Future Imperfect:
The European Union’s Encounter with China (and the United States)

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ABSTRACT There has been much talk in recent years about an emerging EU-China axis that challenges the United States in a new strategic triangle. The EU-China strategic partnership, which was declared in 2003, suggests that both sides are gaining global influence as a new kind of superpower that seeks to avoid the bloody conflict that characterized the Cold War. Rather than discuss the contours of this new geopolitical axis, this essay argues that EU-China relations are shifting the meaning of security in an emerging arena of global symbolic politics. It analyzes the symbolic politics of EU-China relations through a close reading of two sets of documents: (1) official policy papers from the European Commission and the PRC’s State Council, and (2) European think-tank working papers on China policy. It argues that these documents write the narrative of EU-China relations in ways that limit discussion to a specific narrow range of topics. After outlining Europe’s approach to the rise of China, it examines how language politics guides China’s engagement with the EU. Then it explores how European think tanks follow the concept of ‘Europeanization’ to frame both how the EU seeks to transform China, and how China policy can help transform the EU. This shows how the rhetorical form of often ambiguous official pronouncements is key in the construction of the content of EU-China relations. The essay concludes that although EU-China relations are getting stronger, predictions of an EU-China axis are over-blown in the sense of being an action to be completed sometime in the indefinite future – ‘future imperfect’. Yet while EU-China relations are unlikely to construct a shared sense of a Eurasian self, the major legacy of recent EU-China ties is likely to be found in the negative identity politics of creating the US as the shared Other. This new global symbolic politics will have a serious impact on the US’s concrete relations with China and the EU.

KEY WORDS: EU-China relations, symbolic politics, strategic triangle, Europeanization

The Emergence of EU-China Relations

There has been much talk in recent years about an emerging EU-China axis that threatens to challenge the United States (US) in a new strategic triangle. Indeed, in 2003 the European Commission and China’s State Council both stressed how they want to develop a ‘strategic partnership’ that expands from their strong economic ties to address political and military issues in regional and world affairs. Scholars and think tanks in Europe and China are likewise busy creating a new field of study – EU-China relations – to explore the problems and possibilities of this new strategic relationship.

To many, this is a natural and logical extension of the relationship that the EU and China have developed since they normalized relations in 1975, which in turn builds on ties that China and key European states – especially Germany, France and the United Kingdom (UK) – have had for decades. The broadening and deepening of EU-China relations is seen as more than a new bilateral tie: it is taken by each side as evidence that they are becoming superpowers with comprehensive global influence that goes far beyond their present importance as economic superpowers. Importantly, the EU and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) see themselves as a different kind of superpower that

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1This essay has benefited from comments from Mark Aspinwall, Sumalee Bumroongsook and Jean-Pierre Cabestan. Research for this essay was supported by a European Commission Asia-Link grant (ASI/B7-301/98/679-04).
3This is done through international conferences such as the one mentioned above, the research agenda of new think tanks such as the Brussels International Centre for China Studies that was established in 2006, and through special issues on EU-China relations in key journals like the *China Quarterly*, No. 169 (2002), 1–203.
seeks to avoid the bloody conflict that characterized Cold War geopolitics.

The expansion of ties between the EU and China hence legitimize both sides in their domestic and international politics because the new relations reaffirm each side’s image of itself and the Other: talk of a strategic partnership aids the EU’s project of crafting the image of Europe as a ‘civilian power’, and it helps the PRC to construct a view of China as a non-hegemonic superpower. Against the backdrop of the War on Terror, these idealized images of a new harmonious style of global politics are striking. Indeed, Robert Kagan’s argument that ‘Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus’ also applies to relations with China: against US suspicion of China’s rise, Europe has been downright enthusiastic.

Discussion of an EU-China axis and a new strategic triangle came to a head between 2003 and 2005 because a series of events suggested that the US was moving in a different direction from the EU and China. Because of the US/UK invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing insurgency, the EU and China increasingly understood the Bush administration’s unilateral policies as a geopolitical problem. At the same time, the peaceful deepening and broadening of the EU presented ‘Europe’ as a different model of international politics: in January 2002 the Euro currency was launched, in May 2004 the EU successfully expanded to embrace its former Cold War enemies in Eastern Europe, and in October 2004 the Union formally endorsed the European Constitution that would, among other things, turn the EU into a strong global actor with a single foreign minister who could pursue a more coherent Common Foreign and Security Policy. Since 2003, Beijing’s new Fourth Generation Leadership has deepened China’s engagement with the world by pursuing a multilateral diplomacy that stresses its peaceful rise within the international system.

The comprehensive enthusiasm for EU-China relations faced its first test in 2004–05 when the European Commission (EC) sought to lift the arms embargo that Europe had placed on the PRC in the wake of the June 4th massacre in 1989. China saw the embargo as an insulting Cold War relic, while France and Germany argued strongly that after 15 years the embargo was an anachronism. Both sides framed the embargo as more of a symbolic issue than a strategic concern: the PRC said that it was not interested in buying more and better military arms from Europe, while the EU guaranteed that if and when the embargo was lifted there would not be a qualitative or quantitative increase in European arms sales to China. With this caveat in mind, in December

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2004 the European Council decided that the EU would work towards lifting the arms embargo in early 2005, which China took as a formal commitment for lifting the embargo. But due to criticism from many quarters – including EU member states, the European Parliament, the US and Japan – the campaign to lift the embargo ran aground in early 2005. After China’s National People’s Congress passed the Anti-Secession Law in March 2005, which threatened Taiwan with military invasion, most of the EU’s embargo-lifting enthusiasm had drained away. Years after it was promised as a way of addressing both Chinese and US concerns, the Code of Conduct for European arms sales is still on the drawing board.

While many see the arms embargo controversy as evidence of an emerging strategic triangle between the EU, China and the US, this essay will take a different perspective on EU-China relations. Rather than discussing the contours of this new strategic geopolitical tie, which has been admirably done elsewhere, in this essay I will examine how EU-China relations can help us understand how the meaning of security is shifting in the emerging arena of global symbolic politics. Rather than understanding security in terms of objective threats, this essay will follow those who argue that ‘[d]anger not an objective condition; it is not a thing that exists independently of those to whom it may become a threat . . . . danger is an effect of interpretation’. Instead of calculating threats in terms of the hard power of material measures of economic growth and military strength, this essay will examine how EU-China relations are emerging through a symbolic politics that links identity with security. Indeed, prominent American and European security analysts agree that it is important to consider the symbolic politics of EU-China relations, while key European think tanks argue that EU member states need to frame China policy around a ‘shared narrative’.

