



Maritime Cooperation in the European Union-China Relations and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road: What is at Stake?

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between the EU and China in the twenty-first century have featured as one of the most relevant, albeit challenging examples of bilateral cooperation on the international stage. More recently, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its considerable geopolitical and economic weight have brought with it renewed impetus to this rapport, which has been largely managed by a rather institutionalized strategic partnership (SP) that comprises a wide range of issues.

Despite the prominence of trade issues in this developing partnership, security aspects have been gaining increased importance. In this regard, even though maritime security has been an issue less explored at the

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bilateral level, it has emerged as an increasingly relevant topic in the security policy agendas of the EU and China. Against the backdrop of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) which constitutes the maritime component of BRI, China has invested heavily in modernizing its naval assets as part of national endeavors to ensure international connectivity. On the other hand, the EU has gradually developed its maritime security actorhood since the launching of CSDP anti-piracy operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta in 2008, which has counted on Chinese contributions, and it has also attempted to advance the so-called maritime multilateralism, in the framework of the implementation of its Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) (European External Action Service 2016, 43).

The advent of the BRI, and particularly the MSRI, opens up a new range of challenges and opportunities for cooperation between the two actors in the domain of maritime security. Yet, the trajectory of this bilateral relationship has shown that cooperation has not unleashed its full potential yet due to power competition as well as prevailing differences between the two actors when it comes to their nature, identity, values and worldviews.

Considering the recent emergence of EU and China as maritime security actors, this chapter aims at examining the evolution of maritime security cooperation between the two actors while giving particular emphasis to the implications of the MSRI to this bilateral cooperation, inside and outside the existing SP. Such examination will cover the period between 2003 and 2019. This choice transcends aspects exclusively related to the security maritime domain to take into consideration the trajectory of the EU-China relations as a whole. The year of 2003 is considered a milestone since it marks the establishment of the EU-China SP which was preceded by the production of the papers “A Maturing Partnership—Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China Relations” and “China’s EU Policy Paper” by the European Commission and Chinese authorities, respectively. It also marked the approval of the European Security Strategy (ESS), the EU’s first strategic document, under the aegis of which the organization has consolidated its role as an international security actor. The analysis will be stretched until 2019 which saw noteworthy developments springing from the EU-China Summit, namely a new Joint Statement issued in April (European External Action Service 2019). Additionally, this year was eventful for China politically bearing in mind the unprecedented outbreak of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong,

which started in June, and the presentation of the paper on defense entitled “China’s National Defense in the New Era” (2019 White Paper), in July.

In terms of the theoretical approach, this study draws upon practice theory and two of Pierre Bourdieu’s “thinking tools”, notably “habitus” and “field”,¹ which are applied to the analysis of international practices. It also relies on the concepts of “background knowledge” and “strategic interaction” that can foster a “community of security practice” (Mérand and Pouliot 2008; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger 2013; Bueger and Gadinger 2015).

The chapter begins with a brief contextualization of EU-China SP in order to underline the increasing cooperative dynamics existing between these actors. It then proceeds with an analysis of the evolution of maritime security cooperation between the EU and China, before and after the launching of the MSRI. The final section attempts to discuss those specific cooperative experiences and its prospects in light of the above-mentioned practice theory-related concepts, in order to demonstrate that the advent of MSRI has expanded the room for the EU-China maritime security cooperation to grow. The chapter concludes that in spite of a prevailing competitive and mistrustful environment characterizing EU-Chinese maritime cooperation, the amount of opportunities for mutual practical interaction which exist against the backdrop of the MSRI, at the politico-diplomatic level and below, paves the way for increasing cooperation and the formation of a community of security practice.

¹As Anna Leander explains, Bourdieu refers to his own concepts as “thinking tools” which are “open”, in the sense that he wished to develop concepts and mechanisms that should gain meaning in the context of a concrete issue or problem (2011, 308). Pierre Bourdieu has given very limited attention to the subject of the international (Mérand and Pouliot 2008). Such reality, however, paved the way for relevant literature aiming at discussing means to apply his work to IR, such as the one put forward by Emanuel Adler, Anna Leander, Frédéric Mérand and Vincent Pouliot, among others. See chapter’s references for more details. Here, we apply the concept of “habitus” mainly as understood by Adler and Pouliot when laying down the foundations of their understanding over international practices (Adler and Pouliot 2011), as well as Mérand (2012) and Bueger and Gadinger (2015).

THE EU-CHINA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: A CONTEXTUALIZATION

Since it was established in 2003, the EU-China SP has developed into a rather comprehensive framework. While comprising “an annual summit, regular ministerial meetings, and over 60 sectoral dialogues” (European External Action Service 2019, 1), the SP has become the main platform of or channel through which this bilateral relationship has deepened ties between the parties.

