

External relations between EU and China

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Abstract: Paper attempts to give an understanding about EU's external relations and in particular part that includes EU and China's relationship. With comparing the two giants and their functioning it might help to uncover the mystery of a dysfunctional relationship of two strong powers in an international arena, whose common history dates back hundreds of years. It can also be a learning material for other countries to have an example of transferring world view, core values, political views, etc. from one country to another. And what are the benefits, obstacles and consequences of this kind of transfer. Paper concludes with a result that the EU has failed to persuade China to integrate a liberal order and China continues to prefer autocracy.

Key words: Autocracy, China, EU, External relations, Liberalism

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the regulatory framework and decision-making processes of the EU's external relations have been the subject of heated debate in the Member States, the European institutions and in the public generally. There seem to be differences in politicizing and challenging individual areas of the EU's external relations. Using a theoretical approach, we can explore the link between EU external policy and policy in third countries and how it affects EU foreign policy.⁶⁴ What are the benefits and obstacles in an attempt to transfer visions and worldview from one country to another⁶⁵. And what could be the consequences of such actions. Political dialogues between different governments or intergovernmental organizations such as the EU, are neither new nor special. In some cases, the motive for governments to do so is to find new ideas, and in some cases the motive is to share their values in order to expand strategic relations with other countries⁶⁶. Because, in general, for stronger and better cooperation, countries prefer other countries with the same core values, visions and worldviews. This pattern of behavior has also been used by the EU in imposing conditions on acceding countries, for example on human rights and the rule of law.⁶⁷

Although the transfer of political elements and universal values from one country to another may also be driven by basic national needs, such a process may not be successful in the long run. Despite the fact that opposites attract, it is not easy or maybe not even possible to change fundamental values that one side or another have long acted. The ups and downs of relations between China and the EU over the years are a good example to illustrate the transfer of political views, core values, etc., and the pros and cons of the whole process⁶⁸. Relations between these two parties is a very good example precisely because the two parties could not be more different with their views, actions and

⁶⁴ Padgett, S., "Between synthesis and emulation: EU policy transfer in the power sector" *Journal of European Public Policy*, 10(2), 2003, 227-245.

⁶⁵ Dąbrowski, M., Musiałkowska, I., & Polverari, L., "EU-China and EU-Brazil policy transfer in regional policy" *Regional Studies*, 52(9), 2018, p. 1169-1180.

⁶⁶ Dąbrowski, M., Musiałkowska, I., & Polverari, L., "EU-China and EU-Brazil policy transfer in regional policy" *Regional Studies*, 52(9), 2018, pp. 1169-1180.

⁶⁷ Ramiro Troitiño, D; Kerikmäe, T; Chochia, A, "Foreign Affairs of the European Union: How to Become an Independent and Dominant Power in the International Arena" In: Ramiro Troitiño, D; Kerikmäe, T; de la Guardia, R.M; Pérez Sánchez, G.A (Ed.). *The EU in the 21st Century Challenges and Opportunities for the European Integration* (209–230). Springer, 2020.

⁶⁸ Maher, R., The elusive EU–China strategic partnership. *International Affairs*, 92(4), 2016, pp. 959-976.

principles⁶⁹. While the EU has enshrined its values and principles in the Treaties and has remained true to them for a long time, China on the other hand, honors authoritarian rule and despises all the values that are important to the West. The parties seem to be on the opposite opinion in almost every important issue.

PREHISTORY

Already in the 17th century long before the existence of the European Community there were states located in Europe who had relations with dynasty located in China. Historically China has rather preferred relations with giant powerful countries, but the mutual interest started to grow as European Union was established and mutual understanding about cooperation benefits increased. At some point European countries were not just some tiny individuals but a set of countries that functioned as a single whole in almost everything.

For more than a decade now, discussions have taken place among various EU professionals and officials in an attempt to define the content of EU and China relations, emphasizing the mutual benefits as well as the overall international benefits. Cooperation and political dialogues between the two countries has also been highlighted as the key cooperation on issues such as climate change and non-proliferation. Coordinated strategic cooperation between major powers is getting more essential as the global challenges become more and more complex.

Opposites attract but usually relations between two contrary sides will not last long and tend to end with catastrophe if unlucky enough. Non-functioning relations between China and the EU over the years are a good example, where two very opposing parties can go along with the game for a long time but ultimately stick to their principles. Unfortunately, contrary to all expectations and stable relations, the last decade has shown that the priorities and interests of the EU and China differ on a number of important issues. According to the EU's vision, views on important issues should converge over time, but in reality, the differences between the EU and China have just been well masked and hidden because of beneficial motives.

