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CEIAS Global Perceptions of China Center • Policy recommendations

China's global appeal is changing. The EU needs to rethink its public diplomacy

Richard Turcsányi

Key takeaways

1

The global map of public attraction has shifted dramatically.

Over the past few years, the US' global image has deteriorated sharply, weakening in the process also the broader international appeal of "the West." This does not mean that publics everywhere have become anti-Western or pro-China, but it does mean that the EU can no longer assume that association with the transatlantic community automatically strengthens its global image. Europe needs to recognize that it is communicating in a more fragmented and skeptical global opinion environment in which it needs to distinguish its identity more clearly, not only from countries such as Russia or China, but also the US.

2

China has made significant gains, and its appeal is becoming broader and harder to counter

Beijing has been the primary beneficiary of the United States' declining global image, both relatively and absolutely. China's image is driven by various factors in different world regions, from political values dominating China's image in the developed democracies, to the respect for China's development

success throughout the Global South, to Chinese foreign policy being the main factor in its neighborhood. China is increasingly experienced as offering convenience, affordability, modernity, and cultural novelty. This makes China's image more resilient and harder to counter.

3

The EU needs to rethink public diplomacy and narratives on China

EU public diplomacy should move beyond values messaging, overly close identification with Washington, and a generally reactive approach. It should develop a differentiated, region- or country-specific approach that combines credible communication, stronger engagement (including in the digital sphere), visible material delivery, and clearer messaging on technology, de-risking, and resilience. Above all, the EU should not ask others to choose Europe over China, but show how cooperation with Europe helps them preserve choices, reduce dependencies, and build long-term prosperity.

As the US global image has been dramatically weakened recently, Beijing is making significant gains in terms of 'winning hearts and minds' of people globally. China's attraction is no longer based only on propaganda or economic diplomacy, but is increasingly driven also through consumer culture, lifestyle trends, and perceptions of technological competence. For the EU, this means that its narratives on China cannot rely only on values-based messaging, warnings about authoritarianism, or alignment with Washington. Europe needs an approach that combines credibility, engagement, material delivery, and, overall, a clear offer to those countries that want to preserve agency rather than choose sides in a world increasingly dominated by great-power rivalry.

Policy recommendations

The value-based messaging that stresses democracy and opposes authoritarianism is not going to be enough.

Going back to Joseph Nye and his understanding of soft power, it has long been assumed that democracies are attractive and authoritarian countries are not. China's rise has long challenged such views, and several recent polls show that China is now more popular than the US globally, irrespective of its political system. Recent experimental research even shows that global audiences will embrace authoritarian models when they believe that autocracies can meet governance challenges better than democracies. The EU should continue to stand for its political values, including democracy and human rights, but it needs to recognize that this will not automatically win over global public opinion.

The EU should strengthen its own voice, autonomous from the US, without abandoning the transatlantic relationship.

The EU does not need anti-American messaging. But it does need a clearer and distinct voice, not only from the authoritarian actors such as Russia or China, but also from the US. The EU should present itself as a predictable, rules-based, economically relevant, and less coercive partner. That could be a comparative advantage for the EU in an increasingly polarized and US-China-dominated world. Indeed, most of the world does not want to be forced to choose between China and the US, as evidence from Southeast

Asia, Latin America and Africa shows, and the EU consistently scores as the most preferred third option.

The EU should not use one set of narratives to counter China globally.

The sources of China's attraction vary by region and country. In Europe and North America, attitudes toward China tend to be shaped strongly by political values. Throughout the Global South, material factors matter more: China is respected for its development success, which has led to increased quality of life, stimulating attempts to emulate it. In the Indo-Pacific, assessments of Chinese foreign policy and security behavior are especially important. The EU must remain flexible in its approach and narratives.

Public diplomacy must be connected to a policy offer.

The EU's problem is not that it would be perceived negatively; the image of the EU and many of the EU member states rank among the most positive globally. The problem is that many audiences do not see how Europe helps them to achieve their goals in practice. China's appeal often rests on the perception that it can deliver, and does so quickly, be it with infrastructure, trade, technology, investment, or development pathways. The EU's response cannot be moral lecturing or criticism of various shortcomings related to China's engagements. It must show what Europe offers: education, mobility, market access, clean technology, responsible standards, resilient infrastructure, etc. Indeed, the EU does not only compete with Chinese narratives; it is competing with the experience created by Chinese performance, platforms, and products.

Do not turn China into the center of the EU's message.

To communicate effectively about China, the EU should not constantly talk about China. As already mentioned, most audiences worldwide do not want to be recruited into a geopolitical or ideological bloc. They want practical solutions. The EU should embrace its role as the third option, enabling other countries to better hedge against the increasingly polarized US-China global rivalry. This means the EU should resist communicating in terms of "choose us, not China" and instead focus on "work with Europe to keep your choices open." This may be one feature of the EU strategic narrative that could work globally.

The EU must treat domestic credibility as a source of foreign policy.

