

The EU, US and China: Hybrid Multilateralism and the Limits of Prioritizing Values

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Europe feels that it has a different relationship with China, a different history, and different drivers. But in the last few years, at least since 2016, political dynamics in the US and China have made the role of Europeans more uncomfortable and contested, with pressures applied from both sides of their allegiance. This article looks at the kind of structural drivers of US, China, and European relations, and where there is commonality and difference. In particular, the article looks at generic issues like environmentalism and economic sustainability for the Europeans and the EU, and how these provide a common narrative in working with and between China and the US.

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The Europeans can be extended a little sympathy in their geopolitical travails in 2021. From 2008 to 2011, the greatest threat they faced was from potential economic implosion, as the Euro Crisis unraveled, spreading contagiously through Italy into Greece, creating high levels of anxiety that the whole European Union (EU) project and its (at that time) 28 member states would break up.

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A decade on, and the main impact of this era for the Union itself was the decision by the United Kingdom to exit after a referendum in 2016. Most commentators agree that while there were complex reasons for this decision, one of the most important was the sense that the UK's economy had been unfairly exposed to risks arising in Europe over this time that it could not control but ended up paying a price for in terms of austerity measures. That event, despite gloomy predictions at the time that it would lead to others following Britain to the exit, in fact led to only deeper commitment. Even a former Euro-skeptic, extreme right wing politician Marie LePen of France, is likely to stand on a more pro-EU platform in the French presidential elections due next year in 2022. In many ways, the huge complications the UK went through as it finally formally left the EU in January 2020 have put everyone else off doing the same thing.

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After the COVID-19 pandemic impact in early 2020, the main challenge for the Europeans (both those who are part of the EU, and those who are in the continent) have reverted to economic ones, and, in this context, trying to navigate a way between the US and China as their relationship becomes far more fraught. After the 'shock therapy' of the Trump presidency, when it seemed that the US was about to upend its multilateral commitments, and expect the Europeans, either through NATO, or the EU, or simply as a continent, to play a bigger role in global affairs, the Biden presidency has at least returned things to a more even-keeled state. Even so, Europeans remain nervous, and should be.

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The chancellorship of Angela Merkel in Germany, perhaps Europe's most powerful position, is coming to an end in 2021. She has typified the pragmatic side of Europe's

foreign policy, trying to balance economic self-interest with an acknowledgement that in terms of technology, security and political alignment, China is increasingly problematic. Her replacements, whoever they might be, are unlikely to be able to exercise the sort of cautiousness that she did. This article will look firstly at the European position on China; then it will look at the ways in which there is alignment and differences with the US and their position on the same issue; finally, it will look at the ways in which multilateralism between these two, both specifically about China, and then on broader issues, is indicating a new, harsh reality. It is apparent that the costs of prioritizing values in relation to China are increasingly having to be set against the brute fact that in order to face issues effectively that matter to everyone from climate change to sustainability, the only option is co-operation. Here, the EU and Europe may be better able to compromise than the US.

The European Attitude to China

One of the first things to acknowledge is that even after COVID-19, the issue with European attitudes towards China in mid-2021 is that there is no easy consensus. Across the different states, whether they are members of the EU or not, on the questions of what people might think about China under its current political system, and the way it relates to the rest of the world, things are clear enough. Surveys have shown that public attitudes towards China in Europe, partly as a result of the pandemic, but also from other causes such as issues around human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and the tightening grip of Beijing in Hong Kong, have become largely negative. The fundamental issue is however just what sort of significance and permanence to give to these public attitudes. Should they be regarded as permanent shifts, and therefore decisive in crafting policy, meaning that in a raft of areas from economic co-operation to partnership on facing climate change or other public health challenges, work with China should be either kept of a minimum, or simply stopped. Or should they simply be treated as something that might be shallowly rooted and more subject to the vagaries of temporary fluctuations of public mood, and therefore not of huge importance to policy decisions where to not work with China, simply through self-interest, would be harmful and self-defeating. Settling on either of these postures, and making long term decisions based on them, would impact directly both on relations with China, and with the US, and on the role that Europe could play between them. They may end up creating a whole new reality, but from something that in the beginning was perhaps not as deeply rooted as was assumed at the time.

