

China, Europe, and Future Security

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At the recent International Security Forum in Bonn, several analysts raised the idea that the European project, exemplified by the European Union, was intended to promote an alternative to traditional power politics.

Given the bloody history of the twentieth century, it is understandable why there is such interest in an alternative. But looming on the far side of the globe is a very different perspective, held by a civilization as old as Europe's – that of China.

While China has been described as more of a “civilizational state” than a “nation state,” the bitter history of China's interaction with the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has made China a fierce champion of national sovereignty. Indeed, there is arguably no greater defender of the Westphalian international order than the People's Republic of China (PRC).

It is therefore ironic that, even as Europe strives to downplay nationalism and move toward a trans-nationalist or post-nationalist order, China warmly embraces nationalism. Indeed, Beijing is clearly intent on defending its rights as a nation state, whether in

terms of its territorial sovereignty (including its claims to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang), or its rights in the new spheres of outer space and the Internet.

This divergence in perspective is reinforced by the divergence in approach. Europe is committed to a rules-based order, in line with its longstanding commitment to the rule of law. China, by contrast, has never developed a rule of law perspective throughout its five millennia-long history. Instead, it has generally viewed the law as an instrument to support previously established political goals; this is rule-by-law, rather than rule-of-law. Coupled with Chinese economic capability (as the second-largest economy in the world) and growing technological prowess, China poses a growing challenge to the European and Western approaches to international behavior.

This growing friction is displayed in the Chinese disregard for intellectual property, in its efforts to circumvent restrictions on its access to advanced technology, and its treatment of information flow and access. This pattern of behavior reflects a broader point: that China is unlike most past challengers to the international system.

Whether Napoleon, imperial Germany, or the Soviet Union, past revisionist powers have tended to rely more on military capability. In the case of the PRC, the main tool seems to be much more economic and informational. Indeed, because of the Chinese Communist Party's assessment that the twenty-first century has seen the rise of the Information Age, wherein the ability to generate, analyze, and transmit information more rapidly and more accurately than one's competitors, information has become the focal point of national development. It is no accident that China has focused on developing information-related technologies, or has systematically sought out others' intellectual property, i.e., information on embryonic technologies. They see information as the lifeblood of this new age.

This is not to suggest that China has neglected the development of its military. The recent Chinese National Day parade displayed a range of capabilities from unmanned aerial vehicles to fighter jets to advanced missiles. Nor is that military only for parades; Chinese naval forces have recently engaged in exercises in the Baltic and Mediterranean for the first time in recorded history.

But the foremost tools China has thus far relied on are more in the realm of economics, whether Belt and Road Initiative investments or large-scale purchases of raw materials, and in the realm of political pressure, often expressed through non-traditional means such as Confucius Institutes. The type of challenge China poses is very different from those that Europe, or the United States, has confronted in the past century.

It is therefore essential for national security analysts and thinkers, such as those associated with the International Security Forum, to adopt a fresh outlook and approach. Just as China is not the Soviet Union and the world does not face a rerun of the Cold War, it would be a mistake to rely on past precedent, be it containment or arms control, to deal with this returning power. While longstanding concerns about sovereignty, nationalism, and deterrence remain central, how they are expressed in the economic as well as military realms, especially in light of advances in information and space technology, will be ever more salient.

The challenge of a revived China, something not seen in several centuries, cannot be answered with old approaches, but demands new thinking if other nations are to be up to the task of meeting it.

