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The EU and China: military and geopolitical challenges

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This paper was drawn up by Audrey Quintin, Sabrina Blasi and Robin Vanholme under the supervision and guidance of Mr Mario Blokken, Director of the Permanent Secretariat.

This Food for Thought paper is a document that gives an initial reflection on the theme. The content is not reflecting the positions of the member states but consists of elements that can initiate and feed the discussions and analyses in the domain of the theme. All our studies are available on www.finabel.org

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ABSTRACT

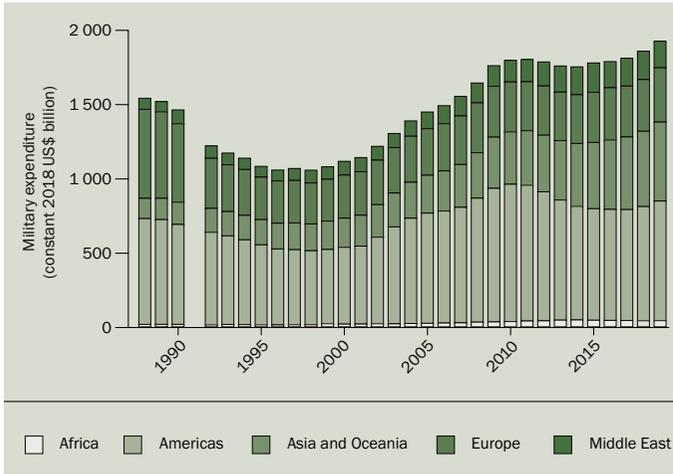
As the deleterious effects of Covid-19 will probably affect trends in world military expenditure, European defence-spending plans will certainly not represent an exception. This could be even more problematic since China's growing power and influence seem to be reshaping the structure and dynamics of global governance. Moreover, China's growing military power may carry inherent risks for the EU in multiple ways, namely the Chinese narrative and its influence in Europe could further undermine the cooperation of EU defence in national systems. To assess what kind of threat Chinese military power represents towards Europe, this paper aims to investigate the impact of a more assertive China has on the global standing of the EU within the framework of the emerging great power politics.

INTRODUCTION

According to the latest data released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2020), world military expenditure rose to \$1,917 billion in 2019, representing an increase of 3.6 per cent from 2018 and the largest annual growth in spending since 2010. The five largest spenders in 2019, which accounted for 62 per cent of expenditure, were the United States, China, India, Russia and Saudi Arabia. US military expenditures grew by 5.3% to a total of \$732 billion in 2019 and accounted for 38% of global military spending. Pieter D. Wezeman of SIPRI argues that a “perceived return to competition between the great powers” helps explain this increase (ibid.). Indeed, at the same time, China's military spending reached \$261 billion in 2019, a 5.1 per cent increase compared with 2018.

These numbers illustrate the increasing military power that China has been acquiring for the past decade, developing new cutting-edge military technology and deeply reforming its armed forces. Moreover, the above discussion shows the effect that China's reforms can have on military dynamics worldwide. However, developments in defence spending in Europe continue to mainly be influenced by the Russian threat. Of Europe's main military spenders, Germany recorded the largest increase with a 10% defence spending hike in 2019, with SIPRI's Diego Lopes da Silva observing that Germany along with many other NATO allies are wary of Russia (ibid.). At the same time, military spending by France and the United Kingdom remained relatively stable.

WORLD MILITARY EXPENDITURE, BY REGION, 1988-2019



Notes: The absence of data for the Soviet Union in 1991 means that no total can be calculated for that year. Rough estimates for the Middle East are included in the world totals for 2015-2019.

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Apr. 2020.



Global military expenditure has consistently increased in the past few years.

The serious economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic threaten to reduce European defence spending, as governments will mainly be focused on “tackling the immediate socio-economic fallout of the pandemic” (Novaky, 2020). European military spending slumped after the 2008 economic crisis, and it was only after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and other aggression in Ukraine that the downward trend reversed (Ibid.).

This time, the external security threat that could require an increase in the defence budgets could be China. This is especially because the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the global balance of power, which could lead to changing ambitions both at the regional and global levels (Marrone, 2020: 4–5). The ensuing windows of opportunity may be exploited by “ambitious, revisionist competitors [...] such as Russia and China” (ibid.). Besides potentially posing new direct security threats to Europe, these changing geopolitical patterns may lead to shifting alliances in various regions of the world, such as the Middle East or the South China Sea (ibid.).

This paper examines the implications of a more assertive China for the global standing of the EU in the framework of an evolving structure of international politics. The analysis will be developed at three levels. Firstly, the paper offers insights on the Chinese defence programme and budget, as the modernisation of Chinese military power is rapidly progressing from a defensive force “charged with domestic and peripheral security” to an outward-looking, “power-projecting arm of Chinese foreign policy” (US Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019: v). Secondly, it takes a closer look at the EU-China relationship, assessing the potential threats Europe faces from the rise of Chinese military power, especially the implications of the growing Chinese ground-based force capabilities. Moreover, it investigates non-military threats such as soft power competition that are calling for the EU to adopt a more pronounced posture in the international arena. Finally, the paper addresses the challenges posed by an evolving landscape of great power competition in which both China and the EU operate, and considers the impact of the pandemic in reshaping or, at least, accelerating current global trends.

