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Role conflict, its compromise, and the European Union's public diplomacy in China

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ABSTRACT

Informed by role theory in international relations, this article argues that there is a role conflict between the European Union (EU) and China over the concept of 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE). This conflict has triggered a process of compromise in EU–China relations that is carefully managed by both parties. China filters the EU's role-projecting efforts in the country, whereas the EU attempts to gain recognition for its international role by selecting feasible approaches and channels to interact with China. As a result, the EU implements its public diplomacy (PD) in various channels to engage with Chinese society. In addition to conventional PD methods of publicity activities and cultural and educational exchanges, the EU targets technical professionals, elites, and policymakers in China through its various bilateral cooperation programmes with the country. As such, the EU's PD in China has become narrowly focused on social and technical elites, and it is unable to directly engage the general public in China. Therefore, the short-term impacts and implications of the EU's PD in China are generally indirect and difficult to measure.

KEYWORDS

CFSP; EU–China relations; European Union; role conflict; public diplomacy

Introduction

In line with its overall engagement strategy, the European Union (EU) has consistently implemented public diplomacy (PD) in its interactions with China, aiming to engage Chinese society at large. However, this raises a key question: how does the EU conduct its PD efforts in China, given that the country is a growing world power that is always closely guarding against foreign influence? Motivated by the self-role conception of 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE; Manners 2002, 2006), we argue that the EU aspires to exercise its normative influence via its PD towards China. Nevertheless, the EU suffers a severe intra-role conflict over NPE, as the EU and China have diverged from each other in terms of their respective role conceptions of the EU. Specifically, the EU attempts to achieve recognition of its NPE role in a target country, such as China, but China has resolutely resisted and rejected the EU's altercasting efforts to treat China as normatively inferior. This role conflict has triggered a formal and informal process of managed compromise by the EU and China, as both parties are motivated to sustain mutually beneficial relations. Due to this dynamic, the EU's PD in China has been subject to a combination of processes: a process of 'filtering' by China of what it regards as unwelcome EU influence in its own geographic region and a process of 'selecting' by the EU of its approach to interacting with China. Consequently, in addition to conventional PD channels, the EU has

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selected and established bilateral cooperation programmes as a major route for the delivery of its normative PD in China. Much of the EU's PD efforts in China are therefore conducted in the 'disguise' of technical cooperation programmes.

Most studies on the EU's PD focus on its internal processes, in particular its institutional arrangements, whereas mainstream studies on EU–China relations focus almost solely on political and economic relations generally (Michalski and Pan 2017b; Jianwei; Wang and Song 2016). We contribute to this special issue on the EU's PD efforts around the world by delineating the policy processes of the often-neglected dimensions of the EU's PD efforts in China. Theoretically, we also apply role theory to studying PD, which shows how role conflict and its resolution by compromise can constrain and enable international actors' PD behaviours and reveals the consequences of these effects. Overall, we aim to increase the understanding of EU–China relations and the process and impacts of the EU's PD, with reference to the general Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU and its normative/soft power abroad.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the second section, we review previous studies on debates regarding the EU's international roles, recent foreign policy agenda, and EU–China relations. We find that the examination of the EU's PD in China has been neglected in studies of these aspects of bilateral interactions between the two parties. In the third section, we describe a role theory framework and argue that role conflict constrains the practical application of the EU's PD, particularly in authoritarian societies. However, we find that compromise of such role conflict enables limited PD efforts to be performed in such societies. In the fourth section, we briefly summarise the EU's PD in China and then describe how compromise of role conflict between the EU and China over the EU's NPE role influences China's filtering of the EU's PD and the EU's selecting of PD channels in China. In the fifth section, we discuss the EU's PD in China in the specific channel of bilateral cooperation programmes. In the final section, we give our conclusions regarding policy implications for the EU's image and its relations with China.

EU's international roles and PD

The EU's international role has been debated since Duchêne proposed the concept of the 'Civilian Power Europe' (CPE) role in 1972 (Orbie 2006). The ongoing debate has generated various other conceptions of the EU's role in the world, including the NPE concept, the enriched CPE (Orbie 2006), 'ethical power Europe' (Aggestam 2008), 'market power Europe' (Damro 2012), and 'global power Europe' (Rogers 2009). NPE has received the most academic and policy attention. It describes the EU's ability to shape the conceptions of 'normal' in international relations (Manners 2002) and consists of the normative bases of the treaties of the EU, such as peace, liberty, democracy, and respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law (Manners 2002). The CPE role is 'an actor [who] uses civilian means for persuasion, to pursue civilian ends' (Smith 2005). The CPE role shows the preference of using non-military and economic methods to promote cooperation, equality, justice, and tolerance to targets of the EU's foreign policy (Smith 2005).

