In 1993, famed economist and former dean of MIT’s Sloan School of Management Lester Thurow published a book called *Head to Head: The Coming Economic Battle among Japan, Europe, and America*. 20 years later, it is now more common to talk about the “Strategic Triangle” (to use David Shambaugh’s description) or “Diplomatic Triangle” (from the editors of *US–China–EU Relations: Managing the New World Order*) of US–China–EU relations. With the Chinese economy superseding Japan around 2008–2009, this new triangle now encompasses the world’s largest economies. The outcome of interactions between China, Europe, and the United States will have great impact on the world. While China–US relations have been subjected to voluminous studies, less scholarly attention has been paid to China–Europe relations. As David Shambaugh bemoans in his edited volume, “only one edited
book [in English] has appeared on the subject in recent years.” Not anymore. By my own count, at least eight edited volumes have appeared in English since then, from which four will be reviewed here. In this review essay, I will, therefore, pay extra attention to China–EU relations. This article will be divided into three parts. The first deals with conceptual issues. Particularly, what are the basic conceptual schemes that have emerged from China and Europe about the global order and what role do these powers play in these schemes? The second part will be devoted to analysis of bilateral relationships. The third will deal with the issues and challenges of cooperation between the two powers in addressing issues of global concern.

1 Conceptualizing the International Order

In the early years of the People’s Republic, Europe (here I am referring basically to the Western European countries) had not figured as a prominent actor in China’s foreign relations, nor was China an important consideration for most European countries. Michael Yahuda attributed the character of a “secondary relationship” to the dynamic between China and Europe. Due to geographical distance and the lack of direct European security interests in Asia (and China’s in Europe) in the post-World War II period, China and Europe found themselves more concerned with their immediate neighbors—Russia, Japan, and the US, rather than each other. However, the way the Chinese conceptualize the balance of power in the international order has frequently given Europe a significant role to play. China’s famous “three-world” theory saw Europe being designated as a member in the anti-Soviet united-front. In the post-Cold War years, the Chinese scholarly community and official view generally give preferences to an emerging multipolar order, a global order in which the hegemony of the United States will be much more constrained compared to the immediate post-Cold War years. Although the United States will still be the “first among the equals,” the other “poles” in this order, including China and Europe, will have the interests and abilities to ensure the global order in check to the unilateral impulse of the United States, to the benefit of others. In addition, a strong “European” pole could provide greater policy options for China. As Robert Sutter contended before, “For China, relations with Europe were viewed with an eye to other Chinese interests; Europe was said to represent a kind of “card” that could be played by China in the more important contest of US–Chinese relations.”

Chinese discussion of the European role in the global order hence tends to focus on the “polarity” or the balance of power in the international system. David

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2 Apart from the four books reviewed here, they are: Zhongqi (2012), Wouters et al. (2012), van der Putten and Sulong (2010), Fei and Kerr (2008). In addition, there is also a monograph authored by Casarini (2009).

3 Yahuda (1994).

4 Chou (1986).

5 Shen (2008).

Shambaugh, for example, while noticing that the quality of China’s Europe scholarship has been excellent, notes the ways the Chinese scholars eye Europe are largely “derivative from broader Chinese understandings of, and preferences for, the global system and order” (China–Europe Relations, p. 128). China prefers multipolar order because there is no single hegemony, and China itself can play a greater strategic role. This line of thinking achieved its peak especially during the run-up to the US war on Iraq, which saw China and traditional European powers (Germany, France, Russia) on the same side opposing the coming American (mis)adventure in the Gulf (China–EU, p. 78). Strategic partnership was pronounced and followed up, with major policy papers intending on establishing closer China–EU relationship being issued by Beijing and Brussels subsequently. Europe, to the dismay of and over the strong opposition from the Americans, also seriously contemplated the lifting of the arms embargo to China (China–EU, pp. 189–192; China–Europe Relations, pp. 271–273). During the height of transatlantic fracture, when then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously dismissed the “Old Europe” in favor of the “New Europe,” the China–EU strategic partnership, and China’s wish for a de-hegemonized, multipolar world, seemed to be on the right track.

