

NAVIGATING THE GEOPOLITICAL TIGHTROPE: THE COMPLEX DYNAMICS OF SINO-EU RELATIONS IN A SHIFTING WORLD ORDER

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Abstract

In recent years, a discernible shift has occurred in the European Union's (EU) stance and policies towards China, prompted by a confluence of crises including different interpretation of human rights concept, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia as well as Sino-US tensions. Meanwhile, many European Union (EU) countries express skepticism about China's Belt and Road Initiative (the BRI), perceiving it as a potential threat to their national interests. In the event of a confrontation between the US and China, the EU is gradually inclined to align itself with the US. Despite its economic prowess, the EU, as a collective entity, is viewed as strategically limited when dealing with China, resorting mainly to technology and commercial restrictions. The EU finds itself walking a delicate line, leveraging its economic strength yet recognizing its strategic constraints in addressing the multifaceted relationship with China. In light of these developments, this article seeks to analyze the evolving dynamics of Sino-EU relations, leading to an inherently unstable partnership.

Keywords: China, EU, the BRI, US, Russia

Jeopolitik İp Cambazlığı: Değişen Dünya Düzeninde Çin-AB İlişkilerinin Karmaşık Dinamikleri

Özet

Son yıllarda, Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) Çin'e karşı tutumu ve politikalarında belirgin bir değişim yaşandı. Bu değişim, İnsan hakları kavramın farklı yorumlanması,

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Ukrayna ile Rusya arasındaki çatışma ve ABD ile Çin arasındaki gerginlik gibi krizlerin etkisiyle tetiklendi. Aynı zamanda, birçok Avrupa Birliği (AB) ülkesi, Çin'in Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'ne (BRI) ulusal çıkarlarına potansiyel bir tehdit olarak görmekte ve buna karşı kuşkucu bir tutum sergilemektedir. ABD ve Çin arasında bir çatışma durumunda AB'nin kendini ABD ile uyumlu hale getirmeye eğilimli olduğu belirtilmektedir. Ekonomik gücüne rağmen, AB, kolektif bir yapı olarak, Çin ile ilişkileri ele alırken stratejik olarak sınırlı olarak görülmektedir ve genellikle teknoloji ve ticari kısıtlamalara başvurmaktadır. AB, ekonomik gücünü kullanırken stratejik kısıtlarını tanıyan ve Çin ile olan karmaşık ilişkiyi ele alırken dikkatli bir çizgi izleyen bir konumda bulunmaktadır. Bu gelişmeler ışığında, bu makale, doğal olarak istikrarsız bir ortaklık olan Çin-AB ilişkilerinin evrilen dinamiklerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çin, AB, Kuşak-Yol Projesi, ABD, Rusya

Introduction

Since 1975, China and the European Union (EU) have navigated a complex relationship marked by fluctuating dynamics. Economic collaboration has thrived due to shared interests, yet their political disparities have introduced significant hurdles, leading to a scenario where interactions lean heavily towards economic cooperation while maintaining a chilly political rapport. Fundamental differences in governance, human rights, and geopolitical outlooks impede warmer political ties, with China's authoritarian regime contrasting starkly with the EU's emphasis on democratic values. Contrary to its initial wishfully thinking of China, in recent years, The EU perceives China as a systemic rival, contributing to a more confrontational approach, compounded by differences in values and regulatory standards, as well as technological competition and concerns about Chinese investments. This complexity leads to a strained relationship between China and the EU.

Both entities recognize the benefits of economic interdependence, yet ideological disparities and conflicting stances on global affairs shape a relationship characterized by cautious economic collaboration and restrained political engagement. This dual nature underscores the enduring economic ties amidst challenges in reconciling their contrasting political landscapes. The EU's mounting concerns regarding China's trajectory prompt a shift towards a more confrontational paradigm, aligning with the United States' containment strategy. Navigating these complexities, the EU seeks a balanced approach that addresses apprehensions about China's ambitions while acknowledging areas of cooperation. Collaboratively with the United States and Japan, the EU strategically leverages Western strengths to influence China, particularly in

market access, overcapacity, and technology transfer. Additionally, the EU engages in security affairs within the Asia-Pacific region to counterbalance China's influence.

The dynamic between the United States, China, and the European Union (EU) profoundly shapes global geopolitics. Tensions between the US and China reverberate in EU-China relations, influencing the EU's stance. Despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the close ties between Russia and China raise concerns among EU nations. EU countries have questioned China's motives behind initiatives like the Belt and Road, viewing them as potential threats to national interests. In a hypothetical US-China confrontation, the EU is expected to align with the US, though its influence may be limited beyond imposing certain restrictions on China. While the EU boasts economic strength, it remains strategically overshadowed by China. Cooperation exists in areas like climate change and energy, but the EU is wary of China's advancements in AI. Sino-EU relations have evolved under Xi Jinping's leadership, becoming politically tense while maintaining commercial interactions. The future promises a continuation of this dynamic, with the EU navigating its position amid global power shifts. This article endeavors to scrutinize the evolving dynamics of Sino-EU relations amidst an intrinsically unstable partnership.

This article endeavors to scrutinize the evolving dynamics of Sino-EU relations amidst an intrinsically unstable partnership. Commencing with an exploration of the historical trajectory of Sino-EU relations, the analysis subsequently delves into aspects affecting EU-China relations such as US-China tensions, the BRI as well as the Russian factor. By evaluating both the opportunities and challenges stemming from these dynamics, this study concludes by arguing the EU is poised to adopt a well-rounded strategy, sustaining its involvement with China while actively working to minimize potential risks and bolster resilience within its economic ties.

I. Theoretical Framework

As Casarini argues, EU-China relations as a scholarly field within the wider field of international relations (IR) has only recently begun to take clear shape.¹ In the complex tapestry of global geopolitics, the relationship between China and the European Union (EU) stands out as a multifaceted interplay of

¹ Nicola Casarini, "Remaking Global Order: The Evolution of Europe-China Relations and its Implications for East Asia and the United States," Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 4-5.

interests, ideologies, and interdependencies. While some scholars in the field of International Relations (IR) have examined the “rise of China” through the lens of trade dynamics, situating it within a liberal framework characterized by globalized economic interdependence, others have placed greater emphasis on notions of power, and multipolarity.² In the dominant realist paradigm, the European Union (EU) has not merely been perceived as an international organization but rather conceptualized as a unitary actor operating in an anarchic global system. Consequently, IR discourse has extensively discussed the Sino-EU relations around a “strategic triangle” of the United States, China and the EU, envisaging a multipolar balance of power in which no one actor can dominate.³

While traditional international relations (IR) theories, like realism and neoliberalism, offer valuable frameworks for analysis, the China-EU relationship defies simple categorization within these paradigms. Instead, it encompasses elements of both realism and neoliberalism, reflecting a fine balance of friction, cooperation, and competition that characterizes contemporary international affairs. Realism, with its emphasis on state-centric interests and power dynamics, provides insights into certain aspects of the China-EU relationship. From a realist perspective, both China and the EU countries pursue their national interests within the international system, often prioritizing strategic goals and maintaining their respective spheres of influence. China's assertive stance in the South China Sea and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the EU's efforts to assert itself as a global player through initiatives like the European Green Deal, exemplify this pursuit of national interest within a realist framework. However, reducing the China-EU relationship solely to *realpolitik* overlooks the significant economic and cooperative dimensions that define their interaction. Neoliberalism, with its focus on institutions, norms, and economic interdependence, offers additional insights into this relationship. China and the EU are not only major trading partners but also engage in extensive diplomatic dialogues, cultural exchanges, and collaborative initiatives on issues ranging from climate change to global governance reform.

