The road not taken: The EU as strategic American partner and a balancer to a rising China

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Abstract
In the context of an increasingly competitive US–China rivalry, the intensity of which is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future, the EU finds itself with a unique challenge and a unique opportunity. It must reaffirm and assert its commitment to a strategic partnership with the US, foremost through increasing its cooperation with NATO and through a recommitment to forging ever-closer economic ties. The EU must also continue to offer bold, creative alternatives to a new bipolar global framework. In particular, these should emphasise the EU’s multilateral ties with partners around the world, as an important balance to potential conflict between the US and China.

Keywords
EU, US, China, Balancing, International relations

Introduction
Just before his December 2017 trip to Brussels, Vienna and Paris, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, long embattled by rumours of his departure from government (Baker et al. 2017), offered an ironic speech at the Wilson Center, a Washington-based think tank (Tillerson and Harman 2017). While Tillerson’s affirmation of the US’s commitment to NATO’s famous Article 5 was crystal clear, he invoked a more loaded touchstone in his overall framing of American foreign policy. Rather than take his cue from the venue’s namesake, former US President Woodrow Wilson, Tillerson pivoted...
to pay homage to Wilson’s predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, extolling Roosevelt’s robust vision for, and exercise of, American leadership. The distinction was striking. More than anything, Wilson is associated with the US’s first steps towards truly global engagement, and ultimately towards a commitment to international norms; his was a liberal vision that is at odds with the America First stance of the current administration. Roosevelt, by contrast, bold and unapologetic in wielding unilateral American power, sought to expand the US’s influence not just in the Western Hemisphere but around the world, in ways both more familiar and more welcome to the team of the current US president. Tillerson’s nod to Roosevelt is emblematic of President Trump’s broader foreign policy approach, an approach critically dissected and often decried by well-known foreign policy experts.

The US and China

Nowhere is this approach more important than in US policy towards China. In one of 2017’s most important foreign policy books, Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?, Graham Allison (2017) examines the US–China relationship in the context of what the ancient Greek historian described as the volatile situation created when a rising power, in his case Athens, challenges an established one, that is, Sparta: a situation in which war—though never inevitable—becomes likely. Allison employs the ancient paradigm to help explain our current one; in making his case, he even refers specifically to Roosevelt as the harbinger of the twentieth century’s strong new America that took its place upon the world stage—his point being not just that current US policy echoes the attitudes of the former Rough Rider, but that, in concerning ways, current Chinese policy does too (Allison 2017, 90–1).

Allison’s thesis is contentious, to be sure. Yet it is hard to argue with the basic conclusion that twenty-first century geopolitics will be driven primarily by competition between the US and China. This suggests a potential return to a kind of bipolar world order. However, the scenario is complicated by the relative decline of American power vis-à-vis several erstwhile merely regional actors, in part due to new asymmetric capabilities such as cyberwar and nuclear deterrence, and by the presence of not just two but several competing models: chiefly liberal democracy, authoritarian nationalism and political Islam. Allison cautions against what he identifies as the longstanding US policy of ‘engage but hedge’ with regards to China (2017, 219). He argues instead, more strongly than for his three other policy options, for what would essentially become a sort of new Cold War: one which would make the growing power struggle between the two rivals more explicit, and therefore more predictable, and which would allow for a common front against other, even more insidious global challenges (2017, 227–8). Allison is not alone. In his 2017 book The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force, Eliot A. Cohen devotes his chapter on China, which he calls ‘America’s greatest challenge’, to arguing why and how the US must balance China; he concludes that this balancing will be fundamentally different from Cold War–style deterrence, though the precise difference remains unclear (Cohen 2017, 99).
Amid these and other prominent American analyses of US–China relations in the twenty-first century, one notices a glaring omission. For while these analyses rightly focus on the respective domestic and foreign policies of the two principal actors, the extent to which they can seem limited, even myopic, in scope with regard to other actors is nevertheless striking. The main assumption is often the relative endurance of American power. And yet despite the probable continuation of US predominance for years to come, most global growth—in demographic, economic and even military terms—is increasingly taking place beyond the Euro-Atlantic space. To take just one example, as Afshin Molavi (2017) points out, ‘By 2030, nearly 60 percent of the world’s population will live in Asia. Add Africa to the mix and you have some 77 percent of the world’s population in those two regions’.

