize the perceived threats arising from China's ascent, that Deng Xiaoping had expressed in the famous admonition "avoid brightness, cherish obscurity" (*taoguang yanghui*). Xi's new guiding ideology signals "an end to the reform era as we knew it, proclaiming the advancement

⁵⁸ Mark Beeson "Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The dynamics of Chinese and American Power." *Review of International Studies* (2009): 95-112.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era", speech delivered at the 19th National Congress, 18 October 2017, Renmin Chubanshe, October 2017; an English translation of the speech is available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm.

of a ‘strong’ China that would strive to shape the global order in accordance with the national interest and its vision”.⁶¹

This process of change has been driven at the domestic level – as Silvia Menegazzi has written – by Xi Jinping’s striking consolidation of power which has been based on a further fortified “political narrative envisioning Xi Jinping as the one and only leader able to guide China toward a New Era”.⁶² The significance of the programmes of ideological indoctrination launched under Xi Jinping’s leadership have been underscored by Pei Minxin who has pointed out that the “CCP under Xi Jinping’s leadership has launched the most sustained and comprehensive program of ideological indoctrination in the post-Mao era”.⁶³

The relevance of the “ideological” aspects in the present phase of the US-China relations is a significant factor underlined by several analysts who have argued that the “ideological rift” between Washington and Beijing indicated that a confrontation which began as a trade war has been “morphing into a battle of values”.⁶⁴ The focus on the ideational elements of this interaction is an important analytical perspective, as we will extensively argue in the next chapter.

The situation within the strategic triangle has revived the debate, at the political, theoretical and operational level, on the rise of China in a scenario characterized by unprecedented elements of strategic competition. From a historical point of view, this debate has been characterized in the United States and Europe by a certain asymmetry in the response to the challenge posed by a rising global China.⁶⁵ In this context the Tiananmen watershed influenced the theoretical and public debate in the United States and in Europe⁶⁶, even though the Chinese leadership, after the crisis, “adroitly kept on

⁶¹ Heike Holbig, “The 19th party congress: its place in history”, in China’s “new era” with Xi Jinping’s characteristics, *European Council on Foreign Relations China Analysis*, December 2017, 3.

⁶² Silvia Menegazzi, “China 2019: Xi Jinping’s new era and the CPC’s agenda” in Michelguglielmo Torri Nicola Mocci Filippo Boni (eds.), in “Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution”, *Asia Major*, vol. XXX/2019, 25.

⁶³ Pei Minxin, Ideological Indoctrination under Xi Jinping, *China Leadership Monitor*, December 1, 2019, at <https://www.prcleader.org/minxin-pei>. See also Minxin Pei, “Rewriting the Rules of the Chinese Party-State: Xi’s Progress in Reinvigorating the CCP,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 60 (June 2019), at <https://www.prcleader.org/peiclm60>.

⁶⁴ The US-China rift has now become ideological, *The Financial Times*, July28, 2020. At <https://www.ft.com/content/1162b53a-d574-4588-b013-f7e3aa0dc2e1>

⁶⁵ Peter Rudolf, “The United States and the Rise of China,” *StiftungWissenschaft und Politik*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, (April 2006).7.

⁶⁶ “Increasingly, rather disquieting predictions were voiced subsequently as to how China was liable to become the most serious challenger to the leadership of liberal democracies after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even though in the early 1990s the problem of China competing with the United States as a peer did not appear imminent, the debate over a future China threat was driven by a growing consideration of the possible shifts in the “relative” balance of power between Washington and Beijing. In

adopting policies which could be read as a renewed commitment to a broader reformist agenda”: this contributed to the strengthening of the paradigm of China as an economic opportunity which has significantly influenced decades of American and European foreign policy towards a rising China.

This strand of strategic thinking intrinsically opposed to the neo-realist security dilemma scenario was supported by various groups and lobbies, “from politicians to the business councils and the academy” which proposed variations of the same basic argument: more economic cooperation and integration with China would push Beijing to “increasingly conform to the norms of Western liberal behavior, both abroad and at home.”⁶⁷ In this period the China policies of the US and the EU - respectively of “comprehensive engagement” and “constructive engagement” - were aligned on the basis of the common assumption that “the transformative magic of economic engagement” would “increase the spirit of liberty over time...just as inevitably as the Berlin Wall fell” (President Clinton) and economic liberalization would create “habits of liberty, and habits of liberty create expectations of democracy” (President G.W. Bush).⁶⁸ On the other side, “the Chinese leadership constantly expressed an overarching sensitivity to the needs of an international projection” which had to take into account, even in the case of disputes, China’s essential trade relations with its most important economic partners - the U.S., Japan and Europe”.⁶⁹

Against this historical background, an increasing level of friction, in particular with the United States, has induced the RPC to balance its assertive stance by resorting to its more traditional policy of “threat reduction” vis-à-vis the growing negative perceptions and reactions of its Western but also Asian counterparts. If it is true, as it has been rightly

contrast, the benign narrative about the rise of China was based on a prolonged positive reading in the West, also after Tiananmen, of the Chinese reform process as a preliminary phase for substantive changes in the political and institutional structure of the Chinese party-state.”Massimo Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence: Ideational and Material factors in the international posture of China rising as a great power*, DLS Doctoral Thesis, University of Georgetown, Washington DC, 2011, 65. Richard Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China* (London: Penguin Books, 1995); Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China. From Revolution through Reform* (Norton & Company, New York 2004), 127-159; Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 19-46.

⁶⁷ Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 188.

⁶⁸ These views were shared “by both liberal and conservative standpoints, irrespective to a large extent of the broader implications of these assumptions in terms of security” The statements of President Clinton and Bush are quotations from Stefan Halper in his *The Beijing Consensus*, 190.

⁶⁹ Goldstein wrote in this regard as follows: “As long as China’s leaders were concerned about preserving the conditions essential for promoting their country’s welfare under circumstances where international trade and investment remained crucial, they would be reluctant to resort to the use of force.”Avery Goldstein, *Rising to The Challenge: China’s Grand Strategy and International Security*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 99.

pointed out,⁷⁰ that “since the start of the Trump administration’s policy of China containment, Beijing determinedly moved to counter Washington’s increasingly confrontational posture, both at the rhetoric and factual level, in Asia and world-wide”, it is also true that representatives of the PRC’s establishment, such as the Ambassador to Washington Cui Tiankai, have nuanced this assertive stance with the call for a reset of the US-China bilateral relations.⁷¹

The 2019 White Paper on “China’s National Defense in the New Era” is another significant example of Beijing’s attempt to highlight its outlook on the most pressing international and domestic matters in a rather reassuring way. With regard to its own global ambitions, the document states, once more, that “China will never follow the beaten track of big powers in seeking hegemony” and that it “will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence”.⁷² In the framework of an intense activity aimed at fostering dialogue and occasions of contact with a large number of interlocutors President Xi Jinping has been engaged before the 2020 pandemic in a “tireless summit diplomacy”.⁷³ As Barbara Onnis has written,⁷⁴ this strong diplomatic activism by the Chinese paramount leader has aimed at mending “fraught relations with some neighbours”, reassuring “some partners about Chinese intentions and confirming Beijing’s vocation to the cause of peace and global governance.”

On the other hand, “China has had to face serious challenges to its leadership and its international reputation that risked seriously undermining Xi Jinping’s long-term plans. Above all, the protracted trade war and growing antagonism with the US [is] certainly the greatest challenge and fraught with consequences”.⁷⁵ The complexity of the post-Coronavirus scenarios for China – in particular with regard to its relations with the United States and the EU – and the ambivalence of its response, a mix of assertiveness and attempted soft power projection, are underlined by initiatives such as the so called

⁷⁰ Michelguglielmo Torri Nicola Mocci Filippo Boni (eds), “Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution”, *Asia Major*, vol. XXX/2019, 13.

⁷¹ Cui Tiankai, “China and the U.S. Should Reset Their Relationship”, *Politico*, August 7, 2020. [politico.com/news/magazine/2020/07/30/us-china-relationship-reset-387515](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/07/30/us-china-relationship-reset-387515).

⁷² The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s National Defense in the New Era’, July 2019, p. 8.

⁷³ Barbara Onnis, “Xi Jinping’s tireless summit diplomacy amid growing challenges”, in Michelguglielmo Torri Nicola Mocci Filippo Boni (eds), “Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution”, *Asia Major*, vol. XXX/2019, 47.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

“wolf warriors diplomacy”,⁷⁶ an interesting example of the “ideological rift” which characterizes these dynamics:

[T]he world and Chinese diplomats have changed. The days when China can be put in a submissive position are long gone. China's rising status in the world, requires it to safeguard its national interests in an unequivocal way.⁷⁷

As it has been noted, this aggressive information strategy “carries risks for Beijing, and in some quarters it seems to be backfiring”. Lashing out at international counterparts and spreading disinformation, and amplifying conspiracy theories not only risks undermining any positive image China has managed to develop but also sends contradictory signals about a global power which simultaneously portrays “itself as a responsible global provider of public goods while engaging in irresponsible behavior online”.⁷⁸ In this sense “over the long run, being obnoxious has costs”⁷⁹ and these repercussions can have an impact not only on the growing negative perceptions of a global China’s international behavior but also on the image of Xi Jinping’s leadership, as Pei Minxin has noted.⁸⁰

In an evolving context, the Chinese leadership has become increasingly aware that the present distribution of power within the international system, notwithstanding China’s rapid rise, cannot be challenged realistically through a “counter-hegemonic coalition” simply defined along anti-Western lines because the interaction among emerging/revisionist powers is complex and certainly not uni-directional.⁸¹

The strategic relationship with Russia has been constantly strengthened on the basis of utilitarian synergies but its intrinsic imbalance makes Moscow sensitive to the potential of Chinese economic expansion and influence in its own far-East and in Central

⁷⁶ Wang Wenwen, “West feels challenged by China’s new ‘Wolf Warrior’ diplomacy”, *Global Times*, 16 April 2020, based on an interview with Chu Yin, a professor at the University of International Relations, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185776.shtml>. The so called “Wolf Warrior” style diplomacy has been named after a Chinese 2015 patriotic action film and its 2017 sequel. Among these Chinese “wolf warriors” diplomats China's foreign ministry spokespersons Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying have been particularly active.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Laura Rosenberger, “China Is Using New Methods to Spin the Coronavirus Pandemic to Its Advantage”, *Foreign Affairs*, April 22, 2020. [foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-22/chinas-coronavirus-information-offensive](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-22/chinas-coronavirus-information-offensive). See also James Palmer, “Why Chinese Embassies Have Embraced Aggressive Diplomacy”, *Foreign Policy*, April 20, 2020. [foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/15/chinese-embassies-embrace-aggressive-diplomacy-coronavirus-pandemicmisinformation](https://www.foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/15/chinese-embassies-embrace-aggressive-diplomacy-coronavirus-pandemicmisinformation).

⁷⁹ “Wolf warrior fantasies”, *The Economist*, May 30, 2020.

⁸⁰ Pei Minxin, “How Has the Coronavirus Crisis Affected Xi’s Power: A Preliminary Assessment”, *China Leadership Monitor* n° 64, Summer 2020, Monday June 1, 2020.

⁸¹ Carlos Pereira and Joao Augusto de Castro Neves, “Brazil and China: South-South Partnership or North-South Competition?” *Brookings Policy Brief* 26 (March 2011), 5.

Asia: “the advantages for Russia of such an unequal partnership are not so obvious”. If Putin gets a comrade-in-arms for his denunciation of Western liberalism, he does it “at the expense of watching Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative undercutting Russian power in central Asia”.⁸² If China’s expanding influence in Eurasia is likely to feed these latent tensions with Russia, Beijing, in turn, “harbours a historically rooted distrust of its northerly neighbour Russia which will not simply disappear by mutual cheering of their ‘best ever’ bilateral relationship”.⁸³ Beijing and Moscow tend to converge “against something” but it is much more difficult for them to define a truly shared revisionist agenda which can encompass critical key issues such as, for instance the sector of nuclear proliferation.⁸⁴ Last but not least, we cannot underestimate the ideational elements and the complex historical background which have shaped Sino-Russian relations from the imperial age until the interaction between the Soviet Union and the PRC. From this perspective the present “marriage of convenience” between Moscow and Beijing needs to be assessed in a broader context that takes into account that the national identity of Russia continues to be shaped, to a significant extent, by the traditionally complex process of attraction/opposition vis-à-vis the West, as has been the case since Peter the Great. In this context, for Moscow to reopen the “European door” is essential to strengthen its strategic role in a phase that sees, as Dimitri Trenin has written⁸⁵, both Europe and Russia confronted to a gradual process of Sino-American bipolarization of the international system.

Both China and Russia, as the major representatives of an anti-Western front, have been trying to change “from a foreign-policy perspective [...] their environment in

⁸² Charles Grant, “Russia, China and Global Governance”, *Working Paper Centre for European Reform*, London 2012; “La solitudine del numero tre” in *La Russia non e’ la Cina*, *Limes*, n° 5, 2020; Philip Stephens, “Russia cannot afford a war with the West”, *Financial Times*, June 26, 2020; Fabio Indeo, “Russia and China in Central Asia: Growing Geo-political Competition.” *ISPI Policy Brief* 199 (October 2010):1-10.

⁸³ Vincent K.L.Chang and Frank N. Pieke, “Europe’s engagement with China: shifting Chinese views of the EU and the EU-China relationship”, *Asia Europe Journal* (January 2018), 322.

⁸⁴ This is clearly a matter of great sensitivity first and foremost for Washington but for Moscow too which does not neglect the dimension of strategic stability because it has not only provided since the Cold War a framework for managing the existential risks associated with massive nuclear arsenals but has also confirmed the Russian great power status in this key sector. On this see: Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, “The age of strategic instability”, *Foreign Affairs*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2020-07-21/age-strategic-instability> James Anderson, “China tilts the nuclear balance”, *The New York Times*, July 31, 2020; Michael Evans, “US uncovers proof that China is accelerating nuclear arms race”, *The Times*, June 30, 2020. For an assertive view on the PRC’s nuclear plans see: Hu Jixin, “China needs to increase its nuclear warheads to 1,000”, *Global Times*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1187766.shtml>.

⁸⁵ Dimitri Trenin, “La Russia non e’ cinese ma quando cerca l’Europa non trova la porta”, *Limes*, maggio 2020.

accordance with aims and objectives they have set for themselves. From a structural perspective [they have been attempting] to adapt to their environment, making the best of the cards the system has dealt them”.⁸⁶ In this sense China seems to be constrained - notwithstanding its impressive rise as a global power - by the “structural cards” the system continues to deal it, as the increasingly complex relations with the two other protagonists of the “strategic triangle” tend to underscore.

Against this background, we can continue to regard China’s approach to the international order as an “amalgam of conformity and revisionism with persistent uncertainties”,⁸⁷ as it has been in the last 20 years. The element of novelty has certainly been Xi Jinping’s ambitious vision for a Chinese “new era” because it has injected - in the interaction with the US in particular but also with the EU - not only a potential of competition on key geopolitical and economic issues but also tends to widen the gaps, in terms of interests-values continuum, between the three sides of the “strategic triangle”. At the same time, the Chinese strategic approach has fostered, in the last two years, a converging element in Washington’s and Brussels’ policy-making, that is a strong “turn to realism” which has been reinforced by the dynamics originated by the pandemic crisis. Against this background Xi Jinping’s China is increasingly aware that these complex dynamics with the other two counterparts of the “strategic triangle” are not just a transitional factor related to contingent circumstances.

From this perspective, the growing determination and confidence of the Chinese leadership in the PRC’s ability of assuming a “leading global role and serve as an example not just for developing countries but for the entire world” will have to meet the challenge of the structural constraints exemplified by the dynamics within the strategic triangle. For this reason, despite the “buoyed expectations of the Xi era”, China could be still “lacking the means to fully realize its ambitious goals, something which is particularly true in defence and diplomacy”.⁸⁸ As Sautin underlines, “for the past two decades, the overarching theme of reporting on China has been that of China’s rise. It appears that China has already risen”: the biggest question now is whether China can really provide international leadership beyond just the ambitions of its ideological turn. As it has been noted, Beijing’s growing tensions with several international counterparts “suggest that

⁸⁶ Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations*, 3rd edition (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 80.

⁸⁷ Deng Yong, *China’s Struggle for Status. The Realignment of International Relations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20.

⁸⁸ Yevgen Sautin, “A ‘new type of great power relation’ revisited”, in China’s “new era” with Xi Jinping’s characteristics, *European Council on Foreign Relations China Analysis*, December 2017, 7.

the ‘new type of great power relations’ proposed by China” might look a lot like the old one.⁸⁹ And in this sense transatlantic relations - a key component of the international system in the last 70 years - continue to be an important structural element that China has to reckon with.

2.2 The EU-China Partnership in light of the “strategic depth” of the relations between the United States and Europe

As Scott Brown has observed,⁹⁰ “the evolution of US and EU-China relations cannot be completely separated out from the evolution of the transatlantic relationship itself”. The “strategic intimacy” between America and Europe intrinsically connected with the international order which emerged from WWII – has been forged by decades of close structural cooperation in the political, economic and security sectors. The transatlantic relationship is characterized by that “structural” strategic dimension which is elusive in the EU-China Partnership. This is reflected in the two main dimensions of the transatlantic relations: the EU-US relationship – which has been mainly focused on trade – and the key defense, political and security cooperation represented by the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Atlantic Alliance, of which all the EU core countries are members (that is, apart from Austria, Finland, Sweden, Malta, Ireland and Cyprus).

With the emergence of a European Common Foreign and Security policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), the role of the EU as a strategic partner was reinforced, in principle, beyond trade matters. This made possible the signature - at the EU-US Madrid summit in 1995 – of a New Transatlantic Agenda (NTA).

The degree of convergence of the interests-values continuums of the EU and the US has always been significant but it has been affected, more recently, by a period of tensions particularly in the trade sector which brought about, inter alia, the failure of the negotiations for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). As Marianne Schneider-Petsinger has written,⁹¹ “since the US and the EU are China’s two most important trading partners, a united US-EU front could potentially lead to real progress and compel Beijing to change its trade practices”. In a phase of complex interaction between Washington and Brussels, the EU has been performing “multiple balancing acts”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Scott A.W. Brown, *Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking: US and EU Responses to the Rise of China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 18.

⁹¹ Marianne Schneider-Petsinger, “US-EU Trade Relations in the Trump Era: which way Forward?”, *Chatham House Research Paper*, March 2019, 23.

with regard to trade concerns with China. Disagreement on the US tariffs policy in Brussels has been, at the same time, complemented by the perception within the EU that with China the Trump administration's "high pressure approach may prove effective". In this context an EU-US renewed common approach for systemic global trade problems – such as the reform of the WTO and China's trade practices – could be an important component of evolving transatlantic relations.

The focus on the importance of the economic and financial dimension in the transatlantic relationship has been recently revived by analysts who have argued that it is useful to reconsider "an oversecritized worldview" which still sees the US ties with the European Union "primarily as military matters or tools for superpower rivalry" without taking into consideration that "the factors binding Europe and the United States together are far different from those present in 1949, when NATO was founded."⁹² Even though a cooperative reconsideration of the foundational economic and financial nexus which has shaped the transatlantic relationship can be beneficial, in particular in times of trade tensions between Washington and Brussels, we cannot underestimate the relevance of an evolving security cooperation/coordination between the United States and Europe. The Euro-American dynamics underline the complex, multidimensional nature of the transatlantic partnership in which, however, the "strategic depth" related to the defense/security aspects is still key.

As an EU senior official has observed,⁹³ the relevance of this relationship has been meaningfully confirmed by the 2016 European Global Strategy (EUGS) which refers to the United States and NATO as core strategic partners for the EU (in the para related to cyber). The breadth and depth of EU-US relations in all sectors are based on uniquely shared values, objectives and practices. It is meaningful that the European ambition to greater "strategic autonomy" in the sector of security and defense has been defined by the Global Strategy as aimed at enabling the EU "to act autonomously while also contributing to and undertaking actions in cooperation with NATO. A more credible European defense is essential also for the sake of a "solid transatlantic partnership through NATO and with

⁹² Edoardo Saravalle, Ben Judah, "Trans-Atlantic ties should put Finance not Security first" *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/30/transatlantic-us-nato-germany-finance-security-biden/>. Today a new approach to the transatlantic relationship should be based - according to these authors - "on what really ties the two continents together: the power and threat of global money".

⁹³ Interview with a EU policy planner by the author, Brussels March 2018.

the United States and Canada”, which helps the EU to “strengthen resilience, address conflicts, and contribute to effective global governance”.⁹⁴

The fundamental value of the cooperation with the Atlantic Alliance is described by the EUGS in crystal-clear terms: “NATO, for its members, has been the bedrock of Euro-Atlantic security for almost 70 years...The EU will deepen its partnership with NATO through coordinated defense capability development, parallel and synchronized exercises, and mutually reinforcing actions”.⁹⁵

On the contrary, China’s concept of the international security order in the post-Cold War era - as Zhang Tuosheng has argued⁹⁶ - has traditionally regarded military alliances as substantially a product of the past and, in particular, the Atlantic Alliance as a bulwark of the US-led hegemony. Chinese suspicion of NATO has been based on Beijing’s realistic strategic consideration that the transatlantic relations between the United States and Europe have been and are a key factor for constraining a multipolar order in which Europe could play the role of a more independent pole.

As we will see, the goal of strengthening multipolar trends in the international system did not play a secondary role, from a Chinese standpoint, in the establishment of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Even though, as a former NATO Deputy Secretary General has commented, the approach of President Trump to NATO – “following years of weak leadership at the helm of the Alliance and of erosion of its political dimension” – has put the transatlantic bonds, to some extent, under pressure, the structural dimension of the cooperation within the Alliance continues to provide unparalleled strategic depth to the relationship between Europe and the United States.⁹⁷

The strength of this strategic relationship has been underlined by the significant progress of the EU-NATO cooperation: in her report on the implementation of the Global Strategy, High Representative Mogherini underlined the EU’s “historic breakthroughs in the field of security and defense, implementing and going beyond many suggestions made by the EUGS”.⁹⁸ These objectives have been met in a context – as the report points out –

⁹⁴ “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe, A Global strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy”, European External Action Service-EEAS June 2016, 36. <http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en>.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁶ Zhang Tuosheng, “On China’s concept of the international security order” in Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø and Zhang Tuosheng (eds.) *US-China-EU relations. Managing the new world order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 37.

⁹⁷ Interview with Ambassador Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, former Deputy Secretary General of NATO, by the author. June 2018.

⁹⁸ “The European Union’s global strategy three years on, looking forward”, EEAS report, Brussels 2019.

“of greater international complexity” where a significant feature “is the ongoing shift from a uni-polar structure to a more fragmented distribution of power” which, so far, has not led “to more cooperation, but rather to growing uncertainty and rivalry”.⁹⁹ The political signal related to this unprecedented cooperation that the EU considers essential is that it has been proven that a stronger European defense would not be to the detriment of the Alliance.

These developments have a clear significance, *per relationem*, for the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: if one thinks that in the mid-2000s – after the establishment of the Comprehensive Partnership – there had been analysts who argued in favor of a greater European strategic autonomy in part through a more structured cooperation with the PRC in the field of security, we can see that this side of the “strategic triangle” has remained considerably underdeveloped, as are any form of strategic contacts between two prominent players in the sector of defence/security such as NATO and China, notwithstanding some timid attempts in this direction in the late 2000s. As a former NATO Deputy Secretary General has observed,¹⁰⁰ “the weakening of the role of the Alliance as a political actor in the last years has limited its interest and ability to look in a proactive way at some of the international transformative trends such as the rise of China as a global player, including in the security sector. Notwithstanding the increasing interest for NATO expressed in the more recent years by ‘partners across the globe’, such as Shinzo Abe’s Japan, the nearly uni-dimensional focus on deterrence and defense towards Russia has defined in a narrow sense the Alliance’s core business. It is therefore not surprising that a rising security player such as the PRC has remained substantially out of the strategic map of the Alliance”. Yet a change in the Alliance’s “mindset” seems to have begun even though, as the former French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine has observed, “pendant longtemps il n’ya pas eu de place mentale pour la Chine au sein de l’Otan”. Now, he has added, the problem is to see how the Alliance will address the relevant issue of the implications for NATO of an increasing strategic interaction with the PRC, in particular in the security sectors which are outside its traditional core

⁹⁹ “The European Union’s global strategy three years on, looking forward”, EEAS report, Brussels 2019. It is indeed remarkable that in a brief period of time the EU has been able to fully implement the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD); the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC); the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) which “provides a binding framework to enhance joint defence investment, cooperation and operational readiness among the 25 participating Member States”; the crucial European Defence Fund (EDF); the European Peace Facility which “should fund the common costs of CSDP operations and contribute to the financing of military peace support operations”.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Ambassador Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, former Deputy Secretary General of NATO, by the author. June 3, 2018.

business. Looking at the wording on China in the 2019 NATO Summit communiqué it seems that the Alliance - following, as usual, the strong signals coming from Washington - has taken note of the strategic re-orientation of its leading member state vis-à-vis the PRC. The London Declaration, issued by the allied Heads of State and Government on occasion of their meeting of December 3-4 2019, has recognized for the first time that “China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance”.¹⁰¹ The anodyne language of the London declaration has been made clearer in the declarations of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg who has defined China as an increasing “threat” to Europe, alongside Russia:

“The rise of China is fundamentally shifting the global balance of power ... multiplying the threats to open societies and individual freedoms and increasing the competition over our values and our way of life...NATO does not see China as the new enemy or an adversary but ... all of this has a security consequence for NATO allies.”¹⁰²

The strategic re-orientation of the Atlantic Alliance vis-à-vis China is a factor¹⁰³ which will be relevant for a EU-NATO cooperation which has been rapidly growing in the last four years, “perhaps beyond the expectations of the two sides”.¹⁰⁴ This trend will inevitably reverberate also on the development of the EU-China Strategic Partnership.

Even though the transatlantic and the EU-US relationship have been characterized at the end of this decade by unprecedented elements of friction, the “strategic depth” of the partnership between the United States and Europe has not been structurally undermined.¹⁰⁵ In particular the cooperation in the defense and security sector between Washington and Brussels has witnessed in this period a convergence on the multifaceted challenges posed by the continuous rise and global ambitions of Beijing. This fundamental Euro-Atlantic convergence in the security sector vis-à-vis China is therefore a “reality check” for Beijing in terms of the significant constraints and potential

¹⁰¹ London Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London 3-4 December 2019. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm

¹⁰² Andrew Rettman, “Nato: China-Russia axis threatens Western power”, *EU Observer*, 9 June 2020; <https://euobserver.com/foreign/148597>.

¹⁰³ Interview with Ambassador Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, former Deputy Secretary General of NATO, by the author. July 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ A very critical view of the Trump presidency also on the transatlantic relations is that of Stephen Walt. Stephen Walt, “Washington’s status as a superpower has been declining for years. Trump’s handling of the pandemic is killing it off”, *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2020. foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/23/how-to-ruin-a-superpower.

confrontation that stem from the comprehensive strategic interaction between the two other sides of the “triangle” on key security issues which, in turn, impinge on – as the 5G controversy underlines – on other crucial areas of cooperation between the PRC and the EU.

2.3 Trends and tensions within the “strategic triangle”: towards a new paradigm of strategic competition?

Some novel elements in the international behavior of the two other main actors of the “strategic triangle”, the United States and China, have been regarded as being conducive to a “paradigm shift” in terms of the American and European consideration of the impact that a global China is having on these key strategic relations. In this perspective the future development of the EU-China Strategic Partnership can be influenced by dynamics which – accelerated and magnified by the pandemic crisis – have been leading to a scenario of increasing strategic competition.

As we have seen, in the framework of the “strategic triangle” the trends between Washington and Beijing seem to indicate a further shift in a more realist and competitive direction of the US approach to its strategic relations with China. This policy change can be regarded as a new version of one of the old paradigms on the rise of China, namely that of China as a systemic challenge, in a sort of up-dated version containing a mix of economic and security elements. As we have argued, the US and EU paradigms on China have been characterized by a certain degree of asymmetry. Washington’s approach has been driven over the years by policies based on elements of engagement coupled with more realist views closer to a “co-engagement” or even containment strategy while Brussels has followed until a recent past a predominant paradigm of “constructive engagement”. If in Washington the debate on the rise of China has constantly influenced the policy-making towards Beijing, in Europe the present strategic reflection - taking into account the parallel process of US strategic re-orientation - has had the merit to connect more closely the EU’s China policy to an in depth reconsideration of the implications of a “risen China”, in conceptual and operational terms.

In this framework an interesting analysis has been developed by Scott Brown who has divided the American and European interpretations of the rise of China into six main categories: military threat, non-military threat, economic threat, normative threat,

economic opportunity, political opportunity.¹⁰⁶ In this respect the Trump administration's "China policy" has prioritized elements of strong global economic competition which have been expanded, in the wake of the pandemic crisis, to political, defense, security and ideological aspects. This approach reflects, however, strands of strategic thinking that were already fully present in the past American debate on the rise of China. In this respect it is interesting to note that one of the allegedly most influential "inner circle's advisers" of the President has indeed been Peter Navarro who, since the late 2000s, has argued that China would become a global competitor of the United States.¹⁰⁷ On the EU's front, as we will see, the strategic reflection seems to be focused in particular on China as a non-military and economic threat but as a potential normative threat as well.

In the context of an increasingly strained relationship between Washington and Beijing the US interpretive paradigm has revived some elements of the "hegemonic transition theories", even though the debate is made more nuanced by the acknowledgement of the multidimensional implications of the interaction with a "risen China". President Trump's China policy has been the most recent step in a process which has gradually changed a long-lasting paradigm of cooperation-competition. If the Obama presidency had regarded the PRC as a partner-opponent which was urged, during the President's first term, to be, hopefully, a "responsible stakeholder",¹⁰⁸ the Trump administration has further moved in a direction which has substantially overcome the concept of engagement.

This approach can be regarded as a paradigm shift which mixes elements from power transition theories with the strategic reflection upon challenges arising for the US from the "complex interdependence". However, the Trump administration's China policy should not be considered a radical change in the US strategic thought and practice: as it has been rightly pointed out, "the contraposition between the US and China has long been in the making".¹⁰⁹ During the concluding years of Barack Obama's presidency the consensus in Washington on China had indeed started decisively to shift:

"the idea that China had to be engaged as a constructive strategic partner and a responsible stakeholder in the US-dominated world order was then

¹⁰⁶ Scott A.W. Brown, *Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking*, 60.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Navarro, *The Coming China Wars*. (New York: FT Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ Robert B. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" (speech of the Deputy Secretary of State before the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, September 21, 2005). <http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive/2005/Sep/22-290478.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Michelguglielmo Torri Nicola Mocchi Filippo Boni, "Asia in 2019: The escalation of the US-China contraposition, and the authoritarian involution of Asian societies", in "Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution", *Asia Major*, vol. XXX/2019, 9-12.

discarded. The view accepted in its stead was that the Asian giant was an increasingly dangerous, unrelenting strategic adversary”.¹¹⁰

As Torri, Mocci and Boni argue, “during Obama’s second term, the new adversarial consensus on China found expression in a well-reasoned and coherent grand policy”. This comprehensive approach was based on two pillars: the “Pivot to Asia” and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) which aimed, in a far-sighted way, at establishing “a set of US-decided new rules, which would mould not only any future economic interexchange in the Asia-Pacific but the working itself of the local economies. Its political aim was the imposition of these new, US made rules on China, by confronting Beijing with the dilemma of either accepting the Washington-dictated rules, entering the gigantic free market created by the TPP, or being excluded from it, with heavy – and possibly disastrous – negative consequences for its economy”.¹¹¹

It is interesting to consider in this respect the argument that the Trump’s China Policy – if compared to Obama’s – has been more a matter of communication than of radical change: the transition process has not been from an engagement policy to active containment, but, rather, “the transformation of an already existing confrontational policy. This transformation, nonetheless, was highlighted as a startlingly new policy, which extended the ‘America First’ political approach...to the field of foreign relations”.¹¹²

The ideological and ideational aspects which has surrounded President Trump’s “new course” vis-à-vis China have probably been the most radical component of it: they have indeed contributed to shape a debate on the perspective of a looming new Cold War because of the increasingly confrontational interaction between the two big powers. As Torri, Mocci and Boni have rightly pointed out, in the “America First” anti-China Trumpian strategy the “most visible hallmark...was the abandonment of any caution in highlighting the administration’s confrontational stand vis-à-vis China”.¹¹³

By contrast, the cautious but clever diplomatic initiatives which had characterized Obama’s de facto anti-China policy had disguised “to a certain extent...its real objective,

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Ashley J. Tellis, “The Return of U.S.-China Strategic Competition”, in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski and Michael Willis (eds.), *U.S.-China competition for global influence*, (Seattle and Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019). https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sa20_overview_tellis_dec2019advance.pdf.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Torri, Mocci and Boni, “Asia in 2019: The escalation of the US-China contraposition, and the authoritarian involution of Asian societies”, 12.

namely taming what had come to be seen as the US' main world competitor".¹¹⁴ In addition to "openly branding China as the most dangerous strategic rival of the US" soon after his election, President Trump transformed the previous US China policy by abruptly jettisoning - in line with his anti-globalist and anti-multilateral inclinations - "the economic containment network that Barack Obama had been building around China through the TPP".¹¹⁵

As we have seen, the tensions between Washington and Beijing originated by the pandemic crisis – fueled by a "battle of narratives", reciprocal accusations of disinformation campaigns and a growing "ideological rift" – have reopened a debate in the United States on China's "grand strategy" which had started a decade ago. In this respect Xi Jinping's assertive stance has been connected to a process which has been regarded as driven by a Chinese long-term strategy aimed at building-up global power. In this regard Ashley Tellis had indeed written that "the principal objective of China's grand strategy, the accumulation of 'comprehensive national power' was clearly inherent in Deng's vision".¹¹⁶ In this sense Xi Jinping's strategic vision can be regarded as different from Deng's in terms of means and policies but not in terms of its ultimate goals. The "quid pluris" which has characterized it compared to the approach of his predecessors is the openly ideological/ideational component inherent in his 21st century worldview.

The ideological and ideational components which characterize, on both fronts, the present phase of the US-China relations have reinforced the American perceptions "that the Chinese model of development - politically authoritarian but open to international economic integration and free-market practices - can be regarded as an alternative (and possible threat) to liberal democracy".¹¹⁷ The position echoes what polemically James Mann had described as a "China fantasy" by underlining that "if China's political system stays a permanently repressive one-party state, that will mean that US policy toward China since 1989 has been sold to the American people on the basis of a fraud – that is, on the false premise that trade and engagement with China would change China's political system".

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ashley Tellis, "China's Grand Strategy." in Gary Schmitt (ed.) *The Rise of China. Essays on the Future Competition* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), 3. This view echoes that of John Garver who stressed that "the broad purpose of China's Deng-inspired drive for modernization [was] to make China rich and powerful, thereby restoring it to the position of high international influence and status that it enjoyed throughout most of the several millennia of its existence." John Garver, "Interpreting China's Grand Strategy," *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, (July 5, 2005).

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Massimo Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*: 110.

What has been really unprecedented in Trump China policy's ideological connotation is that it has impinged ultimately on the Chinese party-state's most important core interest, its legitimacy, on which the survival of the communist regime is based. This was made evident by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who, in a high profile speech - as Francesco Sisci has written - "drove a knife right at the heart of the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese people, crucial for the power of the CCP in Beijing".¹¹⁸ Sisci interestingly argues that Secretary Pompeo - with a logic similar to that used by Mao Zedong in his "On Contradiction" - "tried to prove that the CCP didn't represent the Chinese people, and that actually the party is the enemy of the Chinese people",¹¹⁹ an argument with potentially momentous implications for the legitimacy of the Chinese party-state.¹²⁰

As Frederik Kempe has observed, the strategic relevance and symbolism of this speech was deftly underscored by the choice of the Nixon Library as its stage. Noting that "next year would mark the 50 anniversary of Henry Kissinger's secret mission to China, which began Beijing's opening to the United States and the Western world" the Secretary of State linked "Nixon's aims to President Trump's follow-up".¹²¹ Referring to Nixon's historic assertion that the world could not be safe until China had changed, Pompeo said that "thus, our aim, to the extent that we can influence events, should be to induce change...The kind of engagement we have been pursuing has not brought the kind of change inside of China that President Nixon had hoped to induce".¹²² Pompeo's remarks can be read as part of a package because they "were the last of a quartet of speeches from National security Advisor Robert O'Brien on ideology, FBI Director Chris Wray on espionage and Attorney General William Barr on economics".¹²³ In this sense Secretary of State Pompeo's "landmark speech" at the Nixon Library not only "marked the most robust call to action yet against the Chinese Communist Party"¹²⁴ but also took place in an phase increasingly characterized by new contentious issues in the Sino-American relations, including intensified interaction between Washington and the Taiwan

¹¹⁸ Francesco Sisci, "Pompeo the Maoist", *SettimanaNews*, 29 July 2020, <http://www.settimananews.it/informazione-internazionale/pompeo-the-maoist/>

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Frederik Kempe, "China-US confrontation is nothing like we have seen before", *The Atlantic*, 26 July 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/us-china-confrontation-cold-war-ii-is-like-nothing-we-have-seen-before/>

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

authorities,¹²⁵ a move that directly impinged on the second most important core-interest of the Chinese party-state, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the PRC. If we consider that Taiwan has been traditionally one of the possible “flashpoints” in the US-China strategic relations, it is interesting to note that in a 2020 speech the Taiwanese President has used the concept of “unrestricted warfare” elaborated in 1999 by China’s famous “hawk strategists” Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. As Qiao Liang has pointed out “the Taiwan issue is actually a key problem between China and the US, even though we have insisted it is China’s domestic issue...In other words, the Taiwan issue cannot be completely resolved unless the rivalry between Beijing and Washington is resolved”.¹²⁶ The renewed relevance of the Taiwan question for the US-China strategic relations has been underscored by Robert Kagan¹²⁷ who has argued that – after the crisis in Hong Kong – the US support to the island will be the true test bed for assessing the resolve of either the Trump or a future Biden administration in preventing Taiwan “absorption” by the PRC, an event which “would send shockwaves throughout the region and beyond” and would enable China “to control East Asia and the Western Pacific as never before, scrambling the entire global strategic equation”.

The escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing - the trade war, the “ideological rift” deepened by the pandemic crisis, the confrontation on the HongKong question - have induced several analysts and commentators to brand this situation not only as the initial phase of a new Cold War but even a possible escalatory scenario in security and military terms.¹²⁸ If we are “in the foothills of a new Cold War,” as an eminent “China-watcher” like Henry Kissinger has said,¹²⁹ we have anyway to consider, as it has been rightly pointed out, that this potential “struggle will certainly be more complex and multi-dimensional” because “while the US and the Soviet Union were hermetically separate, the US and China are intimately entangled in economic, technological and cultural terms.”¹³⁰ As Hal Brands and Jake Sullivan have pointed out,

¹²⁵ The US strategic attention to Taiwan has been underlined by the visit to Taipei of the US secretary of Health Alex Azar, the announcement of the sale of a large number of F-16 to the island and the congratulatory letter sent by the Secretary of State himself to the Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Robert Kagan, “What if China calls America’s bluff on Taiwan?”, *Washington Post*, August 18, 2020. <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-washington-post/20200818/283691186938722>

¹²⁸ Frederik Kempe, “China has already decided Cold War II has begun – now it’s escalating”, *The Atlantic*, July 19, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/china-has-already-decided-cold-war-ii-has-begun-now-it-is-escalating/>

¹²⁹ Quoted By Kempe, *ibid.*

¹³⁰ John Thornhill, “China is setting itself up to win Cold War 2.0”, *Financial Times*, June 15, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/b6c5558e-ba0e-4381-b2b4-1acceb2ab484>.

for the United States during the Cold War “the Soviet Union was never a serious rival for global economic leadership; it never had the ability, or the sophistication, to shape global norms and institutions in the way that Beijing may be able to do”.¹³¹

The characteristics of this possible new confrontation have in fact been analyzed from diversified point of views ranging from the focus on its nationalistic and ideological drivers (Peter Gries) to defensive neo-realist positions such as Stephen Walt’s, who has argued that the discussion of the Sino-American rivalry should not succumb “to a latest familiar tendency to attribute conflict to our opponents’ internal characteristics” but should instead look at the structural elements which define this competition because “the roots of the present Sino-American rivalry have less to do with particular leaders or regime types and more to do with the distribution of power and the particular strategies that the two sides are pursuing”.¹³²

Among these diversified analytical standpoints there have also been those who, like Hal Brands, has welcomed a possible “Cold War” with China as a factor which could bring out “the best of the American democracy” by stimulating renewed innovative energies in the system and fostering a more cohesive society¹³³

In the framework of this debate there has been, however, a widespread recognition, as the former Australian Prime Minister and sinologist Kevin Rudd has written, that the recent “saber rattling from both Beijing and Washington has become strident, uncompromising, and seemingly unending. The relationship lurches from crisis to crisis...The speed and intensity of it all has desensitized even seasoned observers to the scale and significance of change in the high politics of the U.S.-Chinese relationship”.¹³⁴ The Western response to the strategic implications of the rise of China –

¹³¹ Hal Brands and Jake Sullivan, “China has two paths to global domination”, *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/22/china-superpower-two-paths-global-domination-cold-war/>.

¹³² Stephen M. Walt, “Everyone misunderstands the reason for the US-China Cold War”, *Foreign Policy*, June 30, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/30/china-united-states-new-cold-war-foreign-policy/>. Frederic Lemaitre, “Pekin se prepare a une nouvelle guerre froide avec Washington”, *Le Monde*, May 29, 2020. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/05/28/pekin-se-prepare-a-une-nouvelle-guerre-froide-avec-washington_6041033_3210.html.

¹³³ Hal Brands, “The upside of a new Cold War with China”, *Bloomberg opinion*, July 7 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-07-07/new-cold-war-with-china-can-make-u-s-democracy-stronger>. See also for a reflection on the implications of this process for Europe Timothy Garton-Ash, “The US and China are entering a new cold war. Where does that leave the rest of us?”, *The Guardian*, June 20, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/20/us-china-cold-war-liberal-de>

¹³⁴ Kevin Rudd, “Beware the guns of August, in Asia. How to Keep U.S.-Chinese Tensions From Sparking a War”, *Foreign Affairs*, August 3, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-08-03/beware-guns-august-asia>

“unmoored from the strategic assumptions of the previous 50 years” is thus defining a new paradigm of interaction with the PRC “but without the anchor of any mutually agreed framework”.¹³⁵

From an American point of view, as Frederick Kempe has written, it is important to recognize first and foremost “the historic novelty of what’s unfolding and its epochal” significance “because the United States, since its rise to global power, has never confronted such a potent peer competitor across so many realms: political, economic, technological, military and even societal”.¹³⁶ In a unique period coinciding with the “Fourth Industrial Revolution and an era of unprecedented technological change”, this contest between the United States and China could re-define the international system not in terms of “world domination” but for its potential “significant impact on ‘world determination,’ influencing whether democracy or autocracy, market capitalism or state capitalism, are the flavors of the future”.¹³⁷

As Pei Minxin had rightly predicted,¹³⁸ between the US and China “the relative balance of power has been changing at a pace” that has finally produced “real geopolitical consequences”: this is due to the fact that “no country in modern history has risen as quickly as China and this leaves Beijing, for the first time, confronting global challenges without the learning curve of a more gradual evolution”.¹³⁹

The complexity and the magnitude of this process clearly affects the EU which is confronted not only with the structural implications of the change in relative power between the other two major international actors but also the dynamics of a new bipolarism, characterized by possible protracted trends of global competition, which makes unrealistic the perspectives of either a cooperative “G-2 Mirage” or a pragmatic “condominium of power”.¹⁴⁰

In this context the trilateral interaction within the “strategic triangle” has been made more challenging for the EU not only by the confrontational trends of “the most important bilateral relationship of the 21st century” but also by the increasing disconnect

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Frederik Kempe, “China-US confrontation is nothing like we have seen before”, *The Atlantic*, 26 July 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/us-china-confrontation-cold-war-ii-is-like-nothing-we-have-seen-before/>

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Minxin Pei, “A U.S.-China Reset?,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Washington DC (13 January 2011). <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/01/13/u.s.-china-reset>.

¹³⁹ Frederik Kempe, “China-US confrontation is nothing like we have seen before”.

¹⁴⁰ Economy, Elizabeth, and Adam Segal. “The G-2 Mirage: Why the United States and China are not Ready to Upgrade Ties.” *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 3 (May/June 2009).

of the EU's interests-values continuum from those of China and by the search of a new consensus in this regard with the United States.¹⁴¹ The EU's reconsideration of its interaction with Beijing in the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership will have therefore to take necessarily into account the fact that, as Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan have recently written, "the United States is in the midst of the most consequential rethinking of its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Although Washington remains bitterly divided on most issues, there is a growing consensus that the era of engagement with China has come to an unceremonious close. The debate now is over what comes next".¹⁴² At the same time the US post-2020 political scenario will make the EU better understand which kind of "American exceptionalism" - Brussels is going to deal with, if any, in particular with regard to the strategic relations of the liberal world with China. For this fundamental element of context will undoubtedly shape the future "environment" of the EU-China Strategic Partnership. The direction of the US foreign policy in the coming years will be a key factor to be considered by the EU China policy-makers: in the event of a second Trump mandate, as the National Security Strategy put it in 2018, "strategic competition" would continue to animate the United States' approach to Beijing. In the event of a Biden presidency a China policy based on a new form of engagement is equally unlikely but it is interesting to take note of how Sullivan, Vice President Biden's former National Security Adviser, and Campbell, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia in the Obama administration, address the key issue of which kind of strategic competition is going to take shape.¹⁴³ If "US policy makers and analysts have mostly, and rightly, discarded some of the more optimistic assumptions that underpinned the four-decade-long strategy of diplomatic and economic engagement with China," nevertheless these authors point out that it is important to be aware today that "in the rush to embrace competition, policy makers may be substituting a new variety of wishful thinking for the old... by assuming that competition can succeed in transforming China where engagement failed, this time forcing capitulation over collapse".¹⁴⁴ What is anyway very likely to be a key component of any future US administration's China policy is the recognition that "the basic mistake of engagement was to assume that it would bring

¹⁴¹ Jing Men and Wei Shen, *The EU, the US and China – Towards a New International Order?* (London: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014).

¹⁴² Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, "Competition Without Catastrophe", *Foreign Affairs*, May 5, 2020. At: foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/competition-with-china-without-catastrophe.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

about fundamental changes to China's political system, economy, and foreign policy.”¹⁴⁵

The analysis of this new context of strategic competition offers converging elements with the reflection that the EU has been developing on its own China policy: the “realist turn” in Brussels vis-à-vis the Strategic Partnership with Beijing has indeed been mainly focused on a rethinking, still underway, of the paradigm of “constructive engagement”.

The paradigm delineated by Campbell and Sullivan – who argue that lessons should be drawn from the Cold War in order to avoid a Cold war logic – would be based on “a steady state of clear-eyed coexistence on terms favorable to U.S. interests and values”.¹⁴⁶ The awareness in this evolving context of the need of realistic views about the capacity of the decisions made in Washington or Brussels “to determine the direction of long-term developments in Beijing” seems to be an essential prerequisite to define a “durable” strategy “whatever the future brings for the Chinese system.”

This approach reflects elements relevant also for the European debate underway by focusing on a kind of coexistence which would involve elements of competition and cooperation with China that might bring about friction while in Washington and Brussels the respective China policies move beyond engagement.

If in the past, in particular in Brussels, the avoidance of friction was “an objective unto itself” in the relationship with Beijing, this new paradigm of interaction should aim at securing the kinds of interests and values that the United States and the EU want to advance by defining, at the same time, “a set of conditions necessary for preventing a dangerous escalatory spiral, even as competition continues”.¹⁴⁷

The potential affinity of a revised strategic EU's approach to China with these strands of American strategic thinking underlines the reluctance of the traditional European paradigm to look at this process through the prism of power-transition theories by assuming that the present evolution of the US-China relations could be leading to a scenario of “Thucydides Trap”¹⁴⁸, whereby a global China has risen to the point that it can even challenge the United States inducing its possible overreaction. Deconstructing the idea of a US-China Thucydides trap, Friedman, Brands and Sullivan have argued that the risks associated to this dynamic are minimized by a set of core strategic problems

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ George Friedman, “The truth about the US-China Thucydides trap”, *Geopolitical Futures*, July 14, 2020. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-truth-about-the-us-china-thucydides-trap/>

which Beijing will find difficult to solve. Firstly, Xi Jinping's China lacks a meaningful alliance structure as a global power, in particular in the security sector. Secondly, China seems to be far less capable of providing "global public goods than the United States, both because it is less powerful and because its authoritarian political system makes it harder to exercise the comparatively enlightened, positive-sum leadership that has distinguished U.S. primacy".¹⁴⁹ Thirdly, in a logic of "complex interdependence", the other two actors of the "strategic triangle" continue to be indispensable counterparts for the Chinese economy. At the same time the dynamics underway seem to delineate a context whereby China, still inferior to the US in several regards, has risen to a point which makes problematic for Washington to accept any longer China's global ambitions nor finance the Chinese economy.¹⁵⁰

The economic dimension is in this sense at the forefront of the debate, exacerbated by the pandemic tensions, which has been significantly centred also on the issue of "decoupling". Of course, as it is recognized by several analysts, to extricate the US and European economies from the structural network of economic ties and integration that has been developed in the last thirty years is an herculean task. Nevertheless, a possible long-lasting outcome of the pandemic seems to be an in depth reconsideration of the vulnerabilities linked to the economic "complex interdependence" with China.

The American nascent debate on "decoupling" has been characterized by very diversified views ranging from those of conservative analysts who argue that its "costs...are dwarfed by the costs of continued Chinese economic predation and the empowerment of the Communist Party" to arguments centered on the economic implications of this process which regard it as a "folly".¹⁵¹ However, as Paul Haenle has written, it is undeniable that the 2020 global crisis has amplified calls to decouple from

¹⁴⁹ George Friedman, "The truth about the US-China Thucydides trap", *Geopolitical Futures*, July 14, 2020. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-truth-about-the-us-china-thucydides-trap/> China impressive export-driven growth "has made it a hostage to its foreign customers. Nearly 20 percent of China's gross domestic product is generated from exports, 5 percent of which are bought by its largest customer, the United States. Anything that could reduce China's economy for the long term by about 20 percent is a desperate vulnerability". Brands and Sullivan, "China has two paths to global domination", *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ George Friedman, "Back to the Future: China and the US", *Geopolitical Futures*, May 18, 2020 <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/pdfs/back-to-the-future-china-and-the-us-geopoliticalfutures-com.pdf>

¹⁵¹ Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, "The Folly of Decoupling From China It Isn't Just Perilous, It's Impossible", *Foreign Affairs*, June 3, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-06-03/folly-decoupling-china?>; Derek Scissors, "Partial Decoupling from China: a guide", *American Enterprise Institute*, July 2020. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/partial-decoupling-from-china-a-brief-guide/>

China increasing “the concerns of multinational corporations with supply chains based in China, many of which have seen business curbed by Beijing’s lack of transparency and extreme, swiftly imposed measures”.¹⁵²

These confrontational trends - which add to the fundamental technological competition between the US, the EU and China - have been probably been a crucial factor for making Beijing send, in the course of 2020, signals of “threat reduction” in order to decrease the potential risks of structural change in the economic cooperation and integration between the RPC and its Western counterparts.

All this underlines, as Rudd has pointed out, that for the United States, “the China challenge is real and demands a coherent, long-term strategy across all policy domains and in coordination with allies.” Both Washington and Brussels in this sense require a new framework for their future relationship with Beijing, which should be based on conceptual and operational elements able to turn the increasing political, economic, technological, and ideological divides into a “managed” strategic competition aimed at avoiding escalation and defining hopefully “areas of global cooperation where it is mutually advantageous”.¹⁵³

The direction of the US foreign policy will be clearly crucial for understanding which kind of “coordination with allies” the new American administration intends to pursue.¹⁵⁴ In this perspective narrowing the gap between the United States and Europe seems to be a key element in this respect because - as we have seen - there is both in Washington and Brussels a growing “ideological barrier to Chinese leadership. The tensions surrounding China’s rise do not simply result from clashing economic and geopolitical interests. They also reflect a deeper, more inherent distrust that often afflicts relationships between democratic governments and powerful authoritarian regimes.”¹⁵⁵ This gulf between Beijing’s political values and those of the world’s democracies has increased also the EU’s unease about China’s assertive stance and role in global affairs. For this reason a coordination between the US and the EU on the “softer tools of competition seems to be “just as important as harder tools in dealing with the Chinese

¹⁵² Paul Haenle, “What the Coronavirus Means for China’s Foreign Policy,” *Carnegie Endowment*, March 12, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/11/what-coronavirus-means-for-china-s-foreign-policy-pub-81259>

¹⁵³ Rudd, “Beware the guns of August, in Asia. How to Keep U.S.-Chinese Tensions From Sparking a War”.

¹⁵⁴ James Traub, “The Biden Doctrine exists already. Here’s and insider preview,” *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/20/the-biden-doctrine-exists-already-heres-an-inside-preview/>.

¹⁵⁵ Brands and Sullivan, “China has two paths to global domination”.

challenge”.¹⁵⁶ At the same time a re-launched cooperative interaction between Washington and Brussels could prove to be a key factor in order to strengthen the transatlantic relations and prevent their “internal decay, hastened by Chinese influence-buying and information operations”.¹⁵⁷ The preservation of the liberal international order is linked, as Joseph Nye has written,¹⁵⁸ to an American exceptionalism able to produce global public goods, strengthen an effective multilateralism, support liberal alliances and partnerships based on the advancement of political values and human rights. In this perspective a renewed convergence of the interests-values continuums of Washington and Brussels seems to be a significant component of the strategic reflection underway within the EU on the long-term challenges posed by “a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” such as China and on the need of defining a new paradigm of interaction with it.¹⁵⁹

This context seems to have pushed the European strategic thinking about China, already shifting, past a tipping point with regard to the traditional paradigm of “constructive engagement”. These dynamics have made more visible the “dissonance” already affecting - as we will argue in the next chapters - both the material and ideational building blocks of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and have intensified the European perception that the pursuit of a “business as usual” approach to Beijing is no longer sustainable.

Against this background, the Chinese Government seems to be confronted with “daunting challenges” to which President Xi Jinping himself has referred calling on the country “to make mental and material preparations for changes in the external environment that will last a relatively long period of time”.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Joseph S. Nye Jr, “American Exceptionalism in the ge of Trump”, *Project Syndicate*, June 5, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Barbara Onnis, “Xi Jinping’s tireless summit diplomacy amid growing challenges”, in Michelguglielmo Torri Nicola Mocci Filippo Boni (eds), “Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution”, *Asia Major*, vol. XXX/2019, 49. See also Barbara Onnis, “Cina-Unione Europea e la prospettiva di un nuovo ordine internazionale”, *Rivista Italiana di Studi Internazionali*, vol. 2/2019, 265-294; Andrew Small, “The meaning of systemic rivalry: Europe and China beyond the pandemic”, Policy Brief European Council on Foreign Relations, May 19, 2020. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_meaning_of_systemic_rivalry_europe_and_china_beyond_the_pandemic

¹⁶⁰ Bao Huaying, “China’s daunting post-Covid challenges”, *The Diplomat*, May 8, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/chinas-daunting-post-covid-challenges/>; Stuart Lau, “Damage control at heart of Foreign Minister Wang Yi visit to Europe”, *South China Morning Post*, August 24, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3098615/damage-control-heart-chinese-foreign-minister-wang->; Minxin Pei, “La Cina si sta facendo troppi nemici”, *Internazionale*, July 24, 2020.

