

## China's Views of Europe: A Maturing Partnership

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*China–EU affairs have acquired a new quality and depth. The growing institutionalization of cooperation between the two bears witness to this dynamism. These developments have been subject to growing attention from academic and research institutions. However, only a few studies have been carried out with the specific aim of providing an outline of how the EU is perceived in China. This article seeks to start filling this gap by offering an outline of how the EU is perceived by China's press, political elites and civil society. The article argues that the dynamism with which China and the EU approach each other is a clear signal that both sides see each other as potential allies in a variety of contexts. The absence of hard security conflicts is an important facilitating factor of this process of convergence. However, the USA continues to play an important role in this context both as a stimulating and constraining factor. Therefore, it is appropriate to think of China and the EU as two actors experiencing a more mature relationship in a changed systemic environment.*

### I Introduction

Most analyses of contemporary EU–China affairs suggest a new quality and depth for an association that has traditionally been described as a ‘secondary

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relationship'.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the dramatic growth in ties between China and Europe has been referred to as 'one of the most important . . . developments in world affairs in recent years' and as 'the new "axis" in world affairs'.<sup>2</sup> Other analyses, instead, partly downplay these claims and stress that while from a quantitative perspective relations between the two powers have certainly intensified, this intensification has not resulted in a corresponding upgrading of the relationship's 'quality'.<sup>3</sup>

Different interpretations notwithstanding, it is difficult to deny that both the EU's economic weight and China's political and economic rise represent some of the key elements in the shaping of a new global order.<sup>4</sup> It is also difficult to deny that since the mid 1990s one way in which both China and the EU have responded to the pressures to redefine their respective roles under conditions of accelerated globalization has been to deepen mutual relations to the point that they have taken the shape of what is today officially defined by both sides as a 'strategic partnership'.

Two important elements distinguish the current status of EU–China relations from that of the pre-1990 period. First, the relationship has been freed from the shadow of the cold war, opening up new possibilities for new autonomous dynamics between the two sides. In other words, this relationship can no longer be conceptualized as 'purely derivative of each side's relationship with Washington and Moscow'.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, both the EU and China have become economic superpowers and have acquired a more assertive political role on the world scene, making themselves something more than regional powers with limited global impact. This is not to argue that mutual relations have been completely freed from the influence of 'the third actor': as it has been argued, 'any assessment of EU–China relations must take into account its effect on other relationships, the most significant for both parties being that with the US'.<sup>6</sup> A variety of factors, however, seem to suggest that China–Europe relations will continue to grow and develop at a steady pace in a manner that

<sup>1</sup> M. Yahuda, 'China and Europe: The Significance of a Secondary Relationship' in T. Robinson and D. Shambaugh (eds), *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> D. Shambaugh, 'China and Europe: The Emerging Axis' (September 2004) *Current History*, pp. 243–248.

<sup>3</sup> K. Moller, 'Diplomatic Relations and Mutual Strategic Perceptions: China and the European Union' (2002) *The China Quarterly*, pp. 10–32.

<sup>4</sup> D. Shambaugh, 'The New Strategic Triangle: US and European Reactions to China's Rise' (2005) 28/3 *The Washington Quarterly*, pp. 7–25.

<sup>5</sup> D. Shambaugh, 'China and Europe: The Emerging Axis' (2004), p. 245. Men Jing, 'Chinese perceptions of the European Union: A Review of Leading Chinese Journals' (2006) 12/6 *European Law Journal*, pp. 788–806.

<sup>6</sup> S. Crossick, F. Cameron and A. Berkofsky, 'EU–China Relations: Towards a Strategic Partnership', *Working Paper*, European Policy Centre, July 2005, p. 16.

cannot be understood on the basis of cold war categories. Undoubtedly, the lack of any systemic or strategic conflict of interests between the two sides represents a crucial factor facilitating the development of a partnership

The growing institutionalization of cooperation between the two clearly bears witness to this new dynamism. The EU, in fact, has been keen to foster a rapid development of Sino-European relations since the mid 1990s and to keep a strong momentum in the relationship by setting up a strategic framework for cooperation at multiple levels. The European Commission first set out its strategy for EU–China relations in the 1995 Communication *A Long Term Policy for China–Europe Relations*<sup>7</sup> and ever since, relations have been pursued under three main headings: political dialogue (including a specific dialogue on human rights); economic and trade relations; and the so-called EU–China cooperation programme. Formally, current EU policy towards China is based on the October 2006 Commission strategy, *EU–China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities*.<sup>8</sup> The previous strategy was based on the paper issued in October 2003 by the Commission entitled *A Maturing Partnership: Shared Interests and Challenges in EU–China Relations*,<sup>9</sup> which updated the 1998 Communication, *Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China*<sup>10</sup> and the 2001 Communication, *EU Strategy towards China: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a More Effective EU Policy*.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, China responded in October 2003 by issuing its first document setting out the official strategy for developing its relations with the EU.<sup>12</sup>

These developments have been subject to growing attention from academic and research institutions. Literature on EU–China relations is on the increase and, while expertise on China is certainly more developed within the USA, the Europeans are gradually catching up and devoting resources and know-

<sup>7</sup> Communication from the Commission, 'A Long-term Policy for China–Europe Relations', COM(1995) 279 final – not published in the Official Journal.

<sup>8</sup> Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, 'EU–China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities', COM(2006) 632 final – not published in the Official Journal.

<sup>9</sup> Commission guidance document of 10 September entitled 'A Maturing Partnership: Shared Interests and Challenges in EU–China Relations' (update of Commission communications from 1998 and 2001 on EU–China relations), COM(2003) 533 final – not published in the Official Journal.

