

Limitations of Global Power: A Comparative Analysis of China and the European Union

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China's rise as a formidable political, economic, and military global leader has been one of the most important developments to the modern system. Growing Chinese power wields potential to impact international markets, condition alliance relations, and shape the very nature of global governance in significant ways. This dynamic has called into question the existing balance of power, and in particular, shed light on the comparative social, military, political, and economic capacity of global actors beyond the Asia-Pacific region. In the context of Europe, the European Union (EU) is experiencing a state of regional and international decline inhibiting it from competing with other major powers and enacting significant change. In many ways, the rise of China has revealed the overall limitations of the EU to act as a strategic power in the realm of global politics.

This article aims to address the following question: How has the rise of China impacted the EU in the context of the global system? It will begin with a literature review of existing scholarship, followed by a brief overview of the evolving China-EU relationship. This article will then move to advance the argument at hand with a five-fold approach: first, by identifying the practical ineffectiveness of the EU-China "comprehensive strategic partnership", then by arguing there are limited areas of compatibility between China and the EU beyond the development of mutual economic and commercial ties. This article will then identify the contradictory normative premises through which either understands, and thus conducts, global relations and foreign policy. Subsequently, this article will demonstrate that the combination of domestic and regional dimensions to a legitimacy crisis currently underway in the EU has cast further doubt on its ability to exercise its role as an international actor. Finally, conclusions drawn from the China-EU relationship will be connected to the broader US-China hegemonic power dynamic. This article will conclude by highlighting suggestions for future policy and discuss potential outcomes in terms of the EU-China relationship moving forward.

Literature Review

Existing literature in China-EU studies is largely focused on the significant economic, commercial, and trade relations between both actors. More recently, scholars have identified patterns of Chinese investment activity in markets of individual EU member states, thereby highlighting repercussions this may wield on collective EU coherence.³⁷³ Since the EU is China's largest trading partner, speculation exists about the future of economic relations as China steadily rises and Europe continues to decline in influence.³⁷⁴ The bulk of this speculation is concentrated from 2003 onwards, after the establishment of a mutual "comprehensive strategic partnership" aiming to improve communication and foster deeper sociopolitical and security relations. However, scepticism is recurrent about the validity of this partnership as many reduce its capacity to economic and trade objectives, doubt the ability of the EU to play a significant role in years to come, and attribute lack of progress to the elusivity of China as a rising global power.³⁷⁵

Scholarship pertinent to the EU and China focuses on strategic implications for Europe in response to growing Chinese hegemony. Many voice concern regarding the global "one belt one road" (BRI) initiative, the future of the European bloc amidst internal disarray and Brexit, market fluctuation, and political clout, amongst other things. Additional literature compares declining EU relevance with other emerging powers, as well as the structural challenges and opportunities these dynamics present.³⁷⁶ Scholars, notably Chen, speculate on the limitations of the EU to function effectively not merely in response to China, but in the world system itself.³⁷⁷

Chinese security scholarship has exhibited decreasing interest in Europe as a whole. The EU is perceived to be a second-order and inferior matter with respect to other Chinese security concerns, such as the Sino-US dynamic and tension in South China Sea.³⁷⁸ Some argue that the EU-China relationship is conditional on fluctuating dynamics between China and the United States, or that Europe merely acts as a strategic buffer to diffuse rising tension.³⁷⁹ As such, Asian

³⁷³ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," *International Affairs* (2016).

³⁷⁴ Hannah Levinger and Syetarn Hansakul, "China and the EU: Where next in Bilateral Trade and Investment Relations?" *China-EU Law Journal* (2016): 55.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ Jolyon Howorth, "EU Global Strategy in a Changing World: Brussels' Approach to the Emerging Powers," *Contemporary Security Policy* (2016); Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of 'One Belt One Road' and 'New Type of Great Power Relations'," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55 (2017).

³⁷⁷ Zhimin Chen, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order," *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2016).

³⁷⁸ Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of 'One Belt One Road' and 'New Type of Great Power Relations'," (2017): 1162.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1163.

security scholarship is directed primarily towards US relations and the EU represents a matter of peripheral consideration. The present EU-China relationship is characteristically elusive and almost entirely characterized by economic terms, thus, security is not a significant concern.³⁸⁰ The contradictory means through which China and the EU conduct international affairs suggests a range of implications for future relations, as well as for the world system overall. Though this is beginning to change, China has demonstrated a strong historical tendency towards bilateralism. Comparatively, the EU prefers to globalize European norms through the promotion of a rules-based world order and multilateral cooperation. This competing dynamic will likely be expanded upon in the literature as China's momentum and global influence continues to expand.