In this process of change the role that the EU can play will depend - as we have argued in this chapter - on the internal dynamics of the Strategic Partnership but also on some key external variables stemming from the broader context which influences the relations between the three main actors of the international system in the 21st century.¹⁶¹

<https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/minxin-pei/2020/08/01/cina-nemici>; Fraser Cameron, “2020: critical year for EU-China relations”, *Euractiv*, December 26, 2019; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/opinion/2020-critical-year-for-eu-china-relations/>; Mark Leonard, “The end of Europe’s Chinese dream”, *The Project Syndicate*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/europe-new-strategy-toward-china-by-mark-leonard-2020-05> ; Gabriel Gresillon, “L’Europe hausse le ton face à la Chine”, *Les Echos*, June 23, 2020. <https://www.lesechos.fr/monde/europe/leurope-hausse-le-ton-face-a-la-chine-1217483>; Mark Scott, Laura Kayali and Laurens Cerulus, “European Commission accuses China of peddling disinformation,” *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-disinformation-china-coronavirus/>

¹⁶¹ Elena Sanchez Nicolas, “Borrell: Coronavirus has 'blown up' global order”, *EUObserver*, May 9, 2020. https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/148296?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium

CHAPTER 3

The ideational dimension of the EU-China Partnership: an epistemological perspective

In this chapter we will focus on a clarification of the underlying epistemological assumptions for this research, arguing that a better understanding of the difficulties and prospects of the EU-China strategic partnership is significantly related to the ideational elements which influence this relationship. We will incorporate in this epistemological approach a hermeneutical perspective which can give a more comprehensive background to the analytical instruments that we will use to investigate some key issues which problematize the strategic potential of the EU-China relationship. In doing so we will take into account not only the Western theoretical elaboration on these issues but also the recent contribution of the Chinese school of International Relations Theory in a pluralist perspective.

In delineating the epistemological assumptions on which the analysis of our subject has been based we think that it is important to underscore - as Kurki and Wight have done - that the reference to what in IR Theory is defined “meta-theory” is essential not only for “being aware of the issues at stake in meta-theoretical debate, and of their significance in terms of concrete research” but also because “meta-theoretical positions direct, in a fundamental way, the manner in which people theorize and, indeed, ‘see’ the world.”¹⁶² The importance of meta-theories is a theoretical aspect which is widely shared by Chinese IR scholars who have made in their analyses frequent reference to the contribution of Western philosophers and social sciences thinkers and to the rich background of the Chinese philosophical tradition.

The second aspect that we will focus on in the chapter is how the identity, historical and cultural background, the actorness of China and the European Union affect their relationship: in doing so we will address a first significant “conceptual gap” between China and the EU, that referring to their contrasting conceptions of sovereignty.

¹⁶² Milja Kurki and Colin Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.) *International Relations Theories, Discipline and Diversity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

3.1 The EU-China Strategic Partnership: a case of “cognitive dissonance” between international actors?

The Strategic Partnership between China and the European Union has been often defined as “elusive” because of a set of substantial factors which constrain its potential evolution. As Jonathan Holslag has argued, “at the discourse level it is found that both sides fail to identify common interests, joint priorities continue to be concentrated in the business sector, and China and Europe have not been able to determine what the relevance of their relationship is compared to other powers.”¹⁶³

This argument underlines the gaps between how the EU-China strategic dimension has been defined in a set of documents and joint statements and its reality “on the ground”. The analysis of these aspects needs to be complemented, however, with the inclusion of underlying ideational elements which shape the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In this respect it is true, as Pan Zhongqi has written,¹⁶⁴ that “the relationship between China and the EU has gone beyond the stage when it was largely shaped by the ‘tyranny of distance’ and ‘primacy of trade’”. For this reason it is useful to analyze the material aspects which influence the Partnership against the fundamental background of those ideational elements which continue to act as a factor of “cognitive dissonance”. This term - used in our context by David Shambaugh adapting a concept created in Psychology by Leon Festinger in 1957¹⁶⁵ - refers to the lack of consistency in the Partnership between some key elements of interaction and the respective conceptualization of these elements by the two international actors. This situation is conducive to a fundamental contradiction between the facts which constitute this relationship and the beliefs, cultural identities, ideals and values through which the two actors categorize the constitutive elements of their interaction. As Festinger argued¹⁶⁶ in the case of individuals – who tend to respond to cognitive dissonance by avoiding the circumstances and contradictory information likely to increase its magnitude – the EU and China seem so far to have been partly in denial of the importance of the ideational elements which significantly affect their relationship and its potential evolution. Along these lines David Shambaugh has in particular argued that cognitive dissonance is “in essence, the natural proclivity to

¹⁶³ Richard Maher, “The Elusive EU-China Partnership”, *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016; Jonathan Holslag, “The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, (2011), vol. 49, n° 2, 295.

¹⁶⁴ Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations. Global Governance, Human Rights and Strategic Partnerships* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 218.

¹⁶⁵ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1957).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

selectively look for confirmation of one's pre-existing beliefs and to reject evidence that contradicts these beliefs".¹⁶⁷

On the basis of this assumption this chapter will try to elucidate more specifically what this cognitive dissonance consists of by arguing that the strategic limits of the EU-China relationship need to be set in an epistemological context which can help to factor into our analysis the complex interaction between material and ideational elements which affects the potential strategic dimension of the EU-China partnership.

This epistemological clarification will also offer the theoretical framework for an in-depth consideration of the consequences of this "cognitive dissonance" which manifests itself, inter alia, through what Pan Zhongqi called "conceptual gaps", which influence the behaviour of the two actors when they address some critical aspects of their relationship. On this basis it will be possible to assess the constitutive characteristics of the relationship between the European Union and China by investigating which elements make it a partnership and which, if any, elements make – or could make it – a partnership of a *strategic* nature.

3.2 The conceptual gaps in the EU-China relations as an analytical tool in the framework of a constructivist/post-positivist epistemological approach

Before analyzing the implications that the existing conceptual discrepancies generate in EU-China relations, the first step is to address the indispensable epistemological clarification of the peculiar framework which influences the development of the strategic relations between China and the EU in a perspective which links the dimension of theory to that of "praxis". To this end I will not only refer here to the epistemological approach that I tried to develop in my previous analyses¹⁶⁸ of China's international behavior but I will also consider the theoretical contributions made in this respect by Chinese scholars such as Qin Yaqing, Yan Xuetong and Zhao Tingyang.¹⁶⁹ An epistemological approach which emphasizes the importance not only of the material but also of the ideational factors influencing international politics and takes

¹⁶⁷ David Shambaugh, "China eyes Europe in the world. Real convergence or cognitive dissonance?" in David Shambaugh, Eberhard Sandschneider and Zhou Hong (eds.), *China-Europe Relations: perceptions, policies and prospects* (London: Routledge, 2008), 128.

¹⁶⁸ Massimo Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence: Ideational and Material factors in the international posture of China rising as a great power*, DLS Doctoral Thesis, University of Georgetown, Washington DC, 2011.

¹⁶⁹ Qin Yaqing, "A Multiverse of Knowledge: Cultures and IR Theories", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2018.

into account the “meta-theoretical” dimension cannot but find some interesting perspectives in the reflections elaborated in the last decade by Chinese International Relations theorists. Actors such as China and the European Union inevitably make their explicit or implicit choices in the context of underlying “theories of knowledge” and “strategies for action” which stem from distinct epistemological paradigms,¹⁷⁰ influenced in turn by specific cultural and ideational backgrounds: the assumptions on which their international behavior is based are thus the product of a complex process of interaction which can have both intended and unintended consequences.

In this respect Shaumbaugh rightly underscores that, for instance, Chinese views of Europe’s role in the world “do not exist independently”.¹⁷¹ This is true also for European views vis-à-vis China, which are defined through a multifaceted prism that reflects both the views of the EU as a unitary actor and those of its member states. Overall, these views are largely derivative from the two actors’ broader “understandings of, and preferences for, the global system and international order”¹⁷² which, as Qin Yaqing has interestingly argued, depend also on the “background knowledge/representational knowledge”¹⁷³ of the strategic partners. As a result, according to Shaumbaugh, the analyses and attitudes of the two actors in their interaction “are somewhat derivative from these broader beliefs and they thus frequently have a cognitively dissonant character”.¹⁷⁴ The reference to the essential role played by “broader beliefs” is echoed by Qin Yaqing when he argues that “social theory as representational knowledge cannot but reflect and represent the background knowledge wherein its producer is deeply embedded”.¹⁷⁵ As we will see, this approach seems to be shaped by ideas in line with Gadamer’s hermeneutical perspective and the key reflections on the nature of understanding made by Heidegger.

As we know, epistemological assumptions do indeed contribute to defining the ontological dimension of the main elements of a problem: from this perspective it is interesting to note that the “conceptual gaps” which characterize the EU-China interactions seem to underscore a low degree of “epistemological awareness” in the reciprocal behavior of the two partners. This deficit seems to be at the root of the

¹⁷⁰ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 17.

¹⁷¹ Shambaugh, *ibid.*, 128

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 418.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 419.

fundamental problem of conceptual dissonance which contributes to weaken the strategic character of the Partnership.

Since they will be used as an interpretive instrument throughout this research, it is necessary to clarify at this point what we exactly mean when we refer to the notion of “conceptual gaps”, as defined by Pan Zhongqi. According to this Chinese author, he coined the term in order to explain

“different conceptualizations of the same concept by different actors. It signifies how two people may understand, define, or interpret a notion in such a different way that it carries divergent connotations when used in communications. As a kind of cognitive difference, a conceptual gap emerges whenever different people resort to the same concept in order to describe different things”.¹⁷⁶

When Pan Zhongqi argues that “a conceptual gap exists because many concepts are multifaceted, dynamic and ambiguous...[and] almost no concept...enjoys a universally accepted definition”¹⁷⁷, he clearly rejects a positivist/rationalist epistemological approach: this is made more evident when he notes that “[m]ultiple definitions make the meaning of a concept ambiguous. And this ambiguity makes a conceptual gap between different actors more likely, on the one hand, and more difficult to discern, on the other”.¹⁷⁸ It is therefore clear that the notion of conceptual gaps can be inscribed in an epistemological approach which refers to the perspectives that both constructivism and post-positivism have brought to bear on the study of International Relations and foreign policy. Post-positivists, as Christopher Hill writes, in general reject

the fact-value distinction most prominent among realists and behaviorists...This is because politics is constituted by language, ideas and values. We cannot stand outside ourselves and make neutral judgments.¹⁷⁹

If we consider that post-positivist positions are based on approaches that, while drawing on a wider range of intellectual traditions, all reject positivism as a valid way of

¹⁷⁶ Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 3.

¹⁷⁷ Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 218.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 7. As we know, in the IR debate the fundamental problem of finding a post-positivist “middle ground” (a term introduced by Nicholas Onuf) originated from the inconsistencies arising from the combination of an inter-subjective ontology and an epistemology still indebted to positivism. Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989). It is meaningful that some influential rationalist constructivists – such as Wendt, Keohane, Krasner – have claimed that no significant epistemological or methodological differences divide them. And Wendt has been propelled into an attempt to find answers in quantum mechanics (*Quantum Mind and Social Science*, 2015).

going about the study of social processes,¹⁸⁰ we can find analytical synergies between some IR Western and Chinese theorists such as Qin Yaqing who has focused in his works on the key link between Culture and Social Theory. Rejecting the long predominant positivist paradigm he has rightly pointed out that

“mainstream IR theory has largely ignored culture, especially in view of its Waltzianization since the 1980s. It aims to generate knowledge across time and space and produce a universally applicable theory that denies the role of any cultural background. As a result, local knowledge production and theory development, usually drawing largely on cultural resources, have been unfairly marginalized”.¹⁸¹

The reference to these strands of recent Chinese theoretical thought has the potential to connect a post-positivist approach to a pluralist approach in terms of IR theory. It is meaningful that Hans Morgenthau wrote from his realist standpoint that foreign policy (and indeed the whole of international relations) is deeply rooted in the cultural background of a historical period and reflects the theory and practice of that context. For this reason it is difficult to understand not only the “conceptual gaps” but also the strategic nature of the EU-China Partnership if we do not try – following Morgenthau’s suggestions – to understand what is the “general philosophy” which influences the context of this key strategic relationship.¹⁸²

If Morgenthau referred to a “general philosophy” which was clearly Western-centred, a pluralist approach can help better clarifying the elements at the root of the so called “cognitive dissonance”. Being aware that our views of international political events and issues are inevitably highly dependent on the philosophical underpinnings that we adopt, whether in an implicit or explicit way¹⁸³ - as Hollis and Smith posited, echoing Morgenthau - we need therefore to find which can be these philosophical underpinnings through a pluralist theoretical lens and in the framework of a hermeneutical approach.

¹⁸⁰ Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 23.

¹⁸¹ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 416. Qin rightly points out that while mainstream Western IR theory has not turned in the past to culture for its sources or for theoretical construction, it has been often informed by and has drawn on theories in other fields: structural realism by microeconomics, neoliberal institutionalism by institutional economics and constructivism by sociology. The focus on the role of culture in IR has been revived, though, by theoretical reflections which began in the early 2000s. See in this regard Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil, (eds.), *The Return of the Culture and Identity in IR Theory* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1997); Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington (eds.), *Culture Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

¹⁸² Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1948), Foreword.

¹⁸³ Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 9.

3.3 A hermeneutical perspective

The theoretical considerations that we have so far developed have sought to set the subject of our research in the context of the epistemological approach from which the notions of “conceptual gaps” and “cognitive dissonance” stem. It is necessary, though, to complement it with what we consider a necessary “quid pluris”, that is a hermeneutical perspective which will link in a systematic way the dimensions of theory and praxis which shape the strategic relations between China and the European Union. Broader interpretive tools are indeed offered, at the meta-theoretical level, by concepts and reflections elaborated in the framework of philosophical hermeneutics in particular by Hans Georg Gadamer.¹⁸⁴ In epistemological terms this perspective can enrich our gnoseological approach in a way which goes beyond the IR debate focused on merely finding a post-positivist/post-rationalist theoretical “middle ground” and, at the same time, can broaden it through a pluralistic interpretive paradigm. If we recognize that the EU-China strategic relations take place indeed in a world “more complexly multiple and closely connected”¹⁸⁵ in which China tends to assert with increasing force its uniqueness in political, economic, ideological but also “civilizational” terms, we then need to be aware - as Katzenstein has argued¹⁸⁶ - that it is clearly no longer possible to implicitly refer to a paradigm which equates Western norms, values and practices with those of the whole human community. As Qin Yaqing has written, it has been indeed a common practice “to equate knowledge produced in the West with universal knowledge. By taking for granted that they produce universal knowledge, theorists tend to forget the fact that culture provides the background that influences their subconscious mind and on a highly abstract and metaphysical level”.¹⁸⁷

Qin Yaqing’s arguments reflect positions of a debate which is extremely relevant for Chinese theorists who have underlined that “the IR theoretical hard core has been formed through the background knowledge gained from the practice of European IR since the establishment of the Westphalian system”: for this reason in the study of world politics

¹⁸⁴ The references to Gadamer’s hermeneutical circle are made on the basis of the explanations and comments contained in Nicola Abbagnano, *Storia della Filosofia. Il pensiero contemporaneo: dall’Ermeneutica alla Filosofia analitica*, vol. 7, edited by Giovanni Fornero (Roma: Gruppo Editoriale l’Espresso, 2006), 1-104.

¹⁸⁵ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 416.

¹⁸⁶ Peter Katzenstein, “The Second Coming? Reflections on a Global Theory of International Relations”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 11, n° 4 (2018), 373–390.

¹⁸⁷ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 421.

the “different international systems that existed in other regions outside the West, especially outside Europe where the IR discipline was initiated” have been rendered largely irrelevant. In this way “only the practice of Westphalian IR” mattered, and “only the background knowledge wherefrom” counted.¹⁸⁸

In a context which increasingly put into question, *inter alia*, the assumption of universality of Western IR theory, the search of an “epistemological middle ground” has been mainly based on the critical constructivist approach and some fundamental post-positivist epistemological assumptions such as the social constituting of meaning, the linguistic construction of reality and the historicity of knowledge.¹⁸⁹ If, from a post-positivist perspective, “there is something larger at stake than different epistemologies” the challenge is to try to respond to the “Cartesian anxiety” for the absence of secure foundations in ethics and politics in a way which can reconcile ontology and epistemology. This can be done through a hermeneutical approach which delineates solid theoretical foundations and connects them with the correlated implications in terms of praxis. In this context, the reference to philosophical hermeneutics - through the fundamental discovery of what Hans Georg Gadamer has defined “the ontological dimension of the hermeneutical circle” - helps us taking advantage of a comprehensive theoretical approach which deconstructs the tenets of positivism and historicism based on the ideal of a scientific objectivity which needs just to be applied through a correct methodology.

In this respect, the key theoretical background is offered by Gadamer’s reflection, developed in the second part of *Truth and Method*¹⁹⁰, on the fundamental problem of “understanding”. By addressing this issue Gadamer takes into account the cardinal idea

¹⁸⁸ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 422. The debate to which Qin Yaqing refers was initiated by Acharya and Buzan. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, “Why Is There No Non-Western IR Theory?”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 7, n° 3 (2007), 287–312. On its evolution see Barry Buzan, “How and How Not to Develop IR Theory: Lessons from Core and Periphery”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 11, n° 4 (2018), 391–414. The Western-centred approach to IR is exemplified by Stanley Hoffmann, “An American Social Science: International Relations”, in Robert M. A. Crawford and Darryl S. L. Jarvis (eds.), *International Relations - Still An American Social Science? Toward Diversity in International Thought* (Albany: The State University of New York, 2001), 27–51.

¹⁸⁹ Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). As David Campbell pointed out, the rationalist reaction to what Robert Keohane defined “reflectivism” underscored a critical anxiety which “mistook arguments about the historical production of foundations for the claim that all foundations had to be rejected”. David Campbell, “Poststructuralism” in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories, Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 210.

¹⁹⁰ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and eds. Garrett Barden and John Cumming, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

elaborated by Martin Heidegger and expressed by the notion of “circle of understanding” (Zirkel des Verstehens).¹⁹¹ By referring to para 32 of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*¹⁹² Gadamer argues that any interpretation is the articulation and the internal development of an original pre-understanding (Vor-verstaendis): the basic assumption underlying the concept of a “hermeneutical circle” is in fact that whenever we try to understand something, we understand something which we already understand in part because of our background of given ideas, opinions, previous experiences and prejudices.¹⁹³ The originality of Heidegger’s concept of Zirkel des Verstehens is the ontological nature and the cognitive function of the hermeneutical circle which goes well beyond a mere methodological approach.

The notion of conceptual gaps can be thus related to what Gadamer explains with regard to the ontological dimension of our understanding: being aware of how the “circle of pre-understanding” works, makes it possible for us to experience a process of true interpretation in the search for autonomous truth in the field of social sciences as in other areas. This epistemological perspective can be fruitfully applied not only to the cultural and historical relationship between the West and China but more specifically – also through the lens of the existing conceptual gaps - to the present debate on the China-EU Strategic Partnership.

The theoretical foundations brought about by Heidegger and Gadamer’s hermeneutical thought - which made possible a new understanding of the historicity of our understanding and of the relationship between language and reality - can also set in perspective the concept of relativism/reflectivism¹⁹⁴ which “rejected the classical positivist/explanatory approach to IR theory and research, emphasizing instead reflexivity and the non-neutral nature of political and social explanation.”¹⁹⁵ From a hermeneutical perspective it is easier to understand why post-structuralism has problematized this

¹⁹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

¹⁹² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, edited by Taylor Carman (New York: Harper Collins 2008).

¹⁹³ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 37.

¹⁹⁴ Robert O. Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches", *International Studies Quarterly* 32, 4 (Dec. 1988), 381, 386. As Kurki and Smith write, Keohane noted the potential of reflectivist “approaches to contribute to the discipline but, in a direct reference to Lakatos’s account of science, suggested that they could be taken seriously only when they developed a ‘research programme’. Kurki and Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.) *International Relations Theories, Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25.

¹⁹⁵ Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches,” 379.

assumption:¹⁹⁶ in order to create, as Onuf said, “a world of our making”, a basic preliminary awareness of the limits and of the scope of our understanding is a *conditio sine qua non*.

This broader theoretical clarification does not exclude a perspective whereby different epistemological approaches should not be seen, as Christopher Hill observes, as competing with one another but should, on the contrary, be considered as a useful part of an “analyst's armory”.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, an important aspect of post-positivism in foreign policy studies, that Hill has highlighted, is that it should be regarded not simply as a competing approach vis-à-vis realism, “but as one which confirms to some extent the importance of the state. Writers like David Campbell, Roxanne Doty and Henrik Larsen have examined the language of foreign policy and what they see as its dominant, usually disciplinary, discourses. These are, however, still national. Language is seen as crucial to national identity, on which the representation of outsiders ('the Other') will be a significant influence. Indeed, foreign policy is important precisely because it reinforces (undesirably, in the view of Campbell) national and statist culture. Language, whether official or private, rhetorical or observational, has a lot to tell us about both mind-sets and actions, and it is a relatively untapped resource”.¹⁹⁸

If we look at Chinese IR Theory we can find some interesting points of contact with those theoretical positions aimed at deconstructing the positivist/rationalist paradigms. If we take, for instance, the role of the state, of national identity and of statist cultures, we can see that it is a significant element for the theoretical approach of Chinese IR thinkers too: from Yan Xuetong's moral realism - which investigates the key relationship between material power and the ideational elements shaping authority and leadership – to Zhao Tingyang's cosmopolitan worldview based on the concept of a “tianxia system” which problematizes the Westphalian order in which every state is an “alien” necessarily acting within the boundaries of the self-other dynamics.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Mainstream rationalist and positivist thinkers have been reluctant to take the knowledge claims of reflectivist scholars seriously, because they challenged the very status of the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions upon which their paradigm depended. Kurki and Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” 25.

¹⁹⁷ Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 9.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 30. See also Yan Xuetong, et al., *Wang ba tianxia sixiang jiqi qidi* (Thoughts of World Leadership and Implications), (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2009). Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia tixi* (Tianxia System) (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005); *Tianxia de dangdaixing: shijie zhixu de shijian yu xiangxiang* (A Possible World of All-underheaven System: The World Order in the Past and for the Future), (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2016). See also Zhao Tingyang,

Qin Yaqing's relational theory of world politics – through its strong focus on the role of culture in IR – looks at the state also as a cultural community which belongs to an international system made by “actors in relations” rather than discrete individual entities.²⁰⁰ All these theoretical perspectives touch upon key elements which are extremely relevant for the EU-China strategic relations. Moreover, the “recognition of a multiverse of knowledge” through a pluralistic approach²⁰¹ makes us better aware - as Acharya and Buzan have pointed out - that “because Western IR Theory has been carried by the dominance of Western power over the last few centuries, it has acquired a Gramscian hegemonic status that operates largely unconsciously in the minds of others, and regardless of whether the theory is correct or not”.²⁰²

These Chinese reflections can offer analytical synergies not only with Western IR post-positivist theories but, more in particular, with what has been defined the hermeneutical dimension of “praxis” by Gadamer.²⁰³ If we consider the “ontological turn” given by Gadamer to philosophical hermeneutics,²⁰⁴ we can see how recent contributions of Chinese theorists - in particular Qin Yaqing's - reverberate some themes developed by those who have looked at Gadamer's philosophical work to underscore, inter alia, the disparity between the Anglo-American and Continental Europe's understanding of the nature of the social sciences”. In this context Bernstein underscores that in the main tradition of Anglo-American thought “the overwhelming bias has been to think of the social sciences as natural sciences concerning individuals in their social relations” while “a proper understanding of the range of the social disciplines requires us to recognize the essential hermeneutical dimension of these disciplines”.

By addressing this kind of issues Qin Yaqing has developed a critique of some key

Meiyou shijieguan de shijie: zhengzhi zhexue yu wenhua zhexue (The World without a Worldview: Political and Cultural Philosophy), (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005).

²⁰⁰ Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²⁰¹ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 415.

²⁰² Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, “Why is There No Non-Western IR Theory?”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 7, n° 3 (2007), 294. See also Barry Buzan, “How and How Not to Develop IR Theory: Lessons from Core and Periphery”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 11, n° 4 (2018), 391–414.

²⁰³ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 34. As Richard Bernstein notes, Gadamer can be regarded as a significant point of reference also when we address issues related to International Relations Theory. In IRT an in depth reflection on the philosophical antecedents of the post-empiricist paradigm-shift has often been neglected, probably because the most significant of them were rooted in 20th century European continental Philosophy rather than in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. In this framework, the magnum opus is represented by Hans-Georg Gadamer's “Wahrheit und Methode” (published in 1960 and translated in English with the title *Truth and Method* in 1975).

²⁰⁴ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 35.

components of IR Theory shaped by the main tradition of Anglo-American thought: he has argued that not only “mainstream Western IR theories...share a similar metaphysical component, that is, individualistic rationality” but also that this form of rationality “is based on an atomistic ontology and focuses on the individual actor, no matter whether an individual in society or a nation-state in international society”.²⁰⁵ In Qin’s theoretical perspective rationality, on the contrary, needs to be “relationally expressed” in a framework in which processes are defined in terms of relations in motion as ontologically significant.

In this perspective the search for a pluralistic epistemological perspective - which helps us avoiding the risks of a “binary logic” in analyzing and conceptualizing key elements of such a complex relationship as the EU-China Strategic Partnership - is enriched by the interpretive potential offered by the “hermeneutical circle.” The theoretical problem of understanding, of its conditions and limits, is addressed by Qin Yaqing in a converging way in his “knowledge-oriented” theory with Heidegger’s “circle of pre-understanding” by delineating the key concept of “cultural background”. What we could call Qin Yanqing’s “ontological dimension of culture can be connected to Gadamer’s “ontological dimension of language” because language is a crucial component of culture at the individual, community and national level. As we have seen, Qin has argued that “Culture matters crucially in the development of social theory” because it is an important source for informing and inspiring theoretical innovation in the social sciences.²⁰⁶ However, in his view “Western social theory draws on cultural resources in a highly implicit way and on a highly abstract level, as if far removed from its cultural background”.²⁰⁷

In his theory Qin divides what he calls “the theoretical hard core” into two interrelated components: a substantive one, “which deals with the outside world by observing and receiving signals from selected ‘out-there’s” and a metaphysical one “which explains, understands, and interprets the perceived phenomenon and received signal. [...] The metaphysical component is the soul of a social theory for it defines and identifies the theory.”²⁰⁸ This approach can be particularly relevant – as Qin argues – “in

²⁰⁵ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 420.

²⁰⁶ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 417.

²⁰⁷ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 424. For this reason he thinks that the influence of culture can be considered with regard to Western IR Theory as a process of “implicit permeation” while it takes shape in Chinese theoretical thought as a process of “explicit penetration”.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. Qin argues that in the social sciences, theory is not only for explaining but also for understanding, interpreting, and constructing social reality. Different theories’ various understandings and

an international system that has gone far beyond the Westphalian fiefdom in a multiple and complex world of pluralistic cultures and societies”.²⁰⁹ On the basis of these theoretical assumptions we could call what Qin defines the “metaphysical component” the “hermeneutical component” of his epistemological approach: the “metaphysical component” is indeed “nurtured, shaped, and informed primarily by background knowledge”, a concept which can be inscribed in Gadamer’s hermeneutical perspective. Qin Yaqing argues that²¹⁰ “background knowledge is the knowledge that has been formed naturally - even spontaneously - in and through practice and over history, which constitute its time-space matrix”.

A key point in this theoretical approach is its emphasis on the fact that background knowledge is “generated in, by, and through practice”. The importance of this “practice turn”²¹¹ connects this theoretical approach to another significant theme of philosophical hermeneutics, the role of “philosophia practica” in linking theory with praxis. As Richard Bernstein notes, “one of the most challenging, intriguing, and important motifs in Gadamer’s work is his effort to link his ontological hermeneutics with the tradition of practical philosophy, especially as it is rooted in Aristotle’s understanding of praxis and phronesis”.²¹² It is not a coincidence that the “specific context in *Truth and Method* where Gadamer explores the relevance of Aristotle to hermeneutics is the investigation of the moment of “application” or “appropriation in the act of understanding”: his approach considers that “every act of understanding involves interpretation, and all interpretation

even opposite interpretations of the same social phenomenon are commonly seen”. Since the so called metaphysical component “provides a scheme for understanding, a frame for interpretation, and a cornerstone for construction and reconstruction”, a theory depends on this component “for its originality and distinctiveness”.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Qin Yaqing’s concept of background knowledge derives specifically from John Searle’s notion of “background” and it is similar to what Foucault has called a “prior history” and Bourdieu “habitus”. John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free press, 1995), 129.

²¹¹ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 418. Qin refers to Vincent Pouliot, “The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities”, *International Organization*, vol. 62, n° 2 (2008), 257–88; Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, “International Practices: Introduction and Framework”, in Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, (eds.), *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16. Adler and Pouliot have pointed out, that “background knowledge consists primarily of inter-subjective expectations and dispositions, which can be grasped only as embedded in practice”. Theodore Schatzki, “Introduction: Practice Theory”, in Theodore Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny, (eds.), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1–19.

²¹² Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 36. As Bernstein explains in this regard, “according to an earlier tradition of hermeneutics, three elements were distinguished: *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), *subtilitas explicandi* (interpretation), and *subtilitas applicandi* (application). But Gadamer argues - and this is one of the central theses of *Truth and Method* - that these are not three distinct moments or elements of hermeneutics.”

involves application”.²¹³ As Bernstein has pointed out “it is Aristotle's analysis of phronesis that, according to Gadamer, enables us to understand the distinctive way in which application is an essential moment of the hermeneutical experience”.²¹⁴

In the context of this epistemological approach the specific notion of “conceptual gaps” can be therefore regarded as a significant act of interpretation and “application” for understanding the weight and influence of the ideational gap between China and the EU.

The focus on this key dimension of praxis is underlined also by Qin Yaqing who argues that international actors often represent “communities of practice”: in delineating this concept the Chinese scholar points out interestingly not only that the “most natural, spontaneous, and prototypical community of practice [...] is a cultural community”, but that “[i]n this sense, a civilization-based cultural community is the most representative of cultural communities”.²¹⁵ As we will see in the next sections this reference to culture as a factor which, “at the macro level shapes the way of thinking and doing of the members of a community” is an important analytical perspective to better understand the identity and actorness of both China and the EU (and its member states).

At the same time, we have seen that in this process of hermeneutical interpretation and application Chinese IR theorists are not only influenced, like their Western counterparts, by their “culture and embedded in the background knowledge therein” but also that they, although critical of Western IR theories, have integrated them into their own discourses and narratives.²¹⁶ A further element of complexity is related to the fact that China’s international behavior - and therefore its interaction with the EU - is shaped by both this broader “civilizational background” and the communist party state’s own ideology and political theory and culture. This multifaceted context makes us better understand the notion of conceptual gaps and the risks that a limited epistemological awareness can generate through “the dichotomous understanding and interpretation of cultural difference”.²¹⁷ this has led to phenomena of Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism in the past interaction between Europe and China while - as Peter Katzenstein has warned²¹⁸ - it is also at the root of cultural exceptionalism if we refer to the relationship of the United

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 429.

²¹⁶ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 430.

²¹⁷ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 431.

²¹⁸ Peter Katzenstein, “Duoyuan duowei wenming goucheng de shijie” (“A World of Plural and Pluralistic Civilizations”), trans. Liu Weihua, *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (World Economic and Politics), n° 11 (2010), 45–53.

States with both China and Europe.

The hermeneutical clarification that we have tried to develop is aimed at reducing the risk of perpetuating, in analyzing the Partnership, a “dichotomous binary trap”²¹⁹ of which the conceptual gaps are a manifestation. An epistemological/hermeneutical approach which takes into account also pluralistic perspectives will allow us to take advantage in the coming chapters of the “conceptual gaps” toolbox, both in terms of interpretation and of application.

3.4 China and the European Union: two rising global powers, different in terms of historical background and identity

The “epistemological synergies” that we have delineated make us indeed better able to understand the peculiar characteristics of the two actors of the Partnership. This is an important element that Pan Zhongqi addresses when he refers to the “actorness” of China and the EU. In this sense he argues that “besides culture and values, actorness also makes the picture more complicated. China and EU are two very different types of players in international politics today. China is writing its story of a peaceful rise and building itself as a consolidated sovereign state. The EU on the other hand, is seeking further regional integration and building itself as a unitary post-sovereign polity”.²²⁰

In assessing the defining components of the EU-China partnership it is indeed important to recognize the constitutive characteristics of its two actors. As Pan Zhongqi argues, the PRC regards herself and the international system as an environment populated by “modern” nation-states which express norms and values still shaped by the principles of “Westphalian sovereignty” while the EU has become a unique model of post-modern normative actorness. This different actorness clearly stems also from distinct identities shaped by the specific historical and “civilizational” backgrounds of the two actors. The two actors are, of course, very different also because the People’s Republic of China is a state - still shaped by the role and structure of the Chinese Communist Party and its ideology - while the European Union is a union of states which has developed its own identity but which reflects also the national identities of its member-states. This is a very important element for assessing the strategic potential of the China-EU Partnership and

²¹⁹ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 432.

²²⁰ Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 20.

we need now to focus on it from the standpoint of the epistemological assumptions that we have tried to delineate in the previous paragraphs.

China and the EU - as rising global players - have distinct identities shaped by the political, cultural, social, as well as material, circumstances in which they are embedded. It is important to note in this regard that social construction, suggesting difference across context rather than a single objective reality, underlines the importance of change at the international level, with subjects that are not static but ever-evolving as they interact with each other and their environment.²²¹ As we will see, this is a crucial aspect for our analysis because both the EU and China are going through a phase of significant transition. This context inevitably influences – with a different degree of continuity and variation – the identity of China and the European Union, driven by a mix of material and ideational forces. It is also important to underline, as Peter Katzenstein rightly pointed out, that “much of the writing on state structures is in fact informed by a historical perspective. State structures are not only the products of competition in the international system but also of history. And the legacy of history leaves a deep imprint on their character”.²²²

These aspects are particularly relevant for a country such as China whose thousands-year history has been characterized by a peculiar civilizational continuity but also by dramatic changes and upheavals. In this sense the Chinese discourse on the country’s historical identity and national interests has been often elaborated through “a rather constant ideological” view of Chinese history” which “has created a ‘mythological’ image of the Chinese past regarded as a ‘cultural genealogy’ functional to legitimize the existing structure of power”.²²³ For this reason, in line with our epistemological premises, we can say that “the risk of either neglecting or misinterpreting significant elements of context such as history can indeed have for China various implications also in terms of foreign policy-making: the definition of China’s core-interests on the basis of national narratives, perceptions and misperceptions [has made] Chinese international behavior more influenced by a new nationalistic discourse”.²²⁴

The set of debates on China’s national identity in parallel with its rise as a global power have been centered on the PRC’s distinct notion of modernity in the framework of the process of reform and modernization of the country. This process has been influenced

²²¹ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 21.

²²² Peter J. Katzenstein, “Analyzing Change in International Politics: the New Institutionalism and the Interpretive Approach,” *Max-Planck-Institut, MPIEG Discussion Paper* 90, n° 10 (November 1990).

²²³ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 25.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

also by historical narratives which have become “a major driver of Chinese soft power projection in recent years as a means of legitimizing current practices by establishing links with ‘sometimes imagined’ historical precedents”.²²⁵ The role of the historical past in shaping the identity of an international actor - an aspect that both the English and Chinese Schools of IR²²⁶ have addressed - is a significant standpoint to analyze the actorness of China as a rising global power.

3.5 China’s national identity: still a “prisoner of history”?

The complex background of China’s history - sometimes perceived as the “weight of the past” - is a rich fabric in which stratified elements are intertwined in a pattern which has contributed to define Chinese national identity. In line with our epistemological pluralistic perspective we need to approach this key historical dimension being aware that it has been often used to justify Western foreign policy options vis-à-vis China. It is therefore necessary to factor into our analysis the Chinese perspective with regard to the historical encounter with Western counterparts which were, first and foremost, European powers, in particular in the period when China’s modern identity as a nation state was shaped.²²⁷

The multifaceted dimension in the narratives of Chinese history and the fact that China has been the historical hegemon of East Asia for practically two millennia are reflected in a Chinese identity which has cultural, historical and political roots not only as a state but also – as Lucian Pye wrote - as a civilization which “pretended to be a state”. The past role of the “Middle Kingdom” as the historical East Asian great power and its influence as the leading civilization of the region have also been used by Beijing in the last two decades for projecting the image of China as an alternative model to certain basic characteristics of Western modernity: this “charm offensive” has evolved since Xi

²²⁵ Shaun Breslin, “Understanding China’s Regional Rise: Interpretations, Identities and implications,” *International Affairs* 85, n° 4 (2009), 824.

²²⁶ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 134. “The focus on historical understanding is a distinctive feature of the English School of IR which has reflected on the central problem of how to construct a form of international society which is orderly and just. A key concept for the English school is the mutual recognition of sovereign states and the notion of “great powers” as an institutional component of world politics”. In this framework the British/Canadian scholar Barry Buzan has reflected about the rise of China and its integration in the international society”. Barry Buzan, “China in International Society: Is “Peaceful Rise” Possible?”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3, 2010, 5-36.

²²⁷ James Mayall, “The Shadow of Empire: The EU and the Former Colonial World”, in Christopher Hill and Michael Smith (eds.), *International Relations and the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2006), 292-316. Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 135.

Jinping's leadership into an approach which blends soft-power projection with more assertive undertones in developing initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative.²²⁸

The historical interaction between Europe and China can be regarded as the most significant example, over the centuries, of both a dialogue and a clash of civilizations. If we consider Qin Yaqing's concept of states as "cultural communities", the "birth of the modern world" in 19th Century East Asia can be analyzed in retrospect as a process characterized, after an initial peaceful interaction, by an increasingly antagonistic encounter which "involved indeed not only the political and economic relations between an ancient and highly civilized country such as China and its Western counterparts but also a confrontation between cultural systems defined by profound differences".²²⁹

In this sense there is a link of continuity between the Chinese past and the present situation because, as Michael Yahuda has noted,

"the development of the Chinese modern state is intrinsically linked with meeting the challenge of the West, or rather that of modernity. There has been a tendency to confuse the two, a confusion that of course is not unique to China, but which has been a particular obstacle to Chinese attempts to establish their political identity".²³⁰

In order to better understand some key dynamics of contemporary China, it is important to underline that – after Imperial China's disruptive and humiliating political decline and collapse of its entire society – it has been "a different form of modernity, communism, which developed a fundamental discourse on national identity and statehood and reached the modernization standards and the nation-state structure that a reformed Japan acquired much earlier in its modern history".²³¹

²²⁸ On the Chinese soft power see Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China is Transforming the World* (New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2007).

²²⁹ The key role in this encounter played, on the European front, mainly by the United Kingdom and France is an element that we cannot neglect when we set in a broader historical context China's interaction with the EU and, in particular, its member states. At the same time – in parallel with this confrontational encounter with European powers – during the 19th century the Chinese predominance in East Asia was gradually diminished by the rise of modern Japan and the crucial presence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, two key elements of context which still characterize the security scenarios in East Asia. Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 136.

²³⁰ Michael Yahuda, "The Changing Faces of Chinese Nationalism. The Dimensions of Statehood", in Michael Leifer (ed.), *Asian Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 25.

In the period of confrontation with the "European West", the Chinese dynastic state - notwithstanding the collapse of its politico-institutional and socio-economic structures - "was first unwilling and then unable to thoroughly accept modernization", unlike Meiji Japan which forged a new national identity through a process of radical reforms driven by a Westernization of its institutions and society. Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 136.

²³¹ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 137.

This confrontation with modernity made the Middle Kingdom evolve from a self-centered, universal dimension based on the “centripetal” elements of the Chinese civilization to a Westphalian nation-state. However, it has never fully obliterated, even in the history of Communist China, some foundational elements of its traditional culture and historical heritage. It is interesting to note in this respect that some of the most important representatives of the Chinese School of IR have developed concepts indebted with the traditional philosophical thought: Yan Xuetong with its reference to morality – a quintessentially Confucian ideal – as a balancing element vis-a-vis material power and the basis for Wangdao (“humane authority”). Zhao Tingyang with his idea of a “tianxia system” opposed to the Westphalian order and aimed at a truly global system founded on coexistence. Qin Yaqing - as we have seen - with its strong focus, in a framework of “zhongyong dialectics”, on the notion of the state and society as cultural and civilizational communities. If we consider these Chinese theoretical perspectives it is interesting to note that the great American sinologist John K. Fairbank has rightly pointed out that modernization is not an autonomous process: “if we define it as a country’s and people’s development in the framework of a comprehensive response to modern technologies, we must recognize that it is linked to profound and complex interactions with cultural values and national trends”.²³² For Fairbank this means, on the one hand, that modernization tends to produce some degree of “convergence” in all countries, since modern science and technology, particularly in the present times of globalization, are international realities influencing all societies in a similar way; and, on the other hand, that individual countries respond to the modernization process according to their institutional and cultural backgrounds.²³³

China’s international behavior as a global power seems underscore that the Chinese complex historical process of modernization as a national state and the sheer weight of its past civilization do not represent any longer a “paralyzing syndrome” for the PRC’s ambitions in the 21st century. In this sense Xi Jinping’s China seems to be determined to overcome the self-centred and inward-looking trends of development that Chinese civilization had for centuries adopted in contrast to “the ‘outward looking’

²³² John K. Fairbank, *Storia della Cina Contemporanea* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1996), 19. Jurgen Osterhammel, *Storia della Cina Moderna* (Torino: Einaudi, 1992), 16.

²³³ Jurgen Osterhammel has written that the reaction of China to the challenge of Western modernity has been mainly analyzed according to criteria focused on the capacity of the Chinese system to overcome the constraints of its traditional culture and historical heritage in order to follow the path of development of the Western countries and societies in modern times. Osterhammel, Jurgen, *Storia della Cina Moderna* (Italian edition of the *History of Modern China*, (Torino Einaudi, 1992), 16.

approaches of the West's ancient classical civilizations and, later on, of the great European nation-states.²³⁴ Imperial China regarded modernization not as a free choice but as a fundamental means of controlling the new dynamics of change resulting from the imposed interaction with the West. 21st century China wants instead to be a driver of change also in the most advanced strategic sectors.²³⁵ If the challenge of modernization in Imperial China was not perceived mainly as a cultural process but as a process of acquisition of western technologies, the PRC under Xi Jinping seems to consider its future predominance in the technological sector not only as a fundamental instrument of strategic competition but also as a way to preserve the communist party-state's core ideological and political values.²³⁶

As Tu Wenming has written, the narratives of the violent encounter with the "West" in the 19th century underline how this set of events were first and foremost a confrontation with a civilization technologically more advanced and with strong universalist pretensions of its own which "fundamentally dislodged Chinese intellectuals from their Confucian haven ...[creating a] sense of impotence, frustration, and humiliation".²³⁷ The "search for modern China" after the end of the Empire and the birth

²³⁴ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 138.

²³⁵ In this respect we can say that the Chinese Communist party-state has successfully responded to the external forces of modernization in an opposite way to Imperial China which "engaged in the modernization process reluctantly, while Japan, after the first shocking confrontation, resolutely undertook a season of momentous reforms. In this sense, to the Japanese reformers of the Meiji period, modernization was inevitable and even desirable in the face of domestic crises and foreign threat (*Naiyu gaikan* "trouble from within and without"), while to China, in the early period of confrontation with the West, modernization was considered neither inevitable nor desirable. Basically, it can be argued that the Meijin ishin reformers were able to successfully install a 'new order' because the system they had to reform was much less complex - in political, cultural, social terms - than that of the Middle Kingdom". Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 138. Moreover, as James McClain writes in his *History of modern Japan*, "the men who seized power in 1968... were profoundly dissatisfied with their world and they wanted to change it." James McClain, *Japan, A Modern History* (New York, Norton and Company, 2002), 153. Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton and company, 1999), 602.

²³⁶ Moreover, these technological ambitions stem from a revived great-power awareness that China had been more technologically advanced than the West during centuries and that the 19th and 20th century technology gap with Western industrialized countries was a sort of aberration in the history of Chinese civilization. The approach of the Imperial and Communist elites in meeting the challenge of modernizing China can be regarded as driven by different approaches but, in both cases, aware of the importance of Western technologies and, at the same time, determined to fully control the country's modernization process; while the response of Imperial China was merely reactive, the present PRC's leadership is proactive and determined to be at the forefront of technological innovation to strengthen Beijing's role as a key global player. On these themes it is important to refer to Joseph Needham's profound reflections contained in volume 7 of his monumental work on China's Science and Civilization. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 224.

²³⁷ Tu Wei-ming, "Cultural China: 'The Periphery as the Center'", *Daedalus* (Spring 1991), issue entitled The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today. What had been for many centuries a strength for Imperial China - the high degree of integration in China between institutions, society and traditional Confucian culture - in the late years of Qing Dynasty was a powerful factor in inhibiting its process of modernization. In this context "the Chinese bureaucracy of officials-literati, a pillar of the Empire

of Sun Yat Sen's Republic is an eloquent example of all the difficulties in finding a new viable political and cultural model in a country where the crisis was due also to the fact that – as Gramsci wrote referring to the “twenty years crisis” period - the old was dying and the new was not born yet.²³⁸

Evolving and contested narratives have reflected and shaped China's relations with the West on the basis either of a “victimization” or of a “victor” syndrome, which have coexisted in Chinese nationalism.²³⁹ The programme of “national rejuvenation” launched by Xi Jinping at the 19th congress of the CPC tends to be characterized by a “victor syndrome”. These narratives are in stark contrast with the powerful victimization syndrome which - since the traumatic confrontation between China and West – has intermittently influenced the Chinese views of the world: from this standpoint it is easier to contextualize the meaning of the so called “Century of Humiliation” for the Chinese national psyche.²⁴⁰

The Chinese party-state has been always acutely aware of this historical background that makes us better understand the obsession of modern China with a strong notion of sovereignty.²⁴¹

As Peter Gries has argued in this respect, “(t)he crucial national narrative of the “Century of Humiliation” (*bainian guochi*) from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century has been and is a central element to Chinese identity-shaping and nationalism”.²⁴² The continuous production and reproductions of this kind of historical

since the Han Dynasty, was instrumental in perpetuating the traditional Confucian-based culture of its institutions. China's written language was another crucial factor in retaining a highly formalized education and means of conveying traditional knowledge, which resulted in preventing mass literacy and stifling more popular culture”. Ambrosetti, *ibid*.

²³⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 275.

²³⁹ Ambrosetti, *The Rise of China: New Nationalisms and Search of Status*.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*. China's civilizational and national identity was destabilized by the crisis and collapse of the millenary dynastic state: this period of structural crisis had – in addition to its disruptive political and socio-economic impact - particularly profound psychological and cultural effects because, historically, “China had been for the first time conquered by the bearers of a civilization which transcended China itself”. For the first time the conquerors of China were not “sinified”. In this context it is also important to note “that in Chinese history earlier victorious invaders (such as the Mongols and the Manchus) had become Chinese while barbarian populations outside the borders of the Empire paid tribute to “civilization” (*wenming*), in a vision of the world that assumed the Middle Kingdom as the universal and superior civilization”. Michael Yahuda, “The Sino- European encounter. Historical influences on contemporary relations” in David Shambaugh, *China-Europe Relations*, 17.

²⁴¹ This catalogue includes historically symbolic events such as, in addition to the two Opium Wars of 1839– 1842 and 1856– 1860, the Sino-Japanese “Jiawu” War of 1894– 1895, the “unequal treaties” signed with the British at Nanjing in 1842 and the Japanese at Shimoneseki in 1895, the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, the neglect of China's aspirations and requests at the peace Conference in Versailles.

²⁴² In this sense, according to Gries, “the telling and retelling of narratives about the Century of Humiliation have framed and still partly frame the views and interaction of the Chinese with their Western

narratives not only contributed to shape China's modern national identity, but also had a direct impact, as Gries points out²⁴³, on political dynamics.

“The ‘Century’ is a continuously reworked narrative about the national past central to the contested and evolving meaning of being “Chinese” today. Furthermore, the “Century” is a traumatic and foundational moment because it fundamentally challenged Chinese views of the world”.

In a perspective which addresses the strategic relationships of China as a global power it is relevant to understand whether, in terms of identity, “China is [still] caught in a (...) prison of history”²⁴⁴ fed by narratives such as the “*bainian guochi*”. In this sense the Chinese party-state seems to have been aware that national narratives “are stories ...[which] infuse our identities with unity, meaning, and purpose. We cannot, therefore, radically change them at will”.²⁴⁵ If, as Stuart Hall has written²⁴⁶, “(i)dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past”, China, in Xi Jinping's era, seems to be confident that its “rejuvenated” identity is that of a global power which, regaining its historical role, will be able not only to shape its own story but also that of the world. At the same time we must be aware, in analyzing China's strategic relations with other global players such as the EU and the USA, that “national identity is both dependent upon interactions with other nations, and constituted in part by the stories we tell about our national pasts”.²⁴⁷

If the “weight of the past” continues therefore to be an important element of context to understand China, it is important to note that in a phase of increasing strategic competition the present leadership has redefined and promoted its ideological worldview also by re-shaping “histories and traditions to serve contemporary ends”.²⁴⁸ This is not surprising because - as Geremie Barmé has written - “(e)very policy shift in recent

and Japanese counterparts. Representations and perceptions of this past still resonate in today's Chinese national identity.” Peter Hays Gries, *China's new nationalism: pride politics and diplomacy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 45, quoted in Massimo Ambrosetti, *The Rise of China: New Nationalisms and Search of Status*, MSt thesis, University of Cambridge (Cambridge 2009), 38-54.

²⁴³ Gries, *China's new nationalism*, 48.

²⁴⁴ Walter J. F. Jenner, *The Tyranny of History: The Roots of China's Crisis* (London: Allen Lane, 1992). Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970). Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976).

²⁴⁵ Gries, *China's new nationalism*, 46.

²⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, *Critical dialogues in cultural studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

²⁴⁷ Gries, *China's new nationalism*, 135.

²⁴⁸ Eric J. Hobsbawm, and T.O. Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 213.

Chinese history has involved the rehabilitation, re-evaluation and revision of history and historical figures”.²⁴⁹

The dimension of national identity - being relevant for some crucial aspects of China’s actorness - has significant implications for its strategic relations with Europe. It is indeed important to recognize not only that “historical narratives” have become “a major driver also of Chinese soft power projection as a means of legitimizing current practices by establishing links with ‘sometimes imagined’ historical precedents”²⁵⁰ but also that are part of the significant ideological background redefined by the party-state for its project of “national rejuvenation”. These components of the Chinese party-state’s political and ideological elaboration contributes to support a “relatively new era of ideational persuasion” which relies also on the idea of a

“historical regional order that prospered when China was strong and in a leadership position. Chinese values are being promoted in a form of occidentalism or ‘reverse orientalism’, in that they are depicted as the mirror image of all that the West (for which primarily read the US) stands for”.²⁵¹

In the last two decades the PRC has referred to “Historical China’s appeal to harmony, peace and virtue...as providing a cultural alternative to Western materialism and individualism”.²⁵² In Xi Jinping’s era these values have been complemented by the confirmation of the Marxist-Leninist principles and structure which define the leading role of the party-state. In the framework of an increasing strategic competition the PRC uses its historical and cultural background to be perceived not only as a model of values which can be adopted in the non-Western world but also as a dynamic and efficient “hybrid system” - permeated by socialist and capitalistic principles - which has been able to undergo a process of impressive modernization while retaining and redefining some aspects of its specific identity. In a context characterized by trends of strategic competition, driven also by the growing confrontation in the field of technological innovation, “for the first time in centuries, a further stage of

²⁴⁹ Geremie Barme’, “History for the Masses” in Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China*, (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 260. On the interaction between cultural background and new nationalism, see also Geremie Barme’, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Geremie Barme’, “To Screw Foreigners Is Patriotic: China’s Avant-Garde Nationalists”, *The China Journal*, 34 (July 1995), 209-234.

²⁵⁰ Shaun Breslin, “Understanding China’s Regional Rise: Interpretations, Identities and implications”, *International Affairs* 85: 4, 2009, 824.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

modernization might be a process influenced by the rising capacity of countries such as China to act as champions of a 'modernity' based on non-Western values".²⁵³

This is a challenge for the main counterparts of a global China determined to act on the basis of a reinforced national identity which promotes an idea of the past which suits "official policy, on one hand, and intellectual endeavours to rethink China's place in the world on the other".²⁵⁴

3.6 National identity and the concept of sovereignty in China

After considering the historical dimension of the Chinese national identity we are now in a better position to understand its influence on China's international behavior and, as we will see later on in this chapter, its implications for the strategic relationship with the European Union. The Chinese discourse on sovereignty is part of the broader connection and interaction between China's national identity and its international behavior. As Zheng Yongnian writes,²⁵⁵ the link between identity and international behavior should be identified not only in material factors but also in a broader dimension which includes cultural and identity aspects.

In the period of reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping the focus on modernization was crucial: one of the effects of this process during the reforms era was, on the one hand, some de-construction of the functions of the state through decentralization, but on the other hand, a response aimed at implementing a form of "statism" conducive not only to the re-constructing of a new strong nation-state but also of a new national identity.²⁵⁶ In this context the so called "New Left" "tried to elaborate in the 1990s a response not only to neo-liberal theories but also to China's transforming national identity and to the challenge posed by the country's increasing Westernization".²⁵⁷ The focus on such a debate can help us better understand how in the post-Mao era the twofold dimension of China's international rise and domestic reform, the definition of a distinct Chinese model of statehood and governance, anti-Westernization trends and the search of national

²⁵³ Ibid. As Shaun Breslin rightly pointed out, a meaningful example of this trend are the efforts "of redefining and reinventing Confucianism (in China and beyond) as a means of redomesticating national capitalisms in response to the dominance of western global norms".

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Zheng Yongnian, *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China, modernization, identity and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10.

²⁵⁶ Zheng Yongnian, *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China*, 13.

²⁵⁷ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 132-133; on these themes see also He Gaochao and Luo Jinyi, "The nature of knowledge is its openness", *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, (July 1995), viii.

identity have been constantly addressed in the ideological and political agenda of the Chinese party-state. In line with the epistemological considerations elaborated by scholars such as Qin Yaqing, the relevance of these debates - as Guo Jian has written - was related to their goal of deconstructing “Western knowledge of China and at the same time [of exploring] various possibilities to reconstruct China's own cultural identity and national subjectivity”.²⁵⁸ This kind of political and ideological approach undoubtedly resonates in the present context of Xi Jinping’s “new era”, where some of these themes seem to be revived. This is true also if we consider the parallel debates on the change in China’s international environment: this increased the perception of the policies and strategies of foreign actors, influencing identity changes to adjust to China’s new role in the international system. The “national rejuvenation” launched by President Xi Jinping is, in many regards, the latest manifestation of “statism”, with its emphasis on the leading role of a strong party-state determined to preserve its fundamental Leninist character. The recurrent renewed focus on “statism” reflects the presence of a “strong state complex” in the modern Chinese national background which is the outcome of China’s interaction with Western powers; as it has been noted in this respect,²⁵⁹ “the modern concept of the nation-state was imported from the West and nation-state building was influenced significantly by Western nationalism”.

As Horseman and Marshall have written,²⁶⁰ the so called Westphalian nation-state has a twofold dimension: “the descriptive, historical one, which is linked to the end of the medieval ideal of ‘universal power’ (both political and religious) and the prescriptive, ‘conventional’ one, which has been used, also in retrospect, to define the legitimacy of the national state’s sovereignty”. Both these dimensions are relevant for China: the imperial-universal one which characterized, in terms of ideology and practice of power, two millennia of its history; and that of the modern Westphalian nation-state which has characterized since the 20th century both republican China and the People’s Republic of China.

