Ganging up on Trump? Sino-German Relations and the Problem with Soft Balancing against the USA

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Abstract

Soft balancing has recently been framed as a general foreign policy strategy that is basically open to any state. However, what coalitions can actually engage in joint soft-balancing behavior? To date, the literature has focused on more traditional foe-foe constellations and less traditional friend-friend constellations. In the former, all the soft-balancing partners are foes of the opponent; in the latter, all the soft-balancing partners are friends/allies of the opponent. But what about mixed soft-balancing coalitions in which one partner is a foe of the opponent whereas another partner is an ally/friend of the opponent? This article sets out to argue that such mixed soft-balancing coalitions are not possible. It moreover contends that the reason for this is the fact that the execution of soft-balancing behavior is more demanding and more consequential than one might think upon hearing the term “soft.” The hurdles for the ally/friend of the opponent in such a (theoretical) mixed soft-balancing coalition are therefore too high to actually follow through with such a strategy. To support its arguments, the article analyzes a crucial case study based on a most-likely-case design. More precisely, it looks into Sino-German reactions to US president Donald Trump’s “America First” approach. The article indeed finds that while both China and Germany have lamented Trump’s “America First” approach, the leap for Germany as a US ally and friend to translating the complaints about Trump into tangible soft-balancing activities together with China has simply been too big. Even though Germany and China are themselves close partners, Germany ultimately remains too close to the USA, and US positions on China, for Sino-German soft balancing against the USA to be a workable option.

Keywords Soft balancing · Mixed coalitions · Sino-German relations · Trump’s “America first” approach · US-German relations
Introduction

When Robert Pape introduced the concept of soft balancing to the International Relations literature in 2005 as an approach that “is replacing traditional hard balancing as the principal reaction of major powers to the Bush administration’s preventive war doctrine” [45:38] and T.V. Paul seconded that soft balancing was an “attractive strategy through which second-tier major powers are able to challenge the legitimacy of the interventionist policies of the United States” [46:59], their reasoning was criticized immediately and quite heavily. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, for example, maintained that “the soft-balancing argument has no traction. The only reason some analysts have concluded otherwise is because they have failed to consider alternative explanations” [2:106]. Similarly, Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander opined that soft balancing resembled “normal diplomatic friction” and that the term was too intangible to be defined and operationalized properly [35:109]. However, despite this sharp criticism, the concept of soft balancing has been applied frequently since 2005 and has been steadily refined in the process. Of particular importance is that soft balancing has increasingly been separated from balance of power theory and transformed into a general foreign policy strategy that is basically open to any state and not tied to specific conditions of polarity [47, 58]. However, does this really mean that there are no limitations on who can engage in soft-balancing behavior?

Generally speaking, soft balancing on the part of relatively weaker powers vis-à-vis their relatively stronger opponents can occur individually or collectively [47]. While instances of individual soft balancing [37, 58] appear to be relatively uncontroversial, the much more intriguing question is about the possible constellations of actors in cases of collective soft balancing. When we look at those cases studied so far, it becomes immediately obvious that two different types of groups have been examined: On the one hand, soft balancing has most commonly occurred between foe and foe. For collective soft balancing, this implies that all actors jointly engaged in soft balancing are foes of the third party against which they are balancing. Contemporary examples may include Russia and China versus the USA, or India and Japan versus China [47]. On the other hand, while probably not as frequent, soft balancing can also take place between ally and ally or friend and friend. For instance, a few studies have examined how the European Union (EU), which is viewed here as a collective actor, has (not) pursued soft-balancing activities against the USA [30, 43]. Another study has analyzed how a number of smaller and US-friendly African states have sought to jointly soft balance against the USA [75]. But what about a potential third type of soft-balancing coalition in which one partner is a foe of the opponent and another is an ally or friend of the opponent?

This article sets out to argue that such mixed soft-balancing coalitions are not possible. It moreover contends that the reason for this is that the execution of soft-balancing behavior is more demanding and more consequential than one might think upon hearing the term “soft.” The hurdles for the ally/friend of the opponent in such a (theoretical) mixed soft-balancing coalition are therefore too great for them to actually follow through with such a strategy. To support these arguments, the article analyzes a crucial case study based on a most-likely-case design. The logic of most-likely cases is “if I cannot make it here—I cannot make it anywhere” [34:12]. Accordingly, the article picks a test case in which the two actors in the potential mixed coalition are close
partners themselves. If it is not possible for them to launch joint soft-balancing activities, then it must be seen as even less likely in cases where the mixed coalition consists of actors that have no close relationship among themselves.

Against this backdrop, the article dissects how China and Germany have reacted to US president Donald Trump’s “America First” approach, which has singled out Beijing and Berlin as two of its most prominent targets. The initial dynamic between these three actors has seen China treated as a US foe, whose rapid military buildup and ensuing actions—for example, in the South China Sea—have increasingly been perceived in the US as signals that Beijing intends to challenge US regional and, possibly, global hegemony [25]. Germany, in contrast, has long been a US ally and friend, and is relatively close to the USA culturally. The two countries are also members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). At the same time, China and Germany also have a close relationship. As one long-time Chinese expert on Sino-German relations revealed to the author in a personal interview in Shanghai in August 2016, China considers Germany to be its closest partner in the West. Similarly, Germany, due to its geographical Mittellage (central position) in Europe as well as its former division into West and East Germany, has a history of looking east, which has led observers of German foreign policy to refer to the possibility of a “post-Western German foreign policy” and Germany’s “pivot to China” [32].

