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Embracing Asymmetry: Narrative Contestation Between the EU and China

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This policy brief argues that EU–China narrative contestation should not be understood as a direct, symmetrical competition between two equivalent geopolitical actors. While both China and the EU seek to shape global understandings of order, governance, development, and security, they do so from fundamentally different institutional and political positions. China’s strategic narratives are more centralised and state-driven, whereas the EU’s communication is dispersed across institutions, member states, civil society, private companies, independent media, and other actors. Rather than treating this plurality simply as a weakness to be corrected through imitation of China’s model, the brief argues that the EU should turn its distinctiveness into a strategic asset, while remaining alert to the risks of fragmentation, inconsistency, and weak coordination.

The brief examines three dimensions of EU–China narrative contestation: the content of their narratives, the channels through which they are circulated, and their reception in two separate domains. It cautions against simplistic claims that

China is “winning” or that the EU merely needs to “speak with one voice.” Instead, it proposes that the EU embraces strategic pluralism: coordination without uniformity; plurality without incoherence.

Recommendations for the EU:

- Do not imitate China’s centralised model. The EU’s potential advantage lies in institutional checks, independent media, civil society, and open debate.
- Make EU narratives audience-specific, varying between regions, and societies.
- Connect communication to a policy offer: the EU needs to show what cooperation with Europe delivers in practice.
- Position the EU as the partner that helps preserve choices. The EU should avoid “choose us, not China” messaging. A stronger message is that cooperation with Europe helps countries avoid overdependence, diversify partnerships, and preserve room for manoeuvre.
- Invest in listening, not only communication. This should go beyond disinformation monitoring and include public opinion surveys, media analysis, and elite discourses.¹

INTRODUCTION

As China has emerged as one of the most significant strategic challenges for the EU spanning economics, politics, and security, the two have also engaged in what has been described by Josep Borrell as a “battle of narratives.”² However, this battle, or “contestation” – as we will prefer to call it in this policy brief – is inherently asymmetric, involving China’s largely centralised discourse strategy and a fragmented European communication ecosystem. The political characteristics of the European Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) drive both the content of their strategic narratives and how these narratives subsequently spread. Moreover, the nature and outcomes of this contestation vary considerably between different world regions (or even individual countries), domains, and audiences.

The policy brief critically assesses the current state of the narrative contestation between the EU and China and offers policy recommendations for the EU on how to engage with the challenges posed by the international system that is increasingly influenced by the worldviews promoted by the PRC. Our goal will be, in particular, to highlight the differences between the EU and China, and discuss what implications these differences carry from the perspective of the EU’s global engagements.

Methodologically, we build on the strategic narrative approach³ to analyse the EU’s and China’s narratives about the international system, identity, and specific issues

As a result, the paper will be structured as follows. We will first highlight main features of China’s strategic narratives about the international system, its identity, and some critical policy issues, and how they compare with the narratives of the EU about the same. Second, we will review the channels through which the narratives of the two actors are spread. Third, we will briefly review how the outcomes of such contestation can be analytically followed in two separate domains (i.e., the narrative reception), although we suggest that

future research should delve deeper into this important issue as its full coverage is beyond the scope of this short policy brief.⁴ Given the focus of this policy brief (and of the broader research project of which it is a part) on China, we devote more space to examining China throughout the paper, while discussing the EU primarily for comparative purposes.

WHAT IS BEING NARRATED? CONTENT OF CHINESE AND EU STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

Strategic narrative approach distinguishes between narratives about the international system, the identity of political actors, and specific policy issues.⁵ At the level of systemic narratives, China presents the contemporary international order as historically unbalanced, excessively Western-dominated, and no longer suited to a multipolar world we are allegedly heading to. In Beijing’s view, Western power is not only material but also discursive: the West is portrayed as having long defined the categories, rules, and narratives through which the world is understood. China’s response is to call for the “democratisation of international relations,” not in the sense of domestic democratisation, but as a more equal distribution of voice and decision-making power among sovereign states. In this vein, Chinese president Xi Jinping has called for the promotion of an ‘equal and orderly multipolar world and universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization’.⁶

Hence China presents itself as defending multilateralism, the UN Charter, international law, and the interests of the Global South, but its preferred order remains strongly state-centric. The principle of sovereignty is used to oppose external interference, democracy promotion, human-rights conditionality, and alliance politics, especially when associated with the US and NATO. The result is a narrative that calls for a less Western-centred order and protects regime security of authoritarian states.⁷

China's identity narratives follow from this. Beijing presents China as a responsible major power, a developing country, a partner of the Global South, and a force for stability in a turbulent world. Under Xi Jinping, concepts such as the "community with a shared future for mankind" and the Global Development, Security, Civilisation, and Governance Initiatives connect China's domestic political identity with its desired international role.⁸ China is not only portrayed as rising within the existing order, but as offering pathways that can help reform that order. This identity narrative is strengthened by references to historical humiliation, anti-colonial solidarity, development success, poverty reduction, and resistance to Western hegemony.

