

Will the European hero please stand up?

An essay on European
global narrative strategy

Clingendael Report

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About the authors

Ties Dams is Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute. He is part of the EU & Global Affairs Unit and the Clingendael China Centre.

Monika Sie Dhian Ho is General Director of the Clingendael Institute. She is also Vice-Chair of the European Integration Committee and a member of the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) and teaches at the Netherlands School of Public Administration in The Hague.

The Clingendael Institute
P.O. Box 93080
2509 AB The Hague
The Netherlands

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Abstract

A more strategic European narrative is called for. That is, European leaders should more actively engage with the stories they tell and are being told about Europe's place in the world. This essay problematises the EU global narrative in order to define ways it can be made more competitive in today's geopolitical discursive arena. It juxtaposes aspects of the European narrative with the discursive moves of China, in order to synthesise elements of a new global narrative for Europe that provides a common sense of purpose with third countries, and that is both competitive and timely. It answers three distinct questions:

- How does the European global narrative currently function?
- Which aspects of the European global narrative are put under pressure by its discursive competition with China?
- And how can EU institutions and European member states contribute to a stronger global narrative strategy?

This essay argues that European leaders should embrace the language of particularism, letting go of universalist value narratives. The European Way of Life is a potentially powerful but underused narrative, through which European leaders can more forcefully explain the existential worth of human rights, democracy and rule of law to Europe. It must dare to speak the language of history, using the ancient civilisational roots of European society as a treasured resource for projecting powerful stories. This means casting as our hero 'Europe' the ancient civilisation, rather than the EU as a young political project. The costs of strategic autonomy ought to be explained as the collective sacrifices needed to protect European values. It would be wise to recognise that European society itself is a hero forged out of hegemonic struggle in order to overcome it. It has little need of enemies, but must emphasise time and again the costs of giving in to our own vices.

If a more strategic European narrative is called for, a locus of strategic narrative formation must be established. The European Commission and Council should build capacity to exercise narrative leadership in the global arena, as it has done within Europe by virtue of the European Way of Life. Institutionally, this means a visible and proactive Stratcom unit that has a status able to amplify the capacity of member state diplomatic networks, EEAS delegations and embassies and the platform of the European Council and Commission Presidents. A more strategic European narrative, crucially, means a more empathetic and research-driven communication strategy. The various audiences within Europe, but also in the European neighbourhood and Africa, are badly under-researched. Opinion research into concrete and local grievances, aspirations, common interests and values, and perceptions of the EU should be conducted in a wide range of regional settings. To this end, historic or current ties between member states and third countries should be pooled. European thought leadership has to reconceptualise and instrumentalise the fundamental power that narrative bears in our age.

Prologue: states and narrative communities

“Longing on a large scale is what makes history.”

Don DeLillo, Underworld

A more strategic European narrative is called for. That is, European leaders should more actively engage with the stories they tell and are being told about Europe's place in the world. Europe's global narrative needs reshaping, as some of its anchors are coming loose: the story of the EU as an example of the end of history as well as that of the Transatlantic partnership as the harbinger of a universal world order are being challenged. China's ascent unhinges both.

This essay problematises the EU global narrative in order to define ways it can be made more competitive in today's geopolitical discursive arena. It juxtaposes aspects of the European narrative with the discursive moves of China, in order to synthesise elements of a new global narrative for Europe that provides a common sense of purpose with third countries, and that is both competitive and timely. It answers three distinct questions: How does the European global narrative currently function? Which aspects of the European global narrative are put under pressure by its discursive competition with China? And how can EU institutions and European member states contribute to a stronger global narrative strategy? Three main clusters of audiences will be highlighted to illustrate points of broader relevance: those in Africa, in the European Neighbourhood and in Europe itself. The differences between the internal and external European narratives are significant but are related and will be discussed in tandem.

The point, here, is not to criticise European narratives on moral grounds, nor indeed to question the policies with which they are twinned. The point is to show that Europe's discursive competition with China lays bare some of the EU's main strategic weaknesses as well as strengths. This essay will not pretend to offer a definitive take on the subject but hopes to add to the discussion on Europe's position in the global battle of narratives (Borrell, 2020) by deepening a handful of key themes and offering some creative options for innovating the European story. Which narrative elements must be enhanced, put to the fore, let go or diminished? How can those narrative elements be put to better use? What does that require in an institutional sense? Hearing Borrell's assertion that the European External Action Services' capacity to let Europe's story be heard in the midst of Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns is inadequate (Cerulus, 2021), this essay asks what story ought to be told and how it can be made to resonate.

Great powers tell grand narratives, not just to further their interests, but because it is in their nature: it is not what they do, it is what they are. Political communities are forged by long histories of struggle and aspiration – by histories of longing, to paraphrase the American novelist Don DeLillo (*Underworld*, 1997). A narrative provides a community with a collective identity and common sense of purpose: towards a preferred way of life for the community itself, and for that community in its relationship to others. A strong collective identity and narrative is also a key dimension in the geopolitical strategies of states. To exercise and legitimise their power, and to mobilise popular support, they produce narratives about their place in the world. All stories states tell are anchored in an interpretation of history and in structures of society and power. The narrative machinery of states runs no matter what; the question is how states permutate it, and whether they do it consciously and indeed strategically. If we accept that premise, the question arises of whether states are able to strategically influence the evolution of their narrative-communities, and, by extension, the evolution of others.

Structure and method: a narrative in five steps

First, a note on method. As Jung (The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, 1991), Brooker (The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories, 2004), Campbell (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 1949) and others have pointed out, the literary world is structured around several basic plots or narrative structures. The stories states tell likewise tend to rely on a fixed narrative structure. As divisive as geopolitical narratives may be, they share a common template. Although philosophers have interpreted this template in various ways, the point here is to use it, and to formulate ways to use it better than European leaders do now.

With this goal in mind, this essay reasons forward from a basic structure, which can be summarised by saying that any successful narrative strategy incorporates and harmonises five elements. Listed below, each element is briefly illustrated by phrases from a speech by President Xi Jinping, namely the one he gave when visiting the exhibition entitled *The Road to Rejuvenation* at the National Museum in Beijing (Xi, *Achieving Rejuvenation Is the Dream of the Chinese People*, 2014). This speech illustrates the methodological backbone on which any successful narrative is based. The rest of this essay will adopt the same structure, taking each element in turn. According to the method of the geopolitical monomyth, the five key elements of powerful narratives are:

1. Grievances and aspirations

Powerful narratives start from the recognition of people's hopes and sorrows

“In the old days, the Chinese people went through hardships as gruelling as storming an iron-wall pass. Its sufferings and sacrifices were rarely seen in the history of the world.”

2. Values and common interests

Powerful narratives connect these grievances and aspirations to captivating core values or common interests to cut across the main dividing lines of a society and engage a sense of community

“Achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times.”

3. Struggle and sacrifice

Powerful narratives tell a story of a historic journey and struggle, identify forces that put core values and common interests under pressure, define the challenge ahead, call out the sacrifices needed, and explain why they are worth making

“We Chinese never yielded. We waged indomitable struggles and succeeded in becoming the masters of our own destiny. ... Our struggles in the over 170 years since the Opium War have created bright prospects for achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. ... Achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is both a glorious and arduous mission that requires the dedicated efforts of the Chinese people one generation after another.”

