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Review Essay 93

Hugo Meijer. *Awakening to China's Rise: European Foreign and Security Policies toward the People's Republic of China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022

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On both sides of the Atlantic it has become fashionable to criticize the China policies of the West over the last few decades as having been “naïve.”¹ Confronted with Chinese President Xi Jinping’s self-confident, often abrasive and confrontational style of foreign policy, the West’s hopes of “*Wandel durch Handel*” (change through trade)—one of the main themes of the West’s China strategies since the 1970s—have been thoroughly shattered.² While the US and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have embarked on a course of open confrontation which plays out not least as intense economic and technological competition, the European Union seems to be caught uncomfortably in the middle. In this rapidly shifting new international environment, calls for an end in Europe to “naïveté” vis-à-vis China have been especially frequent. They have led the EU and its member states to reframe European-Sino relations along decidedly geopolitical concepts of competition between world regions for world markets and global political power. The farewell to the allegedly naïve times quickly erodes former political core assumptions about the close historical links between economic interdependence, liberal democracy and the international order, as built under US leadership after 1945. A deep disillusionment, one which critics argue is necessary, has set in with the realization that China’s historical trajectory has not adhered to this development path. Today Europeans and Americans see in China not a moldable junior partner but an increasingly threatening “systemic rival.”³

¹ The German Minister of Economics, Robert Habeck, is just one of the many voices proclaiming that “the naivety toward China is over.” Matthias von Hein, “Strain Showing after 50 Years of Germany-China Relations” *Deutsche Welle*, September 10, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-and-china-showing-strain-in-50-year-relationship/a-63386172> (accessed June 19, 2023).

² See for example Edward S. Steinfeld, *Playing Our Game: Why China's Rise Doesn't Threaten the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. The phrase “Wandel durch Handel” was coined in the context of the German “Ostpolitik” towards the Eastern bloc in the 1960s and has also informed the German approach towards China. See Karten Rudolph, *Wirtschaftsdiplomatie im Kalten Krieg: Die Ostpolitik der westdeutschen Großindustrie 1945-1991* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2004); Werner D. Lippert, *The Economic Diplomacy of Ostpolitik: Origins of the NATO's Energy Dilemma* (New York: Berghahn, 2011); and Hand Kundnani, and Jonas Parellø-Plesner, “China and Germany: Why the Emerging Special Relationship Matters for Europe,” *European Council of Foreign Relations Policy Brief* 55 (May 2012), 3, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173460/ECFR55_CHINA_GERMANY_BRIEF_AW.pdf (accessed June 26, 2023).

³ See for example European Commission, “EU-China: A Strategic Outlook,” March 12, 2019, 1, <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf> (accessed June 19, 2023). Christoph Schult, and Gerald Trautetter, “Government in Berlin classifies China as ‘Systemic Rival,’” *Spiegel Online*, February 4, 2022 (accessed June 19, 2023). The Federal Government of Germany, Integrated Security for

The “end of naïveté” rhetoric captures the long history of the complicated relationship with China in terms of a morality play: mistakes have been made because the West has been misguided and probably even misled. But it is (hopefully) not too late to learn from the mistakes of the past and to push back. This emotionally highly charged, unabashedly teleological narrative aims for the mobilization of Western publics to support a new more assertive Western stance against China. It is a political tool. But it is of very limited use for historical analysis. It is easy to condemn actors of the past for being shortsighted, unreasonably optimistic, or even simply a historical mistake. Such judgements might be morally gratifying. However, they do not at all satisfy the urgent need for a careful understanding of how we got here. Which political and economic concepts and developments drove Western-Chinese relations in the last five decades, and why are they currently losing the persuasive power they had for such a long time?

Hugo Meijer’s new book, *Awakening to China’s Rise: European Foreign and Security Policies toward the People’s Republic of China*, sets out to give some of the answers that the complexity of Western-Chinese history demands. Meijer “challenges” the “conventional wisdom” that “European foreign policies towards the PRC haven been driven by a ‘naïve’ and self-interested focus on the economic opportunities offered by this large and emerging market, largely ignoring security considerations” (3). Instead, this book shows how “China’s shifting foreign policy behavior, as an exogenous driver, has influenced” the “national threat perceptions and economic interests” of Germany, the UK, and France, “which, in turn, has influenced the policy goals and policy instruments mobilized in the pursuit of these goals” (3). Meijer compares the policies of these “Big Three” countries, arguing that the existing literature on the European Union tends to neglect “the thorough analysis of the national policies that underpin the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy” (5).

For the UK, Germany, and France Meijer zooms in on two central policy fields, which are tied to two key regions. The first half of the book examines at the national security and diplomatic initiatives in response to the Chinese challenges in the Asian-Pacific region. The second half shows how the “Big Three” reacted to Chinese direct investment in Europe and to the perceived security risks of Chinese “technologies in strategic sectors such as critical national infrastructures, dual use-technologies and in the digital domain, including 5G networks” (4).

As promising as this approach is, Meijer’s *Awakening to China’s Rise* is an odd book. There is a perplexing discrepancy between the highly interesting and politically relevant questions the book asks and the depth of Meijer’s research and the actual results in 240 pages of text. This mismatch is all the more puzzling as Meijer’s earlier book on US export control policy towards China is a superb study that tackles similar questions much more successfully.⁴ I discuss here the two main flaws I see with *Awakening to China’s Rise*: first, despite the book’s considerable amount of factual information, it is analytically underdeveloped; second, its architecture does not work. It analytically separates what belongs together and is highly repetitive.

