The EU’s Struggle for a Strategic Narrative: Forging a New Narrative with China?

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Abstract

Can an international organization construct and deploy an effective strategic narrative? The European Union has relied on a strategic narrative from its inception to the present day. This narrative has aimed at building support within Europe for deeper integration and sought to forge influence internationally. Over the years this narrative has shifted from a grand strategic vision of the people of Europe to a narrative of strategic calculation in the post-Cold War period. The formation, projection and reception of the EU strategic narrative is complicated by the hybrid nature of the institution - reflecting both supranational and intergovernmental aspects, which complicates efforts to speak with a single voice in international affairs. This paper argues that the EU has in recent years lost a vision for a shared narrative of European integration, thus hampering the EU's strategic impact. This has been most clearly witnessed in EU crisis management in which diverging and occasionally conflicting narratives have emerged. However, the case of China offers the EU a way forward. The European tour of President Xi Jinping in October 2015 saw positive meetings with Commission leaders as well as national heads of state. China and the EU are foreign policy actors in development. Their emergence is changing international order. Their respective strategic narratives of how they view this new international order, how they view their emergent identities as international players, and how they press strategic narratives in the policy areas they interact in will determine the scope for cooperation and conflict.
Introduction

Relations between the EU and China have reached a critical juncture. The EU struggles through the Ukraine, Syria, Libya conflicts, the refugee crisis, and Eurozone and Brexit crises. Europe seemed surrounded by a ‘ring of fire’ (The Economist, 2014) and now the flames have reached the centre. Meanwhile the slowdown in China’s economic growth threatens the stability of global trade. Mutual impressions between two of the world’s three global powers should not be high. It is a time for retrenchment. And yet the opposite is true. With the launch of its One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, China promises to turn connectivity and cooperation from rhetoric into hard infrastructural reality. Under the One Road One Belt banner, the Silk Road from West Asia through the Middle East to Europe will be renewed, while a Maritime Silk Road will form new partnerships in Southeast Asia, Oceania and North and East Africa. The new Asian Investment Bank through which China offers a rival to the long-established IMF has been joined enthusiastically – and to the consternation of many US commentators – by all leading EU states. The economic and political structures are in place for relations to enter a new era of interdependence, for the thickening of cultural and social ties, and for a perhaps unprecedented degree of a shared understanding to emerge.

In this paper we argue that while the EU has in recent years lost a vision for a shared narrative of European integration, hampering the EU's strategic impact, the case of its relations with China offers the EU a way forward. The EU needs a new “Building block” narrative based on a turn to greater pragmatism and pluralism to overcome its internal and external challenges. The European Union emerged as an organisation that attracted increasingly more member states, providing a blueprint for modern European states to adapt to and work through. The EU’s steady horizontal diffusion across Europe contributed to the region’s stabilisation and post-Cold War transition. However, with increased membership the challenge of maintaining internal cohesion has been greatly complicated by a series of exogenous and endogenous shocks – Brexit; aggressive Russian foreign policy in eastern Europe; the Eurozone crisis – throwing in to question whether the EU model could provide a blueprint for governance resonating outside of the region of Europe. In the face of competing economic and governance models, the absence of a new strategic narrative response to its challenges has led to questions concerning whether the EU can continue to be
influential globally. It is this context which defines the predicament in which the EU finds itself on the international level.

Strategic narratives are defined as ‘a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon, et al., 2013: 2). Why do strategic narratives matter? Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd argues:

The evolution of American conceptualizations of the China relationship has been complex. Chinese conceptualizations of the US relationship have also evolved over time. But my core points remain—very few of these conceptualizations of the bilateral relationship have been conjoint.

The basic reality is that as China’s economy grows and supplants the US as the largest economy in the world, and as China gradually begins to narrow the military gap between the two over the decades ahead, there is a new imperative for a common strategic narrative for both Washington and Beijing. In the absence of such a common narrative (if in fact such narrative can be crafted), the truth is that the two nations are more likely to drift further apart, or at least drift more rapidly apart than might otherwise be the case. By contrast, a common strategic narrative between the two could act as an organizing principle that reduces strategic drift, and encourages other more cooperative behaviors over time. So long, of course, as such a narrative embraces the complex reality of the relationship, and avoids motherhood statements which provide negligible operational guidance for those who have day-to-day responsibility, for the practical management of the relationship. (Rudd, 2015: 17)

