



The EU's discourse coherence and its relationship with China: a new normative actor?

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Received: 30 August 2023 / Accepted: 18 February 2024
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Abstract

This article examines the role of the European Union (EU) as a global actor and its relationship with China. Within the context of the current European discourse, the study delves into the EU's role as a normative actor and the increasing challenges it faces in its interactions with China. Consequently, the article describes how, in specific facets of this relationship, the EU, through its inconsistencies in discourse, engenders a potential perception of ambivalence and vulnerability on the international stage. Therefore, the argument put forth posits that the EU's aspiration to propagate liberal norms and principles has rendered the formulation of an appropriate foreign policy towards China difficult, as manifested by the inconsistent rhetoric employed by its highest-ranking representatives. This discord reflects the intricate task of balancing the interests of the diverse member states, thereby unveiling a fragmented EU grappling with the China predicament while attempting to sustain its normative endeavors. By employing a concept-theoretical approach, the analysis results contribute to a novel comprehension of how the EU adapts its position as a global actor in response to the adversarial nature of China, emphasizing points of discursive incongruities and interest for future research in EU-China partnerships.

Keywords European Union · China · Relations · Normative · Discourse coherence

Introduction

In the present turbulent and uncertain era, the European Union (EU) has exhibited a cohesive unity in the promotion and defense of a set of norms and values that govern its policies and actions. These norms and values encompass principles such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, social justice, and sustainable

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development. Consequently, the EU endeavors to uphold these values within its own borders and in its diplomatic relations, guided by a foreign policy focused on human rights and democratic governance.

Nonetheless, the EU's stance towards China displays distinctive characteristics. The EU's foreign policy towards China can be comprehended as a multifaceted engagement entailing various categories of action, each pursuing its own set of objectives, interests, and challenges. In this domain, particularly regarding economic, trade, and energy transition dependency requirements, the EU and its member states have adopted divergent positions in terms of economic policies, diplomatic relations, regional and international security concerns, as well as intercultural initiatives.

Therefore, by employing a concept-theoretical approach the objective of this article is to analyze the EU's role as a global actor and its position and relationship with China, considering the influence of European discourse and its characteristics as a normative actor. In light of this, it becomes pertinent to examine specific aspects of the EU's relationship with China, including its actions, discourse, and the potential perception of indecision and vulnerability on the international stage, despite its economic and political influence.

To this end, a contextualization of the EU's role as a global normative actor and how it has adapted to the evolving global context will be provided, followed by an analysis of its relationship with China. Finally, a brief reflection on the challenges and inconsistencies within the discourse is presented, concluding with some considerations. Rather than presenting a definitive solution to the relationship dilemmas between the two actors, this study aims to highlight points of interest and discourse inconsistencies for future analysis in EU-China partnerships, while acknowledging the fundamental role played by the European Union as a global actor.

The construction of the concept: European Union as a normative actor

The notion of the “European Union (EU) as a normative actor” embodies the concept that the EU perceives itself not solely as a formidable economic and political entity, but also as a global actor tasked with the responsibility of advancing and safeguarding a set of universal norms and values. As asserted by Manners (2009), normative power is defined as the capacity of a state or other entity to influence the norms and values that underpin international relations, thus arguing that the EU exemplifies normative power by its policies and practices, which exert a substantial influence on the norms and values shaping global politics. This influence encompasses distinct dimensions of ‘actorness’ and ‘legitimacy’ within the framework of international relations theory. Actorness refers to the EU's capability to engage in international affairs, encompassing its entitlement, capacity, and opportunity to act. On the other hand, legitimacy denotes the voluntary recognition of the EU's authority by both member and non-member states (Čmalková and Rolenc 2012). Within this context, focusing specifically on its promotion of democracy, human rights, and social justice, Manners (2009) contends that the normative

power of the EU emanates from its identity, endowing it with credibility and legitimacy in its pursuit of guiding principles.

Hence, the European Union (EU) safeguards its values by positioning itself within a complex network, intertwining the concept of power with ongoing cognitive and communication processes. In this dynamic framework, the articulation and dissemination of normative principles hinge significantly on cohesive and persuasive communication, where actors wield power by strategically selecting suitable networks. Discourse emerges as a mechanism for power formation, exerting influence over evolving relationships through dynamic processes (Castells 2009, p.19). This discursive power is operative through strategic language use, aiming to legitimize specific perspectives, marginalize others, and establish social norms, thereby functioning as instruments of social control (Foucault 1972; Zhao 2016). This underscores the imperative for coherence between action and speech to attain legitimacy within the intricate interplay of power dynamics.

Despite its commendable attainment of a high level of performance facilitated by its institutions and policies, the EU faces challenges in attaining legitimacy, primarily attributed to the intricate nature of its decision-making procedures and the existence of a democratic deficit (Čmakalová and Rolenc 2012). Often, these procedures amplify internal differences, resulting in an external incoherent discourse which may erode the legitimacy of normative frameworks, impeding their ability to shape and influence behavior at the domestic and international levels. As such, the EU has implemented a range of strategies aimed at fortifying its legitimacy, encompassing endeavors such as enhanced transparency, accountability, and engagement of civil society, thus emphasizing the pivotal role of unified discourse in sustaining normative power and highlighting the potential repercussions of linguistic ambiguity on the effectiveness of normative endeavors in the global arena. However, it is essential for the EU's legitimacy to hinge upon its aptitude to strike a balance effectively between its supranational and intergovernmental dimensions (Čmakalová and Rolenc 2012).

