

EU-China relations: rhetoric v. (a very different) reality by
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The European Union and China are strategic partners and thus equipped with the instruments and political will to cooperate in international economics, politics, and security. This is how the EU and China officially talk to and about each other since they adopted their so-called “strategic partnership” more than a decade ago. The reality of EU-China cooperation and the results of institutionalized bilateral exchanges, however, are (much) more sobering.

While EU-China institutional exchanges through the so-called bilateral “sectoral dialogues” (currently more than 50 covering 24 areas, including competition policy, civil aviation, market access, intellectual property rights, nuclear energy, food safety, environment, regulatory and industrial policy, trade policy, etc.) are active, many of the problems and controversies covered by the bilateral dialogues have been discussed for years without results or progress. This is especially true for dialogues dealing with issues related to trade and investment such as market access, government procurement, intellectual property rights, and other matters European (and US for that matter) businesses have been complaining about for years. In fact, the list of obstacles European investments in China confront has remained (very) long and unchanging over the years, as the Beijing-based EU Chamber of Commerce reports annually.

While EU and Chinese officials talk up EU-Chinese cooperation in Asian regional security, this is an area where, despite official rhetoric suggesting otherwise, Brussels and Beijing have little or nothing in common. In fact, those who believe the list of achievements on the bilateral trade and investment agenda is (much) shorter than the list of problems should take heart: the list of achievements of actual (as opposed to those on paper only) EU-China cooperation in regional and global security is shorter still. In fact, there is no such latter list and the closest the EU and China have come to cooperating in international security is the multilateral anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia (a mission during which even China and Japan are exchanging data and information). Of course, even if rhetoric at EU-China summits suggests otherwise, a block of democratic countries (more or less) united in an institution founded on the principle of “interference” in each other’s internal affairs (EU) was always going to jointly do very little (if anything) in international politics and security with a non-democratic country insisting on the “principle of non-interference” as the “sacred” principle of its foreign and security policies (China).

In 2010, the EU and China set up an annual dialogue on Asian security. The most recent “EU-China High-level Strategic Dialogue” was held in January 2014 and Brussels among others hoped – very much in vain it turned out – that the dialogue would encourage Beijing to become more transparent about its defense expenditures, military equipment procurement, and sales policies.

When analysts charge that the EU-China strategic dialogue on Asian security is an annual window-dressing event as opposed to a dialogue that produces real results, much less joint policies related to Asian security, EU policymakers typically respond that talking to China on regional security is better than not talking, even if concrete results are not evident. That may be true when taking into account the (more or less obvious) benefits of European dialogue with China on regional security per se, but that is less relevant if European concerns on Chinese regional security policy – such as Beijing’s assertive policies related to territorial claims in the East and South China Seas – are not appreciated or are ignored in Beijing.

The reality of Chinese regional security policy is that Beijing’s readiness to consult with the EU on security issues which fall under what Beijing calls its “core interests” – Taiwan, and Tibet and what Beijing refers to as “territorial integrity” in Asia’s disputed territorial waters – is non-existent. If that is true, and if European views on Chinese security policies are appreciated on paper and at photo opportunities but ignored in the real world, then EU policymakers must ask whether the dialogue on Asian security with China is a waste of time and resources. Instead, the EU should discuss Asian security with like-minded countries such as Japan that share values and approaches to international politics and security with Europeans.

Who other than policymakers in Europe and China is to blame for the discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality of EU-China cooperation in general and in regional security in particular? I also blame European scholars. Of course, not at all of them and not always, but this occurs often enough for Beijing policymakers and scholars to conclude that they have little or nothing to worry about in terms of European “interference” in what China insists are “internal affairs.” When speaking with Chinese colleagues and policymakers at seminars or conferences, few European scholars dare to criticize Chinese foreign and security policy conduct, or Chinese domestic politics, including the shortcomings (or lack thereof) of the protection of human rights, democracy, freedom of speech and expression in China. Those who do are requested to practice what Beijing claims should be “mutual understanding.”

Yet “mutual understanding” Chinese-style is neither “mutual” nor “understanding” in the way that combination of

these two words would suggest. Instead, it is more often than not the Chinese request to (unconditionally) endorse a Chinese version of history and current affairs with China as a victim of Western and Japanese imperialism during what Beijing calls the “Century of National Humiliation” (the 100 years from the Opium Wars in the 1840s until the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949). Those scholars who refuse to sign up to official Chinese interpretations of the past and present of Chinese domestic and foreign policies are accused of not understanding China and its 5,000-year history.

Such Chinese “history lessons” have become a lame exercise imposed on scholars and analysts who have read and written a book or two on China. Of course, not all of Europe’s China scholars and Sinologists are “China apologists” and follow Chinese “advice” to study more before speaking about the Middle Kingdom. However, their readiness to challenge requests to agree when Chinese officials explain why virtually the whole of the South China Sea and a large portion of the East China Sea belong to China has decreased to a level close to zero.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.