Context of the EU-China Bilateral Relationship

The context and focus of European-Chinese relations have certainly changed over time. In the post-Cold War era, given the demise of the Soviet Union and alleviation of pressure from the United States, Europe began spear-heading the European integration and growth process. European nation states played an important role in the liberal institutionalist order that characterized the post-Cold War era.³⁸¹ The EU was established in 1993, foreign policy was strengthened, and Europe began working to frame international order according to its own liberal democratic and normative image.³⁸² This explicit path of development was marked by the embodiment of both post-modern and post-sovereign features. Order-shaping ambitions began internally to the EU by transforming the existing European nation-state system into a geopolitical bloc with supranational power.³⁸³ Chen remarks the EU has become a status-quo global actor "characterized by the breaking down of [the] distinction between domestic and foreign affairs...the consequent codification of rules and behaviour, the growing irrelevance of borders, and security based on transparency, mutual openness, interdependence, and mutual vulnerability."³⁸⁴ Symbolizing mutual peace, prosperity, and liberal idealism, the EU has become integrated in the international system as a unique geopolitical bloc of nation states.

Perceived success of this growth model offers Europe power to influence both global and regional discourse. For example, as a transformative actor, the EU utilizes the accession process

³⁸⁰ Rem Korteweg, "A Presence Farther East: Can Europe Play a Strategic Role in the Asia-Pacific Region?" *Centre for European Reform* (2014): 8

³⁸¹ Zhimin Chen, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order," (2016): 778.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 778.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 778.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 778.

to liberalize domestic and foreign policy in prospective members. Becoming accepted into the EU entails adherence to European norms and values. States thus become induced or pressured to conform as much as possible to ensure access to material, economic, and sociopolitical incentives.³⁸⁵ Beyond regional concerns, the EU has also begun wielding this normative agility to shape international order. Globalizing rules-based European norms, such as liberal democracy, free markets, nuclear non-proliferation, and environmental awareness, all lead other economic and social conditions to manifest in its favour.³⁸⁶ The EU conducts foreign policy through global organizations, inter-regional relationships, and bilateral relationships with individual states.³⁸⁷

Europe has occupied a central role in Chinese foreign relations and academic discourse, given that their relations have intensified over the last three decades.³⁸⁸ Historically, Chinese understandings of great power are derived from an assessment of those already present in the West.³⁸⁹ In the context of the Cold War, China had been steadily cultivating relations with Western states since the early 1970s.³⁹⁰ During the 1990s, the regime struggled to restore itself following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and near collapse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).³⁹¹ As such, it aimed to maintain a neutral global environment and redirected its attention towards domestic turbulence.³⁹² Guiding bilateral power relations, such as those in Europe with the UK, France and Germany, became goals of Chinese foreign policy during this era.³⁹³ As China began the process of global integration, diplomacy was prioritized alongside strategic growth initiatives. China was under the impression that “changing itself [was] the main source of Chinese power, and [...] the main way [for] China to influence the world.”³⁹⁴ Thus, the regime focused on domestic development to enable external growth. Rapid industrialization, high volume exports, military expansion, investments in industry and manufacturing, and an expanding labour force resulted in impressive domestic prosperity.³⁹⁵

³⁸⁵Ibid., 778.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 779.

³⁸⁷ Weiqing Song and Rodney Hall, "European Union's Construction of International Identity via Strategic Partnerships: Associating and Social Distancing," *Contemporary Politics* (2018):1

³⁸⁸ Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The Rise of China—challenges and Opportunities for the European Union," *Asia European Journal* 15 (2017): 124.

³⁸⁹ Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter?" (2017): 1162.

³⁹⁰ Zhimin Chen, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order," (2016): 779

³⁹¹ Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter?" (2017).

³⁹² Ibid., 1164.

³⁹³ Ibid., 1168.

³⁹⁴ B. Zhang, "[Changing Oneself, Influencing the World]," *[Chinese Social Sciences]*, (2002).

³⁹⁵ Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The Rise of China," (2017): 124.

China continued to solidify bilateral relations with Western powers – even liberalizing its economy to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001.³⁹⁶ This was a significant indication the regime supports open trade and became keen to assert itself.³⁹⁷ China surpassed Japan to become the second largest economy in the world in 2010, and by 2014, made up 60 percent of the EU economy.³⁹⁸ These developments focused attention towards China and has enabled it to wield significant political, military, and economic clout. In possession of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) veto power and pushing an ambitious agenda, China has become a significant force in shaping global order.³⁹⁹ In many ways, China's policy ambitions have inflated alongside its economic growth. Over time, expansion of the state has re-shaped regional security discourse, international markets, and the dynamics of state relations and global governance.⁴⁰⁰ Therefore, China is increasingly understood as a reformist power in the dynamic of global relations.⁴⁰¹ As a result, the rise of China raises unavoidable questions about the future of the global order.