<sup>10</sup> Communication from the Commission of 25 March 1998, 'Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China', COM (1998) 181 final – not published in the Official Journal.

<sup>11</sup> Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament of 15 May 2001, 'EU Strategy towards China: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a More Effective EU Policy', COM(2001) 265 final – not published in the Official Journal.

<sup>12</sup> The document is entitled 'China's EU Policy Paper'. Interestingly, this strategy paper on the European Union is the first strategy paper ever issued by the Chinese Government with regard to its relations with third parties.

how to the analysis of this phenomenon. EU–China affairs, however, have been mainly approached from an historical or normative perspective. So far, only a few studies have been carried out with the specific aim of providing an outline of how the EU is perceived in China. Much attention is paid to the European side of the relationship but there are very few attempts to understand and systematically investigate the other side of the ‘perceptual dyad’.<sup>13</sup> The primary objective of this article is to start filling this gap by offering an outline of how the EU is perceived in this specific country through a survey of the data available at the level of public opinion, political elites, civil society and the media. The analysis of public opinion was based on World Values Survey data,<sup>14</sup> the international polling organization GlobeScan together with the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA),<sup>15</sup> a report conducted by the Empirical Social Research Project Division of TNS Emnid,<sup>16</sup> and opinion polls conducted on Chinese university students.<sup>17</sup>

The analysis of the Chinese political elites’ perception of the EU was based on a careful analysis of speeches, official documents and policy papers from government representatives and agencies. A wide array of official documents was collected from the main official governmental sources.<sup>18</sup> As far as civil society is concerned, obviously, the very nature of the Chinese political system does not allow for an investigation of complex and different articulations of perceptions at the level of civil society organizations. We gave a closer look

<sup>13</sup> We have to give a special thanks to Professor Shambaugh for his kind and helpful suggestion. D. Shambaugh, ‘China Eyes Europe’s Role in the World: Real Convergence or Cognitive Dissonance?’ in D. Shambaugh, E. Sandschneider and Zhou Hong (eds), *China–Europe Relations: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects* (Routledge, London, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> The World Values Survey is organized as a network of social scientists coordinated by a central body, the World Values Survey Association; see <[www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)>.

<sup>15</sup> The 23-nation fieldwork was coordinated by Globescan and completed during December 2004 in most countries. The poll included some questions that were fielded for the BBC World Service

<sup>16</sup> The report entitled ‘World Powers in the 21st Century: Europe’s Global Responsibility’ is based on a nine-country survey commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung presented in January 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Research has been conducted by Zhu Liqun (Director of the Institute of International Relations at China Foreign Affairs University). The data have been collected and presented in his chapter ‘Chinese Perceptions of the EU and the China–Europe Relationship’ in Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

<sup>18</sup> In particular, these are the main sources accessed: the ministry of foreign affairs, <[www.fmprc.gov.cn](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn)> and the ministry of foreign trade and economic cooperation, <[www.moftec.gov.cn](http://www.moftec.gov.cn)>. Chinese embassies and diplomatic missions abroad also proved very useful as a source of information on speeches and official documents. In particular: the mission of the PRC to the European Communities, <[www.chinamission.be](http://www.chinamission.be)>; the permanent mission to the UN and other international organizations, <[www.chinesemission-vienna.at](http://www.chinesemission-vienna.at)>; the Chinese embassy in the UK, <[www.chinese-embassy.org.uk](http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk)>; and the Chinese embassy in the USA, <[www.china-embassy.org](http://www.china-embassy.org)>.

at the internal discourse on Europe as developed by the Chinese community involved in research institutes, universities and, more broadly, 'academic circles' working actively to monitor EU progress and setbacks.<sup>19</sup> The data concerning media representations of the EU in this article have been made available by a pioneering ongoing transnational research project, The EU through the Eyes of Asia, part of the ASEF-sponsored initiative, European Studies in Asia.<sup>20</sup>

In line with the overall approach that characterizes the special issue, we believe that such an effort will help highlight important elements for a better understanding of the EU's international role.

## II The EU as a Political Power: A Common View?

The first and somehow surprising finding concerns the very existence of a Chinese perception of the EU as a political entity on the world stage. At governmental level, for instance, the long-standing attitude of Chinese diplomacy based on the preference to deal 'with Europe (bilateral relations) rather than with the EU'<sup>21</sup> seems to have been replaced by a growing recognition of the EU as a political entity and as a partner with which to structure mutual relations.<sup>22</sup>

This is also true at the level of scholarly interpretations. As recent reviews by Chinese scholars on the EU point out, there is a considerable amount of research that suggests that the EU has already become an independent power in the international system and as such plays an important role in the interplay between great powers, serves as an indispensable actor in the balance of power in world politics, and more generally exerts great political influence.<sup>23</sup>

Before turning to a detailed account of Chinese political elite and academic community perceptions of the political EU, it is worth briefly taking into consideration findings concerning Chinese public opinion and media. At first,

<sup>19</sup> Research has shown that the breadth and depth of Chinese research and understanding of Europe is perhaps even greater than vice versa. To give an example, a 2004 publication entitled 'European Think Tanks and Their Research on China', published by one of the most important Chinese think tanks (China Institute of Contemporary International Relations – CICIR), systematically catalogues all of the main research institutes, universities, foundations and individual specialists who work on Chinese affairs and Europe–China relations (the publication is quoted in Shambaugh et al., note 13 above).