² Jeremy Garlick, “A critical analysis of EU-China relations: towards improved mutual understanding,” *Contemporary European Studies*, 2013, Vol. 01, pp.51-70.

³ David Shambaugh, “China Eyes Europe in the World: Real Convergence or Cognitive Dissonance?”, in *China-Europe Relations: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects*, Edited by David Shambaugh, Eberhard Sandschneider and Zhou Hong, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 139-142.

The evolving dynamics of the China-EU relationship underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding that transcends the dichotomy between realism and neoliberalism. While competition and power struggles exist, they are intertwined with cooperation and mutual interests, reflecting a complex web of interactions that defy simplistic categorizations. Understanding the complexities of China-EU relations requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates both realist and neoliberal international relations theories. By examining the dynamics between these two major global actors through these theoretical lenses, we can gain insights into the interplay of cooperation and conflict across various dimensions, including their relations with the US, responses to the Ukraine-Russia war, and trade relations.

While recognizing the potential for conflict and friction between China and the EU, this study benefits from the insights of neoliberalism as advocated by Keohane and Nye⁴ since it provides useful concepts and analytical framework for a comprehensive analysis of the current dynamics of the Sino-EU relations. The concept of complex interdependence, as advocated by Keohane and Nye, resonates strongly in the context of China-EU relations. Beyond the traditional state-centric focus of realism, complex interdependence acknowledges the role of non-state actors, transnational networks, and soft power in shaping international relations. Civil society organizations, multinational corporations, and academic/cultural institutions play crucial roles in fostering cultural exchange, promoting dialogue, and facilitating cooperation between China and the EU. By recognizing the interplay between power politics and economic interdependence, as well as the role of non-state actors in shaping global affairs, we can better understand the dynamics at play.

Within the context of China-EU relations, complex interdependence emphasizes the role of non-state actors such as multinational corporations, civil society organizations, and transnational networks in shaping outcomes. These actors operate across multiple channels of interaction, influencing policy decisions, economic exchanges, and societal dynamics. In the context of EU-China relations, the BRI emerges as a prime example of complex interdependence, weaving together diverse actors and interests across continents. China's BRI aims to enhance infrastructure connectivity, trade, and investment along ancient Silk Road routes. For the EU, the BRI presents both

⁴ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition," Boston: Little, Brown, 1977.

opportunities and challenges. On one hand, European countries seek to benefit from increased trade and investment opportunities facilitated by the BRI's infrastructure projects. On the other hand, concerns regarding debt sustainability, environmental standards, and geopolitical implications have prompted cautious engagement and strategic recalibration within the EU.

While Keohane and Nye's concept of complex interdependence offers valuable insights into the dynamics of the EU-China relations, it also underscores the presence of vulnerabilities that threaten stability and cooperation.⁵ Applying Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's framework of vulnerabilities to the EU-China trade and political relations might help us to get a better understanding of the complexities of these relations. One such vulnerability in the EU-China relations is the asymmetry in economic interdependence. China's rapid economic rise and its state-led approach to trade and investment have led to concerns within the EU about market access restrictions, unfair competition, and violations of intellectual property rights. This power asymmetry leaves the EU vulnerable against China. At this point, one prominent vulnerability lies in China's state-led economy, characterized by significant government intervention and control. While this model has been influential in China's rapid economic growth and global influence, it also creates vulnerabilities for EU countries. China's state-owned enterprises often enjoy preferential treatment, including access to subsidies and market protection, which can distort competition and disadvantage EU businesses operating in China. Moreover, China's state-led economy contributes to imbalances in trade relations with the EU. The influx of Chinese goods into European markets, often at lower prices due to state support, can undermine domestic industries in EU countries, leading to job losses. This vulnerability is further strengthened by the EU's reliance on Chinese imports for critical goods and components, such as technology, raising concerns about strategic autonomy. Moreover, the proliferation of non-state actors further complicates EU-China relations. Multinational corporations operating in both the EU and China play a significant role in shaping economic interactions. While these corporations benefit from the opportunities presented by the EU-China economic relationship, they also face challenges such as navigating different regulatory environments and managing geopolitical tensions. Their actions and interests can sometimes diverge from those of the EU or Chinese governments, creating additional complexities and vulnerabilities in the

⁵ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition," 1977, New York: Longman, 2012, p.13.

relationship. Transnational issues such as climate change and global health also pose significant challenges to EU-China relations. Both parties recognize the importance of cooperation on issues like climate change and pandemic, yet differences in priorities and approaches can hinder progress. For instance, the EU has stringent environmental regulations and advocates for ambitious climate targets, while China's focus on economic growth sometimes conflicts with environmental concerns. This misalignment of interests underscores the vulnerability of EU-China cooperation on transnational issues.

Despite these vulnerabilities, both actors are bound by their economic interdependence, with trade and investment flows serving as stabilizing forces. Moreover, transnational networks of business, academia, and civil society further deepen ties between the EU and China, fostering cooperation beyond governmental spheres. However, the BRI's expansive scope and China's assertive approach have also raised concerns within the EU regarding fair competition, transparency, and adherence to international norms. Emphasizing multilateralism, rule-based cooperation, and institutional mechanisms, the EU aims to shape the BRI's trajectory in line with its own priorities and standards. As the EU seeks to safeguard its interests and values, it is engaging itself in a two-line struggle with China between competition on the one side, and cooperation on the other.

II. Twists and Turns in China-EU Relations

A. Initial Phase of Bilateral Relations

Since formal diplomatic relations were established between China and the precursor of the European Union, the European Economic Community, in May 1975, the bilateral relationship has undergone a tumultuous developmental trajectory. Initially, from the establishment of diplomatic ties until the close of the 20th century, both parties experienced a period of adjustment.⁶ During this time, the influence of the international strategic environment significantly outweighed the capacity and willingness of each side to independently cultivate their relationship. The mutual recognition and

⁶ Enrico Fardella, Christian F. Ostermann, and Charles Kraus (Edited), *Sino-European Relations During The Cold War and The Rise Of A Multipolar World*, pp.174-184, February 14, 2024, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/Sino_European_Relations_during_Cold_War_Rise_of_Multipolar_World_%282015%29.pdf

establishment of relations between China and Europe were influenced by shifts in the global landscape during the late Cold War era, constrained by strategic dynamics between China, the United States, and the Soviet Union (later Russia), as well as ideological divisions between East and West.⁷ Despite these developments, there was a notable absence of a robust economic foundation and cooperative mechanisms, leading to occurrences such as European sanctions against China and a decline in bilateral relations post-1989.⁸

Following a phase of warming, China-EU relations entered a period of rapid advancement in the early 21st century. This was characterized by the signing of several political agreements, culminating in the establishment of a "constructive partnership geared towards long-term stability in the 21st century" (1998)⁹ and a "comprehensive partnership" (2001).¹⁰ Concurrently, economic and trade cooperation between the two entities flourished. In 2003, on the eve of the EU's expansion to the east, both China and the EU actively sought to adopt a strategic perspective on their relationship, resulting in the establishment of a "comprehensive strategic partnership." This period also witnessed China issuing its inaugural policy document on the EU, marking a period of heightened engagement between the two parties.¹¹

⁷ Cai, Fangbo, "Zhōng-Ōu guānxì 70 nián fāzhǎn lìchéng huígù yǔ zhǎnwàng"(Review and Outlook of the 70-Year Development Course of China-Europe Relations), date of access: January 2, 2024, <http://comment.cfisnet.com/2019/0619/1316479.html>.