NPE differs from other role conceptions of the EU in that it stipulates methods of norm diffusion and the EU's role as the promulgator of these norms. For example, the EU's CFSP, security strategy,[1] and global strategy[2] have strong norm-driven foreign policy goals that can be achieved by the EU exercising its normative power, in addition to its civilian power. Hence, as noted by Michalski, the backbone and the goals of the EU's foreign policy are ideally normative (Michalski 2005, 127). Moreover, PD is an increasingly important part of the EU's general foreign-policy framework. According to the European Commission, the EU's PD is a 'long-term engagement aimed at building trust by engaging with the public in partner countries in a more meaningful way on issues that resonate most at the local level'.[3] That is, the aim of the EU's PD is to improve public perceptions of the EU in other countries, such as by increasing the public's understanding of EU views, policies, and priorities and by promoting the EU's values and interests. The targets of the EU's PD are various social groups, academics and students, policymakers, policy influencers and influence-multipliers, civil

societies and organisations, and cultural operators and artists.[4] The major PD channels and approaches include people-to-people exchanges, networking events, outreach activities, the empowerment of cultural operators, and the encouragement of collaborative activities.[5]

The EU's PD is an important channel by which it exerts its normative power, and NPE offers a lucid conceptual underpinning for the EU PD's vision and action. From an NPE perspective, the aim of the EU's PD is to diffuse the norms that constitute the EU's normative basis by engaging with the public in other countries. Manners and Whitman introduce the conceptual and theoretical framework of NPE to show how the EU's PD has been used in attempts to create audiences around the world who 'share the EU's hearts and minds' (Manners and Whitman 2013, 189). Specifically, they examine how the six ways of norm diffusion specified in the NPE literature (Manners 2002) apply to the EU's practice of PD. They argue that the EU's PD promotes the spread of the EU's values by creating EU value interpreters in other countries; maintaining interactions with these value interpreters via strategic communications; conducting institutionalised educational exchanges to ensure that these value interpreters obtain first-hand experience of the EU's values; transferring the EU's material and ideational assets to NGOs; conducting cultural diplomacy and in-country education; and directly constructing local culture by engaging civil societies and public services (Manners and Whitman 2013, 189–195). It is evident that these PD efforts have an explicit aim of shaping other countries' public conceptions of 'normal' in world politics.

However, the EU's practice of PD in the real world can be severely impacted by the unique characteristics of target countries, particularly those of China, which is a rising global power but also an authoritarian state. With very few exceptions (Tang and Dai 2010; Yang 2015), the recent literature on EU–China relations pays insufficient attention to the EU's PD in China. Instead, it focuses on bilateral interactions at the governmental level (Michalski and Pan 2017a; Telò, Ding, and Zhang 2018; Jianwei; Wang and Song 2016). This neglect of the EU's PD in China is at odds with the buoyant EU–China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, an important pillar of which is people-to-people exchanges. Moreover, given China's cautious attitude towards other actors' PD in the country, and China's strict guarding against foreign influences on its citizens, it is unclear how the EU's PD is conducted in China. We therefore analyse how the EU conducts its PD in China through the lens of role theory in international relations.

PD amidst compromised role conflict

Role theory in international relations offers rich conceptual repertoires on national role conceptions (Holsti 1970) for the self and the others, as well as the enactment of these roles in different situations that have descriptive and explanatory values to foreign policy analysis (Thies 2010, 6336). There are two approaches to role theory: the structural and positional approach (hereafter, positional approach), which regards roles as types of conduct that occupy certain positions, and the symbolic interactionist and cognitive approach (hereafter, cognitive approach), which regards roles as 'repertoires of behavior, inferred from others' expectations and one's own conceptions, selected at least partly in response to cues and demands' (Thies 2010, 6336). The cognitive approach holds that a corporate actor's roles include its self-role conceptions and others' role expectations in various situations. The positional approach considers self-role conceptions to be an actor's perception of its position relative to that of others (Harnisch 2011, 9–10), whereas the cognitive approach considers self-role conceptions to be an actor's self-identification of its behaviour with that of a socially recognised category of actors.

We believe that these two approaches to roles are inherently connected, because a socially recognised category occupies a social position that distinguishes itself from others. In this study, we adopt the cognitive approach to analysing roles because the EU's normative power and civilian power roles are self-identified socially recognised categories. We also use insights from the positional approach to illustrate how the normative power role differs from other role conceptions by occupying a different social position.

Empirical research using role theory does not examine PD, despite it being a topic that fits well into role theory's conceptual repertoires for analysing foreign policy. We thus posit that the rich conceptual repertoires of role theory can analytically elucidate the processes of PD. In role theory terms, PD can be understood as being foreign policy strategies and processes with which an international actor attempts to make its self-role conceptions accepted by others and to shape others' role expectations for the self, by engaging mostly social actors in other states. For example, assume state A self-conceptualises as a leading contributor to countering climate change. State A may thus engage environmentalists, NGOs, and media in state B to publicise state A's achievements in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainable development. As a result of such PD efforts, the general public in state B may recognise A's role as a leading contributor to containing global climate change. Public opinion in state B may then influence B's foreign policy towards A, such as in bilateral cooperation on green technology and sustainable development. State B may also expect A to enact a cooperative role with state B on climate change.

