

PERSPECTIVES ON THE DIFFICULT EVOLUTION OF THE CHINA-EUROPE SECURITY AND DEFENSE RELATIONSHIP

Andrea Ghiselli

On May 31st, Andrea Ghiselli, T.wai's Junior Research Fellow, attended an event organized by Dr. Cao Hui of the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS)'s European Studies Institute. Ghiselli was invited to share his opinions on the current status of the Sino-European relationship in the security realm.

In general, the situation has not changed much over the last decade: the relationship between the two sides remains mainly rhetorical in nature with little concrete outside dialogues and limited joint drills in the Gulf of Aden and port visits. Important exogenous and endogenous factors, such as US concerns and lack of unity in Europe, still prevent the further development of the security and defence dimension of the Sino-European relationship. The

case of the arms embargo testifies to such difficulties. Furthermore, in recent times Europeans, both at EU level and at member state level (especially France), have appeared to be prone to side with the United States with regard to the events in the East and South China Seas. It also seems that Europe is heading in the direction opposite to that suggested by the Dutch scholar Jonathan Holslag, that of "convenient marginalization" from Asian affairs (or at least the thorniest issues where Europe cannot make a meaningful contribution).

Nevertheless, according to Ghiselli, in the last few years North Africa and the Middle East are becoming regions where shared interests between Europeans and Chinese are emerging in a clearer and more definite way. And recent reports on the Sino-European relationship by the European Union show this as well. Zhao Chen, the Chief of the CASS Department of European International Relations,

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confirmed that there is also growing interest within the Chinese academic world to broaden studies on the relationship between China and Europe to explore what are the repercussions of its evolution in other regions of the world, Africa and the Middle East in particular. This evolution should be seen as the result of different, but converging trends that are not influencing Chinese and European foreign policy.

As to the European side, the divisions caused and further aggravated by the debate over fiscal and economic issues have greatly halted the development of a common security and foreign policy for the European Union. The marginal role played by Brussels in the several crises to have broken out right on the EU's eastern and southern borders and the preference to act under the NATO aegis (Libya) or under the umbrella of the United Nations Security Council (Mali and Syria) are the natural result of political disunity. This same disunity is also one of the key factors which, according to a recent report by the European Union Institute for Security Studies, is likely to cause a transformation of the European armed forces into "bonsai armies" with little and redundant capabilities. *Vis-à-vis* decreasing capabilities, it seems that one of the main complaints moved by [Sir Rupert Smith](#) and other former European military commanders has not been addressed by politics.

According to Smith, indeed, the use of overwhelming and blunt firepower has become the favourite solution to foreign policy problems that would require a more accurate vision by governments of what goals the military is meant to achieve. The result was first the bestowing of contradictory state-building tasks to the military and then, when the human and economic costs of such permanent occupations became unbearable for public opinion and European treasuries, the recourse to air campaigns with the same limited and questionable results. Military intervention is not a step within a plan, but the plan itself. See Libya and, to some extent, Syria.

The events in Libya have also affected the way China looks now at Europe's actions: the term "European/Western new interventionism" (read external military intervention aimed at changing an unfriendly regime with not concrete plan for the post-conflict situation) has become common in the Chinese debate and sums up well the initial scepticism towards French intervention in Mali and towards British pressure to expand the air campaign to include Syria, either against the Assad regime or the Islamic State. However, the fact that France was quick to return the leadership of the mission in Mali to the UN and that the British government waited for the UNSC Resolution 2249(2015) before acting made European actions much more acceptable to China. Moreover, since terrorists were the declared targets of military operations, there was no significant clash with China's long-standing principle of non-interference.

Indeed, the protection of Chinese citizens and interests abroad has become a priority for China's diplomacy and the People's Liberation Army, especially since the traumatic Libyan experience of 2011. In particular, as Ghiselli argued, since then it is possible to observe that China is increasingly at ease with the use and authorization to third parties to use force, though always within the UN framework. More recently, the killing of a Chinese hostage in Syria at the hand of the Islamic State and the death of three other Chinese nationals in Bamako a few days after a terrorist attack played decisive role in strengthening this trend. Such evolution, though triggered by terrible events, is positively pushing the Chinese closer to the Europeans in terms of concrete interest to eliminate terrorist groups through military force and, naturally, the authorization of the UN. It is possible to see this looking at the two aforementioned cases of Mali and Syria. In the former, the Chinese position changed greatly from cold acknowledgment of the French action to enthusiastic participation in the peacekeeping mission, once it was clear that France was conducting a quick and effective operation against Islamic groups in order to clear the way for UN troops to stabilize the country. In the latter case, albeit minor players in the negotiation over UNSCR 2249, both England and China found it

convenient to support the resolution *vis-à-vis* terrorists that killed Chinese and European citizens and thereby put both sides under pressure to react forcefully. Some sort of alignment between China and England was already visible in the talks about the fight against terrorism in

Syria between the leaders of the two countries during Xi's visit to England.

To conclude, the necessity to achieve similar goals—fighting terrorism and dealing with regional instability—in the Middle East and North Africa is bringing the Chinese and Europeans closer. Yet, this trend seems rather circumstantial, and hence fragile. While China appears to be firmly headed towards greater security engagement, what and how the Europeans will be able and willing to do is much more difficult to predict. Besides the still existing obstacles (the arms embargo and US concerns), there is a substantial risk that a mix of decreasing capabilities and growing political weakness caused by economic and immigration issues in Europe could close the small window of opportunity opened in recent years.

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