If we refer to the creation of the Chinese Empire – accomplished in the 2nd century BC by the Qin Shi Huang Emperor – and its subsequent development during the Han

²⁵⁸ Zheng, Yongnian, *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China*, 66.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁶⁰ The model of the Westphalian nation-state on the basis of its diversified constitutive historical elements and in the perspective of its meaning and evolution in the framework of 21st century international relations is addressed by M. Horseman and A. Marshall, *After the Nation-State - Citizens, Tribalism and the New World Disorder* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), quoted in Massimo Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 41.

Dynasty as a centralized structure and an ethnically rather homogeneous society - we see that Imperial China has not just been a civilization which wanted to be a state. At the same time we need to be aware of the euro-centric and “ideological” character of the Westphalian model, which - being a structure functional to Europe’s political absolutism - implicitly excluded “a more nuanced and diversified concept of sovereignty...for political reasons”.²⁶¹

The ideas of “universal power” – typical of the European Middle Ages but also of the Middle Kingdom – rested on the assumption of a universal legitimacy and hierarchy of power, both in the political and religious sphere: this universal dimension in the Western Middle Ages was strictly associated with the Holy Roman Empire and the Church of Rome as the two universal medieval institutions in Europe.²⁶² In China the imperial structure and ideology - centred on the figure of the emperor whose legitimacy derived by the theory of the “mandate of Heaven” - always had universalist pretensions and was never rivaled by other entities or models. For this reason, when the efforts of reform accelerated after China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894 the imperial model was perceived in many regards as an obstacle to the creation of a modern Chinese state.²⁶³ As we have seen, during the era of Western imperialism in China the “dynastic state” was totally deconstructed, representing just a “fictio” of sovereignty: China was thus forced to modernize in order to survive and modern Western institutions and concepts flowed into the country and began to influence its own development.²⁶⁴

In this period of crisis Western powers brought the idea of nation-state to China but they were not prepared yet to recognize China as a sovereign state because, as Theodore Friend wrote: “in the tradition of social Darwinism they treated Asian polities as legal and moral inferiors unless counterforce proved otherwise”.²⁶⁵ The domestic and international weakness of the Middle Kingdom reached a point which made China – as Hedley Bull interestingly argued – a member of the international system (being formally a sovereign state still recognized by other sovereign states) but not a member of the “international society”, because of its de facto unequal status vis-à-vis the major world

²⁶¹ M. Horseman and A. Marshall, *After the Nation-State - Citizens, Tribalism and the New World Disorder* (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

²⁶² Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 41.

²⁶³ Ibid. Reformers such as Liang Qichao understood that the traditional imperial system, though highly centralized, was not a modern state and that a strong modern state required a profound shift from a state structure shaped on an emperor-identity to a true state-identity.

²⁶⁴ Zheng Yongnian, *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China*, 15.

²⁶⁵ Marius B. Jansen, *Japan and China from war to peace, 1894-1972*, (Chicago, Rond Mchally Publishing Company, 1975).

powers. This historical trauma and the continuing struggle to come to terms with political modernity is in particular identified by the loss of sovereignty which happened during the “Century of Humiliation”.²⁶⁶

For this reason, since the birth of the modern Chinese state, great emphasis has been put on the principle of sovereignty²⁶⁷ which has remained firmly rooted within a paradigm dominated by “traditional ideas of territorial and state security” and by a notion of sovereignty centered on the Westphalian nation state while, in this respect, the evolution of the European Union has made it “the first truly postmodern international political form”²⁶⁸

3.7 Sovereignty in China’s contemporary political discourses

The concept of sovereignty in the framework of The PRC’s political discourses “has been a keyword for many decades and will continue to be so in years to come”.²⁶⁹ The main interpretation of this concept in China’s contemporary political theory and practice is a set of “entitled rights” such as territorial integrity, non-interference, independence and equality. On the basis of these substantial rights Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai created the five principles of peaceful coexistence: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence. The five principles - which became “a cornerstone of the non-aligned movement at the 1955 Bandung conference and are still a major pillar of Chinese foreign policy today” - are meaningful because they tend to underline how in the People’s Republic of China “state sovereignty is viewed as a prized

²⁶⁶ Zheng Yongnian, *Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China*, 26. It is not a case, as Zheng argues, that at the beginning of the revolutionary period popular sovereignty started to be considered as an essential element of Chinese national identity. Sun Yat Sen identified two basic principles for the new revolutionary Chinese state: statehood based on ethnicity and popular sovereignty based on democracy. Later on he reconsidered, when the Republic of China was at risk of fragmentation, the problem of popular sovereignty and “realized that without strong political institutions, any type of democratic regime would not be stable and China would not become a strong state”. Ibid.

²⁶⁷ John.G. Ruggie, “Territoriality and beyond: problematizing modernity in international relations”, *International organization*, 47 (1), 140. The concept of nation-state and its development are mainly a product of Europe’s history and of its political modernity.

²⁶⁸ On these issues see also: Salvatore Finamore, “Normative differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security: obstacles and opportunities for cooperation”, *Chinese Political Science Review*, 2017, 164; Richard L. Hough, *The Nation States. Concert or Chaos* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003); Daniel Philpott, “Ideas and the Evolution of Sovereignty,” in Sohail H. Hashmi (ed.) *State Sovereignty. Change and Persistence in International Relations*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Robert Cooper, “The New Liberal Imperialism,” *The Observer*, 7 April 2002. Cooper has interestingly elaborated on the notion of modern and post-modern states.

²⁶⁹ Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 20.

historical conquest and as a bulwark against foreign interference and oppression”.²⁷⁰ The PRC considers sovereignty as an absolute and fundamental principle strongly supporting in this field a position which is “more conservative and fundamentalist” than the EU’s in its interpretation of what it views as “the original meaning of the concept and thus in line with traditional understandings of the rules of interaction between states”.²⁷¹ As Finamore rightly points out, in this sense the PRC can be regarded as the norm rather than the exception in international relations in its “staunch defense” of the traditional principle of sovereignty, which is in line with the position of other great powers such as the United States and Russia. As Wacker noted, the PRC’s authorities are “very strict in defending their sovereignty against interference from other countries or from international institutions”.²⁷² The Chinese foreign policy and international behavior are based on the principle of sovereignty intertwined with that of national dignity (*gouge*): this term was coined by Deng Xiaoping who stressed that “without national dignity - disregarding national independence - a country, in particular the third world developing countries like China, cannot stand up”.²⁷³

As Pan Zhongqi, notes,²⁷⁴ the PRC’s notion of sovereignty, as inseparable and non-transferable, underlines the absolute, sacred and inseparable character of the state²⁷⁵: on this basis the PRC has constantly underlined that the principle of sovereignty remains, contrary to various Western theories which challenged the continued relevance of it, the guiding principle of international relations.²⁷⁶ The idea that sovereignty can be transferable has been always opposed by Chinese officials. For this reason in the Chinese academic debate with regard to the process of European integration, it has been argued

²⁷⁰ Finamore, “Normative differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security”, 166. As Finamore notes, the Five Principles were formulated by Zhou Enlai and Jawahrlal Nehru in the 1954 Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India. It is also significant that a reference to the Five Principles was included in all the agreements concluded by China and several European States in the 1970s for the establishment of diplomatic relations.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Gudrun Wacker, *Similarities and differences in China-EU: a common future* (Singapore: Stanley Crossick and Etienne Reuter, 2007), 207-214.

²⁷³ Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol.III, (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1993), 331.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁷⁵ In this sense we can see in the approach to sovereignty of the Chinese Leninist party-state a ramification of the key principle proclaimed by the Jacobins during the French Revolution: “unité et indivisibilité de la République”.

²⁷⁶ In this regard President Jiang Zemin declared that “so long as there are boundaries between states, and people live in their respective countries, to maintain national independence and safeguard sovereignty will be the supreme interests of each government and people”. Statement by President Jiang Zemin at the Millenium Summit of the United Nations, 6 September 2000 quoted by Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 21.

by most scholars that “what the member states have given up to the EU is not their sovereignty but some of their governing power (or right), a process that is not irreversible”.²⁷⁷ As Finamore writes,²⁷⁸ China’s adherence to this traditional, Westphalian view of sovereignty “translates into an opposition to foreign intervention and to the use of force in international relations, in full respect of the principle of mutual non-interference in other countries’ domestic affairs”.

The PRC’s position in terms of sovereignty is centred in this respect on the idea of “mutuality”, which was a driving concept of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The 2011 *White paper on China’s peaceful development*²⁷⁹ included in China’s core interests” state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification”: this document refers not only to the PRC’s sovereignty over Tibet, Xingjang and Taiwan but extends it to the recent Chinese sovereignty claims over other disputed areas such as the islands of the South China Sea and their surrounding waters.²⁸⁰ China’s regional approach to security issues, driven by a much more assertive stance stemming from its assumption of great power status, seems to weaken one of the crucial components - the principle of mutual non-interference - which characterizes its traditional idea of sovereignty.

In contrast to a widespread thesis on the sources of the Chinese concept of sovereignty, Dan Blumenthal has developed an interesting critical argument to explain it which does not regard this concept as stemming from China’s search of being a “modern” nation state in a Westphalian sense: “though China must often behave in accord with the norms and historic patterns of a “normal” nation-state, its dominant personality is that of empire”.²⁸¹ According to Blumenthal, Xi Jinping’s “China dream” doctrine and his program of “national rejuvenation” aim at reviving “the greatness and ancient glory of China’s past, lost to Western and Japanese imperialism”.²⁸² The Chinese historical concept of sovereignty was based on the Chinese empire’s refusal “to accept any country as a sovereign equal”.²⁸³ On the basis of Confucian notions of virtue, the Emperor was

²⁷⁷ Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 22.

²⁷⁸ Finamore, “Normative differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security”, 167.

²⁷⁹ *White Paper on China’s peaceful development*, State Council of the PRC, 2011, quoted by Finamore, *ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Finamore, “Normative differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security”, 167.

²⁸¹ Dan Blumenthal, “China: the Imperial Legacy” in Gary Schmitt (ed.) *Rise of the Revisionists*, (Washington: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2018), 46.

²⁸² Blumenthal, *ibid.*, 47.

²⁸³ Blumenthal, “China: the Imperial Legacy”, 51.

indeed the universal ruler of “all under heaven” and this way of thinking, Blumenthal argues, “left no room for a plurality of sovereigns in international relations, let alone the new European concept of sovereign equality among notions”.²⁸⁴

It is interesting to note - in contrast to Blumenthal’s reflections - the consideration of the universalistic tradition of the Chinese Empire elaborated by Zhao Tingyang in his “Tianxia System” and “A Possible World of All-under-heaven System”²⁸⁵. By referring to concepts of Chinese political philosophy he draws conclusions quite different from Blumenthal’s. Zhao argues that the contemporary international system is not based on a universal institution or, at least, on actors which have universalistic aspirations: the lack of a comprehensive “worldview” deprives the international system of the possibility of having institutions that are of and for all nations and peoples and that are able to resolve conflicts and transnational issues. According to Zhao, the constitutive structure of the Westphalian international system is not functional, by nature and by design, to deal with increasingly complex transnational problems and global issues. In contrast to it, the Confucian “all-under-heaven system”, intrinsically inclusive, could offer an “ontology of coexistence”, not centred on the conflicting dynamics of nation-states, which is aimed at fostering genuine perpetual peace, successful governance, and a stable world order.²⁸⁶

Both Blumenthal’s and Zhao’s arguments tend to underline, however, that the conceptual gap between China and Europe (and the rest of the world) with regard to the concept of sovereignty has deeper roots than it is usually perceived. In this sense different understandings of sovereignty and its applicability would affect not only EU-China controversies on issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, the arms embargo, Africa and the Iranian nuclear issue. This distinctive concept of sovereignty, stemming from a Chinese “civilizational identity”, would influence China’s actorness and its very idea of international relations. As John Fairbank wrote,²⁸⁷ “the Chinese tended to think of their foreign relations as giving expression externally to the same principle of social and political order that was manifested internally... China’s foreign relations were accordingly hierarchic and non-egalitarian”. We will discuss later on whether Blumenthal’s fundamental argument that China “seeks a new order based on this imperial

²⁸⁴ Blumenthal, “China: the Imperial Legacy”, 49.

²⁸⁵ Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia System*, (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005); *A Possible World of All-underheaven System: The World Order in the Past and for the Future*, (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2016).

²⁸⁶ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge”, 426.

²⁸⁷ John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 3.

Sinosphere” is an accurate description of the PRC’s evolving worldview, but what is evident from this analysis is that the concept of sovereignty does not seem to constitute a bridge in the relationship between the European Union and China. From this standpoint it is therefore necessary now to focus on the European Union in terms of its own notion of sovereignty, being aware that it is interconnected with its identity as an international actor.

3.8 The concept of sovereignty in the EU debate

In contrast to China the European Union is often regarded as a “post-Westphalian or post-sovereign polity”.²⁸⁸ Against this traditional background, we need to recognize, however, that the debate on sovereignty in Europe has been recently living through a new and complex phase characterized by “sovereignist” positions which seem to be weakened, however, by the effects of the recent global crisis.

In Europe the role of sovereignty as a key principle has been declining, being put under scrutiny both from a conceptual and a practical point of view. Even though conventional sovereignty rules have never been abandoned in and by the EU, the European approach to sovereignty has been regarded as “reformist” and even revisionist, considering it as “subordinate to the fulfillment of State responsibilities and employing it pragmatically as an optional tool both within and outside Europe”.²⁸⁹ The “sovereignist turn” in European politics has, however, problematized the opinions of analysts such as MacCormick and Henkin who considered sovereignty an outdated principle to be dismissed or even relegated to the “shelf of history as a relic from an earlier era”.²⁹⁰ The evolution of the concept of sovereignty within the EU had in past decades focused more on its character of accountability: sovereignty has been regarded as “an inescapable responsibility to govern in a certain manner”. From this perspective “the legitimacy of sovereignty has changed from sovereignty as control to sovereignty as responsibility”, including the principle of “responsibility to protect” with its strong focus on the human

²⁸⁸ Stephan Keukeleire and Tom Debreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 288.

²⁸⁹ Finamore, “Normative differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security”, 166.

Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 23.

²⁹⁰ Neil MacCormick, *Questioning Sovereignty: Law, State and Nation in the European Commonwealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 226; Louis Henkin et al., *International Law: cases and materials*, 3rd edition (St. Paul MN: West Publishing Group, 1993), 16.

rights dimension.²⁹¹ Overall, as Risse has underlined, “the EU has rejected the notion of unitary sovereignty”, considering it as relative, and transferable. Moreover the idea that sovereignty can be shared and divided at a transnational level “serves as the theoretical basis underpinning European law and legal order”.²⁹² These views elaborated within the European Union on sovereignty represent an approach to international relations which reflects also the identity of the EU as an international actor.

3.9 The identity of the EU as an international actor

As we know, the European Union is neither a nation state nor a classical international organization:²⁹³ its peculiar and innovative nature as an international actor - stemming from the unique features of the process of European integration - poses the question of the identity of the Union itself as distinct from the national identities of its member states. At the same time the influence of some member states’ national identities on the EU’s relationship with China is not a secondary issue, in light also of the “weight of the past” in the relations between Europe and China.

As an international actor, the EU has developed a distinct sense of itself on the basis - as Manners wrote - of its unique combination of “historical context, hybrid polity and legal constitution”.²⁹⁴ As Nicola Verola and other authors argue, the international identity of the European Union has been emerging in the last decades from the EU’s “collective identity”,²⁹⁵ that is the idea that the democratic life and dynamics of the European institutions have shaped, over the years, a European “demos”, a community of citizens which identifies in the EU common values, rules and practices. The peculiar mix represented by the process of European integration has produced distinct ideas and institutions in this context: “individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human

²⁹¹ Clarence Bills, “Europe and changing notions of sovereignty”, paper presented at the annual meeting of the ISA’S 49th annual convention, San Francisco, March 2008.

²⁹² Thomas Risse, “Sovereignty puzzles: a comment on Keohane”, in J. H. H. Weiler, Iain Begg and John Peterson (eds.), *Integration in an expanding European Union: Reassessing the fundamentals*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 335-8.

²⁹³ Roy H. Ginsberg, “Conceptualizing the European Union as an international actor: narrowing the theoretical capability-expectations gap”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol 37 n° 2, (2002), 432.

²⁹⁴ Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: a contradiction in terms”?, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 40, (2002), 241.

²⁹⁵ Nicola Verola, *L’Europa legittima, Principi e processi di legittimazione nella costruzione europea*, (Firenze:Passigli editori, 2006), 243.

rights and cultural freedom [...] are European ideas not Asian or African, nor Middle Eastern ideas, except by adoption”.²⁹⁶

This is a crucial aspect, considering the epistemological assumption that we have chosen, because these ideational components of its identity shape the actorness of the EU and reverberate on its relationship with China. As Hill and Smith write, the ideas that bind the EU’s member states together reflect “also a strong emphasis on the EU’s evolving approach to IR on the ideational quality of the EU’s international role. This involves the development of EU’s principles and a view of its contribution to ‘international society’”.²⁹⁷

As Ian Manners has argued - and Hill and Smith underlined - “what the EU is matters at least as much as what it does, in terms of the impact on others”.²⁹⁸

The fact that the EU’s identity and legitimacy has significant implications for its actorness is clearly an aspect that we also need to consider in connection with the ideational dimension of the strategic relations between Brussels and Beijing. If the EU, in contrast to China, has resisted so far the temptation of a “civilizational view of European identity”, it is undeniable that the evolution of this identity in the framework of the process of European integration has shaped this “quiet superpower” as a peculiar and innovative international actor.²⁹⁹ In order to better understand what kind of international power the European “post-sovereign” polity has become and what this implies in terms of interaction with a great power such as China it is necessary to consider, first, the main labels which have been attributed to the European Community since its early years: those of a civilian and normative power.

3.9.1 *The European Union as a civilian and normative power*

In 2000 Romano Prodi, then President of the European Commission, stated that: “we must aim to become a global civil power at the service of sustainable global

²⁹⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. , *The disunity of America: reflections on a multicultural society*, (New York City: Norton), 66.

²⁹⁷ Christopher Hill and Michael Smith, *International Relations and the European Union*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

²⁹⁸ In this context, the European heritage is also relevant: “the impact of history; the ambivalent relations between Europe and the developing world; the temptation to fall back on a civilizational view of European identity in the face of external (and internal) challenges; the continuing role of national foreign and development policies“. Hill and Smith, *International Relations and the European Union*, 10; Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe reconsidered : beyond the cross-roads, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13/2 (2006): 182-199.

²⁹⁹ Andrew Moravcsik, *The Quiet Superpower*, Newsweek, 2002.
<http://www.princeton.edu/amoravcs/library/quiet.pdf>

development. After all, only by ensuring sustainable global development can Europe guarantee its own strategy security“.³⁰⁰ This statement by Prodi reflects the broad debate which, since its inception, has been aimed at defining the nature of the European Community/European Union considering the fact, as Ginsberg wrote, that is “is neither a State nor a non-state actor, and neither a conventional organization nor an international region”.³⁰¹ At the same time, if one considers the categories to define an international power proposed by Buzan, it is difficult to regard the European Union “as a great power in a classical sense”.³⁰² Nevertheless, its impressive development and institutional evolution has made the EU a key actor on the international stage because of “its significant presence in nearly all international matters” and its ability “to have an impact on today’s complex world”.³⁰³

The European Community was defined back in the 1970s by François Duchêne as a “civilian group of countries long on economic power and relatively short on armed force”.³⁰⁴ Duchêne emphasized for Civilian Power Europe (CPE) the need of characteristics such as “interstate multilateral cooperation, democratic control and soft power over coercion and hard power favored by other international actors”.³⁰⁵ A civilian power was supposed to concentrate on the proliferation of “social values of equality, justice and tolerance”. The idea of a civilian power, on the basis of the different theoretical contributions of Karen Smith, Hanns Maull and Stelios Stavridis has indeed been that of an actor which “conducts its foreign policy through non-military instruments, is subject to democratic control and is willing to address international matters in cooperation with others”.³⁰⁶ However both the notions of civilian and normative power have been

³⁰⁰ Romano Prodi. Speech at the European Parliament 15-02-2000.

³⁰¹ Ginsberg, “Conceptualizing the European Union as an international actor”, 432.

³⁰² Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers- World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

³⁰³ Fabian Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, Atlantic-Community.org. October 9, 2009.

<http://www.atlanticcommunity.org/app/webroot/files/articlepdf/Fabian%20Krohn.pdf>.

³⁰⁴ François Duchêne, “The European Community and the uncertainties of interdependence”, in Max Kohnstamm and Wolfgang Hager, *A Nation Writ Large. Foreign-Policy problems before the European Community*, (London: MacMillan, 1973), 19.

³⁰⁵ Chloe Gotterson, “Is Europe better described as a “civilian” or “normative” power model?”, Atlantic-Community.org., October 6, 2011, 3.

<http://www.atlanticcommunity.org/app/webroot/files/articlepdf/PowerEurope.pdf>, 1.

³⁰⁶ Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, 4.

Karen E. Smith, “Still ‘Civilian Power’ EU?”, Paper presented at the CIDEL Workshop “From civilian to military power: the European Union at a crossroads”, Oslo 2004; Hanns Maull, “The European Union as civilian power: aspirations, potential, achievements, in Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø and Zhang Tuosheng (eds.) *US-China_EU relations. Managing the new world order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Hanns Maull, “Europe and the new balance of global order”, *International Affairs*, 81,

“contested concepts, bearing inconsistent definitions across academia”.³⁰⁷ The fact that the EU has perceived itself first and foremost as a civil power is not surprising: as Krohn notes, “indeed, the best example of the pursuit of civilian means is the creation of the EU itself”.³⁰⁸

The underlying philosophy of the process of European integration have “translated also into a civilian foreign policy”³⁰⁹ and into the EU’s role as a global advocator of human rights and the rule of law: the EU has always aimed at “moralizing its external relations” also as the largest provider of development assistance.³¹⁰

However, after the approval of the Lisbon Treaty, it is rather difficult to define the EU as a pure civilian power because of the increasing importance of its defence and security dimension. This significant evolution is clearly visible if we compare the European Security Strategy of 2003 – which was a notable advance on previous language on security issues but still stated that “spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order”- with the Global Security Strategy of 2016 which has a much greater focus on security issues and cooperation in the defence sector.³¹¹ The development of a more distinct defence dimension aimed at stressing its greater strategic autonomy and the fact that the European military capabilities and budgets, if pooled, would be second only to the United States, clearly do not make the EU a military power in the classical sense.³¹² However, if it is true that, in spite of its growing “hard power”, the EU has never used military means as a primary tool for its foreign policy and “cannot be described as a pure military power, neither in a classical

775-799; Stelios Stavridis, “Why the militarizing of the European Union is strengthening the concept of Civilian Power Europe”, *Robert Schuman Centre working Paper* 2001/17.

³⁰⁷ Gotterson, “Is Europe better described as a “civilian” or “normative” power model?”.

³⁰⁸ Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, 5.

³⁰⁹ Karen E. Smith, “Still ‘Civilian Power’ EU?”, 7.

³¹⁰ Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, 5.

³¹¹ Even though scholars such as Smith and Hedley Bull argued respectively that “civilian and military power are two ideal types on opposing end of a spectrum” and that civilian powers could or should never use military force, the EU seems to be still characterized, overall, by its identity as a civilian power. Hedley Bull, “Civilian Power Europe: a contradiction in terms?”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol.21, issue 2, 149-170.

³¹² Karen E. Smith, “Still “Civilian Power” EU?”, 5. The definition of a military power is that of an actor “which uses military means, relies on coercion to influence other actors and unilaterally pursues military ends”. In the framework of the EU evolving approach to defense and security issues, another relevant objective for the EU has been to develop the decision-making capability which makes genuinely collective foreign policy actions possible, also in this sector. Christopher Hill, “The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe’s International Role”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 31, n°3, (September 1993).

nor in a newer sense”,³¹³ it is also true that the significant EU developments in the field of security and defense have made the Union an actor which cannot be regarded either as a pure civilian power anymore.

If we consider the characteristics of the PRC as a strong military actor since its creation but in particular through the impressive building up of its military capabilities in the last two decades, it is clear that the difference between the two partners with regard to these issues is structural: at the same time their evolving strategic approach to defense and security – an area that was regarded as a possible opportunity for closer cooperation in a more multipolar perspective when the EU-China Partnership was established³¹⁴ - is a factor which cannot be neglected in the framework of the future interaction between Brussels and Beijing.

Because of the difficulty of simply categorizing the EU as a civilian or military power Manners conceptualized the EU as a normative power, that is a power which is able to define what is “normal” in world politics and acts as “a changer of norms in the international system”. As he wrote: “the ability to define what passes for ‘normal’ in world politics is, ultimately, the greatest power of all” because that means, more specifically, shaping the key norms which govern international life over and beyond law and formal rules.³¹⁵ The concept of normative power is not new: Carr defined it as a “power over opinion”; Galtung as an “ideological power” which makes an actor “committed to regard universal norms and principles as the focus of its relations with other actors”.³¹⁶

There is a strong normative element in the European notion of civilian power: for Normative Power Europe (NPE) as with Civilian Power Europe (CPE) “the underlying principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and rule of law are still important but its ideological power and ability to shape conceptions of ‘normal’ in international relations is most significant”.³¹⁷ As Manners has underlined, the EU’s unique combination of “historical context, hybrid polity and legal constitution” makes the

³¹³ Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, 11.

³¹⁴ Andrea Casarini, “The EU-China partnership: 10 years on” in *EU Institute for Security Studies brief*, 35 October, (2013).

³¹⁵ Manners, “Normative Power Europe: a contradiction in terms”?, 253.

³¹⁶ Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, 12; Manners, *ibid.*, 252; Edward H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919-1939: An introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1962); Johan Galtung, *The European Community : A Superpower in the making*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973).

³¹⁷ Gotterson, “Is Europe better described as a “civilian” or “normative” power model?”, 2; Manners, “Normative Power Europe: a contradiction in terms”?, 239.

Union normatively different than other actors because it “exists as being different to pre-existing political forms, and this particular form pre-disposes it to act in a normative way”.³¹⁸

An issue which is extremely relevant vis-à-vis the strategic EU approach to China is how this “normative way” is reflected in the European foreign policy making.³¹⁹ The introduction of the so-called “conditionality clauses” - which imply that human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law are “essential elements of EU aid and political agreements with third countries - should be, in principle, a significant factor for the interaction between the Union and China; however, the EU external relations have been balanced by the intergovernmental dimension of the EU foreign policy which is influenced also by the realist views of the member states.³²⁰

Even though it is questionable whether the EU is an effective and consistent normative power, what is relevant for the analysis of our subject is that in its attempt to be a normative power the EU has placed the promotion of universal rights at the centre of its foreign policy, trying thus to act as an example for other states both in what it does inside the EU and what it tries to stand up in foreign policy.³²¹ Overall, we can say that the EU as an international actor is now a power which “typifies the merger of a civilian, military and normative identity”.³²²

This theoretical debate provides us with some important elements of reflection in the perspective of the EU’s Strategic Relationship with China. Notwithstanding realist, state-centred views undermining the idea of the EU as an effective actor, the evolution of the Union and the development of its Foreign and Security Policy have allowed it to become a significant player in world politics. At the same time it has been widely

³¹⁸ Manners, “Normative Power Europe: a contradiction in terms”?, 242.

³¹⁹ It is indeed important to differentiate this normative approach to the mere power of example/attraction which contributes to define also the soft power of an international actor.

³²⁰ The role of the EU in promoting the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its engagement in favor of the global environmental agreements are two meaningful examples of the EU efforts of acting as a normative power, as the “idea of pooling sovereignty, its democratic requirements and principles or the pursuit of human rights” also tend to prove. Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, 14.

³²¹ Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, 15. On the role of the EU as a normative power a fundamental point against this argument was raised by Helene Sjursen on the basis of the consideration that it is “impossible to come to a rational agreement on universally acceptable norms”. Helene Sjursen, “The EU as a Normative Power: How can this be?”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13, 247.

³²² Krohn, “What kind of power? The EU as an International Actor”, 5.

recognized that the EU is a “sui generis geopolitical entity”, a sub-system of international relations” which has nonetheless been affecting international politics on a global scale.³²³

In this perspective the distinction between the EU’s civilian and normative power elements can be considered a useless dichotomy because “the concept of normative power, rather than being distinct from civilian power is already enabled in the former” and there is no ontological separation between the two.³²⁴ The idea itself of CPE and NPE has been put under scrutiny by scholars who found firstly that the debatable element in these concepts is that of Europe as power.³²⁵

If we consider the centrality in the EU’s external relations of the issues of rule of law, democratization of human rights protection and advancement it is clear that this approach of NPE is intrinsically problematic in the partnership with China, which is partly a revisionist power with regard to the Western-centred set of international principles, norms and practices that we usually refer to as the international liberal order. At the same time this approach of NPE is not easily negotiable because it pertains to how Europe, as a power, is constructed: also Manners has reiterated that “the most important factor shaping the international role of the EU is not what it does and says but what it is”.³²⁶ When CPE and NPE are analyzed, the focus on actorness, on agency is crucial - instead of that on its ontological components - in order to understand the Union’s global role: “the EC/EU emerged from an idea of Europe and so was moulded into the type of power model that was desired”.³²⁷ This model constructed the EU as intrinsically superior, in particular in its identity as NPE which, rather than implying universality, created a “dichotomous other as morally inferior”, perpetuating in this way a “North-South dichotomy whereby the South is portrayed as a victim and the North as its humanitarian saviour”.³²⁸ In this perspective it has been argued that “both CPE and NPE have been constructed, at least in part, as a strategic operation” aimed at concealing and legitimating “its power political interests in the guise of humanitarianism”.³²⁹

³²³ Gotterson, “Is Europe better described as a “civilian” or “normative” power model?”, 3; Hill and Smith, *ibid.*

³²⁴ Thomas Diez, “Constructing the self and changing others: reconsidering Normative Power Europe”, *Millennium: Journal of International studies*. vol. 33, n° 3, 635.

³²⁵ *Ibid.* As to the nature of its power the EU has tended to refer to itself “as an intervener, a global partner, a...mediator”, and a “formidable force for good in the world”.

³²⁶ Manners, “Normative Power Europe: a contradiction in terms?”, 243.

³²⁷ Gotterson, “Is Europe better described as a “civilian” or “normative” power model?”, 5.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

This is a theme which has significantly resonated in the Chinese analytical debate: the critique of NPE has been focused by Chinese authors, such as Pan Chengxin, on the EU's key policy of "constructive engagement" regarded as a normative project implemented through "the discursive construction of a European Self" which makes the "Chinese Other" in European self-image.³³⁰ What is particularly relevant here is the acknowledgement of the power implications of NPE which shapes and legitimates a particular EU's foreign policies in order to enhance the role and the influence of Europe as an international actor.³³¹ From this perspective the practice of "routinized relationships" with "significant others" – as in the case of China – validates and gives substance to NPE agency. We will see in the next chapter how these Chinese analytical positions have deconstructed the EU policy of "constructive engagement", in its "overly ambitious goal of transforming China",³³² as a concept "ill-defined in theory" and "inevitably fraught with contradictions in practice".

It is useful to take into consideration these arguments because they underline how this European approach can set the EU's actorness on a collision course with the PRC which, in terms of identity, is still influenced by a historical victor-victim syndrome and, in terms of agency, is increasingly determined to act as a normative power in order to change some basic tenets of the international liberal order. In this sense the European determination of being perceived as a promoter of values such as democracy, multilateralism and human rights is indeed being put under scrutiny by a more assertive "Normative Power China" which considers this approach as affecting some of its core interests such as stability and non-interference and creating a dysfunctional playing field for the possible definition of common strategic goals in the framework of the EU-China Partnership.

The critique of Europe's construction as both a normative and civilian power has been based not only on the above-mentioned arguments against a Western-centric approach but also on the idea that it served to minimize the shortcomings of the EU role as a military power and as an actor in the realm of power-politics.³³³ As we have seen,

³³⁰ Pan Chengxin. "Problematizing 'Constructive Engagement' in EU-China Policy", in Roland Vogt (ed.), *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: HK University Press, 2012).

³³¹ Ibid., 49.

³³² Ibid., 48.

³³³ Kagan, *ibid.*, 12.

the recent evolution of the EU in the security and defense sector – as underlined by the Global Security Strategy – tends to make these arguments partly outdated.³³⁴

The construction of positive perceptions of CPE and NPE has made it possible for the EU to exert influence by “soft balancing” on some occasions the other two major poles of the “strategic triangle”. In this respect it is partly true that “whatever its origin, Europe today is no longer about peace; it is about projecting collective power”.³³⁵

The 2016 Global Security Strategy seems to confirm that the “mixed nature of the Union’s foreign policy personality” is based not only on a process of structural and functional integration of civilian and military capabilities but, more importantly, on a strategic approach whereby “material and value judgements are intertwined”.³³⁶

In this transitional phase the growing strategic role of the EU as an international actor responds to the complex relationships between ethics, interests and power by considering “both the justifications for the exercise of power and the problems this generates”³³⁷. This model - which combines not only civilian elements of power but also military, social and material elements - reflects the fact that the process of European integration has been and is a normative endeavour which has characterized so far the EU as a predominantly civilian power consistently supporting the importance of multilateral cooperation and of international and supranational institutions.³³⁸ The last decade has seen the international system evolving towards what has been called an “interpolar world”, where multipolarity and interdependence tend to merge:³³⁹ in this context both the EU and China are not only key actors but also actors whose identities are - as we have seen - characterized by specific elements and dynamics which form a significant background for their international role and their strategic interaction.

³³⁴ Moreover, if one considers strategic theories such as that based on the concept of “fourth generation warfare” - in which the moral and mental factors are crucial – the EU’s actorness as a significant normative force can be regarded as an added value for the European means of intervention and influence on the international scene.

³³⁵ Charles Kupchan, “The Rise of Europe: America’s changing Internationalism, and the End of US Primacy”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol.118, n° 2, 2003, 211.

³³⁶ Mary Martin, “Human Security: does Normative Europe Need a New Strategic Narrative?”, Paper prepared for the European Studies Association Conference, 2007.

³³⁷ Gotterson, *ibid.*, 9.

³³⁸ Lisbeth Aggestam, “Ethical Power Europe?, Ethical perspectives of the EU’s global role”, Paper presented at ISA 50th Annual Convention, New York February 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00685.x>

³³⁹ Giovanni Grevi, “The Interpolar World, a new scenario”, *Occasional paper 79, European Institute for Security Studies*, (June 2009). <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/interpolar-world-new-scenario>.

3.10 Identity, sovereignty, actorness: the potential for conceptual gaps between China and the EU

In this chapter we have tried to analyze China and the European Union from the point of view of those essential components which shape their identity and actorness not only as prominent players on the world's scene but also as counterparts in the framework of their Strategic Relationship.

On the basis of the epistemological/hermeneutical assumptions delineated in the first part of the chapter we have focused on the ideational elements which influence what they are and what they do as international actors. In line with one of the key epistemological arguments delineated, it has been necessary to outline how the two protagonists of the relationship perceive themselves – the multifaceted dimension of their identity – and how this identity is reflected in their actorness. In doing so we have tried to develop our analysis on the basis of an epistemological interaction between the phase of “interpretation” and that of “application”: this aims at better identifying the sources of the conceptual gaps which affect the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

As we have seen, a first significant conceptual gap which divides the PRC and the EU is the concept of sovereignty. As most authors recognize, a significant conceptual gap on sovereignty exists between the “fundamentalist” Chinese views and the European “reformist” ones. To make the issue more complex, the traditional European position on this subject has been evolving in recent times on the basis of the “sovereignist” views of some of its member states. This is a distinctive aspect of the issue of the EU's identity and actorness: that is, the identity and actorness of its member states. While the EU has been recently experiencing an intense debate on the question of sovereignty, “it is not expected that China will relinquish or modify the understanding of sovereignty in its political dictionary”.³⁴⁰

At the same time, we have seen that there are critiques of the Chinese concept of sovereignty, such as Blumenthal's, which clearly affect arguments which assume that “the antagonistic approaches to sovereignty have not prevented the construction of a strategic partnership” between the EU and China,³⁴¹ as Pan Zhongqi has written. It seems indeed problematic - in particular in a phase of growing strategic competition - to agree

³⁴⁰ Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 23.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

with the opinion that “excluding sovereignty and human rights issues, China and the EU can usually find common language”.³⁴²

The idea of sovereignty and the concept of human rights stem from the identity of China and the EU and profoundly influence their actorness. For this reason, as Zhongqi Pan himself has to admit, “the conceptual gap on sovereignty seems destined to cast a shadow over China-EU relations in the foreseeable future”; he also recognizes that, to a certain extent, “the maturity and stability of the relationship is contingent on how both sides manage their views on sovereignty. It would therefore be wishful thinking to expect that the relationship will easily overcome the current hurdles associated with their conceptual gap on sovereignty”.³⁴³

What we have tried to underline in this chapter is that - in order to analyze the Strategic Relationship between Brussels and Beijing - is necessary to better understand the two counterparts of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in terms of their identity and actorness. As we have tried to demonstrate, significant conceptual gaps, such as that related to the concept of sovereignty, stem from these essential components of the two actors.

We have recognized, in the framework of this fundamental but preliminary reflection, the role of ideational factors for the two strategic partners because “identities and interests contribute to shaping each other through a continuous process of interaction and mutual constitution”.³⁴⁴

In this sense the “dilemmas of identity” continues to be a key aspect in the EU-China strategic interaction, as European and Chinese authors have underlined over the years.³⁴⁵ The increasing difficulties in the Partnership are also linked - as Reuben Wong has argued - to the redefinition of the identities and roles of the EU and the RPC in the evolving international order. As its role expands, China is “forced to re-evaluate its

³⁴² Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 29.

³⁴³ Pan Zhongqi, *Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations*, 32.

³⁴⁴ Finamore, “Normative differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security”, 163.

³⁴⁵ Wang Yiwei, “The identity dilemmas of EU normative power: observations from Chinese traditional culture”, in Andre’ Gerrits (ed.), *Normative Power in a Changing World: A Discussion*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, The Hague 2009; Cui Hongwei, “Normative power EU and the Harmonious Development of China-Eu Relations”, *Social Science*, n°11, 2007; Hong Yousheng, “Normative Power Europe and the EU’s diplomacy towards China, *World Economics and Politics*, n°1, 2010, quoted in Wang Yiwei, op.cit.; Sonia Lucarelli, “European Political Identity and Others’ Images of the EU”, *CFSP Forum* 5, n° 6, (2007), 11-15; Richard Youngs, “Normative Dynamics and Strategic Interests in the EU’S External Identity”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 42, n° 2 (2004), 415-435; Mikael Mattlin, “Dead on arrival: normative EU policy toward China”, *Asia Europe Journal* 10/2, (2012), 181-198.

identity and preferences, choosing to selectively remember or forget symbols of the past and present”, while the identity of Europe as NPE sets it “on a course of collision” with Beijing.³⁴⁶

After this analysis, mainly devoted to “who” the two actors of the Strategic Partnership are, in the next chapter we will need to analyze “what” China and the EU have done and can do in the framework of their Partnership in terms of strategic cooperation and objectives.

³⁴⁶ Reuben Wong, “The issue of identity in the Eu-China relationship” in *Politique Européene*, n°39, (2013), 158.

CHAPTER 4

The EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: antecedents, motivations, evolution.

This chapter aims at exploring some essential elements of the China-EU “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” by investigating firstly the notion of strategic partnership as elaborated by the EU as an instrument of its external relations. Against this background we will focus on this specific relationship by analyzing the different dimensions which are supposed to make it “comprehensive and strategic”. In doing so we will have to investigate, on the one hand, the EU-China Partnership’s antecedents, evolution, motivations and on the other, how it has been conceptualized and operationalized by both parties “on paper” and in practice. At the end of this analysis, we will try to draw some conclusions as to the material elements, conceptual gaps and normative divergence which affect the strategic dimension of the Partnership in a phase of its development which is characterized by a paradigm shift in the interaction between China and the European Union.

In order to understand the conceptual framework which influences the EU-China Strategic Partnership we have to underscore once more that, while the People’s Republic of China is a traditional state actor, the European Union can be regarded as a “subsystem of international relations” which has a significant “capacity to generate external collective action”. At the same time, as we have seen, the EU is regarded as “a major power impacting upon contemporary relations (...) which occupies a certain position in the international hierarchy of power”.³⁴⁷ Last but not least, we regard in this context the EU as a “unitary actor” because we have argued that it has an identifiable foreign policy which is distinct from that of its member states and is produced through “unique subsystems”.³⁴⁸

As we know, the peculiar structure of the European Institutions does not envisage a “EU government continuously responsible for policymaking”.³⁴⁹ Its functioning in terms of foreign policy is based on two “subsystems”: the intergovernmental one which is “comprised of the member states coordinating external action through the European

³⁴⁷ Christopher Hill and Michael Smith (ed.), *International Relations and the European Union*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

³⁴⁸ Scott A. W. Brown, *Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking. US and EU responses to the rise of China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 104.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

Council and the various incarnations of the Council of Ministers (the Council)”; the other subsystem, the supranational one, “comprises the European Commission as the primary actor, although the Council exerts influence by setting the policy agenda to which the former adheres”.³⁵⁰ The European Parliament is part of the supranational subsystem and, even though – as Scott Brown observes – it has “no ability to formulate policies independently or to block the preferences of other actors”³⁵¹ it has often been a very important contributor to policy discourse on relations with China.

The clarification of the specific nature of the European Union as an international actor is necessary to better understand the interaction that has been taking place in the framework of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Even though we consider the EU a unitary actor, it is important to be aware of the set of relations that, in parallel, link EU member countries to China on a bilateral basis. This is a relevant aspect that we will address more in detail later on in chapter 7.

In general terms, we have to recognize, as a preliminary consideration, that there has been a rather vague conceptualization of the notion of “strategic partnership” both in the EU and China. As May-Britt U. Stumbaum and Wei Xiong have written,³⁵² the process of conceptualization and operationalization of the term “strategic partnership” has been defined on the basis of different aspects. The first aspect - taking historical, political, cultural factors into consideration - focuses on the elements that have shaped the two actors of the Partnership. After having analyzed in terms of identity and actorness, “the EU and China [as] global powers in the making”³⁵³ we will focus in this chapter on the Strategic Partnership as a dynamic process subject to continuous external influence stemming from the development of the two partners, an evolving international context and new policy paradigms.

On this basis we will analyze which concept of strategic partnership has been defined by the EU and China and which mutual expectations have been linked to it. We will then focus on the substance of the Strategic Partnership in terms of its relational and structural strategic dimension. We will finally try to assess whether and how the different conceptualizations and operationalizations of the Strategic Partnership, “exaggerated by

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Scott A. W. Brown, *Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking*, 105.

³⁵² May-Britt U. Stumbaum and Wei Xiong, “Conceptual Differences of Strategic Partnership in EU-China Relations” in Pan Zhongqi (ed.) *Conceptual Gaps in China-Eu Relations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 157.

³⁵³ Ibid.

the dynamics of two emerging powers in an ever-changing interpolar world”,³⁵⁴ have materialized not only in conceptual gaps about the nature and objectives but in an increasing ideational and normative divergence between Brussels and Beijing which put under scrutiny the paradigm of “constructive engagement”.

4.1 The strategic partnerships of the EU

The EU-China Strategic Partnership is not unique in the context of the Union’s external relations and foreign policy making. As several authors have pointed out, the EU has been “a relentless generator of framework agreements and strategies, and is consistently searching for settled, stable, and predictable frameworks within which to define and pursue its international relationships and activities”.³⁵⁵ In the context of the EU “political and contractual relations”, more recent agreements between the Union and third countries tend - as Keukeleire and Bruyninckx note - to strengthen “the political or strategic dimension of the relationship and widen and concretize the scope of cooperation and dialogue”: this approach is aimed at reflecting the growing importance of the partner countries “as well as the increasing political character of the EU as an international actor”.³⁵⁶

The proliferation of EU’s “strategic partnerships” seems to have become “a standard operating procedure, that is to periodically upgrade the label of the EU’s relationship with other major powers”.³⁵⁷ In this respect, as a EU senior official has observed, this network of relations “tells much about the increasing ambitions of the Union as a global player and, at the same time, underlines all the difficulties of deepening and better structuring in terms of substance this *modus operandi*”.³⁵⁸ In this sense the EU’s set of partnerships reads more as a “catalogue of policy domains that are on the agenda of their meetings rather than as well-formulated strategies to pursue well-defined objectives through intensive and purposeful common actions”.³⁵⁹ The main question that

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 156.

³⁵⁵ Stephan Keukeleire and Hans Bruyninckx, “The European Union, the BRICs , and the Emerging New World Order” in Hill and Smith, *International Relations and the European Union*, 385.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 386.

³⁵⁷ Keukeleire and Bruyninckx, “The European Union, the BRICs , and the Emerging New World Order”, 389. As these authors observe, the status of “strategic partner” was also “granted or promised to other medium-sized powers such as Japan, Mexico, Canada and South Africa”.

³⁵⁸ Interview with an European Commission senior official by the author, Brussels. March 21, 2016.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

we have to answer in this respect is whether for China, as for other BRICs, the label “strategic partnership” functions as a “rhetorical façade which masks the reality that the EU, in fact, has failed to transform” this kind of relationship into a truly strategic partnership.³⁶⁰

As Giovanni Grevi has rightly pointed out, “the very concept of strategic partnership is ill-defined and the formal list of the...partners is too heterogeneous to provide direction”. For this reason - it has been often argued - the EU approach in this respect “owes less to a clear-sighted masterplan than to the travails of a process which seems to have evolved in a partly accidental way”.³⁶¹ Moreover, with regard specifically to the EU-China relations, we have to take into account that the Strategic Partnership has not been codified in a single document and this - as Scott A.W. Brown has observed³⁶² - has partly obscured some of its objectives and implications.

At the same time this approach “provided flexibility for the EU to characterize new dialogue and cooperative efforts as evidence of the growing Strategic Partnership, giving substance to its stated objectives of helping China emerge as a responsible actor”, in particular in multilateral settings.³⁶³ From a theoretical point of view, the concept of an EU Strategic Partnership has not only be criticized as ill-defined but also as “relatively empty of political substance”; it has indeed been accused of being an “amorphous concept” which has led “a somewhat awkward life in EU diplomatic parlance”.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁰ Ibid.; See also Sven Biscop and Thomas Renard, “The EU’s Strategic Partnerships with the BRIC; where’s the strategy?”, *BEPA monthly brief*, n°29, September 2009, 5-8; Thomas Renard, “EU Strategic Partnerships: Evolution of a Concept, from Amsterdam to Lisbon”, *EU-China Observer*, issue5, (2010), 16-22; Thomas Renard, “A need for strategy in a multipolar world: Recommendations to the EU after Lisbon”, *Security Policy Brief*, n°5, January 2010; Nicola Casarini, “The evolution of the EU-China Relationship. From Constructive Engagement to Strategic Partnership”, *occasional paper*, n°64 (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, Oct. 2006); Michael Smith and Hie Huaixian, “The EU and China: The logics of Strategic Partnership”, Paper presented at the ECPR Standing Group, Porto 24-26 June 2010; François Godement, “Europe- Asia: the historical limits of a Soft Relationship”, in Richard Balme and Brian Bridges, (eds.), *Europe-Asia relations: building multilateralism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008);

³⁶¹ Giovanni Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, *Working Paper 1, European Strategic Partnership- Observatory- FRIDE*, (June 2012), 7; Giovanni Grevi, “Making the EU Strategic Partnership effective” FRIDE, paper 105, 2010; Giovanni Grevi, *The Interpolar World: A new Scenario*. (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2009); Rosa Balfour, “EU Strategic Partnerships: Are they worth the name?”, *Commentary*, the EPC, 15 September 2010.

³⁶² Scott A.W. Brown, *Power, Perceptions and Foreign Policymaking, US and EU responses to the rise of China*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2018), 126.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, 10. Grevi refers to opinions in this sense expressed by Susanne Grätius, “The EU and the “Special Ten”: Deepening or Widening Strategic Partnership?”, *Policy Brief 76, FRIDE*, June 2011; Thomas Renard, “The Treachery of Strategies: A call for True EU Strategic Partnership”, *Egmont Paper 45*, Egmont Institute, April 2011, 23; Stephan Keukeleire et al., *The EU foreign policy towards the BRICs and other emerging powers: objectives and strategies*, Directorate General for External Policies, European Parliament, October 2011, 28-31; Roberto Menotti and Maria Francesca Vencato, “The European Strategy and the partners”, in Sven Biscop and Jan

With limited theoretical elaboration on the concept of strategic partnership in the field of Political Science and International Relations Theory, some authors have tried to take advantage of definitions developed in the business sector. However, the only elements which seem useful and applicable elsewhere in the theoretical work developed by this area of study are that strategic partnerships imply mutual long-term goals and commitments, are often “highly complex” and are the outcome of extensive negotiations.³⁶⁵

The difficulty of defining a strategic partnership is underlined also by Jonathan Holslag who adopts in this regard a realist approach by arguing that “a strategic partnership is what States made of it”.³⁶⁶ Expressing the opinion that “strategic partnership have more to do with form than with purpose”,³⁶⁷ Holslag believes that, in spite of different interpretations of the concept of strategic partnership, it is possible to identify some essential defining features: a strategic partnership should be based on explicit common interests and expectations which are formulated for the long term. The aims of such a partnership “need to be multidimensional and operationalized in the economic, political and military areas of interest”.³⁶⁸ Holslag argues that another key feature is that a global range is needed; moreover, the incentives related to it should be “of such a nature that they cannot be achieved without partnership and serve to distinguish it from other relationships”.³⁶⁹

Guenther Maihold³⁷⁰ has argued that the cultural idea of partnership carries not only expectations of equality in rights, tasks and influence in the development of the partnership but also an assumption of “exclusivity”. Although this is clearly not the case for the EU and China, which have been expanding their networks of strategic partners, Maihold introduces an argument which is not trivial: a truly strategic dimension cannot easily include a large number of partners unless the very concept of strategic partnership

Joel Andersson, *The EU and the European Security Strategy*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008). Stanley Crossick, Fraser Cameron, Axel Berkofsky, “EU-China Relations -Towards a Strategic Partnership”, EPC working paper, July 2005.

³⁶⁵ May-Britt U. Stumbaum and Wei Xiong, “Conceptual Differences of Strategic Partnership in EU-China Relations”, 159.

³⁶⁶ Jonathan Holslag, “The Elusive Axis: Assessing The EU- China Strategic Partnership”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2011, vol. 49, n° 2, 295.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Guenther Maihold, “Strategische Partnerschaft und Schwacher Interregionalismus” in Annegret Bendiek and Heinz Kramer (eds.), *Globale Aussenpolitik der Europaeischen Union* (Baden Baden: Nomos, 2009), 190-208.

is in fact reduced to a kind of higher level and longer term bilateral form of relationship and cooperation.

An interesting view on the defining criteria of a strategic partnership is offered by Grevi: he agrees with those authors who argue that a real strategic partnership should include basic elements such as “comprehensiveness, reciprocity, empathy and normative proximity, duration and the ambition to reach beyond bilateral issues”.³⁷¹ By putting this kind of relationships in a global context, Grevi, in addition to the above-mentioned parameters, argues that truly strategic partnerships are “those that accompany current power shifts with a shift towards positive-sum and not zero-sum relations among mayor powers”.³⁷² The above mentioned criteria can undoubtedly offer useful benchmarks to assess the strategic dimension of a partnership. On this basis, a crucial guiding principle should be that, as Grevi rightly points out, “partnerships are strategic when they pursue objectives that go beyond purely bilateral issues and help foster international cooperation”.³⁷³

If we consider the very diversified set of countries with which the EU has developed strategic relations, it is fair to recognize that no common criteria have been identified whether in terms of the partners’ power status, their normative affinity or the core EU interests pursued through such partnerships.³⁷⁴ Two more significant rationales, however, seem to underpin the EU concept of strategic partnership, namely the normative proximity and/or the political and economic clout of the partners: this approach, as Grevi notes, could differentiate the notion in two categories - partnerships of choice and partnerships of necessity - even though each EU partnership “includes an uneven mix of elective choice, inescapable necessity and also quite practical convenience, depending on the issues at stake”.³⁷⁵

With a view to our subject of research and considering the conceptual framework we are trying to delineate, the “interest-values continuum” is clearly another important element to be thoroughly assessed on the European front; references to this continuum can be found in all the main EU policy-papers regarding the Strategic Partnership and it has been clearly reiterated as a key element of the EU’s external action by the High Representative, Federica Mogherini, in the 2016 Global Strategy for the European

³⁷¹ Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, 10.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, 7.

³⁷⁴ Gratius, “The EU and the “Special Ten”.

³⁷⁵ Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, 9.

Union's Foreign and Security Policy.³⁷⁶ The first paragraph of the document itself states that, in order to navigate a “difficult, more connected, contested, and complex world”, the EU will be guided “by our shared interests, principles and priorities. Grounded, in the values enshrined in the Treaties...”.³⁷⁷ In this respect, as an EU policy planner has commented, “the new Global Strategy represents a significant step forward for shaping a strategic approach which is firmly based on a re-defined interests-values continuum in light of the macro-trends affecting the international system: this will undoubtedly affect also the development of the Union's partnerships”.³⁷⁸

This continuum is a key component of the Union's approach to the strategic dimension of its external relations but it does not have, as we will see, the same prominence in the Chinese approach to the concept of strategic partnership. This difference of perspectives derived also from the fact – as Scott A.W. Brown has pointed out – that “the perceived importance of the Strategic Partnership was greater on the EU side, as it expected this to facilitate greater discussion of key issues while China anticipated that it would result in less discussion”, shielding the PRC government from pressure on sensitive topics.³⁷⁹

Another difference – a conceptual gap in the opinion of Stumbaum and Wei Xiong – is that “in timeline and speed applied to the question of when a strategic partnership shall bear fruit”.³⁸⁰ For the Chinese approach a strategic relationship is intrinsically characterized by a long-term perspective while the European thinking has more recently evolved towards some degree of “strategic impatience” which could be regarded as a further signal of the evolution of the traditional approach of “constructive engagement”, substantially centered on long-term objectives.

The difficulty in defining this complex dimension of the EU's external relations was epitomized by Herman van Rompuy who said, not without some sense of humour : “ we have strategic partners, now we need a strategy”.³⁸¹ For this reason Biscop and Renard have argued that strategic partnerships should be based on a preliminary strategic review including the following elements: “know thyself”, that is identifying values,

³⁷⁶ “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe, A Global strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy”, European External Action Service-EEAS June 2016, <http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en>, 3.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 7.

³⁷⁸ Interview with a Senior EU policy planner by the author, Brussels, February 8 2017.

³⁷⁹ Scott A.W. Brown, 125.

³⁸⁰ May-Britt U. Stumbaum and Wei Xiong, “Conceptual Differences of Strategic Partnership in EU-China Relations”, 164.

³⁸¹ Statement by the President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy, 14 September 2010.

interests and the desired kind of strategic interlocutor; “knowing the other”, assessing potential partners and “knowing the rules of the game”, that is a better understanding of the dynamics which shape the international system in this evolving phase.³⁸²

4.2 Before the Strategic Partnership: the initial phase of EU-China relations

As we have indicated in the Introduction of this thesis, the timeframe that we have chosen is that comprised between the establishment in 2003 of the EU-China “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” and the present. Of course, as it has been often pointed out, historical periodizations “are always at risk of appearing somewhat arbitrary”³⁸³ but , in our case, we deem it important to analyze the period in which the relationship has been regarded by both sides formally as a “strategic partnership” in order to analyze its reality and its aspirational dimension.