In the dyad of PD sender (state A) and target (state B) illustrated above, the goal of PD is to make the PD sender's (ego's) self-role conceptions recognised and accepted by the target (other, or alter). If this happens, the sender's self-role conceptions converge with the target's role expectations of the sender. In contrast, if they diverge, a conflict arises between the two parts of the role conception: this is defined as *intra-role conflict* – the conflict between the ego's self-role conceptions and an alter's role expectations for the ego (Harnisch 2011). The role conflict may evolve from ideational and discursive divergence to material disputes, with state A retaining its self-role conceptions and state B determined to resist and reject these. An escalation of role conflict may occur if A's self-role conceptions pertain to its foundational identity and are difficult to adjust to particular situations. In addition, B's role expectations for A may derive from B's perception of its own position relative to A in the hierarchical international order or from its embedded normative structure, which is not easy to change in the short term.

Nevertheless, it is probable that A and B will agree to alleviate and resolve intra-role conflict by means of compromise, provided that they are both motivated to maintain their ties and interactions. The compromise of role conflict implies that even if A's PD is destined to be constrained by B's rejection, both actors agree to contain the conflict. This often occurs in traditional intergovernmental diplomacy and can facilitate both actors to 'negotiate' their self-role conceptions and role expectations for each other in certain areas. Having obtained this role information, rational actors may make a compromise, such that they adjust their role conceptions in particular circumstances. Therefore, by a process of negotiation and bargaining, A and B may reach an equilibrium where A's self-role conceptions converge with B's role expectations for A by mutual concession. This path towards the resolution of role conflict can be tortuous, as disputes can escalate during the role bargaining process.

PD is an increasingly important complement or alternative to government-to-government diplomacy for resolving intra-role conflict. By engaging non-governmental actors in its target state (B), a sender state (A) tries to persuade the general public and major social actors in B to accept A's self-role conceptions. Such public perception and opinion on A in B can reach foreign policy decision-makers in B via democratic political institutions and processes, and thereby alter B's role expectations for and foreign policy towards A. Successful PD can thus help assuage role conflict between A and B, although it may take a long time for A to change public perception and opinion in B. Moreover, although unsuccessful PD is fruitless, it may not necessarily instigate disputes and tensions. Because PD is an exercise of soft power through socialisation rather than an exertion of hard power through coercion.

In practice, a state's PD in the presence of role conflict may encounter two main hindrances. First, the PD sender's access to the general public of the target state may be reduced. Second, even if the PD sender is able to engage the target state's citizens without obstacles, it is not guaranteed that public perception and opinion will reach the target state's foreign policy decision-makers and be taken seriously. Therefore, when conducting PD, foreign policy decision-makers and PD practitioners

must consider these two hindrances. This is because they can intervene in the relationship between intra-role conflict and the policy processes of PD in dyadic interactions between two actors. That is, when A suffers an intra-role conflict in its interaction with B, there are two ways it may conduct PD. First, if A has full access to B's general public and B cares about public opinion of its foreign policy, A will conduct PD to persuade B's citizens and other non-governmental actors to accept A's self-role conceptions. Such public perception and opinion can influence B's role expectations for A. Second, if A has limited access to B's general public (as B filters A's PD efforts) and B does not care about public opinion of its foreign policy, A will target carefully selected and malleable social groups in B that have access to and may be influential in policy-making circles. Consequently, the policy processes of filtering and selecting feature the PD practice in the second scenario.

Role conflict, filtering, selecting, and the EU PD in China

Role conflict

EU–China relations offer a vivid example of intra-role conflict. It is argued that although the EU has a self-role conception as a normative power, China does not readily recognise this role conception. It has at most a civilian power Europe (CPE) role expectation for the EU (Chen 2004), whereby it recognises the EU's status in the global economy and some other areas of a technical and functional nature. In role theory terms, the EU's self-role conception as a normative power potentially means it has a normatively higher social position or status to others (including China). In comparison, China's role expectation of the EU as a civilian power gives the EU a normatively equal position or status to others (Hong 2010; Zhang 2008). This cognitive and positional discrepancy causes the EU's intra-role conflict in its interactions with China.

In its policy papers on the EU, China expresses a willingness to increase its comprehensive cooperation with the EU based on interdependence and mutual respect.[6] This is largely in line with the principle of using civilian means for civilian ends in the CPE approach of promoting cooperation, tolerance, and equality. China does not want the EU to conduct high-profile norm-diffusion diplomacy because China regards the EU's foundational norms (the normative basis of NPE) as condescending and not universally applicable. Instead, China prefers a normatively less ambitious EU that respects China's sovereignty and does not intervene in China's domestic affairs. Therefore, while the EU struggles to get China to recognise its NPE self-role conception (Kavalski 2013), China projects its role conception of CPE to the EU via the EU–China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The EU's PD in China thus faces two hindrances. As we show below, first, China filters the EU's PD in China, so this PD cannot reach the general public in China. Second, the Chinese general public's opinion is not important for shaping China's role conception of the EU. Therefore, the EU has to select a group of Chinese citizens (technical elites who are close to government and state-run institutions or who are themselves technocrats) to target with its PD, as this group is most likely to influence China's role conception of the EU.