4. Hero and nemesis

Powerful narratives boast a hero, who embodies the virtues that will help the community meet the challenge ahead, and feature a nemesis, who embodies the vices that will lead to failure

“Empty talk harms the country, while hard work makes it flourish. Our generation of Communists should draw on past progress and chart a new course for the future. ... Reviewing the past, all Party members must bear in mind that backwardness left us vulnerable to attack.”

5. Victory and celebration

Powerful narratives prepare the audience to expect ups and downs, and they celebrate successes in light of the greater victory ahead

“I firmly believe that the goal of bringing about a moderately prosperous society in all respects can be achieved by 2021, when the CPC celebrates its centenary; the goal of building China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious can be achieved by 2049, when the People’s Republic of China marks its centenary; and the dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will then be realised.”

A successful narrative incorporates all five elements in a coherent and focused fashion. This essay continues to discuss each element in turn, reflecting on the European global narrative’s strengths and weaknesses relative to China’s. Both Europe’s internal narrative and Europe’s external narrative, specifically vis-à-vis Africa and the European neighbourhood, are discussed in connection with each other but also separately within each of the five chapters.

One: grievances and aspirations

A successful narrative strategy, as any compelling story, articulates an audience's grievances and aspirations in the same way that an archer hits a bull's eye. In the National Museum speech Xi Jinping recalls the historic grievances of his domestic audience as a prelude to a story about how China's rise on the global stage will help China to achieve Xi's nationalist dream. This is just one example: an international narrative strategy can also be focused on current rather than historic issues, as it can target the problems or aspirations of audiences abroad, rather than at home.

The EU tends to skip grievances, whilst China targets them, both in its domestic and in its international messaging. This becomes clear when, for instance, one considers the European Commission's recent joint communique to the European Parliament and the Council entitled *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa*. This new EU-Africa Strategy opens by saying:

“ *Africa is Europe's closest neighbour. The ties that bind Africa and the European Union (EU) are broad and deep as a result of history, proximity and shared interests. ... We need to partner with Africa, our twin continent, to tackle together the challenges of the 21st century and to further our common interests and future.*

(EC HR/PV, 2020)

Although intended as an empathetic message to the EU's African neighbours, it skips the establishment of a foundation of sentiment on which a sense of kinship may be built, to jump to the shared 'challenges' and 'interests' that demand cooperation. Later on, it does touch briefly upon some of the issues in which the real and urgent problems of the African audiences lie, but it fails to truly acknowledge these on two levels.

First, it describes grievances not as palpable sufferings, but rather as negative qualities – 'fragility' and 'weakness' – inherent in the African institutions. This causes the narrative of kinship to lose empathetic appeal, as the audience is framed as a passive rather than an active element in the story. Secondly, it fails to address the fact that in many African narratives of political identity, current problems of poverty and conflict are intertwined with historic grievances to which Europe was an active contributor (Links, 2020).

The failure to address current and historic grievances in Europe's messaging to Africa offers easy discursive opportunities to Chinese leaders. By consistently recalling the shared Sino-African history of 'humiliation' by colonial powers, matched with a strong

emphasis on ‘win-win’ deal-making in the present, in which each party, African and Chinese, is free and expected to pursue its own best interest, China is able to undermine the European-African kinship narrative and validate its own value proposition in one elegant swoop. In his first speech to an African audience, in Tanzania in 2013, Xi stressed how the African and Chinese people have long shared an ‘anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle’, followed by the reassurance that:

“ *China will continue to offer, as always, necessary assistance to Africa with no political strings attached ... We get on well and treat each other as equals.*

(Reuters, 2013)

Interestingly, this speech followed increased criticism that Tanzania’s trade imbalance with China was ‘the essence of colonialism’, to quote the African country’s central bank governor (Reuters, 2013).

If anything, the EU’s failure to acknowledge historic African grievances leaves Chinese leaders an easy card to pull, whenever it itself is faced with the scrutiny that befalls a superpower. If frustrations with China continue to rise, China will be pushed to further excite the anti-European sentiment in its messaging to African audiences. Ironically, European messages calling China’s presence in Africa ‘neo-colonialist’ are bound to backfire, as long as Europe itself has not addressed its own history to any meaningful degree. More importantly, perhaps, by ignoring historic grievances, the EU undermines its own attempt to ground a sense of kinship in historic ties, which it is, wisely, trying to do. Moreover, it limits the discursive space for cooperation with China in Africa, which is, after all, in its best geopolitical interest.

The extent to which China’s material development in and of itself forms a compelling story of aspiration to African audiences should not be underestimated. It challenges European leaders to ask themselves: how can we more empathetically appeal to African aspirations, given that China’s dream is increasingly becoming Africa’s too? Results from the Afrobarometer survey point in a promising direction (Selormey, 2020). When respondents from across the African continent were asked which country presents the best model for development, two clear winners emerged: the US (32%) and China (23%). China is seen by most respondents as having a positive influence, and most respondents see China as giving aid with fewer strings attached than other donors. As the largest donors of development aid to Africa, this does not bode well for the EU and its member states. However, the survey also shows that China is strongly associated with poor-quality products. This points to the possibility of innovating the European aspiration narrative based on the demands of the new African middle classes, who are looking for higher standards of living. A reinvigorated relationship with African audiences starts by getting to know those audiences in their variety. Very little is known of how different societies on the African continent view the EU. The few studies that have been conducted are elite-focused, whereas the EU’s policy priorities

vis-à-vis Africa should aspire to broad social appeal (Fioramonti & Poletti, 2008) (Fioramonti & Olivier, 2007) (Fioramonti & Kimunguyi, 2011).

China also engages with countries that have urgent and serious grievances within the EU. In these cases, it deploys narratives that emphasise China's willingness to help the country in question exactly when the EU would not do the same. Moreover, it captures that aid in specific terms, relevant to the local context, by means of a tangible object, as a standing symbol of both Chinese charity and European failure. One example is that of Greece in the midst of the eurozone crisis.

A New York Times article entitled 'Chastised by E.U., a Resentful Greece Embraces China's Cash and Interests' reflects on the developments that led to Greece's decision to block an EU statement at the UN denouncing Chinese human rights violations. It shows that the narrative of China's 'helping hand' is to a great extent internalised by European and American audiences. A Greek parliamentarian is quoted as saying that China never explicitly asked for Greece's support on human rights, because it did not need to:

“ *If you're down and someone slaps you and someone else gives you an alm, when you can do something in return, who will you help, the one who helped you or the one who slapped you?*

(Horowitz & Alderman, 2017)

The point is not that China's policy is purely symbolic; China did of course actually invest in the Greek economy during the eurozone crisis. Nor is the point that the EU's policy towards Greece should have been different only because it offered China the chance to take the stage. The crucial thing to realise is rather that these investments are not only of commercial value to China, but also of strategic and narrative value, and were the logical result not only of EU and Chinese material policies, but also of the respective narratives they offered Greece in a moment of crisis. In the midst of Greek grievances and European pessimism, China launched a story of aspiration. In the same NYT article, Marietje Schaake, then a member of the European Parliament, illustrates the EU's messaging towards Greece on the topic of its relationship with China, by saying:

“ *The Greek government needs to choose where its alliances lie and realise the EU is not only a market, but first and foremost a community of values.*

(Horowitz & Alderman, 2017)

China has grand narratives (Dams, 2019), but never forgets to exploit a small narrative (Lyotard, 1984), targeting grievances by offering hope in times of crisis. Apparently, China realised before the EU did that Europe may be a community of values but is not yet seen by all its constituents as a brotherhood of aspirations. The port of Piraeus

stands to this day as a symbol of how China was able to leverage a localised grievance narrative into a positive storyline for Sino-Grecian brotherhood. As former premier Tsipras said last year during a visit by President Xi to Athens:

“ *A friend in need is a friend indeed.*

(Xinhua, 2019)

A friend in need, it may be added, offers a narrative opportunity – one that China took and the EU, in this case, failed to appreciate. The ‘helping-hand’ trope resonates to this very day, and indeed to the pandemic crisis in which we are presently engulfed.