In view of these circumstances, when Trump came to power, a number of scholars and practitioners actually argued that Beijing and Berlin would, or should, react to Trump by cultivating an (even) stronger bilateral relationship, and possibly even teaming up against the USA. Shashi Tharoor, chairman of India’s Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, for example, held in a piece for The Diplomat that “[a]s U.S. President Donald Trump seems disinclined to provide global leadership, many expect Germany and China to fill this vacuum” [66]. In Germany itself, leading experts weighed in. Most prominently, Sebastian Heilmann, the founding president of the Mercator Institute for China Studies, Germany’s foremost think tank on China, opined that Trump’s “attacks on multilateralism may push Chancellor Merkel into an unlikely alliance with Beijing” and that the Sino-German response to Trump should be “to organize an international pushback against destructive US trade policies” [29]. Similar voices could even be heard from Chinese academic circles, which are generally more cautious. Zhang Baohui, professor of international relations at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, for instance, told the New York Times that “Europe in general and Germany specifically are collectively experiencing a paradigm shift in their perceptions of U.S.-Europe relations.” Wang Dong, assistant professor at the School of International Studies at Peking University, added that the current situation might well see China and Germany “moving closer” while the US and Europe “drift apart” [39].

On the other hand, and interestingly, such expectations can be linked to some of the tools used for soft balancing—that is, balancing through international institutions, concerted diplomacy and economic statecraft [47:20]. On the other hand, as shown below, these predictions have proven to be premature. While it is correct that there was something like a temporary “Trump effect” on Sino-German relations, this article demonstrates that this effect was rather superficial and based solely on tentative joint rhetoric, whereas concrete mutual actions have been absent to date. In any case, soft-balancing behavior has not materialized. This is because in spite of Trump, Germany remains too close, and in some areas also too dependent, on the USA.
The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: First, in the next section, the concept of soft balancing is introduced in more detail, particularly with regard to what such a strategy entails and thus requires. Second, and subsequently, the article shows why the triangular US-China-Germany relations represent a most-likely-case scenario for mixed soft-balancing coalitions. Third, it examines the joint Sino-German response to Trump’s “America First” approach, showing that it has fallen far short of what is generally understood as soft balancing. This discussion is followed, fourth, by an extensive section explaining why Sino-German soft balancing has not materialized, linking the reasons to the shadow of US-German relations. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings and also looks briefly at how the present situation might be changed in the future.

**The Concept of Soft Balancing**

Over the years, the literature on soft balancing has produced a number of slightly varying definitions of the term. While Beth Whitaker’s definition of soft balancing as a “challenge […] through means other than the threat of force” still remains rather broad and vague, T.V. Paul’s recent use of the term is more comprehensive and very much to the point. For him, soft balancing means

restraining the power and aggressive policies of a state through international institutions, concerted diplomacy via limited, informal ententes, and economic sanctions in order to make its aggressive actions less legitimate in the eyes of the world and hence its strategic goals more difficult to obtain. [47:20]

If we disaggregate Paul’s definition, we see that it is especially the focus on the three most likely tools of soft balancing—international institutions, diplomatic arrangements, and economic statecraft (already identified by Pape in 2005)—that has become a recurring characteristic surrounding the concept [45:10]. In addition, soft balancing’s major objective of restraining power or threatening behavior so as to impede the target’s ability to profit from its aggressive attitude is noteworthy [47:23]. Other possible objectives of soft balancing include improving one’s bargaining position and hedging one’s bets in the face of growing uncertainty about one’s relations with a major power [74:128–129]. Together, these two features—that is, the tools and the objectives—make up the core of the soft-balancing framework and also help delimit it from other related notions.

Most critically, perhaps, is the differentiation between soft and hard balancing. Unlike the former, hard balancing employs military mechanisms such as the forming of formal alliances (external hard balancing) or the decision to undertake an individual arms buildup (internal hard balancing) in order to confront, and therefore actually balance, the threatening state. Hard balancing, at least in its external form, thus creates formal obligations, while soft balancing occurs through ad hoc arrangements. Consequently, as mentioned before, soft balancing can be used against allies and adversaries alike, whereas hard balancing is applied to adversaries only. NATO and the Warsaw Pact are prominent historical examples of hard balancing [47:22–23].
That said, what is particularly significant for the purposes of this article is another question—namely, what soft balancing entails, and thus requires, for those seeking to engage in it. Three aspects deserve mentioning in this respect. First, the term “soft balancing” should not lead to incorrect connotations or conclusions. As Paul has made quite clear, “both soft balancing and hard balancing are coercive strategies intended to alter the target state’s cost-benefit calculations” [47:23]. As a result, regardless of whether hard or soft, “balancing is risky business,” because strong states are not usually fond of others standing in their way and can mete out harsh penalties for those that do [45:16]. In a similar vein, Ilai Saltzman has argued that when it comes to soft balancing, “friction” is intentional and calculated, and in fact is its raison d’être.” Consequently, “[f]riction is not the inadvertent side effect of usual diplomatic interaction, it is rather the method by which soft-balancing practitioners try to constrain and limit” [58:133].

