

RECONNECT CHINA

POLICY BRIEF 23

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Drinking Xi Wine

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Executive summary:

At the opening of the ‘Summit of the Future Action Days,’ held in New York on 20 and 21 September 2024, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres stated the following: “Four years ago [...] we saw our multilateral institutions ailing—unable to respond to contemporary challenges, let alone those of tomorrow. We saw faith in multilateral solutions eroding. And we saw trust in each other dissipating just when we needed it most. So, we began a journey to reform to renew the international system so that it meets the moment and is fit for the future. We need multilateralism that is more inclusive, more effective and more networked—with stronger links between international institutions and with the people. That means greater representation of developing countries. And it means a stronger voice for all of you and what you represent”.¹ This call reflects the realization that the world’s economic balance is shifting towards the Global South and that, concomitant with this development, the countries of the Global South aspire a greater say in the existing institutes of global governance. This Policy Brief addresses the question of the ‘universality of values’ such a change raises, hereby focusing on the alternative strategic narratives of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the second-largest global economy in nominal terms.

Policy recommendations:

This Policy Brief argues that, for the European Union (EU), it is necessary to:

- Differentiate between the audiences targeted by the Chinese narratives;
- Stand firm with the European values in a context in which the United States (US), the chief architect and defender of the liberal international order, has started to contest the major international institutions it once created to sustain this order;
- Coordinate strategic communication within the EU.

INTRODUCTION

Traveling through China around New Year 2025, billboards calling for “Drinking Xi Wine on the Chinese Year” (中国年, 喝习酒) permeating public spaces such as railway stations, could not but catch the eye. As much as this merchandizing appeals on the intrinsic qualities of this sweet soy-scented wine, it, of course, inevitably brings to mind the name of Xi Jinping (same ‘Xi’). Indeed, “Drinking Xi Wine to follow the Party” has been associated with the 18th National Party Congress of 8–14 November 2012 on which Hu Jintao was replaced by Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and as ‘paramount leader,’ and ‘Xi Wine,’ produced by the ‘Guizhou Xi Liquor Investment and Holding Group Company Limited’ (贵州习酒投资控股集团有限责任公司), has been marketed in print and on China Central Television (CCTV) ever since.² After the selling of ‘Xi Wine’ initially soared, Xi Jinping’s sweeping anti-

corruption crackdown on government spending following the 18th National Party Congress caused sales of liquor brands, including ‘Xi Wine,’ to plummet. In the run-up to the 19th Party Congress of 18–24 October 2017, China’s liquor market, including the sales of ‘Xi Wine,’ was, however, on the rise again. Judging from the recent merchandizing, ‘Xi Wine’ is there to stay in the high-end liquor market.

Merchandizing a type of liquor that shares its name with that of the country’s State President, Secretary General of the CCP, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission within a context in which the Chinese leadership is simultaneously appealing to its functionaries to be very moderate in its alcohol consumption and in spending on luxury goods in general, brings to mind the so-called ‘Overton Window,’ named after the American political scientist Joseph P. Overton (1960–2003). Joseph P. Overton distinguished policies that lie within the ‘Overton Window’ and those that do not. In a democratic system that is characterized by a horizontal competition between different political views, “politicians are limited in what policy ideas they can support” because they are constantly faced with the risk of losing popular support. Politicians will therefore “generally only pursue policies that are widely accepted throughout society as legitimate policy options”.³ In the contrary case, it is task to make acceptable what was not acceptable before, that is, shifting the ‘Overton Window’. This is done through political opinion making, argument, and debate. In autocratic systems in which there is no competition between different political parties, in contrast, shifting the ‘Overton Window’ is a means to maintain adherence of the general population to vertically imposed political directives. Party rhetoric is an important tool to achieve this goal. In the current Chinese context that is characterized by a reinforcement of Leninist structures, ‘Drinking Xi Wine’ can be interpreted as part—call it a meme—of a larger narrative structure with precisely this aim. This brings us to the different audiences targeted by CCP rhetoric.

