

My Summer in Beijing

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When I told people that I was planning to travel to China for the first time since the pandemic, many strongly warned me against it. Many European academics have become extremely reticent to visit China, as they fear for their personal safety, in the light of new catch-all legislation on espionage. And everyone remembers the unfortunate case of “The Two Michaels”: Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig were detained from December 2018 to September 2021 after the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer of Huawei and daughter of its founder, in Canada. I must confess that after a while this did get under my skin. But in the end, I went for 16 days in July, to teach my course on the EU and great power politics at the Renmin University of China in Beijing – and I had a most fruitful stay, speaking with dozens of Chinese colleagues in the think-tanks and universities. After an interruption of three years without face-to-face contact, they were incredibly eager to talk. I conclude that we must definitely resume travel, in both directions, or mutual understanding will degrade very fast.

I did make a point, though, of informing all my contacts, including Chinese officials here in Brussels, of these wide-spread fears. All were genuinely surprised. But whether they think the fears are grounded or not, they are real, and therefore China has a real problem. If Beijing is serious about people-to-people exchange, which it always professes to encourage, it will have to find a way of alleviating these fears. Perhaps China could proactively invite a number of European academics, including those who are more sceptical of its role in international politics.

SCEPTICISM AND THE TRINITY

Dialogue is all the more important because my impression is that many Chinese colleagues do not appreciate how much the tone of the China debate in Brussels has shifted. For sure, the average European view still is far from the average American view of China, but it is a lot more sceptical than some years ago. Many Chinese feel that of late China has been reaching out to the EU, and struggle to understand why there has been but a limited response. Most Europeans, however, have become too sceptical to trust China’s rhetoric – they want to see positive action, creating real reciprocity in market access, notably, before responding in kind.

In addition to market access, the EU is newly emphasising the strategy of de-risking. Chinese scholars widely see that in a negative light, as a façade behind which the EU actually prepares de-coupling. My message is that the choice for de-risking is good news for China. For the alternative is not that the EU would not take any measures – that option is not on the table anymore. The alternative is indeed de-coupling, but the mainstream view in the EU remains that this is a last resort only, if China’s own policies leave Brussels no other option. In the same vein, while Chinese academics mostly see the trinity of partner – competitor – rival with which the EU characterises China as negative (because they reject the “rival” part of it), it should be taken as positive that the EU holds onto it. For the alternative, again, is not that Brussels would treat Beijing purely as a partner – that is political fiction – but that, just like the US, it would see it primarily as a rival.

Russia's war against Ukraine has deepened this mutual scepticism. Many Chinese colleagues genuinely don't understand why the West singles out China as having to do more to end the war. In their mind, China has made major strides already by withholding direct military support from its closest partner, Russia, and by not recognising any of its illegal annexations of Ukrainian territory – which is not wrong. It is true as well that a lot of Western analysis of China's twelve-point position paper, for example, is one-sided. While it certainly is not very satisfactory for Ukraine, it isn't for Russia either. China explicitly condemns using nuclear threats and jeopardising the safety of nuclear installations – which only Russia has done. On the other hand, if China really wants to position itself as an impartial broker, it would do well to bring more balance into its high-level contacts with Moscow and Kyiv, and to refrain from organising military exercises with Russia for the time being (which stand in the way of deepening security and defence cooperation with the EU).

All Chinese colleagues warn that the West overestimates Beijing's leverage over Moscow. That may be true, but it doesn't absolve China from the obligation to keep trying to have some moderating influence, which is very much in its own interest. If a window for real peace negotiations would open up, China would have a key role to play too, in helping to bring Russia to accept a reasonable compromise.

NEW HOPE, FIRST MOVE

The good news is that all my interlocutors strive for improved EU-China relations. The immediate obstacle to reinvigorate the overall relationship are the mutual sanctions. In December 2020 the EU and China announced an agreement in principle on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). Then in March 2021, the EU, in concertation with the US and the UK, adopted sanctions because of the human rights situation in Xinjiang. This fits in the EU logic of “partner – competitor – rival”: one cooperates on one issue, the CAI, even as one disagrees on another, treatment of the Uighurs. To me it remains unclear, however, why sanctions which, though morally justified, evidently

would not have any practical effect on the ground, had to be adopted at precisely that time, together with Washington and London.¹

But the main issue is that China then overreacted and adopted sanctions against a number of individual members of parliament and academics, the entire Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament (EP), the Political and Security Committee (PSC), and a think-tank and a foundation. The result was predictable: this ill-considered move antagonised so many Europeans that it jeopardised the “partner – competitor – rival” approach, meaning, as explained above, that many began to see China only as a rival. Many Chinese will rightly point out that the EU was first in adopting sanctions, but the political reality in Brussels is such that if China wants to re-dynamize relations with the EU, Beijing will have to move first.