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10Stanley Crossick, Fraser Cameron, and Axel Berkofsky, EU-China Relations: Towards a Strategic Partnership (EPC working paper, Brussels: European Policy Centre, July 2005), 36, 38.
This essay will analyze the symbolic politics of EU-China relations through a close reading of two sets of documents: (1) official policy papers from the European Commission and the PRC’s State Council, and (2) European think-tank working papers on China policy. While most analysts treat these documents as sources of objective ‘facts’ to describe the EU-China relationship, this essay will analyze how these documents creatively shape the debate about China and EU-China relations. It will argue that they actively employ the narrative of EU-China relations in ways that limit discussion to a specific narrow range of topics. The second section will explore recent developments in EU-China relations through considering both sides’ official policy papers. After outlining Europe’s approach to the rise of China, it will examine how language politics guides China’s engagement with the EU. The third section then will explore how European think tanks follow the concept of ‘Europeanization’ to frame both how the EU seeks to transform China, and how China policy can help transform the EU. Hence while the second section examines how the PRC uses language politics to influence the EU’s China policy, the third will consider how the EU uses identity politics to Europeanize China. In this way we will see how the rhetorical form of often ambiguous official (and semi-official) pronouncements is key in the construction of the content of EU-China relations.

EU-China relations certainly are here to stay, and are getting stronger. But the essay will conclude that predictions of an EU-China axis are over-blown; the strategic partnership is best understood as an action to be completed sometime in the indefinite future: namely, ‘future imperfect’. As Europe and China are coming to understand, a maturing relationship needs to get beyond a mutual charm offensive that celebrates the ‘shared values’ of ‘ancient civilizations’ to appreciate the important differences within and between Europe and China. Thus one of the legacies of this growth spurt in EU-China relations will not be the construction of a shared sense of Eurasian self; the result of

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11This essay also draws on interviews with European diplomats and think-tank analysts, as well as my own experience as a participant in many EU-China activities over the past ten years, most notably as the director of a three year EC-funded project (2002–05) that built a network of European and Chinese scholars. Because they discuss sensitive issues, I have anonymized interview citations.


recent activity is more likely to be found in the negative identity politics of creating the US as the shared Other. This new symbolic politics will impact a range of political, economic and military issues.

**Official Policy Papers: Strategic Language Politics**

Under the shadow of the US-UK invasion of Iraq in March 2003, which was leading to an insurgency by summer 2003, both the EU and China published very hopeful documents in autumn 2003 about their policies towards each other: ‘A Maturing Partnership – Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China relations’ from Brussels and ‘China’s EU Policy Paper’ from Beijing. These reports demonstrate how, in the words of a European think-tank analyst, ‘EU-China relations have never been better. At least this is what officials and diplomats in both Brussels and Beijing have been telling each other and anyone who cares to listen to them…’.15

The EU’s close relations with China are based on strong trade and investment ties with Germany, France and the UK, which have grown to include close cultural ties as well: 2004 was the Year of China in France. Germany was very active in guiding the EU’s China policy in the early 1990s, and France has been very influential since 1995. Indeed, the EU’s development of close relations with Beijing has followed closely in the wake of France’s own national policy: in 1997 France established a ‘comprehensive partnership’ with China, and in 1998 the EU followed suit. In 2003 the EU proposed a strategic partnership, while in early 2004 France established a comprehensive strategic partnership with China.17

Like in the US, there was a delicate balance between political and economic issues, between criticizing China’s human rights record and conquering the mythical Chinese market. As the EU took on more responsibility for China policy in Europe, a division of labor developed: after 1996, the EC concentrated on touchy issues like human rights through a bilateral dialogue, leaving member state governments free to pursue profitable economic ties. In this way, the development of a China policy was part of important shift in Europe’s attention from an

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15Axel Berkofsky, ‘EU-China Relations – Strategic Partnership or Partners of Convenience’, German Foreign Policy in Dialogue 6/6 (23 June 2005), 14.
16See Möller, ‘Diplomatic Relations and Mutual Strategic Perceptions’.
exclusive inward focus on European integration to consider the EU’s relationship with the wider world.\textsuperscript{18} The EU’s project of engaging China thus is part of the elaboration of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) through reaching out to other regions: Africa, Asia, Latin America. The proposal for a ‘strategic partnership’ with China is one aspect of the EC’s ‘European Security Strategy’ (December 2003), which states that ‘we should look to develop strategic partnerships, with Japan, China, Canada and India as well as with all those who share our goals and values, and are prepared to act in their support’.\textsuperscript{19}

The EU’s China policy paper also asserts a more comprehensive global role for the EU and China. It declares that the EU is important beyond economics and trade: ‘the world community expects the EU to play a role which is commensurate with its size and importance... on issues of global security and other global concerns. These expectations will grow further as the EU enlarges [in 2004], and streamlines its constitutional structures.’\textsuperscript{20} The policy paper likewise recognizes that ‘China is an increasingly important global player’ whose foreign policy is ‘progressively more proactive and constructive’ in global and regional affairs.\textsuperscript{21} The EU thus ‘expects China to contribute to global stability by gradually taking on more responsibility commensurate with its political and economic weight, both in the bilateral and multilateral context’.\textsuperscript{22} Hence the EC argues that the EU and China ‘have a clear interest in working together as strategic partners on the international scene... to safeguard and promote sustainable development, peace and stability.’\textsuperscript{23}

While China’s international role is important to the EU, the Union’s main focus is on the former’s domestic society and politics: ‘the stability and development of China itself is a key concern also of the EU’.\textsuperscript{24} Because Brussels feels it has a ‘major political and economic stake in supporting China’s successful transition to a stable, prosperous and open country that fully embraces democracy, free market principles and the rule of law... [I]t should do its utmost to support China’s transition and reform processes’.\textsuperscript{25} The EC policy paper thus states that China

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 7, 8.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 6, 3.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 3, 7.
should ‘exploit to the full’ the EU’s experience of successfully adapting the socio-economic systems of the formerly socialist accession countries in Eastern and Central Europe.\footnote{Ibid., 7.} The policy paper thus is very positive and optimistic; it recognizes that China’s reforms have dramatically opened up its economy and society. It states that the EU can help China to be even more successful in its transition to an open economy and society, and thus better live up to its World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments and improve its human rights situation.