In October 2003, the “Joint Press Statement on the Sixth China-EU Summit” recognized the expansion of the SP in both depth and scope. At the time, partners described the partnership as one exhibiting “increasing maturity” and “growing strategic nature” (European Council 2003). Shortly before, both parties had issued policy papers on each other. On the EU’s side, the paper “A Maturing Partnership—Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China Relations” (European Commission 2003) stressed the need to strengthen the political dialogue, including cooperation in security, human rights and global governance, as well as helping China to conduct internal reforms and ultimately adopt democracy, rule of law and free market.

On the other hand, the “China’s EU Policy Paper” emphasized the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, as well as the differences in “historical background, cultural heritage, political system and economic development level” (PRC 2003, sec. 2, par. 2), which should lead to a mutually respectful rapport. Security cooperation was mentioned briefly under the last and very short topic entitled “The Military Aspect”, while the perspective of multilateralism was limited to the trade sphere.

Ten years later, the partners issued the “EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation” (European External Action Service 2013). Different from the 2003 policy papers, this document has sought to incorporate a “full-fledged strategic level” to the partnership (Montesano 2019, 141). It has acknowledged the strong interdependence between the two actors (European External Action Service 2013, 2) and ascribed security a prominent position as mirrored in longer considerations on the matter. Against the backdrop of a 10-year period, during which multilateralism had become a pillar of global governance, the partners have described themselves as “important actors in a multipolar world” (*ibid.*, 3). Finally,

cooperation on maritime issues has featured for the first time as a dominant topic, in relation to sustainable development, to which one paragraph is exclusively dedicated (*ibid.*, 13).

More recently, the EU and China have issued a new “EU-China Summit Joint Statement”, that is more focused on prioritizing “day-to-day” issues (Smith 2016, 89) and on settling commitments between the partners so as to generate a real engagement in the international arena (European Council 2019).

For instance, among international issues mentioned in the document are Venezuela, Ukraine (Minsk Agreements) and Myanmar (European Council 2019, 7). There are also references to initiatives related to the increasing importance of China and the BRI, such as EU-Asia Connectivity Platform (2019, 6). Finally, it lays down the intention to adopt a new strategic agenda beyond the year 2020 (European Council 2019, 1). All this denotes the progress that has been made regarding the bilateral dialogue cultivated in the framework of the SP.

The EU-China SP has gathered together two actors that are recognized by some observers as “unlike partners” (Michalski and Pan 2017, 611) given the existence of fundamental cultural and ideological differences that conditions diverging worldview(s). Such differences have fostered conceptual gaps, resulting from “different conceptualizations of the same concept by different actors” (Pan 2012, 2). Among these conceptual gaps, stand out those concerning the meaning of “strategic partnership”, as well as the understanding of “multilateralism”. Regarding the meaning of “strategic partnership”, while the EU sees it as a short-term tool, in order to obtain immediate results, China regards it as a long-term quest (Stumbaum and Xiong 2012, 163–164). As for multilateralism, the EU conceives it as a core Western-dominant world norm; yet China approaches multilateralism as means to attain a more multipolar world (Zhang 2012).

Those conceptual gaps have created additional difficulties in China’s socialization experience at international level and caused its perception as a challenger to the liberal order (Michalski and Pan 2017, 613; Maher 2016, 971), both inside and outside the BRICS. Linked to this, Gustaaf Geeraerts asserts that “the BRICs opposition to the liberal order poses a particular challenge to the EU’s understanding of multilateralism as an organizational concept for world governance and the norms associated with it” (2019, 147). This is not a surprise, given that over the last few

years the so-called Beijing Consensus has questioned the established liberal order that is aligned with the Washington Consensus—designed by the United States and seconded by the EU. The premise of the Washington Consensus relies on the assumption that the Western developed countries define what should be considered good governance on the basis of free-market capitalism guidelines. Also, it stipulates that the aid to developing countries is conditioned to the implementation of policies prescribed by the Western donors (Leandro 2018, 75–76). Conversely, the Beijing Consensus entails a wider flexibility while being a soft power instrument, based on pragmatism, the principle of non-interference and the belief in partnerships to the detriment of alliances (*ibidem*). Along these lines, the EU-China SP has been frequently examined through the perspective of a socialization process conceived to accommodate an actor of a sheer political and economic weight in the international order due to the cultural and ideological differences (Paul 2016; Maher 2016; Smith 2016; Michalski and Pan 2017; Cottey 2019).

