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**White bull, red dragon – EU-China
strategic partnership in the making**

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White bull, red dragon – EU-China strategic partnership in the making

Bonn, 2 June 2009. EU-China relations recently went through troubled times: last year's EU-China summit had been cancelled by the Chinese leadership in protest against a meeting between the French president Sarkozy (then EU-President) and the Dalai Lama. The delayed summit finally took place in Prague on 20 May 2009. This summit served as an opportunity to show that EU-China relations are in the process of reconciliation. Both sides, however, were unable to agree on signing a common statement at the end of the summit, giving clear evidence that differences in bilateral relations are prevailing.

Although European and Chinese interdependence and interaction have been increasing since the Chinese-European strategic partnership was established in 2003, this has not automatically produced political dividends. Indeed, intensifying bilateral relations seem to have translated into an increase of different perceptions and political disagreement. In the wake of the global financial and economic crisis, there is a need to understand the underlying dynamics of conflict that are entrenched in EU-China relations.

The European perspective: Disappointed expectations

During the last years, EU policy makers and the European media have become increasingly critical in their discussion about China. Frustration over relations with China is on the rise. From the European perspective, China's international influence and power is increasing significantly, while China's development seems to be perceived more and more as a challenge rather than as an opportunity.

In Europe, criticism is currently rising with regard to several dimensions: European actors are unsatisfied with the general output of EU-China relations. From the European perspective, major problems such as the high trade deficit, which has increased by more than 50 percent since 2005 to about 170 billion € in 2008, have not been adequately addressed. In addition, criticism targets China's political development. European actors are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that Europe's approach towards China, based on the idea and objective that Europe could influence China's domestic development and China's international behaviour, is not very successful. European scholars also increasingly criticise Europe's foreign policy making towards China and call for reforms. To put it briefly: The EU-China strategic partnership is falling short of European expectations.

The Chinese perspective: Critical towards demands

From the Chinese perspective, relations to Europe look more positive and are overall regarded as moving into a positive direction. Beijing sees the EU as an increasingly important international actor, even though the power and influence of the EU certainly differs between various policy areas. Depending on different degrees of communitarisation in trade, development or foreign and security policy, the EU is seen primarily as an economic and technological power.

Although the EU has not changed its position on issues of importance to Beijing, such as the lifting of the arms embargo or granting Market Economy Status to China, and despite ups and



downs in bilateral relations since 2003, frustrations on the Chinese side derive less from output of bilateral relations. Much more so, the increase of European expectations with regard to China's contributions to and responsibility in international relations are becoming a critical issue. From the Chinese perspective, rising European expectations are regarded as unfair and overly demanding, since they do not take into account that China is still in a difficult phase of its own development and that China is taking responsibilities within its limited capacities. Chinese policy makers and scholars are frustrated by changing European perceptions that construe China more in terms of a challenge. In addition, Chinese policy-makers feel that the country is sometimes unfairly used as a scapegoat for various political issues raised in national discourses within EU Member States.

Current difficulties of EU-China relations: primarily a European problem?

Arguably, Europe and China have different expectations with regard to EU-China relations and they have different perceptions of the current state of bilateral relations. Europe, however, seems to have a bigger problem with EU-China relations. How does this come about?

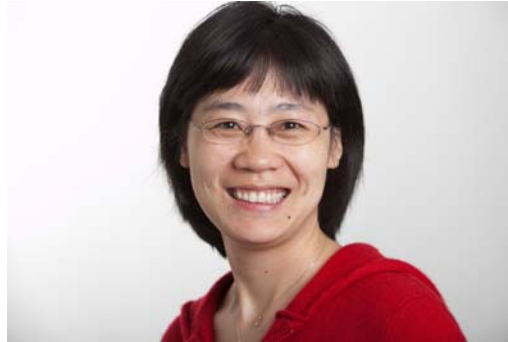
Europe and China constitute two different types of actors in international relations. Against the background of its historical evolution and integration process, the EU seeks to be a normative power and a "post-modern actor". The EU aims at diffusing the experiences from the integration process in her foreign relations: she is pushing for regional integration, e.g. in Asia or Africa, and subscribes to the principles of 'effective multilateralism' in international relations, as put forward in the European Security Strategy, including the promotion of human rights and democracy. At the same time, the EU also has traditional economic and security interests and is struggling to reconcile them with the aspiration of being a normative power. China, however, is a rather classical nation-state and the Chinese leadership adopts mainly a realistic and rather traditional perspective on international relations. While China declares that it is generally favourable of multilateralism in international relations, it is still reluctant to embrace other dimensions of "effective multilateralism". This includes the "rule of international law", at least when it implies a direct impact on the sovereignty of the nation state, thus hurting one of China's core foreign policy principles.

The fact that the EU and China are very different actors in international relations generates different types of interests in bilateral relations and EU-China relations challenge respective foreign policy-making to different degrees: The EU needs China not only with regard to economic and security interests, but also in order to promote and implement its conceptions of international relations. China, parting turn, primarily has economic and technological interests in EU-China relations. However, it does not necessarily need the EU for promoting a conception of its views on international relations.

Current difficulties of EU-China relations, therefore, seem to be very much European ones: European engagement with China is a test for the ability of the EU to engage in international relations alongside its visions. Failure would question the success of the European conception of foreign relations. This, finally, presents the EU with the question, if and to what extent Europe is ready to make concessions in the application of its fundamental principles and values and



emphasise more the “realpolitik” side of its policy. Improvement of EU-China cooperation will therefore not only need a deeper understanding of the positions of the partner, but the EU itself will have to make progress in designing its foreign relations.



By Christine Hackenesch and Dr. Jin Ling.