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Published in:
International Relations

DOI:
[10.1177/0047117815600933](https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117815600933)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Gaenssmantel, F. (2015). Interpreting change: international challenges and variations in foreign policy beliefs as explanations for shifts in China's policy towards the European Union. *International Relations*, 29(3), 395-409. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117815600933>

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Interpreting change: International challenges and variations in foreign policy beliefs as explanations for shifts in China's policy towards the European Union

International Relations

2015, Vol. 29(3) 395–409

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DOI: 10.1177/0047117815600933

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Abstract

This article examines why and how China upgraded its engagement with the European Union (EU) in the years between 2001 and 2004, with reference to pre-existing foreign policy traditions and practices in reform-era China. It argues that most of the observed changes can be explained with reference to two dynamics. First, the changing international environment, mostly with regard to the roles of the United States and the EU, challenged the established approach to foreign policy inherited from Deng Xiaoping, China's pre-eminent leadership figure from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. In this sense, the shift towards the EU was part of wider efforts to solve this dilemma. Second, differences in how various groups in the Chinese foreign policy establishment understood and implemented Deng's guidelines and their respective influence in policy-making can help to grasp some of the more specific developments in Chinese policy towards the EU in the early 2000s. To supplement this main claim, the article also critically evaluates the changes less well explained by these two dynamics and proposes additional explanations.

Keywords

China–European Union relations, Chinese foreign policy, Deng Xiaoping, European Union, market economy status, *realpolitik*, United States–China, US foreign policy

Chinese foreign policy towards the European Union (EU) underwent considerable change in the years from 2001 to 2004, when the EU became one of China's most important international partners. This article will examine why and how this shift came

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about against the backdrop of pre-existing traditions of thinking about and making foreign policy in China and related policy practices. 'Tradition' here does not refer to the legacies of imperial China but rather to sets of ideas about foreign policy that emerged during the reform period after 1978 and are part of the historical and social context within which policy-makers are socialised.

The analysis will be based on the interpretive approach as outlined in the introduction to this special issue which may, at first sight, appear ill-suited to account for change because of its emphasis on history and tradition. However, the focus on 'situated agents' in devising and executing foreign policy strategies (see the introduction for an overview of situated agency in this research programme) means that the interpretivism on offer here stresses the innovative potential of human agency, especially when policy-makers are faced with dilemmas that arise from tensions between a changing environment and their established ideas and practices. While human agency is located, *in primis*, at the individual level, it may also be intersubjective, for example, when groups, such as ministerial or party departments, develop new policy proposals. Therefore, change is also possible when there are variations between the traditions and practices of different groups of decision-makers. In this case, shifts in their respective influence in the decision-making process can lead to changes in policy output.

This means that the interpretive approach usefully accommodates two different accounts of change. On one hand, there is change flowing from efforts at dealing with an evolving international environment – an external impetus. On the other hand, there is the capacity for internally driven change based on altered dynamics between groups of decision-makers within a given political system. This article will argue that a study of both can help us explain China's changing policy towards the EU between 2001 and 2004. International developments around the turn of the twenty-first century challenged some of the basic foreign policy tenets inherited from Deng Xiaoping, as well as the ways in which they had been implemented during the 1990s. Changes with regard to the EU thus happened in the context of larger adjustments in Chinese foreign policy. At the same time, differences in how various groups in the Chinese foreign policy establishment understood and implemented Deng's guidelines and their respective influence in policy-making can help to grasp some more specific developments in Chinese policy towards the EU.

This argument will proceed in three stages. The first section will describe the changes in China's policy towards the EU between 2001 and 2004. The discussion will then turn to the Dengist foreign policy tradition, how it was challenged by changes in China's international environment, and what this meant for China–EU ties. The third section will address adaptations within the Chinese political system – that is among the key groups of actors involved in the foreign policy process – and identify how these dynamics affected China's relations with the EU. The concluding remarks will summarise the article's main findings, reflect on the interpretation of the changes in China–EU relations in the early 2000s considered in the article and assess the scale of the adjustments in the traditions and practices of Chinese foreign policy.