Bearing in mind the trajectory of the EU-China SP and the more recent experiences undergone by the two actors in their foreign and security policies, considerations on existing conceptual gaps and diverging worldviews represent only part of a broader picture. The EU is currently striving to consolidate its role as a security actor in the international arena, while facing multiple internal and external challenges such as the growing populism, the migration crisis, the uncertainty resulting from the Brexit process and the Trump administration's erratic foreign policy. On the other hand, China faces a trade war with the United States, while dealing with a “structural economic slowdown” and trying to manage the downsides of having an export-dependent economy (Geeraerts 2019, 154). Moreover, China deals with serious domestic problems. Among the most pressing are shortage of natural resources (Duarte 2017) and the storm of protests in Hong Kong that has emerged as a new challenge to China.²

Against such challenging backgrounds for both parties, the SP seems to constitute a stable platform in which the EU and China may be able not only to sustain converging stances and approaches, but also to discover new paths of convergence. As already mentioned, trade issues have

²Initially sparked by an extradition bill that would enable residents from Hong Kong to face trial in mainland China, this storm of pro-democracy protests has culminated in the local deepest political crisis in years.

been at the center stage of the SP. According to data made available by the European Commission, “China is the EU’s biggest source of imports and its second-biggest export market. China and Europe trade on average over €1 billion a day”.³ Nevertheless, given that both actors aim at improving their role as international security actors for the sake of enhancing their status and prestige, maritime security cooperation—that has not yet developed its full potential—emerges as a relevant field since it can contribute for increasing mutual familiarity and understanding.

Incidentally, much has been written about the economic and trade dimensions underlying the SP, and very little about security issues that should not be neglected (Kirchner et al. 2016) for at least two major reasons. Firstly, the absence of fundamental disputes regarding security issues between the EU and China, something which creates a window of opportunity for deploying joint efforts (Li 2016, 15; Dorussen et al. 2018, 289). Secondly, the growing interdependence between the two partners in the economic and trade areas, which has the potential to foster closer relations in other fields like security as a result of a spillover effect (Dorussen et al. 2018, 289).

EU AND CHINA IN MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION: EVOLUTION AND SEMINAL EXPERIENCES

As a field of study, maritime security cooperation provides substantive insights when it comes to analyze whether actors are able to work together over and above identity and political divergences, as in the case of the EU and China. This is so because, as Bueger observes, “maritime security is widely understood as a transnational task” and calls for “a shared responsibility and requires a new vision of collective security” (2015, 163). In order to understand the relevance of the MSRI in the EU-China maritime security cooperation, we will first outline the evolution of both the EU and China as maritime security actors during the last decade, look at how the bilateral cooperation has unfolded, and then proceed to discuss the impact of MSRI upon the EU-China maritime cooperation. The EU and China have been asserting themselves as important maritime actors, with anti-piracy operations being the main framework in

³See <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/china/>. Accessed: 26 August 2019.

which both actors have developed their maritime security approaches and profiles. Even so, recent official documents rarely mention direct cooperation between the EU and China in the realm of maritime security.

China's participation in the international coalition to tackle anti-piracy issues off the Coast of Somalia in 2009 is worth noting since it was a case without precedent in recent history (Lanteigne 2013, 291). In 2008, when the situation in Somalia worsened and the piracy activity soared, China supported the UN Security Council Resolution 1851, which legitimized actions that followed suit. This decision was of exceptional nature considering China's traditional profile as an international security actor and its deep-rooted defense of the principle of non-interference (Christiansen et al. 2016, 243–244). In fact, China's defense of non-interference has been at times compromised in the name of economic interests and its willingness to boost its participation in the international fora. An illustrative example of this is precisely China's actorness in Africa and its contribution to counter-piracy-related activities (Gottwald and Duggan 2012, 42–43). For its engagement in the aforementioned coalition, China took into account the fact that the government of Somalia consented to the operation. But the decision was largely taken by virtue of the perceived dimension of the threat and the high risk of deterioration of the security environment highly detrimental for Chinese interests. This is so considering the importance of the Gulf of Aden as a sea lane of communication (SLoC) to many Chinese ships which transport market goods to and from China (Lanteigne 2013, 295–296). At the same time, when deploying vessels in the Horn of Africa, China seized a timely opportunity to employ in an out-of-area operation its People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which had been—and still is—undergoing a modernization process. Thus, counter-piracy operations also provided PLAN with valuable experience and training (ibid., 297). It is important to highlight that China used its participation in international efforts to tackle piracy to improve its status as global security actor. It acted according to all the rules from the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) and protected non-Chinese ships under attack. Also, by taking part in this operation, the country has gained a timely pretext to justify its necessity of enhancing national military assets, which had been attracting external suspicion (e.g., the EU and United States). Overall, China seized this opportunity to promote its international image of a responsible power (Lanteigne 2013; Lin-Greenberg 2010, 220–221). Eventually, this has paid off since it was against this backdrop that, in

December 2010, China was asked to cooperate with the EU Operation Atalanta, by means of protecting naval units that carried cargo for the World Food Programme (Lanteigne 2013, 301). Despite, by then, the cooperative dynamics was somewhat timid, this particular experience was notably valued in the Chinese eyes. The defense paper issued in 2019 entitled “China’s National Defense in the New Era” (2019 White Paper), a long and detailed document addressing China’s account of international security and actions intended to tackle it, confirms it in the following terms:

Exchanges and cooperation in all areas are making sound progress. Targeting a China-Europe partnership for peace, growth, reform and civilization, China conducts security policy dialogues, joint counter-piracy exercises and personnel training with the EU. (PRC 2019, sec. 4, par. 9)