POWER AND ORDER

Post-World War II internationalization, globalization, and interdependence have

increasingly eroded the sovereignty of individual nation states, as these nation states have transferred an increasing amount of policy and decision making power to the transnational level of bodies of global governance.⁴ In this process, the EU has aligned with the US, ascribing to what has become known as the ‘liberal democratic world order’. During the Cold War era, this order was pinned against the socialist revolutionary world order led by the Soviet Union (SU). China became part of the SU’s revolutionary internationalist order through the ‘Sino-Soviet Agreement for Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Help’ (中苏友好同盟互助条约), signed on February 14, 1950. In 1958, however, in a context in which the destalinization that had started under Nikita Khrushchev (General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964) was perceived as threatening the position of Mao Zedong (1893–1976), the disastrous outcome of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ (大跃进) and the ensuing ‘three years of great famine’ (三年大饥荒) that were devastating also for the Soviet investments in the PRC – the last straw that broke the camel’s back – made the SU decide to discontinue the ‘Sino-Soviet Agreement’ and with this also its support to the PRC.

Along with revolutionary internationalism and liberal democratic internationalism (in which we can differentiate Wilsonianism and the view of contingent sovereignty), sovereign internationalism and transactional and mercantile internationalism are the four major views on world order that have, after World War II, been dominant at some time and in some region of the world.⁵ History shows that, apart from a short period of a unipolar world order after the demise of the SU, none of these four perspectives has had or has a unique position. That is to say that there has always been and that there still exists a dynamic interplay between different views on world order. As such, this manifests that multipolarity has always been the basic characteristic of global order. In practice, these four types of views on world order all concern the striking of a balance between, on the one hand, the upper level of governance constituted by transnational institutes of global governance, and, on the other hand, the sovereign rights of individual nation states on the lower level.

UNIPOLARITY AND UNIVERSALITY

The demise of the SU in the early 1990s has put an end to the balance of power between the US and the SU-led blocks. This importantly made the US-led order appear as “synonymous with order itself”—remember Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* of 1992.⁶ This has given the ‘political West’ a monopolistic power in the field of international political narratives. Or, to refer to the introductory part to this Policy Brief, liberal internationalism and its associated comprehension of ‘universal values’ have come to constitute the ‘window’ through which the West assesses global normativity. This helps to explain the development of the concept of contingent sovereignty, i.e., the assumption that a nation state has the right to intervene in another nation state when that nation state is perceived to violate the rights of its citizens or as unable to protect its citizens against incursions by others—such an attitude is illustrated in, among others, different sanctions regimes. In its ‘interventionist’ claim, contingent sovereignty deviates from the peaceful, ‘soft power,’ Wilsonian approach to liberal democracy. The view that builds on the principles the then Democratic US President Woodrow Wilson (presidency from 1913 to 1921) proclaimed and that also is at the heart of the EU’s approach to the world, is that conflicts in the world are caused by the undemocratic nature of international politics and that economic interdependence brings about stability and world peace. This explains the liberal internationalist soft power endeavor to foster practices of free trade, and to, through these efforts, also expand democracy and promote human rights.⁷ A negative outgrowth of the focus on economy and trade is to be seen in ‘transactional and mercantile internationalism’. According to this view that has become very prominent in the second Trump administration with a US that is, as stated, contesting the major international institutions it once created to sustain this liberal democratic world order,⁸ the international sphere is simply the extension of the market. International alliances and multilateral agencies therefore have no place, as they are seen as only obstructing ‘the market’. International transactions thus follow the power-logic of the battle for market share and conform to a zero-sum logic.

CHINA’S THREE-LEVEL COUNTERNARRATIVE

The growing impact on the world economy and, increasingly, also on geopolitics of the PRC, has fundamentally changed the way the country perceives itself and its position in the global order. These perceptions have come along with new narratives, both domestically and internationally. A domestic narrative of Western decay and the rise of the East,⁹ is hereby coupled with a series of ‘initiatives’ that especially cater to the countries of the Global South and that have as common denominator that they ascribe to a ‘sovereign internationalist’ or ‘neo-sovereigntist’ approach to the world.¹⁰ This view on global order prioritizes national decision making power in matters a given nation state deems proper to itself (for the PRC, this also includes the ‘Taiwan issue’), but leaves open possibilities for dealing with global issues in an international context. This view on world order is currently on the rise in the developing world and is, especially by China whose growing economic clout has increased its political influence well beyond its borders,¹¹ advocated as an alternative form of ‘universality’.¹² China’s ‘neo-sovereigntist’ global ‘initiatives’ (the ‘Global Development Initiative’ (全球发展倡议; GDI) introduced in September 2021, the ‘Global Security Initiative’ (全球安全倡议; GSI) introduced in April 2022 in a speech at the Boao Forum, and the ‘Global Civilizational Initiative’ (全球文明倡议; GCI) introduced in March 2023, and together referred to as the ‘three major initiatives’ (三大倡议)¹³, can be considered as the ‘master narrative’ level that focuses on the decolonization process in the developing world in general terms, and on the concomitant shared claim for emancipation of the countries of the Global South—read: China’s offer as alternative for the US and EU offers. This ‘master narrative level’ is characterized by aspects of self-affirmation, self-protection, new mutualism, anti-hierarchy assertion, and protest and flexible norms—exit the ‘universal values’ that are portrayed as ‘Western’.¹⁴ The ‘master level’ of these narratives is underscored by the fact that, after former Secretary General of the CCP Hu Jintao had first used the phrase ‘shared future for mankind’ (人类命运共同体) in 2007 to refer to the ‘special relationship between Mainland China and Taiwan,’¹⁵—an issue that the PRC regards as one of its domestic ‘core interests’¹⁶—he reiterated this

