



# The Remaking of China–EUROPE Relations in the New Era of US–China Antagonism

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Accepted: 13 February 2022

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## Abstract

The recent years have witnessed a significant change in China–EUROPE relations, with the EU’s strategic positioning of China undergoing a fundamental shift from a “partner” to a “systemic rival.” By applying a theoretical framework based on neo-classical realism, the present paper examines the determinant factors leading to such a shift. This study highlights three factors: first, a change in the US’s strategy and governance capability; second, the power symmetries between China and EUROPE, including salient changes in material strength and marked differences in norms; third, an emergent change in strategic culture, encompassing a striving China vis-à-vis a strategically autonomous EUROPE. By following Götz’s (2021) insights on neoclassical realist approaches that employ intervening variables as complementary factors, we identify the US factor as the most important international factor in structural terms, while the power symmetries and strategic culture act as complementary factors. The paper concludes that while maintaining engagement, China–EUROPE relations will only see further intensified rivalry and contradictions in the future.

**Keywords** China–EUROPE relation · Strategic Culture · Engagement

## Introduction

The world finds itself at a critical juncture where relations between the three most significant actors—the US, China, and EUROPE [1]—have been undergoing a dramatic transformation in recent years. The main transition of the international order is captured by the complicated relationship between the US and China, which is

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characterized by a combination of competition, confrontation, and cooperation. Further, in the US–China–EUrope trilateral relationship, EUrope is playing an irreplaceable role, and its choices can influence the balance of the strategic triangle. Indeed, the China–EUrope relationship has become increasingly unstable under pressure from the US and is marked by a shift from a relationship of “engagement and cooperation” to one of “engagement and rivalry.”

For a long time, China and EUrope have taken a proactive and pragmatic approach to advance their cooperation, and both of them are committed to deepening a comprehensive and strategic partnership. In terms of economic cooperation, both sides have moved forward at a steady pace toward enhanced relations. For example, the total trade volume between China and the EU reached USD 705.11 billion in 2019, 49.3 times that of 1985. In 2020, set against the otherwise sluggish global economy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the trade in goods between the 27 EU members and China saw growth on all sides, with exports of EUR 202.5 billion and EUR 383.5 billion, respectively, with China replacing the US as the EU’s largest trading partner for the first time. Moreover, when it comes to political trust, the China–EU relationship has been recognized as continuous and progressive, incrementally developing from a “constructive partnership” to a “comprehensive partnership” and then growing into a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” In 1998, the annual China–EU summit mechanism was established, and the European Commission released its China policy paper, which called for comprehensive engagement with China. [2] In 2003, the EU positioned China–EU relations as a strategic partnership in its first *European Security Strategy*. [3] Correspondingly, in 2003, China issued its first *Policy Paper on the EU*. [4]

However, recent years have witnessed substantial adjustments in China–EUrope relations, involving not only markedly more diversified and differentiated visions from both sides but also increasingly antagonistic and confrontational criticisms of each side. [5–9] First, the China–EU Summits of 2016 and 2017 failed to reach an agreement on a joint statement, which was an unprecedented development since the launching of the annual summit by the two sides. In 2016, the EU adopted a more strongly worded policy paper on China titled *Elements for a New EU Strategy on China* and adjusted their strategy of “engagement” with China through an explicit claim about the principles of engagement with China, emphasizing the necessity of mutual benefit and respect for human rights. [10] Second, although China–EUrope relations are still defined by engagement, the mainstream paradigm of their ties has gradually veered away from “engagement and cooperation” to “engagement and rivalry.” On March 12, 2019, the European Commission issued a new China policy paper, *EU–China: A Strategic Outlook*, which clearly stated that EUrope should no longer regard China as a developing country and that the balance of challenges and opportunities brought by China was tilting toward challenges. [11] This was the first instance of EUrope labeling China a “systemic rival” and reframing China from being a “partner” to being somewhere between a “competitor” and “rival.” Third, since the outbreak of COVID-19, stigmas, rumors, and criticisms about China have surfaced across all of EUrope. Public sentiment in EUrope toward China has been more inclined to rate China as a competitor against such a difficult backdrop. According to a poll by the Bertelsmann Foundation in 2020, 25% of the respondents

identified China as a partner, while 45% of those polled regarded it as a competitor. [12] Therefore, the shift in China–EUrope relations results from a combination of discursive and substantive shifts, which can be observed through the policy papers and statements that have been issued by both sides.

