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# A new tone in EU-China relations

## Corona, Hong Kong, propaganda: The list of dissonances with Beijing is getting longer. We need a new EU-China policy

*Read this article in German.*

Clocking in at just one hour, this year's work report presented by the Chinese Premier at the National People's Congress was unusually short. In the Great Hall of the People, Li Keqiang, with a serious demeanour, pointed to the great successes in combatting the corona pandemic and the openness and transparency that China brought to bear in international cooperation.

Moreover, with regard to China's role in the world, the Premier portrayed a responsible superpower that brings stability and builds peace. Though, the message that the global community derived from this perfectly choreographed 13th National People's Congress could hardly have been more different. By introducing a new National Security Law for Hong Kong, China is ruthlessly and illegally interfering in the autonomy of the Special Administrative Region.

China's increasingly aggressive approach shows us just how urgently we need to adjust our China policy. For too long, our view of the Far East has been clouded by economic interests; for too long, we did not realise just how extensive a challenge China represents. Building on the understanding that China is at the same time a partner, a competitor and a systemic rival, we need to develop a common European policy of critical engagement, which, based on a firm commitment to the West, courageously defends our interests and values towards China.

## A WHO-led investigation

During the Covid-19 crisis, it has become clear that cooperation with China is requiered. The rapid global spread of the virus, from Wuhan to Washington, clearly demonstrated to us that any action taken or not taken by the Chinese gouvernement can affect our everyday lives directly.

With global challenges such as the corona pandemic, we see a high level of dependence on China – but it is a mutual one. Out of pure self-interest, China depends on cooperation with us. In our globalised world, a worldwide infection can only be brought under permanent control through multilateral coordination.

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A co-operative partnership during the pandemic also requires honesty and openness in managing mistakes – because this is the only way we can learn the right lessons to be applied to future health crises. The list of criticisms of the Chinese approach is long: it ranges from a lack of transparency at the beginning of the outbreak to the current propaganda campaign with which China is spreading a narrative of its own successful fight against the virus. And China does not shy away from exerting aggressive influence. Cooperating with China, however, should also allow us to recognise its achievements in containing the pandemic. In the coming months, the Communist Party will be able to demonstrate in many ways the importance of international solidarity in searching for a vaccine and supporting the WHO.

Moreover, an independent investigation of the origin of the novel virus is absolutely imperative. This calls for extensive and open cooperation on the part of the Chinese authorities. As with other viral infections, the international community could draw important conclusions from a WHO-led investigation that may help prevent and combat such outbreaks in the future. This is not the first time that China has been the country of origin of a pandemic, and therefore it too would benefit significantly.

## No complete decoupling from China

The measures to contain the corona outbreak have led to dramatic economic upheavals across the globe: they have hit our economy hard, but also China's. For the first time since 1990, the Communist Party did not issue a growth forecast at the National People's Congress. Due to the global economic interdependencies, the fates of our national economies are closely interrelated. Therefore, on the one hand, each of us will benefit from the other's economic recovery. On the other hand, yet again we have been shown how dangerous it is to have asymmetrical

dependencies in systemically relevant areas.

When production in China declined or in some cases came to a standstill due to the coronavirus, delivery bottlenecks arose – and these included medical goods that are vital in a pandemic. The lesson to be learned is to thoroughly scrutinise supply chains for systemically important products and to critically evaluate cases of one-sided dependency that could prove to be vulnerable. This sort of risk analysis will lead us to realise that we have to diversify  supply chains and <link regionen europa artikel detail kommando-zurueck-4258>bring back the production of selected goods – even if such relocation may lead to higher prices.

However, the call for a complete decoupling from China could head us into the wrong direction – be it in response to the coronavirus or due to the fear of being torn apart by the great power competition between the United States and China. Nobody would benefit from a comprehensive unbundling of the economic and technological spheres of the two largest economies – especially not the German export industry, since China is already Germany's most important trading partner. After a brief decline in growth because of the coronavirus, the long-term trend will resume and China will become the world's strongest economic power. Instead of decoupling from China, we should rather aim at a partial re-coupling that dissolves one-sided dependencies in important areas and promotes interdependencies in other areas, because mutual dependencies create common interests. And these are a prerequisite for partnership.

## The German EU Council Presidency

However, the corona crisis continues to fuel a systemic rivalry with China. The question arises as to which model can best cope with the greatest crisis since World War II: the Western system of a democratic constitutional state with a free market economy, or the Chinese system of a one-party dictatorship with a state economy. No final answer can be determined while we are still in the midst of the pandemic.

***The EU needs a courageous China strategy. The German EU Council Presidency, in which China will receive special attention, is the proper framework for this.***

So that there are no doubts about China's triumphal approach, its propaganda machinery is already in full swing. And China does not pull any punches in the global struggle for sovereignty of interpretation, as the aggressive stance of the young 'Wolf Warrior' diplomats shows. For example, on Twitter, one spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry spread the conspiracy theory that it might have been the US Army that brought the virus to Wuhan. It is

> crucial that the EU has now clearly named China as the author of disinformation and targeted influence campaigns, and has strengthened its own strategic communication. The European Commission has announced the need to fight disinformation even harder, and such measures must now be implemented consistently.

Hong Kong is now taking the systemic conflict to such a new level that it is difficult to describe with just the word rivalry. On the streets of Hong Kong, it is not only protesters and security forces that are facing off in an irreconcilable opposition – but also a Western-oriented canon of values versus an indisputably authoritarian system. We must make it absolutely clear to the Chinese government that we stand firmly with the Hong Kong Democrats. We are only strong together – and during the corona pandemic, this also applies to our relationship with China.

Our foreign policy is deeply rooted in the transatlantic bond of values and security. A second term of Donald Trump could permanently damage the cohesion of the West. That is why we are hoping for an outcome in November's US election where the transatlantic alliance can regain its former strength under President Joe Biden. This notwithstanding, we need to enhance European sovereignty. We need to counter the bilateralisation of relations that China is promoting, for example through its Belt and Road Initiative and medical aid deliveries. Only if we speak in one voice together can we engange in a political dialogue among equals with a superpower like China and successfully defend our values and interests.

The EU needs a courageous China strategy. The German EU Council Presidency, in which China will receive special attention, is the proper framework for this. Germany is a key European political and economic partner for China. Germany has also managed to institutionalise exchanges with China on fundamental differences of opinion. In addition to a format on human rights issues, a rule of law dialogue has been conducted since the time of the Social Democrat-Green party coalition. The relevant German-Chinese agreement was signed exactly 20 years ago on 30 June – just one day before the start of the German Council Presidency.

Postponing the EU-China summit in September for corona-related reasons was the right move. However, we should press forward for a make-up date as soon as possible. While there were calls from the opposition in the Bundestag for complete cancellation in response to the

National Security Law for Hong Kong, we still clearly support holding the meeting. It's always better to talk *with* than to talk *about* each other.

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