

Towards a more effective European China policy

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Talk does not amount to a strategy – and, unless the EU's member states can co-ordinate their policies, China will divide them.

In a few days, Chinese and European leaders will convene in Prague for another summit. Such meetings are key. Both sides need to co-ordinate their policies to effectively combat the global economic crisis and to tackle the many security and environmental challenges that loom across the world. The problem is that much of this talking is about making process instead of progress. While the EU's member states were rightly criticised for failing to get their act together, the European Commission can do more to develop a more coherent European strategy.

Interaction seems to be an end by itself in EU-China relations. At each summit, new dialogues and exchanges are agreed on. Engagement is the name people in the Commission give this. If we have sufficient interaction, mutual confidence will follow, and the Chinese will soon or later adapt their policies in our advantage.

Yet, in many areas, Beijing seems to be willing more than ever before to defend its own interests and values. On the trade side, it turns a deaf ear to Europe's requests for it to liberalise services, protect intellectual-property rights, reduce export supports and allow foreign companies to profit more from government procurement. Even with a new Human Rights Action Plan, China and Europe's approaches towards political rights and the rule of law remain miles apart. Nor is there much co-operation in places like Africa and Central Asia.

China is re-defining some of its policies, but it is doubtful this is because of its exposure to Europe's 'engagement'. Developing countries often seem to have more influence on China's positions than does Europe. The most important factor is the reality that in a rapidly developing society, interests change, and so do policies. Take climate change, which has been on the top of Europe's agenda. That China is now one of the largest investors in clean energy is not because of European pressure, but simply because it understands that pollution has become a threat to national stability.

Are such policy shifts benefiting the EU? Not at all. Chinese producers of wind and solar energy are turning into aggressive competitors for their European peers, and the Chinese government is actively playing Europe off against countries like Canada to get new energy technologies at the cheapest price possible. Another example: multilateralism. For almost a decade the EU has asked China to participate to multilateral co-operation. Now that China has joined most of these bodies and has become accustomed to their procedures, it is becoming more and more effective in using these channels to protect its own interests, often at the expense of Europe's.

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China cannot be blamed for this. As a growing country, it does what it needs to do, and Chinese diplomats should be complimented for their increasing skill. The problem is that Europe is not yet able to convert its potential weight into influence. China used to have high expectations regarding Europe as a global player; Chinese officials and scholars today openly contend that the EU has failed to deliver. Europe's incoherence is an invitation to Beijing to capitalise on its internal divisions. The consequence is a mutual expectation gap, and this has rendered our partnership prone to setbacks over symbolical issues.

The response Europe needs

If China further degrades the EU as a key partner, the EU's member states will be even less interested in working together. Already capitals are reluctant to fine-tune their positions with regard to issues like China's Africa policy, Iran and reform of the UN. Even on economic issues, they refuse to join forces in negotiations with Beijing over technological co-operation, services, investment, and energy.

Neither the new partnership agreement that the Commission is negotiating, nor approval of the EU's reforming Treaty of Lisbon will solve that problem. In the end there will still be 27 different approaches to China.

While the EU will probably never be on par with the United States in terms of policy coherence, we can do more to get our act together, and this is a shared responsibility of the capitals, the Commission, and independent opinion leaders.

The Commission will soon come up with a new project aimed at spurring experts and officials from the member states to strategise about how China affects our Europe's interests and how we should answer these challenges. Such discussions will not only explore new policy options; they will also add bottom-up legitimacy to a unified stance on China. The member states too should support such a two-level game, and have to pool their efforts to map China's growing impact and formulate common interests.

Fostering awareness of the EU's member states interdependence as regards China is inevitably a slow and laborious process, but if the EU's component parts do not start forming collective strategies Europe will continue to beat itself for failing to deliver.

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