China ranks among the most important countries in the EU’s external relations. It is not only the most populous country on earth, but boasts the world’s fastest growing major economy and is increasingly viewed as economically, politically and even militarily strategic to European interests. China is the EU’s second largest trading partner after the US, and is the centrepiece of EU policy in Asia. The EU arms embargo debate in 2004-5 highlighted the potential of triangular politics between the EU, US and China. The EU is China’s largest trade partner, and could be useful to China as a counter-weight to possible Sino-US tensions, and as an alternative source of strategic technology.

The received view of EU-China relations is that they are hostage to historical rivalries and competing national interests between EU member states. Three episodes are frequently cited to support this claim. First, the breakdown of European solidarity in the EC’s sanctions policy following the Tiananmen massacre in July 1989. One by one, the EU member states from 1990 broke ranks with the common sanctions in order to gain political and economic favour with the Chinese leadership. Sectarian (chiefly economic) national interests were thus presented as paramount in the calculations of EU foreign policy makers, to the detriment of collective goals such as the promotion of human rights. Second, the breakdown of the common General Affairs Council (GAC) position on sponsoring an annual EU resolution criticising China at the UN Commission on Human Rights in April 1997, when France, Germany, Spain and Italy defected, leading to a very public volte-face on the EU’s human rights policy on China. Finally, EU member states barely held together in 2004-5 over attempts by Germany and France to lift the arms embargo on China (in place since 1989); with the EU-25 backtracking in the face of energetic warnings from Washington and internal disquiet among non-weapons exporting EU member states.

Notwithstanding the failures in pursuing common EU positions, there has in fact been significant convergence in EU policies towards China. Despite the historical rivalries and competing national interests between EU
Member States, decisions made by the Commission and three key Member States (Germany, France and Britain) since 1985 have been converging on three significant issues which will be discussed in turn: economic questions; human rights; and the arms embargo.

**Europeanization**

The EU is not a unified state actor, nor does it have clear and consistent external objectives. Instead of a coherent and authoritative decision-making centre, national foreign policies operate alongside—and sometimes at variance with—"EU" foreign policies defined by the Commission, the European Parliament and/or the Council. As the EU is not a single unified actor, "EU foreign policy" (EFP) is usually understood and analyzed as the sum and interaction of the "three strands" of Europe's "external relations system", comprising: (a) the national foreign policies of the member states; (b) EC external trade relations and development policy; and (c) the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU.  

This paper employs this concept of foreign policy Europeanization to explain the trends in EU positions on China. This concept is often employed to explain the top-down adaptation of national structures and processes in response to the demands of the EU, or what some call "EU-isation". Under the CSFP, "Europeanization" can be understood as a process of foreign policy convergence. It is a dependent variable contingent on the ideas and directives emanating from actors (EU institutions, statesmen, etc.) in Brussels, as well as policy ideas and actions from member state capitals (national statesmen). Europeanization is thus identifiable as a process of change manifested as policy convergence (both top-down and sideways) as well as national policies amplified as EU policy (bottom-up projection). Europeanization is here understood as three distinct but inter-related processes according to the agents, targets and directions of change. As a top-down process, Europeanization is the process of change in national foreign policies caused by participation over time in foreign policy-making at the European level. As a bottom-up process, it is the projection of national preferences, ideas and policy models into the level of the European Union. A third aspect is the redefinition of national interests and identity in the context of "Europe". Europeanization is thus a bi-directional process that leads to a negotiated convergence in terms of policy goals, preferences and even identity between the national and the supranational levels.

**Beginnings of EU-China contacts**

Until the 1970s, relations between "Europe" and China were either eclipsed by those between major European states and Beijing; or derivative of European states' relations with Washington or Moscow. Western European states largely took their cue from the United States in their relations with China, from acquiescing to the American containment of communist China in the 1950s, to accepting it as the "16th member of NATO" by the early 1970s.