ASSESSMENT OF CHINA'S MILITARY POWER TODAY

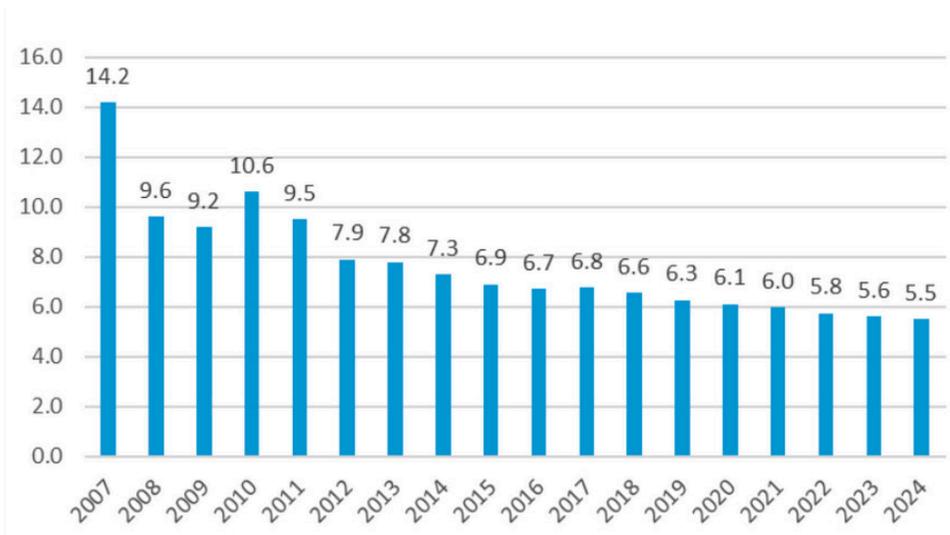
Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has strengthened its military power, in line with Xi's vision to restore the country's great-power status (Maizland, 2020). Besides being the President, Xi is the head of the Central Military Commission, the Chinese army's highest decision-making organ – a position in which he has declared a commitment to developing a “world-class force” ready to win global wars by 2049 (ibid). These reforms are helped by the growing Chinese economy, and by various innovations made in the military and armament domains. Thus, to better understand the military threats China embodies for Europe, it is essential to review the country's defence programme and budget, as well as the new military equipment China is developing today.

China as a major economic contender

When assessed as a major global power, China is often first perceived as a threatening economic

contender. China has already been among the fastest-growing economies in the world since the reforms it made 1979, with the average yearly GDP growth rate in the past forty years being nearly 10% (Morrison, 2019: Summary; World Bank, 2020). As a result, China doubled its GDP and became the largest economy in the world (Morrison, 2019: Summary). In its current economic planning, the Chinese government heavily supports the country's manufacturing industries, which increases Chinese independence from foreign technology (ibid.).

Another key initiative implemented by the Chinese regime is the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), also known as “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR). Launched in 2013, the initiative aims to help Chinese industries penetrate foreign markets, as well as improving the returns on China's foreign exchange reserves (Morrison, 2019: 35). More than 2,000 contracts have already been made under the initiative, for a total worth of 1.12 trillion US dollars (Swedish Ministry for



Real annual GDP growth in China in 2007-2018, and projections for 2018-2024. Data source: IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2019. Graphic: W. M. Morrison, US Congressional Research Service (2019: 10).

Foreign Affairs, 2019: 6-7). Europe has also received investments from the initiative, and for example, Italy concluded a cooperation agreement with China in April 2019 (ibid.)

As China has become a key global player in research, innovation, and technological development, it increasingly represents an economic threat to Europe. China now spends a higher proportion of its GDP than Europe does, and it is advanced in fields such as space technology that has both civilian and military purposes (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019: 8). China has successfully transferred technologies and know-how from foreign companies, and strategic acquisitions of non-Chinese firms with cutting-edge technologies have been significant in this development (Ibid.).

China's increasing commercial influence and investments in Europe imply geopolitical risks for Europe, as the investments have not only financial but also strategic effects. To take one example, in 2019, China had around €2.5 billion of investments in Greece, including in the port of Piraeus which is a point of entry for many Chinese exports into the European market (Tisdall, 2019). Chinese investment can be seen as particularly attractive to European countries recovering from the economic crises of the past decade. As of 2019, China is the EU's largest source of imports with a share of 18.7%, ahead of the United States, which has a share of 12.0% (European Commission, 2019). The "16+1" format bringing together China and countries from Central and Eastern Europe, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Chinese investments in economically fragile countries may at worst fragment the EU from within. This is especially the case given China's tendency to play EU Member States against each other, especially in trade and investment relations (Tisdall, 2019). Consequently, China's increasing economic power has not only financial but also geopolitical implications.

The issuing of a new defence budget and program

China's economic success has allowed the country to strengthen its capabilities in the military and defence sectors while becoming more assertive in its military goals and aspirations. In 2019, the Chinese government issued its "China's National Defense in the New Era" paper, which outlined its national defence policy and objectives, and its desire *"to build a fortified national defence and a strong military"* (China's National Defense in the New Era, 2019). In this paper, the Chinese regime acknowledges the changes occurring in the international strategic landscape, and the uncertainties dominating international security. Moreover, this national defence paper states that *"China will pursue a national defence policy that is defensive in nature"*, and organised around various national defence aims, such as deterring and resisting aggression, safeguarding national political security and supporting the sustainable development of the country. Furthermore, according to this document, the Chinese military strategic guideline adheres to *"the principles of defence, self-defence and post-strike response"*, keeping the stance that *"China won't attack unless it is attacked, but will surely counterattack if attacked"*. Finally, we can find in this paper the strategic goals set by the Chinese government regarding the development of China's national defence and military: to *"achieve mechanisation by the year 2020 with significantly enhanced informational and strategic capabilities"*; to *"complete the modernisation of national defence and the military by 2035"*; and to *"fully transform the people's armed forces into world-class forces by the mid-21st century"*.

To sum it up, the Chinese regime is working to make its military more reliable, more efficient, and more technologically advanced to become a top-tier force within thirty years. Key reforms made under President Xi Jinping's leadership include the strengthening of civilian-military cooperation, personnel cuts, and new joint

theatre commands (Maizland, 2020). Moreover, the government has sought to improve the synergies between state-owned and private defence industries (ibid.). As for civilian-military cooperation, partnerships with foreign companies and universities have, for example, strengthened the artificial intelligence at the Chinese army's disposal (ibid.). Today, much of the People Liberation Army's equipment is built domestically, and China is even estimated to be the world's second-largest arms producer (Tian and Su, 2020).

