**How does Europe (and the EU) fit into China’s strategic narratives? From “new type of great power relations” to “one belt one road”**

**Abstract**

The rise of China as a global power has significantly reshaped its global ambition. Under the leadership of Chinese president Xi Jinping, China has proposed a series of diplomatic initiatives – most notably “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road” – in order to shift the international order in its favour. How does Europe (and the EU) fit in China’s strategic narratives under the leadership of Xi Jinping? This article aims to address this question by analysing Chinese scholarly writings and conducting interviews in China. It also explores the evolution process of China’s strategic narratives with a focus on the gradual appearances of Europe. This article argues that the EU/Europe is a second order concern for China and Europe only plays a marginalized in China’s policy discussion. It suggests that appreciate this internal dynamics of China is essential for Europe to develop a more accurate understanding of EU-China relations.

**Introduction**

China’s re-emergence as a global power has significantly changed the international political landscape and its own view of global governance. As a result, we have witnessed a shift in China’s strategic narratives on global affairs. Since the Chinese president Xi Jinping took power in 2012, China has proposed a series of diplomatic initiatives – most notably “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road”. Both cases demonstrate China’s increasing global ambition to be a norm/system shaper rather than a norm/system taker. Needless to say, China’s strategic move has significant implications for the EU. This article studies China’s strategic narratives that underlie these two cases, with a focus on the role of Europe.

How does Europe (and the EU) fit in China’s strategic narratives in the cases of “one belt one road” and “new type of great power relations”? This article addresses this simple question by examining the domestic debates within China’s academic and policy community. It argues that the role of Europe is marginalized in China’s strategic narratives under Xi Jinping’s leadership. In this regard, there is a further declining interest in the EU within China’s strategic studies – it is important to note that this happens in the context that the EU has always been a second order concern for China.

Many China observers argue the EU-China ties are forming a “new axis in world affairs” (Shambaugh, 2004) and posing strong challenge to American national interests and the American-led unipolar world (Gill and Murphy, 2008; Kerr and Liu, 2005; Scott, 2007; Shambaugh, 2004). In line with those who are sceptical of the EU–China strategic alliance (Holslag, 2011), this article suggests that this is not the case. The EU-China tie is indeed conditional on the development of Sino-US relations. As I shall discuss in the article, this is due to China’s disappointment with the EU, led by its misperceptions about the EU’s inability to act as a coherent and independent global actor. In this regard, there is what is characterized by Hill (1993) as the “Capability-Expectations Gap” – the EU’s capability on the international stage is far short of others’ expectation of the EU. In the meantime, when China’s high expectations meet the reality of the EU’s capability in the broader context of China’s shifting international identity, they also significantly adjusts Chinese expectation. In other words, there is a matter of what Li Zhang (2016) called “reflexive expectation”– Chinese expectation of the EU has constantly varied according to shifting circumstances. In this regard, unlike the previous studies (Zhang, 2016), this article suggests that the “Capability-Expectations Gap” and “reflexive expectation” are not mutually exclusive in explaining EU-China relations.

Along the way, this article also explores the evolution of China’s strategic narratives, with a focus on the role of Europe. When new ideas are proposed by Chinese leaders, they are not always clearly defined (Zeng*, et al.*, 2015). Frequently, the substance of strategic narratives underlying Chinese-coined concepts is filled in by China’s scholarly and policy community in an incremental and subsequent manner. The process of filling new concepts with real meaning are also what has happened with the concepts of “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road.”

This article argues that there are three stages of constructing the strategic narratives of both “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road.” “New type of great power relations” has developed from a bilateral diplomatic initiative targeting China’s relations with all major great power (stage 1), to Sino-US relations (stage 2) and then back to China’s relations with all major great power (stage 3). While this concept refers to similar bilateral framework at stages 1 and 3, it is discussed based on a very different international identity of China and assessment of great power. “One belt one road” has evolved from a development strategy for Asia’s mainly China’s periphery countries (stage 1), to Asia, Africa and Europe (stage 2), and now all countries (stage 3). At stage 3, both “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road” suffer from the problem of over-generalization, and have thus lost the persuasiveness of their strategic narratives.

During the evolution of these concepts, the Chinese academic and policy community plays a key role in elaborating and steering strategic narratives. It is in this steering process that the EU/Europe has managed to be gradually placed into Chinese narratives. By analysing the Chinese scholarly writings and conducting interview with Chinese scholars and officials, this article will analyse this evolution process, with a focus on the gradual appearance of the EU.