Diplomatic and political ties between China and the Union have certainly broadened in the modern era. China-EU summits have been held annually since 1998, and examples of cooperation in security affairs are documented in issues of nuclear proliferation, counter terrorism, cyber warfare, and anti-piracy.⁴⁰² Over 50 official dialogues have been formalized addressing the extent of their relationship in many areas.⁴⁰³ Diplomatic ties have thus become normalized and cooperation on key global issues, particularly the environment and climate change, has gained mutual support from both sides. The establishment of a strategic, stable, and mutually favourable bilateral relationship with China is one of the EU's highest priorities in the contemporary era.⁴⁰⁴ Despite expanding relations, however, both bodies remain inherently divided global entities.⁴⁰⁵ In many ways, China reveals the limitations of the EU to act as a strategic and influential power in the international system. The following section will analyse how the lack of compatibility in interests and norms beyond economic and commercial ties is indicative of this notion.

³⁹⁶ Zhimin Chen, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order," (2016): 780.

³⁹⁷ Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU–China Strategic Partnership," *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2011): 306.

³⁹⁸ Zhimin Chen, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order," (2016): 780.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 780.

⁴⁰⁰ Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The Rise of China," (2017): 121.

⁴⁰¹ Zhimin Chen, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order," (2016): 781.

⁴⁰² Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The Rise of China," (2017): 123.

⁴⁰³ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴⁰⁴ Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis," (2011): 295.

⁴⁰⁵ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

Limited Compatibility Beyond Economic and Commercial Ties

Commercial ties between China and the EU represent the most significant, and strategic, element of their relationship. Bilateral trade relations in 1978 reported a value of 4 billion EUR.⁴⁰⁶ By 2015, both actors shared the second largest economic relationship in the world (after the EU-US).⁴⁰⁷ Respectively, the EU is China's largest trading partner, and China is the EU's second largest trading partner.⁴⁰⁸ Trade value between the two reached 521 billion EUR in 2015 – effectively double that seen in 2006.⁴⁰⁹ According to the Chinese Global Investment Tracker, between 2005 and 2017, China invested \$309 billion in European markets compared to \$172 billion in the US.⁴¹⁰ These ties extend beyond traditional trade to include peripheral economic considerations such as capital flow, economic security issues, and foreign aid.⁴¹¹ However, as this is the only explicitly strategic element of their relationship, it sheds light on the ability of the EU to function as an adaptable, effective, and multi-faceted global power.

Despite current regional stagnation and the Eurozone crisis, the EU still remains the world's largest single market.⁴¹² Member states themselves are keen to further commercial relations with China and pursue activity – particularly in service-oriented economies.⁴¹³ However, Europe plays an increasingly marginalized role in the perspective of Chinese foreign policy. Much of this discourse focuses on gaining access to European markets to further economic interests, but beyond this, seldom pertain to other strategic concerns.⁴¹⁴ The EU is an ideal source for Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) because it allows enterprises access to valuable commodities, namely technology, in exchange for financing.⁴¹⁵ China prioritizes global commercial opportunities, such as securing export markets and maintaining access to natural resources, above all.⁴¹⁶ From the Chinese perspective, Europe represents a mature market with many safe and

⁴⁰⁶ Loredana Jitaru and Lorena Popescu, "Economic Relations EU-China," (2017): 259.

⁴⁰⁷ Jolyon Howorth, "EU Global Strategy in a Changing World," (2016): 391.

⁴⁰⁸ Jing Men, "CHALLENGES TO THE EU-CHINA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP," *Eu-China Observer* (2012): 4.

⁴⁰⁹ Hannah Levinger and Syetarn Hansakul, "China and the EU: Where next in Bilateral Trade and Investment Relations?" (2016): 56.

⁴¹⁰ "China Global Investment Tracker." American Enterprise Institute.

⁴¹¹ Loredana Jitaru and Lorena Popescu, "Economic Relations EU-China," (2017): 257.

⁴¹² Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The Rise of China," (2017): 123.

⁴¹³ Jie Yu, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Domestic Interests, Bureaucratic Politics and the EU-China Relations," (2018): 231.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴¹⁵ Hannah Levinger and Syetarn Hansakul, "China and the EU," (2016): 65.

⁴¹⁶ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU-China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

profitable opportunities for investment.⁴¹⁷ The EU has therefore played a central role in driving Chinese economic ambition and incentives. Relative to increasing commercial ties, cooperation on other issues, such as global security, is severely limited. As the strategic centre of gravity shifts east, the EU risks becoming strategically marginalized and denounced if it is unable to contribute to global security in tandem with China. The regime, as well as most of the Asia-Pacific, observes the EU as little beyond the role of a commercial and business partner and hardly consider the organization a strategic actor.⁴¹⁸ To be considered a global actor of consequence, a convergence over common security interests between China and the EU is imperative. Since the EU remains a mere economic partner, its position consequentially suffers. Further, its ability to function as an effective, strategic, and influential global actor is called into question.

