Where are you heading, European Union?

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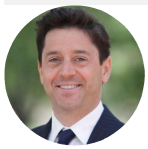
Mar 22, 2024



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The European Union institutions and its member states continue to hold diverse positions on how to approach China. Unexpectedly, there have been a recent series of measures, declarations, and actions over the past two months, all designed to emphasize the divergences between both parties.

EU co-legislators recently introduced a prohibition on imported goods produced using forced labor on March 5th, reflecting weaknesses and further shortcomings in leadership decision-making and geopolitical strategy rather than strengthening them.

The provisional ban raises questions about its consistency, effectiveness, and geopolitical impact, as well as the EU's purported moral integrity in leading global human rights issues. Additionally, it prompts scrutiny of the measures' efficacy beyond mere symbolic gestures.

The primary intention seems to be aligning with Washington's stance, following a similar approach, notably targeting the region of Xinjiang, China. Since June 2022, the U.S. Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act has prohibited the importation of goods, unless traders prove that those are not wholly or partly manufactured with forced labor. "Allegations" alone are sufficient to trigger enforcement, with companies bearing the burden of proof.

In contrast, the EU ban is less stringent, as it necessitates evidence of forced labor rather than solely relying on accusations. This requirement compromises its usefulness; obtaining such proof is tough, particularly given the distance of the region in question, located 5,000 kilometers away from Europe. How will "the Commission lead investigations outside the EU territory" with only a database? Additionally, if products manufactured with forced labor are not final goods but are diverted to another factory elsewhere or concealed within the supply chain, it raises questions about their traceability and subsequent accountability, as evidenced by sanctions to Russia in the wake of the war in Ukraine.

Moreover, the decision to penalize specific companies by withdrawing their products from national markets rests with the 27 EU countries independently, adding complexity to an already ambiguous regulatory background. Member states often rely heavily on trade with China and have thus far resisted addressing concerns individually, fearing retaliation. Further challenges emerge when a sole state lacks a mechanism, potentially allowing unchecked foreign imports into the single market. Additionally, delegating such responsibility to national customs agencies raises concerns, as they are now tasked with making intricate political decisions beyond their usual duty.

The objective would indeed be praiseworthy if applied universally to regions and countries where human rights violations occur. However, selective morality, overlooking similar issues elsewhere, undermines the stance. Trading with autocratic regimes and nations with poor human rights records not only undermines the EU's credibility but also suggests, as acknowledged by those recent measures on forced labor, that failing to actively address these issues may imply complicity in perpetuating abuses. This presents a significant and daunting challenge that cannot be ignored. Why are certain entities targeted while others remain unaffected?

Indeed, the ban on forced labor, paradoxically, appears to be fraught with risks. One might consider the importance of maintaining credibility by reassessing EU alliances, starting with the U.S., given its contentious history of human rights issues, including systemic racism, prison labor, instances of torture at Guantanamo. Similarly, partnerships with countries like India, contending with gender-based violence and discrimination against marginalized communities, or Russia, grappling with political suppression, rights violations, amid unjustified war; as well as Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Morocco, due to various human rights concerns, should underscore the necessity for a thorough and thoughtful reassessment of partnerships.

The EU institutions consistently present themselves as champions of citizens' rights and promoters of an improved quality of life, proudly upholding democratic principles, particularly the protection of human rights, which is commendable. However, what may not be as commendable is the growing divergence in this stance compared to that of China, without similar scrutiny of other nations. The visit of the Presidents of the European Commission and the Parliament, Von der Leyen and Metsola, respectively, to Israel while taking sides during the unselective bombing of the Gaza strip remains etched in memory.

Lastly, the measure appears to be another self-inflicted wound, especially considering Xinjiang's significant role as one of the largest global producers and importers of solar panels. This is particularly striking, given the EU's Green Deal, hailed as the pinnacle of virtue in the current European mandate. Yet, instead of seeking out alternative solar panel producers, EU policymakers are shooting down pleas from the European solar industry for emergency assistance to fend off cheap imports. It's like witnessing a comedy of errors unfolding one after another, with no end in sight—certainly not a happy one. Furthermore, it's becoming increasingly difficult to comprehend what the priorities are.

Hence, the initiative, while boldly announced, appears to lack substantial content, ultimately backfiring and causing self-inflicted damage. Its apparent ineffectiveness raises questions about its rationale, exposing the promoters. Similar to recent economic security measures, these actions may garner more attention than tangible impact.

The proposed ban on "products made with forced labor" raises effectiveness concerns beyond possibly straining relations with China, especially with the upcoming November elections in the U.S. With the prospect of Donald Trump winning the presidency, this could further pressure transatlantic relations and present hurdles for NATO's future and European security. In light of such uncertainties, why is Europe choosing to confront the second most relevant superpower? Would European leaders continue to obediently tow the White House line from next January 2025?

Those leaders have launched their campaigns, vying for re-election next June following the European Parliament ballot vote. Playing the China card irresponsibly in hopes of gaining more votes is shortsighted. Moreover, basing campaigns on such weighty foreign policy issues, or blindly following the U.S., which typically prioritizes strategic interests over human rights concerns, represents a major strategic blunder for the long term. Merely sharing ideological foundations is insufficient today, particularly for Europe, if the U.S. has consistently demonstrated assertiveness in geopolitics and protection of its own interests, regardless of any democratic imperative.

Therefore, the idea of forging a united democratic front between the U.S. and the EU to counter China's growing influence is a bit naive, with Europe being the guaranteed loser in such a scenario. While advocating for cooperation grounded in democratic principles is a noble goal, it oversimplifies the complex realities of current global geopolitics and neglects the significant challenges that the EU, at the very least, must contend with in its relationships with both the U.S. and China.

Certainly, China's model is synonymous with stringent political control, pragmatism, and a one-party system, prioritizing innovation and growth over individual liberties. Despite what European standards might consider constraints, China has made remarkable advancements. What Europe should focus on, without compromising the protection of human rights as much as possible within the scope of its competencies, is to regain ground in innovation and competitiveness.

Effective confrontation requires aligning trade with trade, human rights with human rights, and national security with national security. Otherwise, each power's efforts, especially in Europe, are not focused on the same battleground. The continued insistence of European leaders and representatives on the supremacy of democratic values, suggesting that this alone would lead the U.S. and EU to converge in confronting China, has proven unproductive.

The triumph of the European human rights-driven model, reaffirming the supremacy of liberal democracy, appears unattainable in the current global setting. The solution for the EU is clear: it must become truly more geopolitical. The EU's steadfast emphasis on global citizens' welfare starkly contrasts with prevailing realpolitik dynamics, underscoring a fundamental clash in priorities in today's assertive world. The EU leaders should engage in a nuanced exploration of balancing actual citizens' rights and geopolitical influence.