Exploring the different values and views of both parties on important issues such as ideology, geopolitical priorities and political values, etc. we might become to realize the reasons and disagreements that have prevented the EU and China from achieving better relations over the last decade. And also, why relations between these two huge powers have been dysfunctional since the very beginning.

CONTROVERSIAL VIEWS

From the very beginning, both countries have had very different views on the world organization, governance and other values. While the EU has enshrined its values and principles in the Treaties and has remained true to them for a long time, China on the other hand, honors authoritarian rule and despises all the values that are important to the West. China is repressing all initiatives that do not coincide with the vision of the political elite and the leaders of the country⁷⁰. It is not difficult to understand why the EU and other countries have been highly motivated to improve relations with China. China's development into an economic giant has been a very important geopolitical development and also a very impressive development, if taking into account from where China started its development. China's influence and role in the context of world politics is

⁶⁹Holslag, J., The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership. *Jcms-Journal Of Common Market Studies*, 49(2), 2011, pp.293-313.

⁷⁰ Blanchard, J., "The People's Republic of China Leadership Transition and its External Relations: Still Searching for Definitive Answers" *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 20(1), 2015,1-16.

becoming increasingly important and is likely to grow as it sets an example for other countries.⁷¹ But not always as a good example if we are looking into human rights and democracy issues relevant in China.

Cooperation between the EU and China intensified greatly following the signing of the Diplomatic Agreement in 1985⁷². The parties have had summits since 1998 and have established more than 50 dialogues on relations between the parties in key areas such as the environment, trade, civil society, etc. In addition, the Parties also launched higher-level forums to expand cooperation, one focusing on the economy and trade and the other on climate change and non-proliferation. Geopolitical interests were part of an attempt to take EU's and China's relationship to the next level. China was interested in balancing power globally, and the EU was interested in making China more similar to EU with democratic and transparency through closer cooperation. As both had the same vision and understanding of the United States, the future of cooperation seemed successful. Among other interests, the EU wanted to work with China to prove its credibility to the world and to advance its global interests.

Since the announcement of the EU and China Strategic Partnership in 2003, much of the motivation to strengthen relations has disappeared as world politics have changed dramatically since 2003. China has become much more powerful, and the EU has had to focus more on domestic problems. Lack of common understanding between Member States in relations with Beijing and differing EU and Chinese interests in global politics continue to hamper relations and old unresolved differences are compounded by new ones, such as China's cyber-attacks on EU computer systems. As can be seen, EU and China relations are a complex combination of cooperation and conflict.

DEVELOPMENTS

Differences in political values and ideologies have hindered and will continue to hinder the expansion of relations between China and the EU. While the EU declares its values to be an independent media, the rule of law and Western constitutional democracy, China rejects these values, silencing pro-democracy activists and imprisoning dissidents. The EU and China's relationship has been like a test of the EU's identity, which is centered on human rights and democracy. The EU's efforts to pass the test positively for itself have been a long-standing dilemma and a subject of debate for European policymakers.⁷³

Despite developments in China's political system in recent decades, it has not encountered more democratic and open system and China remains committed to the practices of an authoritarian state and is not interested in liberalizing the country. Although China's economy has become more dependent on the world, expectations of liberalization of China's political system have not materialized, and China continues to see Western values as a threat to itself. China is also one of the few countries to have a political system in which appointments are made in a top-down party structure and elections are strictly controlled by officials. Among other things, China's and other Western countries' perceptions of human rights and state power have always differed greatly. Authorities use a variety of tools to suppress dissent and intimidate dissidents and encourage police to arbitrarily punish anyone who could jeopardize the authority of power. Instead of developing an independent judiciary to protect the human rights of its citizens, the state has stepped up its efforts to

⁷¹ See e.g. Charaia, V.; Chochia, A.; Lashkhi, M., "Caucasus 3 plus Baltic 3 and Economic Cooperation with China", *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, 8 (2), 2018, pp. 44–64.

⁷² Voituriez, T., & Wang, X., "Real challenges behind the EU-China PV trade dispute settlement", *Climate Policy*, 15(5), 2015, pp. 670–677.

⁷³ Ramiro Troitiño, D.; Kerikmäe, T.; De la Guardia, R. M.; Perez, G. A., *The EU in the 21st Century. Challenges and Opportunities for the European Integration Process*, Springer, 2020

quell disagreements. In addition, the authorities have used large amounts of resources for propaganda, censorship and the police to maintain control and retention among the other things.