According to Palm (2021), the construction and equilibrium of the EU initiatives have consequential implications for the interplay between its normative power and the pursuit of strategic autonomy, contending that the EU's normative power serves as a significant source of its strategic capability, whilst escalating geopolitical competition and challenges. In a similar vein, Manners (2009) emphasizes the ongoing necessity for the EU to engage in multilateral collaborations and cultivate alliances founded upon shared values and interests with other international actors.

The European Union's pursuit of normative action

Through its interactions with prominent actors in the international system, such as NATO and the UN, the EU assumes the characterization of an "integrating" entity that leverages its economic and normative influence to advance the principles of multilateralism, thereby constituting a pivotal aspect of its external identity (Koops 2011). An illustration of the EU's normative leadership is explained by Venturi (2016) in its relations with Sub-Saharan African nations, particularly pertaining to

the realms of democracy, human rights, and development. The EU has proactively pursued a heightened level of involvement and significance in the region through a series of agreements and strategic partnerships, such as the Cotonou Agreement, signed in 2000 and revised in 2010, serving as a framework for EU cooperation with African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries. Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) have been established between the EU and African nations and regional groups, aiming to promote economic development and regional integration by reducing trade barriers (European Council 2023a). Additionally, the EU has instituted the EU-Africa Infrastructure Trust Fund (2007), fostering sustainable economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa (European Investment Bank 2015). The Africa-EU Joint Strategy, adopted in 2007 and updated in 2014, serves as a comprehensive framework guiding cooperation in various domains, including peace, security, democracy, human rights, trade, regional integration, and climate change (European Council 2023b). Noteworthy is the establishment of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa in 2015, addressing causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, supporting diverse activities for stability and security in the region (European Commission 2022a). These efforts represent only a selection of the comprehensive range of engagements pursued by the EU in its pursuit of enhanced cooperation and collaboration with African countries, whilst enhancing the EU's significance. Yet, Venturi (2016) highlights challenges and limitations in the EU's normative leadership in sub-Saharan Africa, emphasizing factors compromising its credibility and effectiveness, particularly with countries holding distinct interests and values. These challenges include internal EU divisions, the complex nature of sub-Saharan African societies, and competition from influential actors, particularly China.

Geographical relevance and material capabilities influence the actions of normative powers, as exemplified by the roles of the EU and the United States of America (USA) in shaping East Asia's regional security dynamics (Klose 2017). The EU's normative power is evident in its emphasis on promoting democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law. However, its impact is constrained by limited military capabilities and minimal involvement in regional security institutions. In contrast, the USA employs a conventional approach, prioritizing military power and strategic alliances, potentially creating tensions with regional actors, especially the emerging power, China, thus revealing distinct geopolitical interests and priorities between both actors (Klose 2017; Wacker et al. 2017).

Illustrative of the European approach are human rights dialogues with East Asian nations, including China, Japan, and South Korea. The EU has established trade agreements in the region that uphold the rule of law, labor, and environmental standards. Similarly, collaborative initiatives with countries like China and South Korea aim to advance the Paris Agreement goals and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. The EU has also contributed to peace and security through support for the "Six-Party Talks" aimed at denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Notably, the EU-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has been acclaimed as a model for prospective EU trade agreements with East Asian countries (European Commission 2022b). Additionally, the successful achievement of these agreements underscore the indispensable role of coherent discourse in sustaining normative

power, as the articulation and propagation of the EU's principles inherently hinges upon lucid and compelling communication.

Nonetheless, akin to challenges faced in sub-Saharan Africa, the EU encounters obstacles in Asia. While expressing concerns about North Korea's humanitarian situation, certain EU measures, such as financial sanctions (European Council 2022), may be perceived as exacerbating existing humanitarian crises. Acknowledging the EU's historical legacy and specific interests in its diplomatic relations within these regions is crucial. Such factors may lead to non-alignment and engender distrust concerning priorities or "universal values". Consequently, the EU's championed values may conflict with regional interests, diminishing its legitimacy and impacting its ethical stance. Manners (2008) explores this normative ethics, rooted in values distinct from traditional nation-state associations. The EU's adherence to cosmopolitanism, emphasizing global interconnectedness and collective accountability, is manifested in policies supporting international institutions, prioritizing human rights and environmental conservation, and fostering democracy and peace (Manners 2008).

