

## In kind, or else? Exploring European tactics for the global battle of narratives against the background of China's narrative power

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents an accumulation of insights from, chiefly, two workshops, centred around the question: how should the EU institutions and Member States engage with the various elements of PRC global narrative strategy? The central question is: can and should European partners answer elements of China's narrative strategy in kind? And if not, what could EU institutions and Member States do to meet the narrative challenge China's competition sets Europe globally? Discussions of China's narrative power often focus on diagnosing the problem. Conversely, the workshops focused on exploring potential next steps in answering the challenge. Recommendations for finding pathways to impact are, in summary; meet the political challenge, but avoid a geopolitical narrative; form a locus of strategic narrative formation to help EU institutions and Member States coordinate strategic communications; invest in research into perceptions of China and Europe in the Global South.

### **Keywords:**

*China, European Union, narrative power, FIMI*

**Introduction: co-creation between experts and practice**

This paper presents an accumulation of insights from, chiefly, two workshops, centred around the question: how should the EU institutions and Member States engage with the various elements of PRC global narrative strategy?

The first is the ReConnect China online *Europe-China Table*, organised by the Netherlands Institute for International Relations ‘Clingendael’ on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 2023, titled ‘Answering China’s Narrative Challenge to Europe.’ The second is the invite-only ReConnect China roundtable on ‘Engaging China’s narrative power: in kind, or else?’ on March 20th 2024, at the Egmont Institute in Brussels, Belgium. Participants to the workshop included academic and think tank-experts from the ReConnect Consortium and beyond, from Europa and Asia, and EU and Member-State officials. The findings as they are presented here are the author’s responsibility alone.

The central question is: can and should European partners answer elements of China’s narrative strategy in kind? And if not, what could EU institutions and Member States do to meet the narrative challenge China’s competition sets Europe globally?

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, China’s narrative power has gathered considerable attention from the EU and its Member States. ‘Telling China’s story well’ has been a PRC priority since Xi Jinping’s first term – convergence with Russian tactics of informational manipulation is on the rise. The challenge of China’s narrative power lies both in its broad tactical scope – playing the entire spectrum from robust public diplomacy to disinformation – its strong domestic narrative of Western decay and the rise of the East, and the specificity with which it tailors its narratives to foreign audiences.

Discussions of China’s narrative power often focus on diagnosing the problem. Conversely, the workshops focused on exploring potential next steps in answering the challenge. This is an ongoing process. As a reflection of two rich, varied and multifaceted workshops, the results here presented do not pretend to write the definitive article, or even pose a singular answer: as the challenge evolves, the exploration of answers is only starting and parallel tracks of exploration are opening up. Recommendations for finding pathways to impact are, in summary:

- Meet the political challenge, but avoid a geopolitical narrative.
- Form a locus of strategic narrative formation to help EU institutions and Member States coordinate strategic communications.
- Invest in research into perceptions of China and Europe in the Global South.

**Beyond disinformation: exploring the battle of narratives**

In March of 2020, HR/VP Borrell focused attention on an often underestimated but vitally important aspect of geopolitical competition: narrative power. Borrell said that there was a ‘global battle of narratives going on’ in which states, most importantly Russia, China and the US competed for dominance in the way the coronavirus pandemic was being perceived by global audiences.

The battle of narratives has not waned since. Disinformation and propaganda have been longstanding components of Russia’s strategic arsenal, only to be amped up since February 2022. Chinese and Russian disinformation campaigns seem increasingly to converge. European policymakers are turning their eyes to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI),

leading to a *FIMI Toolbox* jointly announced by VP Jourová and HRVP Borrell and an *Information Sharing and Analysis Center* facilitated by the European External Action Service.

The battle of narratives is connected to the battle of offers: the value-case China offers to third countries in choosing it over, amongst others, the EU and European member states as preferential diplomatic or economic partners, based on the premises of win-win and non-interference. The battle of narratives shapes the battle of offers: even if the value proposition of European partners seems competitive on the surface, it may be differently perceived by vital audiences as a result of changing narratives on ‘Europe.’ This connection between the battle of narratives and the battle of offers becomes even more important in the light of recent EU strategies aimed at improving its economic competitiveness and foreign economic policy – most prominently the Global Gateway, but certainly also the foreign economic policy components of the Draghi Report.