To accomplish these goals, the 2003 policy paper reaffirms that ‘dialogue and cooperation’ – rather than confrontation and containment – ‘should continue to constitute the main EU approach’.\footnote{Ibid., 13.} The document outlines ways to further integrate and institutionalize the EU-China bilateral relationship through cooperation on global security (weapons of mass destruction, non-proliferation/disarmament, arms controls, terrorism) and human security (the environment, illegal immigration and human trafficking, public health).\footnote{For an evaluation of these policies see Bailes and Wetter, ‘EU-China Security Relations’.} Moreover, the policy paper proposes that EC aid programs include projects that encourage the development of civil society in China.\footnote{EC, ‘A Maturing Partnership’, 14–15.} While supporting the PRC’s economic reform and further integration into the global economy, the paper recommends that the EU reinforce sectoral dialogues (on intellectual property rights, energy, environment, food safety, etc.) to make sure that China is living up to its WTO commitments, as well as promote cooperation in scientific research, most notably through China’s participation in the development of the Galileo satellite navigation system.\footnote{Ibid., 19–20.} The EC’s aid program for China (2002–06) committed over €271 million (approx. $343 million) to support social and economic reform, environmental protection and sustainable development, and good governance and the rule of law.\footnote{Ibid., 21.}

The EU’s symbolic recognition of China as a great power and its elaborate material aid program serve not only to help that country, but to achieve the EC’s goal of ‘raising the EU’s profile in China’, which in turn legitimizes the Union as a major global actor. To accomplish these objectives, the policy paper states that the EU needs to better coordinate policy-making and have more continuity in implementation.
It is important for the EU to ‘coordinate Member States’ policies toward China . . . so that the EU speaks with a single voice’.32

China’s EU Policy Paper

The State Council of the PRC responded quickly to the EC’s ‘A Maturing Partnership’ with its own strategic policy paper on the European Union, which as both sides recognized, was China’s first ever policy paper for bilateral relations.33 Indeed, one European diplomat stressed that while the content of China’s EU policy paper was unsurprising, the fact that Beijing had formulated a policy and published the paper on Europe was important.34

China’s EU policy paper emerged in the broader context of Beijing’s search for domestic legitimacy through gaining recognition in international society. Before the 1970s, most of Beijing’s diplomatic energy was spent gaining official diplomatic recognition. In Europe, France recognized the PRC in 1964, and other states followed in the 1970s. After gaining this diplomatic recognition, China modeled a series of images of ‘China in the world’, shifting from ‘victim of imperialist aggression’ to ‘responsible great power in a multipolar world’ by the late 1990s.35 To achieve this new global status in a non-threatening way, the PRC embarked on a campaign to enlist other great powers – including Russia, France and the US – in a web of ‘comprehensive strategic partnerships’. This policy’s mixed results – strong partnerships with Russia and France, a weaker one with the US – revealed the problem of asking other countries for partnership – the risk of being rejected by the other partner. Hence in the early 2000s, the PRC elaborated on this strategic partnership policy to craft its ‘peaceful rising’ strategy in autumn 2003.36 Peaceful rising has the same aims as ‘great power diplomacy’ and ‘strategic partnerships’. But the policy is more under Beijing’s control as it is not dependent on explicit recognition from other international actors. The EC’s proposal of a strategic partnership with China thus neatly dovetailed with Beijing’s declaration of ‘peaceful rising’. But now the shoe was on the other foot since China had the power to recognize the EU as a strategic partner – or not.

32Ibid., 7.
33Ibid., 3; PRC, ‘China’s EU Policy Paper’, 1.
34Interview, 16 June 2006.
36Ibid., 764ff.
It is important to understand China’s EU Policy paper in this context where domestic and international politics overlap. While demurring from stating that China is a global power, the policy paper recognizes that ‘[t]he EU is a major force in the world’. Because of its economic power ‘[t]he EU is now a strong and the most integrated community in the world’. Following on from the EC paper, China recognizes that the EU has expanded from being an economic superpower to be an important strategic power: ‘China attaches importance to the [increasing] role and influence of the EU in regional and international affairs’. With ‘the trend towards world multipolarity and economic globalization’, China values how its relation with the EU is ‘growing stronger and more mature’.37

While the EU policy paper stresses positive shared values with China, the PRC document highlights China’s lack of any negative contradictions with the EU: ‘There is no fundamental conflict of interest between China and the EU and neither side poses a threat to the other. However, given their differences in historical background, cultural heritage, political system and economic development level, it is natural that the two sides have different views or even disagree on some issues.’ Any disagreements between the EU and China will be resolved, the policy paper tells us, because the relation is based on equality, mutual trust, mutual benefit and mutual respect.38 Indeed, like the EC paper, the PRC paper stresses the two powers’ common ground in promoting the United Nations (UN), sustainable development, environmental protection, and fighting international terrorism.

The State Council’s EU policy paper is an interesting example of how the party-state employs language – specifically, a set of official phrases (tifa-formulations) – to guide political understanding and action. As Schoenhals explains, ‘By proscribing some formulations and prescribing others, they set to regulate what is being said and what is being written – and by extension what is being done.’39 While this language politics is common in China’s domestic sphere, recently Beijing has been deploying it in a more sophisticated way for foreign audiences. The best example of a diplomatic tifa-formulation is ‘peaceful rising-heping jueqi’, which appeared in 2003, and dominated China’s explanations of its global role in early 2004. The import of ‘peaceful rising’ does not come from its deep meaning, but from the role it plays

38Ibid., 1–2.
in official language games, which is reinforced through persistent and ever-present repetition. Indeed, Chinese texts do not argue that ‘peaceful rising’ is more persuasive than ‘China threat’ for understanding the rise of China; rather, peaceful rising is presented as an ‘inevitable fact’ while the China threat thesis is dismissed as a ‘malicious fallacy’.40 That peaceful rising could be quickly erased after it fell into disfavour in mid-2004 – only to be replaced by an even blander tifa (peaceful development) – confirms the importance of language politics in Chinese foreign policy.

Beijing’s EU policy paper is interesting because it asserts a new set of official formulations to regulate China’s relations with Europe and Europe’s understanding of China. Although the PRC is wary of the EC’s assertion of ‘shared values’, Beijing’s EU policy paper shows a commitment not only to shared goals but to ‘shared language’. In other words, Beijing engages with EU policies by reflecting and refracting EC formulations in ways that nudge EU-China relations towards China’s policy priorities.

Chinese documents first build confidence in Europe by reflecting the EU’s own terminology back at it in Chinese formulations. Key EU terms like ‘mutual’ and ‘mature’ are redeployed in the PRC document: ‘mutual’ appears, for example, 19 times in the EU document and 26 times in the much shorter Chinese document. At a broader level, the PRC reaffirms its relation with the EU by publishing its white papers soon after the EC documents come out: ‘China’s EU Policy Paper’ was published one month after the EC’s ‘A Maturing Partnership’. China’s white paper on ‘Nonproliferation Policy and Measures’ was published a few weeks after the EC’s ‘European Security Strategy’ in December 2003. The timing – if not the content – of these public documents aims to reassure the EU that it has ‘shared values’ and ‘shared concerns’ with the PRC.