This study summarizes the trend of China–EUrope relations and notes that these relations are moving from “engagement and cooperation” to “engagement and rivalry.” Here, we build an analytical framework based on neoclassical realism, which argues that the US factor, power symmetries, and adjustments to strategic cultures are the main explanatory factors for the shifts in the China–EUrope relationship. The paper examines how and in what ways these three factors shape EUrope’s policies toward China, particularly in terms of its strategic incentives within the US–EUrope–China strategic triangle. The main contributions of the paper are threefold. First, theoretically speaking, it adds to the current neoclassical realist scholarship by establishing a theoretical framework that incorporates structural and unit factors based on Götz’s (2021) insights on neoclassical realist approaches that employ intervening variables as complementary factors. Second, empirically speaking, this study analyzes the shift in China–EUrope relations in both substantial and rhetorical dimensions. Third, the paper adopts an arguably more holistic and balanced view by adding Chinese perspectives to the current English literature on the China–EUrope relationship. Apart from the introduction, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The second section is a literature review, which provides an overview of previous research and introduces the analytical framework of the study. The third section analyzes the reasons for the profound change in the China–EUrope relationship based on the proposed analytical framework; the fourth section further discusses the US–China–EUrope trilateral relationship. Finally, the fifth section concludes the paper and provides an outlook for future China–EUrope relations.

## Literature Review and Analytical Framework

### Literature Review

Although researchers have focused on summarizing and analyzing China–EUrope relations, [13–21] few have conducted a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the recent shifts in China–EUrope relations and the reasons behind them, particularly in terms of the extent to which the dynamics of China–EUrope relations are affected by the structures of different systems and by internal unit-level factors. In the literature regarding China–EUrope relations, it is widely believed that these relations are derived from relations between the major powers (or hegemonies). [22, 23] For instance, during the Cold War, China–EUrope relations were subordinate to the US–Soviet bipolar structure, overshadowed by, at that juncture, the world’s political structure and ideological division. In the post-Cold War era, China and EUrope were still unable to completely transform the international order dominated by American hegemony or redefine the China–US–EUrope trilateral relationship. [24] Structural realism assumes that EUrope is subordinate to US hegemony or functions as a de facto appendage of EUropean countries, [25] which ignores the multi-layered

and complex governance nature of EUrope [26] as well as that of China. [27] In contrast, neoclassical realism [28–30] and foreign policy analysis [31–33] incorporate systemic variables as well as domestic intervening variables. Consequently, the China–EUrope relationship might be better explained by multi-level factors, including the role of the national state, regional organizations, media, expert communities, grass roots, interest groups, and international structural pressures.

Conversely, considering its intrinsic dynamics, some researchers claim that China–EUrope relations are independent of China–US relations or EUrope–US relations. For example, since the second half of the 1990s, China and EUrope have formed a new relationship that is not an alliance but is far from confrontational and does not target any third party. [34] From the Chinese perspective, the China–EUrope relationship is a “new model of major-power relations” (新型大国关系), which is significant for the stability and evolution of the international order. [35, 36] On one hand, China is achieving major power status owing to its ascending role in global governance; [37] on the other hand, China views EUrope as a crucial player in global society, with a consequently unified “whole-of-the-EU” approach. [38] From the EUropean perspective, China has become omnipresent and immensely influential within EUrope, [39] with an attendant expectation–reality gap [40] and a misperception paradox. However, in recent years, there has been a growing tendency for the European Commission to pursue a more realistic, assertive, and multi-faceted EU approach toward China. [41]