Tracing change: China's shift towards the EU

In the first years of the new millennium, remarkable change occurred in China's foreign policy, as Chinese foreign policy elites increasingly turned their attention towards the

EU.¹ Bilateral relations had been severely disrupted as a result of the violent repression of pro-democracy demonstrations in China in 1989 but then regained momentum in the mid-1990s. Beijing was no doubt pleased with its progress in overcoming the post-1989 isolation. Nevertheless, it remained lukewarm about relations with the EU as a whole and tended to focus on bilateral relations with individual member states instead.² This stance changed rapidly from 2001 onwards, and by 2004, the EU had moved to 'the top of the Chinese leadership's international agenda'.³ The shift became manifest in 2003 when the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) described the EU as a 'major force in the world' in *China's EU Policy Paper*, the first white paper on relations with a specific country or region ever published by the Chinese government.⁴ It was also visible in the ever more ambitious language China agreed to use for its relations with the EU, a process that culminated in the establishment of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in 2004.⁵ This rhetoric is significant in that China had previously reserved the term 'strategic' to its relations with the two former superpowers.⁶

This general turn towards the EU was accompanied by a series of adjustments in the way China handled and presented two crucial issues on its diplomatic agenda towards the EU. The first concerned China's pursuit of formal recognition as a market economy. Market economy status (MES) was first placed openly on China's diplomatic agenda towards the EU when Prime Minister Zhu Rongji brought it up at the China–EU summit in September 2002.⁷ This sets the stage for Chinese trade officials to push persistently for MES in their interaction with the European Commission. In late 2003, China started to target individual member states as well.⁸ This wider approach reached its climax in May 2004 when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited five EU countries as well as the EU institutions and forcefully promoted China's desire to gain recognition as a market economy. The way MES was perceived in China also underwent change. Until 2002, the issue appeared largely as a technical matter that posed specific challenges to Chinese companies, as evidenced in articles of the *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China.⁹ With Zhu Rongji's initiative of 2002 China started to emphasise fairness and respect for trade rules, and MES developed into a top trade issue related to fundamental norms of the World Trade Organization (WTO). By 2004, it was increasingly seen as something rightfully due to China on the basis of its economic reform achievements and hence an issue that went to 'the heart of how Beijing views its position in the world trading system'.¹⁰

The second issue concerns China's effort to convince the EU to lift the arms embargo that it had imposed after the repressions of 1989. Again, it was during Prime Minister Zhu's visit to Europe in September 2002 that the issue was first raised explicitly by the Chinese. The arms embargo, however, was not mentioned at the Fifth China–EU summit in Denmark on 24 September 2002 but in the course of Zhu's visit to France 4 days later. For the next year or so, Chinese efforts to have the arms embargo lifted remained targeted at France. A departure from this approach became visible in October 2003 when China included the arms embargo in its policy paper on the EU. This started a period in which China put pressure on all authorities within the EU, including both member states and EU institutions.¹¹ The presentation of the arms embargo also changed over time. In 2002, Zhu Rongji explicitly linked the lifting of the ban to a potential increase in commercial exchanges between China and France.¹² China's 2003 Policy Paper then pointed to benefits in terms of 'greater bilateral

cooperation on defence industry and technologies'.¹³ As in the case of MES, in 2004, Beijing started to express a growing sense of entitlement. On one hand, Chinese officials claimed that the arms embargo did not conform to the new comprehensive strategic partnership; on the other hand, the continuation of the embargo was termed 'political discrimination'.¹⁴

External dimension: international challenges for Chinese policy-makers in the new millennium

These changes took place in the context of shifts in international affairs that directly concerned China and challenged some ingrained beliefs and practices of Chinese foreign policy. Since the beginning of 'reform and opening up' in the late 1970s, China sought to move away from the Maoist legacy of foreign policy. In the early 1980s, the new paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, coined two terms that would become central for China's understanding of international affairs and its foreign policy. First, while acknowledging that 'there is still the danger of war', Deng emphasised that 'the forces for world peace are growing', which made it possible for developing countries such as China to pursue economic development.¹⁵ This assessment was summarised as 'peace and development', a bold shift away from Mao Zedong's emphasis on 'war and revolution'.¹⁶ Second, Deng replaced the anti-Soviet rapprochement with the United States in the strategic triangle of the 1970s with an 'independent foreign policy' that would no longer 'play' either the US or the Soviet Union 'card'.¹⁷