**China under Xi and the role of Europe in China’s strategic studies**

Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, China has been experiencing ambitious reform programs. Domestically, Xi Jinping has introduced new institutions to centralize his power and break the informal rule of Chinese elite politics(Wang and Zeng, 2016). In the name of anti-corruption campaigns, a large number of senior officials have been arrested and replaced by Xi’s followers. Xi has also made impressive efforts to bring ideology and politicisation back to China. By putting forward these reforms, Xi aims to strengthen party cohesion and regime legitimacy. In the meantime, the shift of China’s grand strategy has also become obvious under Xi’s rule. It is argued that China’s grand strategy has now moved from “keeping a low profile” towards “striving for achievement”(Yan, 2014). Following this shift, we have witnessed the increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy in the South and East China seas, where China has been more willing to show off its military muscle. As a result, the tension between China and its neighbour (and the US) has reached a new level. This has worried many about the possibility of direct military conflicts, if not a regional war (Allison, 2015).

In addition to military strength, Xi has been more willing to take advantage of China’s economic power and build up discursive power. This is clearly demonstrated by Xi’s grand vision on “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road”. The former is originally proposed by Xi to re-define future Sino-US relations and thus seize the discursive power, while the latter is to use China’s economic power for its peripheral diplomacy and thus achieve geopolitical purposes. Obviously, Europe played no part in the original plans of these two Chinese strategies. Yet, as I shall discuss in this article, the strategic intentions of these two diplomatic initiatives have changed with their evolving narratives. It is in this process that Europe gradually took roots, however, the emergence of Europe does not change its marginalized place in China’s narratives.

In order to understand the marginalized role of Europe in China’s “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road”, it is important to note the broader context of Europe in China’s strategic studies. Europe used to play an important role in China’s policy and scholarly discussion. It was considered as the second most important pole in a multi-pole system that China aimed to push for. During Jiang Zemin’s term in the 1990s, China struggled to recover from the psychological shock of the collapse of the Soviet Unions and the protest of 1989, which almost led to the death of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The first priority at that time was to ensure the survival of the CCP. As a result, China was keen to maintain a favourable international environment in order to undermine external pressure and concentrate on domestic problems. In this context, the principal goal of Chinese foreign policy was to manage China’s relations with great powers (Shambaugh, 2011). While the US has always been the core of China’s diplomacy, Beijing had internal debates over whether other great powers such as Russia and the EU could play a bigger role in China’s strategic focus (Shambaugh, 2011).

During Hu Jintao’s term (2002-2012), China further integrated into the global system, and its interests became more diverse. While big-power diplomacy remained important, China started to pay more attention to its periphery and multilateral platforms, as demonstrated by the four principles of China’s diplomacy under Hu: “big powers are the key; China’s periphery is the priority; developing countries are the foundation; multilateral platforms are the stage” (Ding, 2011; Sun, 2014; Zhang, 2009). As a result of China’s increasingly diverse diplomatic needs, Europe attracted less attention in China’s strategic thinking – despite Hu Jintao being keen to improve the EU-China ties (Lanteigne, 2016).

The “Capability-Expectations Gap” perhaps happened most obviously in the second half of Hu Jintao’s term, due to the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent Eurozone crisis. On the one hand, the financial crisis situated China as the focus of the world and significantly shifted China’s international identity. At the time, China suddenly realized that it could play a central role in global governance – although it still had faith in the multiple-polar system, and publicly rejected the idea of G2 at the time. Meanwhile, the subsequent Eurozone crisis disappointed many Chinese EU experts. To some extent, it also marginalized the role of China’s EU experts and moved them away from the center of China’s decision-making.[[1]](#footnote-1) These two dynamic changes have significantly reshaped China’s expectations in regards to the EU’s capability as a global actor. As a result, the reflexive expectation (i.e. changing Chinese expectations of the EU) further marginalized the role of the EU in China’s strategic thinking.

