

EU-China Relations: Understanding Institutionalisation

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Introduction

In the past twenty-five years a new and substantial relationship has emerged between the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (China). Up to the 1990s, economic relations between the EU and China were limited and politico-diplomatic ones even more so. Since the early 1990s, economic interaction has expanded greatly, with substantial growth in trade and to some extent also in mutual investment. Paralleling this, a new politico-diplomatic relationship has developed over this period, now encompassing annual summits, regular high-level meetings and more than 50 sectoral dialogues (EAAS 2014b). The 'dialogue architecture' between the EU and China is now so dense and complex that not only external researchers but also officials in Brussels and Beijing struggle to maintain a watch on all the aspects of the relationship.

A proper understanding of the EU-China Strategic Partnership as a heavily institutionalised multi-level, multi-sector, and multi-actor relationship offers two insights. First, relations are much more embedded in societies and the corporate world to be dominated by the ups and downs of high-politics. Acknowledging the dense web of interactions, it is obvious that neither political leadership nor changes in the international environment can simply change the direction and content of the partnership. Secondly, institutionalisation creates path-dependencies but leaves room for change. Our understanding of change, however, lacks conceptual clarity. To understand the dynamics of institutionalisation we need to grasp the ideas, interests, and mutual expectations underlying the actions taken by the partners to further develop the institutional framework. Identifying the underlying (role-) conceptions of the partners offers important insights into emerging and existing disparities and links perceptions with the definition of interests and the process of institutional change.¹

There is now a quite substantial academic literature examining the Strategic Partnership both as a whole and in terms of more detailed analyses of different issue areas. We argue, however, that academic analyses of EU-China relations need to be strengthened in three ways. First, greater attention needs to be paid to conceptualisation: in order to move beyond narrow descriptions and to better understand the EU-China relationship, what are the key characteristics of the new EU-China relationship and how can we best conceptualise that relationship? Here, we argue that the EU-China relationship should be conceptualised as a heavily institutionalised dynamic relationship, the

¹ As a positive side-effect, the use of 'role-conception' as a tool to identify actors' ideas, interests, and perceptions allows for a better integration of cultural studies like sinology into the analysis of the driving forces of China's (and the EU's) foreign actions.

core of institutionalisation being the creation of institutional frameworks designed to give a long-term character to the relationship (- our analysis here draws on the broader political science literature on institutions and institutionalisation). Within this, we argue that three features are central to this institutionalised relationship (- see also Murray 2008):

1. a multi-level relationship, involving dialogue from the highest political leaders through mid-level officials to lower level ones;
2. a multi-sector relationship involving dialogue and cooperation across many, indeed most, areas of public policy;
3. a multi-actor relationship involving not only governments and state/EU institutions, but also non-state actors, in particular businesses and civil society groups.

We also note two additional features: an emphasis on technical and financial assistance, largely from the EU to China, and limited conditionality, with both sides generally steering clear of making cooperation conditional on specific steps by the other side, but with some important exceptions.

Second, we argue that more serious attention needs to be paid to explanation: why has the EU-China relationship developed in the way it has over the last twenty-five years? What are the driving factors behind the relationship? Here we argue that the new EU-China relationship reflects three factors: first, the relationship reflects the role-concepts of both the EU and the PRC and, for the formative years of the relationship, in particular the EU's broader ambition to establish itself as a global actor, with China being an obvious focus for EU attention and a willing recipient of EU guidance – at least nominally; second, much of the institutionalisation that has occurred reflects the specific character of EU foreign policy action; and, third, while China has in general been the follower rather than the leader in the development of the relationship, China has both maintained certain 'red lines' and occasionally lead on issues of particular importance to itself. In this regard, the process of institutionalisation reflects the role-conceptions of the two partners expressed in their actions directed at developing the framework and contents of the strategic partnership.

Third, we argue that in considering dynamics of change in the EU-China relationship and the future prospects for that relationship, more explicit consideration needs to be given to (a) the impact of the institutionalisation and (b) possible critical junctures. Here again, our analysis draws on the broader political science literature on institutions and institutionalisation. In terms of the impact of the institutionalisation on EU-China relations: what impact has this had on the two partners and on the prospects for cooperation? In terms of critical junctures, the most obvious candidate is the global financial crisis of 2007-08. Building on our argument that role conceptions have been a key factor behind the development of an institutionalised EU-China relationship, we argue that attention needs

to be played to the triangular relationship between role conceptions, institutionalisation and critical junctures. Our argument is that while path dependency has outweighed the possibility of drastic change and the basic institutional framework has sustained the strategic partnership, changes in role conceptions are challenging the existing institutional set-up and should be viewed as indicators of possible future disruptions.

Thus the paper has two main objectives: it seeks to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics between the People's Republic of China and the European Union by proposing a more comprehensive and dynamic institutional perspective than is often applied in stock-takings of the strategic partnership or individual policy fields. Secondly, it hopes to contribute to the theoretical discussion by using the concept of national role-conceptions to explain the underlying changes in EU and Chinese perceptions and interests as one factor creating growing disparities between the actors' interests and a multi-level, multi-dimensional, and multi-vectoral institutional framework increasing the costs of departure from path-dependant evolution.