The terms 'peace and development' and 'independent foreign policy' have remained key components of virtually any programmatic declaration on foreign policy ever since, as, for example, in the reports presented by the General Secretary of the Communist Party to National Party Congresses every 5 years.¹⁸ Their analytical assumptions and normative prescriptions have become central to an understanding of the web of beliefs holding together what can be termed the Dengist foreign policy tradition. The resulting policy practices have generally been oriented towards attenuating tensions, promoting economic development and pursuing diplomatic strategies that go beyond the bipolar superpower rivalry of the Cold War era. Unsurprisingly though, as they have been passed on from generation to generation of policy-makers, the specific interpretation and implementation of these principles have repeatedly been adapted in reaction to international developments.

An important period of adjustment occurred in the challenging years around 1990. After the repression of 1989, most developed countries which had previously played a central role in China's economic development strategy interrupted bilateral relations with Beijing. At the same time, many fellow communist regimes disappeared, leaving China with limited international support.¹⁹ In reaction to these constraints, Deng Xiaoping proposed a calm, low-profile foreign policy that would allow China to make some progress despite the adverse international situation. Chinese leaders of the post-Deng era have continued to emphasise this idea, although in recent years its exact meaning and usefulness for China have been hotly debated.²⁰

What were the policy practices that emerged from the combination of the older ideas of 'peace and development' and an 'independent foreign policy' with the new notion of

keeping a low profile? In the early 1990s, China engaged in so-called 'peripheral diplomacy' (*zhoubian waijiao*) focussed on improving relations with neighbouring states. The aim was to enhance regional stability and to work towards overcoming China's post-1989 isolation.²¹ From the mid-1990s onwards, 'great power diplomacy' (*daguo waijiao*) was added to this approach, with the purpose of building mutually beneficial bilateral 'partnerships' so as to 'increase [China's] leverage over those who could be the weightiest members of any hostile coalition' but at the same time 'retaining flexibility by not decisively aligning with any particular state or group of states'.²² In this context, President Jiang Zemin started to prioritise the building of a 'constructive strategic partnership' with Washington in an effort to cope with continuing US dominance in global politics.²³ Finally, to attenuate apprehension over its assertive stance on Taiwan and its fast economic growth, Beijing enhanced its involvement in multilateral settings towards the end of the decade, both in the region and globally, in order to demonstrate responsible behaviour and to reassure the international community.²⁴

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, this practice and some aspects of the Dengist foreign policy tradition were challenged by several external factors. First and foremost, it turned out that the United States was by no means the kind of strategic partner President Jiang had hoped for. A key dilemma in this connection arose in April 1999 when US President Bill Clinton rejected as insufficient a Chinese offer for a bilateral agreement on China's WTO accession that was considered as extremely generous in Beijing and delivered personally by Prime Minister Zhu.²⁵ The resulting tensions were soon reinforced by a 'harder' security problem: in May 1999, during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air strikes on Serbia, the United States bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. This triggered an extensive debate within the Chinese foreign policy establishment about the validity of the 'peace and development' dictum. The conclusions stopped short of reversing Deng's basic assessment but included important qualifications.²⁶ Significantly, 'peace and development remain the trend in international relations'²⁷ as international tensions were perceived to be easing and as economic globalisation continued apace. However, this was accompanied by the view that '[h]egemonism and power politics are on the rise, [t]he trend towards military interventionism is increasing, and [t]he gap between developed and developing countries is increasing'.²⁷ In the aftermath, both the Chinese and the US military enhanced their preparations for a potential war with each other.²⁸