In turn, the EU presents itself as a defender of rules-based multilateralism, international law, human rights, sustainable development, and institutionalised international cooperation. The EU's strategic documents describe global challenges as requiring more multilateral governance, and the EU is framed as supporting the global rules-based order with the UN at its core.⁹ However, the EU narratives have become more geopolitical and interest-conscious in recent years. The EU increasingly describes the world as marked by strategic competition, dependencies, coercion, war, supply-chain vulnerabilities, and contested governance models.¹⁰ Ursula von der Leyen exemplified this direction clearly when she announced in 2019 that *"I want to build a truly geopolitical European Commission."*¹¹

The shift is especially visible in the EU's identity narratives. The EU continues to draw on its older self-image as a normative power and peace project,¹² but it now also presents itself as a regulatory power, security actor, connectivity provider, and partner for resilience. In relation to China, the EU's 2019 Strategic Outlook captured this ambiguity by defining China simultaneously as a cooperation partner, negotiating partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival.¹³ Unlike China's more unified identity narrative, the EU's

identity is layered and internally contested: it is at once a values-based actor, market power, geopolitical actor, and plural union of member states with different China policies and historical experiences.¹⁴

At the level of issue narratives, the contrast between the EU and China becomes more concrete. China's narratives frame development, infrastructure, technology, security, and global governance through the language of sovereignty, non-interference, win-win cooperation, stability, and modernization. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the four Global Initiatives allow China to present itself as offering practical solutions to development gaps, security instability, civilizational tensions, and governance deficits.¹⁵ The EU's narratives, by contrast, emphasise trusted connectivity, sustainability, transparency, high standards, human rights, rule of law, de-risking, resilience, and reducing strategic dependencies. Global Gateway is the clearest example: it presents the EU as offering smart, clean, secure, and trusted connections in digital, energy, transport, health, education, and research.¹⁶

The key difference between the EU's and China's strategic narratives is not just their content but different starting positions and structural features. China's narratives are more integrated: system, identity, and issue narratives are tied together through a relatively coherent story of China's rise, Western decline, Global South empowerment, and reform of global governance. The EU's narratives are more fragmented but also more open: they combine values, regulations, market access, development cooperation, security partnerships, and societal links.

HOW ARE THE NARRATIVES CIRCULATED? ACTORS AND CHANNELS IN THE EU AND CHINA'S COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS

The way narratives are spread is the dimension where the asymmetry between China and the EU is most visible.¹⁷ China's communicative approach relies on coordination, repetition, and the

mobilization of a broad party-state infrastructure. The EU's approach looks very different and is characterised by plurality, transparency, and embedded societal networks that have been long-existing and organically developing between the EU and many third countries. China's model allows for disciplined message projection across state media, diplomatic channels, cultural platforms, and local intermediaries, producing visibility, consistency, and narrative saturation, although not necessarily trust. The EU's more dispersed system is less capable of uniform messaging, but it can produce credibility when its diverse narratives are developed in constant exchanges between various state institutions, independent media, civil society actors, businesses, and local partners.

China's international communication system is rooted in a Leninist understanding of media as an instrument for organizing political meaning.¹⁸ Since the reform period, the Chinese propaganda system has differentiated between domestic and external propaganda,¹⁹ and the external component has become increasingly important as Beijing has sought to improve China's image and strengthen its discourse power abroad. Under Xi Jinping, "telling China's story well" has become a central task for state media and diplomats, closely linked to the broader ambition of increasing China's international status and discursive authority.²⁰

The basic channels for circulating China's strategic narratives are official state media. These include television networks such as CCTV and CGTN, press agencies such as Xinhua and China News Service, radio broadcasters such as China Radio International (CRI), and newspapers including China Daily, People's Daily and Global Times. Many of these outlets have developed multilingual and regionalised operations. CGTN broadcasts in five major world languages (English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Russian) while CRI has long produced programming in dozens of languages.²¹

