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THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHINA'S IMAGE IN EUROPEAN EXPERT DISCOURSE

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Abstract. The article examines how the European expert community perceives China and how this perception has changed from 2003 to 2023, using the classic image theory approach of Richard Herrmann and Michel Fischerkeller. The main objective of this study is to trace how the transformations in the image of China were affected by the evolution of Sino-European relations and to what extent these transformations influenced EU policy toward China. Given the significant role that the epistemic community plays in shaping policy in Europe, both at the national and EU levels, the focus is made on expert positions. The study applies qualitative content analysis of policy papers from seven of the most reputed European think tanks, covering the period of 2003–2023 (a total of 187 documents). Relying on the five ideal-typical images of the “Other” (enemy, ally, degenerate, empire and colony), the paper contributes to the theoretical framework by introducing a new ideal-typical image – a rival – to better describe the nature of EU-China relations and European experts’ perception of China. The conclusion is made that the image of China has shifted from that of an ally with degenerate elements to that of a rival with significant enemy elements. Key periods and turning points in the evolution of China’s image are identified and the linkage between this image and the official EU policy toward China is revealed.

Keywords: China, EU, EU-China relations, image theory, rivalry, rival, content analysis

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Introduction

Over the past decade, international relations have been shifting towards a multipolar system, a period that has also seen the rise of China as a major power. This shift is accompanied by increasing instability and growing contradictions among great powers, especially between Western and non-Western states. Every international actor faces the challenge of adapting to this changing environment and, inter alia, developing a strategic policy course in relation to China.

The relationship between the European Union and China is one of key axes in today's international relations and is attracting growing scholarly attention. Our paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debate by analysing how European experts' perception of China has changed over time.

The amount of research dedicated to EU-China relations is vast and has been growing exponentially in recent years, including contributions from Russian scholars. Most studies focus on EU-China economic relations, specifically trade and investment [Butorina, 2023; Cvetanovska, 2020; Gaenssmantel, 2023; Kashin, Zaitsev, 2021; Leal-Arcas, 2022; Nosov, 2018; Vinogradov, Luschik, 2017; Xin, 2017; Yin, 2018]. A substantial body of academic literature examines the geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects of EU-China relations, especially in the context of the growing US-China tensions [Erdemir, 2023; Danilin et al., 2022; Lomanov, 2019] and, in recent years, China's role in the confrontation between the West and Russia following the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine military conflict [Chang-Liao, 2023; Mikheev, Lukonin, 2024].

EU-China relations present an illustrative case for the analysis of actorness and strategic autonomy of the EU [Istomin, Zhdanova, 2017]. Numerous scholars investigate the EU's ability to use soft power in its relations with China [Cvetanovska, 2020] and the European approach to the Belt and Road Initiative [Gemueva et al., 2018; Tsyvk, 2019].

A limited number of studies are devoted to mutual images. Not without interests are research of the Chinese stereotypes of other peoples (including the Europeans) drawing on the historical sources [Samoylov, 2019; 2020; Samoylov, Mayatskiy, 2020] and research addressing the perception of China among German political leadership [Heiduk, 2014].

There is, however, an apparent research gap regarding the linkage between the mutual perceptions of China and the EU and the development of their relations. Given that the EU now officially categorizes China as a "partner-competitor-rival"¹ and that there have been notable shifts of emphasis within this definition, it is important to understand how both actors perceive each other and how these perceptions might influence their interactions.

To address this gap, we have chosen image theory – a mid-level theory grounded in cognitive psychology and the constructivist paradigm – as our research framework. Most

¹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Joint Communication. EU-China – A strategic outlook. JOIN (2019) 5 final, 12.05.2019.

studies based on image theory focus on policymakers' statements. Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that experts' opinions on international relations can influence official decisions, or at the very least, provide valuable insights into the nuances of policy-making [Weaver, 1989; Ivannikov, Shmonova, 2023].