As a good case study of how this assumption about the hardening of public mood by political figures works out in practice, one can look at the story of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) negotiated between the EU and China over seven years and finalized on the last day of 2020. This sought to open several important sectors to European companies that they had been keen to see become available to them for a number of years. For healthcare providers, finance companies, and high-tech companies, the CAI opens up China, and allows clarity about what China can do in the EU, as never before. On the whole, it was perhaps the first major deal between the two which worked well for Europe and avoided the asymmetry in China's favor of deals from the past, simply because it played to Europe's strengths in the services sectors and allowed a new kind of access to the emerging middle class in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This could be seen as

a clear victory for the pragmatists, of whom Germany's Merkel is the most prominent. However, the European Parliament, who needs to ratify the deal to allow it to be implemented, refused to do so on the 20th of May. This was due to the imposition of sanctions on European parties and members of the parliament by China a few weeks before in response to European and American sanctioning of Chinese officials directly linked to Xinjiang, and the ongoing human rights situation in that region — along with a raft of other concerns. Of the 705 members of the European parliament, 599 voted not to ratify the CAI. This strong rejection showed the strength of this feeling.

Europe in mid-2021 is certainly in a period of rising antagonism towards China. The question is more about how long term this will prove. For evidence of the immediate deterioration, one did not have to look very far. Italy, once enthusiastic about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy idea, considered revoking the Memorandum of Understanding it had signed in 2019 supporting the BRI, despite criticism from their fellow Europeans and the Americans. The Czech Republic, despite having a president seen as largely pro-Beijing, saw an accelerating slump in bilateral relations after the city of Prague engaged in relations with Taipei, much to the ire of Beijing. French president Macron delivered harsh words towards China in an interview with the Financial Times in April 2020 when he said it was time to rethink Europe's relations with its main trading partner. Tellingly though, these were not, however, followed up by major actions, and he subsequently kept a lower profile on this issue.

In terms of the longer-term structural basis of Sino-European relations, their 'Strategic Outlook' on China issued by the European Commission in March 2019, which predated COVID-19, the Union had already adopted a position which at least on the surface accepted the complexity of what it was facing in its relations with China. Nothing that happened over 2020 into 2021 fundamentally changed this posture. China in that document was seen as a 'systemic rival' in some areas, but also a partner in others, and a competitor in some. The durability of this division was proved by the way that it prefigured similar language used by the then newly appointed US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in March 2021 when he also acknowledged that relations with China divided into competitive, collaborative, and adversarial. To some extent, this was also articulated, implicitly rather than explicitly, in the British government "Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy" issued in April (Government of UK Cabinet Office 2021). These, issuing from separate foreign policy actors, at least showed some degree of alignment which might be taken as having longer term meaning. The underlying reality all acknowledged was that working with China was unavoidable, something even the Trump Presidency implicitly accepted with its desire to do new style trade deals with the country rather than simply jettisoning co-operation altogether. The question going forward therefore is not whether there should be a relationship with China, nor that that relationship was not hugely important, but more about where exactly in this trilateral division specific issues are actually placed, and whether the Europeans and the Americans agree with each other on how they have divided things.

The Hundred Flowers, European Style

Europe's position is complicated because of course, policy towards China resides in

many different places, not just in the Union itself, but also across member states. Being an entity that is inherently pluralistic and embraces pluralistic values has always been part of the EU's identity. The downside is that this diversity internally has been a perennial problem for the last two decades. As China has become an increasingly important actor, different views about how to understand this in Europe, and what, if anything, to do about it have often meant that inactivity has been the final result, arising from the inability to agree on what to do. Around the time of China's entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the default for the Union and for its members, and the rest of Europe, was that China was a major economic opportunity that needed the right framework to be optimized. The Union in many ways offered the perfect screen for managing to deal with the thornier issues around China's human rights differences, because while member states could forge ahead trying to get investment and improve trade with Beijing, things WTO entry helped facilitate, the less positive, more complex issues could always be fielded through the EU. It was at this level that, for instance, most contentious matters around ethnic minority rights, or political rights, were fed. As a coalition of nations, this meant when things did get turbulent, Beijing could only aim its ire at Brussels rather than take action against individual states.