Likewise, in the “EU-China Summit Joint Statement” issued in the same year, the partners affirm that:

...the EU and China agree to reinforce cooperation and high-level exchanges on peace, security and defence, including on maritime security and counter-piracy, support for African solutions to African problems to maintain the peace and security in Africa, and information exchange on crisis management and UN peacekeeping operations. (European Council 2019, 7)

Over the last decade, China has been attempting to enhance its status as an international security actor. Howorth highlights that there is little question that the 2015 China’s Military Strategy (2015 White Paper) has committed the country to “a global military role” (2016, 156). This document underlines the need for “pragmatic military cooperation”, to deepen cooperative maritime security (PRC 2015b, sec. 6, par. 3) and asserts that:

Faithfully fulfilling China’s international obligations, the country’s armed forces will continue to carry out escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and other sea areas as required, enhance exchanges and cooperation with naval task forces of other countries, and jointly secure international SLOCs. (PRC 2015b, sec. 6, par. 4)

In light of BRI's ambition to restore the prosperous ancient times of the Chinese Silk Road, this role in maritime security has been recognized as a reminder of "the Ming Dynasty-era exploratory voyages in the Indian Ocean" (Lanteigne 2013, 291).

While China has been developing its maritime security role based on its own values, founded in its millenary culture (Economides 2018, 39), the EU has been promoting a Western value-based foreign and security policy, which came to include a maritime dimension. The first major sign of this was the Commission's "Green Paper Towards a Future Maritime Policy for the Union: A European Vision for the Oceans and Seas" published in 2006. The document was a move toward the design of an overarching maritime policy able to encompass all diffuse sea-related policies. Indeed, the aim was to put together an integrated maritime policy and to forge a European maritime identity (European Commission 2006). To this end, this first document launched a consultation process to stakeholders, which lasted a year and originated in 2007 an action plan, entitled "An Integrated Maritime Policy for the European Union". The latter emphasized not only the economic importance of the seas, but also sustainability and the need for cooperation with third states. Nevertheless, both documents addressed maritime security issues only marginally, in the form of references to surveillance activities intended to tackle piracy, trafficking of human beings, smuggling and illegal immigration (European Commission 2006, 26, 2007, 5).

Yet, since then, the importance of maritime issues in the EU agenda has grown. The EUGS and its extensive focus on various dimensions of security have reinforced the EU partners' expectations for the organization's action as a "global security provider" (European External Action Service 2016, 3). While elaborating on global governance, the strategic document has put forward the concept of "maritime multilateralism" and underscored the EU's intention to "act as an agenda-shaper, a connector, coordinator and facilitator within a networked web of players" (2016, 43). It is worth noting the importance that the EUGS gives to Asia, in line with the "Asian turn" (Ferreira-Pereira and Vieira 2017, 415) when affirming that European prosperity is dependent on Asia's security and stressing the relevance of connectivity and maritime capacity building in the region (European External Action Service 2016, 38–39).

Besides the evolution that was made between 2006 and 2016 at the declaratory level, one should stress other major ventures which,

in the meantime, have promoted the EU's maritime policy and actor-ness. Among these ventures, stand out the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR), also known as Operation Atalanta launched in 2008 in the Gulf of Aden and the EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia launched in 2015, in the Mediterranean. Another major development was the issuing of the European Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), in 2014 that has laid down the main principles, objectives and interests of the organization regarding maritime issues (European Council 2014a). Generally speaking, it has emphasized the importance of multilateralism, as well as rules and principles, pleading for abidance by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Interestingly, the document has acknowledged that "cooperation at sea between all actors involved has a positive spill-over in other policy areas" (European Council 2014a, 9). Even though this statement was originally directed at member states, the same reasoning can be applied to the EU's strategic partners, notably China.

Concerning Operation Atalanta, as some have pointed out, it was not a peace operation. The operation had the goal to protect World Food Programme units which transported food to Somalia. At the same time, it aimed at protecting maritime trade routes from pirates (Riddervold 2011, 386, 396). Moreover, this operation presented itself as a timely opportunity to expand the EU's foreign and security policies competences, while exploring maritime security as a form of power projection (Germond 2011, 567, 574). In a broader reading, the launching of Atalanta has been grounded on the EU's pursuit of geopolitical goals and on its claims of being a reference in tackling piracy threats (Germond and Smith 2009, 589).

The EU's experience as a maritime security actor has been reinforced by 2015 Operation Sophia, whose original purpose was to tackle the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. Like in the case of Atalanta, the objectives of this operation have been questioned. According to some observers, despite being firstly launched as a search and rescue operation, it evolved to be less concerned about human rights, than about "preventing migrants from coming to Europe" (Riddervold 2018, 168). This has reflected tensions between normative standards (i.e., promotion of human rights and rule of law) and member states' material interests concerning migration issues (Riddervold 2018, 171; Cusumano 2019, 118).

