

Glimpse at EU–China relationships since 2008¹

Jelena Staburova
Una Aleksandra Bērziņa

Rīga Stradiņš University
Dzirčiema 16,
Rīga LV-1007, Latvia
E-mail: Jelena.Staburova@rsu.lv
E-mail: una@latviachina.eu

Abstract: *United Europe–China relations have a long history. For many years they have developed successfully, but not along a simple course. The main thesis of this article is that the year 2008, which is associated primarily with the onset of the financial crisis in Europe, became a watershed in the history of bilateral relations between EU and China. Over the past few years the agenda and the role of the actors, and also the content and format of discourse have changed dramatically. This article is devoted primarily to some aspects of the EU's position in relation to China and, to a lesser extent, to the position of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Therefore the history of contacts between the two sides will be considered especially in the light of some EU publications, while China will be outside our primary area of focus. Unlike many studies on economic cooperation between EU and China, our paper will accentuate the political component of the relationship. We shall try to demonstrate that, beginning with 2008, Europe has been partly losing its status as the driving force in the EU–China dialogue. We will conclude by addressing the problem of adequate understanding of Chinese political texts, without which no political communication of Europe with China can be successful. A critical analysis of a recent document prepared by the EU eliminates some problematical points within the united Europe, which affect the effectiveness of its Chinese policy. Our method can be described as eclectic in the sense that it borrows arguments from a variety of political research techniques and terminologies (discourse analysis, historical institutionalism, engagement and stakeholder theories), as well as from sinological (by which we understand the analysis of Chinese texts in the cultural perspective) and historical approaches.*

¹ Co-author Una Aleksandra Berzina's research is supported by the European Social Fund.

Keywords: *11th EU–China Summit, 2008 as a watershed year for Sino-EU relationship, China theoretical framing, Chinese political discourse, European Union (EU), dynamics of EU–China relationship, People’s Republic of China (PRC)*

1. EU–China studies in Europe and China

Taking into account the topicality of the question under consideration, it seems natural that the EU–China studies attract much interest among researchers. The most productive authors working in this field are David Shambaugh, François Godement, Finn Laursen, Katinka Barysch, and many others. Surprisingly, most of the works on this topic in English remain casual papers and are lacking a single scientific strategy. Existing research centers have a rather limited number of employees and have yet to prepare detailed investigations of specific research questions.

The work is carried out in a somewhat different manner in China, where special research centers have mobilized an army of scientists specializing in different issues, including research support to China’s policymakers in Europe. The most impressive research institutes of this type are the Chinese Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). The aspects of the EU–China relationship that are addressed in this paper have not yet been subject to study.

2. Overview: from the beginning up to 2008

The history of relations between the united Europe and China is only a few decades long, but it has been an important time for shaping contacts, which, when considered in terms of intensity and dynamics, are very uneven. The unevenness has been determined by various factors, but above all by the changes in the international political system, the development of China, the institutionalization of the European Union, and volatility of financial markets.

The beginning of the unified Europe’s contacts with PRC dates back to May 1975 when China was under Mao Zedong’s rule. This was the time when bilateral diplomatic relations were established, and the Vice-President of the European Commission paid a visit to Beijing. Apparently, the first agreement between

China and Europe was a purely procedural action, which had the Sino-American rapprochement as its prerequisite. It took both parties three years to find an acceptable format for cooperation. Finally, in May 1978, the trade agreement between China and the European Economic Community (the Common Market) was signed. The agreement was followed by the creation of the Joint Committee, which operated with modest results. As David Shambaugh and his co-authors have noted, “When the then European Community of nine members formally established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1975, the relationship was a minor shadow of what it has become today” (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 303).

It took the EU and China ten years to conclude the trade and cooperation agreement. The agreement signed in 1985 remains the legal basis for the relationship to this day. In 1988, the European Commission (EC, after 2010 – EU) delegations opened a representative office in Beijing. In 1989, after the Tiananmen Square incident, the united Europe froze its political relations with China and introduced a range of sanctions in protest, including an embargo on arms trade, which is still a stumbling block in the relations between the two sides. However, the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was a time of great change, which apparently explains why the European countries have found it best not to let China drift independently. In October 1990, the united Europe made a decision on gradual restoration of the bilateral cooperation. In 1993, the three European Communities established a new institution—the European Union, which implemented normalization processes of relations with China in various fields, although there were exceptions (e.g., the arms embargo). In 1994, the sides agreed to *open a* political dialogue, and a year later, the dialogue on human rights.