Therefore, this article aims to use image theory to evaluate how European experts perceive China, explore how China's image has evolved, and assess whether there is a correlation between these perceived images and the actual state of EU-China relations.

Image theory as a theoretical framework

Image theory draws from the classical studies of K. Boulding, R. Cottam, and O. Holsti. According to Kenneth Boulding [Boulding, 1959], the national image has an ambivalent nature, shaped both by the general public's opinions, which are influenced by traditions and values instilled by family, and by the manipulations of elite groups. Boulding identifies several components of the national image, including territory, attitudes (friendly or unfriendly), and power. He also distinguishes between two types of hostility in international relations: actual hostility, arising from an intractable conflict between the actors (such as a territorial dispute), and illusory hostility, which occurs when a resolvable conflict is exacerbated by mutual misunderstandings, leading to an accumulation of hostility.

Ole Holsti [Holsti, 1962] postulates that images are integral elements of a belief system, which he defines as the sum of an actor's accumulated knowledge about itself and the world. This belief system serves as a filter through which the actor perceives reality. Holsti asserts that images can be either functional – if they accurately reflect reality, or dysfunctional – if they do not. In the latter case, the actor risks making incorrect decisions and failing to achieve desired goals. Holsti also argues that images are dynamic and that their degree of dynamism depends on whether the belief system is closed (rigid) or open for influence and flexible.

Richard Cottam [Cottam, 1977] was among the first to highlight the role of stereotypes in international relations and proposed a system of five ideal-typical images: enemy, ally, empire, colony, and a “complex image” (which he describes as reality in all its shades). According to Cottam, these ideal-typical images are based on stereotypes and serve to simplify the analysis of international relations.

Richard Herrmann and Michel Fischerkeller developed the concept of ideal-typical images, establishing a comprehensive and easily applicable methodology and approach that later became classical in the field [Herrmann, Fischerkeller, 1995]. They concluded that the image of the “Other” is shaped by the ideas, principles, and norms of the actor itself. The central role in forming this image is the assessment of the threats or opportunities the “Other” represents. Another essential dimension is relative power. Finally, understanding the threat or lack thereof, and the power of another actor, should be considered alongside the perception of the “Other's” political culture, with particular emphasis on the norms and values guiding decision-making in domestic and foreign policy.

Herrmann and Fischerkeller identified five ideal-typical images: enemy, degenerate, ally, colony, and empire. They argued that an empirically based image of the “Other” is usually complex and incorporates elements from multiple ideal-typical images. To deter-

mine how the “Me” views the “Other,” scholars conducted content analysis of statements by government officials. They used three criteria to draw conclusions about the image of the “Other”: perception of the “Other’s” motivation, capabilities, and decision-making process [Herrmann, Fisherkeller, 1995: 427].

Explaining the importance of research on images for predicting the development of bilateral relations, Herrmann and Fisherkeller formulated a set of strategies that an actor will use depending on the ideal-typical image it attributes to the “Other.” For example, if the “Other” is perceived as an enemy, the actor will seek to curb its expansionist intentions and avoid significant cooperation. Therefore, the “Me” is more likely to resort to a deterrence strategy. Conversely, if the “Other” is seen as degenerate, the strategy is likely to be more active (aggressive or revisionist). If the “Me” perceives the “Other” as an ally, it will seek cooperation to achieve mutual benefit. When the “Other” is viewed as a colony, the actor will be inclined to pursue a policy of intervention. Finally, if the “Other” is perceived as an empire, the actor will choose more or less cautious strategy to resist its influence. These strategies assume that mutual perceptions align with ideal-typical images; otherwise, in practice, an actor will employ a mixed strategy using various practical means [Herrmann, Fisherkeller, 1995: 431–438].