After outlining the general aspects related to the European and Chinese original cooperative rapport in the domain of maritime security and

ensuing seminal experiences, at this point of the study, attention should be given to the examination of their stances and strategies in light of the advent of MSRI. In 2017, China has published its “Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative” (i.e., 2017 BRI White Paper), which followed up a previous publication entitled “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” issued in 2015 (i.e., 2015 BRI White Paper). In these documents, China upholds its usual discourse of “win-win cooperation” in the sense of joining efforts to ensure the well-being of the world community. Both documents have underlined the general aspects of BRI, namely the need for coordinating policies and building consensus in order to improve connectivity; and also the ambitious objective of improving living conditions at domestic level within the countries envisaged by the initiative (PRC 2015a, 2017).

As mirrored by its title, the 2017 BRI White Paper has focused specifically on the maritime component of the BRI and the development of the blue economy; while calling for “pragmatic cooperation” (PRC 2017, sec. 3, par. 1). This document has set out five cooperation priorities, as follows: green development; ocean-based prosperity; maritime security; innovative growth; and collaborative governance. The “green development” priority addresses marine environment protection along with measures to tackle carbon emissions and climate change. The “ocean-based prosperity” involves fostering good practices of management regarding marine resources, including technical support, stimulating industry cooperation and tourism as well as improving connectivity. “Maritime security”, on its turn, is regarded as a core matter in order to safeguard the blue economy evolution and comprises “maritime public services, marine management, maritime search and rescue, marine disaster prevention and mitigation and maritime law enforcement” (ibid., sec. 4.3, par. 1). The document has stressed that China would honor its obligations as an international actor regarding the fight against crimes at sea by cooperating both in bilateral and multilateral levels (ibid., sec. 4.3, par. 2). The “innovative growth” entails the sharing of technological and scientific know-how as well as information and media cooperation on all matters regarding the sea. Lastly, “collaborative governance” relates to the framing of multilateral institutions to harbor the intended initiatives on maritime cooperation; and to the importance of trust-building through multilateral and bilateral cooperation.

The BRI in general, and MSRI in particular, constitutes a developing venture, given that “flagship projects are in diverse states of progress” (Duchâtel and Duplaix 2018, 11) and “China is learning and adapting as the Road project evolves” (Ghiasy et al. 2018, 3). Massive investment in hard infrastructure such as seaports—for civil and military uses—power grids, pipelines and railways has been planned, and it is deemed to be combined with soft infrastructure in the form of trade deals and creation of multilateral fora with the purpose of benefiting developing countries in Asia and Africa (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 226–227; Duarte 2017, 34). In order to provide funding to ensure the materialization of all those projects, China has created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF), among other funding frameworks (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 228).

According to Blanchard (2017, 251), one can identify soft and hard narratives connected to the MSRI. Indeed, when examining the MSRI one can identify these narratives translated concretely into a softer and a harder agenda. What can be referred to as the softer agenda has been structured around the official discourses and documents previously outlined (i.e., 2017 BRI White Paper and 2015 BRI White Paper). By means of the MSRI, China envisages the achievement of multiple goals, among which stand out the provision of an alternative able “to challenge and corrode ‘Western-centrism’ and balance it with a China-led economic order” (Ghiasy et al. 2018, 9), as well as the promotion of the Beijing Consensus. At the same time, one cannot escape to the fact that China also regards MSRI as a project by means of which the country intends to promote its own material interests beyond its borders (Duchâtel and Duplaix 2018, 28). In this regard, a harder agenda can be related to a realist outlook of EU-China cooperation in the framework of MSRI. China’s action(s) tend to be inspired in its own history, when it reigned as the world’s largest naval power during the fifteenth century. The country is aware that a strong maritime influence is a fundamental aspect for projecting world power (Ghiasy et al. 2018, 4). Hence the growing Chinese investments in the modernization of its naval force (Duchâtel and Duplaix 2018, 27).

It should be also noted that the MSRI has been designed to “sustain and boost China’s growth” (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 229) by providing outlets for Chinese products surplus, improving trade relations with Western countries and developing Chinese provinces and cities like Xinjiang (ibidem). Stability and the welfare of the people are among China’s core interests; thus, ensuring food and energy security is of paramount

importance. Besides this, the MSRI has also the objective of amplifying China's logistic possibilities and resilience due to the country's dependence on maritime chokepoints, such as Malacca Strait and Panama Canal to receive a high percentage of its food and oil imports. The fact that both of these chokepoints are under US Navy surveillance posed a significant challenge to China (Ghiassy et al. 2018, 7). Overall, the MSRI is closely linked to China necessity of securing resources, connectivity and market access, which are critical for sustaining economic growth as well as political and social stability.

