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SWP Comment

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China's Global Connectivity Politics

On Confidently Dealing with Chinese Initiatives

Paul J. Kohlenberg and Nadine Godehardt

European attitudes towards China and its Belt and Road Initiative are changing. While the People's Republic under Xi Jinping is the only country in the world pursuing a global vision, distrust of China's expanding influence is growing. As a consequence, the European debate about China is becoming increasingly emotional with interpretations fluctuating between alarmism and reassurance. Ideas about the 'essence of China' and expectations that the country should fit into the liberal order according to Western standards, however, threaten to limit Europe's scope of action in dealing with the People's Republic. In order to develop strategies for a confident German and European policy, China's current global political approach should be considered systematically. Based on the features of China's 'connectivity politics' (*Konnektivitätspolitik*), Germany and the EU could formulate policy options that go far beyond the realm of infrastructure.

Under President Xi Jinping, China has established a distinct and global form of connectivity politics. This includes investment in infrastructure and international lending, broadening cooperation with and influencing institutions in research, finance and policy-making, acquiring international media houses and disseminating technical and regulatory standards. Thus, connectivity politics is driven by China's strategic understanding that power and connectivity are closely interlinked (see [SWP Comment 13/2018](#)). From Beijing's point of view, political room for manoeuvre stems less from a new, authoritarian "sharp power", as is currently being discussed in the US, but rather from the consistent enforcement of proactive 'connectivity power'. The more connectivity

resources an actor gains, the more potential power he acquires to directly or indirectly influence other actors. So (initially), no distinction is made between forums and channels of connectivity. Instead, the motto 'a lot helps a lot' applies here. As a result, Beijing also uses its relations with Western states and institutions of the liberal order to expand its connectivity resources.

However, this is not compatible with the rather static idea that China can be integrated into an existing liberal international order without it changing. China's economic rise and steadily expanding global range is changing the liberal system itself. Irrespective of the West's hopes for domestic liberalization in the People's Republic, the participation of an authoritarian state



with China's clout and size clearly has an impact on the existing international order. Although liberal standards and principles continue to apply, at the same time, existing rules are being questioned, other perspectives presented, existing institutions criticized or new ones created. Whether it concerns criteria for granting development loans or regulating the cyberspace of the future: China's proactive connectivity politics are transforming the universe of what is possible and legitimate.

Features of China's Connectivity Politics

Proactivity (*zhudongxing*)

The Chinese approach to connectivity politics is often tied to the notion of 'strategic docking'. It refers to how and in what way connections are established. Only by being proactive is it possible to pre-set the agenda of newly created connections and determine the points of contact with other actors and states. As a result, asymmetries can be strengthened in favour of the proactive actor in a connective relationship. Demands for new connections to be reciprocal are largely beside the point because the proactive side, in our case China, has, from the beginning, defined the fundamentals of the connection in its favour. According to US economist Jennifer M. Harris, ever-closer ties between US and Chinese companies in the obligatory form of joint ventures are threatening to suppress internal US calls for more formal reciprocity. It has also been noted that Western companies active in China tend to temper their criticism of legal and political developments in the country. Consequently, widespread Western hopes that more connections and partnerships inevitably generate more reciprocity due to increasing interconnectedness, have been dashed.

Proactivity is a key aspect of connectivity politics because it can be asserted in political rhetoric that one's own foreign policy is committed to the idea of 'openness'. As soon as the other party rejects China's offers, Beijing can portray these actors as isolationist

and therefore destabilizing the global economy. As a result, China uses every political opportunity to actively define what openness means. China is also pursuing this strategy beyond the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and attempting to involve more and more countries using the key phrases 'openness' and 'expanding the circle of friends' among groups such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS.

Multidimensionality (*duowei lianjie*)

In the countless documents on the BRI, connectivity is usually broken down into specific thematic areas. However, interactions *between* the dimensions of different technological layers and geographic spaces, such as economic corridors, supply chains, transit regions and cities, underwater cables, mobile networks and satellites, are far more important. Individual Chinese projects, often criticized as unprofitable by foreign commentators, follow a different logic from China's perspective, depending on which geographic and technical dimensions are jointly relevant. It is a matter of constructing new ecosystems that, once interconnected, establish new geographic and political spaces. For example, China is focussing much of its attention on port cities along the new Silk Road routes. This is not only a question of consolidating logistics routes, but also about creating the conditions to push forward new technical standards, such as data transmission, over the long term. 'Standards' does not necessarily mean that they are Chinese patents. It could also mean that Chinese companies gain a dominant market position in distributing new technologies, such as 5G mobile communications.