Herrmann and Fisherkeller’s approach, which has become well-established, has been applied in numerous studies on foreign policy. For example, Binnur Özkeçeci-Taner [Özkeçeci-Taner, 2012] has analysed the relations between Israel and Turkey and concluded that Israel perceived Turkey as a “frenemy” – a new concept combining elements of both enemy and ally images. Matúš Mišík uses a similar approach to explore how the old EU member states viewed the 2004 and 2007 entrants. He concludes that the new EU member states are seen as allies and having at least comparable culture and motivation [Mišík, 2014]. Ardina Kartikasari explores China’s perception of Indonesia in the context of South China sea dispute and concludes that Beijing sees Jakarta as an ally [Kartikasari, 2019].

While this methodological approach is quite comprehensive, it is not without its flaws. Developed during and shortly after the Cold War [Cottam 1977; Herrmann, Fisherkeller, 1995], it focuses heavily on ally and enemy images, making it less adept at capturing the nuances of contemporary international relations. To address this limitation, we have introduced a new category – the image of rival.

We have drawn on a psychological approach to defining rivalry, specifically the thorough analysis provided by Gavin J. Kilduff, Hillary Anger Elfenbein, and Barry M. Staw [Kilduff et al, 2010]. First, they differentiate between competition and rivalry, arguing that rivalry is more subjective and entails greater psychological involvement and perceived stakes, irrespective of the situation’s objective characteristics. Rivalry occurs when an actor places more importance on competing against certain opponents. The relativity of rivalry complicates the identification of objective reasons for competition. Second, the researchers stress the importance of previous interactions, noting that past competitive experiences heighten the likelihood of rivalry in the present and future. Third, since rivalry is subjective, reciprocity is not necessary. Fourth, rivals are usually comparable in resources and capabilities. Finally, the authors believe that because rivalry in-

creases psychological stakes beyond objective considerations, it can lead to irrational behaviour and disregard for cost-benefit analysis.

Applying this approach to the methodological framework of Herrmann and Fischer-keller, we define the rival image using the following criteria: 1) perception of the “Other” as a challenge (where the “Other’s” motivation is to challenge the “Me’s” interests); 2) comparable capabilities; and 3) differences between the political culture and decision-making systems of the “Other” and the “Me.”

The distinction between a rival image and an enemy image is crucial. While an enemy poses a threat, a rival presents a challenge, and these concepts are fundamentally different. A threat is typically understood as a situation that could lead to the destruction of the actor or other serious negative consequences that might undermine its integrity and position in the international system. In contrast, a challenge is viewed as an obstacle to achieving or maintaining objectives. Consequently, the strategies toward a rival and an enemy should differ. For an enemy, the most common approach is comprehensive deterrence, which carries a high risk of escalation. In contrast, it would be more effective to deal with a rival with a strategy of limited deterrence in the most sensitive areas (such as domestic policy) and open competition in other areas, allowing for potential cooperation in specific domains.

Data and methods

Our investigation of China’s image relied on experts’ opinions. To construct the database, we selected eight of the most reputable European think tanks: five of a pan-European level and three closely affiliated with the governments and interests of leading EU member states (France and Germany). We collected all policy papers of these think tanks on China for the period from 2003 to 2023.

While the relations between China and the EU have been developing for more than 30 years already, their active phase started in 2003, when both sides declared the establishment of strategic partnership, mentioned in the unilateral strategic documents of both actors¹ and in the joint statement of the 6th EU-China summit². The new level of relations reflected the rise of China’s global presence, which made 2003 the starting point of our research period. However, since the selected think tanks published nothing on China in 2003, our research effectively covers the period from 2004 to 2023.

The collected database includes 187 documents³, ranging from short policy briefs to comprehensive studies. Some of the latter comprise multiple chapters authored by differ-

¹ European Commission. Policy Paper. A maturing partnership – shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations COM(2003) 533 final, 10.09.2003; China’s EU Policy Paper. 13.10.2003. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/xos_664404/dqzzywt_664812/200310/t20031013_572356.html (accessed: 20.05.2024).