In this light, the roundtable participants saw foreign information manipulation and -interference as symptomatic of narrative competition against the background of systemic shifts in the global balance of power: as such, the means should not be mistaken for the challenge. Stopping the bullet does not disarm the shooter: nor does closing a bot network disarm the narratives spread across the globe.

The battle of narratives, moreover, is profoundly connected to a battle for access to and the sovereignty and integrity of information space. Tactics including the intimidation and suppression of PRC-critical voices in, amongst others, European media, ‘flooding the zone’ of social media with easily debunkable disinformation, pursuing covert access to traditional media and indeed setting up parallel media infrastructure within European information ecosystems, especially when set against the background of the PRC’s censorship of Western sources and platform in China itself, constitutes a global competition for information spaces.

Even though its weight is increasingly felt, China’s narrative challenge to Europe remains elusive: whereas a trend of China-related disinformation campaigns raises worries, the larger, more long-term challenge China poses is hard to pin down. It raises the question how Europe – EU institutions and Member States – can meet China’s narrative challenge in its own way, by innovating its stories of international order and, crucially, the ways it tells those stories to global audiences.

### **Telling China’s story well: strategic assessment of China’s narrative power**

In spite of recent attempts at conducting a charm offensive in European capitals, soft power – defined as the ability to influence the preferences and behaviour of foreign actors through attraction or persuasion – is no longer seen as the leading concept in China’s narrative strategy to Europe<sup>1</sup>. Instead, achieving ‘*huayuquan*’ (话语权), or, the ‘right to speak’, which is closely associated with the goal of ‘telling China’s story well’, has become a main strategic objective.<sup>2</sup> Leading theorist Zhang Weiwei defines it thus:

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<sup>1</sup> T. Dams, X. Martin and V. Kranenburg, eds. (2021), *China’s soft power in Europe: falling on hard times. Edited volume*, European Think-tank Network on China.

<sup>2</sup> T. Friedman (2022), ‘Lexicon: ‘Discourse Power’ or the ‘Right to Speak’ (话语权, Huàyǔ Quán)’, DigiChina.

Telling the story of China's politics well depends to a large extent on whether we can truly deconstruct the discourse of the West, and particularly the mainstream China narrative in Western discourse, and establish our own political narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Within this strategic frame, competition between Chinese and Western narratives amongst third audiences is seen as a zero-sum game where the power, rather than likeability or attractiveness, of narrative dominates.

Research shows that winning narrative power has been a 'fundamental principle of the Communist Party of China since its establishment in 1921.'<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, top leaders decided to (temporarily) shelve, suppress, or partly eliminate this task since the beginning of the reform era in 1978.<sup>5</sup> As China's great power identity is becoming an increasingly important factor in the structuring of great power relations on the world stage, and its systematic competition with the United States evolves and intensifies, its ability to shape global discourse becomes an even more important aspect of its great power strategy.

The roundtable participants saw as the most important internal source of China's narrative power its long-standing whole-of-society approach, where external propaganda goals are internalized across different levels of society and leadership.<sup>6</sup> The most important external source of China's narrative power is the aspirational value of its rise, the strategic options it creates for the diversification of international links, combined with latent anti-Western sentiments amongst third audiences. Recent research suggests that CCP propaganda emphasizing the superiority of China's model of governance is more competitive than often thought, especially when compared to US messaging.<sup>7</sup> For these reasons and others, China's narrative power poses first and foremost a political challenge to Europe, where its status as an aspirational model of society and indeed as a strong partner among key audiences in various parts of the world are at stake.

In the battle of information spaces, the roundtable participants thought a hypothetical European strategy aimed at penetrating the PRC's information space is unrealistic. Engaging Chinese diaspora across the globe and in European societies through Chinese-language messaging is increasingly relevant and feasible. The keyword should be: resilience-building, for instance by supporting independent journalism from Europe in Chinese languages. Some foreign embassies in Beijing use Weibo, but none are successful in reaching an audience. The roundtable participants see European soft power still as very competitive to Chinese audiences: this implies promoting people to people exchanges, European language learning and making better known the fact that the EU is supporting independent journalism. Providing for actually safe and free information spaces for Chinese-language audiences in Europe could be very important to this goal.