However, the destiny of a closer China–EU strategic relationship seemed to have (kind of) fizzled out subsequently. Perhaps, there is an underlying difference between China’s version of “multipolarity” and Europe’s preference for “multilateralism” (US–China–EU Relations, p. 2). The two concepts do overlap, but they are distinct concepts. While China is uncomfortable with the US hegemonic power status, most Europeans are basically fine with such power status unless it is wielded unilaterally. The foreign policy reorientation of the Bush presidency in his second term, together with the election of Barack Obama, basically repaired the political damages done to the transatlantic alliance. Notwithstanding Bush’s first term, the Europe-America transatlantic alliance is underpinned by deeply shared political, economic, and cultural values, and will remain robust for years to come. The EU, after all, did not lift the arms embargo; despite the strong disappointment such a decision would cause the Chinese. After the euphoria of the China–EU strategic partnership, “the growing China–Europe ties will remain hampered by substantial and sometimes growing problems and competing interests.” While China continued to cultivate closer China–Europe relations, China would do well to go beyond the “multipolarity” conceptual framework in viewing and constructing China–EU relations, for the “polarity” conception ultimately serves to reflect China’s own interests and understanding of the global order more than how the Europeans see and understand it.

On the other hand, Europeans were not free from their own conceptual lenses that distorted the relationship. According to European scholar Hanns Mauss, the EU is a postmodern/civilian/normative power. As a postmodern power, the EU is redefining the modern nation-state. It is transcending state boundaries and the discourse of sovereignty. As a normative power, its main influence in regional and global affairs

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7 Howorth (2007).
lies in its abilities to attract, to set standards, and to shape international relations by persuasion. As a civilian power, it has successfully replaced violence with rules in managing disputes. In short, the EU could be the first soft-power-based superpower (US–China–EU Relations, pp. 48–74). The EU’s self-image as a civilian power is also projected to the way it conceives of the international order and China’s role in it. In short, China is expected to be much more aligned to European values through the EU’s “constructive engagement” policy, de-emphasizing national sovereignty and emphasizing more on universal values (Europe and China, pp. 37–58). Such misconceptions fed unrealistic expectations. Chinese scholars did actually start paying attention to these civilian and normative aspects of the EU in the early 2000s, and have even expressed willingness to learn from Europe’s process of integration and governance (China–Europe Relations, p. 151). For example, China’s “New Security Concept,” shows that China increasingly views the emerging transnational issues and threats the way the Europeans see them—requiring the pooling of state sovereignty to deal with it (US–China–EU Relations, pp. 26–47). Nevertheless, it was totally unrealistic from Europe to expect that China will no longer steadfastly uphold its own sovereign autonomy in order to join a postmodern kind of international order that Europe prefers. When the expectation faded away, dissatisfaction necessarily grew, affecting bilateral relations.

2 Bilateral Relations

In terms of policy, discussions of bilateral relations between individual European countries and China are generally structured around three issue areas: security, economics, and normative issues such as human rights and democracy (see, for example, the chapters contributed by Wacker, Gow, and Cabestan in US–China–EU Relations), which correspond roughly to the vital interests, “possession goals,” and “milieu goals” discussed in Arnold Wolfers’ classic Discord and Collaboration. These are normal foreign policy goals of any state, but in the context of European foreign policy, seeking to fulfill these three goals in relation to China has been a rather complicated matter, and as a result, Europe sometimes can be very ineffective, inconsistent, and naïve. First of all, each individual member of the EU also has to deal with the “Europeanization of foreign policy,” underscoring the complexities of aligning member-states’ foreign policy with the EU’s, and the importance of the EU as an entity in Europe–China relations. Franco Algieri’s illustration of the EU’s China policy process also underscores the increasing “Europeanization” of China policy of the member states (China–Europe Relations, pp. 65–83). However, individual countries still hope to retain certain autonomous actions. Domestic politics of the individual states, such as public opinion and interest groups, still affect the way leaders of European states manage their foreign affairs. Sometimes, individual European states diverge from each other in their approach to China, opening up the possibility for China to play off one state against another. In short, Europe’s policy toward China is complicated by the “multi-level

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9 Wolfers (1962).
governance” at the EU level and the state level (Europe and China, p. 65), notwithstanding the trend toward “Europeanization of foreign policy.” Furthermore, different bodies of EU handle different aspects of China policy. While the EU Commission is in charge of EU–China bilateral relations, focusing mostly on the economic sphere, the EU Council and the CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy) handle diplomatic and political relations with China, and the EU Parliament is more interested in normative issues in China, such as human rights. With the different focus of the different bodies, sometimes the EU can appear to be moving incoherently or without sync. Such is the challenge of coordinating a single China policy from Europe.