Very little research is done on how European narratives are perceived by various local audiences across the globe as well as within the EU. For the EU, a big challenge lies in connecting to local audiences in regional settings. A strong answer to this challenge relies on researching and referring to localised grievance and aspiration narratives. On a more fundamental level, China’s ascent confronts Europeans with a crisis of faith to which China is not party: namely, the crisis of ‘declinism’ in European society, or, put more simply, the widely shared feeling among Europeans that their society is in decline (Elchardus, 2015). Although China, Russia, Turkey and other geopolitical competitors can and will amplify Europe’s self-doubt to undermine the standing of the liberal-democratic societal model globally (Dams, 2020), they are not the cause of declinism’s traction, nor is an assertive European counter-narrative towards these powers a weapon fit for battling declinism. The belief that Europe belongs to ‘yesterday’s world’, while China ‘owns the future’, must be countered not by geopolitical, but by narrative and social means, offering Europeans a mobilising story of collective aspiration and the institutions to realise it. As sociologist Mark Elchardus argues:

“ *That vision or narrative, to be successful, must of course show how and why the proposed solutions are consistent with the values that are dear to people and will in fact increase the probability they can live the lives they want to live.*

(Elchardus, 2017)

Ergo, we must turn from grievances and aspirations towards values, common interests and the role of value narratives within and beyond the European community.

Two: values and common interests

A value narrative is most powerful when it inspires a sense of community and calls out common interests. The EU's value narrative, internal and external, is in two minds, between moral universalism and a European particularism. This ambiguity is being put increasingly under geopolitical pressure.

The multilateral framework is written in the discourse of universalism, and so has traditionally been the EU global narrative. The European strategy has some clear advantages, as it, to use Chinese terminology, amplifies its *huayuquan*, or 'right to speak', within the multilateral order. And yet, the disadvantages of the universalist strategy are becoming rapidly clearer, and indeed, the signs of the EU's own ambiguity are starting to show. The EU has hitched its wagon to an ambitious and increasingly contested normative dream: namely, that of a world moving ever closer to the global adoption of democracy, rule of law, human rights and free-market capitalism as universal norms. If that train falters, so does the European narrative.

China has broken the universalist spell for Europe. In the wake of its ascent, the discursive space of authoritarian states widens. The EU has, indirectly, acknowledged this, by calling China a 'systemic rival', implying that Europe's values, norms and institutions are as much 'a system' as China's are. The increasingly ambiguous universalism of Europe's value narrative is laid bare not only by China, however. Johannes Hahn, then Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations, already recognised the strategic issues a universalist narrative necessarily has when it fails to deliver on its awesome promise in a 2015 speech. Speaking with particular reference to the European Neighbourhood Policy, Hahn stated:

“ *Let me take your minds back to 2003. The EU is on the brink of its biggest ever enlargement, the 'big bang'. The will to follow our European model of democracy, rule of law, human rights and free markets is bringing transformational change to our Central and Eastern European friends – and we can feel confident in our power as a pole of attraction for others. ...*

The vision we once had – the EU with its supposedly irresistible offer, and partners who would, to varying degrees, want to move closer to us – is clearly no longer appropriate.

(Hahn, 2015)

Despite this early and clear-cut diagnosis, the EU has been trying to restore the cracks in the universalist value narrative since then, by supplementing it with other kinds of narratives, the most important of which are output and norm narratives.

An illustrative example of this is a speech by former High Representative Mogherini on 'eastern neighbourhood developments'. In her 2019 speech, a follow-up to Hahn's, Mogherini hails the successes of the EU Eastern Neighbourhood policies (which include the partner countries Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova), which she sums up thus:

“ *The twenty deliverables that we are implementing within the Eastern Partnership focus on the issues our people care the most about: jobs, energy security, education, strong civil society, independent media – things that are indeed on top of our citizens' agendas.*

...

We have also achieved good progress in trade, energy, connectivity or the digital sphere. At the same time, we need to do more in the fields of the rule of law, judiciary or fighting corruption.

(Mogherini, 2019)

'Deliverables' is a term typical of output narratives, although the deliverables mentioned lack the concreteness that makes such a narrative truly potent. In addition, Mogherini's story mixes talk of 'deliverables' with norms, such as 'rule of law' and 'strong civil society'. As such, it fails on both counts, lacking the clarity and specificity of either. Mogherini comes across as responding implicitly and only partly to Hahn's pessimism, by dialling down the value narrative in favour of a more technocratic tone, which fails to persuade.

The Chinese narrator mirrors Europe's weakness, for example, in the way it addresses the Chinese diaspora communities across the world. First of all, it projects a strong narrative of a cohesive Chinese global community, which links the destinies of Chinese people at home with the diaspora community abroad. Xi's encouragement of a renaissance of Confucianism is remarkable in this context. For people in the diaspora who might feel little affinity with communism, but who are still educating their children on Confucian virtues, this shared ancient Chinese culture fits the narrative of a cohesive Chinese global community.

China also mobilises the Chinese diaspora to amplify its narratives in other countries. The most recent example is that of Italy during the COVID-19 crisis (Zeneli & Santoro, 2020). Here, the Chinese diaspora organised many initiatives to donate medical

equipment and funds to Italian authorities to help fight the pandemic. The Chinese embassy's social media accounts actively retweeted and spread posts from Chinese immigrants that showed their efforts. This was aimed at the increasingly negative public sentiment towards China.

Xi has authorised the United Front Work Department (UFWD) to oversee China's approach to the diaspora. It runs the 'China News Service', a CCP media network with many bureaus established across the globe. WeChat is one of the media used to reach the diaspora. Local UFWD leaders also direct Chinese embassy employees in their work towards the diaspora. The narratives used typically present all ethnic Chinese as a 'fictional homogeneous and patriotic group united under the party's leadership', as a recent Australian report explains (Joske, 2020). By presenting UFWD groups as representatives of the Chinese community in a particular country, the diaspora's own voice is stifled. For many in the Chinese diaspora, WeChat is the primary source of news and information. This makes it more difficult for the European Union's narrative to reach the diaspora. Aside from the medium used, language is an additional barrier, as Mandarin is the preferred language for many members of the diaspora.