² Sixth China-EU Summit. Beijing, 30.10.2003. Joint Press Statement URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/77802.pdf (accessed: 20.05.2024).

³ Our database comprises think tanks’ policy papers, policy comments, and policy briefs. Publications of think tanks’ experts in mass media and academic journals, as well as audio and video materials, were excluded from the study.

ent scholars, each offering distinct perspectives on China. To manage these cases, we divided large documents into sections written by individual authors (referred to as “texts”). 192 texts were chosen for further analysis (see Table 1 for details).

*Table 1***Description of the database**

think tank	date of establishment	level and research area	number of documents (number of texts)
German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)	1962	national (Germany), broad research agenda	21 (21)
French Institute of International Relations (IFRI)	1979	national (France), broad research agenda	9 (9)
Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)	1983	pan-European, broad research agenda	10 (10)
Centre for European Reform (CER)*	1996	pan-European, broad research agenda	30 (30)
Jacques Delors Institute	1996	pan-European / national (France), broad research agenda	5 (5)
European Policy Center (EPC)	1997	pan-European, broad research agenda	11 (11)
European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFP)	2007	pan-European, foreign policy studies	69 (69)
Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS)	2013	pan-European, Chinese studies	32 (37)

* We have included the Centre for European Reform in the list of think tanks because the UK was a member of the European Union for most of our research period.

Source: compiled by the authors

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of each text and detected the statements reflecting the perception of China according to one of the six ideal-typical images:

1. Enemy image: China is perceived as a threat, it has comparable capabilities, its motivation is seen as opposing the EU's interests, and its political and decision-making systems are viewed as critically different from (and inferior to) those of the EU.

2. Ally image: China is seen as an opportunity for cooperation, it has comparable capabilities, its motivation aligns with the EU's interests, and its political and decision-making systems are similar to those of the EU.

3. Rival image: China is perceived as a challenge, it has comparable capabilities, its motivation is viewed as an impediment to the EU's interests, and its political and decision-making systems are different from (and inferior to) those of the EU.

4. Degenerate image: China is seen as an opportunity to exploit, it has capabilities that are either somewhat weaker or comparable, its motivation and political and decision-making systems are perceived as chaotic.

5. Colony image: China is viewed as an opportunity to exploit and interfere, it has weaker capabilities, its motivation is characterized by self-centeredness, and its political and decision-making systems are considered chaotic.

6. Empire image: China is perceived as an exploiter, it has superior capabilities, its motivation is seen as threatening the EU's interests (particularly internal ones), and its political and decision-making systems are different from those of the EU and efficient.

We assessed each text according to three criteria of ideal-typical images: perception of China's capabilities, its motivation, and its decision-making (which reflects political culture). Each text could generate a maximum of three points, with one point for each criterion. Noteworthy that each text may enable us to assess all three criteria, some criteria, or even none of them. Accordingly, each text potentially scoring from 0 to 3 points. Text length did not affect the assessment; both short and long texts were equally weighted in their impact on the portrayal of China within our analysis. Points were allocated to the relevant images according to the author's perception of China.

It should be noted that texts may reflect varying assessments within the same document, incorporating elements of multiple ideal images. In such cases, we distributed points among the relevant images. For example, a text might contribute 0.5 points each to the colony and ally images (if the text enables to assess only one criterion) or 2 points to the enemy image and 1 point to the rival image (if the text enables to assess all three criteria). As a result, we excluded two categories – the colony and empire images – due to their underrepresentation. Table 2 illustrates the applied methodology of qualitative content analysis.

Table 2.

