

# AN ANALYSIS OF HOW THE EU UNDERSTANDS ITS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH CHINA

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*From the European perspective, the rise of China challenges the European Union (EU) on intellectual, technological, organizational, economic and political fronts but also offers ample opportunities for cooperation. The EU has attached increasing importance to building a strategic partnership with China. However, what Brussels means when it talks about forging a “strategic partnership” with China and on what conceptual ideas and principles it wants this “strategic partnership” to develop have not been made clear. This paper aims to offer insight into the EU’s ideas of strategic partnership with China. It will begin with a review of the EU approach to China. Next, it will make an assessment of the thinking behind EU-China communications to show the differences between their respective conceptualizations of strategic partnership. Then, it will demonstrate the difficulties caused by these differences and recommend how the two sides should manage them.*

Both the EU and China have changed dramatically during the past 20 years. With a population of 480 million, the Euro as a single currency and the world’s largest GDP, the EU has played an important role in international affairs.<sup>1</sup> China, with a population of over 1.3 billion has achieved unprecedented economic growth through its dramatic reforms.<sup>2</sup> This unprecedented economic growth has enabled China to become increasingly important in the world. Both the EU and China express interest in expanding and further deepening their relationship. As Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner stated in February 2005: “There is no greater challenge for Europe than

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1 Fraser Cameron, “The Development of EU-China Relations,” *European Studies: A Journal of European Culture, History and Politics* 27, no. 18 (2009): 47.

2 Ibid.

to understand the dramatic rise of China and to forge closer ties with it.”<sup>3</sup> Yet it seems unclear what Brussels means when it talks about a “strategic partnership” and whether it shares the same conceptual ideas and principles with China. The EU insists on proclaiming that it stands for a values-based foreign policy with a focus on “effective multilateralism.”<sup>4</sup> China affirms that its rise is peaceful and aimed at developing a “harmonious world.”<sup>5</sup> In recent years the EU has published several policy papers on China while there were just two Chinese policy papers on the EU published in 2003 and 2014, both of which were highly appreciative of the relationship with the EU.<sup>6</sup> An analysis of how the EU thinks of its strategic partnership with China is required for both academic and policy circles to have a better picture of EU-China relations. Thus, this paper begins by reviewing the EU approach to China before evaluating the thinking behind various communications in the EU and China. Then, it will demonstrate the main difficulties caused by the EU and China’s divergences in conceptualizing a “strategic partnership” and put forth some recommendations for managing the conceptual gap.

### The EU Approach to China

In 1995, the EU published a significant Communication of the Commission, “A Long-Term Policy for China-Europe Relations,” which outlined a long-run course for EU-China relations into the twenty-first century. In this very first policy paper on China, the European Commission indicated the vital role of China in the European Union’s external affairs:

The time has come to redefine the EU’s relationship with China, in the spirit of the “new Asia strategy” endorsed by the Essen European Council. Europe must develop a long-term relation with China that reflects China’s worldwide, as well as regional, economic and political influence. Europe’s relations with China are bound to be a cornerstone in Europe’s external relations, both with Asia and globally. Europe needs an action-oriented, not a merely declaratory

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Policy Paper on the EU: Deepen the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit and Win-win Cooperation,” 2014, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/wjzcs/t1143406.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wjzcs/t1143406.shtml) (accessed July 14, 2014)

policy, to strengthen that relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Three more policy papers on China were published in 1998, 2003 and 2006 that, in the same tone as the first one, laid the ground work for the development of a stronger EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.<sup>8</sup>

Since the beginning of diplomatic relations between the EU and China in 1975, the EU's policy on China has been implemented on two levels. On the level of the EU, the European Commission and today's European External Action Service (EEAS) have engaged China by promoting the modernization of its society and socialisation in the international environment, assisting China in development projects, and having dialogues with China on human rights as well as rule-of-law enforcement. The EU's framework for advancing cooperation with China was described in the EU's China strategy paper 2007-2013. The mid-term review of this strategy was released in 2010 and concluded that the response strategy for the future EC cooperation programme should take the contradiction in China's nature into consideration: "...that of a developing country in terms of certain traditional indicators on the one hand, and that of a significant player on the world stage in economic and political terms on the other."<sup>9</sup> At the national level, the EU Member States desired to have good political relations with China and thus tended to turn a blind eye to sensitive issues on China's sovereignty, human rights and democracy. With this approach the EU Member States, particularly Germany and France, have received lucrative contracts for their national companies.