In 2019, the Chinese National People's Congress increased the country's defence spending by 7.5% compared to the previous year, bringing the total to \$177.61 billion a year; however, given that in the past years, the growth had been above 10%, the increases in spending have recently slowed down (Olsen, 2019). In 2020, amid the COVID-19 epidemic, the Chinese defence budget increased by 6.6% (Wolf, 2020c). However, the level of expenditure may be higher than what the numbers initially suggest, a point to which we return in the next section. Overall, between 1998 and 2018, China multiplied its yearly defence expenditure by more than seven, and today the country is the world's second-largest military spender after the United States (Maizland, 2020). The consistent increases in defence investment have already made China a global leader in areas such as anti-ship ballistic missiles and the military applications of artificial intelligence (Maizland, 2020). However, even if we know that China's defence spending is divided roughly equally between personnel, training, maintenance and equipment, the details are still kept secret (Olsen, 2019).

As mentioned above, China possesses advanced artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities. Among

other things, the country is one of the global leaders in the development of autonomous weapons systems. Meanwhile, civilian applications of AI include surveillance systems for domestic purposes. Moreover, major investments are being made to modernise ground force capabilities and China's capacity to project itself as a major maritime power. To do so, the armed forces have been reformed, with increased investment in protecting interests abroad. Likewise, China is rapidly developing its space and cyber capabilities. The below section will offer a more detailed account of the principal investments China has made in various military domains.



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Geographically, China's priority areas are South China Sea where China is involved in territorial disputes over several islands such as the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands; Taiwan, whose independence China opposes; and its land borders with neighbours such as India and North Korea (Maizland, 2020). An illustration of China's strategic focus on the South China Sea is the frequent naval exercises that the country holds in the region (Oki, 2018). However, for some experts, Taiwan remains the main catalyst for the PLA's modernisation (Maizland, 2020). Indeed, the Xi government has taken an increasingly aggressive approach, saying in

its 2019 defence paper that the PLA would “*resolutely defeat anyone attempting to separate Taiwan from China*” (Chinese Defence White Paper, 2019). Moreover, Beijing has already threatened before to use force against Taiwan if the self-ruled island moves towards formal independence (Ibid.).

However, China has also demonstrated strategic ambitions far outside its surroundings. For example, China has since 2017 had a military base in Djibouti, and it launched its new Arctic Policy in 2018 intending to exploit the potential of the region’s natural resources and commercial maritime traffic connections (Maizland, 2020; Foggo, 2019).

In sum, thanks to its increased defence budget, its technological progress and its assertive defence programme, China can be perceived as a strong global military power. During the past decades, China conducted an increasing number of joint military exercises, including with Pakistan, Russia, and members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Maizland, 2020). China’s growing strength, and ambitions for a more influential global role, mean that it is relevant for European military actors to closely monitor developments in the Chinese defence sector. The next section will discuss the current state of play in Chinese military technology.

Recent developments in Chinese military technology

China’s large defence budget has enabled it to develop new weapons and armament programmes at the service of its geostrategic interests. Even if China argues that its military doctrines revolve around self-defence, Western actors have perceived that China seeks to contest American power, especially in Asia (see Olsen, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, Chinese defence spending was officially set at 1.19 trillion yuan (\$177.61

billion) in 2019. However, the official numbers may underestimate the actual level of expenditure. Because of the intertwining of public and private, and civilian and military actors, the numbers do not properly account for Chinese military Research & Development (R&D); moreover, the numbers should be adjusted for purchasing power, since for example labour costs in China are lower than in the United States or Europe (Bartels, 2020). With these considerations in mind, Bartels (2020) calculates that the Chinese defence budget in 2017 was able to buy the equivalent 87% of the American defence budget. He goes on to argue that accounting for purchasing power would explain why, for example, China can procure about 14 warships yearly, while the US Navy only commissions about five.

While Chinese weapons systems have historically been cheaper and less sophisticated than European or American manufacturers’ products, the situation has already changed (Lin, 2020). From the 1990s onwards but especially since Xi Jinping came into power, China has invested in fields such as AI, robotics and 5G and even 6G telecommunications (Huang, 2020).

To protect its militarized islands in the South China Sea, to deter other Asian nations and to challenge the US Navy, the PLA owns some of



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the world's best anti-ship missiles and hypersonic missiles. China possesses several hypersonic missiles, such as the DF-100 cruise missile and the DF-ZF hypersonic glide vehicle (see image below), which are very difficult to intercept with the current US anti-missile systems on US Navy ships (Smith, 2019; Mizokami, 2016).

The Chinese Navy is also boosting its maritime power with the construction of many new warships. China already has the world's

second-biggest Navy, surpassing the Russian Navy during the last decade, and it intends to surpass the US Navy as the world's largest by 2050. The most notable examples include the construction of twenty-two Type-052D Destroyers (with a displacement of 7,500 tons) in only six years (2015–2021). China has also started to build six larger Type-055 stealth Destroyers (13,000t, top of the picture below), which should be done by 2023. China has also constructed rapidly two Type 075 amphibious assault ships (LHD) (40,000t, in





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the middle of the picture below) that would be critical for any invasions by sea, for example targeting Taiwan. A third is under construction. Finally, China already operates two Type-002 aircraft carriers (60-70,000t, bottom of the picture below), and is building two other larger upgraded Type-003(85,000t) carriers. However, due to technical difficulties, a lack of expertise and a massive increase in costs, the planned construction of four other Type-004 nuclear supercarriers (110,000t) has been put on hold. Although this huge procurement of ships would not yet allow the PLA Navy to challenge the US Navy globally, this would enable China to possibly beat the US Navy in conventional combat in the Pacific (Gilsinan, 2019; Lague and Kang Lim, 2019).

To gain aerial dominance against the US and to be able to fly through anti-access area, China has made noteworthy investments in modernised and stealth aircraft. So far, China is, alongside the US and Russia, the only country to operate a domestically-built stealth jet fighter: the Chengdu J-20 (see picture). China is also a leader in the development of stealth drones of different kinds, including the supersonic “Dark Sword” drone, and the GJ-11 “Sharp Sword”

drone that can take off from an aircraft carrier (Gramenz, 2019). To expand its forces and air capabilities in the region, China has also developed new transport aircraft and tankers, such as the Y-20 (US DoD, 2019, p. 41).