Chinese language politics also comes into play when the PRC wants to shift EU formulations. Rather than directly disagreeing with the EU – and thus risk jeopardizing prospects for strategic partnership – China’s EU policy paper replicates the EC language, but with a slight twist. Curiously, here the State Council is drawing on the tactics of Chinese dissidents to refract EC formulations into Chinese formulations: ‘Only by replicating or mimicking the formal qualities of the discourse of the state can critics of the state make their voices heard.”41 By appealing to

41Schoenhals, Doing Things with Words, 21.
the ambiguity of the EC’s official language, the PRC’s EU policy paper aims to shift the discussion from European concerns to Chinese concerns:

- While the EU ‘shares China’s concerns for a more balanced world order based on effective multilateralism’ and recognizes China’s ‘political objective of promoting a multipolar world governed by multilateral rules’, PRC document states that ‘The trend towards world multipolarity and economic globalization is developing amid twists and turns’. While multilateralism is comprehensive for the EU, it is limited to economics in the Chinese document: ‘multilateral trading regime’.

- While the EU underlines its stake in China emerging as a power that ‘fully embraces democracy, free market principles and the rule of law’, the PRC paper repeats ‘democracy’, but in a way that shifts the meaning from domestic political reform to safeguarding national sovereignty in international space: ‘China will, as always, respect diversity in the world and promote democracy in international relations in the interest of world peace and common development.’

- While the EU’s ‘One China’ policy ‘insist[s] on a resolution of the Taiwan issue through peaceful dialogue’ and its ‘interest in closer links with Taiwan in non-political fields’, the PRC policy paper ‘appreciates EU and its members’ commitment to the one-China principle’ and insists that ‘EU exchanges with Taiwan must be strictly unofficial and non-governmental’. China insists that the EU should ‘Not to sell to Taiwan any weapon, equipment, goods, materials or technology that can be used for military purposes’.

- While the EU states that it needs to ‘closely monitor developments in the Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions, notably as concerns the maintenance of the rule of law and safeguard of fundamental freedoms and autonomy, as enshrined in their Basic Laws’, the PRC document replies that it encourages and supports the two territories in ‘developing friendly relations and cooperation with the EU in accordance with the principle of “one country, two systems”’, but not if they interfere in China’s domestic affairs.

- While the EU document lists its concerns over human rights in Tibet and Xinjiang and seeks to ‘encourage’ Beijing’s negotiations with the Dalai Lama, the PRC document seeks to ‘Promote the EU’s understanding of Tibet’ by ‘request[ing] that the EU side not to have any contact with the “Tibetan government in exile” or provide facilities to the separatist activities of the Dalai clique’.

Through these sometimes subtle, sometimes aggressive statements, Beijing seeks to guide the discussion from the EU’s priorities to its own
through a refraction of EC language that does not directly challenge EU policy. This is part of both sides’ goal of ‘mutual understanding’: China here is asserting that it is different from Europe, but in a friendly way where such ‘natural’ differences do not lead to serious disagreements because the relationship is founded on ‘mutual respect’. Europeans should come to China to see the situation for themselves – rather than talking to the ‘Dalai clique’, Taiwanese people, or other groups that do not sign up to the ‘One China Principle’. In this way, the PRC consistently feeds its own preferred language into discussions with the EC, hoping that China’s preferred policies will work their way into joint statements. It has been reasonably successful: many German commentators, for example, were frustrated by ‘[t]he complete internalization of Beijing’s line of argument by Chancellor Schroeder’.42

Straying from its strategy of reflecting and refracting EC discourse, the Chinese policy paper ends rather abruptly with a demand: ‘The EU should lift its ban on arms sales to China at an early date so as to remove barriers to greater bilateral cooperation on defense industry and technologies’. Thus while Beijing appreciates the EU aid program, it has a list of its own conditions for forming a strategic partnership: in addition to signing up to the standard Chinese demands (recognize the One-China policy, isolate Taiwan, do not talk to the Dalai Lama), Brussels would have to lift its arms embargo.

The EU’s policy of engaging the PRC as a respected partner has been quite successful domestically in aiding China’s political-economic transformation (and nudging it in a more democratic direction) and internationally by encouraging China to take more global responsibility through multilateral institutions. If anything, the EU’s charm offensive has been too effective in the sense that Beijing now expects not only friendly gestures, but progress on concrete issues. In addition to the symbolic status of being recognized as a global actor, China wants the EU to facilitate its isolation of Taiwan and the Dalai Lama, while also lifting the arms embargo and granting China Market Economy Status (MES) in the WTO. When the plan to lift the embargo failed in 2005 – due to popular opposition in Europe and official criticism from the US and Japan – Beijing was upset at being humiliated on the world stage. After mid-2005 – which also saw the rejection of the European Constitution – the PRC re-evaluated its ‘Europe policy’ to shift some of the focus from the EC back to member states.43 Contrary to the hype about the formation of a new anti-American axis, the main casualty of

43Huo Zhengde, ‘On China-EU Strategic Relationship’, China Institute of International Studies, 7 April 2005. It is noteworthy that this article was translated into English, and is widely cited.
recent EU-China politics was not the US, but France and Germany. The expansion of the EU from 15 to 25 member states in 2004 weakened the influence of the Franco-German axis on EU policy, a new limitation that has lowered the two countries’ standing in Beijing.44

Although a quick reading of EC and PRC policy papers makes many people think that a new ‘strategic partnership’ has been founded, a closer reading shows that the style of these documents is actually aspirational, and analogous to the ‘future perfect’ verb tense. As the epigram tells us, future perfect is ‘A verb tense that expresses action completed by a specified time in the future...’. Both documents stress ‘growing’, ‘developing’, and ‘maturing’ relations, and ‘hopes’ that the integration into an ‘ever closer union’ would continue. Yet the curious thing about the EC and Chinese documents is that although both sides express a hope and desire to develop a ‘strategic partnership’, the meaning of this term and the timing of its foundation have been left very ambiguous. Hence rather than being ‘future perfect’ the strategic partnership is more like ‘future imperfect’, with the timing of the ‘completed action’ postponed into the indefinite future. According to Möller, this is not the exception, but the rule for EU-China relations: they were established in 1975 with each side ‘acknowledging each other’s future international potential... And yet, most mutual expectations were to be frustrated to different degrees’. This cycle of aspiration and frustration continues to spin through a series of joint statements that are ‘high on ambition, but low on content’.45

Think Tanks: Europeanizing China

If the flurry of official policy papers in 2003 was in part motivated by the Iraq War, then a proliferation of major working papers on China from prominent European think tanks in 2005 emerged in a different historical context: (1) a growing sense of transatlantic division, (2) excitement at the broadening of the EU to include 25 members in May 2004, and (3) the prospect of deepening the EU through the European Constitution. European think tanks were especially enthused by the new European Constitution because it would further centralize EU foreign policy-making.

