
SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #1 | 2022

July



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CAN BRUSSELS AND BEIJING GET IT RIGHT? TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
ECOLOGICAL GEOPOLITICS

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Springs
The Rachel Carson Center Review

1 • 2022

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An explosive geopolitical landscape is confronting the world. It centers around Sino-American hyper-competition. The US-China rift, in fact, has become even more pronounced after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine that pitted the NATO alliance against Russia and stoked Cold War sensibilities. Washington vociferously criticizes Beijing for not condemning President Vladimir Putin's actions and for deepening the Sino-Russian partnership. Already in 2009, the United States had awoken to the realization that China has risen to become not only the second largest economy, but also an acknowledged world power. The academy, think tanks, the media, and policymakers in the West, particularly in the US, are inwardly lamenting what they now view as the mistake of engaging and helping China rise quickly and effectively. Realists, in particular, perceive this as an egregious error of judgement on the part of the US.¹ Moreover, strong advocates of Sino-US cooperation are also now trying to modify their analyses, and are projecting the belief that collaboration on significant world problems can continue even under intense rivalry frames.²

The blinding spotlight that the US has focused on China has now helped globally cement the perception that a world system without China's input is no longer viable.

Though it has been clear for some time that China had become a global powerhouse with its own dynamic agenda, it is the United States that dragged China to its side on the world stage. The image of the two powers standing as equals, engaged in "straightforward competition," as President Joe Biden calls it, largely represents an attempt of the US to reclaim its global market share of political influence and thus set aside the narrative of US decline. The blinding spotlight that the largest economy in the world has focused on China, however, has now helped globally cement the perception that a world system without China's input is no longer viable.



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The world's third largest economy, the European Union, appears to be entirely absent from center stage of these developments. Its silence and non-interference in this bipolar script of power competition have many explanations that have been related on multiple occasions. The EU member states do not always speak with one voice. Their military capabilities are more limited compared to the US and, increasingly, China. Europe has historically aligned itself politically, normatively, and strategically with the United States. Its position in this fight is readily assumed especially now that Europe is facing the Russia challenge on its borders. What may not be so obvious, however, because it is not explicitly expressed, is that the European Union may have other thoughts on the kind of geopolitics that are appropriate for a century in which the climate crisis has overwhelmed the forces of nature and is leading us into uncharted waters.

Europe has made climate diplomacy its calling card and has again and again demonstrated an unwavering commitment to climate leadership. It kept climate negotiations alive, leading to the results of Paris and contributing significantly to an ambitious blueprint for a net zero future at COP26. Europe now has an unprecedented opportunity to spearhead a more comprehensive notion of "ecological geopolitics."³ This notion stems from Europe's declared vision for "living well within the limits of our planet," recognizing earth's ecological limits. In this narrative frame, living well is achieved by building a circular and decarbonized economy, by sustainably managing natural resources, and by protecting biodiversity and building societal resilience.⁴ The extent of the EU's energy reliance on fossil fuels from Russia has in the short term sent member states scrambling for alternatives, but has also heightened their resolve to further diversify the Union's energy mix and accelerate the pace to green their economies.

Even while Europe solidifies its domestic commitment in its Green Deal plan, focusing on this alone constitutes tunnel vision. In fact, the internal changes that the EU seeks to implement inevitably impact its relations and exchanges with the world beyond its borders. In 2021, for instance, the Commission adopted a proposal for a new Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism to put a carbon price on imports of a targeted selection of products, so that ambitious climate action in Europe does not lead to "carbon leakage." Moreover, the electrification of transport that the EU prioritizes will rely heavily on a long list of critical minerals requiring unprecedented levels of new mining. This kind of industrial activity, which will take place primarily in climate-vulnerable countries in the

Global South, cannot be overlooked because it will provoke additional and, in many cases, severe ecological stress. Furthermore, the climate crisis is already resulting in major disruptions across particularly fragile regions, and it is expected that interstate relations will face growing and more complex challenges posing security concerns for Brussels.

In designing a more comprehensive ecological foreign policy that respects the limits of the planet, therefore, the EU needs to develop a geopolitical strategy that utilizes its geoeconomic, regulatory, trade, and multilateral power to reimagine a global transition to net zero, one not or narrowly focused on emissions. Instead, it should prioritize models of regenerative economics,⁵ the deepening of ties of interdependence, ecosocial resilience, ecosystem restoration, and the needs and aspirations of the Global South.

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Although serial “labelists” can find ways of stamping their narrow view on the thinking of solutions to problems of the global commons, they might be advised to refrain. Even the most optimistic have declared that by 2030 we need to change rapidly and holistically in order to keep temperatures from rising above 1.5°C. This is a small and frightening window into humanity’s future.