⁸ Oliver Bräuner, Beyond the Arms Embargo: EU Transfers of Defense and Dual-Use Technologies to China, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2013, Vol. 13, No. 3 (SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2013), p.460, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26335259>; Sun Xuefeng, The Efficiency of China's Policy towards the United States, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 1, 2006, 57–81, doi:10.1093/cjip/pol004, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615569>

⁹ "Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China, COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION," date of access: February 15, 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:1998:0181:FIN:EN:PDF>.

¹⁰ Richard Maher, "The elusive EU–China strategic partnership", *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), Vol. 92, No.4, Chinese foreign policy on trial: contending perspectives? (July 2016), p. 961, Oxford University Press, Stable URL:<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24757684>

¹¹ Ye Jiang, Zhōng-Ōu quánmiàn zhànlüè huǒbàn měixì miànliǎn xīn tiǎozhàn,"(China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Faces New Challenges), *Guójì Wèntí Yánjiū*", no.3, 2011, p. 9; "Zhōngguó duì Ōuméng zhèngcè wénjiàn"(Chinese Policy Document on the European Union), date of

B. Period of Fluctuations in Bilateral Ties

China-EU relations fluctuated from 2006-2012, notably during the 2008 global financial crisis. While China swiftly recovered, EU struggled with the aftermath, diminishing its appeal. China's continued economic growth led to increased investment in EU, while internal EU challenges raised doubts about its future relevance to China.¹² Chen Zhimin notes Chinese doubts on EU's economic strength due to Southern Europe's debt crisis, impacting perceptions post-financial crisis.¹³ Yu Zhenliang argues Europe's diminished geopolitical role and ambivalence towards Chinese investments, alternating between collaboration and competition amid challenges.¹⁴ Some Chinese scholars see China's rise challenging Western dominance, shifting strategic and economic focus between Europe and the US.¹⁵

According to Fang Lexian and Guan Kongwen, despite WTO protocol, EU avoids granting China market economy status, citing "distorted market standards" as a pretext, delaying resolution.¹⁶ EU Parliament analysis finds legal disagreement: China argues for MES by 2016; others say it depends on importing country's domestic laws.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Chinese leadership acknowledges economy lacks EU's market criteria, prioritizes reducing state influence, diverging from Chinese academia's stance.¹⁸

access: February 15, 2024,
https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2003/content_62478.htm

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Chen Zhimin, "Europe as a Global Player: A View from China," *Perspectives*, 2012, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2012), pp. 7-29, Institute of International Relations, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23616128>

¹⁴ Yu Zhenliang, "Ōuzhōu de kùn jing jí qí duì Huá guān xi" (The predicament in Europe and its relationship with China), *Shìjiè Jīngjì yǔ Zhèngzhì Lùntán*, No.6. Nov.2016, p.14

¹⁵ Cui Hongjian, Jin Ling and Wang Yi, "Ōuméng guójiè dìwèi jíqí yǐngxiǎng lì biànhuà" (The International Status of the European Union and Changes in its Influence), No.4, June 2014, *CIIS Yánjiū bàogào, Zhōngguó Guójiè Wèntí Yánjiū Suǒ*, p. 32

¹⁶ Fang Lexian and Guan Kongwen, Ōuméng duì Huá xīn zhànlüè yāosù: zhèngcè nèihán jí tàishì (Elements for a New EU Strategy on China: Policy Connotation and Posture), *Héping yǔ Fāzhǎn*, No. 4, 2017, p.79

¹⁷ For more details, see European Parliament, Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services, Puccio, L., *Granting of market economy status to China – An analysis of WTO law and of selected WTO Members' policy – In-depth analysis*, European Parliament, 2015, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861/22416>

¹⁸ Jakub Jakóbowski, Marcin Kaczmarek, "The EU on granting China market economy status: a compromise or a dodge?" date of access: January 21, 2024,

By 2006, EU led China's trade partners. EU urged China to improve Intellectual Property and human rights.¹⁹ Significant changes occurred in their policies towards China, leading to increased disagreements and friction. By 2010, China's economy surpassed Japan, becoming the world's second-largest economy. Meanwhile, the trade in goods between the EU and China surged by 400%, soaring from €101 billion (bn) in 2000 to €395 bn in 2010.²⁰ By 2014, China's GDP reached \$10 trillion, significantly narrowing the gap with the United States, altering the balance of power between China and the EU, which had a profound impact on the global landscape.²¹

Subsequently, Global crises, including financial, debt, Ukraine, refugee, and terrorist issues, intensified EU internal conflicts, rising Euroscepticism, and economic challenges.²² European decision-makers harbored conflicting attitudes, fearing that China's rise might undermine European interests while also apprehensive of unilateralism from the United States.²³ Hu Zongshan notes EU's waning confidence due to China's rapid growth versus EU's sluggishness, fueling Sinophobia. Overanalysis and misrepresentation of China's actions occur, impacting business and Huawei.²⁴

At that time, although some European views recognized China's development as an opportunity for the EU,²⁵ an academic research points out

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2016-08-05/eu-granting-china-market-economy-status-a-compromise-or-a>

¹⁹ "Evaluation of the European Commission's Co-operation and Partnership with the People's Republic of China Country Level Evaluation," pp.10-13, date of access: February 15, 2024, <https://www.oecd.org/derec/ec/37274405.pdf>

²⁰ "EU-China Trade Relations," op.cit.

²¹ "Facts and figures speak volumes about China," date of access: February 18, 2024, http://www.focac.org/eng/zfzs_1/201909/t20190906_7510992.htm

²² "European Foreign Policy and Its Challenges in the Current Context," date of access: February 18, 2024, <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/european-foreign-policy-and-its-challenges-in-the-current-context/>

²³ Cook RJ, Ohle M, Han Z. The Illusion of the China-US-Europe Strategic Triangle: Reactions from Germany and the UK. *J Chin Polit Sci.* 2022;27(3):493-518. doi: 10.1007/s11366-021-09771-2. Epub 2021 Oct 20. PMID: 34697527; PMCID: PMC8527975.

