



Utrecht University

Strategic Partnership or Systemic Rival?

Explaining EU's Shifted Foreign Policy Discourse About EU-China
Relations Over The Period From 2013 To 2019

MASTER THESIS

MA International Relations in Historical Perspective

Utrecht University

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Wordcount: 14.840

Date: 1 July 2021

Abstract

This thesis seeks to explain EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards its China relations over the period from 2013 to 2019, whereby EU's rhetoric generally transformed from China as strategic partner towards being a systemic rival. This process is mostly perceived through the perspective of supranational EU institutions and actors, particularly the Commission and EEAS, and associated representatives (like the President of the Commission, High Representative and Commissioner for Trade). Conclusions are drawn almost entirely based upon primary sources like speeches, statements and policy proposals from these respective institutions and actors. The theoretical underpinning of the analysis is based on historical institutionalism, which structures the research based on three critical junctures, that characterized EU's shifted policy discourse towards China: strategic partnership in 2013, a new strategy in 2016, and systemic rival in 2019. Also, this underpins the specific research questions for the analysis, thereby focussing on (1) specific path dependencies within EU-China relations, (2) policy inertia in the related EU foreign policy making process, and (3) the role of timing and sequencing regarding efforts by supranational EU institutions and actors.

The conclusion of the analysis is that EU's foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations shifted over time, mainly as a result of the efforts by supranational EU institutions and actors, who increasingly tried to steer and coordinate the related EU foreign policy making process towards a more 'realist' and 'balanced' European approach towards China. This also aligned with EU's overall emerging efforts – e.g. considering the 'EU Global Strategy' from 2016 – to position itself as a strong global actor. The EU's shift in discourse towards China was initially triggered by various trade-related tensions, but later also because of China's increasingly assertive and ambiguous behaviour regarding the international rule of law, the broad geostrategic consequences of China's unprecedented rise over time and the effects hereof for Europe – e.g. via the Belt and Road Initiative – and the increasingly unstable geopolitical context, including transatlantic tensions. The strong path dependent course of integration and (economic) interdependency within EU-China relations as reinforced over time, together with strong policy inertia within EU foreign policy making, substantially complicated this process.

The fact that EU's policy discourse did actually shift over time – from strategic partnership to systemic rival – including the cascading effects hereof, clearly shows and symbolizes the role of supranational EU institutions and actors within EU's foreign policy making process: continuously trying to push the agenda, shape the priorities, and coordinate the policy process. By doing so – despite all the institutional boundaries – they still appear to play a distinct and pivotal role in EU's foreign policy making process.

Keywords: EU-China relations, EU foreign policy, policy discourse, historical institutionalism, critical junctures, timing & sequencing, policy inertia, path dependency.

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List of Abbreviations

AAIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BIT	Bilateral Investment Agreement
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAI	Comprehensive Agreement on Investment
CEEC	Central and Eastern European Countries
CFSP	Common Foreign & Security Policy
CJ	Critical Juncture
CM	Community Method
CRQ	Central Research Question
CSDP	Common Security & Defence Policy
CSP	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
DA	Discourse Analysis
EC	European Commission
ECT	European Commissioner for Trade
EEAS	European External Action Service
EFP	European Foreign Policy
EFSI	European Fund for Strategic Investments
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
EUCO	European Council
EUGS	European Union Global Strategy
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FP	Foreign Policy
FTA	Free Trade Agreement

HI	Historical Institutionalism
HR	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
IM	Intergovernmental Method
IP	Intellectual Property
IR	International Relations
MS	Member States
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
SotU	State of the Union
SRQ	Specific Research Question
TDI	Trade Defence Instrument
TTIP	Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organisation

1. Introduction

1.1 The Rise of EU-China Relations

Relations between the European Union and China have developed substantially over the last decades, enhanced by their 'strategic partnership' since 2003.¹ Back then, the European Commission envisioned for the EU and China to "further broaden and deepen the relationship in all areas" as they were having "an ever-greater interest to work together as strategic partners to safeguard and promote sustainable development, peace and stability".² This happened in a context of China's promising emergence in the world economy after WTO accession in 2001, also including its gradually more proactive involvement in world affairs.³ From European perspective, there was a highly optimistic outlook on EU-China relations, making convergence, cooperation and engagement the fundamentals for engagement. In 2003, China was already EU's third largest trading partner with two-way trade exceeding €115 billion.⁴ However, also the broader significance of their partnership was increasingly perceived as an "emerging axis in world affairs".⁵

In 2013 – a decade later – the EU and China were committed to "consolidate and develop their strategic partnership" as declared in the 'EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation'.⁶ With a strong emphasis on further engagement and win-win cooperation, this policy agenda mostly reinforced their stable and flourishing strategic partnership from the last 10 years – ready for the next decade to come.⁷ However, this strategic agenda would not foreshadow the dynamics and tensions within EU-China relations that would arise in the years that followed.

In June 2016, the Commission and High Representative Mogherini came up with 'Elements for a new EU strategy on China' – a nineteen-page joint communication to the Council and European Parliament.⁸ This document presented a new EU strategy on China, which "puts its

¹ Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, and Uwe Wissenbach, "Introduction," in *The European Union and China*, The European Union Series (Red Globe Press, 2018)

² Commission Of The European Communities, 'A maturing partnership - shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations. ', Brussels, 10 September 2003. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52003DC0533&from=EN> (last accessed: 12-04-2021).

³ Richard Maher, "The elusive EU-China strategic partnership," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.; Commission Of The European Communities, "A maturing partnership - shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations. ."

⁶ European External Action Service, 'EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation', Brussels, 23 November 2013. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china_bs/15398/EU-China%202020%20Strategic%20Agenda%20for%20Cooperation (last accessed: 12-04-2021).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ European Commission and High Representative Of The Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy, 'Elements for a new EU strategy on China', Joint Communication To The European Parliament And The Council, Brussels, 22 June 2016. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=celex:52016JC0030> (last accessed: 12-04-2021).

[EU's] own interests at the forefront" and which would ensure genuine implementation of the Chinese 'win-win co-operation' slogan.⁹ These unusually strong statements indicated – for the first time since 2003 – a clear shift in EU's policy discourse towards its China relations.

Later in 2019, this shift seemed to get further consolidated by the publication of the 'EU-China – A strategic outlook', another sixteen-page joint communication by the Commission and HR.¹⁰ This outlook incited "a further EU policy shift towards a more realistic, assertive, and multi-faceted approach. This will ensure that relations with this strategic partner are set on a fair, balanced and mutually beneficial course".¹¹ This makes sense, for example considering that the daily average of EU-China trade had mounted to over one billion euro around that time.¹² The most striking terminology used in this document, was the characterization of China as 'systemic rival' promoting alternative models of governance.¹³ This term – systemic rival – seems to be in stark contrast with the 'strategic partnership' rhetoric from the near past, and implies competition rather than cooperation.¹⁴

This development raises various questions about EU-China relations over the period from 2013 to 2019. Because why has EU's policy discourse towards China shifted as such? Which contextual factors played a role in this process? And what has been the role of EU institutions and actors herein? This thesis seeks to find answer to exactly these kinds of questions.

1.2 Central Research Question

In particular, this thesis addresses the following central research question (CRQ):

CRQ: How can the EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations over the period from 2013 to 2019 be explained according historical institutionalism, from the perspective of supranational EU institutions and actors?

The rest of this introduction chapter elaborates on elements of this CRQ, mostly on the related academic debate about EU foreign policy, and on differing European perspectives about 'how to deal with China'. It also gives a glimpse of the theoretical lens of 'historical institutionalism' and the according research methodology. Altogether, this is needed to logically present the specific research questions (SRQ's) at the end of this chapter – substantiating the above CRQ.

To start uncovering and explaining the process of EU's shifted policy discourse, an entry point is to focus on EU's foreign policy making process itself. Because although this shift in discourse

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 'EU-China – A strategic outlook', Joint Communication To The European Parliament, The European Council And The Council, Strasbourg, 12 March 2019. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/eu-china-strategic-outlook-commission-contribution-european-council-21-22-march-2019_en (last accessed: 12-04-2021).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gustaaf Geeraerts, "The EU-China partnership: balancing between divergence and convergence," *Asia Europe Journal* 17, no. 3 (2019).

seems to be an unambiguous European development, it is mostly a shift propagated by the Commission and High Representative. The EU's member states however – still at the heart of European cooperation – are anything but united about China. Their strong diverging national perspectives contribute to a “manifest lack of ... consensus among the EU member states”.¹⁵

Also the Commission underscores this issue: “dealing with ... China requires a ‘whole-of-EU’ approach ... Member States should reinforce agreed EU positions in their bilateral relations with China ... they should cooperate with the Commission and EEAS ... to help ensure that ... the overall outcome is beneficial for the EU as a whole”.¹⁶ In other words, the EU struggles to speak with one strong and unified voice.¹⁷ As such, this research strongly revolves around the academic debate – and aims to contribute to a better understanding – on EU's foreign policy. This results in the broad academic relevance of this thesis.

1.3 Academic Debate on EU's Foreign Policy

The coherence and effectiveness of European Foreign Policy (EFP) – or strictly speaking: EU Foreign Policy – have always been subject to debate, ever since European cooperation itself.

In fact, the ‘external relations’ dimension was already a cornerstone in European integration since the Treaty of Rome in 1957, mostly via bilateral trade agreements between the European Economic Community – back then – and third countries.¹⁸ However, the full spectrum of FP at European level was introduced only in 1992 by the Maastricht Treaty, by means of the Common Foreign & Security Policy (CFSP) – later on in the ‘90s to be expanded by the Common Security & Defence Policy (CSDP). These developments made that European cooperation transformed from ‘being’ foreign policy for member states, towards ‘developing’ common FP for the Union itself. Still, the overall EFP domain always remained relatively weak and ‘low profile, mainly due to EU's intergovernmental and complex institutional nature.¹⁹

The latest institutional adjustments of EFP, dating from the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, aimed at enhancing policy coherence, effectiveness and visibility – primarily via the HR and EEAS.²⁰ In

¹⁵ "The European Union's partnership with China: Navigating between trouble and promise," in *The European Union in the Asia-Pacific. Rethinking Europe's strategies and policies.*, ed. W. Song and J. Wang (Manchester University Press, 2019)

¹⁶ European Commission and High Representative Of The Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy, "Elements for a new EU strategy on China."

¹⁷ Carmen Gebhard, "The problem of coherence in the EU's international relations," in *International relations and the European Union*, ed. C. Hill, M. Smith, and S. Vanhoonacker (Oxford University Press, 2017)

¹⁸ Stephan Keukeleire and Tom Delreux, "The Nature of EU Foreign Policy," in *The foreign policy of the European Union* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ This mostly included a reinforcement and strengthening of the position of the so-called High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) as main focal point for EFP, as well as main coordinator of CFSP/CSDP affairs between the Commission and the Council. Also, the HR is strongly assisted by the Union's administrative body called the European External Action Service (EEAS); Gebhard, "The problem of coherence in the EU's international relations."

spite of these organizational advancements of EFP, the associated debate had continuously advanced too. This debate is basically between those that criticize the fundamental inefficiency and incoherence of EFP, and those that rather emphasize the functionality and benefits of this interdependent foreign policy coordination mechanism. Respectively they either point at the intergovernmental flaws of unanimity in most of EFP's decision-making, or at the relative benefits within EFP-making despite the inevitable complexity.²¹ Let's first take a closer look at the functioning of EFP under the Lisbon treaty, before delving into the academic debate.

Within EFP, there are basically two distinct policy-making methods: the 'community method' (CM) and the 'intergovernmental method' (IM).²² The main difference deals with the balance of formal capacities and responsibilities between 'supranational' EU institutions and the member states (MS). As such, the CM focusses on EU's external policies and the external dimension of internal policies.²³ This method has a dominant role assigned for the European Commission (EC) to make policy proposals, to be voted upon ²⁴ by the European Council (EUCCO) – which consists of the heads of state and government from all member states – and the European Parliament (EP).²⁵ The general CM principle however is that MS have accepted the transfer of certain competences to these supranational EU institutions.²⁶

In contrary, the IM deals with CFSP/CSDP affairs and is based on unanimity amongst individual MS. It is important to stress that is the main vehicle for 'high-level politics'. As such, the IM deals with the political and diplomatic positioning of the EU in the world, and the Union's according actions (like sanctions and diplomatic statements).²⁷ The IM's decision-making procedure works on the basis of strategic leadership from the European Council and requires consensus from the Foreign Affairs Council.²⁸ These intergovernmental dynamics make that all EU MS – in the end – retain control over their own FP positions and actions.²⁹ The EC's role within the IM procedure is mostly to develop policy proposals and coordinate the overall procedure.

The formal institutional setting of EFP-making and the according roles and responsibilities as described above, tend to be somewhat more blurry in practice. For example, there is an overlapping grey zone in-between the policy domains of IM and CM.³⁰ Think about the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Keukeleire and Delreux, "The Nature of EU Foreign Policy."

²³ External policies are for example about EU's external trade policy and development cooperation. However, an exemption on this standard procedure occurs in the case of decisions about trade agreements and foreign direct investments, for which unanimity in the Council is required.

²⁴ Generally, a qualified majority voting (QMV) procedure takes place for this, which means that decisions on policy proposal via EUCCO need to be supported by at least 55% of EU countries and 65% of the EU's population. Additionally, also a simple majority consent (>50%) is required from the EP.

²⁵ Keukeleire and Delreux, "The Nature of EU Foreign Policy."

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The Council generally meets once a month in Brussels. This EUCCO should not be confused with the Foreign Affairs Council, that consists of all Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Union's member states.

²⁹ Keukeleire and Delreux, "The Nature of EU Foreign Policy."

³⁰ Ibid.

interference between trade and broader (geo)political considerations. Also, supranational EU institutions and actors – like the EC and HR – try to influence the EFP-making process in more implicit ways, like setting the agenda and influencing the policy discourse. In fact, this makes up a crucial aspect of this research and gets further explained in the next chapter. For now, the academic debate on EFP will be further discussed.

The most pressing ‘realist’ critique towards common EFP would be its high inertia and low efficiency, and the inability for the EU to ‘speak with one voice’ due to the persisting primacy of MS.³¹ As such, scholar Adrian Hyde-Price says that “Europe’s great powers will continue to jealously guard their sovereign rights to pursue their own foreign and security policy priorities”.³² In other words, his argument is that EFP will always be of second order to MS because of their national policy interests and objectives. Scholars like Steven Blockmans and Marja-Liisa Laatsit explain this as the logic of diversity, whereby MS always try to minimize the individual ‘damage’ of common FP, leading only to lowest-common-denominator EFP.³³ Even despite the coordinating role of the HR and EEAS, it would be unable to overcome these engrained intergovernmental flaws, and thereby result in weak and inconsequential EFP.³⁴ In conclusion, Carmen Gebhard says that well concerted EU external action is thus hardly possible, and even has a negative impact on the credibility of the EU as an international actor.³⁵

A more ‘idealist’ perspective puts emphasis rather on the functionality and strength of the current EFP procedures - despite acknowledging drawbacks of the IM. As such, Karen Smith argues that the interdependence between MS actually encourages collective action, because MS are aware that multilateral EFP is relatively more strong and effective than unilateral foreign policy.³⁶ Also, the multilateral context would enable the use of internal leverages for bargaining amongst MS, resulting from their asymmetrical relationships. Thus, the added value of common EFP is that this would offer relatively more opportunities and protection to ‘exercise power in the world’ compared to national FP’s.³⁷ In addition, Christopher Bickerton prefers to talk about the functionality – rather than effectiveness – of EFP, in the sense that the EU has developed a unique institutional capability to manage with FP in a way that fits well to the “complex nature of the security environment” in the contemporary era.³⁸

³¹ Gebhard, "The problem of coherence in the EU's international relations."

