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Europe, Strategic Autonomy and the China  
Question: A Multitude of Dilemmas



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# EUROPE, STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND THE CHINA QUESTION: A MULTITUDE OF DILEMMAS

Andrew Cottey

## I. Introduction

The debate on European strategic autonomy that emerged in the early and mid-2010s related primarily to European strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the United States (US), although it also reflected a more general view that Europe—in the form of the European Union (EU)—needed to be an autonomous global actor in its own right. Since then, the debate on European strategic autonomy has become intertwined with Europe’s relations with China and what is sometimes viewed as a Europe-US-China strategic triangle. For Europe—both individual states and the EU—the China question and the Europe-US-China strategic triangle now pose major foreign policy challenges.

## II. European China Policy: The New Context

Current European debates on China policy and the Europe-US-China strategic triangle need to be understood in recent historical context. In the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, very extensive economic ties developed between Europe and China, in particular in trade, creating an economic relationship comparable in size to the transatlantic one. Inevitably, this created a situation of mutual economic interdependence, including important elements of European economic dependence on - and potential

vulnerability to - China. During this period, the EU also developed what became called a strategic partnership with China, involving a wide range of institutionalised EU-China ties (from annual summits downwards), commitments to a theoretically broad bilateral cooperation agenda and efforts to resolve disputes (over issues such as barriers to European access to the Chinese market) by dialogue (Cottey 2021). From a European perspective, so long as China was a potentially viable partner, economic interdependence and institutionalised bilateral cooperation were relatively unproblematic. European policies towards China largely progressed in parallel to those of the US and other Western states (such as Japan and Australia), with engagement viewed as the best means of encouraging China to be a 'responsible stakeholder' (Zoellick 2005).

Since the early 2010s the strategic dynamics underpinning policies of engagement towards China have changed very significantly. China has become more authoritarian domestically and more assertive internationally, exercising its growing power in ways that were not the case a decade ago. US-China relations have become increasingly confrontational, with some describing the dynamic as a new Cold War. At the same time, the Trump presidency created unprecedented turbulence in transatlantic relations and raised long-term doubts about the US commitment to European security and NATO. Together, these shifts intensified the sense of a triangular Europe-US-China relationship, in which Europe's position—in simple terms, whether Europe will be more closely aligned with the US, with China or pursue a more independent or equidistant approach—is one of the central questions.

### III. European Strategic Autonomy vis-à-vis China

As China's foreign policy became more assertive and Chinese investment in Europe grew in the 2010s, concern increased about the downsides—actual and potential—of increasing economic dependence on China. The shift in European views of China was reflected in the EU's 2016 and 2019 China policy documents, in particular the 2019 document's description of China as 'a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2016, 2019, p1). Today, European views of economic relations with China can be summarised as an uneasy mix of increasing concern about the dangers of dependence on China alongside arguments that the relationship remains broadly beneficial, the interests of particular industries, countries and leaders in maintaining existing economic relations with China, and fears of the risk of a wholesale retreat into protectionism.

China is the EU's largest trade partner, marginally ahead of the US. As of 2020, EU27-China trade amounted to €585,967 million (16.1% of total EU trade), compared to €555,530 million (15.2% of total EU trade) with the US. EU imports from China stood €383,397 million in 2020 (22.4% of total imports), compared to €202,619 million (11.8% of total imports) from the US. EU exports to China totalled €202,570 million in 2020 (10.5% of total exports), compared to €352,911 million to the US (18.3% of total exports) (European Commission 2021). Clearly, this creates a form of European economic dependence on China: were China to cut-off all or significant parts of trade with Europe the impact on the European economy would be very significant and the threat of such a cut-off might provide China with significant leverage over the EU and its member states. As noted above, however, the situation is one of economic interdependence or mutual dependence, meaning that China would also incur very significant costs from any suspension or cut-off of trade, likely deterring it from such a step and reducing the likelihood or credibility of any threat of this type. More substantively, China has a track-record of using economic boycotts against individual European states and other countries, such as Australia and South Korea, which have taken policy positions of which China disapproves (on issues such as human rights, Tibet and the World Health Organisation (WHO) investigation of the origins of the Covid19 pandemic). While the size of the EU and the scale of EU-China trade may limit the vulnerability of the EU as a whole to Chinese economic pressure, China has long played economic divide and rule against individual European states and this will likely continue.