Economic considerations have been the driving force of the EU's China policy. Since 2004, the EU has been China's biggest commercial partner and China has become the EU's second biggest commercial partner. A growing number of European companies have been investigating and relocating production in China, increasing the amount of EU foreign direct investment in this Asian country. Also, Chinese direct investment in Europe has been increasing overwhelmingly as observed by Thilo Hanemann and Daniel H. Rosen:

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7 European Commission, "A Long-Term Policy for China-Europe Relations," 1995, [http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/com95\\_279\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/com95_279_en.pdf) (accessed July 27, 2014)

8 EU-Asian Centre, EU's Key Documents on China, [http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/links.php?cat\\_id=24&level=0&tree=24&code=4](http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/links.php?cat_id=24&level=0&tree=24&code=4) (accessed July 29, 2014)

9 European External Action Service, "China Strategy Paper, 2007-2013," 2006, [http://eeas.europa.eu/china/csp/07\\_13\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/china/csp/07_13_en.pdf) (accessed July 27, 2014)

Europe is experiencing the start of a structural surge in outbound direct investment in advanced economies by Chinese firms. The take-off was only recent: annual inflows tripled from 2006 to 2009, and tripled again by 2011 to \$10 billion (€7.4 billion) for the year. The number of deals with a value of more than \$1 million doubled from less than 50 to almost 100 in 2010 and 2011.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the United States, which has serious commitments to its Asian allies and thus is likely to confront China in the region militarily and politically, the EU's lack of commitments in Asia enables it to avoid contentious matters with China. This helps the EU to develop economic relations with China rapidly and still engage this Asian country in a broad range of issues pertaining to human rights and democratization. For instance, in a 2006 Communication on China, the European Commission indicated clear political conditions for its proposal to remove the EU arms embargo on China. However, Brussels has never had open confrontations with Beijing the way Washington has on political and security issues. It is noticeable that the majority of EU policy makers have not seen China as a potential enemy or as a military threat to current global security.

But the European general public seems to perceive China differently than the government does. In fact, Europeans have held a negative view about developing commercial ties with China in the same way that Americans have.<sup>11</sup> These general public views in Europe reflect the emerging discourse which underscores the economic challenges posed by China in the EU. The European markets have been flooded with cheap products and more Europeans have become unemployed because of China's tendency to become a low-cost competitor in high-skill industries.<sup>12</sup>

In general, the EU has based its approach to China on the concept of change through economic integration. Hence, it seeks to promote a liberal internationalist agenda. The main idea of this approach is that in an increasingly interdependent world the rise of China is sophisticatedly

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10 Thilo Hanemann and Daniel H. Rosen, *China Invests in Europe: Patterns, Impacts and Policy Implications*, (New York: Rhodium Group, 2012), 1, [http://rhg.com/wpcontent/uploads/2012/06/RHG\\_ChinaInvestsInEurope\\_June2012.pdf](http://rhg.com/wpcontent/uploads/2012/06/RHG_ChinaInvestsInEurope_June2012.pdf) (accessed July 20, 2014)

11 German Marshall Fund of the US, "Transatlantic Trends" 2012, Washington, September 12, 2012, <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/survey-eu-more-likely-to-view-china-as-military-threat-than-previous-years/> (accessed August 25, 2014).

12 Jonathan Holslag, "The Strategic Dissonance between Europe and China," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 3 (2010), <http://cjjp.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/3/325.full> (accessed June 24, 2014).

interconnected with and supported by Chinese economic integration into the society of nations. Implicitly, it is unavoidable for China to get involved in non-economic fields of policy. This ultimately leads to the full openness of Chinese society which is likely to embrace all the values of democracy and human rights and adopt a peaceful and cooperative policy stance towards the world. Such a scenario is considered by the EU's leaders to be in the interest of the EU.

