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## **#19 The Power of Narrative: An Analysis of Research Commissioned by the Dutch China Knowledge Network**

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### **Key Takeaways**

- A European global narrative should be tailored to local contexts, addressing grievances and aspirations rather than relying on universal, one-size-fits-all messaging.
- China is increasingly filling geopolitical and economic “gaps” left by the EU, gaining influence by aligning with local development needs in regions such as the Western Balkans, Latin America, and parts of the Arctic.
- The success of both Chinese and European influence depends strongly on perception and credibility, especially whether each side’s narrative matches local expectations and needs.
- CKN research shows a dual reality: China creates strategic risks for Europe (dependency, technology transfer, influence over standards) but also provides opportunities in trade, investment, and cooperation.
- Europe’s key challenge is to build strategic autonomy while balancing risks and benefits, combining protection of its values with more effective and adaptive global communication.

## **Executive Summary**

The text argues that Europe needs to fundamentally rethink its global narrative in response to China's rise. The central idea is that Europe must "change the narrative, change the game" by moving away from universal messaging and instead developing a more flexible and targeted communication strategy. This approach should respond to local grievances and aspirations, emphasise shared interests, and adapt to different regional audiences while maintaining credibility by ensuring that European actions match its stated values.

A key theme in the analysis of China Knowledge Network (CKN) research is that China is actively filling strategic and economic gaps left by the EU. In regions such as the Western Balkans, China positions itself as a provider of infrastructure and financing where EU integration processes are slow or stalled. In Latin America, Chinese engagement is partly driven by anti-colonial sentiment and development needs, while at the same time exposing the value of European principles such as transparency and environmental protection. In the Arctic regions, China similarly expands its presence in areas where European engagement is limited, using economic and scientific initiatives to strengthen its position.

The text emphasises that influence is largely determined by narrative perception. China is effective where its role aligns with local expectations, while the EU's influence depends on how convincingly it communicates the benefits of its standards, rules, and values. At the same time, China's global strategy is not purely local but embedded in broader geopolitical competition and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as rivalry with the United States.

CKN research highlights both risks and opportunities in Europe's relationship with China. Risks include growing dependencies, potential loss of technological control, and strategic influence through standards-setting and supply chains. However, China also remains an important partner in terms of investment, market access, knowledge, and industrial cooperation, which supports European competitiveness.

Overall, the conclusion is that Europe must pursue strategic autonomy while carefully balancing cooperation and competition with China. This requires protecting European interests and values while also improving its ability to communicate effectively across diverse global audiences.