Public diplomacy and China

PD is becoming a vital part of Chinese foreign policy, but other countries' PD practices in China have received less attention. Traditionally, Chinese diplomacy focuses on government-to-government relationships and largely ignores engagement with non-governmental actors and the general public (Y. Wang 2008). China views diplomacy based on its own diplomatic experience, in which the general public and its opinions are seldom involved in foreign policy-making and practice. However, as China's hard power increases, Chinese leadership has become increasingly aware that China's international image affects its soft power (Wang 2011, 3). Hence, PD has been recognised as a tool that can shape other countries' public perceptions of China and has been rapidly adopted by Chinese leadership. This has resulted in a surge of Chinese PD efforts in recent years, with these

attempting to convince other states to regard China as a peaceful and cooperative country. For example, China had built over 120 Confucius Institutes in EU member states by 2018. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China dispatched medical teams to Italy and donated personal protective equipment to European states.

Although recent studies analyse China's increasing PD efforts (d'Hooghe 2005, 88–103, 2011, 19–35; Wang 2008), few studies examine how China views other states' and international organisations' PD in China. One exception is a 2016 article by Hartig, which argues that China's PD is more an instrument to fulfil strategic and functional purposes than an instrument of mutuality (Hartig 2016). That is, while China is devoting much effort to PD to bolster its international image, it is growing cautious of foreign engagement with the general public in China, including ordinary citizens, non-governmental organisations, and general civil society. For instance, although China's official discourse emphasises that people-to-people exchanges are an increasingly important part of China's relations with other countries, the Chinese government is worried about foreign governments' and NGOs' influences on the Chinese general public during these international exchanges. An administrative law to regulate the activities of foreign NGOs in China came into effect in 2017, and it is widely believed to be a concrete step by the Chinese government to counter foreign influence in China.[7]

Furthermore, the public voice on foreign policy is less counted or ignored in China. Moreover, although democracies are generally attentive to public opinion, there is no consensus on the effect of public opinion on the formulation of foreign policy (Baum and Potter 2008). This is because foreign policy is a highly technocratic policy area where public participation can be problematic. Public opinion is subject to media framing particularly in non-democracies. This may agitate populism and ultra-nationalist foreign policy if manipulated public opinion is taken into full account without institutional selection and technocrats' handling. Despite PD's ability to assuage role conflict, such conflict can obstruct PD actor's efforts in a target state.

The EU's PD in China: filtering and selecting

The intra-role conflict between the EU and China, and China's suspicion of foreign PD, have joint and severe impacts on the EU's PD efforts in China. The Chinese government has long been suspicious that Western efforts, such as the EU's academic exchange, NGO training, and educational and cultural programmes, are politicised strategies that aim to harm China's national security and regime stability via a process of 'peaceful evolution' (Ong 2007). This is a result of China's sensitivity to foreign political influence in its domestic politics. This (mis)perception of PD as a security risk means that China blocks the EU's access to the Chinese public and/or the Chinese public's access to the EU's information and activities. For example, the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights in China (2013–2021) is funded by the EU to contribute to the development and the consolidation of human rights, rule of law, and good governance in China.[8] This cooperative programme is an example of the EU's PD efforts to project its normative power in China, as human rights and the rule of law are among the six core norms of the EU's normative power. However, as the programme is partnered with NGOs funded by the EU and aims to improve human rights and the rule of law in China, it arouses the Chinese government's suspicions.

Despite the EU's continual efforts, China effectively prevents the EU's PD from reaching China's non-governmental actors and general public. As China does not want to recognise the EU's self-role conceptions,[9] it prevents its citizens from accepting the EU's self-role conception as a normative power by limiting the EU's information flow and engagement with the general public in China. In addition, China ignores domestic public opinion about the EU's efforts to form role expectations for itself. This process by which China restricts the EU's PD efforts and information represents the 'filtering' of the EU's PD in China. For instance, European NGOs that wish to operate in China must cooperate with many government-organised NGOs and the Chinese Association for NGO

Cooperation (CANGO). This prevents European NGOs from directly engaging the Chinese public, as the CANGO is a quango that filters EU PD conducted by European NGOs in China (Sausmikat and Fritsche 2010, 90).

Despite this role conflict, the EU and China are motivated to continue and manage their bilateral exchanges, as they are aware that the escalation of role conflict may prevent the development of mutually beneficial political and economic cooperation. This makes it possible and desirable to manage their role conflict over the EU's NPE. As a result, a compromise of role conflict is reached and sustained through interactions between the two. From the EU's perspective, such a compromise is manifested by the EU's PD endeavours in China, as PD is an alternative to conventional diplomacy for managing role conflict.