With the Sino-Soviet split and Sino-American rapprochement, the EC established diplomatic relations with China in 1975, signed the first bilateral trade agreement in 1978 and a Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) in 1985 (still in force), but a common policy on China was officially defined only in 1995. In July 1995, then-Trade Commissioner Sir Leon Brittan unveiled the EU's "A Long-term policy for China" which emphasised commerce. This economic-centred China policy was reinforced in 1998, 2001 and 2003 by EU policy documents that clarified EU political and human rights interests with regard to China after an internal "drift" and public intramural disagreements in 1996-97. In the political and human rights domains, there has also been a significant convergence of policies between Paris, Berlin,
London and Brussels. Recent French academic and policy-makers’ references to the US as an “hyper-puissance” that needs to be balanced by other powers—in particular the EU and China—have updated the Gaullist perspective in which China is the most promising, if not sole rising power capable of challenging continued US hegemony in the 21st century. The rise of China fascinates many Europeans, recalling the Napoleonic prediction that “when China awakes, the world will tremble.”

**Economic Ties**

Arguably the “backbone” of the EU-China relationship, a continuum of economic strategies is adopted by EU member states with significant economic interests in China. They range from aggressively championing national industries, to partnerships with other EU states, to cooperating on a pan-European platform in the pursuit of economic goals.

On one end of the scale is the mercantilist strategy of pushing politically motivated national initiatives and singular large-scale grands contrats signed by governments. This has been the approach preferred by the French since 1964 when Paris established full diplomatic relations with Beijing. Politically motivated deals were the most effective means to “get back into the game” in a command economy, and for a few years in the 1960s, this strategy worked. French leaders have typically been active in pressing for government-to-government deals to export everything from agriculture to aerospace to China. For example, in 1981-83 under Mitterrand, French agricultural exports—primarily wheat—increased dramatically to constitute one-third of all French exports to China, but then collapsed to less than 2% in 1984. In 1996, President Chirac announced the ambitious goal of tripling the 2% French share of China’s trade to 6% within ten years.

However, French government-led economic initiatives tend to be launched in fits and starts, and have failed to coax small and medium sized French enterprises out of their caution in making investments in China. Many smaller French businesses that went into China soon after its opening in 1978 discovered that the promise of a vast potential market was taking many years to materialize. They realised that China would become a great exporting nation before it became a nation of consumers for luxury products such as cars, perfumes and wines, the luxury products in which France is competitive.

Unlike British and German businesses which in the 1980s and 1990s made China a priority country in their international or at least regional (i.e. Asian) strategies, French companies still prefer to locate and invest in Indochina. China is a second-tier recipient of French FDI, receiving far less from France than from other EU member states, the US and even Singapore. In contrast, German state support for German firms in China has been more sustained and less disrupted by bilateral political issues. The largest bilateral project in recent years has been the commercial use of the German-built Transrapid magnetic levitation train, a project which met stiff competition from Japanese and French rivals. The strong commitment of Chancellor Schröder and Premier Zhu Rongji was instrumental in this contract being awarded to Germany.

A second strategy is the “pragmatic” economics-oriented policy pioneered by Germany. During the Cold War, West Germany had concentrated its energies on building good economic relations with the People’s Republic. This pragmatism can be traced to at least 1955, when despite the “Hallstein doctrine” which refused diplomatic recognition to all states which recognised the Germany Democratic Republic, the Federal Republic established a trade office in China. This pragmatic economic policy soon paid dividends. By 1966, the Federal Republic had become China’s top European trading partner. In the 1980s, it was estimated that almost 50% of the
foreign technology imported into China came from the FRG. In contrast to the state-led initiatives emanating from France, German business dealings in China have tended to be led by the private sector. The government plays the role of trade and investment facilitator rather than initiator. Germany was quick to adopt pragmatic policies that emphasise good political relations and ignored differences on political or human rights values.