By its actions, the EU is commonly labeled as a normative actor in academic debate, whilst acknowledging the extensive issues that the characterization raises. Despite divergent perspectives within academia, prevailing discourse often positions the EU as a normative actor due to its dedication to fostering a values-based international order and evident commitment to multilateralism with international organizations. The EU champions the ideals of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, fostering a normative framework that extends beyond its borders, linking its membership to adherence to these values, and by employing various policy instruments, such as conditionality and association agreements, to encourage neighboring countries to embrace these values (Michalski and Nilsson 2019). As such, the connection between action and discourse gains a heightened relevance. However, as supranational organization composed by diverse member states, the dynamic interplay between the EU's normative power and its pragmatic diplomatic considerations introduces a nuanced terrain marked by interaction and potential conflict. The geopolitical realities and member state interests drives much of the foreign policy agenda as the discrepancy between member-states economies yields tensions that impact the coherence of member states' positions in different processes. Thus, discourse incoherence in the pursuit of normative power can undermine the perceived authenticity of the EU's normative stance and introduce challenges in maintaining a unified front among member states.

The EU's special relationship with China

Since the establishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1975, China has emerged as a substantial partner for the EU over the years, with its bilateral relationship undergoing substantial evolution and growth, encompassing diverse domains including trade, investment, political discourse, and cultural exchanges. The partnership between China and the EU gained significant momentum during the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period that witnessed mutual recognition of the potential

for economic collaboration and mutual opportunities due to China's rapid economic expansion and its emergence as a global economic powerhouse, thus leading to active engagement in trade and investment activities.

The EU acknowledged China's potential as a strategic ally in key areas such as climate change, global governance, and regional security. Therefore, in the pursuit of sustainable development, China has emerged as a highly significant partner, and both parties are committed to collaborating and attaining shared objectives. According to data from Eurostat (2021), China stands as one of the European Union's key trading partners, accounting for 15.9% of the EU's total trade in goods. In 2022, China ranked as the third largest partner for EU merchandise exports (9.0%) and the primary partner for EU merchandise imports (20.8%) (Eurostat 2023). Consequently, it is noteworthy that EU trade with China has experienced substantial growth over the past two decades, with China evolving into an increasingly crucial market for European exporters, while the EU maintains a prominent position as a destination for Chinese exports.

In 2019, the EU's strategic agenda for 2019–2024 identified several priorities to guide future actions and policies (European Council 2019a), encompassing various areas such as: the COVID-19 recovery process (e.g., vaccination efforts, economic recovery measures, support to health systems); climate action and the commitment to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 (e.g., European Ecological Pact, which defines policies to make the EU economy more sustainable (European Commission 2021); digital transformation measures that promote innovation and include the development of new technologies and the creation of a digital single market; promotion of social and economic inclusion (e.g., European Pillar of Social Rights); and strengthening of security and defense capabilities, including strengthening the European Defence Fund and promoting greater cooperation between member states. Although the relationship between the EU and China is characterized by its complexity, there are numerous areas of convergence between the EU's strategic agenda for 2019–2024 and the global development objectives set by the Chinese government (Yi 2021). This convergence has led to the signing of multiple multilateral agreements, indicating a growing and strengthened cooperation between the two entities. Notably, in the realm of climate action, a significant agreement between China and the EU is the 2015 Paris Agreement, where both parties played crucial roles in the negotiations and contributed to its adoption (UNFCCC 2015). Furthermore, in 2018, China and the EU entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Circular Economy, encompassing collaboration in areas such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, and emissions reduction (European Commission 2018).

In addition to these agreements, the EU and China have actively participated in various collaborative initiatives and projects such as the EU-China Environmental Governance Programme, designed to enhance environmental governance in China through the provision of technical assistance and capacity building (IASQ 2014).

One of the key dimensions of this relationship pertains to the economic cooperation between the EU and China. In this context, the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) of 2020 holds significant relevance. The CAI represents a pivotal economic accord between aimed at enhancing market access, safeguarding

investments, and promoting sustainable development. Spanning a period of seven years of negotiations and 35 meetings, it was concluded in principle in December 2020. This initiative was heavily supported by Germany and France, seeking to address market barriers for EU businesses in China, provide investment protection mechanisms, and incorporate commitments to sustainable practices while replacing individual bilateral investment treaties (BITs) held by many EU member states with China. Despite significant growth in bilateral trade, China accounted for only 2.1% of overseas EU foreign direct investment (FDI) at the start of CAI negotiations and was seen as a possible economic safeguard for the German and French automotive and aviation industries (McElwee 2023). For the EU, the agreement offers improved economic opportunities, enhanced investment protection, and a means to rebalance economic relations with China. Meanwhile, China anticipates increased foreign investment, strengthened trade ties, and global recognition of its economic prominence. The agreement's significance extends beyond economic aspects, intertwining with broader geopolitical dynamics, encompassing areas such as technology transfer, state-owned enterprises flows, and sustainable development (European Commission 2020b).

The EU and China had previously laid the groundwork for economic cooperation through the adoption of the 2013 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation and the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue (HED) initiated in 2008. These initiatives focused on trade, investment, innovation, and climate change, aimed to establish balanced and mutually beneficial economic relations (European Union External Action 2013), as well as addressing critical economic and trade topics such as market access, intellectual property, and regulatory cooperation, thus emphasizing the shared responsibility of the EU and China in maintaining a stable global economy (European Commission 2022c).

