Democratic states are increasingly challenged by assertive authoritarian powers. China has become an economically successful, technologically advanced autocracy and an ambitious global geopolitical actor who promotes its model as an alternative to liberal democracies and their values. Other authoritarian governments like Russia or Turkey pursue similar narratives. At Bertelsmann Stiftung, we think (and worry) a lot about this new systemic conflict and its consequences for Germany and Europe – and so do many of our peers in politics, think-tanks, academia or media. In this compilation, Peter Walkenhorst maps the ongoing debate and points to important contributions we consider essential readings. Please feel invited to comment and complement our selection.

1. Europe

“Building the world we want to live in: A Union of vitality in a world of fragility”

State of the Union Address by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, at the European Parliament Plenary, September 16,
In short: This statement by the President of the EU Commission is one of the strongest official announcements yet of a new and potentially more robust EU policy on China.

In her State of the Union Address on September 16, two days after the latest EU-China leaders meeting, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, commented on the EU’s relationship with China: “The relationship between the European Union and China is simultaneously one of the most strategically important and one of the most challenging we have,” she declared, referring to Beijing as “a negotiating partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival.”

“We have interests in common on issues such as climate change – and China has shown it is willing to engage through a high-level dialogue. But we expect China to live up to its commitments in the Paris Agreement and lead by example. There is still hard work to do on fair market access for European companies, reciprocity and overcapacity. We continue to have an unbalanced trade and investment partnership. And there is no doubt that we promote very different systems of governance and society. We believe in the universal value of democracy and the rights of the individual.”

Emphasizing that, “we must always call out human rights abuses whenever and wherever they occur – be it on Hong Kong or with the Uyghurs,” Ms von der Leyen announced that the European Commission will come forward with a proposal for a European “Magnitsky Act”, modelled along the lines of a similar-named US sanctions framework targeting individuals involved in human rights abuses worldwide who could face EU asset freezes and travel bans.

“The New China Consensus: How Europe is Growing Wary of Beijing”

Janka Oertel, ECFR Policy Brief, September 2020

In short: This policy brief provides a concise summary of recent events that changed the attitude of European policy-makers towards China.

The relationship between EU member states and China is undergoing a transformation that the coronavirus crisis has accelerated, argues Janka Oertel, Director of the Asia Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations, in a recent policy brief. Countries across Europe are becoming
increasingly skeptical of Beijing’s intentions. They are debating reducing their dependency on China for supplies of critical goods, and are ever more concerned about the future of the relationship in a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment marked by growing US-China rivalry. Overall, there is growing skepticism about the future trajectory of the relationship, which provides an opportunity for a more robust and coherent EU policy on China.


MERICS Papers on China, No 9, September 2020

In short: The paper analyses a broad range of EU-China relations and outlines more robust policy recommendations for a common European China Policy.

MERICS’ analysts have made the ongoing shifts in EU China policy the focus of their paper, edited by Mikko Huotari, Jan Weidenfeld and Claudia Wessling. They state that “disillusionment with China has been growing across Europe for years, as policy makers and negotiators have found it increasingly difficult to find common ground with Chinese counterparts.” Against this backdrop, the paper argues that the future shape of EU China policy should be rooted in a “principles-first approach, with competition as the default when engaging with China”.

“From Gold to Dust”

Thomas des Garets Geddes, UK-China Relations The Diplomat, October 2, 2020

In short: Despite the ongoing Brexit negotiations, the U.K. remains an ally for the EU in the new systemic conflict with China.

In just a few months, the U.K.’s overall policy toward China has changed dramatically. Until recently, Downing Street was famously defining itself as “China’s best partner in the West”. Since then, however, the U.K. has become one of China’s most vocal critics, infuriating Beijing with its removal of Huawei from its 5G network and its decision to provide millions of Hong Kongers a
pathway to British citizenship. This startling volte-face has as much to do with domestic factors as American pressure, argues Thomas des Garets Geddes.

2. Germany

“Germany – Europe – Asia: shaping the 21st century together”

German Government adopts policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region, August/September 2020

In short: Although hidden in diplomatic language, the new guidelines manifest a strong shift in Germany’s policy on China.

In the past few years, the importance of the Indo-Pacific region in both economic and political terms has increased markedly. The Federal German Government has set out the course for its future policy on the countries of the region by adopting new policy guidelines. One declared aim is “to diversify its relations both geographically and in substance – with a view to avoiding unilateral dependencies”, especially in trade relations. At the same time, the new guidelines call for “closing ranks with democracies and partners with shared values in the region”.

“Bonding over Beijing: How to deal with China will be one of the dominant issues in transatlantic relations in the coming years”

Erik Brattberg and Torrey Taussig, Internationale Politik Quarterly, October 1, 2020

In short: A timely reminder that transatlantic relations remain a crucial factor in the new systemic conflict with China.

