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ENHANCING EU-CHINA COOPERATION IN EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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Eight years after the launch of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and the European Union (EU), assessing the current status of bilateral relations between the two parties continues to demand both nuanced and high-level critical analysis. On the one hand, bilateral cooperation has become increasingly complex. It covers a broadening range of issues in the frameworks of both sectoral and regular high-level political dialogues. On the other hand, the EU and China have failed to develop a clear shared strategy in regard to the main bilateral and global challenges that confront them, for instance, climate change and the reforms of the financial system. Lack of empathy, competitive agendas, and the absence of crisis-proof mechanisms have often destabilized the trust necessary within the partnership. The unfortunate story of the last French EU presidency – with its verbal escalation before the Olympics Games and the cancellation of the 11th China-EU summit in the wake of the financial crisis – illustrates well the vulnerability of the partnership.

It is submitted that an increase in academic and education cooperation is necessary in order to enhance mutual understanding, to find new strategic areas of cooperation and to positively contribute to the expected and necessary developments of the comprehensive strategic partnership. A new dynamic must therefore take place within the framework of the sectoral dialogues on 'Education and Culture' and on 'Science and Technology'. Bilateral cooperation in these two fields has already led to

the launch of stimulating and relevant initiatives. On the one hand, the Erasmus Mundus Programme and its Chinese windows, the High Level Forum on Culture that was first organized in October 2010, as well as the Europe-China Year of Youth in 2011, are three good examples of successful dialogues on education and culture. On the other hand, the EU-China Science and Technology Agreement (signed in 1998 and renewed in 2004 and 2009) offers a good example of bilateral cooperation under the Science and Technology dialogue. There is nevertheless space for improvement and innovation, requiring additional funding.

Starting from the existing framework, collaboration on education, culture and research should be strongly aimed at enhancing mutual understanding and developing shared paradigms on the major issues fundamental to China-EU relations. These include Security, the Rule of Law, International Responsibility and Climate Change among others. Education and research have a major role to play here because they can contribute to the definition of the content and scope of the main bilateral debates.

In this respect, the sectoral dialogues face two main challenges. Firstly, theoretical and conceptual empathy is very often lacking. Conceptual and theoretical differences are inherent to every inter-state relation or academic debate, but these are particularly substantial in China-EU relations. The Rule of Law example is very instructive in this regard. This concept finds its genesis in Europe but China has now developed its own particular meaning of it. The Rule of Law 'with Chinese characteristics' has become closely related to the Chinese political system and reforms. Understanding the contextual meaning of the Rule of Law is therefore essential in order to ground cooperation on this major challenge. Academic communities should develop an interest in and positive attitude towards the partner's ideas and interpretations, while avoiding the risk of epistemological and moral relativism in the various dialogues they conduct. This is a primary prerequisite for successfully developing 'shared values' or simply defining 'converging interests'. With this in mind, the sectoral dialogues should encourage education and research initiatives that enhance the knowledge of the historical, social and political underpinnings of the partners' conceptual environment. In this regard the study of Chinese history in European academic curricula, as well as increased attention in the nature of the European integration process in Chinese study curricula are examples of potentially beneficial initiatives.

Secondly, the differences between the academic agendas and the lack of knowledge of the partners' internal debates constitute another major challenge. On the one hand, the Chinese side often relies primarily on American literature and perspectives

that frequently differ from European analyses. On the other hand, mainly because of the language barrier, European academics are often unaware of the main debates that divide and mobilise Chinese universities and Chinese think tanks. Both sides need to be fully aware of the academic reflections conducted by the other partner. In fact, filling the gap between the European and Chinese academic debates and agendas is an efficient means to further a genuine common strategy on the main shared global challenges. The approach must therefore be twofold. First, cooperation should invest increasingly in comparative research in order to gain a better understanding of the main differences and commonalities, divergences and convergences between Chinese and European viewpoints. Second, it should provide financial and practical incentives to researchers and students to study the partner's language as well as to translate their main publications. In this respect, it is particularly essential to encourage the study of Chinese language in order to develop a more balanced bilateral relation.

There is still a very long way to go before a real comprehensive strategic partnership is achieved. The development of a common understanding and of shared paradigms through education and cooperation is nevertheless likely to positively contribute to a more comprehensive, strategic and, I would add, sustainable partnership between China and the EU. In order to reach this goal, the sectoral dialogues will certainly have to tackle fundamental shortcomings in empathy and knowledge.



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