Meijer’s research accomplishments are staggering. Not only did he work his way through piles of scholarly literature and printed sources—from government and parliamentary reports, declassified material from national ministries, diplomatic cables and data on naval deployments, but he also conducted no less than 223 interviews with senior officials in Europe, the US, and Asia over the course of nine years (10-12). The book and its footnotes are therefore a treasure trove of facts, bibliographical information, and source references. Unfortunately, Meijer does not fully unleash the analytical potential of this highly valuable material.

Meijer’s source readings often stay too close to the surface. The book often purports to state facts whereas critical deconstruction and thorough historical and conceptual contextualization is needed. For example,

Germany: National Security Strategy, June 2023, 7, 12, 23, <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf> (accessed June 20, 2023).

⁴ Hugo Meijer, *Trading with the Enemy: The Making of US Export Control Policy toward the People’s Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Meijer's use of the concept of "national security" is problematic. In all his country case studies Meijer refers to national security as if it were a static and internationally uniform concept, when it has a complex, nationally highly specific history that deeply informs current national debates.⁵ The different security discourses in Germany, France, the UK, and the US are, despite some similarities, one of the key factors that gives the China policies of these countries their specific character and political direction. They are a central but unexplored dimension of the attempted three country comparison. Also missing is an engagement with the complex entanglements of national security and economics. Meijer shows that many sources claim that there was a time—before the late 2000s—when economics and security were clearly separated. Meijer also shows how they have ever since increasingly converged in Western policies toward China. But there is no systematic exploration of this complex process and its origins (reaching back at least to the World Wars), neither a historical nor a theoretical one.⁶

The book's lack of theoretical sophistication lessens its value for political scientists. Meijer does not develop an overarching theoretical frame or engage with theoretical literature. The analysis would undoubtedly have benefited from a clearly stated set of conceptual threads. Without them the reader is confronted with an unrelentingly matter-of-fact narrative and is left alone with a host of questions of how to interpret Meijer's findings within the larger context of the existing literature. In many ways, Meijer tells a classic story of the "securitization" of crucial aspects of the European-Chinese political, economic and technological relations.⁷ Working with such a well-worn concept would have helped to make the text more intelligible and relatable.

Thus, Meijer's book misses many opportunities. In his chapters on the policies of the "Big Three" for the Indo-Pacific, Meijer aims to scrutinize the colonial history of each country and show "how decolonization shaped its post-colonial diplomatic and military footprint in the region" (21). The passages on colonial history that follow, however, are merely a list of dates of colonial acquisitions and decolonization milestones, and do not really engage with the broad literature on colonial history, nor add to the analysis of Western-Chinese relations.⁸

The architecture of the book is problematic, and for the reader, frustrating. Each of the six main chapters follows the same structure. That is not necessarily a bad thing. But while these different strands have so much overlap that they arguably demand a careful integration, Meijer's narrative works through these categories as if they can be presented with mere bullet points. As a result, *Awakening to China's Rise* is exhaustingly repetitive—between chapters, within chapters, within subchapters, even within passages of two or three

⁵ See for example Eckart Conze, *Geschichte der Sicherheit: Entwicklung, Themen, Perspektiven* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018). Emily S. Rosenberg, "The Cold War and the Discourse of National Security," *Diplomatic History* 17:2 (1993), 277-284; Andrew Preston, "Monsters Everywhere: A Genealogy of National Security," *Diplomatic History* 38:3 (2014), 477-500.

⁶ See for example Robert Gilpin, "Economic Interdependence and National Security in Historical Perspective," in Klaus Knorr and Frank N. Trager, eds., *Economic Issues and National Security*, (Lawrence, KS: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977, 19-66. Mario Daniels and John Krige, *Knowledge Regulation and National Security in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), ch. 7.

⁷ The concept of "securitization" has been since the 1980s developed in Denmark by the so-called "Copenhagen School", a group of political scientists in the field of international relations. See Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1983), Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

⁸ To get started see for example Jürgen Osterhammel, *China und die Weltgesellschaft: Vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in unsere Zeit* (München: C.H. Beck, 1989). Thoralf Klein, *Geschichte Chinas: Von 1800 bis zur Gegenwart* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), 291-321. William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives* 29:2 (2004), 199-218. Niels P. Petersson, *Imperialismus und Modernisierung: Siam, China und die europäischen Mächte 1895-1914* (München: Oldenbourg, 2000). Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

pages. That is not just a matter of style. Following such a fixed template, the book does not reach the level of integration and synthesis one could expect given the depth of his research.

More disconcertingly, things that clearly belong together are separated. Why the policies in the Indo-Pacific and the technology-centered concerns in Europe need to be discussed separately is far from clear—and the many cross-references suggest otherwise. For each country, the two sides of the same coin are described at a distance of more than 100 pages between them. At times it seems that the reader is not meant to read the book cover to cover. When one does so, the atomization of the text and the impediments to the larger analysis are striking.

Finally, there is, at all times, an elephant in the room: the United States. Meijer does not say much about the development of the US stance towards China, as he acknowledges on the very last pages of the book (239-241). I would argue that without closely tracking and firmly integrating the history of US China policy (and of US pressures on its allies), much of the European take on China and the international order, and Europe's role in a changing world, cannot properly be understood.

In sum, Meijer's *Awakening of China's Rise* is a deeply researched resource for everyone who wants to develop a deeper understanding of the China policies of France, Germany, and the UK over the last quarter of a century. But analytically it does not deliver on its promises and is not the critical history of the West's "end of naïveté" we urgently need in these times of profound political change.

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