Criteria of analysis and illustrative examples

Criteria Image	Perception of the capabilities	Perception of motivation	Perception of decision-making (political culture)
Enemy	Comparable «It also constitutes a serious threat to the integrity of the multilateral rules-based trade system» [Blockmans, 2021: 3]	Negative «China has also aggressively expanded its undersea cable network; Such networks and the services that run on them will give China control over information, the opportunity to manipulate information, and to conduct offensive cyber operations and effective disinformation campaigns» [Ohara, 2021]	Critically different and negative «the authoritarian regime in Beijing – which opposes democratic values and universal human rights, relies on unfair competition and subsidies to gain advantage and achieve technological leadership, propagates selective multilateralism to promote its interests, reacts with massive pressure to criticism and aggressively pursues its territorial claims» [Schweisgut, 2021: 9]
Rival	Comparable «A more powerful China no longer feels the same need to make compromises and holds fewer fears about the consequences of deterioration in relations with the West» [Leonard, 2010]	Anxious «China refuses to play the game, or rather plays it very differently» [Godement, 2017]	Different and anxious «China, too, has its own ethical and philosophical system to rival the West's» [Korski, 2010]
Ally	Comparable / weaker	Positive	Comparable and positive

Criteria Image	Perception of the capabilities	Perception of motivation	Perception of decision-making (political culture)
	«Problem cannot be solved without Chinese help» [Grant, 2008]	«China wants its relationship with the EU to become more strategic. China's leaders believe that a multipolar world is both a description of the reality that is emerging in the 21st century, and desirable» [Grant, Barysch, 2008: 27]	«China is not a pure dictatorship where no changes have occurred in the last decades, but a country that is gradually advancing towards a more open society with a growing degree of participation, legal security and individual autonomy» [Bates, Wacker, 2005: 65]
Degenerate	Comparable/inferior «China's potential clash with the West stems from its conservatism, rather than its activism» [Leonard, 2006]	Negative «Beijing does not seem to enjoy the responsibilities that come with a global power status and will follow the path that best serves its narrow interests» [Borges de Castro, 2022]	Different and chaotic «Insecurities and power struggles among Chinese governing elites have created a domestic and global outlook defined by paranoia, which lends itself to a permanent mindset of friend-foe distinction» [Huotari, Weidenfel, 2020: 10]

Source: compiled by the authors.

Results and discussion

Main findings of the content analysis are presented in Figure 1 and Annex 1.

First, it should be noted that European experts' interest in China has grown alongside China's rising role on the international stage, the expanding scope of Sino-European relations, and increasing tensions between the two actors. It is significant that a special pan-European think tank – Mercator Institute for China Studies – was established in 2013.

Figure 1.

Evolution of the image of China

Source: compiled by the authors.

It is also worthwhile noting that the “leaps” on the diagram correlate with milestones in Sino-European relations. For instance, the 2005 “leap” aligns with the intensification of contacts following the declaration of the strategic partnership. The 2007 and 2008 “leaps” reflect the deterioration of relations due to changes in political leadership in key EU member states. The surge in expert attention in 2009 and 2010 was driven by European efforts to involve China in the economic recovery after the financial crisis. The 2017 “leap” may be associated with growing European concerns about China’s activities in the East Asian region and the implementation of the new EU strategy on China. Since 2019, the escalation of US-China geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions and the EU’s need to navigate this nasty sea have caused a steady increase in attention toward China.

Our research traces the transformation of China’s image in the eyes of the European expert community and identifies four periods of image evolution, reflecting the general trends in EU-China relations.

1. *China as a “junior” ally (2004–2006)*. In this period, EU experts generally viewed China as a partner, primarily because they expected China to pursue democratization and economic reforms. However, persistent differences in political culture and the seeming opportunities to influence Chinese decision-makers contributed to what can be described as degenerate features of China’s image.