³² Adrian Hyde-Price, "Normative' power Europe: a realist critique," *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (2006).

³³ Steven Blockmans and Marja-Liisa Laatsit, "The European external action service: enhancing coherence in EU external action?," in *EU External Relations Law and Policy in the post-Lisbon era*, ed. P. J. Cardwell (Springer, 2011)

³⁴ Karen E. Smith, "Introduction: Conceptualizing EU Foreign Policy," in *European Union foreign policy in a changing world* (Polity Press, 2013)

³⁵ Gebhard, "The problem of coherence in the EU's international relations."

³⁶ Smith, "Introduction: Conceptualizing EU Foreign Policy."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Christopher J. Bickerton, *European Union foreign policy: from effectiveness to functionality*, ed. M. Egan, N. Nugent, and W. Paterson, Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

A 'constructivist' perspective on EFP – like that of scholar Reuben Wong – stresses the mutual influence between the national FP's of member states and the common EFP.³⁹ This process is called Europeanization and results from the socialization and repeated interaction between the (in)formal institutions and identities of respectively the MS and EU itself.

Within this broad academic debate on EFP, a more specific one revolves about EU-China relations, which is discussed in the next section. However, the nature of these two debates is basically the same.

1.4 Different European Perspectives Towards China

The specific debate about EU-China relations is perceived through the lens of International Relations (IR) theory. As such, mostly a 'realist' and 'liberalist / constructivist' perspective can be distinguished.⁴⁰ Note that – besides an academic debate – this is also a contemporary debate in society and amongst policy-makers. Additionally – in the broadest sense – it is crucial to understand and address the risks of spiralling tensions between Europe and China, which also makes that "EU's policy towards China is first and foremost a matter of choices about the future of European cooperation".⁴¹ The contribution of this thesis to a greater understanding about the dynamics of EU-China relations as such, makes that this research also has strong societal relevance. Let's return to the debate now.

Realists on the one hand, primarily think in terms of national interests and state power. They perceive the international system as a 'zero-sum game' that is shaped by relative power positions of countries, and the rise of China provides thus little European incentive for deeper engagement.⁴² Especially not in a context of an emerging multipolar world order.⁴³ Besides these power-related arguments, realists generally have strong frustrations about economic relations with China, as there would be an "uneven economic impact of trade and investment relations" exacerbated by a disagreement on normative principles.⁴⁴ Thus, as deeper economic relations with China are understood to become unsustainable over time, the realist perspective

³⁹ Reuben Wong, "The Role of the Member States: The Europeanization of Foreign Policy?," in *International relations and the European Union*, ed. C. Hill, M. Smith, and S. Vanhoonaeker (Oxford University Press, 2017)

⁴⁰ Richard Maher, "Europe's response to China's rise: competing strategic visions," *Asia Europe Journal* 15, no. 2 (2017).

⁴¹ Vincent K.L. Chang and Frank N. Pieke, "Europe's engagement with China: shifting Chinese views of the EU and the EU-China relationship," *ibid.* 16, no. 4 (2018).

⁴² Christiansen, Kirchner, and Wissenbach, "Introduction.;" European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), 'Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry', ed. Mario Esteban, et al. Report, 23 January 2020. Available online: https://meric.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/200123_ETNC_Report.pdf (last accessed: 19 April 2021).

⁴³ A multipolar world order implies the dominance of multiple different 'power' poles in the world, in which at mostly the US, China and the EU can be distinguished (at least around the '10s and '20s).

⁴⁴ Thomas Christiansen and Richard Maher, "The rise of China – challenges and opportunities for the European Union," *Asia Europe Journal* 15 (2017).

pledges for much more assertive EU (trade) policies towards China.⁴⁵ As such, they would also seek for more strategic European response and a 'rebalancing' towards China.⁴⁶

Liberalists and constructivists on the other hand, think more in terms of transformative power, alignment with international norms and institutions, and opportunities for economic engagement.⁴⁷ There is thus much emphasis on the mutual benefits of (economic) cooperation with China – as trade is seen as a 'positive sum game' – as well as on pursuing other common interests, like having international stability and predictability.⁴⁸ Strong and common international rules and institutions are crucial for this, preferably in a Western rule-based and multilateral way.⁴⁹ This is clearly different from a multipolar system. Close cooperation and interaction between the EU and China would lead to further assimilation of the country within the existing international rules-based system. As such, Europe would also be able to influence China's political alignment.⁵⁰ To conclude, liberals and constructivists would thus seek for closer European engagement with China, within a strong rules-based international order.

1.5 Specific Research Questions

Given the above debate, EU's shifted policy discourse on China – from 'strategic partnership' to 'systemic rival' – seems to reflect a shift from a liberalist towards a more realist perspective. But how and why did this shift exactly occur, especially given the manifest lack of consensus and strong diverging perspectives amongst EU member states about EU-China relations, combined with strong inertia in the overall EFP-making process? This research explains and clarifies exactly this process in detail.

The hypothesis of this thesis is that this shift mostly occurred due to the efforts of supranational EU institutions and actors – like the Commission, EEAS and HR – given their influence in the overall EFP-making process. Especially by setting the EFP agenda, formulating priorities, developing relevant policy proposals, and trying to shape the EFP policy discourse. This process has also been characterised by various persisting decisions and choices from the past, that have continued to influence the course of EU-China relations over time – also called path dependency. The latter aspect closely relates to the broad theoretical lens of this thesis: historical institutionalism.

⁴⁵ Gustaaf Geeraerts, "EU-China relations," in *The palgrave handbook of EU-Asia relations*, ed. T. Christiansen, E. Kirchner, and P. Murray (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

⁴⁶ Nicola Casarini, "China's Rebalancing towards Europe," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (2015).

⁴⁷ Scott A. W. Brown, "Interpretations of the 'rise' of China," in *Power, Perception and Foreign Policymaking: US and EU Responses to the Rise of China*, Routledge Studies in Foreign Policy Analysis (Routledge, 2017)

⁴⁸ Christiansen, Kirchner, and Wissenbach, "Introduction."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Frank Pieke, "Not Just a Chinese Century," in *Knowing China: a twenty-first century guide* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Geeraerts, "The EU-China partnership: balancing between divergence and convergence."

For the purpose of this introduction, let's now move to the set of specific research questions (SRQ's) that is used for answering the CRQ of this thesis in a structured manner.

SRQ1: How have path dependent institutions and processes, specific for EU-China relations, shaped the process of EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations?

SRQ2: In how far has policy inertia within the EFP-making process, influenced the process of EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations?

SRQ3: How have the timing and sequencing of efforts by supranational EU institutions and actors, played a role in the process of EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations?

The next chapter explains how these SRQ's are exactly applied in the analysis, as the chapter also explains the broader theoretical underpinning and according methodology of this research. Chapter three and four contain the actual analysis part. Eventually, chapter five presents an overarching conclusion and discussion on this thesis as a whole.

2. Theoretical Framework & Methodology

2.1 A Theoretical Lens of Historical Institutionalism

This thesis seeks to explain EU’s shifted foreign policy discourse towards its relations with China over the period from 2013 to 2019. An entry point for starting this analysis, is to consider three so-called critical junctures (CJ’s) that have characterised this process over time: the reinforcement of the ‘strategic partnership’ in 2013, the launch of EU’s new ‘new strategy’ in 2016, and EU’s characterization of China as ‘systemic rival’ in 2019. These CJ’s provide the basic structure for the analysis of this thesis, as these demarcate two distinct phases over the course of this process. From now on, these are referred to as ‘phase I’ for the period from strategic partnership to a new strategy (2013-2016), and ‘phase II’ from a new strategy to systemic rival (2016-2019). As such, also the two main chapters of analysis in this thesis, align with these two phases. Respectively, the set of three SRQ’s – as earlier presented – is applied to both phases. To bring further structure to this analysis and to make sense of ‘reality’, a theoretical lens of historical institutionalism (HI) is used.⁵¹ Altogether, the above elements thus provide the basic structure for the analysis of this thesis (also see figure 1). These different elements are now further explained in this section.

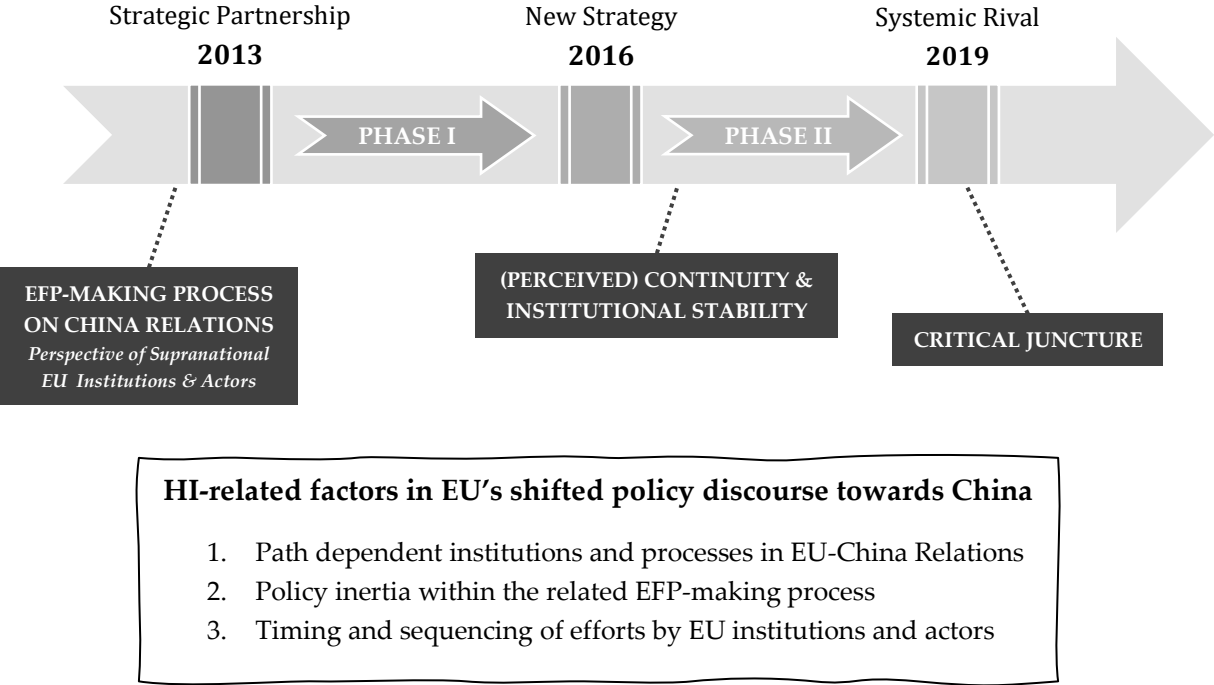


Figure 1: Visualisation of the theoretical approach of this thesis for analyzing EU’s shifted policy discourse towards China

⁵¹ Mark A. Pollack, "Theorizing EU Policy-Making," in *Policy-Making in the European Union*, ed. H. Wallace, M. A. Pollack, and A. R. Young (Oxford University Press, 2010)

To start with, historical institutionalism is not really a clear-cut theory or method, but rather a broad analytical approach to understand and explain change and continuity within political developments.⁵² Logically, HI has thus a combined focus on 'history' and 'institutions' as it "recognizes that political development must be understood as a process that unfolds over time" whereby "many contemporary implications of these temporal processes are embedded in institutions – whether these be formal rules, policy structures, or norms".⁵³ In other words, HI helps to describe how history and institutions, can influence or constrain certain (future) political choices. This particularly applies to describe the behaviour of actors over time, which – despite acknowledging their agency – is as much defined by the institutional context, by providing the broad range of opportunities and limitations.⁵⁴

HI characterises the course of political developments by a few central and interrelated phenomena – as described by well known HI scholar Paul Pierson.⁵⁵

- First of all, there is the critical role of timing and sequencing, whereby the occurrence of fairly small events or contingencies can significantly shape the future institutional context. Especially the effect of sequence matters, as – sometimes crucial – events may come 'too soon' or 'too late' to actually affect political change.
- Second, there is policy inertia (or 'lock-in') which means that existing institutions are likely to remain in a state of equilibrium for an extended period of time, even despite considerable political changes. This is because of the 'sticky' – i.e. persisting and self-reinforcing – nature of political institutions in general. Also the institutional density and complexity of policy making plays a role here. This is particularly relevant when considering the complex interplay between the CM and IM within EFP-making.
- Third, there is the principle of path dependence, meaning that past decisions often continue to provide incentives for actors to sustain these choices over time, even when outcomes of these choices have become clearly inefficient. This also relates to the generally limited time horizons of decision-makers, and the unattractiveness and uncertainty surrounding political changes.

The three SRQ's – as presented in the introduction – are directly based upon these three factors. Respectively, SRQ1 thus aims to identify and understand the role of particular path dependent processes and institutions specific for EU-China relations. SRQ2 addresses the role of policy inertia within the EFP-making process itself. And SRQ3 draws attention to the role of timing and sequencing of efforts by supranational EU institutions and actors. Together, these SRQ's

⁵² "The New Institutionalisms and European integration," in *European Integration Theory*, ed. A. Wiener and T. Diez (Oxford University Press, 2004); Sven Steinmo, "Historical Institutionalism," in *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective*, ed. D. della Porta and M. Keating (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

⁵³ Paul Pierson, "The path to European integration: a historical institutionalist analysis," *Comparative Political Studies* 29, no. 2 (1996).

⁵⁴ Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C.R. Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms," *Political studies* 44, no. 5 (1996).

⁵⁵ Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000).

enable to approach and answer the CRQ of this thesis, and hereby explain the process of EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations over time, by thus primarily focussing on these three HI-related factors. Obviously, also the broader context is considered.

To get a better understanding of the theoretical underpinning and 'logic' of HI, let's go into some more depth now. HI is thus particularly well able to explain political continuity and stability, given its focus on path dependency and 'sticky' institutions. Its research agenda – and also this thesis – rather focusses on explaining the somewhat 'rare' occasions of institutional change. In general, HI perceives political processes to be in a certain 'static' state of continuity through path dependence, only interrupted by CJ's. Such CJ's are thus understood to be critical moments in time – generally after a long period of institutional stability – whereby the occurrence and sequence of (fairly small) events or decisions by relevant actors, can significantly influence and shape the (future) institutional context.⁵⁶

The factors that lead up to such CJ's, can be understood as the combined effect of both 'exogenous' shocks and 'endogenous' factors of (incremental) change.⁵⁷ Although scholars within HI differ about the balance between these two types of factors – favouring either exogenous or endogenous factors – this thesis steps over this dichotomy, and relies on the somewhat balanced description of institutional change by Pierson, again.⁵⁸ He has described four factors that help explain institutional change, applied to the context of EU policy making. These factors are: the (partial) autonomy of EU institutions and actors; the changing preferences of member states⁵⁹; the restricted time-horizons of decision-makers⁶⁰, and the role of unanticipated consequences⁶¹. In this thesis – in line with the hypothesis – especially the role of these (partially) autonomous – in fact 'supranational' - EU institutions and actors is considered. The other three factors – although highly useful too – are not notably considered in this thesis for reasons of feasibility.

