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Discussion Paper

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**Challenges and Opportunities of China-EU Comprehensive Strategic
Partnership
From the Perspective of Different Ideas inside EU on the China-EU
Comprehensive strategic partnership**

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Since China and EU established a strategic partnership in 2003, Sino-European relations have experienced ups and downs, but the partnership has remained at the official level. However, this does not mean that there exist no challenges in the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In fact, the opposite is true. The strategic partnership is now facing serious challenges, among which the most serious is the doubts from inside the EU about it. This paper attempts to analyze those different views, explore the reasons why there are disagreements and doubts, and accordingly discuss the challenges and opportunities in the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership.

I. Different Ideas inside the EU on the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Not long ago, Chinese leaders on May 6th exchanged congratulatory messages with leaders of the European Union (EU) to mark the 35th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral ties. In a congratulatory message to EU President Herman Van Rompuy, Chinese President Hu Jintao stated that bilateral relations had made considerable progress since China and the EU forged ties 35 year ago. President Hu also said, China and the EU formed a comprehensive strategic partnership after entering the new century. As major powers in the world, China and the EU had increasingly broader common interests and their relations were of even greater strategic significance.¹ According to Xinhua News Agency, the EU side is ready to join hands with China to ensure that the EU-China strategic partnership would make still greater achievements. For example, EU President Van Rompuy said in his message that the EU and China had made significant progress, and that the two sides had formed relations of comprehensive cooperation. He expressed the belief that the EU-China strategic partnership and the people-to-people friendship will continue to flourish.²

By contrast, more and more European intellectuals - especially those European experts in the field of China studies - seem not to be so confident about the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and EU. Since John Fox and Francois Godement published their policy report “A Power Audit of EU-China Relations”, the scepticism in the EU-China strategic partnership has become widespread in EU IR circles. In the report, the two authors clearly express their doubts in a EU-China strategic partnership by saying: “As this power audit of the

¹ “Chinese, EU leaders exchange greetings on 35th anniversary of bilateral ties”, *Peoples Daily Online*, May 06, 2010, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6976117.html>.

² “Chinese, EU leaders exchange greetings on 35th anniversary of bilateral ties”, *Peoples Daily Online*, May 06, 2010, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6976117.html>.



EU's relationship with China has sought to demonstrate, the strategy of unconditional engagement is no longer working. The old approach has been rendered obsolete by China's power, its skilful exploitation of European weaknesses and its refusal to become a democracy."³ The report also concludes: "Europe needs China to become a better partner and a better global citizen. Reciprocal engagement can go a long way towards making that happen."⁴

Prof. Eberhard Sandschneider, Otto Wolff-Director of the Research Institute, German Council on Foreign Relations, also expressed his doubts about the strategic partnerships of EU-China relations in the his speech on the Forum on China-EU Strategic Partnership held in Beijing, China November 19-20, 2009. In his speech, Prof. Sandschneider said: "Most so-called 'strategic partnerships' are not 'strategic' in a strict sense of the word. In a more narrow definition strategic partnerships should be based on a mutual perspective on basic values, interests and actions to be taken in specific situations." According to such definition he pointed out, "China is too big and the EU too multifaceted to simply declare 'strategic partnership' and paint the world in black and white."⁵ Stanley Crossick, Senior fellow of the Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies and Founding Chairman of the European Policy Centre also said, "We need to be realistic. The present Sino-European relationship is neither strategic nor a partnership, and signing a 'Partnership and Cooperation Agreement' will not change this. A strategic partnership requires a long-term commitment to establish a close relationship across a significant number of policy areas."⁶

Quite clearly, European politicians and practitioners in dealing with European foreign policy, especially dealing with EU-China relations are inclined to admit that the strategic partnership between EU and China not only still exists but also will continue to develop, while the European theorists in IR circles seem not that optimistic in the same issue. It is quite important for us to analyze the causes which lead to the different perception between European politicians and intellectuals in terms of the EU-China strategic partnership. By doing so we can find out the proper ways to maintain and promote the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership in a transforming world.

³ John Fox and Francois Godement, "A Power Audit of EU-China Relations", published by the European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2009.

⁴ John Fox and Francois Godement, "A Power Audit of EU-China Relations", published by the European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2009.

⁵ Eberhard Sandschneider, "The Strategic Significance of China-EU Partnership (Speaking Points)", from The Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Affairs Journal*, Special Issue November 2009, p.81.

