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New Partners for the Planet? The European Union and China in International Climate Governance from a Role-Theoretical Perspective[†]

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Abstract

Only with the three largest emitters (the EU, China and the US) building a coalition was it possible to conclude the Paris Agreement in 2015. With the announced withdrawal of the US, the interdependence between the EU and China has increased significantly. Both actors have reiterated their will to implement the Paris Agreement and to cooperate on climate change. In times of political constraints between the EU and China, this seems puzzling. The paper takes a role-theoretic perspective to assess the following question: How can the changing roles of the EU and China, ascribed to them by external and internal expectations, explain their increased climate cooperation? It draws on a qualitative text analysis of policy documents and expert interviews. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings against the backdrop of growing tensions between the EU and China.

Keywords: European Union; China; role theory; cooperation; climate change

Introduction

Quick and determined action is necessary to reach the 2015 Paris Agreement (PA) goals and keep the rise of the global average temperature below 2°C or even 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) special report released in October 2018 reaffirmed the urgency of tremendous international efforts to reach these goals and mitigate the adverse effects of climate change. Yet, the announcement of the US's withdrawal from the PA in 2017 has changed the constellation of the remaining signatories, creating a leadership vacuum and raising expectations on the European Union (EU) and China to fill this void. Despite this leadership vacuum, the two large emitters have reiterated their will to implement the PA and have stepped up cooperation.

Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the following research question: How can the changing roles of the EU and China explain the evolution of EU–China climate cooperation? It argues that cooperation between the EU and China emerges and intensifies, when their roles and role performance become more compatible, and ebbs, when their roles diverge. Thereby it builds on the current literature and contributes to the rising discussion concerning EU–China relations by adding a new perspective to existing research. Until now, most scholars interpret China's rise as a threat to the interests of the EU in ideological, economic and strategic terms and focus on possible strategies to

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counter the Chinese influence (Broomfield, 2003). Less often literature focuses on opportunities for cooperation between the EU and China (Torney, 2015; Kirchner *et al.*, 2016; Cui, 2018; Christiansen *et al.*, 2019). Besides, most studies that analyze EU–China relations tend to privilege rationalist interest-driven explanations that take a rather static perspective towards interests and identities and minimize the role of norms, values and perceptions (Little, 1991). Due to a focus on cost–benefit calculations, rationalists do not account for the influence of normative frameworks.

The advantage of constructivist notions is that they can provide insight into how actors constitute their respective others and how foreign policy behaviour is changed through interactions (Uemura, 2015). This paper adopts a constructivist position and applies role theory to EU–China climate cooperation. In the analysis, we deliberately treat the EU as one unitary actor. Although China's relations with individual and especially some of the larger member states are certainly more established than EU–China relations as such, EU–China region-to-state relations have their own dynamics and are consequential in the context of global governance (Christiansen, 2016, p. 31). Climate policy is well suited for this analytical angle, due to the prominent position of the European Commission in international climate politics, the official status of the EU within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the advanced state of EU climate policy making.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, it maps the development of EU–China climate relations over time and shows how cooperation has evolved and intensified, bilaterally and in multilateral negotiations. Second, it introduces role-theoretic approaches and presents the analytical framework. Subsequently, we introduce method and data before analyzing policy documents and interview material to investigate the development of the roles of China and the EU in climate politics and to show how these roles shape EU–China cooperation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings against the backdrop of growing tensions between the EU and China.

I. Mapping China–EU Cooperation on Climate and Environment

EU–China cooperation on climate and environment takes place at an intersection between multilateralism and bilateralism. Both actors cooperate as part of the multilateral climate system while climate is also part of a broader bilateral EU–China partnership. Since 2004, EU–China cooperation on climate has been a key issue within their overall cooperation framework. EU–China policy papers and joint declarations frequently mention climate and environment policies. Additionally, the EU–China cooperation framework to combat climate change has risen to the government level. Although EU–China climate and energy security relations were less formalized previously, cooperation now encompasses institutionalized dialogue formats at ministerial level, high-level working groups, and several cooperation agreements (Torney, 2015; Torney and Gippner, 2018). Over time, it has evolved from development aid on behalf of the EU to a joint action-oriented partnership (Europe–China Clean Energy Centre, 2015). One early milestone was the conclusion of a Joint Declaration on Climate Change in 2005 (Holzer and Zhang, 2008). In the following years, the EU and China continuously expanded their climate partnership.