Aside from economic considerations, there is virtually no strategic overlap between the EU and China. Rather, both actors possess different regional security occupations that inadvertently set their global interests apart. China's immediate geopolitical focus is situated in the Asia-Pacific amidst heightening tension in the South China Sea. Likewise, EU strategic interests are local to the regional European bloc.⁴¹⁹ Despite the significance of commercial ties, Europe has few direct claims in the Asia-Pacific and China has few in Europe. Further, it appears neither body is willing or able to contribute to the regional security interests of the other at this time.⁴²⁰ The EU has been largely excluded from the narrative of strategic Chinese global endeavours, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and strengthened great power relations.⁴²¹ The EU's response to regional concerns in the Asia-Pacific, or lack thereof, are reflective of its own impeding limitations. As such, it is highly unlikely to occupy a strategic presence in China's most central geopolitical concerns – such as the prospect of Taiwanese independence or North Korea, for example.⁴²² Thus, in terms of geopolitics alone, China and the EU possess different regional considerations, given the lack of geographical proximity, which set them very far apart. Aside from commercial and economic ties, there is little to no compatibility between these actors. However, as China rises, it is imperative that the EU adapt in other ways to address the shifting landscape of power.

⁴¹⁷ Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The Rise of China," (2017): 123.

⁴¹⁸ Jolyon Howorth, "EU Global Strategy in a Changing World," (2016): 392.

⁴¹⁹ Rem Koretweg, "A Presence Farther East" (2014): 3.

⁴²⁰ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴²¹ Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter?" (2017): 1164.

⁴²² Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

“Comprehensive” Strategic Partnership

The absence of compatibility outside economic and commercial ties is most observable in the ineffective China-EU “strategic partnership”. Efforts to transition from an exclusively economic relationship to a deeper sociopolitical partnership solidified in 2003 with a mutual agreement coined the “comprehensive strategic partnership”.⁴²³ The EU hoped that boosting its interaction with Beijing would catalyse sociopolitical liberalization in China and facilitate transparency, amongst other things.⁴²⁴ A Chinese regime more accepting of the European world order would be considered a more reliable global partner, therefore, less inclined to develop revisionist or destabilizing tendencies.⁴²⁵ By the same token, China perceived the EU as a counterweight to US hegemony and a crucial factor to the level distribution of global power and influence. It was announced in 2005 that the projected strategic partnership had been achieved. However, scholarly examination indicates this was not necessarily the case in practice.⁴²⁶

As it stands, China has become significantly more powerful, structural motivation has faded, and mutual global interests are not as evident anymore.⁴²⁷ Securing a transparent Chinese regime necessitates a compatibility of security interests with the EU, which historically has not been the case. Europe has been unsuccessful in developing strategic ties, therefore its objectives lack effectiveness. While dialogue and exchange has been consistent, joint statements lack definitive common concerns. Economic priorities have dominated almost all relations, and only recently have issues of global security received discernible attention.⁴²⁸ Moreover, only these commercial interests are translated into clear policy objectives. Other foreign policy priorities have been confined to dialogue of observation and awareness, rather than tangible bilateral cooperation.⁴²⁹ The EU seldom considers domestic discourse of China in conducting relations, but rather, relies on vague statements of awareness toward security developments and concern.⁴³⁰ In 2012, the European External Action Service (EEAS) published guidelines for EU foreign and security endeavours in East Asia. These guidelines identified a number of European interests and

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis," (2011): 299.

⁴²⁷ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴²⁸ Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis," (2011): 299.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 300.

⁴³⁰ Rem Koretweg, "A Presence Farther East" (2014): 2.

economic considerations, but discussion of how to conduct future action was avoided.⁴³¹ EU member states have limited military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, therefore, little opportunity exists to directly impact security discourse.⁴³² As such, a significant gap exists between the ambition of the partnership and the extent to which mutual aspirations are manifested in foreign policy.⁴³³

Further, strategic coordination is unattainable because neither entity recognizes the other as a strategic security partner.⁴³⁴ Europe is of peripheral importance to Chinese security and foreign policy in lieu of US hegemony. Economic interests aside, both parties struggle to discern the relevance and utility of their relationship compared to those of other powers.⁴³⁵ The EU still believes it has the power to sway authoritarian China towards liberal norms and values. In reality, China perceives multilateral actors, particularly the EU, as a means of pursuing its own ends.⁴³⁶ Thus emerges a unique balance of power between two competing agendas – both promoting their own interests and values, within the same framework.⁴³⁷ The strategic partnership has failed to transcend differences in social ideology and political institutions, therefore, failing to bridge the normative divide.⁴³⁸

Put simply, bilateral partnerships of global magnitude do not become strategic by just defining them as such.⁴³⁹ Most evaluations conclude that, if anything, the absence of common military interests prevents EU-China relations from earning an exclusive title in the first place.⁴⁴⁰ As highlighted earlier, Europe and China occupy two different geographical regions – each with different security concerns, interests, and global actors. Thus, there exists little to no overlapping strategic interest or spheres of influence.⁴⁴¹ There is no consensus amongst EU member states about the implications of the rise of China, or how to respond to security considerations of the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁴² Maher speculates the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific would have to

⁴³¹ Richard Maher, "Europe's Response to China's Rise: Competing Strategic Visions," *Asia European Journal* (2017): 142.

