

Questions from the Audience:

There was a lively discussion stirred by the dialogue between Cheng LI and Sebastian HARNISCH. Here is a record of these questions and some answers by Dr. LI!

ON THE MIDDLE CLASS AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS:

Many audience members asked for a closer and more differentiating look at the middle class in the US/Europe and also at different points in time in the (People's Republic of) China:

1. The middle class in America and Europe are culturally similar, at least compared to the Chinese. Never before have we met such a range and different types of “middle class.” Would you say that the Western middle class will find a way to accept the Chinese middle class? Or is it more probable that the Chinese middle class will eventually become just like the Chinese middle class?
2. Xi Jinping’s “common wealth” project and the “common prosperity” project of Deng Xiaoping, in fact, have the same Chinese name: 共同富裕. So, what are their similarities and differences concerning the policies which are applied on the middle class? To me, it seems that Xi’s policies are much more hostile and less economy-oriented. They stressed more the political/nationalistic duties of the middle-class instead. Do you have any comment on that?
3. There is a crucial difference between patriotism and nationalism among the middle class. Many of my middle class friends in China, though patriotic themselves, are increasingly worried about the younger generation, middle class or not, who are getting more and more nationalistic. The concern is that the younger generation is getting less cosmopolitan even while getting richer. What do you think?
4. It has been argued that China’s middle-class population is highly connected to the Communist Party and has so far benefited most from the current politico-economic context. However, recently members of the Chinese middle class also express their reluctance to accept the ongoing reforms under Xi’s leadership such as being a target during the anti-corruption campaign. My question is, how do you view the interactions between the middle class and the leadership? How does the middle class affect Xi’s leadership?
5. Is the Chinese middle class actually coming closer to CCP with recent reforms, such as the restraint over big tech companies like Alibaba?
6. The Trump administration was emphasizing a distinction between the CCP and the Chinese people. What do you mean when you say that the US’s hostility towards China will push the middle-class to react? Or push the CCP to react?

ZOOMING IN ON EUROPE:

Quite a few questions addressed the issue of how different countries in Europe (should) react to China’s rise and whether China (i.e. the PRC) could also learn from Europe:

1. How should Europe react in terms of the China-US rivalry? Given the outsized US influence in Europe including in Germany, how can the EU achieve so-called “strategic autonomy”? Would you have any advice to the new German leader Mr Olaf Scholz in that regard?

2. China is exerting its economic influence on South-Eastern Europe in the last few years. Chinese investments measure in billions of dollars, and this approach has already had effects on diplomacy – a prime example being the vaccination efforts during the pandemic. These efforts are also visible elsewhere, on the African continent, for example. Do you see this as stumbling stone in future Asian-American relations? An additional comment: Mr Li mentioned the bombing of the embassy in Belgrade in 1999. People still remember that, and a large number of people are, therefore, still distrustful of the west. I am prone to think that China is yet to collect fruits of exerting its economic and soft power. In Belgrade, for example, a lot of parents decided to pay for Chinese language courses as they see it as investment for their kids' future in the region.
3. I don't see Germany as a power itself but instead as a part of EU, which is a group of nations based on values mirrored in our system of democracy. That system doesn't deny any people to tune in. But for about 30 years I am now hearing that the US or EU, or "The West" doesn't want China to rise. I always thought this isn't correct and just an unfounded suspicion. However, recently I can detect this is changing. Why? When China started to readjust its policy around 2012 and started showing intentions to interfere and change the rule-based international order, this is a moment where it doesn't sound so far-fetched that anyone in the so-called western value-based system wishes anyone to challenge or alter that hard-won system of participation – not only of middle class but of any citizen in our democratic system – should NOT rise. That's where I can see the growing antagonism.
4. How will the new idea of "Victory through Cognition" factor into China's strategies? Will it change how they choose to face military, economic, or political challenges?
5. While Taiwan Reunification has always been a Chinese aspiration, it is a pity that while China is getting strong it is not exhibiting the kind of quiet, calm, respectful attitude of West Germany towards East Germany in the 1970s which paved the way for reunification later. I would like to see more discussion of how the peaceful unification of Germany could serve as an aspiration for a peaceful solution of the Taiwan issue.

CHINA AND THE US: CONFLICT OR CONVERGENCE?

Another set of questions which were raised also addressed the problem of how best to communicate and whether, actually, the partners in this encounters are speaking the same language:

1. Someone said: "The problem is: China is playing Weiqi and the west is playing chess." What do we do with this "analysis"? It could be that understanding each other is more difficult, if you play different games....
2. There is an increasing impression that a unified Chinese order is encountering a fragmenting Western order, formerly under the hegemony of the United States. As a result, diametrically opposed ideas of norms are coming together. I refer here explicitly to international law. The same norms of international law are interpreted in different ways by both sides, i.e. we are talking about the same subject, but we are talking past each other, because different interests and motives shape the respective understanding of norms. Therefore, I ask myself whether it is possible to agree on a basic consensus of international law?

3. The essence of Reform and Opening up is that China has joined the international system led by the US and achieved great success from it. For China, it seems maintaining the existing international order is profitable. In fact, China has always been a supporter of the United Nations and other international organizations, and it always respects international law. Why does Western society still think that China is a challenger to the existing order, even a revisionist country?
4. Is it too late for de-coupling? Do you suggest that if the CCP doesn't change its political stand, the US has only one way to comply with the CCP in order to protect and preserve the American ideological and economic benefits?
5. Do you think as Chinese diplomacy gets more fierce, the Western perspective on Xinjiang can be moderated in the long term?

On ASIA and the AMERICAs

Finally, there was a question looking beyond China-US-European relations at Latin-America:

This talk refers to the USA-China-Europe relationships. America is much bigger than the USA with many countries right in the middle of this fight between these two powers. I think that the title I of the Encounters Series is misleading in this regard. Could you thus make some comments precisely on the opposition between China and the US in Latin America in general, as a sphere of influence which is being disputed (in many cases with dramatic consequences), as the most aggressive US strategies from the 70-80ties is being used again, today, supporting many coups and dictatorships in the region, precisely to keep their influence on these countries. This was most clear during the Trump administration, as he openly supported the coup in Bolivia and endorsed Bolsonaro, for example. How does this compare or relate to China's influence in the region?