China has been for a long time undoubtedly the biggest dilemma in EU foreign policy. Being, on the one hand, a key player in the Beijing⁷⁴ issue and, on the other, an ever-increasing power on a global scale. But on the other hand, by representing a totalitarian regime and insulting the principles and ideals respected by Europeans⁷⁵. China's attitude towards human rights and democracy hinders the development of the China and EU partnership in a number of ways. The EU considers human rights to be part of its identity and treats them as universal values⁷⁶, while China violates all these values by violating its human rights at the national level. In addition, Europe has been perhaps one of the few parts of the world where the rule of law, democracy, security and human rights have been respected until now. Adherence to these values are also a precondition for EU membership to countries wishing to join the Union.

The arms embargo imposed on China by the EU in 1989 is more symbolic today but was also the result of one of China's many human rights violations. Regardless of its original purpose, the embargo has not hindered trade in military technology between the EU and China, and China has become one of the largest arms producers and suppliers. This contradictory behavior on the part of the EU has damaged the EU's credibility. Credibility has also been undermined by the general increase in trade between Member States and China, at a time when Beijing was experiencing the biggest repression of dissidents in decades. For some, such EU behavior is a sign of double standards and hypocrisy, where economic benefits take precedence over human rights. The EU's loud criticism of China's human rights has only resulted in a Chinese ban on the EU interfering in China's internal affairs. Criticism from the EU could also undermine cooperation on other important issues where the EU and China have a common understanding. Differences in values and principles between the EU and China prevent China from becoming a strategic partner of the EU and build mutual trust.

From a geopolitical point of view, the EU's and China's priorities on strategic and security issues are increasingly divergent. China has focused on expanding power in the Pacific, and the EU's main concerns have been the migration crisis and Russia's aggression. It seems that neither China nor the EU is willing to help each other with their concerns, and that the EU's and China's approach and preferences on important issues have diverged. In some cases, China's intentions remain unclear, but as power increases, it is quite likely that China's intention in the long run is to expand control and influence in its region.

At least in the past China has also been worried that North Korea would collapse, flooding China with refugees, straining China's resources and jeopardizing China's political stability, as the United States and South Korea could take advantage of the situation. At the same time, the EU is seeking to strengthen trade relations with Taiwan, as China is interested in taking control of South China's main shipping lane. Strengthening EU and Taiwan relations could also be useful in helping to prevent Taiwan's hostile integration with China. EU's geopolitical concerns include the situation in Ukraine and the aggression of Russia.⁷⁷ And here, too, the principles and values of the EU and China tend to diverge. While the EU is trying to punish Russia, China has strengthened its relations with Russia and has refrained from criticizing Russia's actions. China's reluctance to help the EU

⁷⁴ Oriol Costa, "After Kyoto, Beijing: The EU and the new climate negotiations" *Revista CIDOB D'afers Internacionals*, (108), 2014, pp. 23-41.

⁷⁵ Isar, Y., "Culture in EU external relations: An idea whose time has come?" *International Journal Of Cultural Policy*, 21(4), 2015, pp. 494-508.

⁷⁶ Dabrell, P. J., "Mapping out democracy promotion in the EU's external relations", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 16(1), 2011, pp. 21-40.

⁷⁷ See e.g. HOFFMANN, T.; CHOCHIA, A., "The Institution of Citizenship and Practices of Passportization in Russia's European Neighborhood Policies" in: A. Makarychev, T. Hoffmann (Ed.). *Russia and the EU Spaces of Interaction* (223-237). Routledge, Taylor&Francis Group, 2018

with its migration crisis and other concerns was highlighted at the 2015 EU and China Summit, when China avoided any discussion of a migration crisis at all costs. From all this, it turns out that both the EU and China intentionally or unintentionally are not extremely helpful to each other's concerns.

The informal friendship between Russia and China has more than once created a situation in which China provides Russia with diplomatic cover by blocking Western proposals, for example on the Syrian issue⁷⁸. With regard to China's behavior on the Syrian side, it was realized that a common understanding had emerged between China and Russia to counter EU aspirations. The EU's and China's differing visions of the international order, national sovereignty and human rights collide on all key issues. Over the next decade, it may become clear whether or not China is trying to change or replace today's international order and policy, and whether it will accept the order in the world, which is very different from China's own organizational system. China is very confident in its principles not to interfere in the internal affairs and sovereignty of other countries, while the EU considers it mandatory in some cases when, for example, human rights are at stake. The EU also considers it right to provide humanitarian aid to countries in need, but China sees this as a threat to its domestic system. China's adherence to its principles stems, on the one hand, from historical reasons when Western countries occupied China, and, on the other hand, neutrality deprives other countries of the opportunity to interfere in China's own internal affairs. China in this case has more materialistic motives as China needs access to gas, oil and other raw materials, it is more likely to work with countries with different political regimes from the West to secure export markets.