China's messaging to foreign audiences strongly emphasises the output that the relationship with China has delivered, and, when appropriate, it connects that to two norms, and two norms only: material development and self-determination (Dams & Putten, 2015). In the run-up to the recent Belarusian elections, for example, Xi called President Lukashenko to propose fast-tracking the China-Belarus industrial park, a cooperation worth US\$520 million of investments in infrastructure (SCMP, 2020). In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic Xi called Lukashenko to express his readiness to strengthen medical cooperation (MoFA of PRC, 2020). In virtually every contact with Belarus, China stresses that:

“ *China will continue to support Belarus in following a development path suited to its national conditions.*

(MoFA of PRC, 2020)

The Chinese self-determination narrative presupposes that societies are distinct moral units, forged out of long and unique sociocultural histories. There is only one legitimate representative of a society's deep 'history of longing', and that is the state. Imposing normative frameworks on countries from a multilateral or unilateral perspective is folly. Cunningly, China slips in a value narrative, propagating the value of political stability and unity over democracy, and cultural identity over moral universalism only implicitly, thus evading a strong claim to moral leadership, whilst making its point nonetheless.

Compared to the Chinese story, the EU's tale of ambiguity has a major downside. It fails to express the boundaries, the integrity and the worth of the European community,

and consequently struggles to convey the unique and vital value of European civilisation to the world. As such, the EU's external narrative reflects a key weakness in the EU's internal narrative: it is a market (economic community), it is a collection of governing bodies (political community), but not yet a social and cultural community, with a collective identity (Sie Dhian Ho, 2018). This is a pressure point that China and other geopolitical competitors are able to press (Van Middelaar, Van der Putten, & Sie Dhian Ho, 2021).

To great promise, as well as controversy, the new Commission has adopted a moniker that could open a new chapter in the European story: the 'European Way of Life'. Although hardly new (Rompuy, 2010), the term was brought to the fore in 2019 by then President-elect of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in her mission letter to the Vice-President designate for 'Protecting the European Way of Life', Margaritis Schinas (Von der Leyen, 2019), later adapted to 'Promoting the European Way of Life'. Following criticism, Von der Leyen published an op-ed in various European newspapers, defining her 'European Way of Life' (Von der Leyen, 2019). Here, Von der Leyen expressly projects a value narrative and indeed a real geopolitical narrative, as she links Europe's values directly to geopolitical rivalry past and present:

“ *Last month marked thirty years since two million people across the Baltic States joined hands to form a 'chain of freedom' more than 600 kilometres long. ... they also showed the uniting force of our common values: freedom, equality, democracy and respect for human dignity.*

These values, and our attachment to them, are our very foundation. ...

This European way of life came at a great price and sacrifice. ... We have seen foreign powers interfere in our elections from the outside. And we have seen home-grown populists with cheap nationalistic slogans try to destabilise us from the inside. ...

Of course, words matter. I recognise that. For some, the European way of life is a loaded and politically charged term. But we cannot and must not let others take away our language from us: this is also part of who we are.

(Von der Leyen, Op-Ed - The European way of life, 2019)

If European value messaging is in two minds – universalist and particularist respectively – the European Way of Life, representing the second, plays into the changed geopolitical climate best. In a manner not unlike Xi's 'China Dream', it explains to the world Europe's core values, and their existential worth, without making universalist promises. It points to Europe's red lines in the geopolitical arena, helps counter the narrative of division that haunts the EU, and potentially helps weave a stronger

normative fabric for the European community. Strikingly, it connects to more basic common interests of the European people: security, order and identity – ones often underestimated in the European grand narrative, yet uniquely powerful in reaching across dividing lines within the European Union. Here too lies a potential flaw of the European Way of Life narrative: if it fails to connect to a positive and empathetic neighbourhood agenda, it runs the risk of bringing together the European community at the cost of appearing protectionist in the eyes of its global partners. The universalist strategy had a major strong point, in that it pointed to and legitimised a clear mission to the world. What does the European Way of Life narrative have to offer the world? The answer lies in part in the great geopolitical struggle of our time. That is, Europe could lead in supporting communities across the globe to protect their way of life in the midst of geopolitical rivalry.

Three: struggle and sacrifice

There is no such thing as a story without struggle. And no struggle without sacrifice. An imposing narrator compels the audience with a challenge: the task of protecting and promoting the values that are the fabric of its communal identity against the forces that undermine it. Crucially, it explains the dues that must be paid to get there.

One of China's signature discursive moves is to frame Europe as part of 'the West', tying together the European and American destinies as one. It then follows up by emphasising that the West is hegemonic, meaning uncontested in its military, diplomatic or economic might. By pointing out 'the West', it invokes another character: The Rest. It frames the struggle of the Rest very differently from the struggle of the West. The Rest is preoccupied with economic development and the cultivation of basic security and order, whereas the West has a far more ambitious agenda: the West works towards a universalist normative world order, in which it itself is able to stay geopolitically dominant. The Rest struggles against domination, the West struggles for it.

This dichotomy serves China well. Casting itself as the champion of the Rest, China enjoys some of the prestige of leadership, without bearing all of its responsibility. When it comes to fighting climate change, China claims a role of leadership on the one hand – a point proven by Xi's 2020 speech to the UN General Assembly (CGTN, 2020) – and reminds the world that it is 'merely' a developing nation on the other, arguing that for this reason it cannot bear an economic burden proportionate to that of fully developed economies. It does the same when it comes to global trade: China must prioritise its struggle against poverty over carrying the responsibility for leadership in multilateral trade governance, and so not all WTO rules ought to apply to China. Criticism is easily framed as the hypocrisy and decadence of the hegemon.

China's 'the West versus the Rest' dichotomy should be unsustainable. China is already, and will increasingly be recognised as, one of two remaining superpowers. The other superpower, Europe must confess, is not 'the West'; it is the United States of America. Trump broke the narrative spell of the 'unbreakable' Transatlantic bond (Schaik & Dams, 2020), but the China factor played its part, and will continue to expose Transatlantic divergence in administrations to come. Despite pressure on European leaders to align their China policies with Washington's push for decoupling, the EU and the US have a structurally different strategic outlook on China. The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, which the EU concluded with China to much American chagrin, is the latest proof of this.

Not only does China's ascent challenge Europe to recapture the values it used to propagate as universal within a particularist narrative, but it also slowly unhinges the main narrative and power-political anchor of Europe's self-image as a global geopolitical player: its relation to the US. Whether Europe is ready or willing to adapt to this reality is a question of real and urgent concern. This not only requires the build-up of material capacity to leverage autonomous geopolitical decision-making, but also requires European leaders to deal with the gradual untangling of the narrative of 'the West' (MSC, 2020).

Structural changes in the 'narrative constellation' (Schiller, 2019) of world politics provide Europe with opportunities too. Much depends on which struggle Europe chooses to engage in. There are at least two stories of struggle to pick from.

The first narrative will be pushed by Washington in years to come, and should prove difficult to resist for Europeans, given the standing its narrator President Joe Biden enjoys amongst European audiences. Biden's world is divided into two blocs, along hard, ideological lines: democracies and authoritarian states. The first bloc is or should once again be led by the US, the second's vanguard is China. Taking the moral argument for granted, that authoritarian advance must be stopped for the survival of democracies to be safeguarded and, acknowledging that the US cannot lead 'by force' alone, Biden concludes the US must lead the world by example and by alliance. In so doing, it will:

“ *renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the Free World ... bring together the world's democracies to strengthen our democratic institutions, honestly confront the challenge of nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda to address threats to our common values. ...*

Working together, democracies can and must confront the rise of populists, nationalists, and demagogues; the growing strength of autocratic powers and their efforts to divide and manipulate democracies.