Similarly, the “One Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) spearheaded by China has attracted considerable global attention. This China-led endeavor entails an extensive international infrastructure development project that seeks to establish connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa. Notably, several EU nations, including Greece, Italy, and Portugal, have entered into Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with China to foster collaboration on BRI initiatives (European Chamber 2020). Furthermore, in the domain of defense and security, China has emerged as a significant partner for the EU. This is evident through their engagement in the High-Level Strategic Dialogue and their joint commitment to the EU-China Joint Declaration on Non-Proliferation and Arms Control, reaffirmed in 2019 by the European Council (European Council 2019b). Additionally, the two entities have established various agreements encompassing strategic confidence and cooperation in security and defense. The dialogues have encompassed diverse topics such as counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, regional security, cybersecurity, crisis management, as well as maritime security and governance (European Union External Action 2020).

Collectively, these agreements and arrangements substantiate the ongoing involvement of the EU in engaging with China across various domains, encompassing economic and trade cooperation, environmental preservation, and cultural interchange. Although certain initiatives have faced scrutiny for perceived

inconsistencies and the omission of human rights concerns, they nonetheless signify significant strides towards augmented cooperation between the EU and China.

New difficulties and tensions in the EU-China relationship

In the wake of the reshaped geopolitical landscape following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU-China relationship has undergone a complex and occasionally contentious transformation, diverging significantly from a previous era characterized by extensive collaboration (Michalski and Nilsson 2019). This shift is attributed to various factors, notably the EU's pursuit of a more equitable economic environment and China's more assertive foreign policy in reshaping the established international order, compounded by the geopolitical rivalry with the United States.

China's contestation of the prevailing global actors and their normative values through an aggressive rhetoric in foreign diplomacy prompts the EU to consider closer ties with the United States, thus rebalancing the EU-China relationship. This realignment is particularly evident in technological competition, where the EU, leveraging its innovation capacity, regulatory framework, and collaboration with the United States, seeks to compete with China (Oertel et al. 2020; Ghiretti 2021).

After 2019 and as a result of the Chinese global positioning, the EU started to display a more assertive stance on normative issues compared to the previous period, characterizing China as a competitor, partner, and systemic rival, being influenced by both internal factors, such as differing member nation interests and the growing authority of the European Parliament, as well as external factors such as the impact of the United States on trans-Atlantic relations and changes in power dynamics between China and the EU. These elements accentuate the divergence in values, particularly regarding human rights and cybersecurity, impacting the potential for future cooperation between the two influential powers (Oertel et al. 2020; Anthony et al. 2021; Ghiretti 2021).

The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) negotiations marked a significant shift in EU-China relations as, despite its potential benefits, encountered criticism related to human rights, transparency, and geopolitical concerns. In late 2020, negotiations rapidly progressed after Chinese President Xi Jinping intervened, offering market-access concessions. This acceleration aimed to finalize the deal before the inauguration of a new U.S. administration perceived as more open to collaboration on China-related issues, and was significantly supported by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, securing an in-principle agreement jointly announced by Merkel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, and Chinese President Xi Jinping in December. Subsequently, the CAI was presented for ratification in the European Parliament (McElwee 2023). In October 2020, the EU's Foreign Investment Screening Mechanism became fully operational, facilitating coordination on foreign investment among Member States. By November 2021, 17 Member States had adopted national FDI screening mechanisms. However, this instrument, like the distortive subsidies regulation, covers only mergers and acquisitions, excluding the

regulation of potentially risky Chinese non-equity investments in Europe (European Parliament 2023b).

Despite significant challenges and divergent positions during the negotiations, several concessions facilitated the successful conclusion of the process. However, amidst these developments and the agreement's prominent visibility, China came under increased media scrutiny for human rights violations, particularly concerning the mass detention of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. As a result of escalating evidence of forced labor in this region by the Chinese government (ICIJ 2019), the EU imposed sanctions on China in March 2021, coordinated with the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada, thus signaling international consensus on addressing Xinjiang's human rights abuses (European Parliament 2021).

In March 2021, Beijing imposed sanctions on ten individuals and four entities within the EU as a retaliatory measure. These sanctions were instituted amidst allegations of external interference in China's domestic affairs and the implied dissemination of disinformation by the EU (European Parliament 2021). This reciprocal action marked a turning point in European perceptions of China (Biscop 2021), leading to increased strategic mistrust in Brussels and various EU capitals. According to Josep Borrell, the EU's representative for foreign and security policy, these Chinese retaliatory sanctions created a new atmosphere in EU-China relations (McElwee 2023). This development significantly influenced the trajectory of the CAI and in Europe's approach to China, with the European Parliament voting in May 2021 to suspend ratification as long as China's sanctions remained in effect. Therefore, the lack of ratification by the European Parliament and criticism for prioritizing short-term economic interests over human rights considerations characterizes a more pragmatic yet challenging stance by the EU (Eran 2021).

