Independence is key to meaningful research.

Beyond just trade
EU-China relations are as deep as they are broad

Thought Leader

The Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) is a European research institute which seeks to enhance knowledge about contemporary China in Europe. Based in Berlin, but with close connections to capitals across Europe, MERICS is harnessing global expertise to deliver nuanced insights into China and Chinese international relations. Countering the widespread misunderstanding of China which exists in European public debate, MERICS undertakes research and disseminates information through a multitude of channels. Research Outreach spoke with Mikko Huotari, the director of MERICS, about this important independent research.

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relations between China and Europe are commonly affected by mutual misunderstandings, and by partisan accounts which lead to confusion or hostility. At times, Europeans might feel there is a conspicuous absence of verifiable and trustworthy research into contemporary China.

MERICS was founded in 2013 to undertake precisely this sort of rigorous research. As a think tank with close ties to numerous European cities – most notably Berlin and Brussels – MERICS sets out to shape and inform public debate about China. It utilises the collective expertise of a broad team of global experts to conduct interdisciplinary research which spans a range of China-related topics. We spoke with the Executive Director of MERICS, Mikko Huotari, to learn more about how the think tank works, and about the diverse projects it is involved in.

What is the aim of the Mercator Institute for China Studies?

The Mercator Stiftung in Essen established MERICS in 2013 because key stakeholders had identified a lack of knowledge on China in public discourse, not only in Germany but in Europe as a whole. Our institute plays an active role in informing European public debates on China and in providing senior decision-makers across Europe with in-depth, China-related insights critical to their portfolios. We have developed a wide variety of formats – from podcasts and videos to short analyses and longer, in-depth studies – to be able to fulﬁl the demands of these different groups. Our research is independent and firmly grounded in liberal-minded and democratic values. Our experts cover a wide range of topics from domestic politics, foreign and security policy to economics as well as science, innovation, and technology – with a focus on contemporary China and its relations with Europe and the wider world.

How did you come to be involved with the organisation?

MERICS was the place to be for impactful and independent research on contemporary China in Europe. When it was founded in 2013, I was initially hired as a researcher for the research program on China’s economy in early 2014 and since then have had the pleasure to lead several work streams at MERICS and shape its trajectory as team leader, as well as Deputy Director since June 2018 and as Executive Director since February 2020.

Can you tell me a bit more about the interdisciplinary research you conduct? What are your main research areas?

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MERICS offers different types of fellowships. How do you choose which scholars and experts to work with, and how do they benefit from being a Fellow? The MERICS fellowship program aims to attract distinguished as well as emerging thought leaders on China from academia, think tanks, the policy-making and business community, and the media. Fellows work closely with our research team, often pursuing individual research priorities and contributing to wider MERICS research.

*Source Eurostat
Greening China is a long-term endeavor in progress
Long-term party goals require a green transformation

Efforts at the same time. While the MERICS Fellowship Program offers long-term opportunities of association, most fellows spend between two to six months at MERICS.

Currently, we have four types of fellowship at MERICS: Senior Fellows are outstanding international scholars and thought leaders on China who stay at the institute for up to six months. European China Policy Fellows are leading European experts on China or European-China relations. This fellowship stream is designed to strengthen pan-European China expertise and exchange and to serve as a foundation for deepening research partnerships with other institutions in Europe. Futures Fellows are talents and experts who join the MERICS ecosystem to develop innovative and promising project ideas to be pursued jointly after the end of the initial fellowship. (Senior) Associate Fellows are long-term collaborators and partners of MERICS and are nominated for the fellowship by the management board.

In this case, we have launched a joint project with a German think tank and technically complex topics like populism, decreasing trust in experts, and questions surrounding talent retention by fostering innovation and facilitating the exchange of best practice.

What are the future plans for MERICS? Since its establishment almost eight years ago, the institute has significantly expanded its reach and impact and is adjusting to new circumstances. This readiness for change is part of our DNA. The establishment of our membership model and of avenues for external project funding are important pillars of our professionalisation as a China think tank. One of my main objectives as Director is to turn MERICS into a truly European think tank. We are independent, but also demand-driven research institute that we have started to develop more bespoke offers for decision makers from business and the public sector: our MERICS membership program, launched in the first quarter of 2021. Members benefit from privileged access to certain publication series, to bespoke events and even tailor-made advice, depending on the level of membership. Apart from that, we are also engaging in project-based collaboration. We have cooperated with industry associations and other think tanks on China-related topics, and we also take on projects that are – sometimes partially – externally funded.

We are an independent, but also demand-driven research institute in the sense that we are keen on keeping the conversation with decision-making circles going, to respond to their needs regarding developments in China. But which topics are chosen for deeper scrutiny is our own decision; independence is key to meaningful research.

Is there a certain project or learning experience that you’d like to tell us about? One particular focus of our research is digitalisation, innovation, and technology in China. Topics we are working on in this area include the ethics of AI, the development of open-source software, blockchain and IoT (Internet of Things) technology in China. Especially China’s role in the semiconductor value chain poses difficulties to the economies of European Union member states. To cover multi-faceted and technically complex topics like this one, we welcome opportunities to cooperate with partner organisations. In this case, we have launched a joint project with a German think tank...