China's investment in improving PLAN capabilities and assertiveness regarding the Chinese claims over South and East China Sea (SCS) disputed waters has increased uncertainty, even pushing member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)⁴ to get closer to the West (Duarte 2017, 259; Cottey 2019, 11–12). In effect, SCS is a pivotal matter in Chinese maritime security agenda given its major economic and geostrategic importance. This area is a valuable source of resources, as well as an essential sea lane for transporting goods. Not unsurprisingly, in 2016, China rejected a decision adopted by the International Court of Arbitration based on the UNCLOS, which was linked to territorial disputes with the Philippines. Other similar disputes have involved Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei (Ghiassy et al. 2018, 19–20). Related to this, China has resorted to the MSRI as a platform for enhancing its economic and political clout, and building a trustworthy environment. Given the importance of the SCS, ASEAN member states have played an important part in such a strategy (ibid., 8–9). Consequently, ASEAN has received wide attention on the 2017 BRI White Paper (PRC 2017) and, more recently, on the 2019 White Paper (PRC 2019). As a result of this, initiatives designed to foster cooperation with ASEAN and ASEAN member states have flourished.⁵ That being said, a purely *realpolitik* reading of the BRI

⁴ASEAN is a concert of Southeast Asia nations, which currently reunites ten member states: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Source: ASEAN Web site. <https://asean.org/asean/about-asean/overview/>. Accessed 24 August 2019.

⁵The most illustrative examples are the following: China-ASEAN Cooperation Framework, the China-ASEAN Marine Cooperation Center, and the East Asian Ocean Cooperation Platform, not to mention MOUs and joint statements for ocean cooperation with Thailand, Malaysia and Cambodia (PRC 2017). Besides this, China and ASEAN conducted a joint maritime exercise in October 2018, the first ever held, are advancing with

scope and purpose(s) has been consistently denied by China (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 234).

In the framework of EU-China relations, the SCS has been a point of friction, precisely because it involves a matter of rule of law and the EU has traditionally aligned itself with the United States on this matter (Cottey 2019). In effect, “official activities reveal that while Asia-Pacific maritime security issues have not traditionally penetrated far into EU policies, the SCS is one of the few exceptions” (Ghiassy et al. 2018, 36). Like the EUMSS, the latest revision of the action plan adopted by the Council in June 2018 does not make any mention to the initiative, nor to any cooperation with China—apart from a vague reference to “relevant partner countries”. Instead, it stresses the need for cooperation with ASEAN and NATO for a maritime rules-based order (European Council 2018, 3).

The EU has not, to date, issued a specific document on the BRI, neither more particularly on the MSRI. It has rather been working on the development of the “EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia” and the “EU Trans-European Transport Networks”, in order to increase synergies between BRI and a future similar EU strategy.⁶ Incidentally, China has welcomed the European strategy (European Council 2019, 6; Bratberg and Soula 2018, par. 14). This is so since the emphasis has been pragmatically placed upon connectivity for the sake of optimal connection flows in view of security concerns that are considered paramount. On its joint communication “Connecting Europe And Asia - Building Blocks For An EU Strategy”, the EU underlines the following correlation between connectivity and security:

the negotiations of a Code of Conduct (COC) and have in 2012 implemented a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) (PRC 2019). The DOC is available at https://asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2. Accessed 24 August 2019.

⁶The clear intention of the EU establishing an initiative of its own that would mirror BRI is implicit in the following excerpt: “Bilateral cooperation with individual countries should be adapted to their specific situation. For instance, with China, the EU should strengthen the existing cooperation *on the respective infrastructure and development cooperation initiatives*, promote the implementation of the principles of market access and a level playing field, as well as rely on international standards within initiatives on connectivity” (European Commission 2018, 7; emphasis added).

(...) Access to trade routes remains dependent on an adequate political and security environment and is subject to addressing challenges, such as transnational organized crime and any kind of illicit smuggling and trafficking, cybersecurity and attacks on transport and energy security. These challenges cannot be addressed solely through the internal or external policies of countries or entities (...). (European Commission 2018, 4)

By advancing its own strategy based on its core values, the EU wants to be able to promote connectivity in “the European way”, i.e., ensuring “procurement rules”, “social and individual rights” and “free and fair competition” (European Commission 2018, 2). This can be read as a direct message to China that the EU is forging an alternative to Chinese BRI-related initiatives and projects. In fact, it can be seen as a European response to BRI, in the sense that it gives the EU the opportunity to distance itself from China in aspects in which they disagree (Brattberg and Soula 2018, par. 14). In this context, the bottom line is that BRI, including the MSRI, has brought with it the prospect of further competition to the EU-China relations, despite Chinese efforts to deny and mitigate it continuously.

EU-CHINA COOPERATION IN LIGHT OF 21ST CENTURY MARITIME SILK ROAD: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As referred earlier, this study draws upon practice theory and two of Pierre Bourdieu’s “thinking tools”, namely “habitus” and “field” that are applied to the examination of international practices within the EU-China rapport in the realm of maritime security cooperation. For the sake of this study, the habitus corresponds to the set of dispositions that guide the agents’ practice and may vary according to their respective position on the field. They are historically incorporated and, thus, not intentional. In so being, the habitus can be seen as natural logics of action (Mérand and Pouliot 2008, 612–613).