Whereas China filters the EU's role-making efforts in its own country by imposing barriers or simply blocking the EU's access to Chinese society, the EU tries to make its international role recognised in China by selecting feasible approaches and channels. Specifically, China rejects the EU's normative power and foreign policy but accepts its civilian power, as exhibited by the EU's economic influence, advanced technological expertise, and its leading status in global environmental politics and international development. On the one hand, China is happy to partner with the EU in selected areas for cooperation in functional sectors crucial for China's own development and to implement its own PD activities (largely) in cultural and educational areas in the EU. On the other hand, China is watchful of any possible EU influence in politically sensitive areas, such as human rights protection, democracy, and the rule of law. China thus strictly controls its communication channels in its relations with Western countries and regions, including the EU. Major Western news media and social media are generally restricted in China. Therefore, with its engagement strategy in place, the EU has to select appropriate approaches and channels through which to manage its relations with China, including its PD efforts in the country. This represents the 'selecting' aspect of the EU's PD in China.

The EU, represented by its institutions and diplomatic delegations, has consistently conducted PD in China since the mid-1990s. The EU's institutions design the guiding principles of its PD (to diffuse the EU's norms and cultivate China's acceptance of the EU's NPE role) and entrust its delegation in China and member states' institutions with specific EU PD tasks. For example, the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights in China is partnered with various NGOs, and the EU–China Social Protection Reform Project is led by the Italian Institute of Social Security, and also involves the Ministry of Employment and Social Security (Spain), the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy (Poland), and other European institutions.[10] The EU's PD is also conducted in parallel with EU member states' PD, such that member states perform their assigned EU PD tasks while also performing their own PD. Moreover, the European governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in the EU's PD all share the goal of projecting the EU's NPE role in China via PD. Their political agency in the performance of EU PD is thus constrained by the NPE role-projection framework.

There are three main PD channels that include conventional PD: publicity activities, educational and cultural exchanges, and bilateral cooperation programmes that are mostly technical in nature (Tang and Dai 2010). The EU Delegation in China has the main responsibility to implement various conventional PD activities, such as the well-known annual 'Europe Day' event. The target audience of this PD activity is the general public of China; however, those invited to Europe Day and other activities are often middle-class and elite Chinese people who have working and other connections with European institutions in China.

Since the early 1990s, the EU has implemented several educational exchange programmes in China that aim to promote knowledge and understanding of the EU. Since 2003, sectoral policy dialogues in relevant fields have been held regularly to coordinate educational and cultural exchanges, during which the EU has a more official ability than in other interactions to engage with Chinese social and academic elites. As in other countries, the EU commits much of its resources and attention to promoting its image via academic programmes, such as various Jean Monnet

activities (Yang 2015). Aside from those globally designed activities, the EU has also implemented activities as part of specific bilateral agreements with China, resulting in concrete outcomes, such as the China–Europe International Business School, the China–Europe School of Law, the EU–China Higher Education Cooperation Programme 1998–2001, and the EU–China European Studies Centres Programme (ESCP) 2004–2007.[11] In cultural exchanges, the EU uses cultural diplomacy to engage the Chinese public with European culture, art, languages, and film, which is also an important part of the second PD channel. For example, the annual EU Film Festival is among several major cultural PD activities of the EU in China, and 2020 saw the twelfth edition of this event. It is organised by the Delegation of the European Union to China and 'stands as one of the most iconic regular European cultural events in China' that 'showcase[s] the creative cinema of all 28 European Union member states'.[12] EU member states' cultural diplomacy mostly involves language programmes and cultural events hosted by their cultural centres (e.g. the Alliance Française [France], the Goethe-Institut [Germany], and the Instituto Cervantes [Spain]). However, these events require pre-approval by local governments and are usually presented in partnership with state-owned universities.

In general, the EU's PD in the first two channels is largely routinised and lacks enthusiasm and energy. Moreover, in China, these two channels – especially educational and cultural exchanges – are strictly framed within a reciprocal inter-governmental format. In its publicity activities in most other countries, the EU is usually able to disseminate information via its official website and popular social media channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. However, as Western social media platforms are not available in China, the EU Delegation in China has to use China-based social media platforms, such as Douban, Wechat, and Weibo.[13] A common complaint is that the EU-related information on these outlets is incomplete and outdated, which is due to limited resources and little effort being put into maintaining it.[14] These all show that China filters the EU's PD.