For Rudd, strategic narrative is a means to forge better understanding and closer cooperation on the basis of shared understanding. Where plural narratives compete, skilful leaders can work to find points of narrative alignment to foster cooperation and a sense of shared destiny. While the formal study of narrative in International Relations has produced a body of literature (Hajer, 1995; Miskimmon et al., 2017; Krebs, 2015), European Studies has been slower to explore narrative communication. In a recent article in the Journal of Common Market Studies, Ian Manners and
Philomena Murray called for a renewed emphasis on research on narratives and the European Union: ‘Research pathways could usefully develop an examination of how, and by whom, many of the EU narratives are formulated; why and when they are projected; and how they are perceived by their recipients, both within the EU and in an international context’ (Manners and Murray, 2016, p. 199). In fact, the formal study of narratives projected by the European Union and its member states has already been underway (Miskimmon, 2012; Miskimmon et al., 2013; Hertner and Miskimmon, 2015; Coticchia and Simone, 2014; Hellman and Wagnsson, 2015). This article extends that trajectory.

The context for thinking about EU-China relations is the trope of a powershift from West to East and a transition from an ordered Western-led multilateral system to a spaghetti bowl of confusing and overlapping institutions, forums and networks (e.g. Naim, 2014). There is no reason to think this transition is determined and inevitable. A few years ago scholars felt the need to point out that Europe may not always remain mired in internal crises while China may not always enjoy surging growth in material resources and geopolitical influence (Cox, 2012; Keukeleire and Hoojmaaijers, 2014). Nevertheless, the "rise of China" and "rise of the BRICS" narratives are performative: they gave a sense of momentum and expectations of growth in those countries that contribute to preferences and behaviour inside those countries and to preferences and behaviour of those outside, such as the EU, who have to respond (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017 forthcoming). China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, Turkey and Brazil's surprise efforts to resolve Iran's nuclear dispute in 2011 and, indeed, India's calling of the United States' bluff with their own nuclear programme as far back as 1998 (Barthwal-Datta, unpublished) all indicate how projections of future power condition demands in the present, or what Howorth and Menon (2015: 14) describe as 'a willingness to translate economic self-confidence into foreign policy actions'.

That notion of a powershift and greater complexity problematised the prevailing notion of Normative Power Europe: that Europe's influence came not from military force but by showing how a peaceful, prosperous polity could grow out of the shadow of successive wars and keep expanding (Manners, 2002). Normative Power Europe would provoke emulation and diffuse its norms of market economy, human rights, good governance and the necessity of social and environmental protection. But this universalist and universalising model is challenged when other paths of
development have been seen to succeed. Tellingly, International Relations scholar Acharya (2014) uses a media metaphor to describe the emerging world order: the transition to a ‘multiplex’ order which, like the cinema, hosts both major blockbusters, art house world cinema from all regions, and a range of mixtures in between, offering audiences a world of perspectives in a contingent but still-present hierarchy. This hierarchy is changing because of the structural, material shifts towards the Global South. This has implications for how Europe should respond. European Studies scholar Howorth wrote in 2010, 'what the EU should seek as a basic strategic objective is a world of cultural and political diversity in which, nevertheless, stability, security, prosperity ... are considered in holistic terms as key elements of global interdependence -- of inter-polarity' (Howorth, 2010: 469). But do EU and European policymakers have the capacity to do so, and do they possess a vision or narrative about how they could realise this in the future? Give the difference between European and Chinese values regarding human rights, democracy and sovereignty, could EU-China relations be one platform that could allow the EU to find a way to achieve this stable transition towards diversity and inter-polarity more broadly? Hence, the focus of this paper is not only of intrinsic interest because it addresses relations between two of the big three economies in the world, but because the findings have broader implications for how Europe engages in the world and how power transition could unfold -- or be made to unfold.