In the mid-1990s, Germany accounted for nearly 40% of total EU trade with China, over twice as much as Britain, China's second largest EU trading partner. In 2004, Germany alone accounted for 44% of the EU25's total exports to China (Commission 2006). Germany's policy towards China since 1992 had been founded on three principles: silent diplomacy (hence no human rights confrontation); change through trade (encouraging political liberalization in China via economic development); and a strict “one-China” policy. The success of the “German model” was evident in its enhanced trade position. German exports to China practically doubled between 1992 and 1994, from DM5.7 billion to DM10.2 billion. The UK (+71%), Italy (+71%), Netherlands (+146%), Spain (+226%) also witnessed significant export growth to China. In contrast, French exports only grew 22% in the same period as a consequence of a diplomatic freeze between Paris and Beijing. Meanwhile, Germany systematically depoliticised economic relations with China. Germany recognized the significance of Asian new markets when EC trade with East Asia overtook EC-US trade for the first time in 1992, and took the lead in formulating its “Asian policy” in October 1993. The central ideas of Germany's Asian policy were "to strengthen economic relations with the largest growth region in the world", restore high level visits to Beijing and stop applying pressure on human rights. In December 1993, Chancellor Kohl returned from a visit to China with a pile of contracts and letters of intent. A few months later, Bonn was the first Western capital to host a visit by Chinese Premier Li Peng, in spite of Li's close association with and responsibility for the Tiananmen crackdown.

Germany's economic success in China inspired emulation by other EU countries. Britain's Secretary for Trade and Industry Michael Heseltine visited China in 1994 accompanied by 130 businessmen. France-China relations were normalized and a joint communiqué was issued in January 1994 during Prime Minister Balladur's visit. The joint communiqué committed France to recognise one China and to refrain from selling new arms to Taiwan. The French Industry Minister Gérard Longuet followed this up by visiting Beijing and Hong Kong in mid-1994 to launch "Ten initiatives for Asia".

Even in tapping the vast and rapidly growing Chinese tourist market, Germany has stolen a march on its EU partners. While negotiations on an "Authorised Destination Status" (which would grant Schengen states the status of approved destination for Chinese tourist groups by the Chinese government) have been stalled, groups of Chinese tourists have been visiting Germany since mid-February 2003, on the basis of a bilateral memorandum. French governments have pushed to "catch up with the Germans" and have tried copying the "German Model" of strong economic and political relations with China. In 1995, Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette announced that Asia would receive special attention as the "nouvelle frontière" of French diplomacy. French leaders' visits to China began to take on a pattern of political dialogue on international developments, accompanied by announcements of contract signatures.

Playing the European card

A third (and increasingly favoured) strategy is to play the "European card" in economic dealings with China. The European Community as a whole witnessed a rapid expansion of relations with China in the 1980s. The EC-China Joint committee created by the 1978 bilateral agreement and affirmed in the 1985 EC-China Trade and Cooperation Agreement, quickly became the
most institutionalised component of the EC’s interactions with China, with the Commission playing the role of intermediary. The member states have entrusted the External Trade Commissioner to conduct economic negotiations with China at the EU level in order collectively to exercise greater bargaining power. EU goals in China have been overwhelmingly oriented towards trade and investment relations related (aside from the Community sanctions imposed in 1989-90 over the Tiananmen incident). However, a convergence of broad EU economic interests and goals in China was achieved only after a series of political frictions between China and individual EU states, although these problems ultimately rallied the EU states to an unanticipated level of cooperation, throwing their support behind the Trade Commissioner so as to maximise their economic leverage as a trading superpower in the China market. From the post-Tiananmen (1989-94) frictions to the 1994 NAS and 1995 China policy papers, and the subsequent papers in 1998, 2001 and 2003, we can see a trend towards an EU-first approach to economic relations with China.