Before moving to the methodology, the last part of this section elaborates a bit further on the particular role of these supranational EU institutions and actors. This mostly deals with the strong influence that the Commission, EEAS and related representatives – in this case – have in the EFP-making process. This clearly links to the debate about the functioning and different mechanisms within EFP-making, as has been described in the introduction chapter.

⁵⁶ Orfeo Fioretos, "Historical institutionalism in international relations," *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (2011).

⁵⁷ Vivien A. Schmidt, "Taking ideas and discourse seriously: explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth 'new institutionalism'," *European Political Science Review* 2, no. 1 (2010).

⁵⁸ Pierson, "The path to European integration: a historical institutionalist analysis."

⁵⁹ This entails changes in the national preferences of individual member states with regards to their foreign policy. This could primarily happen because of electoral changes in national governments, or due to altered circumstances that can trigger a certain 'learning mechanism'.

⁶⁰ This aspect focusses on the role of limited time-horizons of decision makers, often favouring short-term decisions by heavily discounting on long-term consequences.

⁶¹ This is about the role of unintended – and often undesired – consequences that may arise from certain EU policies over time, resulting from the complexity and high issue density of EFP-making, which can hereby lead to EU policy change.

Pierson himself describes that these EU institutions and actors always try to strengthen their own authority within the EU context, by expanding the 'gaps' in MS control.⁶² Especially in the 'post-Lisbon era' it can indeed be said that there has become significant room to play for the EC and EEAS, mainly because of their strengthened (legal) autonomy and their significant influence in all stages of the EFP process.⁶³ Their influence is understood to lie mostly in agenda-setting, process management and dominating the policy discourse.⁶⁴ Also, the strength of so-called 'informal customs' – like networking and lobbying – by policy elites from these institutions, is assumed to play an important role.⁶⁵ Furthermore, they would have developed a strong 'culture of coordination' leading to a "constant generation of consensus" in the day-to-day practice of EFP-making.⁶⁶ As such, the EC and EEAS try to exert – and expand – their influence in policy making, especially also in EFP's grey zone in-between the CM and IM.⁶⁷

To conclude, this thesis aims to contribute to gain a better understanding about the above described dynamics within the EFP-making process, and to develop more insight into the political competition between the EU and the member states.⁶⁸ This entire thesis is written from the perspective of supranational EU institutions and actors for this purpose. The fact that this framework of historical institutionalism appears to have not been applied to the particular case of EU-China relations before, makes this analysis unique and relevant. The next section explains the research methodology, and thereby also the empirical basis of this thesis.

2.2 Discourse Analysis of Supranational EU Institutions and Actors

To study EU's shifted policy discourse, the research design of this thesis logically implies performing a discourse analysis (DA). Generally, the term 'discourse' concerns both the substantive content of texts and ideas ("what is said") as well as the institutional context that it surrounds ("where, when, how, and why things are said") – as discourses are produced, reproduced and transformed in social practices.⁶⁹ In this thesis, DA is specifically used "as a way to explain political change in an institutional context" and thus puts strong emphasis on

⁶² Pierson, "The path to European integration: a historical institutionalist analysis."

⁶³ Smith, "Introduction: Conceptualizing EU Foreign Policy."

⁶⁴ Pol Morillas, "Institutionalization or intergovernmental decision-taking in foreign policy: The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty," in *EU External Relations Law and Policy in the post-Lisbon era*, ed. P. J. Cardwell (Springer, 2011)

⁶⁵ Smith, "Introduction: Conceptualizing EU Foreign Policy."

⁶⁶ Gebhard, "The problem of coherence in the EU's international relations.;" Uwe Puetter, "The Latest Attempt at Institutional Engineering: The Treaty of Lisbon and Deliberative Intergovernmentalism in EU Foreign and Security Policy Coordination," in *EU External Relations Law and Policy in the post-Lisbon era*, ed. P. J. Cardwell (Springer, 2011)

⁶⁷ Keukeleire and Delreux, "The Nature of EU Foreign Policy."

⁶⁸ Bickerton, *European Union foreign policy: from effectiveness to functionality*.

⁶⁹ Kennet Lynggaard, "Discourse Analysis as a Research Strategy," in *Discourse Analysis and European Union Politics*, ed. M. Egan, N. Nugent, and W. E. Paterson, Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Schmidt, "Taking ideas and discourse seriously: explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth 'new institutionalism'."

the linkages of discourse with the surrounding institutional context over time.⁷⁰ Hereby, this DA also closely aligns with the theoretical approach of HI. For clarity, the aim of DA in this thesis is thus to describe institutional change over time on the basis of changes in policy discourse(s). The latter is hereby seen as a representation – an indicator – for dynamics in the preferences, strategies and normative orientations of actors, all limited somehow by an institutional context.⁷¹ Finally, also the deliberate use of discourse as a tool – of institutions and actors – is considered (e.g. by political framing), mostly under SRQ3.

So what exactly does the DA comprise in this thesis, and how does it translate into a research methodology? As the prime focus of this research is on supranational EU institutions and actors, the main focus is on the Commission and EEAS and their most relevant representatives. In particular, these are the [1] President of the European Commission: Jean-Claude Juncker, [2] High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR): Federica Mogherini, and [3] European Commissioner for Trade (ECT): Cecilia Malmström. Before November 2014 – as the EC works in five-year terms – these positions were respectively held by José Manuel Barroso, Catherine Ashton, and Karel De Gucht. Also other EU representatives and officials are included, like several EU Commissioners.

The aim of this DA is to describe the different discourses they have used to talk about EU-China relations, and to uncover and explain a certain logic in the development of using different discourses over time. This is done by collecting and contextualizing a variety of texts, speeches, and statements from these actors and their institutions in the period 2013-2019. In other words, this analysis is completely based on the analysis of primary sources, as a means to describe and interpret 'the past' through the eyes of a few supranational EU institutions and actors. The exact time-frame of the DA runs from 24 November 2013 till 21 June 2016 (942 days) for phase I, and from 23 June 2016 till 12 March 2019 (993 days) for phase II. These periods thus fall exactly in-between the publication dates of the three policy documents, corresponding with the three main CJ's in EU's shifted policy discourse.

There will be some minor overlap regarding these strict time-frames, especially around the beginning and ending of the respective two phases, to make smooth textual transitions. There is also some flexibility regarding the use primary sources, in the sense that also primary sources from other EU institutions and actors are used. This most of all concerns texts from the European Council, including from its President Donald Tusk – and his predecessor Herman van Rompuy. In addition, several documents of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council and the European Parliament are consulted for enriching and strengthening the overall analysis. Lastly, almost no secondary sources are included.

Almost all primary sources are collected by using the official EU databases. Most of all, the so-called 'press corner' of the European Commission is consulted by simultaneously using the search tags (1) EU, (2) China, and (3) partnership.⁷² There is also called upon the EEAS

⁷⁰ "Taking ideas and discourse seriously: explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth 'new institutionalism'."

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>

database, particularly by navigating to the page of the 'Delegation of the European Union to China'.⁷³ The archived version of this EEAS page has been used too, for publications before 2016.⁷⁴ Besides, the official archive of the Council is utilized.⁷⁵ The same counts for EC's official 'trade policy' webpage.⁷⁶ Eventually, more than a hundred primary sources are analysed, of which basically all documents are in English.

The following two chapters contain the respective analyses and elaborations on these sources, and are written in a narrative way, wherein the SRQ's are subtly and smoothly processed. These two chapters respectively focus on the process 'From Strategic Partnership to a New Strategy' between 2013 and 2016, and 'From A New Strategy to Systemic Rival' between 2016 to 2019. The last chapter of this thesis, ultimately answers the CRQ and provides an overarching conclusion and discussion on this thesis.

⁷³ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/search/site/_en?f%5B0%5D=im_field_regions%3A166

⁷⁴ https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/index_en.htm

⁷⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/>

⁷⁶ <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2115>

3. From Strategic Partnership to A New Strategy

3.1 A Flourishing Strategic Partnership around The 2013 EU-China Summit in Beijing

At the 16th EU-China Summit in November 2013, the EU and China celebrated 10 years of 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' (CSP) which had lasted since 2003. Both President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso and President of the Council Herman Van Rompuy had travelled to Beijing to meet with the Chinese leadership, Prime Minister Li Keqiang and President Xi Jinping.⁷⁷ The summit resulted in the basic structure of EU-China relations towards 2020, elaborated in the 'EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation'. As such, their future relationship would be based on three main pillars: peace and security, prosperity, and people-to-people exchanges.⁷⁸ Clearly, the guiding principles for this agenda were to enhance cooperation and interdependencies, and seek for broad win-win results.

Above all, trade and economy were understood as most important. As such, Barroso described that EU-China trade flows had grown tremendously and quadrupled over the last 10 years, which also made their economies more integrated and interdependent.⁷⁹ Van Rompuy too, emphatically and enthusiastically underlined their thriving business and the contribution hereof "to – almost – the biggest trading relationship on the planet".⁸⁰ As EU-China trade even surpassed the volume of EU-US trade for one quarter in 2012, Van Rompuy saw this as "the kind of positive rivalry that we would like to encourage between the three [EU – China – US] of us!".⁸¹ Both him and Barroso also acknowledged however, that the largely trade-driven EU-China relationship had moved well beyond trade, and increasingly involved a wider spectrum of political and security affairs.⁸²

This mostly refers to their mutually acknowledged strive of strengthening a rules-based, transparent and equitable system of global governance, and of promoting multilateralism in response to the global trend towards multipolarity.⁸³ This focus on the 'rule of law'

⁷⁷ European Commission, '16th EU-China Summit (Beijing, 21 November 2013)', Press Release, Brussels, 19 November 2013. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_1099 (last accessed: 18-05-2021).

⁷⁸ European External Action Service, "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation."

⁷⁹ José Manuel Durão Barroso [President of the European Commission], 'Statement by President Barroso at the press conference of the EU-China Summit', Speech, Beijing, 21 November 2013. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_13_959 (last accessed: 18-05-2021).

⁸⁰ European Council, 'Remarks by President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy at the closing ceremony of the EU-China Business summit', EUCO 242/13, Press Release, Beijing, 21 November 2013. Available online:

https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/documents/news/2013112_hvr_closing_ceremony_of_biz_summit.pdf (last accessed: 18-05-2021).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² José Manuel Durão Barroso [President of the European Commission], "Statement by President Barroso at the press conference of the EU-China Summit."

⁸³ European External Action Service, "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation."

consolidated – what Barroso called – “a sentiment of strategic trust ... something that needs to be ... deserved on both sides. That comes from regular contacts and dialogue.”⁸⁴ As such, also the annual ‘EU-China Human Rights Dialogue’ would be strengthened.

In conclusion, the above clearly represents the Commission’s dominant liberalist perspective towards China around that time, due to its dominant focus on enhancing cooperation, integration and (economic) interdependencies, all based on common international rules. The reinforcement of this flourishing partnership in 2013 also further anchored a strong sentiment of trust and mutual understanding, overall laying down a clear path for their future relationship – one that later appeared to be hard to deviate from.

3.2 Europe’s Anticipation on Economic and Social Reforms in China

For long, the EU had – in a supportive spirit – been stressing and awaiting China’s commitments of social and economic reforms and further ‘opening-up’ according WTO regulations. In short, this implied liberalisation of the domestic market and creating a ‘level-playing field’ for external investments.⁸⁵ This European anticipation had grown strongly over time, and as of 2013 mostly came forth out of EC’s growing discontent with the low level of European foreign direct investments (FDI) in China: only 2.1% of its total FDI’s, despite their substantial trade flows.⁸⁶ This was understood to be the result of barriers at the Chinese domestic market, like difficulties to obtain market access⁸⁷ and the lacking of a secure and stable investment environment.⁸⁸

In fact, the EC had been stressing the importance of such reforms ever since China’s admission to the WTO in 2001, and firmly embedded this promise in their 2003 CSP agreements.⁸⁹ Thus, EU’s anticipation of “China’s successful transition to a stable, prosperous and open country that fully embraces democracy, free market principles and the rule of law” had always been a fundamental assumption their relationship. Some ten years later, the EU was thus still stressing – and hoping – that China would eventually ‘transform’.⁹⁰

Something that did had changed in those ten years, were the Commission’s structure and competences regarding EFP. As of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, FDI’s had become an exclusive legislative competence of the Commission. Thus, all bilateral investment treaties (BIT’s) of

⁸⁴ José Manuel Durão Barroso [President of the European Commission], "Statement by President Barroso at the press conference of the EU-China Summit."

⁸⁵ European External Action Service, "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation."

⁸⁶ European Commission, 'EU investment negotiations with China and ASEAN', MEMO, Brussels, 18 October 2013. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_13_913 (last accessed: 18-05-2021).

⁸⁷ For example due to the mandatory joint ventures for European companies with Chinese partners when operating in China.

⁸⁸ For example regarding the protection of intellectual property (IP) rights and a solid ‘rule of law’.

⁸⁹ Commission Of The European Communities, "A maturing partnership - shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations. ."

⁹⁰ José Manuel Durão Barroso [President of the European Commission], "Statement by President Barroso at the press conference of the EU-China Summit."

individual MS with non-EU countries were to be replaced by overarching and streamlined EU agreements.⁹¹ Against this background, the Council had given its green light to the EC in October 2013, to start negotiations on such an agreement with China.⁹² The initiative for this so-called Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) was already taken at the 14th EU-China Summit in early 2012.⁹³ This CAI was a fundamental element in the '2020 strategic agenda', and became even more fundamental for the EU over time.

In short, EU's policy discourse on EU-China relations was fairly positive and promising around 2013, as cooperation would be broadened and strengthened under the conditions of a rules-based system of global governance. Although the EU did stress the importance – and current lack – of ensuring a level-playing field and reciprocity in their relation, it remained strongly anticipating economic reforms in China in the near future. In addition, the prospect of an overarching CAI between the EU and China, enabled by the Lisbon treaty, would also enable the EU to address these issues more strongly.

3.3 Repositioning The EU in A Rapidly Changing World Order

As much as the EU was expecting reforms in China, it was internally reforming too⁹⁴ for dealing with the Eurocrisis, and to foster European GDP growth and investments.⁹⁵ In this context, Commissioner Tajani said in 2013 that "the rapidly-changing world, the global financial and Euro crises ... together with the rise of new aggressive emerging economies, force us to adapt and to elaborate a new vision for the future".⁹⁶ He deemed more assertive trade policies and free trade agreements (FTA's) crucial to better access these international markets, and underlined the importance of finishing TTIP, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and US.⁹⁷ This approach of "Europe should not resist global economic forces: it should seek new opportunities from them"⁹⁸ hereby logically strengthened EU-China economic relations. The coincidence of these complementary developments – the Eurocrisis and China's emerging economy – logically created incentives for the EU towards a path of further EU-China economic cooperation.