⁶ Stanley Crossick, "China-EU strategic partnership: state of play", paper for the FUDAN CES/IFRI/SIES/CSEUS roundtable in Shanghai on 24 September 2009. 斯坦利·克罗斯： "中欧关系：是真正的战略伙伴关系吗？" 《欧洲观察》2010年第4期·总第59期，上海欧洲学会编。



II. Reasons for Different Ideas inside the EU on the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Actually, there are enough reasons for either EU politicians' affirmation or scholars of IR within the EU who have doubts about the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership. First of all, we will analyze the reasons of the EU politicians' affirmation.

1. The serious economic difficulties EU faces at present are the fundamental reason why EU politicians insist on maintaining and promoting the strategic partnership between China and the EU. As we all know, since the world financial crisis in 2008, the EU as a whole has been overwhelmed by the situation. And in 2009, EU member states generally had negative economic growth, in contrast with China's outstanding performance in response to the global financial and economic crisis. China not only maintained a GDP growth of more than 8% in 2009, but to a considerable extent became the engine that drove the world economy out of the crisis. More importantly, shortly after entering 2010, the EU witnessed the Greek debt crisis. The leaders of EU and the Euro-Zone apparently learned the lesson that America had a slow reaction when facing the financial crisis in 2008. Although the process of rescuing Greece has been controversial, the consensus of defending the European economic fundamentals eventually overcame the differences.

However, if the debt crisis of Greece further expands, it is obvious that the economic difficulties facing Europe as a whole will require global financial support. Some media even calculated the responsibilities that members of the IMF should bear, according to their shares in it. According to the "list", China plays a key role in the financial crisis and may bear three billion U.S. dollars of aid money in helping to solve the debt crisis of Greece.⁷ In this grim economic situation, the EU's politicians are clearly not willing to rashly deny the comprehensive strategic partnership relations between China and Europe, since it was the existence of such a partnership between China and Europe, which focuses on comprehensive organization and coordination and globally strategic partnership of mutual cooperation for long-term benefits, that China would not hesitate to lend a helping hand when Europe badly needs a relief. In other words, the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership ensures the basis on which China will help Europe with its own forces when needed most. EU politicians should be very clear about this.

2. China's maintenance of the Sino-EU strategic partnership with good faith is another important reason why European politicians would not deny the strategic partnership. Although Sino-EU relations saw considerable twists and turns in 2008 because Europe neglected China's major concerns related to its core interests,

⁷ News from <http://news.163.com/10/0508/01/664GFQGG00014AED.html>.



China persisted in maintaining the Sino-EU comprehensive strategic partnership, and firmly adhered to promoting it in the very difficult period. In early 2009, when both China and the EU were under the grim situation from the impact of the global financial and economic crisis, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited five European countries and the EU Headquarters. With this trip known as “Warm Spring Tour”, China-EU relations went back on track, and both sides decided to hold the postponed 11th China-EU summit in May that year, pledging to continue to promote China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership. The summit was held in May 2009 in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao clearly pointed out at the summit that the core of the China-EU ties lied in their strategic importance, while the bilateral relations were characterized by comprehensive substance, and the key to their development was to advance with the times. China and the EU should stick to the basic principle of strategic partnership, take the expansion of practical cooperation as a major point, and should strengthen confidence, jointly move forward, and push forward the sustainable development of bilateral relations in an in-depth and all-around way.⁸

A number of European experts on China issues raised questions about the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership before and after this summit. They maintained that after the series of events in 2008, China-EU relations have been neither comprehensive nor strategic. Even in November 2009, at the high-level “China-EU strategic partnership Seminar” organized by the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs and co-organized by eight other institutes including Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, some European scholars stated that only the EU-US trans-Atlantic relationship could be called a strategic partnership, and thus questioned whether there is still a strategic partnership between China and Europe. However, Chinese leaders continued to stress unremittingly the importance of the China-EU strategic partnership. When Premier Wen Jiabao met former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and other European delegates who attended the “China-EU Strategic Partnership Seminar”, he pointed out that EU summit had elected the first permanent President of the European Council and High Representative of Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. As a strategic partner, China was glad to see this. The EU is an important pole in the world, and the European integration process is conducive to EU playing a greater role in international affairs. Wen also stressed that politicians of both sides should have visions and courage to deepen China-EU relations, and it can not do without the community's support and participation. The Chinese government is willing to join the EU in enhancing mutual trust, deepening cooperation and pushing the China-EU comprehensive

⁸ Wen Jiabao's speech at the 11th China-EU Summit, from http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2009-05/21/content_11409714_1.htm.



strategic partnership to a higher level.⁹ Obviously, China has been consistently maintaining and promoting the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership, which has a significant influence on European politicians to address and adhere to the EU-China strategic partnership.