This, indeed, reflects China’s misperceptions of the EU in two respects. First, generally speaking, China had overestimated the EU’s capability. There was a high expectation of the role of, for example, the Euro in global finance. Thus, the gap between the EU’s capability and China’s expectation enlarged the shock of the Eurozone crisis and China’s disappointment in regards to the EU. Second, China misperceived the EU’s capability to develop an independent and coherent position in global affairs. This is quite understandable, given that the EU has kept trying and failing to develop such a position. The failure to get rid of the EU’s arms embargo to China in 2004-2005 is an example. While the efforts of France, Germany, and other EU members to persuade the EU raised Chinese expectation, their failure also intensified the sense of disappointment. In this case, the influence of the US led many to doubt the capability of the EU, and further shifted the focus of China’s strategic thinking on the US – while there is a clear recognition of such a constant factor in China (Dai, 2010b; Jin, 2015).

Notably, China is also to blame as it has taken advantage of disagreements within the EU in order to maximize its interests. Frequently, China has used its economic leverage to divide European countries, thus preventing the EU from developing some sort of unity of, for example, its human rights approach to China. While China manages to divert European governments away from the Dalai Lama and Tibet issue, it also has weakened the EU’s cohesion. So the point to emphasize here is the gap between China’s expectation and the EU’s actual willingness and ability to act as an independent and coherent global actor. This is precisely why we have not witnessed the coming of a new axis in the world, as claimed by many (Scott, 2007; Shambaugh, 2004).

The outcome of “reflexive expectation” has been most obvious during Xi Jinping’s leadership. Unlike his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping is more comfortable with direct interactions with the US and to some extent less committed to the idea of a multi-polar international system (Lanteigne, 2016). In addition, the Ukraine conflict in 2014, which harmed both the strength of the EU and Russia has further undermined China’s confidence in a multiple-polar world. As I shall discuss later, the Chinese discourse of “new type of great power relations” indicates China’s move towards the idea of G2 and the bi-polar system - which it clearly rejected in 2008. Clearly, the EU is left behind in such circumstances.

It is also important to distinguish the role of Europe between economic and geo-political aspects. In geopolitical terms, many including China’s EU experts agree that Europe is secondary to China – the central focus would no doubt be Sino-US relations and China’s peripheral strategy.[[2]](#footnote-2) According to a prominent EU expert, if the EU is not a whole, none of a single European country is more important than, for example, Australia. [[3]](#footnote-3) In a broad sense, the latter could be included in China’s peripheral strategy.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, when it comes to economic aspects, it is widely agreed that Europe is no doubt important given its status as China’s largest trading partner. Nonetheless, according to some Chinese scholars, economics and trade are stable factors, while geo-political factors are much more dynamic. [[5]](#footnote-5) Chinese leaders have to pay more attention on the latter. As such, despite its economic importance, Europe has not been a central focus of China’s policy discussion.

In short, the marginalized role of the EU in China’s strategic thinking is mainly the result of interaction between the “Capability-Expectations Gap” and “reflexive expectation”. The following section will explore the marginalized role of Europe in China’s expanding narratives of “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road” under Xi Jinping’s leadership.

**New type of great power relations and Europe**

“New type of great power relations” is perhaps the first defining diplomatic initiative proposed by Xi Jinping. Indeed, it was first mentioned by Xi when he was still the Vice-President of the People’s Republic of China during his trip to Washington in early 2012. Xi Jinping subsequently reiterated the concept during high level meetings between the US and China. For example, during his meeting withThomas Donilon, National Security Advisor to the U.S. President, Xi said that:

“Both sides should, from the fundamental interest of the people of the two countries and of the world, join the efforts to build up China-U.S. cooperative partnership, trying to find a completely new way for the new type of great power relations, which would be unprecedented in history and open up the future”(Zhao, 2013).

Notably, Xi is not the first Chinese leader to mention this concept. It was discussed during the term of Xi’s predecessor Hu Jintao. Both Hu Jintao and the then state council Dai Bingguo mentioned this concept in 2012 (Glaser, 2012) and 2010 respectively (Dai, 2010a). Even before Hu Jintao, this concept appeared in China’s diplomatic initiatives. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Hu Jintao’s predecessor Jiang Zemin proposed a new type of great power relations with other great powers – mainly US and European countries (Jiang, 2006:546). Nonetheless, the underlying message of using this concept has been very different now from that of Jiang’s era, a point that we shall return to soon.