We present our argument in four steps: a brief review of existing debates on institutional change and the strategic partnership is followed by an outline of our approach. We then discuss the emergence of the strategic partnership as a dynamic heavily institutionalised relationship involving multiple levels, multiple sectors and multiple actors. We then discuss whether or not the global financial crisis of 2007-08 has turned out as a critical juncture triggering a departure from path dependency (which we argue it has not) and presenting the emerging changes in national role conceptions as an indicator for future institutional dysfunctions which will challenge and, in the long run, change the institutional framework. We then summarize our initial findings.

2. Institutionalisation and the Study of EU-China Relations

Relations between the EU and the People's Republic of China have grown tremendously since formal mutual recognition in 1975. The 'partnership, which is based on the 1985 EU China trade and cooperation agreement, has grown to include foreign affairs, security matters and international challenges such as climate change and global economy governance' (EEAS 2014a). This development is somewhat surprising given the fundamental scepticism dominating the study of the European Union as an international actor and the 'secondary' (Yahuda 1994) nature of the relationship between 'distant partners' (Kapur 1990).

Politicians from both sides continue to praise the relevance and intensity of the relationship (Li 2013; Xi 2014; Barroso 2014; Commission 2013a,b). Academic and public observers often take a critical stance with regard to the substance and nature of the strategic partnership (Holslag 2012; Heilmann/Schmidt 2011). Deep differences between the member states (Fox and Godement 2009) and changes in the mutual normative view (Mattlin 2012) highlight the institutional and normative vagueness of this relationship.

In terms of the EU as an actor in international politics and economics, the complex web of national and supra-national interests, organisations and procedures, the role of transnational actors and the continuing institutional evolution within the EU make it difficult to classify the EU as a political system in general and as an actor in foreign affairs in particular. However, on-going research has established the 'multi-faceted, multi-actor and multi-level' (Murray 2008:25) nature of EU policies in general and of its presence in East Asia in particular. Similarly, China's foreign-policy making has undergone continuous change with a higher degree of professionalisation and institutionalisation (Lampton 1999, 2007; Lanteigne 2008) leading to a broad discussion regarding China's role in international relations (Noesselt 2012).

The study of EU-China relations gained track with a broader academic audience particularly after the announcement of a Strategic Partnership in 2003. This triggered a broad debate about the characteristics, contents and significance of concept (see for example Müller, K. 2002; Casarini 2006; Jing Men 2007; Jing Men and Balducci 2010; Scott 2007a, 2007b; Vogt 2012; Shambaugh, Sandschneider and Hong 2007). Discussing the historical developments became one major line of research (for example Cameron 2010; Rees 2010; Shambaugh 2004) while a second stream sought to identify characteristics of the strategic partnership (for example Geeraerts 2011, Holslag (2011), Kirchner (2013). Most observers direct their research at the summits and the area of high-politics (Holslag 2010, 2011, Song 2012, Reuter 2007) while others highlight different areas of exchange between China and the EU (such as Zou 2010, Geeraerts and Gross 2011, Stumbaum Freeman and Geeraerts (2011) , Laursen (2011) and Jing Men (2011 and 2012). The significant role of China in dealing with the financial crisis of 2007ff has added impetus to studies of China in a global perspective (such as Wouters et al (2012), Vogt 2012, Bersick and Gottwald 2013). Theories applied to the subject range from studies of multiregionalism and multilateralism (Bersick, Stokhof and van der Velde 2006, Algieri 2002, 2007). Pan (2010) and Mattlin (2012) took a constructivist approach identifying normative affects and conceptual gaps in bilateral relations. In recent studies, the issue

whether there has been a fundamental shift in mutual expectations and perceptions (Chen Zhimin 2013; Bersick and Gottwald 2013b) adds urgency to the identification of key drivers and processes of the strategic partnership between a 'declining power' (Chen Zhimin 2013) 'past its global peak' (Bretherton and Vogler 2013) and the 'fragile superpower' (Shirk 2007).

The analytical framework of this paper

In this paper we argue that the EU-China relationship should be conceptualised as a heavily institutionalised relationship. Following Douglas C. North (1990), we define institution as 'rules of the game' distinguishing between formal – laws, regulation, treaties - and informal institutions – norms, values, traditions. We follow the mainstream view that an institution exhibits an element of permanence: not necessarily that an institution will last eternally, but in the sense that it is more than simply an occurrence or a short-term trend that is likely to change. In this context, institutionalisation involves the emergence and stabilisation of a particular institution.

Institutionalisation may occur without conscious agency or be the result of conscious efforts by actors to create and embed institutions. We thus build our framework on the works of actors seeking to influence the institutional framework according to their ideas and interests while institutions frame not only the incentives and disincentives for the actors but also their perceptions (Mayntz/Scharpf 1993).