phrase three times, albeit in a new ‘international’ context in a political report to the already mentioned 18th Party Congress of 2012.¹⁷ As a sequel to this, his successor Xi Jinping first pronounced the phrase ‘*jianghao Zhongguo gushi*’ (讲好中国故事), commonly translated as ‘telling China’s story well,’ on 19 August 2013 in a speech at the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference.¹⁸ In 2023, the ‘three great initiatives’ were linked to the ‘shared future for mankind’ narrative.¹⁹ The ‘shared future for mankind’ and ‘telling China’s story well’ can thus be seen as two interrelated concepts that were crafted into the ‘strategic narrative’ of the Xi era.²⁰ To the extent that also the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (一带一路倡议 ; BRI), launched in 2013, is an ‘empty’ concept, open for all kinds of concrete initiatives,²¹ also the BRI can be regarded as belonging to the ‘master narrative’ level.

This sovereign internationalist ‘master narrative’ is composed of different sub-narratives at the intermediate level. This is the level on which the PRC has initiated its own bodies of global governance such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (上海合作组织 ; SCO), an organization that was first focused on demilitarization of frontier areas and countering extremism and drug trafficking, but that has gradually developed to be an instrument of economic development and, increasingly also, political cooperation.²² The BRICS+ concept – the addition of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates to the already existing dialogue platform of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – is another example in case. This intermediate level is, importantly, also the level on which the PRC is engaging with the already existing bodies of global governance. This can, e.g., be seen in the following two examples: The concept ‘shared future for mankind’ has entered several United Nations General Assembly resolutions, the first one being the High Level Meeting on ‘Building the Community of Common Destiny of Mankind’ of the General Assembly of the United Nations of 18 January 2017,²³ and China is increasingly using the concept also in its engagement with the EU.²⁴ This intermediate level is also the level that is instrumentalized by the European Union to achieve its proper global goals, and is therefore also the level on which the PRC and the EU compete.

Examples in case are the competition for influence in the Central Asian region,²⁵ and the EU engagement with Namibia in the field of Critical Raw Materials and Namibia’s green hydrogen economy.²⁶ Also the EU’s ‘Global Gateway’ initiative has, in this respect, yielded the first positive results.²⁷

On the lowest narrative level, we find the constituting parts of the sub-narratives. These constituting parts are short discrete items (texts, slogans, images, and ‘Drinking Xi Wine’ as symbol of loyalty to the paramount leader who embodies the master narrative) that have to win the hearts and minds of the people, i.e., bring them into the reach of the ‘Overton Window’.²⁸

RE-ENGAGING WITH CHINA

At present, the EU is confronted with an increasingly pro-active China, and with Chinese counternarratives that are built on premises of sovereign internationalism and in which the values that the Western world takes to be ‘universal’ are portrayed as ‘Western’. The Chinese counternarratives that focus on concepts such as self-affirmation, self-protection, new mutualism, anti-hierarchy assertion, and protest and flexible norms, appear to be especially appealing to countries of the Global South. Against this background, and in the current global context of intensifying US-China rivalry and a US that is, through its mercantilist and transactional approach, increasingly undermining the global institutions of which it was one of the main architects, the EU appears to be the sole remaining defender of Wilsonianism.