It is necessary, however, to consider some key events pre-dating the declaration of the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” because of their significant impact and influence on the definition of the strategic dimension of the partnership itself. In particular two “inflection points” in the evolution of the EU-China relationship, prior to 2003, are relevant for the arguments that we are going to develop in this chapter: the Tiananmen square events of June 1989 which focused the world’s attention on the crucial issue of human rights and political freedom in China and the introduction by the EU in 1995 of the concept of “constructive engagement”.

The Tiananmen crisis and its aftermath brought to the forefront of the EU-China relationship the key question of human rights which is still a fundamentally unresolved problem in the Strategic Partnership. The 1995 Commission policy paper entitled “*A long-term policy for China-Europe relations*” recognized the rise of China as a source of “enormous opportunities and challenges to the international system”³⁸⁴ and introduced for the first time the concept of “constructive engagement” which has been a defining element of the EU’s strategic approach vis-à-vis China. These two key antecedents still influence the EU-China relations and set the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in a context which can help to clarify some of its key components.

³⁸² Sven Biscop and Thomas Renard, “A need for Strategy in a Multipolar World: recommendations for the EU after Lisbon”, *Security Policy Brief*, n° 5, (January 2010).

³⁸³ European Commission, “A long-term policy for China-Europe relations”, policy paper, Brussels 1995.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

As Jing Men has observed, the initial development of bilateral relations between the EU and China was rather slow: only in 1975 were diplomatic relations established, even though the People's Republic of China had been founded in 1949 and the European Communities had come into existence a decade later.³⁸⁵ This was due to the fact – as David Shambaugh has remarked – that “Brussels-Beijing relations were to a large degree derivative from their respective relations with Moscow and Washington” and the strategic competition between the two superpowers obstructed the cooperation between the two sides of the recently established relationship.³⁸⁶ Moreover, as Jing Men notes, “neither side had an independent motive for developing relations with the other”.³⁸⁷ These substantial limits reduced the scope of the EU-China cooperation: by the end of the Cold War only two relatively important agreements had been signed: a trade agreement in 1978 and one on trade and economic cooperation in 1985.

The late 1970s were a period of historical transformation for both the PRC and the EC: the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong gradually opened a period of domestic political stabilization which was marked by the emergence of the figure of a new leader, Deng Xiaoping, who was to be the architect of the long season of economic reforms which had such an extensive and profound impact on the further development of China. In Europe the 1970s, years of crisis both in socio-economic and political terms, witnessed some important developments in the process of European integration: after the enlargement in 1973 with the accession of Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom, the European Council was formalized in 1974 and, more importantly, in 1979 a European Monetary System was devised and the first direct election of the European Parliament took place. In this evolving context, as Moeller has written, the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the EC can be regarded to some extent as the acknowledgement of each other's “future international potential.”³⁸⁸

³⁸⁵ Jing Men, “The EU-China Strategic Partnership: Achievements and Challenges”, *Policy paper n°12*, European Union Center of Excellence, European Studies Center, University of Pittsburgh, November 2007, 2. The international political context of the Cold War undoubtedly influenced the Sino-European relations: the two sides belonged to opposing camps and held political positions and ideological beliefs which did not make dialogue or cooperation easy. Following the Sino-US rapprochement of the early 1970 and the mutual recognition between the People's Republic of China and most Western European countries, the diplomatic breakthrough of 1975 did not bring about, however, a significant period of development of the EU-China relations.

³⁸⁶ David Shambaugh, “China and Europe”, *Current History*, vol.103, n° 674 (September 2004), 245.

³⁸⁷ Jing Men, “The EU-China Strategic Partnership”, 2.

³⁸⁸ Kay Moeller, “Diplomatic relations and mutual strategic perceptions: China and the European Union”, *China Quarterly*, 169, 2002, 10-32. On the role of Europe as a trading and economic partner and

The 1980s has been considered as a period of “normalization”³⁸⁹ of the EC-China relationship which witnessed not only an increase in economic, cultural, military and scientific exchanges but also the emergence of a “new perception of international politics as an increasingly multi-polar system in which both China and Europe could constitute poles in their own right”.³⁹⁰ During the 1980s, notwithstanding reciprocal positive perceptions, the EC-PRC relationship “appeared to be high on rhetoric and low on substance” lacking a truly strategic approach on either side.³⁹¹

4.3 The Tiananmen crisis and its long-term consequences

The end of the decade brought about, however, the first major crisis in the Europe-China relations following the tragic events of Tianamen Square which took place in a broader context of radical change in the international system, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall which led to the demise of the bipolar order. From this perspective the decisions taken at the time of the Tiananmen crisis by the leadership of the Chinese party-state – under the direct guidance of Deng Xiaoping himself – represent a crucial turning point with lasting implications for the international relations of China: the key issues of democratization, political reform, and human rights – which were at the heart of the crisis – are still relevant in many regards and continue to impinge on the strategic dimension of the Partnership. Even though the tragic events of the 4th of June 1989 triggered economic sanctions and an arms embargo that the EC promptly adopted, following the US lead in this respect, only one year later the relationship with the PRC began once again to be normalized on the European front.³⁹² As Scott Brown has written, it is true that the “relatively quick violation and eventual cancellation of certain sanctions by member states demonstrated that Tiananmen had not

as a counterweight to the two superpowers see Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 15.

³⁸⁹ David Shaumbagh, *China and Europe, 1949-1995*, (London: University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996).

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Moeller, “Diplomatic relations and mutual strategic perceptions: China and the European Union”, 18.

³⁹² Among the EC member states, Germany and Italy, in particular, militated in favor of maintaining good relations with China: in September 1989 the Italian Foreign Minister Gianni De Michelis, meeting on the occasion of the UNGA with his Chinese counterpart Qian Qichen, declared that “under the present complex international situation, strengthening the ties between the EC and China is of great importance to world peace and stability.” Moeller, “Diplomatic relations and mutual strategic perceptions: China and the European Union”, 17.

revised the prevailing interpretation of China as an economic opportunity.³⁹³ However, in spite of these successful efforts at normalizing the relations with Beijing, negative perceptions in the West were historically increased after the Tiananmen crisis, which marked a fundamental turning point also for the process of political reforms in China.³⁹⁴ It is fair to note that the PRC, sensitive in that delicate phase to the urgent need of “threat reduction” in terms of perceptions, reasserted its “good neighbor” policy based on the fear of international isolation.³⁹⁵

This period can be regarded indeed as a crucial juncture in Chinese contemporary history: the two-year process which began with the Tiananmen “incident” and ended in 1992 - with a stabilization of the Chinese leadership and CCP’s move in a more conservative direction - basically decoupled, as Willy Wo-Lap Lam has pointed out, the economic reforms of the emerging “socialist market economy” from the process of a gradual transformation of the political system, that Zhao Ziyang and the reformist wing of the party had favored.³⁹⁶ It is fair to note, in particular in light of the ideological approach propounded by Xi Jinping, that the “cardinal principles” (keep to the socialist road; uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat; uphold the leadership of the Communist Party; uphold Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought”) which, after Tiananmen, aimed at safeguarding the leadership and dominance of the CCP in a logic of regime survival are still considered valid by the Chinese party-state.

While the Tiananmen events did not disrupt the evolution of the EC-China relations in a dramatic way, they had long-term consequences not only with regard to specific measures such as the arms embargo but also in terms of overall perceptions of the Chinese regime. In the 1990s these perceptions - fueled by events such as the Taiwan crisis in 1996 - reinforced in the West the positions of the supporters of a policy of containment

³⁹³ Scott A.W. Brown, *Power, Perceptions and Foreign Policymaking*, 109.

³⁹⁴ This dramatic change was symbolized by the ousting of Zhao Ziyang, the “liberal” Secretary General of the CCP and of all his followers. Zhao Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State, The Secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009). On this crucial period of contemporary China’s history the memoir by Zhao Ziyang sheds further light on the decision making process and the single leaders’ responsibilities during the crisis of June 1989.

³⁹⁵ Breslin, “Understanding China’s Regional Rise,” 819.

³⁹⁶ Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *China after Deng Xiaoping. The power struggle in Beijing since Tiananmen* (Hong Kong: Professional Consultants Ltd, 1995). “The debate about political reform which took place at the time restated that the PRC was not interested in having Western democratic arrangements like the separation of power, bi-party or multiparty system, Western parliamentary democracy, or other aspects of the Western political system. Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 103.

towards a rising China.³⁹⁷ However, this debate in Europe was less significant than in the United States: when talks with the Chinese authorities were resumed after the Tiananmen crisis and the sanctions were lifted, the European Parliament regarded these decisions as intended also “to allow the Community to operate with greater effectiveness, especially in the area of human rights”.³⁹⁸ As Christiansen has written, “after Tiananmen the EU was forced to put the relationship with China into a broader political and human rights context. But soon a fear of losing the China market to US and Japanese competition especially in investment led to a political readjustment”.³⁹⁹

The Tiananmen crisis exposed key issues such as the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms which are still unresolved in the framework of the EU-China Partnership. It is interesting to note that – if the European and American reactions to Tiananmen differed to some extent – also the United States, after a first muscular reaction, softened its stance towards China and in 1992 confirmed a policy of “comprehensive engagement”⁴⁰⁰ based on the fundamental assumption that economic cooperation and integration would ultimately lead to political liberalization of the Chinese political system. The Clinton Administration, at the beginning of its first term critical of Bush’s “soft approach”, from 1994 on adhered substantially to this cooperative China policy.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁷ Ibid. This approach found, from time to time, further theoretical support in the idea of the “democratic peace” against a Chinese regime which was blamed not only for having stopped the mid-1980s trend towards a more democratic evolution but also for being determined to defend a political structure in which the domestic and foreign policy decision-making on fundamental matters is in the hands of a very small group of leaders (the Standing Committee of the Politburo) not accountable to representative institutions but rather to the CCP’s élite. The reference work of the contemporary “democratic peace” debate is Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (Summer and Fall): 205-35; Christopher Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,” *International Security* 19, n° 2 (1994): 5-49; Joanne Gowa, *Ballots and Bullets, the Elusive Democratic Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security* 20, n° 1 (Summer 1995): 5-38. All these authors have questioned the logic and evidence of democratic peace theories.

³⁹⁸ European Parliament (1990), Oral question no. H-1021/90 by Ms Melandri and no. H-1066/90 by Mr Taradash concerning the economic relations between the EEC and China.

³⁹⁹ Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 15. The approach to relations with China centred on the idea that economic cooperation had to be linked also to a process of political convergence, is well expressed in the arguments of US authors such as Kliman who wrote that “real reassurance requires domestic political reform at home. The West cannot force China to democratize, but working in concert, the United States and Europe can inform Beijing’s internal debates about political liberalization and thereby support gradual reform”. Daniel M. Kliman, “China’s Reluctance to Reform at Home Is a Liability Abroad”, *German Marshall Fund Expert Commentary* (July 13), 2011. <http://blog.gmfus.org/2011/07/chinas-reluctance-to-reform-at-home-is-a-strategic-liability-abroad/>.

⁴⁰⁰ David Shambaugh, *China and Europe, 1949-1995*, (London: University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1996).

⁴⁰¹ Robert Suettinger, “The United States and China: tough engagement” in Richard Haass and Meghan O’Sullivan (eds.) *Honey and Vinegar: incentives, sanctions and foreign policy*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 12-32. Robert Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: the politics of US-China relations, 1989-2000*, (Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

In this context the “convergence paradigm” was supported by the declarations of the Chinese regime itself: on occasion of the lifting of the European sanctions the Council - justified its decision to move in that direction by referring to the assurances given by the PRC that it was “irreversibly committed to a policy of reform and openness” and to human rights, as its accession to the main international human rights conventions and its participation to the UN Commission on Human Rights could prove.⁴⁰²

In the years after the Tiananmen crisis, the European approach aimed at “constructive engagement” began to take shape in a context in which China was ready to devise a policy vis-à-vis Europe aimed at further reducing threat perceptions and reinforcing the goal of a more multipolar international order. In doing so the Chinese leadership chose to focus its diplomatic efforts on the major European member-states rather than on the EC itself,⁴⁰³ following an approach which has remained an important constant over the years.

The possible commonalities between Beijing and Brussels that were identified in that period by the Chinese leadership were a transition from a bipolar to a multipolar system; the promotion of peace and stability through consultation and the recognition of the UN’s leading role in conflict resolution; the high complementarity in economic terms.⁴⁰⁴ As Finamore writes,⁴⁰⁵ President Jiang Zemin, during a visit to Paris in 1994, further elaborated on these concepts by listing his “four principles for the development of relations between China and Western Europe”. Probably the most meaningful thing in this list is the title because the Chinese leader did not refer in it to the EC as a specific entity and international actor preferring to use a vaguer term – from a geo-political point of view – such as “Western Europe”.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² Finamore, *Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China*, 49.

⁴⁰³ Ibid. Nicola Casarini, *Remaking global order: the evolution of Europe-China relations and its implications for East Asia and the United States*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Gosset, “China and Europe, towards a meaningful relationship” in *Perspectives*, 2002, 3:7; Moeller, “Diplomatic relations and mutual strategic perceptions: China and the European Union”, 21.

⁴⁰⁴ Moeller, “Diplomatic relations and mutual strategic perceptions: China and the European Union”, 21; Finamore, *Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China*, 49.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Rather generic and vague, as to the substance, was the set of objectives delineated by Jiang Zemin, which basically reflected traditional Chinese guidelines, as we have seen, in terms of interaction between sovereign states and non-interference: the development of relations with a view to the 21st century; mutual respect, a search for common ground, and a downplaying of differences; mutual benefits; the resolution of all international problems through consultation and cooperation.

The economic driver was undoubtedly an important aspect for the resumption of EC-China relations after Tiananmen and in this process the role played by Germany was significant in shaping the EC policy of “constructive engagement” vis-à-vis China.

4.4 “Constructive engagement”: the creation of a long-term paradigm of cooperation between Europe and China

Germany’s China policy after the Tiananmen events was extremely pragmatic and trade-oriented – as was, on a lesser scale, that of Italy – and benefited from the lack of contentious issues with the PRC. This was not the case for the United Kingdom in connection with the future status of Hong Kong, or for France because of its arms sales to Taiwan in the early 1990s. Even though economic priorities were prominent in Germany’s relations with the PRC, Berlin tried to develop a more comprehensive vision for this relationship which was held to be within a broader national Asian strategy, the first to be defined by a European country. The German China policy was based on some key principles: “one China policy”, an understandable objective for a recently reunified Germany; “change through trade” which reflected the belief that respect for human rights and democratization would come as a result of China’s economic cooperation and integration with the rest of the world; and “silent diplomacy” which stemmed from the previous principle as an attempt of avoiding open confrontation with Beijing on sensitive issues such as human rights.⁴⁰⁷ Germany’s Asia and China policies were influential in shaping an EC approach to China centred in substantial terms around the concept of “constructive engagement”. The process of “Europeanization” of Germany’s China policy is evident also in the sequence of the main reference documents: in 1994 the European Commission’s communication entitled *Towards a new Asia strategy* followed a 1993 German paper on the strategic relations with Asia.⁴⁰⁸ In 1995 the Commission issued a new policy paper, *A long-term policy for China-Europe relations*, which, by recognizing the rise of China as a source of “enormous opportunities and challenges to the international system” introduced for the first time the notion of “constructive engagement”.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ European Commission, *Towards a new Asia strategy*, Communication from the Commission, Brussels (1994), COM 314 final.

⁴⁰⁹ European Commission, *A long-term policy for China-Europe relations*, Brussels (1995) COM 279 final. On the process of transformation of China see: Noah Feldman, *Cool war: the future of global competition* (New York: Random House, 2013); David Shambaugh, *China goes global: the partial power*

As Jing Men has written, the Commission's 1995 paper - which marked the opening of a new stage in bilateral relations – indicated “an understanding by the EU of the rising importance of China in the world and pointed out the need to improve relations with China” through the establishment of a long-term relationship which “should reflect China's economic and political influence in the world and the region”.⁴¹⁰ In this perspective the paper underlined that: “the rise of China is unmatched amongst national experiences since the Second World War. China is increasingly strong in both the military-political and economic spheres. Abroad China is becoming part of the world security and economic system at a time of greater economic interdependence and when global problems, from protection of the environment to nuclear non-proliferation, require coordinated commitment from governments worldwide”.⁴¹¹

Against this background, the element of novelty represented by the introduction of the new concept of “constructive engagement” was not clarified, however, by the Commission which in its policy paper referred to it with regard to the political relations with China; only later on, the scope of this guideline was expanded to include all the main elements which characterized the EU's overall approach to China.⁴¹² The approach encapsulated in the notion of “constructive engagement” was undoubtedly influenced by the “primacy of trade” which represented the major driver of Europe's relations with China at the time.⁴¹³ What is also important to note, however, is that in its communication the Commission employed “a discourse based on rules, norms and values not only in relation to political objectives, but also with regard to economic ones”.⁴¹⁴

More problematic, especially if seen in retrospect, was the European approach to the crucial issue of human rights, which substantially reflected Germany's policy of “silent diplomacy and change through trade”. The key criterion chosen by the Commission was that of “effectiveness” which had to be based on a “combination of carefully timed public statements, formal private discussions and practical cooperation”: this approach was motivated by the assumption that “human rights tend to be better

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Hugh White, *The China choice: why we should share power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴¹⁰ Jing Men, “The EU-China Strategic Partnership: Achievements and Challenges”, 3

⁴¹¹ European Commission, *A long-term policy for China-Europe relations*, Brussels (1995), *ibid.*

⁴¹² Finamore, *Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China*, 53.

⁴¹³ The focus on economic and trade relations was motivated by the outstanding performance of the Chinese GDP which, supported by a substantial process of domestic reforms and liberalization, maintained for more than a decade an annual growth of 9%. China's trade with the EU grew from USD 2.135 billion in 1980 to USD 14.58 billion in 1994.

⁴¹⁴ Finamore, *Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China*, 53.

understood and better protected in societies open to the free flow of trade, investment, people and ideas”.⁴¹⁵

The conceptual basis of European policy has been regarded, as Moeller has written, basically as “an attempt to reconcile the abstract human rights imperative with real economic interests on the ground”.⁴¹⁶ This was the outcome, as we have seen, of “horizontal Europeanization” and of “bottom-up projection”⁴¹⁷ of a national China policy, namely that of Germany, because of the difficulties or even failures of the national policies of the other two major European member states, France and the United Kingdom.⁴¹⁸

Moreover, as Leon Brittan argued, the idea that there was “no alternative to engagement with China”⁴¹⁹ was largely legitimized by the “comprehensive engagement” policies pursued in the United States during the 1990s and early 2000s by the Bush and Clinton administrations. If it is partly true, as Casarini and Finamore argue, that the policy of constructive engagement proved to be flexible enough to allow Europe to devise an approach vis-à-vis China which combined “elements of civilian and normative power with more traditional realpolitik”,⁴²⁰ we need to problematize the long-term implications of such an approach also in connection with the subsequent establishment of the Strategic Partnership between the European Union and China.

As Christiansen, Kirchner and Wissenbach have written, “the 1995 EU policy paper set out the stage for the subsequent developments and already covers most of the topics that would remain on the EU-China agenda until today, in particular trade and economic cooperation, political dialogue and human rights [...] The paper introduced a key theme that would remain in the subsequent documents: European trade and investment was believed to lead to a more open and democratic China”.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁵ European Commission, (1995), *ibid.*

⁴¹⁶ Moeller, “Diplomatic relations and mutual strategic perceptions: China and the European Union”, 22.

⁴¹⁷ Nicola Casarini, *A critical analysis of European Foreign Policy towards China (1995-2005)*, Doctoral Dissertation, London 2006, University of London, London School of Economics and Political Science; Finamore, *Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China*, 54.

⁴¹⁸ Italy’s China policy after Tiananmen was much in line with the German approach centered on the primacy of trade, considering also the lack of geo-political priorities in the bilateral relationship between Rome and Beijing.

⁴¹⁹ Leon Brittan, *Engaging China*, speech delivered by the Vice President of the European Commission Sir Leon Brittan at the EU China Academic Network Annual Conference, London, 2 February 1998, SPEECH/98/21.

⁴²⁰ Finamore, *Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China*, 55.

⁴²¹ Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 16.

The promotion of political values and the advancement of human rights and fundamental freedoms is a crucial ontological and deontological dimension for the internal and external relations of the European Union which has been operationalized in the framework of the policy of “constructive engagement”, a key antecedent of the EU-China “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”, which has contributed to shape some fundamental assumptions on which the Partnership has been based.

In this context it is interesting to note, as Scott A.W. Brown has written, that “there have been no significant debates over the implications of China’s rise within the EU. The clear preference at the conceptual level of the relationship has been for an engagement strategy...Engagement policies have persisted with few deviations, primarily because policymaking has not been constrained by protracted debates over the implications of China’s rise”.⁴²² This is a very important argument that elucidates also some key tenets of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: this is why we needed to focus on it before addressing the main topic of our research, that is how the EU-China Strategic Partnership has been defined and evolved over time and what is its truly strategic dimension.

4.5 The birth of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: its context and motivations

In 1998 the European Commission issued a document entitled “*Building a comprehensive partnership with China*” which reiterated concepts of engagement by stressing that “China’s emergence as an increasingly confident world power is of immense historic significance, both to Europe and to the international community as a whole”. In this context the EU should aim at “engaging China further, through an upgraded political dialogue, in the international community” and “supporting China’s transition to an open society based on the rule of law and the respect for human rights”.⁴²³

The idea of an “all-round strategic partnership” between the EU and China – as Jonathan Holslag writes – was uttered for the first time, at a bilateral level, in June 2003, by French President Jacques Chirac and Chinese President Jiang Zemin who “expressed their joint objective of promoting a multipolar world order” while the United Kingdom

⁴²² Scott A.W. Brown, *Power, Perceptions and Foreign Policymaking*, 103.

⁴²³ Communication of the EU, “Building a comprehensive partnership with China”, Brussels March 25, 1998, COM(1998) 181final.

and the People's Republic of China had started a strategic consultation mechanism in the same year.⁴²⁴

The European Commission upgraded the existing Comprehensive Partnership to the level to a Strategic Partnership by issuing in September 2003 a policy paper entitled “*A maturing partnership - shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations*” which emphasized shared interests not only in bilateral relations but also in global affairs by recognizing that “the EU and China have an ever-greater interest to work together as strategic partners to safeguard and promote sustainable development, peace and stability”.⁴²⁵ The following October the joint statement of the EU-China Summit underscored that “the expanded intensity and scope and the multi-layered structure of China-EU relations” was “an indicator of the increasing maturity and growing strategic nature of the partnership”.⁴²⁶

At the end of 2003 the European Security Strategy (ESS) - which officially named the instrument of strategic partnerships for the first time - included China among the EU's six strategic partners. It is important to note that in the same year the first Chinese “EU policy paper” was issued by the PRC government: as Jing Men observes, even though this document came eight years later than the first EU policy paper on China, “this was nevertheless the first policy paper targeting a specific country or a region ever produced by Beijing, suggesting that China attached great importance to its relations with the Europeans”.⁴²⁷

It is also interesting to compare, as Jing Men does, the content of the two policy papers. Against the strong focus on the EU side on human rights and China's transition to an open society, only a short paragraph was devoted to the issue of human rights in the Chinese document. In this respect it is meaningful to note that the Chinese policy paper admitted that on some issues there were differences in understanding between the two sides even though it was stressed at the same time that there was “no fundamental conflict of interest between China and the EU and neither side poses a threat to the other”.⁴²⁸ Here we can see that from the very beginning of the Strategic Partnership, in particular in the Chinese document that set the stage for it, there was awareness of “differences in

⁴²⁴ Holslag, “The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership”, 295.

⁴²⁵ EU Commission policy paper “A maturing partnership – shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations”, September 10, 2003, COM(2003) 533final. Jing Men, *ibid.*, 4.

⁴²⁶ Joint press statement of the Fifth EU-China Summit, Brussels, 30 October 2003.

⁴²⁷ China's EU policy paper, October 13, 2003.

⁴²⁸ China's EU policy paper, *ibid.*

understanding” but the response to it was just a realistic consideration that no concrete threat or interest represented a hurdle preventing such a relationship from developing. The perception of the challenges of moving the EU-China relationship beyond a mainly commercial and economic dimension is present in the EU documents which reflect, at the same time, a renewed paradigm of engagement hopefully leading to greater democracy, openness and transparency in the Asian country.

As Richard Maher has written, a more open and politically liberal China was regarded in 2003 by the EU, “in addition to the normative appeal of consolidating democratic institutions and practices”, as a potential reliable partner on a set of key issues of mutual concern⁴²⁹. As it was tellingly underlined in the statements of the Franco-Chinese meeting between Chirac and Jiang Zemin, geopolitical aspirations motivated the upgrading of the relationship at a strategic level.⁴³⁰ In this perspective the President of the European Commission Romano Prodi called for a “new world order” for the management of global affairs and David Shambaugh defined at the time the Strategic Partnership as an “emerging axis” in the framework of evolving international relations.⁴³¹

Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy later in 2003 made a speech in Berlin in which he elaborated on Prodi’s statements by underlining that: “no single country, however powerful, can deal with all the problems alone...A stronger Europe with a common strategic vision is also a Europe capable of consolidating relationships with the other great partners”.⁴³² After the visit to China of President Prodi in April 2004, the new President of the European Commission, Manuel Barroso - who visited China in July 2005 - confirmed this EU vision of the Partnership by saying that “the development of a strategic, mutually beneficial and enduring relationship with China” was “one of the top foreign policy priorities for this century.”⁴³³

⁴²⁹ Richard Maher, “The elusive EU-China strategic partnership”, 961.

⁴³⁰ Ibid. When the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was launched, leaders and officials in both Brussels and Beijing were alarmed, as Maher has underscored, “by how the United States was using its power around the globe, especially in respect of its unilateral use of its unrivalled military strength. Leaders in both Europe and China believed that the worst excesses of American imperial hubris needed to be contained”.

⁴³¹ Andrew Beatty, “Prodi issues call to arms”, *EU Observer*, 27 March 2003. David Shambaugh, “The new strategic triangle: US and European reactions to China’s rise”, *Washington Quarterly* 28:3, Summer 2005, 9. In this article Shambaugh expresses the opinion that the “European world view” was animated by the belief that “a multipolar world is more stable than a hegemonic or anarchical order”.

⁴³² Javier Solana, “The EU Security Strategy-Implications for Europe’s Role in a Changing World”, 12 November 2003.

⁴³³ Manuel Barroso, New phases of China-EU friendly cooperation, 12 October 2004.

On the Chinese side, government officials and analysts considered the EU “as a possible counterweight to the United States and an important element in a global system in which power and influence would be distributed more evenly”.⁴³⁴ Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, in a 2004 speech, defined the Partnership itself and its main elements: “comprehensive” referring to “all-dimensional, wide ranging and multi-layered cooperation” in various fields, including the economy, science and technology, politics and culture. “Strategic” in this context implied “long-term and stable...EU-China relations” which transcended “the differences in ideology and social system” and were “not subjected to the impacts of individual events that occur from time to time.”⁴³⁵ Wen Jiabao defined the concept of “partnership” as cooperation “on a equal footing, mutually beneficial and win-win” based “on mutual respect and mutual trust” and aimed at “expanding converging interests” and seeking “common ground on major issues”.⁴³⁶

In the period after the launch of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership the EU-China relations enjoyed a phase of “honeymoon” for a couple of years, as Jing Men has written.⁴³⁷ Exchanges of visits by top leaders became more frequent, even though a summit meeting mechanism, aimed at strengthening cooperation and communication through top level annual events, had been in place since 1998.

In October 2003 the 6th EU-China took place in Beijing⁴³⁸ and in December 2004 the 7th Summit took place in The Hague.⁴³⁹ In parallel with the establishment of the summits mechanism, since the 1990s Beijing and Brussels had developed other significant cooperative arrangements such as sectoral agreements and political dialogues “affecting the full range of their relations, from trade and financial affairs to the environment, energy, education, consumer and labour safety, space cooperation and civil

⁴³⁴ Shen Dingli, “Why China sees the EU as a counterweight to America”, *Europe’s World*, n°10, Autumn 2008, 48-53. Deng Yong, *China struggle for status: the realignment of international relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 156-60. Ruan Zongze, “China–EU–US relations: shaping a constructive future”, in Shambaugh et al., (eds.) *China–Europe relations*, 287–300.

⁴³⁵ Jing Men, *ibid.*, 6.

⁴³⁶ “Wen stresses importance of developing EU-China comprehensive strategic partnership”, People’s Daily Online, 7 May 2004. In China – as Stumbaum and Wei Xiong note – the Strategic Partnership did not invite, unlike in Europe, “noticeable debate” but Chinese politicians and scholars made positive comments on it. Stumbaum and Wei Xiong, 161.

⁴³⁷ Jing Men, *ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴³⁸ On that occasion agreements were signed for the cooperation in the Galileo satellite navigation programme, Industrial Policy Dialogue, Dialogue on intellectual property.

⁴³⁹ On that occasion the EU and China signed a Joint Declaration on non-proliferation and arms control; the Customs Cooperation Agreement and the agreement on R&D cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

society. In 2005, after the 8th Summit which took place in Beijing,⁴⁴⁰ the first meeting of the EU-China Strategic Dialogue was held in London in December of the same year. The first phase after the launch of the Strategic Partnership developed in a context infused with optimism.⁴⁴¹ Beyond these very positive expectations the analysis of the EU and Chinese policy papers underlines, as Christiansen, Kirchner and Wissenbach have argued, that in 2003 “both sides declared a strategic partnership focusing on the common ground despite [...] actually quite different visions of the partnership. Interestingly, neither side consulted with the other ahead of their respective publication, a typical blind date”.⁴⁴²

4.6 The institutionalization of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: a work in progress

Just after two years from these positive expectations, however, growing frictions and disputes – ranging from the protracted EU arms embargo to the rapidly increasing European trade deficit with China and the protection of intellectual property – started to put under scrutiny some important aspects of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In 2006 the sixth EU policy paper – which was divided in two separate documents⁴⁴³ – reiterated, on the one hand, Europe’s engagement with China and its commitment to support its transition, while on the other it underlined that the Union needed “to leverage the potential of a dynamic relationship with China based on our values.”⁴⁴⁴

At the same time, both sides recognized the necessity to revise their cooperation framework which dated back to 1985. The negotiations for a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) started in January 2007 and still need to be finalized. Nonetheless the framework was further expanded by the launching of two senior-level

⁴⁴⁰ EU and China signed a MoU on labour, employment and social affairs; a joint statement on cooperation in space exploitation, science and technology development; a joint declaration on climate change.

⁴⁴¹ 2004 registered not only Wen Jiabao’s official visit to the EU headquarters but also 206 visits of EU officials to China, with an almost frantic frequency of four times a week. All this made the then President of the Commission Prodi comment about the development of the EU-China relations that “if it is not a marriage, it is at least a very serious engagement”. Romano Prodi, “Relations between the EU and China: more than just business”, 6 May 2004.

⁴⁴² Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 19.

⁴⁴³ One of these two documents was focused specifically on economic and trade relations, including the European complaints in terms of trade deficits, copyright issues and lack of transparency of several sectors of the Chinese market. See “A policy paper on EU-China trade and investment: competition and partnership”; Commission Working Document, accompanying COM (2006) 631 final, Brussels 24 October 2006, 11. The second document was devoted to EU-China political and strategic cooperation.

⁴⁴⁴ “EU-China: closer partners, growing responsibilities”, Communication of the European Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Brussels 24 October 2006, 2.

fora to promote wider and deeper cooperation: the High-level Economic and Trade Dialogue, established in 2007 at the 10th Summit – which focuses on areas such as trade, investment, intellectual property rights and market access – and the High-level Strategic Dialogue, begun in 2010, which addresses issues ranging from climate change and nuclear non-proliferation to regional security”.

Notwithstanding the increasing level of cooperation and dialogue there has been no comprehensive agreement in which the Strategic Partnership has been codified since its launch in 2003.⁴⁴⁵ As Chen Zhimin and John Armstrong have pointed out,⁴⁴⁶ while the above-mentioned agreements “laid the basic foundations for the EU and China to co-operate in economic and other individual sectoral areas, and the unilateral policy papers served to drive the relationship to a higher level, the two sides have not yet provided a comprehensive bilateral legal framework to guide and regulate the significantly broadened relationship”. Without a comprehensive strategic agreement the widening and deepening of the bilateral relationship has been coupled with a peculiar process of codification, through which bilateral co-operation practices are codified in legal, political and policy norms. For the most part, this has been “achieved through the accumulation of bilateral agreements, joint statements, unilateral policy papers and efforts to negotiate the reconfiguration and streamlining of engagement in the form of an overarching partnership and co-operation agreement between the EU and China”.⁴⁴⁷

If the increasing institutionalization and codification of China-EU relations have suggested in the past that both sides were keen for the relationship to be managed in a more harmonious fashion, this should not disguise – as Chen and Armstrong argue – “a number of outstanding difficulties brought into focus by increased mutual awareness (of each other’s systems and global strategies) and sensitivity (brought about by increased interconnection). What the rhetoric of ‘strategic partnership’ encounters in reality is the reality of a ‘complicated partnership’, increasingly so from 2005 onwards”.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁵ Holslag, “The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership”, 296.

⁴⁴⁶ Chen Zhimin and John Armstrong, “China’s relations with Europe, towards a normal relationship?” in Shaun Breslin (ed.), *A handbook of China’s international relations* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

4.7 The development of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in practice and on paper: convergence or divergence?

A good reference for this kind of analysis are the joint statements made after each annual Sino-European summit even though, as Holslag notes, statements “do not guarantee implementation, and summit organizers might inflate the aims on paper compared to the ambitions in reality”.⁴⁴⁹ The analysis of the summit statements can offer, though, an overview of the evolution of the priorities and areas of co-operation along with the joint interests which are identified with an either bilateral or international range. In his analysis – which encompasses only the summit joint statements of the first period of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2003-2007) Holslag points out some features that will continue to characterize the statements of the following years: the low number of identified interests compared to the proposals for interaction. Against a limited number of joint interests, “needs” or “necessities”, the objective of increasing “dialogues” and “exchanges” was often underlined in the statements even in areas where common interests were not clarified.⁴⁵⁰ Holslag has argued that - in determining whether China should be considered a strategic partner - the EU’s key parameter has been the existence of an institutional framework, increasingly developed and complex, which is epitomized by the regular holding of annual summits between Brussels and Beijing. However, the main problem in this respect has been that interaction has thus been taken for granted, while it has been much more difficult to properly define the needs and interests that ought to underpin the Strategic Partnership.⁴⁵¹

Against this background it is interesting to consider an important argument made by Giovanni Grevi with regard to the nature of the EU strategic partnerships: for the Union the first function of a strategic partnership, Grevi has written, “is a reflexive one, namely the self-assertion of the EU as a partner, an actor or a pole in a challenging international system. From this standpoint, the very fact of announcing a strategic partnership sets up the two parties as pivotal mutual interlocutors, upgrading their status in mutual relations and beyond. Establishing a strategic partnership therefore carries political value for both parties but it may do so in different ways, at different stages”.⁴⁵² As we have seen, this discrepancy in the significance given to their strategic partnership

⁴⁴⁹ Holslag, “The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership”*ibid*,

⁴⁵⁰ Holslag, “The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership”, *ibid*.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵² Giovanni Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, *Working Paper 1, European Strategic Partnership- Observatory- FRIDE*, June 2012, 13.

by China and the European Union was clear from its establishment and has been underscored by the different degree of ambition expressed by the two counterparts in terms of their strategic objectives. In this respect we can say that China has always had a realistic view of its Strategic Partnership with Europe: Beijing has fairly consistently promoted the idea of “seeking common ground while reserving differences”.

At the same time, Chinese analysts have often underlined that – in spite of the contentious issues such as the arms embargo, the Market Economy Status, increasing trade disputes – “the China-EU partnership should not be undervalued ”because it is an essentially important institution that helps stabilize China-EU relations. Moreover, through its impressive set of dialogues and cooperative activities, the Partnership contributes to the development of world economy and global security”.⁴⁵³

As Grevi has pointed out, from an EU’s standpoint “strategic partnerships fulfill not only a ‘positional’ role – setting the EU on the map as a key global player beyond trade and economic issues – but also what has been defined as an ‘integrative’ role. Performing as a strategic partner requires the EU to improve coherence between the different instruments in its toolbox and between action at the EU and national level”.⁴⁵⁴

The issue of the Union’s cohesion in its strategic approach to China vis-à-vis the national policies of its member states is a key aspect because the Strategic Partnership not only has created substantial expectations but also has put the credibility of the Union on the frontline.⁴⁵⁵ For this reason, Grevi has argued, the practice of strategic partnerships can expose “the relative fragility of the Union at both the institutional and political level”.⁴⁵⁶

In this respect the 2008-2009 global crisis had a very significant impact on the dynamics and perceptions within the Partnership. After the crisis, attitudes vis-à-vis Europe were influenced, not insignificantly, by widespread Chinese perceptions of the potentially declining role of the EU as a global strategic actor. As authors such as Jing Men,⁴⁵⁷ Piecke and Chang have underscored⁴⁵⁸ ”whereas for more than a decade, policy

⁴⁵³ Stumbaum and Wei Xiong, 162; Jing Men, *ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵⁴ Grevi, *ibid.* As he writes, in this respect “it is not by chance that the issue of strategic partnerships climbed the EU foreign policy agenda right at the time when the Treaty of Lisbon came into force. Deepening these partnerships provided a rationale for progress in implementing the Lisbon reforms and a political selling point for the new EU leadership”.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ Jing Men, “The EU and China: mismatched partners?”, *Journal of Contemporary China* (2012), 21(74), March, 333–349.

⁴⁵⁸ Vincent K. L. Chang and Frank N. Piecke, “Europe’s engagement with China: shifting Chinese views of the EU and the EU-China relationship”, *Asia Europe Journal* , 16 (2), January 2018.

makers and Europe specialists in China had regarded the EU as an example of regional integration and as a promising new ‘pole’ in the global order..., in the wake of the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, and the ‘Brexit’ referendum, many perceive the EU as a troubled actor unfit to deal with the existential challenges confronting it, let alone play a credible leadership role beyond its own borders”.

As Roland Vogt argued, the “crisis of the European model” stemming from the crisis made the EU “much less interesting to Chinese decision-makers than before”⁴⁵⁹ bringing about a dramatic change in official Chinese perceptions, with a profound reversal of traditionally optimistic attitudes towards the Union.⁴⁶⁰ Until the 2008-2009 inflection point Chinese perceptions of the EU and of EU-China cooperation had been largely positive despite periodic setbacks and challenges in the development of the Partnership.⁴⁶¹

The traditionally positive Chinese vision of the process of European integration began to be put under scrutiny from 2011 onwards, by a debate in China on the EU’s future, divided into two main camps.⁴⁶² On the one hand financial experts and the more ideological Chinese political scientists “saw the crisis principally caused by structural problems within the EU which it was unable to address”; on the other many Europe specialists and economists continued to underline “the historical success story of the EU”, believing in the economic “logic” of the EU and remaining “cautiously optimistic about its future”.⁴⁶³

Later developments such as the migration crisis, terrorist attacks and particularly the rise of populist/sovereignist/nationalist political dynamics and sentiments in Europe – of which Brexit has been the most significant outcome – “have revealed that truly profound problems are facing the EU” and raised in China “strong doubts about the EU’s capacity to root out these problems in the foreseeable future”.⁴⁶⁴ This debate on the “decline of the EU” focused on three essential problems which made the EU a “compromised global actor” in Chinese eyes: deepening economic and political divisions between the core and the periphery of the Union; a lack of the “required institutional effectiveness and flexibility to implement the necessary reforms and reinvent itself”; a “legitimacy gap” which made the Union “increasingly incapable of reaching and

⁴⁵⁹ Roland Vogt, “Europe and China after the Global Financial Crisis”, in Roland Vogt (ed.) *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Chang and Pieke, “Europe’s engagement with China”, 319.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

convincing European citizens”.⁴⁶⁵ This Chinese debate has been focused also on the “increasingly inward-looking attitudes in several parts of the Western world” which contrasted “sharply with developing and emerging countries, including China itself, which in many ways are becoming more outward-looking, firmly embracing globalization as a means of achieving progress”.⁴⁶⁶ These European attitudes have been regarded as unproductive by Chinese observers because they fuel “the perception in the developed West of a ‘threat’ from emerging countries like China, which is often seen as a ‘winner of globalisation’ - and therefore as a wrongdoer bearing primary responsibility for the adverse effects of globalization”.⁴⁶⁷

What is particularly relevant in this analysis of the Chinese evolving perceptions of the EU, and in the connected debate in terms of policy-making, is the acknowledgement that Beijing’s “ambitious international agenda at a time of increasing global uncertainty”⁴⁶⁸ continues to include an ongoing strategic reflection on the merits of building an effective Partnership with the EU. As Chang and Piecke have noted, there are in China expectations that the EU and its Member States can “rethink the basic assumptions underlying their China policies” by exploring new approaches of engagement that match China’s shifting perceptions, policies and political realities.⁴⁶⁹

As Sautin has pointed out in this regard,⁴⁷⁰ this Chinese debate expressed “also vocal frustration with the EU, which might not have an ‘American-style strategic competition mindset’ vis-à-vis China, but individual member states persist in bringing up ‘values’ issues with China that are both deep-seated and unfavourable towards the Chinese people”. Notwithstanding these changed perceptions, the EU has continued to be described, overall, as a force for global peace (not a term used for the US) and the Chinese side has regularly reiterated at the official level its desire to forge a Strategic Partnership with the EU.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁵ Chang and Piecke, “Europe’s engagement with China”, 323.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Bonnie S. Glaser, “Chinese foreign policy research institutes and the practice of influence”, in G. Rozman (ed.) *China’s foreign policy: who makes it, and how is it made?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 87–124.

⁴⁶⁸ Chang and Piecke, “Europe’s engagement with China”, 321. Li Wang, “From Client Status to Strategic Partnership: China’s Changing Perceptions of Europe” in Roland Vogt (ed.) *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Yevgen Sautin, “A ‘new type of great power relation’ revisited”, in China’s “new era” with Xi Jinping’s characteristics, *European Council on Foreign Relations China Analysis*, December 2017, 9.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

These revised Chinese views on the role of the EU have had implications for the development of the “political dimension” of the Strategic Partnership which should be a key component of the structural interaction between Brussels and Beijing. If in the summit joint statements of the first period of the Comprehensive Partnership economic issues dominated the agenda, in the last decade the joint statements have underlined an expanded political-diplomatic agenda with new priorities mainly related to multilateral issues also in the security sector, while human rights and the rule of law have continued to remain remarkably marginal.⁴⁷² In this sense, the predominant trade bias which characterized the first years of the EU-China Partnership has been partly circumscribed; nonetheless, if the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has to evolve from its “relational dimension” - in which the economic backbone of the relationship has been fundamental – to a “structural” strategic partnership, it is necessary that it seeks “to make bilateral dealings not only compatible with but also conducive to stronger multilateral cooperation”.⁴⁷³

We can see from Holslag’s analysis that while trade priorities tended to be translated into clear policy objectives, the wording of the international security and policy clauses remained limited to “observing” and “welcoming” rather than resulting in agreements on co-operation initiatives;⁴⁷⁴ and the increase in the number of bilateral priorities was larger than the growth in international objectives. In the initial period of the Strategic Partnership both parties sought to emphasize various features that set their ties apart from the EU-US or the PRC-US axis, such as the pledge for a multi-polar world order as well as the subsequent joint support for multilateral cooperation.

Overall, as Holslag notes, the extent to which China and Europe have shared priorities that might distinguish their Partnership from other key relationships has been hard to measure: the United States seems to be the only other power that allows China and Europe to implicitly distinguish their Partnership from others.

⁴⁷² Holslag, “The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership”, 296.

⁴⁷³ Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, 16.

⁴⁷⁴ According to Holslag, a close examination of the joint statements reveals that while there has been a proliferation of dialogues and exchanges, joint statements lack well-defined common interests; joint priorities for several years were located predominantly in the economic and commercial sectors. When political and security issues received more attention, this did not translate into clear objectives. Bilateral issues, again mainly in the economic sector, have continued to outweigh international areas of interest.

At the level of discourse, since its launch there has been a marked gap between the proclaimed strategic nature of the Partnership and the extent to which strategic objectives have been defined or translated into concrete policies.⁴⁷⁵

In this sense the key benchmark for further assessing the strategic nature of the EU-China Partnership is its “structural dimension” contributing to enhancing global governance. As Grevi underlines, “effective strategic partnerships are those that seek to make bilateral dealings not only compatible with but also conducive to stronger multilateral cooperation. As such, they form part of a structural approach to foreign policy, shaping international relations beyond bilateral transactions”.⁴⁷⁶

In a speech during his visit to Beijing in 2011 the President of the European Council Van Rompuy stated hopefully that “Europe and China can pave the way for global solutions and promote international peace and security across the world”.⁴⁷⁷ These expectations, reiterated in many declarations over the years by EU leaders, indicate that “the resilience of the ‘strategic partner’ concept has been remarkable”.⁴⁷⁸

The analysis of the degree of convergence on multilateral issues between China and the EU can therefore offer significant indications on the character of “structural partnership” of their strategic relations. An area of the Partnership which goes beyond mere bilateral engagement is that related to the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation adopted in November 2013.

As Francois Godemont and Abigail Vasselier have written, the Agenda 2020 “was indeed a genuine pledge to widen cooperation, putting peace and security as the first pillar of the relationship” by prescribing overall 94 “key initiatives” in areas covering peace and security, prosperity, sustainable development, and people-to-people exchanges.⁴⁷⁹ Even though in the following years since its inception there have been many meetings and statements on these issues “there have been few formal agreements, and even fewer

⁴⁷⁵ Holslag, *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ Grevi, “Why EU strategic partnerships matter”, 16. As Grevi has observed the EU clearly frames its strategic partnerships as transcending the purely bilateral dimension because it seeks structured relations with major global and regional actors which “can provide critical leverage for common action or at least to approximate respective positions on the multilateral stage. A structural foreign policy, as traditionally practiced by the EU, is grounded on coherence between internal and external policies and the pursuit of specific interests through broader, sustainable frameworks of rules and cooperation”. I fear that most of Grevi’s view here is merely pious aspiration, with little empirical evidence adduced...

⁴⁷⁷ Herman van Rompuy, speech on ‘Europe and China in an interdependent world’, Central Party School, Beijing 11 May 2011.

⁴⁷⁸ Scott A. W. Brown, *ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁷⁹ Francois Godemont and Abigail Vasselier, “China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations”, *The European Council on Foreign relations*, (December 2017), 23.

really new agreements. Some initiatives have seen no implementation at all”⁴⁸⁰ while “some omissions from the list of dialogues stand out: Iran and North Korea”.⁴⁸¹ In the economic field the conclusion of a Comprehensive Agreement on Investments - and its specific content - looks as a key test-bed also for its broader implications in signalling the further possible path of development of the Partnership. From the degree of implementation of the Agenda 2020 we can see limited results: this situation has reinforced the European perceptions “that only where issues fit a narrow definition of China’s interests...does cooperation move ahead”.⁴⁸²

In a broader perspective the engagement of the PRC in global issues does not seem conducive to that kind of “structural partnership” which – according the criteria we have examined – should make a relationship of the EU with a counterpart truly strategic. What seems to be structural in this context is the lack of convergence within the EU-China Partnership in key strategic sectors which encompass civilian, security and military aspects such as, for instance, cyber security, although it has been the subject of annual dialogues and a EU-China Cyber Taskforce was established. At the 2019 Summit the EU recalled the importance of the application of international law and cooperation against malicious cyber activities, including on ICT-enabled theft of intellectual property, “for an open, stable and secure cyberspace.” It is meaningful, though, that while the Summit recognized that 5G networks will provide the backbone for future economic and social development, just before the Summit the Commission recommended that, when deploying 5G networks, all Member States should conduct a thorough risk assessment and take the appropriate security measures, aiming thus at building an EU coordinated approach to both risk assessment and management. Even though the Commission has stressed that it does not intend to target specific companies or countries, the contentious security debate on 5G was clearly the background of these recommendations.⁴⁸³

Overall, the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership seems mainly to be confined to its “relational dimension” focusing on and trying to make progress, in the framework of its ever-expanding bureaucratic architecture, first and foremost on issues

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Godemont and Vasselier, “China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations”, 24.

⁴⁸³ “EU-China Summit: Rebalancing the strategic partnership”, European Commission press release, Brussels 9 April 2019. Stronger sensitivities are present from the EU side with regard to cyber security, as Godemont and Vasselier note, because the numerous attacks, over the years, on institutions throughout Europe – from the EU to Italy’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France’s Ministry of the Economy and the UK Parliament, that were credited to hackers originating from China.

of direct bilateral interest to China and the Union, even though global issues also figure in the Partnership's set of priorities. In this sense the Partnership, as a senior EU official has observed, has followed a more "realistic" path of development which, in fact, has been an "implicit recognition of the persistent difficulties in fostering a truly structural strategic dimension with a global reach".⁴⁸⁴

In a changed international context no convergence and closer EU-China cooperation on common endeavours and "rules of the road" has materialized as a possible response to the recent US distancing from international institutions and many multilateral commitments.⁴⁸⁵ This would have been in line with China's traditional stance on the international stage which "has made great play of its commitment to important elements of the global system,"⁴⁸⁶ regularly raising Europe's hopes of seeing China as a partner that shared an interest in upholding a rules-based world order. Xi Jinping himself, in a speech made at Davos in 2016, had confirmed China's determination to strengthen its multilateral contributions.⁴⁸⁷

The Chinese approach seems to be characterized by a new assertiveness which selectively uses multilateral initiatives and organizations to advance national interests. The follow-up on the official statements with regard to the PRC's multilateral commitments has been very limited and the areas of increased international responsibility taken on by the Chinese have been scarce, even though analysts such as Jiang Shixue underlined the positive interplay between the PRC and multilateral formats such as the G20.⁴⁸⁸

The reasons for a certain degree of European scepticism on the potential of the EU-China Partnership on global issues have been reinforced if one looks more in depth at the main areas of cooperation. Climate change, for instance - the object of several

⁴⁸⁴ Interview with a EU's senior official, by the author, Brussels, December 2, 2016.

⁴⁸⁵ Philippe Le Corre and Alain Sepulchre, *China's offensive in Europe* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2016). Uwe Wissenbach, "The Role of (New) Leadership in EU-China Relations", *International Relations and Diplomacy*, 2(2), 2014, 133-143; John Farnell, Paul Irwin Crookes, *The Politics of EU-China Economic Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid*.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid*. Chen Zhimin, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order", *Journal of Common Market Studies* (February 2015), 1-18.

⁴⁸⁷ Nien-Chung Chang Liao, "The Sources of China's Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?" *International Affairs*, 92 (2016), 817-833; François Godemont, "Expanded ambitions, shrinking achievements: How China sees the global order", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 March 2017. http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/expanded_ambitions_shrinking_achievements_how_china_sees_the_global_order.

⁴⁸⁸ Jiang Shixue, "China EU cooperation in the G20", in Catrina Schlaeger and Chen Dongxiao (eds.), *China and the G20. The Interplay between an Emerging Power and an Emerging Institution* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2014), 254-268.

declarations at EU-China summits and in the context of the Paris December 2015 Conference - has seen fairly limited results in terms of EU-China commitments and joint action. It has also been victim of the contentious debate on other issues: in 2017 “China conducted extensive pre-summit dialogue with the EU but sacrificed the result during the June summit because of the ongoing dispute over market economy status for China”.⁴⁸⁹ Moreover, if the Trump administration has sought to reverse previous US positions on climate change, “China itself has never signed up to any commitment in a legal sense. Its goals and instruments correlate strictly to its own economic interests, which also include making this sector a key asset for future exports (solar, wind, nuclear)”.⁴⁹⁰

Also in other important areas of engagement on global issues China’s openness and commitment have been relative.⁴⁹¹ Cooperation in the field of multilateral security issues should be an area where the development of EU-China relations could acquire a more structural character: nevertheless this crucial sector has so far proved to be in many regards a “mismatch of interests”.

As Maher has pointed out,⁴⁹² “in addition to being unable or unwilling to contribute much to each other’s immediate security interests and concerns, the EU and China have pursued different strategies in responding to some of today’s most pressing security problems”. If we consider two of the most important security issues of the last years - Iran’s nuclear programme and Syria’s civil war – we can see that they “have revealed divergent EU and Chinese preferences and policy approaches”.⁴⁹³ China’s response to

⁴⁸⁹ As Godemont and Vasselier have written, “China signing up to the December 2015 Climate Conference was a milestone...But the meeting of minds was not confirmed. China punished the EU for withholding Market Economy Status by denying the fruits of tortuous weeks of joint negotiation on climate”. Godemont and Abigael Vasselier, “China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations”, 26.

⁴⁹⁰ Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid.*

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.* “On peacekeeping operations, for example, China’s contribution represents less than 0.5 percent of its defence budget, suggesting room for improvement for further engagement. On humanitarian aid its commitments are tiny compared to China’s overall capacity”.

⁴⁹² Richard Maher, *ibid.*, 970.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.* Although China enforced UN sanctions on Iran, the divergence of its strategic approach is underlined by the fact that not only it has regularly blocked or delayed more punitive measures desired by the United States and the EU but also “refrained from using its considerable leverage over Tehran to persuade the Iranian leadership to make binding commitments in respect of its nuclear activities”. As Maher notes, while the EU shelved negotiations for a trade and cooperation agreement (TCA) with Iran in August 2005 as a result of its illicit and intensified nuclear activities, and in 2012 imposed an embargo on Iranian oil exports, China - getting more than 11 per cent of its oil imports and 5 per cent of its total supply from Iran – has become Iran’s biggest oil customer.

Erica Downs and Suzanne Maloney, “Getting China to sanction Iran: the Chinese–Iranian oil connection”, *Foreign Affairs* 90: 2, (March-April 2011), 15–21.

See also John W. Garver, *China’s quest: the history of the foreign relations of the People’s Republic of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 569–77. Scott Harold and Alireza Nader, *China and*

these two complex international issues showed a very limited degree of affinity with the EU's approach, not only because China avoided using its leverage on these regimes but also because it used its veto in the UNSC to block Western-sponsored resolutions, as happened in relation to the Syrian crisis. This behavior confirmed the Chinese leadership's strong suspicion of Western calls for humanitarian interventions, being convinced that any operation would turn into an effort at regime change similar to the one that took place in Libya in 2011.⁴⁹⁴

It is meaningful to note that in Syria China did not act to protect its own limited interests: as Maher has written, China's "primary motivation for blocking Western proposals in the UNSC to unseat the Assad regime was to provide diplomatic cover for Russia". The increasing degree of coordination between Beijing and Moscow in the UNSC on issues considered vital to each other was once more underlined by the fact that China vetoed – with Russia – a resolution sanctioning the Syrian regime after its use of chemical weapons in February 2017.

Instead of trying any kind of meaningful diplomatic interaction with the EU the priority of Beijing during the Syrian conflict seemed to be centred on keeping a strategic understanding with Moscow aimed at defying the West together, so that neither might look isolated.⁴⁹⁵

Considering that nuclear and ballistic proliferation is a key issue of global interest for the EU on which China is clearly influential, it is worth underlining that, in the case of both North Korea and Iran, the PRC - apart from repeated declarations of principle in the Summits joint statements - not only failed to cooperate with the EU but actually pursued a policy strictly centred on its national interests.⁴⁹⁶ A stark divergence from the

Iran: economic, political, and military relations (Santa Monica: RAND, 2012) http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP351.pdf.

