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Thomas Renard on China-EU Relations

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Thomas Renard is Senior Research Fellow at Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

Q: You have published a lot on China-EU relations. How would you define the obstacles or problems of the bilateral relations?

A: Given its size and growing global clout, China is certainly one of the EU's most important partners. But it is also one of the most challenging ones. The relationship has been bumpy, with ups and downs, and progressive adjustments. Despite all declarations and good intentions, it is still difficult to deem the partnership as being truly 'strategic'. There are obviously many reasons for this, but I want to emphasise three.

First, there is between the EU and China a certain 'normative disconnect'. This means that both sides have different normative backgrounds and frameworks to interpret and interact with the world. Discussions on values and particularly on human rights reflect this normative disconnect. Repercussions on all aspects of the bilateral relationship are quite important. Indeed, the practice has shown that the EU is more at ease and can deliver more with like-minded partners, even though like-mindedness is not necessarily recipe for effectiveness. Addressing and narrowing this normative disconnect should be an objective on both sides of the partnership, while acknowledging that it will take time and patience.

Second, it is striking that the EU and China have difficulties to identify common interests. They surely have some conflicting interests (in trade or in Africa, for instance). They even have some mutual interest, that is to say an interest for the same issue/region, but this rarely goes beyond rhetoric (counter-terrorism or non-proliferation, for instance) and there are even good reasons to believe that in many cases (but perhaps not most) it is better not to scratch below the surface in order to avoid uncovering more conflicting interests. Yet, the EU and China have identified very few areas of common interest, where they share similar objectives and priorities (and, ideally, methodology as well). This policy failure (or is it a failure of imagination?) has negative repercussions on the overall partnership.

Finally, China and the EU are on a very different trajectory. On the one hand, there is a confident and assertive China, a great power in the making. On the other

hand, there is a relatively declining and inward-looking Europe. Present preoccupations are therefore very different, and this holds true for future expectations as well. Ambitions and mutual perceptions are constantly evolving. This further complicates the partnership.

Q: It seems that Chinese scholars and diplomats tend to believe in the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and the EU with more sincerity and esteem than their European counterparts. Don't you think so?

A: Sincerity and esteem are impossible to measure. What I would say, however, is that both sides have had high expectations which have been deceived, to a certain extent. Years ago, China was dreaming of a powerful EU which could act as a counterweight to American hegemony. They now realise that this will not happen, but this is no longer necessary since China has itself become a counterweight to American hegemony! China must now learn how to deal with its new status, and the EU must accept to be treated as a peripheral power.

This has changed the potential that both sides see in the strategic partnership, but it does not mean that there is no longer interest into it. The fundamental ambition of the partnership has changed, perhaps, but the terms remain the same – and both sides are still hoping to take the best of this relationship.

Q: What is your understanding of the China-EU strategic partnership? Is it real or only a wish? How can we make it more meaningful?

A: The strategic partnership exists in the sense that it is regularly referred to by both administrations, publicly and in internal documents. It has even become a sort of narrative permeating the bilateral relationship. Yet, this partnership is still a project in the making. By definition, it should be comprehensive and long term. Yet, many aspects of bilateral, regional and global issues are not properly covered by the partnership, and the long-term dimension could be strengthened. In many regards, the partnership is also under-delivering. Addressing this problem – that is to say ‘talk less and act more’ – is the key to make this partnership truly strategic.

Q: Mutual understanding between China and the EU is definitely not enough. How can the two sides deal with this issue?

It is true that China and the EU often talk cross each other, without listening or understanding each other. Even when both sides use the same vocabulary and concepts, they do not necessarily mean the same thing. This problem has many dimensions (cultural, linguistic, normative, etc.) which should all be addressed. But how? More European studies in China and Chinese studies in Europe should be encouraged. These studies should cover all aspects (culture, history, language, etc.). Clearly, funding is the key issue here. There is already a lot of money being spent on this, but probably not enough given the overall importance of the partnership.

Q: China has established its new leadership. What would you say about the future prospects of the China-EU relations?

A: I would not expect much change from the previous leadership. Continuity seems to be the prevailing rule. In terms of foreign policy, China will be mostly preoccupied with its own neighbourhood, just like the EU to a large extent. Obviously, the EU has views and opinions on the situation in the Asia-Pacific, and so does China in the Arab world. But there are no major interferences to be expected in respective neighbourhoods.

Bilateral relations will probably see the increasing importance of trade and investment, with large space for economic diplomacy. This brings in the difficult issue of the EU versus its Member States, since economic diplomacy is what divides them mostly.

Finally, there is the relationship with the US, which is important although qualitatively different to both the EU and China. It has significant ramifications in Asia, since the EU-US joint statement on Asia-Pacific whereby the transatlantic partners pledged to coordinate their actions and policies. China is suspicious vis-à-vis this sort of joint transatlantic front. But it should not fear nor resist an alliance that has proven its strength over decades. It should rather try to engage and work constructively with it.

Q: It's said that China and the EU has more than 80 areas of cooperation. Which area(s) do you believe should have greater potentials of development by the two sides?

A: The strategic partnership is underpinned by many dialogues, including ministerial but also civil society dialogues. All these dialogues are important because they address key issues and maintain channels of communication open, including on sensitive issues. Yet, I would highlight the dialogue on urbanisation as being particularly significant: it is very concrete, it can deliver, and it touches many fundamental dimensions of the overall partnership (environment/climate, energy, sustainability, social cohesion, etc.).

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