Those who bask in the spotlight of bipolar smiles believing that it is possible to both compete fiercely and collaborate effectively and without prejudice dismiss Europe as feeble and powerless. The United States takes Europe for granted as a silent partner following its lead. China, accordingly, prioritizes its bilateral antagonism with the United States, because the rivalry between them legitimizes its power and gravitas in world affairs. Yet, Europe’s nascent attempts at formulating a comprehensive vision for ecological geopolitics are worthy of note.

Europe’s strategy is not a mere fantasy though it has yet to crystallize and present itself as a distinct alternative paradigm. Nonetheless, the groundwork has already been laid. The EU supports the reform of global institutions so that they are more inclusive and therefore more relevant in a changed world. It emphasizes “variable geometry multilateralism” in recognition that there are no longer fixed sets of like-minded countries that see eye-to-eye on all issues.

Europe’s uninterrupted ties and robust engagement with the Global South could become a game changer in the quest to—equitably and inclusively—decarbonize the planet. More importantly, Europe has developed a rich web of policies and a toolbox to address key priorities of its partners in the Global South. Because of these ties and history of interactions, the EU is deeply aware of something the United States overlooks. China may rhetorically embrace the bipolar spotlight with the United States and use a language of power that the US can understand and respond to, but it has made the development of nations across the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) its principal global vision.

Responding to criticism, moreover, China is now actively greening the Belt and Road and making sustainable development the bedrock of its plans to help its partners modernize. Some find China’s intentions disingenuous and suspect. There is no lack of criticism of China’s top-down, centralized one-party governance and technocracy-driven policy making. Beijing’s preference for setting quantitative goals and targets and adopting mechanistic approaches to policy design, and clear preference for environmental authoritarianism to modify citizen behavior and realize government targets, result in normative divisions across states and societies.

China's vision for achieving the universalizing goal of "ecological civilization" dispels any doubt that the PRC understands what kind of geopolitics will garner influence in the years to come.

Nevertheless, Beijing claims to be "greening" the Belt and Road by investing in clean energy, digitally networking nations along the BRI, and actively supporting UN discussions on standards and the implementation of SDG goals.⁶ These claims and actions have turned China into a de facto global climate leader. Moreover, its vision for achieving and sharing the universalizing goal of "ecological civilization" for the Anthropocene dispels any lingering doubt that the PRC understands what kind of geopolitics will garner influence in the years to come.

During the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the China Communist Party in Beijing that took place in November 2021, the party re-iterated that a key objective was that China continues to "adhere to its peaceful development path and to ensure that further reform and opening-up strengthen global patterns of development and help maintain security."⁷ Moreover, it launched its trademark "ecological civilization" politically in 2007 primarily as an internal and nationalist aspiration to offset the negative impacts of fast-paced industrialization, create additional space for Chinese exceptionalism, and redirect the PRC's growing economy toward sustainability.⁸ This has now become the new, powerful global narrative of a more outward-looking China.⁹

On the sidelines of Sino-US competition, the European Union has been systematically preparing. In 2019, the EU outlined an ambitious Green Deal to decarbonize and digitalize its economy in order to "future proof" the European continent in light of the climate crisis. The ultimate goal would be for Europe to become the world's first climate neutral continent by 2050. On 1 December 2021, the president of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, presented the details of Global Gateway with a projected budget of 300 billion euros of European investments in the Global South. The fund would be mobilized between 2021 and 2027 and conjoin the "resources of the EU, member states, European financial institutions and national development finance institutions." Global Gateway seems to tick all the boxes. It would transparently finance new infrastructures of connectivity in the Global South, ensuring that they are smart, sustainable, and of "good quality." Health, climate, energy, digital, transport, education, and research are among its top investment priorities. The announcement made a point of acknowledging that this plan was in step with the Build Back Better initiative whose transatlantic roots are clearly defined. Still, the distinct underlying message was that the EU would enhance its existing partnerships while also building new ones.¹⁰



Photo of two businessmen shaking hands in front of flags of the European Union and China. Photo by Marco Verch. [CC BY 2.0](#).

