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TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE US-PRC-EU STRATEGIC TRIANGLE STRENGTHEN THE EUROPEAN POSITION IN ITS BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH THE PRC?

Abstract

The EU–China relationship is becoming a more and more important feature in international relations. The EU’s institutional consolidation, development of supranational trade power and the foreign policy is opening the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has entangled with the PRC’s ongoing sense of geopolitical intrigues between the superpowers. With its talk of ‘multipolarity’, grand strategy has converged, though China’s stress on ‘multipolarity’ can perhaps be distinguished from the EU’s stress on ‘multilateralism’. However, EU–China relationship has matured in the previous two decades to involves significant economic matters and the outlook of a wider ‘strategic partnership’, bringing with it a challenge to US’s unipolarity and unilateralism (Scott, 2007: 23).

I. Introduction

This article will gain an insight of how the ‘strategic partnership’ announced in 2003 between the PRC and EU will be in the future. Strategic geopolitical balancing and containment towards other third parties have been prominent features of their convergence, during a period when the EU developed more of a foreign policy dimension and China continued its economic surge (Scott, 2007: 217). I will argue that the triangle has and will tighten EU-Sino relation and EU’s position will be strengthened in front of China, mainly in economy, trade and culture; meanwhile, EU should size the situation, too, for though peace and cooperation are thought to be the mainstream, there are still some sensitive topics residing in the triangle relations, especially between US and China. This article will be organized in the following way: firstly, I will conclude and characterize the basic relationship between EU and China, the current development the multipolarity of the world and the situation of the strategic triangle relations of US-EU-China. Secondly, I discuss US’s influence to the developing trend between Sino-EU relation, in the field of politics and economy; to demonstrate US’s promotion to EU in the bilateral relation. Then I use a case of the problem of energy to illustrate the point of the previous part.

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II. The browse and characterization of EU-Sino relation and the triangle strategic relation

1. The EU-China relation

At the beginning, 'for almost a decade after the 1949 revolution, Western Europe was at the lowest rung of China's diplomatic ladder', a 'far away continent' which did not 'possess the sufficient clout to influence international politics,' with a 'lack of interest from China' (Kapur, 1985: 72; Shambaugh, 1996: 18). Both sides saw each other as 'weak and far away' (Griffith 1981: p.176). The divergence in ideology, capitalism and communism, has aggravated the bilateral relation. China labeled Europe as a political and economic appendage of US while Europe deemed China as a totalitarian base camp. However, the suspended term of the bilateral relation was 1970s. The differentiation of internal capitalism provided a chance to both Europe and China and with the deepening economic communication and the trend of multipolarity after the Cold War, EU-China relation became one of the most important bilateral relations in the world.

Even more, in recent years a perhaps rather unexpected, yet significant and generally positive relationship has emerged between the EU and PRC (Scott, 2007: 217). EU-Sino relation should have been regarded as 'strategic partnership' (Holslag, 2011: 295) since a series of political dialogue between the leaders in recent years, which entitled the 2004 EU-China Summit as a more 'maturing strategic partnership' (EU Commission, 2006). Firstly, this strategic partnership reflects in the progressive cooperation in economy and trade, which was also the stepping stone of the bilateral relation. Previously, the limited EU-China trade agreement in 1985 had been overtaken by a wider trends in 1990s (Scott, 2007), and as a leading non-American centre of finance and technology, West Europe had a key economic role for Deng Xiaoping's new China (Scott, 2007: 223), led by Reform and Opening Policies. Economics was 'strategic' in enabling China's modernization of its armed forces and national defense; economics was 'strategic' as well in increasing China's general diplomatic leverage and influence. Nowadays, this economic tie has been placed more emphasize upon. While most of the dramatic increases in exports to China have occurred within Asia, the share of exports from the US and EU that go to China have also increased, from 1 percent in 1990 to 3 1/2 in 2002 (Blancher and Rumbaugh, 2004: 3-4). Actually, at the beginning of Reform and Opening up, Deng Xiaoping noticed the importance and great potential of launching economic cooperation with Europe, he said,

'We should lose no time in seeking their cooperation, so as to speed up our technological transformation...We should seize this opportunity. It is a matter of strategic importance.' (Deng 1983: p.43)