In recent years, a growing number of scholars and policy makers have begun to argue for the need to link economic benefits for China with political conditions in the EU-China relationship.<sup>13</sup> In a similar fashion, the European Parliament, some national Parliaments and several political forces of the EU Member States have increasingly criticized China's trade policies and practices, which in the European view have created unfair competition in EU and China commercial relations. More reciprocity in EU-China relations is what key EU policy makers like the EU Commissioner for Trade Karel De Gucht are very much concerned about and call for over time.

In 2003, Brussels and Beijing launched a strategic partnership. In 2010, this strategic partnership was brought to new heights with an inclusion of foreign affairs, security issues and global challenges such as climate change and global governance. The EU-China strategic partnership features a high degree of institutionalization. Since 1998, an EU-China summit has been organized every year. Also, an EU-China High-Level Trade and Economic Dialogue as well as an EU-China High-Level Strategic Dialogue have been organized annually since 2008 and 2010, respectively.

The growing degree of institutionalization reflects that the EU desires to develop bilateral relations with China in not only trade and commerce but also on strategic issues. The EU acknowledges that China is emerging as a force in a multipolar world and developing multilateral relations in such a world is beneficial to both the EU and China. Though both the EU and China are highly appreciative of the strategic partnership that they are seeking to build, it is likely that they are using the same term, but with different connotations.

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13 John Fox & François Godement, *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, (London: The European Council on Foreign Relations, 2009), [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR12\\_-\\_A\\_POWER\\_AUDIT\\_OF\\_EU-CHINA\\_RELATIONS.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR12_-_A_POWER_AUDIT_OF_EU-CHINA_RELATIONS.pdf) (accessed August 18, 2014).

## Differences in Conceptualizing a Strategic Partnership

At the Europe-China Forum organized by Friends of Europe and the Chinese Mission to the EU on November 26, 2013, participants had a discussion on all aspects of EU-China relations including elements of the 2020 Strategic Agenda adopted by the EU-China summit in Beijing on November 21, 2013. At this forum, one European participant said: “there is a trust gap in EU-China relations.”<sup>14</sup> This “trust gap” is firmly rooted in the differences between the EU’s and China’s understandings of strategic partnership.

### *Strategic Partnership from the European Perspective*

The 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) “A Secure Europe in a Better World” is a brief but comprehensive document that analysed and defined for the first time the EU’s security environment, identifying key security challenges and setting out the political implications for Europe.<sup>15</sup> This document explains why the EU needs to have strategic partnerships. It argues for the importance of advancing EU relations with the US and Russia as the heads of the EU unanimously stated that:

there are few if any problems we can deal with on our own. The threats described above are common threats, shared with all our closest partners. International cooperation is a necessity. We need to pursue our objectives both through multilateral cooperation in international organizations and through partnerships with key actors.<sup>16</sup>

The EU stressed that the transatlantic relationship is vital and that the EU needs to build an effective and balanced partnership with the United States. At the same time, the EU needs to work for closer relations with Russia, a main factor in European security and prosperity. Additionally, the EU “should look to develop strategic partnerships, with Japan, China, Canada and India as well as with all those who share [the EU’s] goals and

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14 Friends of Europe, “Ten Years On: Rebooting the EU-China Strategic Partnership,” 2013, <http://europesworld.org/think-tanks/ten-years-on-rebooting-the-eu-china-strategic-partnership/#.ULHOPmSx64> (accessed July 12, 2014).

15 European External Action Service, “The European Security Strategy,” 2003, <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/csdp/about-csdp/european-security-strategy/> (accessed July 20, 2014).

16 Ibid.

values, and are prepared to act in their support.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet, the European Council shifted from this concentration on common goals and values when in its 2010 document “Trade, Growth and World Affairs: Trade Policy as the Core Component of the EU’s 2020 Strategy” it underlined that such strategic partnerships should be “based on mutual interests and benefits and on the recognition that all actors have rights as well as duties.”<sup>18</sup> This shows that the heads of the EU have no clear statements of what strategic partnerships are.