⁴³² Rem Koretweg, "A Presence Farther East" (2014).

⁴³³ Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis," (2011): 299.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁴³⁷ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU-China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴³⁸ Jing Men, "CHALLENGES TO THE EU-CHINA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP," (2012): 4.

⁴³⁹ Camille Brugier, "The EU's Trade Strategy towards China," *Asia European Journal* (2017): 201.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴⁴¹ Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis," (2011): 298.

⁴⁴² Richard Maher, "Europe's Response to China's Rise: Competing Strategic Visions," (2017): 143.

escalate considerably, or China would have to become much more destabilizing, for Europe to become strategically involved in the Asian security community. Both parties could certainly benefit from mutual relations of a strategic nature but have yet to capitalize on the opportunity. As China asserts itself, the EU becomes hindered by its own insecurities. Therefore, this strategic partnership is fundamentally limited, at best.⁴⁴³ These limitations, both on paper and in practice, parallel those evident of the EU to function as a strategic global power.

Contradictory Normative Premises of International Relations

Aside from strategic cooperation, the EU and China support contradictory normative premises of foreign relations. This distinction manifests fundamental differences in the methods through which either actor conducts diplomacy and global affairs.⁴⁴⁴ At the international level, China behaves in a way that emphasizes its power and undeniable political, military, and economic power and influence. Differences in EU-Chinese dynamics have led scholars, such as Chen, to describe the relationship as “two order-shapers in different directions.”⁴⁴⁵ This dynamic reveals that when it comes to equating power and leverage with China, the EU remains at a steep disadvantage.

In the context of global relations, China has exhibited an implicit preference for realism. It conducts foreign policy in a way that prioritizes features such as the defence of state sovereignty, non-interference, the right of each country to decide the nature of its own sociopolitical system, and action based on consensus rather than supranational governance.⁴⁴⁶ This approach to national interest contrasts the traditional value-based approach preferred by the EU.⁴⁴⁷ China rejects many of the Western-oriented principles the EU embraces and seeks to promote around the world, such as human rights and democracy.⁴⁴⁸ On the world stage, the EU works in ways to further the existing international order through peaceful negotiations and the promotion of liberal norms, values, and domestic practices.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴³ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴⁴⁴ Jie Yu, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Domestic Interests, Bureaucratic Politics and the EU-China Relations." *Asia European Journal* (2018): 231.

⁴⁴⁵ Zhimin Chen, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order," (2016): 781.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 783.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 780.

⁴⁴⁸ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴⁴⁹ Richard Maher, "Europe’s Response to China’s Rise: Competing Strategic Visions," (2017): 137.

Further, it has become characteristic of China to use other global actors as a means of projecting its own standards and expectations – often at the direct expense of the EU.⁴⁵⁰ Within the UN and WTO, for example, Chinese-EU relations have become highly asymmetrical. The EU uses these organizations to promote idealism, whereas China considers them to be arenas for projecting alternative norms and deflecting Western criticism.⁴⁵¹ In response, the EU is often inhibited by the contradictory nature of its own agenda, which implies pursuing strategic objectives while simultaneously promoting the European value system.⁴⁵² Holslag argues multilateralism represents an arena of contest that rather than promoting effective global governance, is becoming increasingly less in accordance with European norms.⁴⁵³ As such, while the EU's approach to global governance is conceptualized as “constitutionalism based on human rights”, it is distinct from Chinese “egalitarianism based on sovereignty.”⁴⁵⁴

In particular, contrasting views of national sovereignty have created friction on the merit of intervening in other state's internal affairs. Manipulating economic power in this way has historically been a strategic mechanism of Europe. However, China neglects to tie trade agreements or foreign aid to the improvement of human rights or political institutions, for example.⁴⁵⁵ Consequentially, states that previously relied on the EU for financial assistance are diverting attention towards China – establishing Chinese economic leverage and undermining European bargaining power. This friction identifies a considerable gap in the positions from which either body perceives, and thus conducts, global relations. Further, it inhibits their ability to effectively cooperate while revealing inherent limitations of the European bloc. As China continues to assert itself, the EU appears feeble by contrast. This dynamic is likely to become increasingly exacerbated.

Internal and External Legitimacy Crisis

Perhaps the most evident indication of limitations in the EU is the internal and external legitimacy crisis it is currently experiencing. This narrative has collectively affected perceptions of the EU as an effective global power amongst member states, within European populations, and

⁴⁵⁰ Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis," (2011): 309.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 306.

⁴⁵² Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴⁵³ Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis," (2011): 308.

⁴⁵⁴ C Zhao, "[A Comparative Study of Global Governance Concepts of EU, U.S. and China]," (2012).