The second feature that is strategic should be the political dialogues and the policies derived from them, which could potentially fulfill mutual strategic targets. EU Commission already started 'political dialogue' with China in 1994, and had hammered out strategy in A Long Term Policy for China-Europe Relations (1995) and Building a Comprehensive Relationship with China. On the other hand was China actively looking for economic transfusion from the West amidst its dramatic economic surge, also trying to bring about a more multipolar balance of power in the international system, which involved a search for other 'poles' that could help

it balance US preeminence. As a result, the 2003 EU–China Summit noted ‘the increasing maturity and growing strategic nature of the partnership’ (Scott, 2007: 24). Thus, ‘power’ considerations were apparent for others as well. EU-China convergence was to be welcomed, to ‘lead to a change in the balance of power...the balance of power in the world will be better assured as a result of their collaboration (European Parliament 1975: p.131). This ‘power’ balance supposing started from the era of European Community, nevertheless, in the Cold War time dominated by two superpowers, EC-China diplomatic recognition did not make an immediate ‘direct impact on the international balance of power’, which was still dominated by US and USSR, whereas it ‘acknowledged the other’s future international potential’ (Moller, 2002: 11).

As Scott put it, the EU-China relation is explicitly economic, however implicitly, it is strategic (Scott, 2007: 223). Obviously, the leaders of both sides have been communicating and cooperating through official negotiations. A pair of policy papers, the EU’s *A Maturing Partnership: Shared Interests and Challenges in EU–China Relations* and the PRC’s *China’s EU Policy Paper* (Scott, 2007: 24), which were released in 2003, were thought to be a coordination of policy and complementary to each other. On the other hand, both sides also take advantages of other kinds of meetings or forums to exchange their appeals. For example, established in 1996, initiated by ASEAN states, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is a regular platform for EU and China to contact and compare notes. Not only does it provide a gathering of discussing great themes like security, but also prove to be effective in dealing with affairs of low politics, like climate change (Loewen, 2007). Therefore, though the EU-China relation is not always very smooth, it is strategic and comprehensive, having concrete and lasting orientation, as well as covering many fields and topics.

2. The strategic triangle relations

US people have spent much of the last 20 years unlearning our Cold War inclination to define our relations with the outside world, no less with Europe or China, by reference to a broader geopolitical context. In the wake of our sudden graduation to sole superpower status, it was difficult for some Americans to define a new context that did not involve more than mere acquiescence to US leadership by Brussels or Beijing. Twenty years later, US has clearly begun to realize that, however significant a member of the international community it may be, its ability to act unilaterally is restricted by normative, economic, or even military factors (Gill and Murphy, 2008: forward).

After the collapse of the USSR, US policy establishment has clearly been seized with the new contextual challenge of a rising China (ibid: forward). Some in that establishment may, in fact, see in China the potential for a new rival to replace the Soviet Union, though very few in number. Others regard China’s emergence as an economic and political leviathan which is sophisticated in organization and operation, breaking US political dominance. Remarkably, however, questions in terms of the rise of China have not been much shared between US policymakers and their European companions (ibid: forward), despite what would seem to be the sharing of so many common interests and perspectives with respect to China’s rise.

The transatlantic rift over EU's proposed lifting of its arms embargo on China emblematic of the shifting geopolitical global order (Shambaugh, 2005: 7). Events like those could be seen as evidence that Europe does not act like US's assistant in executing the latter's global strategies as in the Cold War era. China, on the other hand, being restricted by US and its allies in East and Southeast Asia, is attempting to guard its core interests (Rice, 2000: 48) and reclaim its own way of development. The problems of Diaoyu Island, mineral rights in East and South China Sea, as well as the status of Taiwan, would still be amongst the hot issues within a long time. Under this circumstance, EU's strategic stand and choice seem to be quite crucial to both US and China.

While the US's military shows its supremacy and omnipotent power, EU has enjoyed its increasing coherence and economic status, and the acceleration of technological and economic globalization; meanwhile China is also experiencing its 'peaceful rise' in global affairs. Those tendencies largely consist of the new global order. In this order, China is becoming a more responsible player on the global stage and is involved with a growing number of issues on the international agenda, such as counterterrorism, environment rescuing and climate change, energy security, nuclear nonproliferation, disease control, and the stability of the global financial and monetary system, etc (Shambaugh, 2005: 7). China's shift from passive audience or free rider to proactive engagement in addressing these challenges reflects Chinese leaders' increasing self-confidence as well as their recognition that China's burdening its responsibility in global arena is growing along with their nation's rising power and influence. As China becomes more involved in the global system, US and Europe increasingly interact cooperatively with China on these and other global governance challenges. However, in other areas their interests diverge (ibid: 7-8). So in this sense, the triangle strategic relation could be seen as a flexible and multivariate one. Coordination and cooperation are the mainstream as said above; nevertheless, there are still a lot of problems that cannot be neglected. Once the situation were altered or even deteriorated, maybe due to some abrupt events, the manifestation would change. Anyway each of the angle does not willing to use force to solve the disputes, because in a world of globalization and multipolarity, societies are intertwined as never before (Shambaugh, 2006). Thus, the three angles should endeavor to maintain the stability of the subtle relations, instead of rashly infuriating the other one or two.