⁴⁹⁴ As Godemont and Vasselier have written, "on Syria, the lines were drawn early. Any convergence between Europe and China was precluded by hostility to regime change, concern about Uighur fighters on the ground, close Chinese relations with Iran, including the Revolutionary Guard active in Syria. China has above all opposed military intervention (except Russia's), and vetoed alongside with Russia six successive UN resolutions. Godemont and Vasselier, "China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations", *ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁹⁵ Maher, "The EU-China elusive strategic partnership, 971.

⁴⁹⁶ As Godemont and Vasselier write, by 2017 the PRC "had cornered 83 percent of North Korea's foreign trade, a figure that is trivial in view of China's overall foreign trade, but vital to North Korea. In the case of Iran, whose top trading partner before sanctions were introduced was the EU, China has surged ahead, narrowly tailing the United Arab Emirates as Iran's second trade partner. Moreover, China has not joined the voluntary Missile Technology Control Regime, but has pledged to abide by its rules, including on exports. Given the ambiguity of UN Resolution 2231, that only "calls for" Iran to refrain from ballistic missile testing, China did not criticize Iran over its 2017 missile tests.

Ibid., 28.

EU has been also registered with regard to the maritime disputes in the South China Sea, where the positions taken by the PRC are clearly in contrast with the Union's international principles. This divergence is linked to the intrinsically different value given by the EU and China to multilateral institutions, as the Chinese approach to issues such as the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) underscores. The joint statement of the 2019 EU-China summit reiterated once more rather anodyne language on global geopolitical issues such Iran, the Democratic Peoples's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Afghanistan, Venezuela (included for the first time in a joint statement), the South China sea, Ukraine, while Syria and Libya were not mentioned as was the case in the joint statement of the 2018 Summit.

On the basis of the previous analysis we can begin to draw some conclusions: the first one is that the degree of convergence or divergence on global issues which stems from the evolution of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is - as a EEAS senior official observed⁴⁹⁷ - not a "quantitative" problem but a "qualitative one". The potential for cooperation within the Strategic Partnership on global and multilateral issues might be revealed by the fact that Europe has significant interests in several regions where China's geopolitical influence has been growing: the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa including South Sudan, Somalia, Mali, Afghanistan, Latin America. It is also true that when there have been some examples of positive coordination and collaboration between the Union and China in the field of security - such as, for instance, the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy joint operation and some other United Nations operations in South Sudan and Mali to which Beijing contributed -⁴⁹⁸ the EU did not feature as a direct partner of China in these UN operations.

Overall, the evolution of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, in particular if we consider the last decade, has not gone in the direction of deepening the

⁴⁹⁷ Interview with a senior EEAS official, by the author, February 22, 2018

⁴⁹⁸ On the security dimension of the EU-China relations see: Martin Renner, "The EU's Security Policy Towards China: A Liberal-Relational Approach to Hard Security Issues", *Studia Diplomatica*, LXV-3 (2012), 59-75; Frans-Paul van der Putten and Chu Shulong (eds.), *China, Europe and International Security: Interests, Roles and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2012); Frans-Paul van der Putten, "The Security Dimension in EU-China Relations", in Nicola Casarini (ed.), *Brussels-Beijing: Changing the Game?*, *EU Institute for Security Studies, Report n° 14*, (February 2013), 53-59; Karolina Pomorska and Sophie Vanhoonacker, "Europe as a Global Actor: the (Un)Holy Trinity of Economy, Diplomacy and Security", *JCMS Annual Review* (2015), 216-229; Thomas Christiansen, "A Liberal Institutional Perspective on China-EU Relations", in Wang Jianwei and Song Weiqing (eds.), *China, the European Union and the International Politics of Global Governance* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2016), 29-50.

“structural character” of the strategic relationship notwithstanding the considerable “widening” of its “relational dimension”: as we have seen, the bureaucratic architecture of the EU-China relations encompasses by now a truly impressive set of sectors of cooperation, coordination and dialogue. It is fair to note that this development responds to the EU objectives of a “reflexive strategic partnership”, that is one which aims to “put the Union on the map” as a prominent international actor while it adds only partial value – in a more recent perspective – to China’s traditional search of status as a global superpower.

As we have seen, the degree of convergence on strategic issues is limited in terms of results and prospective trends. This situation derives not only from the divergence in the strategic interests of EU and China from a material point of view but first and foremost from a different ideational approach to their values-interests continuum which is a key element related to the identity and actorness of the two counterparts of the Partnership. These conceptual gaps are also reflected in the worldviews expressed by the two actors – in particular with regard to the evolving international order – when they address global and multilateral issues in the framework of the Partnership.

These unsatisfactory trends rooted in a widening ideational disconnect between the strategic partners are visible in the language of the EU 2016 policy paper *Elements for a new EU strategy on China* in which the focus on reciprocity and respect for rules shapes an approach which put “The EU’s own interests at the forefront of the relationship”.⁴⁹⁹ As Christiansen has written, the EEAS policy paper addresses “relational” unresolved issues, by expressing “concern about China’s economic slowdown, rebalancing industrial overcapacity, and the lack of progress in market reforms and access for EU companies”, and by reiterating “demands on China in terms of levelling the playing field, market opening and fair competition, holding out the perspective of a EU-China Free Trade Agreement /FTA”. Even though the joint communication expressed the EU willingness of “managing constructively” the differences originated by China’s authoritarian response to domestic dissent, including in Hong Kong, it then clearly stated the relevance of the ideational dimension of the Partnership by confirming “the EU’s intention to

⁴⁹⁹ EEAS Joint Communication to the European parliament and the Council: *Elements for a new EU Strategy on China*, 2016.

uphold universal values and the protection of human rights and China's international obligations in this field".⁵⁰⁰

This document is important because it translated, on the one hand, the EU Global Strategy's (EUGS) "principled pragmatism" into the EU-China context; on the other, "more openly than in most previous policy papers, the 2016 communication [underlined] the fundamental importance of member states falling in line with EU policies and rules to allow a 'strong, clear and unified voice', a veiled criticism of the 16+1 Central and Eastern European cooperation with China".⁵⁰¹ Another important aspect of the policy paper was its reference to the broader context in which the Partnership was set by articulating more clearly than before the "fundamental importance of trans-atlantic links, EU-US cooperation and coordination" and by putting the EU-China strategic relationship also in the framework of the EU's other partnerships.⁵⁰²

In this respect, the 2016 *Elements for a new EU strategy on China* underline some structural challenges within the Partnership because, as Grevi has argued,⁵⁰³ linking bilateral partnerships and multilateral cooperation can face normative hurdles. In this respect the policy paper reflected the growing European perception that China, as other EU strategic partners, did not really share the EU's stated aim to strengthen a multilateral, rule-based order and delimit their national sovereignty in the process.

Emerging powers such as China have indeed tended to take a rather instrumental approach to international cooperation, favouring the emergence of a multipolar system primarily as an antidote to American or Western hegemony. In this perspective multilateral bodies are regarded "as useful in so far as they amplify their respective national positions, constrain or inhibit unwelcome initiatives and uphold the traditional principle of non-interference in internal affairs".⁵⁰⁴ Brussels has become increasingly aware of the normative disconnect which has hampered substantial cooperation on global issues with Beijing, preventing the evolution of the EU-China relationship towards a more "structural" Strategic Partnership.

This disconnect has been regarded as the outcome of a process which has amplified the distance between the interests-values continuums of the two partners in the last years

⁵⁰⁰ Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 26.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Grevi, *ibid.*, 16

⁵⁰⁴ Francois Godemont and Abigail Vasselier, "China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China Relations". *The European Council on Foreign Relations* (December 2017).

and it has been reflected by the paradigm shift affecting the prospects of the Partnership. However, these relevant aspects of “ideational and normative disconnect” have never been openly addressed in the official dialogue and interaction within the Partnership, remaining thus an underlying factor of divergence which increasingly undermines its prospects. This is an implicit challenge, as we will argue in the concluding section of this chapter, also for the search and definition of a new paradigm guiding the future strategic relations between Brussels and Beijing.

4.8 An emerging “turn to realism” in the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

As we have seen, China and the EU are “global actors in the making” whose identities and actorness reflect, on the one hand, their historical and cultural backgrounds, on the other, their changing international role and worldviews: for this reason the concept of strategic partnership as an instrument in the toolbox of these two emerging global players has been evolving over the years.⁵⁰⁵ The growing European awareness of a substantial stalemate in the development of the Partnership, both in its relational and structural dimensions, has led in the two last years – along with the implications of an evolving international context – to a rethinking and, hopefully, a rebalancing of the strategic relations between Brussels and Beijing.

The need for this rebalancing is related, as we have argued, to the respective dynamics of the two actors, including China’s impressive and complex path of development, which influence the ongoing conceptualizations of their strategic partnership. The European position seems at the same time to reflect the analytical and political debate which in the last years has been underlining that “the Sino-European partnership begs for more realism”.⁵⁰⁶

In this respect the paradigm seems to be shifting from “constructive engagement” to a EU China policy based on more “realist engagement” or even to a mix of cooperation and competition. What is certain is that the “myth of convergence” with regard to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has been increasingly questioned on the basis of an “experience of difficult – or sometimes inexistent – relations”. As we have seen, “new agreements are missing, even on trade and economic issues which are at the core of the

⁵⁰⁵ May-Britt U. Stumbaum and Wei Xiong, “Conceptual Differences of Strategic Partnership in EU-China Relations”, 163.

⁵⁰⁶ Holslag, *ibid.*, 294.

interest for Europe; the agreed Agenda 2020 for political and security cooperation is fulfilled” only in a limited way, with “human rights and humanitarian aid as the most disappointing areas”.⁵⁰⁷

If we look at the EU-China Partnership as a “relational” strategic partnership – that is, centered on bilateral cooperation – we have seen that convergence has been decreasing on the “bargaining topics” which have become “active points of contention, and (could) lead to retaliation and damage in other areas”; this risk can be increased by the practice of “negative linkage” as was the case in 2017 when contentious trade issues prevented an important EU-China joint declaration on climate change.

The language used by the EU on occasion of the 2019 Summit and 2020 Leaders’ meetings has confirmed a growing requirement for reciprocal opening, with a strong European focus on the need of preserving the international rules-based trade system and enhancing bilateral trade and investment.⁵⁰⁸ At the “Leaders’ Meeting” of September 2020 – chaired by President Michel on the EU side and President Xi on the Chinese and attended by the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and, for the Council presidency, German Chancellor Angela Merkel – the rather critical EU positions on the “state of the Partnership”, already expressed at the 22nd EU-China summit of June 22, have been reiterated. If the leaders welcomed “the progress on the ongoing negotiations for the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investments (CAI)”, the EU emphasised at the same time that “more work was urgently needed on the issues of rebalancing market access and on sustainable development”.⁵⁰⁹ The European leaders stressed “the importance of a level playing field also in the areas of science and technology, calling for high ethical standards in the areas of technological developments, product safety and innovation”.⁵¹⁰ The EU demand for “reciprocity” – which has become a keyword embedded throughout the recent statements on China – has been gradually reinforced by the fact that China, the world’s second largest

⁵⁰⁷ Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ On other trade and economic issues, the EU has stressed, as it has done at the June Summit, that “more needed to be done to improve market access in areas such as agri-food, financial services and the digital sector”, welcoming the only concrete result of the meeting, the signature of the EU-China Agreement on Geographical Indications which should “improve access to the Chinese market especially for high-quality European agricultural products”. European Council/Council of the European Union, Press release on the September 14 Leaders’ Meeting, *EU-China leaders’ meeting via video conference*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2020/09/14/>

⁵¹⁰ European Council/Council of the European Union, Press release on the September 14 Leaders’ Meeting, *EU-China leaders’ meeting via video conference*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2020/09/14/>

economy thanks to global trade and finance rules, still refuses to fully recognize the consequences of its spectacular rise: in Xi Jinping's words, "China's international status as the world's largest developing country has not changed".⁵¹¹

In this chapter we have tried to underline that the roots of this gradual paradigm shift within the EU-China Partnership can be traced back to the crucial turning point brought about by the 2008-2009 financial crisis. The crisis, with all its consequences, weakened, on the one hand, Chinese perceptions and expectations that Europe not only could be a strategic interlocutor for making the international system more multi-polar but also a key counterpart for the "new type of great power relations advocated by Xi Jinping";⁵¹² on the other hand, it gradually strengthened in the Union a debate which – focusing on the economic balance of power between China and Europe - made a forceful case for "reciprocal engagement" whereby the "benefits of developing the relationship should be shared between the two sides of the aisle".⁵¹³

As a senior EU official has observed,⁵¹⁴ in this perspective the main outcome, also in terms of messaging, of the two last EU-China summits seems to be the increasing awareness from the European side that there is a need of "rebalancing" the Strategic Partnership which should be based on a "realistic, assertive and multi-faceted EU approach." As the European Commission's press release stated on the occasion of the 2019 summit "while China's economic and political influence makes it a vital partner for the European Union, as well as vice-versa, there is a growing appreciation in Europe that the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted".⁵¹⁵

In this sense there has been an asymmetry between Brussels and Beijing in the awareness and response to the main problems affecting the Partnership: while from the European side there has been an increasing recognition of the challenges posed by the complex development of the Partnership, China has tended to avoid a substantial problematization of its Strategic Relationship with Brussels.

⁵¹¹ Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era", Opening address to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, *Xinhua* (translation), 18 October 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf.

⁵¹² In 2009 two EU-China summits took place, the 11th in May and the 12th in November, which focused extensively on the consequences of the financial crisis, as did the 13th Summit in 2010 addressing issues related to global governance, in particular sustainable growth in a post-crisis world economy.

⁵¹³ Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid.*, 9.

⁵¹⁴ Interview with a European Commission high official, by the author, June 2 2019.

⁵¹⁵ "EU-China Summit: Rebalancing the strategic partnership", European Commission press release, Brussels 9 April 2019.

If in 2009 the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao underlined the need for a review of some tenets of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, in the last decade there has been a decreasing Chinese focus on it. If we consider the conceptualization of the Partnership, the EU in the last four years has indeed elaborated a new Global Strategy and a new “China strategy”, from the Chinese side there have been no comprehensive policy papers or major statements on the EU-China relations in the same period. This is the outcome, as we have seen, of Chinese perceptions shifting from the traditionally positive consideration of the EU-China Partnership to more critical views which caution about “the content and deliverability of a Sino-European Strategic Partnership, almost exclusively questioning the EU’s ability to deliver the promise of a strategic partnership”.⁵¹⁶ However, during 2019, as a reaction of growing negative European views on the PRC coupled by trends of increased international competition, the Chinese leadership has taken more proactive positions to underline the specific relevance of the strategic relations with the EU.

At the heart of this process, as we have argued, there is a thorough reassessment of the EU’s “constructive engagement paradigm”, in particular of its fundamental assumption that China, developing ever more dense relations across the world, would eventually converge towards common standards in terms of market economy and rule of law. This shift, driven by the European perception that there is a deep and still-growing imbalance between Europe and China is reflected in the main EU documents on China of the last four years. As we have seen, the EU’s 2016 “*Elements for a new strategy on China*” – which still remain the “cornerstone of EU engagement”, as the March 2019 EU-China *Strategic Outlook* of the European Commission has underlined - called for China to take action on a number of key issues: the reform process, reciprocity, the CAI, open and rules-based connectivity, global public goods and security, rule of law and human rights, and sustainable development.⁵¹⁷ On the basis of a “further EU policy shift towards a more realistic, assertive, and multi-faceted approach which “will ensure that relations with this strategic partner are set on a fair, balanced and mutually beneficial course”, the EU’s 2019 *Strategic Outlook* clearly puts forward a vision of China which has important implications for the very concept of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership itself:

⁵¹⁶ May-Britt U. Stumbaum and Wei Xiong, *ibid.*, 166.

⁵¹⁷ The fact that the 2016 *China Strategy* called also for increased cohesion and efficiency of the EU in pursuing these objectives has already had some concrete follow-ups such as, for instance, in the EU negotiating approach which has made reciprocity in opening up public markets and investment in China a priority.

“China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. This requires a flexible and pragmatic whole-of-EU approach enabling a principled defence of interests and values”.⁵¹⁸

This approach takes clearly into account the narrowing space for discussion between Europe and China on strategic global issues, with a prominent focus restricted to bilateral issues, economic or normative. The EU has been experiencing significant difficulties, as we have underlined, in implementing a broader strategic agenda, with the debate on global issues “largely confined to those where both China and the EU are unavoidable actors, if very dissimilar ones”.⁵¹⁹

This latter aspect confirms that in the “structural” dimension of the Strategic Partnership there is a substantial and persistent element of divergence between the two actors when the “interests-values continuum” is taken into consideration. In its recent efforts of rebalancing the Strategic Partnership the EU seems indeed determined to assert both its values and interests. At the highest level the centrality of the “continuum” was confirmed in the 2016 EU Global Strategy which states:⁵²⁰

“We will be guided by clear principles. These stem as much from a realistic assessment of the current strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world. Principled pragmatism will guide our external action in the years ahead. Our interests and values go hand in hand. We have an interest in promoting our values in the world. At the same time, our fundamental values are embedded in our interests. Peace and security, prosperity, democracy and a rules-based global order are the vital interests underpinning our external action”.

This interests-values continuum is regarded as driving the EU role as “a responsible global stakeholder”, but, at the same time, the Global Strategy underlines that “responsibility must be shared and requires investing in our partnerships. Co-responsibility will be our guiding principle in advancing a rules-based global order”. It is

⁵¹⁸ “EU-China-A Strategic Outlook”, Communication of the European Commission to the European Council, Brussels 12 March 2019. The *Strategic Outlook* also posits that “the tools and modalities of EU engagement with China should also be differentiated depending on the issues and policies at stake. The EU should use linkages across different policy areas and sectors in order to exert more leverage in pursuit of its objectives”.

⁵¹⁹ Godemont and Vasselier, 29.

⁵²⁰ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, Brussels June 2016, at <http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en>.

meaningful that the new Global Strategy – when it refers to the Partnership’s “structural” dimension related to the “vast majority of global governance issues” – mentions firstly “the UN as the framework of the multilateral system and a core partner for the Union” and immediately after “other core partners such as the US”; only at the end does it refer to “regional organizations” and to “like-minded and strategic partners in Asia, Africa and the Americas”.⁵²¹ China is not explicitly mentioned as a “core-partner” and is supposedly included in this third category of strategic partners.

The main EU documents on the Strategic Partnership reject the reduction of norms and values to a by-product of material interests with an approach which is also in line with the normative role that the Union has traditionally intended to play. If ideational and normative considerations and references to the coexistence of values and norms with material interests are present in the main EU documents, some high-profile Chinese documents too connect a discourse of interests with one which emphasizes “the basic norms governing international relations”,⁵²² particularly those based upon the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.⁵²³ The normative stances held respectively in Beijing and Brussels – which do not seem to be conducive to normative affinity – have never been the subject of a true conceptual and operational “clarification” between Brussels and Beijing. This would be important because China’s normative perspective is increasingly influenced by its identity and priorities as a global actor which not only often considers the EU’s rules and norms as an obstacle for its objectives but also rejects the Normative Power Europe approach.⁵²⁴ This lack of normative affinity prevents, as we have seen, cooperation between the two strategic partners on “structural” strategic issues: this is due to a set of reasons ranging from the “conceptual gap” which divides the notions of sovereignty of China and the EU to a Chinese tendency of increasingly placing the PRC’s law and norms above international law, norms and principles.⁵²⁵ This “ideational and

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Xi Jinping, New Asian security concept for new progress in security cooperation, speech delivered at the 4th Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Shanghai, 21 May 2014.

⁵²³ Salvatore Finamore, “Normative differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security: obstacles and opportunities for cooperation”, 163.

⁵²⁴ Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid.*, 29.

⁵²⁵ Ibid. As these authors rightly point out “the rule of law will remain central to the EU’s approach; as long as there is an EU built on this basis, this will form the basis of its international approach”. For this reason “even during these years of great difficulty for the EU, China has found it difficult to circumvent the complex of rules and conventions that bind European states – and prospective EU members – together. Yet it still operates on a vision where Europe is a set of sovereign states with a regional organization that happens to be the EU”.

normative distance” between Brussels and Beijing significantly undermines the potential of the Partnership and requires the EU and the PRC to address the profound asymmetry defining their interests-values continuum with inevitable repercussions on their conceptualization and operationalization of the Partnership.

In this perspective, as Oertel has argued,⁵²⁶ there has indeed been a new consensus within the EU on the systemic challenges that China poses to Europe. As the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission Borrell has pointed out,⁵²⁷ “at the June summit with China, the EU expressed its disappointment to Beijing about the lack of progress in implementing the agreements reached at the previous meeting in 2019. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, made it clear that Beijing had not honoured its commitments to ensure access to the Chinese market on a reciprocal basis and reduce aid to state-owned companies, and had thus placed European companies at a clear competitive disadvantage”. He also reiterated the important goal of concluding by the end of 2020 the EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investments, that the EU has been negotiating since 2013.

The assessment of the “relational dimension” of the Partnership made by the High Representative is a very strong signal for the future EU’s stance on this set of issues:

It is becoming increasingly clear that China is taking advantage of our economic relationship...Keeping things as they stand (lack of reciprocity and unequal conditions) is not an option. Our relationship is too asymmetric for the current level of Chinese development. This needs to be redressed.⁵²⁸

In EU statements mounting concerns have been confirmed – in addition to the economic ones - about China’s assertive approach abroad, as well as its breaches of international legal commitments and massive violations of human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Overall, “there is growing scepticism about the future trajectory of the relationship, which provides an opportunity for a more robust and coherent EU policy on China”.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁶ Janka Oertel, “The China Consensus: How Europe is Growing Wary of Beijing”, *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, September 2020.

⁵²⁷ Josep Borrell, “The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU should deal with the US-China competition”, *IAI papers no 20*, (September, 24 2020).

⁵²⁸ Josep Borrell, “The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU should deal with the US-China competition”, *IAI papers no 20*, (September, 24 2020), 8; European Commission, Report on Trade and Investment Barriers - 1 January 2019-31 December 2019, June 2020, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/158789.htm>

⁵²⁹ Oertel, “The China Consensus”, *ibid.*

This new EU policy trend - shaped by an underlying “turn to realism” - is still in the making and will be the outcome not only of the dynamics between the Union’s sub-systems but also of the positions of the major member states, first and foremost Germany which historically was the country which influenced in the most significant way the EU China policy. In its search of a new paradigm the EU – according to the High Representative – should be aware of a context in which the recent global crisis “acted as a catalyst for exacerbating an underlying [US-China] rivalry that will become the predominant geopolitical trend in the post-virus era”.⁵³⁰

Responding to the challenge of finding a “middle ground”, Josep Borrell has argued that in order “to avoid becoming entrenched between the US and China, the EU should look at the world from its own point of view, defending its values and interests, and using the instruments of power available to it”.⁵³¹ At the same time the High Representative has underscored that the Strategic Relationship with Beijing should be pursued on the basis of a stronger unity within the EU:

“Unity is vital in every area of our relationship with Beijing because no European country is capable on its own of defending its interests and values against a country the size and might of China...A balanced EU–China relationship is essential to address and eventually resolve major world problems”.⁵³²

The “doctrine” delineated by Borrell recognizes that the PRC has become “gradually more assertive, expansionist and authoritarian” and that the new Chinese assertiveness has been reflected by a significant change in attitude: “this ambition for leadership is the main difference compared with past eras. China’s aim is to transform the international order into a selective multilateral system with Chinese characteristics, in which economic and social rights would take precedence over political and civil rights”.⁵³³

This important reflection paper meaningfully criticizes the Chinese strategy “deployed on several fronts” of “undermining international rules” and rejects China’s expansionism, visible from the South China Sea to the Himalayan border. The third key point underlined by the High Representative for the revised EU’s strategic approach to China is the recognition that a new EU China policy cannot be merely based on

⁵³⁰ Josep Borrell, “The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU should deal with the US-China competition”, *IAI papers no 20*, (September, 24 2020), 3.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Borrell, “The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU should deal with the US-China competition”, 4.

“constructive engagement” because it has not led to convergence between Brussels and Beijing: “on the contrary, there has been greater divergence in recent years. China is the paradigm that has disproven the theory that economic and political openness are two sides of the same coin” as tend to underline the crackdown in the PRC “of any signs of dissidence, a rise in human rights abuses, increased repression of human rights defenders, journalists and intellectuals, the violation of basic rights of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang” and the deterioration of the situation in Hong Kong.⁵³⁴

In a perspective in which the EU “must look at the world from its own point of view and act to defend its values and interests”, Borrell has based his doctrine on two pillars: “continuing the cooperation with Beijing in order to address global challenges ... while at the same time strengthening the EU’s strategic sovereignty by protecting technological sectors of our economy which are key to ensuring the necessary autonomy and promoting international European values and interests”.⁵³⁵

In this sense the “doctrine” proposes a sort of principled and more realist engagement with China which, however, does not address in depth the structural elements – including the ideational and normative ones – that constrain the strategic development of the Partnership. The search of a “middle ground” aimed at reinforcing the strategic autonomy of the EU is not an easy objective for the EU.⁵³⁶ “independence from two competitors/rivals does not mean being at equal distance from them” because the “common history and shared values with the US” mean that Europe is closer to Washington than to Beijing.⁵³⁷

The further development of the Partnership represents therefore a challenging test-bed for a EU’s “strategic sovereignty” able “to defend European values and interests by means of a united front”. In this sense, as we have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, the sustainability of a more realist EU China policy is related to a process of “paradigm clarification” – within the Union and vis-à-vis China - which fully reckons with the degree of complexity of a strategic relationship which is characterized, on the one hand, by

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Borrell, “The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU should deal with the US-China competition”, 7. According to the High Representative his vision of the EU-China Partnership “is not a change in policy, but rather a development within the boundaries of the 2019 EU strategy” which fundamentally aims at responding to Chinese assertive and expansionist policies, opposing “cherry-picking” multilateralism and ensuring greater reciprocity in terms of market access, investments, innovation and research programmes.

⁵³⁶ Enrico Letta, “Our Second Identity, Protected by a United Europe”, in TEDxVicenza, 8 June 2019, https://www.ted.com/talks/enrico_letta_technological_humanism_our_second_identity_protected_in_europe.

⁵³⁷ The report underlines in this respect that cooperation “within NATO is still crucial for European defence”. Borrell, “The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU should deal with the US-China competition”, 9.

structural divergence in its material, ideational and normative components and is increasingly constrained, on the other, by an international context in which the role of the US will continue to be crucial in shaping the opportunities and the limitations for the EU-China relations.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁸ Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 9.

CHAPTER 5

At the heart of EU-China ideational divergence: the issue of human rights

In this chapter we will address one of the most complex issues in the whole Sino-European relationship from the specific standpoint of its significance in the framework of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. As underscored by Duncan Freeman and Gustaaf Geeraerts⁵³⁹:

The issue of human rights has been one of the most sensitive elements in the EU-China relationship. It has been difficult to deal with in the official relationship between the EU and the Chinese government and has also been controversial in public opinion and in the media. The question of human rights often appears to be the aspect of their relationship where the differences between Europe and China are the greatest and most destabilizing.

Human rights are indeed a crucial test bed to assess the structural strategic dimension of the Partnership on the basis of the degree of convergence or divergence on what can be regarded as a “constitutive issue” because of its nature intrinsically linked to the interests-values continuum of the two actors. For this reason normative contrasts between Europe and China have nowhere been so evident as in this field, underscoring profound differences not only in the two political systems but also in their cultural and societal spheres.⁵⁴⁰ As Richard Maher has written,⁵⁴¹ “stark differences in political values and ideology have limited and will continue to limit the scope and depth of any EU–China strategic relationship. China rejects many of the norms, principles and values that the EU embraces and seeks to promote around the world, including western-style constitutional democracy, the rule of law and independent news media. Europe’s relationship with China tests the EU’s commitment to democracy and human rights, which are central to its identity and ostensibly at the centre of its foreign policy”.

From this perspective the evolution of the Partnership’s Human Rights Dialogue underlines one of the major conceptual gaps in the relations between Brussels and Beijing stemming from the normative differences in this field which are “of a very fundamental

⁵³⁹ Duncan Freeman and Gustaaf Geeraerts, “Europe, China and Expectations for Human Rights” in Pan Zhongqi (ed.), *Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations . Global Governance, Human Rights and Strategic Partnerships* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

⁵⁴⁰ Finamore, *Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China*, PhD dissertation, (University of Cambridge, June 2016), 56.

⁵⁴¹ Richard Maher, “The Elusive EU-China Partnership”, *International Affairs* 92: 4, (2016), 963.

nature and...deeply engrained both in the cultural underpinnings of Chinese society and the dominant state ideology”.⁵⁴² In this sense, as Finamore has rightly pointed out, the PRC’s behavior vis-à-vis human rights is “not only a matter of political expediency and often lack of administrative and judicial capacity, but also of fundamental differences between Western and Chinese understandings”. Within the Strategic Partnership the recognition of this important conceptual gap has been to some extent minimized by the two actors from different standpoints: on the one hand Europe, developing its “constructive engagement policy”, has expected China to gradually converge towards Western human rights standards mainly because its socio-economic development was regarded as potentially conducive also to political and cultural change. However, as Freeman and Geeraerts note, “of all liberal fallacies, none is more curious than the assumption” that China should be like the West because it has been getting rich like the West: this expectation is “as facile as the thesis that capitalism necessarily leads to liberty”.⁵⁴³ On the other hand, if it is important to recognize – in line with our theoretical and epistemological premises - that the differences in the conception of human rights result from the divergent cultures, histories and official policies of the two strategic partners, it is equally important not to look at human rights as a set of issues considered in isolation because “since the 1990s the Chinese Government has officially accepted much of the international conceptual and formal institutional framework in which human rights are discussed”.⁵⁴⁴ It is therefore against this background that we need to analyze the relevance of human rights for the evolution of the EU-China Strategic Partnership without neglecting the influence of the broader context of China’s new assertiveness as a global power and its evolving domestic politics.

The persistent difficulties of the human rights dialogue within the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership reflect first and foremost the broader conundrum represented for the PRC by the normative integration of the main human civil and political rights⁵⁴⁵ such those contained in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The lack of ratification of the ICCPR – which has been defined “the most authoritative legal instrument in the field of civil and political rights” and “probably the

⁵⁴² Maher, “The Elusive EU-China Partnership”, *ibid.*

⁵⁴³ Freeman and Geeraerts, 99.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁵ With the term “normative integration” we mean the process of internalization and implementation within a national legal system of international norms and standards which make the system itself more integrated into a broader international system.

most important human rights treaty in the world”⁵⁴⁶ – is indeed a meaningful case-study in this respect: it confirms a substantial ideational divergence which makes extremely complex selectively integrate core principles and rights of this kind in the PRC’s constitutional order, since they are still partly incompatible with some key-components of the Chinese system in its present ideological, political and legal configuration.⁵⁴⁷

In this respect the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue is not conducive to a incremental adaptation of the PRC to a current “human rights standard” which would have systemic implications for the Chinese party-state in terms of stability, sovereignty, legal structure and societal dimension. Within the Dialogue it should be recognized that the Chinese party-state is, under the present circumstances, still based on a set of structural elements which makes it unwilling to internalize civil and political rights such as those protected by the UN Covenant.⁵⁴⁸ The progress of the EU-China dialogue on human rights is therefore dependent on a complex and uncertain process of change and overall evolution of the Chinese party-state in a direction which should make compatible and “sustainable” the internalization of this kind of rights. As we will see, this does not seem to be the trend of more recent years and certainly it is not a priority of the present Chinese leadership. The dynamics of the EU-China human rights dialogue have been influenced by this broader context, as reflected by the evolving European policy approach and by the Chinese leadership’s increasing sensitivity to any process of internalization of norms and principles which can challenge the core interests and the preservation of the Chinese regime.

The chapter argues that, in this context, the key conceptual gap on human rights between Brussels and Beijing will continue to generate an extremely complex asymmetry in the bilateral relationship in terms of convergence of the interests-values continuum of the two strategic partners, thus undermining the “structural” strategic dimension of their

⁵⁴⁶ China signed on 5 October 1998 the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which had been adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200 A (XXI) on 16 December 1966 and entered into force on 23 march 1976. Sarah Joseph, Jenny Schultz and Melissa Castan, *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Right: Cases, Materials, and Commentary* (2nd edn. OUP 2004), 4.

⁵⁴⁷ Li Meiting, “China, Pariah Status and International Society”, PhD thesis, University of Exeter (January 2012).

⁵⁴⁸ The analysis in this chapter substantially takes advantage of my previous research in the field of International Human Rights Law. Several reflections that I will refer to on the challenges of internalizing in particular civil and political rights in the Chinese system had been elaborated in my MSt thesis: Massimo Ambrosetti, *China’s ratification of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Challenges and prospects*, dissertation for the MSt in IHRL, Oxford University (New College), Hilary Term, 2013.

Partnership. At the same time the acknowledgement of this situation should put under scrutiny a EU human rights policy still largely based on the paradigm of “constructive engagement” which faces an increasing Chinese resistance towards the potentially transformative impact of internalizing in the PRC’s legal and political system a set of rights that are at the heart of the EU’s identity and normative project but contrast with the identity of the Chinese party-state.

5.1 The EU-China Human Rights Dialogue in an evolving international and domestic context

On the European front, human rights have always been a key component of the EU’s interests-values continuum because they represent a constitutive element of the Union’s identity and they “play a crucial part in the legitimization of the EU as a polity and of its role as a foreign policy actor”.⁵⁴⁹ Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union considers human rights as an independent goal of Europe’s external action for their intrinsic value: the EU has developed policies which through “means of encouragement and dissuasion”⁵⁵⁰ have tried to preserve the consistency of the European approach in this field over the years. In this respect the new EU Global Strategy has reiterated the EU’s willingness to “champion the indivisibility and universality of human rights” and to⁵⁵¹ “live up to the values that have inspired [the EU’s] creation and development. These include respect for and promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. They encompass justice, solidarity, equality, nondiscrimination, pluralism, and respect for diversity. Living up consistently to our values internally will determine our external credibility and influence”.

In the PRC’s domestic and international behaviour vis-a-vis the human rights regimes we can find some constant guiding principles characterized by an overarching revisionist vision based on a “relativist” approach and a strong preference for economic and social rights v. civil and political rights, collective rights v. individual rights, obligations v. rights, the protection of sovereignty and non-interference v. the promotion of human rights.

⁵⁴⁹ Finamore, Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China, 70.

⁵⁵⁰ Finamore, Engagement as a Foreign Policy Strategy in EU relations with China, 71.

⁵⁵¹ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, Brussels June 2016, 15.

In the 1980s China's participation in various international human rights regimes and institutions was marked by sustained growth: the PRC became a member of the Commission on Human Rights (UNHCR) in 1982⁵⁵² and subscribed and ratified major human rights treaties.⁵⁵³ China's process of treaty ratification during three decades has underlined, in principle, its commitment to having its behaviour increasingly bound by human rights norms and "its domestic conduct exposed to intense international scrutiny and appraisal".⁵⁵⁴ Treaty ratification has thus gradually expanded China's cooperation with international treaty bodies and special procedures through its participation in the Human Rights Commission (UNCHR, since 2006 Human Rights Council-HRC) sessions and conferences; its regular submission of reports of implementation; its collaboration with OHCHR special rapporteurs and working groups; its interaction with the HRC on the Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR).⁵⁵⁵ This process of treaty ratification - which confirmed China's selective approach to human rights core treaties - has been substantially stopped, with the meaningful postponement, year after year, of the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The process of ratification has been smoother and faster when the treaties concerned protected rights which were closer to the Chinese vision of human rights and which did not affect the stability of the Chinese political and legal system. Overall, the PRC's approach has been characterized by a "revisionist strategy", aimed at reshaping the human rights discourse itself by rejecting a "comprehensive notion of human rights" that considers political and civil rights, socio-economic rights, individual and collective rights and national developmental rights as "mutually interdependent and indivisible".⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵² During that decade the Chinese government signed seven international human rights treaties: the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crimes of Apartheid; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees; the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees; and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). Ambrosetti, *China's ratification of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Challenges and prospects*, 12. See also in this respect Chen Dingding, "China's Participation in the International Human Rights Regime: a State Identity Perspective", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, (2009) 2.

⁵⁵³ CEDAW was ratified in 1980, CERD in 1982 as well the Convention and Protocol on Refugees; the Conventions on Genocide and on Apartheid in 1983; CAT in 1988. This process has continued over the years: by 2010 China had ratified 25 major human rights "legal documents under the UN framework", seven of which between 2000 and 2010. Li Meiting, "China, Pariah Status and International Society", 130.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid, 131.

⁵⁵⁵ Ambrosetti, *ibid*.

⁵⁵⁶ Deng Yong, *China's Struggle for Status, The Realignment of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), 92.

During the phase of increasing treaty accession in the 1980s and 1990s – which culminated with the signing of the two UN Covenants – China’s international behaviour had partly become more sensitive to the idea of human rights because of their possible negative impact on the PRC’s national interests and its international reputation.⁵⁵⁷ As Deng Yong has written,⁵⁵⁸ the effects of the violent repression of the demonstrations in Tienanmen Square in June 1989 and the international pressure put on China by the liberal democracies, which had reaffirmed “human rights as a foundational principle of the post-cold war world order”,⁵⁵⁹ underscored “a gap between the CCP polity and the rights-respecting great-power community”.⁵⁶⁰ As Deng writes in this regard, “after the cold war, human rights have been embraced to such an extent as to exemplify an international norm, commonly understood to be collective understanding of the proper behaviour of actors in the international society”.⁵⁶¹ The PRC has constantly rejected a Western-centred notion of human rights but in its historical phase of reforms, opening and integration in the international system, the PRC’s regime felt that the human rights issue - with “remarkably persistent, if diverse, effects on China’s relations”⁵⁶² - could become a serious “liability” at the international level.

This background helps us to better understand why, for instance, China chose to accede in 1986 to the Convention Against Torture (CAT), which protects one of the most fundamental and non-derogable of rights:⁵⁶³ the response quoted by Kent in this regard, “because of [China’s] obligations as a large power”, seems to stress the PRC’s sensitivity to the recognition of its international status. Moreover, as Lee points out,⁵⁶⁴ “when the Convention was signed in 1988, China was still relatively unsophisticated in its appreciation of the international human rights regime and how the mechanisms at the UN worked (and in particular of the role and voice of NGOs). But above all, it was pre-

⁵⁵⁷ Deng Yong, *China’s Struggle for Status*, 87.

⁵⁵⁸ Deng Yong, *China’s Struggle for Status*, 69.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Deng Yong, *China’s Struggle for Status*, 71. In this respect this author notes that “human rights are often held as an international standard required of all sovereign states. In parallel to its unprecedented salience, an impressive body of IR literature has been produced to explore where, when, why, and how the norm succeeds or fails to enforce behavioural claims on target sovereign states.”

⁵⁶² Ibid., 73.

⁵⁶³ As Katie Lee writes, China signed the CAT and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment on 12 December 1986 and ratified it on 4 October 1988 making, a reservation against Article 20 and a declaration against Article 30(1). At the time of China’s ratification, the Convention was one of the treaty bodies with the lowest memberships of all. Katie Lee, “China and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Prospects and Challenges”, *Chinese Journal of International Law* (2007) 6, 452.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

Tiananmen and China had yet to feel the full force of international opprobrium for China's abuse of human rights that then ensued and has continued to these days".

In this sense, in the post-Tiananmen period the "rejuvenated human rights norm in world politics represented an unprecedented source of disadvantage the PRC had to wrestle with in its international relations".⁵⁶⁵ This background resulted in tenacious international scrutiny of China's human rights during the 1990s and in partly negative political images, which the Chinese leadership particularly resented on the grounds that it "continued to invite prejudiced treatment that significantly disadvantaged its national interests".⁵⁶⁶ The PRC's response to this situation of "human rights stigma" was a mix of compliance and contestation. In post-Tiananmen China, in parallel with an impressive improvement of the economic welfare of the country's population, a significant process of strengthening of socio-economic rights and - to a much lesser extent - of individual freedoms took place. The perception of the role played by human rights within the evolving international system of the 1990s was thus a major factor in favouring the Chinese leadership's decision to sign the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the two other fundamental components, along with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UNDHR), of the so-called "International Bill of Human Rights". In this way the PRC recognized implicitly and with persistent reservations, that "no matter how imperfectly promoted, human rights have become a source of the states' international legitimacy in ways analogous to how some of the original Eurocentric ideas evolved into the underpinning values of the globalized Westphalian interstate system".⁵⁶⁷

While not openly acknowledging that human rights constitute an essential component of a "new standard of civilization",⁵⁶⁸ the Chinese regime implicitly recognized the influence of the standard of human rights not only "as a source of legitimacy and authority, but also [as] a constraining power that inflicts restrictions on states".⁵⁶⁹ As Li Meiting writes, "the case of human rights in China is a typical example, which displays both the positive and negative impact of the human rights standard".⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁵ Lee, "China and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights", 78.

⁵⁶⁶ Lee, "China and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights", 77.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Li Meiting, *ibid.*, 117. This author notes in this respect that "the standard of human rights, as a normative dimension of the new standard of civilization, complements the material power and legal dimensions in explaining the sources of state legitimacy and authority as well as political boundaries and membership criteria in international society."

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 124.

China rising in the 1990s as a global power on the world's scene perceived – especially after the intense international scrutiny originated by the Tiananmen crisis – that the signing of the two UN Covenants was necessary to reaffirm the legitimacy of its regime and its status as a “responsible stakeholder” of the international system.⁵⁷¹ In that period “potent claims for respect of human rights from multilateral institutions, leading democracies and NGOs did erode China’s psychological and institutional barriers to receptivity to the international norm”⁵⁷² while, with regard particularly to socio-economic rights, the efforts in the 1990s to improve China’s rights-respecting records grew out also of the necessity of domestic reforms. However, this pragmatic approach continued, on the one hand, to include contesting what the PRC regarded as “Western domination of the human rights discourse and self-serving deployment of the standard itself; on the other hand, it tried “to steer attention toward its own areas of comparative advantage in social and economic rights”,⁵⁷³ while continuing to promote, at the same time, relativism on the whole concept of human rights.

In the 1990s - a period of “intense scrutiny” for China in the field of human rights - the EU’s approach to the issue of human rights in China was substantially driven by the key paradigm of “constructive engagement”: as we have seen, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crisis sanctions were approved by Brussels against the Chinese regime but they were rapidly lifted just after one year, apart from the arms embargo. As Finamore observes, historically the EU “has been generally reluctant in using sanctions as an instrument of its human rights policy” and “despite its importance in the EU’s foreign policy” human rights conditionality has not played “a major role in its relations with China”.⁵⁷⁴ Dialogue has been Europe’s main instrument for interacting with China on human rights: framework indications of this approach were already contained in the European Commission’s communication on human rights, democracy and development cooperation of 1991.⁵⁷⁵ Reaffirming the universal value of fundamental rights, the document stated that, in choosing its policy options, “the Community will whenever possible give preference to the positive approach of support and encouragement” while

⁵⁷¹ Ambrosetti, *ibid.*

⁵⁷² Ann Kent, *China, the United Nations, and Human Rights: The Limits of Compliance* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Rosemary Foot, *Rights Beyond Borders: The Global Community and the Struggle over Human Rights in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁷⁴ Finamore, *ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁷⁵ European Commission, *Human rights, democracy and development cooperation policy*, Communication from the Commission, Brussels, SEC (1991) 61 final.

promoting “frank and trusting dialogue on human rights”.⁵⁷⁶ This general approach was specifically applied to China in 1995 by the Commission’s first policy paper on China which warned against the risks of “relying solely on frequent and strident declarations” which could “dilute the message or lead to knee-jerk reactions from the Chinese government”.⁵⁷⁷ This approach, based on a “combination of carefully timed public statements, formal private discussions and practical cooperation”, has substantially characterized over the years the Human Rights Dialogue with China which stands out as the only “regular, institutionalized dialogue devoted solely to human rights between the European Union and a third country”.⁵⁷⁸ This policy of engagement has not been significantly affected by the increasing recognition – already underlined in the 2001 policy review document - that there existed a growing divergence between Brussels and Beijing in particular on the protection and promotion of civil and political rights and fundamental freedoms. This is still, as we will see, the major stumbling block in the EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights.

5.2 Civil and political rights as a persistent, structural element of divergence in the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue

China since the mid-2000s has perceived its selective approach to human rights as more “sustainable” in terms of international pressure and recognition of its status as a major “stakeholder” of the international system.⁵⁷⁹ This change of attitude of the Chinese authorities has been motivated by a set of realistic considerations which has, to some extent, circumscribed the perception, as Li Meiting writes, that “conformation to the human rights standard... is an important source of state legitimacy and soft power” and of “international recognition conferred by states that uphold the same sets of values and rules”.⁵⁸⁰ The concept of a “human rights standard” can be a useful analytical tool because, even though the PRC does not subscribe to such a concept, the Chinese regime has been acutely aware of it and of its implications. China’s rise on the world’s scene has

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Quoted in Finamore, *ibid.*, 71

⁵⁷⁸ Finamore, *ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁷⁹ Ambrosetti, *ibid.*

⁵⁸⁰ Li Meiting, *China, Pariah Status and International Society* (PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, January 2012) 123. As this author writes, we have to consider the standard of human rights as a standard of state behaviour which is both prescribing and proscribing behaviour in order to promote and protect human rights. In this sense he notes that: “the power of the standard of human rights is two-fold. It is not only a source of legitimacy and authority but also a constraining power that inflicts restrictions on states. Moreover the right to shape the standard of human rights reflects and reinforces the status of the rule-makers as the architects of the international normative structure.”

made the Chinese regime's position on human rights more assertive: the impressive growth of China's "comprehensive power" along with the degree of China's economic integration and "market civilization" - which have been regarded as "critical to the formation of a new 'standard of civilization' in an age of globalization"⁵⁸¹ - have increasingly linked the human rights discourse to its compatibility with China's core interests and guiding principles.⁵⁸²

In the late 1990s the Chinese signing of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) had also raised in Europe expectations that this key treaty - once ratified - could be a facilitating factor for a new process of political domestic reforms conducive to gradual internalization of the principles and norms contained in the Covenant. Notwithstanding this important signing, however, a fundamental - although not openly declared - reversal of any real process of democratization and political reform had taken place in the PRC after Tiananmen. Even though the signing of the ICCPR and of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) contributed to reinforce "the benign narrative...of the Chinese reform process as a preliminary phase for substantive changes in the political and institutional structure of the Chinese party-state,"⁵⁸³ from the late 1990s on the focus of China's debate on domestic reforms has indeed gradually shifted away from the most sensitive issues of a possible political evolution.

As Jonathan Spence and other historians have noted in this respect,⁵⁸⁴ in the 1990s "the Chinese leadership adroitly kept on adopting policies which could be read as a message of renewed commitment to a broader reformist agenda." When the 15th Party Congress (the first Party Congress after the death of Deng Xiaoping) was convened in September 1997 - a year before China's signature of the ICCPR - "the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seemed interested in carrying on with Deng Xiaoping's unfinished agenda on political reforms but the real thrust of Jiang Zemin's report was only on economic reforms." As a matter of fact, political reforms "trailed behind economic reforms and the Chinese leadership was much more liberal and willing to borrow capitalist economic experiences but very reluctant to follow Western political

⁵⁸¹ The specific argument of the influence in this context of "market civilization" has been developed by Brett Bowden and Leonard Seabrooke (eds.), *Global Standards of Market Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁸² Ambrosetti, *ibid.*

⁵⁸³ Ambrosetti, *Power and Influence*, 64. On these issues see Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China. From Revolution through Reform* (New York: Norton & Company 2004), 127-159.

⁵⁸⁴ Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (2nd ed., New York: Norton, 1999).

practices”.⁵⁸⁵ When we consider the debate on political reforms at the time, it is necessary to bear in mind, as Jonathan Spence has argued⁵⁸⁶, that “after Tiananmen, when the Chinese communist leadership has talked about political reform, it did not refer to the Western democratic arrangements... To Deng Xiaoping and his successors, the Western model represented a recipe for instability, destruction of socialist norms and values and possible political crisis... During the reforms process Beijing was prepared to accept modern technology, science, investment and trade from the West for the sake of its four modernizations, being a lot more reserved and resistant to Western political traditions, values and practices.”⁵⁸⁷

This approach was substantially confirmed by the CCP Congresses between 1997 and 2012, while the 19th Congress can be regarded as a closing point for any possibility of political reform not compatible with the renewed Leninist orthodoxy of the Chinese party-state. As Maher has written, the CCP has consistently portrayed democracy as unsuitable for China, and alleged that Western ideas and values are “dangerous”, “subversive” and a threat to China’s social cohesion and stability⁵⁸⁸.

The internal thinking of the Chinese leadership was exposed by the leak of a secret memo known as Document no. 9 that was circulated among high ranking party cadres in 2013: “the document listed ‘seven perils’ considered by the Chinese leadership to represent threats to its authority, including ‘western constitutional democracy’, the promotion of ‘universal values’ of human rights, Western-inspired ideas of news media independence and civic participation, strong pro-market or ‘neo-liberal’ economic policies, and ‘nihilist’ criticisms of the Communist Party’s past”.⁵⁸⁹ As Godemont and Vasselier have observed,⁵⁹⁰ the focus at the 19th Party congress was on “checks and oversight” in the context of “an authoritarian modernization of the centralized party-state” and of its paramount leading role for the Chinese state and society. In the light of the outcome of the 19th Chinese Communist Party congress, principles of liberal democracy and the connected individual civil and political rights have been confirmed not only as incompatible but also threatening the foundations of the Chinese party-state.

⁵⁸⁵ Spence, *ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 65.

⁵⁸⁸ Maher, *ibid.*, 963.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 964.

⁵⁹⁰ Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid.*, 4.

In the context of an increasingly complex interaction with this “rejuvenated” PRC, on the European front it is important to underscore the tendency of a number of member states of completely delegating “to the EU their capacity to discuss human rights with China, limiting themselves, at best, to submitting lists of cases to the EU”.⁵⁹¹ This attitude – to a large extent driven by opportunistic reasons – instead of reinforcing a common EU’s position in the interaction with China on human rights in fact seems to relegate only to the rather bureaucratic dimension of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue and of the Summits joint statements a key issue for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

It is clear that in this context the difficulty of establishing a substantial and constructive dialogue on civil and political rights and fundamental freedoms is also reflected in the postponement sine die of China’s ratification of the ICCPR. The question has gradually faded away in the last years as a point of reference in the Chinese public debate: the process possibly conducive to this event has registered very few significant steps forward in terms of legislative measures and policies aimed at achieving this goal.⁵⁹² As we have seen, the elements of context influencing China’s signing and possible ratification of the ICCPR have changed over the years along with the perceptions, objectives and “trade-offs” related to the internalization of the Covenant. Moreover, in 1998 China “might not have fully appreciated the significance of what it was doing in terms of accepting international norms”.⁵⁹³ As Lee had already written thirteen years ago, it seems still true that “what is less likely is that ratification will be driven by a desire to embrace civil and political rights as is generally understood.”⁵⁹⁴ In this context manifestations of persistent attention to the issue of ICCPR ratification from representatives of the Chinese “civil society” have decreased and by now these initiatives seem “voces clamantium in deserto”⁵⁹⁵ which try to underline human rights as a component of China’s “civilizational” heritage and the need to ratify the ICCPR in light of the PRC’s role as a great power on the world’s scene.

Any perspective of ratification is at present unrealistic because this decision would imply for China acceding to a very substantial international regime and to make it

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² Ambrosetti, *ibid.*

⁵⁹³ Lee *ibid.*, 473.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ The petitions presented to this end by groups of intellectuals before the UPRs look like a cry from a distant past. China Media Project’s translation, *Deutsche Welle*, (March 5 2013). <http://www.dw.de/china-open-letter-calls-for-political-reforms/a-16632243>.

binding for its domestic legal system⁵⁹⁶, exactly what the present Chinese leadership wants to avoid with regard to its approach to the issue of human rights.

5.3 The EU-China Human Rights Dialogue: conceptual gaps leading to a structural stalemate?

The main trends that we have tried to delineate in the previous sections have influenced the evolution of the issue of human rights in the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and they are vividly reflected by the results of the 37th round of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue which was held in Brussels on 1-2 April 2019.⁵⁹⁷ The fact that this was the 37th time that Brussels and Beijing have jointly addressed the issue of human rights without substantial change in their respective positions obviously confirms – beyond the repetition of the bureaucratic procedures – that there are persistent diverging views in an area that has been regarded as a critical test for cooperation since the inception of the Strategic Partnership.

If we read through the EU Commission statement released after the meeting we can see that the two sides were interested first and foremost in presenting and supporting the respective positions without finding much common ground in terms of shared views and action⁵⁹⁸: from the positions expressed by the two strategic partners we can see emerging – once more – the conceptual dichotomies which have characterized, over the years, the interaction of Europe and China on human rights. As the EEAS press release underlines “the EU Special Representative on Human Rights... stressed the importance of the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights”. Here we can find the first traditional dichotomy between Brussels and Beijing on the basic concepts of human rights: European universalism versus Chinese relativism.

The debate between the EU and China on the so-called “universality” of human rights and the cultural diversity of the contexts in which they have to be implemented clearly reflects a broader debate. The “universal” dimension of human rights is a dynamic “deontological” perspective and not merely a static “ontological” concept, in the sense that it reflects also the aspirations and the objectives of the “human rights project” (and

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 124. In this changed context, the signing of the ICCPR in 1998 needs to be better understood not only in light of the historical background of the Chinese process of reforms but also in the broader framework of China’s significant process of treaty ratification in the human rights field that has been evolving since the early 1980s.

⁵⁹⁷ Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁹⁸ “The European Union and China held their 37th Human Rights Dialogue”, EEAS press release, Brussels 2 April 2019.

of its philosophical, moral and political implications) rather than a supposed reality of how human rights are universally perceived and understood.⁵⁹⁹ By addressing this subject, several authors have underlined that an “interpretive” approach is a prerequisite in order to provide, as Tamara Relis notes,⁶⁰⁰ a critical account of some important remaining gaps in our reflection upon international human rights theory and practice.⁶⁰¹ The idea of the “universality” of human rights has been questioned by arguing that human rights have been regarded as universal because they are an important component and a product of that kind of cultural hegemony that Richard Rorty defines the “Western Enlightenment project”.⁶⁰² In light of our epistemological assumptions, we cannot but agree with the consideration that the background underlying the more recent concept of “universal” human rights is in fact the outcome, as Ardeshiri⁶⁰³ writes, of a historical, political and cultural process. The European position does not reject the idea that fundamental human rights are the stratification of a very long process of moral, cultural, political, social and economic advancement of a set of principles, identities rules and standards applied to our individual and collective life: for this reason they do not simply reflect an existing reality but they represent the outcome of this transformative process. “Universal” rights cannot be therefore identified in “natural” rights because they do not stem from a state of nature codified by natural law based upon universal principles of rationality and of human good.⁶⁰⁴

As Charles Beitz has written, the idea of the “universality” of human rights “understood as the property of belonging to or being claimable by any person ‘as such’ in any society simply in virtue of their humanity” is not unproblematic. Naturalistic theories on human rights have been challenged by “agreement theories” which take into account the cultural, social, legal diversity related to human rights. In this sense human rights are “the expression of a set of important overlapping moral expectations to which

⁵⁹⁹ Ambrosetti, *ibid.*

⁶⁰⁰ Tamara Relis, “Human rights and Southern Realities”, in *Human Rights Quarterly* 33 (2011) 509

⁶⁰¹ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, for instance, analyzing the human rights dimension in the Muslim world in its relationship with religion, observes that religious texts too “like all other texts, are open to a variety of interpretations”. Abdullahi A. An-Na’im and Louis Henkin *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting (American Society of International Law)* vol. 94 (April 5-8, 2000), 95-103.