Liberal institutionalism also contributes to explaining China–EUrope relations, which holds the view that it is the institutional framework that determines the behaviors of China and EUrope. [42] Liberalists view the China–EUrope relationship as a highly institutionalized international partnership [43] with institutional-related convergences and differences. [44] Under these circumstances, the China–EUrope relationship has evolved based on functionalism logic from an economic partnership, to a political partnership, and then to a strategic partnership. The economic relationship between China and EUrope is complicated by normative concerns, thereby incurring spillover effects for China–EUrope relations. Asymmetry and symmetry are often intertwined with respect to China–EU relations. The asymmetry manifests not only in the economy and political systems but also around issues concerning history and culture, inevitably causing collisions and a lack of coordination between the “Chinese model” and the “European model.” [45]

Aside from the perspective of constructivism, China–EUrope relations are expected to move forward via the ongoing redefinition of their identities. [46] Chinese researchers have highlighted two dimensions: social ontology and future orientation. From the perspective of social ontology, China–EUrope relations can be defined as a social relationship with intersubjectivity, [47] thereby constructing an appropriate identity in a continuous and constant interaction. In other words, China and EUrope are promoting the development of benign interactions in areas that are free from the constraints of the international system. The future-oriented perspective emphasizes the necessity of future orientation of strategic thinking in developing China–EUrope relations. [48] The proposition is that in the dynamic trajectory of China–EUrope relations, apart from international structural factors and the self-transformation of China and EUrope, there is also a mutual dynamic process of

seeking common ground while reserving the right to maintain differences in terms of objective interests and subjective ideas.

Based on previous studies, we find that although the China–Europe relationship is evolving with its intrinsic dynamics, it is still subordinate to systemic imperatives and particularly unable to avoid the influence of the US–China–Europe trilateral relationship. Therefore, it is impossible to understand variations of China–Europe relations solely from the logic of rationality, including games of great power, or the logic of appropriateness, including the role of norms and morality. In this paper, we try to develop a comprehensive analytical framework by combining international and domestic factors to better explain the recent shift in the China–Europe relationship.

### **Analytical Framework**

This paper adopts an analytical framework that draws on neoclassical realism, which incorporates both external and internal variables. The core argument of neoclassical realism according to Gideon Rose is that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy [are] driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are [realistic]. ... [Yet] the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical. [49] In other words, states pursue their interests by responding not only to the competitive pressures of the international system but also to forces and demands that emanate from within their borders.

However, critics claim that neoclassical realism lacks a distinct theoretical logic, finding the designation of some factors as independent and intervening variables to be particularly arbitrary. [50] Indeed, in the existing literature, neoclassical realists have identified a broad range of real-world factors that can serve as intervening variables, such as state power, strategic culture, domestic institutions, domestic ideology, interest group pressure, policymakers' perceptions, and the extractive capacities of the state. [51, 52] Given the growth of neoclassical realist scholarship, the list of intervening variables is still expanding and far from exhaustive. The main shortcoming of this conceptual framework is that although researchers have a broad understanding that intervening variables operate somehow in between cause and effect, the intervening variable concept remains underdeveloped. More generally, few studies in the field of international relations explain what intervening variables are and how these variables function. As Götz noted, it seems that neoclassical realists use the term “intervening variable” to refer to factors that fulfill different causal roles within their theories. [53]

Nevertheless, this potential shortcoming of neoclassical realism is compensated for by its high degree of focus and explanatory power. Therefore, in this paper, we adopt a neoclassical realist approach while allowing for its inherent definitional and conceptual ambiguities, such as variables being generated and applied in an ad hoc fashion. At the same time, since neoclassical realism is a progressive research

program, we try to improve on the conceptual clarity of our analytical framework herein by following Götz's insights on neoclassical realist approaches that employ intervening variables as complementary factors. This framework provides us with general guidance on the selection of causal factors.