The participants identify as a weak spot in China's narrative strategy the fact that it can be very referential to the West, relying on latent anti-Western sentiments amongst third-country audiences. This aspect of the PRC's narrative strategy relies on European narratives that take the EU as an aspirational model for the whole world, but now, the 'whole world' may not be aspiring to be European anymore. Then again, some argue that the core of the European identity narrative is not threatened: peace through prosperity and pluralism. European scholars and policymakers have for years been discussing 'normative power Europe', 'civilian power Europe', and yet,

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<sup>3</sup> D. Ownby (2022), Zhang Weiwei on 'Telling China's Story', Readingthechinadream.com.

<sup>4</sup> Zhao K. China's Rise and Its Discursive Power Strategy. *Chin. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 2016 Apr 19:1–25.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Read the official report on the meeting [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Mattingly, D., Incerti, T., Ju, C., Moreshead, C., Tanaka, S., & Yamagishi, H. (2023). Chinese State Media Persuades a Global Audience That the "China Model" is Superior: Evidence From A 19-Country Experiment. OSF Preprints.

European narratives tend to be very inward-looking. The issue is not so much that the EU is ‘imperialist or neocolonial’, but that the ways in which it engages with the world can very easily be construed or perceived as such. If the EU would address this, a major aspect of the PRC’s narrative would suffer credibility. This is a weakness that Europe might be able to exploit, especially if in the near future, the PRC is seen more and more as a superpower. However, it is also vital to change this in the EU’s practices, regardless of China.

Especially considering tactical convergence, the differences between Russia and China in the field of narrative strategy should be kept in mind. Russia uses hard power to ‘send a message’. Conversely, there is no hard power struggle between Europe and China and a persisting deep economic interdependence. The question is: is Europe an actor, or an arena for the US, China, and Russia?

A fundamental question remains whether the success of PRC narratives stems primarily from the virtues of the (developmental) model that it proposes, or from its anti-Western nature, selling the story of ‘the decline of the West’ well? This becomes increasingly important if economic ‘headwinds’ in the PRC continue, and the promise of its economic model suffers credibility at home and abroad. Could it be that Europe is overestimating the effectiveness of the Chinese narrative strategy, while at the same time underestimating its own narrative?

### **In kind, or else? Answering China’s narrative challenge**

The counter-FIMI Toolbox is an important step in addressing the ‘battle of narratives’, as are the Information Sharing and Analysis Centers (ISACs) of the EU. Their approaches are aimed at protecting information flows within the open societies of Europe against malign actors by focusing not on regulating the substance of narratives, but rather on manipulation of media for dissemination. It is ‘narrative’-agnostic, protecting free speech and diversity of opinion. This approach plays to the EU’s strengths: internal, regulatory and neutral.

At the same time, it only covers part of the story: it addresses some of the tactics of China’s ‘global struggle’ for narrative power, but does not meet its overall strategy at eye-level. The very fact of China’s ascent to superpower status unhinges some of the main narrative anchors of Europe’s story to the world: it challenges the story of the EU as belonging to Fukuyama’s end of history as well as that of the Transatlantic partnership as the harbinger of a universal world order. As Borrell said, ‘When the pandemic came, we started speaking about ‘the battle of narratives. This is a sentence as important as ‘the Geopolitical Europe.’<sup>8</sup> If Europe is to fulfil its promise of evolving into a mature geopolitical actor with a degree of strategic autonomy, it needs a ‘narrative identity’<sup>9</sup> to match.

Sino-US rivalry exposes Europe’s main weakness, as European Member States and EU institutions struggle to meet Trump and Xi with an equally unified form of representation on the world stage. Furthermore, European Member States and EU institutions lack a meaningful presence in global Chinese-language media, let alone narrative pathways into Chinese society, whereas PRC-based global media are present in the European infosphere. Europe’s narrative strategy towards third audiences is strongly norm-based, emphasizing the ethical standards one needs to adopt when

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<sup>8</sup> See Borrell’s full text speech [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volumes 1,2, and 3.

cooperating with the EU and its MSs, failing to exploit the laws of persuasive storytelling that underlie Chinese narratives.

Organizationally, the PRC seems to be a monolith, but in fact it is very successful in tailoring to very specific foreign audiences. Europe should be far better in that aspect of narratives tactics than the PRC, given the profoundly pluralist nature of European societies. Europe often misses the agency of local actors. Another weakness of the EU is the lack of embodiment of its narrative by globally recognized leaders, such as special envoys that represent an issue.