Moving down to more granular detail, the main European states have a spectrum of policy attitudes towards China, arising from their specific histories with China, and their own assessments of their needs and strengths, which impacts how they regard the current global role of the country, and what sort of relationship to have with it. For Germany, under Merkel, the attitude has been pragmatic, framed by the success that the country has enjoyed as an exporter and manufacturer. For many years Germany uniquely had a trade surplus with the PRC. Its companies like Siemens and Volkswagen found huge and lucrative markets there. In protecting this, Germany has often been called an appeaser, even though over 2019 more strident voices started to appear, looking for harder push back. The Green Party, enjoying rising political influence, has adopted a tougher attitude since 2020, though it is a legitimate question about how much that attitude can be maintained if and when they come to national power once Merkel retires and new elections in late 2021 and early 2022.

For France, investment and trade are far less developed. Historically, their relations with China have tended to be far less politicized and revolve more around issues such as culture and communication. France's soft power is well recognized amongst Chinese middle class, who constituted until 2019 its largest suppliers of tourists. It is hard to spell out a well-defined French policy towards China — it has tended to veer from antagonism to pragmatism in recent years, framed more by Paris's issues with the US, Germany, or the rest of the EU, rather than on overtly bilateral matters. Somewhat tellingly, the official China France page of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at least as of the 20th July 2021, had not been updated since mid-2019, despite all the changes over that period, and spelled out two key strategic aims — to rebalance trade, and to engage in science and technology. (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2019)

Beyond these larger countries, approaches to China split, sometimes starkly. Some like Greece have enjoyed good levels of investment and rising trade with the PRC, even allowing the Chinese state company, China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), to own Piraeus Port, and vetoing criticism of human rights issues coming from the EU during the 2017 UN Human Rights Council meeting. Others, like Poland have figured as part of the 16 (subsequently increased to 17 when Greece joined in 2019, before returning to its

former number after Lithuania dropped out in 2021) plus one gathering of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which China instigated from 2012 (much to the irritation of Brussels because of the involvement of 11 EU members). For Eastern Europe, the memory of many of the countries there once having been under Communist rule meant they at least on the surface understood the political system of China better. But, despite this, their main priority has been to ensure higher levels of Chinese investment and economic support. Some, like Hungary, have in recent years even become enthusiastic and vocal supporters of more involvement and closer relations. Non-EU members like Serbia have also tried to engage more with economic opportunities from China.

Across all these different countries, and their different perspectives and attitudes, if there is one thing that unites them it is a sense that up to 2021 the opportunity from China has so far not met with expectations. Countries like Germany and Greece are those that have done best in terms of investment and trade. The members of the 16 plus one (apart from Greece), however, started off expecting the most and have not seen their original projections a decade ago met. On top of this, they have had to balance the political costs of risking alienating their chief security relationships — which mostly means the US. In that sense, there is therefore a European quandary, one that is shared across different places — and that is how to craft a more hybrid, nuanced approach to China when what was expected to be the most compelling element of relations with it, economic benefits, are either not yet at a level to justify the security and political risks these carry or look like they might not ever fulfil the high expectations once held. Were these economic links stronger, then perhaps there would be more European political figures willing to argue more strenuously for working with China and trying to shape public opinion. At the moment, however, that is not happening.

Solving the EU China US Riddle

For a group that constitutes over half of global GDP, one of the anomalies of the last two decades has been the way in which the EU, China and the US have never sat down in a room and spoken to each other. The closest they have come to this is the G20, which the EU belongs to as a partner. But that, of course, has many others gathered around the table. This is despite the fact that the EU and China between them have a High-Level Strategic Dialogue, established in 2005, which held its tenth meeting in June 2020. The US and China also set up their own similar dialogue in 2009 — the US-China Economic and Strategic Dialogue, a body which grew from two entities from the George W Bush era, the Strategic Economic Dialogue, and the Senior Dialogue. In 2017, this became the Comprehensive Economic Dialogue.