Second, if soft balancing is a risky endeavor, then close coordination and reliability among those undertaking it become all the more important, and in fact necessary. As a result, Pape has referred to soft balancing as a “game of coordination” [45:16]. In such a game, however, the principal obstacle is to actually guarantee timely cooperation. While each party in a potential soft-balancing coalition is better off cooperating with the others, each party’s decision to actually balance depends on the expectation that its partners will do so as well, which is in turn dependent on these partners’ balancing expectations [45:16]. At this point, a number of factors come into play. McDougall has mentioned mutual perceptions, geographic distance, economic interests, and domestic politics as aspects that may be relevant to a state’s decision to engage in soft balancing together with another state or not [37:3].

Third, and finally, even though the emphasis of soft balancing is, as we have already seen, on signaling through diplomatic means, resolve is crucial [45:37]. In this regard, soft balancing may involve a military component “in the sense that states engaging in soft balancing need to convey the message that they can deploy armed force in support of their strategic objectives” [37:4]. This is in line with Kai He and Huiyun Feng, who have claimed that soft balancing policies “may [actually] be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies” [28:370]. Similarly, Stephen Walt has described how soft balancing today may lay the foundations for more significant undertakings tomorrow in that states that collaborate on minor issues may become more comfortable with each other and increasingly work together on larger issues as well, thereby building the trust and readiness for more ambitious coalitions [45:37, 74:140]. In reverse, however, the fact that soft balancing requires resolve may also have a deterrent effect for engaging in soft balancing in the first place.

In other words, and to summarize, the execution of soft-balancing behavior is more demanding and more consequential than one might think upon hearing the term “soft.” This certainly has implications for those seeking to engage in soft balancing. In the theoretical case of mixed coalitions, which are the focus of this article, the major implication is that soft balancing is too costly for the ally/friend of the opponent, as it may lose much more (especially with regard to its security) than could possibly be gained from teaming up with the foe of the opponent. Therefore, such coalitions do not emerge.1

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1 Theoretically speaking, an exception to this rule could be when the foe of the opponent is able to provide the friend of the opponent with the same economic benefits and security guarantees that the opponent itself can provide. However, as balancing generally occurs amongst relatively weaker versus relatively stronger powers, this is not a realistic option.
A Most-Likely-Case Scenario: Overview of the Triangular US-Sino-German Relationship

From a neutral point of view, the USA and China can be seen as rivals, whereas the USA and Germany have been long-term friends and alliance partners. In Trump’s world, however, what counts, and what China and Germany crucially do have in common, is that both countries have strong export-oriented economies, which have long run large trade surpluses vis-à-vis the USA. According to official data from the US Census Bureau, the US trade deficit with Germany amounted to more than US$68 billion in 2018 [72]. Over the same period, the deficit with China was even bigger, at almost US$420 billion and up from US$375 billion one year before [71]. This situation is obviously unacceptable for Trump and has resulted in his harsh criticism of both China (foe) and Germany (ally/friend) on numerous occasions.

As a matter of fact, in the US National Security Strategy from December 2017, the Trump administration overtly labeled China a “revisionist” power that would aim to shape “a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests” [69]. Moreover, Trump has drawn China into a protracted “trade war” [5] that has been interpreted as an “opening salvo in a new tech cold war that could upend the global supply chain and rewrite business orders worldwide” [60]. When it comes to Germany, Trump has more than once found fault with the country for not meeting NATO’s target that members spend 2% of their GDP on defense. In one Twitter post he said that Germany owed “vast sums of money to NATO & the United States must be paid more for the powerful, and very expensive, defense it provides to Germany!” [70]. Other thorny issues for Trump have been Germany’s attitude towards Russia [41] and Iran [68]. All of this has brought US-German relations to a “post-war nadir” [63] and German chancellor Angela Merkel herself to publicly conclude, with reference to Trump, that traditional alliances were no longer as steadfast as they once were [40].

Meanwhile, China and Germany, which today represent the world’s second- and fourth-largest economies, had developed a solid bilateral relationship well in advance of the Trump presidency. The two countries are not long-term allies like the USA and Germany, but they are not geostrategic rivals like the USA and China either. In 2004, the two countries formed a “partnership of global responsibility within the framework of Sino-European comprehensive strategic partnership” that was upgraded in 2014 to an “all-dimensional strategic partnership” [19]. In accordance with this official description of their relationship, the two sides have established some 80 dialogue mechanisms, many of them at senior-government level. Significant and rather new formats for coordinating policy include the strategic dialogues on foreign and security policy between the two countries’ foreign ministers and the high-level dialogue on financial policy between the two finance ministers and central bank chiefs [16]. In addition, Germany is the only country in the world that holds intergovernmental consultations with China. These consultations were launched in 2011 and regularly bring together the two cabinets, presided over by the German chancellor and the Chinese premier [16].