⁹¹ European Commission, 'Commission proposes to open negotiations for an investment agreement with China', Press Release, Brussels, 23 May 2013. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_458 (last accessed: 18-05-2021).

⁹² "EU investment negotiations with China and ASEAN."

⁹³ "Commission proposes to open negotiations for an investment agreement with China."

⁹⁴ Mostly of the European Monetary Union (EMU).

⁹⁵ Antonio Tajani [EU Commissioner responsible for Industry and Entrepreneurship], 'An Industrial Compact for Europe', Speech, London School of Economics, London, 3 December 2013. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_13_1008 (last accessed: 18-05-2021).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Olli Rehn [EU Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs and the Euro], 'Reform and recovery of the European and global economy', Speech, Wirtschaftsrat Europe Symposium, Brussels, 3 December 2013. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_13_1015 (last accessed: 18-05-2021).

In late 2013, the EU was also preoccupied with finishing the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014-2020.⁹⁹ Eventually, regarding EU's external action, only the underpinning principles were revised to "make Europe count in a world of shifting alliances and emerging new powers ... further reinforce its role on the global stage and promote its interests and values"¹⁰⁰ This heralded a change in EU's overall perception of the global world order, which was now perceived as a rapidly changing one, in which emerging economies like China played a prominent role by their influence in global affairs. This more 'realist' analysis of a rapidly changing world order, moved beyond EC's commonly more restrained 'liberalist' tone. Also the ambitions for EU's own position in this context became clear: it "must stand together and ... further reinforce its role on the global stage and promote its interests and values".¹⁰¹ The most logical and distinct way for the EU to do so, would be via trade and related agreements.

Now, it makes sense that both Barroso and Karel De Gucht – Commissioner for Trade – as of 2014, began increasingly stressing the importance of the CAI negotiations with China, for levelling the playing field, removing trade irritants for European industry, and tackling unfair trade practices.¹⁰² This should also be seen against the background of EC's recent proposal to modernize EU's Trade Defence Instrument (TDI) for addressing such issues more adequately. Barroso was looking forward "to the Council giving a mandate to the Presidency so that this file concluded".¹⁰³ Eventually, this mandate would follow only in 2018.¹⁰⁴

To summarize, EU's rhetoric on China had become somewhat more harsh and outspoken by 2014, mainly resulting from the Commission's increasing awareness about the rapidly changing world order and China's emerging role herein – and its 'unfair trade practices'. As such, the EC started to put the need for advanced European trade defence on the Council's agenda, and increasingly tried to position the EU – at least in discourse – as global power that influences global affairs via its trade flows, as Barroso more or less put it.¹⁰⁵

3.4 Strategic Rebalancing of EU-China Relations and The Transatlantic Partnership

In early 2014, Commissioner Michel Barnier translated these contemporary global developments into a need for rebalancing between Europe and China, and stressed economic

⁹⁹ European Commission, 'The Multiannual Financial Framework: The External Action Financing Instruments', MEMO, Brussels, 11 December 2013. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_1134 (last accessed: 18-05-2021).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Karel De Gucht [EU Trade Commissioner], 'EU trade policy under this Commission's term', Speech, Committee on International Trade (INTA) of the European Parliament, Brussels, 1 April 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_270 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ This was strongly affected by policy inertia within EFP. After all, a strong TDI also implied more power towards the EC – not too interesting for MS – and 'strain' EU's distinct liberalist approach.

¹⁰⁵ José Manuel Durão Barroso [President of the European Commission], 'Reforming Europe in a changing world', Speech, London School of Economics, London, 14 February 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_131 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

globalisation to be organized according international rules. For China, this meant avoiding protectionism, reducing internal imbalances and increasing reciprocity.¹⁰⁶ Later in June, Barnier even talked about international (dis)order “in which the economic, military, political and even moral leadership of the West is increasingly challenged” by big industrial, economic and sometimes military powers like China.¹⁰⁷ As such, he also deemed strategic strengthening of the Transatlantic Partnership – via TTIP – crucial.¹⁰⁸ But in how far got his view of ‘strategic rebalancing’ within EU-China relations, propagated broadly by the EC?

Also De Gucht had consistently been stressing EU’s commitment to strengthen transatlantic relations: “Let us build another, even stronger bridge over the Atlantic!”.¹⁰⁹ One of his main arguments concerned EU’s external relations, as TTIP would significantly enhance the Unions influence to shape regulations and standards around the world.¹¹⁰ Barroso in his speech called “Global Europe, from the Atlantic to the Pacific”, even talked about a context of “... competing world views that pose serious questions about how we defend our democracies, the way we lead our lives and promote the values we believe”.¹¹¹ Despite sentiments of “the decay of west and the rise of the rest”, Barroso firmly believed that the West and EU in particular, were best equipped to address the related challenges of this context: via international rules.¹¹² He also explicitly stressed that strong Atlantic ties – consolidated via TTIP – would help to shape globalisation more on the basis of their shared values – peace, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights – and it would also be in line with their common strategic interests to “influence developments in the pacific”.¹¹³ Although China was not explicitly mentioned, EU’s ambition is clear: to position itself more within a Western trading and strategic block.

Later on May 22, Barroso and De Gucht held a speech – respectively in Brussels and Berlin – in which they both explained EU’s trade policy again, as a tool for shaping globalization and stressed the need of political engagement on a global scale to organise trade liberalisation, “in an age where state capitalism is a significant factor behind a number of emerging economies

¹⁰⁶ Michel Barnier [Member of the European Commission responsible for Internal Market and Services], 'China and the EU – partners in reform', Speech, Development Research Centre, Beijing, 7 January 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_3 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹⁰⁷ 'Strengthening the Transatlantic Partnership Beyond TTIP: A strategic vision for the EU and US', Speech, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, 12 June 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_464 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Karel De Gucht [EU Trade Commissioner], 'The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership: Where do we stand on the hottest topics in the current debate?', Speech, Lecture and discussion at Atlantikbrücke, Düsseldorf, 22 January 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_52 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ José Manuel Durão Barroso [President of the European Commission], 'Global Europe, from the Atlantic to the Pacific', Speech, Stanford University, Stanford, 1 May 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_352 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

[meaning: China] across the world".¹¹⁴ Most salient element of both speeches was the exact same notion that EU's trade policy should be more consistent with the principles that underlie the Lisbon Treaty: "democracy; the rule of law; the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms; respect for human dignity; the principles of equality and solidarity; and respect for the principles of the UN Charter and international law".¹¹⁵ This clearly seems to be a tuned action by these EU officials, to tell a unified story about EU's global perspective, and about its 'strategic' interest – given China – for strong transatlantic relations.

In short, all of the above indeed consolidate the trend in EU's discourse halfway 2014, of more broad 'strategic rebalancing' towards China. Although economic interests remained at the heart, this 'strategic' aspect increasingly included the need for the EU to defend its own values and principles in global affairs more strongly – backed by strong Atlantic ties. As such, the EC's efforts of promoting 'principled trade' and positioning itself as a global trade power, can be considered as soft tools to perform 'high politics': to strongly align global governance and the rules-based international system with EU's values and interests. However, despite the EU's more 'realist' analysis of the rapidly changing world order, its approach remained fairly 'liberalist'. Cooperation and convergence over competition and confrontation. Or as Barroso would say: "defending our values and interest in a smarter way".¹¹⁶

3.5 China's Increasingly Assertive Behaviour in International Affairs

Let's now take look at the broader context around 2014. In late March, an 'historic landmark' in EU-China relations was reached: President Xi Jinping had visited various EU institutions at the invitation of van Rompuy and Barroso.¹¹⁷ This visit was believed to give political impetus to the ongoing talks about the CAI.¹¹⁸ They also reaffirmed commitment "to reinforce their cooperation within the G20, IMF, World Bank and WTO on global economic governance" and intended to find synergies with China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" plans – which later became known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹¹⁹ It seemed not to be coincidence that the EC drew

¹¹⁴ 'The rule of law and open economies - two sides of the same coin', Speech, Georgetown University Law Center, Brussels, 22 May 2014. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_403 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹¹⁵ Karel De Gucht [EU Trade Commissioner], 'EU Trade Policy as a Means to Influence Globalization', Speech, Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, 22 May 2014. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_405 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹¹⁶ José Manuel Durão Barroso [President of the European Commission], 'Speech by President Barroso at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy University', Baku, 14 June 2014. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_468 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹¹⁷ European Commission, 'Joint Statement: Deepening the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for mutual benefit', Brussels, 31 March 2014. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_14_89 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹¹⁸ 'EU and China hold investment talks ahead of President Xi Jinping visit to Brussels', Press Release, Brussels, 24 March 2014. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_291 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹¹⁹ "Joint Statement: Deepening the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for mutual benefit."

strong attention to its – earlier mentioned – TDI proposal the day right after Xi’s visit. This seems to have been a diplomatic push of discontent about the lack progress in the CAI negotiations, and about the (low) pace of Chinese reforms. Besides, it could have been a reply to China’s overall more assertive behaviour in other realms of international affairs.

First of all, this relates to the emerging disputes in the East and South China Sea at that time. Leaving details aside, tensions were about territorial and maritime claims by China and other Asian countries – mostly members of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). The EU and US had both urged all parties “... to avoid taking unilateral action ... and increase tensions in the region”.¹²⁰ Later in June, the G7 also expressed serious concerns about these tensions. The use of intimidation and coercion by any party to assert its claims was strongly opposed, rather they should “pursue their territorial and maritime claims in accordance with international law”.¹²¹ Also the EU itself strongly encouraged to find solutions in accordance with international law. It is no surprise that Barroso declared the need of establishing a strategic – ‘counter’ – partnership with the ASEAN countries later in August that year.¹²²

Second, China’s approach to human rights was an aspect of growing European concern. Consecutively in February, March, April and May 2015, High Representative Catherine Ashton published various statements and declarations wherein she repeatedly shared deep concerns about trials and convictions of various Chinese human rights defenders¹²³. This also included prosecutions of several human rights activists and associated waves of arrests. The EU hereby mainly reiterated its calls “... on the Chinese authorities to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.¹²⁴ In October 2014, the EU showed similar concerns about the situation in Hong Kong.¹²⁵

All of the above describes China’s increasingly ambiguous adherence to international law, which particularly became an aspect of concern for the EU, as ‘stronghold’ for the international

¹²⁰ 'EU-US Summit – Joint Statement', Brussels, 26 March 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_14_84 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹²¹ 'The Brussels G7 Summit Declaration', MEMO, Brussels, 5 June 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_14_402 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹²² José Manuel Durão Barroso [President of the European Commission], 'Remarks by President Barroso following the bilateral talks with Prime Minister Dung of Vietnam', Press Conference, Hanoi, Vietnam, 25 August 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_570 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹²³ European External Action Service, 'Declaration by High Representative Catherine Ashton on behalf of the European Union regarding the treatment of human rights defenders and their relatives in China', Brussels, 5 February 2014. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2014/20140205_en.htm (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹²⁴ 'Statement on the recent wave of arrests and detentions in China', Brussels, 28 May 2014. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2014/20140529_en.htm (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹²⁵ Italian Presidency on behalf of EU High Representative/Vice-President Catherine Ashton, 'Remarks about the situation in Hong Kong', EP Plenary Session, Strasbourg, 22 October 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_718 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

rules-based order. As such, China's growing assertiveness also took up an emerging position in EU's shifting discourse towards China.

3.6 The First Year of The Juncker Commission and Forty Years of EU-China Relations

By October 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker took office as new President of the Commission, together with new Council President Donald Tusk, new High Representative Federica Mogherini, and a team of new Commissioners, like Cecilia Malmström responsible for trade. This new grouping gave the EU fresh impetus for making an ambitious new start in EU-China relations and rhetoric. Before handover, Barroso and Van Rompuy had assured "to maintain the level of engagement with the Chinese leadership" and strongly underlined the importance of the strategic partnership.¹²⁶ This set a final seal on the EC's predominantly liberalist approach towards China up until 2014.

Since his accession, Juncker had particularly 'internal' EU prioritizations, like bridging the investment gap and strengthening the European economy after the Eurocrisis. He was also dealing with the 'refugee crisis' due instability in EU's direct neighbourhood.¹²⁷ Although Juncker called for the EU to act more as a global actor, it was fairly low at his priority list.¹²⁸ It took until June 2015 before Juncker gave a first, clear insight into his 'China approach'.¹²⁹

Juncker wanted to breathe new life into their partnership by further deepening it in the fields of trade, investments and connectivity. This worked well together with his top priority of addressing the European 'investment crisis', which had caused an investment loss of 70% compared to pre-crisis year 2007.¹³⁰ As such, the EU had already established the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI).¹³¹ Even more relevant became the emerging rollout of China's 'One Belt One Road' initiative (or: BRI) to enhance China's foreign infrastructural – and strategic – investments. Juncker saw "the project as an open hand ... the ambition of our response should be equal to the scope of the project itself".¹³² The smooth complementarity of

¹²⁶ European Commission, 'Press statement following the meeting between Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, and Premier of the People's Republic of China, Li Keqiang', Milan, 15 October 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_14_320 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹²⁷ Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'State of the Union 2015', Speech, Strasbourg, 9 September 2015. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_15_5614 (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹²⁸ Jean-Claude Juncker [President-elect of the European Commission], 'Setting Europe in Motion: President-elect Juncker's Main Messages from his speech before the European Parliament', European Parliament plenary session ahead of the vote on the College, Strasbourg, 22 October 2014. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_705 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹²⁹ Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'The EU and China: A solid partnership', Speech, EU-China Business Summit, Brussels, 29 June 2015. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_5278 (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

Juncker's investment seeking and China's emerging BRI, also consolidated a path dependency in EU-China relations of further mutual interdependency, especially from EU perspective.

A generally friendly and 'festive' atmosphere seemed to revolve around the 17th EU-China summit in 2015, perhaps also due their milestone of 40 years of diplomatic relations – something continuously reiterated by all officials. Juncker did also stress EU's well-known concerns about a level playing field – by explaining that the business atmosphere for European investors in China was deteriorating – and the importance of reforms and of their CAI negotiations. His overall tone seemed much less 'harsh' and more welcoming again, after the somewhat more tense and outspoken atmosphere of strategic rebalancing towards China in 2014. He also underlined the high value the EU attaches to human rights, but that he "don't want to lecture China" about this topic, but it should be discussed when it comes to these issues: "not only as partners, as friends. And friends also have to be frank with one another".¹³³ As such, Juncker clearly used an 'open hand' approach again, different from EU's more realist and distancing tone from 2014, which seemed to have moved to the background again. Tusk however, stressed the importance of adhering to international law more strongly, as well as Europe's concerns about the freedom of expression and association in China.¹³⁴

To conclude, why did Juncker chose this highly constructive approach again? Most likely because he genuinely wanted to make a fresh and constructive start with his new Commission in EU-China relations, likely expecting that this way of encouragement would be most effective. This may also have resulted from his good experiences with China during his time as Prime Minister of Luxembourg in the '90s.¹³⁵ He also was seemed clearly in favour a strong 'liberalist' approach, hereby avoiding confrontation. Finally, Juncker and the EC were mostly focussed on the EU internally and the investment gap. As such, Chinese investments (via BRI) were warmly welcomed.¹³⁶ Thereby, EU's high ambitions in early 2014 to be more a global player via 'principled trade', seem to have disappeared again by 2015.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Donald Tusk [President of the European Council], 'Remarks by President Donald Tusk at the press conference of the EU-China summit', Brussels, 29 June 2015. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/06/29/tusk-remarks-eu-china-summit/> (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹³⁵ In his speech held at the 17th EU-China Summit in Brussels, Juncker Said: "I am a great admirer of China ... I was always admiring the performances of this great nation, of the leaders of that nation and although from time to time we have divergences on views, mainly as far as human rights are concerned, I was always strongly believing in the capacity of the Chinese nation and of the Chinese leadership" referring to his experiences with China as Prime Minister of Luxembourg; Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the 12th EU-China Business Summit', Speech, Brussels, 2 June 2017. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_17_1526 (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

¹³⁶ The EU simply had its hands full with priorities closer to home around 2015. Anecdotaly is that Juncker was actually absent in various meetings during the 17th EU-China summit, as he was too busy with the 'Greek crisis' [Eurozone crisis]: "My apologies once again, on my knees, that I was not able to attend all the meetings which have been planned for today. Blame Greece, not me." Although perhaps

3.7 A Further Deepening and Broadening of Relations Towards 2016

Given the rather constructive summit in June 2015, how can the run-up towards EC's 'new strategy' on China – one year later – be explained? Especially because basically only two developments seemed to be happening: further deepening of relations in the domains of trade and connectivity, and broadening in the domain of foreign policy and security.