²⁴ Hu Zongshan, "Ōuméng de duōyuán kùnjing yǔ Zhōngguó de duì Ōu zhànlüè" (The Diverse Predicaments of the European Union and China's Strategy Toward Europe), date of access: January 2, 2024, <http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2019/0731/548363.shtml> 02/01/2024)

²⁵ Nunziante Mastrolia, EU - China: moving toward a new approach? European Centre for International Affairs (2012) Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep06714>; Martin Wolf, "China's rise need not

however, China increased trade with peripheral Eurozone nations post-debt crisis, securing a foothold and enhancing relations, with Belt and Road initiative reinforcing tie.²⁶ Some views are shared by François Godement & Abigaël Vasselier who cannot resist accusing China of exploiting euro crisis for extensive acquisitions in Southern Europe, offering terms resembling those to developing nations.²⁷ Casarini believes that China supports euro for political goals, leveraging Eurozone crisis to strengthen EU, aligning with its aim to challenge US dominance.²⁸

III. Factors Influencing Sino-EU relations

After taking office in 2012, Xi Jinping was hailed by Western scholars for openly demonstrating his commitment to opening up China's economy and embracing his newfound role as a leading proponent of economic openness and international cooperation.²⁹ However, With Xi Jinping's gradual assertive foreign policy taking shape, and the United States' efforts to rally Europe to contain China's development, China-EU relations faced new opportunities and severe challenges which eventually resulted in EU redefining China as a 'partner, competitor, and systemic rival' in 2019.³⁰ Europe is currently witnessing fresh debates regarding how to navigate the rivalry between the United States and China, ensuring the protection of economic interests while formulating a coherent strategy towards China.³¹

bring conflict," date of access: February 18, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/7115ffc0-254e-11da-98dc-00000e2511c8>

²⁶ Del Ponte, A., Canofari, P. & De Dominicis, A. Financial and trade relationships between the Eurozone and China in the age of resilience. *Asia Eur J* **19**, 489–506 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-021-00619-1>

²⁷ François Godement & Abigaël Vasselier, *China at The Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, The European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, p.7.

²⁸ Nicola Casarini, *The EU-China partnership: 10 years*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) (2013) Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep06823>

²⁹ Gustaaf Geeraerts, *The EU and China: Modest Signs of Convergence?* Egmont Institute (2018), p.3. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep21383>

³⁰ "Commission reviews relations with China, proposes 10 actions," date of access: February 17, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_1605

³¹ Nihar Kulkarni, "Preserving Europe's Interests Amid U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry", date of access: February 17, 2024, <https://isdpr.eu/preserving-europes-interests-amid-u-s-china-strategic-rivalry/>

From 2020 onwards, China and Europe saw a sharp decline in their bilateral relations, marked by increased friction, competition, and confrontation across political, economic, and strategic security realms.³² During this period, the EU has been engaged in economic, trade, and technological frictions with China,³³ taking measures such as resolutions linking environmental protection and human rights to corporate supply chains, and freezing the approval of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment,³⁴ accusing China regarding intellectual and industrial property theft, as well as allegations of political interference.³⁵ Thus, political trust between China and Europe gradually deteriorated,³⁶ leading to heightened political friction and ideological clashes. EU institutions took a tough stance on China regarding human rights violations, passing resolutions and initiating sanctions. This led to reciprocal sanctions and a significant deterioration in bilateral relations,³⁷

³² Chen X, Gao X. Analyzing the EU's collective securitization moves towards China. *Asia Eur J.* 2022;20(2):195-216. doi: 10.1007/s10308-021-00640-4. Epub 2021 Oct 7. PMID: 34642582; PMCID: PMC8496888.

³³ Fu Congcong and Wang Qi, “Guóji guānxì yùcè: zhànlüè gōutōng xià Zhōng-Ōu guānxì jiāng yǒu suǒ huǎnhé,” (International Relations Forecast: Strategic Communication Suggests Easing of China-Europe Relations), *Guóji zhèngzhì kēxué* 2022, 7(1): 186-193 doi: date of access: February 17, 2024, <http://qjip.tsinghuajournals.com/article/2022/2096-1545/101393D-2022-1-107.shtml#>

³⁴ “A new EU-China strategy European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 on a new EU-China strategy” (2021/2037(INI)), date of access: February 22, 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021IP0382>

³⁵ Frederic Grare, Lay Hwee Yeo, “Europe’s Security Posture in the Indo-Pacific and the View From Asia,” date of access: February 10, 2024, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/07/04/europe-s-security-posture-in-indo-pacific-and-view-from-asia-pub-90081>

³⁶ “EU Foreign Policy Chief: Trust Between China, Europe Eroded”, <https://www.voanews.com/a/eu-foreign-policy-chief-trust-between-china-europe-eroded-/7309699.html>

³⁷ “EU imposes further sanctions over serious violations of human rights around the world,” date of access: February 17, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/22/eu-imposes-further-sanctions-over-serious-violations-of-human-rights-around-the-world/>; “Wàijiāobù fāyánrén xuānbù Zhōngfāng duì Ōuméng yǒuguān jīgòu hé rényuán shíshī zhīcái” (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Announces China's Sanctions on Relevant Institutions and Individuals of the European Union), date of access:

with Lithuania taking provocative actions regarding Taiwan.³⁸ The EU has introduced a new policy to counter coercive trade tactics by third countries, citing instances like China's threat of tariffs on EU cars due to Huawei bans and pressure on Lithuanian ties with Taiwan.³⁹ In addition, due to rising supply chain issues and geopolitical tensions, the EU emphasizes reciprocity and resilience in its policies, seen through tools like Foreign Direct Investment regulation and the European Economic Security Strategy, and the 2023 Foresight Report.⁴⁰ Through these measures, EU seeks to renew ties with China while addressing economic security concerns. Policy tools aimed at single market balance will impact Chinese involvement, shaping the future of EU-China economic relations pivotal to their overall relationship.⁴¹

Other factors contributing to the tense and confrontational relations between China and EU are many folds, among which China-US tensions, Chinese position on Ukraine crisis and China's Belt and Road Initiative are the most noteworthy to be discussed below.

February 22, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/zcjd/202103/t20210322_9180639.shtml

³⁸ Konstantinas Andrijauskas, *The Sino-Lithuanian Crisis Going beyond the Taiwanese Representative Office Issue*, IFRI, date of access: February 20, 2024, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/andrijauskas_sino_lithuanian_crisis_2022.pdf

³⁹ Olsen, K. B. (2022). *Diplomatic Realisation of the EU's "Goeconomic Pivot": Sanctions, Trade, and Development Policy Reform*. *Politics and Governance*, 10(1), 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i1.4739>; European Commission, "Protecting against coercion", https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/enforcement-and-protection/protecting-against-coercion_en; "China's economic coercion Evolution, characteristics and countermeasures," [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738219/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)738219_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738219/EPRS_BRI(2022)738219_EN.pdf)

⁴⁰ European Commission, "Investment screening," https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/enforcement-and-protection/investment-screening_en; European Commission "an EU approach to enhance economic security", https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_23_3358; European Commission, "Strategic Foresight Report 2023," https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/SFR-23-beautified-version_en_0.pdf

⁴¹ Alice Politi (2023) *The Paradigm-Shift In EU-China Relations And The Limits of The EU's Current Strategy Towards China: A Relational Perspective*, *Asian Affairs*, 54:4, 670-693, Doi: 10.1080/03068374.2023.2281164, p. 678

A. The Implications of US-China Tensions on Sino-EU Relations

China's rise reshapes Western interests. Disparities spark dominant discussions, notably evident in US opposition to EU-China collaborations since 2005. Oliver Bräuner contends that despite Chinese complaints, EU remains vital for high-tech exports to China, especially in aerospace and information technology sectors.⁴² US shifts focus to engage EU, jointly addressing Pacific issues. Cooperation intensifies, yet European nations may align flexibly based on national interests.⁴³ In June 2012, EU issued East Asia foreign policy guidelines, joins ASEAN Regional Forum with US, releasing joint statement on Asia-Pacific security.⁴⁴