Key to the positive relationship has always been (the perception of) mutual economic benefit. As a matter of fact, China is Germany’s leading trading partner in Asia—and since 2016 also worldwide—while Germany represents China’s most important economic partner by far in Europe. Bilateral trade reached €170 billion in 2016 and €186 billion in 2017 [61, 62;421]. As Germany is a heavily export-oriented
country, China’s vast market has played an enormous role for German industry. Germany’s crucial automobile sector provides a highly illustrative example of this role. According to a January 2017 Ernst & Young study, in 2016 a whopping 33.9% of global sales by German car manufacturers occurred in China alone [22]. In return, China has profited primarily in terms of the transfer of high-class German technology to the country, making Germany pivotal in helping it move to the next stage of its economic development [31]. Consequently, a 2012 report published by the European Council on Foreign Affairs reached the conclusion that China and Germany were in a state close to economic symbiosis consisting of a “technology-for-markets swap” that even had created some degree of interdependency [31:1].

As a result, a few months into the Trump presidency, the triangular relationship between the USA, China and Germany could well have been described as a most-likely case for a potential mixed coalition in which a foe and a friend of the counterpart would engage in joint soft-balancing behavior against the latter.

**No Soft Balancing At All: The Actual Sino-German Reaction to Trump**

The common denominator in Trump’s criticism of China and Germany has been related to trade imbalances (both global and vis-à-vis the USA) in combination with US threats to abandon the established international economic order in favor of an “America First” approach. In August 2018, for instance, Trump warned that he would pull his country out of the World Trade Organization (WTO), claiming that the body would treat the USA unfairly [1]. Meanwhile, given that China and Germany represent two of the world’s leading export nations and largest trade surplus countries, Beijing and Berlin have shared an interest in unprotected trade and an open global economic system. As a result, the main area where China and Germany have jointly reacted to Trump’s attacks has been in defending globalization and free trade against protectionist tendencies elsewhere (read, the USA).

On January 16, 2017, a few days before Trump’s inauguration, the German embassy in Beijing released a statement unambiguously announcing that “Germany is willing to closely cooperate with China to work against protectionist and populist trends” [23]. The statement, which also came out in the immediate run-up to the World Economic Forum in Davos where Chinese president Xi was to deliver the keynote address, furthermore emphasized that

Germany and China share a strong interest in moving the world towards more openness and to defend multilateral approaches towards solving trade and other issues. In order to stem a current trend towards closing markets and minds, we need strong political leadership, strong political signals and, above all, credible action that shows we mean what we say when we talk about further opening. We would strongly welcome if China were to make a call in defense of open markets and globalization and against protectionism at Davos [23].

President Xi then actually cast China as the defender of global free trade during his Davos speech, heralding the social and economic benefits of globalization as well as rejecting protectionist measures—and thereby also fulfilling German hopes [3].

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Following this, Chinese premier Li Keqiang and German chancellor Merkel reaffirmed to each other in a phone call on January 25, 2017 that their countries championed free trade and a stable global economic order [24].

After Davos came the G20 Hamburg Summit in July 2017. At the summit, climate change was one of the crucial topics where China and Germany sided against Trump [6]. However, the focal topic that the German host government had put on the agenda was free trade. During a visit Germany in late April 2017, China’s foreign minister Wang Yi had already stressed that “China is willing to make joint efforts with the German side [...] for the success of the Hamburg Summit.” In addition, Wang said that his “country hopes that [the] Hamburg Summit will send a clear signal of jointly building an open world economy, safeguarding [the] free trade system and promoting globalization” [38]. When President Xi traveled to Germany for the G20 summit, he underlined in a signed article for the German daily newspaper Die Welt on the eve of the summit that the “strategic importance of [the] China-Germany relationship continues to grow” and stated that the “[p]ractical cooperation between China and Germany not only sets the pace for China-Europe relations, but also serves as a successful model of win-win cooperation between the world’s most important economies” [77]. The summit then indeed saw China and Germany stand shoulder to shoulder.

The fact that Germany held federal elections in September 2017 and that the ensuing phase of forming a government was quite long slowed the joint Sino-German pro-globalization agenda somewhat. However, in mid-2018 the common agenda was resumed and to some extent broadened. The first occasion was Merkel’s first trip to China following her reelection, in late May 2018. Trump’s trade disputes with China, and also Europe, were gathering speed at the time. Moreover, Trump had recently withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal. China and Germany, however, reassured one another that they were willing to keep the deal intact. The result was that in addition to free trade and climate change, a third issue of global importance emerged where China and Germany were seeing eye to eye, and in direct contrast to the US position. As a result, President Xi stated in a rather comprehensive fashion that China “would like to promote global governance and multilateralism together with Germany within the multilateral frameworks” [78]. Similarly, Chancellor Merkel highlighted that “because the international situation has undergone great changes, Germany and China must enhance communication and coordination on international affairs [and] intensify cooperation within multilateral frameworks such as the G20” [78].