China considered the EU's sanctions as external pressure and intrusion on national sovereignty yet demonstrated continued willingness to enhance bilateral relations by ratifying two International Labour Organization (ILO) Fundamental Conventions on forced labor (ILO 2022). Nonetheless, the Chinese reaction to criticism on similar sensitive issues such as the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and the Hong Kong national security law further contributed for strained diplomatic relations, justifying the changing dynamics of Europe's association with China from engagement to heightened skepticism (Oertel 2020; Biscop 2021; European Council 2021). Hai (2017) had substantiated this notion by asserting that the EU has exhibited hesitancy stemming from apprehensions surrounding China's human rights track record and its perceived lack of transparency, whilst conversely, China has maintained a skeptical stance toward the EU's recent development approach, interpreting it as an endeavor to impose Western values upon developing nations.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) amplifies these concerns, potentially undermining the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy. Chinese investments in EU markets, contrasted with restricted access for European companies in China, raise the specter of trade imbalances through "dumping" of Chinese products to flood the EU market, and security risk through investments in critical infrastructures which may grant access to sensitive information (Geeraerts 2019; Anthony et al. 2021).

Consequently, the acquisitions of a section of the Piraeus port in Greece as part of the European phase of the BRI, or the investment in the Tollerort container terminal in Germany by the state-owned enterprise China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company (COSCO) have faced severe criticism, showcasing concerns about environmental impacts, labor conditions, unfair economic leverage and a sense of alienation of local communities (Eran 2021; Calatayud 2023; Sullivan 2023).

The EU responds to the BRI with initiatives like the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, the European Neighborhood Policy, and the Global Gateway initiative. These aim to enhance connectivity, stimulate investment, and create new markets, aligning with the EU's trade and investment strategy. Emphasis on economic and technological capacities and forging partnerships with Asian nations underscores the EU's prioritization of strategic autonomy over the EU-China partnership, leading to heightened competition (Wacker et al. 2017; European Union External Action 2019, 2021; European Commission 2023a, b).

This paradigm shift towards competition has implications beyond the EU-China relationship, fostering increased skepticism toward cooperative efforts and politicizing discussions on engaging with China, especially in European countries where China's image is unfavorable. Additionally, the rise of populism in the EU introduces novel complexities, as populist movements prioritize domestic concerns, economic nationalism, and challenge established norms of international cooperation. This internal dynamic adds an extra layer of difficulty to formulating a cohesive EU position on China-related matters (Medeiros 2021; Rühlig et al. 2021). Despite differences, the EU and China share a significant interest in addressing climate change, offering areas of potential cooperation in technology transfer, investment in renewable energy, and carbon pricing mechanisms. To navigate these complexities, the EU needs a cohesive long-term policy toward China, balancing cooperation and competition, avoiding a confrontational stance, and acknowledging diverse member state interests and perspectives. This strategic and comprehensive approach should encompass considerations of security and geopolitics (Stanzel 2017; Wacker et al. 2017; Geeraerts 2019; Oertel 2020; Ghiretti 2021).

EU addressing China: a cohesive response or an incoherent discourse?

There have been notable shifts in the stances of both the EU and China regarding the aforementioned agreements and conventions, primarily driven by security implications and increasing instability. The shift towards a more pragmatic approach in the European Union's (EU) foreign policy is influenced by a confluence of factors that have evolved over time, as a response to the complex and dynamic nature of contemporary global affairs. It reflects the EU's comprehensive recognition of the need to balance normative aspirations with the practical realities of international relations in order to safeguard its interests, security, and influence on the global stage. Specifically, the EU has displayed growing caution regarding the security ramifications associated with Chinese investments and acquisitions in critical infrastructure and key industries, including the high-tech sector.

As a response, the EU has fortified its foreign investment control mechanism (European Commission 2022d) and enacted new regulations to restrict the acquisition of European companies by non-EU entities (European Parliament News 2022). These measures could be perceived as a manifestation of economic protectionism or an ideological inclination towards specific international actors. Conversely, China has also adapted its position considering the evolving global economic and political landscape, placing greater emphasis on strengthening ties with other regions, such as Southeast Asia and Africa.

Yet, different bilateral arrangements between EU members and China, as well as the different positions on the CAI have demonstrated that the EU does not present itself as fully united, leading to accusations of a deficit of strategic orientation. China strategically employs bilateral arrangements to reshape its networks within distinct country groups, thereby exerting influence over EU policies (Rühlig et al. 2021). In countries with low public interest in China, such as Austria, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, and Slovakia, China adopts a passive stance in projecting soft power. Conversely, in Italy and Greece, where China faces an image crisis, efforts are directed at image rehabilitation. Meanwhile, in Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, and the UK, perceptions on China are gradually souring, mirroring trends in Czechia, Denmark, France, and Sweden, where Chinese soft power experiences a decline. Therefore, the EU's growing vigilance results from the varying attitudes of member states, which are influenced by factors such as public interest, image perception, and China's geopolitical ambitions (Rühlig et al. 2021).