While the EC has hesitated to define more concretely what a ‘fully-fledged strategic partnership’ with China would entail, in mid-2005 two key European think tanks, the European Policy Centre (Brussels)

and the Centre for European Reform (London), stepped into the breach to flesh out the meaning of this ambiguous phrase in their first China policy papers. The EPC working paper is especially clear in what it thinks is important in such a partnership with China. Following on from the EC China policy paper (2003) and the European Security Strategy (2003), EPC states that ‘The EU’s objective is, or should be, to help China to be a peaceful, stable, democratic (although not necessarily in the full western sense), internationally responsible country, internally consensus-seeking and externally multilateral, sharing broadly similar values and goals’. The EPC feels that main goals of the strategic partnership should be:

- to promote mutual understanding
- to promote respect for the rule of law, including human rights
- to increase economic and social sustainability
- to promote regional and global security
- to strengthen international cooperation and global governance

Like the 2003 EC policy paper, this think-tank working paper states that to achieve these objectives and goals, ‘EU members should recognize the importance of speaking to China with a united voice on all issues.’

While the official EC policy papers generally use a bland diplomatic style, think-tank working papers are much more bullish about China and the possibilities for a strong EU-China strategic partnership. Indeed, although the EC documents resist Chinese formulations, the think-tank papers tend to uncritically reproduce the party-state’s tifa: ‘peaceful rising’, ‘national humiliation’, ‘multipolarization’, ‘hegemonism’, and ‘western-style democracy’ are presented as obvious ‘facts’, rather than as a set of issues to be analyzed. Indeed, the EPC working paper, which was funded in part by the EC and presented at the 2nd EU-China Relations Think Tank Roundtable, shows how the reproduction of Chinese policy in semi-official European texts can go beyond

46 A European think tank report on the role of European think tanks states that the EPC and the CER are successful at exerting influence over the European Commission and popular opinion (Stephen Boucher, Europe and its Think Tanks: A Promise to Be Fulfilled (Paris: Notre Europe, Studies and Research No. 35, Oct. 2004), 13, 88).
47 Stanley Crossick, Fraser Cameron, and Axel Berkofsky, EU-China Relations: Towards a Strategic Partnership, EPC working paper (Brussels: European Policy Centre, July 2005); Katinka Barysch with Charles Grant and Mark Leonard, Embracing the Dragon: The EU’s Partnership with China (London: Centre for European Reform, May 2005).
48 EPC, EU-China Relations, 32–3, 6.
repeating formulations to simple plagiarism. The following key passage from the EPC working paper was cut and pasted from ‘China’s EU Policy’ paper:

There is no basic conflict of interest between China and the EU, and neither represents a threat to the other, although their views sometimes diverge, which is understandable given their historical, cultural, political and economic differences.49

The odd convergence of the languages of the Chinese party-state and European think tanks tells us less about shared values than it does about the knowledge politics of ‘mutual understanding’ where Chinese regulate the production and distribution of information about China, and Europeans control the images of Europe.

However, rather than focusing on how the party-state controls Europe’s images of China this section will examine how European think tanks use China policy to pursue their understanding of the European project. In particular it will examine how the think tanks follow the concept of ‘Europeanization’ to frame how the EU seeks to transform China, and how this China policy can help transform the EU itself.

The working papers take for granted that the EU is a benevolent force – a soft civilian power – that presents the model not just for peace and prosperity in Europe, but a model for world order.50 While ‘Americanization’ is dismissed as cultural imperialism, many of the think-tank arguments revive Europe’s ‘mission civilisatrice’ in terms of ‘Europeanization’. Here Europeanization is more than Eurocentrism; it is a technical term referring to a current strand of European integration theory. It grows out of debates about European regionalism that started in the 1950s and 1960s, which were dominated by a neofunctionalist understanding of ‘spillover effects’ where one program of integration (such as creating a common market) creates pressures for deeper integration (such as strengthening political ties through a common foreign and security policy).51 These spillover effects often entail an expansion from economic ties to political integration. Although classical neofunctionalism has been challenged by other theories such as liberal

49Ibid., 22; also see PRC, ‘China’s EU Policy Paper’, 1. Crossick cleaned up the style and grammar, but the language and content are identical.
intergovernmentalism, most understandings of European integration have focused on regional institutions and their output in terms of regional policies. Europeanization theory, on the other hand, seeks to shift the research focus from the transnationalism of supranational governance back to activities in nation-states as they adapt European legislation and directives into their domestic institutions. Europeanization follows the general logic of neofunctionalism, where economic reform creates pressures for political change, but seeks to further institutionalize the link between economic and political development. Europeanization thus stresses the EU’s ‘central penetration of national systems of governance’. It is a top-down process of civilizing existing and prospective member states according to the Copenhagen criteria of democracy, market economy and rule of law. In this way, Europeanization entails the ‘diffusion of global prescriptions, templates and standards of universalistic rationality and validity’.

Europeanization thus does not apply just to EU member states and applicants; many argue that it can be applied ‘to other cases of regional integration. In this way we can embrace the theoretical argument that views the EU not as a unique phenomenon..., but as an advanced instance of regional cooperation’. While recognizing that ‘Europeanization as Westernization’ was part of imperial conquest and colonial administration, Olsen thinks that Europeanization can now be exported as a model to other parts of the world that would accept it as ‘imitation and voluntaristic borrowing from a successful civilization’. Europeanization analysts thus celebrate how ‘the center is assimilating the periphery by progressive waves of enlargement’. The EU’s soft power therefore largely grows out of its ability to set standards – economic, political, social and cultural standards – that the EC enforces in European space and exports to other regions through its foreign aid program. Although neither think tank dwells the concept of Europeanization – for obvious reasons – the rest of the section will demonstrate how this idea animates the working papers’ understanding of the EU’s mission in China and Europe.

54Ibid., 938.
57Bruno Coppieters et al., Europeanization and Conflict Resolution (Brussels: Academia Press 2004), 242.
Transforming China

Like the EC’s ‘A Maturing Partnership’ policy paper, the CER working paper declares that ‘the EU has much to offer the Chinese in terms of experience and expertise’.\textsuperscript{58} It also assures us that ‘China is keen to learn from the EU’s experience’.\textsuperscript{59} The basic argument of the working papers is that EC should use the EU model of integration – Europeanization – to transform China from an authoritarian state into a responsible and stable democratic capitalist country. As an EU official put it: ‘Officially we call it “exchange of experience”, but in reality we are exporting our model to China.’\textsuperscript{60}

Domestic Reforms

The EU’s policy toward China largely focuses on domestic issues. Its goal is to soften the social shocks produced by China’s economic reform program by setting standards and building institutions. Here the think-tank working papers are applying to China the logic of Brussels’s reform policies that successfully integrated the ex-communist states of Eastern Europe into the EU.\textsuperscript{61} As one of the working papers summarizes: ‘Europeans hope that a China with open markets and a firm rule of law will be more likely to respect human rights and allow democratic freedoms.’\textsuperscript{62}