The Community has privileged commerce with China over political or strategic considerations. This allowed for the EU’s economic relations with China to make continual good progress despite political tensions between individual European actors (the Parliament, Britain and France in particular) through the 1990s. The 1995 China strategy paper recognized the “rise of China as unmatched amongst national experiences since the Second World War”. It followed on the Commission’s 1994 “Towards a New Asia Strategy” initiative and followed roughly similar positions taken by Germany and Britain. All papers emphasised economic relations and looked upon China as a “cornerstone” of the EU’s “New Asia Policy” (NAS). The European goal is to develop relations with China on a long-term and comprehensive basis. Four areas were defined as a “new focus”:

- human resource development—considered key to sustained economic growth and development in China;
- support for economic and social reform through promoting modernisation and market-oriented policies in key economic sectors;
- business and industrial cooperation; and
- cooperation on environmental and rural development matters.30

Trade and WTO negotiations since China’s 1986 application to join the GATT/WTO further consolidated the Commission’s role as the central actor in economic relations between Europe and China. Unlike the US, the EU was receptive to Chinese arguments to be treated as a developing economy. Based on objectives spelt out in the Commission’s 1998 “Comprehensive Partnership” country strategy paper, then-External Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy reached an agreement with China on its WTO accession on 19 May 2000. After years of intense negotiations, the Member States succeeded in coordinating their efforts under Lamy to prise open protected sectors such as insurance, telecommunications, banking, aviation and infrastructure building—sectors in which European companies are strong.31 Despite the absence of a new Trade and Cooperation Agreement (stalled over China’s objections to the inclusion of human rights conditions) to replace the 1985 TCA, EU-China trade continued to expand at a spectacular pace, from euros 17 billion in 1990 and euros 70 billion in 1999, to over euros 174 billion in 2004—total trade increased over fourfold between 1978 and 2004. In 1999, the EU overtook Japan to become China’s second largest export market. European companies invested US$4.5 billion in China in 1999, making the EU the largest foreign direct investor in China that year, and the second in 2000. China remains the EU’s second largest trading partner today, after the USA.32

As in the 1980s when the EU was confronted by a rising tide of Japanese imports, EU governments have worked through the Commission, eg. in demanding market access and negotiating hard for reciprocity in China’s accession to the WTO (in December 2001), and in pushing for common EU
trade promotion programmes in China. They have also found a collective voice in the Trade Commissioner in prosecuting disputes with China ranging from textiles to car parts.22

Human Rights

“The most complex and multifaceted dialogue on human rights” which the EU has with any country is considered by many to be the one with China.23 Although the EU has established an important human rights dialogue with China, it has suffered from conflicting interests and coordination problems between the General Affairs Council (GAC), the Member States, the Commission and the European Parliament (EP).24 Human rights issues have been an emotive and controversial facet of EU-China relations since the Tiananmen Square crackdown in June 1989. Until the end of the Cold War, few member states apart from the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, made human rights a major plank in their relations with China. However, Tiananmen politicised the Community approach to economic relations with China. For example, the Commission which had hitherto refrained from political comments, issued a statement expressing “consternation” and “shock” at the “brutal suppression” in Beijing, and cancelled Foreign Trade Minister Zheng Tuobin’s scheduled visit to Brussels.25 The introduction of sanctions, human rights and the UN Commission on Human Rights (CHR) issues in EC-China relations shifted much of the discussions on China to the Council and CFSP structures.

From 1989 to 1997, the EU policy on human rights in China lay principally in (i) the sanctions policy (effectively lifted in October 1990), (ii) dialogue between individual EU governments and China, and (iii) holding China accountable in multilateral fora, in particular the CHR by annually co-sponsoring with the US a resolution criticizing China’s human rights record. Some human rights activists consider this the most “symbolically important” EU policy in monitoring and moderating human rights in China.26 The EC-12, held together in supporting most of these sanctions from June 1989 to October 1990, the date when most of the sanctions were lifted (except the ban on military sales—see Part III).