Regarding the deepening of relations, both China and the EU had been showing strong interest in each others flagship initiatives, China had decided to contribute to EU's Investment Plan (EFSI) of € 315 billion.¹³⁷ Besides a 5G partnership¹³⁸, Europe also embraced China's BRI which mostly resulted in strong economic engagement of individual MS vis-à-vis China – as no overarching EU investment agreement (CAI) with China existed yet.¹³⁹ As such, the amount of Chinese FDI's in several EU countries had increased significantly towards 2016.¹⁴⁰ Also several EU countries had bilaterally joined and invested in the recently established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a BRI-related and China-based financial institution.¹⁴¹ After all, Europe – logically – did not want to 'miss the boat' regarding these promising developments and opportunities surrounding China, especially as it was still seeking to strengthen its own economy. However, the deepening of EU-China relations thus mostly comprised of fragmented bilateral MS efforts – undermining a unified and strong EU.

The EU-China relationship had also broadened in scope in 2015 – like in the domain of global security cooperation via the UN Security Council – mainly resulting from efforts by HR

only a subtle detail, it does show EU's internal preoccupation and also signalled the diplomatic weight it attached to this EU-China 'anniversary summit' with one of it's largest trade partners – and with a rapidly emerging global power after all.

¹³⁷ European Commission, 'Investment Plan for Europe goes global: China announces its contribution to #investEU', Press Release, Brussels, 28 September 2015. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_15_5723 (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹³⁸ To cooperate on 5G research and investment, and ensure future European membership to this new technology. After all, 5G was perceived to become the backbone of the digital economy and society, with China as main player herein. For example by considering its "Made in China 2025" strategy, aiming for the country to become global leader in (high) technological sectors in the near future; 'The EU and China signed a key partnership on 5G, our tomorrow's communication networks', Press Release, Brussels, 28 September 2015. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_15_5715 (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹³⁹ This initiative can really be seen as the centrepiece of China's foreign policy since 2013, and focusses on enhancing infrastructure between China and – to put it broadly – the rest of the world. Although primarily focused on physical infrastructure, the BRI is about 'connectivity' in the broadest sense and thus also comprising the digital, economic, political and cultural domain.

¹⁴⁰ Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), 'Record Flows And Growing Imbalances - Chinese Investment in Europe in 2016', *Papers On China*, ed. T. Hanemann and M. Huotari January 2017.

Available online: <https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Chinese%20investment%20in%20Europe%20-%20record%20flows%20and%20growing%20imbalances.pdf>

(last accessed: 03-06-2021).

¹⁴¹ 'EU-China Summit joint statement - The way forward after forty years of EU-China cooperation', Brussels, 29 June 2015. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23732/150629-eu-china-summit-joint-statement-final.pdf> (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

Mogherini: “Our partnership, initially focused on economic issues, has evolved into a political dialogue”.¹⁴² As such, she stressed the importance to “face the differences - and sometimes also the difficulties - of a relationship, but also able to overcome them in a spirit of mutual cooperation”.¹⁴³ Later in 2016, about two weeks before EU’s ‘new strategy’ on China would get presented, Mogherini’s constructive and diplomatic tone towards the Chinese leadership had basically remained unchanged, although she seemed to stipulate more strongly now that “the rule of law and human rights are at the very centre of our bilateral relations.¹⁴⁴ Something that had changed even more clearly by then, was EU’s overall global strategic approach.

3.8 The EU’s Global Strategy and its Approach of ‘Principled Pragmatism’

In June 2016, Mogherini presented – on behalf of the EEAS – the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) which included a broad vision and outspoken (re)prioritisation of EU’s values, principles and interests, to underpin its external relations. Needless to say that this EUGS was closely related to the – also presented in June – ‘new strategy’ on China. Let’s take a look at the EUGS first.

Mogherini was mandated in June 2015 by the Council to develop this EUGS.¹⁴⁵ A task that well suited her, as she had long been articulating her ambitions to streamline and coordinate the EFP domain more strongly on the basis of a common vision and clear priorities.¹⁴⁶ Also Juncker gladly embraced the efforts of “our highly determined High Representative” during his first ‘State of the Union’ (SotU) speech in September 2015.¹⁴⁷ He also aroused Europe to play its part on the world stage by thinking more strategically and by acting more united. Because “how

¹⁴² European External Action Service, 'HRVP Mogherini's meeting with Premier of China Li Keqiang', Press Release, Brussels, 6 May 2015. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2015/20150506_en.htm (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹⁴³ Federica Mogherini [High Representative / Vice-President], 'Joint press point with Yang Jiechi, Chinese State Councillor', Beijing, 5 May 2015. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2015/20150506_en.htm (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹⁴⁴ 'Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press event on the occasion of High Level Strategic Dialogue between the EU and China, with State Counsellor Yang Jiechi', Brussels, 10 June 2016. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2016/20160613_en.htm (last accessed: 21-05-2021).

¹⁴⁵ The “High Representative will continue the process of strategic reflection ... to preparing an EU global strategy on foreign and security policy ... to be submitted ... by June 2016”; General Secretariat of the Council, 'European Council meeting (25 and 26 June 2015) – Conclusions', EUCO 22/15, Cover Note, Brussels, 26 June 2015. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/06/26/euco-conclusions/> (last accessed: 21-05-2021).

¹⁴⁶ European Parliament, 'Hearing of Federica Mogherini (Italy), High Representative-designate of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President designate', Extracts from the statement by Federica Mogherini, Strasbourg, 6 October 2014. Available online: https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/hearing-of-federica-mogherini-italy-high-representative-designate-of-the-union-for-foreign-affairs-and-security-policyvice--president-designate-extracts-from-the-statement-by-federica-mogherini_I093072-V_v (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹⁴⁷ Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], "State of the Union 2015."

can it be that a strategically important new Infrastructure Investment Bank [AIIB] is created in Asia, and European governments, instead of coordinating their efforts, engage in a race who is first to become a member?"¹⁴⁸ In response to this – at least his – growing awareness about EU's 'strategic deficit', the EUGS was a logical and realistic first European answer to this.

In summary, the EUGS outlined a new guiding approach of 'principled pragmatism' for the coming years whereby "peace and security, prosperity, democracy and a rules-based global order are the vital interests underpinning our external action"¹⁴⁹ Specific for China relations, the strategy underscored "respect for rule of law, both domestically and internationally" to be the fundamental criteria for all engagement.¹⁵⁰ Clearly a shift compared to the principles of 'equality, respect and trust' that underpinned the '2020 Strategic Agenda' from 2013.¹⁵¹ This was at least a clear shift in discourse, as this strategy – what's in the name – still mostly provided a policy framework rather than clear-cut actions.

In this context, the publication of the 'Elements for a new EU strategy on China' by the EC and HR in June 2016 makes sense now, as this basically – but extensively – applied the EUGS to EU-China relations.¹⁵² This 19 page long document proposed five main elements that should underpin EU's future engagement with China, based on 'principled pragmatism' to protect its own interest stronger. Still, this all continued to be "based on a positive agenda of partnership coupled with the constructive management of differences"¹⁵³ Respectively, these five elements were about: (1) EU's principles of engagement with China, (2) the state of the prosperity and reform agenda, (3) common interests on foreign policy and security, (4) global governance and multilateralism, and (5) a common European approach towards China.¹⁵⁴

Basically, this strategy was a collection and meticulous wording of all the various concerns within EU-China relations from over the last few years. It is important to realize that this China strategy, was still only a joint communication from the EC and HR to the Council and

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ European External Action Service, 'Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe', *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy*, Brussels, 28 June 2016. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf (last accessed: 13-04-2021).

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation."

¹⁵² European Commission and High Representative Of The Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy, "Elements for a new EU strategy on China."

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ In more detail, these elements respectively pledged for: (1) an EU-China relationship with more reciprocity in both political and economic terms, within a rules-based international order, and wherein especially EU's values and interests would get articulated more strongly; (2) a level playing field in all aspects of the trade and investment relationship – like improved market access for European companies, protection of IP rights, compliance with WTO rules – and implementation of domestic economic reforms; (3) recognition of China's increasingly assertive role in global affairs and better consideration of geostrategic consequences of the BRI; (4) a system of global governance that is based on multilateralism, supports global standards and institutions, and complies with international human rights obligation; and (5) a "whole-of-EU" approach whereby the activities of EU institutions and member states are coherent, in order to project a strong, clear and unified voice towards China.

Parliament, and was not adopted formally yet. This clearly portrays the role of the EC and HR in EFP-making, of trying to influence the process of EU's priority setting and trying to shape the policy discourse, as they thus have quite some autonomy within the EFP process. However, most of these efforts still stand or fall by EUCO decisions as of its dominant supervising role in EFP. In all cases, the EU's own discourse and approach towards China had definitely changed halfway 2016, from now on strongly revolving around this 'new strategy'.

3.9 Other Factors that Shaped EU's New China Strategy

This last section concludes the analysis on 'phase I' by briefly providing three additional factors that were relevant in the run-up towards EU's 'new strategy' on China from June 2016.

First of all, EU-China trade tensions had been rising again due to the persisting lack of China's compliance to WTO rules – comparable to the 'WTO stalemate' from 2014.¹⁵⁵ In late 2015, Hans Dietmar Schweisgut as EU ambassador to China, explained the frustrations about China's lacking "responsibilities in line with the benefits it draws from the international system" and he was worried about their seemingly "closing-up reflex".¹⁵⁶ Also ECT Malmström said in early 2016 that "China has taken worrying steps backwards" as it was postponing meaningful reforms, and she was also worried about "the step backs in human rights ... now affecting the business climate too".¹⁵⁷ These trends got further consolidated in China's new five-year plans – accompanied by more domestic restrictions – as presented in March 2016.¹⁵⁸

This clearly shows EU's frustration – and perhaps naivety – about the unforeseen 'contradictory' internal developments in China that accompanied the "unprecedented scale and speed" of its rise¹⁵⁹. This was especially frustrating because the CSP was grounded in the assumption that China would reform and smoothly assimilate in the international rules-based order. Reality was thus increasingly showing the opposite. At the same time, the two had become increasingly integrated and interdependent over time, creating a strong path

¹⁵⁵ Cecilia Malmström [Commissioner for Trade], 'The Trade Commissioner and Parliament: A Vital Relationship', Speech, Meeting of the European Parliament's International Trade Committee, Brussels, 3 December 2014. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_14_2348 (last accessed: 19-05-2021).

¹⁵⁶ Hans Dietmar Schweisgut [Ambassador of the European Union to the People's Republic of China], 'Changing landscape of EU-China economic and trade relations', Speech, 3rd Annual Conference of EUCCC, Beijing, 1 December 2015. Available online:

https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/15599/changing-landscape-eu-china-economic-and-trade-relations_hy (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹⁵⁷ Cecilia Malmström [Commissioner for Trade], 'China EU- A Partnership for Reform', Speech, A joint BUSINESSEUROPE, EUCCC and EUCBA Event, Brussels, 28 January 2016. Available online: https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2016/january/tradoc_154182.pdf (last accessed: 21-05-2021).

¹⁵⁸ European External Action Service, 'Commissioner Vestager meets Chinese counterparts in Beijing to discuss competition policy and economic reform', Press Release, Beijing/Brussels, 18 March 2016. Available online:

https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2016/20160318_en.htm (last accessed: 21-05-2021).

¹⁵⁹ "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation."

dependency in their relations. All of this seems to have logically contributed to a much stronger EU approach towards China – at least in discourse ¹⁶⁰ – according to the ‘new strategy’.

A second factor has been the substantial EP resolution on EU-China relations from December 2015, of which various elements have directly been adopted in the final ‘new strategy’.¹⁶¹ The resolution emphasized that “China’s persistent rise as a global power requires a continuous and rapid reconsideration of Europe’s strategic priorities in its relations with China” and demanded for “... a coordinated strategic approach”.¹⁶²

Finally, a third factor were the growing European concerns about human rights in China. Multiple bilateral human rights dialogues had taken place in 2015 to “discuss human rights in a frank, open and constructive way”.¹⁶³ In January 2016, the EEAS published in a statement that the EU and MS were “worried about the ongoing detention of human rights lawyers and activists” and “extremely concerned about the continued detention by the Chinese authorities of a number of EU nationals”.¹⁶⁴ This was described as a worrying trend and called China’s respect for the international rule of law into question.¹⁶⁵ The EC had identified similar developments for the situation in Hong Kong.¹⁶⁶ Eventually, all of such concerns had been adding-up over time, making them pivotal in EU’s new policy discourse towards China.

¹⁶⁰ Later on, the difficulty of translating this approach into practice became clear, thus mainly due to this EU-China path dependency, but also due to policy inertia in EFP-making. This puts the efforts by the EC and HR – drafting proposals and influencing the policy discourse – into perspective again.

¹⁶¹ European Parliament 2014-2019, 'P8_TA(2015)0458 EU-China Relations', Resolution, Strasbourg, 16 December 2015. Available online: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0458_EN.pdf (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹⁶² For example, it referred to the 16+1 group – a BRI-related cooperation platform between China and several Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC’s) that bypasses the EU – and the risks hereof for enhancing internal divisions and asymmetries vis-à-vis China, hereby complicating the development of a coordinated EU position; European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, 'Report on EU-China relations', Strasbourg, 2 December 2015. Available online: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0458_EN.pdf (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹⁶³ European External Action Service, 'EU Special Representative for Human Rights visits China', Press Release, Brussels, 16 November 2015. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2015/20151117_en.htm (last accessed: 20-05-2021).

¹⁶⁴ 'EU Concerns about the Human Rights situation in China', Press Release, Brussels, 29 January 2016. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2016/20160129_en.htm (last accessed: 21-05-2021).

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ European Commission, 'Joint Report To The European Parliament And The Council - Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: Annual Report 2015', Brussels, 25 April 2016. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016JC0010> (last accessed: 21-05-2021).