For European practitioners, the concept of strategic partnership remains confusing. At a meeting of EU leaders and foreign ministers in Brussels on strategic partnership on September 16, 2010, one EU diplomat pointed out that: “it’s like love - no one can define it. You only know what it is when you experience it.”<sup>19</sup> Another EU diplomat added that the term had been thought up a few years ago “without anyone ever really defining what it meant and whether, indeed, the others regard us as their strategic partners.”<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, the term “strategic partner” is not well-defined in EU usage. This concept is mainly employed for political aims - either to underline the significance of a partner country or to highly praise the partnership with that country. Also, it is used as an alternative to full-fledged EU membership, as mentioned in the negotiations of Turkey’s entry into the EU. The EU Member States mostly see the concept of “strategic partnership” with China as relating only to selected issues and shy away from what are considered sensitive matters in their bilateral relationship. For European scholars, the concept of EU strategic partnership, which was introduced into the European discourse in the late twentieth century, remains hotly contested. The list for potential partner states has been extended, but the instruments of building partnerships have been devised inconsistently. Particularly, what role a strategic partnership has in EU economic and political affairs has remained ambiguous. This was reflected in a statement by the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy in September 2010: “We have strategic partners, now we need a strategy.”<sup>21</sup>

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17 Ibid.

18 European Commission, “Trade, Growth and World Affairs: Trade Policy as the Core Component of the EU’s 2020 Strategy,” 2010, [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2010/november/tradoc\\_146955.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2010/november/tradoc_146955.pdf) (accessed July 20, 2014).

19 Andrew Rettman, “Ashton Designates Six New ‘Strategic Partners,’” 2010, <http://euobserver.com/institutional/30828> (accessed June 24, 2014).

20 Ibid.

21 Herman Van Rompuy, “EU External Relations,” 2010, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/>

The European academic circle seems to be making more effort to search for the European meaning of “strategic partnership.” In their policy paper for the EU in 2010, Sven Biscop and Thomas Renard offered a clear explanation of why the EU needed a strategy:

In a world that is increasingly multipolar and interdependent – this is to say interpolar – the EU cannot continue to approach emerging global powers without a clear strategy. The EU has therefore created a new instrument to engage with other global actors: strategic partnerships.<sup>22</sup>

These two scholars point out the main rules of establishing a strategic partnership in a post-Cold War inter-polar world:

The first rule of strategy-making is to know thyself. Seemingly evident, it is actually not that clear which values and interests the EU seeks to safeguard, and which kind of international actor it wants to be. Therefore, the EU should start its strategic review by looking at itself and try to identify the purpose of its foreign policy. But there are many dangers in looking too much into the mirror, and furthermore the EU cannot pretend to become a strategic actor if it continues to ignore the other strategic players. This is not about knowing thy enemy (arguably the EU has no direct enemies, although strategic surprises should never be entirely ruled out), but about knowing “the other.” Finally, a last principle of strategy-making could be: know thy environment, or to put it in other words, know the rules of the game. If the EU hopes to become a global power, it needs to understand – or better to shape – the rules defining international relations.<sup>23</sup>

In his 2010 working paper for Friderici, a European think tank for global action, Giovanni Grevi argued that how strategic partnerships can be defined depends on how vital the partnerships are in helping to advance or achieve European interests and objectives:

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cms\_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/116494.pdf (accessed July 20, 2014).

22 Thomas Renard and Sven Biscop, “A need for strategy in a multipolar world: Recommendations to the EU after Lisbon,” *Egmont Security Policy Brief* no. 5 (2010), <http://aei.pitt.edu/14426/> (accessed June 25, 2014).

23 Ibid.



the EU should identify what its main interests and objectives are and consider strategic those partnerships that tangibly help it advance or achieve them. Strategic partnerships are those that both parties regard as essential to achieve their basic goals. This is because the cooperation of strategic partners can lead to win-win games and, conversely, because such partners are those who could inflict most harm to one another were relations to turn sour. Strategic partnerships are therefore important bilateral means to pursue core goals.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously, the EU itself is still searching for the meaning of “strategic partnerships.” The term normally means what the EU wants to achieve when establishing a strategic partnership. Its aims for strategic partnerships are to jointly promote effective multilateral cooperation while pursuing common challenges. Put simply, the EU desires to be an active actor in seeking common ground on issues of mutual interests and concerns, assisting each other’s political agendas and acting at both the regional and global levels. It is noticeable that what these issues of mutual interests and common concerns comprise is different from partner country to partner country. The nature of the EU’s strategic partnerships with emerging countries in general, and with China in particular, is that they allow the EU to pursue its goals and spread its norms at the international level.