China-US relations took an even sharper turn for the worse in 2001. The new George W. Bush administration adopted a rhetoric of strategic competition rather than partnership, proposing plans to develop theatre missile defence in East Asia which made China fear for its deterrence capability. Bush also took a rigid diplomatic stance after the collision between a US spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet near China's Hainan Island in April 2001.²⁹ Although the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 prompted some cooperation between Washington and Beijing in the fight against international terrorism, US preparations for a war on Iraq and the decision in 2003 to wage war without approval of the UN Security Council deepened suspicions between the United States and China.³⁰ This had a double effect. First, as a vocal critic of the US stance, China moved to the centre of global affairs and away from the low-profile tradition. Second, the aggressive US stance again sparked a wide discussion among foreign policy-makers and

consultants in Beijing, this time with the conclusion that US unilateralism needed multipolar balancing and that the EU was a promising partner in this undertaking, given the transatlantic disagreement on the Iraq war.³¹

Aside from the tensions in China–US relations, the EU itself was also changing in a way that attracted the attention of Chinese policy-makers. Four of these changes stood out. First, since the mid-1990s, the EU had shown greater ambition in promoting its relations with China. For Beijing, it was obvious that the Europeans were eagerly waiting for a more forceful and substantial Chinese reaction to their advances. Second, in 1999, the Treaty of Amsterdam entered into force, creating the office of High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In Beijing's eyes, the appointment of former Spanish Foreign Minister and NATO General Secretary Javier Solana lent prestige to the post and gave more credibility than before to the EU's capacity to exert its presence internationally through joint foreign policy activity. Third, the bilateral negotiations that led to a China–EU agreement on China's WTO accession in May 2000 had created an impression of EU strength and unity in Beijing.³² Chinese trade diplomats had mostly focused on the talks with the United States and were surprised about the tenacity with which EU negotiators pushed a number of European priorities. Fourth, Chinese exports to Europe almost tripled in the second half of the 1990s, while exports to the United States (at that time still China's top trading partner) only doubled.³³

These changes in China's relations with the United States and the EU, respectively, also created some very concrete dilemmas that directly influenced China's handling of the MES issue and the arms embargo. Aside from status per se, MES took on significance in the context of the anti-dumping rules of the WTO because it is generally easier to abuse anti-dumping for protectionist purposes and impose high duties on imports from non-MES countries.³⁴ Therefore, increasing exports to the EU meant that the growing trend in EU anti-dumping duties against China risked causing greater economic damage. This was most certainly a motivator for China to seek a better position in anti-dumping investigations by asking the EU to grant it MES. In the military sector, China had been placing growing emphasis on enhancing its capabilities since the mid-1990s, not least in reaction to the rising tensions with the United States.³⁵ In this context, arms imports played a crucial role, and here, China felt disadvantaged due to its increasing dependence on Russia and the lack of advanced technologies.³⁶ For both concerns, Beijing would have welcomed the lifting of the EU's arms embargo.

This means that external challenges and the resulting dilemmas can explain why Chinese foreign policy-makers shifted their attention to the EU and also increased their efforts on MES and arms embargo during the early 2000s. However, some of the more specific developments in China's perception and handling of these issues cannot be accounted for, particularly Beijing's growing sense of entitlement to have them resolved in a manner that suited Beijing interests so strongly. It is also difficult to see, in terms of diplomatic tactics, why China should have focused only on France at the beginning of its attempts to have lifted the arms embargo or why later on Beijing targeted the European Commission although it has no competence in the security policy field. Similarly, it remains unclear why China insisted so much on bringing MES up with all EU member states, although EU rules requested a Commission initiative and qualified majority voting in the Council. To more fully account for these developments, we need to look to processes of Chinese foreign policy-making, and this is the theme of the next section.

Internal dimension – differences in understandings of the Dengist foreign policy tradition

If the external challenges and the dilemmas they created for Chinese foreign policy-makers cannot fully explain the changes in China's relations with the EU in the years 2001–2004, a closer look at shifting dynamics within the Chinese foreign policy-making process may well provide further insights. Given the nature of the Chinese political system, openly competing traditions, as, for example, those associated with different political parties in a democratic system, are unlikely. It is possible, however, that the various institutions or groups that contribute to the Chinese foreign policy process understood and implemented the Dengist tradition differently. This section corroborates that this indeed was the case in the years under scrutiny, meaning that shifts in the respective influence of different individuals and groups within the Chinese foreign policy process led to a series of practices that in turn adapted the broader Dengist foreign policy tradition.

