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Final Summary and Outlook

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This publication takes as its main task three basic objectives: First, to expand the radius of observation in security policy analysis in general by including strategic spaces, usually less considered in traditional security policy research. Second, to broaden the horizon of knowledge about China's current foreign policy drivers affecting the European Union. Against this backdrop, the individual contributions strive for a broader picture while taking stock of China's growing footprint in various strategic spaces. The third objective proves to be most complex: to examine Brussels' strategic approach towards Beijing in different strategic spaces and to highlight those trends that might shape the future EU-China relationship. To this end, it was also necessary to point at neglected issues or to address discursive flaws.

Summing up, what conclusions can be drawn from the co-authors' contributions of this volume? The editors want to emphasize the following points:

- The understanding of China's strategic narratives without eclipsing the corresponding counter narratives enables a more profound debate on China in an increasingly polarized geopolitical landscape. The current shrinking space for political debate does not bode well for EU-China relations as well as for global stability.

- Chinese geopolitical narratives are based on the definition of the People's Republic as a developing country. Respective narratives require profound adaptation once China has lost the developing country status and self-imposed role as representative of the Global South. According to the EU-China strategy update 2019, China can no longer be regarded as a developing country.

- Beijing's official policy line to support EU enlargement efforts follows a mercantilist logic that seeks improved access to EU markets. Further, enlargement and integration are advocated by China under the aspect of an envisioned multipolar world order to raise the Union's geopolitical importance as a counterweight to the United States.

- Beijing is first and foremost competing with Brussels in the economy and technology sphere. Geoeconomics appears as the current decisive strategic vector in the EU-China relationship.

- In respect to normative rivalry, China has gained influence in the broader orbit of eurostrategic regions. The political elites of developing countries are impressed by China's successful large-scale poverty alleviation program at national level. This leads to a trend where poverty alleviation is given preference over civil and political rights in developing countries.

- Cyberspace, Low Earth Orbit and Outer Space show the highest dynamic level in terms of competing for innovative markets but also in regard to risk scenarios. In these non-traditional security spaces, we see a strong intertwining of civilian and military domains. The room for hybrid activities is enlarged dramatically by the new strategic spaces. Against this backdrop, the EU has to adapt its security strategy.

- The EU has been demonstrating considerable flexibility and ingenuity in terms of realpolitik response to China's rise as a competing or rival power outside the confining frame of threat perception. However, the strategic course-setting is lagging behind. As a first priority, the Union must define its interests in order to deal with China's new assertiveness in global agendas to the fullest extent possible.

To approach the future of EU-China relations, three scenarios suggest themselves:

1) **Disintegration of EU-China relations**

   The EU is taking a confident and hard line on China as a sole actor to the point of an eroding bilateral relationship. Brussels is pursuing its own geopolitical path. This scenario presupposes for Europe a position of strength as a largely autonomous power in a multi-polar geopolitical setting. Since Beijing views the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation primarily as a tool for US global "hegemonism" including the presumption of a hegemonistic attitude towards Europe, the EU would have to present its strength outside NATO structures – such as in the form of mobile EU special forces or a European space force. The friction points that lead to the disintegration of EU-China relations can therefore be manifold and need not be related directly to China-U.S. rivalry. In case the attitude of Brussels should be aligned closely with the NATO headquarter in regard to the legitimacy of interference in the Asian Pacific, Beijing is likely to renounce the EU-China Strategic Agenda for Cooperation (2016) and proceed with the closure of markets as in the case of Australia. The result would be a profound disintegration of EU-China relations.

   For the time being, the signs do not point to the eruption of an armed conflict in the Asian Pacific or along the Himalaya range. On the other hand, time is working against the current supremacy of the United States in several technological fields, both civilian and military. This circumstance could accelerate completely new variants of hybrid warfare, for example in the international monetary and financial system. In this light, recent US government restrictions against large Chinese companies that were going to list on the New York Stock Exchange appear even more profound in a national security context.

2) Continuation of troubled EU-China relations

It is fair to note that the European Union has been far more confrontational towards China during recent months EU-China relations with minor confrontation than in previous years. The ratification of the bilateral comprehensive investment agreement was put on hold by the European Parliament in May 2021 and official statements on China have substantially hardened. However, one thing should be taken into account: Beijing's perception of confrontation with Brussels is a differentiated one. For Beijing, it makes a significant difference, based on a whole set of security policy parameters, whether Europe joins US initiatives or takes an independent path of confrontation. In the latter case, the doors are more likely to stay open for compromise and negotiations; in the former case, the negative perception dominates to such an extent that dialogue would most likely be frozen from the onset.

Since the G7 and NATO summits of June 2021, a transatlantic convergence in regard to China policies has shown first contours. However, it would be premature to speak of a full "body shape."[1] Opinions are divided on the question of how to proceed with confronting Beijing. On the one hand, we see the widespread point of view that there is little room for Brussels to act alone. It is therefore concluded that Brussels' stance towards China should be contingent on developments in the US-China relationship. On the other hand, the opposite view that the accelerated competition between the great powers is not limiting but enlarging the action space of the EU, is gaining popularity. The editors of this book argue that, even while maintaining a confrontational course, the European Union should always keep open the option for issue-based dialogue with China, taking transatlantic commitments into full account.

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1 For an analysis in this context see: Wolfgang Ischinger, Joseph Nye et. al., *Mind the Gap: Priorities for Transatlantic China Policy*, Report of the Distinguished Reflection Group on Transatlantic China Policy, July 2021, https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2021/Report_of_the_China_Reflection_Group/MindTheGap_PrioritiesForATransatlanticChinaPolicy.pdf.

3) Declining confrontation in EU-China relations

In this outlook scenario, the European Union would renounce major confrontation (e.g. sanctions policy, non-ratification of bilateral agreements) with China in line with the current value-based strategic approach. Such kind of radical policy change appears realistic only under the condition of a significant weakening of the Union, whether due to disintegration or Black Swan events, such as natural disasters or a near-collapse of the European financial system. In any case, Europe would give up its claim to major power politics vis-a-vis Beijing and would retreat to acting like a middle power. This scenario assumes an internal weakening of the EU, while Beijing continues to act from a position of strength. EU-China relations would be increasingly asymmetric.

The three scenarios as specified above are derived from the assumption of relatively constant realpolitik reaction patterns in the geopolitical field of action. Additionally, a look into the future benefits from including extraordinary development options that should not be instantly discarded as dystopian. A deeply alarmed world in which the European Union together with a deeply alarmed China and other nations are struggling – irrespective of normative rivalry and economic competition – to ensure the survival of their populations in the fight against threatening climate change.

Quite deliberately, no probability forecast was made for the different future scenarios of this outlook. Yet, it is everyone's hope that the emergence of the catastrophic scenario will never manifest itself in reality. In this context and on a final note, it should be emphasized that close global cooperation in regard to climate change is desperately needed. Such an endeavour must extend beyond the European Union and China.