Chinese economic influence over EU member states already impacts EU foreign policy positions relating to China. EU foreign policy decisions are made on the basis of consensus and in some cases member states where China has particular influence (most notably Greece and Hungary) have vetoed or watered-down common EU positions. In 2016 Greece, Hungary and Croatia opposed stronger language in an EU statement on China's maritime disputes with its neighbours in the South China Sea, resulting in what was generally viewed as a weak EU position (Fallon 2016). In 2017 Greece vetoed a common EU position criticising China at the UN Human Rights Council (Smith, 2017). Such national positions have had the effect of institutionalising weak, lowest common denominator EU positions on various China policy issues.

Since the 2010s Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Europe has caused increasing concern in Brussels and national capitals. Chinese FDI in Europe (EU-27 plus the UK) grew very significantly during the 2010s, from relatively low levels in the 2000s (less than €2 billion annually) to a peak of €44 billion in 2016, falling back to €6.5 billion in 2020 (partly as a result of the Covid-19 induced recession, but with the decline beginning before that) (Kratz, Zenglein and Sebastian 2021: 9). There is a general concern that Chinese FDI may give China influence in Europe, as economic and political actors may

develop an interest in maintaining such economic ties and avoiding actions which displease China. More specifically, there are concerns about excessive Chinese influence in or control over particular industries, companies or technologies, since most Chinese FDI involves mergers with or acquisitions of European companies. These concerns apply especially to high-technology sectors which are widely viewed as the forefront of future economic development. A further area of concern has been Chinese investment in transport infrastructure (such as ports and rail links) as part of the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), where there are again fears of excessive Chinese influence or even control. Finally, there have been specific concerns about 5G mobile telephone networks, where Chinese company Huawei is the leading global provider (and other companies lag behind). Again, two types of concern exist: the general one of possible dependence on a single supplier controlled by China and more specific concerns about possible security weaknesses that may allow the Chinese government to use 5G networks underpinned by Huawei's technology for spying (Rühlig and Björk 2020).

Since the mid-to-late 2010s, there has been growing recognition in Europe of the risks of economic and technological dependence on China and a variety of efforts at the EU and national level to address the issue. The EU's 2019 China policy document included a substantial section relating to the risks of economic and technological dependence on China, in particular "(F)oreign investment in strategic sectors, acquisitions of critical assets, technologies and infrastructure' and 'critical infrastructure, such as 5G networks" (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019: 9). The document argued for a renewed industrial policy to "foster industrial cross border cooperation, with strong European players, around strategic value chains that are key to EU industrial competitiveness and strategic autonomy", noting the role of the Strategic Forum for Important Projects of Common European Interest, the EU Coordinated Action Plan on Artificial Intelligence and the European battery alliance project. On the European battery alliance project, the document noted that "(P)articular attention is being paid to ensuring a reliable supply of raw materials and access to rare earths" (where China is overwhelming the world's largest supplier of rare earth metals).

European states and the EU have a range of options for reducing economic and technological dependence on China: investment screening mechanisms; diversification of supply and production chains; sector specific arrangements (as in the case of 5G); support for domestic/European technology development and companies; and the radical option of pursuing a more fundamental economic decoupling from China (by imposing tariffs, limits or even outright bans on imports from China). The EU introduced a new regulation on screening of FDI in 2019-20, although decisions ultimately remain at the national level. In this context, European countries have begun to halt Chinese acquisitions of

European companies under national investment screening mechanisms: Germany and Italy, for example, have halted Chinese acquisitions of companies involved in semiconductors, satellite communications, radar, metallurgy and the automotive industry (Kratz, Zenglein and Sebastian 2021: 16). On 5G, a growing number of European states have taken action which will ban or significantly limit Huawei's involvement in the 5G systems: most Central and Eastern European EU member states signed memoranda of understanding with the US during the Trump administration shutting Huawei out of their 5G networks; while

Western European states have been more circumscribed in their approaches, most have introduced national frameworks which have or are likely to limit, and possibly entirely shut out, Huawei's involvement in 5G networks (Chivot and Jorge-Ricart 2020, Noyan 2021). Notably, on both investment screening and 5G EU member states have been reluctant to surrender much power to the EU: while EU level frameworks have been put in place, decisions in both areas remain ultimately national ones.

