

Five minutes with Gudrun Wacker: ‘The Chinese political elite perceive the EU as a successful example of regional integration that has created stability and peace in Europe’.

Dr. Gudrun Wacker, Senior Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, argues that China does not see the EU as an influential geostrategic competitor. Nevertheless, the Chinese political elite considers the EU as a successful example of regional integration which has fostered peace and stability.



How important is China to the EU, and vice versa?

The EU has become China's biggest trading partner; it is an important source of technology and of foreign direct investment. In terms of foreign relations, however, the EU (or European member states) is not the most relevant partner for China and China does not see the EU as a geo-strategic competitor (unlike the USA). The relationship with the United States is the most relevant for China – due to the economic interdependence and due to the strong military presence of the USA in the Asia-Pacific region.

From the European perspective, China is a very important trading partner (the second biggest outside the EU). But China is also seen as a key actor in tackling global issues like climate change, preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), global financial order etc.

Should European leaders engage more strongly with China over issues like human rights?

Ever since 1989, when China's leaders decided to use military force against the demonstrators on Tiananmen Square, human rights have been a controversial issue between the EU and China. On the European side, there is public pressure on top politicians to address human rights issues when meeting with their Chinese counterparts. Moreover some member states also hold separate human rights meetings with China on a regular basis. And there have been many efforts to support human rights and the rule of law in China by offering training and other practical measures.

While it is important to raise these issues with Chinese leaders, we should be careful not to expect any fast and direct positive changes as a result of these efforts. Chinese leaders and many academics reject Western (including European) criticism of the human rights situation in China. They argue that such criticism either lacks credibility (because very often double standards are applied) or it fails to acknowledge the progress that China has already made or it lacks understanding of the immensity of China's development problems. For China's leaders, maintaining political stability takes priority over individual rights like the freedom of expression or freedom of the media.

How does the Chinese political elite perceive the European Union?

In general, the Chinese political elite perceive the EU as a successful example of regional integration that has created stability and peace in Europe. Between 2002 and 2005, China's elite might well have expected the EU to develop into a full-fledged political actor on the international stage and even into a counterweight to the United States. But such expectations have since almost

disappeared. Over the last years, some degree of disillusionment has set in. Partly, this is a reflection of the negative changes that have taken place in the perception of China on the European side. Moreover, the spread of the European debt crisis and the difficulties for the EU in finding a way out of this crisis have certainly also contributed to less positive image of the European Union among China's elite.

Many Chinese students are pursuing degrees in Western universities. Do you think this will affect their political points of views on China?

This is a difficult question. In the past, the leadership in China itself seemed to believe that students who come back from abroad cannot be politically trusted. Very often these home-coming students had problems in finding jobs in responsible positions that were really adequate for their qualification. But this attitude has since changed, not least because it was not very attractive for well-qualified Chinese students to return home if they had no prospect of finding a really good (and well-paid) job.

Studying abroad can strengthen your sense of identity. So maybe Chinese students feel more "Chinese", when they spend some years in the United States or in Europe – especially if they get the impression that there is not much willingness to understand the situation of China on the part of their co-students or teachers. So if the question means whether Chinese students necessarily look at their home country in a more critical way and through a 'Western' lens, I would say No, or at least not generally so.

What do you think the China – EU relationship will look like in 20 years time?

I don't have a crystal ball, unfortunately. One of the problems is that we often merely extrapolate past trends into the future (like China's growth rates, for example).

The EU and China are facing many challenges. Will the EU find a way out of the present crisis? Will it become politically more integrated and start to act with greater unity? At present, there seem to be some trends to 're-nationalise' our foreign policy, including our China policies. The notion of the nation-state seems to be quite persistent in the European Union. And national governments defend their sovereignty and their seats in international institutions (like the Security Council of the United Nations) and groupings (like the G20). We have no common vision of where the EU should be two decades from now.

As for China, the challenges are of a similar, if not bigger magnitude: China's model of export-led and investment-led growth has become unsustainable. Environmental problems have reached a threatening level; corruption is widespread; the income gap has been growing and social unrest has been on the rise. The new generation of Chinese leaders will take over political power during the next year. Will they be able to find solutions for all these problems? Will it be possible to continue the modernisation process while maintaining political and social stability? The answer to these questions will also have an impact on what EU-China relations will look like over the next decades. But for now, we don't have the answers.

Gudrun Wacker is a speaker at today's Global Policy Institute's panel discussion on 'Europe and the Rising Powers of Asia: Competitors or Partners?'

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Dr. Gudrun Wacker is a Senior Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. She is particularly interested in China's foreign and security policy and China's domestic development. Previously, Dr Wacker has worked as a researcher at the Department for Chinese and Korean Studies at the Eberhard-Karls-University Tübingen and at the Federal Institute for Russian, East European and International Studies in Cologne.



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