Nonetheless, the Chinese military sector is not always the most efficient, given that private defence firms are shielded from competition, that the companies suffer from increasing debt levels, and that corruption remains widespread in the country. There remain gaps in the Chinese production capability: for example, China is currently unable to rival technologies such as the Russian S-400/S-500 anti-missile systems, or the American Ford-class nuclear supercarrier (Yang, 2017). Moreover, However, “until the PLA has achieved its goals of recruiting, training and managing an educated, competent and non-corrupt personnel force, there will be limits to how much the military can absorb extremely advanced technology.” (Science Techniz, 2020).

Finally, concerning the ground forces, the PLA has the second-largest army in the world with 975,000 active soldiers (IISS, 2018, p. 250), a thousand aircraft (ibid, p. 251) and almost

8000 main battle tanks (Claws, 2012). However, China's huge land warfare capabilities do not appear to pose a direct threat to Europe. Not only is politically China unlikely to invade Europe, but the geographical distance between Europe and China combined with the current lack of sufficient capable military airlifts would make any such attempt particularly difficult (US DoD, 2019, p. 41). The truth is, in the past decade, Chinese military investments have prioritised the Navy (with investments like destroyers and aircraft carriers), and the Air Force (with new engines and stealth aircraft), rather than the land forces (Maizland, 2020).

For instance, the Chinese land forces have few recent main battle tanks. The People's Liberation

Army (PLA) does own several robust Type 96B and 99A tanks, but some of these are getting old. Moreover, they lack any soft-kill active protection system measures. China does own the very recent VT-4 tank, but it has not yet entered mass production or active service in the Chinese land forces. Secondly, China also suffers from a lack of cutting-edge self-propelled artillery. Thirdly, although they do own recent attack helicopters, the PLA Ground Force is often supported by old planes and helicopters, such as the Shaanxi Y-8 cargo planes from the 1970s, and the Mi-8 helicopters from the 1960s. Finally, the Ground Forces lack practical experience, as they have not fought any major combat engagement since the Vietnam War (Blumenthal, 2012, p. 75).

THE POSITION OF EUROPE VIS-À-VIS AN ASSERTIVE MILITARY CHINA

Main challenges from China towards Europe

The potential challenges China presents to Europe are changing rapidly. At present, these challenges are mainly in the realm of economics, intelligence gathering, and cyber-espionage. Short of the EU or NATO member states engaging in defence drills in the Pacific, the actual conventional military threat from China is minimal; however, that does not mean Brussels should completely disregard the possibility of conventional conflict. Going back to Russia's 2017 Zapad exercises, China participated in naval drills with Russia in the Baltic Sea, causing some concern from NATO about Chinese intentions (Trickett, 2017).

The biggest immediate roadblocks to forming a coherent policy on China are likely to be the seemingly deteriorating transatlantic relationship with the US, and the lack of uniformity amongst EU member states on an approach for relations with China on 5G involvement by Huawei, investments, trade, and the extent

of relations in general. Given that China is the EU's second-biggest trading partner, only behind the United States (European Commission, 2020), the EU faces a problem with protecting its interests and balancing its relations with these two powers.

This is especially difficult for the EU, because the current security architecture of Europe is centred around NATO and the Article 5 guarantee that in any worst-case scenario the US would rapidly build up its presence on the continent. Moreover, the overarching influence of NATO architecture is not limited to conventional military apparatuses. Still, it encompasses, for example, the extensive amount of intelligence sharing between American and European intelligence agencies on a range of security dilemmas, including illicit Chinese activities.

The popular use of Huawei throughout European markets has caused increasing tension with the White House out of fear that the company could be accessing sensitive information that American and European share to counter

common threats. The current trends, however, lean towards European states allowing Huawei to develop its 5G networks on the continent (Sanger & McCabe, 2020). US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has issued warnings that European states that use Huawei developed networks could face the risk of losing access to expansive US intelligence sharing networks (Wintour, 2020).

The tensions of transatlantic relations are a saga unto itself; however, the state of these relations will also have major implications for Europe's relationship with China. Despite Europe's seeming willingness to accommodate Huawei networks, Europe has also expressed its concerns and suspicions towards China. For example, the European Commission called China a "systemic competitor" in spring 2019, leading to a backlash from Beijing that was feared to damage investments (Peel, 2019).

Despite the European Commission's statements, there is little unity on how to deal with China. Northern European countries, France and Germany, seem more suspicious of China, with especially the latter two seeing China as a potential rival for their global influence (Bloomberg, 2020). Meanwhile, countries in Southern and Eastern Europe have been more dependent on Chinese investments, with Italy's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative being a high-profile example (Olsen, 2019). Moreover, the Chinese 16+1 initiative with Central and Eastern European countries has strengthened Chinese foothold in Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided China with opportunities to improve its image in various countries through exporting medical supplies, in what has been dubbed "mask diplomacy" (Hutt, 2020).

A major concern for military integration is the 16+1 format where Central and Eastern European states starved for outside investment all hope to curry China's favour. A major fear is that this could be a trojan horse for Europe and

could undermine efforts across the spectrum, including defence integration (The Diplomat, 2019). However, in light of increasing calls for disinvesting in China, one unlikely member state is calling for it to replace China in critical economic sectors.

The Vice Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Tomislav Donchev, has called for his country and other Eastern European nations to replace China in critical sectors (Euractiv; 2020). He points out that Bulgaria, unlike many other European nations, has retained its capacity for key industries such as textiles and electronics amongst others (Ibid). The idea is that it would promote European solidarity, and such moves would increase the self-reliance of Europe in future worse case scenarios. Likewise, it will have to balance the fact that the US is not only its largest trading partner but a guarantor of its continental security. Even so, it should not kowtow to the whims of either country (Cyber Scoop; 2020).

It should be made clear that the EU seeks to maintain good relations, cooperation, and international trade with China. Concurrently, Brussels must be unequivocal that it still seeks to maintain the transatlantic alliance and NATO as the key lynchpin to European security. This is why that European solidarity is the only way to move forward in forming a consistent strategy on relations with China and advocating for the promotion of a rules-based order in partnership with the US and other liberal democracies.