When applied to international practices, the habitus is closely related to the concept of background knowledge, i.e., “dominant interpretive backdrop that sets the terms of interaction” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 17). Just as the habitus, the background knowledge is unintentional and yet it can change and evolve through interaction. It materializes through practices, i.e., “socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and

possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” (ibid., 4). Nevertheless, practices are not static. In other words, “the habitus is the origin of the practices that reproduce or change the existing structures of the field. These practices again shape the experiences of actors, form their habitus, and stabilize power structures in the field” (Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 455). Hence, practices can be transformed through an agent-structure joint movement insofar as the world is formed by countless “assemblages of communities and their practices that interact, overlap, and evolve” (Adler and Pouliot, 27). Amidst them, are different communities of security practices, such as the one formed by maritime security actors that interact with each other. Finally, it is also pivotal to have in mind that practices are relational.

Even though Bourdieu’s approach originally considers the concept of “habitus” as being more related to power and domination, than to the possibility of actual change (Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 455), here we adopt Mérand’s conceptualization as an actor’s “position and trajectory in a social field” (Mérand 2012, 139), by focusing on the habitus’ utility as the origins of practices. In this context, as a result of continued strategic interaction over time, the actors will eventually “cross-habitus”, meaning that they will be able to achieve a “deep understanding of each other’s position” (ibid., 144). Such strategic interaction that allows for cross-habitus will then generate new practices, i.e., will enable transformation (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 26). In this way, as Mérand puts it, “practices are generated by the schemes of perception and action that social agents have internalized by rubbing off shoulders with each other in a social field over a long period” (2012, 139), in other words, “a context in which learning is likely to result in the construction of common practices” (Geeraerts 2019, 156).

From these practices, in the long run, a community of security practice will have room and base to emerge. In this regard, “from the perspective of practice, what is important in terms of processes of (security) community-building is not that they first create a common identity, but whether actors learn to do something in a new way” (Bremberg 2015, 677). In other words, a community of security practice will always precede a common identity, if this is ever reached, as it is not a pre-condition for the assemblage of the community. Rather, what is needed is a mere “compatibility of values and mutual responsiveness” (ibid., 676).

Against this theoretical background, after having outlined and examined in the previous section the EU’s and Chinese stances and strategies in

light of the advent of MSRI, it is possible to assess the challenges and the possibilities for maritime security cooperation between the two actors in light of practices. Firstly, it should be stressed that when it comes to maritime security against the backdrop of MSRI, cooperation apart from practices is hard to achieve. At the political level, cooperation is limited insofar as each partner has its own strategy regarding EU-Asia connectivity. This occurs because the relationship in the realm of maritime cooperation is marked by reciprocal mistrust, as well as conflicts deriving from diverging background knowledge. In fact, from the EU's perspective, there is a clear "reluctance to accept Chinese terms of engagement on BRI projects" (Duchâtel and Duplaix 2018, 7), the MSRI included. Therefore, prevailing mistrust stands out as the first major challenge to the enhancement of EU-China cooperation.

The EU's mistrust vis-à-vis China has two main reasons. Firstly, there is a sheer impression that BRI is in fact about power projection, notwithstanding Chinese attempt to promote a benign narrative about its role in the world (Duchâtel and Duplaix 2018, 7). Secondly, there is the tangible experience of internal divisions within the EU caused by the BRI (ibidem). Examples include the accession of some member states to the AIIB without any prior coordination at the EU level (Fallon 2015, 146); and also the China and Central and Eastern European Countries cooperation framework (CEEC 16+1),⁷ that has raised criticism that "China was instrumentalizing the EU only when and where it sees fit" (Makocki 2016, 69). Those episodes have inspired the fear that China was adopting an approach to divide and conquer within the EU (Dempsey 2019; Cottey 2019); and this has further contributed to fostering mistrust in the relationship. Moreover, these illustrative episodes have made the EU realize the need for a coordinated and unified approach toward BRI, something that has now being addressed on the basis of the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia (Brattberg and Soula 2018).

This leads to the second challenge that links to the different ways in which both EU and China have engaged in BRI as well as in the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia, for that matter. The EU

⁷The framework involves cooperation in a wide array of areas between China and those countries, between EU member states and neighboring countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia). Source: CEEC Web site. <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>. Accessed 24 August 2019.

has been developing its own strategy not only because of the realization that it needed a unified approach, but also because of disagreements with China over practices and norms, which are grounded in diverging background knowledge/habitus. This has been an important reason for China engaging with member states separately, to the detriment of cooperating directly with the EU. China has initially perceived a bilateral approach with the EU as being problematic given its infrastructure financing operations that entail “state guarantees from the borrowing country and requires the direct award of a financed project to the Chinese companies, without an open and competitive tender” (Makocki 2016, 68). On the other hand, when it comes to financing rules, the EU upholds diverging practices, founded in diverging norms such as sustainability and transparency (Brattberg and Soula 2018, par. 9). However, China might eventually come to terms with the need to coordinate with the EU in those operations, even if as an interested party. For example, on the recent EU-China Joint Statement, there is a commitment to rules and principles, as well as the acknowledgment of the need to “comply with established international norms and standards, as well as the law of the countries benefiting from the projects, while taking into account their policies and individual situations” (European Council 2019, 6).