On the multilateral level, especially under the UNFCCC, the EU and China are decisive actors. Whereas their status as major players can partially explain their

motivation to engage in bilateral talks about climate change, they have often been on opposing sides in UN-led international negotiations. In the years leading to the Kyoto Protocol, EU–China cooperation seemed to be a stepping-stone to overcome North–South tensions, but China’s unwillingness to commit to Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emission reductions put further North–South rapprochement to a hold (Dai and Diao, 2011). Although the EU and China intensified their cooperation efforts in the early 2000s, the 2009 Conference of the Parties (COP) in Copenhagen challenged the emerging EU–China partnership. In Copenhagen parties failed to agree on a successor treaty to the Kyoto Protocol and the EU and China found themselves on opposing sides of the negotiations regarding the goals and instruments for a new treaty. (Groen *et al.*, 2012).

The 2015 COP in Paris that resulted in the PA marks a watershed in international climate governance. When parties after years of stalemate in climate politics finally reached an agreement, part of the negotiation success could be attributed to closer ties between China and the USA on the one hand, and EU and China on the other hand (Schreurs, 2016). As we will discuss further below, the PA has not ultimately put all disagreements between the EU and China to rest, but paved the way towards more cooperation. A boost for the EU–China partnership on climate change occurred in spring 2017, when the US administration under Donald Trump announced the plan to withdraw from the PA. An immediate reaction to this declaration was the attempt of China, the EU and Canada to build a new coalition to salvage the agreement (Dröge and Rattani, 2018). They reaffirmed their commitment to the PA and decided to intensify their cooperation on climate change and clean energy (European Commission, 2018). The 2018 COP in Katowice was crucial for the future of international climate politics, because parties negotiated a rulebook to operationalize the PA.

II. Role Theoretical Approaches in IR

Roles, which ‘refer to patterns of expected appropriate behavior’ (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2012, p. 94), are an important concept in social sciences. While role theory has a long research tradition in sociology and social psychology, Holsti was one of the first to draw links between role theory and foreign policy (Holsti, 1970). Constructivist scholars like Wendt further emphasized the connection between states’ roles and their foreign policy behaviour, as states ‘act (...) on the basis of meanings’ grounded in the conceptions that they hold vis-à-vis themselves and other states’ (Wendt, 1992, p. 397). This understanding also reveals that roles are not only based on states’ beliefs of themselves, but also on beliefs, which states hold in relation to others.

Central Concepts of Role Theory

Whereas Holsti developed different national role conceptions of states and focused on the *ego dimension* of roles, meaning states’ perceptions of themselves and their position in the international system, foreign policy scholars later incorporated an *alter dimension* into the analysis of states’ roles (Jonsson and Westerlund, 1982). Consequently, the majority of role-theoretic approaches in IR and foreign policy analysis regards three elements when analyzing states’ roles in the international context. These elements are (1) *internal role conceptions*, namely an actor’s self-perception, ideas about his place in the

international system, and about appropriate behaviour (the ego dimension), (2) *external role expectations*, namely the role prescriptions, implicit and explicit demands of other states as well as structural features of the international system (the alter dimension), and (3) *role performance*, namely the actual foreign policy behaviour of a state (Walker, 1987; Harnisch, 2011; Nabers, 2011; Thies and Breuning, 2012; He and Walker, 2015). Thus, role theory expects that an actor's choice for a foreign policy is driven by roles, constituted by external and internal role expectations. This is in contrast to rational choice approaches that explain foreign policy behaviour based on preexisting preferences. One of the central arguments of role theory is that most states do not only hold one role, but can have multiple roles (either complementary or conflicting) and that states can possess issue-specific roles in different policy fields (Breuning, 2011).

Role Change, Interaction and Cooperation

Roles are not necessarily stable over time, but can evolve, so role theory also provides an opportunity to study policy change. Besides incremental development, roles can also change significantly due to role conflicts, especially in the case of multiple roles. Role conflicts that might result in role change can arise from mismatches between self-conceptions and external expectations, discrepancies between different self-conceptions, or role ambiguity due to unclear and vague roles. Nabers (2011) further argues that crises or other critical events often trigger role change, as they can provide 'windows of opportunity' for role and role performance change. Scholars have not only theorized sources of role change, but also explained different mechanisms or modes of role change. Harnisch distinguishes between role adaptation, which 'refers to changes of strategies and instruments in performing a role' (Harnisch, 2011, p. 10), while the underlying role remains unchanged and different types of role change, in which an actor's role conceptions change. Mechanisms of role change include learning, normative persuasion and socialization (Harnisch, 2011; Michalski and Pan, 2017).