Gideon Rachman, in his book *Easternisation: War and Peace in the Asian Century*, explores the phenomenon further, stressing several crucial geopolitical consequences: ‘Chinese military spending is soaring. India and Saudi Arabia are jostling for the title of the world’s largest arms importer. Even cash-strapped Japan increased its military spending . . . In military affairs, as in business, economics and power politics, the process of Easternisation is well underway’ (Rachman 2016, 178). There remains a real question as to how much longer the US can maintain military and economic hegemony.

Drawing on a thread found in Rachman’s book, this article focuses on a particular oversight in much of the mainstream US–China analysis: specifically, the role of Europe, and of the EU more specifically still. This space—the main prize over which the first Cold War was waged—is geographically equidistant between its Atlantic allies and Eurasian neighbours; this space, as the geographical territory of the EU, remains steadfastly committed to the transatlantic partnership, even as it continues to pursue its own global agenda; and this space is inextricably linked, through history, culture and trade, to the West, even as it also forges ties to its east and south as well. The EU as a whole comprises over 400 million people and is the world’s largest economy. The project of European integration continues to push forward, despite its vulnerability. Ultimately, where Europe fits into the broader dynamic of increasing US–China rivalry, in terms not only of ideology but also of economic and military capacity, will prove decisive not just for the continent but for shaping the nature of the future world order. This, in fact, is likely to be Europe’s central role for the twenty-first century, more deeply and systemically significant for global geopolitics, even, than the continent’s response to Russian revanchism, African migration or jihadist terrorism.

**The EU: small steps towards a better security and defence partnership**

The EU’s strategic capacity per se has become the subject of intense debate in recent years, on both sides of the Atlantic. Ultimately, it has also become the catalyst for real, if incremental, steps towards deeper European integration, including regarding security and defence. The June 2017 reflection paper on European defence (European Commission 2017a), together with Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker’s call for a ‘fully-fledged European Defence Union by 2025’ during his State of the Union speech in September 2017 (Juncker 2017), capped a longstanding effort to implement a plan for
enhanced research and development in defence, more efficient collective procurement, and even, eventually perhaps, something approaching a European army. The December 2017 start to the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative, signed by every EU member state except for Malta, Denmark and the UK (which is expected to leave the EU by March 2019 due to Brexit), signalled yet another step towards deeper long-term defence integration (Council of the EU 2017). NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has strongly welcomed the EU’s efforts as—and insofar as they remain—complementary to the US-led alliance (Stoltenberg 2018).

Despite ongoing efforts such as these—and efforts among both NATO and non-NATO member states in Europe to boost defence spending and deepen cooperation—the EU’s collective military capability remains meagre. Add to this the need for unanimous consent among the members of the Council of the EU, and arriving at a meaningful foreign policy consensus, resulting in decisive strategy, becomes all but impossible.

This relative military and strategic incapacity will have a major impact upon any potential role the EU could play vis-à-vis the US and China. As Cohen (2017) argues forcefully, it is still primarily military power that matters. And as Allison (2017) notes, though economic interdependence makes war between parties more costly and therefore less desirable, this factor alone is by no means fully prohibitive, with the First World War being the clearest case in point. What role, then, can or should the EU play in contributing to a more peaceful and less dangerous world order—given that its own ability to pursue strategic interests will probably remain small for the foreseeable future?

More than one belt and road?

It makes sense to think of the EU’s role as twofold. It must continue to re-embrace its supporting role within a US-led security umbrella, as indeed it has taken steps to do ever since Russia’s illegal 2014 annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea region. At the same time, the EU should recognise and assert its role in establishing new and deeper multilateral ties with partners around the world, as an important anchor amid rising great-power competition. These roles are not mutually exclusive.

The steps taken by European NATO members—and by the EU’s non-NATO members (Austria, Finland, Ireland and Sweden) through initiatives such as PESCO—to bolster their individual and collective defence capabilities are clear to see, even though their impact is likely to remain marginal for some time. The essential point is that Europeans and Americans are not only allies, via NATO, but partners in a much broader and deeper sense, and that both sides could and should do more to undergird this reality and prevent drift in the relationship. Policymakers on both sides of the water, including from President Trump’s own party, have clearly criticised his inaccurate or incendiary tweets. For some, this reflex has perhaps made it more difficult to offer constructive affirmation of any US administration policy at all. Certainly, democratically elected leaders are and must be accountable primarily to their own voters, and Trump’s low approval ratings in Europe have not made the jobs of many leaders easier in terms of reinforcing their commitment to the transatlantic relationship. But such is their responsibility nevertheless. NATO
remains, and must remain, the primary guarantor of transatlantic security. This must begin with ongoing mutual support vis-à-vis North Korea. It must continue with further mutual support for the Minsk Process, for stability and good governance in the Balkans, for the lasting peace and reconstruction of Syria, and for a united front against ‘Iran’s malign behaviour’, as Secretary Tillerson argued in his late-November address at the Wilson Center (Tillerson and Harman 2017).