Nowadays, the core message of the new type of great power relations is to avoid potential conflicts within Sino-US relations. This also goes back to realist thinking. Power transition theory, for example, argues that a rising power and existing hegemony hardly settle with peace. According to John Mearsheimer (2014b), a rising China and a declining US will engage in security competition in East Asia with great potential for war. This may be summarized as “Thucydides trap” – a story derived from the Athenian historian Thucydides about a rising Athens challenging the ruling power of Sparta in ancient Greece. Many argue that China and the US may be very likely to fall into this “Thucydides trap” (Allison, 2015).

This pessimistic view of China’s rise is not only germane academic domains – it is so influential that Xi Jinping directly responded to it. According to Xi Jinping, “we all need to work together to avoid the Thucydides trap — destructive tensions between an emerging power and established powers, or between established powers themselves” (Berggruen and Gardels, 2014). The idea of new type of great power relations is built precisely on this basis, with the good will to avoid the “inevitable” conflict between China and the US.

In this concept, “new type of relations” narrative contrasts with the old/traditional type of relations described by the literature of power transition theory, security dilemma and “Thucydides trap” (Allison, 2015; Holslag, 2015; Kirshner, 2012; Liff and Ikenberry, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014a). Not surprisingly, in Chinese discussions of new type of great power relations, the US has been the principle focus. A previous study analysed 141 articles in Chinese with “new type of great power relations” in the title, 72% of the Chinese writings only refer great power to the US (Zeng, 2016). The majority of Chinese scholars (68%) argue that avoiding ‘Thucydides trap’ between the rising power and the declining power is a key reason for establishing a new type of great power relations (Zeng, 2016).

In essence, “new type of great power relations” includes three key principles: “mutual trust” “no confrontation” and “win-win”. However, all these principles are quite vague, and lead to the overall vagueness of its narrative. In addition to the strategic deliberation of keeping such vagueness, a key reason for this is the nature of constructing Chinese strategic narratives underlying its diplomatic initiative (Zeng, 2016). When the idea of new type of great power relations was proposed by Xi Jinping in 2012, it was not clearly defined at all. The process of filling it with specific substance happened in a subsequent and gradual manner. During this process, it has shifted from China’s unique bilateral relations with the US towards China’s relations with all great power. After all, these relations may also fit in to the principles of “mutual trust” “no confrontation” and “win-win” – their vagueness also helps. This provides the EU with an opportunity to jump into the narrative.

Indeed, despite the contemporary focus on the US, Europe is embedded in the narratives of new type of great power relations in explicit and implicit ways. Europe is the historical origins of the “Thucydides trap”, which this Chinese concept is built upon. More importantly, European countries have occupied a relatively central place in the Chinese discourse of great power. The traditional Chinese understanding of great power principally focuses on “Western traditional power”. This includes the US, Russia and European countries (e.g. France, the UK and German). Similarly, when the idea of new type of great power relations was put forward in 1990s by Jiang Zemin, European countries such as France, the UK and German were the principal focus. At that time, China still had high expectations of Europe in building a multiple polar world.

As mentioned, unlike his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping is more interested in directly interacting with the US and to some extent less committed to the idea of a multi-polar international system. Indeed, a key school of thought in the new type of great power relations discourse is to promote a revised version of “G2” or “G2 with Chinese characteristics” (Zeng and Breslin, 2016). Some Chinese scholars implicitly and explicitly suggest a Chinese version of bi-polar system in which the international system is mainly governed by the US and China. Wu Xinbo, for example, argues that China’s new type of great power relations is a “new type of bi-polar relationship” which provides a foundation for “the US and China to co-govern the world” – despite the fact that this governance model may be disliked by others such as the EU and Russia (Wu, 2014:37). In this regard, traditional powers such as Europe and Russia have become less relevant in Chinese narratives of global governance.

Not surprisingly, in contemporary discussions regarding new type of great power relations, only 8.51% see the EU as being a great power, less notable when compared to individual countries like Russia, Japan and even India (Zeng and Breslin, 2016). A distinct feature of the discussion is moving from traditional Western power especially the European countries, towards an emerging power such as BRICS. Needless to say, the rise of BRICS in the Chinese discourse of great power is made at the expense of “traditional Western power”, especially the EU.