Next year's European elections are an opportunity: could China afterwards not “simply” announce that with a new parliament in place, the sanctions against the MEPs lapse (and quietly drop the other sanctions at the same time)? Some Chinese doubt, however, whether even then the EU would respond. The Council should then, indeed, reciprocate and drop the EU sanctions – they are anyway purely symbolic (the Parliament, of course, takes its own decisions). That doesn't mean, obviously, that the EU thereby accepts that there are no human rights abuses in Xinjiang. But it would mean beginning to question sanctions as the default (and sometimes only) response to any issue, often knowing full well in advance that they will have little or no real impact. Sanctions are but an instrument of foreign policy, never a substitute for it.

This would open the way for substantial discussions, probably not about reviving the CAI in its current shape, but negotiating an updated version, or even a new agreement altogether. In the current political climate in Europe, China will have to demonstrate its sincerity by taking early and effective action to create more economic reciprocity. The Chinese economy, in effect, remains very much in need of close trade and investment relations with the EU, so this would definitely be in China's own

interest. Beijing must understand that even then the EU will go ahead with de-risking, just like China itself seeks to manage its external dependencies. The EU, for its part, must have a thorough debate but then come to a fast decision about the precise meaning of de-risking, so that everyone (including our own companies) knows what is and what is not allowed under this new approach.

NATO GOES TO ASIA – OR NOT

Meanwhile, many Chinese academics worry about the increasing attention that NATO is paying to China, and don't comprehend why the European Allies go along with this. The idea in particular of opening a NATO liaison office in Tokyo, which was floated before the Vilnius Summit last July, causes a lot of concern. Yet from 2001 to 2021, NATO had an information office in Moscow: surely it cannot be that threatening then. If the office in Tokyo would become a reality (which is still to be decided – for now the Allies disagree), China should avoid overreacting once again – that would only play into the hands of the hawks on all sides. Instead, why not demine the issue by inviting NATO to open an information office in Beijing as well? The People's Liberation Army (PLA) having resumed in-person staff talks with NATO in Brussels last March, that would open an additional channel to improve understanding.

That said, does the Alliance really need offices in Asia? What is a NATO presence intended to signal, given that the Allies remain very divided about this? NATO must, of course, track China's military development, but for now Europeans primarily position themselves vis-à-vis Beijing through diplomacy and geoeconomics, which they can only do effectively through the EU. And the EU coordinates directly with the US through bodies such as the Trade and Technology Council. The Europeans must take care that not very well thought through NATO initiatives do not jeopardise EU strategy.

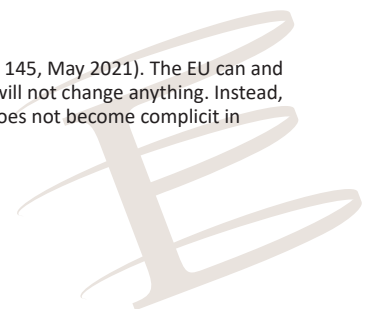
Endnotes

- 1 For my analysis at the time, see: [The EU and China: Sanctions, Signals, and Interests](#) (Egmont Policy Brief No. 145, May 2021). The EU can and must criticise China when it violates the human rights instruments that it has subscribed to, but sanctions will not change anything. Instead, the EU should focus on regulation to ensure that by trading with China, or any other authoritarian state, it does not become complicit in those violations, e.g., by outlawing the import of the products of forced labour.

CONCLUSION: INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT

Perhaps more important than anything else, is that Europe and China remain open towards each other at the intellectual level. Without a sincere desire to understand each other, no real improvement in the relationship is possible. There is a debate in China, and Europeans can engage with it. Rather than shying away from that, China should be more open to European diplomats, academics, and others than it is today. The EU should stay as open as it is, and certainly not curb academic exchanges (of students and faculty). Of course, in certain sensitive areas one wants to be careful about giving access to any foreign student. But I honestly don't see how limiting the number of Chinese PhD and MA students improves our security or serves the cause of human rights in China. Every student who spends time abroad returns home with a more nuanced view of the world – let us embrace that opportunity. Only the timid and the scared on both sides would rather lurk behind ever higher walls.

Sven Biscop warmly thanks all Chinese colleagues for the frank discussions and for their kind hospitality. One thing at least the Belgians and the Chinese have in common: serious matters must be discussed over a serious supper. Equally warm thanks to Victor De Decker, Pol De Witte, Tobias Gehrke, Tania Latici, Astrid Pepermans, and Jasper Roctus for their most useful comments on the first draft of this paper.





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