Among the three issue areas, human rights issues tend not to supersede economic and political/security issues. True to their own self-conception as a bloc of liberal democracies, the EU does want to engage with China in human rights issues. But its stand, or the stand of some powerful member-states, may not always be consistent, subject to changing economic and strategic needs. It initiated dialogs with China, and collaborated with Chinese authorities on a number of programs that focus on “capacity-building” such as training programs for Chinese legal and judicial personnel, support for the rights of handicapped persons, grassroots democratic elections, and others. It also pressed strongly on the issues of death penalty, torture, and abuse of children’s and women’s rights. Overall speaking, these areas of human rights cooperation differ from the more controversial and confrontational (in China, at least) push for greater civil and political rights; they are, accordingly, “‘soft,’ subtle, low profile,” (Europe and China, pp. 123–124). Nevertheless, China’s human rights progress may not always fit the expectation from Europe.

That the economic relationship underpins overall EU–China ties should not surprise anyone. Since 1995, policy documents issued by the EU increasingly attested to the importance of China as a trade and investment partner for Europe. However, with increased economic relationship, the rise of frictions is inevitable as well. As noted by Robert Ash, the 2006 EU policy paper on the EU–China relationship marked “something of a watershed in terms of the policy discourse… [which] goes much further than its predecessors in its condemnation of China’s continued IPR [Intellectual Property Rights] violations and maintenance of market barriers, and in its warning that failure by the Chinese government to address such problems could seriously undermine the future development of trade” (China–Europe Relations, p. 213). China also has justified grounds for complaints: the refusal to grant Market Economy Status smacks of hypocrisy, in the eyes of many Chinese (China–EU, pp. 171–177). Yet, despite these warnings and frictions, EU–China economic ties have grown substantially to the extent that a European China specialist notes that “in the economic field, EU–China relations have surpassed US–China relations in importance in terms of value and volume.”10

In the political and security sphere, the lack of direct geopolitical conflict between China and Europe does not necessarily mean that there are no areas of contention or cooperation between the two. From the EU’s perspectives, there are several security issues where it expects Beijing to make contributions for the

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10 Brødsgaard (2013, 455).
purpose of international stability: cooperation in strengthening multilateral institutions for conflict resolution and nonproliferation, energy security, East Asian stability, and a transparent defense policy (China–EU, pp. 43–45). Nevertheless, Europe has little leverage over China unless China shares the same objective. From the perspective of Beijing, it also upholds the principle of nonproliferation of weapons and solution of crisis through multilateral institutions, but will only do so on its own terms. While several European states (particularly France and Britain) continue to see “humanitarian intervention” as justifiable grounds for military actions against domestic atrocities, China (together with Russia) tends to oppose such moves. China also regards its Taiwan policy and its territorial disputes with Japan and Southeast Asian countries matters of its own internal affairs and would not welcome European interference. As documented by Jean-Beta Cabestan, Taiwan is “more of an irritant than an average” (China–Europe Relations, p. 99). China is also going to protest against the accusation of implementing a nontransparent defense policy.

3 Global Governance

The final part of this review essay looks at those chapters that are on “managing the world order,” namely, how China and EU cooperate, or differ, in terms of managing global issues. In the late 2000s, talks of China becoming a “responsible stakeholder” became more prevalent in western policy and media circles. With China growing rapidly and benefiting enormously from participating in the global trading system, western powers were eager to see China sharing some of the burdens of “global governance.” The EU, being a prime promoter of multilateral cooperation and global governance ideas, of course would welcome and expect greater Chinese participation. In China–EU: A Common Future, the authors list more than 20 policy areas that would be of mutual or global concerns. Among the issues raised are environmental protection, energy security, reforms of the UN system, international economic stability, development and poverty alleviation in Africa, and global strategic “hotspots” such as Iran and North Korea. More and more global issues that were traditionally exclusive concerns of the western powers are now opening up for China’s participation as well.