Regarding the official position, the European Commission’s 2003 policy paper reflects an optimistic view of EU-China relations, describing them as maturing. It also notes that both sides have “an ever-greater interest to work together as strategic partners”, and the EU largely supports and promotes the Chinese democratic transition¹. The former European Commission President Romano Prodi described the period of 2003–2004 the following way: “if it is not marriage, it is at least a very serious engagement”². EU officials had the highest regard for the relations between the two sides. Additionally, the EU, at the initiative of France and Germany, considered lifting the arms embargo on China, although it remains in place to this day. Thus, we may conclude that, at the official level, China was perceived as a potential or junior ally, at least partially open to EU influence. This official approach aligns with the image of China presented by experts. However, the situation changed significantly at the end of the first period. The 2006 strategy highlights challenges originating from China’s insufficient democratization, though some optimistic notes persist³.

2. *Transition period (2007–2009)*. A rival image of China began to emerge in expert papers, although a considerable share of the degenerate and ally features remained, albeit decreasing. Throughout this period, relations between China and the EU cooled significantly due to transitions in political leadership in major EU member states, with the newcomers focusing more on improving transatlantic relations. Additionally, European experts pointed at the absence of real changes in Chinese domestic policy, especially re-

¹ European Commission. Policy Paper. A maturing partnership – shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations. COM (2003) 533 final, 10.09.2003.

² Speech of President of the European Commission Romano Prodi. Relations between the EU and China: more than just business. SPEECH/04/227, 06.05.2004.

³ European Commission. Communication. EU – China: Closer partners, growing responsibilities. COM (2006) 631 final. 24.10.2006.

garding human rights. However, the global financial crisis provided an opposing impetus, prompting the EU to strengthen economic ties with Beijing. This explains the persistence of ally elements in China's image.

EU policy toward China was inconsistent in this period. Following the unrest in Tibet in 2008, the EU leaders called for the boycott of the Chinese Olympics (but at the end attended them). Relations tended to normalize due to the financial crisis, and the EU even discussed lifting the embargo in 2010 to improve economic relations with China [Vinogradov, Lushchik, 2017: 364]. Thus, although experts already perceived elements of rivalry in China's image, the EU real strategy was mostly based on the image of a degenerate. EU officials viewed China as an actor with an interfering culture but with comparable capabilities that could be leveraged in favour of the European Union.

3. *China as a rival, with complementary elements of ally and enemy images (2010–2017)*. The third period is characterized by the dominance of the rival image, with elements of both enemy and ally images. Initially, ally features prevailed over enemy characteristics, but this shifted toward the end of the period. At the 16th EU-China summit in 2013, the parties have adopted 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, acknowledging the EU and China as equal international partners¹. At the beginning of the decade, China launched two major projects reflecting its global ambitions: the 16+1 format and the Belt and Road Initiative. Experts immediately expressed concerns about the rising Chinese presence in Europe, accusing China of employing divide-and-rule tactics [Godement et al, 2011: 11]. European politicians reacted later, only in 2016–2017;² in particular the EU's 2016 strategy emphasized that EU member-states should speak with a strong and unified voice³. Additionally, the EU initiated a major trade dispute over solar panels during this period. There were also increasing concerns about China's reluctance to implement democratic reforms and its expanding regional and global ambitions.

However, the EU still hoped to deepen cooperation in such areas as trade, investments, and climate change. After Xi Jinping became President, China, in turn, aspired to strengthen cooperation with Europe to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership. However, the situation gradually deteriorated, and by the end of the period, EU member states sought to condemn "Chinese aggression" in the South China Sea⁴. Although EU strategic documents had not yet been revised, the challenges posed by China were already recognized. The elements of the rival image were sufficiently strengthened, while the aspirations for cooperation gradually diminished.

¹ The 16th EU-China summit. EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation. Beijing, 21 November 2013. URL: <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/20131123.pdf> (accessed: 30.05.2024).

² Xinhua. China "shocked" by German FM's accusation of dividing Europe. 31.08.2017. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0831/c90000-9262963.html> (accessed: 01.06.2024).

³ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Joint Communication. Elements for a new EU strategy on China. JOIN (2016) 30 final, 22.06.2016.