Under Trump, US bolstered containment of China, naming it a strategic adversary in national security strategy, rallying allies against Chinese threats.⁴⁵ Trump administration sees China's values, socialist system, state-controlled trade, military modernization, South China Sea activities, and cyberattacks as threats.⁴⁶ Under persistent U.S. pressure, NATO urged to

⁴² Oliver Bräuner, "Beyond the Arms Embargo: EU Transfers of Defense and Dual-Use Technologies to China," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, September–December 2013, Vol. 13, No. 3 pp. 457-482, Cambridge University Press, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26335259>; Mathieu Duchâtel, "Intangible technology transfers in EU-China relations" in *Guns, Engines And Turbines: The Eu's Hard Power In Asia*, Edited by Eva Pejsova, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) (2018) pp.33-41, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21141.7>

⁴³ Zhu Feng, "Zhōng-Měi jìngzhēng bèijīng xià de Zhōng-Ōu guānxì: Tuòzhǎn hézuò, zhèngshì fēnqí, jiāqiáng duìhuà, guǎnkòng fēngxiǎn (China-Europe Relations in the Context of Sino-US Competition: Expanding Cooperation, Addressing Differences, Strengthening Dialogue, and Managing Risks), date of access: February 18, 2024, <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202306/09/WS6482d059a310dbde06d22aef.html>

⁴⁴ "Defending National Interests, Preventing Conflict", Speech delivered by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the Shangri-La Dialogue Singapore, 1 June 2013. date of access: February 15, 2024, www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137368.pdf.

⁴⁵ "United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China", May 26, 2020, date of access: February 14, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.20.20.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

address China's challenges. Pompeo emphasizes inclusion in "London Declaration" at December 2019 NATO Leaders Meeting.⁴⁷

Alarmed by China's rapid technological advancement in the West, the Global efforts to combat Huawei are a crucial component of the United States' strategy to restrain China's technological advancement and maintain its own technological dominance.⁴⁸ US pressured European allies, urging exclusion of Huawei from 5G networks due to security risks.⁴⁹ In addition, US urges EU to jointly reform WTO, targeting China's state-owned enterprises, subsidies, tech transfer, and IP rights to maintain Western rules dominance.⁵⁰

However, as the "America First" policy of the Trump administration has brought uncertainty to transatlantic relations and posed challenges to security cooperation between Europe and the United States, subject of 'open strategic autonomy' within the European Union became a serious concern.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Biden's presidency improved transatlantic ties, aligning US-EU

⁴⁷ NATO, "London Declaration," December 4, 2019, date of access: February 15, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm.

⁴⁸ Anastasia Tolstukhina, "US Technology Policy amid Rivalry with China", date of access: February 14, 2024, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/us-technology-policy-amid-rivalry-with-china/>; Wang Shuo, Hùli gòng yíng: Zhōng-Ōu guānxi bùrù xīn jiēduàn (Mutual Benefit and Win-Win: China-Europe Relations Enter a New Stage), date of access: January 2, 2024, <http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2021/0323/610246.shtml>

⁴⁹ "2019 NATO Leaders' Meeting: In Brief Updated December 12, 2019," date of access: February 15, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46066/4>; Amanda Macias, "Pelosi Says Working With China's Huawei Is Like 'Choosing Autocracy Over Democracy,'" CNBC, February 16, 2020, date of access: February 14, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/16/pelosi-working-with-chinas-huawei-is-choosing-autocracy-over-democracy.html>

⁵⁰ Peter S. Rashish, "The United States, Germany, and WTO Reform: An Answer to the Rise of China?" American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, March 28, 2019, date of access: February 10, 2024, <https://www.aicgs.org/2019/03/the-united-states-germany-and-wto-reform-an-answer-to-the-rise-of-china/>.

⁵¹ For more details, see Tobias Gehrke, 'EU Open Strategic Autonomy and the Trappings of Geoeconomics'. *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, Special Issue (2022): 61–78.; Lisbeth Aggestam and Adrian Hyde-Price, "Double Trouble: Trump, Transatlantic Relations and European Strategic Autonomy," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57. 1(2019): 114 -127.

policies on China. EU's pursuit of autonomy persists amid nuanced strategic shifts.⁵²

The pressures from the US for common actions against China has led to strategic anxiety within the European Union, whom felt obliged to rethink its overall policies which led to the birth of 'strategic autonomy.'⁵³ With its robust capabilities and close ties with both China and the United States, EU holds a pivotal role in shaping the strategies of these two global powers and influencing the trajectory of their strategic rivalry, but this may also entail walking a tight rope in terms of strategic autonomy. Feng Zhongping contends that 'not all nations in Europe endorse EU's efforts to bolster its strategic autonomy. Those advocating for an independent stance towards China primarily cite the divergence in economic interests between Europe and the United States concerning China. Conversely, countries pushing for Europe and the United States to align their policies towards China primarily underscore Europe's growing dependence on the United States for security, especially amid escalating tensions in the Ukraine crisis.'⁵⁴ Liu Zhijie is convinced that supporting the European Union's strategic autonomy is a crucial aspect of planning China's diplomacy towards Europe. Europe serves as a "buffer zone" where both China and the United States can exert influence. The EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy, refusing to "take sides" between China and the United States, also provides diplomatic space for China to manage its relations with Europe.⁵⁵ Emphasizing China's role as the world's second-largest economy, Feng Zhongping argues that European nations are hesitant to pick a side in the rivalry between China and the United States. Even as tensions escalate between the two powers, Europe is wary of aligning exclusively with the United States and struggling with the dilemma of having to choose definitively between China and the United States.⁵⁶

⁵² Yan Shaohua, "Ōuméng zhànlüè zìzhǔ yǔ Zhōngguó duì Ōu zhànlüè xīn sīwéi," (European Union's Strategic Autonomy and China's New Thinking on Strategy Towards Europe), *Fùdàn Xuébào (Shèhuì Kēxué Bǎn)*, No.6, 2021, pp.126-136.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Feng Zhongping, "Zhōng-Ōu hézuò jùyǒu zhòngdà zhànlüè yìyì"(China-Europe Cooperation Holds Significant Strategic Importance), date of access: January 2, 2024, <https://www.cpifa.org/cms/book/247>

⁵⁵ Liu Zhijie, "Cóng Ōuméng duì Huá zhèngcè xīn dòngxiàng kàn Zhōng-Ōu guānxì"(Examining China-Europe Relations Through the EU's New Policy Trends Towards China), July 2023, date of access: January 2, 2024, <https://www.cdi.org.cn/Article/Detail/19259> accessed on 02/01/2024

⁵⁶ Feng Zhong Ping, "Gèng zhòngyào, gèng fùzá, Zhōng-Ōu guānxì wèilái lù zài héfāng" (More Important, More Complex: Where Does the Future Path of China-

Recent reports from the European Union underscore Europe's nuanced understanding of its relationship with China, recognizing both areas of intense competition and conflict alongside vital opportunities for cooperation.⁵⁷ Fostering positive relations with major powers is seen as mutually beneficial, prompting most European countries to pursue policies based on their own interests and to compartmentalize issues across political, security, and economic domains.⁵⁸ Ideologically, European countries generally align with the United States, particularly in matters concerning human rights, where the EU often collaborates with the US in criticizing China.⁵⁹ However, navigating the complex power structures within European countries and EU institutions poses challenges. For instance, the European Parliament's resolutions condemning China's internal policies may contrast with the European Commission's pragmatic approach to China.⁶⁰ Although the EU and China have maintained their strategic partnership until 2019,⁶¹ however, due to mounting tensions after the pandemic, the EU now adopts a realistic, assertive approach towards China, seeking fair relations while recognizing it as a partner, negotiator, competitor, and rival.⁶²

As far as security issue is concerned, European nations, as traditional allies of the US, prioritize coordination in addressing security threats, such as those posed by Russia in Europe.⁶³ European nations, traditional allies of the

Europe Relations Lead?), November 2022, date of access: January 2, 2024, <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202211/01/WS63610417a310817f312f40ba.html>

⁵⁷ "EU-China Relations Factsheet," date of access: January 2, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-factsheet_en.