Along these lines, the EU-China maritime security cooperation resulting from MSRI is not likely to develop its full potential between at the highest political-diplomatic level. However, the situation might change if we draw our attention to the level of practice. The potential to build a security community exists if drawing on the practice theory, once we place emphasis upon practical cooperation such as information sharing, training exercises, expertise transfer and other types of practical interaction (Bueger 2013, 307).

In spite of the challenges above mentioned, the MSRI has widened the prospects for a common security agenda encompassing “economic avenues since the two are often wed” (Ghiassy et al. 2018, 46; Dorussen et al. 2018). Therefore, the MSRI has originated new opportunities for cooperation, which in future might well transcend maritime security *stricto sensu*. If the EU bets on a more practical approach, in line with the goal of promoting “maritime multilateralism”, it is likely to be able to expand its participation in the development of MSRI (Ghiassy et al. 2018, 46), especially through synergies with its own strategy. To this end, multiple areas present valid avenues of cooperation in multiple sectors, something that has to be harnessed by the two partners in

order to overturn criticism regarding the effectiveness of the existing SP (Hong 2018, 22). Among these sectors, the establishment of Special Economic Zones and joint ventures for working on infrastructure projects, development and sustainability (Ghiasy et al. 2018, 36 and 48) is a case on point. To this should be added anti-piracy initiatives, in which the EU and China have already cooperated, as previously discussed. Equally important, cooperation is also more likely where competition between the two actors is less prominent as in the cases of the Mediterranean as well as the Indian and Atlantic Oceans (Duchâtel and Duplaix 2011, 37).

According to Bueger, the emergence of a given security community depends upon three major aspects: “(1) the intensity with which actors engage and communicate with one another, (2) the degree to which actors securitize together and develop a common repertoire, and (3) the degree to which they engage in a common enterprise” (Bueger 2013, 299). From this, it follows that when considering the extent of the MSRI and the degree in which it will require the EU and China to jointly engage on several projects, the potential for such emergence of a security community does exist—even if the EU chooses to design its own strategy. Although we see two diverging habitus—with the EU putting forward the background of liberal order while seconding the Washington Consensus and China promoting the Beijing Consensus—each habitus will produce its own practices and undergo mutual pressures of change. Moreover, those differences between EU and China are not so important in the field of practice because, as previously mentioned, identity does not have to be common, only compatible, something that can be optimized through cross-habitus. Considering day-to-day practices between the EU and China, gaps linked to identity issues and diverging worldviews are not likely to cause incompatibility and hinder mutual interaction. Along these lines, if both EU and China take full advantage of opportunities created by the multiplication of contacts and exchanges as a result of increasing growing cooperation, “commonalities between the EU and China inevitably expand” (Hong 2018, 22).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have attempted to outline and appraise the evolution of the EU-China maritime security cooperation against the backdrop of the MSRI, taken here as an integral part of the BRI. Since 2003, the EU

and China have developed a SP, through which growing interdependence and socialization between the two actors has been gradually taking place.

China's recent leap to the position of a leading economic power, with the perspective of becoming a military world in the upcoming decades has raised suspicion within the EU. Such suspicion should be seen in light of the EU's transatlantic connections and concerns regarding Chinese investments across Europe and also claims regarding the South China Sea that could impact important sea lanes of communication essential to the EU's trade relations. Mismatches regarding background knowledge, encompassing the value-system, have contributed to intensify competition and mistrust in the field of maritime security—one in which each actor has invested significantly in recent years.

However, as this study has attempted to demonstrate, the development of MSRI has brought with it opportunities of further cooperation tantamount to the challenges. Such opportunities derive from the growing interaction required by the implementation of every project and negotiation, making it necessary for actors to interact not only on the highest politico-diplomatic level, but also at the level of strategic interaction through practices. Based on the concepts of cross-habitus and community of security practice, we have argued that the unfolding of the MSRI may be able to provide a wide field for cooperation, which over time may foster conditions for a transformation in patterns of practice. Consequently, over time competition in some instances may decline in favor of a more regular cooperative dynamics.

Although the existing gap between the EU and China over world-views will not go away any time soon, and the liberal values will prevail as the dominant norm system, the cross-habitus between the two actors has the potential to promote an increase of cooperation in the field of maritime security. Among practices, there is no need to share an identity, but only compatibility for cooperation to advance further. Both the positive evolution and record of the EU-China SP have given evidence of such compatibility that may allow the incremental bridging of the gaps which ultimately benefit the security cooperative dynamics.

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