There is wide agreement among scholars that throughout the 1990s, Chinese foreign policy was largely based on a *realpolitik* approach to international affairs, privileging power political and material considerations over explicitly ideological or ethical considerations in foreign policy-making.³⁷ How did this relate to Deng's foreign policy guidelines? First, if peace and economic development were seen as possible and necessary, these goals were linked to mutual respect for sovereignty and depended on the pursuit of international cooperation in what appeared a 'competitive and relatively dangerous world'.³⁸ Second, although China had joined more and more international organisations since the early 1980s, and stepped up its multilateral activity since the mid-1990s as described above, it remained 'ambivalent, if not suspicious, of global governance'.³⁹ Therefore, Beijing's independent foreign policy remained built on the development of bilateral ties. Finally, in terms of China's 'low profile' strategy, the focus was on what this would allow China to achieve in the medium to long term, in the sense of increasing its relative power and gaining a more influential position in the international order.⁴⁰

This *realpolitik* version of the Dengist foreign policy tradition may be considered the mainstream position among Chinese officials at the time.⁴¹ The most influential stronghold of this attitude was certainly the small foreign policy elite at the apex of the foreign policy machinery, including top officials from the MFA and the few members of the State Council and the Politburo with a foreign affairs remit who participated in the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group (*zhongyang waishi lingdao xiaozu*).⁴² This group plays a key role in foreign policy decision-making as it controls the flow of information between the top leadership, especially the Politburo Standing Committee as final decision-maker, and the MFA. But it is likely that similar views were dominant among many officials of the Ministry, whose senior and/or retired diplomats regularly served as advisers to the Leading Group.⁴³

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the *realpolitik* approach was shared by all groups involved in the foreign policy process or that there were no variations on this theme. This is evident in diverging opinions on Europe in the early 2000s. On one hand, 'the leadership had never taken the European integration process very seriously' and 'could not see why the EU should be considered an important political player in its own right'.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the views expressed by policy consultants in academia and think-tanks tended to emphasise the potential of a united Europe as an influential actor in

a future multipolar world. They implied that Beijing needed to help strengthen Europe in its integration efforts as a means of balancing against US power in the international system. These ideas can be traced back to Chinese efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to engage with Western Europe and promote European integration in the European Economic Community (EEC), in the hope that this would have a balancing effect on superpower rivalry and lead to a more multipolar international order.

In those years, Chinese diplomats surprised their European colleagues with enthusiastic encouragement of further integration, especially their attempts to widen integration from economic to the political and defence fields.⁴⁵ However, this fervour faded in the course of the 1980s, not least because the stagnation of European integration ('Eurosclerosis') shattered hopes of any significant progress even among Europeans themselves. Scholars in Chinese universities and think-tanks, by contrast, remained more alert to the potential for further integrative initiatives in Europe.⁴⁶ Among these 'Europe watchers', the EU's enhanced diplomatic efforts towards China in the second half of the 1990s were greeted with excitement, and they celebrated the potential for China–EU cooperation in a multipolar future.⁴⁷ It is in this intellectual environment that the reconsideration of China's foreign policy in 2002 and 2003 took place. It was also a time when a process of 'corporate pluralisation' in the Chinese foreign policy process led to an enhanced role of expert advice.⁴⁸ This meant that scholarly writings and think-tank reports played an important role in the re-orientation of Chinese foreign policy in the early 2000s. They provided the analytical repertoire and the vocabulary for the shift of China's foreign policy towards the EU.⁴⁹

While this emphasis on the importance of the EU as a partner for China in a multipolar world can be seen as variation on the *realpolitik* version of the Dengist foreign policy tradition, other groups involved in the Chinese foreign policy process showed even greater propensity to depart from Deng's guidelines. In contrast to the realist mainstream, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC) and its successor since 2003, the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), had developed a comparatively liberal worldview.⁵⁰ Since the early 1980s, they had been in charge of matters that were at the heart of China's policies of 'reform and opening up', and their officials 'believed that China should engage actively in international trade and that at least some competitive pressure was good for the Chinese economy'.⁵¹ At the same time, this was 'less than pure market liberalism', as, for example, membership of the WTO was pursued 'to create a strong Chinese economy and thereby to strengthen the Chinese state'.⁵² As compared to the *realpolitik* version of the Dengist foreign policy tradition, here the emphasis shifted to the possibility and necessity of bilateral and multilateral cooperation to achieve development in an increasingly interdependent world. In this context, an independent foreign policy could be seen as a way of enhancing opportunities for cooperation, while a low profile helped to avoid the politicisation of economic matters.