4. From A New Strategy to Systemic Rival

4.1 The Tense Start of A New Era in Bilateral Relations after June 2016

The fresh narrative of EU's 'new strategy' on China was also heralding a new era in EU-China relations.¹⁶⁷ This got reflected during the 18th EU-China summit, some weeks later in July, which turned out much less 'festive' as the 2015 summit was.¹⁶⁸ This was mainly due to persisting tensions about China's overcapacity of steel, and their 'market economy' status under WTO rules. Although Juncker was still very confident about their future bilateral relations, these would from now on continue without naivety – "this is a very serious problem for Europe"¹⁶⁹ – and he even talked about European trade defence, clearly expecting more reciprocity and commitment from China.¹⁷⁰ Despite their "rich and sometimes very candid" discussion with President Xi and Premier Li, also Tusk emphatically stressed their differing ideas about a global rules-based international order, and disagreement on human rights issues.¹⁷¹ Finally, the absence of a joint statement afterwards – as clear diplomatic statement – underlined the tense start of a new era in EU-China bilateral relation.

A few days after the summit, also the Council officially adopted the EU's 'new strategy' on China. However, they seemed to have a more moderate take on EU's described priorities herein, as the MS mostly identified the major opportunities in this strategy, in particular for creating jobs, economic growth, and connectivity.¹⁷² Even though the Council expressed concerns about upholding the global rule of law, it mostly stressed the importance of continuing CAI negotiations, rather than taking European trade defence measures. Furthermore, the EUCO mostly welcomed BRI investments and the 16+1 platform, somewhat remarkable given its desire to also have a "strong clear unified voice in its approach to China".¹⁷³ This shows mostly how the MS 'downgraded' these attempts by the EC and HR to incite a stronger and more cohesive European approach towards rebalancing of EU-China

¹⁶⁷ 'The European Union sets its sights high on ambitions with China', Press Release, Brussels, 22 June 2016. Available online:

https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/china/press_corner/all_news/news/2016/2016062205_en.htm (last accessed: 21-05-2021).

¹⁶⁸ '18th EU-China Summit in Beijing', News, Brussels, 13 July 2016. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_16_3700 (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'Discours du Président Jean-Claude Juncker au EU-China Business Summit 2016', Speech, Beijing, 13 July 2016. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_16_2522 (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

¹⁷¹ Donald Tusk [President of the European Council], 'Remarks by President Donald Tusk after the 18th EU-China summit in Beijing', Statement, Beijing, 13 July 2016. Available online:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/13/tusk-remarks-eu-china-summit/pdf> (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

¹⁷² General Secretariat of the Council, 'EU Strategy on China - Council conclusions', Brussels, 16 July 2016. Available online: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11252-2016-INIT/en/pdf> (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

¹⁷³ Ibid.

relations. This is a clear symptom of policy inertia, whereby the Council thus seem to retain a strong role of supervising EC's mandate and complying with its proposals. In all cases, the EC for itself had made the turn towards stronger expressing its frustrations about longstanding tensions within China relations as of mid-2016.

4.2 The Trade Defense Instrument of A Union in Existential Crisis

Three days after these EUCO conclusions, the EC vigorously continued its course and announced taking “legal action against export restrictions on Chinese raw materials” via WTO's mechanism for dispute settlement.¹⁷⁴ China's export restrictions would be distorting the international market, violating WTO rules, and “we do not see China advancing to remove them” Malmström said.¹⁷⁵ In that same spirit – and officially demanded by an EP resolution in April ¹⁷⁶ – the college of Commissioners had been discussing China's anti-dumping practices and expiring ‘market economy’ status by the end of 2016.¹⁷⁷ It concluded that the Union had to modernise its TDI for adapting to these “new economic realities”.¹⁷⁸

Later in October, the EC urged the support of MS for these ambitions, because “within the limit of existing EU law ... we have reached the limit of what is feasible’, and “the Council has to this date not been able to find an agreement”.¹⁷⁹ In reality, this particular disagreement among MS persisted for years already, as the EC sent its first ‘TDI modernization’ proposal already in 2013 to the Council – but without success.¹⁸⁰ This aspect is another clear example of policy inertia, showing the ‘cumbersome’ dynamics between the EC and the Council as a factor in EU-China relations. This TDI ‘issue’ would return – more successful – later in 2018.

This specific ‘policy rumble’ however, should also be seen in the broader context of late 2016. Juncker declared in his SotU speech in September, that the EU was in an existential crisis – mostly relating to Brexit.¹⁸¹ Therefore, he introduced a new catch phrase and policy focus for

¹⁷⁴ European Commission, 'EU takes legal action against export restrictions on Chinese raw materials', Press Release, Brussels, 19 July 2016. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_16_2581 (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ European Parliament 2014-2019, 'P8_TA(2016)0223 China's market economy status', Resolution, Strasbourg, 12 May 2016. Available online: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0223_EN.html (last accessed: 21-05-2021).

¹⁷⁷ European Commission, 'College orientation debate on the treatment of China in anti-dumping investigations', Press Release, Brussels, 20 July 2016. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_16_2567 (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ 'Towards a robust trade policy for the EU in the interest of jobs and growth', Communication from The Commission to The European Parliament, The European Council and The Council, Brussels, 18 October 2016. Available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=COM\(2016\)690&lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/documents-register/detail?ref=COM(2016)690&lang=en) (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'State of the Union 2016', Speech, Strasbourg, 14 September 2016. Available online: <https://op.europa.eu/nl/publication-detail/-/publication/c9ff4ff6-9a81-11e6-9bca-01aa75ed71a1> (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

the upcoming year: “A Europe that protects, empowers and defends”. Regarding EU-China relations, he added that “we should not be naïve free traders, but be able to respond as forcefully to dumping as US [i.e. 265% tariffs]”.¹⁸² The existential crisis Juncker talked about stretched much further, and was also about fragmentation among MS, the rise of populism, emerging public debate about backlashes of globalization, and the increasingly complex global environment. The election of Donald Trump as new President of the US later in November, further accentuated this. An amplifying sequence of events so to say. This again, also made EU-China relations more complex, but also more strategically relevant.¹⁸³

4.3 The EU and Transatlantic (Dis)order: “Building Bridges, not Walls”

In the aftermath of the eventful 2016, the EU clearly shared its awareness and concerns about the new geopolitical reality and its own position herein. Its main concern was that their transatlantic relationship with the US had become tense, less evident and much more unpredictable than before. In specific, these geopolitical dynamics towards more ‘power politics’ based on a zero-sum game logic – a distinct realist IR perspective – challenged the functioning of the Unions preferred type of – liberalist – international order: cooperative, stable and rules-based. The EU clearly resisted this trend, like Mogherini, who said that “more power-politics is the perfect recipe for further destabilisation” and that “the cure to the current disorder, is a cooperative global governance based on rules”.¹⁸⁴ Malmström showed her frustration and disappointment about this even stronger: “Those who, in the 21st century, think that we can become great again by rebuilding borders, reimposing trade barriers, restricting people’s freedom to move, are doomed to fail”.¹⁸⁵ As such, the Unions counter-rhetoric had become: “Building bridges, not walls”.¹⁸⁶ So what did this rhetoric imply for EU’s approach towards China?

First, somewhat ironically, this led to closer EU engagement with China again, at least normalization after the tensions from 2016. This was mainly because both said to still believe in open trade as a force of good in the world, and that “a trade war would be catastrophic for

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Hans Dietmar Schweisgut [Ambassador of the European Union to the People's Republic of China], 'The European Union and China's relationship enters a new phase', Speech, European Chamber Annual Conference 2016 "Globalisation in Retreat: Risks and Opportunities for China", Beijing, 14 December 2016. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/17414/european-union-and-chinas-relationship-enters-new-phase_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

¹⁸⁴ Federica Mogherini [High Representative / Vice-President], 'Europe and Asia - Building a Cooperative Global Order', Speech, Tsinghua University, Beijing, 20 April 2017. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/20832/speech-federica-mogherini-munich-security-conference_en (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

¹⁸⁵ Cecilia Malmström [Commissioner for Trade], 'Building bridges: strengthening EU-China trade and investment relations', Speech, At the event organised by Business Europe called "China's reform agenda: what's next for European companies?", Brussels, 6 February 2017. Available online: https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2017/february/tradoc_155277.pdf (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

all parties”, according to Xi in his Davos speech from 2017.¹⁸⁷ In fact, the US-China trade war on tariffs was emerging, and embedded in a broader trend of protectionism and reversing globalisation.¹⁸⁸ Also negotiations on TTIP – once the “the biggest fish ... to fry”¹⁸⁹ – were now firmly put in the freezer by the US, heavily regretted by Malmström.¹⁹⁰ These factors combined gave new incentive and impetus to the EU-China engagement to uphold the international rules-based – trade – order, and for renewed EU incitement again towards China about prioritizing reforms and their CAI.¹⁹¹ This also triggered the EU to position itself stronger as independent global actor and to think and act more ‘strategically’ to defend its own interests.

Second, EU’s ‘building bridges’ approach entailed a strong component of security and diplomacy, in line with the EUGS and Juncker’s ‘Union that protects and defends’. In short, this addressed EU’s growing awareness about security threats of the new geopolitical environment.¹⁹² However, EU’s dominant approach to exert global power unequivocally remained cooperation and making common rules. This is exactly what Mogherini was doing by 2017, convinced that “the European Union is much, much stronger than we Europeans realise ... a reliable, predictable, strong, cooperative partner for many in the world”.¹⁹³

This optimism grew further after Mogherini’s visit to China in April 2017 for the annual ‘Strategic Dialogue’ with the State Councillor.¹⁹⁴ Whether genuine or purely diplomatic, Mogherini praised the “very positive meeting” and their “excellent working relation” whereby the EU-China strategic partnership had “reached an unprecedented level of maturity”.¹⁹⁵ She strongly underscored the importance hereof, given the geopolitical unpredictability, and their joint responsibility as global powers, to work together for peace and security and to uphold a rules-based global order.¹⁹⁶ Finally, both parties recognised to support the WTO and act

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ "The Trade Commissioner and Parliament: A Vital Relationship."

¹⁹⁰ 'The future of EU trade policy', Speech, Bruegel Lunch Talk, Brussels, 24 January 2017. Available online: https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2017/january/tradoc_155261.pdf (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

¹⁹¹ "Building bridges: strengthening EU-China trade and investment relations."

¹⁹² This had already resulted in negotiations about a European Defence Action Plan (EDAP) — for enhancing cooperation on external security and defence in December 2016. This was mainly due to the high European military dependence on the US, and also the fact that e.g. China’s defence budget had increased by 150% over the last decade, compared to 12% by EU MS; European Commission, 'The European Defence Action Plan - FAQs', Memo, Brussels, 30 November 2016. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_16_4101 (last accessed: 07-06-2021).

¹⁹³ Federica Mogherini [High Representative / Vice-President], 'Speech by Federica Mogherini at the Munich Security Conference', Munich, 18 February 2017. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/20832/speech-federica-mogherini-munich-security-conference_en (last accessed: 10-06-2021).

¹⁹⁴ 'Remarks by the High Representative Mogherini following the 7th EU-China Strategic Dialogue', Beijing, 19 April 2017. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/24821/remarks-high-representative-mogherini-following-7th-eu-china-strategic-dialogue_en (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ "Europe and Asia - Building a Cooperative Global Order."

accordingly. This meeting mainly restored trust again, expanded the bilateral relationship towards the global dimension, and paved the way for a fruitful EU-China summit later in June.

A third aspect of EU's 'building bridges' approach literally translated itself in terms of infrastructure and connectivity, as the EU and China firmly continued cooperation on BRI and full deployment of 5G in Europe.¹⁹⁷ Commissioner Jyrki Katainen even understood investments in EU-China connectivity as symbolising openness in times geopolitical unpredictability: "The European Union is proud to work with China".¹⁹⁸ In contrast to the instable EU-US relations, the EU and China were rather partnering-up in the first half of 2017.

4.4 Moving Forward with The Global Partnership through (Principled) Pragmatism

The 19th EU-China summit in early June 2017 was significantly more constructive compared to its 2016 edition.¹⁹⁹ Although still no joint statement was presented – as in 2016 – various agreements were in fact signed, and the EC wanted "moving forward with our global partnership".²⁰⁰ The summit introduced broadening – or actually a 'decoupling' – of two policy domains: (1) bilateral relations and (2) global challenges.²⁰¹ Regarding the former, main priorities were the CAI negotiations, and protection of the rules-based global (trade) system.²⁰² Juncker stressed the CAI to be a 'game changer' for making European business in China much easier and secure, especially because Chinese FDI's in Europe had increased by 77% in 2016, but European FDI's in China only by 3%.²⁰³

Another game-changer was the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, a day before this EU-China summit.²⁰⁴ Juncker on behalf of the EC was "happy to see that China is agreeing to

¹⁹⁷ Jyrki Katainen [EU Commissioner for Jobs - Growth - Investment - Competitiveness], 'European Commission Vice-President Jyrki Katainen speech at Belt and Road Forum Leaders' Round Table', Beijing, 16 May 2017. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/26154/european-commission-vice-president-jyrki-katainen-speech-belt-and-road-forum-leaders-round_en (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ European Commission, 'EU-China Summit: moving forward with our global partnership', Press Release, Brussels, 2 June 2017. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_1524 (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Council of the European Union, 'Background EU-China Summit 1-2 June in Brussels', Press Release, Brussels, 31 May 2017. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23539/170531-china-background-brief-final.pdf> (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²⁰² Or as Juncker put it himself: "Our relationship is founded on a shared commitment to openness and working together as part of a rules-based international system. I am glad that we can meet here today and say this, loud and clear ... This is the vision that President Xi so eloquently described in Davos earlier this year"; Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], "Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the 12th EU-China Business Summit."

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Donald Tusk [President of the European Council], 'Remarks by President Donald Tusk after the EU-China summit in Brussels', Statement, Brussels, 2 June 2017. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/06/02/tusk-remarks-eu-china-summit-june/> (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

our unhappiness about the American climate decision. This is helpful, this is responsible ...".²⁰⁵ As such, the timing of US's withdrawal made that the EU and China explicitly stepped-up further cooperation on climate changes, and hereby seemed to decouple – at least virtually – their cooperation in this policy domain of 'global challenges' from their bilateral-specific challenges.²⁰⁶ However, as no ground-breaking agreements were made, this was mostly a symbolic and rhetorical strengthening. Still relevant though, as it provided the EU some leverage to stress the importance and their joint responsibility of "upholding and strengthening the rules-based international system ... in these difficult times".²⁰⁷

Thus, this EU-China summit in mid-2017 moved the partnership indeed forward, mainly resulting from EU's awareness about the need for closer engagement with China – despite their differences – due to their mutual interdependencies to address global challenges. More important perhaps was EU's interest of having a more stable and predictable international system, and to have more global impact in the geopolitical context at that time.²⁰⁸ Thus, the EC clearly tried to wield its 'principled pragmatic' approach, in line with its new China strategy, although the main focus was on 'pragmatism' - 'realpolitik' in way. The aspect of 'principles' would gradually return again in late 2017.