⁵⁸ "In the geopolitics of blocs, Europe as a power of balance - Speech by Commissioner Breton," date of access: January 2, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_5684

⁵⁹ Sophia Besch, Ian Bond, "Europe, The Us And China: A Love-Hate Triangle?" date of access: January 2, 2024, <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2020/europe-us-and-china-love-hate-triangle>

⁶⁰ "Topical Digest: EU-China relations", January 2, 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/TD_China-EU_relations.pdf

⁶¹ Gustaaf Geeraerts, "The EU-China partnership: balancing between divergence and convergence". *Asia Eur J* 17, 281–294 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00554-2>

⁶² EU-China Relations factsheet, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-factsheet_en

⁶³ Alina Polyakova, Edward Lucas, Mathieu Boulègue, Catherine Sendak, Scott Kindsvater, Ivanna Kuz and Sasha Stone, A New Vision for the Transatlantic Alliance: The Future of European Security, the United States, and the World Order after Russia's War in Ukraine, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/a-new->

US, prioritize coordination to address security threats like those from Russia. Concerns rise over China's growing strength and its impact on the Asia-Pacific security structure, prompting the EU to reassess its policy. The EU acknowledges the need to engage actively in Asia-Pacific security, recognizing its economic interests at risk due to potential conflicts and the absence of military power to protect investments. Thus, it must involve itself in the region's security affairs to safeguard vital interests.⁶⁴ Therefore, due to this consideration, in the Indo-Pacific, European countries are poised to bolster their military presence, aligning with the US Indo-Pacific strategy through deployments and regional partnerships.⁶⁵

Economically, while some European countries maintain positive relations with China, especially in trade, cooperation may be restricted in certain sectors due to factors like US security policies.⁶⁶ Amid escalating US-China trade friction, "de-risking" from China involves reducing market and supplier exposure, coupled with export control tightening to manage geopolitical uncertainty.⁶⁷ It is evident that China's difficulty in deepening cooperation with Europe in advanced industries reflects this dynamic.⁶⁸ Notably, European major powers cautiously navigate between China and the US, adopting a pragmatic approach to maintain favorable positions in specific issue areas without overtly favoring either side. This "cake theory" approach enables Europe to preserve cooperation with both parties while mitigating

vision-for-the-transatlantic-alliance-the-future-of-european-security-the-united-states-and-the-world-order-after-russias-war-in-ukraine/

⁶⁴ Zhao Ke and Ding Yifan, "Shīhéng de Zhōng-Ōu guānxì: Jiěxī Ōuméng duì Huá zhèngcè tiáozhēn"(The Imbalanced" China-Europe Relations: Analyzing the European Union's Adjustment of its Policy Towards China), date of access: January 2, 2024, <http://m.1she.com/b-360838.html>

⁶⁵ "Indo-Pacific Strategy Of The United States", February 2022, date of access: January 2, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>; Fu Congcong and Wang Qi, op.cit.

⁶⁶ Ding Chun, "Dāngqián xíngshì xià Ōuzhōu jīngjì xiànzhuàng hé Zhōng-Ōu jīngmào hézuò"(The Current Situation of the European Economy and China-Europe Economic and Trade Cooperation), date of access: January 2, <https://index1520.com/cn/news/tekushchee-sostoyanie-evropeyskoy-ekonomiki-i-torgovo-ekonomicheskogo-sotrudnichestva-mezhdu-kitaem-/>

⁶⁷ Michelle Toh, "Three key sources of tension between the US and China," date of access: January 2, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/15/economy/us-china-key-issues-apec-summit-intl-hnk/index.html>; Emily Benson and Gloria Sicilia, "A Closer Look at De-risking," date of access: January 2, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/closer-look-de-risking>

⁶⁸ Hu Zongshan, op.cit.

adverse repercussions.⁶⁹ While the USA and the EU may align broadly on China policy, achieving complete consensus across all policy areas and Member States in their relations with the USA seems increasingly challenging. National priorities regarding ties with China often compete with maintaining unified approaches, potentially complicating sustained convergence.⁷⁰

From the discussions above, we can conclude that the escalating tensions between China and the United States have significant implications for Sino-EU relations. As the US intensifies its containment policy against China, it pressures the EU to align its policies, leading to strategic anxiety within the EU. This pressure has spurred the EU to reevaluate its overall policies, resulting in the emergence of "strategic autonomy" to navigate between the conflicting interests of China and the US. While the Biden administration's thaw in transatlantic relations offers a more aligned approach towards China, the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy persists. While actively engaging in Asia-Pacific security, EU balances ties with US and China, emphasizing human rights but facing complexities in institutions.

B. The Russian Factor in Sino-EU relations

The geopolitical tensions stemming from the Russia-Ukraine conflict have indeed reverberated globally, influencing China-Europe relations in multifaceted ways. Stark disparities in perspectives between China and Europe, coupled with significant gaps in mutual expectations, have strained political trust. These differences are particularly evident in their interpretations of the root causes and nature of the conflict. Chinese analyst Yen Shaohua claims that the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has caused a shift in the European Union's policy towards China, with the EU increasingly viewing China as a systemic rival and emphasizing competition in its approach: This conflict has led to two related changes in EU-China relations: firstly, a stronger tendency to politically link China and Russia, and secondly, an interpretation of China's stance on the conflict as being "pro-Russian neutrality," which in turn pushes the EU towards closer strategic alignment with the United States in the face of strategic competition between

⁶⁹ Mario Esteban et.al. "Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry," date of access: January 2, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2020/01/200122-Final-ETNC-report-Europe-in-the-Face-of-US-China-Rivalry.pdf?type=pdf>

⁷⁰ John Farnell, Paul Irwin Crookes, *The Politics of EU-China Economic Relations: An Uneasy Partnership*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 204

China and the US.⁷¹ Due to different perceptions of Ukraine conflict, the China-EU video summit held on April 1, 2022, did not achieve any significant progress as to how to respond to Russia's war on Ukraine. The European Union expressed its hope that China would use its influence as a major country to persuade Russia to end the war, and deepen its involvement and take tangible steps to safeguard both the principles outlined in the UN Charter and the security of Europe.⁷² In contrast, China hopes to set aside differences on Ukraine and other contentious issues, and focus on the positive aspects of bilateral relations, mainly in the economic sphere. China still maintains its consistent stance: it hopes for peace and de-escalation in Ukraine, while refraining from making any specific commitments.⁷³

From the European viewpoint, Russia's assertive pursuit of "spheres of influence" clashes with the aspirations of smaller nations for collective security, serving as a primary driver of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Most European countries emphasize NATO's defensive nature and dismiss Russia's justifications for military actions, characterizing the conflict as Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Conversely, China frames the conflict within the context of broader regional security dynamics, attributing it to U.S. utilization of NATO and Ukraine to counter Russia, thereby provoking a backlash. China advocates for equal consideration of Russia's and Ukraine's security concerns, urging European nations to play a constructive role in establishing a balanced regional security framework to prevent future conflicts.⁷⁴ Overall, China's alignment with Russia, though not occupying a central position, has been unfavorably perceived in the West.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Yan Shaohua, "Ōuzhōu duì Huá zhèngcè bàogào," (Report on European Policies Towards China), Fùdàndàxué Zhōng-Ōu Guānxi Yánjiū Zhōngxīn Shànghǎi Ōuzhōu Xuéhuì, (2022), Issue 6.

