

Interview – Ties Dams

Written by E-International Relations

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Ties Dams is a Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute, the Netherlands' leading independent think tank. Whilst focusing on Chinese geopolitical strategy, he holds in-depth expertise on both great power discursive or narrative strategy as well as geopolitical risk and financial markets with special attention placed upon China's importance to European investors. In addition to his research work at Clingendael, he has published a bestselling book on the life and rule of president Xi Jinping titled *De Nieuwe Keizer*, frequently appears on radio and television as a geopolitical expert, and teaches a masterclass at the University of Amsterdam on geopolitical strategy. His expertise in China has grown over the course of his studies in political theory in the Netherlands, the UK and China. A selection of publications include *China and Liberal Values in International Relations: Opposing the Promotion of Democracy, Human Rights and Liberal Market Economy*, *China's Soft Power in Europe Falling on Hard Times* and *Will the European hero please stand up? An essay on European global narrative strategy*.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

What's exciting to me is that the geopolitical context of European international political thought is quickly changing, turning what seemed to be trusted maxims of IR and related fields such as macroeconomics on their heads. Two geopolitical developments stand out in my own research: first, the ascent of the first non-Western superpower, China, and second, the re-emergence of a European geopolitical consciousness. What does it mean to be Europe in a world that is no longer dominated by European, or even Anglo-Saxon, ideas of power?

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I think being in Asia for longer periods of time guided me through a process of escaping the provinciality of Dutch intellectual-political life. I think, for a while, this led me to fall into another trap: namely, being slightly obsessed with turning the 'otherness' of Asian societies into critiques of Western society. The second big intellectually formative event for me was simply returning to Holland, serving in the Dutch government, making a home, and starting a family. It taught me that while it is crucial to always look at one's own point of view on the world as if it is one of an 'outsider', and vice versa, a person cannot help being rooted in some point in space and time. There is no escaping a particularist perspective when looking at international relations. That doesn't have to be a bad thing, but it does imply letting go of universalist pretensions as well as purely deconstructive self-criticism.

In your recent work on geopolitical narratives, you write about the strength of China's story and Europe's lack of effective response. How can an effective narrative benefit global powers in their political aims?

The main premise of the argument, not often taken seriously enough by IR scholars I believe, is that human beings, societies and consequently states are narrative beings; we need a priori frameworks of meaning to get around the world, and those frameworks often have a narrative structure. Simply said, we understand and deal with problems and each other through stories, often without knowing that's what we do. If one accepts that premise, it follows logically that in trying to influence others, or exercising power, states attempt to shape the storylines through which we understand the world. Countries like Russia and China and the US do so quite consciously, strategically and in some cases even effectively. European powers exercise narrative power too, but not strategically.

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To what extent does disinformation play a part in establishing and maintaining state narratives?

Disinformation is a terrible word because it implies the point of it is to disrupt the information space, whereas the champions of disinformation know quite well that information on its own is worthless; it is the narrative in which the information is wrapped up, or indeed the narrative the disinformation is aimed at disrupting, that really matters. China and Russia know this: the point of spreading Covid-*quatsch* is not primarily the chaos and grief it causes, but the lack of trust in Western institutions and the stories it inflames.

How have recent crises affected the European psyche in terms of the union's own self-image and support from citizens? Will this be an obstacle to the formation of an effective "European Way of Life" narrative?

I think there are at least two conflicting developments in Europe's self-image. On the one hand, narratives of decay, division and decadence have gained momentum. On the other hand, especially among young Europeans, there is a growing awareness of the need for Europe as a provider of security and geopolitical unity. The 'European Way of Life' narrative tries to play into both. It needs to confront the myth of decay with a narrative of aspiration, explaining what the European Way of Life will achieve in years to come; and it will need to explicate what it wants to protect from geopolitical strife and what the costs of protection will be.

How has China's narrative affected its geopolitical aims, particularly in the European neighbourhood, and how can the EU compete?

I think China has successfully carved out a narrative space for alternatives to Western modernity, sometimes to the detriment of Europe's soft power, but at the very least to relative gains in legitimacy of China's model of development. Especially in different parts of Africa, it has succeeded in projecting a strong, positive image. China trains thousands of African journalists every year, has opened dozens of Confucius Institutes, and invests deeply in diplomatic ties on all levels – from continent to township. The European neighbourhood is far more conflicted. Europe will need to relearn the power of narrative. It will need to explain in a detailed and engaging manner why sharing the European way of life tackles the grievances and lifts the aspiration of specific regional audiences. It will need to do that across the world, but the European neighbourhood ought to have priority. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, saying that the European neighbourhood is engulfed in flames doesn't help: Europe will need to project a sportive story for common development.

How enmeshed is the European stance on China with the USA's aims, and will the Biden administration take the lead?

Biden's stance on China is more problematic to European interests than Trump's was because European leaders have a far harder time saying no to Biden than they had to Trump. By encapsulating the China issue in a Manichaeic narrative – a world of good and evil, of democracies versus autocracies, only one can survive – Biden is cunningly playing into the European self-image. Ask a European, will you fight a war to save Taipei? The answer is probably 'no'. Ask a European to fight to save democracy, well, the debate changes. The big question now is, of course, will Biden be able to focus on China or will his administration's foreign policy, too, get stuck in the Pandora's box Bush opened in Afghanistan?

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Honestly, most advice is as well-intentioned as it is useless, usually saying more about the person giving advice than about you. Don't get lost in the academic reality of IR – it is really not that interesting to spend a career trying to add a footnote to debates between, say, constructivists and post-structuralists. IR theorists are generally bad at theory, so I would say, better go to a somewhat ecumenical philosophy or history department and you'll have a far better time. Also, travel lots, read widely, always raise your hand to ask a question and never hesitate to do the thing that you secretly really want to do. It is a lot easier to excel at the thing you're actually obsessed with but seems like a mission impossible than pretending to like doing what you think you'll get lots of credit for. Also, don't be afraid to get your real

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life going: I see many people waiting with getting their adult life started until they get their PhD, or post-doc, or tenure, or whatever the next thing is, and it just doesn't work. You'll write far better essays and books when your life is rooted in the wonderfully boring routines of a relationship, a family, or a pet.