The EU may also have options for reinforcing the political side of foreign policy independence vis-à-vis China. First, the introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) for EU foreign policy would prevent individual or small numbers of member states from vetoing or watering down collective positions, likely resulting in stronger policy positions on issues such as human rights and the South China Sea. Second, the institutionalisation of EU-China ties has arguably imposed a form of self-binding on the EU, whereby the Union faces political pressure to agree common EU-China positions or risks political costs in terms of the breakdown of institutional ties if it antagonises China. Consideration could be given to the downgrading (or even suspension) of institutionalised cooperation with China in order to avoid this kind of self-binding. Both of these options, however, would involve risks. The introduction of QMV in EU foreign policy decision-making might risk states openly breaking with EU positions they had not supported and possibly a more general fragmentation of EU foreign policy. The downgrading or suspension of institutionalised ties with China would risk cutting off important means of communication, confidence-building and policy coordination.

Within Europe, there is little support for a more radical economic de-coupling from China. A recent report from the EU Chamber of Commerce in China concluded that “the ‘nuclear’ options of direct confrontation or cutting China off from the US dollar (USD-)backed financial system” were “universally considered unlikely” by European companies engaged in China (European Union Chamber of Commerce in China 2021: 4). The mainstream view is that economic decoupling from China would cause very significant economic damage and should therefore be avoided—one estimate suggests that unilateral EU economic decoupling from China would reduce real income by 0.8% or a permanent real income loss of €131.4 billion (Felbermayr, Gans, Mahlkow and Sandkamp 2021)

## IV. Recalibrating European China Policy

The EU is at the beginning of a process of recalibrating its policy towards China. This is already resulting in efforts to reduce economic and technological dependence on China. How far this will—and should—go remains to be seen and involves significant dilemmas. Diversifying supply chains makes sense in principle, but may involve duplication, inefficiencies and higher costs. Direct EU or member state support for companies or particular industrial sectors or technologies may reduce dependence on foreign suppliers, but risks creating longer term inefficiencies or making companies/sectors dependent on permanent EU/member state subsidies. Downgrading institutionalized ties with China may reduce the risk of the EU binding itself to a search for cooperation with China, but risks removing important frameworks for communication and dialogue.

The debate on economic de-coupling with China is sometimes reduced to a crude choice between a deeply enmeshed status quo or Trump-style protectionism. In fact, steps taken by both China and the EU and its member states in the last few years are already producing a model of “patchwork globalisation” (Kratz, Zenglein and Sebastian 2021). Given the shifts in Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy over the last decade, there is a strong case for Europe to reduce its economic dependence on China, especially as relates to key industrial sectors, advanced technology and infrastructure. This, however, needs to be balanced against maintaining what has been a broadly beneficial mutual economic relationship and the need to maintain dialogue and cooperation with China in other areas, especially climate change. Getting this balance right will be no easy task.

## V. Europe, the United States and the China Question

The picture is further complicated by the new US-China strategic rivalry and the triangular relationship between Europe, the US and China in this context. The intensifying US-China strategic rivalry raises major questions for Europe (both the EU and individual European states): should Europe align itself with US in seeking to counterbalance China? Should Europe pursue a policy of equidistance between the US and China? Are there circumstances in which Europe may find itself closer to China than the US? Can Europe define a policy which is both critical of China, but different from that of the US?

From a strategic autonomy perspective, one argument suggests that without an independent European policy, Europe risks being dragged into Cold War with China by policies driven and shaped by the US. In the worst case, European states could find themselves dragged into a war with China (over Taiwan, the

South China Sea or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands) driven by US policies. Even short of worstcase scenarios, being drawn into a US-China Cold War on the US side risks seriously damaging cooperation in other areas, in particular climate change, where China's engagement may be vital. This view has been articulated in particular by French President Emmanuel Macron: "A situation to join all together against China, this is a scenario of the highest possible conflictuality. This one, for me, is counterproductive" (Momtaz 2021).