The lack of a proper European response towards China

Facing China's role as a potential military threat, Europe seems to be squeezed between the absence of a common European answer and an increasingly unreliable United States. As we have seen earlier, China is developing an increased interest in the Arctic and has already participated in exercises in the Baltic Region,

raising the question if European armed forces would be ready for any conventional threat originating from China. Moreover, China is progressively becoming a leader in the Artificial Intelligence sector, while reinforcing its cyber warfare capabilities; these issues also pose a threat to Europe. Nevertheless, Europe still heavily relies on NATO for its security and defence, thus pushing the old continent to back up US military and economic stances towards China. For example, according to current US Secretary of Defense Mark. T Esper, the Belt and Road Initiative is using overseas investments to force other nations into making sub-optimal security decisions (US Department of Defense ; 2020). This has wide-ranging implications for the US and its allies in areas such as data security and military interoperability. Another example is China's telecommunication firm Huawei, which has developed and is exporting 5G networks that could render the US partners' critical systems vulnerable to disruption, manipulation and espionage. It is because of this risk assessment made by the US that most of European countries have ruled out the option of adopting 5G on their territories in 2018. Thus, in August 2019, during a visit to Australia, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg declared that, while there were many reasons for the alliance to be in conversation with its Asian partners, there was a specific *"need to assess the security consequences for all of us of the rising military power of China."* (The Hill; 2019). He added that this was not about NATO expanding its military presence in Asia, but rather about dealing with the fact that China was "coming closer" to Europe.

In the Asia-Pacific region, it is mainly the United States that seeks to deter China. In Europe, one possibility is for NATO to take a stronger role in ensuring security through the creation of a NATO-China Council, similar to the NATO-Russia Council (see Pavel & Brzezinski, 2019). According to its proponents, such an organ would align the NATO Allies in a

dialogue with China, potentially strengthening stability in Europe and beyond (ibid.).

Beyond the role that NATO could play in protecting Europe against a potential Chinese military threat, it seems vital for European states to try to find a common answer, as the US's positions appear to be more and more volatile in the conduct of its foreign policy. As already stated before, Chinese companies are looking to expand their market access in Europe, also trying, by hook or crook, to acquire European technology assets and valuable dual-use technologies. Furthermore, by investing in smaller and weaker economies of Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans, Beijing gains political and diplomatic leverage that complicates the ability of the European Union to develop a working consensus among its members. This lack of unity could thus play in favour of China when it comes to developing its military capabilities. However, Europe does not appear to be completely resourceless in front of China's influence. Indeed, in 2019, Brussels established a framework for sharing information about foreign investments thought to be problematic with respect to national security or strategic European interests (The Hill; 2019). Although a useful first step, the European Union mechanism is not binding on individual member states, and only half of member states have a national entity intended to review such investments.

Various foreign policy initiatives by the EU address Chinese influence and leverage in the field of defence. The EU-China strategic partnership was established in 2003 and was upgraded in 2010 to include foreign affairs, security matters and global challenges such as climate change and global economic governance (Kirchner, 2016). However, the dialogue existing between the EU and China on defence and security issues exists since the mid-1990s. This dialogue has been important given the increasing volume of trade and investment



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between the EU and China; China's grappling with its domestic political developments; and the EU's desire to promote its values in its relationship with China. Meanwhile, this dialogue has seemed useful for China, given that European defence integration might have a strong impact on China's security and defence agenda (Scott, 2018). For example, the development of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) could impact Chinese foreign policy ambitions, as they could be perceived as an "insurance policy" for Europeans against the United States abandoning the continent.

As a consequence, Europe needs to take a stronger stance towards China's potential military threat, by finding a common voice and continuing to advance programs such as PESCO, to ensure the security of the continent by itself. However, it also still needs to collaborate with the United States and to follow NATO recommendations. Indeed, today, both the US and Europe are impacted by the fierce competition China is waging in the fields of the

fifth-generation wireless technology (5G), AI and web-based services. Differences in regulation will be a sticking point in transatlantic relations. However, there is no need for the United States and the European Union to be perfectly aligned; the best solution would be for both sides to push for global regulations in these edge-cutting fields, to avoid China or others filling the void. In the long run, the security of the European continent could depend upon the success of such implemented international regulations.

IS CHINA THE NEXT GLOBAL HEGEMONIC POWER?

A Looming Cold War?

The relationship between the United States and China has been conflictual, and tensions may be expected to increase if China continues challenging the American-led world order. This tension represents ideological competition between a communist authoritarian state and a liberal democracy. In this context, Europe would side with the United States. Still, it is unclear to what extent Europe will be united, and to what extent its deteriorating relationship with Washington affects coordination in any future China strategy.

Increasingly it seems that Brussels and other European capitals are more willing to be vocal about the threats China poses to the continent and globally. Brussels, Berlin, Paris, London, the Scandinavian pairing, and others have all raised their misgivings about both China's cover-up of the initial outbreak, but also their attempts to capitalise on propaganda efforts to change the narrative of the outbreak (New York Times; 2020). This has caused a rebuke from China, and before the release of a scathing EU report, it softened its language, to appease CCP officials who threatened economic consequences (New York Times; 2020).

This shows, however, that despite growing concerns that member states lack unity or the will to collectively stand up against China to the necessary extent. Before the onslaught of Covid-19 conventional wisdom was that Europe was already heading in the direction of reassessing its tithes with China. Still, that growing disunity in the transatlantic relationship and even within the EU made Brussels more reluctant to take stronger stances. Herein lies one of the most important elements in creating a strategy in how to counter China's malign activities, but maintaining good relations to the best extent possible. Forming a cohesive strategy with the

US, Canada, and other liberal democracies is vital in drawing the red lines for Beijing.

Not only the question of how to do that, but how to mend deteriorating relations with the US remains elusive. Tensions between the US and Europe will likely remain present for the foreseeable future, but it remains to be seen if relations can be mended to the extent needed. This leaves Europe in a vicarious position of an increasingly disengaged partner in America, and an increasingly assertive China in global affairs. It also means European policymakers must prepare for a scenario where this trend continues and forces them to reconsider decades-old policy stances and common interests.