It is striking that, in the context of Europe’s many ongoing crises, the head of the European Research Council published a book focused on dealing with uncertainty as Europe seeks to forge its future. Helga Nowotny argues we must build futures (for futures are a cultural fact (Appadurai 2013)) and this requires a shared vision (2015: xiv, 26-27). In doing so, we must embrace what she describes as the “cunning of uncertainty”. We must be crafty and adaptive in situations where core aspects like the role of technology or the role of institutions are ambiguous. This also entails a certain way of thinking about time and history -- as open, not determined or anchored by destiny. The point is to tame the future and move it towards preferred futures, not just probable or possible ones (Adam and Groves, 2007: 30-31). Of course, this means living with uncertainty and knowing you may not achieve the future you prefer. However, this is just the mindset that European policymakers must adopt when thinking about One Belt One Road, for instance.
In this paper we first elaborate the strategic narrative theoretical framework. We examine the difficulties the EU has faced until now forming and projecting a coherent strategy. We then explore the potential for alignment between EU and China in their narratives (and actions) at the level of issue, identity and system. We argue that the EU has always seen itself as a model for other countries’ transformation in the international order. This is the EU’s identity narrative. But with its internal and external problems, it has lost its ability to project itself as a transformative model. At the same time, China has become a goal-shaper and order-shaper and the EU has no option but to engage with this. The EU’s model of transforming the international system – its system narrative – must respond to this challenge. This entails forging a narrative along the lines Rudd suggested above, aligning with China’s narrative of how the international system should and will function, to prevent potential tensions and conflicts and to restore its own vitality.

Given the nature of challenges faced internally (Brexit and Eurozone crises hint at multi-speed Europe) and externally (shift to multipolar world and hybrid governance initiatives like OBOR), the EU’s response must involve projecting a new version of singularity through plurality. This should happen at the levels of issue, identity and system narratives. Instead of a narrative of pluralistic member states moving together through ever closer union and more coherent EU actor-ness, the EU must go with the grain of international affairs and project a narrative of plural speeds, organisational forms and values. We call this a “building block” narrative because it indicates the necessity of continually building and rebuilding relations and institutions rather than aiming for settled forms. Since this narrative is not strikingly intuitive – it may appear paradoxical or uncertain in its embrace of paradox and uncertainty – what must be conveyed is a continued sense of movement and action. There must be recognition that movement and action does not have to be directed by EU institutions; this may occur on occasions, particularly when high-level diplomacy is required, but more often a combination of actors at different levels will be involved. Again, we point to China’s OBOR initiative as exemplifying the type of hybrid initiative the EU both represents and must itself engage with and where that sense of movement and action – and concrete economic and security results – can be achieved.

Theoretical framework: Strategic narratives
Our argument about possible alignment between Chinese and European strategies towards shaping world order allows us to account for human perceptions alongside material factors. This matters because actors act upon how they think the world is, not how the world is objectively of their knowledge of it. In the context of EU-China relations, for instance, Mauß has argued that:

...shared European misperceptions about Europe (as a benign senior partner and educator) and about China (as a junior partner who could be socialized into one's own values and thus, with European help, would eventually become a liberal market economy and democracy) represent [an] important shared element ... that enabled Brussels to build a common EU China policy. (2016: 11)

European policymakers' shared characterisation of Europe as a normative power whose values can be diffused, and China as a developing country seeking integration into a Western-led international system, allowed those policymakers to share, in turn, a projection of a plot forwards that involved European pressure gradually taking China towards a European model of economy and society. Mauß considers this perception misguided, but nevertheless it allowed some degree of a joint strategy and support for policies to realise it.

The strategic narrative theoretical framework allows for the tracing of such characterisations, plots and contextualisations in order to identify how and why they make a difference to behaviour in international affairs. Recall our definition of strategic narratives: ‘a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon, et al., 2013: 2). By narrative we refer to meaning created specifically through representation of a time sequence, linking separate events causally related, with a past-present-future structure, some attempt at resolution, and a notion that events are connected in a meaningful way. Narratives feature characters or agents, a setting, environment or scene, a conflict or action, tools and behaviour actors use to address it, and a resolution (Burke, 1957). We identify three main forms of strategic narratives in international relations, all featuring those five components: Those about the international system which outline how an actor...
views the international order; narratives which are deployed by political actors to influence the development of policies; and finally identity narratives which is projected by a political actor to influence international affairs. We theorise that alignment between system, policy and identity narratives increases opportunities for influence, persuasion and ultimately agreement and cooperation.