In comparison, the third channel of bilateral cooperation, which is of a technical nature, has usually been neglected in studies of the EU's PD efforts in China. Nevertheless, this channel warrants scholarly attention as it is a major way that the EU uses its PD to manage its role conflict with China. In this study, technical cooperation denotes the 'provision of resources aimed at the transfer of technical and managerial skills or of technology for the purpose of building up general national capacity'.[15] This cooperation is motivated by the problem-solving logic of effectiveness and efficiency, rather than by political considerations. By this definition, technical elites are professionals and practitioners who are directly or indirectly involved in this process of international cooperation. Bilateral technical cooperation is also selected as a PD channel by the EU because Chinese technical elites are accessible audiences who are possibly influential in shaping Chinese role conceptions of the EU. For instance, the EU–China Social Protection Reform Project is an EU-selected PD effort for bilateral technical cooperation. The project aims to further develop the social protection system in China, with assistance from the Italian Institute of Social Security, several European technical institutions, and Chinese technical elites from the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs.[16] The EU uses this bilateral social protection project for its PD purposes because it wants Chinese technical elites to recognise and learn from European experiences of an inclusive and equitable social protection system.

The EU's PD in China via technical cooperation programmes

Pairing PD and international development policy

A country's PD and its development policy are officially two separate policy domains, with different goals and intended outcomes. Development policy is generally defined as being activities such as practical cooperation, which aim to reduce poverty and foster sustainable development in the developing world. However, there is arguably a meaningful synergy between development policy and PD, particularly with regards to the instrumental use of the former to conduct the latter (Langan, 0000). Recent PD studies generally confirm that there is little difference between the two domains at

both the conceptual and practical levels (Pamment 2016, 7): in their targeting of the audiences of a host country, the two domains largely converge in their objectives, discourses, and activities. Moreover, the concept of development diplomacy (Zielińska 2016) considers that diplomacy is performed through developmental aid as part of an international actor's overall PD approach to realising its aims using its soft power resources. In view of a country's PD and its development policy having many overlapping goals and instruments, such as policy recommendations, these two areas should be integrated at the level of national strategy. Researchers in this area also contend that because countries' PD and development policies are distinct research fields, few studies seek to elucidate how the two fields relate to one another (Pamment and Wilkins 2018, 2).

As mentioned, a key goal of EU foreign policy and PD is to promote the EU as a model for others to follow (Sandrin and Hoffmann 2018) and/or to ensure that others recognise the EU's normative power role. This is well embodied by many of EU-dominated partnerships and cooperation agreements with countries in its neighbourhood, and in the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) region and beyond, in which the EU speaks, sets the standards, and provides the models, and its partners are expected to listen and follow. These programmes place the EU in a normatively more advanced social position than its partners. The trend of pairing PD and international development policy in recent PD research has revealed that this one-way norm-laden interaction from the EU to its target countries is also operative in other policy areas, such as the EU's development policy, in which the EU uses its technical expertise to provide solutions to local needs.

We argue that the EU's PD in China is closely connected with its international development and cooperation policy with China, due to the afore-described role conflict and the resultant PD processes of filtering and selecting. Therefore, the EU pairs PD and international development policy in China, with the aim of persuading Chinese technical elites to recognise the EU's NPE, and thereby influence Chinese decision-makers' role conceptions of the EU.

The EU's PD in China via bilateral cooperation programmes

After the EU and China established official diplomatic relations in 1975, the EU gradually began bilateral cooperation with China. However, the EU had nascent competencies in the foreign policy area during this early period, and it was not until mid-1995 – when the EU decided on its engagement strategy in China – that this foreign policy area was fully mature. Much of the EU's cooperation with China is integrated with the EU's overall cooperation with its partner countries and is conducted as part of its international development policy. With the rise of China, the EU has had more difficulty maintaining its one-way interactions in EU–China cooperation, due to the increasing salience of role conflict over NPE and CPE. Hence, EU–China cooperation increasingly manifests as an equal partnership, at least at the rhetorical level. The EU's bilateral cooperation with China was streamlined into a coherent framework in the EU–China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation (hereafter, Strategic Agenda), which was jointly established by the two parties in 2013. The Strategic Agenda is comprehensive in scope and covers four areas of cooperation: peace and security, prosperity, sustainable development, and people-to-people exchanges. The nature of cooperation varies across these areas. The first two areas are more traditional in scope, focusing on coordination and management of security and economic affairs, including global governance. However, these areas do encompass some technical aspects. For example, the peace and security area involves cooperation on information and telecommunication technology, nuclear technology, and cyber security, and the prosperity area involves cooperation on intellectual property rights, international standardisation, product safety, energy efficiency, agriculture, and social protection.[17] The people-to-people exchanges area largely involves traditional cultural exchange and social mobility in the domain of PD.[18]