⁶⁰² Rorty is quoted by Henry Steiner, Philip Alston, Ryan Goodman, *International Human Rights in Context. Law, Politics, Moral.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), 519.

⁶⁰³ Masoud Rajabi-Ardeshiri, “The Rights of the Child in the Islamic Context: The Challenges of the Local and the Global”, *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 17 (2009), 475.

⁶⁰⁴ Charles Beitz, *The idea of human rights*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72.

different cultures hold themselves and others accountable”.⁶⁰⁵ In this respect it is interesting to note the theoretical affinity of this approach with Qin Yaqing’s reflection on the “relational identities” of international actors shaped by their essence and practice as “cultural communities”.

The position of the EU can be considered close to a concept of “universality” of human rights as the product of the cultural and political consensus, over time, which has been substantiated and formalized through International Law. This normativity has created a “core group” of fundamental human rights - irrespective of their historical origins – which is perceived as substantially uncontroversial also from the point of view of cultural diversity: their “universality” is indeed represented by the international recognition of their validity *erga omnes*. From this perspective the EU position has responded to the challenge of cultural diversity also by implementing human rights, as Healy puts it, “in culturally inflected ways”, without at the same time compromising the fundamental standards which are inherent to their advancement. As Michael Freeman notes, an approach sensitive to these needs in terms of application has been followed by several international human rights institutions “which have generally accepted that universal human-rights standards ought to be interpreted differently in different cultural contexts”.⁶⁰⁶

Since the advancement of human rights is still a “work in progress” the potential “universality” of a larger number of human rights is nowadays confronted by international relations which are increasingly less Western-centred in terms of diffusion of power and value systems. As we have seen, in this context the Chinese human rights concept takes a clearly relativist approach which questions not only the universality of human rights but also their interdependence.⁶⁰⁷ The Chinese position in addressing these issues reflects also an approach which has been shared by the proponents of a human rights vision based on “Asian values”.

This is an element of context which will continue to influence the overall attitude of the Chinese authorities vis-à-vis the need of political and legal changes related to a further process of internalization of human rights. As Li Meiting has underlined in this

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid. As Beitz notes, “these theories conceptualize human rights as standards that are or might be objects of agreement among members of cultures whose moral and political values are in various aspects dissimilar”.

⁶⁰⁶ Michael Freeman, *Human Rights*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 124

⁶⁰⁷ Zhang, Chi, “The Conceptual gap on Human Rights in China-Europe Relations” in Pan Zhongqi (ed.), *Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations, Global Governance, Human Rights and Strategic Partnerships* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 86.

respect “just as the Western countries associate human rights with liberal democracy”, China will continue to inject “its own civilization values into the concept of human rights and international norms at large”.⁶⁰⁸ On the international stage, China has escalated its challenge to the universality of human rights by successfully supporting the passage of a resolution at the Human Rights Council that has replaced state accountability for protecting human rights with a model that centers on “cooperation among states.”

At the same time, it is important to consider that - since “the concept of human rights respects autonomy - it not only allows but also celebrates considerable cultural diversity”, which is a fundamental characteristic of some important trends which are making the international system more multipolar and multicultural. In this complex and evolving context extreme cultural relativism can, on the contrary, be used “as a tool to advance an agenda aimed at safeguarding the interests of ruling classes, social and economic groups or an outmoded concept of national sovereignty”. In this way cultural relativism, as Freeman notes, risks of being “biased against the weak”: the debate on cultural relativism has indeed often failed to recognize the difference between states and cultures and to analyze the complexity of cultures. For this reason, some of its categories – such as imperialism, Western cultural hegemony etc. – can be easily deconstructed.

In this perspective the ambitions of the European Union of being – as an international actor – also an “ethical power” has raised its awareness that extreme cultural relativism⁶⁰⁹ can seriously undermine the whole “human rights project” because it can play – as Elvin Hatch⁶¹⁰ points out – “into the hands of oppressors and supporters of the status quo”. Moreover, the absence of shared foundations and standards is seen as problematic for a project which necessarily has to be based on ethics and politics, because it reflects – as Rorty has written – an idea of the International Society conceived as a “moral community”.

The PRC’s approach to human rights is undeniably inscribed in a conceptual framework still characterized by a specific Chinese “hierarchy of human rights” in which they are seen not as a limit but as an instrument of state power and, for this reason,

⁶⁰⁸ With regard to the issue of “Asian values” and human rights see Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 105-123. In particular, Donnelly argues that, if we consider the relationship between the individual and the state in the Confucian tradition, we cannot strictly speak of a “different approach to “human dignity”. In this sense Donnelly doubts that the focus on economic and social rights, the emphasis on duties instead of rights and the priority of social order and harmony can be regarded as a distinct Chinese or Asian vision of human rights. Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, 108.

⁶⁰⁹ Michael Freeman, *Human Rights*, 2nd edition (OUP, Oxford 2011), 125

⁶¹⁰ Henry Steiner, Philip Alston, Ryan Goodman, *International Human Rights in Context*, 523.

submitted to the preeminent role of national sovereignty and to the staunch defence of the principle, from an international point of view, of “non interference”.⁶¹¹ The priority given by China to an “absolutist” concept of sovereignty (and its corollary of non interference) has made its approach diverge substantially from that of the EU on the occasion of major crises with humanitarian implications: the case of Darfur was emblematic in this sense. During the crisis in Darfur the EU regarded the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine as an innovative response to major humanitarian crises which was justified by the assumption not only that a “passive strategy of dealing with violations of sovereignty” was no longer sufficient but also that “an active strategy that addresses the pathology itself..., both pragmatically and by the very conception of modern sovereignty” was required.⁶¹²

While the PRC did not oppose the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1999 - in a phase of active convergence towards human rights standards, as the signature an year earlier of the ICCPR had underscored - the decade which opened the new Millennium witnessed increasingly assertive state-centric attitudes of China and Russia and of other emerging global powers. Darfur was a particularly contested example of this inability to act because of diverging views on non-interference and the doctrines of humanitarian intervention and the R2P.⁶¹³ A very reluctant position was indeed expressed by the PRC towards the R2P doctrine⁶¹⁴ by underscoring that “there must not be any wavering over the principles of respecting state sovereignty and non-interference” and by making a clear distinction between R2P and humanitarian intervention.⁶¹⁵ Since the EU has set “the promotion of democracy, good governance and the rule of law as one of its policy objectives”,⁶¹⁶ China’s view of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference “are in direct tension with the EU’s conviction that foreign interventions, even foreign

⁶¹¹ In this sense both Lee, 467 and Li, 147.

⁶¹² Michael Reisman, “Sovereignty and Human Rights in Contemporary International Law“, 874

⁶¹³ Nsongurua Udombana, “When Neutrality is a Sin: The Darfur Crisis and the Crisis of Humanitarian Intervention in Sudan”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 27 (2005) 1149-1199 .

⁶¹⁴ During the Darfur crisis, as Finamore has written, Beijing confirmed its strong reluctance to “adopt sanctions which may pave the way for military intervention”, insisting in a consistent way “on the principle that the assent of all involved parties is a necessary precondition for peacekeeping operations”. Finamore, “Normative differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security, 168.

⁶¹⁵ Statement by Ambassador Liu Zhenmin at the Plenary Session of the General Assembly on the question of responsibility to protect. New York: Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations, 2009.

⁶¹⁶ Finamore, *ibid.*, 168.

military interventions, can be both necessary and legitimate to prevent or stop gross human rights abuses and atrocities”.⁶¹⁷

Europe and China’s different positions on sovereignty and non-interference vis-à-vis humanitarian intervention have been evident on the occasion of crises such as NATO’s operations in Lybia and the civil war in Syria. From a Chinese point of view humanitarian intervention has been seen with growing suspicion, as a means often used by Western powers to induce regime-change for so-called humanitarian reasons. China has promoted the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference over universal human rights also because of its sensitivity to “opening itself to outside criticism of its own domestic political system and practices”, including its own record in terms of political and religious freedoms and treatment of ethnic minorities. In this way, Maher has argued, “China’s policy of non-interference has enabled it to deflect foreign criticism of its own internal actions, avoid entanglements in the domestic affairs of other countries, and remain neutral over contentious and controversial issues”.⁶¹⁸ It is also undeniable that realpolitik motivations - linked to “China’s need to secure export markets and maintain access to oil, gas and other raw materials” - has led it to engage and enter into partnerships with regimes which have very problematic records in terms of democracy and human rights standards.⁶¹⁹

In this context the R2P doctrine has been regarded by the PRC as also the by-product of an approach mainly propounded by Western liberal democracies - with inherent double standards, risks of misuse and, in some cases, possible hidden agendas. China has always refused⁶²⁰ not only to accept an evolving definition of sovereignty which implies that human security cannot be regarded simply as a national concept but has also perceived the R2P doctrine as being shaped by “the global North” against an increasingly influential “global South” in which China still positions itself. The objective of making the R2P a significant step in the direction of shared norms supporting a broader notion of "actionable" international legality/lawfulness, has clearly been stalled in the more recent years because of the lack of a more consensual application of this doctrine.

⁶¹⁷ Maher, *ibid.*, 971

⁶¹⁸ Maher, *ibid.*, 972.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.* In line with this approach the PRC has regularly used or threatened “to use its veto power in the UNSC to block resolutions that target regimes western countries have tried to isolate and punish”, as happened in case of Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, the military junta that ruled Myanmar until 2011, and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad.

⁶²⁰ Christopher Joyner, “The responsibility to Protect”, *Virginia Journal of International Law*, vol. 47:3, 706.

As Karen Smith observes, the UN Security Council “is likely to become even less amenable to taking strong measures against governments or groups accused of perpetrating mass atrocities. The apogee of R2P may already have passed”.⁶²¹

Notwithstanding these difficulties, it is meaningful to note that the 2016 EU Global Strategy has forcefully restated that the EU “will act globally to address the root causes of conflict and poverty, and to champion the indivisibility and universality of human rights” stressing once more the connection between its strategic goals and the key dimension of universal and indivisible human rights.

In the framework of the EU-China Dialogue the attempt to avoid the implications of the substantial divide between the concepts of human rights of the two strategic partners – as has been often the case on the occasion of EU-China summits – is evident, in the report of the latest session of the Dialogue, in the enumeration of a rather diversified set of human rights issues, ranging from the rights of the child to counter-terrorism , without any sign of a true convergence on common strategic objectives, as a EU official has observed.⁶²² The EU addressed, once more, the key issue of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue by highlighting “the deteriorating situation of civil and political rights in China, marked by the arrest and detention of a significant number of human rights defenders and lawyers”.⁶²³ Expectations of progress in this domain are extremely limited because the Chinese party-state’s approach to civil and political rights, - which are highly individual - is based, as Kent has written, on a view of society “as an organic whole whose collective rights prevail over the individual, the idea that man exists for the state rather than vice versa and that rights, rather than having any absolute value, derive from the state, have been themes prevailing in old as well as new China”.⁶²⁴

This other fundamental dichotomy with the European approach has been reinforced by the recent political trends in the PRC but it also rooted, from a legal point of view, in article 51 of the Chinese Constitution which posits that the Chinese citizens “in exercising their freedom and rights, may not infringe upon the interests of the state or society”.⁶²⁵ The constitutional text, moreover, limits the enjoyment of fundamental rights by corresponding duties, as in article 33 of the Constitution which reads: “Every citizen is

⁶²¹ Karen E. Smith, “The EU and the Responsibility to Protect in an Illiberal Era”, *Dahrendorf Forum Working Paper n°3*, 21 August 2018, 21.

⁶²² Interview with a EEAS official, by the author, May 2019.

⁶²³ “The European Union and China held their 37th Human Rights Dialogue”, *ibid.*

⁶²⁴ Anne Kent, *Between Freedom and Subsistence: China and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.

⁶²⁵ Chinese Constitution, 1982.

entitled to the rights and at the same time must perform the duties prescribed by the Constitution and the Law”. It is interesting to note that in 2004 an amendment was added to this same article to declare that “the state respects and safeguards human rights”: it introduced for the first time in Chinese official legal terminology the term “human rights”.⁶²⁶ Notwithstanding this important addition, it is undeniable that the PRC’s Constitution still has, in several regards, a significant level of incompatibility with civil and political rights such those contained in the ICCPR.

The pre-eminence of state interests over the rights of the individual as well as that of collective rights over individual rights is a constitutive part of the Chinese approach to human rights that has not changed over the years. It has not changed as well China’s strong focus on economic and social rights: during the last meeting of the EU-China Dialogue this priority was confirmed by the Chinese delegation which “focused on achievements in economic and social rights, in particular as regards employment, poverty alleviation and social protection”.⁶²⁷ It is interesting to note that China’s commitment “to this class of rights ahead of civil and political rights”⁶²⁸, made the process of ratification of the ICESR rather expeditious: the treaty – which had been signed on the eve of President Jiang Zemin’s visit to Washington on 27 October 1997 – was ratified in 2001 while the freezing of any prospects of structural political reform explains the stalemate on the ICCPR.⁶²⁹

In response to the Chinese delegation’s focus on economic and social rights during the 37th Dialogue session the EU, “while acknowledging that China has made progress on economic and social rights, ...insisted that equal weight should be given to political and civil rights”.⁶³⁰ Furthermore, the European side underscored that “international laws and standards are universal and must be applied accordingly”: for this reason the EU expressed, once more, its expectations that China would “expedite the process of ratifying

⁶²⁶ Zhang Chi, *ibid.*, 91. The set of constitutional amendments passed by the national People’s Congress in 2004 have indeed inserted for the first time in the Chinese constitution an explicit pledge “to respect and protect human rights”.

⁶²⁷ “The European Union and China held their 37th Human Rights Dialogue”, *ibid.*

Katie Lee, “China and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Prospects and Challenges”, *Chinese Journal of International Law* (2007) 6, 449.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁹ As Zhang Chi writes, the ICESR’s ratification and the incremental implementation of its provisions are in line with the party-state’s enactment of Karl Marx’s admonition that “rights could never go beyond the social economic structure and the social culture”. Zhang Chi, *ibid.*, 86.

⁶³⁰ “The European Union and China held their 37th Human Rights Dialogue”, *ibid.*

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, signed by China in 1998, and implement the recommendations of UN human rights bodies”.⁶³¹

On the basis of the elements that we have already delineated it is not surprising that, 21 years from the signature of the treaty, China has not yet ratified the ICCPR: the evolution of the PRC’s approach to human rights based on traditional relativist arguments - which “emphasize a country’s cultural, societal and economic conditions in determining its human rights practices”⁶³² - makes realistically this perspective “*incertus an, incertus quando*”. In parallel, at the domestic level, the public debate on civil and political rights has been substantially sidelined by the authorities while there have been constant attempts of the government to minimize the societal demand for this kind of rights. Even though comments and recommendations related to ratification of the ICCPR were advanced by numerous UN member states both at China’s 2013 and 2018 Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR), the present “*impasse*” is due to “the slowing down and weakening of the two driving factors which had facilitated in the 1990s the signing of the two UN Covenants, namely the perception of an instrumental role played by human rights both for the recognition of China’s international status and for its process of domestic reforms”.⁶³³ In the last two decades, China has tried to minimize the role of human rights as “a yardstick for international standing”⁶³⁴ and its process of domestic reforms, as we have seen, has not certainly been driven by priorities related to the civil and political dimension. Addressing the interconnection between the advancement of human rights and the need for structural reforms, Risse and Sikkink pointed out that “stable improvements in human rights conditions usually require some measure of political transformation and can be regarded as one aspect of liberalization processes. Enduring human rights changes, therefore, go hand in hand with domestic structural changes.”⁶³⁵

⁶³¹ Ibid. As Lee has written, it is fair to note that “there is no country in the world whose legal system is in complete conformity with the ICCPR. This demonstrates that the ratification of the ICCPR is a very sophisticated issue.” Katie Lee, *ibid.* Frank Ching, *China: The Truth about its Human Rights Record* (Rider 2008), 10.

⁶³² Ambrosetti, *ibid.*

Sonya Sceats and Shaun Breslin, “China and the Human Rights System”, Chatham House Report, October 2012.

http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/International%20Law/r1012_sceatsbreslin.pdf.

⁶³³ Ibid.

⁶³⁴ Deng Yong, *China’s Struggle for Status. The Realignment of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91.

⁶³⁵ Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, “The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction”, in Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, (eds.) *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3-4.

The significant conceptual gap on human rights has been also underlined by the fact that China, during the 2019 session of the Dialogue, “emphasized the outcome of the Universal Periodic Review of China and stressed its approach to interpreting international laws and standards in the light of its national conditions”.⁶³⁶ The outcome of the two last Universal Period Reviews, beyond the formal statements on China’s improvements and constructive and cooperative attitude, has indeed been rather problematic for Beijing. The degree of sensitivity and contestation which defines some of the above-mentioned issues had already been underlined in 2013 by the Chinese authorities’ approach in the framework of Beijing’s cooperation with the Human Rights Council on its second Universal Periodic Review (UPR)⁶³⁷ and within the bilateral and multilateral human rights dialogues Beijing has been engaged in.

Even though the Chinese participation in the UPR had been broadly described in the report of the working group on the UPR as “constructive and cooperative”,⁶³⁸ it was stressed then - as underlined by major NGOs - that there was “a continuing record of human rights abuses”⁶³⁹ stemming from systemic unresolved problems related to civil and political rights. China’s third Universal Periodic Review - held in Geneva in 2018 - took place in a context of increasing reports on the internment of ethnic Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang “re-education camps”.⁶⁴⁰ Preoccupations in this regard were echoed by the EU in the last session of the Human Rights Dialogue which “addressed the issues of the protection of freedom of religion and belief, the rights of persons belonging to minorities, and the situation in Xinjiang and Tibet. The EU raised (the issue of) the system of political re-education camps which has been established in Xinjiang as a worrying development” expecting China to allow meaningful, unsupervised and unrestricted access to Xinjiang for independent observers, including for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Special Procedures”.⁶⁴¹ In the framework of the Dialogue the EU also reiterated, in line with recommendations contained in the annex to the UN Human Rights High Commissioner letter on China’s UPR, its opposition to capital punishment in all cases

⁶³⁶ “The European Union and China held their 37th Human Rights Dialogue”, *ibid.*

⁶³⁷ Li Meiting, *China, Pariah Status and International Society*, 133.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁹ Lee, *ibid.*, 456.

⁶⁴⁰ These issues were mentioned in the annex to the letter of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet to the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi. In August 2018, when questioned about the detention and the camps during China’s review by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD),

United Nations Council for Human Rights, Universal Period review China 2018. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/CNindex.aspx>

⁶⁴¹ “The European Union and China held their 37th Human Rights Dialogue”, *ibid.*

and without exception” and also “stressed that all detained individuals must be allowed to be represented by a lawyer of their choosing, be given the possibility of meeting their family members, have access to appropriate medical assistance when required, and have allegations of their torture and mistreatment promptly investigated”.⁶⁴² Other issues raised by the European Union in the Dialogue included torture, judiciary reform, China’s Foreign NGO Activity Management Law, labour rights, freedom of expression on-line and offline, and the freedoms of assembly and association reflected also the growing concerns on the human rights situation in China expressed by many NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The international concerns for the human rights situation in the PRC have recently led to the establishment of a coalition of 321 civil society groups, including Amnesty International, which have requested the United Nations to urgently create an independent international mechanism to address the Chinese government’s human rights violations.⁶⁴³ These concerns have been forcefully stressed on the occasion of the 2020 June EU-China Summit and the subsequent September 14 Leaders Meeting: “on Hong Kong, the EU reiterated its grave concerns at steps taken by China to impose national security legislation from Beijing” considering that “those steps [are] not in conformity with the Hong Kong Basic Law and China’s international commitments, and put pressure on the fundamental rights and freedoms of the population protected by the law and the independent justice system”. Overall, the EU reiterated “its concerns on the deteriorating human rights situation, including the treatment of minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, and of human rights defenders, as well as restrictions on fundamental freedoms”.⁶⁴⁴

From the analysis that we have developed in the previous sections, China’s approach to human rights offers an overall picture whereby the PRC “complies as best it

⁶⁴² Ibid.

⁶⁴³ Amnesty International, “China: Global coalition urges UN to address Beijing’s human rights abuses”, September 9, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/china-global-coalition-urges-un-to-address-beijing-human-rights-abuses/>

The focus of human rights activists have recently underlined the problematic implications in terms of human rights in particular of: large-scale crackdowns on lawyers and advocates, including prominent rights defense lawyers; the Law on Management of Foreign Non-Governmental Organizations in the Territory of Mainland China; the National Security Law which allows authorities to scrutinize virtually all activities in society under the lens of “national security”; the Cybersecurity Law and its implementing regulations which have escalated control over online information flow; a “social credit system” aimed at keeping under control citizens’ behavior along with that of enterprises, and organizations.

⁶⁴⁴ European Council/Council of the European Union, EU-China Summit: *Defending EU interests and values in a complex and vital partnership*. Press release by President Michel and President von der Leyen, June 22, 2020. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2020/06/22/eu-china-summit-defending-eu-interests-and-values-in-a-complex-and-vital-partnership/>

can when it is in its interest to do so but uses whatever techniques at its disposal to resist intrusion into its domestic arena when it is not...In many respects, therefore, when it comes to a fundamental human right, the impact of the international treaty on China's domestic regime appears limited and only one of a number of influences being brought to bear upon decision-making".⁶⁴⁵

The conceptual gaps which characterize the relationship between Brussels and Beijing in this field "have yet again exposed the fundamental normative conflict over the particularity and universality of human rights between China and the democratic West. If China were ever to fully embrace the liberal democratic version of human rights, a political transformation or at least a major political adjustment would have to take place in the superstructure of Chinese society first."⁶⁴⁶ The overarching sensitivities of the Chinese political and legal system continue to stem by the pre-eminence of state sovereignty over human rights and by ideological and "cultural preferences for social stability, a tendency to favour the interest of the group over the individual and the lack of a strong tradition of individual rights".⁶⁴⁷ Moreover, we cannot underestimate the basic problem that, as Meiting Li notes, in the framework of the gradual evolution of the Chinese legal system, "China's laws have functioned as a protective mechanism for human rights, but at the same time also provided shields for the Chinese government's infringement upon human rights".⁶⁴⁸

Even though the Chinese regime had recognized that "international human rights are not just another norm to be dismissed or bargained away" because they are "a constitutive principle of contemporary international society" which "demarcate political boundaries and set standards"⁶⁴⁹, the PRC has shown in the last decade an assertive attitude vis-à-vis human rights. The PRC has increasingly projected its considerable global power within UN human rights institutions reversing an approach which had been low-key, watchful and above all defensive. China is nowadays not reticent about its preferred understanding of human rights and has built new diplomatic capabilities in the human rights field which make it increasingly confident and assertive in its dealings with Western governments on these issues.

⁶⁴⁵ Lee, *ibid.*, 457.

⁶⁴⁶ Li Meiting, *ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁴⁷ Lee, *ibid.*, 456.

⁶⁴⁸ Li Meiting, *ibid.*, 143.

⁶⁴⁹ Deng Yong, *ibid.*, 69.

The crisis related to the special status of Hong Kong has underlined that this fundamental divergence is particularly complex not only with regard to the issue of the “institutions of democratic governance” but also for the application of the guiding principle of the rule of law within the Chinese system. While it has been increasingly relevant for some aspects of the Chinese economic and legal system there has been a strong opposition to its application to civil and political rights, even when they are granted by international agreements as is the case of Hong Kong. The supremacy of the political dimension inherent to the structure of the communist party-state prevents the thorough internalization of a set of fundamental rights and freedoms as those contained in the Hong Kong Basic Law safeguarding the principle of “one country, two systems”.

The Chinese decisions on the status of Hong Kong confirms the selective process chosen by the Chinese authorities which continues to be characterized by a pattern of very limited normative convergence coupled with contestation.⁶⁵⁰ “Against the international pressure on its political and civil rights conditions, the Chinese government has consistently asserted the determination of the pace of human rights progress and the scope of external oversight to be strictly a matter of sovereignty.”⁶⁵¹

This situation highlights some basic contradictions in the evolution of the Chinese system with regard to human rights: on the one hand, we have seen that China’s ratification of most core human rights treaties and instruments has gradually increased and expanded Beijing’s cooperation with international human rights treaty bodies and special procedures.⁶⁵² On the other, even though China has selectively agreed to be assessed by the special procedures in certain areas, becoming more sensitive to international monitoring, it “remains reserved on certain touchy areas such as religious freedom, political freedom”⁶⁵³ along with freedom of expression and of information.

On the basis of the analysis that we have developed in this chapter we can say that in the framework of the EU-China Dialogue the degree of divergence on many key human rights issues - first and foremost the dimension related to fundamental civil and political rights and freedoms – has been widening in the recent past short of a comprehensive true dialogue centred on the differences between the two partners in terms of conceptual approach, setting of priorities and definition of policies in this field. Awareness of the fact

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ Li Meiting, *ibid.*, 149.

⁶⁵² Li Meiting notes, China has regularly submitted reports of implementation to the treaty bodies, including CAT, CEDAW, CERD, CESC, CPD, CRC, CRC-OP-AC and CRC-OP-SC. ”

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

that the Chinese leadership seems not interested in speaking “the same human rights languages as the Western democracies do” by accepting “the underlying principles and values at varied degree in various areas of rights,”⁶⁵⁴ is a necessary prerequisite to try to make the EU-China Dialogue more realistic and more productive. Europe’s recognition that China’s approach to human rights is and has been a mix of selective compliance and persistent contestation can be the basis for the search of a necessary clarification aimed at addressing the present EU-China’s “human rights conundrum” which significantly affects the “qualitative development” of the Partnership.

5.4 Implications for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of the conceptual gaps on human rights between the EU and China

The implications of this “human rights conundrum” for the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership are significant from a twofold point of view: it impacts on the structural strategic dimension of the relationship and makes extremely complicated to reconsider the interaction between the two partners also in terms of policy.

The relevance of the human rights dimension for the Partnership has been clearly reiterated by the European Commission in EU-China Strategic Outlook of March 2019:

“The ability of EU and China to engage effectively on human rights will be an important measure of the quality of the bilateral relationship. The EU acknowledges China's progress in economic and social rights. However, in other respects, the human rights situation in China is deteriorating, notably in Xinjiang and regarding civil and political rights, as witnessed by the continuing crackdown on human rights lawyers and defenders. The human rights of EU and other foreign citizens in China must be protected. The high degree of autonomy enshrined in the Hong Kong Basic Law needs to be respected”.⁶⁵⁵

The divergence that characterizes the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue derives from a interests-values continuum on which there are few points where the two partners overlap. This serious disconnect impinges directly on the “structural dimension” of the Strategic Partnership by making increasingly difficult – if not often impossible – the cooperation on some key multilateral and global issues between Brussels and Beijing.

For instance, the complex interaction between human rights and sovereignty/non-interference offers a significant benchmark to underline how the diverging visions in this

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁵⁵ “EU-China-A Strategic Outlook”, Communication of the European Commission to the European Council, Brussels 12 March 2019, 2.

field limit the structural strategic dimension of the Partnership with regard to most security issues. Notwithstanding the bureaucratic efforts towards incrementally improving interaction in the framework of the Human Rights Dialogue, the analysis that we have tried to develop in this chapter points out that the constraints which limit the bilateral and multilateral cooperation in this field stem from the contrasting identities, value-systems and actorness of the EU and China. If China is not operating as a norm-maker in the field of human rights yet, its diplomatic activism in this field illustrates that it is not a passive norm-taker either: as we have argued, a conflict between Normative Power Europe and Normative Power China is looming.

Against this background emerges also the inadequacy of the policies which continue to be followed in the field of human rights in the framework of the EU-China Dialogue and Strategic Partnership. The “realist turn” which has begun to characterize the EU approach in its strategic relationship with China has raised the awareness that, from the Chinese point of view, the Dialogue has basically been “a place to park issues discreetly in order to avoid stronger criticism from the EU in multilateral fora”.⁶⁵⁶ In this respect the Chinese approach has been coherent because, from the beginning, Beijing regarded this objective as prominent in the interaction with Europe on human rights.

The EU-China Dialogue – which was initiated specifically at China’s request - used to take place until 2006 before the March session of the UN Commission on Human Rights and the October session of the UN General Assembly Third Committee on the basis of Beijing’s expectation that the EU “would refrain from co-sponsoring resolutions on China at the UNCHR”.⁶⁵⁷ This Chinese utilitarian imprinting tends to confirm the limits of the scope of the EU-China interaction on human rights from its outset and throughout the subsequent period.

From the European perspective, as Finamore points out, “the EU’s strategy is also a prime example of its logic of engagement: a policy driven primarily (albeit not solely) by normative goals related to the socialization of a third country, conducted via an array of foreign policy instruments...”.⁶⁵⁸ This approach has not been immune in its implementation of some elements of *realpolitik* - which have occasionally diluted its

⁶⁵⁶ Finamore, *ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

coherence - stemming from “exogenous factors such as divisions between member states, the role of the United States, and overriding economic and security interests”.⁶⁵⁹

However, the present stalemate on human rights within the Partnership is the consequence of a delay in reconsidering – in light of the evolution of the EU-China Dialogue – the limits of the paradigm of constructive engagement also in this field. As Freeman and Geeraerts have argued, the EU’s human rights policy has been indeed based on some wrong suppositions: not only the assumption that the socio-economic development would bring about political change in terms of convergence with the Western standards but also the idea that human rights “as they are conceived in Europe are beneficial or even necessary for economic development”.⁶⁶⁰

As they have written, “rather than converging, as many Europeans expect, views on human rights may actually be diverging. The dialogue which is supposed to occur is not necessarily producing greater understanding on either side. Both Europe and China may have to reconsider how they approach the question if there is to be an effective exchange that benefits both sides”.⁶⁶¹

In these trends we see reflected once more how the “civilizational dimension” continues to shape the positions and views of the two strategic partners with regard to human rights: Europe in this field has been influenced in some regards by an underlying vision of progress which stems from the Enlightenment roots of the “human rights project” but also by the holistic approach of its juridical tradition. For China the millenary cultural tradition of Confucianism still influences the pre-eminence of rights connected with “relationships and roles within relationships”, denying that “the sole unit of ethical or political assessment is the individual”.⁶⁶² Coupled with the more recent Marxist-Leninist ideology this background explains - as we have seen - the existing dichotomies which take shape through contrasting normative projects.⁶⁶³ At the same time, it is

⁶⁵⁹ The issue of the arms embargo, in its evolution over the years, is a meaningful example of a short term instrument in the framework of a human rights policy of sanctions which evolved in a long-term measure influenced by different objectives. Ibid., 89.

⁶⁶⁰ These wrong suppositions are contradicted also by the study of expectations and perceptions vis-à-vis human rights in the Chinese population: referring to the data from the World Values Survey Freeman and Geeraerts have underlined that “contrary to expectations in Europe, the evidence that there will be an increasingly strong constituency for human rights demands in China is weak at best”. Freeman and Geeraerts, *ibid.*, 109.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 111.

⁶⁶² Stephen Angle and Marina Svensson (eds.), *The Chinese human rights reader – documents and commentary* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), xxiii.

⁶⁶³ Robert Weatherley, *The discourse of human rights in China: historical and ideological perspectives* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 52.

interesting to note that a prominent theorist such as Qin Yaqing argues that it is important in a process of “relations in motion” - as it is also the case for human rights - to deny any pretext through which to subjugate the “self” in the name of the collective: a view which problematizes some traditional Chinese interpretations of human rights.⁶⁶⁴

The complexity of this background has been dramatically made evident by the democracy/human rights crisis in Hong Kong where the clash of cultural and political values has sent a powerful message also in the perspective of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. If the state of denial on the stalemate of the Dialogue on Human Rights has been so far sustainable for the PRC and even functional to the preservation of its core interests, it could increasingly put under pressure its interaction with Europe. The EU, on the basis of the interests-values continuum that the Global Strategy and other EU relevant policy documents have confirmed, cannot compromise on one of the truly key components of its identity and normative project. In parallel, the human rights dimension impinges directly on the core interests of the Chinese party-state in terms of preservation of its political and ideological identity.

For these reasons, the two partners should be aware that the “state of denial” of the EU-China “human rights conundrum” weakens the “reflexive dimension” of the Strategic Partnership just as it does – in light of the analysis that we have tried to develop in this chapter – its structural strategic dimension. This awareness, which needs to address and try to reduce the ideational gap between Brussels and Beijing in this field, is the necessary basis for a hopefully effective reshaping of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue beneficial for the whole “coherence in action” of the Partnership.

⁶⁶⁴ Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

CHAPTER 6

“Putting the Strategic Partnership on the map”: the approach of the EU and China to multipolarity and multilateralism

We have looked in the previous chapter at the issue of human rights as a crucial benchmark to assess how the divergence of the interests-values continuum of the EU and China affects the strategic dimension of their partnership at a structural level. This strategic dimension, we have argued, cannot be assessed only on the basis of the bilateral interaction of the two partners: it also depends on the ability of Brussels and Beijing to cooperate on multilateral and global issues because this makes the objectives and the scope of their interaction more comprehensive and more connected to key dynamics of the international system and thus potentially more strategic. The cooperation on multilateral and global issues developed within the Partnership can indeed connect its strategic dimension to the set of other strategic relations and actors which contribute to influence and shape the international system: this broader interaction also helps to define the third strategic dimension of the Partnership – the reflexive one – by putting the two partners “on the map” of international relations as primary actors.

In this perspective a fundamental factor is represented by the worldviews of the two strategic partners because the way they “put on the map” their relationship is clearly affected by how they see and consider the map of contemporary international relations and their place in it. In this sense the analysis of the approach to multipolarity and multilateralism of the European Union and China is another significant benchmark to assess the degree of strategic convergence/divergence within the Partnership and how this also affects the two partners’ contribution to global governance in the interaction with other strategic actors and institutions on the world’s scene.

As Davis Scott has rightly pointed out,⁶⁶⁵ it is useful to compare how the EU and the PRC view the international system through key concepts such as multipolarity and multilateralism “precisely because both of them are significant actors able to impact on the structure and workings of the international system”.

In the following analysis we will advance some basic arguments: the first is that the references to multipolarity and multilateralism have had a very different place in the

⁶⁶⁵ David A Scott, “Multipolarity, Multilateralism and Beyond ...? EU-China Understandings of the International System”, *International Relations* 27/1, (March 2013), 4.

framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: the focus on multipolarity has indeed been only a Chinese objective – never shared in any official EU-China document – while the importance of multilateralism has been underscored in many joint statements, even though with different interpretations of the concept by the two strategic partners. For this reason, we will argue, the approach to multipolarity and multilateralism of the EU and China can be regarded as another example of the conceptual gaps and normative disconnect which influence the strategic objectives and dimension of the Partnership. In this perspective we will analyze whether – as Zhang Xiaoming has argued – the EU is “multilateralism oriented, while the Chinese are multipolarity oriented”⁶⁶⁶ and which kind of implications these respective approaches have for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

6.1 The concepts of multipolarity and multilateralism in the European and Chinese debate

As David Scott has written, we know that in IR the terms multipolarity and multilateralism represent

different types of statements concerning the international system. The term ‘multipolarity’ is a measurement of the distribution of power as concentrated in several poles of power, those poles being Great Powers. The term ‘multilateralism’ is a process; a way of acting that involves several states (big, medium, or small) working together as a matter of practice.

In this sense multipolarity is a “structural-descriptive measurement word for the existence of several centres of power, multiple ‘poles’, in the international system”:⁶⁶⁷ it describes a “distribution of (economic, political and military) power”⁶⁶⁸ among the main international actors and can imply “the emergence of new poles in the third world”⁶⁶⁹ and, in a Chinese interpretation, “a world order where countries balance against the prevailing power”.⁶⁷⁰ From an analytical point of view the term is centered on a particular

⁶⁶⁶ Zhang Xiaoming, “Multipolarity and Multilateralism as International Norms”, in Pan Zhongqi, (ed.), *Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations*, 174.

⁶⁶⁷ David A Scott, *ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁶⁸ Gudrun Wacker, “Similarities and differences”, in Stanley Crossick, and Etienne Reuter (eds.) *China–EU: A common future*, (Singapore: World Scientific, 2007), 213.

⁶⁶⁹ Liselotte Odgaard and Sven Biscop. “The EU and China: Partners in effective multilateralism?” in David Kerr, and Liu Fei (eds.) *The international politics of EU–China relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68.

⁶⁷⁰ Zhao, Suisheng, “China rising: Geo-strategic thrust and diplomatic engagement” in Zhao Suisheng (ed.) *China–US relations transformed: Perspectives and strategic interactions* (London: Routledge 2008), 38.

distribution of strength in the international system and is the outcome of a process which has been defined as multipolarization, while the policies designed to facilitate such a process are referred to as multipolarism.⁶⁷¹ Multipolarity is a term which has acquired a specific significance in the more recent debate on the evolving trends in international relations which seem to evolve towards a greater diffusion of power driven by a long-term process of multipolarization of the structure of the international system itself. After the two-bloc bipolarity of the Cold War where power was concentrated between the only two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and the so-called unipolar moment in the post-Cold War 1990s, where the “preponderant power” of the United States seemed to have brought about a kind of unipolarity, the concept of multipolarity has been often associated with the “rise of the rest”, that is the power shift from the West to non-Western rising actors such as China.

This is a very important theme, as we will see, in the Chinese debate on multipolarity.

Multipolarity and multilateralism have been regarded by authors such as Zhang Xiaoming also as “conceptual norms” in international society:⁶⁷² international norms are thus regarded as largely accepted normative principles in international society which “can both enable and restrict state behavior”⁶⁷³ and such a concept can be used - as Peter Katzenstein argued - “to describe collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity. [...] Norms thus either define (or constitute) identities or prescribe (or regulate) behavior, or they do both.”⁶⁷⁴

Scott too considers multilateralism as a manifestation of cooperative idealism and of IR liberalism-functionalism: he defines it as “a way of operating in the international system” and as a process which – on the basis of Ruggie’s view - “coordinates behaviour among three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct”.⁶⁷⁵ Scott’s consideration that the EU’s nature as “a regional organisation with some supranational powers and some increasing capacity to operate multilaterally as an international actor” seems to underestimate the fact that “the European regional integration has been so far

⁶⁷¹ David A Scott, *ibid.*

⁶⁷² Zhang Xiaoming, “Multipolarity and Multilateralism as International Norms”, in Pan Zhongqi (ed.), *Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations*, 174. Zhang considers “multipolarity as a realist international norm closely linked to the structure of the international system (distribution of power), balance of power and sovereignty...Multilateralism as a liberal international norm closely linked to the process of the international system, or patterns of behavior”

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶⁷⁴ Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), “Introduction” in the *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5.

⁶⁷⁵ David A Scott, *ibid.*, 32; John Ruggie (ed.), *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Practice of an Institutional Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 14.

“the most successful model of multilateralism in the world and the EU has been the champion of multilateralism”,⁶⁷⁶ as China itself has often recognized. To some extent, multilateralism militates in favor of a democratization process of the international society because it implies a way of operating which involves “a wider range of other states than just other Great Powers” including also regional and international organizations.⁶⁷⁷

In addition to these definitions it is important to consider – as Scott does – how the EU and China have referred to these concepts not only in their joint statements and documents in the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership but also in their public diplomacy language aimed at larger audiences in the international community. In this perspective “EU and PRC usage of these two terms in their public diplomacy language says something about each of these two actors, as well as something about the structural processes and trends affecting the international system as a whole and within which these two actors are operating”.⁶⁷⁸ In this context Scott rightly points out that there has been “a clear difference of emphasis and of timing between the EU and PRC use of these two terms” with the PRC having focused much more frequently on the notion of multipolarity than the EU.⁶⁷⁹ Even though there has been an apparent degree of convergence in the last decade with both strategic partners “frequently invoking multilateralism”, it is also true that there is still a strong divergence “between a normative (values) EU use of multilateralism terminology versus a more instrumental PRC use of multilateralism terminology”.⁶⁸⁰

An aspect that we will need to investigate in this respect is whether there “may be an important long-term identity-related process of socialisation going on, in which the PRC’s deployment of multilateralism in its public diplomacy language is now starting to move from an instrumental to a normative usage, perhaps in part resulting from the PRC’s interaction with the EU”.⁶⁸¹ As we will see in the next chapter, initiatives such as the “one belt, one road” could be examples of this new Chinese multilateral approach.

In this process the concepts of multipolarity and multilateralism have also been shifting and have been subject to further re-conceptualization as identities and the very nature of the international system shift. As we will see, the approach of the EU and the

⁶⁷⁶ Zhang Xiaoming, *ibid.*, 177.

⁶⁷⁷ David A. W. Scott, *ibid.*

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*

PRC to multipolarity and multilateralism “shines a light on the identity that each actor sees for itself” not only within the strategic partnership but also in the international system and on the image that the two partners want to show the world.⁶⁸²

In line with our epistemological premises the focus on the role of language in considering the approach of China and the EU to the concepts of multilateralism and multipolarity underlines once more that “norms, ‘values’ in other words, are highly contextual, politically and culturally laden, both in the abstract and in the actuality of language encapsulation”.⁶⁸³ In this sense, as Qin Yaqing has written, values are also products of “cultural communities of practice”. For this reason it is interesting to consider how the identities and public images of international actors emanate from “a universe of discourse” which can be regarded as a “multiverse” in its pluralist cultural declinations.⁶⁸⁴ The influence of “performative speech” as the basis for normative conduct is undoubtedly an aspect of the complex interaction of Europe and China in the framework of a relationship which has been gradually shaped not only by the constant production of statements, documents, policy papers but also of “role conceptions” driving the evolution of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

In this sense a preliminary conceptual clarification and the consequent analysis of how the notions of multipolarity and multilateralism have been used and empirically deployed by the EU and the PRC remind us what Renard and Biscop have written in their study of EU multilateralism and multipolarism: “in international politics, rhetoric and the choice of words are never innocent”.⁶⁸⁵

6.2 The approach to multipolarity of the EU and China

The analysis of multipolarity in the framework of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is an important perspective because the creation of the Partnership

⁶⁸² Ibid.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.; On the focus of a constructivist approach on language, identity and image see Nicholas Onuf, “Worlds of Our Making: The Strange Career of Constructivism in International Relations”, in Donald Puchala (ed.) *Visions of International Relations* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 131. Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory”, *International Security*, 23(1), 1998, 177.

⁶⁸⁴ Qin Yaqing, “A Multiverse of Knowledge: Cultures and IR Theories”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, (2018). On discursive power see Kenneth Boulding, *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1956), 15.

⁶⁸⁵ Thomas Renard and Sven Biscop, “A Need for Strategy in a Multipolar World: Recommendations to the EU after Lisbon”, *Security Policy Brief* (Egmont, Royal Institute for International Affairs), 5, January 2010, 4–5.

in 2003 took place in a context of significant contrast between the United States and Europe - in particular with two prominent member-states of the Union such as France and Germany - in relation to the war in Iraq. In a logic of balancing the “predominant power” and growing assertiveness of Washington, the Chinese leadership regarded at the time the strengthening of the relations with EU as a strategic objective aimed at multipolarizing the international system. As Zhang Xiaoming has noted⁶⁸⁶, “for a long time, the future configuration of power in the international system has been a central concern of Chinese leaders and researches, and they are enthusiastic about promoting multipolarization on the world stage”. In this respect Zhang Yongjin pointed out that

“The future configuration of power in the international system (guoji geju) is a central concern of the Chinese, which has produced a diverse range of views and pluralistic perspectives. The original ideas of guoji geju have often been traced back to Mao’s conception of ‘Three Worlds’ and to the concept of strategic triangle in the 1970s. Following the end of the Cold War, discussions of guoji geju in China have evolved into a discourse of the emerging multipolarity in post-Cold War international relations, through which Chinese elites have been trying intellectually to come to terms with the transformation of global order and in which they have identified rationale in terms of their strategic policymaking”.⁶⁸⁷

This approach reflected a fundamental strategic objective of the PRC as an emerging power: by taking a rather instrumental approach to international cooperation, Beijing aimed at “favouring the emergence of a multi-polar system primarily as an antidote to American or Western hegemony”.⁶⁸⁸ In this perspective Cui Liru has argued that China considers itself to be operating in a multipolar international configuration after the 2008 crisis which marked the turning point from a unipolar to a multipolar system. His view reflects an important Chinese debate which regarded the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar system as having originated by America’s decline in a context in which the “centre” weakened to the point that it was “unable to easily exercise hegemonic authority like it did in the post-Cold War era”.⁶⁸⁹

In this perspective multilateral bodies have been regarded by China “as useful in so far as they amplify the respective national positions, constrain or inhibit unwelcome

⁶⁸⁶ Zhang Xiaoming, “multipolarity and multilateralism as International Norms, 175

⁶⁸⁷ Zhang Yongjin, quoted in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds.), *China and the new International order* (London: Routledge, 2008), 150.

⁶⁸⁸ François Godement and Abigail Vasselier, “China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China Relations”. *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, (December 2017).

⁶⁸⁹ Cui Liru, “The Evolution of the International Configuration and the Construction of the Order in the Multi-Polar Era (First Part),” *Contemporary International Relations*, Issue 1, 2016. http://www.cssn.cn/zzx/gjzzx_zzx/201604/W020160421376680708043.pdf.

initiatives and uphold the traditional principle of non-interference in internal affairs”⁶⁹⁰. Fundamentally China’s approach has expressed a realist view in its consideration of the possible impact of its rise on the international system. In this context, polarity - a traditional structural notion mainly used to explain the possibility and consequences of “balancing” in the case of hegemonic transition - was a concept largely referred to in the Chinese theoretical debate with the basic assumption that the world was moving towards a more multi-polar international order. As Salvatore Finamore has written, “the rhetoric of multipolarity has appeared prominently in China’s political discourse since the end of the Cold War, and it is a cornerstone of Beijing’s view of international politics, especially in the realm of high politics and security relations”.⁶⁹¹

If the Chinese approach has been characterized by realist considerations, it is useful also to note the ideational background of China’s discourse on multipolarity which “resonates with the anti-hegemonic rhetoric of the Century of Humiliation and ... reinforces its defence of the principle of non-interference, weaving together concerns for international security and stability with a claim for justice and equity in global affairs”. Jiang Shixue, echoing key arguments in favor of a multipolar transformation of the international system often discussed by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has underscored the potential of convergence between China and Europe in “defending fairness and justice” as driving elements for multipolarization.⁶⁹²

In the 1990s, multipolarity (*duojihua*) emerged as a constant conceptual reference in the Chinese foreign policy elaboration. As the father of post-Maoist China Deng Xiaoping stated: “in future when the world becomes three-polar, four-polar or five-polar, the Soviet Union [...] will still be one pole. In the so-called multi-polar world, China too will be a pole. We should not belittle our own importance: one way or another, China will be counted as a pole”.⁶⁹³

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹¹ Finamore, “Normative differences”, 170.

⁶⁹² Finamore, *ibid.* Jiang Shixue. How to further improve China-Europe relations. Discussion paper for the 11th Annual Conference on the Taiwan issue in China-Europe Relations. Shanghai: September 14-16, 2014.

⁶⁹³ Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Vol. III (1982–1992) (Beijing, China: Foreign Language Press, 1994), 341.

Denny Roy, “China’s Pitch for a Multipolar World: The New Security Concept”, *Asia-Pacific Security Studies*, 2(1), 2003, 1- 4.

Christopher R. Hughes, “Nationalism and Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: Implications for Southeast Asia”, *The Pacific Review*, 18 (1), 119-135.

As Scott underlined,⁶⁹⁴ at the beginning of the new decade Chinese scholars stressed “the importance of multipolarization for China’s strategic calculations”: in 2001 Wang Jisi argued that “the key notion and belief in China’s conceptualization of international politics today is “multipolarization”” while Ren Xiao stated that “no other theoretical reasoning has greater impact upon actual Chinese foreign policy” than multipolarization.⁶⁹⁵ This approach was presented as “a pragmatic line that China has to walk in a multi-polar era taking shape faster than we had foreseen”, defining “world multipolarization, as the requirement of history”.⁶⁹⁶ At the highest political level Hu Jintao confirmed in a major foreign policy speech in 2001 that multipolarity constituted an important base for Chinese foreign policy.⁶⁹⁷ In the Chinese view a multi-polar world was better and more stable than a unipolar one, and it was therefore conducive to furthering the Chinese national interest.⁶⁹⁸ President Jiang Zemin proclaimed in 2000, “multipolarity is better than unipolarity and political multipolarization is of great significance to world peace, stability and development”.⁶⁹⁹

In the following years the Chinese discourse on multipolarity was characterized by tones increasingly critical of US hegemony: as Finamore has observed, the goals of multipolarity, described by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs “in clearly normative terms”, assumed that multipolarization helped “weaken and curb hegemonism and power politics”, served “to bring about a just and equitable new international political and economic order” and contributed “to world peace and development”.⁷⁰⁰ Considering multipolarization as an inevitable historical process, the document of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented it in an implicit but transparent anti American key by stating that “at present [...] an individual country is pursuing a new ‘gunboat policy’ in contravention of the United Nations Charter and the universally acknowledged

⁶⁹⁴ Scott, *ibid.*, 37. The strategic focus on a process of multipolarization was evident, for instance in a 1997 Sino-Russian Joint Statement entitled *Multipolarisation of the World and the Establishment of a New International Order*.

⁶⁹⁵ Wang Jisi, “China-U.S. Relations at a Crossroads” in Zhao Mei and Maxine Thomas (eds.) *China-United States Sustained Dialogue: 1986-2001* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation, 2001), 67; Ren Xiao, “The International Relations Theoretical Discourse in China”, *Sigur Center Asia Papers*, 9, 2006, 9.

⁶⁹⁶ “China’s Chief Delegate Stresses Multipolarity at IPU Conference”, *People’s Daily*, 2 May 2000. http://english.people.com.cn/english/200005/02/eng20000502_40134.html;

“The Falsehood of Monopolar Theory”, *People’s Daily*, 30 July 2003. http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200307/30/eng20030730_121258.shtml.

⁶⁹⁷ “Multipolarity Plays Key Role in World Peace: Chinese Vice President”, *People’s Daily*, 6 November 2001. http://english.people.com.cn/english/200111/05/eng20011105_83945.html.

⁶⁹⁸ Zhang Xiaoming, *ibid.*, 176

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁰ Finamore, *ibid.*, 170.

principles governing international relations in an attempt to establish a monopolar world under its guidance”.⁷⁰¹

As Zhang Xiaoming has noted, it was the US unilateralism and hegemonism - strong at the beginning of the 2000s - that influenced, and not incidentally, the establishment of the Sino-EU Strategic Partnership, in 2003.⁷⁰² Accordingly, the PRC regarded an integrated and united Europe as an important pole in a multipolar world.⁷⁰³ In this respect - as Dan Bingran observed - “during the Cold War era, Europe was regarded first as a force to be united in the ‘Three Worlds’ doctrine, then as a balancing force against Soviet hegemony. This interest continued after the Cold War..., as Europe [was] looked upon as a potential pole in the future multipolar world order which China favours”.⁷⁰⁴ This interest in Europe as a pole was also evident in the 2003 Chinese policy paper on the EU, which praised the Union’s power and influence in the world, stressed the converging views of the PRC and the EU, the lack of conflicts of interest and their shared willingness to fight for a “more democratic and multipolar world”.⁷⁰⁵

In the relationship with China, as Bart Gaens has written, the fundamental goal of the EU of “advancing the EU’s identity as global actor” included the projection of its own regional integration model to the rest of the world:⁷⁰⁶ for the EU the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was therefore aimed also at integrating China more fully into multilateral global governance, as Michael Yahuda has written.⁷⁰⁷

While in the first half of the 2000s the Chinese approach to multipolarity was therefore articulated through a sort of “cooperative rebalancing” of which the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership could be an instrument, at the end of this period the call for “the establishment of a multipolar world” was driven by the conviction in the Chinese leadership that the progress toward it was “irreversible” because the international

⁷⁰¹ The document also undelined that the US policy was “against the tide of history” and doomed to failure”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s views on the development of multipolarization”, Beijing 2004.

⁷⁰² China Reform Forum on China-US-Europe Trilateral Relations, central Party School press, 2009, 88.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁴ Quoted in David Shambaugh, Eberhard Sandschneider, Zhou Hong (eds.) *China-Europe Relations: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2008), 109.

⁷⁰⁵ Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds.) *China and the New International Order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 25.

⁷⁰⁶ Bart Gaens (ed.), *Europe-Asia Interregional Relations: A Decade of ASEM* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 4.

⁷⁰⁷ Shambaugh, Sandschneider and Zhou (eds.), *China-Europe Relations*, 27.

balance of power was changing.⁷⁰⁸ If the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the EU had been part of China's balancing calculations involving other poles of power, after the 2008 economic crisis a more assertive PRC perceived that "central to the multipolarization discourse are Great Power relations" - as was underscored by the formula "Great Powers are the key (*daguo shi guanjian*)" - ⁷⁰⁹ which included emerging non-Western powers such as the BRICS. In this evolving context, support for greater international multipolarity was thus also confirmed as one of the overarching objectives of China's foreign policy in a logic of search for status and recognition as a great power on the world scene. China expressed its views clearly in this respect in documents such as Beijing's 2008 National Defence White Paper:

"Economic globalization and world multi-polarization are gaining momentum... The rise and decline of international strategic forces is quickening...and groups of new emerging developing powers are arising. Therefore, a profound readjustment is brewing in the international system".⁷¹⁰

Along the same lines the 2010 *China's National Defense* paper stated once more that "progress towards...a multi-polar world is irreversible" while in the wake of US and European growing economic difficulties, Chinese commentators argued in an increasingly assertive way that "a new phase of multipolar world power structure will come into being in 2009, and the international order will be correspondingly reshuffled".⁷¹¹ In the Chinese approach to multipolarity the original anti-hegemony component (*fan ba*) has remained "a key Chinese imperative" previously directed at the Soviet Union and then at the United States, aimed at weakening and curbing hegemonism.⁷¹² Even though such a process has been often officially described as not

⁷⁰⁸ "President Hu Jintao Had a Collective Meeting with the Leaders of India, Brazil, South Africa and Mexico", 8 June 2007. <http://www.chinaembassy.org.in/eng/zgbd/t329817.htm>. Also 'Chinese President Calls for Multi-polar World, Democratization of Int'l Relations', *People's Daily*, 3 November 2010. <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/7187288.html>; Hu Jintao, "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress", 15 October 2007. http://english.gov.cn/2007-10/24/content_785505.htm.

⁷⁰⁹ Zhang Yongjin, "Understanding Chinese Views of the Emerging Global Order", in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds.) *China and the New International Order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 152.

⁷¹⁰ *China's National Defense in 2008* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, January 2009). http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2009-01/20/content_17155577_3.htm.