Europe's main strength should be its global economic weight – like China, it could more strongly connect the battle of narratives with the battle of offers, especially to audiences in Africa and Asia that are looking to hedge against Sino-US rivalry. A locus of strategic narrative formation could help EU institutions and MSs coordinate strategic communications.

The EU could invest more in deep, localised research into different regional audiences' aspirations, grievances, common interests, and values. It should connect that knowledge to the strategic formation of narratives in congruence with Member States, playing into particular strong ties certain Member States have with third audiences, leading to a division of labour. In the context of Global Gateway, the EU should invest in structural capacity to cobrand successes of cooperation with third countries. The establishment of the EU-co-funded Strategic Communications Education and Research Unit at the University of Tokyo presents a best practice for exploring ways in which to combine expertise on strategic communication with key likeminded countries.

Europe has not yet been able to find an answer to the ways in which China is presenting itself on the world stage but it urgently needs to do so. Thus far, it has focused on spreading norms, rather than spreading a comprehensive narrative through persuasive storytelling. We should not abandon our norms, but rethink fundamentally the way we narrate them. Europe does not use its aspirational value as a basis for its narrative, rather taking it for granted. Is the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) a story to tell better abroad? Look at Indonesia and the Philippines: the CEE's story should be globally interesting, some suggest. Then again, these stories hit grievances within the European family, coming from an uneven integration process.

Often, the EU is seen as the herbivore in a room of carnivores. But the EU cannot afford to just be a herbivore. If the EU is not able to enforce hard security on its own borders, its peace-narrative implodes too. China has military soft power; the PRC does not need to intervene, its hard assets give it a place at the table. It is worth asking whether the European narrative strategy has been unsuccessful because we have not been selling that narrative enough, or because we are selling a narrative that is not strong enough. Europe should not be afraid to look at its own shortcomings. The main weak points of the European narratives are summarized as:

- 1) lack of representation,
- 2) lack of unity,
- 3) lack of offensive capabilities.

These problems can and will not be solved with a 'quick fix.' It will take a long time before the EU reaches the level of institutional maturity and unity that China currently has.

## Telling Europe's story well: potential pathways to impact

Despite current European shortcomings, Member States and EU institutions should move forward, take initiatives, and be confident, building on their strengths, as Europe has a lot to offer. It is not sufficient to just counter disinformation: Europe must collectively improve its capacity to tell its story well – in its own ways. EU Institutions and Member States should communicate what 'Europe' stands for, as an independent narrative identity from 'the West'. This way, it should show that liberal-democratic values still matter and put forward the value-proposition of the EU as an economic, organizational, and societal model.

Europe can take steps. Ongoing policy initiatives (e.g. Global Gateway, Indo-Pacific Strategy) offer plenty of potential in this regard: those initiatives and the actions taken under their flags could support the spreading of European narrative power. This process will take time, so in the meanwhile we should focus on reconnecting with countries in other parts of the world. We should think more in terms of 'engagement' instead of 'outreach', as 'engagement' implies an interaction with others based on equality. Europe needs to engage with the Global South based on what these countries need from Europe. Many countries in the Global South are not too comfortable with the idea of a world order led by China. Europe could act on that. Europe should offer an alternative to the Chinese narrative and Chinese investments and therefore should seek input from the countries in the Global South on how it can best support them.

It is important to be both confident of our European narrative, but to also be humble about our approach. This is especially important in multilateral fora, where the image of Europe as a colonial power is an issue for its engagement with other countries, and where Chinese influence is particularly strong. Europe needs to pay attention to the image of Europe in different parts of the world. Let China speak! China should be allowed to exercise its right to speak, so that Europe and the world can see what its narratives have to offer.

Europe should work together with other regions and coordinate the development and dissemination of narratives, in particular with countries in the Indo-Pacific. There can be no engagement with the Global South without engaging with the Indo-Pacific as the political centre of gravity in the 21st century. Europe needs to be absolutely clear on its red lines with regard to Chinese narratives and activities. Europe needs to focus on maintaining a level playing field, and should not shy away from applying countermeasures. We need more empirical research on what exactly China is doing in terms of its narratives and how people in different countries in the global south perceive and respond to the Chinese narrative. A narrative will come about through taking small steps, not by taking dramatic leaps.

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