### *Strategic Partnership from the Chinese Perspective*

Chinese leaders and scholars appear to have a clearer understanding of strategic partnerships compared to their European counterparts, especially with regards to the China–EU “strategic partnership,” for which they have displayed a positive stance and attitude. Speaking in 2004 at the Investment and Trade Forum jointly sponsored by China’s Ministry of Commerce and the Directorate General for Trade of the European Commission in Brussels, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao explained what China means when referring to a comprehensive strategic partnership with the EU:

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24 Giovanni Grevi, “Making EU Strategic Partnerships Effective,” *Fride Working Paper* 105, 2010, [http://www.fride.org/download/WP105\\_Making\\_EU\\_Strategic\\_ENG\\_dic10.pdf](http://www.fride.org/download/WP105_Making_EU_Strategic_ENG_dic10.pdf) (accessed June 24, 2014)

It is a shared view of the two sides to work for a comprehensive strategic partnership. By “comprehensive,” it means that the cooperation should be all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered. It covers economic, scientific, technological, political and cultural fields, contains both bilateral and multilateral levels, and is conducted by both governments and non-governmental groups. By “strategic,” it means that the cooperation should be long-term and stable, bearing on the larger picture of China-EU relations. It transcends the differences in ideology and social system and is not subjected to the impacts of individual events that occur from time to time. By “partnership,” it means that the cooperation should be equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win. The two sides should base themselves on mutual respect and mutual trust, endeavour to expand converging interests and seek common ground on the major issues while shelving differences on the minor ones.<sup>25</sup>

In the twelfth China-EU summit in 2009, Premier Wen Jiabao elaborated on the concept of comprehensive strategic partnership and stressed that the current situation demanded that China-EU ties should be more strategic, comprehensive and stable. The EU and China needed to expand consensus on major issues concerning the development of the world community and deepen cooperation in political, economic and cultural areas:

The two sides should also make sure they are on the right path for sustainable development...I hope to have a candid and in-depth talk with the EU leaders. We need to make concerted efforts to ensure the meeting is a success, which could manifest resolutions of both sides on jointly coping with challenges and achieving common development...It is of great significance for both China and the EU, and will influence the world in a constructive way.<sup>26</sup>

Chinese analysts are positive about the necessity for developing the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership even though the two sides have had disputes on such issues as the arms embargo, China’s market economy status and trade. Therefore, the comprehensive strategic partnership

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25 Wen Jiabao, “Vigorously Promoting Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between China and the European Union,” 2004, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/zt/t101949.htm> (accessed June 24, 2014).

26 Xinhua, “Wen Calls for more strategic, Comprehensive, Stable China-EU Ties,” 2009, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2009-11/30/content\\_18978182.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2009-11/30/content_18978182.htm) (accessed June 24, 2014).

presents a significant institution contributing to stability in China-EU ties. With this institution, China and the EU are able to have open dialogues on a broad range of issues including politics, economics, jurisdiction, society, culture, environment, technology and information.

Clearly, both Chinese and European leaders understand that their partnership is important to the prosperity of their economies and the advancement of their citizens. Their partnership also contributes to stabilizing the regional and global orders as both China and the EU are important players on the world's economic and political stage. In addition to the significance of the EU in China's foreign relations, the reality that Chinese analysts highly appreciate the partnership between their country and the EU indicates that the Chinese foreign policy circle embraces the concept of a strategic partnership. China has been seeking to build partnerships with different countries since the late 1990s.<sup>27</sup> For Chinese policy-making and academic circles, a partnership means that neither party should view the other one as an enemy; the parties need to treat each other with respect and equality; the parties should not intervene in each other's internal affairs; the parties need to coordinate with each other to advance their common political and economic interests and they need to support each other in international affairs. Although the concept of "strategic partnership" has not been well defined in general, it in fact represents an important institutional framework through which China can advance cooperation with its most important partners, especially with the EU. From the Chinese perspective, one of the fundamental functions of the strategic partnership is to increase consensus and reinforce mutual trust. This serves as a firm base from which China and the countries it sees as strategic partners can cooperate and coordinate in the international system and thrive in harmony.