The CHR approach was adhered to each year from 1990 to 1996 (except 1991 when the US, Britain and France sought China’s vote in the Security Council to endorse allied action against Iraq). Although the resolution was always defeated by a no-action motion (except in 1995), the move was politically symbolic and significant in underlining the EU’s commitment each spring to improvements in China’s human rights record. However, mercantilist considerations chipped away the collective EC resolve and discipline so that EC countries were competing to get back into the Chinese market as early as the end of 1989. Almost a year before the EC officially lifted the economic sanctions in October 1990, both Germany and France breached the EC sanctions on financial aid and extended soft loans to projects undertaken by German and French companies in China.27

As the shock of Tiananmen faded away, the GAC and larger Member States have tended to pay lip service to human rights in order to cultivate good political and economic relations with Beijing. The British have found it prudent after the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to “soft-pedal their interest in human rights and democratic principles” in order to maintain a working relationship with China.28 The French under a Socialist president (Mitterrand) initially took a high-profile principled position on human rights after Tiananmen, but this was toned down considerably after the Beijing-Paris spat over Taiwan arms sales. Under Chirac, France made a dramatic volte-face in favour of shielding China’s human rights record from EU and international scrutiny (notably at the 1997 CHR in Geneva). In 1997, Foreign
Minister Hervé de Charette remarked that it was "preposterous for the West, which invaded and humiliated China in modern times, to "lecture" China, a country with a 5000-year old civilization, on the Human Rights Declaration and the US Constitution, which are merely 200 years old".40

The new French position was brought to bear at the 53rd UNCHR debate in April 1997 in Geneva. Unable to persuade its EU partners and the Dutch EU Presidency to drop the resolution criticizing China, France decided to withdraw its support from the ritual EU sponsorship of the resolution. Further, France led the "airbus group" (France, Germany, Italy and Spain) in defecting from the common position. It was left to Denmark to draft the resolution, and the US and 14 other Western countries to co-sponsor it. With the split in EU ranks, the vote was 27 in favour of China's no-action motion, 17 against and 9 abstentions, the most stunning repudiation of the UNCHR mechanism condemning China since the campaign started in 1990. The UNCHR debacle was celebrated as a spectacular victory by Chinese diplomacy.41 France was heavily criticized by many Western governments for "kowowing to Chinese pressure", putting short-term national economic interests over collective long-term EU interests and hence undermining the EU's credibility and its own credentials as the birthplace of human rights.42 The stage was then set for Chirac's state visit to China in May 1997, where a France-China joint declaration was issued. On human rights, it declared that both parties would "respect diversity" and take into account the "particularities of all sides".43

After the French-led defection in 1997, a new European approach to human rights in China was decided by the GAC and codified in the Commission's March 1998 strategy paper, "Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China". The 14 March 1998 General Affairs Council agreed that at the upcoming 1998 UNCHR session, the EU would "neither propose nor endorse, either by the organization as a whole or by individual members" any resolution criticizing China.44 In effect, the French position had won the day and the "hardliners" found themselves tied to an EU position projected by France. This Europeanized position not to co-sponsor (albeit with reservations expressed by the "hardliners") the UNCHR resolution with the US has been reached at the Council each March since 1998. The Council has typically agreed that the EU should adopt the following approach at the UNCHR on China:
— If the resolution is put to a vote, EU members of the Commission will vote in favour, but the EU will not co-sponsor;
— EU members will vote against a no-action motion, should one be presented, and the EU will actively encourage other Commission members to do likewise, since in the EU's view, the very notion of no-action is itself contrary to the spirit of dialogue.45

Pressured by the pragmatic positions taken by Germany and France, most of the EU member states and the Commission had towards the end of the 1990s toned down their critiques of the Chinese government towards a coordinated but weak common position of "constructive dialogue". Aside from common actions taken under the CRSP and coordinated by the Commission, individual governments still regularly raise human rights concerns in their discussions with Chinese leaders. The former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer singled out China at the CHR in 1999 and 2002. The German Federal government and the Bundestag have also repeatedly called upon the Chinese government to enter into a dialogue with the Dalai Lama with a view to granting Tibet substantial autonomy, and to end the suppression of Tibetan culture and religion.46