In addition to some technical cooperation in the other three areas, the majority of EU-China technical cooperation is conducted in the third area of cooperation: sustainable development. In particular, as sustainable development and good governance are both key norms constituting the EU's normative power (Manners 2002), the EU aims to diffuse the norm of sustainable development

in China via technical cooperation projects. These projects span a wide range of fields, including science, technology and innovation, space and aerospace, energy, urbanisation, climate change and environmental protection, ocean, regional policy, social progress, public policy, and cooperation on global development.[19] The EU's role as a civilian power is well recognised by China in these projects, as China welcomes the EU's assistance to improve its domestic expertise in technical and functional fields. Consequently, despite EU–China cooperation in the Strategic Agenda being described using terms such as 'exchange', 'consultation', and 'dialogue', the technical part of this cooperation is largely one-directional (i.e. from the EU to China). This is consistent with a PD sender attempting to have its role accepted by the receiver. The main goal of the EU in these projects is to assist China to improve its performance in the above-defined fields of cooperation by learning from European experiences (Fanoulis and Song 2021). The cooperation projects follow similar patterns of procedures that are administered almost solely at the governmental level and subsequently implemented by officials and technicians from the central to regional levels.

An exemplar is EU–China cooperation on regional policy. Based on a 2006 Memorandum of Understanding on regional policy cooperation, the European Commission and the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission have cooperated to exchange information and best practices on experiences in establishing and implementing cohesion policy. Since then, several concrete projects have been performed in this area, in addition to high-level bilateral regional policy dialogue. From 2010 to 2014, for example, the Chinese European Training on Regional Policy (CETREGIO) created links between selected cities and regions in the EU and China, which led to 220 Chinese decision-makers from all 31 provinces participating in experience-sharing on good practices during site visits to more than 45 regions of 17 EU member states. Implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Corporation for International Cooperation) GmbH, the CETREGIO is designed to assist Chinese cities to pursue sustainable urbanisation and regional development, good governance, and regional innovation. Core norms of NPE, including sustainable development and good governance, underpin this project. China was also one of the four non-EU countries selected in 2015–2016 to participate in the EU's regional and urban policy action in the field of international cooperation, known as 'World Cities', through which several Chinese cities were paired with cities in Europe.[20] Thus, despite the conflict between China and the EU over the role of NPE, this conflict is effectively managed by the EU's PD performed via its EU–China cooperation on regional policy. Specifically, Chinese technical elites are trained to learn from European experiences of sustainable development, urbanisation, and social and regional cohesion, illustrating that the EU implicitly enacts its NPE role and garners a positive reaction from China.

In a similar vein, EU–China cooperation in social policy has occurred through the EU–China Social Security Project and the EU–China Social Protection Reform Project (SPRP), which were implemented in 2006–2011 and 2014–2018, respectively. These projects focused on building actuarial capacity and developing policy recommendations for reforms of pension schemes, ensuring financial sustainability of the social security system, and extending social protection to workers in informal employment.[21] Social solidarity, a key norm in the NPE, is embedded in the SPRP, as this project is designed to further develop an inclusive and equitable social protection system in China. Cooperation projects such as these can also be considered PD efforts because they target Chinese government officials, as these actors are social and political elites involved in bilateral technical cooperation. These Chinese elites can gain expert support from European countries, join training sessions, dialogues, and study visits, and are exposed to the best and most relevant European social-protection practices.[22] EU–China role conflict over NPE is therefore properly managed by compromise. If the social solidarity norm can diffuse in the process of bilateral cooperation, it is likely that the EU may shape Chinese role conceptions of the EU as a normative power, in addition to as a civilian power.

Whereas cooperation in policy exchange largely involves government officials and technocrats, cooperation in science and technology more directly targets Chinese technological professionals. Similarly, through cooperation, the EU expects these technological professionals to accept the EU's standards, and thus develop an NPE conception of the EU. For example, the EU and China signed an

Agreement on Scientific and Technological Cooperation in 1998, which was renewed in 2004, and aims to link research organisations, industry, universities, and individual researchers in specific projects. More recently, the EU–China Co-Funding Mechanism (CFM) was launched as an EU–China joint initiative to support collaborative research and innovation projects conducted by European and Chinese universities, research institutions, and enterprises in strategic areas of common interest under the framework of Horizon 2020. The CFM began in 2015 and has provided a new package of flagship initiatives to boost cooperation in key areas: food, agriculture, and biotechnologies; environment and sustainable urbanisation; surface transport; safer and greener aviation; and biotechnologies for environmental and human health.[23] All of the above efforts aim to promote the EU's norm of sustainable development through concrete, collaborative science, and technology projects with China.