Over the past few years, China's rise has become a top priority in Washington and in many European capitals – and a big-ticket item on the wider transatlantic agenda. Yet the United States and Europe have so far not been able to capitalize on this convergence by building anything resembling a coherent agenda to address jointly shared challenges from China. As Erik Brattberg and Torrey Taussing point out, this task will be among the most pressing on the transatlantic agenda over the next four years, regardless of
whether Donald Trump is reelected on November 3, or Joe Biden becomes the next US president.

3. United States

Republican Leadership in the United States House of Representatives
Released Final Report of the China Task Force, September 30, 2020

In short: Many of the recommendations outlined in the report enjoy bipartisan support. It is, therefore, seen by many observers as a possible road map to the future U.S. strategy toward China.

On September 30, the Republican leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives released the final report of the China Task Force (CTF). The CTF, formed in May 2020, was intended to be a bipartisan investigation into U.S. policy toward China. In the end, Democrats chose to not join. The CTF report lays out 83 key findings and makes 430 policy recommendations to address issues ranging from national security concerns, human rights violations, problems with the supply chain, Beijing’s missteps in its handling of the pandemic and China’s overall expanding influence on the world stage.

“The U.S. Intelligence Community Is Not Prepared for the China Threat”

Adam Schiff, Foreign Affairs, September 30, 2020

In short: This article by a prominent Democrat suggests that harder-line China U.S. policies are likely to prevail in the coming years, whether in a second Trump term or in a Biden administration.

“We are witnessing the resurgence of authoritarianism across the globe, and it poses a growing challenge to the very idea of liberal democracy. China, with its expanding economic, military, and diplomatic might, is at the forefront of this neoauthoritarian challenge”, writes Adam Schiff in the magazine Foreign Affairs. In his article, the Chairman of the US House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and prominent representative of the Democratic Party, argues that based on an extensive review of the nation's intelligence apparatus his committee conducted, the US intelligence agencies are not well prepared to compete with China on the global stage for decades to come.
“Democracy first: How the US can prevail in the political systems competition with the CCP”

Patrick W. Quirk, David O. Shullman, and Johanna Kao, Brookings, September 2020

**In short:** Besides exploring how China is actively polarizing an authoritarian alternative to democratic governance, the paper also suggests a strategic approach to win the political systems competition by strengthening democracies worldwide.

As part of the Brookings project “Global China: Assessing China’s Growing Role in the World” this policy brief explores the role of U.S. democracy promotion in America’s broader China strategy. It examines how China’s malign influence tactics corrode democracy in target countries, explains the impact on U.S. interests, and then provides recommendations for using U.S. support for democracy to secure American objectives and compete with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which is actively popularizing an authoritarian alternative to democratic governance. As the authors argue: “The challenge posed by China under the leadership of the CCP is better defined as a contest of systems that will play out globally, rather than primarily a competition for power and primacy in Asia.”

“The Struggle with China is not a Replay of the Cold War”

Chas W. Freeman, Jr., Remarks to the Asia American Forum, September 25, 2020

**In short:** A thoughtful cautionary note not to subscribe to easily to a historical analogy that might be misleading and even dangerous!

For many observers the U.S. and China are entering a new Cold War. Chas W. Freeman, Jr. objects. In his remarks to the Asia American Forum, the American diplomat, businessman, and writer points out why the Cold War was radically different from the current great power struggle between the U.S. and China: “The US-China contention is far broader than that of the Cold War, in part because China, unlike the determinedly autarkic USSR, is part of the same global society as the United States. The battlefields include global governance, geoeconomics, trade, investment, finance, currency usage, supply chain management, technology standards and systems, and scientific collaboration,
in addition to the geopolitical and military domains in which the Cold War played out. Short of nuclear war, the struggle the United States has begun with China may not be existential, as the Cold War was, but it cannot avoid being hugely consequential.”

“What Happens When China Leads the World”
Michael Schuman, The Atlantic, October 5, 2020

In short: The article does away with some widespread myths of Chinese historiography and elaborates on China's ambitions as a new superpower.

“What kind of superpower will China be? That's the question of the 21st century," writes Michael Schuman in the magazine The Atlantic. The American journalist and author seeks to find an answer in the history of China's foreign relations. He concludes that Beijing will insist on its own world order. "What becomes clear from an examination of China's history is that the Chinese don't just want to be a great power - they believe they deserve to be. In centuries past, the Chinese thought their sovereign had a right to rule 'all under Heaven.' Due to the realities of technology and distance, China's reach usually remained regional. But now, in the age of globalization, Beijing's influence may achieve that lofty goal.”

“Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries”
Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, Pew Research Center, October 6, 2020

In short: The findings of the Pew research survey provide strong empirical evidence that China's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak and its assertive foreign policy during the pandemic have backfired.

Views of China have grown more negative in recent years across many advanced economies, and unfavorable opinion has soared over the past year, a new 14-country Pew Research Center survey shows. Today, a majority in each of the surveyed countries has an unfavorable opinion of China. And in Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States, South Korea, Spain and Canada, negative views have reached their highest points since the Center began polling on this topic more than a decade ago. The
rise in unfavorable views comes amid widespread criticism over how China has handled the coronavirus pandemic.

PROJECTS

Germany and Asia