
LET'S NOT BE 'NAIVE' WITH CHINESE PARTNER, SAYS SENIOR MEP

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With the US, its closest ally, treating it as a threat to national security, the EU is looking more and more to China to maintain a rules-based world order.

In Beijing on Monday (16 July), the EU and China committed to conclude as quickly as possible a bilateral agreement on investment.

"China is a strategic partner," Jo Leinen, the chairman of the European Parliament delegation for relations with China, told EUobserver.

But within this evolving partnership, "we have to define more concretely where we have a strategic interest and where we have conflict," he said in an interview ahead of the summit.

"We should not be too naive and comfortable in our approach with China," he insisted.

Leinen, a Social Democratic MEP from Germany, noted that Europeans and Chinese have a common interest in implementing the Paris climate agreement from which US president Donald Trump pulled out, as well as on security issues.

But the MEP pointed out "growing frictions" on economic issues, which are "at the heart of EU-China relations."

"China is not a market economy, there is not a fair competition between Chinese and European companies," he said.

He insisted that "Europe has to be prepared for [a] challenge and look for reciprocity."

"Chinese companies have an open market, European companies should have normal access to the Chinese market," he argued.

"If Chinese researchers take part in the Horizon 2020 programme, European companies should have non-discriminatory access to Chinese research programmes. If Chinese companies can use free internet in Europe, European companies should have the possibility to use the internet freely in China."

"There is a Chinese egoism that we cannot overlook," he added, referring to China's selective observance of the rules of the World Trade Organization - "step by step when it suits them, and

under pressure."

'Reminder - human rights are universal'

Leinen insisted however that talking to China was "the right approach", compared to Trump's "very destructive way" to address problems such as overcapacities or state-subsidies.

"The main challenge for them is the US," he noted.

"They like to have Europe as a partner against the US, that's clear on trade, and more and more on peace and security," he argued. "They see Europe as a global player that could mediate between them and the US and that could be ally against threats and challenges from the US."

From his role as EU parliament pointman, Leinen insisted that freedom and values were also a central issue in relations with China.

"We have to remind them that human rights are universal," he said.

There is a conflict [on the human rights issue] that is growing because repression is growing after the last party congress," he added.

The MEP, who said he has been interested in China since his student days but was never a Maoist, noted that "communism dominates the whole society," especially since the 'Xi Jinping Thought' - named after the current Chinese leader - was introduced as a new official doctrine last year.

He argued that the doctrine, which states the Communist Party's "absolute leadership" and combines economic liberalism with social control, "creates mistrust."

No role model

In the current global "competition of models of society", Leinen admitted that China was "of course a role model for illiberal democrats, like Turkey's Erdogan, Russia's Putin or Hungary's Orban."

He argued however that "China will probably lose [because] they do not offer a model of society that is attractive."

"They are successful on economic development but they are not successful in political development," he argued.

China, which is already the second world economy behind the US, "will be number one in the world, in 20-30 years," Leinen observed.

In that process, a crucial question will be what it can do with its power.

"Is China the peaceful country that they are claiming or will they use their power to dominate their neighbourhood and whoever they can dominate?" the MEP asked.

"It can be a danger for Europe, as well as a partner to develop the world and to keep stability in the world," he said.

But for now, "this is something that is unclear."

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