It begs the question of what should Europe do if it is inevitable a Cold War does come? In the scenario where relations are mended, and a commons strategy is formed, it is pretty straight forward and ideal. However, if the current trajectory continues, then Europe must find its way in balancing relations between the two hegemonies and increasing its own internal and external capabilities to respond to any given crises that may come. In terms of European defence, it will come down to the willingness of EU member states to set aside personal policy differences to form a cohesive strategy for military integration.

More immediately, the much bigger threat for the EU is Russia, and under current defence architecture, the US is an insensible part of ensuring the continent's security. As former Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė said in 2016: "The United States has been the guarantor of peace since the Second World War and we expect that to remain. (CBC; 2016)." This is not likely to change any time soon. Still, given the fast-changing pace of geopolitics, this is why initiatives like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and others are so vital to European interests.

It's less about tensions with DC (even though it's a major issue for lots of reasons) and more about the ability to adapt to these changing environments. Concurrently, a stronger Europe also means a stronger ally to bolster NATO's defences in such an unpredictable world. It also means that if need be, they can prioritise their interests with regards to the US, China, Russia, or other major global actors. In essence, gradually reducing dependency on the US for security is a good thing, and gives Brussels the flexibility it needs in formulating policies that are first and foremost for the benefit of Europe. It will also provide policymakers with the ability to form clearer stances on how to deal with the emergence and rise of China as a global hegemon.

In that regard if the Cold War is to come, then Europe can hold fast to its values of liberal democracies and promotion of human rights with or without the United States. It will also have the ability to couple its immense soft power with credible hard power to serve as a deterrent against would-be aggressors. This is one area where there is a fundamental difference with China in that it doesn't have any soft power. Instead, it was lots of investments through the Belt and Road Initiatives that focus on lease developed and developing countries starved for investment (Financial Review; 2019). Immediately this is one-way Europe can leverage its immense soft power to counter China's likely nefarious intentions.

Concurrently, though, they must figure out how to deal with member states taking part in the initiative, namely Italy and Greece, but also potentially Eastern European members. Instead of resorting to knee-jerk reactions, there should be a more explicit stance on what countries stand to gain and what they and the EU may stand to lose. By doing so, it will not wholly alienate Chinese trade and investment, which is vital for the foreseeable future at least to some extent. Still, this should not give Beijing (or Russia for that matter) *carte blanche* to strong-arm

the continent into submission. Quite the contrary, this is why Europe must leverage its soft power and build its hard power.

A recent European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) report lays out many of the plausible scenarios that may happen with the future of Sino-European relations, in which it focuses on the potential decoupling of the respective economies (ECFR; 2020). If a new kind of Cold War is to come, then this will be crucial in ensuring vital supply chains cannot be leveraged for political gain. This would mean it would be critical for Europe to find ways to ensure that its supply chains that affect any kind of defence production were not dependent especially on China. However, this will be much easier said than done simply because of both potential competition from the US and Japan and the lack of potential alternatives (ECFR; 2020). Still striking that balance of reducing dependence and still finding ways to leave trade and investment open for its second-biggest trading partner is a tedious task indeed.

One area that might already indirectly speed up European interests is Chinese investment in the Balkans region. Balkans Insight, a leading regional policy outlet, contends that it is speeding up EU integration by default, mainly because of concerns from Brussels (Balkans Insight; 2020). This would give China even less leverage if it did speed up integration, and more say from the bloc on how relations with China are dealt with. There's no doubt that Europe's alliance with North America will directly impact it, but it's also clear that both continents cannot just shut China entirely out. Nor can it entirely stop Beijing's rise as a global player.

This is why it is crucial for the US, Europe, and even other liberal democracies to cooperate as much as possible in moving forward in a post-COVID-19 pandemic, and if an inevitable Cold War is in our midst. But it's also clear why Europe must protect its interests,

find solidarity, and be one of the poles of influence in an increasingly multipolar world order.

Is COVID-19 a game-changer in great power politics?

The Covid-19 pandemic has emerged as a massive shock that calls to mind 9/11 or the 2008 financial crisis, producing a kaleidoscope of effects in every domain of our society – government, economy, healthcare, lifestyles and power politics too. The discussion in global think tanks rages about what type of post-COVID world come out to be: more or less polarised? Will China be the next hegemon? Will the transatlantic relations be affected negatively? For sure, COVID has acted as an “accelerator” (Moisi, 2020) of phenomena that were already shaping our new world.



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A shift in the centre of gravity of the balance of powers

As the global system is amid realignment and the US ability to shape global politics declines, other powers are emerging and re-emerging. The unipolar international system of the post-Cold War order is gradually collapsing in the “rimland peripheries” after the rise of a decentered,

multi-powered world that provides regional powers with greater scope for local and regional approaches (Stuenkel, 2016). Covid-19 has tested the global standing of the “Russia-India-China” format that seemed to develop a concise response cooperating with WHO and providing humanitarian aid in emerging countries, thus portraying a nuanced picture of the BRICS involvement in building a multipolar and post-Western world order. Global concerns about a “neo-imperialist” Russia, assertive in Eastern Europe, are secondary compared to the ones due to the Asian countries’ economic might – that includes market size and manufacturing base – which altered the economic and the political balance of power throughout the world, turning them rapidly from emerging economies into drivers of global change. In particular, the pandemic appears to offer an illustration of the Chinese slippage into the role of

the significant actor in the international arena. As Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi argued in *Foreign Affairs*, there are possibilities that China will take advantage of the faltering US in the pandemic response to position itself as the incipient global leader (Campbell and Doshi, 2020). If this will be the case, scholars of IR share concerns that a revisionist China would, shortly, drive the US-China rivalry into a “Thucydides Trap” (Allison, 2017), with China looking for supplanting the US as the dominant state in East Asia and beyond, and the declining

US attempts to arrest China’s growth. The “War of Words” over responsibilities for Covid-19 has recently exacerbated their antagonism, over-politicising the actions of their rival (Jing Yu, 2020). As the virus was first detected in the city of Wuhan, China had to deal with mounting international criticisms and Trump administration seized the opportunity to overtly complain against China’s misinformation about the

severity of the outbreak which was delayed by at least five weeks measures that would halt the spread of the virus.