⁷¹¹ Information Office of the State Council, *China's National Defense in 2010*. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-03/31/c_13806851.htm; Li Hongmei, "The U.S. Hegemony Ends, the Era of Global Multipolarity Enters", *People's Daily*, 24 February 2009. <http://english.people.com.cn/90002/96417/6599374.html>

⁷¹² In a post-Cold War world which many thought would be an era of American unipolarity, the rise of China has been regarded by many analysts as a possible driver toward a new more multipolar situation.

being aimed at the US and its power by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs – which regularly repeated that the PRC “efforts to promote the development of the world towards multipolarization [were] not targeted at any particular country” – it is clear that for China “one of the basic goals of multi-polarity is to prevent the United States from becoming the one and only hegemonic power in the world and to preempt its possible negative impact or pressures on China”.⁷¹³ This approach has been regularly reiterated by institutions which influence the analytical debate and reflect official policy-making such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences whose member Jiang Shixue has underscored in this respect that “though China and the EU do not hold the same positions on all international issues, both sides oppose the single-polar world pattern and hegemony [and] advocate establishing a multi-polar world pattern as soon as possible”.⁷¹⁴

In relation to this Chinese debate it is fair to note that in the West, particularly in the US, the problem of polarity has been thoroughly analyzed mainly by neo-realist theorists in close connection with the questions of balance of power and hegemony. As David Scott has written, such compensatory balancing is why the PRC considers that the United States has been unable to retain its so-called unipolar moment gained in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union: “amid long-term ‘decline’ (*shuai luo*), US ‘unipolarity’ (*danjihua*) is envisaged as giving way to multipolar settings for the coming century”.⁷¹⁵ As we have seen, the official PRC view is that this is a structural process⁷¹⁶ which - notwithstanding a persistent asymmetrical distribution of power between the US and the PRC - supports a plurality of power centres that can compensate this situation, as long as they do not balance against China.⁷¹⁷ While China’s multipolar focus has aimed at restraining the United States, it is meaningful to add that the Chinese approach values the status quo with regard to the structure of the UN Security Council,

David Scott, *Multipolarity, Multilateralism and beyond...*, 37; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s Views on the Development of Multipolarization’, 11 November 2000. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjw/zzjg/gjs/gjzzyhy/2594/2595/t15139.htm>.

⁷¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s Views on the Development of Multipolarization’, 18 August 2003. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/wjzc/t24880.htm>;

Wang Yizhou, “Multi-polarity Does Not Equal an Anti-U.S. Position”, *Global Times (Huanqiu shibao)*, Summer 1999. http://www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/2000_2003/pdfs/mpolari.pdf.

⁷¹⁴ Jiang Shixue, “How to further improve China-Europe relations”. Discussion paper for the 11th Annual Conference on the Taiwan issue in China-Europe Relations, Shanghai, China, September 14-16, 2014.

⁷¹⁵ David Scott, *ibid.*

⁷¹⁶ “China’s Views on the Development of Multipolarization”, 19 April 2004. <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/ljzg/zgwjzc/t85892.htm>.

⁷¹⁷ Brantly Womack, “Asymmetry Theory and China’s Concept of Multipolarity”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 13(39), 2004, 151–66.

opposing its enlargement to other permanent members with veto power. At the end of the second decade of the new millennium, even though post-Cold War American “unipolarity” has been weakened,⁷¹⁸ Washington’s leadership is still for the EU a point of reference, notwithstanding some controversial positions at transatlantic level and in the face of the competition of a global China. At the same time, the Chinese interest in the European model of multilateralism in the Post-Cold War era has been gradually replaced by a “global multilateralism” centered on the reinforcement of the United Nations (as opposed to unilateralist actions of a US-led NATO).

On the European front, the EU’s approach to multipolarity has been overall limited, “intermittent” in the declarations of some EU representatives but substantially absent in the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China. It is meaningful that the concept of multipolarity was not used either in the 2003 European Security Strategy or in the 2016 Global Strategy, while in both multilateralism is a prominent conceptual point of reference. Instead of a strategic vision on multipolarity the EU’s approach has been characterized by statements in the framework of its public diplomacy rhetoric but the concept is not elaborated in any of its policy documents. It was mentioned by EU Commissioners such as Pascal Lamy – who regarded multipolarity as an “objective and a principle” of EU external policy - and Peter Mandelson who argued that “in this multi-polar world, the challenge for the EU and China is to create a strategic vision of the kind of partnership we want ... The EU is an essential component of a multipolar world”. Javier Solana stated that in an “increasingly multipolar world”, where “a stronger Europe with a common strategic vision is also a Europe capable of consolidating relationships with the other great partners” like the PRC⁷¹⁹.

Some recognition of multipolarity in EU official documents can be found in Joint declarations with strategic partners such as India (as David Scott underlines, the phrase “global actors in the multipolar world” was used several times over the years⁷²⁰) while

⁷¹⁸ Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008). On the “hubris” of the United States as international hegemon this author develops an interesting critique.

⁷¹⁹ Pascal Lamy, “Trade Policy, the Convention and External Relations”, SPEECH/02/585, 22 November 2002, http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2004/september/tradoc_118895.pdf;

Peter Mandelson, “The Larger Trend: China, Britain and Europe”, 8 September 2009. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/the-larger-trend-china-britain-and-europe-in-a-multilateral-world>; Javier Solana, “Europe in the World in 2057” in Maurice Fraser (ed.) *European Union. The Next Fifty Years* (London: Financial Times Business, 2007), 38.

Also see Charles Grant and Tomas Valasek, *Preparing for the Multipolar World: European Foreign and Security Policy in 2020* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2007).

⁷²⁰ David Scott, *ibid.*

the *Maturing Partnership* EU document referred to some extent to multipolarism with its analysis that “China’s geopolitical vision of a multipolar world, and the Chinese perception of the EU as a partner of growing importance, also provide a favourable context” for the EU-China strategic Partnership, in which “the EU as a global player on the international scene, shares China’s concerns for a more balanced international order”.⁷²¹

Further elaboration on the role of multipolarity for the EU was made by the EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso who - acknowledging “some virtues in a multipolar international society” – delineated multipolar concepts in one speech in 2011: “the bi-polar system of the world before 1989 has been replaced by a multi-polar, more unstable and more unpredictable world ... if Europe wants to play its role in this new world, our nation states must realize that they do not have the power or influence to do so alone”.⁷²² At the same time he warned that “it would be unwise to overlook the risks associated with multipolarity”. Drawing lessons from the past great powers competition originated by “attempts to create a multipolar balance of power”⁷²³ Barroso expressed the opinion that a multipolar world would not “solve all the problems we face today. Europe tried a multipolar balance of power in the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century ... but let us not forget that multipolar systems are based on rivalry and competition”.⁷²⁴ In the framework of “a multipolar, more unstable and more unpredictable world” the President of the EU Commission underlined that the EU “having delegitimized multipolar power politics in the European continent” had to “work to prevent the emergence of this [multipolar] model on a global scale”.⁷²⁵

Overall we can see from the EU statements and official positions that, in the framework of the Partnership, dialogue on the concept of multipolarity has not taken place because the Union has never “supported multipolarity. Its traditional close relationship with the US explains this reluctance. Although it has developed independent policies in a number of areas... it cannot ignore its close strategic links with the US since most of its members, including France, are also part of NATO”.⁷²⁶

⁷²¹ Ibid.

⁷²² Manuel Barroso, “The European Union and Multilateral Global Governance”, p. 1.;

⁷²³ Manuel Barroso, “The State of Europe”, 9 November 2011.

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/11/738>;

⁷²⁴ Barroso, “A Letter from Brussels to the Next President of the United States”, 24 September 2008. <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/08/455&guiLanguage=en>

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Wang and Zheng (eds.), *ibid.*, 210.

The conceptual gap in this field is grounded not only in different historical legacies, identities, concepts of sovereignty, value-systems but also, as Zhang Xiaoming argues, in the fact that “China has been the newcomer to the Western-dominated international society” the “great outsider” whose rise is regarded as a challenge to the US-led international order. If we consider multipolarity as a norm, China has not yet been a norm-shaper and it is not likely at all that it will be helped in this regard by the EU, which has not been converging with the Chinese vision of the structure of the international system. It is true – as Scott argues – that the “multipolarity pattern now emerging is not so much a matter of fixed permanent alignments. Rather, this post-Cold War multipolarity involves diffused and fluid alliances of the moment coalescing around different issues and with differential power capacities across the hard power–soft power spectrum”.⁷²⁷ If multipolarity retains “its basic structural sense of pointing to differentiated power distribution in and across the international system, with new rising centres of power that include the EU and the PRC”,⁷²⁸ it is interesting to consider what Benita Ferrero-Waldner said on multipolarity in one speech appropriately titled *The EU, China and the Quest for a Multilateral World*: “China and the EU are obviously interested in the nature of global politics in the 21st century. Some have talked of building a ‘multipolar world’. For the EU, however, it is not the number of poles which counts, but rather the basis on which they operate. Our vision is a world governed by *rules* created and monitored by multilateral institutions”.⁷²⁹ This brings us to an analysis of the EU and China’s approach to multilateralism, but it has been important, before this further step, to address the diverging views of China and Europe on multipolarity not least in light of the practical consequences for the EU-US-China “strategic triangle” in terms of multiple relationships, partnerships and alignments between the various poles of power in the international system.

6.3 The approach to multilateralism of the EU and China

If we consider how multilateralism has been regarded and implemented by the two strategic partners we can see clearly diverging trajectories and visions. As Finamore

⁷²⁷ Scott, *ibid.*

⁷²⁸ Gustaaf Geeraerts, “China, the EU, and the New Multipolarity”, *European Review*, 19(1), 2011, 57–67.

⁷²⁹ Benita Ferrero-Waldner, “Closing Speech” 4 July 2005, rep. in Pierre Defraigne (ed.) *The EU, China and the Quest for a Multilateral World* (Paris: IFRI, 2006), 113.

rightly points out “while the European Union is a prime example of multilateralism, as well as one of its staunchest advocates in international relations, the notion of multilateralism has entered China’s political discourse only in relatively recent times”.⁷³⁰ Multilateralism has been mainly regarded by the PRC as a way to promote multipolarization: in fact China’s taste for multilateralism is “recently acquired and rather tentative”⁷³¹ and reflects the fact that the leaders of the People’s Republic traditionally “stressed the importance of bilateralism and were reluctant to endorse multilateralism because of China’s concern over possible erosion of national sovereignty”.⁷³²

The more recent embrace of multilateralism on the part of Beijing is the outcome, to some extent, of its realist considerations aimed at supporting multipolarity; in this respect it “masks a divergence between a normative (values) EU use of multilateralism terminology versus a more instrumental PRC use of multilateralism terminology”.⁷³³ The adoption of a more multilateral approach has indeed been driven in the 21st century by the tactical acknowledgement of China’s leaders that “multilateralism may be a more effective and acceptable way of pursuing the anti-hegemonic goals which they traditionally sought to achieve through the construction of a multipolar world order”.⁷³⁴ In this Chinese view, multipolarity is seen as a potentially necessary condition for multilateralism, but it is important to note that whereas “the global balance of power may limit hegemonic unilateralism, [...] it does not by itself stop unilateral strategies by the different poles”.⁷³⁵

The conceptual and operational disconnect between the EU and China on multilateralism stems from the fact that it has been for the Union a fundamental *modus operandi* which reflects a set of political values shaping the EU identity and actorness. The promotion of “an international system based on stronger multilateral cooperation” is indeed a “constitutional goal” of the Union, enshrined in Article 21.2(h) of the Treaty on the European Union. The EU’s approach to multilateralism, rooted in its identity and actorness as a civilian and normative power, has thus become for the Union not only a fundamental way of operating but also of being: its concept in fact “is engrained into the DNA of European politicians, since the Union is itself a multilateral construction”.⁷³⁶ The

⁷³⁰ Finamore, “Normative differences”, 169.

⁷³¹ Zhang Xiaoming, *ibid.*, 182

⁷³² Zhao Suisheng, *ibid.*, 37.

⁷³³ David A Scott, *ibid.*, 31

⁷³⁴ Finamore, *ibid.*, 170.

⁷³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁶ Charles Grant, “Europe, China and the Multilateral World Order”, *Global Times*, 8 July 2008, 15.

habit of constant negotiations in the various EU institutional frameworks “through a process of internal multilateralism in the flow of EU policymaking and adjustments”⁷³⁷ has made “multilateralism a way of life in Europe”⁷³⁸ based on what has been defined a “normative disposition for multilateralism”.⁷³⁹ The structural dimension of EU’s multilateralism - defined by Keohane as “supralateralism” for its intrinsic characteristics which has made the Union a “champion” of it - is underscored also by the EU focus on multilateralism as “both a means and an end” for a European foreign policy aimed at avoiding the dangers of “multipolar power politics”.⁷⁴⁰ The analysis of how the EU multilateralism has shaped in a profound manner the process of European integration sets in the right context arguments such those which have tried to explain it as a response to American unilateralism under the Bush Presidency of 2001–2009.⁷⁴¹ This can be regarded as an element of context that reinforced at the time the European multilateralist attitudes and – as we have seen – a facilitating factor for the establishment of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: however, the Union’s commitment to multilateralism pre-dates the “American unipolar momentum” of the early 2000s and has not been driven by contingent forces. Equally limited is the argument which links European multilateralism to a supposed “EU failure in grasping the nettle of hard power multipolarity game playing”: in order to respond to “this rising multipolarity” - according to authors such Renard - it would be “in the interest of the EU ... to promote an international order based on systemic and rule-based multilateralism because the EU is simply unable to play [multipolar] realpolitik with other global players”.⁷⁴²

The argument that the priority given by the Union to multilateralism was motivated by the fact that the EU did not possess the hard power capabilities necessary to play the “great power politics game” is both rather simplistic and outdated: the “raison

⁷³⁷ David Scott, *ibid.*, 38.

⁷³⁸ John Groom, “Multilateralism as a Way of Life in Europe”, in Edward Newman, Ramesh Thakur and John Tirman (eds.) *Multilateralism under Challenge: Power, International Order and Structural Change* (Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University Press, 2006), 460–80.

Robert Keohane, “Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research”, *International Journal*, 45(4), 1990, 732; Sonia Lucarelli, “European Political Identity and Others. Images of the EU”, *CFSP Forum*, 5(6), 2007, 12.

⁷³⁹ Richard Higgott, “Multi-Polarity and Trans-Atlantic Relations: Normative Aspirations and Practical Limits of EU Foreign Policy”, *GARNET Working Paper*, 76 (10), 2010, 15.

⁷⁴⁰ Lazarou, 20

⁷⁴¹ Mark Pollack, “Unilateral America, Multilateral Europe?” in John Peterson and Mark Pollack (eds.) *Europe, America, Bush: Transatlantic Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 115–28.

⁷⁴² Thomas Renard, “From the New G20 to a Multilateral Order”, *European Geostrategy*, 14 January 2010. <http://europeangeostrategy.ideasoneurope.eu/2010/01/14/from-the-new-g20-to-a-multilateral-order/>

d'être" of the process of European integration is in fact the refusal of the mere power-politics logic which twice in the 20th century brought about the destruction of Europe and the loss of its world leadership. Moreover, with its post-modern multilateralist approach the EU has developed – in terms of power and influence – a prominent role in some of the driving sectors of contemporary international relations, first and foremost the economic sphere. However, more recently, the EU approach based on its constitutive identity and actorness as a Civilian and Normative Power has been complemented by growing capabilities in the defence and security sectors aimed at strengthening its “strategic autonomy” and, in the longer run, its comprehensive power.

In this perspective it is fair to admit that the coherence of the multilateral and supranational approach of the EU as an unitary actor had to be sometimes reconciled with the power-politics and multipolar impulsions of some member states which - still operating their own external foreign policies within varying degrees of common European positions - can impact the multilateral dimension of the EU external relations. This aspect has also been relevant, to some extent, for the EU-China interaction within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, as in the case – as Scott has underlined - of “Franco-Chinese rhetoric [which] frequently deployed ‘multipolarity’ in Joint Statements” about the self-proclaimed “strategic partnership” between Paris and Beijing.⁷⁴³

More importantly, as we will see in the next chapter, this logic has been used by the PRC – through initiatives such as the BRI and the 16+1/17+1 format – in order not only to usefully interact with “smaller poles” but also to advance a nascent “multilateralism with Chinese characteristics” in its relationship with Europe, as a EU policy planner has observed.⁷⁴⁴

Overall, for the EU multilateralism has represented the formally preferred option, as the Treaty of Lisbon explicitly stipulates:⁷⁴⁵ this preference has been underlined by the development of a network of relations between the EU and other multilateral frameworks (“intersecting multilateralisms”) and with other regional actors on the basis of the EU “interregionalist agenda”.⁷⁴⁶ In its peculiar power projection multilateralism has been not

⁷⁴³ Davis Scott, *ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁴⁴ Interview with a senior EU policy planner by the author, Brussels, January 30, 2018.

⁷⁴⁵ Nadia Klein, Wulf Reiners, Chen Zhimin, Jian Junbo, and Ivo Slosarcik, “Diplomatic Strategies of Major Powers”, *Mercury E-Paper*, 2, February 2010, 36.

⁷⁴⁶ Katie Laatikainen and Karen Smith (eds.), *The European Union at the United Nations: Intersecting Multilateralisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006); David Camroux, “Interregionalism, a Critique”, in Alex Warleigh-Lack, Nick Robinson and Ben Rosamund (eds.) *New Regionalism and the*

only a key component of the EU in terms of values and principles but it is a norm that has been constantly emphasized by the Union as a significant emanation of its civilian and normative power. In this perspective it has been argued that multilateralism as an expanding norm by means of the value and stress placed on it by the EU can “provide a different paradigm to balance of power (multipolarity) frameworks”.⁷⁴⁷ What is clearly relevant for our research is to assess now the role which the practice of such a multilateral norm has played in the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

The central place of “effective multilateralism” in the evolving dynamics and structure of the international system is significantly present in the EU’s 2003 *European Security Strategy-ESS* (approved the same year of the establishment of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership) which avoided any reference to multipolarity but mentioned multilateralism five times.⁷⁴⁸ In the ESS section entitled “An International Order Based on Effective Multilateralism” it was posited that “the development of a stronger international society, well-functioning international institutions and a rule-based international order is our objective”.⁷⁴⁹ In this respect the EU’s approach as “a normative, values-fostering and multilateralism-orientated actor”⁷⁵⁰ was well expressed by the High Representative Javier Solana: “Europe is a new form of power. A force for good around the world. A promoter of multilateralism, international law and justice” and for these reasons “at a global level, Europe must lead a renewal of the multilateral order”.⁷⁵¹

The EU position was further elaborated in a substantive 2010 policy paper *The European Union and Multilateral Global Governance* in which the President of the EU Commission Barroso argued for “the EU’s role in reinforcing multilateral rules and

European Union (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 204; Knud Jorgensen and Ramses Wessel, “The Position of the European Union in (Other) International Organizations”, in Panos Koutrakos (ed.) *European Foreign Policy* (Cheltenham: Edwin Elgar, 2011), 261–86.

⁷⁴⁷ Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford, “Normative Power: The European Practice of Region Building and the Case of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)”, Working Paper no. AY0404 (Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley Institute of European Studies, 2004), 8.

⁷⁴⁸ David Scott, *ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁴⁹ European Union, “A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy”, 12 December 2003, 9, available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>. Also Richard Gowan, “The European Security Strategy’s Global Objective: Effective Multilateralism”, in Sven Biscop and Jan Joel Andersson (eds.) *The EU and the European Security Strategy: Forging a Global Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 42–61; Jan Wouters, Sijbren de Jong and Philip De Man, “The EU’s Commitment to Effective Multilateralism in the Field of Security”, *Yearbook of European Law*, 29(1), 2010, 164–89. European Council, “Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy: Providing Security in a Changing World”, S407/08, 11 December 2008, 2. http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/reports/104630.pdf.

⁷⁵⁰ David Scott, *ibid.*

⁷⁵¹ Javier Solana, ‘Speech’, Conference (The Sound of Europe), 27 January 2006, 3. http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/discours/88179.pdf.

institutions at the global level. Multilateralism is the right mechanism to build order and governance in a multipolar world, and the European Union is well-placed to make a decisive contribution”⁷⁵² in order “to create a normative framework” and “stimulate the reinforcement of multilateral institutions”.⁷⁵³ The reference to multilateralism as a “normative framework” was aimed at stressing the role of Europe as an example for partners such as China:⁷⁵⁴ “the creation of an institutional multilateral order in Western Europe” meant that the European Union could “play an important role in the reinforcement of multilateral global institutions”⁷⁵⁵ and be an “indispensable partner for global multilateralism”, on the basis of the European “experience with multilateral reciprocity, the core of European politics”.⁷⁵⁶

The 2016 Global Strategy fully confirmed the EU position on multilateralism by stating that the EU is aware that its “priorities are best served when we are not alone. And they are best served in an international system based on rules and on multilateralism”.⁷⁵⁷ For this reason “the EU will promote a rules-based global order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core”⁷⁵⁸ considering “a strong UN as the bedrock of the multilateral rules-based order”.⁷⁵⁹

All these principles were, once more, underlined by the 2019 *EU-China Strategic Outlook* which not only stated that: “the EU is committed to supporting effective multilateralism with the United Nations at its core” but meaningfully added that “as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and a beneficiary of the multilateral system, China has the responsibility to support all three pillars of the United Nations, namely Human Rights, Peace and Security, and Development”.⁷⁶⁰

These expectations – as we have anticipated – have found a remarkable degree of reluctance in the international behaviour of China which, like other EU strategic partners, does not share the EU’s stated aim to strengthen a multilateral, rule-based order and

⁷⁵²Jose’ Manuel Barroso, “The European Union and Multilateral Global Governance”, *RSCAS Policy Papers*, 2010/01 (2010), 1.

⁷⁵³ Barroso, “The European Union and Multilateral Global Governance”, 2.

⁷⁵⁴ David Scott, *ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁵⁵ Barroso, *ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁵⁶ Barroso, *ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁵⁷ “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe”, A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy, Brussels June 2016, 4.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10

⁷⁶⁰ European Commission-High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, “EU-China – A strategic outlook”, Strasbourg, 12.3.2019 JOIN(2019) 5 final, 2.

delimit their national sovereignty in the process. As it has been noted,⁷⁶¹ “a deeper understanding of multilateralism, as entailing mutual and binding obligations for large and small countries over the long-term, is not the prevalent one in countries whose room for maneuver in international relations is expanding”. It is also true that in the present phase of evolution of international relations the American approach to multilateralism has been increasingly selective and pragmatic and in this sense - albeit for different reasons – “in many ways closer to that of large emerging powers than to that preached by the EU”.⁷⁶²

The normative disconnect between the EU and the other two poles of the “strategic triangle” is, however, very uneven: notwithstanding the unilateralist approach of Trump’s “America first”, Europe and the US continue to be structurally linked by a network of multilateral relations, as the steady strengthening, for instance, of the EU-NATO interaction has underlined. On the contrary, with the PRC this disconnect materializes in an “impediment to engaging at the multilateral level” and in this way hampers significantly the strategic development of the Partnership. The degree of divergence has not in fact been bridged by China’s “turn to multilateralism”⁷⁶³ which began in the 1990s, mainly with the aim, as we have seen, of “promoting ‘multipolarization’ in an attempt to counter U.S. preponderance rather than adopting multilateralism per se”⁷⁶⁴ and then gained in the 2000s some more prominence with a corresponding decline of the use of the term “multipolarity” in the government’s official discourse.⁷⁶⁵ As Scott has written, “advocacy of ‘multilateralism’ (*duobian zhuyi*) has been a relatively slow development for the PRC”, surrounded by a “somewhat ‘conditional’ hesitation”:⁷⁶⁶ even though in several official documents – such as the *China’s Defense Review* – the references to multilateralism overshadowed those to multipolarity, China’s “embrace of

⁷⁶¹ Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid.*

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*

⁷⁶³ Wu Guoguang and Helen Lansdowne. “International multilateralism with Chinese characteristics: Attitude changes, policy imperatives, and regional impacts”, in Wu Guoguang and Helen Lansdowne (eds.), *China turns to multilateralism: Foreign policy and regional security*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 3; Nadia Klein, Wulf, Reiners, Chen, Zhimin, Jian, Junbo, and Ivo, Slosarcik, “Diplomatic strategies of major powers: Competing patterns of international relations? The cases of the United States of America, China and the European Union”, *MERCURY E-paper* n° 2. 24.

⁷⁶⁴ Zhao, Suisheng, “China rising: Geo-strategic thrust and diplomatic engagement”, in Zhao Suisheng (ed.), *China-US relations transformed: Perspectives and strategic interactions*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 38.

⁷⁶⁵ Scott, *ibid.*, 38; Song, Xinning. “European ‘models’ and their implications to China: Internal and external perspectives”, *Review of International Studies*, 2010, 36 (3): 770–771.

⁷⁶⁶ Scott, *ibid.*

multilateralism” was driven by the interest of Chinese leaders “to show that China is a big responsible country on the multilateral stage”.⁷⁶⁷

In this perspective “the PRC’s *practical multilateralism* of the 1990s (in which the PRC joined existing Western-shaped organisations on their terms) gave way to a more *strategic multilateralism* in which China has sought to adjust such organisations and set up new structures”.⁷⁶⁸ This approach was reflected in Chinese assertions that “multilateral participation will benefit China in its strategies gearing up to a peaceful rise” for “only through partaking in the multilateral institutions, can emerging economies possess the likelihood to alter the existing international power structures and operating rules”.⁷⁶⁹

From a theoretical point of view these variants of multilateralism within the Chinese discourse have been defined by Shambaugh⁷⁷⁰ as follows: *selective multilateralism* in which multilateralism is tactical not philosophical: on the basis of this realist view authors such as Huang Weiping and Song Xinning have argued that “for China, multilateralism is more like a kind of diplomatic tool rather than a mechanism for international order”. At the same time a multilateral regionalism based on an *Asia First* approach which “emphasizes normative behavior”⁷⁷¹ and a “globalist” multilateralism “interested in diplomacy and pan-regional partnerships”⁷⁷² has emerged in the Chinese discourse and practice. In this context – as Zhongqi Pan has observed – “the transformation of China’s diplomacy ... from bilateral engagement to multilateral engagement ... is closely related to China’s image of world order and the dynamic change of its image gap”.⁷⁷³ It also reflects, as a EU policy planner has pointed out⁷⁷⁴, “China’s growing confidence in its normative power which is a component of the evolution of strategic initiatives such as the “one belt, one road” in its connotation of a peculiar Chinese multilateral approach”.

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁸ Song Xinning, “China and Regional Integration: From Bilateralism to Regional-Multilateralism”, *IUP Journal of International Relations*, 4(1–2), 2010, 51–61.

⁷⁶⁹ Pan Zhongqi, “China’s Changing Image of and Engagement in World Order”, in Gao Sujian and Jean-Marc Blanchard (eds.) *Harmonious World and China’s New Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 48.

⁷⁷⁰ David Shambaugh, “Coping with a Conflicted China”, *Washington Quarterly*, 34(1), 2011, 14.

⁷⁷¹ Huang Weiping and Song Xinning, *China and the Global Political Economy* (Madrid: CEU, 2011), 9.

⁷⁷² Shambaugh, *ibid.*

⁷⁷³ Zhongqi Pan “China’s Changing Image of and Engagement in World Order”, *ibid.*

⁷⁷⁴ Interview with a senior EU policy planner by the author, Brussels, January 30, 2018.

6.4 The persistent divergence on multilateralism/multipolarity in the framework of the EU-China Partnership

China's approach to multilateralism has not chosen - as a matter of fact - the Strategic Partnership as a privileged framework of interaction but – in its shift “from bilateralism to regional-multilateralism”⁷⁷⁵ has focused on the UN Security Council - where China's veto power as a permanent member of the Security Council can maintain the paramount principle of Chinese sovereignty – and on new forms of “multilateralism with Chinese characteristics such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this perspective the conceptual and operational gap within the EU-China Partnership partly stems – as in the case of human rights – from the imperative of entirely safeguarding its sovereignty (*zhuquan*) and resisting any outside “interference”.⁷⁷⁶ The rise of “sovereignism” in Europe has probably made less true the idea that while “historically, sovereignty is what Europeans invented and what the Chinese were forced to accept” it has become what the Europeans have tried to bury “and what the Chinese hold dear”.⁷⁷⁷ Yet is it undeniable that in the Chinese view “sovereignty reigns supreme in a rebalanced world order”.⁷⁷⁸ This view impinges not only on the structural dimension of the Partnership, preventing cooperation on global multilateral issues, but also on other multilateral forums like ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asia Summit (EAS), as the contentious sovereignty and territorial questions in the South China Sea have made clear.

This broader dimension of the Chinese approach to multipolarity/multilateralism has implications for Europe's global strategic interests, beyond its relationship with China. We can see a significant example of these implications and of the “divergence between the EU and China on the intrinsic value of multilateral institutions” in the case of “one of Europe's most significant foreign policy goals in the field of nuclear non-proliferation, namely the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)”.⁷⁷⁹ While all EU member states have ratified the treaty given that the EU is “one

⁷⁷⁵Song Xinning, “China and Regional Integration: From Bilateralism to Regional-Multilateralism”, *ibid.*.

⁷⁷⁶ Scott, *ibid.*

⁷⁷⁷ Pan Zhongqi, ‘Managing the Conceptual Gap on Sovereignty in China–EU Relations’, *Asia Europe Journal*, 8(2), 2010, 227.

⁷⁷⁸“Sovereignty Reigns Supreme in Rebalanced World Order”, *Global Times*, 21 November 2011. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/684906/Sovereignty-reigns-supreme-in-rebalanced-world-order.aspx>.

⁷⁷⁹ Finamore, “Normative Differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security”, 172.

of its staunchest supporters”, China’s position has made it “a de facto participant in the regime”: since joining the CTBT Beijing has been committed to a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing but the Chinese approach continues to be “highly influenced by the actions of the United States, as Beijing is adamant on not ratifying the treaty before Washington does”.⁷⁸⁰ The case of China’s position vis-à-vis a multilateral regime such as the CTBT underlines interestingly how the Chinese approach to multilateralism reverberates on the EU-China Partnership through broader dynamics which affect its “structural” strategic dimension and are key in the “strategic triangle”. It also underscores that - as Finamore has pointed out⁷⁸¹ - when “Beijing has accepted to be restrained by multilateral rules it has only done so out of the realization that these arrangements best guaranteed its own security” and national interests.

If China’s involvement in multilateral arrangements was at the beginning mainly focused on the economic sector, it has in fact gradually expanded to other fields, with a preference for formats where the PRC can enjoy a “particular position as the sole representative of developing, culturally non-European and non-democratic or protodemocratic states”.⁷⁸²

This pragmatic approach by China has made it possible, however, that “the notion of multilateralism has become firmly embedded” [also] in the rhetoric of EU–China relations, “becoming a staple element of EU–China Summit declarations”.⁷⁸³ If the first references were related to multilateral trade they “quickly expanded to the field of international security to include “multilateral non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament” and the need for a multilateral approach to the fight against terrorism.”⁷⁸⁴ If we examine the joint summit declarations we can see that there have been references to “strong support for a fair, just and rules-based multilateral international system with the UN playing a central role”, “effective multilateralism” and – as the 2018 and 2019 summits statements have reiterated – to the renewed commitment to multilateralism, the rules-based international order, the respect for international law and for fundamental norms governing international relations “with the United Nations at its core”. It is meaningful that the joint statement of the 2018 summit also includes in this list the

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁸¹ Finamore, “Normative Differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security”, 171.

⁷⁸² Wu and Lansdowne cited by Finamore, “Normative Differences in Chinese and European Discourses on Global Security”, 171.

⁷⁸³ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

“principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders”, with a connection of multilateralism to a set of key priorities for the PRC. Furthermore the EU–China 2020 Strategic Agenda has described multilateralism as “crucial to ensure effective, coordinated and coherent responses to pressing global challenges”.⁷⁸⁵

The language of summit joint statements and of other EU-China documents indicates a trend in the increased use of the concept of multilateralism while that of multipolarity has been “left unused”.⁷⁸⁶ After China’s attempt to insert common language into the concept of multipolarity on the occasion of the first EU-China summit in 1998, in the following EU-China joint statements - as we have seen - references to multilateralism appeared on a regular basis. If the term multipolarity has never been adopted in the EU-China terminology the PRC has continued to make references to it in its relations with other major partners. However, in the last decade the Chinese leadership has ceased to explicitly describe the strategic relationship with the EU as a potential force in a process of multipolarization: Li Keqiang had indeed argued that “both China and the EU are the motivators of world multipolarization”⁷⁸⁷ while Wen Jiabao had stated that both EU and China stood for “world multipolarity [in which] we believe Europe is an independent pole in the world”.⁷⁸⁸ Yet Xi Jinping’s PRC seems less interested in referring to Europe as a pole in the evolving balance of power of the 21st century. As Scott has rightly pointed out, the ironical thing is that the EU leadership has been doing “a similar but opposite thing, claiming that they share a common multilateral vision with the PRC”.⁷⁸⁹

Europe’s aspiration to be a normative power has indeed translated into several statements – since the establishment of the Partnership – expressing hope that multilateralism would be increasingly in play in China’s foreign policy. This was in line with the EU’s “official rhetoric with other major states, potential Great Power partners in a multipolar world” which has generally and deliberately evoked multilateralism rather than multipolarity. In the framework of the EU-China Partnership European declarations stated that “EU and China share views on the importance of multilateral systems and rules

⁷⁸⁵ EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda, *ibid.*

⁷⁸⁶ Scott, “Multipolarity, Multilateralism and beyond...?”, 40.

⁷⁸⁷ Li Keqiang, “Speech at the Forum on China-EU Strategic Partnership”, *Foreign Affairs Journal* (CIFA), November 2009. <http://cpifa.org/en/q/listQuarterlyArticle.do?articleId=27>

⁷⁸⁸ Wen Jiabao, “Remarks by Premier Wen Jiabao at Joint Press Conference with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso”, 29 April 2010. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t689865.htm>

⁷⁸⁹ Scott, *ibid.*

for global governance”; “multilateralism and respect for international law are fundamental tenets of the EU’s foreign policy. And...the same is true for China”; “in a world governed by *rules* created and monitored by multilateral institutions China shares this approach”; at the highest level the President of the EU Commission Barroso told Wen Jiabao of “our shared belief in multilateralism” while his predecessor Romano Prodi was convinced that China and the EU had “a common vision of the principle of multilateralism”.⁷⁹⁰ Later statements on convergence on multilateralism have been basically limited to the summit joint statements. Even if the two strategic partners have asserted that within their relationship “both sides stand for multilateralism”, it seems clear not only from their interaction in this framework that the “EU’s more normative sense and commitment to multilateralism” diverges from China’s more instrumental–tactical sense and commitment to multilateralism.⁷⁹¹

The increasingly less frequent usage of multipolarity language in relation to the EU-China Partnership seems to indicate something of China’s own perplexity on the real potential of the EU as a “multipolar” partner, in stark contrast with past arguments underlying that China had “very strong soft-balancing motivations to invest in the relationship with Europe”.⁷⁹²

In the last decade – apart from some degree of apparent similarity in European and Chinese discourses – true normative convergence seems to be “dubious, and contested at best”.⁷⁹³ Even though both actors have evoked “multilateralism when appearing on their common public platforms”, China’s approach to multilateralism seems to have been motivated by a number of diversified concerns such as anti-hegemonism, economic development, international status as a responsible stakeholder.⁷⁹⁴ These trends seem to indicate – as we have argued – that multilateralism is becoming part, through specific initiatives, of the strategic design of an increasingly assertive Normative Power China. Such an approach problematizes the EU’s traditional hope that its “strong advocacy” of effective multilateralism may have a socializing effect on China through a process of “normative identity change shaped through international [‘social’] encounter situations where language is being deployed”.⁷⁹⁵ The evolution of China’s approach to

⁷⁹⁰ All quoted in Scott, “Multipolarity, Multilateralism and beyond...?”, 41.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid.

⁷⁹² Chen Zhimin, “Lecture by Prof. Chen Zhimin, Fudan University, on China’s Evolving Strategic Partnerships”, 8 March 2010. <http://www.vub.ac.be/biccs/site/index.php?id=149>.

⁷⁹³ Finamore, “Normative Differences in Chinese and European Discourses”, 172.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.; Scott, *ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid.

multilateralism does not seem in fact particularly interested in grounding a broader adoption of multilateralism rhetoric in a process of converging normative beliefs with Europe. The PRC's process of internalization in this context appears to be limited by dynamics which characterize a Chinese approach summarised by Song Xinning as follows: "we are still uncomfortable with multilateralism, and prefer bilateralism and multipolarity".⁷⁹⁶ This seems true if we consider the PRC's stance on key multilateral issues ranging from its position in the negotiations on Climate Change to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

More positive views have been expressed on the Chinese evolving approach to multilateralism and its impact on the further "deepening" of the EU-China Partnership by authors such as Mario Telo' and Zhou Hong.⁷⁹⁷ In particular Zhou Hong - the Director of the European Studies Centre at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) – has assumed that "China and the EC/EU developed their relations with a clear strategic goal of balancing world powers, and both mentioned multipolarity as a possible world structure":⁷⁹⁸ their current position on the world order - she has argued - should be based on the "shared commonality" in terms of global governance that Beijing and Brussels can express through their interaction in international institutions such as the UN, the WTO and the G 20. Telo', in turn, regards the EU-China Partnership as an important example of a "gradual process of bilateral and multilateral institutionalisation" which defies the multipolarity/multilateralism dichotomy by keeping a strong potential for cooperation on global issues.⁷⁹⁹

These neo-institutionalist perspectives need to be evaluated, however, in light of the problematic record of the EU-China interaction on issues of global governance, as we have tried to underline in previous chapters.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid.; Song Xinning, "China and Regional Integration: From Bilateralism to Regional-Multilateralism", *ibid.*

⁷⁹⁷ Mario Telo', Ding Chun and Zhang Xiaotong (eds.), *Deepening the EU-China Partnership. Bridging Institutional and Ideational Differences in an Unstable World* (Routledge:London and New York, 2018). Zhou Hong (ed.), *China-EU Relations: Reassessing the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* (Singapore: Springer, 2017).

⁷⁹⁸ Zhou Hong, "China and EC/EU General Foreign Policy Strategy" in Mario Telo', Ding Chun and Zhang Xiaotong (eds.), *Deepening the EU-China Partnership. Bridging Institutional and Ideational Differences in an Unstable World* (Routledge:London and New York, 2018), 51. On the concept of "commonalities" see: Zhou Hong (ed.), *China-EU Partnerships: Commonalities and Differences* (China Social Sciences Publishing House, 2004).

⁷⁹⁹ Mario Telo', "European and Chinese Multilateralism at Stake. Political and theoretical implications" in Mario Telo', Ding Chun and Zhang Xiaotong (eds.), *Deepening the EU-China Partnership. Bridging Institutional and Ideational Differences in an Unstable World* (Routledge:London and New York, 2018).

If we consider James Rosenau's definition of governance as "a system of rule that works only if it is accepted by the majority or at least by the most powerful of those it affects",⁸⁰⁰ we can understand the relevance for its functioning of the degree of convergence/divergence of the main international actors with regard to their approach to multilateralism/multipolarity. As Gross and Jian have argued, "the concept of global governance and the collective management of global challenges through multilateral institutions inherently resonate with the EU" while China's approach to multilateralism/multipolarity – which has prioritized so far sovereignty and stability – makes its conception of global governance "differ significantly from the EU's, whether on a normative, institutional or policy level".⁸⁰¹

Barry Buzan has defined China as a revisionist but reformist power which accepts existing international institutions for "calculated and instrumental" reasons but also resists political, liberal institutions and wants to reform others (as well as raising its own status):⁸⁰² this implies, as Gross and Jian argue, that "in terms of reflexive commitment to multilateralism and a rule-based international system, EU and Chinese views on global governance" have not been converging.⁸⁰³

The different concepts of multilateralism and multipolarity of the two strategic partners reflect also their ambitions as global actors and normative powers which try to influence key issues of international governance such as peace-keeping, reform of the international economic institutions, development assistance, engagement in international regimes and regional security arrangements. In this sense the EU and Chinese approaches to multipolarity and multilateralism need to be set in the context of "systemic changes in the international system itself [which have] generated further adjustments" of the two concepts.⁸⁰⁴ In this sense we have seen a Chinese trajectory from strategic multipolarity

⁸⁰⁰ James N. Rosenau, "Governance, Order and Change in World Politics", in James N. Rosenau and Ernest O. Czempiel (eds), *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4.

⁸⁰¹ Eva Gross and Junbo Jian, "Conceptual gaps on Global Governance between China and the EU", 210.

⁸⁰² Ibid. ; Barry Buzan, "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol.3, n°1, 2010, 5-36.

⁸⁰³ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁴ With regard to multipolarity – as Acharya has argued – a distinction can be made between *strategic multipolarity* - tied to *hard power* calculations in a 'balance of power' framework - and *normative multipolarity* "more tied to *soft power* ideational resources, such as an adherence to international law and institutions and a strong sense of collective national or regional identity". Amitav Acharya, "Regional Security Arrangements in a Multipolar World? The European Union in Global Perspective", *Briefing Paper* (FES), December 2004, 2.

towards a kind of normative multipolarity compatible with a “multilateralism with Chinese characteristics”.⁸⁰⁵

At the same time the evolution of multilateralism⁸⁰⁶ has problematized the EU’s approach aimed at “effective multilateralism” because not only China but also some of its own member states are “perhaps not ready yet for such a move” while the United States under President Trump has significantly scaled down its traditional support to multilateral institutions.⁸⁰⁷ In this sense the sovereign-state “fixation may then be a problem” for both Brussels in its interaction with some member states and for Beijing seeking to assert a vision of the international system still centered on sovereignty and national interests.

However, in a framework of dynamics variously described in terms of interolarity, asymmetrical multipolarity, region-polarity, multilateralising multipolarity and “multi-multilateralism”,⁸⁰⁸ it is interesting to consider that a “multilevel and often untidy EU that blurs the national-regional-transnational boundaries may be more easily able to operate in such untidy cross-cutting international settings than a national-level tighter sovereignty-bound PRC”.⁸⁰⁹

Against this evolving background, the EU-China Partnership is in any case affected by the existing ideational - and increasingly normative - disconnect between the two partners on multipolarity/multilateralism, which weakens its function of framework where to address key issues in terms of global governance.

As Christiansen, Kirchner and Wissenbach have written, “ in terms of perceptions the different meanings the EU and China attach to the principle of sovereignty, to multilateralism and to other concepts indicate that disagreements are not merely the reflection of different interests. The EU and China...have fundamentally opposed

⁸⁰⁵ As has been noted, “21st century multipolarity differs in fundamental ways from the past examples of multipolar balance of power. The concentration of power in a number of poles [multipolarity]’ goes “hand in hand with fragmentation and diffusion into multiple centres of power, such as international institutions, nongovernmental organizations, private corporations, global networks, including financial networks and so on”. Eva Gross and Junbo Jian, “Conceptual gaps on Global Governance between China and the EU”, *ibid.*

⁸⁰⁶ Scott, “Multipolarity, Multilateralism and beyond...?”, 44.

⁸⁰⁷ Luk van Langenhove, “Multilateralism 2.0.”, *EU-GRASP Working Paper*, 21 (August 2010), 14.

⁸⁰⁸ Giovanni Grevi, *The Interpol World* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2009); Alvaro de Vasconcelos, “‘Multilateralising’ Multipolarity”, in Grevi and de Vasconcelos (eds.) *Partnerships for Effective Multilateralism: EU Relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia* (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2008), 11–32.

⁸⁰⁹ Scott, “Multipolarity, Multilateralism and beyond...?”, 44.

attitudes to these key aspects of global politics, and these differences are bound to create further tensions in the development of global governance regimes in the future”.⁸¹⁰

In this perspective, the development of the strategic structural dimension of the Partnership is confronted with two major challenges: on the one hand, the intermittent disunity between Europe and United States on the respective approaches to multilateralism, which might be the more contingent factor; on the other, the increasing strategic inclination of the PRC of advancing its own model of multilateralism through evolving initiatives such as the Belt and Road, a process which can have complex implications for the interaction with Europe and for the coherence of the Partnership itself, as we will see in the next chapter.

⁸¹⁰ Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 177.

CHAPTER 7

The bilateral dimension in relations between Europe and China: a challenge for the coherence and significance of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

This chapter addresses a key issue that we have often mentioned in our analysis: the impact and the implications of the national “China policies” of the EU member states and of the PRC’s “European policies” for the coherence and effectiveness of the interaction between Brussels and Beijing in the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This dimension is significant because it amplifies the conceptual gaps between Brussels and Beijing by introducing further elements of complexity: on the one hand it weakens the role of the EU as a unitary actor and makes more challenging the elaboration of a coherent China policy-making. On the other hand, the fact that China has developed its “European policies” - through initiatives such as the One Belt One Road and formats of cooperation such as the 17+1 - seems to indicate not only a decreasing Chinese commitment to the Partnership as the main framework of interaction with Europe but also a strategic approach which reflects the objectives that an increasingly assertive Normative Power China seeks to advance.

In this context the advancement of political values in the EU’s interaction with the PRC is problematized not only by the dynamics between the Union and its member states but first and foremost by an ideational and normative disconnect between Brussels and Beijing: both strategic partners tend to assert normative goals which reflect diverging “role conceptions” and “relational identities”. If a “normative project” has been an intrinsic component of the EU identity and actorness, China has recently reversed the assumption that it can be a rather passive “learner” of international norms and has thus deconstructed - as Pan Chengxin has argued – the “rhetoric of dialogue and partnership” which supposedly afforded it “some measure of equal agency” in this respect.⁸¹¹

This set of issues impinges on the theoretical assumption that the EU is a “unitary actor” in a framework of coexistence with other “sub-systems” which are part of the broader picture which characterizes the relations between Europe and China. As we know, the Union’s member states and the intergovernmental dimension in which they are directly represented, through the meetings of the Council, are one of these sub-systems.

⁸¹¹ Pan Chengxin. “Problematizing ‘Constructive Engagement’ in EU-China Policy”, in Roland Vogt, ed. *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, 50.

In this respect we will argue that these dynamics of diversified interaction between Europe and China pose a challenge for the coherence and effectiveness of the EU policy-making in the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. A stronger “ownership” by all the components of the process - with agreed objectives delineated by the Union as a unitary actor – needs to take into account this multifaceted dimension: the “internal” which is based on the role of the sub-system represented by the Commission/EEAS and the “external” which is represented by the relations developed with the PRC on a bilateral basis by single member-states.

Against this background we will firstly analyze how, on one hand, the national policies of the EU member-states – and their competition - influence and interfere with the development of the EU-China Strategic Partnership; on the other, how the complex dynamic Union-member states and “core-periphery” is instrumentally used by the PRC to support and advance its interests not only within the Strategic Partnership but also in the framework of the bilateral relations that Beijing has been actively developing with European countries.

Secondly we will examine how the recent complex reality of “China in Europe” reflects the changing identity and actorness of China as a global power. Finally we will focus – by analyzing the issue of converging/diverging political values expressed by the EU and by single European countries in their interaction with China – on the growing divergence in terms of normative approaches and worldviews between Brussels and Beijing. We will conclude by underscoring that the analysis of these issues – which link internal and external dynamics affecting the coherence and significance of the Strategic Partnership – seems to confirm how the ideational and normative disconnect between the two partners is a key element which influences, as we have argued in the case of human rights and multilateralism, the development of a structural strategic dimension within the Partnership.

7.1 The bilateral relations of European countries with China and their implications for the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

As we know, the bilateral relations of the major European countries have always played a significant role in the evolving relationship of an increasingly integrated Europe with China. In this sense the “weight of History” has been and is – as we have argued - not only a quintessentially Chinese problem but also a fundamental component of the background of the relations between the Old Continent and China.

On the Chinese front there has been, at the same time, a sort of constant double-track in the development of a more comprehensive and strategic relationship with Europe. The case of Franco-Chinese relations is in this respect paradigmatic:⁸¹² the ambitions and search for status of France - deeply rooted in the Gaullist DNA of the Fifth Republic - have frequently supported a national “China policy” aimed at defining the bilateral relations between Paris and Beijing as strategic. The fact that both France and the PRC are permanent members of the UN Security Council have facilitated these attitudes but such an approach can be ascribed to the sensitivity of French foreign policy - in the post WWII context - to the political, cultural and economic leadership of the United States and to the “quasi-hegemonic” role of the “anglosphere”. President De Gaulle’s imprint in this regard on French foreign policy is a lasting legacy and has made France the only major European country to have been, to some extent, sensitive to the Chinese discourse on multipolarization of the international system.⁸¹³ The search of a strategic bilateral relationship with China was a clear objective in particular during the neo-Gaullist presidency of Jacques Chirac. However, the institutional role of the President in shaping France’s foreign policy has led to fluctuations in Paris’s strategic view of its relationship with Beijing: more recently – as President Macron’s approach seems to confirm – there has been a trend of Europeanization in France’s “China policy”.

In a completely different but equally important way the historical legacy has had an impact on the “China policy” of the United Kingdom, mainly through the complex problem of Hong Kong, whose partly unresolved issues in terms of rule of law, democracy and human rights are at the root of the present serious crisis in the territory which undermines the principle “one country two systems”. In the past the UK has tried to develop a China policy – as James Gow has argued⁸¹⁴ – centred on concrete trade and economic priorities which needed to be reconciled with the “ethics dimensions” of a historically complex bilateral relationship. The Cameron Government’s plans for a

⁸¹² Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “The Role of France in Sino-European Relations: Central or Marginal?” in David Kerr e Liu Fei (eds.), *The International Politics of EU-China Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129.

⁸¹³ Moreover France’s peculiar position within NATO has been seen with interest in Beijing as a manifestation of a sort of “balancing” on the Western front vis-à-vis the US leadership. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China and European security and economic interests. A French perspective”, in Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø and Zhang Tuosheng (eds.) *US-China_EU relations. Managing the New World Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 123.

⁸¹⁴ James Gow, “Travelling hopefully, acting realistically? UK-China interactions”, in David Kerr e Liu Fei (eds.), *The International Politics of EU-China Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 116.

“golden era”⁸¹⁵ of cooperation with the PRC turned out to be drastically problematized not only by an emerging crisis in Hong Kong but also by a growing US strategic competition with Beijing which implies for London “a rethink of the trade-offs between economic interests and political values in its relations with China”.⁸¹⁶ Certainly Brexit has opened a new phase for Britain’s interaction with global players such as China: in this sense the UK - acting on a bilateral basis without the “critical mass” granted by its former membership in the Union – seems to need a new policy of closer coordination with its allies and partners in the interaction with an increasingly assertive global China.

As for Germany – and Italy – the prominent economic component in their bilateral relationship with China has found in the EU policy of “constructive engagement” a long-lasting functional framework, even though this has gradually changed, in particular with regard to the cooperation on sensitive issues in terms of global competition such as the BRI and the 5G networks.⁸¹⁷ In this sense Germany and Italy are a good example, as a EU high official has observed, of the increasing difficulty for major European countries of having a China policy which “does not take sides” in the context of growing global competition. In the past, notwithstanding the intense competition of the European countries in the Chinese market, the effects of the national policies and priorities were balanced by the fact that, to a large extent, this intra-European competition was inscribed in the paradigm of constructive engagement”.⁸¹⁸

As we have seen, The PRC has always had a strong interest in “the balance of power among nations and the international system that emerges from that balance at a given point in time”, a concept that Chinese scholars define “international configuration”, as Cui Liru points out.⁸¹⁹ For this reason Beijing has seen in Europe a potential counterpart

⁸¹⁵ Isabel Hilton, “End of the Golden Decade”, *New Statesman*, July 7, 2020. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2020/07/end-golden-decade>; Jonathan Ford and Laura Hughes, “From the Golden Era to the Deep Freeze”, *Financial Times*, July 14, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/804175d0-8b47-4427-9853-2aded76f48e4>; George Magnus, “China’s threats to the UK are more than ‘loud thunder, little rain’”, *Financial Times*, July 10, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/fe0b9dde-0c7a-4746-9d56-9a6918e9304a>; Tim Summers, “UK: Sharpening the China Debate amid Covid-19”, *Chatam House ETNC Special Report*, April 29 2020.

⁸¹⁶ Tim Nicholas Rühlig Björn Jerdén Frans-Paul van der Putten John Seaman Miguel Otero-Iglesias Alice Ekman (eds.), *Political values in Europe-China relations*, European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) Report, December 2018, 18.

⁸¹⁷ Gudrun Wacker, “Change and continuities in EU-China relations. A German perspective”, in Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø and Zhang Tuosheng (eds.) *US-China-EU relations. Managing the New World Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 96; Nicola Casarini, “Rome-Beijing: Changing The Game”, *Paper of the Istituto Affari Internazionali – IAI*, Rome 2019.

⁸¹⁸ Interview with a EEAS senior official, by the author, Brussels, February 2018.

⁸¹⁹ Cui Liru, “The Evolution of the International Configuration and the Construction of the Order in the Multi-Polar Era (First Part),” *Contemporary International Relations*, Issue 1, 2016. http://www.cssn.cn/zxx/gjzxx_zxx/201604/W020160421376680708043.pdf.

for its efforts of multipolarizing international relations not only in its relationship with the Union but also with its member states. The growing perception in the Chinese leadership that the role of an integrated Europe as a pole has been weakening – compared to the early 2000s when the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was established – has militated in favour of a very active policy of cooperation (mainly through the penetration of economic markets) with single European countries or in the framework of groupings – such as the 17+1 (formerly 16+1) – aimed at strengthening the overall Chinese presence and influence in Europe. This action has been reinforced by the PRC’s exploitation of all the advantages that the national competing interests of the European countries for the Chinese market have offered. As has been noted in this respect, “the density of government and related exchanges between China and the EU, and through mutual visits at the member states level, is almost overpowering. It reflects the Chinese preference for bilateral interactions but also Europeans’ eagerness to compete – with each other – for the attentions of China”.⁸²⁰ This “density” has been underscored by the number and level of the meetings at a bilateral level between the PRC and some of the major EU member-states.⁸²¹

On the Chinese side the amount of resources and political energies devoted to the strengthening of these relations has been considerable and denotes the importance of this dimension for China’s overall relationship with Europe. Yet, in parallel, the level of convergence and “productivity” of the main strands of cooperation within the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue, High Level Economic Dialogue, Human Rights Dialogue) has not been increasing, as we have seen. China’s “investment” in parallel relations with European counterparts is a factor which clearly can at least reduce - if not undermine - the structural engagement and the strategic potential of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In turn, the economic competition of the European national systems in China has been a factor with a constant impact on the EU’s China policy-making. For Europe, at the intergovernmental level, possible liabilities stem not only from the internal competition of major member states in China but also

⁸²⁰Francois Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, *China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations*, European Council on Foreign Relations-ECFR (London, December 2017), 21.

⁸²¹ Ibid. As Godement and Vasselier have written “the “United Kingdom alone had 14 direct ministerial encounters between January 2016 and May 2017” while Germany can rely on “a near-on full government-to-government yearly exchange” and similar situations characterize the interaction of Paris and Rome with Beijing. It is not only “old Europe” which has been competing “over strategic (or security) and financial dialogues and initiatives with China”. More significantly, the new EU member-states have also been determined to have a direct and “tailored” interaction with the PRC, making possible the establishment of formats such the formerly 16+1 cooperation.

from “the potential divergence of interests between its core and the periphery – whether this periphery is the austerity-marred south, the under-regarded east, or the somewhat complacent north”.⁸²²

This “double-track” in China’s strategic relations with Europe has provided it with a better range of policy options: “by focusing on its direct interests, and often ignoring EU norms in its proposals” the PRC has developed a growing network of bilateral relations with EU member states, “putting special emphasis on Europe’s periphery”.⁸²³ A significant example of this trend is the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) indicated by the 17+1 format. As Hillman and McCalpin have written,⁸²⁴ this format is a Chinese initiated-platform established in 2012 with the aim of expanding “cooperation between Beijing and a group of EU member states and Balkan countries: although the initiative pre-dates the formal announcement of China’s Belt and Road initiative (BRI), the 17+1 cooperation has been widely seen as an extension of the BRI. The three priority areas that China has identified for increasing cooperation under the formerly 16+1 include infrastructure, advanced technologies, and green technologies”. As it has been pointed out, “although the grouping gives the outward impression of multilateralism, it is mainly a forum for China to strike bilateral deals”.⁸²⁵

The strengthening of this complementary dimension to the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was facilitated by the consequences of the European economic crisis and long recession which made possible very important Chinese takeovers, in particular in Southern Europe, and raised in Central and Eastern European countries the expectations for the advantages which might flow from the 16+1 format. The dangers of this Chinese initiative for the coherence of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership have not been underestimated by the EU: as Hillman and McCalpin have underlined, EU officials have been “increasingly critical of the 16+1 and worry the mechanism could further undermine EU unity on policies toward China”.⁸²⁶ In 2016, The European Commission’s Joint Communication on *Elements for a new EU Strategy on China* had insisted that any bilateral relations with China - including in group settings

⁸²² Ibid., 34

⁸²³ Ibid.

