

#26 Undercurrents: essays below the surface of China's geopolitics

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Key Takeaways

- The text introduces “undercurrents” as hidden beliefs, emotions, and dynamics shaping China–US relations and broader geopolitics, often beyond what is visible in policy or rhetoric.
- A central “paradox of understanding” emerges: as geopolitical tensions rise, the need for insight increases, yet channels for obtaining that understanding shrink.
- The essays highlight four major undercurrents: irony (mutual mimicry between China and the US), history (the weight of narratives shaping policy), psychology (emotions and identity in geopolitics), and Europe’s self-conception.
- The collection argues for deep, context-heavy understanding of China, emphasizing that simplistic or reductive interpretations risk misjudging both China’s role and Europe’s strategic positioning.

Policy Recommendations

- Invest in broad, deeply grounded knowledge of China, including informal and contextual insights (“whisper circuits”), to complement official data and analysis.
- Avoid reductive or binary narratives (e.g., democracy vs autocracy) and instead acknowledge complexity, diversity, and internal contradictions within China.
- Develop long-term strategic thinking that integrates historical trajectories, future scenarios (e.g., demographic change, climate adaptation), and geopolitical evolution beyond US–China rivalry.
- Strengthen Europe’s own narrative and strategic identity, focusing not only on reacting to China but defining its role based on shared interests, internal cohesion, and socio-economic resilience.

Executive Summary

This introduction frames the concept of “undercurrents” as hidden but powerful forces, beliefs, emotions, and structural characteristics, that shape China’s evolving role in the global order. Drawing on the metaphor of crossing a river, it argues that geopolitical decisions are rarely straightforward: unseen forces beneath the surface often determine outcomes. Contemporary

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leaders such as Putin, Xi Jinping, and Biden are portrayed as navigating such uncertain waters, where misreading these undercurrents may lead to costly errors.

The central analytical framework is the “paradox of understanding”: as tensions between states increase, the need to understand each other grows, yet the channels through which such understanding is gained deteriorate. This paradox is evident in US-China relations, where diplomatic exchanges have weakened, and in Sino-European relations, where sanctions have even targeted researchers. As a result, analysts increasingly face conditions reminiscent of the Cold War, relying on limited information to interpret complex strategic intentions, thereby increasing the risk of miscalculation.

The essays in the volume respond to this paradox by emphasizing the importance of deep, context-rich knowledge. Contributions span journalism, history, economics, cultural theory, and philosophy, collectively arguing against superficial or overly simplified interpretations of China. They highlight the importance of informal knowledge networks, contested historical narratives, cultural ambiguity, and structural economic dynamics in shaping China’s trajectory. The analysis also underscores that Western perceptions of China are often intertwined with internal contradictions, including inequality, political polarization, and uncertainty about globalization.

From this diversity of perspectives, the editor identifies four key undercurrents. First is irony, particularly in US-China relations, where both powers define themselves in opposition to each other while simultaneously adopting similar strategies, from industrial policy to global initiatives. Second is history, which weighs heavily on present dynamics; China’s leadership actively mobilizes historical narratives as instruments of power, while policymakers often struggle to integrate long-term historical perspectives into strategic planning. Third is psychology, referring to the role of emotions, identity, and perception in international relations. These factors are often neglected in favor of rational, structural models. Fourth is Europe’s narrative identity, as European actors confront the challenge of defining their geopolitical purpose in a world increasingly shaped by US–China rivalry.

The text concludes that understanding China requires moving beyond surface-level observation to engage with these deeper forces. Rather than offering definitive solutions, the collection aims to complicate and enrich analysis, encouraging policymakers and researchers to critically reflect on their own assumptions. In doing so, it suggests that navigating current geopolitical tensions depends less on decisive “crossing of rivers” and more on the ability to perceive and interpret the undercurrents that ultimately determine outcomes.