In 1998, the first EU and PRC Summit was held, on the eve of which the European Commission issued the communication *Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China* (European Commission, 1998). It would not be an exaggeration to say that these events launched Europe’s comprehensive partnership building with China, thus the previous twenty-three years can be viewed as a preparatory stage. By that time, the Institute of Summits had worked without interruptions for ten years. Apparently, picking the year 1998 to start a high-level dialogue was not a random choice for the EU, but was directly connected with the 1997 Asian crises. China had demonstrated its financial stability, becoming more attractive to its European partners. This was indirectly specified in the summary of the above-mentioned communication (**European Commission**, 1998, p. 3). In 2003, the EU and China agreed upon a strategic partnership.

It is worth noting that China issued its first official policy document on its relations with the EU with some delay—namely, in 2003 (FM PRC, 2003). This lack of notification may have happened on various reasons, but whatever they were, it is a clear indication that Europe took the initiative in the EU–China relations for a certain period of time.

In 2006, **the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament** published a document on the basic principles of relations with PRC, *EU–China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities (European Commission, 2006)*. Formulating binding obligations for both sides, the authors of the document tried to establish parity between the EU and China. Somehow, the format of the relations offered by the EU was to be based solely on European values: “We need to leverage the potential of a dynamic relationship with China based on our values” (European Commission, 2006, p. 2).

3. The year 2008: low-profile partnership in EU–China dialog

Throughout these years, the EU had successfully balanced its interests and values in its relations with China. Despite the fact that the EU and China’s problem areas (Tibet, Taiwan, African countries, democracy, human rights, carbon emission, arms embargo) were unresolved, the only issue on which China had consistently defended its position was Taiwan. Failure struck in 2008, when China on the eve of the 11th Summit unilaterally canceled the meeting. It now seems that this was the first sign of a change in the relationship.

To recall the basic outline of the events, the 11th Summit was to be held in December 2008. Faithful to its policy of values, the EU had decided to remind China that the fate of the Tibetan Autonomous Region also lies in the competence of Europe. Therefore, French President Nicolas Sarkozy in his capacity as the rotating President of the EU announced that he would meet with Dalai Lama after the Summit. China responded four days(!) before the 11th EU–China Summit by announcing the summit being postponed for an indefinite period.

EU’s statement on China’s decision indicated that with the expanding financial crisis the EU hoped to synchronize its economic schedule with China, and therefore the unilateral postponement of the Summit by China was received with disappointment (PFUE, 2008). China’s demarche was a sign of the country strengthening its position in the new circumstances. In 2008, several significant issues shaped China’s political agenda, such as the impressive Olympic Games,

the Kuomintang party's victory in the presidential elections in Taiwan, and, last but not least, the United States' suggestion to establish an informal alliance, a so-called "Group of Two" (G2). The postponement of the Summit reflected all the tectonic shifts that occurred in 2008. As the Chinese researcher Zhongqi Pan (2012, p. 1) noted, "2008 marked a low point in China–EU relationship".

4. China's increasing assertiveness

Although the misunderstanding that had arisen between the EU and China in 2008 was apparently quickly overcome, China currently enjoys significant momentum in mutual relations with the EU in the sense of being in a leading position in agenda setting. The EU is concerned but is trying to cope with this new reality.

François Godement, a prominent analyst of China at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and the founder of Asia Centre at ECFR, has accused China of becoming more aggressive towards foreign critics (Godement, 2010, p. 3). As an example, he quotes the case of the changed attitude of China to Denmark, stressing that Denmark continues on the same course of conduct designed to protect the moral values of Europe, which it has been following for many years:

For example, in 2009 it [i.e. China] boycotted the Danish government, which for decades had pursued a dual strategy on positive cooperation on the one hand, and criticism of China over human rights and its treatment of Dalai Lama on the other (Godement, 2010, p. 3).

François Godement has recorded another example, which, in his opinion, indicates that

China had also become more open in rejecting Western human rights standards: For example, in January 2012, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman responded to a question about the whereabouts of a well-known dissident, Gao Zhisheng, who had been missing for almost a year, by saying that "he is where he should be" (Godement, 2010, p. 3).