Referring to persuasion and socialization reflects an interactionist perspective on role theory. Recent literature has highlighted the significance of interactionism, a concept based on the work of social psychologist George Herbert Mead to understand role formation and change (Klose, 2018). Interaction can not only alter role conceptions, but also affects external expectations. While certain structural demands of the international system are fixed, external role demands can be subject to change whenever states interact. Thus, role theory conceives roles as an interplay of corresponding self-perceptions and perceptions by others (Thies, 2010; He and Walker, 2015). Michalski and Pan's (2017) article on EU–China interaction in the context of their strategic partnership, is one example of a role-theoretical study looking at bilateral interactions between states. They understand the EU–China partnership 'as an arena in which the EU and China enact their respective international roles through a process of competitive role-playing' (Michalski and Pan, 2017, p. 624). While they focus on how interaction alters role conceptions and expectations, we argue that the relationship between interaction and roles and role performance is mutually reinforcing.

Thus, we go beyond most role-theoretic analyses and focus on how role dynamics explain the evolution of cooperation and how changes in actors' roles and role performance alter the prospects for cooperation (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2012; Thies and

Breuning, 2012). We understand cooperation as a type of interaction that states choose deliberately, when role conceptions and expectations vis-à-vis each other match, and states perform their roles by taking up steps for cooperation. This does not imply that role conceptions and expectations necessarily have to converge for the emergence of cooperation in a specific policy area, but that at least some of the underlying beliefs of appropriate behavior and respective position in the international system have to be compatible. We agree with Michalski and Pan that the ‘character of the interaction depends on the degree of congruence in norms and worldviews between the partners and their relative positions in the international system, ranging from competitive to accordant’ (Michalski and Pan, 2017, p. 612). Accordingly, we expect that cooperation emerges and intensifies, when roles and role performance of actors become more compatible and ebbs, when roles diverge. Although the differentiation between role adaptation and role change can be difficult to assess analytically, we posit that role adaptation can suffice for cooperation. However, strong and stable cooperative relations become more likely if there is a change in the underlying roles towards more compatibility. In the following section, we examine the plausibility of these expectations.

III. Data and Methods

The analysis proceeds in three steps, triangulating different types of data. The first two parts trace role conceptions, expectations, and performance of China and the EU in the international climate governance by reviewing literature, and using interview material and news sources. The third part focuses on EU–China interaction. It conducts a qualitative content analysis of joint EU–China declarations and policy papers of China and the EU between 2005 and March 2019 (see Table 1). We select the joint documents based on their reference to climate change cooperation. Joint documents are the product of negotiation processes and are stylized expressions of roles commonly used in diplomatic contexts directed at other states (Michalski and Pan, 2017). The content analysis applies

Table 1: Analyzed Documents

<i>Year</i>	<i>Documents</i>
2005	EU–China Joint Declaration on Climate Change
2006	EU Policy Paper on China ‘Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities’
2010	Joint Statement on Dialogue and Cooperation on Climate Change
2012	EU–China Joint Declaration on Energy Security
2013	EU–China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation
2014	China’s Policy Paper on the EU “Deepen the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit and Win-Win Cooperation”
2015	EU–China Joint Statement on Climate Change
2016	Elements for a new EU Strategy on China
2018	EU–China Leaders’ Statement on Climate Change and Clean Energy
2018	Memorandum of Understanding to Enhance Cooperation on Emissions Trading between the European Commission and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People’s Republic of China
2018	China’s Policy Paper on the EU
2019	EU Commission Paper ‘EU–China – A Strategic Outlook’

an inductive coding approach, in which we reduced the material, and assigned codes that we subsequently categorized. For instance, we coded the main arguments that the two actors give for cooperation, such as economic, security and normative arguments. Moreover, we coded principles of cooperation as well as their framing of climate change (see Online Appendix). We supplement the text analysis with interviews, in which we asked the interviewees to give their assessment on the roles of the EU and China. In total, we conducted 16 interviews with stakeholders from the European Commission, Parliament and Delegation to China and with academic and policy experts from China.