⁴⁵⁵ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

on the world stage. Further, this dynamic has inhibited the actor from establishing a policy approach to China that correlates with its strategic ambitions. For the purpose of clarity, the following section will present a three-fold analysis of the legitimacy crisis and how it indicates the existence of fundamental EU limitations in projecting its status as an international actor – beginning first with member state fragmentation and bilateralism, followed by regional turmoil such as the Eurozone crisis and Brexit, and concluding with inadequate global power relations.

It is common knowledge that individual EU member states rarely act in unison, or defer to institutions of the Union in conducting foreign relations.⁴⁵⁶ Members are free to maintain control over their individual foreign policy, despite the existence of a European Common Foreign and Security Policy. Thus, the organization reflects a tangled and uncoordinated collective of separate and distinct bilateral interests advanced by the UK, France, and Germany, in particular. These member states, among several others, wield a more comprehensive and strategic foreign policy towards China than the EU itself.⁴⁵⁷ The UK emphasizes the development of stronger diplomatic, economic, defence, and security relations. Likewise, France projects a future diplomatic and economic pivot to Asia, and Germany prioritizes exports alongside trade and commercial relations.⁴⁵⁸ As China prefers to conduct foreign policy through a ‘divide and rule’ type of bilateralism, rather than directly with the EU, member states tend to compete with each other to expand their own interaction.⁴⁵⁹ China takes advantage of the absence of unified EU policy, in turn, maximizing the potential of strategic bilateral relations.⁴⁶⁰ In this regard, China has the power to wield economic leverage with the potential of provoking internal fragmentation within the EU.⁴⁶¹

Closer ties with China are often inseparable from economic interests, thus, this dynamic occurs even at the expense of EU-driven policy or initiatives.⁴⁶² Bilateral discourse between China and member states weaken EU cohesion and prevents it from establishing a coherent and strategic approach towards China.⁴⁶³ Fox and Godement compare this dynamic to “a game of chess with

⁴⁵⁶ Rem Koretweg, "A Presence Farther East" (2014): 8.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁵⁹ Rem Koretweg, "A Presence Farther East" (2014).

⁴⁶⁰ Loredana Jitaru and Lorena Popescu, "Economic Relations EU-China," (2017): 262.

⁴⁶¹ Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter?" (2017): 1165.

⁴⁶² Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴⁶³ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

[28] opponents arguing about the piece that needs to be moved.”⁴⁶⁴ For these reasons, the EU struggles to construct a common foreign security policy and equate itself with other strategic global powers.

Additionally, regional and domestic turmoil within the European bloc has presented a subsequent array of limitations. In the last several years, Europe has become preoccupied with issues such as the Eurozone debt crisis, refugee crisis, Russian assertiveness, fragile conditions in the Ukraine, and Brexit, respectively.⁴⁶⁵ In addition, the rise of polarizing and populist political movements within a number of EU member states exacerbated tensions between the EU and sovereigntist members, such as Greece and Hungary.⁴⁶⁶ These internal concerns have made the European bloc less capable of demonstrating effective leadership, both regionally and at the international level.⁴⁶⁷ Furthermore, they continue to impede the overall functionality of the EU and give way to a sense of long-term uncertainty and apprehension about the global role of the EU. From the Chinese perspective, the EU internal and external crises are indicative of decline.⁴⁶⁸ As a result, attention has been directed elsewhere and the influence of the EU on global affairs further reevaluated.

Moreover, the EU as a whole has exerted ineffective, or feeble, relations with China in particular but other global powers in general. This dynamic is a representation of limitations imposed on the EU and its inability to function effectively in the world context. Relative to other global powers, the EU is not considered comparable.⁴⁶⁹ The EU has very little leverage with other major powers, as well as an inconclusive and unclear grasp of how to engage with them.⁴⁷⁰ Likewise, global actors are unsure of how to engage with the EU as a whole.⁴⁷¹ For this reason, strategic bilateralism in Europe is not a foreign policy tendency unique to China.⁴⁷² In a study conducted of the frequency with which actors are referred to as great or rising powers in Chinese discourse, the EU was mentioned only 8.5 percent of the time.⁴⁷³ Zeng shows that when

⁴⁶⁴ J. Fox and F. Godement, *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, (2009).

⁴⁶⁵ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴⁶⁶ Zhimin Chen, "China, the European Union and the Fragile World Order," (2016): 779.

⁴⁶⁷ Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter?" (2017): 1173.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1173.

⁴⁶⁹ Jolyon Howorth, "EU Global Strategy in a Changing World," (2016): 389

⁴⁷⁰ Jolyon Howorth, "EU Global Strategy in a Changing World," (2016): 389.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 389.

⁴⁷³ Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, "China's 'new Type of Great Power Relations,'" *International Affairs*, (2016): 793.

considering global issues, it is not uncommon for China to neglect differentiating between the EU as a unit, individual member states, or Europe as an undefined, ambiguous entity.⁴⁷⁴ To some degree, this can be attributed to a general lack of understanding, but also the structural opacity of the EU and how it presents itself at the international level.