In the final months of the Trump Presidency in 2020, and for the first time, the EU and US decided to establish their own Bilateral Dialogue on China. This was, as the press release launching it in October that year declared, ‘dedicated forum for EU and U.S. experts to discuss the full range of issues related to China.’¹ The main significance of establishing such a body however was a tacit acknowledgement by the US (and to be fair, by the EU) that China was now a problem that was too big for either of them to deal with alone. Despite their trade arguments over the Trump era, there was an admission that with

¹ The launch of the U.S.-EU Dialogue on China was October 26, 2020.

China, perhaps their common problems outweighed their differences.

The Dialogue has outlasted the transition between administrations. Biden has proved as keen as his predecessor to show he is tough on China. He has also tried to do this through commitment to multilateral partnerships. On March 24, 2021, his Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, met with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell. In their joint statement after the meeting, the two declared that the bilateral China Dialogue would continue. Their statement (Joint Statement 2021) went on that "they acknowledged a shared understanding that relations with China are multifaceted, comprising elements of cooperation, competition, and systemic rivalry", using the language informed by "competitor, collaborator, adversary" found in key European and American documents of recent years about China referred to above. They continued that the dialogue would embrace economic issues; resilience; human rights; security; multilateralism; and areas for constructive engagement with China, such as climate change.

In participating in this Dialogue, the EU has already set out its broad position, which was to create its own space, but ensure that it kept close to the US. Borrell, speaking a year earlier, stated that "there is an increasing confrontation between China and the US. It is something that will frame tomorrow's world. The EU is not neutral in that confrontation. We share the same political system with the US, and we don't want to embrace the political system of China. We don't have to choose [between the US and China]," he said adding that "some people would like to push us to choose, but we don't have to choose — it has to be like Frank Sinatra's song, 'My way'". We have our own interests, and we should be able to defend them.' As the following year was to show, however, the challenges on trying to maintain a European balance on China became increasingly tough. On Hong Kong and the imposition of the National Security Law in June; on the claims of genocide in Xinjiang; on China's stance towards Taiwan; on claims that the coronavirus originally arose in a laboratory in China rather than a wet food market; and on issues around claims of widespread Chinese state sponsored cyber-attacks, Borrell had to issue different statements over 2020 into 2021 condemning China's behavior. Typical of these was one issued in Borrell's name on the 19th of July 2021, denouncing cyber-attacks on Microsoft. In the statement he said: "The EU and its member states reaffirm their strong commitment to responsible state behavior to ensure a global, open, free, stable, and secure cyberspace...The EU and its member states strongly denounce these malicious cyber activities, which are undertaken in contradiction with the norms of responsible state behavior as endorsed by all UN member states. We continue to urge the Chinese authorities to adhere to these norms and not allow its territory to be used for malicious cyber activities." (Council of the EU 2021)

These kinds of events were similarly condemned by the US. This implied therefore that there was now, as never before, an alignment between the two on how to work with China. The US, once jealously guarding its freedom of autonomy and action with China, was now keen to find common cause with other like-minded powers to try to work out a way of facing down this immense new challenge. And despite Borrell's words about the EU needing to defend its own sovereignty of action, and its interests, it is highly telling that in this area too, the EU was increasingly using a similar language and similar approach about China as the US. Such a fortuitous emerging and deepening alignment, with more consensus on themes, and how best to carry the dialogue forward, and much more

appreciation of parity between the two, would have been impressive but for one thing — 270
neither the EU nor the US separately nor together seemed to have worked out the magic
solution of how to have relations with a partner where there was so much depth and
collaboration in some areas (climate change, trade, tacking global public health being the
most obvious) and yet such profound divergence in others. That they were working
together was therefore perhaps more a sign of their drawing the line under their own efforts 275
to find bilateral solutions and seeking some epiphany elsewhere.

