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China and the EU: 2020

The media and the US think tank complex have persistently touted the narrative that Europe is "turning against China" and presumed instantly that a Biden victory would create a "transatlantic alliance" against it. It's time to look at the details:

2020 has been a bad year for China's relations with the west at large. It would be naïve to assume that this has had no impact on the EU. However, it would be a simplification to assume that such spells an appetite for Pompeo's cold war fanaticism and evidence of this is scant

Firstly, European Union foreign policy is a collective endeavor, than a monolithic one. We should not talk about the EU as "one" thing when it is a bloc of 27 countries who forge common positions through pragmatism and compromise, and is subsequently less dogmatic than the US.

The diversity of Europe means that priorities and perspectives amongst the states subsequently differ, therefore its views on China constitute an aggregation, than a single binary position which the U.S advocates. Some countries in the EU dislike China more than others.

The European Union subsequently operates on an agreement of its collective interest towards a "greater good". Whilst this means it will have some disagreements with China in the process, it also means it has a pragmatic understanding of why Beijing is important too.

Now in the meanwhile, the US is pursuing a fanatical cold war confrontation against China in a way which peddles a zero-sum, uncompromising narrative. Whilst some countries in Europe may be receptive to aspects of this, overall it doesn't sell because Europe is not dogmatic

Firstly, Europe is a continent which has suffered from great power confrontation. World War I and II destroyed Europe, and the Cold War divided it. These historical experiences have moderated its approach even accounting for it being pro-US, why would you want this again?

Not surprisingly, secondly, the EU believes primarily in diplomacy and negotiation, not confrontation. If the EU has differences with China, these must be pursued constructively rather than taking a sledgehammer to everything. It has a lot to lose from taking on Beijing.

If the European Union collectively identifies differences with China, they propose common solutions to fix it. This includes for example, expanding market access. They work together to negotiate a better deal from themselves, rather then attempting to crack a nut with a mallet.

It is the measure of EU diplomacy that if a single state has objections to a specific policy (in any capacity), they tend to voice these objections but then never go against the grain. Their principle is that the unity of the continent is not to be undermined by one grievance.

For example, Greece and Italy are more pro-Russia than other EU states. They don't like EU sanctions, but notice how they agree to them each time. The use of the veto is reserved because it damages a comprehension of the bloc's collective interests.

This is the same way how Brexit operated. The interests that EU states have with the UK vary widely, but what did they do? They all formed a common pragmatic position and stuck to it, and nor did they preach fire and brimstone to the renegade UK acting against them.

Now of course on the sidelines, the Trump administration has sought to exploit internal divisions within Europe in order to try and escalate anti-China sentiment by making bilateral deals. For example, with the Huawei and "clean network" nonsense.

The U.S has subsequently gained some inroads into Europe's East, where a number of post-communist, anti-Moscow states are more reliant on the U.S in the security dynamic, and thus more receptive to anti-China calls. This explains Poland's objections to the investment treaty.

However, on broader economic policies these states do not have the leverage to feasibly object to the will of France and Germany, who are the de-facto "economic core" and "leaders" of the bloc, and cannot undermine the common negotiating position.

As a result, whilst the US has arm twisted a number of EU states away from Huawei (largely in the East) it has not been able to meaningfully influence Europe's collective position of its own interest in what it needs from China. This exists regardless of what the naysayers scream

What liberal idealists not do not understand is that the EU interest will not absolutely align with the US one simply because of principle, even if the values are similar. Europe had long prioritized getting more market access from China and made a commitment to do so.

As a result, 2020 has ended with two agreements between the EU and China. The first is an agreement on the "geographical indications" of products, protecting EU goods in China. Then second is the investment treaty which has been in the works for a long time.

Some had hoped that one EU state would veto this because of human rights in Xinjiang. That's not how EU diplomacy works, and one might note as the EU has dished out sanctions against Belarus, Russia and others, it has ignored China every single time. This is not a path it wants.

Whilst this does not mean the EU won't continue to disagree with China in many areas, what it does mean is that Pompeo's talk of "free nations" ganging up against China "and a transatlantic awakening" are all utter drivel. Moan all you like, it ain't happening.

The western public have been taught to vent so much hatred and disdain towards China that they have lost touch with the reality that Beijing is an economic superpower, soon to the largest economy in the world, who cannot be ignored or shut out. The US is doing it at its own peril