Beijing has also relied on indirect channels that are often better suited to reaching foreign audiences. These include paid media supplements, content-

sharing agreements, cooperation with local broadcasters, partnerships with foreign media organizations, and the use of intermediaries.²² The logic is not only to broadcast China's position, but to plant Chinese narratives within local media ecosystems where they may appear less obviously state-driven. This includes the long-standing use of "foreign friends": foreign experts, former officials, influencers, business figures, or commentators who can spread – and validate – Chinese positions in a more credible voice for local audiences.

Digital platforms have become especially important. The Chinese state media have built large audiences on global social media platforms and have gathered some of the largest followership worldwide. However, questions have been raised about the authenticity of some of this online engagement. For instance, Meta and Microsoft published reports which described how accounts tracked to China tried to manipulate public discourse in places such as the US, Taiwan, South Korea or the Czech Republic through the use of AI-created content or petitions criticising government policies,²³ while Facebook profiles of Chinese media in Albania and the Czech Republic reached more than one million followers and included many names which seemed fabricated.²⁴

This points to an important caveat: China's communication system is coordinated, but not always persuasive. Chinese state media content is centrally produced and repetitive but may also be poorly localised and too closely aligned with domestic propaganda language to resonate with foreign publics. As a result, China's narrative projection may generate visibility without necessarily generating trust.

In practice, China-related narratives are often shaped by domestic political divisions, with China being used as a tool in local political infighting rather than discussed on its own terms. Chinese state-affiliated accounts usually promote China's economic achievements, development success, culture, technology, and image as a stable global actor, but broader resonance often comes when

these narratives are adopted by domestic actors for their own goals, for instance when they wish to criticise the EU, the US, liberal values, or local political opponents – and China’s narratives would validate their positions.²⁵

The EU operates through a very different communicative logic. It has public diplomacy tools embedded within its institutional setting (such as the EU Delegations, EEAS, member-state diplomacy, development agencies, etc), but it is not a centralised narrative organism comparable to China. The EU narratives are co-produced and circulated by a wide range of institutions, governments, media, businesses, researchers, civil society groups, and local partners. This makes EU communication messier, and sometimes less visible. But it also gives the EU a potential credibility advantage, because its messages do not depend solely on state authority.

In recent years, the EU has attempted to meet the narrative challenges coming from actors such as Russia and China by producing geopolitical counter-narratives, and also focusing on disinformation. This has led the EU to devote considerable energy to what it calls “Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference” (FIMI). The FIMI fits into EU–China narrative contestation mainly as a defensive and resilience-oriented response. It has strengthened the EU’s ability to detect, analyse, expose, and disrupt information operations through the FIMI toolbox, EEAS threat reporting, EUvsDisinfo platform, sanctions, and cooperation with member states, civil society, and international partners. These efforts have produced better situational awareness, common terminology, and more systematic exposure of malign tactics, including those linked to China. However, FIMI policy does not solve the broader narrative challenge: it does not make the EU’s own story more persuasive.²⁶

As has been mentioned, the EU’s narratives are often circulated and co-produced by actors that are not formally part of EU public diplomacy. European media retain substantial global reach: Euronews

operates as a multilingual news provider with a global footprint, and several member states operate their own public media tasked with global outreach, including France 24, Deutsche Welle, Spanish RTVE, Portuguese RTP, Italian RAI, Dutch RNN, Swedish SVT, Polish TVP, and others. Private and commercially driven media brands such as El País, Le Monde, Spiegel complement the picture. Some of the world’s most influential press agencies are the EU-based AFP, EFE, Lusa, and ANSA.²⁷

Besides, European countries boast perhaps the world’s most dense and wide-spread network of cultural and language institutes. Alliance Française, Goethe-Institut, Instituto Cervantes, Società Dante Alighieri, and Instituto Camões each operate in more than 100 countries worldwide, and even medium-sized or smaller EU member states would devote significant energy to global cultural outreach. Universities in the EU countries belong to some of the most respected institutions worldwide, also due to their independence and quality they attract some of the brightest students.