3. Politicians from the EU and its member states are more willing to treat the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as transcending ideology. They stress that maintaining the strategic partnership is a great stimulation to China and EU jointly addressing global challenges and promoting global governance. Just as mentioned above, on May 6, 2010 EU leaders sent a congratulatory message to Chinese leaders to mark the 35th anniversary of the establishment of China-EU diplomatic ties. It made clear that the EU-China ties have made great progress over the last 35 years. The EU and China have set up a comprehensive strategic partnership, and conducted all-round cooperation which turned out to be fruitful. In face of the current global challenges, the EU-China relations have become more important than ever before, they added. The EU side is ready to join hands with China to ensure that the EU-China strategic partnership would make still greater achievements.¹⁰

Now let us analyze why some European scholars question the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Firstly, a very important reason lies in that European scholars or intellectuals place more emphasis on the differences between China and EU in ideology and political system. According to the authors of “A Power Audit of EU-China Relations”

...the EU’s China strategy is based on an anachronistic belief that China, under the influence of European engagement, will liberalise its economy, improve the rule of law and democratise its politics. The underlying idea is that engagement with China is positive in itself and should not be conditional on any specific Chinese behaviour.¹¹

However,

Examples of Europe’s failure to mould China in its own image are legion. Political liberalisation seems to have stalled, or even reversed: China has tightened restrictions against NGOs, stepped up pressure on dissidents, and stopped or rolled back local electoral reforms. At the UN, Beijing has built an increasingly solid coalition of general assembly votes, often mobilised in opposition to EU values such as the defence of human rights.¹²

⁹ China News Web: “Wen Jiabao meeting European Delegates attending China-EU strategic partnership Seminar”, <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2009/11-20/1976725.shtml>.

¹⁰ “China and EU leaders Sending congratulate telegraphs celebrating 35 anniversary of founding diplomatic relations each other”, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t693304.htm>.

¹¹ John Fox and Francois Godement, “A Power Audit of EU-China Relations”, published by the European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2009.

¹² John Fox and Francois Godement, “A Power Audit of EU-China Relations”, published by the European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2009.

Just because of this “ignored reality” EU-China relations can not be treated as a Strategic Partnership while only transatlantic relations meet the criteria of a strategic partnership.¹³

Secondly, they believe that the establishment of the strategic partnership between China and EU was the result of EU and its Member States having implemented an “unconditional engagement” with China on the one hand, on the other hand, when the strategic partnership was established, the EU saw China as a developing country, and the legal basis of its relations with China is the *Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the European Economic Community and the People’s Republic of China*. However, when the legal document was signed, the then-EC’s trade with China enjoyed a huge surplus. As China has risen as a world-class power, and at the same time Europe no longer is prepared to implement an “unconditional engagement” with China, the then-established China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership naturally exists in name only.

This means that if the EU currently still regards China as a developing country, and is prepared to continue an “unconditional engagement” with China, believing China will change because of this, just like a web of European-inspired dialogues and agreements is supposed to entangle China in rules and commitments, protecting the EU from bad Chinese behaviour and transforming Chinese policy along European lines, then the relationship between the two can still be described as a comprehensive strategic partnership. However,

Even with no conditions attached, EU engagement with China – so goes the optimistic assumption – will ‘Europeanise’ China’s behaviour at home and abroad. But this attitude overestimates the transformational power of the EU while underestimating China’s ability to use engagement with Europe to its own ends. The EU’s official policy towards China is woefully out of sync with the reality of the relationship.¹⁴

Once the basis of prediction on which the EU maintains the strategic partnership disappears, such a strategic partnership is like a tree without roots.

Finally, a series of differences between China and the EU on issues like trade, Africa, climate change in recent years is also an important reason why some European scholars question the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership. Those scholars argue that Europeans feel that there is insufficient trade reciprocity - that the legal and administrative restrictions on European companies trading and investing in China are far greater than those Chinese companies face in Europe. This feeling is confirmed by the European Union Chamber of Commerce’s “European Business in China Position Paper 2009/2010” which was

¹³ Eberhard Sandschneider, “The Strategic Significance of China-EU Partnership (Speaking Points)”, from The Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Affairs Journal*, Special Issue November 2009, p.81.

¹⁴ John Fox and Francois Godement, “A Power Audit of EU-China Relations”, published by the European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2009.



published on 2 September 2009. European businesses have observed a slowdown in the pace of reforms in China over the past 12 months, with some sectors reporting that the situation has actually worsened as industrial policy interventions and foreign investment restrictions have increased.¹⁵

On the African issue, they point out that the non-conditionality of Chinese policies has been severely criticised in the West. What is more, Beijing's policies towards Darfur, Zimbabwe and the wielding of its UNSC veto, opposing the imposition of sanctions against Zimbabwe and Sudan, have also been different from European policies, although the usefulness of China's mediating role in Sudan is acknowledged.¹⁶ The fact that China strongly adheres to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of other countries especially in Africa also causes European discontent because it is quite opposite to the neo-interventionism favoured by the EU to some extent.