<sup>20</sup> See <[www.europe.canterbury.ac.nz/appp/project\\_description/](http://www.europe.canterbury.ac.nz/appp/project_description/)>.

<sup>21</sup> K. Moller, 'Diplomatic Relations and Mutual Strategic Perceptions: China and the European Union' (2002) *The China Quarterly*, pp. 10–32.

<sup>22</sup> H.D. De la Batie, 'L'Union européenne vue de Chine: un partenaire majeur?', *Policy Paper*, No. 5, Centre ASIE IFRI.

<sup>23</sup> Zhu Liquan, 'Chinese Perceptions of the EU and the Sino-European Relationship' in Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

it seems that such a positive perception is not widespread among the Chinese general public. In fact, from a recent public opinion survey, it clearly emerges that few Chinese (only 17 per cent of those interviewed) consider the EU as holding the status of a world power.<sup>24</sup> In addition, other surveys show that the Chinese general public tend to have little confidence in the EU. The last World Values Survey conducted in China (2001) stresses that the majority of respondents (60.6 per cent) declared to have little or no confidence in the EU. Surprisingly, and differently from other countries,<sup>25</sup> it is possible to identify a negative correlation between levels of confidence in the EU and the level of education of the population. The data show that the higher the education of respondents, the lower the level of confidence in the European Union. Actually, no respondent with an upper educational level declared to have 'a great deal of confidence' in the EU. These data seem to contradict previous statements. A more detailed analysis, however, casts a more complex and to a certain extent less gloomy perspective. Opinion polls conducted on narrower groups such as university students show a different picture. In particular, a recent survey where only university students were taken as target group indicates not only that an overwhelming majority of respondents declared to know the EU (88 per cent) but also that 52.18 per cent of them answered 'yes' when asked whether the EU represents a pole of power in today's world.<sup>26</sup> More recent opinion polls add interesting elements of evaluation. At the level of general public, the envisaged role of the EU for the future remains basically unchanged. A 2006 survey shows that only 22 per cent of respondents believed the EU would acquire world power status by 2020.

However, things seem to have changed substantially over time in relation to the overall judgment over the EU. For instance, an 2004 opinion poll on how people in different countries perceived Europe's influence in the world showed that an overwhelming majority of Chinese people viewed Europe's influence in the world as mainly positive (77 per cent against 7 per cent responding 'mainly negative'). In addition, in a 2006 poll, an astonishing 96 per cent of respondents answered 'yes' when asked whether China should strengthen cooperation with the EU. Clearly, these data contradict previous World Values Survey's reports concerning levels of confidence in the EU. Although difficult to interpret, they seem to suggest that there has been a significant improvement in the Chinese image of Europe in the last few years. Such a positive dimension becomes even stronger when one looks at these findings comparatively. In all waves analysed, the EU ranks above the USA and US-led

<sup>24</sup> See note 16 above.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, the article on Brazil.

<sup>26</sup> This mismatch between different sources, however, can be explained by taking into consideration that the target group of the second opinion poll was composed of university students attending courses or departments on European studies.

organizations. As far as World Values Survey data are concerned, for instance, in both years considered (1990 and 2001), the confidence of Chinese people in NATO was below that in the EU. In 2004, only 40 per cent of respondents viewed the USA as having mainly a positive influence in world affairs while 42 per cent saw it as mainly negative. Moreover, asked to express themselves on how they judged the possibility of Europe becoming more influential than the USA in world affairs, 66 per cent of Chinese respondents viewed it as a mainly positive development and only 16 per cent as a mainly negative one. Highly educated Chinese share these opinion. When asked 'which is the better model to follow when dealing with international affairs, European or American?', almost half of university students polled (43 per cent) chose the European model and only 26 per cent the American.<sup>27</sup>

Recent research on Chinese media also offers interesting insights. First, it ought to be stressed that the EU is an issue in Chinese media. In the first half of 2006, for instance, China's popular newspaper *China's Daily* came up with 61 news stories per month on average referencing the EU. Two other newspapers also presented rather high numbers in the volume of EU coverage (54 news stories per month on average in the case on an English-language newspaper and 47 in a business newspaper). Television prime-time bulletins featured more modest numbers (12 news stories reporting the EU per month on average) but still relevant ones.

Table 1. Media coverage of the EU in China (January–June 2006)

Media	January	February	March	April	May	June	Total
<i>People's Daily</i>	77	68	48	47	67	59	366
<i>International Finance News</i>	50	51	81	44	36	24	286
<i>China Daily</i>	48	48	56	45	68	59	324
CCTV-1	17	14	12	8	11	10	72

In addition, such an analysis shows that patterns of representations in Chinese newspapers were framed in the Chinese 'domestic discourse' in the majority of cases. In other words, news stories featuring the EU and China together were prevailing with respect to news stories featuring the EU alone without any involvement of China or news stories featuring within the context of a third party (neither the EU nor China). As our research points out, such

<sup>27</sup> Zhu, note 23 above.

a peculiar grounding of EU representation in the newspapers' discourses provided their audiences with a particular framing of the EU that indicate that the EU and its actions have immediate consequences for local developments, thus turning EU happenings into 'zones of relevancy' in the public's mind. This is particularly relevant in light of our findings concerning the indexes for the evaluations of the EU news, namely positive, neutral and negative. Results showed that the two selected media used predominantly neutral evaluations of the EU (83.2 per cent in newspapers and 95.8 per cent on television) and, even more surprisingly, that there were no negative assessments found in the EU news on television.

