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Understanding China:
Is Europe Up to the Task?

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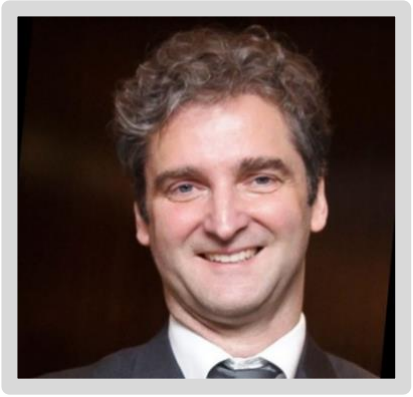

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The Fourth Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee (20–23 October, 2025) did not produce any breakthrough decisions. What it delivered instead was something far less tangible but more revealing: a change in tone. In the official communiqué, the word "security" appears twenty-seven times, while "innovation" is mentioned just three times. The ratio speaks for itself. China is no longer articulating its future in terms of growth, but in terms of survival. What Beijing presents as a strategy for safeguarding the system still tends to be read in Europe as a form of economic policy — and that disconnect is telling.

In Chinese political life, language is never merely a vehicle for communication. It is an instrument of power — and power itself is a process of assigning meaning.

This is why the terse statements issued after the October plenum of the Chinese Communist Party, including references to a "modern industrial system", should be read as clues to how China thinks and where it is heading. Beijing is crafting its own narrative of the world — one in which Europe appears, at best, as a point of reference rather than a central actor.

A Europe Adrift

The year 2022 marked the moment when Europe's shared language for describing China began to fall apart. Until then, pragmatism prevailed: Beijing was viewed as a difficult yet indispensable partner — a source of raw materials and a vital export market. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine upended that equilibrium. After February 2022, everything became a matter of security — including the words we use.

Since then, the European Union has struggled to find balance in how it speaks about China. The same three labels continue to appear in European Commission documents: partner, competitor, systemic rival. At successive European Council meetings, leaders have repeated that Europe must "reduce risk", that "dependencies must be diversified", that "resilience cannot be allowed to erode".

The difficulty is that no one can define with precision what that risk actually is — or where it begins.

The concepts Europe uses to frame its approach to China are largely imported from American strategic vocabulary: resilience, containment, strategic autonomy. In Polish translations they blend with business jargon; in German debates they intersect with industrial doctrine; in French discourse they resonate with the republican ethos of sovereignty. What is missing is a shared conceptual ground from which China can be understood as a cognitive reality, not merely a geopolitical actor.

Europe has begun to reach for terms taken from someone else's toolbox — convenient, yet fundamentally ill-fitting. Meanwhile, Beijing has relied on a lexicon of its own: security, stability, self-sufficiency, harmony. Western audiences often take these terms at face value, unaware that in the Chinese political tradition the word "security" (安全) does not simply denote the absence of threats, but rather the authority to define what constitutes a threat in the first place.

When Xi Jinping spoke of "technological self-reliance", Brussels interpreted it as an industrial strategy rather than an ideological statement. It was at this point that a deeper perceptual split emerged: Europe was describing China through the language of risk management, while China was describing the world through the language of meaning management.

The cognitive frameworks diverged. The same phrases, the same cadence — yet entirely different semantic weight. In effect, an invisible crossroads opened up between the two

worlds, one in which each side believed it was responding to the other, while in truth it was engaged only with its own reflection.

Language as Economy

The communiqué from the Fourth Plenum reads like a technocratic manifesto. Phrases such as "a modern industrial system", "new quality productive forces" (新质生产力), or "a reasonable share of industry in GDP" appear neutral, yet they are saturated with ideology. 新质生产力 is not a promise of innovation, but a formula of mobilisation: an industrial base able to shift from civilian to military production, and technologies designed to serve the state rather than the market. In this logic, the economy becomes a form of security — and security becomes an economic category of planning.

Western agencies tend to analyse the plenum through the lens of growth, but the core lies elsewhere. Xi Jinping is not talking about "a new development model", but about "the concentration of forces" (集中力量) — a concept that implies not decentralisation but the tight coupling of science, the military and industry into a single circuit. It is a vision of the state as a laboratory of total mobilisation — not military, but cognitive.

In this sense, Europe loses what is most essential when it reads Chinese statements in English. Translation smooths the tone. "A reasonable share" becomes a technical indicator in English, while in the original it functions as a warning: industry must not shrink — it is the guarantor of the state's ability to endure.