In particular, we assume that structural incentives and constraints account for the broad behavioral pattern of states. This assumption is consistent with Arnold Wolfers's famous "house on fire" and "racetrack" analogies, which distinguish our analysis from liberal theories of foreign policy that privilege domestic-level factors over structural ones. Furthermore, unit-level factors are also important co-determinants of foreign policy. These factors comprise the so-called "intervening variable," which we refer to as "complementary factors" at the unit level. As Götz noted in his paper, complementary factors are those that add to the impact of the main variables of interest, accounting for why the means that states employ in response to external stimuli are similar but not identical. However, the structural factors explain a larger part of the variance in the dependent variable than the complementary factors, while the complementary factors account for a lesser but nontrivial extent of the variance. This logic can be restated using a metaphor, for example, a multivehicle accident (dependent variable) may be adequately explained by an icy road (structural factors), but to explain why some cars slid 5 yards and others 50, one must look at factors such as the condition and quality of their tires (complementary factors). Thus, the underlying logic behind this paper's analytical framework integrates structural factors with complementary factors—the US factor is the dominant structural factor, [54] while the power symmetries and strategic culture are the complementary factors that are the nontrivial co-determinants of China–Europe relations [55]. The interaction between these distinct aspects produces different foreign policy orientations in China and EUrope, thereby explaining the shift of EUrope–China relations from "engagement and cooperation" to "engagement and rivalry."

In our analytical framework, the complementary factors can explain certain aspects of the underlying causation of China–EUrope relations that are unaccounted for by the structural factors. However, real-world complementary factors at the domestic level [56] can involve many individual and often quite complex storylines—some being embedded in domestic structures and political processes [57], others being present in national cultural values [58], and still others manifesting in governmental stability. In this paper, we select the power symmetries between China and EUrope (including material and normative power) and strategic culture as the main complementary factors because we believe that these two elements 1) are strongly correlated with the shift in EUrope–China relations and 2) are independent of each other. Moreover, we exclude economic factors or the impact of politicians' personalities because we wish to avoid explanations that mix causes. However, note that the economic factors are closely linked to the material dimension of power symmetry, and the politicians' personalities are closely related to strategic culture. At the same time, it may be seen as a theoretical (over)simplification to rule out other factors even though these factors may have a relevant impact on the EUrope–China relationship. Nevertheless, this potential shortcoming of our theoretical framework is compensated for by its high degree of focus. One caveat for the conceptual framework of the paper is that some unaccounted-for "residual variance" in the shift in

EUrope–China relations can be attributed to the omitted variables outside the scope of the analytical framework adopted herein.

The roadmap for the analytical framework in the present study is shown in Fig. 1.

## Factors for Explaining the Shift in China–EUrope Relations

### Structural Factors

The anarchic international structure generates both incentives and constraints for states in how to respond and behave, which exerts systemic impacts on China–EUrope relations. Currently, with the unipolar structure ending, the US is a declining power. [51] Under these circumstances, new powers are emerging simultaneously; thus, a complex international system of institutions is being gradually strengthened, accompanied by attendant rules shaping major-power relations. The core indicator of changes in international structure is the US’s status and strategy, which is reflected in the decline of American hegemony and the diminishment of its influence. Despite the Biden administration’s efforts to restore the global leadership of the US and return to multilateralism after assuming power, the “America First” policy and anti-establishment propositions of the Trump administration have already resulted in the contraction of the global institutional power of the US and the related assumed legitimacy of American freedom and democracy.

The US factor is the most crucial structural factor that contributes to explaining changes in China–EUrope relations. In the post-Cold War era, despite a degree of independence from the hegemony, China–EUrope relations did not completely act independently of the international order, which was dominated by American hegemony. [34] The interaction between the two was affected by the fact that much of EUrope’s China policy agenda was developed with an eye to transatlantic relations. For EUrope, the relationship with the US was of a more fundamental importance than that with China owing to the security guarantee offered by the US, which shaped EUrope’s geopolitical calculations. [59]