In addition, the media analysis tells us something more. In comparison with other cases where the EU is primarily viewed as an actor in the field of economics, the image that the leading Chinese media cast of the EU includes a strong component of political characterization. The theme of the EU as a political power led to television reporting of the EU (58 per cent of all news stories), while other images such as the EU as an economic actor and a social affairs actor were much less visible (21 per cent each). Though this might have to do with the time frame of the analysis (the first half of 2006 being a period of 'domestic' high-political debate in the EU), these findings seem to be relevant, particularly when compared to the prevalent economic image present in other countries.

Dealing with perceptions of the EU among the other two target groups analysed here – the Chinese political elite and the academic community specializing in EU issues – provides further insight into Chinese views of the EU.

In order to understand how the Chinese political elite perceives the EU, we have to take into consideration the wider framework within which Chinese foreign policy is conceived. While it is obvious to state that a country's view of other international actors is a function of its general beliefs and preferences with regards to the global system, this is particularly true in the Chinese case. In fact, one of the key features of Chinese foreign policy is that it traditionally looks towards the long term. As David Shambaugh very clearly points out, the starting point for every assessment of how Chinese officials interpret and conceive Europe's role and political status in international politics is to understand that such analyses share a strong cognitively dissonant character.<sup>28</sup> That is, Chinese officials and to a certain extent Chinese scholars both hold uniform views of the macro trends in the world and certain preferences for the evolution of the international order that serve as a set of broader beliefs

<sup>28</sup> Shambaugh borrows this concept from the classic work by Leo Festinger, *The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957), where cognitive dissonance is defined as the natural proclivity to selectively look for confirmation of one's pre-existing beliefs and to reject evidence that contradicts these beliefs.



through which Europe's role and actions come to be interpreted. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that claims about shared world views do not necessarily imply similar underlying long-term preferences or motives. It is certainly true that 'Chinese observations about Europe's role in the world derive from broader Chinese hopes for developing an international order based on non-hegemony, dispersion of power and regional multipolarity, political equanimity, cultural diversity, and economic interdependence'.<sup>29</sup> It is questionable, however, whether these objectives respond to the same needs for both sides.

Cognitive dissonance, in this case, works in favour of the EU. The recognition of the EU's role as a political actor goes hand in hand with a positive perception of its role which is associated with a wide range of issues where the EU is seen as playing a constructive role, one that is in line with China's long-term interests. In the official rhetoric it is common to find statements such as those of the former Chinese premier, Zhu Rongji, declaring that 'there is no conflict of fundamental interests between Asia and Europe . . . in fact they hold identical or similar views on many international issues'<sup>30</sup> or that of Mei Zhaorong, president of the Chinese institute of foreign affairs, who argued 'both sides stand for the establishment of a just and rational new international political and economic order, advocate multilateralism and democratization of international relations, oppose unilateralism and militarism, are committed to resolving international disputes through diplomatic and political means, and hope to strengthen the authority of the UN'.<sup>31</sup> In scholarly discourse it is possible to identify two approaches to explain this 'congenital condition' that characterizes Sino-EU relations. The first, termed the realist approach, looks at strategic complementarities between the two sides, arguing that the convergence of interests represents the main driving force of this relationship. The second, defined as the constructive approach, criticizes the realist approach for its lack of historical profundity and concentrates on respective internal changes following the end of the cold war as the cause of the increasing interest of both sides.<sup>32</sup>

More specifically, the evaluation on the EU's role in world affairs is articulated on different levels. The most common reference, consistent across time, in Chinese political discourse concerns the EU's contribution towards multipolarity. Just to present a few examples: in 2000, Jiang Zemin defined the EU's growth as 'conducive to pushing forward multipolarity and the

<sup>29</sup> Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, speech by Premier Zhu Rongji of the State Council of the People's Republic of China at the closing ceremony of the Third ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Xinhuanet, Beijing, 25 May 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

<sup>32</sup> Zhu, note 23 above.

establishment of a new international political and economic order'<sup>33</sup> while in 2001 the former Chinese foreign minister, Tang Jiaxuan, affirmed that 'politically, Asia and Europe are major forces in the trend of mutipolarization' and defined Asia–Europe cooperation 'of far-reaching importance . . . for the trend of political multipolarization'.<sup>34</sup>

Another key feature of the EU's representation within the Chinese political community is that of the EU as a potential ally in the struggle to shape a more balanced and democratic system of global governance. Once again, this perception is consistent across time and at different governmental levels. For instance, on different occasions Premier Wen Jiabao expressed this idea very clearly, defining 'China and the EU as important forces for world peace and stability committed to multilateralism and to the promotion of democracy and the rule of law in international relations'<sup>35</sup> and stating that 'Asia and Europe foster a favourable international security environment . . . maintaining that regional and global issues should be addressed through multilateral cooperation and international relations be democratized'.<sup>36</sup> On another occasion, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing pointed out that 'both China and the EU advocate multilateralism, stress the enhancement of the role of the United Nations and peaceful settlement of international disputes'.<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, these elements are consistent with some of the findings of the Chinese media analysis. Such research, in fact, indicates that both Chinese newspapers and television concentrated overwhelmingly on the EU as an actor in international politics (respectively 86 per cent and 90.5 per cent), focusing in particular on EU negotiations around an anti-nuclear deal with Iran and on updates on EU–China dialogue. This particular framing shapes an image of the EU actively performing as an international agent preferring diplomatic means. Analogously, more than one-third of highly educated Chinese (34.73 per cent) believed the EU was a 'comprehensive' power.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, the EU is also perceived as a development-friendly actor. In 2003, China's EU Policy Paper states that 'both China and the EU . . . are committed to combating international terrorism and promoting sustainable