The analysis of strategic narratives focuses on processes of narrative formation, narrative projection, and narrative reception (Antoniades, et al., 2010; Miskimmon, et al., 2013, 2017; Roselle et al., 2014). Identifying and explaining reception is perhaps the most difficult but important aspect of this emerging field of narrative analysis: how narratives are received, interpreted, and become meaningful to audiences, be they elites or publics. This can be approached in terms of reach, how individuals understand and process information, the affective responses narratives generate, and – particularly in a digital age – how audiences recirculate, remediate and remix the narrative content. Reception occurs in social contexts where narratives may be discussed collectively and ritually as well as processed individually, and where cultural filters conditions degrees of openness or dogmatism in responses to new or challenging narratives (Gillespie, 2006). Reception depends on the availability of specific mediums like radio or services like Facebook, and each medium offers different possibilities for communicating back (Miskimmon, et al., 2017). This takes place within a complex media ecology which shapes, distorts, disrupts but ultimately enables communication of strategic narratives. It allows alternative voices and marginalized actors to challenge dominant narratives, but also opens up opportunity for the powerful to project narratives in new ways (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010).

Narratives differ to other communication forms analysed in international affairs such as frames and discourse -- different in specific ways. We understand frames as relatively short-term heuristics on a snapshot event (frame X as) (Entman, 2004), and discourses as long-term bodies of knowledge in specific fields of practice that create stable subject positions or actor roles (Epstein, 2011). In contrast, narratives are the time-sequenced structuring of linked events (Miskimmon et al., 2013). But whether our focus is narratives, discourse, myths or other communication forms, what matters is how ‘they act in combination with one another rather than in isolation’ (Charteris-Black, 2005: 7, italics in original). Analysing narrative alone will not explain why a speech is persuasive. Persuasion works through the activation of associations, often very subtle, in the interaction of different modes and figures of
speech. In our analysis we will see how narratives are embellished or underpinned by key metaphors and discourses.

Systematic analysis of the structure of narratives is necessary both because it makes analysis replicable and because it makes for a more powerful explanation of how narrative structures come to steer meaning in the contexts we analyse; we are analysing ‘ideash-form’ (Barthes, 2009: 135). However, as International Relations scholars our aim is to explain how these ideas-in-form make a difference to processes and outcomes. How does the use of strategic narratives by the EU and China, as well as the constitutive features of those narratives, create conditions for agreement or disagreement? And here we cannot emphasise enough how much audience matters. It is not just that political leadership involves providing a narrative account offering meaning to past, present and future, but that this narrative is ‘compatible with an audience’s ideology’ (Edelman, 1988: 105). What matters is less the narrative’s vulnerability to empirical criticism than whether audiences are willing to suspend disbelief in possible contradictory aspects and offer their support. We are not interested in whether the EU or China’s narratives are true, valid or appealing, but how they generate interactions and play a part in relations of power.

The shadow of Kissinger’s phone: The European Union’s struggle for a strategic narrative

The EU is inextricably linked with a strategic narrative, primarily aimed at bringing European states together in a cooperative project and to communicate a collective voice internally and externally. Studying the EU as an international actor comes up against a number of persistent questions – what kind of actor is the EU? Is the EU a state in the making or a sui generis phenomenon? What is the EU’s role in the world – is it an emerging power that should assume the traditional traits of Great Powers? What are the main aspects of the EU’s external relations and how does the development of the EU’s foreign and security policy relate to its constituent parts – its 28 member states. The European Union faces significant challenges to projecting a strategic narrative due to the continued centrality of member states as the main
foreign policy actors. This is reinforced by a limited Europeanisation of foreign policy, an area in which co-operation is largely voluntary, rather than legally enforceable as in the communitarised aspects of the EU.

The EU’s structure and inner workings have often made it very difficult to maintain and deploy a consistent narrative, which has been laid bare with the Eurozone crisis. There have been a number of ways in which scholars have sought to conceptualise the EU as an international actor. These conceptions have often been intimately linked with normative claims about what type of actor the European Union is. Francois Duchene’s conception of the European Community’s Civilian Power status suggested that in the highly charged atmosphere of the Cold War, that the European Community lack of military capability offered it a chance to be a new type of international player (Duchene 1972; 1973). This tradition of asserting the EU’s distinctiveness in how it exercises power and influence in the world has been continued in the work of Ian Manners in his conception of the EU as a normative power (Manners 2002; 2006. See also Diez 2005). Manners appreciates that this conception of the EU is mired is myth and lore:

...the normative power myth functions as a narrative about the EU’s puny size and capabilities at the end of the cold war, and how these were gradually enlarged and strengthened throughout the 1990s...the normative power myth performs an important role in the make-up of the EU as a global actor seeking to transform itself in anticipation of the more complex, increasingly globalized, 21st century (Manners 2010, 77).
These attempts to selectively narrate both Europe’s past and its current status are at the heart of the EU’s efforts to position itself in international affairs. However, the difficulty of normative power as a concept is in charting its effects. Further contributions to debates concerning Europe’s narrative include Aggestam who argues that the EU is an ethical power (Aggestam 2008). Kaldor, Martin and Selchow have called for an EU foreign policy founded on strategic narrative of human security as a means to gain international influence and reinforce domestic support for EU external affairs (Kaldor et al. 2007). These narratives of the EU’s international role rest on a conception of the EU as being a force for good (Nicolaidis and Howse 2002). There is, however, an emerging literature which is more sceptical of these claims and a growing application of realism to understanding EU external action (Rynning 2010; Youngs 2004; Zielonka 2008). There is also evidence that the EU’s “Erasmus generations” do not perceive the fruits of previous integration and focus more on the EU’s deficits, damaging EU internal legitimacy. Despite this, there is still considerable interest in what has been defined as the EU’s transformative power – its ability to diffuse norms and practices internationally (Youngs 2005. See also Boerzel and Risse; van Ham, 2010).iii All of these approaches are predicated on the idea that the EU offers a distinct vision of international affairs that is both progressive and inclusive.

Zakaria argues that ‘Global Power is, above all, dominance over ideas, agendas and models’ (Zakaria 2009, xxiv). This is complicated by that fact that emerging powers in the international community are dissecting the narratives, arguments, and assumptions of the West and countering them with a different view of the world’ (Ibid., 35). The EU’s interests and values are likely to be challenged, particularly in
light of the crisis in the Eurozone, the poor image which the protracted treaty revision negotiations of the 2000s displayed and the EU’s inability to position itself as a key player in shaping global order (Walker 2010). In 2008 the EU’s Council of Ministers declared, ‘To ensure our security and meet the expectation of our citizens, we must be ready to shape events. That means becoming more strategic in our thinking and more effective and visible around the world’ (Council of Ministers 2008). The EU has accepted the necessity to present a more unified and strategic vision of foreign policy, but the implementation of this has yet to be fundamentally addressed.

The EU has sought to narrate its own emergence as an international actor along a number of lines. First, that the EU is a ‘force for good’ in the world having learned the lesson of a bloody European past. According to this narrative, this bloody past, overcome by the integration of states around a common set of goals, sets it apart as a different type of actor. The overcoming of its internal diversions prepares it well for diverse challenges at the international level. Second, the EU’s success has made it inherently attractive to others. Ian Manners’ idea of Normative Power Europe suggests an actor possessing enormous soft power, securing influence through the power of attraction. Peter van Ham’s stress on social power fits neatly with the narrative of the EU as an emerging actor on the world stage. The work of Natalia Chaban, Ole Elgström and Martin Holland suggest that such narratives of European integration and the EU as an international actor are perceived in many different ways by actors outside of Europe – and not as always intended by EU members (Chaban et al 2013; Chaban and Elström 2014; Chaban and Holland 2008; Chaban and Magdalina 2014). The EU faces a dilemma around how it can communicate its identity, its role in the world, how it understands the emerging international order, and
how it narrates emerging policy challenges both within the EU and further afield. Inevitably, the EU’s attempts to narrate its identity, how it views the international order and how it addresses policy developments comes up against entrenched narratives, emanating primarily from the EU’s member states. The EU’s narrative of an emerging cosmopolitan supranationalism jars with views of citizenship based on the nation state. Likewise, the EU’s efforts to play a leading role in the shifting international order face counter-narratives of the role of existing and emerging Great Powers shaping the rules of the game. The EU’s desire to be considered a new type of international actor comes under pressure to demonstrate influence in the face of powerful nation states.

The European Union recognizes the challenges it faces to forge a strategic narrative. The European External Action Service’s (EEAS) 2015 Strategic Review states,

> The very nature of our Union – a construct of intertwined polities – gives us a unique advantage to steer the way in a more complex, but connected, but also more contested world (EEAS 2015, 1)

This review is a precursor to agreement on a new European Security Strategy in 2016. The first European Security Strategy of 2003 came a time of deep discord over the decision to invade Iraq, and sought to stake out a set of principles which would guide the emerging Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union. Its creation forced EU member states not only to more explicitly address its external environment, but also to look within, to project a narrative of the EU to the rest of the world. In 2015 the EU faces considerable challenges, necessitating a renewed
assessment of its aims and capabilities. The crisis in Ukraine and of relations with Russia, continued instability in the neighbourhood, the response to the Eurocrisis and the concomitant demotion of foreign policy on the agenda of the EU necessitates a rethinking through of the EU’s foreign and security policy strategy.

