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Sino-European Security Relations: the Challenges Ahead

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The rise of global security challenges that cannot be properly tackled by any one country alone has stressed the importance of cooperation between states, or state like entities. The cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) appears to be promising since non-traditional security threats such as energy and environmental security, international terrorism, climate change, drugs and human trafficking, modern piracy, illegal immigration or pandemics are at the core of the security notions of both the EU and the PRC. These multiform challenges are reshaping countries' priorities and fostering interstate cooperation.

However, despite having promoted China to the rank of 'strategic partner' in 2003, the EU does not seem to have developed a comprehensive approach to security and strategic concerns. The EU and China are two global security actors who, alongside the established US, are playing an increasing security role internationally. Some suggest that the EU should play the role of a third pole in the Sino-American relationship.

Nevertheless, such a role would define the EU approach as dependent on the American approach and thus limit the scope of the European relations with China.

Although the EU and the PRC share the need for a multipolar system, they do not share the same definition of multipolarism. 'China favours a stronger EU but one that is not necessarily involved in conflict resolution affecting security issues in Asia'^[3]. The EU is not a Pacific rim state like the the US and has neither the military allies nor military bases in Asia. Moreover, it has a successful track record of contributing to peace-keeping, and peace-building operations through which it has played a stabilising role in Asian security.

Since bilateral trade has been growing at a very fast pace between China and the EU, and both rely on oil imports, especially via sea lanes, they share the common vital goal of providing international maritime security. Thus, safeguarding the global commons and countering piracy are Sino-European common interests that can be developed further. The EU Naval Force Somalia operation has already cooperated with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden and there is room of manoeuvre to cooperate further to protect the Sea lanes of Communications (SLOCs). Thus, the EU could more easily than the US accept China's naval modernisation which in turn can better contribute to maritime security.

The PRC lacks the 'an advanced monitoring system', a 'high-level national coordination mechanism on marine security'^[4] to deal efficiently with global problems such as marine pollution or tsunamis and other sea disasters while many EU countries such as France or the UK already possess these capacities. Therefore are many competences that European member countries have acquired thanks to their strong maritime tradition and they can sell these to China, a relatively new maritime power. Knowledge of environmental protection, maritime disaster response, search and rescue missions are strong in many EU countries. In recent years, the PRC has been strengthening cooperation with foreign navies to deal more efficiently with non-traditional security issues. Therefore, it is crucial that it has a unique European counterpart^[5] instead of several member countries, with each one trying to gain some national benefit from its direct relationship with Beijing. This would also avoid China being able to play the divide and rule card, which would reduce the gain for the EU as a whole and has thus a sub optimal result due to the different size between the PRC and every individual European state.

Therefore, Can the EU's capital knowledge in building regionalism and its role as a provider of peace and security in troubled countries be an asset in its bilateral relations with China? Can the EU help in building the new Asian security architecture? What role can the EU play in the Asian security due that the question is whether – and to what extent – there could be a role for outside actors such as the EU'^[6].

^[1] Frans-Paul van der Putten & Chu Shulong, *China, Europe, and international security : interests, roles and prospects*, Abingdon, New York, Routledge, 2010

^[2] Nick Ottens, 'Europe As Third Pole in Sino-American Relations', *Atlanticsentinel.com*, 16 June 2011

[3] John Quigley, 'EU-China Security Relations', *EurAsia Bulletin*, Vol. 8 No. 3&4 March-April 2004.

[4] Yang Mingjie, 'Sailing on a Harmonious Sea: a Chinese Perspective', *Global Asia*, , Vol. 5, No. 4, Winter 2010, p. 23

[5] François Godement, 'A Global China Policy', *ECFR Policy Brief*, No. 22, June 2010

[6] Nicola Casarini, 'Security developments in East Asia: what implications for the EU?', *EUISS Policy Brief No.7*, 15 February 2011, p. 3

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