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The Response of the EU to Major Shifts in US Foreign Policy in the Last Decade

by

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Abstract

This dissertation discusses the European reaction to changes in priority of US foreign policy. The main premise behind this study is the fact that as the world-order realigns with the rise of China and the end of American hegemony, the EU and its Member States must adapt out of necessity. This study brings out how essential and influential the transatlantic relationship is in the psyche of European policy makers when determining policy in fundamental areas such as relations with other third countries and security and defence.

Through desk-based qualitative research, this dissertation evaluates how and why the foreign policy priorities of the United States are changing. This then leads to an investigation on the effects of these changes on the transatlantic relationship and how the EU is reacting to these changes in its policy towards China. By splitting the objective of this study into different segments, this dissertation presents a broad overview of the dynamics between the different actors considered and the interconnected nature of decision-making in a globalised world.

The emergence of a bipolar world and the American disengagement from the European theatre in light of its 'pivot to Asia' has set-off Europe's long walk towards strategic autonomy in security and defence. This in itself has profound implications on the make-up of European security that has traditionally been the purview of NATO. This search for sovereignty is in itself an assertion of the EU's aspiration to not be subject to the whims of Washington and Beijing.

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List of Acronyms

ASEAN - Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CELAC - Community of Latin American and Caribbean States

CFSP - Common Foreign and Security Policy

COSCO - China Ocean Shipping Company

CSDP - Common Security and Defence Policy

EDAP - European Defence Action Plan

EDF - European Defence Fund

ENISA - European Union Agency for Cybersecurity

EU - European Union

FAC - Foreign Affairs Council

FOIP - Freedom and Open Indo-Pacific

HR/VP - High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
and Vice President of the European Commission

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OEEC - Organisation for European Economic Co-operation

PESCO - Permanent Structured Cooperation

PRC - People's Republic of China

TTIP - Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership

TPP - Trans-Pacific Partnership

UN - United Nations

US - United States

WTO - World Trade Organisation

Chapter 1

Introduction

The 21st century is Europe's appointment with realism. This dissertation will be analysing a period in retrospect, yet it is motivated by trends that will be fully realised later on in the century. The world is at the precipice of unipolarity and at the start of a multipolar world where the United States will no longer be the sole superpower in the world, where European countries will have to make key decisions on alignment and where China will come to realise its inevitable potential as a dominant power. Such a seismic change in the way world power is distributed is bound to generate uncertainty that will require agile institutions to react quickly and adapt accordingly.

The transatlantic partnership is the result of a world order that was born out of the devastation brought about by the Second World War and its aftermath, consisting of two opposing ideologies and a divided Europe in the middle. Fukuyama, in the 1990s, heralded the 'end of history', the great battles on ideology and philosophy were thought to be over, the liberal order and capitalism had won their battle over totalitarianism and communism, the trajectory of global affairs was thought to be crystallised. In hindsight, there is now broad consensus that Fukuyama was in fact premature. The conditions at the time were unique. Russia had just suffered a hit in its self-confidence and was recovering from the national trauma of losing an empire, and the Chinese were still following the Dengist approach to international affairs of "biding their time". This state of affairs was merely an anomaly. Therefore, as the world order realigns, since the transatlantic relationship is its direct product, the partnership will have to accordingly react or render itself unsustainable.

The period under investigation follows a turbulent time in transatlantic relations during the Bush Presidency. The major US-EU disagreement at the time stemmed

from the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, with then US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld likening Germany to Libya and Cuba. The Iraq War also set in a divide amongst EU Member States on the war, with then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair showing steadfast support to the war and President Jacques Chirac persisting with a French 'non'. The aftermath of Iraq and its consequences left a sour taste on both sides. This is why the election of President Barack Obama was met with optimism in European capitals that a new positive chapter for the transatlantic alliance was incoming. It was however met with a rather tepid response from the Obama administration that was clearly reorienting America's priorities towards the Asia-Pacific with the so-called 'pivot-to-Asia'. Even encouraging signs of a transatlantic upgrade such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) eventually fizzled into disagreement. The unprecedented Trump years consisted of outright hostility - with the then President questioning NATO's purpose and economic nationalism that saw the US imposing harsh tariffs on European goods. The successive administrations were polar opposites in both style and policy, yet when analysing them jointly, one can notice a clear pattern - the US is no longer as enthusiastic about maintaining its role as Europe's security guarantor.

Apart from the turbulence, this period is also significant due to the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, with significant institutional reform that resulted in the EU gaining legal personality and the creation of entities such as the EEAS, and new roles such as the President of the European Council and the HR/VP. By the end of the period under investigation the changes brought by Lisbon had been in place for just over a decade and this allows for an analysis on the adequacy of this institutional reform in geopolitics. The EU in its decades-long transition from a largely intergovernmental entity to a state-like organisation has found itself in an institutional flux after Lisbon, where despite having entities and policies such as the EEAS and the CSDP it does not have the bite required to truly assert itself on the world stage.