In the conclusion of the 2015 Strategic Review the EU makes a bold call for action:

In a more connected, contested and complex world, we need a clear sense of direction. We need to agree on our priorities, our goals and the means required to achieve them. We must refine the art of orchestration of the polyphony of voices around the table and the panoply of instruments at our disposal. We need a common, comprehensive and consistent EU global strategy (EEAS 2015, 20)

The theme of polyphony is picked up in Jan Zielonka’s 2014 book *Is the EU Doomed?* This musical metaphor is central to Zielonka’s argument of how to better organize European integration. He sees increasing danger in a state-centric monophonic approach to integration which has caused chaos and cacophony and argues for a polyphonic system of integration founded on ‘interaction, respect, differentiation and improvisation’ as providing a solution to the current impasse (Zielonka 2014, 98). Herein is the nub of the debate – should the EU press on towards ever closer union to overcome what the 2015 strategic review calls the ‘Vertical and horizontal silos (which) hamper the EU’s potential global role’ (EEAS, 2015, 20)? Or should it follow a strategy or embracing coordinated diversity without pressing for a single strategic narrative? Placed in the context of the EU’s current challenges, defining the very nature of the problems, let alone the solution and the potential
outcome of EU decisions remain deeply contested. The EU’s hybridity throws up competing conceptions of crisis management, reflecting and reinforcing polyphony rather than a clear unified European voice.iv

Can China relations enable a new EU narrative? Analysing alignment potential

Analysis 1: Issue narratives

Here we can distinguish issues of major interest to only one of the EU and China; issues of interest to both but on which they disagree; and issues of interest to both and which agreement can be found.

At first glance Europe appears to lack any major interest in South China Sea security or the state of Taiwan’s democracy, while China lacks interest in the EU’s local conflicts and tensions such as Ukraine, Syria and Iran. While these issues affect their respective allies, we are likely to see at best ‘shallow’ agreement between the EU and China here and, as we have seen in the past decade, disagreement via the UN Security Council (Maher, 2016: 950). China cannot stop Europe’s migrant crisis and the EU could not stop the collapse of North Korea. Hence, their overlap on issues to narrative is partial.

Second, there are issues that both take interest in but narrate and approach differently. Both European states and China have tried to foster dialogue between parties in Afghanistan or cultivate stability in conflictual African states. Their approaches to these security issues encompass concepts of non-traditional as well as traditional security. However, what each means by non-traditional security is not clear: the EU and China could form cooperative projects around the notion of non-traditional security that do lead to concrete actions, but it is equally possible that different understandings could undermine concerted efforts (Maier-Knapp, 2016).

Third, there are projects such as China’s One Belt, One Road initiative that the EU can endorse and contribute to. Such projects fit a narrative of a diverse, multipolar and differentiated international system that the EU can characterise itself as suited to, practically and normatively. We explore this in the system analysis below.

Analysis 2: Identity narratives
China is cultivating its identity as a great power but not of the traditional type that emerged in the European balance of powers system. It is contesting and trying to reshape the norm or meaning of what a great power is and does. This is a negotiated process. After being accused of not pulling its weight through the previous decade, since a trip to Washington by Xi Jinping in 2012 China has emphasised it is willing to take on responsibilities and show initiative traditionally associated with a great power such as building institutions and partnerships through which order can be maintained and reformed; but Xi described this as a 'new type of great power relations' (cited in Zeng and Breslin, 2016: 774). This phrase had been used by Chinese leaders before but with the emphasis on a new type of relations, as China began to rise. But from 2012 Xi's emphasis was on a new type of \textit{great power} relations (Zeng, 2016). This implies there can be varying types of great powers.

So what is that 'new type' of great power? In their analysis of policy debates within China, Zeng and Breslin note 'there is a particular focus on the work of John Mearsheimer, who argues that history has shown us that a rising power and the existing hegemon are unlikely to come to peaceful accommodation' (ibid: 779-780). This is exactly the kind of thinking the Chinese leadership wishes to avoid; Mearsheimer's offensive realism is cited a lot precisely as the logic they wish to negate. So what do they offer instead? The problem is the Chinese leadership are yet to articulate this. And there is also the danger that they look for recognition from others of their different kind of great power identity but others do not confer it. Obama has spoken of a new type of relations but not described China as a great power (Zeng, 2016).