(Biden, 2020)

A 'Concert of Democracies' has been proposed many times, by many authors, ever since the early optimism of the end of the Cold War faded (Daalder & Lindsay, 2007). Biden's play stands or falls on European leaders' willingness to provide a supporting act, as no global alliance of democracies is fit to exert significant power on China without the EU's support and that of its member states. This implies a number of things.

European leaders can leverage their support for the 'Concert of Democracies' storyline to their advantage, as Biden seems to acknowledge that he needs his European partners most of all. Then again, China will counter such a strategy by arguing that a Concert is

merely decoupling in drag: an attempt by the US to force third countries into a new Cold War against China, supposedly on ideological grounds, but really driven by the West's will to maintain power. This could alienate the democratic countries of the world that do not want to decouple from China. A storyline of diametric-ideological confrontation goes against the EU's chosen strategic ambiguity, which frames China simultaneously as a cooperation partner, economic competitor and systemic rival (European Commission and HR/VP, 2019). This framing suits the EU's priorities well, as fighting climate change and a strong post-COVID-19 economic recovery make close cooperation with China a necessity. More fundamentally, American and European narratives on China's ascent diverge, because European and American narratives of ideological, systemic confrontations in times past differ far more than we like to think. From Washington the Cold War looked quite different than it did from Berlin, or indeed, Beijing.

The second narrative of struggle Europe may choose to adopt is far less obvious but all the more interesting. It recasts Europe as the champion of the Rest. It argues that European civilisation has for centuries been the playground of empires battling for hegemony. The EU is the institutional embodiment of the idea that power can be used to defuse, rather than dominate, great power strife.

In our time, the world is yet again confronted with an episode of tragically escalating battle between two hegemonies. Most of the world, however, consists of countries like the European member states that would be painfully torn in a new Cold War. Most European societies have no interest in, nor longing for, a world dominated by hegemonic confrontation, split along ideological lines. Much the opposite is true. After the second world war, the United States had two-thirds of the world's gold reserves, three-quarters of its capital and more than half of its manufacturing capacity, while the USSR had effectively cut its economy off from the world, and the European economy was devastated (Leffler, 2019). Now, China is the world's biggest economy, with deep ties to Europe.

In 2019, an ECFR survey (Dennison, Leonard, & Lury, 2019) asked EU citizens 'if the European Union were to fall apart, what would be the biggest loss?' After the benefits of the single market, the most common answer was 'the existence of a European bloc to counter superpowers like the US and China', followed by 'EU countries working together on climate change'. A Eurobarometer survey (Schulmeister, 2019) of the same year reported that two-thirds of EU voters believed that membership had been positive for their country, and yet, most Europeans believe that the European project could collapse within the next 10-20 years. The most recent Eurobarometer survey points out that two-thirds of EU citizens believe that the EU should have more competences to deal with crises such as the Coronavirus pandemic, and that an absolute majority support a larger EU budget to overcome the consequences of the pandemic, which should be spent on public health, economic recovery and climate change (Schulmeister, 2020). Europeans

have no problem pointing out the struggles they want their leaders to fight and seem increasingly aware of the sacrifices needed.

Referring back to Brooker (2004), the literary world is structured around several basic plots or narrative structures. The Quest is one, the Iliad being the prime example of a storyline in which a hero sets out to find treasure, facing temptation and obstacles along the way. The Monster story is another, Beowulf being a famous example of a hero who sets out to defeat and destroy an evil enemy. The European struggle against hegemonic strife ought to be framed as a quest, a heroic hunt for treasure – in this case, a future of peace. This implies two things: a strong narrative of struggle refers to history – and European leaders could do that far more – but always reaches for a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; the EU's narrative of struggle must be strongly focused on the future. Here, it must explicate the dangers of hegemonic strife and warn against the obstacles and seductions on the way forward.

As the next chapter will show, Europe would limit itself needlessly if it adopted a storyline of 'fighting monsters'. Rather, by virtue of its historic example, and by force of alliance, the EU could brand itself as a linchpin of leverage for the Rest to curb the rivalry of the Two, countering both American and Chinese narratives that push European countries into a position of ideological conflict and pooling efforts to fight the global crises that are at the top of European citizens' worried minds. The aforementioned surveys show a call to action, as well as a cry for narrative, that European leaders would be wise to heed: proselytise the value of the EU in its struggle against global threats and hegemonic strife. Explicate, furthermore, the costs of 'strategic autonomy' in terms of the collective sacrifices needed to defend the European way of life, and viscerally explain the treasure that lies waiting at the end of Europe's quest: peace.

Four: hero and nemesis

Every story needs a hero. So, who is Europe's?

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the epic, or heroic verse, thus:

“ *Epic poetry corresponds to tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of admirable people. But they differ in that epic ... is narrative. ...*

One should not compose a tragedy out of a body of material which would serve for an epic – by which I mean one that contains a multiplicity of stories.

(Aristotle)

Tragedy and epic are both about heroes – ‘admirably people’ – but whereas a tragedy lets the characters speak for themselves, in an epic we hear the narrator tell the story. The epic has one important strategic advantage: it has a significantly wider scope, as the narrator can link many stories within one grand narrative. The weakness of the epic is that it is less direct: the narrator draws attention away from the hero, by standing between him and the audience. Homer, in Aristotle's mind, has used the epic to its full potential, weaving a narrative of unparalleled breadth in his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, yet claiming as little space as possible for himself, letting his heroes, Odysseus and others, tell the story for him.

The Chinese story-machine is in the business of producing epics. Xi is not only the most powerful leader since Mao, but he is also China's most visible in decades, probably even surpassing Deng. Mao was the revolutionary master of chaos, who did the impossible by reclaiming an empire seemingly lost in decades of division and decay. Deng was the wise man, the restorer of order, who led China towards its own path of development. Xi is the poet as well as the protagonist of part three of China's modern epic: the return to global leadership.

China's mode of narration reflects its sociopolitical model, strongly emphasising unity. With the succession of Hu by Xi, the CCP supplemented and partly replaced its model of collective but opaque leadership with a single, visible storyteller-in-chief. In a 2011 op-ed, sinologist Kerry Brown already argued that:

“ *Hu's reticence as a national leader, his lack of profile and ego, the things that have made him a successful Party secretary, are also the very things that inhibit him as a spokesperson or face of the new, emerging China.*

(Brown, 2011)

China needed both a hero and a narrator to humanise its growing power. Xi has added greatly to the recognisability of the Chinese leadership abroad (Saich, 2014).

The ambiguity that comes with the divided, multifaceted structures of European power is reflected in the evolving way the Chinese leadership approaches Europe. During his first visit to the continent in 2014, Xi made his first stop in the Netherlands (BBC, 2014). As head of state, Xi was welcomed at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport not by Prime Minister Rutte, but by King Willem-Alexander. This probably reflects the Chinese appraisal of the Dutch King that, although largely bereft of official powers, he is the Netherlands' face and voice on the global stage. After the Netherlands, an important centre of Sino-European economic interdependence, Xi visited the European capitals of power. First, Paris, where French President Hollande stood waiting on the tarmac (Ng & Chen, 2014). Second, Berlin, where Xi held a joint press conference with German Chancellor Merkel (DW, 2014). Finally, Xi made a first-ever visit by a Chinese head of state to the seats of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. These meetings, however, were not followed by a press conference, and were framed as 'personal visits' rather than an official summit (Gardner, 2014).