In practice, the leading actor within the EU in promoting human rights in China has been the European Parliament (EP). It has since 1987 made regular and public criticisms of the Chinese human rights record, especially on Tibet, arbitrary detention, capital punishment, religious and political freedoms. The GAC in May 1999 supported the EP's 1994 initiative to streamline a series of budget headings under a single chapter of the EU budget (B7-70) in the "European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights" (EIDHR). The EP's budgetary power
over the EEUHR, gives it added oversight of the Community’s external relations. The EP thus holds the Commission and GAEC accountable for developments “on the ground” for the continuation of the EU-China dialogue.47

Aside from its powers over external assistance, the EP has leveraged on the political prestige and international publicity it can confer on foreign personalities embodying human rights struggles. The EP infuriated the Chinese in 1996 when it awarded Wei Jingsheng—then China’s most celebrated dissident—the Sakharov prize for Freedom of Thought.48 Then it invited the Dalai Lama to address a session in Strasbourg in October 2001. Dealing with China on the subject of human rights remains a bone of contention within the EU, between member states who advocate making China publicly accountable at international fora (“naming and shaming”), and those who prefer silent diplomacy or constructive engagement. While France and the “Airbus group” defied the EU common position in 1997, they were nonetheless constrained by the general EU consensus at the GAC that China’s human rights record was in need of improvement. The convergence (or compromise) of the member states’ human rights policies on China since 1998 has watered down the positions of some of the more hardline countries, into an amalgam of the EPP/Nordic governments’ hard approaches and the conciliatory “constructive dialogue” approach pioneered by France and Germany. This could be viewed as a way of engaging China through a mixture of negative measures and positive incentives.49

The EU Arms Embargo

In 2004-5, the EU found itself under pressure from the US when Paris and Berlin prematurely announced that the EU arms embargo on China—in place since 1989—would soon be lifted. Although the US sells more weapons to China than the euros 416 worth by all the EU members states combined (2003 figure), the EU’s response on this issue was portrayed as a test of loyalty by Washington. The resulting internal dissension within the EU has since scuttled the lifting of the embargo, and instead intensified US-EU joint consultations and intelligence sharing on China.50

The commercial advantages of lifting the embargo to European arms manufacturers are quite evident. China is a key player in the lucrative East Asia arms market—the only region that registered growth during the global contraction in the industry after 1989. Japan, China, Taiwan and South Korea alone represent 82% of the region’s arms market.51 The major European arms manufacturers (based in Britain, France, Germany and Sweden) have been active in this competitive market and have offered themselves as serious alternatives to the US and Russia as arms suppliers. Yet the last large-scale arms deal involving an EU state and an East Asian one was over a decade ago: the sale of six French Lafayette frigates to Taiwan in 1990, and Taipei’s 1992 purchase of 60 Mirage 2000-5 fighter jets.52

Increased arms sales to China would also help the political dialogue and make the EU-China dialogue more of a “strategic one”, as both sides had announced at the EU-China summit in 2004 (Centre for European Reform 2006). Angela Merkel’s first visit to China in May 2006 looked set to continue her predecessors’ cozy relations with China and paying lip service to human rights, although she distanced herself from Schröder’s controversial attempt to lift the China arms embargo.53 Like Germany, the EU as an entity has enjoyed a less problematic relationship with China than have Britain or France. Since an EC Delegation was established in Beijing in 1988, a political dialogue set up in 1994, and an annual summit started with China in 1998 (regular ministerial level meetings began in 1995), the EU as an actor has begun to challenge the traditional dominance of London, Berlin and Paris in Europe’s relations with China. In the late 1980s and 1990s, western Europe’s relations with China changed from being derivatives of the Cold War and broader relations with the superpowers, and developed an “independent dynamic” of their own.54
The EU has entered into strategic linkages with China, especially in aerospace cooperation projects in 2003—coincidentally the year in which China became the third nation to send a man into space. A joint Sino-European satellite navigation cooperation centre was opened in Beijing in February, and an agreement was reached in September committing China to finance up to euros 230 million or one-fifth of Galileo, the EU’s euros 1.1 billion satellite positioning system which is seen as an alternative to the US’ Global Positioning System. The announcement of the decision made a positive prelude to the 6th EU-China summit the following month in Beijing, although human rights, market access and the EU’s growing trade deficit with China continued to be niggling issues. Evidence that China has begun to take the EU seriously as an actor can also be found in the publication of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s first ever “EU policy paper” in October 2003. The paper noted that the EU was an important international player in the trend towards multipolarity, and that the Euro and the EU’s expansion to 25 members in 2004 served to augment the EU’s weight in international affairs. Although there were “twists and turns” in China’s relations with the EU, both were not security threats to each other, but shared fundamentally similar views and interests on trade and world order.