Assessing the three levels of the Chinese counternarrative to the Wilsonian interpretation of the liberal world order, it is clear that the EU cannot directly influence the lower level of composite parts, crafted within the confines of the CCP, nor can the EU directly influence the master narrative concocted in the PRC. The EU does, however, have major possibilities to influence the intermediate level that is the level on which actual engagement of the PRC with existing bodies of global governance occurs, and the level on which it develops its own multilateral platforms. It is therefore important for the EU to:

- Differentiate between the different levels of audiences targeted by the Chinese narratives. It may be that, for the domestic audience, a narrative of a decay of the West and a rise of the East is prominent, but this narrative cannot deny economic reality. This economic reality implies that, for China, maintaining sound economic relations with the EU – its major export market – is of vital importance, also for the CCP to maintain its domestic position.²⁹
- Stand firm with the European values. In a context in which many countries of the Global South are forced into a position of either aligning with China or with the US, the EU can come in as an alternative. The EU should, in general, be aware of and speak out on its colonial past, but should at the same time also take a micro-approach to engage with different countries of the Global South on an individual basis, tackling specific needs rather than focusing on spreading norms, i.e., focusing more on ‘interests’ and less on ‘values’. This is also the approach the PRC takes. The ‘Global Gateway’ may develop to be an important instrument for this aim. Tailored engagement with the countries of the Global South will, conform to the Wilsonian principles, indirectly enhance such EU values as democracy and human rights, and foster world peace. That is to say that the EU’s engagement with third

countries – the EU’s direct neighborhood and the Central Asian region being examples in case – on the intermediate level will unavoidably diffuse European values to these regions and, as such, impact China’s ‘master narrative’.

- Coordinate strategic communication within the European Union. The current global situation provides excellent opportunities for the EU to shed off the impression that it is nothing more than a marionet of the US. It is only when the EU will, in a concerted way, bring its own story of ‘principled pragmatism,’ i.e., acknowledging that regions are as they are, rather than as Europeans might want them to be, while, at the same time “staying focused on the principles needed to secure longer-term stability” and combining “the pursuit of urgent goals with a strategy to create stability in the longer term,”³⁰ that it will become clear to the rest of the global world that ‘the EU matters’.

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ENDNOTES

¹ “Pact for Future Must Lay the Ground for Reform,” Says Secretary-General at Opening of Summit’s Action Days.’ <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sgsm22370.doc.htm>. (accessed April 20, 2025).

² ‘政治变化影响消费：习酒，云烟和小熊猫’，BBC News 中文，9 February 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-41301802> (accessed February 12, 2025); ‘从习水大典到窖藏年份酒’。钱江晚报，11 November 2018. https://qjwb.thehour.cn/html/2018-11/11/content_3713023.htm?div=-1 (accessed February, 12, 2025).

³ See ‘A Brief Explanation of the Overton Window’, Mackinac Center for Public Policy. <https://www.mackinac.org/overtonwindow> (accessed February 12, 2025).

- ⁴ On the EU's "willingness to disregard Westphalian conventions": see Ian Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2), 2002, p. 239 and Ian Manners and Richard Whitman, 'The "Difference Engine": constructing and representing the international identity of the European Union', *Journal of European Public Policy* 10(3), 2003.
- ⁵ See Richard Sakwa, 'BRICS and Sovereign Internationalism', *Strategic Analysis* 43(6), 2019, pp.456-458.
- ⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press, 1992. See Richard Sakwa, 'BRICS and Sovereign Internationalism', *Strategic Analysis* 43(6), 2019, p.456.
- ⁷ See John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.111; Stanley Hoffman, 'The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism', *Foreign Policy* 98, 1995, p.159.
- ⁸ Tim Heinkelmann-Wild, Andreas Kruck, and Bernhard Zangl, 'The Cooptation Dilemma: Explaining US Contestation of the Liberal Trade Order', *Global Studies Quarterly* 4(2), 2024.
- ⁹ See Ties Dams, 'In kind, or else? Exploring European tactics for the global battle of narratives against the background of China's narrative power', *ReConnect China Research Paper*.
- ¹⁰ See Delphine Alles and Bertrand Badie, 'Sovereignism in the International System: From Change to Split', *European Review of International Studies* 3(2), 2016.
- ¹¹ See Gustaaf Geeraerts, 'China, the EU, and Global Governance in Human Rights', in *China, The European Union, and the International Politics of Global Governance*, eds. Wang Jianwei and Song Weiqing. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2016, p.234.
- ¹² See Randall Schweller and Pu Xiao, 'After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline', *International Security* 36(1), p.2011; Pan Zhongqi, ed., *Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations. Global Governance, Human Rights and Strategic Partnerships*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Shaun Breslin, 'China and the Global Order: Signaling Threat or Friendship?', *International Affairs* 89 (3), 2013.
- ¹³ Taylor M. Fravel, 'China's global security initiative at two: a journey, not a destination', *China Leadership Monitor* 80, 2014.
- ¹⁴ See Delphine Alles and Bertrand Badie, 'Sovereignism in the International System: From Change to Split', *European Review of International Studies* 3(2), 2016, pp.16-18.
- ¹⁵ See Denghua Zhang, 'The Concept of "Community of Common Destiny" in China's Diplomacy: Meanings, Motives and Implications', *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 5(2), 2018, p.196.
- ¹⁶ See Avery Goldstein, 'China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping, Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance'. *International Security* 45(1), 2000.
- ¹⁷ See 'Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at the 18th Party Congress'. 18 November 2012. http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/Diplomacy/201211/t20121118_1586373.htm. (accessed October 23, 2024).
- ¹⁸ See Jian Xu and Qian Gong, "'Telling China's Story Well" as propaganda campaign slogan: International, domestic and the pandemic', *Media, Culture & Society* 46(5), 2024.
- ¹⁹ See Taylor M. Fravel, 'China's Global Security Initiative at Two: A Journey, Not a Destination', *China Leadership Monitor* 80, 2024.
- ²⁰ See Ignacio de la Rasilla and Yayezi Hao, 'The Community of Shared Future for Mankind and China's Legalist Turn in International Relations', *Chinese Journal of International Law* 20(3), 2021; Svetlana Krivokhizh and Elena Soboleva, 'Strategic Narratives in China's Bid for Discursive Hegemony', *International Organisations Research Journal* 18(2), 2023, p.181.