IV. The EU's and China's Roles, Role Performance and Cooperation

The following section identifies the role of China and the EU and their respective development over time. Furthermore, it explores how the EU and China perform these roles in bilateral interactions and how this affects cooperation.

China between Developing Country Status and Strong Power Projection

Since the beginning of international cooperation on climate change, China's role performance has undergone tremendous changes. The lead-up to and the conclusion of the PA represents a turning point for China's role. In general, China's role performance in international climate governance is driven by a doubled identity, which consists of a 'weak power' face and a "strong power" projection (Geeraerts, 2011). At some points, China presents itself as a rising and strong power (Guo, 2004; Kopra, 2019), pursuing its aim to become a regional hegemon with global claim to leadership. At other times, it considers itself a developing country, which was harmed by imperialists and claims a right to development and economic growth. Although in general, China's self-perception changed towards increased leadership, China pursues a political strategy of pick-and-choose when it comes to displaying itself as a developing or a great power. As a Chinese policy expert stated, we see 'political tactics at play' (Interview #5, 06–03-19) in China's choice of climate policies due to a multiplicity of political realities, which China faces.

Playing the 'Developmental Country' Card: China as a Defender of Developing Countries

For a long time, China has presented itself as a defender of developing countries in international climate negotiations, reinforcing their dominant narratives in the UNFCCC system. From this perspective, the US, Europe, Japan, Australia and other highly developed countries have the historical responsibility for climate change and should provide financial support for mitigation and adaptation efforts in developing countries. Thereby China refers to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, a concept written down in the 1992 Framework Convention. China was one of the major players establishing this principle and reiterating it in UNFCCC negotiations, while the EU initially accepted it as means to relieve pressure from developing countries, but also expected that developing countries eventually have to cut emissions in the future (Yan and Torney, 2016). Hence, China denied having an active role in climate change and resisted demands for emission reductions for a long time, although China's economy and GHG emissions had increased rapidly (Schreurs, 2016). This led to tensions between China's internal position on its global obligations and external expectations of the international community, as observed by a European expert on EU–China relations (Interview #8,

15–03-19). In particular, the US criticized China's low efforts for not matching the country's economic strength and corresponding responsibility for climate change (Li, 2016), especially since China superseded the US as the largest emitter of GHG in 2006 (Vidal and Adam, 2007).

From Policy-Negotiator to Policy-Creator: China as a Greater Power

In the run-up to negotiations of the PA, we observe a role change of China towards a more proactive policy-creator (Godbole, 2016). China signaled its willingness to curb emissions and held out the prospect of peaking emissions in 2030. Moreover, the US and China clearly exhibited leadership in making a deal possible (Li, 2016). The negotiations leading to the PA constitute a significant shift away from China's weak power face and developing-country role towards a stronger power face, claiming a leading role in climate negotiations alongside the US and the EU.

Why was that the case? First, external expectations changed and foreign pressure on China increased, mainly due to the dissonance between China's fast-growing economy and its low level of accountability when it comes to mitigation efforts (Interview #8, 14–03-19). This led to a role conflict between China's actual role performance and external role expectations. Further, internal pressure to participate more actively in climate change mitigation and to transform the country into a resource-efficient economic power independent of financial aid, increased, as observed by a Chinese academic (Interview #4, 05–03-19). To meet internal and external pressure and to pursue national interests, China began taking a more proactive stance towards climate change (Giessmann, 2008). One may argue that China's aim to be perceived as a regional hegemon has paved the way towards more possibilities for cooperation (Interview #3, 14–03-19), as China is reaching out to conclude new bilateral partnerships to demonstrate its increased responsibility (Li, 2017). Furthermore, China has proven willing to take adequate responsibility matching its economic power, when the US announced its withdrawal from the PA. China used this as a window of opportunity to demonstrate its willingness to act as a 'proactive builder' and major power in global climate governance (Espa, 2018; Kopra, 2019).

However, the strategic pick-and-choose of policies continued and became obvious during the 2017 and 2018 COPs in Bonn and Katowice. During the 2017 COP, China fell back to old habits of adapting the dominant narrative of developing countries like the group of Like-Minded Developing Countries on Climate Change (LMDC) and the G77 group, claiming more financial support to implement the PA (Dröge and Rattani, 2018). Thereby, China failed to continue its proactive role exhibited in 2015, when the country announced to spend around 3 billion dollars for climate finance in the context of the South–South Climate Cooperation Fund. During the 2018 COP in Katowice, in contrast, China flagged openness to following uniform climate change rules and thereby deviated from supporting a clear division of responsibilities for rich and poor countries (Climate Change News, 2018). To create a rulebook for global climate change rules, China sided with the EU in drafting proposals and revealed its possibilities to act as a policy-creator in international climate governance.