⁴ Euractiv. EU unable to adopt statement upholding South China Sea ruling. 14.07.2016. URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-unable-to-adopt-statement-upholding-south-china-sea-ruling/> (accessed: 30.05.2024).

4. *China as a rival, with rising elements of enemy image (2018–2023)*. The EU officially acknowledged China as a rival (as well as a competitor and a partner) in the 2019 strategy¹. High-level EU officials emphasized this in their statements, arguing that China's main goal is to reshape the world order in its favour². Although the relationship was characterized by the trichotomy “partner-competitor-rival,” European leaders repeatedly stated that the latter two components prevailed³.

Relations continued to deteriorate, leading to a tougher EU policy. Notable actions included the EU's refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Investment Agreement, subsequent mutual economic sanctions, and the establishment of an investment screening mechanism. Diverging positions on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, accompanied by harsh criticism of Chinese inaction, further strained EU-China relations since mid-2022. Unlike the previous period, opportunities for cooperation became narrower, and the ally features were barely present. The concept of de-risking became dominant in EU officials' rhetoric⁴, clearly indicating the predominance of the rival image in both expert and governmental discourse.

In summary, the transformation of China's image among European experts corresponds to the actual evolution of EU-China relations. There is an evident correlation between the periodization given above and the EU strategic narratives. Furthermore, the perception of the expert community usually precedes the change of EU official policy line.

Conclusion

The image studies approach, based on the analysis of expert opinions, can generate added value compared to the analysis of official documents and statements. It enables a more complex analysis and a nuanced picture of mutual perception and relations between countries. Analysis of expert opinions may yield predictive results for several reasons. First, in political systems like the European one, the epistemic community exerts appreciable influence on decision makers. Second, independent experts face fewer constraints in expressing their views and can identify trends that politicians prefer not yet to mention publicly.

Our research contributes to the theoretical framework of image studies by introducing a new ideal-typical image. The rival image is characterized by the following criteria: 1) perception of the “Other” as a challenge that could impede the “Me's” interests without posing an existential threat; 2) comparable capabilities between the “Me” and the “Other” and 3) differences in their political culture and decision-making systems.

¹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. EU-China – A strategic outlook. JOIN (2019) 5 final, 12.05.2019.

² Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre. SPEECH/23/2063. 30.03.2023.

³ Bloomberg. Scholz Says China Increasingly Rival Rather than Partner for EU. 09.05.2023. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-09/scholz-says-china-increasingly-rival-rather-than-partner-for-eu> (accessed: 01.06.2024).

⁴ Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre. SPEECH/23/2063. 30.03.2023.

This ideal-typical image captures nuances of contemporary international relations and, in particular, more accurately characterizes the nature of EU-China relations and the perception of China in Europe.

The research reveals the transformation of China's image within the European epistemic community and identifies specific time periods to better capture this evolution. The dynamic of the image reflects the transition from initial hopes for China's internal democratization and its incorporation into the international (liberal) community toward growing concerns caused by China's global ambitions and the consolidation of its political regime, viewed as authoritarian in Europe. Since the establishment of the strategic partnership in 2003, China was initially viewed as a junior partner (or even an ally). Concerns over China's willingness to continue economic and political transition emerged in 2005–2007, which resulted in some negative features added to its image. Despite some rapprochement after the financial crisis of 2008–2009, these negative features grew, and the rival image finally formed in the late 2010s.

From a theoretical perspective, the best strategy toward a rival involves limited deterrence on sensitive issues, combined with open competition and selective cooperation. The evolution of the EU's strategic policy course toward China over the last decade aligns with this theoretical prediction, demonstrating the predictive potential of image analysis. Considering the consolidation of China's rival image, we can expect the EU to continue its policy based on a combination of deterrence, competition, and cooperation in a limited number of areas. US influence on the European Union and a possible drastic escalation of the situation around Taiwan are potential game changers that could force the EU to change its strategy toward China.

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