The rising reluctance to engage with China, observed in central and northern European countries like France, Sweden, Netherlands and Denmark, correlates with a simultaneous upswing in populist trends. Populist movements, present in these nations, prioritize domestic concerns and economic nationalism, challenging established norms of international cooperation (UNDP 2022). Importantly, the stability of these countries' economies plays a pivotal role in shaping their connections with China, contributing to divergent approaches to China and complicating efforts to formulate a cohesive EU stance, particularly in cases where China's image is unfavorable versus countries that value China's economic stimulus (Medeiros 2021; Rühlig et al. 2021). Germany, as the EU's largest economy, has often pursued robust economic ties with China, emphasizing trade and investment, while concurrently facing criticism for allegedly prioritizing economic interests over human rights concerns. In contrast, countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, which are less reliant on Chinese economic cooperation, have been vocal in their advocacy for a more principled stance, prominently highlighting human rights considerations in their approach to China. Central and Eastern European nations maintain distinct positions, enticed by economic opportunities and utilizing their negotiation stances as power-decision instruments. This nuanced diversity complicates the formulation of a unified EU policy toward China, particularly in debates concerning 5G technology, investment screening mechanisms, and responses to geopolitical assertiveness (Eran 2021).

Within this context, the prevalence of bureaucratic decision-making processes and a preoccupation with procedural matters, rather than concrete outcomes, can

engender perceptions of the EU as feeble on the international stage, despite its considerable economic and political power (Bakare and Sherazi 2019). While the EU possesses significant power, it lacks the necessary strategic acumen to wield it effectively, presenting itself as excessively optimistic and complacent about its achievements in international affairs, downplaying both internal and external challenges it confronts (Carta 2014).

This concept underscores the challenges and intricacies associated with reconciling the divergent priorities and perspectives of the 27 member states. It emphasizes the imperative for the EU to enhance its actorness in foreign policy and coherence of discourse, as articulated by representatives of the European institutions (legitimacy), to effectively tackle global challenges and advance its interests and values.

Although the EU and China have maintained a multifaceted and intricate relationship throughout the past decade, it is important to note that criticisms regarding China's ambiguous discourse are overshadowed by a lack of coordinated approach within the European institutions and their representatives. The document "EU-China Strategic Perspectives 2019" characterizes China as both a "systemic rival" and a "cooperation partner", underscoring the significance of establishing relations with China in areas of mutual interest, such as trade, investment, and climate change (European Commission 2019).

In her address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presents a nuanced perspective on EU-China relations, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of these ties. Delivered at the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Center, her speech acknowledges the intricacies of the relationship, highlighting the importance of upholding human rights and the rule of law while underscoring the economic significance of the partnership (European Commission 2023a, b). President von der Leyen commends China's achievements, expressing concerns about expansionist tendencies, raising alarms about human rights violations—particularly regarding the treatment of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang—and advocating for "decoupling". These positions reveal a complexity that contrasts with the outlined goals. Moreover, President von der Leyen recognizes the EU's diverse composition, comprising member states with distinct interests and priorities. She emphasizes the importance of EU unity and a cohesive approach in dealing with China, while acknowledging the divergent approaches and distinct priorities of individual member states (European Commission 2023a, b).

In the European Council's new strategic agenda for 2019–2024, the objectives of sustainable development and the green transition are prominently featured. These goals are closely tied to the overarching objective of fortifying the unity of a more robust and democratic Europe, capable of effectively addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the evolving global landscape (European Council 2019a). The strategic agenda underscores the importance of addressing climate change and implementing measures to promote multilateralism, global governance, and the reinforcement of the EU's foreign and security policy. However, the EU has adopted a highly critical stance regarding China's potential mediation efforts to resolve the military aggression by Russia against Ukraine, displaying reticence in said involvement, despite the favorable reception of such actions by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Prior to an official visit to China in March 2023

to discuss potential bilateral agreements and the situation in Ukraine, Ursula Von der Leyen reiterated the need for Europe to adopt a “tougher” approach towards China, which has exhibited a more assertive posture. During the same speech, the President of the European Commission utilized the CAI as a political tool, implying that any support for Russia could have implications for the ratification of the agreement (Lau 2023a). Within the realm of multilateralism and foreign diplomacy, it is comprehensible that agreements are employed as instruments of influence. However, this approach contradicts the statements made by Charles Michel, President of the European Council, and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, during the summit held with Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang on April 1, 2022, in which the urgent necessity for collaborative efforts to resolve global security conflicts was emphasized (European Commission 2022e).

Regarding global stability, the South China Sea is of paramount importance to the EU, with about 40% of its foreign trade passing through these seaways. The EU actively supports a free and open Indo-Pacific, aligning with its Indo-Pacific strategy adopted in September 2021, which backs the ASEAN-led process for a legally binding code of conduct in the South China Sea. Responding to China’s military activities, the European Parliament in June 2022 called for a strategic response and increased EU maritime security cooperation with ASEAN. Notably, the Netherlands, France, and Germany, with their independent national Indo-Pacific strategies, are the sole EU Member States deploying navy vessels to the South China Sea in recent years (European Parliament 2023b). In an article published on April 23, 2023, Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, proposed the dispatch of EU member countries’ warships to patrol the Taiwan Strait as a deterrent against potential military aggression from Beijing, due to Taiwan’s economic, trade, and technological importance to the EU, advocating for a position of strength to safeguard against potential provocations (Lau 2023b). Borrell’s previous remarks on China have also been controversial.