In summary, we observe a change in China's internal conceptions towards a more responsible and leading actor in international climate governance but a strategic pick-and-choose approach when actually performing this role. This shows the ambiguity of China's

Table 2: China's Roles and Role Performance in Climate Governance. Own Depiction

<i>Role elements</i>	<i>Roles</i>		<i>Role performance</i>
	<i>External expectations</i>	<i>Internal conceptions</i>	
Before Paris	rising developing country (with rising responsibilities)	developing country	'weak power face' → advocating for historical responsibility → requesting financial/ technological support → claiming right to economic growth
Since Paris	rising power (with rising responsibilities)	regional hegemon with global power claim	'strong power face' but 'pick-and choose' → from policy-taker to policy-maker → new bilateral climate partnerships → increased mitigation efforts

role. Table 2 displays the influence of external and internal conceptions on China's roles and role performance in climate governance before and after the conclusion of the PA.

The European Union between Leader and Bridge-BUILDER

While China's role conceptions and role performances have oscillated between a role as a great power and that of a developing country, the EU has claimed global leadership since the early days of international climate politics. However, the EU's role has changed over time, too. In contrast to China, the 2009 COP in Copenhagen was a critical point for role change for the EU. While there are extensive discussions in the literature on the EU's external actorness (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Klose, 2018), this paper assumes that that the EU can be understood as a collective external actor in international climate governance. Not only the member states, but also the EU itself is a party to the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and the PA. While acknowledging that discrepancies between EU member states on climate policy and the relationship to China exist, we argue that the EU still has a distinct role in international climate politics that is meaningful to be analyzed in its own right.

The EU's role in international politics consists of its self-conceptions as well as of external actors' images and expectations that reflect back on the EU's own role conceptions. Generally and across different policy fields, the role of the EU has been discussed as 'civilian power' (Duchêne, 1972), a 'multilateral actor' (Jorgensen, 2006), a 'market power' (Damro, 2012), and most prominently put forward by both policy-makers and academics, as 'normative power' (Manners, 2002; Elgström and Smith, 2008; Manners, 2008).

From Leader to Bystander – And Back? EU Roles in Climate Politics

EU role conceptions and expectations vary between different policy areas. In climate politics, the EU has been portrayed as a leader, but this role has been contested over time

(Schreurs and Tiberghien, 2007; Wurzel *et al.*, 2017). The EU was a key player in setting up the UNFCCC (1992) and the negotiation of the Kyoto Protocol (1997) in the earlier years of international climate politics (Oberthür and Groen, 2017). It further made considerable efforts towards saving the Kyoto Protocol and supporting its entry into force in 2005, eight years after the international community had signed it (Elgström, 2015). Consequently, from the beginning of international climate politics and well into the 2000s the EU's self-perceived leadership role was largely reflected by external actors (Kilian and Elgström, 2010). However, the 2009 COP negotiations in Copenhagen seriously challenged the EU's leadership role in climate diplomacy. Until Copenhagen, the EU's leadership style can be considered highly normative and ideational and the EU's strategy was based on a combination of 'leading by example', namely unilateral reduction pledges and climate policies, and the promotion of norms and visions vis-à-vis third parties (Kilian and Elgström, 2010; Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013). But during the failed negotiations for a successor treaty for the Kyoto Protocol, the EU had been sidestepped by the US, and the newly constituted BASIC coalition (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), who did not support the EU's ambitious goals and opposed legally binding emission targets (Groen *et al.*, 2012). Falling behind its own ambitious expectations, the EU came out considerably weakened from the Copenhagen negotiations, which had a considerable impact on its role performance thereafter. The EU's own role conceptions were challenged having experienced a gap between leadership ambition and negotiation reality. The Copenhagen COP also harmed external leader expectations. This led to a conflict between internal conceptions, external expectations and the actual role performance of the EU.