Shortly after Merkel’s China visit, on July 9, 2018, China and Germany held the fifth Sino-German intergovernmental consultations in Berlin. Two days before the consultations, Premier Li emphasized in an article for the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung that in times of increasing protectionism and unilateralism, China and Germany would be responsible for jointly maintaining free trade and multilateralism [21]. The consultations themselves, apart from bilateral issues, indeed saw a renewed focus on free trade and the strengthening of the rules-based international order. In an obvious allusion to Trump’s “America First” approach, both sides agreed more precisely that open markets, free trade and equal market access are of great importance for mutual relations but also for the global economy as a whole. Germany and China
reject all forms of protectionism and are committed to resolving trade disputes using established WTO mechanisms. [15]

With this July statement, however, the peak of joint Sino-German rhetoric on defending globalization, multilateralism and free trade had been reached. The next time that a somewhat similar tone was adopted was not until the sidelines of a trilateral meeting between China, Germany and France in Paris in late March 2019. President Xi put forward a three-point proposal for enhancing Sino-German ties to Chancellor Merkel. His third point was on “jointly advancing global governance to safeguard multilateralism” [79].

It has been interesting to observe on a number of occasions that the Sino-German fervor to champion free trade in unison has died down. For example, the events surrounding the G20 summits in Buenos Aires in December 2018 and Osaka in June 2019 saw nothing like the marked joint rhetoric preceding the 2017 summit in Hamburg. Similarly, Chancellor Merkel’s most recent China visit in September 2019 did not produce more than relatively vague and incidental statements on the importance of multilateralism in global affairs. More noteworthy, Merkel urged both the USA and China to end their ongoing trade conflicts [67].

How can the Sino-German reaction to Trump described above be assessed in terms of soft balancing? On the one hand, it is certainly correct that Sino-German rhetoric on various issues of global concern—but also with a clear focus on free trade and the global economic system—was relatively well-orchestrated during the period from roughly early 2017 to mid-2018. The timing and the very issues on which this joint rhetoric focused suggest quite strongly that it was President Trump’s assumption of office and his announcements of an “America First” approach, in combination with bilateral attacks on both China and Germany, that fostered this Sino-German coordination—though Trump was never explicitly referred to. On the other hand, however, it is noteworthy that Sino-German anti-Trump coordination remained almost exclusively on a purely rhetorical level, with declarations of intent and the like only. It is conspicuous in this regard that Germany (like the entire EU) has, for instance, rejected a Chinese proposal to launch joint action against the USA at the WTO [53].

To be sure, therefore, the actual degree of cooperation that can be detected falls glaringly short of the elements that have previously been defined as possible tools of soft balancing. In other words, and going back to Paul’s definition of soft balancing (see above), China and Germany have effectively not sought to jointly restrain Trump’s “America First” approach through the use of international institutions (either through existing ones, or by jointly establishing competing ones), concerted diplomacy beyond declarations of intent, or economic sanctions. If anything, the 2017 G20 Hamburg Summit represented a short-lived and one-time exception to this rule. Meanwhile, the tariffs that both China and the EU have levied on US goods since 2017 in retaliation for US trade policies do not qualify here, as they were not coordinated but separate efforts.

While soft balancing would have meant that China and Germany were willing to proactively confront the USA and produce some degree of intentional friction vis-à-vis Washington, Beijing and Berlin’s de facto collaboration was rather cautious and reactive. In this sense, the Sino-German joint approach very much resembled the countries’ respective bilateral strategies in light of Trump’s attacks—that is, defend one’s position where necessary, but refrain from actively escalating the situation.
is more, even the Sino-German coordination on the rhetorical level has lost steam since mid-2018. It is obvious that amid Trump’s unabated “America First” approach, the resolve generally required by soft-balancing partners would look rather different.

**Explaining the Lack of Soft Balancing: The Shadow of US-German Relations**

The fact that there has been no joint Sino-German soft-balancing behavior in response to Trump’s “America First” strategy of targeting China and Germany like almost no other countries can be directly linked to the mixed composition of the potential soft-balancing coalition. While both China and Germany have lamented Trump’s “America First” approach, the leap required for Germany, as a US ally and friend, to translate the complaints about Trump into tangible soft-balancing actions together with China has simply been too big. That is to say, even though Germany and China have been close partners, this partnership has not been significant enough to make Germany consider leaving the USA behind. If anything, the following subsections demonstrate that in spite of unprecedentedly strained US-German relations under Trump, Germany has become more and more critical of China’s own economic agenda, grown increasingly wary of Chinese influence in Europe and remained fully devoted to, and dependent on, NATO. In other words, Germany remains too close to the USA, and US positions on China, for Sino-German soft balancing against the USA to be a workable option.

