
THE MEANING OF SYSTEMIC RIVALRY: EUROPE AND CHINA BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

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Europe is in the nascent stages of a new debate about China. Last year, the European Union published a strategic outlook paper in which it labelled China as a systemic rival, reflecting a sharp change in its balance of assumptions about the Sino-European relationship. The pandemic is tilting that balance further. This is certainly not happening out of preference: European policymakers would rather address the urgent health and economic challenges they face with geopolitical competition largely suspended. Pragmatic cooperation with Beijing to secure essential medical supplies remains at the top of the bilateral agenda for a number of European countries, while the need to revive shell-shocked economies will drive many of their decisions in the months ahead. But, even in the midst of the crisis, Chinas attempts to exploit political and economic vulnerabilities in Europe have necessitated pushback – be it against disinformation campaigns or attempts to target strategically important economic assets.

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