Theorists of institutions, especially historical institutionalists, argue that institutions are path dependent: once particular institutions or institutional patterns are established they tend to be maintained and future developments follow the path. Theorists of institutions are also interested in critical junctures: institutions are established at such key turning points and such critical junctures occur only occasionally. Within the institutionalist literature there is also debate around change: do institutions only emerge or change as a result of major changes in socio-economic circumstances (critical junctures) or do more incremental forms of change occur and, if so, how? We propose another element explaining institutional change: changes in role-conceptions which integrate ideas and perceptions into the formation of interests. Changes in role-conceptions lead to discrepancies between the institutional framework, mutual perception by the partners and the underlying domestic and foreign expectations. Role-conceptions thus become an independent variable explaining the drivers of institutionalisation in the formative years of the bilateral relationship as well as growing tensions at a point when the institutional set-up starts to mismatch changing role-conceptions.

Role-conceptions are a key aspect of role-theory based approaches to the study of foreign policy and international relations that have recently gained ground in the field of IR as well as of EU studies and China Studies (Aggestam 2006; Cantir/Kaarbo 2012; Harnisch/Frank/Maull 2011; Thies/Breuning 2010; Harnisch/Bersick/Gottwald 2015). Role theory supposedly offers a pragmatic linkage between structure and actor and between domestic and trans-national policies. It 'promises to build an empirical bridge between agent and structure' (Breuning 2011:16). Besides, role theory allows linking domestic policies with international ones and internal and external expectations regarding what is considered an 'accurate' pattern of behaviour in a given situation. One key assumption in this context is that 'foreign policy behaviour is contingent upon relative influence of various individuals on the decision-making process at a given moment in time' (Breuning 2011:25). In this regard, role theories allow to abandon the pre-set world of rationality where 'objective' interests are supposed to define both preferences and the room for manoeuvre in a given setting (Gottwald/Duggan 2011a,b; Bersick/Gottwald 2013a). Role theory offers a venue to integrate the process of interest-definition into the domestic formulation of foreign policies including contributions to global economic governance.

Roles are characteristic patterns of behaviour learned through experience and based on 'expectations held by the self and a corresponding other' (Nabers 2011: 74). 'A social role is a comprehensive pattern of behaviour and attitudes, constituting a strategy for coping with a recurrent set of situations, which is socially identified-more or less clearly-as an entity (Turner 1990:87)'. Roles incorporate sets of diplomatic actions, approaches and behaviour in the international context (Holsti 1970). Roles are dynamic and subject to choice and revision. Role-taking, i.e. the definition of a social position by one actor – for example regional leader – must be matched by important partners or rivals, so-called significant others, to be translated into a new role (Harnisch 2015 forthcoming). *Role conceptions* are national or regional ideas about international order. They are not given or constant. They are shaped and reshaped continually by 'domestic and external developments, such as economic growth and crisis, war and peace' (Acharya 2011: 852). In the original definition by Holsti role-conceptions include 'the policymakers' own definitions of the general kind of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis' (Holsti 1970:245).

Against this background, the EU-China relationship which has emerged since the early 1990s can certainly be viewed as an institutionalised one establishing a social relation based on two overlapping and to significant degree (although not always) mutually compatible role conceptions:

an established international actor, the EU, supporting the socialization of an emerging new power, the PRC. As role conceptions are subject to domestic and external contestation, they provide a dynamic and differentiating approach to improve our understanding of the complex web(s) of actors, ideas, and interests in the formulation of policies and the process of institutionalisation. While other approaches like the societal approach (Schirm 2012) are based on the pre-condition of a liberal-democratic order, role-theory has been successfully applied to the study of neo-authoritarian regimes like China (Shih 2011; 2012).

Regarding EU-China relations, it is important to notice that this perspective of the EU as a role-maker and the PRC as a role-taker has been explicitly supported by the PRC leadership following the traditional role-concept of keeping a low profile in international relations while seeking to advance domestic reforms. In this regard, the role-conception of the EU as a normative global power (Manning 2001) and of an emerging China taking the position of a benign bystander (Gottwald/Duggan 2011a,b) have inspired the scope and content of the process of institutionalisation of the partnership.

The EU and China have put in place a broad set of institutional arrangements which commit them to on-going dialogue and cooperation. If an element of permanency – or an attempt to create such permanency – is the central defining feature of an institution, the institutional arrangements that now underpin EU-China relations should at this stage, twenty years on, be viewed as more than simply short-term or transient. They are the outcomes of a social relationship between the EU and China and constitute the role-conceptions of the time of their emergence. Whether these institutional arrangements will remain intact over a longer time period is dependent on three variables: changes in the global environment, changes in the EU's role-conception and changes in the PRC's role-conception. Thus, the developments within both partners and the impact of a potentially transformative event like the global financial crisis might be expected to challenge the existing framework.

Within this overall context of a dynamic process of institutionalisation, we identify three central features of the EU-China relationship as it has developed over the last twenty-five years (see also Murray 2008) – these are:

- a) a multi-level relationship, involving dialogue and cooperation at multiple levels (from the highest political leaders through mid-level officials to lower level ones;

- b) a multi-sector relationship involving dialogue and cooperation across many, indeed most, areas of public policy;
- c) a multi-actor relationship involving not only governments and state/EU institutions, but also non-state actors, in particular businesses and civil society groups.