**The Economic Dimension**

Germany exhibits a high level of dependency on manufacturing and high-tech and has therefore been identified as one of the industrialized countries most vulnerable to pressures arising from China’s economy as the latter continues to modernize and move quickly up the value chain [76:6]. Against this backdrop, Germany has developed an increasingly strong feeling since the second half of 2016 that while China has championed open markets elsewhere—for example, in the USA—it appears much less inclined to open its own domestic markets, at least those sectors deemed strategic [33]. The most instructive example for Germany in this regard has been China’s industrial master plan “Made in China 2025,” which is obviously geared to turning the country into a “manufacturing superpower” over the coming decades and thus presents countries such as Germany with major challenges. A report released in December 2016 by the Mercator Institute for China Studies, Germany’s leading China research institute, found that

Made in China 2025 in its current form represents exactly the opposite of the principles and rules of open markets and fair competition: China’s leadership systematically intervenes in domestic markets so as to benefit and facilitate the economic dominance of Chinese enterprises and to disadvantage foreign competitors. [76:7]

A March 2017 document from the European Chamber of Commerce in China, titled “China Manufacturing 2025: Putting Industrial Policy Ahead of Market Forces” and
written under the aegis of then-chamber president Jörg Wuttke, a German, likewise stressed that

[d]espite the rhetoric of the Third Plenum’s Decision of 2013—which strongly advocates market forces—it seems that the Chinese Government is determined to maintain a prominent role in guiding the economy. This is highlighted by the large number of domestic and international market share targets that have been set, along with references to “indigenous innovation” included in the multiple planning documents related to [China Manufacturing 2025]. The appearance of “indigenous innovation”—along with mentions of the need to realise “self-sufficiency”—is particularly concerning—it suggests that Chinese policies will further skew the competitive landscape in favour of domestic companies. [14]

It is noteworthy that such rhetoric echoed the concerns brought forth in a similar report issued by the US Chamber of Commerce [73]. What is more, given these assessments, Germany’s ambassador to China at the time, Michael Clauss, urged China to actually create a level economic playing field for Sino-German relations by transforming the warm Chinese words of the past into tangible and durable policy measures aimed at liberalizing Chinese domestic markets. In a December 2017 interview for the South China Morning Post, Clauss argued,

we cannot deny the various indications looming on the horizon that conditions for foreign businesses in China are changing and apparently not in a positive direction. China’s economic success story will obviously lead to more competition in our economic relations. However, it has to be noted that the increased competition is not always based on fair and equitable conditions for all market players. More and more German companies approach the embassy and express their grievances about increasing discrimination and obstruction as a result of state intervention and administrative measures. [59]

This official statement was based on real anxieties on the part of German businesses in China. In November 2017, the Delegations of German Industry and Commerce (DIHK) in China had—while certainly still valuing the opportunities of the Chinese domestic market—issued a press statement in which they criticized “attempts of the Communist Party of China trying to strengthen their influence in wholly foreign owned German companies in China” and even threatened that should these attempts continue, “it cannot be ruled out that German companies might retreat from the Chinese market or reconsider investment strategies” [7]. Similarly, but upping the ante, the Federation of German Industries (BDI) issued a policy paper in January 2019 in which China was termed not only a “partner” but also “strategic competitor,” against which the EU was urged to strengthen its own competitiveness [18]. This label—“partner and competitor”—was then even used by Chancellor Merkel in March 2019 to describe the German government’s view of China [42].

Importantly, however, Germany has not left its criticism of China at the rhetorical level. In addition, Berlin has followed through with a few concrete anti-China policy measures, the direction of which is in line with US attitudes. Most pronounced in this regard is probably that Germany has narrowed the gap between its own position and
US positions on foreign direct investment (FDI) from China. This shift can be traced back to 2016, when Germany was suddenly flooded with Chinese outbound FDI. In that year alone, Chinese FDI in Germany was worth more than €11 billion and accounted for more than 30% of total European investment from China [27:8]. Germany, however, did not fully welcome such investment. Instead, a couple of these deals became highly controversial, even though, or perhaps because, the German government did not have the legal means to veto them. One of the most salient examples included Midea’s Kuka takeover, which stoked German fears of a sellout of its advanced technology to China. Another was the Chinese bid for chipmaker Aixtron, which was ultimately cancelled due to US intervention [27:8–9]. Worried both by the lack of intervening tools at its disposal and the lack of reciprocity with regard to investment openness in China, Germany, along with France and Italy, in February 2017 suggested the EU rethink its rules on incoming FDI [50]. This led to the adoption of a new EU screening mechanism in early 2019 [11].

Around the same time, the German minister for economic affairs, Peter Altmaier, rolled out Germany’s new “National Industry Strategy 2030,” which “defines the cases in which state intervention can exceptionally be justified or even [be] required in order to avert serious disadvantages for the country’s economy and the well-being of the nation” [17]. He furthermore made clear that going forward, Germany would not tolerate a “technological sellout” to China, highlighting that his country had already enacted various laws to better control foreign corporate takeovers [65]. All this has at least gradually moved Germany in the direction of the USA, where the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) can effectively ban investment deals that impact US national security interests (as in the Aixtron case mentioned above).

Another area with a similar yet not quite as pronounced trend is the WTO. At first sight, the WTO example might seem counterintuitive, given that Trump has threatened to leave the organization and has basically paralyzed it by blocking the appointment of new judges to its appellate body [9]. Nonetheless, while Germany has rejected Chinese proposals for an anti-US trade alliance at the WTO (see above), it has not objected to the US-EU-Japan trilateral discussions on WTO reform that have been taking place since December 2017 [49]. There is also some related previous history. When China entered the WTO in 2001, it was promised that it would be granted market economy status in 15 years’ time—by the end of 2016. Being awarded market economy status would, for example, make it harder for other WTO countries to launch anti-dumping measures against China. China expected Germany to support Beijing’s goal vis-à-vis the EU. However, the German government remained very cautious due to apprehensions about Chinese industrial overcapacities and cheap exports [10]. Ultimately, the EU did not grant market economy status to China. This was in sync with the position taken by the USA, which argued that China had not lived up to its WTO obligations [20].