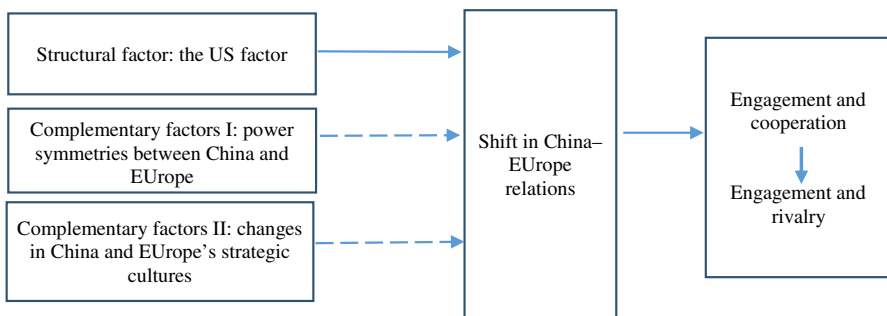


Fig. 1 Analytical framework

Following the Cold War, when the US increased its engagement strategies with China to utilize China's cheap labor and huge market, Europe followed in its footsteps and adopted a similar engagement approach. [60] In recent years, as the US adjusted its strategy in an attempt to contain China's rise, [61] Europe has been trying to avoid becoming involved in the great-power competition. However, this does not mean that Europe will remain equidistant between the US and China because it is always closer to the US than to China ideologically, politically, and economically. [62] Consequently, this has led to Europe emphasizing coordination with the US in dealing with China, particularly after the change of US administration in 2021. In contrast to the Trump administration, the Biden administration is keener to work with its allies in this regard. [63]

The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified the antagonism between the US and China and intensified pressure from the US for Europe to "take sides" to contain China's rise. [64] During the pandemic, a new "public opinion warfare" campaign against China was launched by American media outlets wherein attacks on China shifted from "racial discrimination" to a "battle of narratives." Europe's opinions on China have also been substantially affected by the heated debate of public opinion between China and the US as evidenced by the re-established and politicized critique of China's political system and behaviors.

As the US further escalated its economic and geostrategic rivalry against China and attempted to impose sanctions on China in all aspects, including the economy, technology, and security, Europe followed suit by tightening control on investments from China. For example, the UK, the EU, and core EU members such as Germany, France, and Italy have all adjusted their legal frameworks concerning foreign investment security reviews and tightened the supervision of foreign investments, which either explicitly or implicitly targets China. [65] In addition, in the final stages of the EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) negotiations, when the process unexpectedly sped up because of new concessions from China, the Biden transition team urged the EU to wait until the new US administration was in place before concluding the agreement. [59] Although the EU reached a deal with China before Biden's new administration took office, the ratification of the CAI was delayed, with the US gloating at the uphill struggles and sanctions between the EU and China over the situation in Xinjiang. Notably, however, the investment agreement was reached after seven years of intense negotiations; during this period, although Europe–China relations fluctuated, neither side suddenly changed overnight. The most significant change is the strategic intention of the US to contain China. [66]

## Power Symmetries between China and Europe

The power symmetries between China and Europe are another important variable that affect China–Europe relations, which are based on the symmetries between their material power and rivalry of norms. The scope and orientation of one global actor's strategy are determined by an objective assessment of its internal and external position and a combination of subjective willingness and objective environment.



In general, owing to its faster growth rate over the past decade, China is in a better position than EUrope not only in material terms but also in terms of the rivalry of rules and norms.

### **Material power symmetries between China and EUrope have fomented their bitter rivalry.**

In recent decades, there has been a drastic increase in China's comprehensive strength and a relative decline in traditional Western powers as represented by EUrope. [67] In 2018, China, EUrope, and the US together accounted for 58% of the world's GDP, up by 1% in the 1990s, within which China's share rose from 11.6% to 16% [68]. Economic and trade connections have always played a vital role in stabilizing China–EUrope relations. Although China and EUrope are still each other's largest trading partners and comprise important markets of investment, in recent years, competition between them has undeniably intensified.