We also note two additional features: an emphasis on technical and financial assistance, largely from the EU to China, and limited conditionality, with both sides generally steering clear of making cooperation conditional on specific steps by the other side, but with some important exceptions.

Why has this institutionalised EU-China relationship emerged? And why has it taken the particular forms it has? We suggest that the answers to these questions relate to three factors. First, the EU-China relationship reflects the EU's broader ambition to establish itself as a global actor. Since the Maastricht Treaty entered into force in 1993 the EU has had a formal Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and has taken a wide range of steps to give substance to that policy. In this context, it would be surprising if the EU had not made significant efforts to engage with China: China is *the* rising global power and any actor with global ambitions must per force, one way or another, address China or at minimum is likely to find itself impacted by China. Second, and this factor we argue is central to understanding the EU-China relationship, much of the institutionalisation that has occurred reflects the specific character of EU foreign policy action. If one examines the EU's relations with other states and other regions, especially as they have developed since the early 1990s, one can identify in almost all cases common features: a multi-level approach; a multi-sector approach; an emphasis on technical and financial assistance; and limited conditionality. In essence, therefore, the EU-China relationship reflects a broader pattern in EU foreign policy. This pattern can be seen in other key areas: enlargement²; EU neighbourhood policy; the EU's strategic partnerships with other major powers, as well as China; and the EU's relations with other regions and regional organizations. There is, further, a case that much of the institutionalisation of EU-China relations has arisen from EU initiatives: if one examines the series of EU policy papers on China since the 1990s, each has proposed the deepening of cooperation and often in specific new or additional areas. China has been willing to accept many of these initiatives and has sometimes bargained hard on the content and form of institutional arrangements but, it appears, has rarely been the initiator of these arrangements. Additionally, it may be noted that while China and Russia sometimes use the term 'strategic partnership' to describe their relationship, the Sino-Russian relationship remains primarily a high-level political one, supplemented by military cooperation and Russian gas sales to China, but

² A caveat should be added in relation to EU enlargement: here, because membership is a bigger step for the Union and because membership gives the EU greater leverage, one sees much more extensive and tough conditionality compared to other areas of EU foreign policy.

rather different from the multi-level, multi-sector institutionalised relationship between the EU and China – reinforcing the argument that the EU has been the primary driver of the institutionalisation of EU-China relations.

The third factor explaining the character of the institutionalisation in EU-China relations, however, is China's own position. There has been much debate on Chinese foreign policy over the last two decades or so. On balance, most observers agreed that at least until the early 2000s China's foreign policy was relatively passive and reactive: China's primary goal was economic development and in this context China sought to avoid external conflict or onerous global responsibilities; China had – and still has - key 'red line' issues (Taiwan, Tibet, non-interference in relation to human rights) and asserted its views fairly strongly on these issues, but otherwise usually prioritised domestic economic development and stability. Since the mid-2000s, there has been growing debate over a China's turn from 'charm to the offensive' (Schmidt 2013). Within China, the 'pessoptimistic nation' (Callaghan 2012), there appear to be divisions over how far the country should seek to assert itself within its own region and globally inspired by the debate whether or not its foreign policies should be based on a 'Chinese School of International Relations' (Noesselt 2012). While the specifics of Chinese foreign policy can be debated, these various dynamics have nevertheless shaped the institutionalisation of EU-China relations in a number of ways. As suggested above, much of the development of an institutionalised EU-China has been EU driven: in this context China has been a follower rather than a leader, reflecting the more general pattern of Chinese foreign policy during this period. China has, however, largely been willing to accept the institutionalisation of its relations with the EU so long as the creation of EU-China institutions does not bind it to specific commitments or actions: this has been particularly clear in relations to human rights (where Beijing has been willing to accept a dialogue with the EU so long as that dialogue does not give the EU any specific rights or commit China to specific steps), but in more subtle ways the same can probably be said of many areas of EU-China dialogue. Occasionally, in particular areas, China has been the driver rather than the follower in EU-China relations: the most obvious example here was its efforts in 2003-04 to persuade the EU to end its embargo on arms sales to China, where China pushed the issue quite hard (although ultimately unsuccessfully). More recently, as China's global role and impact have expanded the range of issues where there is EU-China dialogue *and* China has distinctive interests or views has expanded. One example illustrate the point: in relation to climate change, as China has assumed a growing role in global negotiations it has become increasingly willing to assert its position also in EU-China discussions on climate change and related issues. Overall, the story of EU-China relations since the early 1990s has been one of a primarily EU driven institutionalisation process,

albeit one also shaped by specific Chinese interests and concerns. The extent to and ways in which China's rise will re-shape this dynamic in future remains to be seen.

3. The Strategic Partnership as a Dynamic Process of Multi-level, Multi-sector, and Multi-Actor Institutionalisation

Following the analysis of Kirchner and Christensen (2013), the motivation to upgrade EU China bilateral relations in 2003 was a 'similar understanding of the post-Cold War international system and of both partners' place within it' (Casarini, 2012:23).