Behind these questions about European strategy are deeper questions about the new US-China strategic rivalry and different answers to these questions suggest different conclusions for Europe policy.

One question is what is causing the US-China strategic rivalry or in simple terms, 'who is to blame'? If the answer to this question is primarily shifts in Chinese politics and foreign policy—the increasingly authoritarian turn in Chinese politics and the increasingly forward, even aggressive, Chinese position on a wide range of regional and global issues—then arguably Europe should support the US in pushing back against China. If the US-China strategic rivalry is driven primarily by an exaggerated perception of the 'Chinese threat' in Washington, DC and by unnecessarily provocative US policies, then arguably Europe should seek to distance itself from US policies and maintain an open door for cooperation with China. A second set of questions relate to whether a US (and wider Western) Cold War with China can be avoided or mitigated and how far it is possible to both strategically push back against China and maintain cooperation with Beijing in other areas? If a Cold War with China is avoidable, then policies designed to de-escalate tensions with China might be prioritised. If a Cold War with China is inevitable, then policy attention will shift to how best to conduct that Cold War. If pushing back against China can successfully be combined with cooperating with Beijing then such a policy will be preferably; if the two strategies cannot be combined, then Europe and the US will face some difficult strategic trade-offs. Assessments of the answers to these questions will differ within Europe (in both Brussels and national capitals) and lead to different conclusions about how Europe, especially the EU, should position itself in the new Europe-US-China strategic triangle.

## VI. Transatlantic Relations and China: From Trump to Biden

The politics of the Europe-US-China strategic triangle has been quite fast-moving in the last few years, shifting in particular in response to changes in US domestic politics. During the Trump administration,



Europe, especially the EU, sometimes seemed closer to China than the US, in particular in terms of shared opposition to the Trump administration's trade tariffs and support for the Paris climate change agreement and the Iran nuclear agreement. At their 2018 summit, the EU and China issued a strong joint statement of support for multilateralism, in particular in relation to trade and climate change (European Union 2018).

In 2021 the Biden administration sought to repair the damage done to transatlantic relations by the Trump administration. A central element of this was efforts to forge a common front against China. At an EU-US summit in June 2021, the two parties agree to “closely consult and cooperate on the full range of issues in the framework of our respective similar multi-faceted approaches to China” and to establish a high-level EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC). Although the TTC's agenda is much broader than China, it was clearly envisaged as a framework within which to address economic and technological dependence on China and China's role on in the global economy. Borrowing from the EU's 2019 China policy document, the statement from the EU-US summit also noted the “elements of cooperation, competition, and systemic rivalry” in both the EU and the US's relationships with China and committed the EU and the US to “coordinate on our constructive engagement with China on issues such as climate change and non-proliferation, and on certain regional issues” (European Union 2021, para. 26)—suggesting an approach shaped also by European concerns rather than Europe simply following the US lead.

The positive dynamic in US-European coordination of policies towards China was disrupted by the announcement of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) pact in September 2021, under which the UK and the US agreed to help Australia develop nuclear-powered submarines and the three countries committed to cooperate on security more broadly. Although the agreement did not mention China by name, AUKUS was clearly designed to counter-balance Chinese power. AUKUS overturned a previous agreement with France to help Australia produce conventional submarines and was announced without consultation with France or other European states. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described the pact as a “stab in the back” (Charlemagne 2021). AUKUS's announcement as a bolt from the blue only one day before the EU published its own Indo-Pacific strategy, reinforced the sense of US unilateralism.

For France—and to some extent for other EU member states—AUKUS reinforced the arguments for strategic autonomy from the US, especially in relation to China policy and the Indo-Pacific. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy's strong emphasis on cooperation in the region, as opposed to counter-balancing China, only added to the sense of divergent US and European approaches (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2021). Following the furore

surrounding AUKUS, the Biden administration sought to calm the diplomatic storm by emphasising the importance of France and the EU as partners in the Indo-Pacific. One suggestion was that Europe might be brought into policy coordination on China and the Indo-Pacific by expanding the Quad (US, India, Japan, Australia) grouping to a Quad-plus-two framework with France and the UK. The longer-term impact of the AUKUS rift, however, remains to be seen.