⁷² "EU-China relations: A candid exchange on our differences", date of access: February 22, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-candid-exchange-our-differences_en

⁷³ Bernardo Mariani, Sino-European relations amid the war in Ukraine, date of access: February 18, <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Sino-European-Report-Digital-1.pdf>

⁷⁴ Cui Hongjian, "Zhōng-Ōu néngfǒu gòng kè shí jiān zēngjìn hézuò? — É wū chōngtū duì Zhōng-Ōu guānxi de yǐngxiǎng jí yǐngduì" (Can China and Europe Overcome Difficulties Together and Deepen Cooperation?—The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on China-Europe Relations and Responses), date of access: January 18, 2024, <https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/zlyaq/5006> .

⁷⁵ Anastas Vangeli and Arne Schildberg, "The Role Of China In Southeast Europe," June 2022, date of access: January 2, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/athen/19416.pdf>

The ramifications for China-Europe economic and trade ties are equally intricate. While Europe threatens punitive trade measures if China supports Russia in circumventing sanctions,⁷⁶ there is also a resurgence in European discourse advocating for reduced dependence on the Chinese market for supply chain security,⁷⁷ driven partly by concerns over China-Russia ties.

In the broader geopolitical landscape, amid unchanged competition between China and the United States, a stable China-Russia partnership, and escalating U.S.-Russia tensions, Europe's shift towards confrontation with Russia and enhanced coordination with the U.S. places additional strain on China-Europe relations. The erosion of strategic mutual trust, which historically centered on multilateralism and peaceful conflict resolution, underscores the challenges posed by increasing group confrontation and power politics, constraining the maneuvering space for China-Europe relations and heightening uncertainties.⁷⁸

C. Examining the Influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative within the EU

The global landscape has been turbulent since China's launch of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, with events like Brexit, China-US tensions, and Russia-Ukraine conflicts. Europe's strategic importance due to its position is considered to be the key for the success of the "Belt and Road Economic Belt" and the "Maritime Silk Road," affecting the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI).⁷⁹

The significance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) lies not merely in its role as a transformative force in Chinese foreign construction endeavors, but in its extension of Chinese efforts beyond Asian and African markets to encompass Europe.⁸⁰ Chinese construction firms operating in Europe, such as

⁷⁶ "EU proposes sanctions on Chinese firms for helping Russia", date of access: February 22, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-proposes-sanctions-on-chinese-firms-for-helping-russia/>

⁷⁷ "China-EU business relations in 2023: Resumption and recovery," date of access: January 2, 2024, https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2023/EU-China_TT_Compendum_2023_Final.pdf

⁷⁸ Cui Hongjian, op.cit

⁷⁹ Zhang Xuan and Yang Yudi, "Yīdài yīlù" chāngyì shí zhōunián huīgù: Ōuméng guójiā rènzhī chāyì fēnxī (Review of the 10th Anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative: Analysis of Differences in Perception among EU Countries), date of access: February 2, 2024, https://zijing.com.cn/article/2023-06/28/content_1123585791247183872.html

⁸⁰ James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, *China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative*, date of access: February 22, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>

CRBC and CCCC, have positioned themselves as active participants, constructors, and contributors to the BRI, viewing it as a platform for expanding their global footprint and enhancing competitiveness. While Chinese contractors are engaged in a limited number of European projects, Chinese companies have also made investments in existing infrastructure. Notably, Chinese entities have stakes in five of the top ten European ports by container volume: Le Havre (China Merchants Group), Antwerp (COSCO), Rotterdam (COSCO and China Merchants Group), Valencia (COSCO), and Piraeus (COSCO). Furthermore, the majority ownership of container terminals in two EU ports—Piraeus in Greece and Zeebrugge in Belgium—rests with the Chinese state-owned enterprise COSCO.⁸¹

Despite 18 European countries signing BRI MoUs by May 2023, there's diversity in EU stances towards the initiative, influenced by project implementation and global shifts. Xiao Fang points out that Central and Eastern European nations are reaping the rewards of European integration, although certain ones are entangled in power dynamics, hindering their ability to make strategic choices. The interactions between China and Europe through the BRI are establishing a framework of mutual support within the value chain.⁸² Central and Eastern European EU nations, like Hungary and Poland, favor stable development and have fostered strong ties with China through initiatives like "17+1."⁸³ The Balkans and Southeast Europe have also actively participated in BRI projects, such as China's investments in Greece's Port of Piraeus.⁸⁴

The A2 motorway between Warsaw and Lodz, Poland; the Pelješac Bridge in Croatia⁸⁵ as well as the Hungarian section of the Belgrade–Budapest railway as well as are the three significant construction projects in the EU involving China have progressed beyond mere agreements and have

⁸¹ Mirela Petkova and Frans-Paul van der Putten, "Building the 'Belt and Road' in Europe? Chinese construction companies and transport infrastructure in the European Union" Clingendael Institute (2020) Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24642>.

⁸² Xiao Fang, "The Belt and Road initiative," *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 3, *China's Discovery of Central Europe* (2015), pp. 3-14, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26591865>

⁸³ Lithuania Estonia and Latvia quitted from this platform after the pandemic.

⁸⁴ Zhang Xuang and Yang Yudi, *op.cit.*

⁸⁵ Hannah Langford, Kyu Kyung Lee, Shimon, "Failed Highway Project in Poland & Croatia Bridge Construction Rosenblum," date of access: February 2, 2024, https://is.muni.cz/el/cus/podzim2018/CZS56/um/presentation_covec_croatian_bridge.pdf?lang=en

entered the construction phase. Notably, these projects are primarily concentrated in the eastern part of the EU, with no substantial construction activities in key destinations for Chinese foreign direct investment such as France or Germany. Chinese construction firms may be favoring countries outside the traditional EU core, possibly perceiving newer member states as having less stringent legal frameworks.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it's crucial to note that EU law holds supremacy over national legislation throughout the EU, implying a consistent legal environment across member states. Another potential motivator could be a strategic attempt to build economic ties with countries on the periphery or outside of the EU, possibly aiming to gain political leverage in the region.⁸⁷ Contrary to the enthusiastic attitudes towards the BRI of some Central and East European countries, leading EU countries like Germany and France have expressed apprehensions regarding projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), citing concerns about inadequate adherence to labor, environmental, and human rights standards, insufficient transparency in procurement processes, and the sustainability of debt levels.⁸⁸ Some European analysts ascertain that Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are to blame for creating unfair competition within the European market.⁸⁹ It is believed that China has long utilized its state-managed economy to wield trade and investment tactics for geopolitical ends, a trend intensifying in the past decade. This includes unfair trade practices, the "going out" strategy for Chinese overseas investment, opaque foreign investment reviews, Belt and Road Initiative's potential debt traps, and currency manipulation.⁹⁰ In addition, Chinese SOEs play a significant role in the Belt and Road Initiative, with estimates suggesting between 71 and 80 SOEs involved, potentially more including subsidiaries. They've executed over 3100 projects since 2013, spanning infrastructure sectors like transportation, energy, and

⁸⁶ Erik Brattberg et al. *China's Influence in Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries*, date of access: February 22, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-southeastern-central-and-eastern-europe-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85415>

⁸⁷ Mirela Petkova and Frans-Paul van der Putten, op.cit.