4.5 The Council 'Agrees' on TDI Modernization and 'Welcomes' FDI Screening

Two weeks after the summit, the Council decided on two relevant matters.²⁰⁹ It gave green light to work towards modernization of the Union's trade defence instrument, and it welcomed the EC's recent 'Harnessing Globalisation' report.²¹⁰ Especially the section about screening incoming FDI's in strategic European sectors grabbed EUCO's attention.²¹¹ On the one hand, these decisions seem to portray that the EU is able to take decisive steps as EU institutions work together smoothly and complementary. A closer look shows however how slow and inertial EU's foreign policy making process can be; how the Commission constantly tries to set EU's priorities and hereby push the EFP agenda; and how the Council can eventually 'downplay' EC proposals.

²⁰⁵ European Commission, "EU-China Summit: moving forward with our global partnership."

²⁰⁶ Donald Tusk [President of the European Council], "Remarks by President Donald Tusk after the EU-China summit in Brussels."

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ European Commission, 'Frequently Asked Questions on EU-China relations', Memo, Brussels, 1 June 2017. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_16_2258 (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²⁰⁹ General Secretariat of the Council, 'European Council meeting (22 and 23 June 2017) – Conclusions', Brussels, 23 June 2017. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23985/22-23-euco-final-conclusions.pdf> (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²¹⁰ This report sketched the EC's ideas about shaping globalisation more in line with EU's interests and values; European Commission, 'Reflection Paper On Harnessing Globalisation', White Paper, Brussels, 10 May 2017. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/reflection-paper-globalisation_en.pdf (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²¹¹ General Secretariat of the Council, "European Council meeting (22 and 23 June 2017) – Conclusions."

The EC's policy proposal on TDI modernization was already initiated in 2013, and has come across several times already. Especially in 2014 and 2016 – when trade tensions with China were running high – the EC had already been strongly pushing the Council and MS to get this proposal adopted. Without success. It thus took until June 2017 before the Council called to “swiftly agree on modern, WTO-compatible trade defence instruments ... which will reinforce the ability of the EU to effectively tackle unfair and discriminatory trade practices and market distortions”.²¹² Although EUCO's intentions with the TDI seemed to be in line with those of the EC, it specifically demanded for ‘non-legislative implementing measures’.²¹³ In fact, a fairly ‘soft’ and downgraded policy instrument after all, especially considering the extensive policy run-up for it since 2013. Eventually, EC's new trade defence legislation officially entered into force at 20 December 2017.²¹⁴ In short, these rules mostly implied a change in the methodology of “calculating the dumping margin in anti-dumping investigations on imports from ... WTO members whose prices and costs are distorted because of state intervention”.²¹⁵ On that same day, also the first country report – with no less than 466 pages – got published: about China, not surprisingly.²¹⁶ A clear signal by the EC, but with relatively low impact after all.

The Commission's idea about screening FDI's in critical European sectors seemed to advance more rapidly from the start, after EUCO's welcoming words in June. The official proposal presented later in September, addressed the “increasing concerns about strategic acquisitions of European companies with key technologies by foreign investors, especially state-owned enterprises [read: from China]”.²¹⁷ As such, it specifically focussed on protecting strategic industries, infrastructure [e.g. particular BRI projects] and key technologies [e.g. 5G] that may put national and European security interests at risk.²¹⁸ The proposal aimed to develop a common EU framework to screen such FDI's, and harmonize the various screening mechanism that some MS were already using.²¹⁹ Also Juncker himself stressed the importance hereof in his 2017 SotU speech – “it is a political responsibility to know what is going on in our

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ European Commission, 'EU puts in place new trade defence rules', Press Release, Brussels, 20 December 2017. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_5346 (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²¹⁵ 'The EU's new trade defence rules and first country report', Memo, Brussels, 20 December 2017. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_17_5377 (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²¹⁶ 'Commission Staff Working Document on Significant Distortions in The Economy of The People's Republic of China for the Purposes of Trade Defence Investigations', Brussels, 20 December 2017. Available online: https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2017/december/tradoc_156474.pdf (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²¹⁷ 'Welcoming Foreign Direct Investment while Protecting Essential Interests', Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 13 September 2017. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0494&from=EN> (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

own backyard” – and he also pledged for the EU to become a stronger global actor by moving certain foreign policy decisions from unanimity to qualified majority voting.²²⁰ This is something that the Lisbon Treaty would allow, but would thus need unanimous consent. A short analysis concludes that this noble attempt by Juncker would not be successful, as this touches upon the very nature of EFP and power of individual MS. Accordingly, also the fact that the FDI screening mechanism got adopted only in March 2019, and became fully operational in late 2020, clearly show the policy inertia in EFP-making and the strong role of EUCO’s supervision.²²¹

4.6 An Emerging European “Promise Fatigue” about Chinese Reforms

Despite the dynamic state of EU-China relations – somewhat more tense around 2016, but with political upswing again in 2017 – EU’s patience with Chinese promises of economic reforms and enhancing reciprocity was rather consistent. This could not be more true for President Juncker himself, who never made a secret of his affection and admiration about China and his believe in the capacity of the Chinese leadership.²²² Despite this personal (and diplomatic) touch of him, the EU’s overall sentiment of trust towards China seemed to be changing around 2018. The “progress has been so slow that EU companies are now suffering from what they call ‘promise fatigue’ – as the EU ambassador to China explained in late 2017.²²³ Besides, he considered it unreasonable that China had now started to accuse the EU of protectionism, regarding the TDI and FDI proposals.²²⁴

From an EC perspective, all of this had led to accumulated frustrations about China’s somewhat reluctant behaviour with respect to its earlier promises and commitments towards the EU over the years. This especially counted for ECT Malmström, firmly hoping that “President Xi’s stated ambition is delivered ... that the country ‘walks the talk’.... and that rhetoric is matched by reform ... we are far from balance or a reciprocal approach”.²²⁵ At the same time, she was also worried that “sometimes reforms have gone the opposite direction” pointing to China’s tightened domestic security rules.²²⁶ She was also concerned about the

²²⁰ Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'State of the Union 2017', Speech, Brussels, 13 September 2017. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_17_3165 (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²²¹ European Commission, 'EU foreign investment screening mechanism becomes fully operational', Press release, Brussels, 9 October 2020. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1867 (last accessed: 10-06-2021).

²²² Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], "Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the 12th EU-China Business Summit."

²²³ Hans Dietmar Schweisgut [Ambassador of the European Union to the People's Republic of China], 'Time to rise above the noise and reap the full potential of EU-China economic relations', Op-Ed, Beijing, 28 September 2017. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/32964/time-rise-above-noise-and-reap-full-potential-eu-china-economic-relations_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Cecilia Malmström [Commissioner for Trade], "Building bridges: strengthening EU-China trade and investment relations."

²²⁶ Ibid.

overall limitations to (online) freedom, which would be crucial for a stable business climate for European companies.²²⁷ In short, Malmström's discontent and disappointment were clear.

Despite this promise fatigue, the global economic context around 2018 was not favourable, rather counterproductive, for the EU to foster reforms in China. The ongoing US-China trade war basically put the WTO – the multilateral institution dealing with free trade rules and reforms – including its dispute settlement mechanism, offside. Mainly by the imposition of unilateral 'tit-for-tat' trade tariffs by the US and China against each other.²²⁸ The EU was clearly not pleased by this – to say the least – as this situation would make it impossible to “deal effectively with unfair trade practices [by China]”.²²⁹ Most pressing for the EU, was that this undermined WTO's relevance and hereby also the impetus for accelerating reforms in China.

In that context, the 20th EU-China Summit took place in June 2018, celebrating their 15 years of CSP. In their joint statement – which made a 'comeback' after three years – they were both praising “the breadth and depth of the EU-China relationship ... in particular for addressing global challenges”.²³⁰ As expected, multilateralism and free trade were omnipresent in this statement, and the EU and China would set-up a working group for coordinating WTO reforms. However, Juncker said that “it's not just about building a group, it's about delivering - actions are more important than words”.²³¹ Clearly also showing a glimpse of his promise fatigue. However, he also knew “in today's world that partnership is more important than ever before. Our cooperation simply makes sense”.²³² After all, what could the EU as 'rule-making power' do in this context, other than pragmatically balancing in-between two fighting global powers, both flouting the international rules-based order? As such, a further tightening of EU's policy discourse towards China, that would follow in early 2019, starts to make sense already. But which other factors characterised EU-China relations towards the end of 2018?

²²⁷ 'Strengthening EU-China trade relations', Speech, EU-China Business Summit, Brussels, 2 June 2017. Available online: https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2017/may/tradoc_155609.pdf (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²²⁸ 'Transatlantic Trade in Turbulent Times', Speech, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels, 19 July 2018. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_18_4604 (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²²⁹ European Commission, 'Discours par le Président de la Commission européenne Jean-Claude Juncker au EU-China Business Summit', Speech, Beijing, 16 July 2018. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_18_4543 (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²³⁰ Li Keqiang [Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China], Donald Tusk [President of the European Council], and Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'Joint statement of the 20th EU-China Summit', Beijing, 16 July 2018. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36165/final-eu-cn-joint-statement-consolidated-text-with-climate-change-clean-energy-annex.pdf> (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²³¹ European Commission, 'President Jean-Claude Juncker at the joint press conference with Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, and Mr Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China at the EU-China Summit', Speech, Beijing, 16 July 2018. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_18_4541 (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²³² *Ibid.*

4.7 The Increase of European Concerns and Cautiousness towards China

A recurring element in EU-China relations have been European concerns about human rights in China. Although this delicate topic had been addressed regularly over the years, “it is not always easy to find agreement as differences persist” like Tusk said in 2018.²³³ During the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue in 2017, the EU repeatedly stressed its concerns on matters like “the deteriorating situation for civil and political rights in China ... accompanied by the detention and conviction of a significant number of Chinese human rights defenders and lawyers ... [and] restrictions on the freedom of expression in China”.²³⁴ The “universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights” was emphasized in the respective dialogue in 2018.²³⁵ Additionally, also Juncker, Tusk²³⁶ and Mogherini²³⁷ gave political weight to these concerns over time via several statements on related individual cases.

Besides growing concerns about human rights, also a broader kind of ‘cautiousness’ towards China seemed to arise by 2018. This becomes clear by the extensive EP resolution on EU-China relations got adopted in September 2018, in which “more ambitious, united and transparent policy” towards China was demanded.²³⁸ Some major aspects comprised EP’s concerns about China’s interest of investing in strategic European infrastructure, and the potentially great political influence hereof which could undermine EU’s common position; the little attention to “transparency in public procurement as well as environmental and social standards” surrounding BRI projects; the strategic risk of “compromising of national and European interests for financial support from China” via the 16+1 platform (between CEEC’s and China); and thus concerns about human rights, for example regarding the situation in Hong Kong and

²³³ Donald Tusk [President of the European Council], 'Press Statement by European Council President Donald Tusk following the 20th EU-China Summit', Beijing, 16 July 2018. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/48419/press-statement-european-council-president-donald-tusk-following-20th-eu-china-summit_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²³⁴ European External Action Service, 'Human Rights Dialogue between the European Union and China', Press Release, Brussels, 23 June 2017. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/28768/human-rights-dialogue-between-european-union-and-china_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²³⁵ 'The European Union and China held their annual Human Rights Dialogue', Press Release, Beijing, 10 July 2018. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/iran/48217/european-union-and-china-held-their-annual-human-rights-dialogue_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²³⁶ Council of the European Union, 'Joint statement by Presidents Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker on the passing away of Liu Xiaobo', Brussels, 13 July 2017. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/07/13/tusk-joint-death-liu-xiaobo/pdf> (last accessed: 08-06-2021).

²³⁷ Federica Mogherini [High Representative / Vice-President], 'Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the continued detention of Gui Minhai in China', Brussels, 15 February 2018. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/39919/statement-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-continued-detention-gui-minhai_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²³⁸ European Parliament, 'State of EU-China relations', Resolution, Strasbourg, 12 September 2018. Available online: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0343_EN.html (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

Xinjiang, and development of digital surveillance and a social credit system.²³⁹ This report was also crucial for EU's new outlook on China that would be presented in early 2019.

High Representative Mogherini embraced EP's resolution as it was "very balanced" and "accurately reflects the state of EU-China relations".²⁴⁰ She said that "we know that the Chinese government does not share all our principles and values ... we will not sacrifice our values in the name of real-politik. We are always very clear on that ... [but] we should not be afraid of a more proactive and a more confident China".²⁴¹ This EP resolution seems to have strengthened the 'principled' part in Mogherini's clear 'principled pragmatic' approach. This became clear by Mogherini's speeches in October 2018 about EU's deep concerns about "detentions in political 're-education camps' affecting Uighurs" in Xinjiang²⁴²; and in January 2019 about "tensions between mainland China and Taiwan" that had risen again²⁴³. This thus fits in the broad European emergence of more 'cautiousness' towards China in 2018, mainly resulting from EU's – somewhat unpleasant – realization that China's substantial economic power and opportunities, could potentially also translate into 'undesired' political and strategic influence in Europe.

4.8 Nearly 'Lame Duck' President Juncker Calls for European Sovereignty

In July 2018, both Juncker and Malmström held a sophisticated and encouraging speech about the future of transatlantic relations, hereby strongly referring to their "shared history, shared values, shared interests".²⁴⁴ From EU perspective, these speeches were a clear call – perhaps against better judgement – to revive this transatlantic partnership and to "sustain the liberal world order ... [and] guarantee stability in the 21st century".²⁴⁵ In short, let's say this call got

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Federica Mogherini [High Representative / Vice-President], 'Speech by HR/VP Mogherini at the plenary session of the European Parliament on the state of the EU-China relations', Strasbourg, 11 September 2018. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/50337/speech-hrvp-mogherini-plenary-session-european-parliament-state-eu-china-relations_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² 'Speech on behalf of the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament urgency debate on "Mass arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and Kazakhs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region"', Strasbourg, 4 October 2018. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/51670/speech-behalf-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-european-parliament-urgency_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²⁴³ 'Speech on behalf of the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary debate on the latest developments in the cross-strait relations between mainland China and Taiwan', Strasbourg, 30 January 2019. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/57441/speech-behalf-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-european-parliament-plenary_en (last accessed: 10-06-2021).

²⁴⁴ Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'Transatlantic relations at a crossroads', Speech, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington D.C., 25 July 2018. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_18_4690 (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²⁴⁵ Cecilia Malmström [Commissioner for Trade], "Transatlantic Trade in Turbulent Times."

rejected, if only because two weeks later, the US withdrew from the internationally agreed Iran nuclear deal.²⁴⁶ The EU realized it had to stand increasingly on its own feet in international affairs, and clearly did not want to get ‘squeezed’ in-between the US and China.

Therefore, it makes sense that President Juncker had one central message in his last SotU speech in September 2018: “the world today needs a strong and united Europe ... the time for European sovereignty has come”.²⁴⁷ He emphatically desired for Europe to become more a global player that works for peace, for FTA’s, champions multilateralism and there needs to improve its “ability to speak with one voice when it comes to our foreign policy”.²⁴⁸ He proposed to move ‘specific areas’ of external relations to QMV and hereby make use of this “lost treasure” – so he said – of the Lisbon Treaty.²⁴⁹ As the Commission’s five-year term would end in 2019, Juncker was mostly recapping already on EU’s achievement under his presidency. Somehow, this made him and the EU so-called ‘lame duck’ already, as real significant decisions would probably wait until the EC’s next term. Thus, Juncker’s geopolitical SotU message, can probably best be seen as one of his last – most ‘unreserved’ – attempts to sketch a broad vision for EU’s future. Also, it would incite (internal) debate, perhaps put some pressure on the Council, and hereby shape the future policy agenda.