Credible perception globally starts at home: domestic stability, security, government legitimacy, economic well-being, and good governance significantly affect countries' ability to compete internationally. It has been shown that dissatisfaction with the status quo creates an opportunity for China to gain popularity by presenting itself as the alternative. This applies not only to countries, often throughout the Global South, that feel left out, but also to segments of societies within Western countries who may feel the same. If European societies are polarized, minorities feel excluded, institutions look dysfunctional, EU public diplomacy loses force and China can project itself in a better light.

Foreign policy needs to be perceived as principled.

Too often, the EU is perceived as hypocritical or Eurocentric: applying certain principles and paying attention when an issue touches upon its interests, but overlooking those that do not. In recent years, such accusations have appeared in relation to the EU support for Ukraine (and Ukrainian refugees), positions vis-à-vis Israel and more broadly the Middle East, or generally related to European approaches to its colonial legacies. It is difficult to resolve these immediately, but it should at least be recognized that even individual incidents of perceptions of biases can cause long-term harm to the EU's image in many parts of the world, and China is often the first to benefit from them.

The EU needs to have a better understanding of public opinion trends.

EU institutions and delegations should systematically monitor attitudes toward China, the EU, the US, Russia, and other relevant actors. This should not be limited to tracking of hybrid or disinformation tactics. It should include serious engagement and study of survey data, media analysis, and elite discourse. It is not enough to expose attempts by China, Russia, and other actors to shape information environments; the EU needs to understand the outcomes and compete to preserve its positions in global perceptions.

Conclusion

The EU's public diplomacy should begin from a hard truth: global audiences are not waiting for Europe to explain China to them. Most already have their own experiences, interests, calculations, or grievances. Some admire China. Some fear it. Many want benefits from China without increasing dependence on China. Others are less pro-Beijing than disappointed with the US and the Western-led international order. That creates an opportunity for the EU. Europe can be credible only if it is more principled than transactional great-power politics, and more materially useful than abstract value diplomacy. The point is not to win a propaganda contest with China. The task is to make Europe a partner that others can trust when they want to keep their options open.

Author

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About CEIAS

Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) is an independent think tank focusing on Europe-Asia relations and developments in the Indo-Pacific region. Originally founded in 2007 in Slovakia, CEIAS is today a **transnational think tank with main branches in Bratislava (Slovakia), Prague (Czech Republic), and Vienna (Austria)**, and further regional presence in Poland, Hungary, Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and beyond.

We strive to combine **academic and policy advisory role**, producing **data-driven, methodologically rigorous, reliable, and practically relevant research** that is highly valued by experts and policymakers.

Our activities focus are **focused into several research programs and centers:**

- **Global Perceptions of China Center**
- **Geo-economics & Technology Center**
- **EU-Taiwan Center**
- **Indo-Pacific Program**
- **EU-China Relations Program**
- **Southeast Asia Program**
- **Human Rights & Law Program**

Since its establishment in 2007, CEIAS has consistently worked towards becoming a **go-to think-tank in the CEE for matters related to East Asia and the Indo-Pacific region**. We have a track record of successful project

implementation **supported by regional and international donors**, including the European Commission; Government of Taiwan; US State Department; UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; the Government of Japan; the Government of Slovakia; National Endowment for Democracy (NED); the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE); Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Fridrich Naumann Stiftung; International Visegrad Fund; International Republican Institute (IRI); Korea Foundation, and many others.

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CEIAS researchers regularly comment for and publish op-eds in leading CEE and international media. Our work has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, Foreign Policy, South China Morning Post, NHK, Deutsche Welle, Euractiv, CNA, The Diplomat, Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Euractiv, and other media.

Our outputs are referred to in the work of other thinktanks, e.g. Brookings (USA), Clingendael (Netherlands), MERICS (Germany), Institute for Security & Development Policy (Sweden), IFRI (France), ISPI (Italy), Global Taiwan Institute (USA), Prospect Foundation (Taiwan), ISEAS (Singapore), Elcano Royal Institute (Spain) and many others.

CEIAS analysis was also highlighted in the outputs of the **European Parliament** and the **U.S. Congress**

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Global Perceptions of China Center

The Global Perceptions of China Center focuses on studying public attitudes toward China worldwide and how they are influenced by Chinese foreign policy, including public diplomacy, strategic narratives, propaganda, and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) operations.

Our goal is to understand how China is perceived across different regions, what drives these perceptions, and how China's image compares with that of other major actors, including the United States, the EU, and Russia.

CEIAS launched its public opinion research in 2020 and 2022, when, together with the Sinophone Borderlands project at Palacký University Olomouc, it conducted a series of representative online surveys in 56 countries and territories, encompassing more than 80,000 respondents. The most recent wave of surveys was carried out in the Visegrad Four countries in 2025.

In addition, we analyze media discourse both about China and within China to identify the actors that shape narratives and public perceptions. We also regularly monitor media and social media spaces in Central Europe to track how narratives about China circulate in the region, to what extent they echo Chinese state propaganda, and how they are influenced by Chinese Communist Party-led FIMI operations.

For more insights on how public attitudes impact our approach to China, explore the publications on the page of the [CEIAS Global Perceptions of China Center](#).

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