Meanwhile, it should be recognised at this point, that the legacy of European colonialism creates here an opening for China to exploit through its anti-colonial narratives, yet this legacy has also produced dense and durable links between Europe and many parts of the world, including shared languages, educational pathways, media spaces, diaspora communities, legal and administrative traditions, and personal networks. These links should not be romanticised, but they can and do facilitate Europe’s exchanges with many parts of the world beyond official EU communication. The obvious task for the EU is to acknowledge the colonial past honestly while using existing linguistic, cultural, and social connections to support more reciprocal and credible forms of engagement with post-colonial countries.²⁸

RECEPTION OF THE CHINESE AND EU STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

Unlike the previous dimension, where the asymmetry between China and the EU is most

visible, the reception of narratives can be compared directly but is also harder to assess fully. This section analyses reception by relying on two proxies for narrative resonance: public opinion and diplomatic positioning at the UN General Assembly (UNGA). These are important indicators but by no means the only ones. Future research could expand the analysis through media discourse, elite interviews, social media analysis, diplomatic behaviour in other international organisations, or issue-specific case studies.

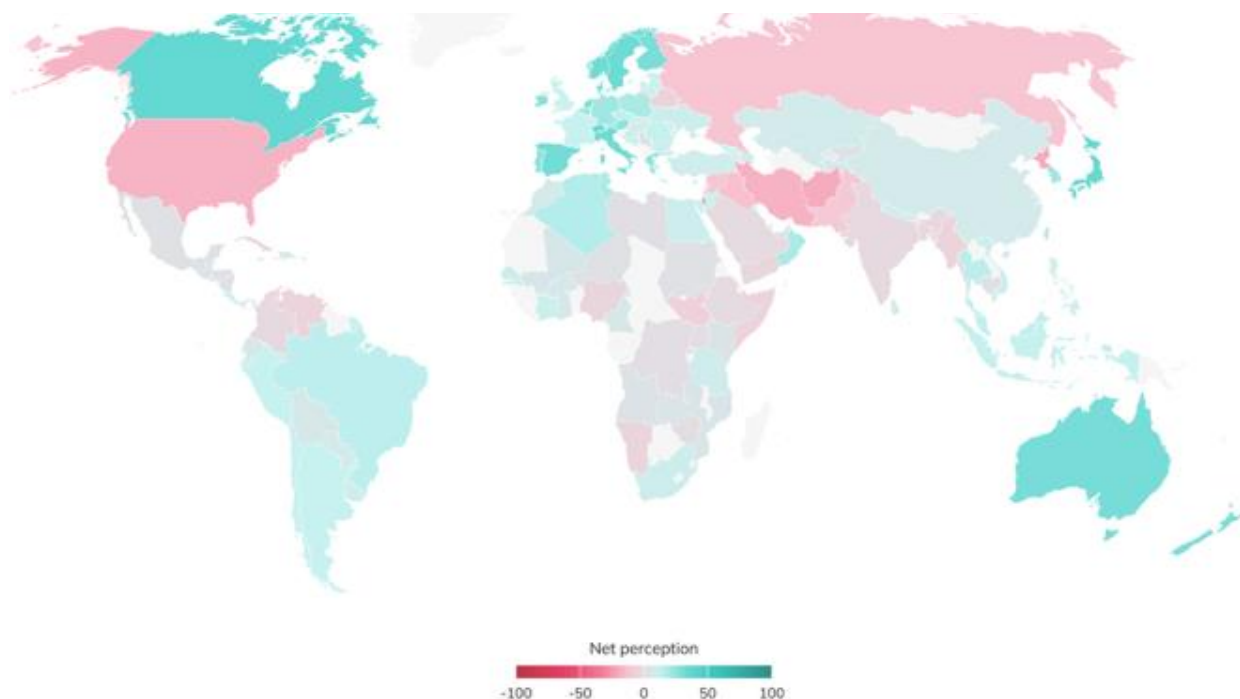
Based on the data from NIRA public opinion survey ²⁹ conducted in 2026 in 85 countries worldwide, individual EU member states belong to some of the most favourably seen countries worldwide: Sweden records a net favourability score of +33, Italy +32, Spain +31, and Denmark and Finland +30. China also scored positively but significantly lower than most EU member states: with a net favourability score of +7.

The positive global image of the EU is especially notable when compared with the US, whose image has deteriorated dramatically over the past three

years³⁰ and now scores with -16 differential, which is more negative not only than the EU, but also China, and even Russia (only surpassed in negativity by Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea, and Israel, from among the countries respondents were asked about).

