Attila Marján

China's multilateralism and the role the EU can play in it

Abstract

Europe's and China's interests are best served by a stable multipolar world, which makes them potential partners. China's interests are best served by a multipolar world, displacing American hegemony, boosting China's global role and influence and dismissing the global fear of China's rise. Chinese and European interests partly overlap, but there are major differences. There are also major barriers for the EU to serve as a credible model for China in pursuing multilateral geopolitics. The first is that the European concept of multilateralism differs from the Chinese idea of multipolarity. The second is that multilateralism (or rather a multipolar geopolitical strategy) for China serves nationalistic objectives which by definition cannot be the case for the EU. The third reason is the EU's fragmented diplomatic and geopolitical profile which lacks the convincing edge. Therefore while the EU is a reasonably adequate partner for China in multilateral actions it is not an ideal model for present day China because of different interpretation of national sovereignty as well as multilateralism, and also because of the EU's relative weakness in global security affairs.

Key words: EU-China relations, multipolar world order, multilateralism

The EU and its member states see China's rise mostly as an economic opportunity as well as an economic challenge. To the US, China is a major geopolitical challenge, a rival that could potentially break American global hegemony. Understandably, with no imminent geopolitical risk involved, Europe is more inclined to believe that China will be a cooperative member of the post-American new world order. Unlike the US, European countries do not have a military presence in the region and while there are obvious frictions (trade issues, industrial property rights, human rights, the market economy status of China) there are no unbridgeable differences between Beijing and Brussels concerning their views on the international order of the future. European countries support the "one China" principle. Economic and trade interests complement each other and the European Commission strikes a fundamentally positive note about China's emergence as a global power.

As said earlier the mainstream Chinese view on the possible versions of a new world order is that it will and should be a multipolar one simply because China's interests are best served by it, displacing American hegemony, boosting China's global role and

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Attila Marján is a Hungarian economist, also holds PhD in international relations. Based in Brussels for fourteen years as diplomat and member of EU commissioners' cabinets. Former public policy scholar of Wilson Center in Washington DC. Former European research director of the Hungarian institute of International Affairs and head of European Studies Department of the National University of Public Administration, Budapest. University professor and author of books on EU affairs and geopolitics.

influence and dismissing the global fear of China's rise. Chinese and European interests partly overlap, but there are major differences in their geopolitical situation: China is not part of the Western world or its security alliance but it has the potential to become a challenger of the USA geopolitically. Neither of those statements is true for Europe.

It is in the common interest of China and Europe, as well as a precondition for the creation of a multipolar world, that they narrow the gap between them. Rapprochement between powers has been a key driver of peaceful development. Bridging the historic divide between Germany and France was a long and arduous task, but it was a *sine qua non* of European integration. Ideally this should serve as a model for East-Asia, but post-war East Asia is not like western- Europe: there is no NATO or EU to bind former enemies together. East Asia is much less stable: a mix of countries with very different levels of development, some democratic, some authoritarian. There is no agreement on common values or sometimes even on borders. The Korean peninsula, China-Japan relations and Taiwan continue to be potential flashpoints. How these will be solved obviously depends largely on China. Should the Chinese government look for a successful historical experience, the EU is certainly one to examine.

Chinese scholars hold – as explains Song Xinnig – that the EU's successful rise was made possible because the EU handled the three most important geopolitical relationships wisely, namely its relations with its neighboring countries, its relations with the dominant power (US), and its relations with international institutions. Therefore the EU's strategy should provide a good example for China.[1] As China assumes an increasingly prominent role in global affairs, it becomes more important to find a reliable international partner. That is one of the reasons why the European Union has become an important partner of China, despite all the incomprehension and numerous reservations in foreign policy. Chinese reforms and the policy of opening up to the outside world required an economically viable and politically reliable partner. This directed China's attention to Europe, which ticked all the right boxes. Undoubtedly, Europe has the economic might as well as the political stability to fit the bill perfectly even in the light of the recent economic crisis which proved to be the gravest in the history of the EU. Chinese officially use expressions to describe EU-China relations such as: "stable political foundations and strong mutual trust"; "key economic partners with huge opportunities"; "growing consensus on key global and regional issues"; "resolving differences of opinion through dialogue" -- to pick a few representative examples of the political statements and diplomatic courtesies issued.