Although EC support for civil society in China is part of this project, the main thrust of EU policy involves the ‘diffusion of global prescriptions, templates and standards’ mentioned above. The EC’s ‘technical assistance’ seeks to integrate China into international society by helping the PRC to institutionalize a set of standards: ‘efforts to agree common standards and to promote convergence are being addressed through 13 EU-China working groups’.\textsuperscript{63} Thus the ‘low politics’ of the sectoral dialogues – that address intellectual property rights, science and technology, regional development, environmental protection, sanitary standards – are seen as the ‘backbone of the relationship’.\textsuperscript{64} These standards and institutions are the nuts and bolts

\textsuperscript{58}CER, \textit{Embracing the Dragon}, 8.
\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{60}Cited in ibid.
\textsuperscript{61}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62}Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{63}EPC, \textit{EU-China Relations}, 29.
\textsuperscript{64}Ibid., 42–6; CER, \textit{Embracing the Dragon}, 28. For a discussion of the need to evaluate the success of these dialogues see EC, ‘EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities’, 10.
of economic reform that promise to spur the anticipated spillover into capitalist democracy.

The EPC working paper is optimistic about the prospects for this spillover: ‘It is...broadly understood by officials in Beijing that economic liberalisation is likely to lead to political reform and increasing democratization’.65 Unfortunately there is little evidence for this bold statement. Indeed, after a decade of low key meetings many are now questioning the efficacy of the EU’s Human Rights Dialogue with China: European diplomats complain that these dialogues are quite formulaic, with the Chinese side reading the same prepared statements year after year. The EC’s ‘EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities’ 2006 policy paper likewise states that ‘the EU’s expectations...are increasingly not being met’.66 Actually, Beijing’s goal has been to limit the spillover from economic reform to political reform. Although China certainly has learned about the importance of setting standards from the EU (and others), rather than ‘converging’ with international standards, China now increasingly pursues a ‘techno-nationalist’ policy of setting its own exclusive national standards.67

Hence the EU is getting impatient for the promised political spillover to materialize, and think-tank working papers increasingly argue for more direct linkages between economic aid and political reform. In its policy recommendations, the CER urges the EU to be ‘more courageous in linking the different aspects of its relationship with China’, such as linking the lifting of the arms embargo with China’s concrete improvement of human rights and arms control.68

Yet the EC’s new political activism risks alienating China. Chinese think-tank reports are increasingly uncomfortable with the EU’s strategy of ‘peaceful evolution’ that seeks to westernize Chinese culture and divide Chinese sovereignty.69 Indeed, rather than Europeanize, the objective of the Chinese leadership is develop a system similar to

65EPC, EU-China Relations, 38, also see 10.
69See the report of the ‘EU-China Relations Think Tank Roundtable’, co-organized by the EPC and the China Institute of International Studies, sponsored by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Brussels, July 2005; Huo, ‘On China-EU Strategic Relationship’.
Singapore’s authoritarian capitalism that has limited space for civil society.

**International Relations**

Since 2003, the EU has been increasingly interested in fostering China’s role on the world stage by encouraging that country to be more active in multilateral regional and global organizations. The CER working paper underlines how this is part of the EU model for harmony in international society: ‘The EU’s own experience shows that closer economic ties, political dialogue and the habit of working together can turn even the most quarrelsome neighbours into peaceful cohabitants.’70 Since joining the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, China has been much more active in multilateral regional organizations including ASEAN + 3, the Asia-Europe Meeting, and the East Asia Summit. Moreover, China also has taken the lead in forming multilateral organizations: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was formalized in 2001, gathers together Central Asian states in the region’s most powerful security organization.

Because of the EU’s successful history of regionalization, it is common for Europeans to take credit for China’s recent participation in global and regional multilateral organizations.71 Yet regionalism is quite different in East Asia and other regions.72 While it takes on a more institutional character in Europe, regionalism is more of a social performance in East Asia. This difference in style is reflected in content and practice: the EU, which relies on institutions to administer and enforce formal rules and regulations is an example of a ‘hard regionalism’ that is closed and exclusive. East Asian regionalism, on the other hand, is an example of ‘soft regionalism’ that is constituted through a network of informal relationships that are constructed through transactions in the marketplace.73

Thus most East Asian specialists argue that contrary to responding to ‘the “follow-me” hubris of European institutionalization and

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China has been socialized into the multilateral system by the ASEAN’s less institutionalized style of cooperative multilateral diplomacy. China responded positively to the ARF’s multilateralism, for example, because the organization works according to consensus, and thus would not risk compromising China’s sovereignty. Hence it is important to note that ASEAN’s and the SCO’s multilateralism are quite different from the EU’s preferred model of regional integration. While the EU exemplifies a post-sovereign organization where sovereignty is shared for the greater good of the Union, China participates in ASEAN activities (including ASEM and EAS) in order to safeguard its nineteenth century-style national sovereignty. While one of the goals of regionalism in the EU is greater popular democracy, Asian regional organizations actually often serve to limit democratic dialogue because members of ASEAN and the SCO agree to not interfere in each other’s internal affairs. East Asian regional organizations thus are examples of a multilateralism that goes against Europeanization.

Moreover, experience shows that the spillover logic of Europeanization is problematic in East Asia. For the past 35 years Japan has been using a combination of aid and trade to build strong relations with China. For the past 25 years, both Beijing and Taipei have also tried to use economic cooperation in ‘Greater China’ to achieve their political aims of reunification/independence. But Japan’s and Taiwan’s ever-closer economic ties with mainland China have not lead to the promised spillover effect of regional political harmony. Quite the opposite, although the Japanese and the Chinese economies are more closely linked than ever before in a complementary relationship, the political and cultural relations between the two countries’ leaders and peoples are very cool. Despite close economic ties between the mainland and Taiwan, the Straits continue to be one of the major security hot spots in the region.

Unfortunately, because they romanticize multilateralism as Europeanization, European think tanks cannot acknowledge how China’s closest aid, trade and investment partners – Japan and Taiwan – are also its worst political enemies. Thus it is not surprising that Japan and Taiwan vociferously criticized the EU’s plans to lift the arms

76 See Callahan, Contingent States, 1–24.
embargo – they would likely be the targets of the China’s European weapons. Indeed, the EC’s 2006 policy paper recognized this by adding in a whole section on the EU’s interests in Taiwan and peaceful cross-Straits relations.  