Multilateralism Comes into Play

The US China EU/Europe bodies alluded to above were by no means the only 280
action on the multilateral front, nor perhaps the most significant. We can broadly categorize
other forms of multilateralism as those where China was involved and therefore directly
able to influence the situation and outcomes, and those where it was absent but
increasingly, and more profoundly, becoming the main focus of conversation. Of the
former, if we are explicitly referring to bodies where Europe through the EU or member 285
states have a strong specific voice, we can largely talk of the G20. Of the latter, these
would be NATO and the G7. It is through these bodies that we can see clearly the emerging
of the China dilemma, and how the US and EU/Europe have had to construct and then
work in a bifurcated world despite their clear language about seeing common problems and
issues with China. 290

To deal with the second group — those multilateral fora where China is absent —
first, we must refer to recent history to give a bit of complicating context. From 2017 to
2021, meetings of the G7, and of the transatlantic security agreement — NATO, were, for
non-Americans, nerve-racking affairs. US President Trump clearly regarded them dimly,
generally opposing multilateral arrangements. For Trump his opposition highlighted his 295
policy to pursue his own domestic agenda as the President who could show fellow
Americans that foreign freeloading was becoming a thing of the past, or as an opportunity
to berate fellow heads of government and state to contribute more to their own security,
rather than relying on Washington. The US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on
Climate Change, along with similar action on the EU brokered nuclear proliferation deal 300
with Iran, all helped to create the sense, perhaps for the first time in the current century,
that the US was no longer an entirely reliable partner. And although Biden's presidency has
brought about a return to multilateralism, how long this lasts and how enduring it will
prove to be are questions yet impossible to currently answer. In any case, despite this, as
was argued above, when discussing the EU-US Bilateral Dialogue on China, the Trump 305
Administration towards its end seemed to agree that even in the era of Making America
Great Again, China was an issue that they were not able to deal with on their own.

Perhaps a clearer way to work out what will happen going forward is to look less at
the very antagonistic and sometimes fractious language that now prevails from the EU and
US towards China and focus instead on the areas where they have had to agree that China 310
is a collaborative partner in ways which speak to their own self-interest. It is in the recent
communiqués of multilateral fora that one sees this come to the fore. The G7 held in
Cornwall, UK in mid-June gives some sense of how this works. In the past, in the era of Hu
Jintao, Xi Jinping's predecessor as president and Party head in the 2000s, China was from

time to time present as an observer at what was then the G8 (while Russia was still a partner, before Russia was suspended because of the annexation of the Crimea in 2010). 315

Under Xi, China has not been involved in the G7 work at all, even as an observer. In the last few years, it has grown progressively more suspicious and skeptical of the grouping. For the 2021 gathering, an official from the Chinese government said curtly that "The days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone. We always believe that countries, big or small, strong or weak, poor or rich, are equals, and that world affairs should be handled through consultation by all countries" (BBC News 2021). 320

The optics of the G7 in 2021, after the turbulence of the previous year with COVID-19, and the transition from Trump to Biden, do seem to fit a narrative from Beijing's viewpoint which has an air of containment about it. Even so, it is striking that the G7 Communique (2021), in its 25 pages, only mentions China directly twice. The first, deep into the document, occurs on page 19 (G7 Cornwall Communique 2021), after a discussion about commitment to supporting the current multilateral system. The communique continues: 325 330

We will cooperate where it is in our mutual interest on shared global challenges, in particular addressing climate change and biodiversity loss in the context of COP26 and other multilateral discussions. At the same time and in so doing, we will promote our values, including by calling on China to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially in relation to Xinjiang and those rights, freedoms, and high degree of autonomy for Hong Kong enshrined in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law. 335 340

There is then a subsequent, very brief, reference to the need to preserve stability on the Taiwan Strait, and in the South China Sea. China however is not referred to explicitly here — it is the Indo-Pacific that takes full billing. While issues like Ethiopia, Russia, Myanmar and the DPRK get paragraph long treatments, China is passed over largely in discreet silence. 345

The quotation above is worth dwelling on because of the way that this single explicit mention of China is made. The acknowledgement of the generic, massive, shared challenges of climate change and sustainability takes precedence. Multilateralism figures as one of the main means by which to address these. The G7 partners assert that their shared values lie at the heart of this. In that context, China is figured as a problem — a partner in combatting the first set of issues, but also one that, in its management of Xinjiang and Hong Kong, has posed increasingly hard questions since 2019, and shows that its practice of multilateralism while deeply useful and important, is still problematic and untrustworthy. 350