This approach to Deng's heritage may be called the 'development sub-tradition'. With regard to the EU, it implied a better understanding of European integration due to the pragmatic openness of MOFTEC–MOFCOM officials to the benefits of multilateral cooperation. They had also had the chance to accumulate extensive experience in dealing with EU bodies rather than member states. With commercial policy delegated to the supranational level, the natural contacts for China's commercial policy-makers had

always been the European Trade Commissioner and the Commission's trade officials. More concretely, the China–EU Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation of 1985 had set up an institutional framework that guaranteed regular meetings between the two parties. This suggests the potential for an alternative explanation of the changes in China's handling of MES between 2001 and 2004. The issue was originally firmly in the hands of the MOFTEC-MOFCOM, whose officials interacted with their counterparts in the European Commission. In 2002, Zhu Rongji's initiative reflected this pattern by bringing up the issue during the China–EU summit but not in his meetings in France. However, once the leadership had decided to enhance its diplomatic efforts towards Europe (after the foreign policy debates of 2002 and 2003), the MFA became progressively involved in presenting the MES request to European partners. In line with the preference for bilateral relations in this ministry and among the foreign policy elite, this implied increasing attention to the EU's member states rather than to the Commission alone. The first signs of this appeared in December 2003 when China's new Prime Minister Wen Jiabao actively requested German support in pushing the EU towards recognising China as a market economy.⁵³

A last factor that helps to understand the changes in China's policy towards the EU has to do with differences between the leadership generation under President Jiang and Prime Minister Zhu and their successors Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao who took over in the years 2002 and 2003. The shift towards the EU started during the very last months of the old leadership, during Zhu's trip to Europe. Now, if Jiang had been a promoter of better relations with the United States, the new President Hu had the reputation of favouring Europe over the United States, and consequently, the cultivation of China's EU diplomacy continued under his watch.⁵⁴ The new leadership then embedded China–EU ties in a diplomatic strategy that went well beyond the great powers and sought to enhance relations with many other states and regions around the world, including Africa and Latin America.⁵⁵ This meant that the China–EU 'comprehensive strategic partnership' had become the building block of a new foreign policy programme, which would suggest that the Hu–Wen leadership gave a much wider meaning to the idea of an independent foreign policy, in that it reached out beyond the great powers and China's periphery. In addition, the new leadership also placed more emphasis on status-related issues. China's standing in international affairs has been a central theme in Chinese foreign policy since 1949, in reaction to the preceding 'century of humiliation'.⁵⁶ This intensified under Hu and Wen with the launch of a 'multipronged approach to boost China's status in the international community',⁵⁷ an indication of progressing detachment from the low-profile principle. The insistence from 2003 onwards that MES was 'due' to China as an equal member of the WTO and that the arms embargo constituted discrimination can be linked to Beijing's greater sensitivity to China's status in the international community in the period under investigation.

To summarise this section, internal dynamics of the Chinese foreign policy system, related to the influence of different groups of decision-makers and their respective understandings of the Dengist tradition, provide some additional explanatory perspectives on the timing and nature of China's shift towards the EU in the early 2000s. First, the wide debate on its basic foreign policy orientation from 2002 to 2003 constituted a chance for the scholarly community of 'Europe watchers' in China to promote the EU as a partner

and influence a foreign policy elite previously reluctant to engage with this international organisation. Second, with regard to MES, the fact that the MFA got more and more involved meant that its bilateral preferences led to a diplomatic strategy targeted also at EU member states. Finally, the leadership change in 2002 and 2003 may have further enhanced the significance of the China–EU comprehensive strategic partnership and led to a growing emphasis on status in both the MES and arms embargo issues.