Multi-level: From Top to Bottom

A central feature of the EU-China relationship as it has developed since the early/mid-1990s has been its multi-level character. Building on initial relationship between highest level political leaders, the EU and China have put in place on-going meetings and dialogues not only at head of state/government (and EU equivalent) levels, but also between EU Commissioners and their Chinese ministerial/governmental counterparts, senior officials at the level below Commissioners and Ministers and mid- and low-level officials also.

Multi-sector: Expanding the scope of bilateral exchange and cooperation

Comparing the development of the architecture of bilateral relations, even the two official charts from 2005 and 2014 indicate the substantial increase in complexity (see chart on architecture 2005 and 2014). The strategic partnership has become multi-sector in the sense that the dialogues are stretching out across policy fields and bring together participants from government and government, government related agencies, government organised non-governmental organisations (Gongos) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The key factor here is the increase in numbers and in official recognition of the so-called sectoral dialogues who seem to have started to development life of their own nearly independent of the ups and downs of high politics. Sectoral dialogues have become the underpinnings of the Strategic Partnership. They have outgrown their original function of introducing policy-makers and experts in certain fields into a vast and complex web of mutual exchange. Based on shared interests, 'these dialogues have grown considerably in recent years and now cover a wide range of areas: from science and technology to enterprise regulation, and from environmental issues to education and

the information society' (EEAS 2014a). They 'have helped to develop a solid foundation for the EU-China relationship which is now characterised by increasingly close policy co-ordination in many important areas' (ibid.).

After establishing some dialogues in the early 1990s, a more comprehensive approach to organising the exchanges between experts and policy-makers was introduced in the early 2000s. More and more non-governmental and expert groups became involved in the bilateral relations. Quite often initial meetings and roundtables preceded the formal establishment as a sectoral dialogue and, based on information provided by various secretariats of the EC, not all dialogues became or continued to stay very active. This might help to explain why neither the exact figure of dialogues nor their classification is used coherently within the EU.³

Energy (1994) and science and technology starting in the early 1990s (ibid.) were among the first areas identified for technical co-operation. The first cooperation programme in this area was launched in 1983 (EEAS 2014c). Similarly, an early set of projects in management training and rural development started in 1984 – long before these projects and exchanges were classified as sectoral dialogues. The exchanges on human rights were first conducted as part of the political dialogues and then established as human rights dialogue in 1995 (EEAS 2014b). A first meeting of the EU China Joint Committee was held in July 1979 and a first inter-parliamentary meeting was held in 1980 (EEAS 2014c). Most exchanges have been set up after 2002. This followed a call by the European Commission to expand these exchanges in their 2003 Policy Paper. The 1998 strategy 'Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China' mentioned individual sectoral projects, but does not introduce the term 'sectoral dialogue(s)'. Yet it proposes to strengthen cooperation in trade through the 'conclusion of specific bilateral agreements in areas of particular interest' (Commission 1998:16) such as maritime transport, air transport, nuclear trade and safety, customs, science and technology. The paper also called for a dialogue on business bringing in the corporate world into the official bilateral architecture (Commission 1998: 21). In her 2001 update, the Commission had the sectoral dialogues already in her executive summary: As part of the overall objective of 'integrating China further into the world economy' the strategy proposed 'strengthening existing sectoral dialogues and agreements in key areas (...) and develop new ones' (Commission 2001:4). The development of various dialogues was perceived as one key element why the setting for EU-China relations had changed since the last communication and needed an update (Commission 2001: 6). The

³ Similarly, there seems to be no single Chinese translations (among others: 部门对话机制; 对话磋商机制; 项目谈话)

intensification of sectoral dialogues had received a clear commitment from the Chinese side (Commission 2001: 7) for the introduction of a series of new dialogues on ‘enterprise policy and regulation, industrial standards and certification, securities markets and competition policy’ (Commission 2001: 15). The EEAS stressed that “regular exchanges between specialists, officials and the business community serve to boost mutual understanding, and provide the substance for further developing the EU-China ‘strategic partnership’. This is a stabilising element for the relationship, which helps to counterbalance other more sensitive issues such as human rights, migration, and trade negotiations’ (EEAS 2014a).

In 2013, the European Strategic Partnership Observatory listed one annual summit, eight ministerial dialogues, 51 sectoral dialogues and three other platforms (ESP 2013). But even at a lower level, the number and variety of EU-China co-operations highlight the dense web of exchanges (see table below). Staley Crossick was perfectly right to point out that ‘(I)t is a poor reflection on the EU’s China activities if the latest available organigramme is nearly five years old and there is no agreement as to how many Dialogues, Working Groups (WG) etc there are. It indicates a serious lack of coordination’ (Crossick 2010). Yet while the lack of coordination and coherence deserved criticism – and the difficulties of the European authorities to come up with a reliable overview of all these activities when formally requested by a researcher in (EEAS 2013a) – it indicates the degree to which these dialogues have started to have a life – and a death – of their own and a very specific/individual development in between.