The EU publicises 'success stories' of EU-funded cooperation projects in research and innovation, which serve as the typical PD method of development communication. For example, in the 2013–2016 project 'Better forecasting to head off acute pollution events in Asia', Germany was selected by the EU to coordinate some European countries and China to develop tools for air quality prediction in 37 Chinese cities, for public health purposes.[24] A European participant proudly claimed in an interview that this was one of the most ambitious air-quality monitoring and assessment activities in the region, and that collected data were made freely available to environmental managers, local, regional, and global authorities, academia, and any other interested party.[25] In another example, the EU-funded MycoKey project, which concluded in 2020, was coordinated by Italy and focused on developing safe and secure food supplies by sharing advanced methodologies and practical solutions for fungal toxin (mycotoxin) management in food chains, for use by growers, traders, food and feed manufacturers, and policy-makers.[26] Its China project, involving 11 Chinese partners, was geared towards exchanging best practices and co-developing new solutions for effectively controlling the concentrations of mycotoxins generated in grain production. The coordinator on the Chinese side acknowledged that by using the EU's research guidelines and approaches, the Chinese partners were able to establish an effective and sustainable strategy for controlling mycotoxin concentrations in these products. His European counterpart said in the same interview that by sharing advanced methodologies and practical solutions for growers, traders, food and feed manufacturers, and policy-makers, the MycoKey project strengthened both the European food and feed safety system and the partnership between the EU and China. This illustrates how China's urgent need to enhance its technical standards in food safety gives the EU an opportunity to implement its PD by targeting specific technical elites in China.

Despite their technical nature and the official rhetoric of equal partnership, the above projects were implemented by the EU to engage social elites in China, with typical PD goals of understanding, informing, and influencing foreign audiences to accept the normative power role of the EU. Sustainable development, a core norm in NPE, is embedded in the above-mentioned examples and in many other science and technology cooperation projects. The EU expects Chinese technical elites to learn and share European standards and experiences of sustainable development in key scientific and technological areas (e.g. air pollution monitoring and control, food safety, and agriculture), thus cementing Chinese elites' NPE conceptions of the EU's role. Thus, the role conflict between NPE and CPE is effectively managed and resolved by compromise, as bilateral scientific and technological collaborations continue to be an important area of cooperation within the EU–China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Conclusion

In addition to the EU's much-routinised PD activities in conventional channels, it has explored a third and innovative channel to implement its PD in China: bilateral technical cooperation. In this channel, the EU's PD is largely implemented as a nominally two-way process under the official bilateral agreement between the EU and China, whereby the EU attempts to grow its visibility and influence in China and to shape Chinese technical elites' conceptions of the EU's role. A specific

issue relates to the actorness of the EU's PD in China and worldwide. Due to its limited resources, the EU experiences much difficulty in performing its PD efforts singlehandedly in countries, particularly in large countries such as China. It deals with these difficulties by conducting PD through bilateral cooperation programmes in China, which involves EU institutions, EU member states, and other European organisations working together to implement projects in China. Specifically, EU institutions have the main responsibility to pursue PD efforts, whereas EU member states continuously or periodically partner with the EU in projects. For example, an EU–China project on social protection involves a consortium led by an Italian institution, whereas an EU–China project on disaster management involves a consortium led by the French government. Some European social groups may also participate in the EU's PD activities. The European Chamber of Commerce, for example, is active in organising networking events for business communities in the EU and China.

The EU's PD efforts in China have helped disseminate the EU's knowledge, image, norms, and values in the country (Weber and Tarlea 2021). The years of conventional PD activities by the EU in China, and educational exchanges between the EU and China, have greatly increased knowledge of the EU in Chinese government think-tanks and media. These groups have thus started publishing lengthy reports and in-depth analyses on the state of the EU and its members, sometimes praising the flourishing bilateral relationship and calling for further steps to serve Chinese foreign strategy goals. Nevertheless, role conflict can negatively impact the efficacy of the EU's PD in China. Moreover, despite the compromise of intra-role conflict, the EU's PD efforts have limited penetration in China, and thus reach only some technical elites. This means that the impact and implications of the EU's PD in China are generally indirect and are difficult to measure over the short term.

However, the EU's international development channel of bilateral technical cooperation also performs a PD function. Thus, despite its noted limitation, this channel provides the EU a useful way of engaging with at least part of Chinese society. Furthermore, EU–China bilateral cooperation is an especially important means by which both parties can develop their relationship in a positive direction, which is crucial during the current period of economic upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and countries' responses to it. The EU and China are now reviewing the outcomes of the Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, which has recently concluded. It is hoped that the EU and China can further their mutually beneficial cooperation in this policy area, and thus help solve the wide-ranging and unprecedented global problems that currently exist.

The EU's international role and image, and its soft power in China, are more influenced by Chinese media coverage of the EU's overall performance at home and abroad on key issues and policies than by the EU's PD efforts (Jiang, Zhang, and d'Haenens 2021). Over approximately the past 12 years, there has been a continual stream of negative news from Europe to China: first the European debt crisis, then the refugee crisis, then the shock of Brexit, and then the rise of populism. Moreover, the images of Europe and the EU itself have been most adversely affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Attention was drawn by the Chinese media[27] to EU countries' refusal to help supply Italy with personal protective equipment and other medical equipment in early 2020, and then again when the EU initially struggled to coordinate and control the supply of SARS-CoV-2 vaccines, due to ill-preparedness at the EU level. These issues have considerably damaged the EU's PD efforts to enhance its image, reputation, and normative power role in the eyes of China.

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