European experts repeatedly express their concern about the fact that in recent years China has intensified the promotion of its interests through various EU Member States, thus inducing a split within the united Europe.

China also attempts to influence individual European politicians to focus on its particular goals. In 2010, there was a case involving an arms embargo during the Spanish presidency. Official representatives of Spain, in contrary to the decisions of the EU blocking the right of China to the arms trade, all of a sudden proposed to lift the embargo (Laursen, 2011). This did not lead to its abolition, but the incident demonstrated that in the EU China is no longer a player on the institutional level, but on the personal level as well.

The fact that in 2012 China started to become actively involved on the political level with the Central and Eastern European countries—the EU Member States—did not go unnoticed by the European experts. In April 2012, a meeting was convened between Chinese and Central and Eastern European (CEE) leaders in Warsaw. On 24 April China announced the publication of the document *China's Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries*, which was perceived with mixed feelings in the central EU institutions, because it involved only 16 European countries (FM PRC, 2012). On September 6, the Inaugural Conference of the Secretariat for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries was convened in Beijing. According to Roland Vogt from the University of Hong Kong, China at present pursues its interests in a more assertive manner (Vogt, 2012, p. 12).

5. Lost in translation

A special topic that needs to be addressed is the problem of the language of politics, and more specifically, the political discourse and how it is delivered to the Europeans who do not know Chinese. We argue that a good portion of what is said by Chinese politicians cannot be understood in the EU because it consists of purely Chinese phenomena, which are in no way related to the European cultural tradition. So, in translation many characteristic concepts and terms are replaced by words rooted in European cultures and therefore become d

The process is best illustrated with a paper published by the Asia Centre, which acts as an analytical mouthpiece of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). The 2008 article is by Dr. Mathieu Duchâtel, who was at that time the chief editor of China Analysis and a research fellow at Asia Centre at Sciences Po (Duchâtel is currently working at the School of International Studies, Peking University, where he conducts research on China's foreign and security policies and China–Europe relations), and is actually a digest of Chinese publications from the perspective of China's soft power policy. Among the Chinese scholars

discussed by Duchâtel is Li Yonghui, head of the College of International Relations at the Beijing Foreign Studies University. In 2008, Li published an article in Chinese entitled “Traditional wisdom and China’s post-Olympic diplomacy”. Li had devoted his research to the problem of redefining China’s foreign policy in terms of traditional Chinese wisdom. It would seem that a review of this paper by a European scholar requires particularly careful attention to traditional Chinese concepts.

Mathieu Duchâtel argues that according to Li Yonghui:

soft power should be prioritized, and to accomplish this China must “cultivate its virtues and practice the way of the Prince” (内聖外王之道, neixiu qide, waixing wangdao) by adopting a magnanimous and irreproachable foreign policy (Duchâtel, 2008, p. 5).

Thus, according to Duchâtel, the Chinese academician suggests China should adopt “a magnanimous and irreproachable foreign policy” using a carefully chosen figure of speech to substantiate his idea: China must “cultivate its virtues and practice the way of the Prince”.

The semantics of the phrase “cultivate its virtues and practice the way of the Prince” seems understandable enough, but, unfortunately, the English translation has little in common with the original text. Verbatim translation of the phrase gives some idea of its actual meaning: “On the inside cultivate the De of oneself, on the outside go for the sovereign’s Dao”. The phrase is an extended version of the phrase which was first mentioned in a work of Zhuang Zi (4th century BC) as “inside—sage’s, outside—sovereign’s Dao” (内聖外王之道, nei sheng wai wang zhi dao) (Zhuang Zi, 1940, p. 13). Zhuang Zi used these words in the sense that an ideal form of government is possible only where the sovereign and the sage have merged into a single whole.