However Chinese diplomatic moves often run in the face of Western principles and interests, and have got China into trouble both with the EU and the USA. China has violated basic international principles by adopting a dissident position towards Iran, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Venezuela, and has frequently acted as the defender of the third world in a non-constructive manner, to give just a few examples. There are indeed several obstacles to the EU-China partnership becoming a true community of

[1] Xinning Song: European 'models' and their implications to China: internal and external perspectives. Review of International Studies, Vol. 36. Issue 3. July 2010. pp. 755-775.

values: differing approaches to human rights, the issues of Tibet and Taiwan, violations of intellectual property rights and China's status as a market economy. China's political system and inclination for dictatorship are equally problematic. But the greatest test of Sino-European relations is to overcome the differences in political culture so deeply rooted in history.

Europe's interests are also best served by a stable multipolar world, in which China is a considerably reliable partner. But even if China and the European Union share the interest in a multipolar power arrangement which makes them potential natural partners, their relationship obviously cannot and will not be based on the Chinese hidden agenda of breaking America's hegemony. China may need Europe to help loosen America's grip on global dominance but it should not have false hopes: it will never have Europe by its side against the United States. As Shi Zhiqin puts it:[2] "the relationship between the EU and the United States remains strong, as the US is the only major state that significantly supports European security through NATO. The security interdependence between the U.S. and the EU has become even more important today after the Ukrainian crisis and the disputes with Russia."

Even though the Chinese talk a lot about multipolarity, they see the world at present as fundamentally a bipolar one. The only international hard actor that matters to China is the USA. Europe is neither a counterweight, nor an alternative in geopolitics. Naturally, China welcomes any step that Europe takes away from the US position. There are several examples of this, the most important one being the status of Taiwan. China regularly reiterates its demand that on Taiwan Europe will never follow the US, and will stick to its one-China policy. Pursuing a multipolar policy is therefore useful to China even to prevent the US from extending or upholding its sphere of influence to the Asia-pacific region.

For several reasons it is rather difficult to build a real community of interests between Europe and China. First, though, the two sides should understand what they mean by multipolarity. Can postmodern Europe live with China's geopolitical definition, which uses Westphalian principles of balance of power, sovereignty and national security? For several reasons that will be explained below, Europe should not daydream about a breakthrough success in showing the example to China on multipolarity and global responsibility. This does not entail that Europe cannot be a key partner for China, but rules and principles governing the international order will probably not be imported from the old continent.

There are three major barriers for the EU to serve as a credible model for China in pursuing multilateral geopolitics. The first is that the European concept of multilateralism differs from the Chinese idea of multipolarity.[3] The second is that

[2] Zhiqin, Shi: It is the 40th anniversary of China-EU relations. Where do they stand? (interview). The Diplomat, July 27, 2015. (Shi Zhiqin is dean of the department of international relations at Tsinghua University.)

[3] According to the established international relations (IR) terminology multipolarity is a structural-descriptive measurement word for a global order where several centers of power exist, while multilateralism is a coordinated way of operating the international system. Nevertheless the use of these terms are not entirely precise

multilateralism (or rather a multipolar geopolitical strategy) for China serves nationalistic objectives which by definition cannot be the case for the EU. The third reason is the EU's fragmented diplomatic and geopolitical profile which lacks the convincing edge.

David A. Scott[4] has a point arguing that although China and the EU use the term multipolarity and multilateralism in their diplomatic rhetoric, they do not mean the same concept by these words. Moreover the EU puts the emphasis on multilateralism, while China clearly cherishes multipolarity. In a speech the then foreign policy commissioner of the European Commission, Benita Ferrero-Waldner stated in 2005 that many in China talk about building a multipolar world, „for the EU however, it is not the number of poles which counts, but rather the basis on which they operate. Our vision is a world governed by rules created and monitored by multilateral institutions."[5] This could not have been made any clearer. China wants a global order in which the powers of independent nation states are balanced, so unipolarity is not possible, while the EU wants a coordinated system, where nation states cede and pool a certain amount of sovereignty and accept to be governed by common rules and coordinate their policies via strong international institutions. This is in fact what the EU has done over the last sixty years in Europe. Scott also argues that globalisation and the general erosion of the concept of nation state in the longer run plays against the hard interpretation of global affairs by China and makes the EU interpretation more reasonable. There seems to emerge an understanding and acceptance of this even in the Chinese academic and political circles as well which demonstrates that to take the EU as a model for multilateral geopolitics is not that outlandish any more.

