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Europe as a Normative Power on Climate Change? The EU's Engagement with China

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Normative Power Europe on Climate Change? An Examination of the EU's Engagement with China

The concept of “normative power”, put forward by Ian Manners as “the ability to define what pass for ‘normal’ in world politics,”[1] has provided a new perspective to understand the EU's role and identity in international society. In contrast to the previous idea of “Military Power Europe” or “Civilian Power Europe”, Manners' conceptualization of “Normative Power Europe (NPE)” seeks to interpret the identity and nature of the EU by “refocusing on the ideations and power of norms.”[2] From the NPE perspective, the EU is not only constructed on a normative basis developed over the past 50 years, but also acts in a normative way, striving to “extend its norms into the international system.”[3]

The growing popularity of the NPE concept is not without debate, as scholars have endeavored to examine the NPE in various policy areas. In this regard, environmental policy stands out as one of the best testing grounds to look at the EU's normative power. The EU's “actorness” in environmental affairs has been well recognized and illustrated by scholars such as Tom Delreux.[4] Moreover, the EU has been further considered as a “frontrunner”[5] in the global politics of the environment. By implementing high standards of environmental policy internally and shaping international environmental regimes externally, the EU aspires to be a “global leader in international environmental politics.”[6]

In this context, this essay aims to answer the question to what extent is the EU a normative power in environmental policy. For that purpose, it looks at the case of the EU's engagement with China on climate change, a critical environmental issue that concerns both sides. The essay first investigates the key norms and principles underpinning the EU's climate change policy. It then goes on to analyze how the EU diffuses its norms in its engagement with China on climate change. This is followed by an analysis of the normative impacts of the EU's engagement. The final part of the essay concludes with an assessment of the EU's normative power on climate change.

Key Norms of the EU's Climate Change Policy

Over the years, the EU has internalized and developed a set of norms that shapes its climate change policy. In examining the declaratory political statements and EU treaties, several key norms could be identified with regard to the EU's climate change policy. Some of these include the polluter pays principle, the precautionary principle, the preventative principle, environmental protection, and sustainable development.[7] This essay will focus its analysis on the principle of sustainable development.

The concept of “sustainable development” came out amid the discussion about the balance between economic development and environmental protection. After the accomplishment of the Single Market in 1987, Europe “realized once again that environmental protection must complement the principal goal of the integration project, namely economic development.”[8] Sustainable development, which reconciles economic growth with the environment, has thus “became a very significant idea for the EU.”[9] This had led the EU to gradually replace “environmental protection” with “sustainable development” as “the legitimizing principle for EU environmental policy.”[10]

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The principle of sustainable development was formally enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty, which states that “the Community [...] should promote [...] sustainable and non-inflationary growth respecting the environment.”[11] The principle was further entrenched by the Amsterdam Treaty, which committed the Community to promote “a harmonious, balanced and sustainable development of economic activities.”[12] As a result of the treaty revisions, “sustainable development” has been established as a key norm of the EU's environmental policy, both internally and externally.[13]

Norms Diffusion: the EU's Engagement with China on Climate Change

This essay employs Manners' analytical framework to study how the EU diffuses its norms on climate change in its engagement with China. According to Manners, EU norms are diffused in six ways: contagion, informational diffusion, procedural diffusion, transference, overt diffusion, and cultural filter.[14] These means are applied and analyzed where appropriate in the case of this essay.

Informational diffusion is seen in the EU's various strategic communications and country strategy papers to China. In the 1995 communication, the EU stressed that “China should be engaged in dialogue and cooperation towards sustainable development and for the protection of the environment.”[15] The 1998 communication proposed initiatives to develop dialogue on the environment and sustainable development with China. The 2001 communication identified the promotion of sustainable development and environment as “the priority area of intervention.”[16] In the 2003 strategic communication, sustainable development was listed as one of three goals of the EU-China strategic partnership, together with peace and stability.[17] The latest communication in 2006 had dedicated a special part to sustainable development, combating climate change being one of the key issues discussed under this title.[18] Therefore, it is evident that the EU has been trying to diffuse its norms on climate change policy by consistently invoking the norm in its strategic communications to China.

The EU also promotes its norms through procedural diffusion. The annual EU-China summit, the ministerial-level dialogues, and sectorial dialogues on climate change and environmental policy, as well as the establishment of the EU-China Partnership on Climate Change, provide evidence for this. The annual EU-China Summit has served as a high-level channel for the EU to address climate change issues with China, which was further institutionalized by the establishment of the EU-China Partnership on Climate Change following the 8th Summit. The partnership aims to “strengthen cooperation and dialogue on climate including clean energy, and promote sustainable development.”[19] This partnership also incorporated the norm of sustainable development into various concrete cooperation projects such as “the EU-China Action Plan on Clean Coal to promote collaboration in the development of clean coal technologies in China” and “The China-EU Action Plan on Industrial Cooperation on Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energies.”[20]

A third means for the EU to diffuse its norms on climate change is transference. This is embedded in the EU's trade with China as well as technology transfer to China. Due to the broad effects of trade policy on environment and climate change, the EU wants to see that “international trade and investment are used as a tool to achieve genuine global sustainable development.”[21] As the largest trading block and China's largest trading partnership, the EU, through its trade policy, serves as a powerful tool to diffuse its norms of sustainable development within China. The EU also diffuses its norms through financing technology transfer projects. For example, in 2007, the European Investment Bank extended a 500 million Euro loan to China, in order to support the National Climate Change Programme. The 2011 EU-China Environmental Governance Programme was funded 15 million Euro to improve the accountability of local governments and the judicial system in implementing and enforcing environmental rules.

Normative Impacts of the EU's Engagement with China on Climate Change

Normative impact is an important factor for a normative power. As put by Nathalie Tocci, identifying normative impact would involve “delineating when, how and to what extent specific foreign policies engender specific institutional, policy or legal changes within a third country.”[22] In the case of the EU's engagement with China on climate change, although it is difficult to conduct detailed analysis of the normative impacts, it is possible to identify some impacts on China's rhetoric and practice on climate change policy.

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Rhetorically, China has accepted the norm of sustainable development and has taken it as a key area of cooperation with the EU. In its recent policy paper on the EU, China committed itself with the EU to “jointly advancing international efforts to attain the Millennium Development Goals, eliminate poverty and achieve sustainable development with a view to realizing common development and prosperity.”[23] This is indicative of the EU’s normative impact on China.

Practically, the EU’s engagement has also begun to produce positive results. Climate change and sustainable development have now become a major priority in in bilateral relationship, and the EU “has helped transform China’s domestic policy in this area.”[24] The cooperation projects under the EU-China Partnership on Climate Change have led to legal, institutional, and policy changes in China with regard to climate change. Institutionally, China has established special agency within the powerful National Development and Reform Council. Legally, China has also made significant efforts to improve legislation on climate change.[25]

Conclusion

Through the examination of the EU’s engagement with China on climate change, the essay has come to the conclusion that the EU is credible to be described as a normative power on climate change policy. This conclusion is based on three considerations: first, the EU’s climate change policy is founded on a normative basis; second, the EU acts in a normative way to promote its norms on climate change policy; and third, the EU’s climate change policy has produced normative impacts in practice. Thus, the EU fulfills the criteria of “actorness” as a normative power in the field of climate change.

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