Nevertheless, what was meant to be a “Chinese Chernobyl” turned to be almost a victory by early March (Campbell and Doshi, 2020) when the epicentre of the virus shifted to the Western countries and China found itself uniquely positioned for a global soft power grab with its “mask diplomacy” supply of medical equipment. Setting a narrative of the country that has successfully combated the virus and is ready to help the world, China has flexed its muscles in getting strategic advantage from the crisis in countries where it already was making progress on Belt and Road and on its propaganda. Its discourse based on the difficulties that Western countries were experiencing in managing the health crisis, worsened bilateral quarrels that comes amid previous areas of confrontation: the unfinished business of the trade war, the disputes about the Western Pacific and the confrontational streak over technological dominance which is going to become an essential prerequisite of power in our new world, including in the military realm (Ortega, 2020). If Russia is still a source of concern, due to its nuclear capability, China is perceived as a more alarming rising power, and the Sino-US game in the international chessboard gains the priority to be analysed.

In the context of a confrontational multipolar world, Covid-19 appears to act as a turning point in revising major powers relations, as it was after the Suez debacle that signed the end of the United Kingdom’s reign as a global power. Today the coronavirus pandemic could mark another “Suez moment” for US global power (Campbell and Doshi, 2020). As China controls much more relative power than ever before, it is expected to claim a more significant role in world politics – proportionate with its size and economy. Indeed, Chinese meteoric rise shifts the regional balance of power

in China’s favour. Nevertheless, while aiming at widening and deepening its global search for energy and resources, as well as expanding its investment, market and political influence, China could be simply both unprepared and unwilling to bear the burden of an activist foreign policy that lead to global hegemony, as it remains consumed by domestic priorities and development concerns (Nye Jr, 2020).

Despite alarms about a predatory China and even considering its assertiveness proved during this further millennium crisis, China’s leadership is still regional, and its actions should be observed in the framework of its geostrategic context. China is situated on the eastern third of the Eurasian landmass, between Russia and the Indian subcontinent. Its coastline surrounds the Yellow, East and South China Seas and, as a huge country, it presents a geographic split between the fertile eastern lowlands and the arid and scarcely populated highlands. Since threats to territorial integrity came firstly by borderlands, China has historically tried to push them outwards and to integrate the highlands as strategic “buffer zones” forming a shield for the core. Thus, historically, for security reasons, China would control the “buffer regions” (Friedman, 2016). Maintaining control of these regions requires a united and robust core that was threatened, in turn, by the everlasting internal divisions. Chinese history is defined by cycles of unity and fragmentation, from periods when a strong core captures and holds the surrounding buffers to those when a weak core breaks into its constituent parts, loses internal coherence and cedes control of the borderlands.

Today, the struggle for the “buffer spaces” has been updated with a new maritime dimension since Chinese growing international trade and rising reliance on overseas resources. Thus, what Beijing is pursuing is a kind of “Monroe doctrine” for Asia, a regional exclusion doctrine aimed at pushing the United States out of the Asia-Pacific, very similar to

the nineteenth-century US policy in the Western Hemisphere against European great powers (Jackson, 2016).

The tensions between China and the United States are strengthened by conflicting interests in East Asia, and China's difficult relations with some traditional US allies such as (Shiffrinson, 2018: 178). In the past decade, China has been active in various territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas. Still, it has also extended its influence in Africa and Central Asia (Shiffrinson, 2018: 189). At the same time, China is surrounded by potential adversaries. It has land borders with Russia and India, with which it has had conflicts in the past; meanwhile, Japan, South Korea and Australia have traditionally had good relations with the United States, and countries like Vietnam and Malaysia have at times been uneasy about growing Chinese power in the region (Shiffrinson, 2018). In this context, a 'Monroe doctrine' would entail controlling the area inside the "first island chain" off of the East Asian coast, intercepting American access to the East China Sea, South China Sea and the Yellow Sea, cutting off the US Navy from Korea or Taiwan if necessary. Alternatively, pushing the Chinese sphere of control to the "second island chain" would also close off connections to Japan and the Philippines. Mearsheimer (2014: 4) argues that this Chinese strategy would shift the US attention to its neighbourhood. Therefore, China's increasing presence in Latin America may be interpreted as a part of the same strategy, limiting American mobility in the geopolitical arena.

China's strengthening global presence is connected to its need for raw materials and expanding its markets. As the world's biggest provider of industrial products, China relies heavily on foreign markets to fill its energy and resource demand (Zou Lei, 2018). For example, the Belt and Road Initiative, which runs from Southeast Asia through South Asia to the Mediterranean,

protects Chinese trade routes, as well as strengthening China's partnerships with participating countries (Glosserman & Marantidou, 2015: 2). China has also sought to enhance its cooperation with Middle Eastern countries which are crucial for China's energy imports (Nye Jr., 2020), as well as African and Central Asian countries. Meanwhile, in the past two decades, China has invested in various infrastructural projects in Tibet related to managing the water supply, including dams and water diversion projects (Albert, 2016). The Himalayan rivers are a significant source of water for neighbouring countries such as India and Bangladesh, and with the anticipated shortage of water in the future, control over these water sources will be of growing geopolitical importance (ibid.).

As a result, security reasons behind the regional hegemonic position searched by Beijing stand upon the purpose to solve territorial disputes on China's terms through military prowess. In other words, the main reason why China needs to become a regional power is the need to dominate its regional rivals. Territorial disputes, on the other hand, make China neither equipped nor ready to step up to global leadership in a "Suez moment", even at this time of international crisis and even if the US retreats further from the world stage. Achieving superpower status depends on a nation's mission and vision being embraced by the rest of the world, universally accepted (Ho Chun, 2016). At present, China's ideology and illiberal political order hardly represent an attractive model for the largest part of the world, despite its flourishing economy and although China has started to acquire soft power through offering unconditional loans, increasing its investments (ibid.) and acting as the benign country leading the medical supply exports during a global health crisis. Still, China seems not to match the legitimacy requirement that the world would recognise as a global hegemon.