As Christopher R. Hughes and Michael Leifer[6] argue, nationalism has an important influence on China's foreign policy, and multilateralism is an effective tool to support its nationalist interest of becoming a regional power and at the same time it helps avoid the confrontation with the US or regional powers such as Japan. Moreover as opposed to the EU, the Chinese type of multilateralism is based on the precedence of national sovereignty and therefore its capacity for geopolitical compromises is significantly weaker (see the Taiwan or the South China See disputes). Another facet of the nationalistic trait of the Chinese version of multilateralism is that it is shaped to a great extent to enhance and reinforce the role of ethnic Chinese in the South-East region.[7]

The other major issue with the EU's potential to become an international geopolitical model is that Europe hardly ever appears on the international scene as a uniform political actor. The European Union is an undisputed economic powerhouse, but in foreign policy and military terms it punches way under its weight. The EU is the world's

especially in the political discourse.

[4] Scott, David A.: Multipolarity, Multilateralism and Beyond…? EU-China Understanding of the International System. International relations 2013. 27(1) pp. 30-51

[5] B. Ferrero-Waldner. Speech 2005. In: David A Scott (2003). p. 42.

[6] Leifer, Michael (ed.): Asian nationalism. Routledge, 2000.

[7] Hughes, Christopher R.: Nationalism and Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: Implications for Southeast Asia. The pacific review. 18 (1) pp. 119-135. "005.

biggest economy; both its GDP and its share of world trade are bigger than that of the USA, and Europe is also the world's number one trader. The United Kingdom and France are permanent members of the UN Security Council and both have nuclear weapons. But the EU due to lack of coordination of policies has a humble global foreign policy and security role as compared to the US. The EU – even after the Lisbon treaty's reforms - still does not speak with a single voice, it still does not have a truly common foreign policy and the political union is still not a reality. "European foreign policy" is an obscure, complicated, multi-tier system. The general rule of unanimity in the field of CSFP decision making renders the EU slow and ineffective.

The evolution of a "common" European foreign policy has been a painfully slow process: the so-called European Political Cooperation (a synonym for consultations between foreign ministries) was only superseded by foreign policy coordination -- misleadingly labeled the common foreign and security policy -- a quarter of a century later. European defense cooperation is in an embryonic stage. Europe's total defense spending is about half of the USA's 350 billion (per year), but the main reason behind its military weakness is the fragmentation of its national armies. The number of American soldiers readily deployable oversees nears half a million, compared with less than a hundred thousand in the EU.

As we know from the American neoconservative Robert Kagan, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus. Another piece of terminology, which no article or book about foreign policy fails to mention is soft power and hard power.[8] The term soft power was coined by the neoliberal political scientist Joseph Nye in 1990. In international affairs, soft power denotes the ability to obtain what you want through non-violent means, by persuading the other party (country or region) through diplomatic, economic or cultural relations to adopt your values or models. The popular theory, which has inspired innumerable publications, goes on to identify America with hard power and Europe with soft power.[9] Europe is as this opinion goes a soft power that represents and disseminates its values and intends to protect universal human rights. The latest crisis situations (in Ukraine and in the Southern Mediterranean areas) showed that the EU is still not a real global player and without effective tools has limited influence on situations that create serious security challenges and threats even in its closest neighbourhood.[10] In 2015 the President of the European Commission,

[8] Nye, Joseph S: Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics . New York: Public Affairs, 2004; Ian Manners: "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," Journal of Common Market Studies. 40, no. 2, 2002, pp. 235–58.

[9] The US is also a remarkable soft power in fact. For decades it has been controlling the key trends in popular culture.