To summarize, Germany has not just been confronted with an “America First” approach. In fact, since approximately the same time that Trump took office, Berlin has increasingly realized that Beijing is itself pursuing nothing other than a “China First” strategy. Faced with this situation, Germany, as we have seen, was initially willing to employ joint Sino-German rhetoric against Trump’s economic agenda. Ultimately, however, Germany has opted for positions that are in many ways much closer to those of the USA than those of China.
The Geo-Economic/Geopolitical Dimension

In recent years, China has made unprecedented inroads into Europe. Particularly through two institutionalized channels, its 17 + 1 mechanism (formerly 16 + 1 until Greece joined in 2019) and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has in a sense shrunk the geographical distance between itself and Europe. Against the backdrop of a potential soft-balancing coalition against the USA, Germany could have embraced such Chinese initiatives. However, Germany has in fact become one of the European countries most critical of China’s increasing influence in Europe’s border regions, such as the western Balkans, and has also sought to muster other European countries’ support.

To begin with, China and Germany have had very different perceptions of the objectives of the 17 + 1 mechanism (which includes 12 EU member states). From the perspective emphasized by Chinese experts in personal interviews during summer 2016 and spring 2017, this mechanism has been a tool for reaching out to the smaller countries of central and eastern Europe and supporting them in the fields of infrastructure and transportation in particular. However, Germany has been skeptical about Chinese intentions and actions, which have been regarded as potentially divisive tactics affecting EU unity. Questioning the need for this mechanism, Germany’s then-foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel caused an unparalleled diplomatic controversy when he called in August 2017 for China to follow a “One Europe policy” in a reference to China’s demand that all other countries follow its “One China policy” [13].

Meanwhile, the BRI clearly has a number of diverse purposes, including geo-economic and geopolitical ones. China prefers to portray the BRI chiefly as a mutually beneficial instrument to promote connectivity and enhance infrastructure, especially across Eurasia [64]. Thus, China would like to obtain more support for the BRI from European countries, and from Germany in particular. Foreign observers, however, above all in Western Europe, have tended to see in the BRI a less friendly attempt “to change the rules of the global economy, primarily by granting China a set of tools with which it can reorder global value chains” [36:6]. Germany has, after an initially warm reception of the BRI, become very reserved about the initiative. This was exhibited during China’s May 2017 BRI summit, when Germany (followed by other European countries) refused to sign a joint communiqué that it viewed as insufficiently representing aspects such as transparency, fairness in tenders, environmental protection and conformity with international trade standards [8].

On the one hand, it is correct that Germany was not alone in its viewpoint. In April 2018, all 28 EU ambassadors to China (except the Hungarian one) signed a report bashing the BRI for hampering free trade and effectively being a one-way street favoring Chinese companies and leaving European countries without a say [26]. Additionally, in March 2019, the European Commission released a new strategic outlook on China, which represented the climax to date of a gradual but nonetheless memorable change of course towards Beijing. In it, China was openly labeled a “systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” [12]. On the other hand, however, it should be clear that such a critical document would have been impossible without German consent, given Germany’s weight within the EU. Under the new commission, which has been in office since December 2019, this critical EU view of China is unlikely to change. The new commission president, former German defense
minister Ursula von der Leyen, has already found fault with China’s debt-laden infrastructure deals, arguing that they are intended to buy influence and create dependencies [48]. Such rhetoric does not sound all that different from the Trump administration’s raising of alarm over the BRI as a Trojan horse for China-led regional development and military expansion [4]. Once again, therefore, Germany’s position remains close to that of the USA and disapproving of China’s behavior.

The Military/Security Dimension

The most significant impediment to successful Sino-German soft-balancing activities versus the USA, however, certainly relates to the absence of resolve with respect to joint military measures if these were to become necessary. This is the case above all because Germany remains firmly anchored in a US-centered NATO and moreover is fully aware that in times of a deteriorating security environment around Europe’s periphery, including a resurgent Russia, there are no realistic alternatives to this alliance [56]. China, to be sure, would be neither able nor willing to step into the breach. Meanwhile, an actual German pivot to China could add fuel to Trump’s threats to leave NATO. Against this background, the recent discussions about Germany’s (monetary) contributions to NATO have left no doubt about Germany’s security dependence and how it is attempting to deal with it: On the one hand, it is true that Germany has sought to defend its position against US attacks on what Washington perceives as inadequate German defense spending. The German defense minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, stated in June 2019 that sharing burdens “is not only about the NATO spending goal: it’s [also] about reliability” [54]. On the other hand, however, Kramp-Karrenbauer also conceded in November 2019 that Germany must, and will, spend more on defense. As a result, she openly committed Germany to spending 1.5% of its GDP on military expenditure by 2024 and 2% by 2031, thereby belatedly reaching NATO’s spending target [56].