The question of the China quandary and the divided, ambiguous responses it elicits from outsiders referred to above haunts the way the country appears in the G7 2021 communique. There, China figures as the thorny, and largely unresolved, question of how to balance the seemingly categorical insistence on shared, presumably liberal, democratic values amongst the G7 and their allies on the one hand, and the pragmatic acknowledgement on the other that for issues like the environment, or public health, or any 355 360

one of the other challenges the G7 make statements about, China's partnership is key. It is an unavoidable partner, dealing with unavoidable problems. Some commentators make the argument that in this situation, China's needs from combatting the degradation of its natural environment, and managing its carbon emissions, are greater than those of the US or Europe. The G7 feels that in fact this situation means that China is, despite its current confidence and the power gained from its economy, in a more vulnerable position than it seems. As journalist Isaac Stone Fish (2021) writes: 365

Beijing is in greater need of the United States' cooperation on climate than the reverse. Climate action is necessary for China and, thus, for the party's legitimacy — and the United States weakens its own fight against climate change if it compromises to strike a deal with China on an issue that is more in the party's interest to address. 370

The logical fallacy of this argument is that somehow there is a China climate change issue, and a US one, and they can be easily segregated. In fact, it would be much more accurate to say that there is a common climate change issue – called the provision of global public goods – getting progressively worse by the day, and that China, the US, and everyone else needs to solve this. This is not something that one party can use as leverage over the other. Failure to address it will simply bring down everyone. Twenty or thirty years ago, perhaps, when the problem was not so grave, it might have been possible to play politics with it this way between contesting parties. But these days, the overwhelming evidence shows that the searing temperatures seen in the last couple of years in North America mean there is not much merit in talking about the Communist Party getting a better deal than the US if America decides to co-operate in this area. 375 380 385

Prevaricating like this might expend a little of the precious time left to really deal with this issue. Everyone is in the same boat on this one — and the boat is taking on water.

The Existential Issues

The striking feature of the G7 communique therefore was how much of it even in a gathering like this where China was absent, was devoted to more generic issues like health, economic recovery and jobs, free and fair trade, climate and environment and gender equality. On each of these issues, China is not an opponent in terms of acknowledging their importance and accepting the challenges they pose. The main issue is more means to cooperation, rather than that cooperation needs to happen in the first place. Indeed, as with climate change above, it is hard to see how a country constituting a fifth of global GDP, and of the world's population, could be excluded from trying to find solutions in any of these areas. The whole COVID19 pandemic for all the generation of political anger and geopolitical spleen between different nations has underlined that some problems do not respect national boundaries. And even though the origination of the virus in Wuhan, central China, with the ongoing controversy over precisely how the first infections happened, created political bad blood between China and the outside world, it also powerfully showed that if these different parties didn't at some level have a way of cooperating, then the original problem would end up being close to insoluble. 390 395 400 405

That makes the way in which China is presented as a central, all-encompassing threat by many political and administrative parties in Europe and the US particularly purblind, and contestable. The American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is a good illustration of this: ‘The greatest long-term threat to our nation’s information and intellectual property, and to our economic vitality, is the counterintelligence and economic espionage threat from China,’ its director, Christopher Wray, is quoted as saying on its ‘China Threat’ website (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2021). This is a powerful and dramatic statement, and there are some ways where it may well be true. But compared to the sorts of issues that Oxford University based futurologist Toby Ord (2020) outlines in his recent work on existential crisis that may, in the near to medium term future, destroy the human race, and which therefore will have vast economic consequences, China simply does not register. 410

On Ord’s account, the impact of climate on sea levels, and through extreme weather events, stands a good chance of dramatically disrupting human life in the next century. A nuclear war might well, if it broke out, be so extreme in its impact that it makes all but tiny, remote pockets of the earth uninhabitable. A pandemic, as events over 2020 into 2021 dramatically showed, would also potentially cause widespread fatalities. Interestingly, of all the challenges that Ord writes about, artificial intelligence is the gravest. He envisages a chillingly plausible scenario where, quite soon, humans create entities that are intellectually superior to them, and, driven by their own desire for dominance and survival, start to turn on their creators. The Frankenstein dystopian vision of two centuries before from the adolescent pen of Mary Shelley remains as potent and terrifying in terms of its possibility today. And this, even in the wilder imaginations of the most implacable of China’s opponents, is not a country specific threat – it is a threat to humanity itself. 420 425