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'President Jiang Zemin meets Chirac and Prodi', *Xinhuanet*, 15 November 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Tang Jiaxuan, 'The Prosperous and Promising Cooperation between Asia and Europe', *People's Daily*, 24 May 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Wen Jiabao, 'Deepening China–EU Relations and Strengthening All-round Cooperation', speech at the China–EU Business Summit, The Hague, 9 December 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Strengthening Partnership through Increased Dialogue and Cooperation', speech by Wen Jiabao at the Fifth ASEM Meeting, *Xinhuanet*, 9 October 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'China Marks 30th Anniversary of Sino-EU Diplomatic Ties', *Xinhuanet*, 13 May 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Liqun, note 23 above.

development through poverty elimination and environmental protection endeavours'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Jiang Zemin described Europe as a force that 'pay[s] close attention to the interests and demands of the vast number of developing countries'<sup>40</sup> and former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Guangya referred to China and the EU as 'major forces in international affairs that contribute . . . to the sound and balanced development of globalization and narrowing of the North–South gap'.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond the official rhetoric, among China's EU scholars there are two main tendencies. As mentioned above, a first group of realists tends to look at the EU through the lens of competition with the USA.<sup>42</sup> Some Chinese scholars tend to see Europe's role as a promoter of multipolarism, multilateralism and international development – as a potential instrument for countering US hegemony. In fact, some have come to the point of interpreting the ample range of European actions characterized by a growing degree of independence as 'countering hegemony' actions *tout court*.<sup>43</sup> Other interpretations, instead, tend to look at the EU's external posture from a more constructivist angle. The increasing use of notions such 'normative power', 'civilian power' and 'European model' among Chinese Europe-watchers is a signal that in EU studies the approach is gradually moving away from the perspective of power politics to an approach eager to learn from the European experience in integration and governance.<sup>44</sup> According to these readings, the EU's behaviour stands in contrast to the realist approach on international relations and signals a 'diversity' of the so-called European model. As Zhu points out, for instance, the EU–China human rights dialogue stands as an example of how Europeans promote human rights through an approach that, relying on multilateral dialogue, is less tough and provocative than that adopted by the USA.<sup>45</sup>

Overall, these elements point to the existence of a perception on the Chinese side of a wide-ranging and structural convergence of interests between the EU and China. It is obviously difficult to distinguish between rhetoric and substance. What emerges behind the lines is that there is another element that needs to be taken into consideration to fully understand what substantiates Chinese views of Europe as a political actor: not only is the EU seen as sharing similar views about the management and the structure of international relations but,

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, *China's EU Policy Paper*, October 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jiang Zemin's speech at the Third ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting, *Xinhuanet*, 25 May 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, statement by Wang Guangya, vice minister of foreign affairs of the People's Republic of China and head of the Chinese Delegation at the Fourth ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting, *Xinhuanet*, Madrid, 7 June 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Men, note 5 above.

<sup>43</sup> Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

<sup>44</sup> Zhu, note 23 above.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

and maybe more importantly, the Chinese political elite perceives that there are no structural and foreseeable obstacles to developing such a partnership. As the Chinese government bluntly puts it: 'there is no fundamental conflict of interest between China and the EU and neither side poses a threat to the other.'<sup>46</sup> The EU's decision to avoid taking a confrontational stance on the Taiwan issue is presented as just one example of the absence of any serious hard-security conflicts of interest between the two sides and this, in turn, certainly favours the strengthening of a positive perception of the EU's image on China's part.<sup>47</sup> Broadly speaking, therefore, it is possible to argue that at the political level there is a widespread perception that the respective views of the world fit comfortably with each other and that such political convergence is reinforced by the absence of both serious security and geopolitical conflicts on the mutual agenda.

A further component of this largely positive image is represented by the overall appreciation of the European integration project. For instance, the Chinese authorities greeted the launch of the euro by declaring: 'We believe that the birth of the euro will help advance the process of European integration and establish a more balanced international financial and monetary system.'<sup>48</sup> More recently, on the occasion of the formal signing of the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, the Chinese government vigorously restated its positive perception, defining the treaty as 'a new milestone in the process of EU integration' and expressing the will 'to see the EU make greater achievements in its political integration and continue to play a positive and constructive role in European and international affairs . . . convinced that a European Union which strives for its own prosperity through integration will provide fresh opportunities for deepening China–EU relations'.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, the EU is also viewed positively as a model for integrative efforts in other areas of the world.<sup>50</sup> In the same vein, Chinese European

<sup>46</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, *China's EU Policy Paper*, October 2003.

<sup>47</sup> As the Chinese government explicitly recognizes, 'the proper handling of the Taiwan question is essential for a steady growth of China–EU relations. China appreciates the EU and its members' commitment to the one-China principle and hopes that the EU will continue to respect China's major concerns over the Taiwan question', *Ibid*.

<sup>48</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Asia and Europe Work Together to Create a Better Future', speech by Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan at the Second ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting, *Xinhuanet*, Berlin, 29 March 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue's remarks on the EU Constitution Treaty, *Xinhuanet*, 3 November 2004.