In addition to the paramount NATO factor, three other episodes have recently showcased, to various degrees, Germany’s proximity to and dependence on the USA when it comes to security matters. These incidents have also revealed the limited potential and vigor of Sino-German security-related cooperation. The first issue revolves around China’s maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. China has placed significant value on the fact that it does not have any (major) geostrategic conflicts with Germany, since the latter is not a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and does not (usually) play a role in China’s territorial disputes. In recent years, however, Germany has repeatedly, albeit not immediately, become involved in the maritime disputes—but has not taken China’s side. In particular, Germany has supported a number of G7 declarations on the maritime disputes with which China has been “strongly dissatisfied” [51]. In 2018, for example, a G7 communiqué emphasized strong opposition to any unilateral actions that escalate tensions and undermine regional stability and the international rules-based order, such as the threat or use of force, large-scale land reclamation and building of outposts, as well as their use for military purposes. [44]
The second issue concerns the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which US president Trump unilaterally withdrew from in May 2018. China and Germany (together with the EU), meanwhile, immediately reassured one another that they were willing to keep the deal intact [52]. Almost two years later, though, the deal appears to be dead. The reasons for this situation are complicated and many. But it is clear that the Sino-German objective of preserving the deal has not been helped by the fact that the USA has been able to put effective pressure on Germany by threatening to sanction German companies doing business in Iran [55]. Once again, China and Germany’s joint rhetoric has failed to change the facts on the ground because the USA has loomed too large for Germany.

The third and final issue concerns the ongoing debates on 5G infrastructure development and the related IT-security concerns. Here it is certainly true that US pressure has failed to make Germany, unlike other key allies, implement an outright ban on Chinese provider Huawei in its domestic market. At the same time, however, the “rules-based approach” now favored by the German government (and the EU) and allowing for the different handling of Huawei components in various parts of the 5G network is indicative of Germany’s growing wariness of China. Moreover, this rules-based approach would not likely have emerged without the push from a bloc of pro-US German lawmakers, which is another example of how US influence remains strong in Germany [57].

**Conclusion**

This article has set out to demonstrate an important limitation of soft balancing, and thus to contribute to our understanding of a concept that has been applied frequently in recent IR literature. While previous studies have only examined straightforward foe-foe or friend-friend constellations, this article has probed the possibility of mixed soft-balancing coalitions in which both a foe and a friend of the counterpart engage in joint soft-balancing behavior versus the latter. The article has argued that such mixed coalitions are not possible, given that soft balancing is more demanding and more consequential than what the term “soft” might imply. In particular, soft balancing entails coercive strategies that require not only close coordination but also the resolve to undertake military action if necessary. For the ally/friend of the opponent, such requirements represent hurdles that are ultimately too high to overcome. A most-likely-case scenario has supported this argument.

The article has demonstrated that China and Germany, in spite of their close partnership, have not managed to establish a joint soft-balancing coalition against the USA in light of US president Trump’s “America First” approach, which has focused on Beijing and Berlin as two of its primary targets. Even though such a coalition was previously envisaged by a number of observers, China and Germany never moved beyond a relatively short-lived phase of joint rhetoric that promoted, above all, free trade and multilateralism on the global stage. Consequently, Sino-German cooperation has fallen starkly short of what soft-balancing behavior stands for. An examination of the reasons for the lack of soft balancing has revealed that when the going gets rough, Germany remains (too) close to the USA and adopts similar positions vis-à-vis China. This may be due to a number of factors, which have not been explored in detail in this article but tend to characterize relationships between friends and allies in general—
namely, joint historical experiences, shared values, cultural proximity, and military
dependence.

At the same time, however, this is not to say that Germany has begun to
embrace Trump’s “America First” approach. In fact, US-German relations remain
severely strained—as have US-Chinese relations. This poses the final, though
somewhat hypothetical, question about what would be needed to bring about
Sino-German soft-balancing behavior against the USA after all. From a theoretical
point of view, this article has made clear that such behavior could only materialize
if Germany were no longer a US ally/friend or China were no longer a US foe.
Both alternatives, however, seem to be quite unlikely for the time being. Conse-
quently, Trump’s tactic of assaulting China and Germany as well as his attempts
to undermine the global economic order may well continue without producing any
substantial anti-US coalition between Beijing and Berlin. While both China and
Germany may seek to mitigate Trump’s “America First” approach, they will do so
cautiously—and separately.

If China and Germany were seriously interested in changing the current situation—
though it should be obvious now that this would not happen quickly or easily—their
most promising option, interestingly and to some extent counterintuitively, would be to
converge around strengthening the EU. While Germany alone is too weak a player in
the concert of great powers, a strong and united EU still represents an economic
beheemoth that could rival the USA. But the EU has been in poor shape for several
years. It urgently needs to reform and also to become more autonomous militarily. To
achieve this, Germany needs to rediscover its zeal to drive bold EU reforms in tandem
with France and other members. China, meanwhile, would also benefit from a strong
EU emancipated from the USA; this would represent China’s only chance to work with
the EU as a truly non-US-aligned entity. Rhetorically, China has long understood this;
its actions, however, have been quite ambiguous.

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