The EU sincerely wishes to play a leading role in response to global climate change all long. Before the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, the EU member states continued to coordinate their positions, repeatedly stressed the EU's stance in participating in the Conference, and pointed out that if the parties concerned could increase commitments on the emission reduction, the EU would reduce its greenhouse gas emission by 30% in 2020 compared with that in 1990. It also insisted that the parties should reach a binding emission reduction commitment in Copenhagen and draft a timetable, while some follow-up is essential, including providing financial assistance to developing countries and measures to protect forest resources. The EU believed that Europe should play a role of leadership on all these issues.¹⁷ However, the results of the Copenhagen Conference were not as envisaged by the EU - only a legally non-binding "Copenhagen Accord" was reached then. Thus, Europe accused China and the U.S. of having destroyed the Copenhagen Conference, and the British Minister of Energy and Climate Change Ed Milliband even said that China and other countries set insurmountable obstacles to reach an ambitious agreement at the Conference.

According to some European scholars, despite many differences between them, the partners must recognise the importance of their commitment to each other and be prepared to try to reach common ground wherever possible. Premier Wen Jiabao stated:

¹⁵ Stanley Crossick, "China - EU strategic partnership: state of play", paper for the FUDAN CES/IFRI/SIES/CSEUS roundtable in Shanghai on 24 September 2009. 斯坦利·罗斯：“中欧关系：是真正的战略伙伴关系吗？”《欧洲观察》2010年第4期·总第59期，上海欧洲学会编。

¹⁶ Stanley Crossick, "China-EU strategic partnership: state of play", paper for the FUDAN CES/IFRI/SIES/CSEUS roundtable in Shanghai on 24 September 2009.

¹⁷ 中国气候变化网：《国际社会继续热评哥本哈根大会》
<http://www.ipcc.cma.gov.cn/Website/index.php?ChannelID=11&NewsID=1141>



‘Strategic’ means the cooperation should be long-term and stable, bearing on the larger picture of China-EU relations. It transcends the differences in ideology and social system and is not subjected to the impact of individual events that occur from time to time. By ‘partnership’, it means that the cooperation should be equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win. The two sides should base themselves on mutual respect and mutual trust, endeavour to expand converging interests and seek common ground on the major issues while shelving differences on the minor ones.¹⁸

Therefore, when EU and China don’t assume the long-term responsibility, and don’t even have a basic consensus on these specific issues, how can that relation between Europe and China be called a strategic partnership?

III. Challenges and Opportunities in the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Within the EU there are two distinct voices on current China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, so the partnership faces challenges as well as significant opportunities for development.

There is no doubt that EU scholars’ doubts are the major challenge for the China-EU strategic partnership set up in 2003. First, these doubts will have a direct impact on foreign policies of the EU and its member states towards China. For example, the report on the EU’s policy to China released by John Fox and Francois Godement “A Power Audit of EU-China Relations” was published by European Council on Foreign Relations. The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of a coherent and effective European values-based foreign policy. Among the members of the European Council on Foreign Relations are former prime ministers, presidents, European commissioners, current and former parliamentarians and ministers, public intellectuals, business leaders, activists and cultural figures from the EU member states and candidate countries. Thus, the views of European scholars will have a very direct impact on EU politicians.

Second, politicians and scholars in EU generally share the same ideology, although there remain disagreements on the Sino-EU strategic partnership between them. They share the same recognition of differences between Europe and China in ideology, values and political system. Moreover, they both place emphasis on universal values in Europe such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and even in the hope that further contacts with China will promote it to accept the universal

¹⁸ Cited from Stanley Crossick, “China-EU strategic partnership: state of play”, paper for the FUDAN CES/IFRI/SIES/CSEUS roundtable in Shanghai on 24 September 2009. 斯坦利·克罗斯：“中欧关系：是真正的战略伙伴关系吗？”《欧洲观察》2010年第4期·总第59期，上海欧洲学会编。



values Europe has been advocating. However, because European politicians stressed that in response to the challenges of globalization and coping with the enormous economic difficulties, Europe can not deny the strategic partnership between China and EU established for many years, they technically play down their tune on the ideological differences between the two, while European scholars don't agree on such an attitude. This means that, to a large extent, the European politicians' affirmation of the EU-China strategic partnership has no solid ideological basis. Once the international situation changes, the economic difficulties facing the European turn around or there appears some kind of twists and turns in Sino-EU relations, European politicians are quite likely to change their views of the strategic partnership.