Although the mainstream view argues that only the US can be considered as a great power in China’s new type of great power relations, a few insist that the EU may fit in (Cui, 2015). It is worth mentioning here the varying way that China’s EU watchers and China’s international relations experts understanding the EU. The former have a better understanding and sometimes higher expectations of the EU than the latter (e.g. see Chen, 2016) – especially China’s US watchers, who are the mainstream and loudest in China’s strategic studies. Needless to say, in the case of new type of great power relations, the mainstream approach especially China’s US experts, does not pay much attention to the EU, while those EU experts and Chinese officials whose work is close to Europe seek to insert Europe into China’s narratives – although their voice is not loud enough to influence the mainstream view. The U.K. Ambassador Liu Xiaoming (2013), for example, proposes establishing a new type of great power relations between China and the UK in public. However, his call has not aroused a sufficient response (Zeng, 2016).

**Table 1: The evolution process of “new type of great power relations”**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| New type of great power relations | Stage 1 | Stage 2 | Stage 3 |
| Time period | Late 1990s and early 2000s | 2010-2014 | 2013-present |
| Leadership | Jiang Zemin | The later term of Hu Jintao - early term of Xi Jinping | Xi Jinping |
| Target | China’s relations with all great powers; mainly traditional Western power including the US, UK, France, German, Russia, and Japan | Sino-US relations only | Mainly Sino-US relations but also refer to China’s relations with all great powers; traditional Western power including the US, the EU, Russia; rising power mainly the BRICS |
| China’s own international identity | A normal power | No.2 power (second only to the US) | A leading rising power |
| The role of Europe | A principal role (perhaps second only to the US) | No role | A marginalized role |

Overall, as Table 1 shows, there are three stages of China’s new type of great power relations. The first stage is around the 1990s when Jiang Zemin used this concept to refer to China’s relations with all major powers (mainly traditional Western power). Here, Europe includes the largest group of members that China aimed to work with. Afterwards, this concept become quiet in China’s official and scholarly discussion for almost a decade until the second stage, in which Xi Jinping referred to Sino-US relations. Xi’s call for new type of great power relations immediately evoked enormous academic interest in this topic within China. By then, its narrative was to avoid the so-called “Thucydides trap” about the potential conflict between a rising China and a declining US. Europe obviously played no part in this narrative.

The hot debate about this concept soon brought it into the third stage, in which it was generalized within China’s relations with all great powers. To some extent, this was quite similar to the first stage, as both are about China’s relations with all great powers in the world. However, they are based on very different Chinese evaluations of its own role and others. At the first stage, the narrative of this concept was based on China’s identity as a normal power who wished to improve relations with the similar (if not more) powerful traditional Western power. On the contrary, at the third stage, mainstream discourse is based on China’s identity as a global power or perhaps No.2 power (second only to the US). In addition to China’s shifting international identity, its assessment of great power has also changed. At the first stage, “great power” mainly referred to Western traditional power, and European traditional power was the largest audience. However, at the third stage, while the EU remains, the Chinese view of great powers starts to shift away from traditional Western power (especially Europe) to emerging power, such as BRICS.

Following new type of great power relations, one belt one road is another major strategic initiative proposed by Xi Jinping’s leadership. There are also three evolution stages to one belt one road: from Asia (mainly China’s periphery countries) at stage 1 to Asia, Africa and Europe at stage 2, and now all countries at stage 3. The following section will explore the evolution of this concept at these three stages.

**“One belt one road” and Europe**

“Silk Road Economic Belt” and “the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route Economic Belt” were first proposed during Xi’s state visits to Kazakhstan in September of 2013 and to Indonesia in October of the same year. This is often compared with the US-led Marshall Plan that aimed to revive Western Europe in the post-World War II era (Chen, 2014; Shen, 2016). It is considered by many as China’s response to the current American-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (Shen, 2016; Ye, 2014).

At first, one belt one road was clearly a development strategy for China’s periphery diplomacy. During China’s first-ever “work forum on diplomacy to China's periphery” in October 2013, Xi Jinping noted that since the 18th Party Congress in 2012, the Chinese government has highlighted the importance of periphery in China’s overall development and diplomacy. As Xi elaborates, China

“should focus on maintaining the peace and stability of its *periphery* and promote win-win and mutual benefits. It should actively participated in regional economic cooperation; accelerate interconnectivity of infrastructure and establish *‘Silk Road Economic Belt’* and *‘the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route Economic Belt’*” (emphasized added by the author)(Xinhua, 2013).

Following Xi’s tone, the report of the CCP’s “major issues concerning comprehensively deepening reforms” noted that China “should establish financial institutions for development, accelerate interconnectivity of infrastructure with *periphery* countries, advance the establishment of *Silk Road Economic Belt* and *Maritime Silk Route Economic Belt*” (emphasized added by the author).