This issue of it mattering deeply where one stands is a crucial one to bear in mind in this context. If the world is to be seen purely through the prism of competition between nation states, and their differing value sets and visions, then China does loom large. Despite over four decades of economic partnership with North America, Europe and others, China has ended up creating a capitalist looking economy, but one run by, the Communist Party. This is a staggering place for history to end up — with the world’s largest economic actor, at some point in the next decade, being one led by a ruling party and the government under it that, on their outside at least, bears the label of a Marxist-Leninist political movement.² This is disruptive, in many ways inconvenient, and problematic for sure. Is it, however, an issue on the same level as any of those mentioned in the paragraph above? If one shifts the frame of the China challenge to the context of these problems of existential significance, then things look very different. That is for the very simple reason that all of Ord’s problems are not the West’s, or China’s, but humanity’s. And all their solutions, too, are ones that the global community will need to play a role in, no matter where they reside. 430 435 440

² Whether China, either currently or ever, has really practised Marxism-Leninism is a thorny question. A good recent treatment of this, in Tony Saich (2021). Saich shows just how torturous and complex the Communist movement in China’s relations were from its foundation in 1921 onto its rise to power 28 years later. Chinese Marxists under Mao added the crucial qualifier that while they were working in accordance with a universal ideology, they were doing so in a way that suited China’s unique conditions, meant that in many ways they were undercutting the pretensions of universality in their guiding, imported ideology. It remains a moot question to this day therefore just how Marxist, or Communist, China is. But in view of the collapse of the other major countries following the same ideology, the fact that China under its current system survives, and might in some respects even be said to prosper, speaks volumes.

In this context, in fact, shifting the China and the West relationship more into the existential problems space sparks off radically new ways of seeing things, and marks a wholly new urgency to multilateralism that is almost blind to countries and only focused on issues. The artificial intelligence problem Ord refers to is one good place to think about this. China's vast investments into this area, and its deployment of some of this technology in areas like Xinjiang where there have been multiple, credible reports of systemic human rights abuses over the last few years, in particular, are indisputably profoundly troubling. It is right that the outside world, as the G7 leaders did, continue to raise this issue and put what pressure they can on China. The challenge however is that simply declaring this a horrifying situation but not knowing how to do something about it risks ending up in the same old space of moralizing and berating China for the sake of it. An even sharper problem, and one laden by moral challenges, is just how one balances concerns about this issue with the need to continue to work positively on the generic issues outlined above? All that one can say here is that anyone who comes out with neat, easy answers is missing something hugely important.

This does not mean that Beijing can wage ahead unheeding and indifferent to criticisms made of it. It too is now a stakeholder in what everyone else is doing. To take one particular case at some point, if Ord is right, then even Beijing will need to think deeply about the dangers that he so lucidly describes in terms of AI getting out of hand and threatening its human creators. Already, researchers in Chinese laboratories have undertaken problematic gene editing experiments (something the Chinese authorities immediately condemned, showing they have some awareness of the dangers of unbridled experimentation). China has created some of the world's most powerful computers. It has committed seven per cent of GDP to research and development under the current national Five-Year Plan running from 2021. That comes to billions each year, to be spent on creating new innovations and pushing back the frontiers of knowledge. It is likely that the fateful day when humans see creations springing from their own ingenuity that are able to operate against them will occur in a Chinese laboratory rather than a western one. Artificial intelligence is a deadly serious problem for China as much as anyone else.

These grand existential questions, with all their gravity, and chilling massiveness, are at the same time also great geopolitical levelers. They put the other associated issue of lack of alignment in values, and economic imbalances between countries, into a new perspective. This is not to suggest that these issues are unimportant. But it is to make clear that this new context will mean that they need to be rethought — and that needs to happen with China involved.

Multilateralism Coming Back — getting the form right

This means that despite the harsh response by China to the few words levelled at it in the G7 communique in 2021, the very fact that Italy, America, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, and Japan mentioned the country so briefly is testament to the fact that even these partners know their priorities mean that they have to speak, think and articulate positions on China that are nowhere near as starkly negative as much public language and discussion on China today. Politicians in Britain and the US can play for applause and plaudits before their respective domestic audience by adopting a hardline on China — but

the reality is that a hardline on China also means jeopardizing job creating economic cooperation or technology alliances that might now be in the West's favor. Opportunity costs and risk management have become far more important. Ironically, the pandemic has made it clear that, like it or not, because of a borderless issue like this, a new era of multilateralism is at hand. The menu of other existential issues above reinforces that. These will need multilateral responses to be soluble. The question is what format this multilateralism takes.