The debate on waning transatlantic relations has been ongoing for decades. From Gaullist France to the Iraq war, the demise of the transatlantic partnership has been heralded time and again, yet it persists. As the world order shifts, the relationship between the EU and the US in the coming decades will determine whether or not the established multilateral institutions and western norms in international politics will be maintained.

The changes in priority in US foreign policy are not necessarily the result of

a waning transatlantic alliance. Change is guaranteed because the US is losing its ‘unipolar moment’ and its ability to maintain Europe’s security. The rise of China as an opposing geo-political power to the United States has the potential to act as an inhibitor in transatlantic relations and is challenging the privileged EU-US partnership. Whether or not China manages to disrupt transatlanticism, the Chinese factor will nevertheless prove to be fundamental in the coming decades.

The West is also facing a challenge in making the case for global leadership domestically, following decades of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the popular appetite for geo-politics is waning. The effects of globalisation and the repercussions that this has had in industrious areas, together with the economic devastation that European austerity post-financial crisis, has led to increased antagonism and resentment towards the political class and certain strata of society. Isolationism is on the rise and this is limiting the possibility of a western response to change. This can be seen through the rise of populist movements all across Europe and the US that has led to far-right parties entering European parliaments, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US President.

With this background in mind, the overarching purpose behind this dissertation is to evaluate the shift in priorities in US foreign policy, deciphering the reasons behind this shift and then answering how the EU is responding to this change. To realise this objective the analysis is structured around the following research questions:

- Are the foreign policy priorities of the United States changing? What is causing this change?
- What are the effects of this change on the transatlantic relationship?
- How is the EU reacting to these changes in its policy towards China?

The main premise behind this dissertation is that the changes in US foreign policy are to some extent a direct result of a shifting world-order due to the rise of China. In answering these questions, this study will shine light on how the transatlantic partnership is also contingent on the context in which it exists. Attempting to explain US-EU relations independently of relations with other actors would result in an inelegant explanation of certain phenomena in the transatlantic relationship.

Taking a realist perspective, the transatlantic alliance is the product of state interests at a period in history in the aftermath of World War II, therefore as these

interests shift, the alliance will correspondingly evolve. Through these research questions, this study frames changes in EU policy in the context of changes in US foreign policy that are in part a consequence of the American ‘pivot to Asia’.

In the literature review, reference is made to relevant works which set the scene and present the current context as a new world order emerges. Through the work of notable international relations theorists, this section includes reflections on the rise and fall of American unipolarity due to the rise of China and the dawn of a new multipolar world. This is followed by an overview of literature that characterises the transatlantic relationship and its role on the world stage and a discussion on the importance of the American world order in creating the conditions for the EU to exist and thrive. An overview of the already published literature, when considered in sum, manifests an interesting contradiction - the US as a reluctant multilateralist sustained the conditions for multilateral institutions to endure. The subsequent methodology chapter sets forth the research design of this dissertation and motivates the research questions.

The next chapter will focus on ongoing trends in transatlantic relations. Covering a period spanning from President Obama’s ‘pivot to Asia’ to President Trump’s rhetoric on NATO and European allies, this segment shows a clear and persistent trend on the evolution of transatlanticism. The chapter includes a discussion on how despite attempts by the US to ‘lead from behind’, the EU’s institutions are still unable to mobilise Member States to act as a reliable defence and security partner, even in conflicts that are in Europe’s immediate neighbourhood. Cognisant of these issues, this section analyses how ‘strategic autonomy’ has become an integral part of the EU’s jargon on security and defence, a direct reaction to American disengagement from the European theatre.

The following chapter goes into the EU’s China policy in the context of its relationship with the US. An analysis of EU-China relations would be incomplete without considering the emerging context of Sino-American rivalry and its geopolitical impact. The EU’s classification of China as a partner, rival and competitor all at once, encompasses the tight-rope that the EU must walk when navigating its relationship with China whilst safeguarding its interests. The period under investigation is important for EU-China relations for two main reasons. Firstly, the Great Recession and its impact on Europe’s economy made EU Member States more open to Chinese investment in their territories. Secondly, over a decade of American disengagement, culminating in the election of Donald Trump as President, made Europe seek its own strategic autonomy, that in turn influences its relationship

with China as can be seen in the Huawei saga.

The intention of this dissertation is to shine a light on the current dynamics in world politics that are bound to dramatically affect the EU and its position in the world. It is the intention of this research to document and analyse the European response to the changes in priority of US foreign policy that is adapting to a new world order.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The transatlantic relationship is a core component to the idea of western civilisation, in many ways the relationship between Europe and the United States embodies the co-existence of different facets of the same principles. This partnership allows for the propagation of shared values including free trade, democracy, and respect to human rights and has ensured that these ideals are core-components of the current world order and its respective institutions.