The above speech and document demonstrate that one belt one road was clearly proposed for China’s periphery diplomacy. The strategic goal of this initiative was to put periphery diplomacy into practice. Given the geographic distance, Europe had no role to play in this initiative. Put simply, Europe was not a part of the plan. This is further demonstrated by EU-China exchange at the time. One belt one road was not mentioned at all during the 16th EU-China Summit held in Beijing in November 2013 (and its subsequent “EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation”) as well as the Meeting of Heads of Government of China and Central and Eastern European Countries held in Bucharest in the end of November 2013 (and its subsequent “the Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries”).

With the development of “one belt one road” strategy, this concept had been filled with more substance. This led the concept to evolve into the second stage. It was in this process that Africa and Europe gradually took root in this plan. This became obvious in early 2014. In March 2014, the Chinese deputy minister of foreign affairs, Zhang Yesui, publicly stated that the purpose of one belt one road was to connect Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Western Asia and even a part of Europe (Li, 2014). Here, he only mentioned a part of Europe, which left the question of which European countries were considered.

In June 2014, the Joint Document of China-Central and Easter European Countries Ministerial Meeting on Promoting Trade and Economic Cooperation stated that China and the relevant European countries should “seize the opportunities in the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road”(China-CEEC, 2014). This document confirmed that at least a part of Europe was in. However, this also left a potential governance problem for the EU. If only a few European countries were to join one belt one road, China would only negotiate with individual European countries rather than the EU as a whole. This would no doubt touch upon the autonomy of European countries to make independent foreign policy out of the EU framework.

This also exposes a structural problem of the EU. It is not very clear how the existing bilateral investment treaties of the member states can be multilaterised to EU level. Despite the creation of the role of Vice-President of the EU and a foreign policy institution in the European External Action Service, member states still retain control of their own foreign policy, as traditionally defined. This is more obvious when it comes to dealing with China, as they tend to compete with each other –which also gives China an opportunity to manipulate the EU’s internal divisions by using its economic leverage. In mid-2016, the European Parliament voted not to grant market economy status to China. Yet the actual impact of this decision is questionable given the complicated governance framework of the EU. The structure of the EU would no doubt make its participation in China’s one belt one road more complicated.

This is more messy and confusing when it comes to China’s perceptions of the EU. When discussing relevant issues, Chinese scholars do not often differentiate Europe as some undefined entity, the EU and European nation states. To some extent, there is a lack of understanding on the difference among these three reference points and their specific role and responsibility. This is quite understandable, as there is perhaps a staggering lack of understanding of these sorts of issues in Europe itself. In short, if the already complicated governance problem were to meet China’s insufficient understanding of the EU system, it would only bring more complexity and ambiguity.

To return to the development of the one belt one road, in March 2015, China announced the official document of one belt one road “Vision and proposed actions outlined on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, in which it was stated that “the Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is designed to go from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other” (China, 2015). Since then, the roles of Europe and Africa in this one belt one road have become clear. However, it still remained vague whether the entire EU were included in the one belt one road or not – if not, how would China bypass the EU and directly negotiate with individual European countries? By early 2015, the expanding narrative of this initiative at the second stage was concluded with an already broad range: Asia, Africa and Europe. At this stage, this concept had already become too broad to be meaningful. The strategic value of being included in the one belt one road was undermined by its overwhelming expansion.

Afterwards, this concept was further filled with more substance, which started the third stage. During his visit to the UK, Xi Jinping (2015) publicly stated that one belt one road was open and all countries that were interested in it could join. After Xi’s statement, the discourse of one belt one road has essentially included all countries – for example Australia, Brazil, Peru that had nothing to do with China’s ancient Silk Road (Wang, 2016). This might solve the problem of only a few European countries being included in the original Silk Road, and others not. In this revised plan, the entire EU can fit in like all countries do. However, this has again undermined the strategic value of being a part of, as it is no longer exclusive. As many Chinese scholars have stated, when one belt one road includes everything, it becomes nothing (Yan, 2015). It gradually lost the persuasiveness of its narrative during the process of expanding substance. Its historical link with ancient Silk Road, for example, becomes meaningless when the current plan has nothing to do with its historical origins.