## Conceptual Differences

Though the EU has released many policy papers on China and regarded China as its strategic partner, it continues to make complaints that there is more competition than cooperation in the China-EU strategic partnership. China has reflected its dissatisfaction with the EU by expressing that the EU approach to China tends to be commercial rather than strategic.

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27 Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, "China's strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world," European Strategic Partnerships Observatory Working Paper 8, June 2014, [http://fride.org/download/WP8\\_China\\_strategic\\_partnership\\_diplomacy.pdf](http://fride.org/download/WP8_China_strategic_partnership_diplomacy.pdf) (accessed November 16, 2014).

Their unhappiness with their strategic partnership is deeply rooted in the differences between their respective understandings of a strategic partnership.

China perceives strategic partnership as a long-term, well-rounded and stable relationship while the EU holds that such a partnership should be predicated on market penetration and a common approach to global governance. This comes from the fact that the EU is in its post-modern period while China is still emphasising the modernization of its society. Thus, the EU and China have been struggling to execute the proclaimed strategic partnership.

Though China and the EU use the same term of “strategic partnership” when speaking about their relationship, the connotations and conceptualizations of the term may be conceived differently. Jonathan Holslag stated that: “Europe’s posturing as a liberal normative power has resulted in a strategic disconnect with China.”<sup>28</sup> Eberhard Sandschneider, a European scholar, observed that “most so-called ‘strategic partnerships’ are not ‘strategic’ in a strict sense of the word. In a more narrow definition, strategic partnerships should be based on a mutual perspective on basic values, interests and actions to be taken in specific situations.”<sup>29</sup> Regarding the partnership between China and the EU, he underlined that “China is too big and the EU is too multifaceted to simply declare a ‘strategic partnership’ and paint the world in black and white.”<sup>30</sup>

Stanley Crossick echoed Jonathan Holslag’s view when adding that the current relationship between China and the EU is neither a partnership nor strategic.<sup>31</sup> Gustaaf Greeraerts emphasized that China and Europe have to agree on which interests they will build the pillars of their strategic partnership. One of the main setbacks in the EU-China relationship has been its obsession with dialogues without a common view on how the world order actually binds them together.<sup>32</sup>

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28 Jonathan Holslag, “The Strategic Dissonance between Europe and China,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 3 (2010), <http://cjip.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/3/325.full> (accessed June 24, 2014).

29 Eberhard Sandschneider, “The Strategic Significance of China-EU Partnership,” 2009, <http://www.cpifa.org/en/q/listQuarterlyArticle.do?articleId=40> (accessed July 10, 2014)

30 Ibid.

31 Stanley Crossick, “China-EU Strategic Partnership: State of Play,” 2009, <http://crossick.blogactiv.eu/2009/10/13/china-eu-strategic-partnesr-ship-state-of-play/> (accessed July 22, 2014)

32 Gustaaf Greeraerts, “China, the EU and the New Multipolarity,” *European Review* 19, no.1 (2011), <http://www.vub.ac.be/biccs/site/assets/files/apapers/China,%20the%20EU%20and%20Multipolarity-2.pdf> (accessed July 24, 2014)

The Chinese academic circle appears to be cautious about the substance and realization of a EU-China strategic partnership, and they especially question whether the EU is able to fulfill the promise of a strategic partnership.

### **Impacts of Conceptual Differences**

The conceptual differences regarding strategic partnership give clues as to why there is still friction between the EU and China. Since the late 1990s, the EU has been seeking to socialize China with its own post-modern values such as respecting the rule of law, promoting human rights, and creating a liberal economic order. The EU has expected to advance those values in China through conditional and constructive engagement. Yet the reality shows that the EU and China have not agreed on these values. China's stance in multilateral organizations indicates that its eco-political goals and norms are still different from those of Europe. This divergence can be seen in their views and attitudes towards Africa, Iran, and climate change. The EU believes that they can further cooperate with China on the issue of climate change, yet this has turned out to be a source of tension. In particular, the EU has not succeeded in pushing China to fully open its markets. Though China entered the World Trade Organization in 2001, it was reluctant to further open new sectors. The EU has been worried about the possibility that the Chinese state may use its invisible hand to exert influence on China's economic transition. This implies that the EU has not gained what it expected to achieve from its relations with China.