On the contrary, what Doshi and Campbell have seen as a “victory” in Chinese efforts to restore its soft power after the initial disastrously late reaction to the outbreak of the virus, is meant to alter its international reputation much longer. Moreover, the attempts to hide the severity of the disease caused a lot of anger also internally (Biscop, 2020). Such blatant disregard for people’s lives brings back bad memories of the worst excesses of Mao’s rule (*ibid.*). The crisis strengthens opposition to Xi Jinping within the Chinese Communist Party, which might have consequences for the succession (*ibid.*).

As well as China, the USA will not come out as the winning party. The US has proved strikingly absent from the international scene. By not taking the crisis seriously, Trump has lost the opportunity for the USA to play any role in international solidarity and coordination (*ibid.*).

Besides, the economic damage has been massive for both of them. The US and Chinese economies have been hit hard, as have those of the United States’ European and East Asian allies. Before the crisis, China’s economy had grown to two-thirds the size of the United States’ (measured at exchange rates), but China entered the crisis with a slowing growth rate and declining exports (Nye Jr, 2020). Beijing has also been investing heavily in military power, but remains far behind the United States and may slow down its military investments in a more adverse budgetary climate (*ibid.*). Among other things that the crisis has exposed is China’s need for significant expenditures on its inadequate health care system (*ibid.*).

Despite the best efforts by Beijing and Washington engaged in vigorous propaganda, China and the United States are both likely to emerge from this crisis significantly diminished. Neither a new “Pax Sinica” nor a renewed “Pax Americana” will rise from the ruins. Rather,

both powers will be weakened, at home and abroad. And the result will be a continued slow but steady drift toward international anarchy across everything from international security to trade to pandemic management (Rudd, 2020). This brings us to our second point.

The weakness of global governance

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in a context of governance fragmentation and incipient inequality. The multilateral attempts to coordinate a global response to a transnational threat encountered obstacles in political polarisation and geopolitical competition. The global competition between US and China (and Russia to a lesser extent) prevented the major multilateral forums from coordinating action planning against the common threat which knows no borders. The US slow but evident decline led to the lack of the intellectual driver that crafted the multilateral rules-based system that governs our world (Bernes et al., 2020). In searching to adapt to this new world, the US shifted from being the global leader to becoming almost an impediment to multilateral cooperation (*ibid.*). As a result, international institutions falter to provide an effective and coordinated pandemic response. The American withdrawal and the discord among major powers undercut international efforts within the World Health Organization, the Group of Twenty, the United Nations, and other major multilateral settings. The WHO is not playing the central role it should in the Covid-19 crisis. It was informed too late by China, to the detriment of other states’ ability to react, and having to comply with Chinese injunctions before declaring a state of a pandemic. WHO gives the sense that it is echoing a “Chinese line” on the fight against the virus (Duclos, 2020).

COVID management shows that creating worldwide international consensus on global issues will be a difficult task in a multipolar world, due to the lack of a common understanding

on a number of international challenges, as well as for the fundamental perception of its role in a multipolar world: major great powers may have different views of multilateralism itself and take different shades of responsibilities (Zhongping, 2009). The discords among major powers and the lack of global leadership will obstacle collective action across a range of global challenges.

The post-Cold War 'unipolar' turned 'multipolar' sees the West no longer able to tackle global issues on its own, as well as it can deal alone with regional crises. In particular, for the EU, the strategic vision of Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRICs countries) shows that the best policy mindset is not to try to become a normal hard-power player but, to survive and to influence the outcome of the international order, it must succeed in giving a multilateral dimension to the current multipolarity.

To sum it up, the world to come is no more nor less pacific than the previous one characterised by US undisputed global leadership. What we are assisting nowadays is a world shaped by internally hierarchical spheres of influence with a regionally dominating State. That is leading to a jeopardised world governance in which the strengthening of defensive regionalism and economic nationalism is supporting demands for tighter economic protectionism and military security (Telò, 2014). Anyway, there are several forms of a multipolar world, the most fashioned on which suggested the balance between various spheres of influence as a basis for a stable world government. Nevertheless, the classical theories that emphasise the dimension of power politics or the possibility of a world of bargaining blocs should take into account the complex interdependence of our new world as well as the development of transnational relations. Admittedly, it will not be a kind of militarised 1930-style society. Still, the new multipolar balance of power will have to cope with the historical transformations of the last decades at global,

regional-domestic and transnational levels. In this context of increasing multipolarity, Europe for its democratic legacy and experience in balancing power should play a prominent role in defining the norms and rules that would prevent a future clash for competing for unilateral leadership: what will threaten us more.

CONCLUSION

China has made rapid progress with many military technologies in the past decade, surpassing European armed forces in several fields, such as drones, stealth aircraft and hypersonic missiles. These technological developments, paired with the geopolitical ambitions of Xi Jinping, can cause a military threat in the Pacific, but not so much in Europe. The challenges that China poses to Europe are rather economical and political. As we saw, at least in an armed conflict, especially on the ground, Russia would be a more likely and dangerous opponent than China for several reasons, such as geopolitical tensions, geographic proximity, a large fleet of armoured vehicles, and recent development in tactical cutting-edge technologies like hypersonic missiles or advanced tanks.

The difficulty with China will mainly be its desire to see a more compliant Europe on increasing its influence and geopolitical ambitions on the continent. Secondly, the fact that most EU

members are in NATO will also be problematic because of the organisation's historically close relationship with the US. It is doubtful that China will be as aggressive as Russia in dividing Europe, but it will continue to fill vacuums where it can, and strive to push its narrative in European capitals. Lastly, it will seek to pull Europe away from the United States, quite possibly in tandem with Russia, to quell voices on its numerous human rights abuses and perhaps its more nefarious intentions.

Still yet, China knows it has to keep a delicate balance in order not to draw the ire of Europe and push it back into the US's corner in a time where relations have been at their worst perhaps ever. Because of this, expect China to continue to push its narratives and try to increase its influence in Europe, but still staying clear of anything that could create a united geopolitical front with the US and other liberal democracies.



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