²¹ See Jasper Roctus, 'Remolding China's 'empty' Belt and Road Initiative – An opportunity for the EU', *Egmont Security Policy Briefs* 128, 2020, p.4.

²² See Fabinne Bossuyt, 'Engaging with Central Asia: China compared to the European Union', in *China, the European Union, and the developing world: a triangular relationship*, ed. Jan Wouters, Jean-Christophe Defraigne and Matthieu Burnay, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015, p.230. China's regional importance has further enhanced through adhesion to the SCO of Pakistan and India in 2017, and of Iran in 2023. Since 2008, Sri Lanka, Türkiye, Cambodia, Azerbaijan, Nepal, Armenia, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Maldives, Myanmar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain have become 'dialogue partners' of the association.

²³ <https://www.un.org/pga/71/2017/01/18/high-level-meeting-on-building-the-community-of-common-destiny-of-mankind/> (accessed 14 September 2024).

²⁴ Chunrong Liu, 'Framing China-EU Subregional Cooperation. The Elusive Pursuit of Normative Resonance?', in *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards a EU-China Strategic Narrative*, eds. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp.45-66.

²⁵ See Ikboljon Qoraboyev and Kairat Moldashev, 'EU-China relations in Central Asia in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative', in *The European Union, China and Central Asia. Global and Regional Cooperation in a New Era.*, eds. Fabienne Bossuyt and Bart Dessein. London and New York: Routledge, 2022, pp.257-273.

²⁶ See Sarah Logan, 'Material world: How Europe can compete with China in the race for Africa's critical minerals', European Council on Foreign Affairs, *Policy Brief* 7 November 2024; Adolf Kaure, 'European Union envisions more investments in Namibia's Green Hydrogen economy'. [European Union envisions more investments in Namibia's Green Hydrogen economy](#) (accessed October 29, 2024).

²⁷ For a general statement: see European Union, 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank. The Global Gateway' (Document 52021JC0030). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021JC0030> (accessed April 30, 2025). For more concrete overviews: see European Commission, 'Global Gateway flagship projects – Infographics' (last updated on 20 February 2025). https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/publications-library/global-gateway-flagship-projects-infographics_en (accessed April 30, 2025).

²⁸ See Joseph A. DeVito, *The Communication Handbook: A Dictionary*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986; Gardt Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2018.

²⁹ See Jian Xu and Qian Gong, "Telling China's Story Well" as propaganda campaign slogan: International, domestic and the pandemic', *Media, Culture & Society* 46(5), 2024.

³⁰ See Julien Barnes-Dacey and Hugh Lovatt, 'Principled pragmatism: Europe's place in a multipolar Middle East', European Council of Foreign Relations *Policy Brief* 28 April 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/principled-pragmatism-europes-place-in-a-multipolar-middle-east/> (accessed April 30, 2025).



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