With its values of democracy, freedom, human rights, and good governance, the EU may think of itself as a good strategic partner in the international system. Yet it does not seem easy for the EU to attract China with these values. Thus, developing a strategic partnership between the EU and China is still a very daunting task. Modern states and post-modern states naturally have difficulty in adapting to each other. This is even more difficult for China (a modern state) and the EU (a post-modern state) as they have to do it in a changing world order.

### **Managing the Differences**

The conceptual gap between the EU and China in understanding strategic partnerships, especially the EU-China strategic partnership, is hard to close because of two main reasons. First, both the EU and China have ill-

defined concepts of a strategic partnership. Second, the concept of the EU-China strategic partnership has been affected by dynamic developments in their relationship at bilateral, regional, and global levels. As the would-be superpowers, China and the EU are both employing the instrument of strategic partnership as a means to realize their ambition of becoming influential actors on the world stage. The lack of clearness in conceptualizing a strategic partnership and of historical knowledge of the other caused by physical distance and commercial dominance has resulted in friction and conflict in EU-China relations. Put simply, the gap in a shared understanding of the term “strategic partnership” has led to increasing frustrations in the EU-China relationship. This gap needs to be bridged.

Both China and the EU have a responsibility to manage this gap. Four steps should be taken into consideration by the two sides. First, they need to have a better knowledge of each side’s norms and values. This means that an extensive examination of the differing backgrounds of linguistics, histories, societies, politics, economics and cultures in China and the EU needs to be carried out. This will be a starting point for the EU and China to learn about the hidden factors shaping the Chinese and European perspectives and thus their respective perceptions of strategic partnerships. Both China and the EU need to find out the other’s preferences as the EU and China are currently at different stages of development.

Second, the EU and China need to push forth the development of a common strategic concept. This has invited more debate from scholars and policy-makers. Such a debate will help to set up policy priorities and strategies that will assist in the successful implementation of strategic policies. Thus, more strategic debate is necessary within the EU as well as in China.

Third, a clear expression of priorities, interests, and aims would help to enhance mutual trust between China and the EU. For instance, if the EU can have a better understanding of the priorities that its strategic partner China has set forth, it will be able to shape its policy towards China. To achieve this, the EU should also demonstrate to China what it is prioritizing on its agenda. The exchange of priorities, interests and aims can be supported by the exchange of people. More programs allowing the exchange of scholars and policy-makers who would be allowed to live in each other’s countries for a certain period of time would help enhance mutual understanding of each other’s perspectives and policy lines.

Last but not least, both China and the EU should make concerted efforts in building their partnership. Though this is not a natural partnership,

it is necessary for both China and the EU to sustain a partnership with each other. The rhetoric of a declining EU and rising China can negatively influence the minds of decision-makers in China and the EU. However, it is the global challenges for and the interdependence of these would-be great powers that put them in a situation in which it is necessary to understand and compromise with each other.

## **Conclusion**

The conceptual differences of a strategic partnership may have heavy costs. Clarity of thought would contribute to building a real strategic partnership between the EU and China. This paper explains that China and the EU both expect to be each other's strategic partners. However, their understanding of strategic partnership is not the same and so they expect to achieve different goals in the partnership. The conceptual differences on strategic partnership help to explain why frustrations remain between the EU and China. The EU's endeavors to enforce the rule of law, promote human rights, and create a liberal economic order on a global scale seem to clash with China's concentration on economic development and modernization. This means that it will continue to be an uphill journey for the EU to realize its strategic partnership with China. This journey can be successful if both the EU and China see that this partnership is in their interests and if they advance research on each other's historical, linguistic, cultural, eco-political, and social backgrounds, support people-to-people exchange programs, invite more debate on common strategic concepts, and clearly express their priorities and goals. Another important factor that will decide whether the EU and China can be real strategic partners is whether or not they are willing to make concerted efforts to coordinate with each other. Building a strategic partnership is not easy, and it is particularly difficult in the case of the EU and China. **Y**