There are also important differences between EU and China's conclusion of agreements. While the EU incorporates its values and principles into trade agreements, China has maintained its position that politics and business do not interfere⁷⁹. This tactic from the EU has so far been one of the most effective tools in policy, as the EU market has been very profitable and attractive to other countries. China's growing strength was accompanied by China becoming a major economic donor. While the EU imposed conditions on aid and agreements⁸⁰, China overcame the EU in favor of countries, and as a result has offered very much competition to the EU in both the distribution of economic aid and the conclusion of trade agreements. China's expanding economic interests could pose a serious threat to its neutrality if, at some point, China has to make decisions that will inevitably interfere with other countries' internal affairs, such as Afghanistan⁸¹. Despite the fact that the EU's and China's approach to things began to resemble each other at some point, it does not necessarily mean that friendships have strengthened. If two giants with such different lines of government have already shown that they do not agree on important issues, then these differences will probably arise in the future as well. On the one hand, Europe has been a promoter of the liberal order, but on the other, Europe has also been the biggest beneficiary of all this. In the institutions shaped by the EU, through which economic and political agreements are managed, European countries have the necessary power to influence.

Although China has expressed its desire to be part of these institutions and has proposed a fairer redistribution of power, it would be very difficult to integrate a country as large and with such a different worldview as China into the liberal world order. Although China has experienced rapid economic growth and development in recent decades, its role in the world's leading lending

⁷⁸ Fung, C., "Global South solidarity? China, regional organisations and intervention in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars", *Third World Quarterly*, 37(1), 2016, pp. 33-50.

⁷⁹ O'Dolan, C., & Rye, T., "An insight into policy transfer processes within an EU project and implications for future project design", *Transport Policy*, 24, 2012, pp. 273-283.

⁸⁰ Hackenesch, C., Bergmann, J., & Orbie, J., "Development Policy under Fire? The Politicization of European External Relations*" *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(1), 2021, 3-19.

⁸¹ Spornbauer, M., "EU peacebuilding in Kosovo and Afghanistan: Legality and accountability" *Studies in EU External Relations*, 7, 2014, pp. 1-452.

institutions remains disproportionate. Since the inception of the World Bank, both the United States and Japan have had greater voting rights, and Western European countries have taken the lead in the institutions. The G20 summit in 2010 tried to carry out a reform in this area, but it failed. Liberal methods among western countries already began to triumph after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but China's economic success with the opposite order has set an example for many countries to find opportunities and alternatives to a liberal society.

CONCLUSION

Political dialogues between governments and intergovernmental organizations have been going on for a long time. When governments face difficulties, it has become a common practice to look for ideas in the success stories of other countries. But one can also look for motives for promoting and sharing countries' own visions. And sometimes political dialogues take place between countries because of the national need of cooperation. Whether it is related to economical issues, environment or just to eradicate poverty and learn from successful countries.

EU and China relations exist today and are likely to continue to do so in the future, but their relations will remain limited rather than as the EU originally hoped. The differences in values, interests and the controversial view of the world order between the EU and China over the years are too different and contradictory to facilitate a warmer relationship. Whereas initially China's motivation to cooperate with the EU was quite high, today China no longer considers the EU to be serious enough. In the years following the creation of the EU, the EU's influence was considerable in the world, but today it is only a remnant of its full potential, and China is taking advantage of the EU's weakening by splitting Europe's political divide with its attitude. In addition, China has helped uncover the EU's weaknesses. For example, different standpoint inside EU over Beijing and the desire to conclude trade agreements contrary to EU values and principles. Although China has made great strides in recent decades in favor of expanding EU and China relations in terms of economic interdependence, the EU has failed to persuade China to integrate a liberal order. Despite the EU's efforts to make China more respectful of human rights, free media and democracy, China continues to be more respectful of autocracy and uses all means to remove dissidents who threaten its power. The people of China must continue to be careful if their views do not coincide with those of the ruling authorities and the country continues to violate most human rights. Silencing, imprisoning and suppressing dissidents continues to be part of China's governance.

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