Some of the dialogues cover areas where the EU and China face similar challenges (internal market; science and technology; health issues) others have been set up to allow for the expression and coordination of joint interests in global issues. In some fields, the EU (still) provides a model for Chinese policy makers (i.e. competition policy): ‘The EU is demonstrating its willingness to **share this experience with China** (sic!). And China has shown an interest in using the best practices of the “EU model” in these policy areas’ (EEAS 2014a). Other dialogues deal with topics of great public concern creating difficulties in bilateral relations at the summit level (i.e. human rights) or follow the interests of multi-national corporations (i.e. financial services). Recently, the EU has started to acknowledge that in some fields, it might now learn from the Chinese experience an benefit from superior Chinese facilities (peaceful nuclear research; China EURATOM agreement 2004).

Table: Overview of EU projects in China (supported by/linked with the ECPDSF):

Area	Projects
Governance, democracy, human rights and support for economic and institutional reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every Child Matters --- Developing Child Friendly Communities in Xinjiang • ‘Nothing for us without us’ -- Improving participation and capacity of disabled children project • Promoting Older People s Participation in Development in Rural China
Trade and regional integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Train Of Trainers": A Proposal To Train Chinese Construction Sector Smes In Energy Saving Techniques & Technologies • China Higher Efficiency Power And Distribution Transformers Promotion Project • Electric Motor Systems Energy-Saving Challenge – Improving the Operating Efficiency of Chinese Electric Motor Systems • Green Products Development and Labelling in Mongolia • Implementing Industrial Symbiosis And Environmental Management Systems In Tianjin Binhai New Area • Improving Environmental And Safety Performance In Electrical And Electronics Industry In China • Sustainable Building Interior Renovation and Decoration Initiative in China (SUS BIRD) • Sustainable Public Procurement in Urban Adminsitrations in China (SuPP-Urb China) • Sustainable revival of livelihoods in post-disaster Sichuan: Enhancing eco-friendly pro-poor bamboo production supply chains to support the reconstruction effort
Social Cohesion and Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China NGO Connect: Building Communications Capacity among the Chinese Civil Society. • Community Based Rehabilitation Program for People with Disabilities in Mongolia • Improving the inclusion of children with disabilities in the Guangxi Autonomous Region • Improving the life of people with disabilities in the Tibet Autonomous Region
Human Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INDIGO, Intercultural Development In favour of Gender Opportunities • No child left behind- improving maternal and health care for under 5’s in China’s migrant population • Reduce the effects and spread of HIV among youth and target groups specifically vulnerable to HIV and AIDS in four Chinese provinces • Rewriting the future from the beginning - improving early childhood care and development for the most marginalised children in rural and urban China • Steps from exclusion to inclusion – achieving quality inclusive education for children with disabilities in China • Support to the health sector in Panam County
Rural development, territorial planning, agriculture and food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Driven Poverty Alleviation in Shalatuo township, Yuanyang County in Yunnan Province, China • EU-Mongolia Animal Health and Livestock Marketing Project

security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mongolia Sustainable Livelihoods Programme Phase II • Sustained Poverty Reduction Through Agricultural development (SPADE)
The environment and the sustainable management of natural resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting policy, legal and institutional frameworks for the reform of forest tenure in China's collective forests and promoting knowledge exchange • Sustainable and Responsible Trade Promoted to Wood Processing SMEs through Forest and Trade Networks in China, India and Vietnam
Multi-sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biodiversity Protection Programme • China-Europe Public Administration project (Phase II) • China Strand: Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window • EU Centre for Support to European SMEs • EU-China Civil Society Dialogue Project • EU-China Clean Energy Centre • EU-China Environmental Governance Programme • EU-China Institute for Clean and Renewable Energy (ICARE) • EU-China Managers Exchange and Training Programme • EU-China Project on the Protection of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR II) • EU - China River Basin Management Programme • EU China Social Security Reform Co-operation Project • Europe-China Business Management Training Project • Europe -China School of Law (ECSL) • Governance for Equitable Development (GED) - Strengthening Rule of Law and Civil Society Participation in China • Institutional Capacity Building for the Civil Aviation Sector in China • Natural Forest Management Project • Policy dialogues Support Facility (PDSF) • Science & Technology Fellowship Programme China • Support to China's Sustainable Trade and Investment System • Support to SME Development in Mongolia

Source: Delegation of the European Union to China (2014), List of Projects, available at http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/projects/list_of_projects/projects_en.htm (last accessed 20 August 2014).

Back in 2005, 24 areas for sectoral dialogues (excluding human rights and migration which were re-classified as belonging to the political dialogue) were identified, already with substantial differences in names, persons involved and structures of the dialogues: 'Exchanges take place under different denominations depending on the specific context of the sector. They are referred to as 'dialogues', 'regular exchanges', or simply as 'co-operation', and they take place at various hierarchical levels, from working level to ministerial level. A variety of participants may be involved, including officials, politicians, business organisations, and private companies. Proceedings are organised in a flexible way and take the form of working groups, conferences, annual formal meetings or simply informal

exchanges. Specialists from nineteen Directorates General in the European Commission are involved in regular exchanges with their respective counterparts in China' (EEAS 2014a).