Over the past few years, Chinese companies have become increasingly competitive and are marching inexorably toward the higher end of the industrial chain. Ever since the launch of “Made in China 2025,” EUrope has increasingly harbored a stronger feeling that China is overtaking its traditionally predominant high-tech industries and seizing the commanding heights of the future economy. Facing more rivalry from China, EUrope has been concerned that China's excess production capacity might pose a threat to relevant EU industries, which could, in turn, make EUropean domestic consumption overly dependent on the Chinese market. The previous shortage in the EU's medical supplies that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic further made the EUropean business communities call for a reduction of their dependence on the Chinese market. [69] To some extent, the situation is similar to what occurred in the 1980s when EUropean countries faced more competition from Japanese companies.

Consequently, EUrope has redefined China as an economic competitor. The European Commission observed that “the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted” and that China should no longer be viewed as a developing country; instead, it is a leading power in technology with an aim to become the world leader. However, unlike the unilateral actions taken by the US, EUrope resorts to rule-making. For example, EUrope enhanced its trade and investment protection by promulgating the “Regulation: establishing a framework for the screening of foreign direct investments into the Union” in 2019, which was fully enforced in November 2020. Furthermore, the European Commission approved the *EU White Paper on Leveling the Playing Field as Regards Foreign Subsidies* in June 2020 to limit the adverse effects of foreign subsidies on the EU single market. [70]

### **Rivalry in norms has added a new impetus to the political divergence between China and EUrope.**

Being a “community of values” in pursuit of “universalism” or “cosmopolitanism,” EUrope holds in its global strategies a position of establishing a world order in accordance with EUrope's wider “shared values.” Value-based diplomacy is thus the

guideline of the EU's foreign policy. It runs through the EU's enlargement policy and is reflected in the EU's global strategy when targeted at other regions and countries. This position can be traced to the first Asia policy paper issued by the EU in 1994 and has since permeated numerous subsequent EU policy papers on China. [71]

In the past, Europe adopted a constructive engagement strategy with China in that it sought to gain economic benefits from China's development while trying to "assimilate" China toward living up to Western expectations. However, such attempts have been far from successful. Instead of being assimilated by Europe, China has achieved economic success under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, which has proved difficult for many Europeans to accept and has led them to re-examine their long-term strategy of engagement with China. Conversely, the success of EU enlargement, combined with the heritage of "Eurocentrism," gives Europeans a sense of superiority in relation to their values. Given that China has different value systems from Europe, a rivalry in terms of norms has added a new impetus to the political divergence between them.

The rivalry between China and Europe on the terrain of norms is characterized by cyclical fluctuations and persistence. The two sides have been persisting in resolving differences through constructive communication in the past. However, in recent years, conflicts in norms between the two sides have staged a harsh revival. For example, after China introduced the *Law on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong SAR*, some European countries followed the US's steps by imposing sanctions on Hong Kong. In May 2020, the European Council released a statement questioning the "one country, two systems" [72] paradigm and imposed restrictions on the export of sensitive technologies to Hong Kong SAR. [73] Subsequently, the UK, Germany, and France also announced the suspension of their extradition agreements with the SAR. Moreover, educational and academic exchanges between China and Europe have also been affected to a certain extent. In 2019, the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies issued a report warning that China was interfering in British universities. [74] In May 2020, Sweden closed its last Confucius Institute. According to a poll carried out by the European Council on Foreign Relations, European respondents' views toward China became even more negative than before the pandemic. [75] The rivalry in norms between Europe and China reached a climax when EU foreign ministers agreed to impose sanctions in March 2021 on four Chinese individuals and one entity over alleged human rights abuses against China's Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which were the latest sanctions against China since the arms embargo in 1989. In response, China countered with retaliatory sanctions against some European individuals and institutions. [76]

## Adjustment to Strategic Culture

According to Alastair Iain Johnston, a strategic culture is a conceptual environment that restricts behaviors. It comprises common assumptions and decision-making rules regulating the conceptualizations of individuals and groups concerning their

social, organizational, or political environment. [77] In other words, a strategic culture serves as a mode of thinking and behavior preference based on historical memory and values in the strategic decision-making of global actors. As a “symbolic system,” it can better reveal the continuity behind global actors’ international strategies and motives.