Complementary Roles? The EU as Leader, Mediator and Bridge-Builder

After Copenhagen, the EU tried to regain influence by changing its negotiation strategy. Some scholars describe this as a shift from a leader to a 'leadicator', a combination of a leadership and a mediating role, or from an ideational towards a more pragmatic approach (Groen *et al.*, 2012; Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013). The EU as a 'leadicator' increased efforts in building bridges between major emitters and vulnerable, developing countries. With this role adaptation the EU was in a better place to influence negotiation outcomes in its favour at the 2011 COP in Durban (Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013).

In Paris, the EU also perceived itself as both a leader and a bridge-builder between developed and developing countries. Before and during the Paris COP it reached out to island states, African and Latin American countries and brought together an alliance of ambitious countries from different voting blocs in the High Ambition coalition towards the end of negotiations, thereby separating China from a large share of developing countries (Vidal *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, the EU achieved many of its goals for the conclusion of the PA (Oberthür and Groen, 2017).

Despite its relative success in negotiating the PA, the EU is often struggling to prevail in its role as an influential actor in international climate politics. At the 2017 COP in Bonn the EU 'failed as bridge builder', since it could neither step up its own climate action nor help to resolve conflicts over equity concerns (Dröge and Rattani, 2018). The outcomes of the Bonn negotiations did not reflect the EU's efforts to salvage the PA after the announced US withdrawal by reaching out to partners like Canada and China. There is a continuing mismatch between EU role expectations and the opportunities to realize this role. In the run-up to the 2018 COP in Katowice, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to

Table 3: EU's roles and role performance in climate governance. Own depiction

<i>Role elements</i>	<i>Roles</i>		<i>Role performance</i>
	<i>External expectations</i>	<i>Internal conceptions</i>	
<i>Time</i>			
Before Copenhagen	leader, developed economy (responsibility)	global leader and normative power	Exerting leadership →leading by example (domestic policies) →advocating for international cooperation and emission reductions
Since Copenhagen	inconsistent leader, developed economy	leader and mediator	Facilitating cooperation →Facilitating international cooperation by coalition-building and mediation →Striving towards leadership by cooperating with key players

an ambitious climate policy in a Council decision (European Council, 2018) but failed to agree on more determined climate pledges for a future Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) (Drøge and Rattani, 2018).

In summary, we observe a role adaptation with the EU changing its strategy from leading by example to mediating between different countries. Furthermore, the failure to perform as a leader in Copenhagen implies a change in the underlying role conceptions of the EU not least because external expectations were disappointed. Table 3 depicts external role expectations as well the EU's own role conceptions and the resulting role performance.

Roles and EU–China Interaction

Not only the EU's and China's roles but also their cooperation on climate change changed significantly from the early days of international climate politics. While they 'have formed both cooperative and competitive relations in this field at global and bilateral levels' (Yan and Torney, 2016, p. 213), this section focuses on EU–China cooperation on the bilateral level that has emerged despite tensions. Cooperation in the climate policy realm is also affected by the overall EU–China relationship, which has experienced ebbs and flows over time (Jørgensen and Wong, 2016; Michalski and Pan, 2017). For a long time, the EU and China have often had contrary roles in the international climate system. While the EU considers itself as an ambitious leader, trying to get other countries on board with a strategy of 'leading by example', a Chinese policy expert described China as an emerging economy claiming a 'right to develop' and consequently a right for further emissions (Interview #6, 07–03-19). Nevertheless, both actors started a bilateral partnership on climate cooperation in 2005 publishing a joint Declaration on Climate Change. Several statements, declarations and cooperation programmes followed.

In the following, the article presents the results of the qualitative content analysis. The material reflects interesting developments in EU–China climate relations. These reinforce the changing role conceptions that we outlined in the analysis, but also a changing attitude towards climate change by policy makers on both sides. Over time, the actors have

attached more importance to climate issues, and have emphasized their critical position in responding to these issues.