The EU and the US share liberal-democratic values and have a joint interest in shaping China’s transition as it grows as a world economic and military power. However, they hold increasingly divergent views on the utility and efficacy of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the unilateral use of force versus negotiations and diplomacy, and dealing with terrorism and “rogue states” such as Iraq, Iran, Cuba and North Korea. The EU has distinct political, economic and even nascent security interests in China, and is likely to exploit them in the event of tensions between the US and China.

**Conclusion**

On China, the policies and reflexes of each of the EU member states have undergone significant convergence with each other, as well as with the Commission. Much of this trend towards convergence has been by default. First, individual European states’ influence in Beijing rapidly declined after 1949. Only London and Paris have some residual diplomatic influence in Chinese affairs. Second and more importantly, the EU’s role and presence in China has grown. One may argue that in the 1990s, EU policy towards China was effectively “Germanised”, in that Germany succeeded in exporting its model of discreet diplomacy, change through trade and non-confrontation on human rights to the EU level. In other words, Germany “Europeanized” what was originally one member state’s national China policy. This is most patent in the economic and trade issue-area, where human rights has been delinked from trade. What exists of EU policy in China continues to be dominated by Pillar I issues as China is the focal point in an important economic region for European trade.

In the area of human rights, the common EU positions built from 1989 acted as a constraint and damper on the French-German-Italian-Spanish deflection in 1997. France may have defected from the specific agreed EU action of sponsoring a resolution at the CHRI, but it had to redouble its efforts urging the Chinese government along other paths desired by the EU, eg, signing onto the ICCPR, resuming the EU-China dialogue on human rights, and in 1998 agreeing to a common GAC position to vote in favour of a resolution on China (albeit one not sponsored by the EU).

Over time, European foreign policy-makers can be expected to share even more coordination reflexes on foreign policy towards China. They have similar values and interests in China’s economic development, diplomatic-military power, as well as its political and social evolution. Compared
to recent US-Europe disagreements over Iraq and dealing with terrorism, EU Member States’ policies towards China have actually been steadily converging between themselves and diverging away from Washington’s preferences. Member States have not always held together, as the face-off with Beijing or Washington over the arms embargo demonstrates. But they realise the need to harmonise their national policies in order to maximise their collective bargaining power against powerful international actors.

Attempts by Europe (both individual states and as a group) to upgrade ties with Beijing have been welcomed as a useful and potentially important hedge to economic and technological overdependence on the United States. Unlike the US, the EU is not bound by alliance commitments to Japan and Taiwan. It is therefore not obligated to intervene on Washington’s side in the event of conflict in the Asia-Pacific. While Europe certainly has important security interests in the Asia-Pacific and has even played or is currently playing a peace-keeping role in Asian flashpoints such as Cambodia, East Timor and Aceh, it does not have substantial military assets based in the region.10

While an “EU-China axis” may not be imminent, the EU-China relationship is no longer the “secondary relationship” of the past.11 Unlike the USA, the EU does not view China as a strategic competitor. Its positions are closer to China on the need for multilateral global governance based on the United Nations and on international law. China on its part has been hoping to use the EU as a counter-weight to the US, in areas as diverse as trade, human rights and aerospace.12 Both need to be more active in resolving conflicts such as those in the Middle East, as they depend on imported energy. With the enlargement of the EU in 2004, 2007 and beyond, the Europeans’ ability to stay the course of pursuing a distinct and independent policy towards China, may well be a litmus test of the coherence and viability of a common EU foreign policy.