

Convergence and divergence between the EU and China

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The EU and China, the first and third largest economies in the world, launched a strategic partnership in 2003. From the onset, this partnership had two main objectives: deepening and broadening cooperation and enhancing bilateral collaboration on a wide range of policy areas at the global level. On the 10th anniversary of the partnership, this special issue seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms, the evolution and current state of EU–China relations, and the divergence and convergence between them on a number of issues. The special issue includes articles setting out the historical and institutional background behind the EU–China partnership, examining their cooperation and problems in the economic, financial, climate change and security fields as well as in relation to third parties. In this way, this special issue covers the most important fields of policy coordination and cooperation between the EU and China.

Furthermore, through the examination of EU–China policy cooperation, the papers try to understand and explain how global governance works in practice and the mechanisms whereby two of the most important global actors coordinate their policies and work together. In addition, this special issue seeks to comprehend the nature of the strategic partnership between the EU and China. Forging strategic partnerships has become increasingly common among international actors. However, such partnerships are often criticised for being devoid of real content. The issue examines how the EU–China strategic partnership works as well as the problems that exist between the two partners.

The special issue begins with Yongjin Zhang's examination of the historical background behind Europe–China relations. He does so by examining the role of Matteo Ricci as a cultural agent, a knowledge broker and a practitioner of public diplomacy in fostering bilateral exchanges 400 years ago and his legacies to enriching bilateral relations in the twenty first century. Zhang argues that Ricci's conception of culture, his wisdom about the power of knowledge and his practice of people-to-people diplomacy would inspire the EU and China in search of a viable strategic partnership.

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In his contribution, David Scott analyses the existing and potential Sino-European cooperation structures. Scott believes that there is a ‘trust deficit’ in EU–China relations. This deficit stems from poor diplomatic coordination and economic asymmetries. Nevertheless, new and more pragmatic dialogue mechanisms can help overcome the trust deficit. The people-to-people High Level Dialogue launched in 2012 can be particularly useful in this respect.

Michael Smith’s article is the first of a group of four contributions—on economic diplomacy, climate change, financial governance and security governance—examining Sino-European relations in the juncture between bilateral and multilateral frameworks. Smith focuses on the economic diplomacy of the EU and how this is exercised in the context of its relations with China. He argues that the EU faces several dilemmas when engaging China at the bilateral and multilateral levels. These seem to be the result of changing dynamics in the international system and the concomitant reconfiguration of Sino-European relations.

In her article, Jing Men analyses policy cooperation between China and the EU in the area of climate change. She examines the respective climate change policies of each of them, as well as the institutional arrangements set up by both Brussels and Beijing. In the case of carbon aviation tax dispute between the EU and China, Men identifies the disagreements between China and the EU, but at the same time, from this dispute results in a shift in Chinese policymaking that promises to lead to a better understanding of the EU and, correspondingly, toward possible global solutions on climate change.

Ramon Pacheco Pardo then focuses on EU–China relations in the area of financial governance. He explains how financial governance structures have been modified as a result of the global financial crisis. A new regime has emerged following this crisis. This new regime is more amenable to China, which has led Beijing to be more actively involved in it. Meanwhile, Sino-European pre-crisis cooperation in the area of global governance has continued in spite of the crisis. At the same time, the nature of this relation has also been modified by the crisis.

In their contribution, David Kerr and Xu Yanzhuo analyse Sino-European security governance cooperation. More specifically, they address the question of whether there is normative convergence between the EU and China in this area. To do so, Kerr and Xu analyse the cases of applying the doctrine of ‘responsibility to protect’ in Sudan and the counter-proliferation policies towards Iran’s nuclear programme. They argue that normative divergences persist. Nonetheless, there is a trend towards certain convergence that can facilitate cooperation between Beijing and Brussels.

In the closing article of this special issue, Patryk Pawlak uses ‘network power’ and ‘network diplomacy’ to conceptualise Sino-European policy interactions. Pawlak explains that the rise of China has led to an important shift in global governance whereby Beijing needs to be included in the resolution of policy conundrums. He analyses interactions between the EU and China in several cases, including policy towards ASEAN and cyber security. Network diplomacy can enhance mutual understanding and cooperation in these and other areas.

In the contributions to this special issue, two issues stand out in EU–China relations. Firstly, the cooperation between them has yet to fulfil its potential. Ten years after the launch of their strategic partnership, a host of dialogues, meetings and other channels have significantly increased the number of contacts between Europeans and Chinese.

But these are insufficient for the two partners to overcome their differences to forge a constructive and meaningful strategic partnership.

Secondly, and on a more positive note, contributors to this special issue note that 10 years after the launch of the strategic partnership, regular contacts between policy-makers and people from both sides help to promote EU-China relations. Cooperation between the EU and China is deepening and widening, and if this trend continues, there will be more policy convergence in the future. .

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