In 2005, the EU and China launched their Partnership on Climate Change, formulating concrete cooperation objectives. One of the aims is to support the UN-led process and ‘strengthen (...) dialogue on climate change policies and exchange views on key issues in the climate change negotiations’ (Council of the European Union, 2005), but the main objective is technical cooperation and knowledge exchange on issues like energy efficiency, and low-carbon and renewable energy technologies. This shows the close connection between climate change, energy policies, and energy security in EU–China relations. Furthermore, it implies that energy security, namely the secured supply of cheap and ‘clean’ energy to serve economic demands and create economic benefits from technology innovations, might be equally important or even supersede motivations to curb climate change. The 2012 Joint Declaration on Energy Security reiterates the importance of this topic for EU–China cooperation and mentions climate change as a concomitant for energy security. Newer documents are broader with regard to climate change matters. The 2015 joint statement published before the Paris COP, and the 2018 statement reflect more general issues discussed in the international climate system, namely mitigation and emission reduction options, adaptation measures or climate finance for third (developing) countries among others. However, some issues prevalent since the first cooperation steps, are still visible in recent publications, for instance the emphasis on economic arguments for EU–China climate cooperation, on market mechanisms (especially emissions trading), as well as on energy security.

Over time, normative considerations, an increased importance attached to climate change, and a higher awareness of the critical position of China and the EU become apparent. In 2013, the EU–China Strategic Agenda highlighted ‘a common responsibility for advancing global development’, while the 2015 Declaration recognizes the EU’s and China’s ‘critical roles in combating global climate change, one of the greatest threats facing humanity’ (European Union and People’s Republic of China, 2015). It marks a clear point of departure from earlier statements. The 2018 EU–China Leaders’ Statement on Climate Change and Clean Energy further emphasizes this development. It expresses the urgency of climate change, frames the responsibility to solve the issue as a common one, and underlines the significance of the PA as an ‘historic achievement’. Furthermore, it emphasizes the commitment of the two parties, stating that ‘the EU and China are committed to show firm determination’ and the parties ‘underline their highest political commitment to the effective implementation of the PA in all its aspects’ (European Union and People’s Republic of China, 2018).

The 2018 statement can also be understood as a response to the US’s announced withdrawal from the PA, since it is an appendix to the declaration of the 2018 EU–China summit, but was already drafted in 2017, when a joint declaration fell through due to trade issues. The 2018 version was published with only minor changes (Gaventa, 2017; Apparicio and Mathiesen, 2018). Passages such as ‘They call on all Parties to uphold the PA’ and the expressed support for ‘global free trade’ and a ‘multilateral rule-based system’ can be read as a response to the US. This also implies that the EU and China understand their roles as responsible and cooperative players in contrast to the US role. Thus, the US’s withdrawal created a window of opportunity for the EU and China to fill the resulting vacuum and readjust their role performance. A leading Chinese academic

emphasized that before 2018, cooperation with the US was a key pillar of China's climate policy. With the overall geopolitical relationship between the US and China deteriorating from critical engagement to rivalry and competition (The White House, 2007), this changed. After the US's withdrawal, the EU took over the role of the US as the main partner in the field of climate, but in a different way, seeking to share the burden of combating climate change with China (Interview #4, 05–03-19). In a similar vein, the 2019 EU strategic outlook on China underlines the necessity of EU–China cooperation on climate change, stressing the need 'to continue developing a strong relationship' and underlining that the 'partnership is essential for the success of global climate action' (European Commission, 2019). The joint documents show an emerging common understanding of climate change as a major threat, and a new framing of EU–China cooperation as critical for solving the problem. Furthermore, China gradually adjusts its role conceptions towards a major power and key player in climate politics, thereby fulfilling the external role expectations the EU has towards China as the largest emitter and major economy. At the same time, however, the EU critically notes that China is investing in coal energy production in many countries and formulates the expectation that China should peak its emissions before 2030, departing from earlier policy papers on China in terms of clear language (Interview #14, 10–09-19; Interview #16, 12–09-19). This shows that there is indeed criticism of the EU that China does not yet fully live up to its role as a leader.

Analyzing the joint documents further reveals different principles, which imply underlying role conceptions. The documents reflect which principles the actors deem important and on which they could agree. The EU's emphasis on multilateralism and international cooperation based on rules and institutions pervades the documents. The UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and the PA are mentioned and supported as a basis for cooperation. Other international institutions and fora, including the G20, are evoked as platforms for climate cooperation. Thus, the cooperation style expressed in the documents reflects the EU's role as multilateralist actor. The texts repeatedly mention 'multilateralism' (six times as opposed to only one reference to 'multipolarity'), for instance in 2018: 'The PA is proof that with shared political will and mutual trust, multilateralism can succeed in building fair and effective solutions to the most critical global problems of our time' (European Union and People's Republic of China, 2018). This implies that China has accepted the EU's understanding of international cooperation in the course of its interaction with the EU.¹

Another principle mentioned in the documents is the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. According to a Chinese expert, the repeated reference of this principle reflects that China perceives its responsibilities as an emerging economy as different from the EU (Interview #9, 18–03-19). Here we see how China refers to itself as a developing country, as it does not accept the same responsibility (which implies a different willingness to accept the economic burden of mitigating climate change) as the EU.