Where does Europe fit into this narrative? While the US still dominates debates in quantitative terms, since 2012 and the narrative about a new type of great power, greater emphasis has been put on Russia, India, Japan and Europe (Zeng and Breslin, 2016). The European Union is considered a great power but without a single voice, and debate centres on how to build partnerships with its internal powers Germany, the UK, and France. China's attempt to create a new concept of great power opened up a debate that EU voices could have influenced. Through 2012-15 the concept was still fuzzy, defined more by what it was not than by what it was, with many Chinese thinkers establishing why this new concept was needed without giving it substance (Zeng, 2016). In that period, the EU could have contributed to fleshing
out a concept of great power-ness that reflects its own attributes and aspirations. Instead, Chinese policymakers and scholars began to question whether the concept might have a self-constraining effect, trapping China into being recognised by others in a certain way, for instance as pushing its own status as a great power without having the material or concept foundation to support it.

In narrative terms, then, China is struggling to characterise itself clearly. This creates opportunity for others to characterise it in the global public sphere. And without a clear identity, it is difficult for others to form expectations about where China wishes itself and the international system to go. This is a window of opportunity for those who mistrust China to characterise it in negative terms without a clear counter-argument from China. For instance, Diamond et al (2015: 28-30) argue that even if China isn’t explicitly anti-democratic, it cannot help but be seen to be because people inside and outside China realise it is authoritarian and has, ceteris paribus, enjoyed successful economic development.

Meanwhile, the EU’s self-narrative has evolved in the past decade from normative power to pragmatic player (Biscop, 2016). If its values are no longer automatically universally desirable, this transforms the narrative the EU uses to characterise itself and others towards a more humble actor in a pluralistic world. Howorth (Howorth, 2010: 469) writes, ‘what the EU should seek as a basic strategic objective is a world of cultural and political diversity … of global interdependence -- of inter-polarity’. The OBOR offers such an inter- (not multi-) dependent opportunity; the Juncker plan for investment in the EU could include financing OBOR initiatives that benefit the EU, thereby embedding EU resource and interest in China’s flagship strategy project.

The problems and self- and other- recognition in the EU-China relationship is not helped by the lack of public connection. If there was little contact between elites from the 1950s-70s (Redmond and Lan, 1986), since then there has been relatively little public or social contact. Public opinion in China towards the EU and European citizens is relatively positive but marked by a sense of distance (van der Noll and Dekker, 2016); Europe is not a presence in the Chinese everyday imaginary.

Analysis 3: System narratives

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While the academic middle ground positions China as seeking to reform the international system -- why would it transform or overthrow a system within which it has risen so quickly? -- China does pose serious challenges to the system that the EU must respond to and find advantage in.

First, value pluralism. China has shown willingness to disobey institutions of the current order, for instance rejecting The Hague’s decision endorsing the Philippines’ claims to South China Sea land rights over China’s claims and saying that, by rejecting it, China is *upholding* international law (Ching, 2016). This implies a willingness to *reshape* international order according to China’s own understanding of law and sovereignty. There are signs the EU is beginning to recognise such value contestation. Take the following extract from the European Commission’s 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP):

> The purpose of the current review of the ENP is to propose how the EU and its neighbours can build more effective partnerships in the neighbourhood. In doing so, the EU will pursue its interests which include *the promotion of universal values*. The EU’s own stability is built on democracy, human rights and the rule of law and economic openness and the new ENP will take *stabilisation as its main political priority* … recognising that *not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards* … (European Commission, 2015: 2, italics added)