Ultimately, a significant gap exists between China's expectations of the EU and the EU's capacity to meet these expectations. From the perspective of China, the European bloc has failed to demonstrate potential.⁴⁷⁵ Further, expanding Chinese strategic interests have prompted the state to shift towards increasingly complex diplomacy – potentially losing sight of the EU en route.⁴⁷⁶ For these reasons, EU relations with other global powers in general, and China in particular, reveal a complicated dynamic of interaction, expectations, perception, and overall understanding.⁴⁷⁷ These narratives shed light on limitations of the EU to function as an effective global power.

With Regard to Power Transition and the China-US Dynamic

The following section speculates on the potential role a limited EU could play in managing growing US-China hegemonic tension. This emergent power transition dynamic certainly offers opportunities for Europe, but ultimately leads to new and unpredictable challenges for the future of global order.⁴⁷⁸ From the Chinese perspective, Zeng speculates that Brussels will eventually be excluded from US-China discourse entirely.⁴⁷⁹ As tensions in the South China Sea continue to represent an arena of political and military power, critical economic and security concerns of the EU will soon become threatened. Despite this, EU action in the region thus far has been uncoordinated, hesitant, and feeble.⁴⁸⁰ Relative to regional concerns, Brussels does not consider tensions between the US and China in the Asia-Pacific an immediate threat.⁴⁸¹ As economic ties between China and Europe deepen, however, it would be incredibly irresponsible of the EU to perpetuate this norm and continue acting with such ambivalence. At the very least, and with respect to the historical precedence of the US pivot to Asia, the EU must develop a security strategy concerning the Asia-Pacific moving forward. It is consequential of this reluctance that Brussels is

⁴⁷⁴ Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter?" (2017): 1171.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1167.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1173.

⁴⁷⁷ Jolyon Howorth, "EU Global Strategy in a Changing World," (2016): 398.

⁴⁷⁸ Richard Maher, "Europe's Response to China's Rise: Competing Strategic Visions," (2017): 134.

⁴⁷⁹ Jinghan Zeng, "Does Europe Matter?" (2017).

⁴⁸⁰ Rem Koretweg, "A Presence Farther East" (2014): 1.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

discredited by some as a “cushion” against mounting US pressure to contain China – thus, only a function of broader, more significant, relations between Beijing and Washington.⁴⁸²

By this notion, however, Europe is presented with the unique opportunity to establish a strategic middle ground, or buffer zone, to counter-weight pressure between these entities. In the context of prevalent cyber warfare, economic trade wars, and artificial intelligence, strategic assertion may enable the European bloc to redeem itself. To this extent, the US may also be able to work alongside European member states to establish collective standards of transparency and policy recommendations in engaging China through “soft” power moving forward. Establishing partnerships and security cooperation with the US in the Asia-Pacific could structurally impede China from facilitating global fragmentation and engaging in threatening behaviour.⁴⁸³ Failure to act in this context only reiterates the regional limitations of Europe to exercise power elsewhere in the world. The conclusive role of the European bloc, however, has yet to be fully determined within this dynamic.

Policy Recommendations and Future Prospects

The following section explores the merit of potential foreign policy initiatives between China and the EU, exclusively, moving forward. Some scholars, such as Christiansen and Maher, are hopeful about prospects for the EU in the context of a rising China.⁴⁸⁴ They do acknowledge, however, the sense of insecurity over how China will exercise leverage in regions beyond its own. In lieu of the current European “hodgepodge” approach to Chinese engagement, there is a multitude of effective strategies that could conversely be adopted.⁴⁸⁵ First and foremost, it is crucial for the EU to identify the most important objectives at stake, the potential threats to these objectives, and what the most strategic foreign policy mechanisms to protect these objectives and advance EU interests are.⁴⁸⁶ Some scholars advocate for an approach of strategic military and political balancing to counteract rising Chinese influence. However, in the context of Europe, China’s rise alone does not pose a fundamental threat to European interests.⁴⁸⁷ Thus, it may be wise to adopt a more integrative approach to future foreign policy and bilateral interaction.

⁴⁸² Jonathan Holslag, "The Elusive Axis," (2011): 308.

⁴⁸³ Richard Maher, "Europe’s Response to China’s Rise: Competing Strategic Visions," (2017): 135.

⁴⁸⁴ Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The Rise of China," (2017): 122.

⁴⁸⁵ Richard Maher, "Europe’s Response to China’s Rise: Competing Strategic Visions," (2017): 133.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

This article is cautiously optimistic about the potential for Europe to mobilize and re-establish its status as a global power in years to come. A crucial step in doing so, arguably, is a re-evaluation of the existing “comprehensive strategic partnership” with China. As stated previously, the EU-China relationship has proven to be the opposite of “comprehensive”, with an emphasis on trade and commercial relations to the detriment of common strategic concerns and security cooperation. This relationship, however, has potential to turn into something more meaningful and tangible in the near future. The framework and intentions of the partnership have already been established on paper. Future steps can thus be undertaken to develop existing mechanisms in practice. The following suggests there is possibility to do so through strategic economic diplomacy and the development of sociopolitical connections.