How did the Chinese react to the western invitation for global governance and responsibility? Wang Yi-zhou, a Chinese scholar, alludes to the notion of “tripartite collaboration on global governance” (US–China–EU Relations, p. 194) in dealing with global issues like Islamic terrorism, the re-emergence of Russia, as well as the rise of emerging powers. This call for “tripartite collaboration” is echoed by American China specialist Bates Gill, who also proposes “trilateral cooperation and action on global and regional governance, security, and developmental challenge” (US–China–EU Relations, p. 272). Nevertheless, while China is willing to cooperate with the West in tackling global issues, at times even conceded to US leadership, there is also a perception that “the major western powers seek Chinese participation in resolving international issues only when it is in their narrow self-interest and that they exclude China from participating when they fear that it would undermine their
own interests. Thus, international demands for greater Chinese participation in global governance look like empty talk” (US–China–EU Relations, p. 202).

In addition to this perception that invites for China’s participation in managing global affairs only reinforces the interests of the West, not China’s, there is also the difference between China and the West in terms of how to deal with the issues at hand, and China has exhibited significantly different approaches to global issues that the West may not find comfortable. For example, in 2008, the EU issued the document paper The EU, Africa and China: Towards Trilateral Dialogue and Cooperation, clearly signaling the EU’s willingness to work with China in a pragmatic way to address issues in Africa. Yet, the Chinese “no-strings-attached” approach to aiding Africa runs deeply counter to the European emphasis on aids conditioned upon improvement in governance, transparency, and accountability. Although both approaches are not necessarily diametrically opposed to each other and can actually be made complementary to each other, there is a continuous perception that China’s approach undermines much of the efforts by the developed world to improve governance and long-term development of Africa (Europe and China, pp. 139–154).

Another global issue, global warming, also exhibits both areas of differences and cooperation between China and Europe. China shares with Europe the concerns of climate change and other environmental issues confronting the whole globe, but insists on the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” which apportions greater blame and responsibility to the developed countries and henceforth concludes it is the role of the developed countries to make greater sacrifice. Developing countries will also take pro-active measures to mitigate climate change, but their level of responsibility is lower than that of the developed countries (Europe and China, p. 164). China also contends that technology transfer plays an important part in terms of the developed world’s shouldering of greater responsibility in tackling climate change, which becomes controversial when China has become a competitor in green technology. China adopts a stand in which developing countries should unify in resisting the call by the developed countries (principally EU) to commit to binding agreements on emission reduction. While Europe and China actually may have a wide number of common agreements regarding a number of climate change policies or principles, such as the centrality of the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change, and the idea of sustainable development, China’s insistence on putting its own economic development as the ultimate priority does not fit well with the expectation coming from post-industrial Europe.

In short, China so far has not balked at working closely together with the western powers, but depending on the issue at hand, it may want to choose to “cooperate more” or “cooperate less,” the choice of which is not necessarily dictated by the western agenda and interests.

4 Conclusion

Many Chinese were indeed fascinated by European integration, especially by its potential role to deprive US hegemony in the international order. The four books
reviewed here, however, would present a more complicated picture. Focusing too much on the strategic implication of “multipolarity” could lead Chinese officials and scholars to make an incorrect assessment of the transatlantic alliance and could result in counterproductive policies as well. Europe, on the other hand, also has had false expectations of an enormously different sort of rising power in China. From *China–EU: A Common Future* (published in 2007) to *Europe and China: Strategic Partners or Rivals* (published in 2012), there is progressively a movement away from initial optimism to a more realistic appreciation of the relationship along the three themes discussed in this essay. These books, therefore, present refreshing ideas on the state of EU–China relations. It should be noted that this review essay only discusses selected chapters that fit with the three themes covered here, while those chapters not discussed by this essay in general also have excellent analysis or discussion over other topics. Overall, despite the toning down of the initial optimistic rhetoric between EU and China, EU–China relations is not heading toward collision, and grounds for greater improvement and achievable cooperation are always there, which have yet to be fully utilized. The overall tone of these volumes, therefore, are more EU–China (and EU–China–US) cooperation, as many emerging issues assume a transnational character that cannot be satisfactorily dealt with either unilaterally or bilaterally.

**References**


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