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# ‘The biggest mistake was not believing China’

## Marina Rudyak on why understanding China begins with questioning our own assumptions

**When you look at the European debate on China – and specifically the German debate – what is the biggest misconception preventing us from understanding China realistically today?**

I don’t think there is a single biggest misconception. The fundamental mistake we made with China – and, incidentally, with Russia as well – was that we simply did not believe them. Or, more fundamentally, we did not seriously engage with what they were actually saying and writing. If you look at China over a longer period of time, you can see that, by and large, the Chinese government has implemented exactly what it has been announcing for decades. That applies to industrial policy, innovation, green technologies and the development of strategic supply chains.

Take rare earths. As early as 1992, Deng Xiaoping said: ‘The Middle East has oil, China has rare earths.’ Since then, official documents have revealed a remarkably consistent strategy. In 2017, Xi Jinping articulated the goal that there should be no significant global production chain that could function without China. Massive investment in research and development, electric vehicles and green technologies had likewise featured in China’s Five-Year Plans for years. None of this was hidden. We either did not read it or did not believe it. And that is precisely where many of the misunderstandings originate.

**What exactly did we fail to believe?**

That China might actually achieve the goals it had set for itself. The Five-Year Plans contained highly specific targets: increasing spending on research and development, building a green economy, promoting electric vehicles and driving digital transformation. Many people dismissed this as political rhetoric — the sort of thing governments simply write down. Beneath that lay an even deeper assumption: that

an authoritarian state could never be innovative. So these plans were bound to fail.

I remember conversations with German companies around 10 years ago. Even then, it was already abundantly clear in China how much priority was being given to electric vehicles. Yet here in Germany, many people remained convinced that the internal combustion engine would continue to dominate for a long time because that was what consumers wanted. Many people with experience of China – Germans and Chinese alike – could only look at that assessment in disbelief. Today we know how costly that misjudgement has been. The more interesting question, therefore, is not why China succeeded. It is why we did not believe China could succeed. That probably tells us more about ourselves than it does about China. Why do we operate on the basis of projections rather than seeing China for what it actually is?

**In hindsight, much has been said about Germany's illusions regarding Russia. Is there now a risk of developing the opposite illusion about China — seeing it only through the lens of threat and confrontation?**

Yes, I do see that risk. With Russia, we essentially knew what we were dealing with. We made a fairly conscious decision to look the other way and pretend everything was fine. With China, we now risk making the opposite mistake: we no longer look closely because we have already convinced ourselves that China represents nothing but a threat. I think that is just as dangerous.

We remain deeply interconnected with China in many areas. If China were to stop supplying permanent magnets tomorrow, production lines across Europe would grind to a halt. Studies suggest that it would take us around 10 years to reduce such dependencies in critical sectors. Those 10 years need to be used wisely. We have to manage our relationship with China — and to do that, we need to understand China.

Above all, we need to be as well informed as possible. That means many more people who can read Chinese, greater expertise across ministries, parliaments and research institutions. Much of the relevant information is freely available — but it is in Chinese. If we rely solely on translations, we are also relying on other people's choices about what is translated and what is prioritised. Official Chinese translations naturally present the image that the Chinese state wishes to project. And if we only read English-language sources, we inevitably end up following the political priorities of other countries.

If we live in a world shaped geopolitically by the United States and China – and I firmly believe we do – then we should be investing

comparable resources in understanding both. Are we doing that? The answer is clearly no.

**We have been asking for a long time how things in China are changing. But perhaps we should be questioning our own assumptions about China instead?**

Absolutely. For many years, political science assumed that economic development would inevitably lead to democratisation and that authoritarian systems could not remain innovative in the long run. Neither assumption has proved true in China's case. Perhaps that tells us less about China than about our own analytical models. We tried to explain China through the lens of our theories instead of looking at what was actually happening there. We should approach it much more like a laboratory: observing the debates taking place, where investment is flowing and which priorities are being set, and then drawing conclusions, rather than constantly asking whether China fits our models.

Eurocentrism certainly played a role. We treated the West as the norm and assumed that sooner or later other societies would follow the same path. But why should they necessarily do so? Even if one believes liberal democracy is the best form of government, it does not automatically follow that every country will take the same historical route. China sees its current rise not as the beginning of something new but as a return to a position in the world that it once occupied historically. If you take that perspective seriously, many developments become much easier to understand.

**In Europe, China is often described either as an economic partner or as a systemic rival. Is that distinction still useful?**

No, because it suggests an either-or choice that simply does not reflect reality. China is simultaneously a partner, a competitor and a systemic rival. The European Union's threefold characterisation captures this rather well — we just tend to forget that all three roles apply at the same time. Even economically, the picture is far more complex. China is an export market, a supplier of critical components and, at the same time, our fiercest competitor in key industries of the future, such as electric vehicles. We have to learn to live with that ambiguity.

Interestingly, we are much better at dealing with this complexity when it comes to the United States. We are able to talk about shared values while also expressing sharp criticism of political developments. We accept that both can coexist. When it comes to China, by contrast, we still tend to see everything in black and white. Of course, there is systemic rivalry. But it is not exhausted by the contrast

between democracy and autocracy. Increasingly, the real question is which political and economic system can offer more convincing answers to the major challenges of our time. That competition is real — and we should treat it as such.

At the same time, there are areas where no solutions will be possible without China. Think of the global Sustainable Development Goals or climate action. After the United States, under Donald Trump, withdrew from many international commitments, China explicitly reaffirmed its support for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. That, too, is part of the reality.

**What, specifically, should Germany change in order to understand China better? And what role can the Social Democratic Party play?**

We need to invest much more heavily in China expertise. That may sound rather unremarkable, but it is a strategic issue. Germany needs many more people who can analyse Chinese-language sources, interpret developments and feed that knowledge into politics and public administration. I would very much like to see politicians place greater emphasis on exactly that.

I would also stress the importance of the SPD's party dialogue with the Communist Party of China. This is periodically called into question, but I believe it would be a serious mistake to abandon a format that has existed for more than 30 years. In China, there is no way around the Party – it is the centre of power – and such channels should not be given up lightly. They are important for communicating our own concerns and for understanding the logic that drives China's party-state. Keeping these channels of communication open is not a sign of naivety, but an expression of strategic wisdom and foresight.

*The interview was conducted by Philipp Kauppert.*

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