Doctor of Political Science

Normative Power Europe?
Assessing the EU’s effectiveness as a normative power with regard to China

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Abstract

As widely recognized, China is important to Europe and Europe is important to China. The regional and global implications of their relations are far-reaching, central to global developments. Beyond shaping their respective regions, they shape discourse in addressing key international challenges.

Importance at such global scale suggests power and influence; power to speak out, to act and to excel over the other. While historically the Union has never excelled in hard power and struggled to gain leverage from its economic weight, it has been widely acclaimed and self-acclaimed a normative power.

It has claimed to lead through the power of example and that of ideas, the essence of the concept of normative power. When it comes to shaping China however, Europe has never had an easy time pursuing its normative ambitions. Fundamental normative differences have dictated divergent interests, leading to trade frictions and human rights related concerns. Europe’s structure, multi-layered between different institutions, divided among member states and fragmented between supranational and intergovernmental levels, is believed to have generated a unique and difficult decision-making process where legitimacy is constantly challenged. As a consequence, the overall sentiment that has emerged from the literature on European normative power effectiveness is gloomy.

Instead of normative convergence, as pursued by Europe, a normative divergence has become gradually apparent, suggesting that Europe wields limited influence over its partner. The far-reaching implications on future Europe-China relations require further study, going beyond acknowledging such assumptions. This research contributes to academic literature through a comprehensive review of Europe’s foreign policymechanisms vis-à-vis China, complemented with interviews, hence its added value. Within the theoretical framework of social constructivism as an alternative to the realist tradition, it updates ongoing debates on Europe’s effectiveness. Through in-depth assessment of five areas of cooperation – human rights, development aid in Africa, environment, civil society and rule of law – the research reveals that three factors shape Europe’s effectiveness: normative divergence, fragmentation and Europe’s crises. Ensuring originality and added value, the findings illustrate that examining Europe’s level
of effectiveness requires the explanatory power of both constructivism and realism, providing the opportunity to explore the dialogue between them. I thus establish that, albeit slowly and selectively, Europe is socializing China. It is however a process in which Europe’s effectiveness faces limitations. While Beijing takes international norms on board only selectively and partially, its national interest considerations cannot be disassociated from the social element of its interaction with European normative power where norms matter. Considering the internal complexities and external challenges Europe is facing and given that China’s global economic, political and diplomatic clout has dramatically grown, the relevance of the project is more than obvious.