III. The advantages EU can get from the triangle relations

Among the three camps, US is still a global superpower, who definitely intends to continue its hegemony and ensure the vested interest; China, as one of the multipolarities, is newly becoming more and more influential in regional and some global affairs. And EU, possessing highly developed industries and sound financial system, is an old power. US and China, the greatest developed state and the largest developing state, their bilateral relation could be regarded as a vital one. In this condition, suspicion and balance would be filled with their relation besides the cooperation, and it is EU who can benefit in the triangle. Firstly, the entanglement over the arms embargo exposes the remarkably different attitudes through which Europe and US view China's rise. It could be ensured that US and EU share some important commonalities in coping with China's rise, whereas it is

also very crucial to recognize the differences. If Europe had any important strategic interest or military presence in East Asia, or was committed to Taiwan's security, European states would likely to be much less tempted to lift the arms embargo (Shambaugh, 2005: 8). And, those regions are tightly related to China's mainland and the whole territory, which seem to be sacred to China, like the One-China Principle (Wei, 1999: 1169). EU's potential lifting the arms embargo will surely facilitate the enhancement of the capability of Chinese national defense and operation. So, US's toughness in this point could be a chance for EU to tighten its relationship with China.

Secondly, in balancing the US power, EU and China have many topics to share. During the Cold War, Europe offered solidarity and entrusted themselves to US in exchange of security and a junior role in the partnership that ran the world (Shapiro and Witney, 2009: Executive Summary). After 1991, when the security never accounted for the greatest proportion of financial expense, European economy soared and became a regional power rapidly. Along with the economic ascendance, its status within the transatlantic relationship needed to be improved. A fierce debate surrounding the European security mechanism has been about its width and leadership (Hofmann, 2011: 2). In 1999, CSDP was established and its institutional phase, the capabilities build-up phase and the operational phase (Ginsberg and Penksa, 2012) have been mended in the next few years. Functionally, CSDP has some overlaps with NATO, which to some extent weakens the US's position in Europe and its neighbourhood. CSDP is a tool with which EU attempts to balance US. In this respect, China has the similar appeal. As was mentioned above, China is being confined by US and its followers, so that it is also seeking the way out. EU and China may connive with each other in balancing the US. Thirdly, the mutual economic ties are important that promoted by the triangle relations. The most obvious area of growth and common interest in Europe-China relations has to do with business (Gill and Murphy, 2008: 9). China is the second-biggest trading partner for the EU (after US), and the EU became China's largest trading partner in 2004. especially, after the 'Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities' strategy outlined in October 2006, EU Commission released a policy paper on EU-China trade and investment, entitled 'Competition and Partnership' (ibid: 9), deepening the trade and economic relation with China again.

The EU-China economic ties have been extending to more fields and dimensions. In 2007, EU released the findings of a study assessing the 'Future Challenges and Opportunities in EU-China Trade and Investment relations' in key sectors, including: machinery, chemicals, agriculture, financial services, telecommunications services, sustainable technologies, and the environment, etc (European Commission, 2007). In addition to specific policy recommendations for each sector and highlighting particular trade issues, the study recommended that high-level dialogue on strategic economic issues be strengthened; coordination among member states regarding trade policy be pursued in order to present a coherent 'EU's voice' to China; and attempts to meet the goals of the Lisbon Agenda be stepped up (ibid, 2007). Those outstanding outcomes of EU-China economic development, on one hand, are related to China's maintaining its diversity and stability in economic development. US had been the greatest trading

companion of China and is still so significant in China's import and export. However, China needs to make its economy more diversified and balance, which asks for more market and policy implication. EU, who has many member states, is a decent choice for China to rely on. Unlike US analysts who pay more attention to China's external posture, EU analysts focus on the internal scene (Shambaugh, 2005: 14-15). On the other hand, in recent years, China has been investigated by international organizations like WTO and suffered from obstructions in international trade. As the greatest voice holder, US should have had balanced China of its outstretched economic influence, engendering contradictions between them.

