

EU-China security relations

by Marcin Zaborowski

Until recently European security planners had little to say about and indeed not much interest in China. The People's Republic was primarily regarded as the cradle of an ancient and rich culture, a place where Europeans liked to travel and, latterly, make money, taking advantage of the country's economic dynamism. Considering China's place and its role in the global security system was more or less left to the Americans, with the Europeans following Washington's lead. This has changed to the point that most of the recent European policy papers and bilateral EU-China summits place security at the heart of the relationship. In the meantime, it has also become clear that the European and American security perspectives on China are not identical and indeed that they are increasingly divergent. Two developments are responsible for this change: the continuing development of the EU as a global security actor and the expansion of China's interests into the areas (Africa, Middle East) which overlap with the European security interests.

This paper deals with the European perspective on the relationship's security aspects. It looks first at the most essential aspects of bilateral Sino-European relations and then at their transatlantic implications.

EU-China: closer partners, growing responsibilities

The EU and China agreed to form a strategic partnership in 2003. At this point in time the EU came to the conclusion that China's rise was an enduring process and major phenomenon, which would change the nature of the international system. Rather than object to the inevitable, the EU decided in favour of embracing the process, engaging China and influencing its strategic culture through dialogue and cooperation. Of course, the EU continued to have a number of concerns about China's international posture and especially about cross-strait relations and China's relations with Japan – traditionally a close partner of the EU. On the other hand, with US unilateralism in the background, China's international behaviour did not appear uncooperative or irresponsible. Whilst retaining its differences China was open to discussion and often agreed (or abstained from voting) with the western powers at the United Nations. Like most European countries, China opposed the war in Iraq, although, unlike France, it did not threaten to use its veto power at the Security Council. In 2004 in a landmark decision China agreed to send its peacekeepers to Haiti, hence overcoming its traditional opposition to intervening in other countries.

Both the Europeans and the Chinese talked about a pluralistic international system and the fact that this meant different things to both parties was not yet apparent at the time. In 2003 the expansion of the Chinese presence in Africa and the Middle East was only beginning, as was the process of China's military modernisation, neither of which caused much concern in Europe at the time. As a result, security issues were either absent or certainly not at the forefront of European considerations when embarking on the strategic partnership with Beijing in 2003. The same was true for the initial European decision to lift its embargo on arms exports to China. The subsequent reversal of the EU decision on this issue was largely motivated by the fact that the strategic implications of the move began to filter into the calculations of European policy-makers.

Three years after the landmark 2003 agreement, the EU decided on a major revision of its China policy. This time, it is clear that security had become one of the top factors motivating EU's China policy, a trend which is likely to continue in the future. Security-related aspects of the EU's three most important documents (the Commission Communication of 24 November 2006, the Finnish Presidency's EU Council Conclusions of 11-12 December 2006 and the Joint Statement of the Ninth EU-China Summit of 9 September 2006) fall into four categories: Security governance, energy security, East Asia and China's defence policy. They are discussed below:

1) *Global governance*

The overall tone of the EU's recent China policy papers unmistakably suggests that Brussels expects and calls for a greater contribution by Beijing towards the maintenance of international stability. A few years ago the EU's comments on China's global role were limited to commending Beijing's re-entry into the international system and its overall cooperative posture at the UN. This time, however, the expectations of the EU have grown, with Brussels saying that as one of the major world powers, whose global importance will only continue to increase, it is essential that China takes a greater share of responsibility. The EU also argues that China has clearly benefited from its integration into the international system and that global stability remains essential for China's economic development and its security interests. What concrete steps and policy posture is the EU calling for here? They fall into the following categories:

- Strengthening the role of the UN, other international organisations and regimes. Embracing a genuine commitment to international law and multilateralism. The Chinese tend to replace multilateralism with multipolarity and arguing in favour of a more pluralistic international system – both of which are greeted with unease by the Europeans.¹ Multipolarity has clearly negative connotations for most Europeans who associate it with the balance of power politics of the 19th and early 20th century. In the European mind 'multilateralism' (which the Europeans promote) means the rule of international law whilst 'multipolarity' means the rule of a few big, powerful states and perennial instability. The prospect of a more pluralistic international system is also greeted with ambivalence in Europe and especially by those who do not question their reliance on the American security protection.
- Enhancing cooperation on non-proliferation. The EU cooperates with China on non-proliferation on the basis of the Joint Declaration issued at the 2004 EU-China summit. The EU expressed its appreciation of the role China played in reaching the six-party agreement in February 2007, which may pave the way towards the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. The EU also compliments China's role in resolving the nuclear issue in Iran, although it is well known that Beijing rejects the EU's call for more assertive action *vis-à-vis* Tehran. It is against the background of the Iranian and North Korean contexts that the EU urges China to promote global compliance with the non-proliferation regime. Brussels also calls for the strengthening of the WMD-related materials and technologies. This provision alludes to China's cooperation with Iran as well as some African states.