In response to China’s growing influence in Africa in 2019, the EU emphasized the need for a balanced and reciprocal relationship, acknowledging challenges posed by China’s military expansion and human rights violations (European Commission 2019). However, in 2020, Borrell’s statement on Africa downplayed concerns about China’s military presence, emphasizing Africa as a continent of opportunities (UN 2022). Borrell’s statements reveal contradictions, shifting from emphasizing China’s strategic importance and cooperation to asserting that “China cannot be trusted”. In October 2022, he referred to Europe as a “garden” and the rest of the world as a “jungle”, suggesting Europe’s responsibility as the “global gardener”. These statements were criticized for their racist and xenophobic implications. Despite a timid apology, Borrell maintained his metaphor, raising concerns about the EU’s commitment to normative principles and human rights (European Union External Action 2022; Liboreiro 2022, 2023).

These instances of contradiction highlight the inherent difficulties the EU encounters when attempting to maintain a coherent and unified stance towards China, particularly when confronted with situations that encompass diverse areas of strategic interest such as investment, trade, infrastructure, security, and energy.

Examples of such situations include the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement (CAI) and integration into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While certain EU leaders have adopted firm positions on matters such as human rights and strategic concerns, others have exercised caution or even advocated for closer relations with China, citing the potential for engagement and relationship improvement.

Although the EU has recently confronted a range of challenges, including the economic crisis, the surge of populism and nationalism, the Brexit vote, the COVID-19 pandemic, energy dependency and green transition, and the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, among others, and has exhibited displays of integration and cohesion in immediate response to these situations (e.g., collective efforts in COVID-19 vaccination and joint positions on the Ukrainian invasion), significant obstacles persist. These challenges include member states' resistance to relinquishing more authority to the EU and the difficulties associated with forging long-term consensus among a diverse array of nations, thereby raising concerns about the EU's capacity to sustain itself and evolve (Bakare and Sherazi 2019). This lack of consensus among EU member states hinders the effective coordination of a cohesive strategy towards China and may result in the transmission of conflicting messages to both China and the international community.

Important considerations

By analyzing the EU-China relationship and the European discourse, we can reflect on how context and narratives can enhance tensions or difficulties in strategic and development partnerships in key areas of cooperation between the EU and China, encompassing trade, investment, climate change, and global governance, while emphasizing the primary issues and divergences within each domain (European Policy Centre 2022a). Therefore, this article recognizes the intricacies and potential risks associated with the existing networks of interdependence resulting from an intensified process of globalization, although it does not intend to adopt a critical stance regarding the legitimacy of the strategic choices made by the EU or China in their diplomatic relations. The "EU-China relations at a crossroads" report ultimately concludes that EU-China relations have reached a critical juncture, necessitating a fresh *modus vivendi* based on mutual respect, reciprocity, and a shared dedication to multilateralism. It further presents recommendations on how to achieve this new *modus vivendi*, including the enhancement of EU-China dialogue, the promotion of trade and investment reciprocity, and the reinforcement of cooperation on global matters such as climate change and global governance (European Policy Centre 2022a).

The European Policy Centre (2022b) highlights the particular manner in which Chinese international relations are influenced by an internal narrative of legitimation. Within this narrative, the utilization of discourse, specifically "power discourse", assumes a crucial role in consolidating China's position with its society. When considering the historical context, this approach engenders a distinctive *modus operandi* on the global stage and in its interactions with other actors. It is

imperative to recognize that, within this context, the communication style employed can possess varying degrees of significance within external diplomatic relations. Thus, it must be a considered factor in strategies for enhancing diplomatic relations between the EU and China.

Another reflection point is the importance of language, used by policymakers and diplomats in shaping and communicating foreign policy in different contexts, as they can create different power dynamics that directly impact relations, reveal authority, identities, and underlying motivations (Holzscheiter 2014; Daddow 2015). Per example, the USA president George W. Bush's rhetoric of "axis of evil" demonstrates how improper use of language can create antagonistic tensions, revealing the extents of causal links between discourse and conflict (Liu 2010). Hence, it is crucial to recognize that, while English serves as a widely adopted global language, the modes of interaction and communication associated with it are not universally standardized. Consequently, particular emphasis needs to be placed on understanding how to effectively engage with Asian nations, specifically in the context of China. In this regard, specific wording and concepts may undergo diverse interpretations and warrant careful consideration.

Regarding global cooperation and positioning, when discussing the war in Ukraine in a June 2022 interview, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar stated "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems", while additionally criticizing Europe's silent stance on various issues in Asia (Huhtanen 2023). In February 2023, German Chancellor Scholz acknowledged the insufficiency of shared values alone during the Munich Security Conference, emphasizing the imperative of multilateral cooperation, solidarity, and development. Contrasting this, in March 2023, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, in her speech in New Delhi, reiterated that "Europe's problem has become the world's problem" (Bikhchandani 2023). Both leaders notably supported converging aspects of enhanced multilateralism, yet their distinct discourse approaches created an impression of discord among EU member states and had differing impacts on their respective audiences.