As a consequence, this interplay of the different dimensions within China's connectivity politics can also create new geographic regions. They may not be easily depicted on maps (as in the case of 'smart cities'), but grow more closely together as transnational networks. This applies, for example, to flagship projects pursued by China in its Belt and Road Initiative, such as in Duisburg or Gwadar (Pakistan). These projects are supposed to lay the tracks for

new technical developments. Against this backdrop, global investment and company acquisitions are intended to ensure that practices and standards shaped by China can find future clients and be implemented globally.

Discourse power (*huayuquan*)

The (Chinese) term ‘discourse power’ is currently dominating a large number of political science publications in China, more than other notions of power, such as “soft” or “sharp power”. Discourse power has both a practical and an ideational-strategic component. Its practical side is intended to result in better communication channels and platforms. For Xi Jinping, the further development of technical innovations in the cyber sector has particular priority here. At the same time, China’s foreign investment in media houses, think-tank partnerships and research projects is not only intended to influence news content and debates. It also wants to determine rules and procedures for political discussions that are advantageous to Beijing in the long term. In addition, organizations of the existing liberal world order play an important role, for example the United Nations. Representatives of Beijing are deliberately trying to place Chinese policy formulations in UN bodies.

In an ideational-strategic sense, discourse power is, therefore, also based on proactive, *ideational connectivity*. For example, Beijing carefully considers which concepts and ideas of the Western liberal world order can be linked to China’s own ‘discourse system’. More neutral terms such as ‘openness’ and ‘inclusiveness’ or China’s efforts against ‘deglobalization’ do not only act as mere hinges between different political value systems. Unlike with more predefined terms such as ‘democracy’, ‘reciprocity’ or ‘human rights’, China sees an opportunity here to influence the use of these newer terms in the West as well.

For strategic planners in Beijing, exchanges with countries in Latin America or Eastern Europe are particularly promising as they are seen as less firmly anchored in

the liberal value system. This suggests that China intends to limit the territorial reach of the liberal system in the long term.

According to Beijing’s interpretation, parts of Latin America or Eastern Europe should no longer be located in the global West.

Internationalizing implicit (Party) rules (*qian guize*)

China has preferred a more informal template for establishing connections in its initiatives. These include numerous *match-making* trade fairs between Chinese businesses and local companies to establish initial contact in new partner countries. If the contact is formalized or institutionalized, foreign actors in China are confronted not only with (state) law, but also with the rules, standards and institutions of the Communist Party. However, Party cells in Chinese companies and Sino-foreign joint ventures can come to the fore after a delayed period of time. Only then does it become clear that, for example, they influence corporate and human resource decisions. This is a profound change because the Party’s prerogatives, such as data protection and access to information, take precedence over existing contracts and agreements. In terms of its general approach to connectivity, this means the legal nature of links with China may change over time. Beijing has announced it will set up its own international arbitration tribunals for disputes over investments related to the Belt and Road Initiative. This makes such implicit shifts in the legal logic more likely in the long term because China has enough leverage over many actors to force them to accept particular dispute resolution forums.

Conclusion

Beijing’s authoritarian leadership cannot decide alone with whom, through what and how its connectivity-centred approach to global politics is to be implemented. Therefore, the above description of the features of China’s approach is not intended as an

appeal to European actors to copy Beijing's strategies.

To take advantage of their options for action (see table), German and European policymakers and experts should take into account four guiding principles. First, they should avoid making premature judgments and adopting overly static views of Chinese politics. Second, it is better to focus on the strengths of democracy, in particular its culture and spirit of intense, disputatious, public debate, its transparency and perseverance. Third, it is essential that the public sphere and democratic discourse are given a similar status as critical infrastructure. Although Chinese positions are also to be included here, allowing Chinese-driven censorship to take hold in Germany and the EU should be avoided. Fourth, it is appropriate to establish individuals' data protection as a basis of liberal foreign policy. For example, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation could be applied to the activities of Chinese technology groups such as Baidu, Alibaba or Tencent (BAT). In dealing with Chinese initiatives, German and European politics do not, therefore, have to become 'Chinese' but they must, above all, become more confident.

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European Union Fields of Action

European Code of Conduct on openness, reciprocity and transparency in dealing with foreign direct investment.

Rethinking connectivity as a complex set of issues: recognizing cross-connections between cyberspace, mobility, communication, the power grid and others as regulatory spaces and shaping them politically.

Using China's national isolationism to legitimize more robust measures. For example: ensure free communication (i.e. without censorship) on Chinese communication apps if their users are in the EU.

Options for Action with respect to China

Provide targeted support to Chinese initiatives based on liberal standards. For example: the operating mode of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, China's peacekeeping efforts.

Concentrated and sustained analysis of Chinese terms and concepts. For example: Chinese interpretation of 'deglobalization', reinterpretation of terms such as 'openness'.