As with domestic policy, the EU is moving toward requiring a more direct linkage between its economic aid and its political goals in China. The EPC working paper quotes European Commissioner Peter Mandelson in Beijing (February 2005): ‘I accept that there has to be give and take on both sides. We in Europe are preparing to move forward to lift the arms embargo. But if and when we do, we shall find the step easier if we can point to clear evidence that China is taking account of our concerns in other areas of policy, which, in turn, will allow us in Europe to feel confident about our next move.’ China responded to Mandelson’s call for linkage in March 2005 by passing the Anti-Secession Law, which gives legal sanction for military action against Taiwan. While the model for China’s domestic politics is a Singapore-style authoritarian capitalism, the model for its regional politics is the SCO’s militarized multilateralism of authoritarian states.

**Europeanizing China Policy**

In addition to Europeanizing China, the think tanks stress how the EC should use China policy to strengthen the EU as a foreign policy actor. Like China, the EU wishes to expand its global role from being an economic superpower to being a political superpower. The way to do this, the think tanks argue, is to Europeanize foreign policy by centralizing it through the new structures of the proposed European Constitution.

All commentators agree that the EU’s China policy has been weak and unfocused: ‘the EU-China relationship looks like a gigantic patchwork quilt, many coloured, many splendoured in places, but in need of greater coherence.’ Think tanks in particular blame the member states – especially the Big Three: Germany, France and the UK – for their greedy lack of discipline: ‘Confusingly for the Chinese, individual EU Member States – particularly the big ones – promote their own political relationships with China, using this as leverage for trade deals.’

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79Cited in EPC, *EU-China Relations*, 19; this point was reiterated in EC, ‘EU-China: Closer partners, growing responsibilities’, 11.  
81EPC, *EU-China Relations*, 36.
of paramount importance that the Member States agree common policies towards China and support, rather than undermine, the EU-China relationship. The goals recommended in this paper are not achievable unless the EU’s Member States can agree a much stronger shared narrative on their collective interests in relation to China.\(^8^2\)

This concern goes beyond the particular problems of China policy to the problems of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. According to the CER since 1995 ‘the EU realised that it needed a coherent China strategy for the credibility of its emerging common foreign and security policy’.\(^8^3\) The think-tank working papers, which were written in early 2005 as the European Constitution was being considered by member states, are campaigning not just for a coherent China policy, but for the European Constitution itself: ‘the EU will continue to beef up its Common Foreign and Security Policy, to accumulate new powers...The EU constitutional treaty, if ratified, would bolster these trends.’\(^8^4\) In this way, the think tanks are using China policy to ‘Europeanize’ member states in the sense of advocating the EU’s ‘central penetration of national systems of governance’\(^8^5\) in foreign policy issues.

The think tanks’ hopes for a more centralized and coherent European foreign policy were dashed when the Constitution was rejected by France and the Netherlands in May–June 2005. Although the EU refuses to pronounce it dead, further consideration of the Constitution was deferred to 2008 by a meeting of the European Council in June 2006. Regardless of its current health status, the rejection of the European Constitution in key countries reveals the weakness of plans to Europeanize China policy. The European Constitution failed in France and the Netherlands for two main reasons: European citizens thought that the Union was expanding too far and too fast; people felt that there was a ‘democratic deficit’ in EU policy because their views were rarely consulted, let alone followed. In other words, there was a yawning gap between elite views and popular opinion over the direction of the EU. The reaction of many European bureaucratic elites in 2005 – that the voters got it wrong when they rejected the Constitution – served to widen this gap.

The formation of the EU’s China Policy likewise produces friction between the centralized administrative elite and the European populace. According to the think-tank working papers, the failure to

\(^8^2\)Ibid.
\(^8^3\)CER, *Embracing the Dragon*, 7.
\(^8^4\)Ibid., 2.
lift the arms embargo in 2004–05 is seen as a problem that would have been solved by a more centralized and coherent China policy. Under the Constitution, the EC would still need to consult with member states that did not want to lift the embargo like the Netherlands, Denmark and the UK. But it would not need to convince them. After a qualified majority vote of the European Council to set EU foreign policy, ‘Member states shall ensure that their national policies conform to the positions of the Union.’ This Europeanization of China policy, the think-tank working papers argue, could better face up to US opposition.

But this geopolitical framing of the issue obscures how lifting the arms embargo was problematic not just for half the member states, but also for popular opinion in Europe. The media and human rights NGOs in Europe criticized the plan. Since China desperately is trying to modernize its military and the top arms manufacturer in Europe, the European Aeronautics, Defence and Space Group (EADS), sees China as a ‘strategic partner’ and key emerging market, this became a symbolic problem in a different way: understanding EU-China relations in terms of military arms sales goes directly against idealized images of Europe as a ‘civilian power’ and a ‘peacefully rising’ China. A German commentator reasoned that ‘A dictatorship that executes more people than all other governments in the world combined and that openly threatens a small established democracy with military invasion hardly looks like a good choice for arms sales.’ Hence while the think tanks concentrate on criticizing the US Congress for opposing lifting the embargo, they generally fail to mention that Europe’s own elected representatives were against it. The European parliament voted numerous times to uphold the embargo, and Chancellor Schroeder’s campaign to lift the embargo was ‘faced with a surge of opposition’ in the German Bundestag.

The EPC’s response to popular opposition is telling: ‘The public debate over whether or not the EU should lift its arms embargo on

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China has generated more heat than light, and seems largely to have been conducted without full knowledge of the facts. Although one of the goals of think tanks in Europe is to bridge the gap between unaccountable institutions and an alienated general public, the China policy working papers neatly reproduce the elitist arrogance of European leaders’ responses to the rejection of the Constitution. Indeed, it also underlines how European think tanks, including the EPC and the CER, do not represent the European citizenry – they work for Corporate Europe, which benefits from trade and investment ties with China.

In addition to dealing with gaps between the EU and the US, reactions to the arms embargo show that the EC needs to better address Europe’s serious democratic deficit in China policy. Hence rather than focusing on the standards of Europeanization, a prominent analyst suggests that a strong CFSP for China needs to look to the soft power of values: ‘Promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law are three of the EU’s main foreign policy and security goals. If the EU wants its foreign and security policy to be called “coherent”, it needs to put these goals at the top of its agenda.’

This section has explored how European think tanks understand China and the role of the EU’s China policy. It has argued that the working papers employ the logic of Europeanization, which argues that the rationalization and institutionalization of governance leads to the spillover effect of capitalist democracy. It seeks to bring China into international society by exporting European standards to the PRC. These standards seek to guide China’s domestic and international politics toward the EU’s goals of a democratic capitalist state that works in multilateral institutions at the regional and global levels. Yet the section demonstrated that China is not necessarily learning the lessons that the EU is teaching. Rather than reproducing the Eastern European reform experience of becoming democratic in a peaceful borderless community, Beijing is setting its own standards in order to promote the party-state’s interests: authoritarian capitalism and a multilateralism that preserves national sovereignty.