## VII. Stronger Together

Stepping back from short-term diplomatic developments, two broader arguments may be made, both of which suggest that the longer-term dynamic may be towards transatlantic cooperation on China. First, if the issue is autonomy from and influence over China, there is a strong case that Europe and the US will best be able to reduce economic and technological dependence on and exercise influence over China if they work together (and with other democracies such as Japan, Australia and India). China may soon become the world's largest economic power, but the combined economic might of the world's democracies will significantly outweigh that of China, suggesting that the degree of unity or disunity amongst the world's major democracies will have a major bearing on the future direction of geopolitics. If European strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific means an approach strongly divergent from that of the US, both Europe and America's position vis-à-vis China may be weakened.

Second, notwithstanding the unilateralist tendencies in US foreign policy, in the medium-term Europe is likely to find that it has much more in common, in terms of both values and interests, with a democratic United States than with communist China. On multilateralism, for example, China's approach is arguably quite different from Europe's, preferring the kind of great power sovereigntism that allows it to exercise a veto and weak commitments that it can ignore or bypass in practice. The case for transatlantic cooperation on China, therefore, is strong. Such cooperation, however, cannot rest simply on Europe following America's lead and will require a willingness to compromise on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, the possibilities of a future populist US President and/or a breakdown of democracy in the US cannot be ruled out, in which case Europe could find itself facing a scenario of deeply troubled relations with both China and the US. This possibility provides a powerful case for a European hedging strategy of seeking transatlantic cooperation on China while further building European political unity and capabilities.

## VIII. Conclusion

Europe's strategy of engagement with China—as well as the more narrowly self-interested economic decisions of businesses and governments—have resulted in a relationship of substantial mutual interdependence between Europe and China. Inevitably, this involves dependence on China and gives China leverage over Europe. When China looked like a viable—or potentially viable—partner for Europe this was relatively unproblematic. Today, with China becoming increasingly assertive internationally and increasingly authoritarian domestically, this dependence is problematic and becoming more so almost by the day. In this context, Europe is seeking greater strategic autonomy vis-à-vis China. The difficult questions are exactly how this can and should be achieved and how far it necessitates the dismantling of existing economic and institutional relationships with China. European states and the EU need to find a middle road which reduces economic and technological dependence on China, while maintaining, in so far as possible, broadly beneficial trade relationship and the scope for cooperation with China in other important areas, in particular climate change.

The European China question, furthermore, is now deeply intertwined with Europe's relationship with the US. Differing views of the nature and causes of increasing US-China tensions lead to differing assessments of how Europe should try to position itself in the new US-Europe-China strategic triangle. These, in turn, are intertwined with profound uncertainties about the long-term direction of US domestic politics and foreign policy. This briefing has argued that, ultimately, European states and the EU will find that they have much more in common with the US than they do with communist China and that differences between Europe and the US over China are more likely to be ones of nuance than grand strategy. The case for transatlantic cooperation towards China therefore remains strong. Nonetheless, given the uncertainties about the strategic direction of US foreign policy and domestic politics, Europe is also likely, at least in part, to hedge against the possibility of a more problematic relationship with the US. Balancing transatlantic cooperation vis-à-vis China and hedging against the possibility of a populist authoritarian America are likely to pose on-going challenges for European states and the EU.

## IX. Policy Recommendations

1. Europe (both European states and the EU) should seek to reduce economic and technological dependence on China, especially in key sectors and technologies, while maintaining, in so far as possible, an open trade relationship and the possibility of cooperation in other areas, in particular climate change.

2. The EU should review its institutional relations with China in order to assess the utility and value of the current wide-ranging institutional ties.
3. Europe and the US can best maintain their autonomy from, and influence over, China if they work together with one another (and with other democracies). This will require a willingness to compromise on both sides of the Atlantic. Charlemagne (2021) The great sub snub. *The Economist*, 25 September, p25.

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