Finally, if the uncoordinated situation in those issues like trade, Africa, climate change and others which do exist can not be resolved consistently, European politicians will change their views on the EU-China Strategic Partnership. In general, the purpose of a strategic partnership is to enable the two sides to enhance their close relationship in a considerable number of policy areas and to ensure mutual responsibility and obligations from the perspective of long-term interests. When both sides can never coordinate their respective interests in areas related to some specific interests, and fail to reach a compromise to cooperate, then such a strategic partnership will be inevitably difficult to keep, or at least this will lead to questions of politicians in both parties. To a certain extent, the current China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership is indeed faced with such threats.

Noticably, however, there are also opportunities for further development of the partnership besides the above challenges. The main reason lies in the following two aspects. First, European scholars who presently question the strategic partnership between China and EU don't believe there is no need to maintain and promote it. On the contrary, the reason why they question the existence of the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership is to promote it, and enhance a more extensive cooperation between China and Europe in dealing with the challenges of global issues, not to worsen the relationship. Prof. Francois Godement one of the author of "A Power Audit of EU-China Relations" argues:

Between China and Europe, a declaration of intent on a strategic partnership was affirmed by both sides in October 2003. Subsequently, this has remained an objective to which both sides refer from time to time, but it is not fully established in name, nor perhaps in reality. Should we care? Yes and no, or rather, no but yes.¹⁹

He also points out:

Euro-optimism and euro-pessimism go in cycles. So does the international vision of China, affected by sudden events or bolstered by

¹⁹ Francois Godement, "The Strategic Significance of China-EU Partnership", from The Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Affairs Journal*, Special Issue November 2009, p. 89.



China's achievements. A strategic partnership between China and Europe is not designed to limit a strategic competition that does not exist. It is necessary to unlock the potential of each partner along lines of shared interests, with global governance as a goal and respectful debate as the norm.²⁰

Second, because European scholars have clearly put forward the inconsistency of the policy between EU and China in such areas as Africa, climate change, economy and trade, which means that there is a bilateral strategic partnership in name only, therefore, China and EU politicians who wish to maintain and promote the strategic partnership will carry out substantive coordination and cooperation in these areas. In fact, they have noticed the problems of bilateral cooperation in these areas, and are making efforts to overcome their differences and expand the cooperation. For example, on trade and economic issues, the “Joint Statement of 12th EU-China Summit” clearly states

The two sides acknowledged their key role and responsibilities in world trade and shared the view that economic and trade ties between the EU and China are an important and integral part of the comprehensive strategic partnership. To effectively address the current economic and financial crisis, the two sides agreed to step up efforts to promote trade and investment and increase effective market access. The European Union appreciates the efforts of China to undertake trade and investment promotion missions to Europe during the economic downturn.²¹

On Africa, the same statement points out:

The EU and China welcomed trilateral dialogue between the EU, China and Africa, and agreed to explore appropriate areas for cooperation. They reaffirmed their commitment to supporting the full and timely achievement of the MDGs and to supporting Africa's sustainable development and early economic recovery.²²

And also on the climate issue, China and EU have already released a joint statement on climate change dialogue and cooperation on April 29, 2010 in Beijing, which declares to set up a ministerial-level hotline on climate change to deepen mutual understanding, strengthen coordination, promote pragmatic cooperation and exchange their views. Xie Zhenhua, vice minister of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), met Connie Hedegaard, the EU commissioner for climate action, during the European Commission's ongoing visit to China that day. The Statement says the two sides “reaffirmed the ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ principle and respective capabilities, as well as the

²⁰ Francois Godement, “The Strategic Significance of China-EU Partnership”, from The Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Affairs Journal*, Special Issue November 2009, p.99.

²¹ “Joint Statement of 12th EU - China Summit”, http://www.china.org.cn/learning_english/2009-12/01/content_18984323_3.htm.

²² “Joint Statement of 12th EU - China Summit”, http://www.china.org.cn/learning_english/2009-12/01/content_18984323_3.htm.



goal of a comprehensive, effective and sustained implementation of *the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol*.²³

To sum up, the different voices on the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership within the EU can be seen as both a great challenge and an important opportunity for the comprehensive strategic partnership. For the two sides, it is extremely important to seize the opportunity in a timely manner while properly coping with the challenge. The key is whether the politicians and academia as well as grassroots public of both sides have been well prepared for the challenges.

²³ Xinhua: “China-EU establish Ministerial mechanism for dialogue and cooperation on climate change”, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-04/30/c_1264975.htm.