Starting with the Song dynasty, this phrase became part of the philosophy of Confucianism, and the phrase’s second part with its social component came to the forefront. During the Ming dynasty the phrase came to be regarded as the core principle of national ideology and represented the idea that an individual is encouraged to search for truth within him and cultivate himself for the good of the state (or the sovereign). Extrapolating this expression to the soft power concept, Li certainly meant that Chinese traditional political thought could afford alternative values, based not on hidden selfish interests, as it is the case with the above-mentioned Joseph Nye’s soft power concept, but instead on

a deep insight into the laws of nature and of human life by putting together the personal and social, philosophical and political. We do not seek to answer what it means or how it operates, but how is it possible for us, Europeans, to comment on the Chinese expert's idea of “the way of the Prince”, if we ignore the powerful Chinese cultural tradition, including the concepts of Dao and De, the philosophy of the inner and outer (or here, domestic and international or perhaps even personal and social)?

China's political discourse, which during the 20th century had rapidly absorbed the political arguments of the West, is now increasingly borrowing concepts from Chinese classics. China is also purposefully reviving its traditional ideas. This is promoted through education, as school curricula include knowing Chinese classics by heart. Huge databases containing texts from classical philosophy and literature from the earlier written documents in the 9th to 6th centuries BC to the 20th century are available on the Internet. There are TV and radio programs devoted to the explanation of ancient texts.

In foreign relations, such references to Chinese classics contain huge amounts of information and without understanding these, effective interaction with China will become more and more difficult. We believe that the European political scientists should redefine their attitude towards China's self-perception in international politics. The above translation of the Chinese text partly explains why until now the EU has considered China policy initiatives unworthy of serious attention by Europeans—indeed, how can we take seriously the recommendation “to practice the way of the Prince” in the 21st century?

6. China's theoretical framing by the EU

Currently some EU think tanks acknowledge that the European policy towards China has been unsuccessful (Fox & Godement, 2009, p. 11). The political role that the EU has chosen—the balance between values and interests—*turned out* to be *very complicated*. The main arguments of the EU suffered from inconsistencies (some European leaders welcomed Dalai Lama, some refused to meet him) and from disconnection from China's reality.

The EU has defined its core policy towards China in terms of engagement. The concept of engagement is a piece of political science baggage imported from the U.S., and it by definition presupposes an unfriendly partner whose behavior should be shaped in the right direction. According to authoritative

American scientists Richard N. Haass and Meghan L. O'Sullivan (2000, p. 2), "the distinguishing feature of American engagement strategies is their reliance on the extension or provision of incentives to shape the behavior of countries with which the U.S. has important disagreements".

In Europe, the engagement concept was looked upon as a useful tool for "shaping the behavior" of China; consequently, it was expected that it would meet the requirements of Europe, because these requirements meet the interests of China: "Building on this approach, EU aims to persuade the Chinese leadership that it is in its own interests to do what Europeans ask" (Fox & Godement, 2009, p. 21).

The second core concept of EU's strategy towards China is called the stakeholder. This concept has been included in the EU political lexicon after 2005, when the U.S. Deputy State Secretary Robert Zoellick during his China visit offered it as a new direction of US–China relations. The stakeholder theory is actually accompanied by different confusing approaches and, furthermore, it derives from corporate management practices. Zoellick offered his own interpretation of the concept as applied to international relations, suggesting that China and the U.S. should become mutual stakeholders with shared responsibility (Zoellick, 2007). However, the question remains open as to who will manage this international corporation, in which China, the United States and other countries will become shareholders. Who will define the rules of conduct, should China and the U.S. position themselves as owners of stocks? When adopting this theory, the EU has also left this question unanswered. It should be noted that both of the theoretical frames—"engagement" and "stakeholder"—impose a discourse about disparities.

7. EU's answer to China's challenge: a case study

A relatively new document, published in March 2012 and prepared for the European Expert Network on Culture (EENC), might give some idea of how the EU is acting in the current situation. From the brief summary we learn that "the EENC was set up in 2010 [...], with the aim of contributing to the improvement of policy development in Europe" (Staines, 2012. p. 2). The document is called *Mapping Existing Studies on EU–China Cultural Relations* and it promises

to present a concise and pertinent knowledge base on EU–China cultural relations, including concrete examples of cooperation and bilateral relations, in order to contribute to a better understanding

of the opportunities, challenges, policy, priorities, perceptions and experiences of cultural relations between EU and China. (Staines, 2012, p. 4)

The document reveals an interesting set of EU countries cooperating with China, including Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Portugal, Romania, Scotland(?), Spain, the Netherlands, England and UK, Norway, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Malta, Ireland, and Belgium. It is astonishing that information about some EU countries' transactions with China (for example, Estonia) was not received directly from them but instead has been retrieved from the website of the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China. (To paraphrase the famous statement by Henry Kissinger, one should assume that phones were to blame.)