<sup>50</sup> As expressed by the former Chinese ambassador to Germany, Mei Zhaorong, 'the path taken and experience gained by the EU to date have great significance of reference for different regions in the world to realize coexistence and prosperity by conducting regional cooperation . . . with a view to acquiring through unity benefits that which could not be achieved by individual nations', cited in Mei Zhaorong, 'A New Phase in China–EU Relations Development of an All-round Strategic Partnership' (2004) 71 *Foreign Affairs Journal*, pp. 27–37.

specialists have started to look at European integration as a potential model for devising strategies concerning China–Taiwan relations and for Asian integration.<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note that the few data available on specific aspects of the EU's international role at the level of public opinion confirm that the integrative dimension is a relevant component of the EU's image. The quoted opinion poll on university students shows that when asked 'what is the EU advantage in international affairs', 65.82 per cent of the participants answered 'European integration' (12.36 per cent answered 'democracy and the rule of law' while 13.27 per cent answered 'the development model').

This is not to argue that there are no sensitive issues between the two powers. The most frequently mentioned issue concerns the EU's stance on the human rights situation in China. On the occasion of the adoption of a critical resolution on China's human rights situation by the European Parliament in January 2000, for instance, the Chinese government reacted promptly by issuing a note in which it expressed great dissatisfaction and its opposition to a move that in its view 'went so far as to openly enter into confrontation with the Chinese people' and 'seriously interfered with the development momentum of the relations between the two sides and ran counter to the overall situation of China–EU relations'.<sup>52</sup> Despite this rhetorical declaration, it is clear that, following the less confrontational European approach on China's human rights abuse adopted in recent years, at the official level the issue has been relegated as a marginal problem. The tone of the declarations where the matter is mentioned bears witness to this development. China's EU Policy Paper, for example, states: 'there are both consensus and disagreements between China and the EU on the question of human rights.'<sup>53</sup> The human rights issue, however, is important to the extent that it signals the existence of a strong sensitivity among the Chinese elite towards every foreign attitude or strategy that is perceived as threatening or disrespectful of national sovereignty and independence. In light of this element, for instance, we should interpret the arguments of those Chinese Europe-watchers that express concerns about a perceived attempt to 'Westernize China' on the issue of human rights protection that somehow, in their view, derives from a feeling of cultural superiority.<sup>54</sup>

Human rights issues are not the only problematic areas. Zhu's recent review of Chinese literature on the EU points to other 'problematic' perceptions of the EU in its political dimension. More specifically, it is argued, while the EU has gone beyond traditional security, the core of China's security goals

<sup>51</sup> Song Xinling, 'China's View of European Integration and Enlargement' in Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, spokesperson on the resolution on China's human rights situation adopted by the EP, *Xinhuanet*, 15 November 2000.

<sup>53</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, *China's EU Policy Paper*, October 2003.

<sup>54</sup> See D. Shambaugh, 'China Eyes Europe in the World: Real Convergence or Cognitive Dissonance?' in Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

remain political and military, thus creating disagreements on issues such as humanitarian intervention. Other scholars stress different ideologies and values, arguing that there is still a tendency to encourage China to accept Western ideology.

However, the general impression is that the structural elements of convergence are in the perception of Chinese Europe-watchers strong enough to outweigh the causes of friction between the two sides. The predominant idea seems to be that the goal of China's modernization and that of European integration are both consistent with the multipolarization development trend and that the existing historical and social differences can be overcome through peaceful confrontation.

### **III The EU as an Economic Actor: An Opportunity Involving Little Risk?**

To investigate China's perception of the EU's image as an economic actor primarily means looking at how China views and interprets its commercial and investment relations with Europe. As Zhang Zuqian points out: 'today commercial ties between China and the EU are not only the core elements of their relationship and central to their interests, but also serve as the driving force for the development of their relationship as a whole.'<sup>55</sup> In fact, the backdrop of intense investment and trade relations as well as of technological cooperation makes the economic relationship between China and Europe somehow unique.<sup>56</sup> In 2006, China remained the European Union's second largest trading partner and displaced the USA as the largest source of EU imports. Mutual trade, in addition, increases at impressive rates. Chinese imports to the EU totalled approximately EUR191 billion during that period, representing a year-on-year increase of almost 21 per cent. Likewise, EU exports to China increased by 22.5 per cent to approximately EUR63 billion, accounting for overall bilateral trade of upwards of EUR254 billion.<sup>57</sup>

Again, media representations mirror such a reality. The research on Chinese media show, for instance, that in the frame 'the EU as an economic power', the most visible images of the EU in newspaper reports were the actions of the EU as a trading power (49 per cent), followed by the EU's actions in the fields of industry, and business and finance. These themes, were the most

<sup>55</sup> Zhang Zuqian, 'China's Commercial Relations with Europe' in Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

<sup>56</sup> W. Klenner, 'Economic Relations between the EU and China: Evolution of an Exclusive Partnership?' (2005) 3/2 *China: An International Journal*, pp. 331–346.

<sup>57</sup> See European Commission, DG Trade, *Bilateral relations: China*, available at <[ec.europa.eu/trade/issues/bilateral/countries/china/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/trade/issues/bilateral/countries/china/index_en.htm)>.

prominent on television too (trade and industry themes leading with 40 per cent and business/finance 20 per cent). Unsurprisingly, university students – supposedly highly informed individuals – are well aware of the relative relevance of the EU as an actor in the economic sphere: when asked in which field the EU is most powerful the largest share of respondents (43.35 per cent) indicated the economic one.