[10] Another problem is that the European defence capabilities have been gradually reduced over the years (European Defence Agency data). 1 million 450 thousand soldiers served in the EU member countries in 2013, 500 thousand less than in 2006. This number is equal to the force of the United States, and one and a half times higher than the size of the Russian armed forces. At the same time, the EU countries spent only 190 billion euro (12% of total world spending) for the military, 1% less than the previous year. From 2006 to 2013, the European defence spending declined by 15% (€ 32 billion), and stood at only 1.45% of the EU's total GDP. World

Jean-Claude Junker argued for the creating a European army[11] to face up with Russia and other new threats[12] nevertheless a project like this will not materialize quickly nor easily in a community of 28 where national budgets are under constant pressure and other major challenges such as immigration, economic stability, unemployment come first on the priority list.

Some Chinese analysts like Lai Suetyi and Shi Zhiqin claim that the way the EU handled the Ukraine crisis is a complete failure. They hold that "EU member states' prioritization of their own interests above the fate of Ukraine, the failure of the EU and United States to reach an agreement on sanctions against Russia, and the fact that Putin directly discussed the issue of Ukraine's federalization with Obama without consulting the EU—demonstrate that the EU has failed the test.[13] As a result – they argue - the EU has missed the chance to play its unique role as lead mediator. As the crisis has turned into a power struggle between Russia and the United States, "the EU is no longer considered a party in core discussions". The Chinese scholars also claim that the Ukraine crisis is not only a failed test for the "EU and Germany but also a significant opportunity for China to usher in a new relationship among large powers."

According to a 2015 research by Carnegie Europe[14] "with few exceptions, European governments do not think or act strategically." Moreover there is little ambition to shape foreign policy on the EU level. Another conclusion was that "instead of the EU forging a common strategic outlook, the union has achieved the opposite: ambition, if it exists at all, is inward looking and based on the national level, on narrow interests, on short-term goals." Ambition seems to have little to do with projecting a strong EU to the world. Only Germany (with Russia) and France (in the Sahel) showed resolve to

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military expenditure in 2013 totalled 1.747 billion $, around 2.4% of World GDP. However, China (188 billion US $) and Russia (88 billion US $) continuously increases the military budget. 80% of the European defence spending produced by the "big three" countries (France, Germany, United Kingdom), although each of them is reducing its defence budget. Although the EU officially has 485 thousand deployable and 110 thousand deployable and sustainable troops, the European forces ability to fight modern conventional warfare raises serious doubts. In the Wales NATO summit most of the European countries promised to increase the defence budget but only one country (Estonia) will spend 2 % of GDP on defence in 2015.

[11] A European military union is not a new idea: as early as in 1952, under the threat of the Korean War and the Soviet military preponderance, the establishment of the European Defence Community (EDC), including a joint military force under European control and command was tabled but was refused by the French National Assembly in 1954. There is still no breakthrough on this front, nor is on foreign policy.

[12] Jean-Claude Juncker calls for the EU Army. The Guardian, 8 March 2015 http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/08/jean-claude-juncker-calls-for-eu-army-european-commission-miltary accessed at 10 March 2015.

[13] Suetyi, Lai - Zhiqin, Shi: EU's Ukraine test. Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy. July 22, 2014.

[14] Judy Dempsey: Europe's Pathetic Lack of Foreign Policy Ambition. Carnegie Europe August 7, 2015.

act, but even these countries do not seem to have a coherent proactive and long-term foreign policy strategy. On issues of common concern like the pressing problem of migration member states are reluctant to give the EU a major role. There is also an "extraordinary lack of interest in the Islamic State and the serious security and social challenges that the militants pose for Europe." Europe seems to think that is living in a comfort zone which is a false assumption in reality. On another major issue, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) there is huge dearth of public discourse. As a conclusion the paper holds that "most countries neither see the relevance of Europe nor want to make Europe relevant" which is somewhat an exaggeration but still there is a long way to go to the establishment of a truly common and effective European foreign policy.

In sum, the EU seems a reasonably adequate *partner* for China in multilateral actions and even in the process of the establishment of a new multipolar global order. Although the EU is not as easily manageable as BRICS and other non-western countries may be, but it is certainly more powerful partner especially when economic clout is concerned. The EU is also a politically stable and calculable player. The deeply rooted Chinese view that Europe is not only a place of big business and cutting edge technology but also of high culture also plays in favour of long-term cooperation. On the other hand, the EU is not an ideal *model* for present day China because of different interpretation of national sovereignty as well as multilateralism, and also because of the relative weakness of the EU in global affairs.

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