Starting with different preceding arrangements, different set up of actors, different interests of the two partners and with a different degree of public interest, it seems fair to follow the official description of the dialogues and findings by individual sectoral studies to assume that these dialogues follow different vectors (speed, intensity, direction) of development. In this regard, multi-vectorial indicates that the process of institutionalisation of the Strategic Partnership has created areas that follow very different trajectories, differ in intensity, public interest and significance for the role-conceptions of the two partners.

Multi-actor: Bringing in experts and civil society

In 1975, the EU and the People's Republic of China agreed in formal mutual recognition. At this stage, bilateral relations were very much in the hands of the Chinese party-state leadership and the representatives of the EU. Following the overall process of European integration with the gradual expansion of Europeanization of policy areas.... (Andrew?!)

One of the key issues resulting from the political order of the EU as a system sui generis are the issues of actorness and effectiveness in the conduct of their external relations (Niemann and Bretherton 2013). In the area of high-politics, the issue in how far leading member states overcome problems of joint action and allow for a co-herent and sustainable European position has become one of the most criticised shortcomings in EU-China relations (Godement/Fox 2009). The growing significance of China for EU member states has led to the inclusion of the topic of bilateral relations into national political debates (Gottwald 2010). Obviously, the political structure of the EU has its impact on bilateral relations. Yet the process of institutionalisation has been further shaped by this aspect of the EU polity than simply acknowledging the co-existence of member states' China policies and EU China policy. The process of institutionalisation has benefitted from two-level games of creating new dialogues in member states spilling over to the EU level and EU level initiatives spilling over to the member states. Human rights cooperation is a point in case. Through the integration of the European Parliament and the creation of the second and third pillar of the architecture (see below), a process starting in 1983 with the agreement on technical co-operation has led to various level below the high-politics of the summits. The increase in pillars and levels in turn has paved the way for including various policy areas at various level creating a multi-dimensional institutional framework.

4. Driving the change: External factors, interests and role-conceptions

The EU has repeatedly stated its ambition to play a central role in global economic governance '(t)he European Union will take a leading role at the global level in promoting a swift return to sustainable economic growth;' (European Council 2009: 8). Back in the 1990s, the EU aimed explicitly at becoming the most competitive global economy, thus implicitly claiming to offer an alternative to the Anglo-American variety of capitalism. These claims have suffered considerably – at least in the eyes of external observers – in the wake of the global financial crisis (Bretherton and Vogler 2013; critical: Zimmerman 2013). China's leaders, by contrast, held a generally positive but distant view of global economic governance and continued to emphasize their role as a representative of developing and emerging nation throughout the global financial crisis (Bersick and Gottwald 2013a; Chin 2012). Yet inspired by a global debate on the 'Beijing Consensus' and a 'China model' and with global attention focusing on China's growth to pull the global economy out of recession after 2008, the traditional role-concept and the policy of keeping a low profile, proved increasingly difficult to maintain.

The EU has often explicitly referred to norms and soft power as the basis for their global role. Even after the crash of the Irish economy and a bank run in the UK, the EU seemed to be able to claim the superiority of European Welfare State Capitalism. This perception, of course, changed profoundly with the aggravation of the Euro-Zone crisis in 2010. The amount of distress in the EU economies and the difficulties to agree on policy measures to deal with it undermined the EU's credibility in promoting policy ideas on international regulatory issues (Ferran 2013: 96) even if the true amount of the EU power loss might be overstated (see Zimmermann 2013). Yet a change in foreign expectations and self-perspective both added up to create the image of a 'descending power Europe' (Chen Zhimin 2013; Gottwald/Bersick 2013 b).

If the global financial crisis provided a critical juncture for change and the sovereign and private debt crisis in Europe increased calls for substantial joint action, the earlier failure to successfully conclude a new cooperation agreement had already highlighted the need for new concepts like the New Major Power relationship, which is usually attributed to the Chinese president and secretary-general of the CCP, Xi Jinping. A few months before Xi was selected as new party leader, he introduced the idea of a new framework for relations between the United States and China during a visit to the US

in February 2012. The concept was picked up by then State President Hu Jintao at the Sino-US Strategic High Level Dialogue in Beijing in March 2012 and further elaborated during Xi's State Visit to the US in June 2013 (Renmin Ribao 2013). The basic idea behind this concept refers to the notion of avoiding conflict between an established super-power and an emerging rival through mutual trust and respect for different domestic developments. It thus ties in with the earlier foreign policy dogma of peaceful development and Hu Jintao's emphasis of interpreting international politics and China's growing importance as a win-win situation for everyone, not a zero-sum conflict. While some voices in China have proposed to include all major powers including the European Union and even the system of major powers, others have expressed their scepticism (Pang Zhongying 2014:3-4). Xi Jinping seemed to extend his analysis in his Report to the 18th Party Congress to all advanced economies (Shu Sui 2013). Key elements of the New Major Power relationship concept found their way into China's new EU policy white paper, albeit without explicit use of the term (State Council 2014). Within Europe, interest in the concept as a source for new impetus to the Strategic Partnership has been miniscule: there seems to be virtually no official document or source applying this idea to EU-China relations.

