

HOW EUROPE'S FALLING BEHIND ACCELERATES CHINA'S RISE

China is in the process of displacing Europe as the second most influential actor in international affairs. As a result the international appeal of political and economic liberalism is diminishing. This process affects Europe and weakens the global standing of the United States.

China is in the process of displacing Europe as the second most influential actor (behind the United States) in international affairs. Whether China will continue to emerge as a leading actor depends on its ability to maintain its political stability in the domestic sphere. A decline in China's stability remains a distinct possibility. However, if the country does succeed in moving along its present course, the consequences for the international system can hardly be over-estimated. China displacing Europe in terms of global influence signifies the end of the brief era of Western leadership that began only twenty years ago, when the Cold War ended. The ability of the West to shape the world in its image will be significantly smaller than it has been in the past two decades. The degree to which political and economic liberalism currently exists throughout the world is set to diminish. This, in turn, will speed up the rise of China relative to the United States.

China is becoming influential at the global level because it is prominent in both economic and security affairs, and it is able to closely integrate economic and security themes into its foreign policy. Europe's security policy is for the greater part neither unified nor independent, and therefore it is not integrated with its external economic policy. So whereas China can fully exploit its economic size and growth to achieve leverage in international affairs, Europe can do this only to a limited extent. Given the relative size of the Chinese and European economies, China will at some point have overtaken Europe in terms of its impact on international affairs.

In the past few years, China has become - besides the US - the most influential actor in the North Korean nuclear issue, in Myanmar (Burma), and in many respects also in Africa and with regard to climate change. Significant progress in terms of international stability with regard to Iran, Afghanistan, and South Asia, as well as the global economy, cannot be made without the participation of China. Europe remains a major player in terms of global economic stability and climate change, but its role in maintaining stability in Africa and the Middle East cannot keep up with China's new prominence.

It has often been said that Europe's future role in the world will be based primarily on its ability to be an example for others, and to provide the norms that shape international relations. However, it is precisely in this context that China is in a stronger position than Europe. Although the EU is an impressive example of regional integration, most countries have priorities other than regional integration. For developing countries, the Chinese experience of the past half century seems more relevant to their own situation than the sophisticated process of European integration. If China is a greater source of inspiration on development than Europe is, then this means that the state-centred development model is more attractive than the liberal development model. The result is that developing countries will increasingly favour a stronger role for government in the economy and less political freedom than is customary in Europe. Through this process, it is likely that China will have a growing impact on international norms, and Europe a decreasing one.

Of course this applies not just to Europe, but to the West in general. The diminishing role of Europe results in the West being less able to promote economic and political liberalism. Beijing will play a prominent part in international organisations, thereby diminishing their capability to advance liberalism.

A US-China leadership of the international system - contrary to a Western leadership - will be ideologically neutral. At the same time, China's statist model will become more popular in the developing world. This is to the disadvantage of Western - including US - companies. As they find it harder to compete internationally, the economic power of both Europe and the US will be affected. China's rise will be further accelerated, also relative to the United States.

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