⁸²⁴ Jonathan E. Hillman and Maesea McCalpin, “Will China’s ‘16+1’ Format Divide Europe?”, *Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.*, April 11, 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/will-chinas-161-format-divide-europe>. The present CEEC membership is composed by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

⁸²⁶ Ibid.

such as the 16+1 format - should be coordinated with the European Union to ensure that relevant aspects are “in line with EU law, rules and policies, and that the overall outcome is beneficial for the EU as a whole.” The European Parliament reiterated this stance in a resolution on the state of EU-China relations in December 2018.⁸²⁷

Even though China responded to these statements by insisting that it firmly supports European integration and unity, these trends epitomize the structural change in the “balance of power” between Europe and China which has characterized the strategic relationship in the last decade. When the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was established the focus was indeed on “Europe in China” because of the opening of the Chinese market and the massive process of manufacturing delocalization from the West to the Asian country. This process was driven by the reassuring paradigm of “constructive engagement” which minimized the implications for the EU of the competition among single European countries in the Chinese market.

Conversely, China is now inside Europe – as it has been rightly pointed out – and “if one were to select just a single example to show how issues have shifted in the last decade from the question of Europe’s presence in China to China’s involving itself directly in Europe and its neighbourhood, it would be the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)”.⁸²⁸

7.2 The BRI as a manifestation of China’s shifting vision of its long-term relations with Europe

The BRI can be regarded as a significant manifestation of China’s search for a “grand strategy” in the framework of a comprehensive power projection aimed at shaping its external environment and advancing its long-term interests. Vis-à-vis Europe it has been described as the “dominant popular narrative for EU-China relations”,⁸²⁹ supported by all the means of Chinese “hard and soft power mobilized from the top”⁸³⁰ and aimed at appealing to Europe on different fronts. Even though the Chinese debate on a “grand strategy” is still open and no official document has so far delineated it, the strategic

⁸²⁷ Ibid.

⁸²⁸ Godemont and Vasselier, “China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations”, 14.

⁸²⁹ Zeng Jinghan, “Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of ‘One Belt One Road’ and ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 55, n° 5, (2017), 1162–1176. Godemont and Vasselier, *ibid.*

⁸³⁰ Nadège Rolland, “The Belt and Road Initiative: China’s Grand Strategy?” in Angela Stanzel Jabin Jacob, Melanie Hart and Nadège Rolland, *Grand Designs: Does China have a ‘Grand Strategy’?*, European Council on Foreign Relations (October 2017), 5.

approach embodied by the BRI, as Rolland has argued, reflects the vision that the PRC “has for itself and for its desired position in the international system” and is “meant to shape the international environment in a way that benefits [its] long-term strategic objectives by seeking “to mobilise and integrate all the available domestic resources and instruments of national power”.⁸³¹ The BRI reflects also a meaningful change in Chinese strategic thinking in terms of its normative and ideological characteristics: as Chang and Pieke have noted, this initiative is the practice of the “concept of a community with a shared future for mankind” delineated by Xi Jinping in 2017.⁸³² It is also, as we have argued, the concrete implementation of a new approach of pragmatic “multilateralism with Chinese characteristics”.

The perception has grown in Europe of the BRI as a key component of a Chinese “offensive” designed to shape the international environment in ways that promote China’s national values and interests and as a possible alternative model of governance. In particular, the concept of “connectivity” propounded by the Chinese authorities through the BRI - based on “Europe’s until-recent openness to Chinese activity behind its own member states borders” - has become matter of closer scrutiny on the real added-value for the European partners of this cooperation. Growing concerns have been expressed that “China’s trade advantage is moving upstream, into logistics, finance, cyber, and technology”.⁸³³ In this perspective it has been argued that:

the BRI, elevated to the constitutional rank by the Chinese Communist Party as a part of Xi Jinping’s ‘China’s Dream’, is an open competition for global leadership, and a way to reshape the international system, putting China at its center.⁸³⁴

The BRI is increasingly perceived as part of the strategic ambitions of China as a global power which have been underscored by its systematic bid to take over the management of infrastructure such as European ports and by its interest in key activities from aerospace to grid networks and data storage. The Chinese expansion into European markets has been fueling, however, greater investment screening, as was underlined by the change of Germany’s position in this regard “after the 2016 Chinese raid on German

⁸³¹ Ibid.

⁸³² Vincent K. L. Chang and Frank N. Pieke, “Europe’s engagement with China: shifting Chinese views of the EU and the EU-China relationship”, *Asia Europe Journal* , 16 (2), January 2018, 323.

⁸³³ Godemont and Vasselier, *China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations* , ibid.

⁸³⁴ Valbona Zeneli, “Italy signs on to the BRI: EU-China relations at crossroads?”, *The Diplomat*, 3 April 2019. Accessed at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/italy-signs-on-to-belt-and-road-initiative-eu-china-relations-at-crossroads/>

high tech firms”.⁸³⁵ The complex implications and overall compatibility of this strategic initiative for a EU coordinated China policy have been underlined by Italy’s decision to sign - the day after the EU Council meeting of 22 March 2019 - which approved the common EU strategy toward China in preparation of the EU-China Summit - a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Beijing to become an official member of the BRI. The signing of this MoU produced strong reactions in both Europe and the United States because Italy is the first big EU country to become a member of the BRI and also the only G-7 member which has decided to join the Chinese initiative.⁸³⁶

The fact that a country like Italy – the third largest economy of the Eurozone – has joined the BRI was perceived in Brussels as an intrinsic weakening of the credibility of a EU China policy based on the “wider understanding that while the BRI promises global development, at the same time it carries daunting challenges” running counter not only to the “EU’s agenda favoring trade liberalization” but also to the Union’s concept of multilateral cooperation. In direct response to the BRI, “the EU Commission published its Strategy on Connecting Europe and Euro-Asia, based on Western economic and institutional norms and principles, a document that completely ignores the BRI”.⁸³⁷

The growing awareness of the complex implications of the BRI for Europe has been underscored by a certain “turn of the tide” in the national China policies of several European states with regard, in particular, to their projects of cooperation with the PRC on the issue of fifth-generation (5G) telecom services, one of the most sensitive aspects because of its structural security implications in key areas. The Chinese telecom giant Huawei is regarded as the world leader in high speed 5G equipment and the US has expressed “fears that this new technology could contain security loopholes that allow China to spy on global communications traffic, and has been lobbying European countries to stay clear of it”.⁸³⁸ The US diplomatic offensive on the Chinese “predatory approach” to trade and investment and its connected security risks has been met in Brussels and other European capitals in a changing context characterized by an in depth reflection on the

⁸³⁵ The European response to Chinese strategic acquisitions has been driven by the countries which have received the largest share of Chinese investment: Germany and France, which coordinated with Italy through bilateral demarches and the common drafting of a non-paper on investment screening addressed to the EU Council. Godemont and Vasselier, *China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations*, 19.

⁸³⁶ Ibid. In the framework of China’s so called “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” – which is an integral part of the BRI - “Italy represents one of the most important strategic players for China in Europe”.

⁸³⁷ Ibid.

⁸³⁸ *The Japan Times*, October 2 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/10/02/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/u-s-warns-italy-china-5g/#.XZ6RP0bHyUk>

strategic relationship with China.⁸³⁹ After the UK and France, Germany and Italy have also decided to substantially limit the cooperation with China in the 5G sector.

In the context of dynamics of growing strategic competition with China, dramatically fueled by the pandemic crisis, the endorsement by European countries “of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy initiative” has been regarded not only as undermining the renewed EU’s “efforts at finding a common stance vis-à-vis Beijing”⁸⁴⁰ but also as a significant factor of friction with Washington “in its tug-of-war with China over trade and global leadership”⁸⁴¹. In this context there has been an increased awareness in Europe that the set of more fragmented bilateral relations supported by initiatives such as the BRI and the 17+1 and the stalemate in the development of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership have not reinforced the cohesion of the EU’s attempt to forge a unitary approach to China.

If the policies of the Trump administration toward China and the EU might have offered – as Nordin and Weissmann have argued⁸⁴² – a “window of opportunity that Beijing has used skillfully to promote its claim to international leadership”, the pandemic crisis has also represented in this respect an inflection point for a European rethinking of the strategic relationship with China.

7.3 The role of economic bilateral interests in Europe-China relations: growing signs of divergence.

The “parallel” Europe-China relations which have been developed by Beijing through a network of bilateral/multilateral strands of collaboration have been defined “a mismatch in rules, culture and expectations”⁸⁴³ which not only has prevented cooperative positions on a wide set of economic issues “ranging from business arbitration to telecoms norms and public-private partnerships” but also normative convergence between the EU

⁸³⁹ Ibid. In the Sino-Italian MoU on the BRI the telecommunications sector was left out of the scope of the agreement. The Italian Government has stressed that the so-called “golden powers” in supply deals for fifth-generation (5G) telecom services, approved by the Italian government in September 2019, “make us among the most advanced in Europe on security.” The special powers should allow the Italian government to impose conditions and requirements on the purchase of goods and services for 5G networks or deals between telecoms companies. Minister of Foreign Affairs Di Maio underlined that Italy has “no intention of taking part in trade accords that might harm our sovereignty as a state”.

⁸⁴⁰ Nicola Casarini, “Rome-Beijing: changing the game”, *paper of the Istituto Affari Internazionali – IAI*, Rome 2019, 3.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid.

⁸⁴² Astrid H.M. Nordin and Mikael Weissman, “Will Trump make China great again? The belt and road initiative and international order” *International Affairs*, vol. 94, issue 2, March 2018, 231–249; <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix242>.

⁸⁴³ Godemont and Vasselier, *China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations*, 16.

and China on multilateral issues, for which Europe had high hopes in order also to broaden and strengthen the structural strategic dimension of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

In this evolving context, if “the age-old questions of European division versus European unity remain unanswered on many issues”,⁸⁴⁴ the strategic approach developed by the Union and several member states has problematized not only the traditional policy of “constructive engagement” but also the “bilateral dimension” of European relations with China, which has been regarded as a factor weakening the EU’s comprehensive strategic approach towards Beijing mainly given the short-term national priorities and fragmented objectives it implies.

This is a very important aspect of the problematique that we are examining: on strategic priorities and political issues and values - as we will see in the second part of the chapter - attitudes have been changing in Europe not only between different governments but sometimes also within the same party, as the case of the British Conservatives tends to underscore.⁸⁴⁵ At the same time this process has been influenced in a significant way by the core-periphery dynamics which have been taking place within Europe. The crisis of the Eurozone and the long recession which followed amplified the gaps that separated Northern from Southern Europe: this left China with considerable room for manoeuvre in taking advantage of its bilateral relations with single European countries. In light of the tensions related to the pandemic crisis the strategic reflection underway within the Union has refocused on the necessity that the “EU core” can reinforce commitments with its “periphery” in order to avoid the risk that divisions in the membership can be used by external actors as a means of increasing influence to the detriment of broader European strategic priorities. In parallel, a new debate has addressed the complementary key question of the European economic presence in China in a framework which, for the first time, has taken into account - as we have seen - the issue of “decoupling”: this debate is still in a nascent phase but constitutes a significant element of novelty in the interaction between Europe and China.

⁸⁴⁴ If the very concept of “periphery” is generic, as Godement and Vasselier argue, because it is hard to define a “single European periphery”, it is also true that Chinese bilateral cooperation initiatives “do strengthen the bargaining hand of the smallest or weakest inside Europe. More solidarity and shared economic interest is a necessary response” to these tactics of “divide and impera”. Godement and Vasselier, *China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations*, *ibid.*

⁸⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

In this perspective the “principled pragmatism” that the EU has delineated as a general “norma agendi” in its new Global Strategy also needs to be supported by “core countries” in terms not only of economic priorities but also of advancement of values, norms and international standards in the key strategic relationship with China.

China’s fluctuating behavior within the Partnership has been influenced also by the realistic acknowledgement of the many obstacles which characterize the development of the “relational dimension” (that is, the economic component) of the Strategic Partnership. While an EU-China investment agreement has been delayed for a long time because it would require – if implemented in a thorough way - significant changes and reforms in the PRC’s economy, China “has rather sought a guarantee against anti-dumping by proposing a free trade agreement” and has also used “every bilateral opening with member states and beyond”⁸⁴⁶ to protect and promote its interests. This approach was facilitated by the fact – as we have underlined – that it coincided with the period of greatest difficulty for the EU, following the 2011 public debt crisis. This phase of particular EU weakness seems to have been overcome by the determined response of the EU to the economic implications of the pandemic crisis and the unity and lessons learned by the EU and its members in facing Brexit seem to have had an impact even on European governments led by “sovereignist” parties which have limited their polemics vis-à-vis the EU’s lead on economic issues.

China’s bilateral activism with single European countries on the economic front has implicitly undermined the prospects of re-launching the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as the primary framework for the two actors’ interaction. The need of a comprehensive approach sustained by the two sides seems to be a prerequisite for addressing the pending contentious issues, as the EU leaders have underlined on occasion of the last EU-China summit and the subsequent Leaders Meeting in September 2020. On those occasions a higher degree of reciprocity has been indicated as a key objective by European leaders: “the reality is that this relationship has advanced in areas of direct interest to China, including some which are not shared with Europe” and for this reason a set of serious unresolved problems continues to affect a balanced and substantial development of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

In a phase characterized by growing ideological tensions,⁸⁴⁷ the question of reciprocity needs also to be addressed from an ideational point of view, on the basis of the reciprocal awareness that some structural changes are required in the strategic approach of the two partners. On the EU side the limits of its normative power strategy vis-à-vis China are being recognized along with the rethinking of the “constructive engagement” policy on the basis of its inconsistencies; on the Chinese side any strategic reflection on the implications of the “dual approach” implemented through initiatives such as the BRI for the role and potential of the Partnership as the main framework of interaction with Europe is still limited. China’s recent “sub-regional focus”⁸⁴⁸ - more centred on the bilateral interaction with single EU countries - seems indeed to be driven not only by real-politik and “economic opportunism” but, more importantly, by an ideological and ideational vision of the role of China in the framework of an evolving “international configuration” (*guoji geju*).⁸⁴⁹

What it is important to consider is that the European response to this Chinese approach is being driven not only by a logic of economic needs – as happened during the worst period of the post-2008 recession – or a predominant focus on national priorities but also by the consideration of a set of political values which link – even though not in a linear way - the individual behaviour of EU member states with the action and objectives of the Union within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

7.4 The role of political values in the bilateral relations between China and EU member states

The picture which emerges from the diversified set of bilateral economic relations between China and single EU member-states is twofold: if these relations often add a further element of complexity to the search for an effective and coherent EU approach to its Strategic Relationship with the PRC, we have also seen that there is a growing awareness in Europe of the Chinese determination to take advantage of uncoordinated and sometimes short-sighted national “China policies”. This process is further defined and nuanced if we consider how political values – in connection and beyond the economic

⁸⁴⁷ Angela Stanzel, “China’s ‘new era’ with Xi Jinping characteristics”, *China Analysis paper*, European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2007.

⁸⁴⁸ Vincent K. L. Chang and Frank N. Pieke, “Europe’s engagement with China: shifting Chinese views of the EU and the EU-China relationship”, *Asia Europe Journal*, 16 (2), January 2018, 323.

⁸⁴⁹ Melanie Hart, “Analysing China’s Position in the Global System” in Angela Stanzel Jabin Jacob, Melanie Hart and Nadège Rolland, *Grand Designs: Does China have a ‘Grand Strategy’?*, European Council on Foreign Relations (October 2017), 9.

interests and priorities - shape the attitudes of the EU and of its membership towards China.

The multifaceted role of political values in the relationship with China of most European countries has been in fact regarded as a crucial ideational factor which contributes to the definition of the EU's interests-values continuum and its implementation in the interaction with Beijing. Since the Treaty of Lisbon envisages that all EU member-states are committed to the external promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, it is relevant to analyze how "the EU member-states promote these values in their relations with China...and what importance do EU member-states place on political values when they conflict with other interests, such as those in the economic field".⁸⁵⁰ In this sense we will see that "promoting political values and protecting economic interests are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but trade-offs between different objectives often arise".⁸⁵¹

At the same time it is important, in line with our epistemological premises, to understand how - as Michalski and Pan Zhongqi have argued⁸⁵² - in the specific context of the Strategic Partnership the two partners "engage in role-playing to assert their international identities and enhance their status and prestige as global actors". The character of the interaction between Brussels and Beijing on political values "depends on the degree of congruence in norms and worldviews between the partners and their relative position in the international system": in this sense the increasing divergence on political values is reflected by the "competitive role-play that emerges between China and the EU in the Strategic Partnership" which underlines the complexity of socializing "a significant Other to norms and worldviews that are central to their respective identities in the evolving international system".⁸⁵³

On the European side, it is important to focus on the diversified elements which define the approaches developed by European countries in their interaction with the PRC: the historical legacies which, as a fundamental background, influence, through national identities and actorness, political values; the level of economic relations with China in

⁸⁵⁰ Tim Nicholas Rühlig Björn Jerdén Frans-Paul van der Putten John Seaman Miguel Otero-Iglesias Alice Ekman (eds.), *Political values in Europe-China relations*, European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) Report, December 2018.

⁸⁵¹ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 4.

⁸⁵² Anna Michalski and Pan Zhongqi, "Role Dynamics in a Structured Relationship: The EU-China Strategic Partnership", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 55, n° 3, 2017, 611-627.

⁸⁵³ Michalski and Pan Zhongqi, "Role Dynamics in a Structured Relationship: The EU-China Strategic Partnership", 626.

quantitative and qualitative terms; the degree of Chinese pressure exerted in the interaction with the single European partner.⁸⁵⁴

The role of political values in the behavior of the European countries with China tends to underline a set of dynamics which is diversified and multi-directional. If there has been a general trend of downgrading “the importance of political values in the approaches to China” - with the younger European democracies “more affected by this trend”⁸⁵⁵ - it is worth noting that “Chinese pressure has led some European states to reconsider their level of activity in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law” but has not been able to convince them to take “political values entirely off the agenda”.⁸⁵⁶ On the economic front the interaction between trade and investment interests and the promotion of political values is sometimes counter-intuitive; as Rühlig has written⁸⁵⁷ “states with a higher per capita gross domestic product tend to be more active in the field of political values” and “close trade relations with China also correlate with a higher level of activity in this field”.

If analytical evidence does not indicate “strong correlation between absolute or relative amounts of incoming Chinese investment and the active promotion of political values by European states” there have been individual cases which demonstrate that Chinese investments, or the expectation of such investments, have had an impact in “periphery countries” such as Portugal, the Czech Republic and Greece⁸⁵⁸ while “core countries” such as Netherlands and the UK, for example, “are openly critical of China’s political values but welcome investment projects”.⁸⁵⁹ The case of Italy, again, has been peculiar because Italian governments before the decision to join the BRI - had been much more sensitive to “the economic dimension of China’s growing influence in Europe than on issues related to democracy, human rights and the rule of law”.⁸⁶⁰ This approach mirrors the behavior that countries such as Italy - but also Germany – followed when the economic interaction with the PRC was mainly centred on European interests in the Chinese market.

⁸⁵⁴ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 9.

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁶ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 10.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁸ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 17.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid.

All these trends are relevant for the overarching action and position of the EU as an unitary actor in this field. As we have already seen in the case of human rights, structural engagement at the EU level on issues related to political values has also had the negative side-effect of serving “as an excuse for inactivity in this field in many member states”.

These attitudes have inevitably weakened the EU approach in the framework of the Partnership: notwithstanding Brussels’ constant focus on these problems the results have indeed been sporadic, apart from “some impact in individual human rights cases as well as with regard to legal reform in areas with direct economic implications”.⁸⁶¹ The lack of a process of normative convergence in this area has made the EU’s impact on China’s political values substantially limited, while China has been significantly promoting its “new ideational position” which is supported not only by “harder sources of power” but also by soft power and actions of influence. As Joshua Kurlantzick has argued, “as China has built a global strategy, it has also developed more sophisticated tools of influence, which it deploys across the world”.⁸⁶² The instruments of China’s soft power have been also deployed in support of initiatives such as the BRI which have projected not only China’s growing economic might through appealing images such as the “new Silk Road” but also a new Chinese model of multilateral governance. In this regard it is interesting to note - as Zeng Jinghan has argued ⁸⁶³ - that the current Chinese “narratives of both ‘new type of great power relations’ and ‘one belt one road’ suffer from the problem of being overloaded” and they have become “far too broad to be meaningful”.

Despite China’s increased efforts of soft-power projection aimed at promoting its image and perception abroad - in most European countries “the general public and large sections of the political élite and media hold largely negative views of China’s system”.⁸⁶⁴ Although these polls “do not explicitly measure European support for China’s political values, they do indicate largely negative general views on China”, notwithstanding the intensified Chinese public diplomacy and foreign “propaganda in the past decade”.⁸⁶⁵

⁸⁶¹ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 10.

⁸⁶² Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 62;
Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁸⁶³ Zeng Jinghan, “Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of ‘One Belt One Road’ and ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 55, n° 5., 2017, 1162–1176.

⁸⁶⁴ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 11.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid.

These findings are interesting because they problematize a fairly widespread narrative on the increasing Chinese influence in its relations with Europe. As we have seen, during the pandemic crisis, China's assertive participation in the "battle of narratives", through information campaigns and "wolf warrior diplomacy", has backfired in terms of European perceptions.

However, a generally negative image has not prevented China from "increasingly seeking to align Europe with China's own interests and values" in order to gain "influence over decision making in some sensitive fields".⁸⁶⁶

Another interesting trend that is underscored by survey data is that the political élites with an acceptance of China's political system are for the most part Eurosceptic but not all Eurosceptics have a favourable view of China. If Chinese political values mostly meet opposition in European political élites, China's growing footprint does however serve the interests of some of them, in particular of those EU political actors which are critical of the EU and tend "to use China as leverage vis-à-vis the EU institutions and other EU member states".⁸⁶⁷

If it is true, for instance, that the Hungarian sovereignist and Eurosceptic government is "alone in expressing ideological interest in China's political values" – with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán praising China's "efficient, labour-oriented society in comparison to the lengthy processes of the EU" – it is also true that the Hungarian people continue to be "highly sceptical of the Chinese Communist Party" and regime.⁸⁶⁸ In this attitude the historical legacy of the Communist period in Hungary is undoubtedly a significant factor in shaping the people's perceptions and opinions vis-à-vis the PRC in terms of political values, as similar dynamics are evident in former communist countries such as the Czech Republic, Romania and Poland.⁸⁶⁹

The case of Italy is interesting for being an anomaly in this respect: it indeed tends to suggest an opposite dynamic if we consider the influence of historical legacy on the view of communism in the Italian élites. Italy had the largest communist party of Western

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁸ Tamas Matura, "Absent political values in a pragmatic Hungarian China policy" in Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 47.

⁸⁶⁹ In this regard, as Rühlig has written, the contrasting symbolism of 4 June 1989 in Poland and China is telling: "while China conducted its violent repression of protestors in Tiananmen Square, Poland was holding its first semi-free elections – and for many years served as a marked example of the different political values in the two countries. Only when the Law and Justice Party (PiS) felt confident in power did criticism of the semi-free elections of 1989 become more mainstream" Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 15.

Europe and this made possible not only the development of structured relations with the PRC but, more importantly, produced - through an effective implementation of the Gramscian concept of “cultural hegemony” - a lasting benign perception of the Chinese regime in significant parts of the intellectual and political class.

In addition to the importance of historical legacies for the role of political values vis-à-vis China we also have to consider the impact of changing domestic political dynamics. With the same historical background stemming from the Fifth Republic’s ambitions to be a strategic partner of China on a bilateral basis, Emmanuel Macron’s China policy seems to indicate a shift towards an increasing importance of the political values in French-Chinese relations compared to his predecessors.⁸⁷⁰ In Germany if the legacy of the Nazi period has remained a crucial component of the Federal Republic “self-identification and has a big impact on its policy regarding democracy, the rule of law and human rights”, we can see that the “former Social Democrat government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder paid less attention to promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China than Angela Merkel’s subsequent administrations”.⁸⁷¹

An important indication which stems from the analysis of these components of the behavior of the EU member-states towards China is that historical references often “appear in discourses on the role of democracy, human rights and the rule of law and while this may be a discursive strategy to some extent, all politics start with words. Hence, such discourses should not be ignored”.⁸⁷²

The necessary focus of the EU on these bilateral dynamics also requires a coherent perspective on the connection between bilateral economic interests and the promotion of political values. Recent research in this respect seems to underline that “richer countries - but not necessarily big economies - adopt a more active stance on the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China. Of course, in many cases richer countries are also older democracies, which makes it difficult to distinguish between the relative effects of historical legacy and economic performance”. This counterintuitive finding in any case contradicts the “common belief that extensive economic cooperation with China makes European states more reluctant to promote political values”.⁸⁷³

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid.

⁸⁷² Ibid.

⁸⁷³ Ibid.

Notwithstanding the lack of attractiveness of the Chinese political model and the growing European criticism of it, the degree of influence of China's outreach is not easily measurable in its effects because it is meant to produce its main returns in the long run. What is directly relevant for the EU approach within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is that "China has gained in influence in particularly sensitive fields of decision making" as the cases of the "watering down of the EU's position on adherence to international law in the South China Sea dispute in 2016 and the Greek veto of the EU's condemnation of China's human rights violations in the UNHRC in 2017" underline in a clear way.

Even though Chinese pressure on member-states to make them reconsider their level of active promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in China has been a growing element in the last years, it is unlikely that any EU member-state could take political values entirely off its agenda: nevertheless it is an important goal for the Union to reinforce convergence in this regard by supporting European countries which are put under pressure by Beijing, in particular if they belong to the "periphery" of the Union. This is also an essential prerequisite for strengthening the coherence and credibility of the EU as a unitary actor in particular in a phase when it is reassessing its policy-making on China, as we will see in the next section.

7.5 The role of the EU as the main actor for the promotion of political values with China: Normative Power Europe versus Normative Power China?

The analysis developed in this chapter confirms that, even though the EU's interaction with China has been significantly based on its political values because they stem from its peculiar identity and actorness, this approach needs also to mirror "the diversity of perspectives and interests of its member states" particularly in the area of foreign and security policy, which remains an intergovernmental competence.⁸⁷⁴

The introduction respectively of the Bilateral Political Dialogue in 1994 and the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue in 1995 underlined the importance for the EU of the political dimension in the strategic relations with the PRC. As Christiansen, Kirchner and Wissenbach have pointed out "the 2003 partnership agreement demonstrates that both parties were willing to engage in a high degree of political cooperation, resulting in one

⁸⁷⁴ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 17.

of the most extensive institutional bases of EU strategic partnerships – all that despite the effects in the partnership of different histories, state traditions, values and norms orientations, as well as different geopolitical interests”.⁸⁷⁵

Since the political values are constitutive of the EU’s “historical emergence and development, and are thus at the heart of the self-identification of the European institutions... the agency of the EU strengthens a China policy that aims to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and all member states to varying degrees share a belief in these political values”.⁸⁷⁶

As we have argued, however, this process is the outcome of the interaction of the “sub-systems” which contribute to the agency of the Union as an international actor and in this context the role of the Commission/European External Action Service - the EU’s bureaucracy - has a “significant impact on foreign policymaking even though it lacks formal decision-making power”.⁸⁷⁷ The fact that the EU operates on the basis of this multilayered structure composed by its sub-systems poses a clear challenge for the strategic coherence of the EU’s China policy within the Comprehensive Partnership in a phase where the PRC has been actively interacting with the components of one of these sub-systems, namely the EU member-states.

The coherence and unity of the EU’s approach to China based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law has been traditionally promoted by this bureaucratic framework which - by providing constant coordination - has worked to harmonize European foreign policy and external relations. At the same time, part of the reason why the EU has not been more successful in advancing this political dimension is due, in addition to internal coordination problems “to an uneasy coexistence between normative concerns and material interests”.⁸⁷⁸ While the EU-China Partnership enhanced the European focus on this political dimension, “competing strategies within the EU, particularly between the European Commission/European Parliament, and with/between member states on relations with China have continued”.⁸⁷⁹

⁸⁷⁵ Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 74.

⁸⁷⁶ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 17.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁸ Christiansen, Kirchner, Wissenbach, *The European Union and China*, 75.

⁸⁷⁹ Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 18.

This dual approach – based on an EU policy with a strong emphasis on political and human rights issues and on traditional state-to-state relations predominantly focused on economic matters – affects “the extent to which the EU can speak with a single voice in its relations with China and/or is able to leverage the Chinese partner for greater commitment to the Partnership”.⁸⁸⁰

The active ownership also by the member-states of the objectives of the EU in terms of political values is therefore a necessary condition to strengthen the EU’s leverage in this respect and to support its strategic role as an advocate of democracy, human rights and the rule of law within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

In preserving the fundamental ideational component of its identity as a civilian/normative/ethical power the EU seems to be, however, realistically aware that its effectiveness and recent impact on “China’s treatment of political values has been limited”⁸⁸¹ because the PRC has rejected the normative goals intrinsic in the EU China policy. The severe backlash that political values are suffering in China and the growing difficulties in the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue put indeed in question the “EU’s treatment of political values” aimed at shaping Europe’s self-identification and signalling “to the rest of the world what Europe stands for and that China’s attempts to redefine concepts such as democracy and human rights do not go uncontested”.

As Pan Chengxin has argued, the EU approach to political values aimed at shaping the normative framework of the Partnership has been opposed by an increasingly assertive Normative Power China as a manifestation of “lingering Eurocentrism” based on a policy characterized by “inconsistencies and double standards”.⁸⁸²

If the ability or, at least, the willingness to significantly contribute to shape “the normative framework of the international order” is a key component of the peculiar strategic role that the EU aspires to play in its relations with the other main actors on the world’s scene, Brussels is increasingly aware - as Zeng Jinghan has pointed out - that “the creation of ‘new type of great power relations’ and ‘one belt one road’ demonstrates

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid. See also Katrin Kinzelbach, *Quiet Diplomacy and Its Limits*, (New York: Routledge, 2015); Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, *Europe, China, and the Limits of Normative Power* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019).

⁸⁸² Pan Chengxin. “Problematising ‘Constructive Engagement’ in EU-China Policy”, in Roland Vogt, ed. *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, 56.

China's determination to move from a norm/system taker towards a norm/system shaper".⁸⁸³

The interaction within the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on political values is a benchmark not only for assessing a structural strategic dimension which reflects diverse approaches to China across Europe but also for better understanding the Chinese approach vis-à-vis Europe in this respect. In this sense this process is, as Zeng Jinghan has argued⁸⁸⁴, "a two way street" which underlines also "a decreasing interest in the EU within China's strategic community [as a] reflection of the relative decline of the EU and the effects of the 'Capability-Expectations Gap'".⁸⁸⁵

If the EU has considered the promotion of political values a core component of its identity and normative ambitions Brussels needs to be aware that "the shifting international identity of China has further changed its evaluations of the EU's global role" in this regard.⁸⁸⁶

As Michalski and Pan Zhongqi have written, since the establishment of the Partnership "the EU and China have engaged in a competitive role-play attempting to influence the role conceptions, role enactments and foreign policy behaviour of the other". If the socialization "was first driven by the EU which strove to introduce China into the multilateral world order and induce China to adopt the EU's norms and principles on international engagement" the weakening "of the EU's position in the international system" has severely diminished its "ability to influence China" and has made necessary "to adjust its role conceptions and enactment" in light "of China's refusal to acquiesce to liberal values and principles".⁸⁸⁷

The analysis that we have developed in this chapter underlines some relevant aspects to assess both the prospects for development of the Partnership and some significant conceptual gaps stemming from the set of parallel bilateral/multilateral relations which affect the institutional framework of interaction between Brussels and Beijing.

⁸⁸³ Zeng Jinghan, "Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of 'One Belt One Road' and 'New Type of Great Power Relations'", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 55, n° 5., 2017, 1176.

⁸⁸⁴ Ibid,

⁸⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁶ Zeng Jinghan, "Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of 'One Belt One Road' and 'New Type of Great Power Relations'", 1175.

⁸⁸⁷ Anna Michalski and Pan Zhongqi, "Role Dynamics in a Structured Relationship: The EU-China Strategic Partnership", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 55, n° 3., 2017, 625.

On the one hand, we have seen how the gaps among member-states on Europe's "China policies" need to be bridged in order to strengthen the coherence, credibility and effectiveness of the EU approach in its strategic relationship with the PRC and to overcome a stalemate that has been vividly described as follows: "an array of documents detail the EU's relations and ambitions with China; the pile sits atop a mountain of bilateral relations that European countries maintain with China".⁸⁸⁸

On the other hand, the consideration of the issues analyzed in this chapter has confirmed the increasing normative divergence between the EU and the RPC which – with regard to the "political" dimension of the Partnership – is significantly driven by ideational elements such as the partners' identities and worldviews.

In this perspective the relevance of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is put under scrutiny by the impact of the European and Chinese "dual approaches" described in this chapter: the response to this challenge implies, on the European front, the awareness of the need of a policymaking, based on a coherent interaction between the Union's sub-systems, which can define its strategic objectives on the basis of a realistic consideration of the limits of the EU's normative power.⁸⁸⁹

On the Chinese front, Beijing's critical view of the Eurocentrism inherent in the EU's normative approach could lead to a mirroring form of Sinocentrism driven by a "grand strategy" - based on initiatives such as the BRI and the 17+1 - which implicitly undermines not only the role of the EU as a strategic counterpart⁸⁹⁰ but also that of the Partnership as the key framework for the development of the relations between Europe and China.

⁸⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁹ Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, *Europe, China, and the Limits of Normative Power* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019).

⁸⁹⁰ It is worth noting that the European Union has been defined by Beijing - according to a statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson - as "a regional organisation composed of sovereign states, not a sovereign country itself". This underlines "a vision of the international order which is substantially at odds with the EU view of itself as a unique and innovative international actor". Rühlig, Jerdén, van der Putten, Seaman, Otero-Iglesias, Ekman, *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 17.

CHAPTER 8 : CONCLUSIONS

8.1 The diverging strategic identities, behaviours and objectives of China and the EU: still an aspirational Strategic Partnership?

It is not easy in a phase driven by significant elements of novelty to draw conclusions which can address not only the obstacles and unresolved issues which affect the EU-China Partnership but also its prospects of further development, as the title of this thesis reads. Nevertheless, the analysis that has been developed here allows us to delineate some concluding considerations on the past evolution and present dynamics of change which characterize the EU-China Strategic Partnership. The first two sections of the conclusions will focus on a set of broader theoretical and practical questions to which the thesis has responded by analyzing how our subject of research has evolved through an interpretive approach whose validity - it is supposed – will be confirmed in the future. The section more specifically devoted to the main analytical findings will offer some concluding remarks also on the issues which are going to influence the prospects of further development of the Partnership.

In this perspective a first conclusion that can be drawn is the importance of the broader context for the Partnership: this was true when it was established in 2003, was confirmed by the impact of the 2008 crisis and its lasting consequences on the EU-China strategic relations and has been underlined by later trends.

The conceptualization and operationalization of the Strategic Partnership has taken place in a dynamic environment characterized by a “changing state and status of the EU and China”. It has been therefore important to recognize the impact of evolving international relations on the concept and practice of strategic partnerships in general and of the Strategic Partnership between China and the EU in particular.

This has been a challenging but also stimulating aspect of this research and hopefully an element which has allowed us to bring a more original contribution to an area of study already widely investigated. The EU-China Partnership is indeed inscribed in a strategic context which has been characterized by evident “fluctuating trends”, influenced not only by some key material and ideational “open issues” but also by a broader process of strategic re-orientation in the international system.

By taking into consideration the fundamental implications of the evolving context for the EU-China strategic relations we have come to the conclusion that the

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has been increasingly influenced by a phase of growing international competition which has contributed to push European strategic thinking about China, already shifting, past a tipping point with regard to its traditional paradigms of interaction.

If an internal logic had tried, to some extent, to insulate the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in conceptual and operational terms from the multidimensional consequences of an epochal phenomenon such as the rise of China, the increasing complexity of the EU-China interaction has gradually put under scrutiny the main tenets of the predominant paradigm of interaction between Brussels and Beijing. The thesis has underlined the necessity of overcoming the limits of this “internal logic” which has guided the development of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the framework of an impressive institutional architecture of summits, dialogues, and initiatives of cooperation.

In this context-driven process for the EU and China the other key relationship within the “strategic triangle” – that with the United States – will continue to be a crucial factor in shaping the opportunities and the limitations of the Strategic Partnership. In a perspective of possible protracted international competition the EU needs also to be aware that it has not been so far able to influence the US strategic thinking on China while the “new era’s grand strategy” for China seems implicitly to consider the Partnership with Europe to be a secondary relationship.

In this perspective a renewed analysis of the development and prospects of the relations between Brussels and Beijing is even more important because the concept of a strategic partnership – which has been often criticized for its lack of definition and “questionable results” – has indeed attracted “considerable support with limited critical reflection” becoming more than just a descriptor...an interpretation of China’s rise in its own right”.⁸⁹¹

For this reason the thesis has delineated a concept of strategic partnership by taking advantage in particular - amidst the vast literature that has investigated this theme - of a conceptualization proposed by Giovanni Grevi which differentiates its relational, structural and reflexive dimensions. This conceptualization has proved to be functional to address the different aspects which characterize the present complex phase of evolution (or involution?) of the Partnership: the important relational dimension driven by the

⁸⁹¹ Scott A.W. Brown, *Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking*, 129.

economic cooperation between Brussels and Beijing and the structural dimension which addresses those political, multilateral and global issues which should make this relationship truly strategic for their broader impact on the international system. This conceptualization - based on two dimensions which reflect the material and ideational elements constitutive of the Partnership – has been analytically productive because it is in line with the epistemological /hermeneutical premises of this research.

The overarching analytical finding and, hopefully, contribution of this thesis is an in depth reflection on how the “ideational divergence” between the EU and China continues to affect in a “structural” way the development and prospects of the Partnership also through its declination in terms of conflicting normative ambitions.

On the basis of the thesis’ epistemological/hermeneutical premises - which have been defined in a pluralist perspective considering the analytical contributions of Chinese political theorists such as Qin Yaqing as well European concepts – the thesis has broadened the interpretive potential of the analytical instrument represented by the category of “conceptual gaps” - developed by Pan Zhongqi - by linking the “ideational disconnect” from which the gaps stem to their practical and normative implications for the development of the Partnership.

The focus of the thesis on some prominent ideational/political issues - human rights, political values, multilateralism/multipolarity - has been functional to explore how these unresolved problems affect the structural dimension of the Partnership. In line with the post-positivist epistemological approach of the research the analysis of the discourse mechanisms that Europe and China have been using to develop their political language within the Strategic Partnership seems to confirm “the gaps, inconsistencies, and slippages between what is being said and what is being understood”.⁸⁹² Policymakers and scholars alike have indeed had increasing difficulties in developing shared concepts that can support and serve common goals of the two strategic partners.

As the thesis has underlined, the fact that the concept of strategic partnership has not been fully defined by either side since its inception is at the root of its persistent vagueness in terms of conceptualization which – coupled with a lack of in depth historical/cultural awareness and full understanding of the “other” – has contributed to the increasing frictions and frustration in the Sino-European relationship.

⁸⁹² David Kerr and Liu Fei (eds.), *The International Politics of EU-China Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

In the context of the structural dimension, another important conclusion is related to the awareness that “Europe’s posturing as a liberal normative power has resulted in a strategic disconnect with China” which, in turn, has increasingly developed normative ambitions at the international level.⁸⁹³ The different backgrounds which shape each actor’s perspectives, paradigms and actorness have been contributing to diverging strategic identities and behavior of the two partners because of a fundamental lack of comprehension of all the different factors and processes which influence not only each strategic partner’s shaping of its “self” but also the values and norms that have either been referred to or rejected in the framework of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

This process still underway leads us to conclude that there are not only persistent conceptual gaps with regard to the conceptualization of the Strategic Partnership but also a broader and more profound disconnect which pertains to how China and the European Union define their interests-values continuum. This situation makes the Partnership still largely aspirational in its structural strategic dimension and it also reverberates in a negative way on its “reflexive” dimension by exposing the present limits of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: in this sense the Union and China risk being “put on the map” of a new global order in a dysfunctional manner.

8.2 A reality and ideational check for the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Another overarching concluding consideration which emerges from the analysis of our subject is therefore that the recognition by both partners of the deeply rooted problems within the Partnership is a prerequisite for avoiding the pursuit of a strategy of interaction without substantive reflection on the part of the main policy players. This recognition would operationalize a conceptualization which considers the process of development of the strategic relations between Brussels and Beijing as driven - as we have argued - by the evolving identities, actorness and normative objectives of the two partners which have gradually problematized the interaction within the Partnership.

In this perspective the thesis has argued that - if it is undeniable that the EU-China Comprehensive Partnership needs a “reality check” - it is important to recognize that it also needs an “ideational check”.

On the basis also of an analytical debate which has been developed in the last

⁸⁹³ Jonathan Holslag, “The strategic dissonance between Europe and China”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol.3, no.3, 2010, 325-45.

decade, the thesis has argued that the “ideational disconnect” between Brussels and Beijing has produced persistent conceptual and normative gaps between the partners. This implies for the EU a “reality check” aimed at acknowledging not only the shifting realities and growing global uncertainties which affect the material elements of the Partnership but also its ideational dimension as a basis for rethinking a EU’s China policy “still premised on the idea of exerting normative power to mould China in its own image”.⁸⁹⁴ The thesis has therefore argued that this EU reality and ideational check emerges from a realistic need for Europe to rethink “the viability and practicality of existing policies of projecting European ‘core values’” onto the Chinese system.

At the same time the challenge of a paradigm shift from “constructive engagement” to “principled realism” is related to the Union’s unique interests-values continuum whose preservation and promotion continues to be its fundamental *raison d’être*. In this sense the Partnership with China is a litmus test not only for the EU’s normative role but also for its internal unity and external effectiveness.

The necessary process of resetting of the Partnership depends, in turn, on China’s recognition that the strategic dimension of its relationship with the EU is not a mere problem of effectiveness of action or of a more efficient management of sectoral issues, selectively chosen in a pragmatic perspective: this is a fundamental conclusion that we have drawn from our analysis by arguing that an interaction mainly focused on the “relational” dimension of the Partnership cannot be conducive to a truly strategic relationship. The ambition of Xi Jinping’s China of being an active norm-shaper and not just a norm-taker in an international system still shaped by Western ideational hegemony is therefore a key factor which problematizes the paradigm of interaction between Brussels and Beijing.

If in a context of changing “US approaches to a rules-based multilateral global order...the incentives for EU–China collaboration across aspects of global governance” have changed:⁸⁹⁵ the EU-China lack of convergence within the Partnership reflects in this sense dynamics driven by competitive models that denote, once more, the present transformative phase of the international system. In this framework state-centric visions put under pressure the peculiar model represented by the EU and its strategic partnerships.

⁸⁹⁴ Mikael Mattlin “Dead on arrival: normative EU policy toward China”, *Asia Europe Journal* 10(2) 2012, 181–198.

⁸⁹⁵ Jing Men and Wei Shen, *The EU, the US and China – Towards a New International Order?* (London: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014).

The challenge for a 21st century international system “under construction” is related not only to redefining a hierarchy of power but, more importantly, to a functioning model of enlarged leadership and governance for a globalized world. The shared objective of contributing to this process continues to be part also of the future interaction within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership but – as the thesis has argued – it is being made more challenging by the process of necessary clarification of the still uncertain paradigm that the EU and China want to define for their strategic relations and for their roles in an evolving international system.

8.3 Review of the main findings

The conclusions to be drawn from this research should be regarded as being at the crossroads of two analytical periods: as we have argued, the Partnership has reached an inflection point which underlines the importance of finding a new paradigm for the development of the strategic relations between Brussels and Beijing. In this sense these conclusions take stock of some key findings which emerge from the analysis of the development, problems, dynamics which have so far affected and influenced the material and ideational dimension of the Partnership. On this basis - and at the beginning of a new more complex phase of the strategic relationship - these conclusions can hopefully indicate further analytical perspectives for better understanding a key component not only for the external relations and foreign policy of the two partners but also for the evolution of the international system in the 21st century. The connecting element which links these two analytical periods is the epistemological/hermeneutical approach that this research has elaborated for the study of this subject and which can be a good theoretical basis for the analysis of this problematique also in the framework of future scenarios.

These conclusions try therefore to offer some elements for theoretical reflection without neglecting the possible implications in terms of policy-making for a subject which continues to be a “shifting platform” in analytical terms.

8.3.1 Linking theory to praxis: in search of “coherence in action”

The first conclusion that we draw from the analytical findings of this research is that the epistemological awareness that we have considered as an indispensable prerequisite for addressing our subject needs to be consequential in terms of the

hermeneutical approach for which we have argued. This means linking the dimensions of theory to that of praxis: the interpretation of the elements of significant “conceptual disconnect” which affect the interaction of the two partners on key aspects of their strategic relationship needs to be connected to the implications for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of this situation in terms of practical responses and effective policy-making.

In order to respond to the challenges stemming from the elusive EU-China strategic dimension we need to address not only the overarching problem of “ideational and normative divergence” which divides the two partners but also the key question of “coherence in action” as well. This is what we have called in our epistemological premises the need for a “*subtilitas applicandi*”, the consequential practical application of an interpretive approach to a theoretical problem.

If the recognition of the role played by the significant conceptual gaps affecting the EU-China relations has become part of the discourse on the EU-China Strategic Partnership the thesis has tried to demonstrate that what seems to be missing at present is a broader reflection conducive to operational follow-ups on how to respond to the growing trends of “ideational and normative divergence” in the behavior of the two partners.

Against this background the logic driving the development of the EU-China Partnership has been based, as we have underlined, on the tendency to insulate the interaction of the two partners inside the framework of the bureaucratic architecture that has been developed over the years, instead of addressing the potentially contentious debate on the diverging approaches to key issues for the “structural” dimension of the Strategic Partnership - such as human rights, political values and the cooperation on global “post-material” issues - which could foster effective multilateralism and international governance.

This method and practice of interaction has in fact led to the current stalemate in the development of the Partnership which has been based on a rather formulaic repetition of summits, dialogues, meetings which have not addressed the elements at the root of the increasing divergence between Brussels and Beijing. In this respect the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue epitomizes the structural difficulty of addressing in a productive way contentious issues which are inevitably an important component of the structural dimension of the Partnership. To reverse this situation, the thesis has argued, two essential elements are needed: first, an “epistemological awareness” of the process which has

increased the degree of divergence of the interests-values continuum of the EU and China respectively; and second, a renewed political commitment to the Partnership as the framework of reference for the development of a “primary” strategic relationship between Brussels and Beijing.

8.3.2 “The leadership gap” in redefining the commitment of the EU and China to the strategic dimension of the Partnership.

The main arguments developed in the thesis problematize the approach to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership “from within”, that is an approach merely aimed at guaranteeing a constructive interaction in the framework of the existing mechanism and practices. The limit of this approach is that the EU-China agenda should also include a more substantial debate related to the diverging views on key issues that the two partners manifest through their international behavior outside this format of cooperation.

The rationale for this pragmatic but implicitly “minimalist” view of the Partnership’s potential has been based by authors such as Pan Zhongqi (who expresses a widely held position in this regard) on the argument that a “bottom-up” cooperative approach on issues of common interest can contribute to the development of the Strategic Relationship despite significant conceptual gaps and diverging positions between Brussels and Beijing on strategic problems such as human rights, political values, climate change, global economic governance, key relations with other strategic actors, etc.

This approach – which is a kind of facile realism – has perpetuated the idea that the development of the Partnership can be driven by the mere search for agreements on issues mainly related to its economic dimension in order to secure - instead of debating matters of principle - concrete, practical deals on a quid-pro-quo basis so as to move strategic cooperation beyond rhetoric and to make real progress. However, “matters of principle” are in fact - as the thesis has demonstrated - unavoidable obstacles for relaunching the strategic relationship between the EU and China because they stem from constitutive elements such as the identities, actorness, normative goals of the two partners. A cooperation focused only on the “relational” dimension of the Partnership is not a guarantee of progress because key practical issues depend on the clarification of elements which stem themselves from the “structural” strategic dimension of the Partnership.

In a phase which necessarily requires strategic rethinking in Brussels and Beijing the thesis has underlined how the development of the Partnership has suffered from a “leadership gap” because national decision-makers have had “few incentives to invest

political capital into this relationship”.⁸⁹⁶ In this sense, in line with what Vogt argued, if China and Europe are serious about the qualitative upgrading of the relationship “a more sustained effort by its decision-makers is called for” in particular in this complex phase of evolution of the Partnership.⁸⁹⁷

The deconstruction of a “bottom-up” approach to the unresolved issues of the strategic relationship militates in favor of a “top-down” process of clarification of the commitment of both sides to the Partnership driven by a renewed endorsement at the highest political level by China and the EU. If this endorsement is needed in light of Brussels’s shifting China policy-making it is equally required if one considers the PRC’s strategic approach which has de facto undermined the significance of the Partnership by actively interacting with either single EU member states or preferring ad hoc formats such as the so-called 17+1. The Chinese diplomatic and economic initiatives along with Europe’s re-emerging, traditional fault lines are clearly weak points not only for the EU’s role as a key strategic partner but also for its overall credibility. This approach has been driven not insignificantly - as we have argued - by widespread Chinese perceptions of the potentially declining role of the EU as a global strategic actor. These trends indicate that the Partnership has reached in this respect too an inflection point which significantly affects the development of its strategic dimension.

The evolving Chinese strategic vision – of which the BRI is an important example – not only weakens the function of the Partnership as the reference framework for Sino-European relations but implicitly marginalizes the comprehensive political cooperation on global issues which is at the heart of the potential strategic relevance of the interaction between Brussels and Beijing.

8.3.3 Between “constructive engagement” and “principled pragmatism”

One analytical contribution - hopefully original - developed in the thesis is the analysis of the need for the EU to reconsider the paradigm that has driven its China policy until the very recent past: “constructive engagement”. The thesis has addressed this key issue not only on the basis of European sources but also of the Chinese literature which has problematized this staple policy as a constitutive part of the EU normative project of

⁸⁹⁶ Roland Vogt, “Europe and China after the Global Financial Crisis” in Roland Vogt (ed.), *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 228.

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid.

“transforming China”. At the same time it has been argued that the persistence of this paradigm has reflected a unidimensional assessment by the European Union of such a multifaceted process as the rise of China. The reconsideration of “constructive engagement” has thus been investigated as part of an evolving EU approach to the rise of China and its implications in the present international scenario.

In underscoring the limits of “constructive engagement” for advancing an agenda within the Partnership which can preserve the EU’s balance between interests and values, the thesis has, in parallel, problematized the implementation of a new policy of “principled pragmatism”, as posited in the 2016 Global Strategy. The challenge of an EU China policy based on “principled pragmatism” requires, on the internal front, a greater unity between the approach of the European Commission and the intergovernmental dimension of the EU foreign policy, which is also influenced by the bilateral priorities of the member states in their interaction with China.

On the external front, the approach of the European Union as a normative power - founded on the fundamental political values enshrined in its treaties - has been facing an increasingly assertive China in normative terms: this growing divergence makes, within the Partnership, the traditional EU’s goal of inducing the PRC to internalize norms and values which are convergent with those of the EU extremely challenging. For this reason a China policy which is “principled, practical and pragmatic” seems bound to conflict with that of a “Normative Power China” determined to support Chinese political values globally in a process of redefinition of the international order itself.

This increasing “normative divergence” between the EU and China constitutes a further element of complexity within the Partnership because it stems from the identities and value-systems of the two actors - as well as from their increasingly global role and ambitions - and shapes in a significant way their actorness.

The EU-China disconnect in terms of the interests-values continuum is particularly evident in some areas which are key for making the strategic partnership structural: human rights, political values and the worldviews of the two partners in terms of multipolarity and multilateralism, as argued in the last three chapters of the thesis.

The “paradigm shift” underway is driven by the change in long-standing European assumptions about China’s approach to the European project and to the Partnership itself. As the nascent stages of a new EU debate about China have indicated and the outcome of the EU-China summit and Leaders Meeting held in June and September 2020 has confirmed, the notion of China as a “systemic rival” seems to have become a significant

component of the European strategic assessment. The complex challenge of defining a new paradigm that can reconcile more realism with a renewed values-centred strategic approach will need to take this into account.

The realignment of the EU's China policy can be therefore regarded as a meaningful case-study for the challenging trends which problematize not only the future role of the EU as a committed promoter of liberal values but also the configuration of a changing international system which is witnessing the rise of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian alternative models and an overall weakening of the principles and norms of the international liberal order.

8.4 Prospects for further research

This thesis has been developed over the course of seven years, from 2013 to 2020: it has inevitably witnessed a significant evolution of its research subject, driven by the events affecting the development of the Partnership and by the related complex of debates in terms of analysis and policy-making. The search for the “structural strategic dimension” of the Partnership has been based on a theoretical, epistemological and hermeneutical approach which seems to offer an analytically significant added-value.

The role of the ideational elements influencing the development of this strategic relationship – a relationship now widely researched - will provide also in the future an important interpretive “fil rouge”. The thesis has sought to provide a useful contribution in this sense by focusing not only on how the interests-values continuum of the two partners is shaped by their identity, actorness, historical and cultural background but also on how these elements are at the root of the increasing conceptual and normative divergence between the EU and China. From this perspective a renewed focus on the study of the evolving reciprocal perceptions of the two partners has an interesting analytical potential going forward.

We have argued that the Partnership has reached a crucial inflection point and has entered a phase which could be conducive to further development either on a new basis of cooperation or on that of possible greater strategic competition.

The most challenging field for further research – on the basis of the multifaceted level of analysis already developed – is therefore related to the implications of the paradigm shift which is taking place in the framework of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

In this context, from an EU's point of view, the challenge is related to the acknowledgement of the limits of the policy of "constructive engagement" and the necessary elaboration of a more realist approach which has to take into account the dynamics of increasing strategic competition between United States and China but also the difficulty for Brussels in finding allies for a values-centred strategic approach. The developing dynamics within the "strategic triangle" will certainly be a field of analysis given its implications for the redefinition of the EU China policy.

From a Chinese standpoint the analytical focus could probably further address the sensitive question of the compatibility of the strategic objectives of Xi Jinping's "new era" with the development of the Partnership in light of the sustainability, vis-à-vis the EU, of initiatives such as the 17+1 and the Belt and Road, which have been fueling additional elements of friction between Brussels and Beijing. In this sense the reflection already started by Chinese analysts on the increasingly divergent paths of Normative Power Europe and Normative Power China is an important subject which deserves further analysis in the particular context of the future of the Partnership.

If the clarification of a "new paradigm" must be a key starting point for any future assessment of the structural strategic dimension of the EU-China Partnership, it could also revive a broader analytical reflection on the role and functionality of the EU's policy of strategic partnerships as an important instrument for the development of its Foreign Policy and External Relations.

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