The media covered the announcement as a demonstration of Europe's pushback to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Was Europe throwing down the gauntlet to the PRC in order to stand side by side with the United States? Many journalists seemed to think so and focused their analyses on whether Europe was in fact too late in coming up with a concrete plan to help the Global South grow and transform in light of the fourth industrial revolution and the worsening climate crisis. Some thought that because China had already spent \$140 billion on BRI projects, it had gained too much ground for Europe to have a lasting impact. The PRC, they claimed, has deeper pockets and a more centralized control of financial instruments, whereas Europe was still planning to rely on public and private financing for Global Gateway projects.¹¹

What they failed to elaborate on is that the EU had recognized that it was no longer enough to reach net zero domestically through the Green Deal, but that it was also essential politically and economically to invest in the Global South's equitable participation in this next wave of green industrial transformation. Europe was already facing off with China on the African continent, having discovered that its development aid was no longer enough, and that support for African nations' agency and infrastructure development was imperative if the Union had any ambition to maintain its sway and influence in what it considers its backyard.

The EU had recognized that it was essential politically and economically to invest in the Global South's equitable participation in this next wave of green industrial transformation.

Global Gateway is not a plan conceived by a Europe blindly following the United States in curbing China's influence. The volatility of US domestic politics has proven to the EU that this would be unwise. Instead, the plan constitutes Europe's strategic endeavor to protect its relationships, partnerships, and interests. It also confirms its belief that the climate crisis, as a threat to the global commons, requires solutions that no longer leave the developing world behind.

Until now, the Belt and Road Initiative was the only alternative to more limited and conditional western investment in the Global South. As the BRI grew and united Eurasia and Africa, it became quickly apparent that two major powers stood at the bookends of China's many Belts and Roads. Europe could no longer forego standing its ground vis-à-vis China's ambitions because the two actors espouse distinctive norms and values and adhere to dissimilar governance systems that are now competing for the hearts, minds, economies, data, and ecologies of the nations along the ancient Silk Road.

Still, Europe and China do not have the kind of antagonism that characterizes the US-China rivalry. Europe does not, after all, consider itself a Pacific power. Yet, the civilian power the EU projects was not enough for China to openly acknowledge and appreciate its convening and regulatory power. It was rather drawn to the more antagonistic US like a moth to a flame. It is Europe, however, that remains deeply engaged and invested in many parts of the Global South, particularly—in Africa. This giant continent whose population is expected to double by midcentury sits in close geographical proximity to the EU and is among the most climate-vulnerable. This is why Ursula von der Leyen identified the February 2022 EU-Africa Summit as the first venue in which the EU will discuss its new connectivity strategy with regional partners.¹²

China's "ecological civilization" and Europe's "living well within the limits of our planet" will be competing universalizing visions for the twenty-first century.

China's BRI and Europe's Global Gateway are both mainly operational plans to decarbonize and digitalize the developing world. They are, however, increasingly reflecting certain distinct norms and values. China's "ecological civilization" and Europe's "living well within the limits of our planet," which also emphasizes justice, transparency, and quality development, will be competing universalizing visions for the twenty-first century. Now that the PRC no longer offers the only concrete development plan for the Global South, the EU and China encounter could help create the synergies to re-imagine net zero across Eurasia and Africa.

The long history of climate engagement offers a solid base for Europe and China to work together to avoid sacrificing global decarbonization and digitalization initiatives on the altar of geopolitical competition and nationalistic narratives.¹³ More importantly, the EU has a long-standing strategic partnership with China that has produced concrete collaborations and projects to decarbonize their respective economies, protect biodiversity, construct carbon markets, and coordinate and facilitate the taxonomy for green financing.

But a few important conditions need to be met for this partnership to bear fruit. First, Europe must not allow its perception of China as an increasingly systemic rival to blind it to the benefits of consciously and systematically working with the PRC on new pathways for the Anthropocene. Second, China would need to step back from its current buy-in of the bipolar narrative and instead put more effort into its relationship with the EU. This is certainly possible. While Europe has tried to apply critical pressure on issues such as human rights, it has not turned squarely against China and has sought avenues of collaboration and exchange in line with its own wider strategic goals and views of the world order. Third, neither power should allow Putin's invasion to distract them from executing their own strategies and reaching their goals to decarbonize and digitalize their economies nor from the potential of deepening their collaborative partnership. They can and should step back from the brink of a new bipolar divide which is unfit for the Anthropocene.

Underestimating or entirely overlooking the fruits that a Sino-European collaboration can produce even while the EU remains close to the US constitutes a lost opportunity for both parties. Strengthening coordination on climate, sustainability, and related UN Sustainable Development Goals—for example, through the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership—would provide a constructive way to enhance both of their broad networks and relations in the Global South. Finding ways to collaborate through the BRI and Global Gateway could open a pathway to create viable ecological geopolitics for the twenty-first century.

Notes

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Cite this article

Kalantzakos, Sophia. "Can Brussels and Beijing Get It Right? Twenty-First Century Ecological Geopolitics." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 1 (July 2022). <https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-407>.

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ISSN 2751-9317

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