Xi's more recent European visits show interesting divergences in the relatively stable constellation of European representations of power. In 2019, two weeks after the EU dubbed China a 'systemic rival', Xi visited Italy and France, leaving Germany and the EU conspicuously aside. During the visit to Italy, Xi and prime minister Conte surprised the world by signing a memorandum of understanding that amounted to Italy joining the Belt and Road Initiative. This was a highly symbolic move, allowing Xi to claim his first major EU player to join the BRI team. After Italy came France. On the second day of Xi's visit to Paris, Macron invited German Chancellor Merkel and President of the European Commission Juncker to meet with Xi, alongside him (Tiezzi, 2019). In this way Macron staged a timely play of European unity, artfully casting himself as the hero. In the 2020 video summit between the EU and China, Xi was met by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and for the Council Presidency Chancellor Merkel (European Council, 2020). The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment between the EU and China was concluded in a videocall between Xi, Michel, Von der Leyen, Merkel and Macron (Lau & Wu, 2020).

This goes to show that the EU's modes of narration reflect Europe's political model, too. It has many Homers, even if it lacks an Odysseus.

European power is – and will in all probability be for generations to come – a web of member states spun across three main poles – the French Presidency, the German Chancellery and the European Union. Its great narrative weakness is the inability of any constituent part to credibly be Europe's hero on the global stage. Europe will not have a personification of its grand narrative to rival Xi in the near future. Another would be the unwillingness of other member states to accept the stronger voice of Berlin, Paris and

Brussels on the world stage, rendering Europe mute as a narrator. Its great strength, however, is the plethora of potential narrators it has on offer: any member state can potentially use its narrative power – even if this power is distributed unequally – to voice and thereby shape the European story of struggle and aspiration, at home and abroad. If Europe wants to make a stronger show in the global discursive arena, it should make more use of this strength rather than wait for its weakness to disappear. Macron shows it can be done, and indeed to France's own greater glory and *huayuquan* within Europe and beyond. The difference between concert and cacophony will be made not by a single conductor but in improvised forms of harmony and coordination, in Brussels and beyond.

'From War to Peace: A European Tale', the joint speech given by Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council and José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, upon receiving the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the EU, offers an additional solution to the hero conundrum. The European hero, in this narrative, is an abstraction. It is ...

“ *speaking to us from the centuries, the idea of Europa itself ...*

(Van Rompuy & Barroso, 2012)

Crucially, the value of *Europa* is explained in opposition to evils that are worded not abstractly, but in emotive, visceral and concrete terms. A history of 'scars of spears and swords, canons and guns, trenches and tanks' is set against the longing for 'the simple joys and hopes that make life worth living'. European peace is summed up by means of a single, simple object of sentiment:

“ *When Konrad Adenauer came to Paris to conclude the Coal and Steel Treaty, in 1951, one evening he found a gift waiting at his hotel. It was a war medal, une Croix de Guerre, that had belonged to a French soldier. His daughter, a young student, had left it with a little note for the Chancellor, as a gesture of reconciliation and hope.*

(Van Rompuy & Barroso, 2012)

The point here is not to get into the technicalities of speechwriting; rather, it is to prove that an abstract hero can indeed carry a compelling narrative when it lets specific, human grievances, aspirations and struggles take centre stage. Emotive language is key (Clerck-Sachsse, 2020) – and so is the language of history. The recognition of *Europa* as a character that represents ancient cultures, of which the EU and its member states are guardians, offers opportunities to both match and compete with China's 'civilisation state' discourse. If European leaders acknowledge that they need a European hero to tell their story, it must be that deep history of longing for peace and order, that speaks to us from the centuries, rather than any one institution that represents it.

As the Nobel Peace Prize speech shows, a compelling hero's narrative requires the narrator to describe in no uncertain terms the forces the hero is fighting against. If every story needs a hero, every hero needs a nemesis.

The mistake often made is to equate the concept of 'nemesis' with the character of 'enemy'. American presidents have a track record of framing competition in terms of animosity. In a 1983 speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, President Ronald Reagan famously referred to the Soviet Union as 'the focus of evil in the modern world' and 'an evil empire' (Reagan, 1983). His successor George H. W. Bush said in his 1992 State of the Union Address that winning the Cold War meant that 'we can stop making the sacrifices we had to make when we had an avowed enemy that was a Superpower' (Bush G. H., 1992). In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush called out the 'axis of evil' (Bush G. W., 2002). President Donald Trump called the EU a 'foe' (Politico, 2018) and Xi Jinping both his 'friend' and his 'enemy' (CNBC, 2019). Biden has called Xi 'a thug' (Bloomberg, 2020).

Is China the enemy Europe needs to become a hero? Probably not. In 1995, then Assistant Secretary of Defence Joseph Nye Jr. said in an interview:

“ *If you treat China as an enemy, China will become an enemy. ... It will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.*

(Mann, 1995)

This statement resonated recently when a Chinese diplomat literally repeated Nye's words in an interview with the Sydney Morning Herald (Kearsley, Bagshaw, & Galloway, 2020), reflecting on the spiralling of animosities between the Australian and Chinese governments. The Chinese diplomat is not wrong, although he may be right for the wrong reasons. Talking 'tough' to China only adds fuel to Xi's attempts to fire up nationalistic anti-Western sentiments at home and abroad. It helps Xi and the CCP, if only marginally, to legitimise China's ever more assertive foreign policies. When it comes to China, it is probably better to act tough than talk tough.

Europe does not need an enemy. It needs a nemesis. The goddess Nemesis did not fight Narcissus to punish him for his vanity. Unseen, she enacted her divine retribution by letting him suffer the final consequences of his vice: death by *hubris* (Ovid). If we cast *Europa*, the idea, as our hero, representing the virtues of peace and compromise, amongst others, our European leaders should explain viscerally the consequences of our vices: division, arrogance and a lack of action. Our own failure to protect, unify and innovate is our nemesis. China's ascent is merely the reminder that it would be hubristic to take the European Way of Life for granted.

Five: victory and celebration

The EU suffers from a lack of visibility and a reluctance to celebrate its victories. Partly, this issue should be attributed to the hero conundrum, but there is more to it than that.

Knowledge of the EU among general audiences in non-European countries is poor indeed. Country studies are sparse, but available data show that in India and Brazil, for example, most citizens are unaware of the existence and purpose of the EU. In South Africa, the EU is viewed as ‘an ineffective actor by the few who have an opinion on it’ (Lucarelli, 2014). Unsurprisingly, the EU is better known among elites, especially in former colonial countries and countries close to the EU’s borders. As Lucarelli (Seen from the Outside: The State of the Art on the Image of the EU, 2014) concludes:

“ *The EU tends to be regarded as complicated, bureaucratic and potentially ‘boring’ for the broad public.*

Other data show that the EU is globally recognised as an economic powerhouse and a potential leader that, as of now, lacks strategic influence. In Southeast Asia, the EU is the largest provider of FDI and amongst the top three importers for most states in the region. According to the last ‘State of Southeast Asia’ survey, when asked which state or bloc was most trusted to champion global free trade, the EU came in second only to Japan, leaving the US and China far behind. It won the contest for ‘leadership in maintaining the rule-based order and upholding international law’, with the US and Japan coming in second and third respectively. Only a fraction of respondents (0.7% in 2019 and 1.1% in 2020) indicated that the EU had the most political and strategic influence. The EU ambassador to ASEAN is quoted as saying that the EU suffers from ‘a visibility deficit’, adding that this is far from being only the case in Southeast Asia:

“ *It is hard enough already to get people to write and read about the EU and EU policies within Europe.*

(Hutt, 2020)

There is, in short, much to be gained by systematically and audaciously banking on the latent positive sentiments towards the EU and complementing narratives of economic success with those that emphasise geostrategic leadership. The public diplomacy activities of the European Commission’s Foreign Policy Instruments could be brought to the fore and adapted to incorporate strategic narrative formation.