More specifically, the analyses conducted on the Chinese elite's perceptions of EU economic power show that its prevailing image is that of an 'opportunity'.<sup>58</sup> In broad terms, the Chinese elite perceives the EU as an actor that, in economic terms, offers vast opportunities both as a source of foreign direct investments and as a partner for technological cooperation. 'Complementarity' is the word that is most often used to define relations between the Chinese and European economies. Once again, from the Chinese perspective, there is no serious reason to perceive the EU as a threat or as a possible obstacle on the path towards the achievement of the country's primary development objectives. Not only are Chinese representatives keen to recognize that 'both China and the EU have strong economic complementarities' and that 'to deepen and expand cooperation will bring benefits to both sides',<sup>59</sup> but they also stress how 'thanks to their respective advantages, namely, [that] the EU has advanced technologies and strong financial resources, while China boasts a huge market, increasingly deepened cooperation [has] brought mutual benefits and win-win achievements'.<sup>60</sup>

In this context, technology transfer plays a crucial and, apparently, long-standing role. As Zhang Zuqian notes, as early as 1983 Deng Xiaoping stressed that China should take advantage of economic difficulties in West European countries to import more technology. The Chinese minister of science and technology claimed in 2005 that bilateral science and technology cooperation with the EU was functional to enhancing Chinese market development and expanding the space for industries to develop and accelerate industrial transformation.<sup>61</sup> It is from such a perspective, for instance, that we should interpret the Chinese willingness to cooperate with the EU over the Galileo Programme. As Casarini argues, Beijing's interest is also driven by the recognition that 'cooperation over Galileo and other space-based technologies

<sup>58</sup> A. Poletti, R. Peruzzi and Zhang Shuangquan, 'Country Report on China' in S. Lucarelli (ed.), *The External Image of the European Union: A Preliminary Survey on the Existing Sources*, manuscript developed in the framework of the Network of Excellence *Global Governance, Regionalisation and Regulation: the Role of the EU* – Garnet, November 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Forging Ahead into the Future and Furthering the Development of the China-EU All-round Strategic Partnership', *Xinhuanet*, 1 May 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, speech of Mr. Zhang Yesui, vice minister of the ministry of foreign affairs at the opening ceremony of the Sino-EU Policy Paper Seminar, *Xinhuanet*, 9 December 2004.

<sup>61</sup> Zuqian, note 55 above, p. x.

will entail a certain amount of European technology transfers to China'.<sup>62</sup> It has been noted that Chinese leaders actually use China's attractive market as leverage to induce concessions regarding technology transfers that would not otherwise be achieved.<sup>63</sup>

It goes without saying that both sides are not fully satisfied with the current state of economic relations. On the Chinese side, in particular, a number of factors are pointed at as examples of the extent to which the EU handles economic relations unfairly and discriminatively. Chinese government officials and most Chinese scholars often mention the EU's arms sales embargo against China and the problem of recognition of China's full market economy status within the WTO system as the greatest problems on the agenda.<sup>64</sup> At the political level, in December 2004, for instance, Premier Wen Jiabao defined the arms sales embargo as 'a legacy of the Cold War that does not conform to reality'.<sup>65</sup> More often, Chinese leaders use softer formulas such as 'expressing the hope that the EU can proceed from the overall perspective to lift the ban over the weapons embargo to China and recognize China's full market economy status'<sup>66</sup> or 'hoping that the EU could be practical and realistic [enough] to recognize China's full market economy status as soon as possible'.<sup>67</sup>

The issue of market economy status is of great practical relevance for China because of its implications in trade relations. Refusing to grant such a status implies making it easier for the EU to apply anti-dumping measures against Chinese exports onto the European market. In addition, the issue has become a question of political prestige for Chinese leaders, not only because this would mean that China is regarded as an equal economic partner for the EU but also because there is a perceived discrimination related to the fact that the EU granted this status to a country such as Russia.<sup>68</sup>

The arms embargo problem is closely related to the question of technology transfers from the EU towards China. Indeed, for China the issue is charged with high political significance and Beijing has often reiterated that a European move to lift the arms embargo would acquire a symbolic significance and

<sup>62</sup> N. Casarini, 'The Evolution of the EU-China Relationship: From Constructive Engagement to Strategic Partnership', *Occasional Paper*, No. 64, The European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, October 2006, p. 29.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Poletti et al., note 58 above.

<sup>65</sup> Wen Jiabao (the Chinese premier), 'Arms Sales Embargo against China is a Legacy of the Cold War', *Xinhuanet*, 8 December 2004.

<sup>66</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'President of the European Commission meets with Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing', *Xinhuanet*, 18 March 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Ministry of Commerce, 'Bo Xilai meets with EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson who visited Dalian to participate in an informal WTO ministerial meeting', Network Center of the Ministry of Commerce, 15 July 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Casarini, note 62 above.



represent a substantial improvement in the overall China–EU strategic partnership.<sup>69</sup> It goes without saying, and we will touch on this point in the following section, that any decision on the European side of this issue is and would be mediated by strategic considerations concerning EU–US relations. What is of interest here is that the Chinese side conceives the arms embargo issue as a test with regard to the quality of the China–EU strategic partnership for evaluating the EU's independence from the USA, and its stance on a potential crisis in the Taiwan strait.

Overall, the few analyses conducted on the different ways in which the Chinese perceive the EU as an economic actor show that the negative perceptions concentrate on very specific issues while the positive ones refer to a more general evaluation of the EU's role in this field. To a certain extent, the same arguments developed in the context of how the Chinese perceive 'political' Europe seem to apply to 'economic' Europe. To put it bluntly, China does not have much to fear from the EU in economic terms. In fact, Zhang stresses that 'there are several developments which make China–EU trade and economic disputes more frequent and fierce than ever'.<sup>70</sup> These include, in addition to the problems mentioned above, pressures to intervene on the value of the Chinese currency and the EU's increasing willingness to apply anti-dumping measures on Chinese labour-intensive exports. Nevertheless, it is China that represents, to quote Peter Mandelson, 'the biggest single challenge of globalization in the field of trade'.<sup>71</sup> As has rightly been pointed out, China and the EU will be partners and competitors simultaneously. Our argument is that China is likely to become far more a competitor to the EU than the reverse. This is why, apart from rhetorical declarations, the overall positive evaluation attached to the EU's image as an economic actor is not overshadowed by contingent frictions concerning more specific issues.

