Europe as a Global Player: A View from China

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Abstract: Europe in the form of the European Union is seen in China as a major player in global affairs. As a sui generis actor, the EU was seen in general as a progressive force in world affairs in China. Europe’s economic might and normative appeals were also widely acknowledged in China, even though the Chinese on occasions complained of the assertive normative diplomacy of the EU and its member states, which was backed by its economic power. However, as Europe encounters a severe sovereign debt crisis, and China continues its fast growth in terms of economic development and international influence, the Chinese leaders, elites and general public are starting to develop a more realistic view of Europe and scaling down some of their wishful thinking about the ever-growing influence of the EU. Yet, at government level, relations with the EU and its member states are still on the top of China’s foreign policy agenda. By trying to offer a helping hand to the EU, the Chinese government is hoping that the current crisis might turn into a stimulating factor for a closer relationship between China and the EU/member states on both bilateral and global issues.

Keywords: EU, China, sovereign debt crisis, normative power

This article argues that since 2008 and especially in the course of the global financial crisis and the European debt and Euro crises, important changes have taken place with regard to how the global role of the European Union (EU) and its member states is seen in China.

A number of efforts have been made to capture the Chinese views of the EU as a global actor in the pre-crisis years. In their respective contributing chapters, David Shambaugh of George Washington University and Zhu Liqun of China Foreign Affairs University arrived at quite identical findings: the Chinese tend to believe that the EU is becoming more powerful and playing a more important role in the world because of the European integration process; however, there is a fair amount of wishful thinking and cognitive dissonance in Chinese assessments of Europe’s role in world affairs, in the sense that they are often too quick to identify apparent areas of overlapping perspectives, overstate the similarities, and understate or ignore the differences (see Shambaugh, 2008; Zhu, 2008a). These assessments were based on their respective surveys of Chi-