In the context of the former Eastern bloc countries' relations with China, the document speaks of them tactfully as of the little brothers who, because of their scarce experience in international relations, are simply scared of the huge country like China:

Some of the former Eastern bloc countries have enjoyed long diplomatic relations with China compared to newer states. It can sometimes be a challenge for smaller, younger countries to engage in meaningful, visible bilateral cultural relations with a huge country like China. (Staines, 2012, p. 25)

Evidently, these words are addressed to such countries as Slovakia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. As to Sweden, Luxemburg, Cyprus, Italy, and Greece, they have been completely excluded from the map of the EU relations with China.

The document in question reveals a certain trend—with the rise of China, certain areas of the EU, ranging from economy to its analytical competence, are growing weaker. The document reflects yet another trend—it attempts to mitigate the EU's attitude towards the human rights issue in China. This is virtually the first time that an EU document makes a suggestion to consider what the other side is saying:

The issue of human rights has been difficult to deal with in the official relationship between EU and the Chinese government, and has also been controversial in public opinion and in the media. Contrary to beliefs widely held in Europe, this paper shows that people in China have a very positive view of their human rights. [...] This has

implications for policies adopted in Europe, since a policy based on an assessment of conditions in China that is at variance with how Chinese see their own condition is unlikely to gain acceptance by those it claims to benefit. (Staines, 2012, p. 25)

Thus, China's new role has led some observers to understand that, even if human rights are a moral issue for the EU, an unyielding framing of the issue might not be persuasive to the Chinese.

8. Conclusion

For many years, the relations between China and the unified Europe were determined by the political initiative of the latter. Based partly on universal and partly on Eurocentric values, Europe had the role of forming the political agenda in the bilateral relations, and China was trying (though not always successfully) to comply. Since 2008, the relations entered a new stage. To put it in terms of historical institutionalism, in 2008 the EU–China relations had reached a kind of “critical juncture”, which, due to many reasons, still did not lead to a comprehensive crisis.

From the EU perspective, there are two main features characteristic of the period: first, further development of negative trends in the economy, and second, the growing discussions between those who advocate the transition from supranational governance to a stronger integration and their opponents. These two factors have weakened the position of the European politicians in dialogue with China. On the other hand, China succeeded greatly in strengthening its position as a major world power, and, as a result, challenged the status quo in the political routine of the EU.

Unfortunately, Europe's choice of conceptual approaches towards China cannot be considered successful. Meeting the demands of contemporary China, the EU who is still thinking of China in terms of “the way of the Prince” and is willing to “engage” China loses its political advantage. The EU, albeit with difficulty and slowly, is in fact adjusting to this new reality. The article illustrates how the EU is starting to find appropriate arguments in the question of human rights in China.

Should the contemporary dynamics of the EU–China relationship that developed after 2008 remain, the EU shall be forced to redefine the political paradigm of its cooperation with China. To sum up our brief study we suggest the EU

(1) leverage the competence of officials working with China; (2) seek the possibilities to bridge the gap in the mutual perception between the EU Member States (former countries / newer states; more experienced / less experienced, big / small, rich / poor, privileged / *unimportant*, weak / strong; see Staines, 2012); and (3) reconsider the core approaches regarding China.

Una Aleksandra Bērziņa is PhD candidate in Political Science at the Rīga Stradiņš University, Latvia. Her interdisciplinary research comprises aspects of Chinese language and political science theories; it broadens the scope of western discourse analysis theories by adjusting them to Chinese empiric material. Bērziņa focuses on contemporary Chinese political discourse and the influence of traditional Chinese notions on the political language of the modern PRC.

Jelena Staburova is Professor of Political Science at the Rīga Stradiņš University, Latvia. She graduated from the University of St. Petersburg, Russia as a specialist in the history of China. Her first and second doctoral degrees were received from the Institute of Asian Studies in Moscow and the University of Latvia. Her published research works are mainly related to the history, philosophy, and politics of China. She is the founder and director of the Confucius Centre at the Rīga Stradiņš University.

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