

#3 Will the European hero please stand up?

Authors: Ties dams & Monika Sie Dhian Ho

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Key Takeaways

- 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.

Recommendations

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. European governments should develop Mandarin-language messaging on WeChat, aimed at the Chinese diaspora community.
4. 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.
5. Rebrand European development assistance and Connectivity Strategy in unison.
6. In the context of Connectivity Strategy, FPI and ODA, invest in structural capacity to cobrand successes of cooperation with third countries.

Executive Summary

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 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 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. 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.