Also, the way he talked about QMV in EFP as a ‘lost treasure’ of the Lisbon Treaty, shows how EU institutions from the past – once formalized – continue to provide the range of opportunities and limitations for ‘contemporary’ actors to manoeuvre. Also, it hints at a certain level of ambiguity within the Lisbon Treaty itself when it comes to EU’s external action, as it seems to leave room for actors like Juncker to continuously try and shape the implementation of these treaties in their own way. However, an even older institution – unanimous voting about EU’s external action – is making this fairly difficult again. All of this shows the continuous dynamic between EU institutions and actors over time – historical institutionalism.

Also Mogherini for her part via the EEAS, had been trying to shape and make fully use of the – by Lisbon provided – room to strengthen EU’s external action. She would have “made Europe’s diplomacy more coherent than it has ever been before”²⁵⁰ as Juncker said. She mostly tried to stronger position the EU as global power – and player – in the world. A partner that is “reliable, credible, predictable and consistent” with cooperation that stretches far beyond the

²⁴⁶ European External Action Service, 'Joint statement on the re-imposition of US sanctions due to its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)', Brussels, 7 August 2018.

Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/49169/joint-statement-re-imposition-us-sanctions-due-its-withdrawal-joint-comprehensive-plan-action_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²⁴⁷ Jean-Claude Juncker [President of the European Commission], 'State of the Union 2018', Speech, Brussels, 12 September 2018. Available online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_18_5808 (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

economic domain and more towards security and global governance.²⁵¹ In this strategic line of thinking, she was also responsible for the development of a more comprehensive approach towards Asia and the Pacific – hereby counter-balancing China in the region – and as such “to find common political solutions”.²⁵² This all fits in the implementation of ‘her’ EUGS and according efforts to strengthen EU’s diplomatic status as global actor. This shows how a supranational EU actor like the HR – within the institutional limits – still tried to influence the EFP agenda, dominate the policy discourse, and hereby exert influence.

4.9 The EU’s Strategic Outlook on Partner, Competitor and Systemic Rival China

The launch of the ‘EU-China Strategic Outlook’ in March 2019 did not come as a surprise, given the further increase of China’s economic power and political influence, geopolitical instability in transatlantic relations, and EU’s continuous search for an appropriate ‘modus operandi’ in this context, ever since EU’s China strategy three years earlier. The 16 page long document can be seen as an extension that builds on the 2016 strategy, as “the European Commission and the High Representative aim to start a discussion to refine Europe’s approach [towards China] to be more realistic, assertive and multi-faceted”.²⁵³ Considering the upcoming 21st EU-China summit later in April, this strategic outlook was clearly intended to influence the summit’s agenda, set new EU priorities for China relations, and thus put pressure on the Council and MS to decide on more coherent and assertive approaches towards China.

So what did this strategic outlook entail? Its most salient, rhetorical element would be EU’s ‘multifaceted’ four-fold characterization of China, being a cooperation partner with closely aligned objectives (e.g. the ‘global challenges’), a negotiating partner with differing interests, an economic competitor (e.g. regarding technological leadership), and – here it comes – a systemic rival that promotes alternative models of governance.²⁵⁴ As such, EU’s policy discourse about China – although balanced – clearly tightened again. The multifaceted characterization seems sophisticated, but logically also requires a multifaceted approach. This is where the Commission and HR fall short in decisiveness however, because “finding the right balance of policy approaches is a political judgement, requiring the attention of the European Council” and thus “requires a ... whole-of-EU approach”.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Federica Mogherini [High Representative / Vice-President], ‘EU as a Global Actor’, Speech, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 3 August 2018. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/49112/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-lecture-eu-global-actor-nanyang_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²⁵² ‘Europe and Asia – together for a more secure world’, Op-Ed, Brussels, 25 May 2018. Available online: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/45248/europe-and-asia-%E2%80%93-together-more-secure-world_en (last accessed: 09-06-2021).

²⁵³ European Commission, ‘Commission reviews relations with China, proposes 10 actions’, Press release, Brussels, 12 March 2019. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_19_1605 (last accessed: 10-06-2021).

²⁵⁴ European Commission and High Representative Of The Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy, “EU-China – A strategic outlook.”

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

Even though the document presented 10 concrete action points – mostly reiterating and sharp(er) formulating all aspects in EU-China relations that have come across so far ²⁵⁶ – the MS themselves via the Council remained in charge of adopting or ignoring – elements of – this EFP proposal. Particularly for EU-China relations, almost always policy decisions would require intergovernmental unanimity, as the policy areas covered within EU-China relations relate both to EU's external policies and to CFSP/CSDP matters. This aspect of 'overlapping policies' has been a fundamental determinant for EFP on EU-China relations. In all cases, the efforts by the EC and HR via this outlook of propagating a new EFP discourse on China again, and of – at least – inciting what EU's priorities would have to be, characterize the role of these EU institutions and actors best: steering and influencing the policy process.

Later in March 2019, the Foreign Affairs Council and EUCO itself, discussed the political agenda in preparation for the EU-China summit in April. Whereas the former still mentioned the strategic outlook as providing "useful guidelines on how to refine Europe's approach to China" ²⁵⁷, the Council itself only "exchanged views on overall relations with China in the global context"²⁵⁸. For the EC perhaps a disappointing, but not surprising response. However, in October 2020, the EUCO eventually "reaffirms the policy approach towards EU-China relations as set out in the ... 'EU-China: A Strategic Outlook' ... and calls for further coherent efforts to implement it"²⁵⁹. It also recalled the goal of finalizing the CAI with China by the end of the year – which eventually succeeded on 30 December 2020 (!).²⁶⁰ Without further elaboration, as the scope of this thesis is limited to March 2019, this does give an interesting glimpse of what would follow in EU-China relations afterwards.²⁶¹ Perhaps the most interesting thing to say for now, and to conclude this chapter, is that the variety of efforts by supranational EU institutions and actors over the years, has eventually thus been embraced by MS and Council, and hereby shows that they also strongly influenced the EFP-making process on EU-China relations – after all.

²⁵⁶ These action points were arranged under the following five main categories: I. Support effective multilateralism and fight climate change; II. Commitment to international peace, security and sustainable economic development; III. Achieving a more balanced and reciprocal trade and investment relationship; IV. Strengthening the Union's competitiveness and ensuring a level playing field; V. Strengthening the security of critical infrastructure and the technological base.

²⁵⁷ Council of the European Union, 'Outcome of 3681st Council meeting - Foreign Affairs', Brussels, 18 March 2019. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39024/st07600-en19-vf.pdf> (last accessed: 11-06-2021).

²⁵⁸ General Secretariat of the Council, 'European Council meeting (21 and 22 March 2019) – Conclusions', Brussels, 22 March 2019. Available online: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-1-2019-INIT/en/pdf> (last accessed: 10-06-2021).

²⁵⁹ 'Special meeting of the European Council (1 and 2 October 2020) – Conclusions', Brussels, 2 October 2020. Available online: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13-2020-INIT/en/pdf> (last accessed: 11-06-2021).

²⁶⁰ European Commission, 'Key elements of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment', Press release, Brussels, 30 December 2020. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2542 (last accessed: 11-06-2021).

²⁶¹ General Secretariat of the Council, "Special meeting of the European Council (1 and 2 October 2020) – Conclusions."

5. Conclusion

5.1 Overview

This section provides a broad, summarizing overview on the analysis of this research. In the subsequent sections, the overarching conclusions on this analysis are presented, followed by a brief discussion on this research.

The reinforcements of the EU-China comprehensive strategic partnership as of 2013 – with paramount focus on trade – enhanced and consolidated a path dependent process over time of enhanced and broader cooperation, which fitted in EU's dominant liberalist EFP approach. Although the EU had always underscored the low reciprocity and lack of level-playing field in their economic relationship, it always anticipated economic reforms in 'emerging economy' China to come soon. Additionally, the Lisbon Treaty from 2009 had given the prospect of an EU-China CAI, which would enable to address Chinese trade and investment barriers for Europe more strongly. However, towards 2016, it became increasingly clear that China would not smoothly assimilate into the international rules-based order, as it actually became rather assertive in global affairs. The EU (or EC) became – slowly and rigidly – aware of this rapidly changing world order and the unprecedented scale and speed of China's rise as global power, economically and politically. It struggled however to come up with a strong and unified 'answer' to this, that would move beyond the rhetoric of 'strategic rebalancing' towards China.

Especially the strong path dependency of cooperation and interdependency, long engrained in EU-China relations, made changes in EU's China approach complicated. This was strengthened by China's advancing BRI investments in Europe, initially highly welcomed by the EU – and Juncker – as strongly seeking for investments after the Eurocrisis. In the meantime however, China's persisting 'unfair trade practices' had clearly been culminating in European frustrations. Also, geostrategic consequences of BRI and related emerging bilateral engagement of MS with China were increasingly considered, together with concerns about human rights in China. Altogether, this explains the launch of EU's 'new strategy' in June 2016 – strongly coherent with the EUGS – calling for stronger protection of EU's own interests and values within EU-China relations. However, this was mostly a clear effort by the EC and Mogherini to set new policy priorities in EU-China relations, change the policy discourse about EU's China relations, and as such influence the EFP-making process. This also seems to flow logically from their frustrations about the slow pace of Chinese reforms and CAI negotiations (and persisting 'unfair trade practices'), but as much from EU's inability to project a strong and unified voice towards China due to differing MS positions and the related policy inertia in EFP-making, whereby the EUCO did not seem to align with the EC's emerging 'realist' approach and proposals (e.g. on TDI modernization) to address China-related challenges.

These dynamics and frustrations surrounding EU-China relations got enhanced significantly towards 2019. However, they got also tempered by the increasingly unstable and complex geopolitical context, mainly characterized by disrupted and unpredictable transatlantic relations, strong US-China (trade) tensions, the rise of global 'power politics', and existential

EU 'crisis' considering Brexit and MS fragmentation. This context forced the EU to position itself more strongly in the world and not get 'squeezed' in-between the US and China. This reinforced EU's approach of principled pragmatism, mostly presenting itself as the stronghold for upholding the – severely damaged – liberal rules-based world order. It also acted accordingly - "building bridges, not walls" – by strategically strengthening its relations with China again after 2016, mostly as an attempt to reinforce the relevance and functioning of common international rules and institutions (like the WTO), but increasingly also to 'take joint responsibility for addressing global challenges. As much as this context made the EU-China CAI negotiations and Chinese reforms relevant, it constrained the EU making related progress.

Also strong policy inertia in the EFP-making process, made it hard for the EU to respond in a strong and unambiguous way (e.g. via stronger trade defence), mostly because of the slow and 'downgrading' effects of the Council concerning EC's proposals. At the same time, a certain European promise fatigue regarding China's earlier commitments emerged, strengthened by 'adverse' domestic developments within China. As such, also an overall cautiousness towards China grew, especially because of growing awareness about China's (potential) undesired political and strategic influence in Europe, on top of continuously growing concerns about the human rights situation in China. The 'EU-China strategic outlook' presented in 2019 - which introduced the term systemic rival – thus logically flows from the above developments. However, this should mostly be seen, again, as an attempt by the EC and Mogherini, to influence, steer and prioritize the EFP-making process regarding EU-China relations, and also to push EFP's 'institutional boundaries' (e.g. Juncker's call for QMV) for this purpose. Although clearly constrained by path dependency and policy inertia, these efforts thus also show the role and – potential – influence of supranational EU institutions and actors within EFP-making, and as such also within EU-China relations.

5.2 Conclusions

To conclude the analysis, the CRQ ²⁶² of this thesis can be answered in the following way.

The process of EUs shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations over the period from 2013 to 2019, can be best explained as being mostly a reflection of the efforts by supranational EU institutions and actors (SRQ3²⁶³) to influence the EFP-making process on EU-China relations, by trying to steer and coordinate this process, to set the agenda, give shape to EU's priorities, and thus by trying to dominate the policy discourse itself – which is most of all the reason why EU's discourse shifted over time. Most of all, these EU institutions and actors increasingly tried to push for a more 'realist' and 'balanced' European approach towards China: initially because of various trade-related tensions, later also because of China's increasingly ambiguous and assertive behaviour regarding the international rule of law, the

²⁶² CRQ: How can the EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations over the period from 2013 to 2019 be explained according historical institutionalism, from the perspective of supranational EU institutions and actors?

²⁶³ SRQ3: How have the timing and sequencing of efforts by supranational EU institutions and actors, played a role in the process of EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations?

broad geostrategic consequences (within Europe) of China's unprecedented rise over time, and the increasingly unstable geopolitical context.

These efforts have been constrained by a strong path dependent course (SRQ1²⁶⁴) of integration and – economic – interdependency within EU-China relations, which had been strongly consolidated by promises, agreements and investments over time: making it fairly difficult to for Europe to change its course – even if it would want to. This was further complicated by strong policy inertia within EFP-making (SRQ2²⁶⁵), whereby mostly the diverging preferences of MS (and unanimity in the Council) and complexity of the EU-China policy domain itself (e.g. due the overlapping trade and 'high political' affairs) made it fairly difficult for the EU to have a strong and unified approach towards China.

However, the fact that EU's policy discourse did actually shift over time – from strategic partnership to systemic rival – including the cascading effects hereof, clearly shows and symbolizes the role of supranational EU institutions and actors within the EFP-process, of continuously trying to push the agenda, shape the priorities, and coordinate the policy process. And by doing so – despite the strong path-dependencies, institutional boundaries and policy inertia – they still appeared to have played a pivotal role in the EFP-making process.

5.3 Discussion

The outcomes of this thesis are relevant in several ways. First of all, they contribute to the academic debate on EFP, as they provide more insight into the actual functioning hereof in practice. Although this research strongly seems to resonate with the realist critique's on EFP-making – considering the Council's inability to come up with a strong and unified EU approach towards China, enhanced by the overlap of trade (CM) and 'high politics' (IM) in EU-China relations – it also shows that the supranational EU institutions and actors play a distinct and pivotal role in this process too. This research also clearly showed the different European perspectives towards China: the EU itself gradually moved from a 'liberalist' towards a 'realist' perspective – culminated by the term 'systemic rival'. However, EU's dominant approach remained mostly in line with the 'liberalist' perspective. Finally, this thesis provides empirical insights to HI theory, about the working of path dependencies within EFP.

A critical note on this thesis would be that the exclusive scope on EU institutions and actors, without strong triangulation by e.g. considering press and media, has limited the scope and leaves out other explanations. Also, the role and perspective of member states would enrich the analysis. Finally, application of the HI framework can have created a certain bias in the analysis, in favour of path dependent factors. These aspects can be considered in future research on this topic, for example about possible – and quite plausible – newly emerging critical junctures within EU-China relations, after 2019. A topic of persisting interest after all.

²⁶⁴ SRQ1: How have path dependent institutions and processes, specific for EU-China relations, shaped the process of EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations?

²⁶⁵ SRQ2: In how far has policy inertia within the EFP-making process, influenced the process of EU's shifted foreign policy discourse towards EU-China relations?

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