⁸⁸ Erik Brattberg, *Europe's Emerging Approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative*, date of access: February 22, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/19/europe-s-emerging-approach-to-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-77536>

⁸⁹ Politi, op.cit.p.679.

⁹⁰ Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaidi, *JCMS 2019 Volume 57. Annual Review*, pp. 103–113 DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12932

communication, including both 'hard' and 'soft' infrastructure investments in BRI partner countries.⁹¹

Given the varying economic development levels, bilateral ties with China, and diverse positions of EU nations, significant differences persist in their perceptions and attitudes towards the BRI.⁹² In addition, the European Union is concerned about the lack of transparency rules within the BRI, fearing that opaque financing agreements could pose a threat to the competitiveness of European enterprises.⁹³ Recently, EU imposed restrictions on China in investment and technology,⁹⁴ and announced plans to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁹⁵

In the EU countries, China's Belt and Road Initiative, characterized by massive investments and strategic partnerships, has raised concerns about debt sustainability and geopolitical influence. To most of the EU member countries, the Belt and Road Initiative seems as “debt trap diplomacy” - an aid mechanism that aims to burden countries with unaffordable loans and unsustainable debt, making them vulnerable to Chinese coercion.⁹⁶ The European Union has announced a similar initiative called the Global Gateway, aiming to help developing countries rebuild their infrastructure. The Global Gateway Initiative, firstly introduced by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during her State of the Union speech on 15 September 2021, aims to mobilize 300 billion Euros between 2021–2027 for connectivity projects, notably in the digital, climate and energy, transport, health,

⁹¹ Soo Yeon Kim, “The Politics of FTAs in Asia: The Role of China and Implications for EU Trade Policy,” in J. Adriaensen and E. Postnikov (eds.), *A Geo-Economic Turn in Trade Policy?*, The European Union in International Affairs, p. 36. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81281-2_2

⁹² Zhang Xuang and Yang Yudi op.cit.

⁹³ Zhao Minghao, “China’s New Silk Road Initiative,” Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) (2015) Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep09680>

⁹⁴ TAKASHI TSUJI, “EU weighs outbound investment curbs on AI and biotech, eyeing China”, date of access: February 22, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/EU-weighs-outbound-investment-curbs-on-AI-and-biotech-eyeing-China>

⁹⁵ “EU launches ‘Global Gateway’ to counter China’s Belt and Road”, February 22, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-launches-global-gateway-to-counter-chinas-belt-and-road/>

⁹⁶ Nick Beake, Why Europe will have to face the true cost of being in debt to China, date of access: February 24, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61276168>.

education, and research.⁹⁷ While accusing Belt and Road as being non-transparent and having secret agendas, the EU seeks to emphasize European values of democracy, human rights, and environmental protection with this new initiative. However, the project's feasibility relies on EU funding, private investment, member state support, and outreach to key partners like China.⁹⁸

Although its budget is small compared to what China is mobilizing through the BRI, this new initiative has the potential to come into direct competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative. In fact, the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Gateway appear to be on a collision course, representing competing visions for global connectivity. However, beneath the competition lies a potential for cooperation between the BRI and the Global Gateway. As two of the world's largest trading partners, China and the EU share common interests in promoting infrastructure and connectivity in the developing countries. The sheer scale of global infrastructure needs necessitates collaboration rather than confrontation. However, the path to cooperation between the BRI and the Global Gateway is not without challenges. Geopolitical tensions, divergent interests, and historical mistrust may hinder collaboration, necessitating careful navigation and diplomacy. At this point, as the Global Gateway emerges as a rival to the BRI, complicated situations arise again where cooperation and competition are intertwined. Some of the implementing countries of the Global Gateway (e.g. Greece), are beneficiaries of the BRI. On the other hand, Germany and France, two of the leading architects of the Global Gateway initiative, have intense commercial relations with China. Thus, it will be difficult for the European Union to take serious concrete steps in terms of blocking and containing the BRI within the scope of the Global Gateway. Given that China and the EU are significant trade partners, and many European countries are also beneficiaries of the BRI, competition between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Gateway must be managed carefully.

⁹⁷ Ursula von der Leyen, 2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen, date of access: February 22, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_4701.

⁹⁸ Gustaaf Geeraerts (28 November 2019), "Europe and China's Belt and Road Initiative: growing concerns, more strategy", in Security Policy Briefs, www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2019/11/SPB118.pdf

Conclusion

In navigating the geopolitical tightrope of Sino-EU relations within a shifting world order, several key dynamics emerge. The escalating tensions between China and the United States have significant implications for EU-China relations, leading to strategic anxiety within the EU. This pressure has prompted the EU to pursue strategic autonomy, balancing its robust capabilities and close ties with both China and the US. Despite aligning ideologically with the US on issues like human rights, the EU maintains a pragmatic approach, engaging in cooperation and competition with China across various domains.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has further complicated EU-China relations, with Europe increasingly viewing China as a systemic rival due to its perceived alignment with Russia. This has strained political trust and led to shifts in EU-China policy dynamics, particularly regarding security concerns and economic cooperation. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents both opportunities and challenges for EU-China relations. While some EU member states have embraced BRI projects, others express concerns about transparency, labor standards, and debt sustainability. The EU's response includes imposing restrictions on China's investment and technology and announcing plans to counter the BRI.

Overall, EU-China relations are characterized by nuanced dynamics influenced by global power shifts and regional conflicts. The EU seeks to balance its interests and values while engaging with both China and the US, navigating complex geopolitical terrain to safeguard its economic interests and maintain strategic autonomy. On the other hand, from the dynamics of Sino-EU relations discussed above, we can draw the outcome of the EU's de-risking policy, aimed at reducing economic dependence on China, could indeed increase the potential for decoupling between the two entities amid strained relations. By diversifying supply chains and reducing reliance on Chinese markets, the EU seeks to mitigate risks associated with geopolitical tensions and safeguard its economic interests. However, decoupling from China is complex and challenging, given the deep interdependence between the two economies. While the EU may prioritize strategic autonomy and reduce vulnerabilities, complete decoupling is unlikely and could have adverse economic consequences. Instead, the EU is likely to pursue a balanced approach, maintaining engagement with China while seeking to mitigate risks and enhance resilience in its economic relationships.

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