Overall, EU–China cooperation on climate change has developed from cooperation on energy and technology issues, to a partnership that aims at shaping global climate politics. This reflects the understanding of both that they are in a critical position in the international system and shows their ambition and willingness to become leading climate actors (Interview #9, 18–03-19). Furthermore, it becomes obvious that EU–China cooperation

¹While the EU emphasizes multilateralism as an important foreign policy concept, China has predominantly emphasized understandings of a multipolar world order (Jørgensen and Wong, 2016).

intensifies when their roles approximate each other. The cooperation documents from 2015 and 2018 are a sign of cooperative efforts and a result of China's role change before Paris, the EU's role adaptation after Copenhagen and the window of opportunity that opened with the announced US withdrawal from the PA.

Conclusion

This article has shown how role changes have contributed to closer cooperation between the EU and China in climate governance. Building on role theory, this paper intends to fill an analytical gap, as the 'well-developed conceptual apparatus' (Thies and Breuning, 2012, p. 1) of role theory has predominantly been used to analyse foreign policy behaviour of single actors and not cooperation between actors. The analysis revealed three critical events that contributed to a recent increase in climate cooperation and a development from rather technical towards political cooperation, despite the overall political constraints in EU–China relations. The first critical juncture was the 2009 COP, which led to a role adaptation of the EU role towards a bridge-builder supplementing its leadership claims in international climate governance. The second critical juncture was the PA, which became possible due to the role change of China from a policy-taker or even policy-negotiator towards a more proactive stance in climate change. The third critical juncture was the US's withdrawal from the PA, which created a leadership vacuum, opening a window of opportunity for the EU and China to readjust their positions in the international climate governance system and fostered EU–China cooperation.

While we do not claim that roles are the only factor that can explain the behaviour of the EU, China and the evolution of their cooperation in the climate realm, employing role-theoretical concepts can enhance our understanding of these developments. The analysis shows how internal role conceptions influence the behaviour of both the EU and China in both international negotiations and bilateral cooperation. Furthermore, the analysis sheds light on how conflicts between either different internal role conceptions within an actor's role-set (the conflict between China's developing country and major power role) or between internal conceptions and external expectations (the EU's international leader role conception, which turned out not to be widely shared among other players in Copenhagen and external expectations on China as major emitter and economy that stood in contrast to China's self-conception as developing country) led to a change in role performance. The analytical focus on roles, however, has some clear limitations. One blind spot of our analysis is the influence of economic and geopolitical factors and how these factors interact with roles and role expectations. Studying the interactions of these explanations and their effects on cooperation can be an interesting avenue for future research. Another important limitation of our approach to treat the EU as a unitary actor is that we cannot account for interesting cooperation dynamics between China and individual EU member states and neglect controversies between member states about how to engage with China. In climate governance as in other policy fields, some of the member states have established closer ties with China, while others remain sceptical about cooperation with China. While these dynamics certainly affect EU–China cooperation overall, we have to leave it up to future research to analyse these effects.

Our main theoretical contribution revolves around the argument that cooperation intensifies when roles become more compatible. The roles of China and the EU have recently

become more compatible, as both understand their position and the position of the respective other in the international climate system as critical. Furthermore, they share a sense of responsibility for international cooperation on climate change and the implementation of the PA. It was only with the previous role changes after Copenhagen and in the process leading up to the Paris COP, which brought the roles of China and the EU closer together, that actors chose to use this window of opportunity after the US withdrawal to intensify cooperation. This does not mean that there are no divergent views or role expectations. One example for this is the EU's recently reiterated request that China cuts emissions sufficiently and fast, implying that the EU is unsure whether China lives up to its promises and leadership claims. This implies that some disagreements prevail, even though the trajectory of EU–China relations until now hint at deepened cooperation in the future. Overall, it has become clear that climate and energy security can be a showcase of EU–China cooperation and create common ground for deeper alignment in times of deepening political tensions and remaining systemic differences.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Data S1. Supporting information