In comparison to the BRI, the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy exemplifies what happens when victories are left uncelebrated. Launched in 2018 by means of the 'Joint Communication Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy' (EC; HRVP, 2018), it is widely recognised as the EU's answer to the BRI, even though the EU has tried hard to escape that frame. On the surface, it is similar to the BRI: a bureaucratic framework that brings together all kinds of trade-enhancing measures, such as investments in transportation networks, across Eurasia and Southeast Asia. In terms of volume, it is probably a lot smaller, as the BRI has grown into an umbrella for all of China's economic diplomacy. As narratives, the two could not be more different.

The BRI was born in 2013 during visits Xi made to Kazakhstan and Indonesia (Xinhua, 2016). Even though at that initial stage it encompassed only a number of projects in two countries, in his speeches Xi launched a narrative of wider ambition and deeper relevance. Staunchly historicist and civilisational, Xi's tale recounted '2000-plus years' of trade and cultural links between Asia and Europe and announced that now was the time to breathe new life into these ancient 'Silk Roads' (Xi, President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries, 2013). In the beginning of the BRI, it can be said, there was the Word, not the policy. And by virtue of Xi's words, and the narrative space he created, material policies could grow all the more rapidly. Xi's strategic forte exemplified by the BRI should not be misunderstood: the project is poorly defined and opaque, and the narrative was partly designed, but also improvised and revised many times. Yet, the very fact that the BRI was launched by narrative means implies that, however imperfect, Xi created a literary device that can be used time and again to celebrate relatively small successes in light of the greater victory ahead: China as an imperishable power and an indispensable centre of world trade.

The EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy is the opposite: it projects norms but has no narrative. Unsurprisingly, the strategy's existence is barely known beyond the office walls of European ministries and think tanks. The issue is not that the EU, in this case, has forgotten to put the icing on the cake; rather, half the cake is missing, as the BRI shows that narratives exert their own power, which, in turn, amplify the material prowess of policy. In the case of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, the mutually enforcing machinery of narrative and material policy never got running, as internal competition between various EU bureaucracies and member states made it impossible to create a singular strategic narrative (Okano-Heijmans, 2021).

Although, since 2019, the EEAS has appointed an Ambassador-at-large for Connectivity, this office is too understaffed and too isolated to construct an EU-wide narrative while funding to put the lofty ambitions into practice is lacking (Okano-Heijmans, 2021). Europe's untapped power of materially impactful and geopolitically strategic storytelling lies, rather, in the potentially amplifying effects of the EEAS network of embassies and delegations and those of the member states. This potential can only be tapped when there is in fact a narrative to tell. EU and member-state leadership should take a leaf from Xi's

book and lead by force of narrative, initiating compelling stories that drive policies and shape interests. Von der Leyen, with her European Way of Life, shows it can be done. Xi shows it must be done, and that it must be done on a global level, to compete.

The issue resonates in the field of development assistance. The EU and its member states are the world's largest development donor (European Commission, 2019), but are recognised by few as such. Over the past two decades the US has stepped up its efforts to publicise and brand its development assistance. USAID legislation requires that all programmes under the Foreign Assistance Act 'be identified appropriately overseas as "American Aid"' (USAID, 2020). Likewise, since 2012, the UK government has required that 'aid from Britain will ... be badged with a Union Flag when it is sent overseas' (Department for International Development, 2012).

Around the same time, the EU issued guidelines on the use of the EU emblem, requiring beneficiaries of EU programmes at home and abroad to use the 'European emblem in their communication to acknowledge the support received under EU programmes' (European Commission, 2012). In 2018 an update on 'Requirements for implementing partners' with regard to 'Communication and Visibility in EU-financed external actions' was published, which deems it a matter of some importance that

“ *C&V [communication and visibility, auth.] measures ... must be designed as part of a structured communication and visibility plan developed by the partner concerned ... must be people-centred, adopting where appropriate a story-telling approach that emphasises the impact of action on individual lives, rather than administrative guidelines or budgets.*

(European Commission, 2018)

Conversely, China brands many different kinds of projects, including many commercial initiatives, as development assistance, whilst at the same time spending very little money on aid in the narrow sense (Fang, 2018). In so doing, it lends an aura of charity to big, visible projects, most importantly in the field of infrastructure. This has helped Chinese aid become highly visible relative to its actual size. Moreover, as we have seen before, it has made its aid-branding part of a larger narrative, that points to the emancipatory potential of a post-Western world.

The Anglo-Saxon approach has some clear disadvantages. It reeks of neo-colonialism and undermines the authority and agency of local governments. Although it may invigorate national pride in donor countries, it diminishes the altruistic quality that pride may have. When it comes to the EU, more importantly, the biggest issue is not diminishing support for development aid at home, which was cited as the main reason behind the UK's branding spree. Recent figures indicate that more than 73% of EU citizens believe aid spending by the EU and its member states should either stay the same or increase (Chadwick, 2019).

The EU and its member states are not better served by Anglo-Saxon fanfare, nor by Chinese sophistry. Europe may benefit, however, from cunningly making use of narrative power to increase the impact of the money it spends on aid. How? Paradoxically, the Commission's requirements for communication and visibility above already point to the answer: storytelling, but on a large scale. Europe must breathe life into the institutional instruments in place by exercising narrative leadership, making aid, connectivity and foreign policy parts of a larger narrative that explains the story *Europa's* vital value to the world. Furthermore, Europe can competitively distinguish itself by offering budgets for local governments of recipient countries to cobrand with the EU: celebrating shared successes in a way that adds to, rather than undermines the agency and self-worth of local audiences. Europe must show *and* tell.

The European reluctance to celebrate victories is not only a missed opportunity but also a strategic weakness that has indeed been exploited in recent times. A virulent mix of braggadocio and smear coming from geopolitical competitors has made its mark on European discourse during the COVID-19 crisis.

The Chinese leadership knows it has long struggled to project soft power or an attractive national image on the global stage. As a consequence of China's ascent and the growing liabilities and responsibilities associated with this power, of the escalation of animosities in messaging between Washington and Beijing during the Trump administration and of the PR calamity that the COVID-19 outbreak was feared to be, the Chinese leadership has been experimenting with more audacious forms of public diplomacy. 'Face mask diplomacy', as China's COVID-19 publicity campaign has come to be known, exposes an important strand of insecurity in China's self-image as a great power.

Even though many European countries were quick to deliver aid to China as the epidemic emerged, with EU officials noting exchanges of over 50 tonnes of medical supplies in January alone, European messaging was deliberately muted, in response to Chinese requests to maintain a low profile. When the crisis hit Europe, Chinese assistance arrived all the same, although commercial exchanges of medical supplies far exceeded aid volumes. Ironically, Chinese government, state-owned and private enterprises, local Chinese communities and other actors amplified well-coordinated and locally tailored messages of Chinese leadership and charity (ETNC, 2020).

The Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic is among China's most vocal supporters, spreading billboards across the country thanking Xi. In an official address announcing a state of national emergency, Vucic said:

“ *European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairytale on paper.*

(Evans, 2020)

Serbia is not an EU state, but a candidate member, neighbour and recipient of EU aid. Italy is another interesting case: after the EU declined Italy's request for aid under the Civil Protection Mechanism, Chinese parties (state and private) provided 30 tons of medical supplies for Italy (Verma, 2020). This was accompanied by a relentless social media campaign, using both anonymous bot accounts as well as the embassy's own media to amplify China's message (Ghiretti, 2020). Later, the European Commission did provide Italy with aid for medical equipment and offered a 'heartfelt apology' for not coming to Italy's aid initially. Several member states followed by treating Italian patients and sending medical equipment (Verma, 2020).

The next chapter in China's COVID narrative is unfolding as we speak: vaccine diplomacy. It raises the question of how a European leadership is preparing to project narratives of European effectiveness and solidarity, before these can be trumped by Chinese counter-narratives of division and inertia. Even more surprising has been the rise of Chinese disinformation tactics, which focus not on projecting a positive image for China abroad but on infusing European public discourse with polarising and negative messaging. EU vs. Disinfo is an EU desk aimed at mapping, checking and refuting disinformation tactics. A recent post by EU vs. Disinfo explains that disinformation is a form of storytelling; false claims narrated in a compelling way, in the full knowledge that people are generally poor at remembering facts and all the better at internalising narratives (EU vs. Disinfo, 2021).

Propaganda and disinformation are very different, both on a strategic and ethical level. China's recent experiments with this broad range of narrative interventions, however, come from a more profound and long-standing strategic concept of discourse power, *huayuquan*, which does not focus on attractiveness like soft power does, but rather on an actor's right to speak in a global arena of discursive competition dominated by a few powerful players. The current Chinese leadership recognises the West as discursively hegemonic and views breaking that hegemony as a matter of great, long-term priority.

A strategic outlook such as that showcased by the Chinese leadership blends material and immaterial forms of power and recognises offensive and defensive narratives as complementary rather than conflicting forces. Conceptually, it is poorly understood in Europe; its strategic usefulness has yet to be embraced; and instruments barely exist to fit European societies. China's experiments urge us to fill in these blanks, if Europe wants to have its voice heard in the future. Europe should innovate its strategic conception of the power of narrative, translate that into instruments that fit its sociopolitical model and geostrategic interests, and adapt its institutions to make targeted use of these instruments based on deep research into and localised data on audiences' grievances, aspirations and common interests. The biggest danger is only to react.

Epilogue: will the European hero please stand up?

The European narrative community is being changed; by means of influence, interference and by the sheer gravitational pull of China's ascent, the mechanics of European power and identity are irrevocably transformed. European leaders ought to start driving those changes. In accordance with the five main elements of powerful narratives, this essay has put forward arguments for making the European story machine more adaptive and competitive in its discursive relation to China.

Europe must more forcefully research the grievances and aspirations of its most important audiences in Africa, the Neighbourhood and in Europe itself. Broad strokes will not do; Europe must tailor its messaging to local audiences in regional contexts, building on extensive knowledge of how these audiences perceive Europe, what historic grievances fester and what future aspirations Europe can appeal to. European leaders ought not be reticent in addressing these grievances and aspirations, as ignoring them only leaves China easy discursive opportunities to take.

- *The EU should invest in deep, localised research into different regional audiences' aspirations, grievances, common interests, and values and connect that knowledge to the strategic formation of narratives in congruence with member states.*
- *In the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe, African leaders should be given an active role, addressing with European leaders historic grievances as well as aspirations as the basis for a new era of Afro-European strategic partnership.*
- *European governments should develop Mandarin-language messaging on WeChat, aimed at the Chinese diaspora community.*

European leaders should embrace the language of particularism, letting go of universalist value narratives. The European Way of Life is a potentially powerful but underused narrative, through which European leaders can more forcefully explain the existential worth of human rights, democracy and rule of law to Europe. Europe would be wise to relearn the grammar of community. It must dare to speak about the European way of life, its limits, its costs and the reasons it is worth defending. And it must dare to

speak the language of history, using the ancient civilisational roots of European society as a treasured resource for projecting powerful stories. This means casting as our hero 'Europe' the ancient civilisation, rather than the EU as a young political project. The costs of strategic autonomy ought to be explained as the collective sacrifices needed to protect European values. It would be wise to recognise that European society itself is a hero forged out of hegemonic struggle in order to overcome it. It has little need of enemies, but must emphasise time and again the costs of giving in to our own vices.

- *Act as the champion of the Rest: quickly play into future escalations between the US and China by displaying Europe as a partner for hedging against hegemonic strife.*
- *Rebrand European development assistance and Connectivity Strategy in unison.*
- *In the context of Connectivity Strategy, FPI and ODA, invest in structural capacity to cobrand successes of cooperation with third countries.*

The institutional setting in which strategic narratives are formed must be updated. Within the European narrative space, not all voices are equal; this is a fact widely recognised but rarely acknowledged. If member states want to play a part, and see a strong European narrative strategy as being in their own interest, they must start speaking for Europe in a strategic and coordinated fashion.

Reality will dictate, undoubtedly, that European messaging will come about through improvisation as well, and it is in this theatre of improvisation that those who dare speak up drive the story. Each member state should at least recognise that power and aim to seize it, if only momentarily and never exclusively for one's own. Via such a process a European geopolitical narrative will be formed and institutions must build the capacity to contribute to it. The Netherlands' China policy paper, as well as its recent Indo-Pacific Strategy, prove that taking initiative on strategically hot issues pays off. Member states should innovate on a European scale, by initiating debate, proposing ideas, forging alliances and driving structural change. The same should be done for a European Global Narrative Strategy.

If a more strategic European narrative is called for, a locus of strategic narrative formation must be established. The European Commission and Council should build capacity to exercise narrative leadership in the global arena, as it has done within Europe by virtue of the European Way of Life. Institutionally, this means a visible and proactive Stratcom unit that has a status able to amplify the capacity of member state diplomatic networks, EEAS delegations and embassies and the platform of the European Council and Commission Presidents.

- *Create a strategic locus to coordinate the EU's and EU member states' joint narrative formation.*
- *Pool narrative capacity of member states' diplomatic networks, EEAS and the office of the European Council President and the Commission President.*
- *Develop a new conceptual framework for European narrative power and translate that into concrete instruments for diplomats, policy makers, strategic communication-experts and political leadership.*
- *Build capacity to study and counter Chinese disinformation, but go beyond the reactive mode, to chart and diminish the trend of declinism through which it festers.*

A more strategic European narrative, crucially, means a more empathetic and research-driven communication strategy. The various audiences within Europe, but also in the European neighbourhood and Africa, are badly under-researched. Opinion research into concrete and local grievances, aspirations, common interests and values, and perceptions of the EU should be conducted in a wide range of regional settings. To this end, historic or current ties between member states and third countries should be pooled. European thought leadership has to reconceptualise and instrumentalise the fundamental power that narrative bears in our age.

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