This signalled a pragmatic turn; still a nod to universal values but a recognition that these values are not shared and, as crises intensify in and around Europe’s borders, stability is the priority value to realise. The document speaks of finding common interests but differentiated partnerships. Its turn away from the prioritisation of democratisation reflects what Biscop a year later described as ‘Realpolitik with European Characteristics’ (2016: 1). Writing about the ENP, Börzel claims, ‘By promoting effective government rather than democratic governance, the EU helped stabilize non-democratic and corrupt regimes in its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood rather than transforming them’ (Börzel, 2015: 526). The European Commission’s own ENP review seems affirm this as a strategy. It is telling that rather than speak of humanity as a universal whole, EU High Representative Mogherini spoke in Beijing recently of ‘an alliance of civilisations’ (Mogherini, 2016: no page).
Second, institutional pluralism. China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative is the kind of hybrid institutional configuration that European policymakers should find conceptually and normatively compelling as well as practically interesting. There is potential convergence between the EU’s Investment Plan for Europe or “Juncker plan” and China’s OBOR. The EU and China are already cooperating on a Connectivity Platform to build transport infrastructure through OBOR as a platform for commercial network building. The commitment of half of EU member states to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) through which China is funding OBOR projects further institutionalises this cooperation, as recognised in the June 2015 EU-China Summit joint statement (European Council, 2015). Given that many problems contributing to its crises -- energy supply uncertainty, migration flows -- lie on the edge and beyond Europe’s neighbourhood, there is a logic to extending Neighbourhood policy and/or finding new strategies to work with, and thereby shape from within, China’s OBOR initiative (Simon, 2015). Evaluating this area in the 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), Biscop writes, ‘The intention to ensure a coherent response to China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative not just through the EU-China Connectivity Platform (to create the link with the EU’s own investment plans) but through ASEM [Asia-Europe Meeting] and the EU-ASEAN partnership as well could signal the start of a sophisticated diplomatic initiative’ (Biscop, 2016: 4). Verlare and van der Putten (2015: 3) put it straightforwardly:

Here lies the main geopolitical opportunity for the EU with OBOR: by aligning its existing approach to Central Asia with the Silk Road, the EU could utilize the security dimension of the infrastructure network that Xi Jinping himself has imbued it with. The EU could become not just part of, but a contributor to a Eurasian security network in the making.

We would go further: OBOR is not just a geopolitical, security or commercial programme. It signals the kind of hybrid governance project through which stability and eventually prosperity can be built. Any joint or concerted action affords the possibility of mutual learning and legal/technical spillover, offering Europe new mechanisms to advance its values and standards. And while the EU’s Connectivity Platform emphasises transport and technological infrastructures, these can provide the
conditions for (an historical renewal of) social and cultural connectivity across that region that might, over many decades, gradually bring Europe and China into greater mutual presence and understanding.

The turn away from value universalism and towards the kind of pragmatic, hybrid programme of activities and relationships that would constitute genuine engagement with OBOR might signal what we label a “building block narrative” (cf. Chen, 2016). Of course, the EU has always operated through a mixture of bi- and multilateral agreements, and supranational and intergovernmental policymaking. However, a narrative based on mutual accommodation of diverse values and concerted action in ‘middle spaces’ (Simon, 2015) in which both have direct interests could be acceptable to both parties. This would entail Europe moving away from prioritising its normative power identity and China accepting some European say in the decision-making processes in any joint or concerted initiatives. It would also entail European leaders beginning to enter such arrangements as equals, not as senior partners. The European Commission High Representative wrote in June 2016 of the ‘opportunity to marry our experience with China’s resources’ (European Commission, 2016: 13). Here we see how identity characterisation -- wise old Europe, rich new China -- could become an impediment to cooperative system reshaping.

**Conclusion**

The rise of China is seeing a gradual, but increasingly apparent shift in dynamics of global politics. From the perspective of the US/European core, seeking to shape the institutions of international order, we are moving to a stronger co-constitution of a new emerging order involving more powerful actors demanding a voice. Whilst this could be viewed as a challenge to the EU’s status and influence, the emerging international system presents the potential opportunity for reinforcing interdependence and sustainable relations with China. The EU’s desire to be part of a G-3 –and not excluded from a bilateral US-China G2 - is dependent on overcoming the internal and external challenges it faces and forging a new strategic narrative to influence this emerging picture.

As outlined in our strategic narrative model above, the EU’s strategic narrative must fuse its Brussels elites’ concern for greater international influence, with mutually
reinforcing identity, system and issue narratives able to overcome internal contradictions with external realities of a more active Chinese shaper of global order. This new building block narrative is central overcoming the instability of recent years and providing a narrative framework to define the terrain for policy engagement with China and other leading states.

References:


Richard Youngs, ed. *Global Europe: Report 2 – New Terms of Engagement*, Foreign Policy Centre, London, 2005. See also Tanja Boerzel and Thomas Risse’s research project available at [http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/en/v/transformeurope/](http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/en/v/transformeurope/) Van Ham argues persuasively that the EU’s preference for projecting social power is grounded in two reasons. First the prioritising of social power is a reflection of the EU’s political identity. Second, the EU perceives itself to have a comparative advantage in social power over more materially powerful actors (van Ham 2010, 34-35).