The adjustment to the strategic cultures of China and EUrope refers to changes in the strategic preferences of their global strategies. The cultural basis of global strategy is a summary of global strategy practice, reflected in the position of global actors in dealing with the world and their understanding of the international community. At present, both China and EUrope’s strategic cultures face new adjustments. China’s strategic culture has deviated from the past strategy of keeping a low profile, whereas the EUropean strategic culture demonstrates a more strategic autonomy.

Since the inception of the reform and opening up process, Deng Xiaoping introduced the foreign policy of “keeping a low profile and get something done” (韬光养晦, 有所作为), which sets the tone of China’s global strategic culture. In recent years, following profound and complex changes in the domestic and international situations, China’s global strategy has shifted to “striving for achievements” (奋发有为), the goal of which is to help China achieve its “two centenary goals” (两个一百年奋斗目标). [78] The priority of China’s foreign policies has evolved from “creating a peaceful international environment for economic construction” to “shaping an international environment for realizing the great rejuvenation of China.” [79] David Shambaugh believes that there is a significant increase in China’s strategic confidence. [80] According to Yan Xuetong, “keeping a low profile” is mainly reserved for economic development, while “striving for achievements” is mainly a matter of political progress. [81] China’s global strategy has changed from a “stimulus–response” (刺激–反应) [82] to an “actively shaping” (积极塑造) [83] policy model.

Concurrently, EUrope is increasingly emphasizing its strategic autonomy. The idea of “strategic sovereignty for Europe” has been shared as a consensus among major EU member states and is becoming the fundamental concept of EUrope’s global strategy adjustment. At the end of 2019, the then new President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, said, shortly after taking office, that her commission would be a “geopolitical commission” and emphasized that “Europe must learn the language of power.” [84] In August 2020, Michael Roth, the deputy to the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany, stated that EUrope should leverage its trade policies and the single market more effectively to justify European values and interests. [85] The COVID-19 pandemic has further solidified “strategic sovereignty for Europe” as a consensus among major EU member states. In September 2020, the European Parliament released a policy report titled *Strategic Sovereignty for Europe*, which defined the “strategic sovereignty” of EUrope as “the ability to act autonomously, to rely on one’s own resources in key strategic areas[,] and to cooperate with partners whenever needed.” The first sentence of the report clarified the background for the EU to pursue “strategic sovereignty,” stating the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed the vulnerability of the EU to external actors (such as China). [86]

## Discussion

The earlier analysis shows that the most significant factor in explaining the evolution of China–EUrope relations in terms of international structure is the status and strategic adjustment of the US. The unilateralism of the Trump administration has revived “great-power politics.” The Biden administration anticipates a return to multilateralism, which will bring opportunities and challenges in China–EUrope relations. Apart from the structural factors, the unit-level complementary factors have also played prominent roles in the intrinsic dynamics of China–EUrope relations. Given changes in the material power symmetries and the rivalry of norms, a new asymmetry is emerging in China–EUrope relations. Furthermore, a striving China and a strategically autonomous EUrope make China–EUrope relations more complex, mixing cooperation and rivalry.

Note Although the US factor plays a crucial role in EUrope–China relations, this does not mean that EUropean perceptions and interests are precisely the same as those of the US. On the contrary, there is a substantial and distinct discrepancy between them. First, unlike the US, there is no “Thucydides’ trap” logic between EUrope and China. Second, EUrope has no direct territorial disputes with China and is willing to pursue strategic autonomy in response to China–US rivalry. Third, EUrope advocates multilateralism in the global order and opposes unilateralism and protectionism.