In addition, there is the matter of trade. Despite heated rhetoric from both right- and left-wing populists, in both the US and Europe, decrying the irrational or immoral excesses of the other party when it comes to trade, the success of transatlantic commerce is indisputable. What should also be clear is the common interest that the US and the EU have in defending against unfair Chinese trade practices, such as dumping or intellectual property infringement. To this end, it is encouraging to note the US’s stance in defence of the EU’s position with regard to China’s status as a market economy under WTO protocols (Swanson 2017). Further cooperation, for example, to prevent unintended consequences from stronger US measures to ward off steel and aluminium dumping, could go a long way towards securing a strong common transatlantic position for the benefit of not just the respective US and EU economies, but for the prospects for partnership in all other areas as well. Perhaps it is even time to revive an old hobby-horse: the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. This agreement has now been stuck ‘in the freezer’ for so long that it barely elicits mention any longer in discussions of transatlantic relations (Malmström 2017). However, with new administrations now finally in place in the US, France and Germany, it would behove both sides to at least test these waters once again. President Trump, who has predicted a spate of win–win bilateral deals, has yet to open any major new trade agreements since taking office; on the contrary, he has withdrawn the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and called into doubt both the North American Free Trade Agreement and the US–Korea Free Trade Agreement. Therefore, securing even a renewed negotiations process with the US’s biggest trading partner could offer a win for his administration, as it would signal a recommitment to long-term transatlantic ties. Such a move would require a similar degree of political courage from the president’s European counterparts. Even a more limited approach, one focused merely on stronger follow-up in terms of sectoral cooperation, would still be helpful (Huhtanen 2018).

Bolstering transatlantic relations per se, and especially in the myriad ways that relate to security matters, will be crucial to balancing a rising China. Both sides of the Atlantic face the same challenges—including those that are opportunities, such as booming Chinese tourism and consumer demand—that China’s growth entails. A December 2017 Economist cover story, for example, examines what has come to be felt, in many quarters, as no longer soft, but ‘sharp’, Chinese power (Economist 2017). And yet bolstering the transatlantic relationship will not be Europe’s only role or responsibility in the coming decades. For one, Europe sits removed from China’s immediate sphere of strategic interest in ways that the US does not and yet at the same time is more inextricably linked to the vast Eurasian and African network of infrastructure China is intensively building and to other investments it has been making. The US and its European partners do not and will not share identical interests; China is a less natural strategic adversary for Europeans, even though its economic heft is felt to a greater extent.
The EU has responded to the new America First foreign policy by moving forward vigorously with a robust trade agenda and with new ideas for multilateral engagement in fields such as digital trade, climate policy and tax transparency (European Commission 2017a, 13–14). This reflects enduring European values as well as a long-term European vision regarding future economic and geopolitical realities. Crucially, it also signals a new confidence in European leadership. In an ever-more-integrated global economy and ever-more-precarious geopolitical and environmental contexts, Europe has positioned itself as a visionary leader with proposals for constructive new forms of cooperation.

A fascinating joint report published in 2017 by Bruegel, Chatham House, the China Center for International Economic Exchanges and the Chinese University of Hong Kong explores the deepening EU–China relationship in great depth, citing as examples European support for China’s Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank in 2015 and China becoming a shareholder in the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 2016. It concludes more generally: ‘There is much overlap between the EU and China in terms of strategic outlook; this includes the desire for “multilateralism” to be central to global governance. China has long seen the EU as an important “pole” in an emerging multipolar world order . . . Both see globalization as broadly beneficial, but are looking to manage its effects’ (García-Herrero et al. 2017, 6). While this relationship is certainly not strategic to the same degree as that between the EU and the US, as the report also notes, the growing synergy between the EU and China offers an opportunity to cooperate deeply not just on matters of global significance, such as climate change, but in forging more integrated trade and investment relations based on ever-clearer and fairer rules.

**Conclusions**

The EU must remain firm in its bedrock commitment to the transatlantic relationship. Indeed, it must continue to move forward in significantly improving its own defence capabilities, as this is one essential part of upholding its European end of the transatlantic bargain. In the context of the rivalry, which is likely to increase, between the US and China, the EU must also show itself as a leader in its own right when it comes to putting forward new norms for global cooperation. This is something that the EU does well. And this will help to maintain order and balance in a world in flux.

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