Some Countries Are Learning

In Stockholm, analysts at FOI have for years studied China's strategic documents, treating Party language as a coded system. In Copenhagen, researchers at the Danish Institute for International Studies examine how the word "green" (绿色) in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative refers not to ecology but to energy security. France's Ifri and the Institut Jacques Delors teach that the Chinese notion of "innovation" (创新) has little to do with the liberal understanding of creativity — it is closer to an enhancement of control.

Taiwan goes even further. Institutions such as National Chengchi University and the Prospect Foundation have long run workshops for diplomats and journalists from around the world, showing how to detect shifts in the tone of Xinhua's messaging. Taiwan understands that the future begins with language: what Beijing describes today as "reform" may tomorrow mean "closure".

In Poland, work on Chinese literacy takes a quieter, more organic form. At the Centre for Asian Affairs at the University of Łódź, Professor Dominik Mierzejewski has spent years reading daily releases from China's state media, tracing changes in official vocabulary. He follows how, in Party communications, emphasis moves: when "cooperation" starts to mean "control", and "development" becomes "subordination". He does not simply translate documents — he listens to them.

In this way, Poland is beginning to develop what could be called the early grammar of meanings: a practice that anticipates policy because it starts with words, long before any strategy is formulated.

The institutions of the European Union would do well to learn from these examples of disciplined attentiveness. For now, however, they continue to translate the world into their own familiar categories — as though language were a neutral medium rather than a contested space.

If Europe is to build a shared competence in dealing with China, it will need to rely on the microscopic laboratories of understanding in which language is the object of inquiry, not merely decorative phrasing. It is in these spaces that genuine cognitive autonomy begins to take shape.

Chinese literacy

Knowledge is not a collection of facts but the ability to understand them within the context in which they were produced. To form a position on China and craft a coherent strategy, Europe must acquire Chinese literacy — the capacity to grasp China in its own conceptual terms. It requires recognising that words are maps — and that a flawed map leads one astray faster than the absence of a map at all.

In the language of the Chinese Communist Party, the noun “modernisation” (现代化) may imply militarisation; “opening” (**开放**) can mean controlled expansion; and the phrase “common development” (共同发展) may denote the creation of a hierarchy of dependencies. For a European reader these appear as variants of economic vocabulary; for China, they are a means of structuring the world.

Europe, in attempting to respond to the challenge posed by China, has drifted into mimicry. It adopts terms that sound timely and sophisticated — strategic autonomy, de-risking, green transition — yet forgets that each carries its own history, often not Europe's own. Borrowing vocabulary without understanding its origins leads to a form of cognitive bifurcation: the words exist, but they do not connect into a coherent web. They lose the meaning grounded in lived experience and begin to lead an independent life, endlessly repeated in documents, reports and panel discussions.

In this way, the world becomes stratified. Instead of a shared field of meaning, we are left with multiple parallel languages that merely simulate communication.

Europe possesses excellent tools for measuring the world, but very poor tools for understanding it. It can calculate China's share of global trade, predict the trajectory of the renminbi, or estimate the value of rare metals — yet it struggles to read what these numbers mean within China's political grammar. When the Fourth Plenum communiqué refers to "maintaining a reasonable share of industry in GDP", European media treat it as if it were a note from a central bank. But in the language of the Party, it is a warning: industry is not merely an economic sector, but a pillar of state power; its contraction would signal a breach in the political order.

The absence of this awareness creates a form of semantic dependence — far more dangerous than economic dependence. It is a condition in which we use Chinese concepts without grasping their function. We repeat phrases such as "modernisation with Chinese characteristics", "a moderately prosperous society", or "new quality productive forces",

without recognising that each carries its own value system. In European universities, Chinese documents are cited as though they were neutral texts; in government, they are translated from English versions; in public debate, they are used as synonyms for progress.

Cognitive sovereignty is the ability to engage with another system of concepts without losing one's own language. For Europe, this requires rebuilding an internal interpretive capacity — from linguists and anthropologists to security analysts. For Poland, it presents an opportunity for a new role: not peripheral, but interpretive. We are accustomed to living at crossroads — between East and West, North and South — and this positions us well to become a place where Europe learns to listen to the Far East. But only on the condition that, in our own approach to China, we abandon the slogans and begin to read its language as it is meant to be read.

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CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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