Conclusion

On the basis of the interpretive approach, this article has shown that two different dynamics of change shaped the adjustments in Chinese foreign policy towards the EU in the years 2001 to 2004. First, it has argued that the deteriorating relations with the United States challenged Beijing's previous practice of great power diplomacy with a focus on relations with Washington and that changes in the perception of the EU's global standing and economic importance for China helped to shift the attention of Chinese foreign policy-makers towards Europe. In addition, the EU's growing importance as a destination for Chinese exports motivated Beijing to pursue MES, while China's military modernisation drive and its dependence on Russian defence imports nurtured the desire to overcome the EU's arms embargo. Second, major strategic developments in China's policy towards the EU in these years can be linked to differences in beliefs and practices between several groups involved in the foreign policy process. Policy consultants in academia and think-tanks managed to promote the EU as a partner among a foreign policy elite who had previously been reluctant to engage decisively with Europe. Furthermore, the involvement of the MFA on MES introduced its focus on bilateral relations to an issue that had previously been handled by MOFTEC-MOFCOM through their established contacts with the European Commission. Finally, under the Hu–Wen leadership, relations with the EU became a key element of a new, wider diplomatic strategy, while a new emphasis on China's international 'status' influenced the way both the MES and arms embargo issues were presented to the EU.

A few aspects of the shift towards the EU have not been covered above. Why did China initially concentrate its efforts on the arms embargo on France alone? This is a tricky detail that does not fit easily into a study of the dilemmas raised by external challenges or alterations to the policy process studied under the heading of internal dynamics. Certainly, the strong personal ties between Chinese President Jiang Zemin and French President Jacques Chirac played a role but possibly also the French elections in May 2002, in that they brought to an end the Jospin government, which had had tense relations with China.⁵⁸ Also, it has not been explained why China approached the European Commission with the arms embargo request, although the Commission has no authority in this policy field. A possible explanation has to do with the Chinese foreign policy process.⁵⁹ While working-level officials in the MFA had excellent knowledge about the EU and its institutions, such knowledge was scarcer the more one moved up the ladder of hierarchy towards the top leadership. Yet, the endeavour to enhance relations with the EU and to place particular emphasis on the arms embargo via stronger contacts with EU institutions came from the very top, and therefore, it took some time for the

MFA to elaborate and implement a more adequate strategy based on special presidential envoys sent to member state capitals.

What does all this imply for an interpretive assessment of the evolution of the Dengist tradition of Chinese foreign policy in the reform period? The three dictums ('peace and development', an 'independent' foreign policy and a 'low profile' foreign policy) were not overhauled, but all were debated, re-interpreted and adapted in some crucial ways. 'Peace and development' was repeatedly challenged and adapted. The first reappraisal occurred in the aftermath of the Belgrade embassy bombing in 1999. Later developments such as the Iraq War, the global economic crisis since 2008 and the Arab Spring from 2011 presented further opportunities to reconsider this tradition in the face of international dilemmas facing China. Nevertheless, the basic idea that peace and, therefore, development are possible remains a crucial element in Chinese foreign policy thinking. The idea of an 'independent' foreign policy was also re-interpreted, not only in that the focus of great power diplomacy shifted from the United States to the EU, but after that through the development of a broad diplomatic strategy that went far beyond the previous practice of peripheral and great power diplomacy to embrace virtually every region of the world. The most visible developments, however, occurred with regard to the 'low-profile' concept. Both China's stance against the Iraq War and the quest for 'status' initiated by the Hu–Wen leadership already showed a readiness to adopt a more assertive stance in international affairs. However, the expectations and fears that China's growing resources and capabilities have created have also fuelled an intense debate, both in China and elsewhere, as to whether the idea of keeping a low profile is still adequate as a guiding principle and descriptor for China's foreign policy practice. It is on this theme that a more explicit departure from the Dengist foreign policy tradition may already be in the making.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Unless noted otherwise, the following overview is based on Frank Gaenssmantel, 'Chinese Diplomacy towards the EU: Grand Vision but Hard to Manage', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 5(4), 2010, pp. 379–403.
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