The process of institutionalisation of EU-China relations has produced a sophisticated structure of three pillars plus a dense web of dialogues, yet it is built on substantial normative and policy disagreement. The key objective of EU China policies is the integration and socialisation of the PRC into the global economy. With China having joined the WTO, taken an important role in the G20 and all sorts of economic coordination forums, this objective has lost some of its significance. These positive developments notwithstanding, eternal issues of market access and fair treatment continue to call upon the strategic partners to seek further cooperation in the framework for economic activities. In this respect, further aims of the EU in dealing with China remain to be achieved: contributing to a change in the political legal and social system of the PRC towards a more democratic, rule of law based pluralistic society and contributing to the development of a sustainable socio-economic model of development. For the Chinese side, the key interest was to benefit from European technology, know-how and investments and support the EU in taking an active stance in global politics. These interests could be summed up in the dual objective of using them for the promotion of domestic reforms and balancing US hegemony (Cotter and Gottwald 2008).

'With global power comes global responsibility and we want China to be part of the solution in addressing some of the pressing issues facing the international community from climate change to

cyber-security,' concluded President Manuel Barroso the 14th EU-China Summit in Beijing in February 2012 (Barroso 2012a). From a European perspective the Chinese leadership is officially expected to act as a responsible stakeholder. At the same time, the EU is still considering itself advanced in the sense that it can facilitate China's role-taking in the existing global framework. Yet the PRC is perceived as a potential new dominant actor in global governance. 'China needs to adapt to its new position of strength and leadership' (de Gucht 2012). Incoherent and self-centred policies underpin the image of the hesitant bully that pursues sinister strategies to promote its own enterprises at the costs of its Western competitors and, on the other hand, comes to the rescue of the shaken European and global economies.

At the other end, China has started to push for the lifting of the arms embargo and has called for the full recognition of its development model. While China courts the EU, it has clearly stepped up its cooperation with the governments of the member states. Much will depend on whether or not the EU and China-EU relations will develop in the direction expected by the new Chinese leadership. The semi-official Chinese news magazine Global Times thus called Xi Jinping's visit to Brussels in April 2014 'Operation Seduction' welcoming that the partner apparently had found a way to put frictions aside and concentrate pragmatically on the development of bilateral relations (Lui 2014). Few days after the conclusion of Xi Jinping's visit, the Chinese government published a new China EU policy white paper with substantial proposals regarding the development of political ties (State Council 2014) on the basis of full recognition of normative differences and including clear requests regarding EU policy changes in the field of arms sales, technology transfer or dealing with representatives of Tibetan Buddhism like the Dalai Lama. From an EU perspective, thus, the new concept highlights China's turn towards emerging powers and the United States. It increases the pressure to redefine its own role in global politics. Europe's normative power is vanishing. The decreased significance of norms and a more realistic view on economic benefits and political tensions might foster an overdue normalization of Sino-EU ties which have often been overburdened with exaggerated ambition

Conclusion and outlook: role-conceptions, institutional change, and growing mismatches in E-China relations

In his programmatic speech at the College of Europe in 2014, President Xi concluded that the 'relationship between China and the EU has become one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world... (but) we should not forget that there is still greater room for the growth

of China-EU relations and the potential is yet to be fully tapped' (Xi 2014:1).

The dissonance and normative shift in the strategic partnership became quite obvious when Europe failed to address its sovereign and private debt problems. Before the global financial crisis, China had been attacked by leading European politicians and publications alike as a major rival threatening Europe's social and economic well-being through its successful 'Going-out Strategy' of investment in and increased exports to Europe (and the world in general) (Gottwald 2010). When EU member states found it increasingly difficult to refinance their banks and national budgets, China suddenly emerged as something like a 'white knight' riding to the rescue. While there is limited yet substantial Chinese investment in European debt (Casarini 2013; Anderlini and Spiegel 2010), the overall policy of the PRC follows a clear line: increased cooperation with Europe, a rhetoric reassurance of partnership, but few additional investments into EU debt. Instead, the EU received outspoken advice to first deal with its problems itself before expecting major new foreign support. As a developing country facing substantial challenges at home, the Chinese leadership refuses to commit to exaggerated bail-out for a wealthy region such as Europe (MOFA 2013). Chinese leaders linked the issue of support to the solution of long-standing conflicts of interest in partnership and made political concessions by the EU as a precondition for further support (Wen 2011; Anderlini and Zhang 2011). 'The lasting image and fitting metaphor will be that of Europeans going cap-in-hand to China to bail out their governments and financial institutions, and being told to find their own solutions' (Cooper and Thakur 2013: 110).

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's foreign policy strategy is undergoing a re-definition. This revision will create a new national role conception. Early indications promise a new concept that emphasizes equality with advanced powers like the US and the EU. The institutional framework between the two partners, however, has been built on the premise of the EU supporting China's socialisation into the international society. This mismatch will challenge further attempts to consolidate and strengthen bilateral relations. Yet a fundamental break seems unlikely: path-dependency and the multi-dimensional nature of the institutionalisation created a much denser web of bilateral relations than a simple look at events at summit might reveal. In either case, the specific political set-up of both partners and the dynamic of institutionalisation of relations between is set to challenge traditional IR theories.

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