

# **EU-China Relations: Linkage, Leverage, and Strategic Autonomy**

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(Summary of the talk compiled by PKUIAS staff member)

Over the past few years, a series of significant changes have been taking place in the bilateral relationships between China and the Europe Union (EU). China and the EU have made breakthroughs in cooperation on climate change, new energy and other fields. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has strengthened policy coordination with the EU on China, while continuing to pursue a policy of containing China. With this background, Tanja A. Börzel, a professor of Political Science at the Otto-Suhr-Institute of Political Science of Freie Universität Berlin, gave a presentation for sharing her views on the increasingly challenging China-EU relations. Prof. Tanja A. Börzel mainly discussed three topics: current contestations of the liberal script, China's role in world politics, and the China-EU relations in a liberal international order framework.

## **(I) Current contestations of the liberal script**

Prof. Tanja A. Börzel defined a script as descriptive and prescriptive knowledge about the organization of society, and the liberal script is based on the core principle of individual self-determination. The liberal script always competes with alternative scripts for organizing societies, such as communism, or authoritarianism. On this basis, she defined contestations as discursive and behavioral practices that invoke or challenge core components of a script and come with a certain level of social mobilization.

Overall speaking, the contestations of the liberal script can emerge within liberal societies, e.g. by authoritarian populism, and from outside, e.g. by Russia's imperial nationalism. Moreover, contestations can be divided into two types. Full-fledged *external* contestations are understood as a wholesale rejection of the entire core of the liberal script are rare. The second type are *internal* contestations, which take aim at particular components, such as fundamental rights (sexual orientation, religious freedom) or target more fundamental components, such as individual self-determination or equal human dignity. These internal and external contestations shaped the development of current varieties of the liberal script, which emerged after the end

of the Cold War, one of which was spelt out by the EU.

Prof. Tanja A. Börzel emphasized that, China has always been considered as a prominent external contestant of the liberal script. Not only because China is a rising power, but also because it presents itself as offering an alternative to the liberal script. China's script appears to be very successful in recent years, and even more effective in addressing some of the global challenges, such as climate change, social inequality, and pandemics, than liberal societies. This makes the question to what extent China's script at the domestic level and the international level for organizing societies is compatible with current varieties of the liberal script.

## **(II) How to approach China's role in world politics**

Prof. Tanja A. Börzel compared the similarities and differences between China and the Soviet Union. There are some parallels between China today and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Soviet Union, the transformation of Eastern Europe and other parts of the world, as well as the rise of China in the 21st century, constituted challenges for liberal societies. The Cold War was a systemic conflict defined by two major powers confronting each other with very different scripts of how to organize their societies. Therefore, many EU scholars and policymakers feel reminded of the Cold War when they analyze what is going on in the world or interpret the rise of China, and the US is to some extent fueling this perception.

Power transition theory is widely used in the analysis of systemic conflict. China is a rising power, and power transition theory claimed that if there is one power rising, another power has to decline. However, Prof. Tanja A. Börzel pointed out that even though the rise of China is impressive, it is not matched by a similar decline of the US. The US might have decided not to use its power in the same extent it used to, but it still commands significant economic and military resources. Moreover, it is not the first time that we see a decline in US power. The 1970s saw the emergence of more cooperation among democracies promoting and protecting the liberal script at the international level.

Prof. Tanja A. Börzel continued that EU scholars have to take a more differentiated approach to China's role in world politics. Policymakers create international

institutions to pursue their own national interests, not only in terms of economic growth and security, but the stability of their own domestic order as well. Eminent IR scholars argue that the liberal international order was set up by the US and its Western allies after World War II in order to anchor their liberal democracies. Contestations of the liberal international order by China have therefore also implications for domestic liberal orders reinforcing the EU's perception of China as a systemic rival.

### **(III) The China-EU relations in a liberal international order framework**

Thirdly, she pointed out that many EU scholars and policymakers initially perceived China as a partner, with regard to not only to trade, but also in addressing issues of global governance, such as climate change. With its rise, China increasingly turned into competitor. Today, the EU perception has changed again towards perceiving China as a systemic rival, a transformation which resembles a kind of “disappointed love”, or an increasing irritation against China.

A major reason for this irritation is how China is approaching the liberal international order. China has not only engaged with but also immensely benefited from at least some liberal international institutions. For instance, China has been a permanent member of the UN Security Council for decades, and China has taken advantage of the global trade regime in its rise. These facts imply that China has embraced the liberal international order, rather than challenging it entirely or abolish it. Many expected China would be socialized into the liberal script, become a responsible member in the liberal international order, and eventually make the transition to democracy. She concluded that the reason for the deterioration of China-EU relations is the increasing disappointment on behalf of the Europeans with regard to China's role in the liberal international order.