It also has to be recognized here that in terms of framing the centrality of values, despite the EU presenting itself as the ultimate liberal norms setter because of its history and the underpinning importance of European Enlightenment values, it has necessarily had to be a more pragmatic actor because of its internal diversity and complexity. It has constantly needed to broker compromise and consensus amongst its complex membership, and amongst its key partners in Europe who are neighbors but not formally part of the Union — of whom now the UK is one. America as a more unified political actor means that its discourse on China is far more unified, and starkly Manichean. In this China is the ultimate home of tyranny, Communist repression and Atheism, a place that figures to many citizens and politicians in America as an almost existential threat. While there are some in Europe that might subscribe to this view, overall, the general impression, historically, and even in 2021, is not so starkly binary. In essence, European views on China are more complex, often more nuanced, and sometimes deeply ambiguous. That mindset frustrates the US clearly, but it may well be the more appropriate approach to a power that does not present the same stark security threat that the USSR did decades ago, but which is clearly deeply problematic in terms of its lack of alignment of values with the West. Ironically, for once Europe's complexity might be an asset rather than an impediment.

More positively, for combatting issues of existential importance like climate change, COP26, and the Paris agreement at least offer some multilateral structures that seems, mostly, to work and which can complement the work of the G20. With other issues, there is less clarity — but that does not mean that these too cannot also have a similar architecture to work on. China certainly is not averse to multilateralism. Its own Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the more amorphous Belt and Road (BRI) prove this. The G20 perhaps offers the main hope to set a more diverse global structure to do this up. After all, this is the key multilateral body after the UN and its agencies where China is definitely in the room and part of the conversation. This means that the communiqués that issue from the G20 do not, therefore, contain even the sentence or two of direct criticism and voicing of concern about China that the G7 2021 communique did. For Japan's G20 Leaders' Summit, Osaka 2019, for instance, the headings of the communique finally issued were all addressing generic issues: global finance and technology, anti-corruption, inequality, women's empowerment, public health, sustainability, and climate change. In essence, the G20 stands increasingly as the place where the inevitable, more realistic face of multilateralism figures — an acknowledgement that despite all the differences, the priority is to address existential issues like that of climate change and sustainability. Values in many ways, although this is not something that any key European leader would dare to say, have been slowly relegated. The harsh truth is that in 2021, after the ravages of the pandemic, and the increasing evidence across the planet of larger and larger numbers of serious extreme weather events, the world is moving into an era of profound crisis and emergency.

Much will depend on the economic situation. As the US and Europe emerge from the shock of COVID-19, there is a lot of uncertainty. The G7 2021 vision of ‘Building back better’ is a noble one. It may well prove to be impractical too. The quandary for Europeans may well end up being trying to work out ways of economically engaging with China at a time when its economy will be doing well, and it may well be granting wider access to outside partners. Asserting the primacy of values and principles over everything else gets more difficult for politicians when jobs are being lost, and economies are ailing. The great test for Europe will therefore almost certainly come at the point when its own economic challenges mean China, rather than the US, offers stronger prospects. 535

To be able to navigate the demands of both Washington and Beijing going forward will stretch the diplomatic skills of the Europeans as never before. Too often in the past they have tended to go with the flow, sometimes when the time seemed propitious getting closer to China, sometimes sharply drawing away when America expressed displeasure. 545

During a particularly difficult moment in the Trump presidency, German Chancellor Merkel stated that Europe would need to be more autonomous in its decision-making and security in the future. They were brave words, but ones that have much truth. To be able to work out a way to balance between China and the US will mean that Europe, despite its complexity, and the difficulty of the questions being posed for it by this issue, will have to hammer out a consensus about what it wants, and how it intends to achieve that. Ironically, it is possible that focusing on the existential issues first, and then moving backwards to spelling out what necessary role China plays in addressing these, might offer the most positive way forward. 550 555

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