Acknowledging the EU's role as a normative actor, characterized by its adherence to core values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, it is noteworthy that its normative power has encountered challenges from Russia and China, as these nations reject some of the EU's fundamental principles (Michalski and Nilsson 2019). However, it is the EU's internal divisions, lack of coherence in its external policies, and inability to timely adapt to evolving global power dynamics that have primarily contributed to its fragmentation. The EU's discourse incoherence reveals a notable inconsistency in applying norms, particularly in economic relations, thereby challenging the EU's assertion as a normative actor. Despite advocating for a unified stance, the inherent tension between the EU's ethical norms and the material interests of its member states results in a failure to effectively encourage other states to adopt these norms. This dilemma is observable in the EU's engagements with China, where human rights initiatives are frequently leveraged to strengthen trade ties, as evidenced in agreements like the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) and negotiations surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, member states' reluctance to employ

negative conditionality undermines the overall effectiveness of the EU's actorness (European Union External Action 2016).

The defense of human rights faces a growing challenge in EU discourse, as the imperative for energy and decoupling prompts the EU to bolster partnerships with entities that diverge from their normative values, as exemplified in dealings with Saudi Arabia (European Parliament 2023a). Similarly, the transition from the 'urgent decoupling' to 'necessary de-risking', although comprehensible and multifaceted in nature, demonstrate a turbulent and swift pragmatic approach that prompts the rise of similar populist arguments in Europe. The clash between economic interests and norms not only constrains the EU's impact on the behavior of other actors, but also diminishes its international reputation as a values-based actor. Consequently, the presented discourse incoherences underscore the EU's struggle to align rhetoric with actions, leading to resistance against its values, particularly in regions targeted by its policies (European Union External Action 2016). This underscores the significance of the interactive dimensions of roles, emphasizing the actor's ability to perceive the expectations and demands from other entities. Thus, even when the actor's role conception is rooted in a consensus among constituent members, yet lacks a cohesive foreign policy identity and speech, it may encounter challenges in comprehending the competing role expectations emanating from antagonistic partners. The EU's struggle highlights the intricacies involved in adapting foreign policy when role conceptions are entrenched and divergent, particularly in the face of China's rising position in international order (Michalski and Nilsson 2019).

Conclusion

In recent years, the EU has encountered a multifaceted challenge in the realm of geopolitics, manifested in the form of geopolitical shifts, external pressures and internal debates, while concurrently endeavoring to uphold its foundational values. Instances such as the impasse in the EU-Mercosur trade deal underscore the challenges in translating normative aspirations into tangible policy outcomes. Similarly, the contemplation of an EU-mandated ban on Huawei-5G in Europe, as a response to member states deviating from EU recommendations, illustrates increasing internal divisions and a diminishing internal normative power. Consequently, the EU has had the need to prioritize areas of cooperation, striving for a delicate balance between its core values and what is realistically achievable. This strategic recalibration has, however, led to a diminution of negotiation effectiveness (European Parliament 2023b), with the measures adopted by Europe in countering Chinese disinformation and malign influencing having drawn criticism for their perceived inadequacy from the United States. Furthermore, recent energy and economic agreements within Europe indicate a potential inclination toward a compromise approach in responding to Chinese actions aimed at forceful unification with Taiwan, notwithstanding the discourse emphasizing the imposition of comprehensive sanctions (European Parliament 2023b). The uncertainties inherent in these evolving responses underscore the

inherently unpredictable nature of EU-China relations, contributing to the EU's diminishing standing as a credible long-term mediator, namely in fostering improvements in USA-China relations or to counter Chinese influence in Africa and Latin America.

The perceptual erosion of European unity has been fueled by rapid shifts in short-to-medium-term commitments. Manners (2013) contends that the efficacy of the EU's normative power hinges on the long-term stability and impact of the international context. Notably, this does not insinuate inherent incorrectness in adopted positions or a loss of the EU's legitimacy as a normative power. Rather, it underscores that processes integral to the European model, such as negotiation and democratic consensus, may diminish in significance when high-ranking EU representatives align external assertive discourse with contradictory statements. This alignment dilutes personal positions with official joint stances, introducing discrepancies and inconsistencies in discourse that have the potential to undermine the EU's capacity to effectively promote its interests and values globally.

In summary, while the EU continues to exert normative power globally, interactions with China unveil a certain degree of inconsistency, portraying it as a "disjointed actor" due to the absence of a unified discourse and strategic approach among representatives. In this context, the speeches and discourse of EU high representatives may wield more influence than EU institutions themselves, with discourse incoherence limiting the EU's ability to proficiently advocate for its mission in the long term. Although the EU can adapt normative engagement in new regions, building connections with international agents, the absence of shared agreement among member states impedes the efficient synchronization of a unified approach toward China. This lack of consensus could convey contradictory signals to China and the global community, projecting the EU as a weakened, fragmented, or fragile actor on the global stage.

Irrespective of the future decisions it makes, the EU holds significant importance in the global landscape and should strive to uphold normative values across all facets of its foreign policy. To do so, the EU must maintain a flexible yet cohesive and coherent disposition, adapting effectively to the evolving geopolitical landscape.

Acknowledgements Not applicable.

Author contributions The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Funding No funds, grants, or other support was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Data availability The author confirms that all data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this article. Furthermore, primary and secondary sources and data supporting the findings of this study were all publicly available at the time of submission.

Declarations

Ethical approval Ethical approval was not required for this study.

Informed consent This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

Conflict of interest The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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