European discussions of the country policy generally miss these important points because of their shallow understanding of the country and the momentous changes that it is facing: one Chinese specialist was aghast at how few of Europe’s ‘China experts’ could actually use

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91EPC, *EU-China Relations*, 16.
93The Notre Europe report stresses how these think tanks are funded in large part by corporate subscriptions and donations (Ibid., 35, 44, 177, 182).
Chinese-language sources in their analysis. In addition to this lack of curiosity about China, European think tanks’ guiding interest in Europeanization limits their discussion of Chinese politics. The working papers’ glorification of multilateralism as the solution to all problems means that European think tanks are unable to ask the critical questions about China – let alone answer them.

Conclusion: Future Imperfect

By questioning the ambitious pronouncements of a new ‘strategic partnership’ in EU-China relations that challenges the US in a strategic triangle, this essay has gone against the grain. Rather than the inevitable outcome of evolving relations, I have argued that the new interest in EU-China relations is the product of the confluence of historical events: the Iraq War, the expansion of the EU in 2004, and the promise of the European Constitution. The essay has argued that, once again, the ambitious pronouncements have turned out to be low on content, and have led to frustration on both sides.

The rosy future of EU-China relations predicted in EU and Chinese documents has already past: the Constitution was stillborn along with hopes for a more robust and coherent foreign policy, and European expansion has diluted the power of the main drivers of a multipolar EU China policy (France and Germany). Indeed, by the time they were published in mid-2005, the think-tank working papers, which were meant to provide direction for future EU policy, were largely out of date. At the EU-China roundtable that launched its working paper in July 2005, the EPC was forced to back pedal from its enthusiasm for balancing the US and democratizing China.

These problems are institutional: they grow out of a democratic deficit in the EU’s China policy-making, and Europe’s general lack of capacity in the field of contemporary China studies. To solve them Europe would need to open up discussions of China policy to a much broader audience and better relate them to the CFSP’s key goals, while also investing more educational resources into contemporary China studies at all levels: pre-university, university, graduate school, and professional training programs. While some EU countries are beginning

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96See the report of the ‘EU-China Relations Think Tank Roundtable’, July 2005.
to address these knowledge capacity problems, the EC is still quite opaque about China policy-making.

Even so, the problems of forming a strategic partnership (or a strategic triangle) have not led to a crisis in EU-China relations. After waking up from the dream of a new strategic partnership, China and the EU are more measured about their relations to each other, and their relations with the US. Rather than trying to forge ‘shared values’, the EU and China have been dealing with the normal problems that characterize a complex and productive relationship. The crisis over Chinese textile imports to Europe that erupted in summer 2005, for example, was resolved in a reasonable manner that took account of growing pains in the EU, in China and in EU-China relations. As the EC’s most recent policy paper on China, ‘EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities’ (2006), states: ‘Some differences remain, but are being managed effectively, and relations are increasingly mature and realistic’.98

These mature and realistic relations, which increasingly focus on economic rather than strategic matters, generate their own frictions: the EU is taking what the Financial Times calls a ‘tough line with China on trade’, including a more aggressive use of the WTO’s anti-dumping actions.99 This is a concrete example of the conclusion drawn in the EC’s 2006 policy paper: ‘A closer, stronger partnership is in the EU’s and China’s interests. But with this comes an increase in responsibilities…’.100 Thus rather than aiming for ‘future perfect’ relations, both sides have settled for the long term trials of ‘future imperfect’ relations, which are still primarily based on economic ties.

While a strategic triangle is unlikely to emerge, the events of 2003–05, however, will have a lasting impact on the meaning of security in global symbolic politics. Although the China policies of the EU and the US are more or less the same in content – both seek to integrate China into the international system, and both have a long track-record of engaging that country in bilateral relations and multilateral forums101 – European writers tend to focus on the symbolic politics of differences in

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While the EU uses discussions of ‘strategic partnership’ to bolster its legitimacy as a ‘civilian power’ and China uses them to legitimize its new self-image as a ‘peacefully rising’ great power, EU-China discussions also spend a considerable amount of time and space promoting their understanding of the US as a problem, if not the problem. Here the EU and China build common security by highlighting their common differences with the US – thus papering over their considerable differences with each other.

The ‘American theme’ in EU-China relations comes out indirectly in the diplomatic language of the EC policy papers, which draw the multipolar strategic triangle without mentioning the US: ‘events since 2001 – regarding the EU, regarding China, and in global affairs – create the need to take the partnership forward’. Its message is that ‘The EU, as a global player on the international stage, shares China’s concerns for a more balanced international order based on effective multilateralism…’. Although the EC does not agree with China’s view of multipolarity, it opportunistically recognizes how ‘China’s geopolitical vision of a multipolar world…provide[s] a favourable context for increased EU visibility in China’.

The think-tank working papers, on the other hand, are not shy about America-bashing. In a negative form of soft power, the think tanks engage in language games to categorize American actions as ‘irrational’ and Chinese ones as ‘rational’. For example, at the beginning of its working paper, the EPC boldly states that Chinese leaders are ‘rational, calculating and conscious of both China’s strengths and weaknesses’. On the other hand, throughout the working papers, American views and US policy toward China are judged to be irrational, cynical, emotional, panicky, inconsistent, suspicious and meddling. The CER reports states that in the debate over the arms embargo, ‘Many Americans reacted emotionally…preferring bluster

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102 Differences in tone are not merely symbolic, but are the result of different capabilities for influencing China. While the US is confident that it can influence China, the UK feels its ‘influence can only be at the margins’ (Cited in Shaun Breslin, ‘Power and Production: Rethinking China’s Global Economic Role’, Review of International Studies 31/4 (2005), 738).
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 23.
107 EPC, EU-China Relations, 4.
108 CER, Embracing the Dragon, 24, 24, 47, 70, 76; EPC, EU-China Relations, 16, 17, 21, 22, 31, 32, 34, 37.
and intemperate threats to a rational analysis of the issues.' 109 Many of the European think tanks thus spend more time criticizing American policy than explaining European policy or exploring Chinese policy. 110 Delegitimizing the US therefore is commonly used as the first step in clearing the way for the Europeanization of China.

Hence the lasting legacy of debates over the strategic triangle is not likely to be a new Eurasian axis. Rather, as is unfortunately common in identity politics, the enduring theme is not a positive sharing of values in the construction of a new Eurasian self, but negative sharing of an Other. This new global symbolic politics will have a serious impact on the US's concrete relations with China and the EU. Indeed, Beijing seems to have succeeded in one of its main strategic objectives: that the EU would not support the US in any future military conflict with China over Taiwan.

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109 CER, Embracing the Dragon, 60.
110 See, for example, Bersick, ‘The Impact of European and Chinese Soft Power’.
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