IV. A case study: the energy problem and EU-China relation

EU has recognized that China's increasing appetite for energy has important repercussions upon the global markets and the environment (Gill and Murphy, 2008: 27). So, the EU and China have established their working relationship upon the energy security issues within the framework of a 'sectoral dialogue' (ibid: 27), which is aiming at addressing areas of common concern, exploring areas of common interests, communicating the energy technologies, and providing a more solid foundation for the bilateral relation. Since 1994, this mechanism has been taken into effect, and an annual senior-level working group meeting will be held, as well as a biannual conference on energy cooperation. Topics of those meetings and dialogues are about the future energy policy and how to deal with the serious energy situation. Besides, the evolution and upgradeability of energy markets and sustainable development are all included in the themes.

The sustainability of energy is highly connected with the environmental protection. In 2005, China and Europe announced a climate change action plan. Two years later, at the EU-China summit in 2007, clean energy was heralded as a key new area of cooperation (Holslag, 2011: 307). Both the EU Council conclusions (2006) and the joint statement of the EU-China summit (2007) articulated that energy and climate change issues would become central aspects of the bilateral relationship, indicating that the bilateral relation did not always place emphasis on economic interests. Climate change, energy security and environmental protection have been the focuses of both sides since 2007, when the EU-China Partnership and Cooperation Agreement negotiations held. Emphasizing the importance of energy and environmental benefits seem to be a new field for EU to strengthen its status in front of China. Firstly, EU is advanced in developing the renewable energy and quite experienced in treating the environment which has been polluted by industrialization. Doubtlessly, China is on the track of what the developed states used to pass, so that EU could provide the sophisticated machinery and advanced ideas to China, to help the latter obtain more environmental benefits, along with the high-pace development of GDP. Secondly, EU is a large destination of China's export and EU has a strict standard of products coming from overseas. Not only should the products have good enough quality, but also be characterized as environmentally friendly (not all the products). China, who is the 'world factory', has to boost its requirements of the environmental benefits of the commodities that sent to European market. In this process, EU could have advantages over China because it owns both rules and rulers.

Despite the fact that both US and EU are engaged in the competition of China's energy market (Shambaugh, 2005: 15), when faced with a rising China, they are differentiated in the attitude of government. US, viewing China as a major competitor in the future, invests Chinese resource industries more out of the aim of monitoring (ibid: 15) China's arms industries and slackening China's footsteps of competing for the regional or even world hegemony; meanwhile EU's aim is more transparent, which is to realize the sustainable development of both sides. Provided with this comparison, EU is more likely to win the favor of Chinese people.

V. Conclusion

In this article I argue that EU will strengthen its position in front of China, under the context of the strategic triangle. The relationship of the triangle, as well as the bilateral relation between EU and China, is comprehensive and complicated. US, in the foreseeable future, will still occupy the supremacy of the world, depending on its strong military and economic power. The mighty US may make China burden huge pressure, in the realm of trade, finance and national security. At this juncture, EU's involvement may be quite wise. On one hand, EU and US share the similar value, the faith of democracy and freedom, along with the long-lasting cooperation, so it could be certain that EU is still a reliable ally of US. What is more important, essentially, EU and US both want China to stay status quo rather than become revisionist (Shambaugh, 2005: 8), and the difference is residing in the concrete measures and divergences of some certain affairs.

On the other hand, EU has its foreign policy more moderate than US and pays more attention to the soft power, such as the idea, culture and history. Those features make EU win more favorable impression from China and its 'harmonious world', which is now surrounded by states disputing in various problems. Domestically, China is experiencing the social transition. Tackling the different social contradictions, such as environmental pollution, education and co-exist of various religions, also calls for the cooperation from abroad. To sum up, US, Europe and China have their own challenges to cope with, also have to respond to each other reasonably. In terms of this article, EU needs to reinforce and maintain a comprehensive and integrated relation with China, which also strengthens or at least keep the transatlantic relations. Possessing the close strategic relation with US, EU has laid a good foundation of developing further relationship with China.

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To What Extent Does The Us-Prc-Eu Strategic Triangle Strengthen The European.....

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