#### **IV Talking of Strategic Triangles: The USA as a Major Intervening Variable**

Very interestingly, all the studies that have been taken into consideration for this investigation converge in recognizing that Chinese Europe-watchers' perspectives of the EU can be organized into three main categories: the EU's role as a political power (both internally and externally); EU–US relations; and EU–China relations. Attention focused on EU–US relations among China's Europeanists is characterized by a paramount concern/interest for the

<sup>69</sup> Casarini, note 62 above.

<sup>70</sup> Zhang, note 55 above.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Mandelson, 'Europe's Response to Globalization: Where does EU Trade Policy go from Here?', Globalization Seminar, Wolfsberg, Switzerland, 4 May 2006 (SPEECH/06/274).

perceived emergence of a new Sino/European/American triangle. The reason for such an interest in EU–US developments needs to be understood in light of the widespread perception that the interactions within the Sino/European/American triangle will play an increasingly important role in international relations and in the world's strategic architecture.<sup>72</sup> Chinese analysts recognize that both EU–US and Sino-EU relations have their own independent dynamics and that the latter is becoming more mature and not merely derivative. As has been rightly stressed, compared with the cold war period, the China–EU relationship has been much less affected by the US factor.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the USA continues to play a crucial role in the context of such a relationship both as a stimulating and constricting factor. In other words, this seems to suggest that Chinese politicians and commentators are convinced that while the independent dynamics of the relationship with the EU have certainly become stronger in the last years,<sup>74</sup> they still have to be conceived as necessarily partly deriving from wider developments involving both EU–US and Sino-US relations.

As an example of this strategic linkage, it is worth remembering that the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the September 11 attacks and the resulting US invasion of Iraq in 2003 altogether contributed to creating a widely shared perception of a more dangerous US foreign policy attitude targeted, at least indirectly, towards China, which in turn made it more appealing to reinforce the partnership with the EU. The aforementioned arms embargo issue is another important example of this complex triangular relationship.

## V Conclusions

The primary aim of this article was to start filling what we perceived to be a vacuum in the context of the growing scholarly output concerning Sino-European relations. Much attention has been paid to the European side of the relationship with China and very few attempts have been made to understand and systematically investigate the other side of the coin. The assumption was that understanding how others see us is a crucial precondition to having a better understanding of ourselves and how we frame our own identity.

One result of the study has been to show that there is an emerging and growing community of researchers interested in this specific aspect of EU–China affairs. The studies quoted here are certainly interesting works, also proving that efforts to build up a body of knowledge and research on this

<sup>72</sup> Shambaugh et al., note 13 above.

<sup>73</sup> Men, note 5 above, pp. 788–806.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

neglected aspect of such a crucial phenomenon are actually taking place. In addition, we have discovered that the growing European interest in China is mirrored by an equally strong interest by Chinese politicians, scholars and commentators in the EU and its internal and external developments.

As expected, we have found very few sources on how Chinese people perceive the EU. At this level, it is difficult to make any conclusive generalizations. If anything can be said in this context, there are no signs of any widespread negative perceptions about the EU. Despite some incongruence resulting from contradictory findings concerning the level of importance attached to the EU as an actor in international politics, the studies considered point to a generally positive evaluation of the EU.

At the level of political elites, there is a clear and consistent articulation across time of how Chinese political leaders perceive different dimensions of the European integration process. The EU is seen as an opportunity insofar that its development is considered consistent with China's own view of global politics. It is interesting to note that many of the concerns expressed by European commentators are not shared by Chinese ones. Europe does not pose any threat to China, either in the field of security and military, or in the economic sphere. What remains, therefore, is an attention to a 'pole' that shares many fundamental principles with regard to the future architecture of global governance.

As we have argued, a few obstacles still need to be overcome but they are highly unlikely to cause major setbacks in a relationship characterized by the absence of any 'hard security conflict'. As noticed, however, one should be cautious about giving too optimistic an interpretation of official Chinese rhetoric on the existence of shared world views. While both sides claim to pursue multipolarity and multilateralism, the degree to which these claims imply similar preferences and result from a similar underlying logic is questionable. In this sense, it seems appropriate to take into consideration the arguments of those who suggest that cognitive dissonance is a useful concept for a proper understanding of Chinese approaches to other international actors. The most interesting element here concerns the extent to which attention on the EU is put in a wider context that includes the USA and its relations with both the EU and China. As we have argued, highly relevant in this context is the focus on the dynamics concerning the Sino/European/American strategic triangle. The intersection between respective bilateral relations and, more importantly, the indisputable significance of the USA for both sides, make it almost impossible to understand EU-China dynamics without bringing this fundamental external parameter into the picture.

To sum up, the depth and dynamism with which China and the EU approach each other is a clear sign that both see each other as potential partners in a variety of contexts. The absence of security conflicts is the most important

factor facilitating this process of convergence. In this sense, it is appropriate to think of China and the EU as two actors experiencing a more mature relationship in a changed systemic environment. To think of this relationship as one with its own completely independent dynamics is altogether another question.