Europe is uniquely situated in this context with respect to its nature as a hybrid global actor. EU institutions have potential to matter just as much as the will of individual member states, who are playing an increasing role both within Europe and on the world stage, including in Asia to some degree.⁴⁸⁸ An important consideration moving forward is for both entities, the EU and individual member states, to continue perpetuating constructive economic relations with China. Establishing independent foreign policy frameworks that consolidate respective bilateral interests with China is invaluable, however, these interests should not consequentially undermine institutions of the EU. This is a contradictory dynamic that has recurrently impeded the ability of the EU to command legitimacy and establish global clout. As Chinese action in the South China Sea continues to threaten the economic interests of EU member states, as well as the international norms that the EU embodies, increased collaboration within the EU in relation to strategic engagement in the Asia-Pacific is imperative. The EU and individual member states should act in solidarity and work together to ensure both individual and collective European interests with regards to China and in the Asia-Pacific are met, instead of working at the direct expense of one another.⁴⁸⁹

Further, the EU should prioritize strategic “starting points” to establish broader and deeper relations with China moving forward, in the sense of focusing on existing footholds to capitalize and build upon the global position it has already established. Environmental concerns, as well as

⁴⁸⁸ Michael Smith, "EU-China Relations and the Limits of Economic Diplomacy," *Asia European Journal*, (2014): 39.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

economic and commercial relations are excellent examples of this dynamic. As a response to ongoing challenges in the China-EU relationship, the EU should strengthen existing economic diplomacy to its direct advantage. Establishing comprehensive deliberation, representation, communication, and negotiation in economic terms will enable the EU to maximize its gains in an area of pre-established strength, which could be further extended to other domains. Economic diplomacy has long been a foreign policy mechanism of the EU, for example through enforcing sanctions on countries against human rights violations or for humanitarian purposes. It is, however, one that has not been exercised in the context of Chinese relations.⁴⁹⁰ The EU does not publicize China's poor human rights record, but has rather chosen to separate this conflict of values from existing trade relations.⁴⁹¹ Re-evaluating the potential of strategic economic diplomacy within the EU, and amongst member states, represents a potential starting point for broader engagement and the re-assertion of European legitimacy. Doing so may shed light on the potential for dialogue of a long-term free trade agreement in the future.⁴⁹² Economic diplomacy also represents a means to understand the China-EU relationship more deeply, and restructure it, if need be.

Inherent to the China-EU relationship are unavoidable issues of trust and misunderstanding. China is a characteristically enigmatic global power that often contrasts with the norms and values promoted by the EU. Though difficult to achieve, developing a collectively transparent and mutual understanding would alter this dynamic in many meaningful ways. Doing so would eliminate the tendency of either actor to define global interests through the lens of their own narrative.⁴⁹³ Transcending this impediment, even minimally, is a crucial step in consolidating the potential of future relations. Establishing trust identifies additional potential for a "soft" EU influence on Chinese domestic policy through social relations and structures.⁴⁹⁴ Both actors would thus be able to establish mutual expectations and perceptions of one another – stream-lining the future of foreign policy. It is important to acknowledge that mistrust is an inherent characteristic of most bilateral global relationships, and extremely difficult to overcome. Nonetheless, doing this wields enormous potential in the China-EU context.

Conclusive Sentiments

⁴⁹⁰ Richard Maher, "The Elusive EU–China Strategic Partnership," (2016).

⁴⁹¹ Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The Rise of China," (2017): 129.

⁴⁹² Hannah Levinger and Syetarn Hansakul, "China and the EU," (2016): 56.

⁴⁹³ Michael Smith, "EU-China Relations and the Limits of Economic Diplomacy," (2014): 41.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

This article has argued that the rise of China has ultimately shed light on the collective limitations of the EU to act as a strategic global power. China and the EU share limited compatibility of interests beyond economic and commercial ties, have established an entirely ineffective “strategic partnership” in practice and project contradictory normative premises of how to conduct international relations in the global sphere. In addition, the EU is increasingly debilitated by a crisis of internal and external legitimacy, which hampers its ability to project power beyond its immediate regional vicinity. These variables have functioned together to impede the EU’s status as a global power, and undermine its strategic potential in the context of a rising China. There is hope for redemption, but the EU must first be willing to consolidate these matters by focusing on strategic areas of existing relations. Ultimately, the potential benefit of a strategic Europe engaging China more constructively and effectively will only increase, at a time of growing major power rivalry. There is immense potential for future discourse if the EU is able to rise to the challenge.

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