In short, as Table 2 shows, there are three stages of the one belt one road strategy. Its original plan in the late 2013 was about periphery diplomacy, which the EU was not a part of. Afterwards, in early 2014, it started to include Africa and Europe – or perhaps more accurately, a part of Europe. In late 2015, China opened the membership of one belt one road to all countries. Nonetheless, the developing initiative of one belt one road has not changed its very nature. As confirmed by one of my interviewees in Beijing, periphery diplomacy has always been the “core” of one belt one road. In this regard, Europe has never occupied a central place in this one belt one road strategy.

**Table 2: The evolution process of “one belt one road”**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| “One belt one road” | Stage 1 | Stage 2 | Stage 3 |
| Time period | Late 2013 – early 2014 | Early 2014-early 2015 | Early 2015 - |
| Target | Asia mainly periphery countries | Asia, Africa and a part of Europe | All countries |
| The role of Europe | No role | A marginalized role;  A few European countries were considered as the terminus of this plan | An average role; the entire EU could fit in like all countries (do) |

**Concluding remarks**

The rise of China has been significantly reshaping the current international order. Xi Jinping’s leadership in particular is more willing to promote China’s favourable changes in the international arena. As the key diplomatic initiatives of Xi’s China, the cases of “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road” provide us with an opportunity to observe the shifting Chinese strategic narratives and their perception of the EU. Unlike those who suggest “a new axis” formed by the EU-China ties, these two cases point to a rather deflating reality for Europe: the EU does not command a great deal of attention in China’s strategic narratives, as it did before.

The declining influence of EU-China relations is a result of a two way street. On the one hand, the domestic turmoil of the EU – especially the Eurozone crisis and refugee crisis – and its direct conflict with Russia over Ukraine crisis has made the EU less capable of providing global leadership. The decreasing interest in the EU within China’s strategic community is a simple reflection of the relative decline of the EU and the effects of “Capability-Expectations Gap”. On the one hand, the rise of China has diversified China’s diplomatic needs. The increasingly diverse interests of China have forced it to move away from simplified great-power focused diplomacy towards a more comprehensive one. In this regard, China is still learning to be a global leader. Meanwhile, the shifting international identity of China has further pushed the process of “reflexive expectation” and thus its perceptions of the EU.

In order to promote an international order that works in its favour, China has been actively advocating new diplomatic initiatives to better use its economic power and build up its discursive power. The creation of “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road” demonstrates China’s determination to move from a norm/system taker towards a norm/system shaper. Yet as this article shows, the current narratives of both “new type of great power relations” and “one belt one road” suffer from the problem of being overloaded – they become far too broad to be meaningful. When the “new type of great power relations” are extended from Sino-US relations (stage 2) to China’s relations with all major powers (stage 3), its original narratives – “to avoid the potential conflicts between the rising power and the existing power” –gradually become irrelevant. As such, this Chinese-coined concept has failed in its strategic value of being a useful tool to redefine Sino-US relations in China’s favour.

Similarly, the strategic value of “one belt one road” has gradually depreciated when it evolves to be an exclusive development strategy for periphery countries at stage 1, for Africa, Asia and Europe at the stage 2, and for all countries at stage 3. When the membership of “one belt one road” is open to all countries, it degenerates into a slogan without any real practical meaning or guiding significance. In short, the strategic ambiguity of elaborating its diplomatic initiatives and overloaded diplomatic vision indicate that China still needs to make a considerable efforts to construct a convincing and sound narrative.

Indeed, being over-generalized/loaded is a common problem of China’s political concepts (Zheng, 2016). When the top leader proposes a new concept, different actors within and without the political system tend to fill this concept with substance and meanings that work in their favour, so that they could take advantage of this new concept in order to gain maximum resources and interests. As Scott Kennedy states, “it’s like a Christmas tree. You can hang a lot of policy goals on it” (Clover and Hornby, 2015). In this regard, China needs to differentiate its diplomatic priority and better manage different demands within its political system. For the EU, it is essential to appreciate this internal dynamics of China in order to develop a more accurate understanding of China’s diplomatic initiatives. As the largest economy in the world and the largest developing power, both the EU and China have powerful incentives to make these relations work. Finding a common strategic narrative together may be the way out.

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2. Interview conducted between 11-20 June 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interview conducted between 11-20 June 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interview conducted between 11-20 June 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Interview conducted between 11-20 June 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)