US–EUrope relations are also considerably complicated. Despite the influence of the US, EUrope still maintains a certain degree of autonomy. The “security community” and “democratic peace” theories recognize that EUrope and the US are bound together by the ties of economy, security cooperation, and shared values, claiming that the US–EUrope relationship is a stable alliance. [87] Although their disagreements grew after the Iraq War, the US and EUrope remained close allies. However, since Trump took office, the relations between EUrope and the US have become increasingly uncertain, facing more severe challenges in all the ties that bind them, which gradually eroded the foundation of their relationship as allies. The US and EUrope have been at loggerheads over a series of issues in recent years, including economy and trade concerns (such as trade disputes), military and security matters (such as disputes over the role of NATO), and energy issues (such as the issue of Nord Stream 2). Moreover, the differences between EUrope and the US are not only reflected in their policies but also in their thoughts and ideas. As Robert Kagan put it, “Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus.” [88]

The pandemic has further placed the EUrope–US relationship in crisis. Instead of taking the opportunity to foster international cooperation, both sides had numerous disagreements. For instance, following the outbreak of COVID-19, vaccine-related competition became a new challenge for US–EUrope relations, for both sides wanted to make breakthroughs in vaccine production as soon as possible. [89] A poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations demonstrates a significant slump in EUropean respondents’ trust in the Trump administration, where only 2% of the respondents still regarded the US as their

crucial ally in the context of COVID-19. Moreover, most European countries had a more negative perception of the US. For example, more than two-thirds of respondents in Denmark, Portugal, France, Germany, and Spain held an increasingly unfavorable impression of the US, while 46% of French respondents and 42% of German respondents admitted that their impression of the US had worsened. [90]

However, although consensus in transatlantic relations are eroding, Europe and the US still share critical economic and strategic interests. In other words, the worst relations between the US and Europe might still be far better than the bilateral relations between most countries. Since the Biden administration came into power, there have been continuous calls for coordination between the US and Europe in relation to their China strategies. The European Commission also released a report, intending to seize the advantage in setting the agenda for the transatlantic partnership. [91]

Europe is a collective of medium-sized countries that are caught between great powers. Today's Europe still responds passively to US–Europe relations; hence, China–Europe relations are to some extent subordinated to the US–China strategic rivalry. Nonetheless, the US–China strategic rivalry does not equal a US–China bipolar structure or a Cold War situation. First, there remains a considerable discrepancy between China and the US in terms of comprehensive strength. Despite the rapid development of its economy, China still has significant weaknesses in soft power. Second, China and the US are in a complex state of interdependence, which makes it impossible to decouple or cut off all lines of communication entirely. Third, China insists on nonalignment and has no intention of establishing an alliance to counter those of the US.

## Conclusion and Outlook

In the future, while maintaining engagement, China–Europe relations will see further intensified rivalry and contradictions, showing more complex features of rivalry, antagonism, cooperation, and compromise. Unlike the US, which identifies China as its main threat, Europe's strategic choice will be affected by the factors listed in the earlier analysis.

For Europe, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and antagonism between China and the US have brought it to a critical point at which it has to make choices. Europe should not be bound by the dilemma and should try to maintain the multilateral world order and prevent the world from returning to the Cold War pattern of “bipolar hegemony.” Simultaneously, when China is facing the so-called “changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局), it should attempt to achieve a positive interaction and balance between the changes in the world and its own development.

In the present era of globalization, China and Europe face common opportunities, challenges, and uncertainties at both global and regional levels. China and Europe could strengthen communication and coordination on global issues in a positive and pragmatic manner. China's concept of a “community of common destiny for mankind” and the EU's good governance and multilateralism policies share similar ideas of active participation in global governance. Together, the two sides could help all

humankind to find a path of peaceful development. Further, there are many similarities and parallels between China's new "innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared" development concepts and the EU's sustainable transformation goals, which evinces bright prospects for enhancing cooperative relations between both sides.

**Acknowledgements** We would like to thank the comments received from the workshop on "China-US-EU Europe: Global Power Triangles and the Remaking of the International Order" organized by the University of Duisburg-Essen and Freie Universität Berlin.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest statement** No conflict of interest was declared by all the authors.

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