2) *Energy security*

The EU has watched the expansion of China's energy demand with growing unease. As EU documents have noted over the last few years, China has become the world's second energy

¹ For example, see 'China's EU Policy Paper', 13 October 2003.

consumer and it is on its way to overtaking the US as the biggest consumer of world's energy resources. This is, of course, a natural consequence of China's economic development, which in itself is welcomed by the EU. However, the following aspects of China's energy policy cause some concern in the EU:

- China invests in some energy-rich 'states of concern', for example in Iran, Sudan, Burma/Myanmar, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, whilst ignoring the nature of political leadership there. Refraining from interfering in other states' internal affairs is a longstanding cornerstone of China's foreign policy, but in this case its posture directly undermines whatever leverage the EU could have in promoting reforms in these countries.
- China's overseas investors seeking to secure long-term and exclusive contracts. Almost all Chinese energy companies remain state-owned or state-controlled and their investment plans are heavily influenced by the government's calculations rather than expectations of profitability. In the view of the EU, these practices often run against the principles of the open market and free competition as well as contributing to the increase in energy prices.
- The environment. There is no doubt that China's economic development and its dynamically growing energy consumption are posing an environmental challenge and are among main factors contributing to global warming. According to some experts, whilst the US remains the world's primary polluter, in some areas (acid rain, particles and toxic metals) China has already 'caught up' with the US.² The recent EU documents emphasise the need to enhance cooperation with Beijing over the reduction of emissions and promotion of clean energy.

3) East Asia

The EU commends China for its role in promoting regional integration and for the improvement in relations with India as well as for being a taming influence on North Korea. The EU has expressed some concern about China's relations with Japan, noting recent tensions and arguing in favour of stronger diplomatic engagement. However, Brussels recognises that history divides these two neighbours and that Japan has not been as forthcoming with regard to settling these past differences as it might have been.

Most importantly, however, Brussels is clearly concerned about the state of cross-strait relations, fearing a possible escalation of tensions, especially during the forthcoming election year in Taiwan. The EU always stresses its commitment to the One China policy but it strongly opposes forceful ways of achieving unification. China's threat of the use of force was in the view of the EU advanced by the mainland's passing of the anti-secessionist law, which was one of the main factors motivating the reversal of the EU decision to lift arms embargo on China. But the EU has also warned Taipei against pursuing any measures that could unilaterally change the existing status quo, such as a declaration of independence.

² Philip Andrew-Speed, 'China's energy policy and its contribution to international stability', in Marcin Zaborowski (ed.), 'Facing China's Rise: Guidelines for an EU Strategy', *Chaillot Paper* no. 94, December 2006, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris.

4) China's defence policy

The modernisation and the growth of China's Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) does not raise the same concern in the EU as it does in the US. The EU recognises that China's rise must inevitably be reflected in the military and defence spheres. However, whilst the growth of China's military spending does not alarm the Europeans, Brussels is increasingly concerned about the lack of transparency in this process. In particular, the EU is sceptical about the actual level of the PLA's budget (assessed by the Pentagon as two or three times higher than official figure) and its military objectives. Consequently, the EU has taken steps to develop its capacity to assess the PLA and China's defence policy.

Transatlantic implications

The China factor has begun to figure in transatlantic relations following the EU's debate on ending its arms embargo. At the moment the EU's decision on the embargo has been delayed and it does not seem likely that the matter will be resolved any time soon, although in its recent conclusions the EU Council has reasserted that it would work towards ending the restrictions.³ Still, the United States remains staunchly opposed to any policy change on the embargo and the EU is concerned about making a move that could undermine the post-Iraq transatlantic *rapprochement*. However, the importance of transatlantic considerations in this decision seems exaggerated if not misjudged. After all, America's other close allies Israel and Australia are selling arms to China, which so far has not led to any major friction in Washington's relations with these states.⁴

Whilst the arms embargo has been the focus of the transatlantic debate on China, there is no doubt that the significance of this issue has been blown out of proportion. In reality, on the majority of issues concerning East Asia the positions of the EU and the US are very close. For example, like the US the EU has an interest in the peaceful resolution of the Taiwanese issue and in preventing instability in East Asia. Equally, like the US the EU is concerned about the link between China's energy investment and its lenient attitude towards Iran, Sudan and other states of concern.

However, whilst similar, the interests of the EU and the US *vis-à-vis* China are not always identical. Most importantly, unlike the US the EU is not militarily present in East Asia and it does not represent an element of the balance of power in the region. As argued above, China's military modernisation bothers the US to a much greater extent than it does the EU, which tends to see it as a natural consequence of the PRC's growing international status. The US debate remains focused on the rapid growth in China's defence spending, but the Europeans point out that even if China spends twice as much as it declares (\$ 35 billion) this is still a small fraction of the Pentagon's nearly \$500 budget.

It is clear that Europeans do not always share America's security assessment in the region, in particular they are not willing to participate in the China 'hedging' strategy. As the EU further develops its foreign policy role and its political presence in East Asia grows, it is perhaps inevitable that, although minor at the moment, some transatlantic differences of perspectives in East Asia will become more apparent and perhaps more consequential in terms of policy. It is however far more important that both Europe and the US share the view that a stable, prosperous and internationally responsible China is in their common interest.

³ See point 13 of the Council Conclusions, Brussels, 11-12 December 2006.

⁴ According to Dan Blumenthal (China expert in the conservative American Enterprise Institute), after Russia Israel is the second biggest exporter of weapons to China; see: Blumenthal, 'Providing Arms. China and the Middle East'. See also: Israel Authorises Resumption of Military Exports to China, *Atlantic News*, 7 March 2006.