Indeed, the image of Europe is seen separate from the US in China, too. The Chinese public has long held quite negative opinions of the US but surprisingly positive views of the EU (especially countries such as Germany and France),³¹ although more recently the image of the EU in China is becoming more complex and critical views are becoming more visible.³² All in all, this is to point out that at the general level, the EU and many of its like-minded partners (such as Canada, Australia, or Japan) enjoy the positive environment when it comes to global public attitudes, even though the US no longer does. At the same time, this lead over China should not be taken as a reason for complacency as it can disappear very quickly, as the US experience in recent years also shows.³³

Figure 1: Global public perceptions (net positive/negative perception of individual countries)



Source: NIRA

A second way we will use here to approximate narrative reception is to examine diplomatic positioning at the UNGA, both through voting behaviour and through the rhetoric of General Debate speeches.³⁴ Interestingly, unlike public opinion data, UNGA voting and speech patterns point to a different direction. Previous research using UNGA votes and speeches shows that many states, especially in the Global South, often position themselves closer to China than to the United States, with Germany (as a proxy for the EU which does not vote in the UNGA) occupying a more intermediate position.³⁵

This does not necessarily mean that these states accept China's strategic narratives wholesale, but it does suggest that China's official discourse often resonates with the preference of many states in the Global South: sovereignty, non-interference, development, anti-hegemony, and reform of global governance. Germany is often closer to the global mainstream than the US, but still less aligned with most countries than China in rhetorical and voting terms.

The data points introduced in this section reinforce the broader argument of this policy brief: EU–China narrative contestation is not uniform. The EU may enjoy stronger global public favourability, but China may find greater diplomatic resonance in multilateral arenas where its narratives overlap with long-standing demands among political leaders and elites in the Global South for sovereignty, development, non-interference, and a less Western-centred international order. These findings also show that the outcome of the contestation is far from settled.

CONCLUSION

While EU–China relations are often analysed through trade, security, and geopolitical rivalry, they also involve a struggle over political meaning. European and Chinese actors promote competing accounts of global order, development, security, and legitimate governance. Yet this struggle is best understood as narrative contestation rather than a

direct and symmetrical battle between two equivalent geopolitical actors. China and the EU differ not only in what they say, but also in how their narratives are produced, circulated, and received.

At the level of narrative content, the contestation is most visible in competing visions of international order. The EU presents itself as defending an open, rules-based international order grounded in human rights, multilateralism, international law, transparency, and high standards. China, meanwhile, promotes concepts such as the “community with a shared future for mankind” and the Global Development, Security, Civilisation, and Governance Initiatives as proposals for reforming global governance. It frames itself as a responsible major power, a partner of the Global South, and an alternative to Western hegemony. At the issue level, this contestation appears in concrete questions such as de-risking, connectivity, technology governance, human rights, Russia's war against Ukraine, Taiwan, development finance, trade, and infrastructure.

The greatest asymmetry, however, lies in how these narratives are circulated. China benefits from a centralised party-state communication system capable of repetition, coordination, and narrative saturation across diplomatic, media, cultural, and digital channels. The EU cannot and should not imitate this model. Its communicative ecosystem is more fragmented, but also more plural, transparent, and societally embedded. This can make the EU less visible and less disciplined, but potentially more credible, especially when European narratives are carried by independent media, universities, civil society, businesses, cultural institutes, and local partners rather than only by official institutions.

The reception of these narratives is also uneven. Public opinion data suggest that the EU and its member states retain a more favourable global image than China, especially when compared with the recent deterioration of the US image. Yet diplomatic positioning at the UN General Assembly

points in a different direction: many states, especially in the Global South, often speak and vote closer to China. This contrast reinforces the core argument of this brief: there is no single global “battle of narratives.” The EU may be better regarded by many audiences, while China may find greater resonance among some elites. The picture would get even more complicated if we look at different world regions, countries, and segments of society.

The EU should not try to out-compete China in producing and spreading uniform propaganda. Instead, it should develop strategic pluralism: making Europe’s diverse narratives more coherent, locally resonant, and connected to a visible policy offer, while preserving the openness and autonomy that distinguish Europe from

authoritarian models of narrative projection. The EU’s task is not to speak like China, but to make its own plural, credible, and materially useful model more legible to the audiences it seeks to engage.

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ENDNOTES

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