

PRESS RELEASE

Conflict between the US and China: Europeans want a stronger Europe

The tensions between the US and China are a source of great concern to people living in the EU. At the same time, the uncertain global situation is increasing their desire for a more sovereign Europe. The world's two superpowers are viewed differently by Europeans: While the latter continue to feel a bond with the US, they see China largely as a competitor. One area where the EU's citizens are particularly critical of the People's Republic is data protection. Those are some of the key findings from a Bertelsmann Stiftung survey of public opinion in the 28 EU member states.

Gütersloh – January 17, 2020. Three out of four Europeans (75 percent) are concerned about the conflict between the United States and China – in Germany the figure is even 81 percent. That is one of the findings from an opinion survey carried out by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in the 28 EU member states. The survey also reveals marked differences in how EU citizens perceive both superpowers. For example, approximately half of the respondents say their own country has common economic interests with both China and the US. In Germany, 58 percent say that China is economically significant for their country, an above-average result compared to other European nations. Yet when it comes to common values and political interests, the survey shows that Europeans are significantly more skeptical of China than the US.

Almost half of the respondents, 45 percent, perceive the People's Republic mainly as a competitor; merely one-quarter view it as a partner. Only 9 percent of the respondents say that their own country has the same political interests as China or that they share the same values. In Germany, almost one-third of the respondents (32 percent) consider China a partner, while 38 percent view it primarily as a competitor. By comparison, Europeans still feel a strong affinity with the United States, with 36 percent saying they have the same political interests as the US, and almost one-quarter citing common values as a unifying element. In Germany, the figure for those who feel their country has the same political interests and values as the US lies slightly below the EU average.

Little confidence in data protection by Chinese firms

Europeans are particularly critical of China when it comes to digitalization and data protection: Only 6 percent of the respondents trust a Chinese company to handle their data responsibly. One in five feels this way about American providers; for Japanese companies the figure is 16 percent. Europeans have the greatest confidence by far in their own companies, with 40 percent saying European providers adhere to high privacy standards.

Broad support for the new European Commission's China policy

Given today's tense geopolitical situation, the Europeans surveyed put the greatest faith in their own continent, with one in two saying the other EU member states are Europe's most important allies. In comparison, 17 percent say the US is their country's key ally, a role that is ascribed to China by only 5 percent of the respondents.

“Europeans are aware that conflict between the two superpowers, China and the US, is also forcing Europe to reposition itself politically on the global level,” says Anika Laudien, China Expert at the Bertelsmann Stiftung. “Public opinion reveals broad support for the EU’s China policy, which is an important part of the strategy for creating a stronger, more sovereign Europe in general. Europeans are therefore also providing support for the course set by the new president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who wants to use a ‘geopolitical Commission’ to give Europe more of a say on the global stage.”

The survey also shows that the public debate on China has not been particularly emotional, which is why Europe’s policy makers have some leeway to implement fact-based policy responses, the Bertelsmann Stiftung experts say, and given the numerous challenges impacting the relationship between China and the EU member states, such responses are exactly what is needed.

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Background information

To find out how Europe’s citizens view the complex debate on China, the Bertelsmann Stiftung commissioned an opinion poll which surveyed 12,263 people throughout the EU, providing an in-depth look at what the European public thinks of China. The survey took place in September 2019. Detailed information on the survey methodology can be found in the publication.

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