This dissertation is evaluating the shift in priorities of US foreign policy in light of the new challenges presented in the Pacific due to China's rise, and how the European Union reacted to these changes within the period 2009-2019. Despite the fact that there are differences in approach between the Obama and Trump administrations, on many issues of substance there is an element of continuity, after all, as things stand, it seems that Kagan's iconic assertion that "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus" still stands ([Kagan 2003](#)). Yet despite these differences, Europe, following the calamity of the Second World War thrived under an American world order. Layne argues that rules and institutions do not exist on their own steam and despite their role in managing power, they are still the direct result of great power politics ([Layne 2012](#)). Therefore, from a realist perspective, the current multilateral institutions are only effective, when they are effective, because the entity that has accumulated the most power tolerates that these institutions work.

For Layne, the world order that the European Union, the United Nations and other institutions operate in is part of an American order that champions the interests of the United States ([Layne 2012](#)). For Gilpin, hegemony ensures that

peace is sustained since the dominant power does not need to cause conflict whilst the other states are unable to do so (Gilpin 1981).

The current unipolar world upends the Westphalian order that has characterised international relations for centuries. In the classic world order, sovereign states held a monopoly on the use of force within their borders. American hegemony has given the United States a quasi-monopoly on the use of force internationally and the psyche of nation states has been altered such that they are open to international, particularly American, scrutiny (Ikenberry 2004). Zakaria claims that since 1989 in particular, ‘all roads have led to Washington’ and for perhaps every significant country, its most important relationship has been that with the United States as the most powerful external actor on every continent in the world (Zakaria 2008). This remains the case for EU member states.

This literature review, through a discussion on power dynamics between the United States as a current power and China as a rising power, aims to set the scene and thus give context to the eventual discussion on transatlantic relations and the EU’s China policy in subsequent chapters.

A changing world order

A change in priority in US foreign policy is not only taking place due to changing domestic political preferences but is also necessitated by a changing world order and the rise of new powers particularly China. Following simple arithmetic, considering the demographic and economic characteristics of other countries such as India and China and their significant growth, one can come to the conclusion that the West including the US and the EU member states will undergo a relative decline, irrelevant of their performance in the world economy (Layne 2012). The rise of China and India is not some historical anomaly, it is merely a restoration of previous powers, after all before industrialisation these countries were the world’s largest economies (Layne 2012).

The current world order sees its roots in the 1930s where the Great Depression and political instability in Europe made then President Roosevelt understand that a *Pax Americana* is required to safeguard US security and its prosperity (Arrighi 2005). For Zakaria, the current order was not set as the result of rivalry but rather as a result of ‘international and human realities that transcended any particular threat’ and conditions that existed despite the perceived threat of the Soviet Union and not necessarily because of it (Zakaria 2008).

Uncertainty and change are two endemic features in international relations, the absence of harmony is in fact the norm rather than the exception and therefore transitions and change are to be expected (Keohane 2012). These periods of change do not have a stellar reputation in history and are known to come with significant dangers. Great-power disputes over ideology and hierarchy tend to generate conflict. A sober reflection by the West and a realisation that global stability will require the participation of new powers is necessary to ensure that this period of possible transition is well managed (Hass and Kupchan 2021).

The ‘unipolar moment’ of sole American supremacy identified by US political analyst Charles Krauthammer as the Soviet Union disintegrated, is coming to an end (Krauthammer 1990). Fukuyama’s bold assertion following the demise of communism that the great ideological debates that have plagued history with war and conflict are over and that therefore we are seeing ‘the end of history’ (Fukuyama 1992), is being challenged by the rise of previously sleeping giants such as China that whilst somewhat embracing capitalism is increasingly directly challenging liberalism.

To sustain its development, the Chinese integrated their economy well into the American-led international order, their peaceful rise followed Deng Xiaopeng’s foreign policy philosophy of “Lie low. Hide your capabilities. Bide your time” (Layne 2012). Deng understood that an assertive China increases the probability of provoking the international community with the economic repercussions that are bound to come with it (Wright 2017). Clover remarks how under President Xi Jinping, China seems to have moved on from this logic. In fact Xi in a 2017 address to the Chinese Communist Party insisted that “[i]t is time for us to take centre stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind” (Clover 2017). The evolution from the Deng to Xi era debunks the myth that as the PRC progresses economically, there will be a liberalisation of the Chinese political system, and that somehow in the 21st century, great powers will not act on their primal urges to dominate. Indeed, this myth was the basis of US foreign policy towards China for decades (Gallagher 2002). It is clear that despite the multitude of Western platitudes that economic openness will stifle these urges, human nature remains a contributor to international affairs (Kagan 2019).

This hypothesis that as China opens up economically it will correspondingly reform itself politically to become more liberal, has been debunked time and again, especially since Beijing’s repressive government and autocracy is being presented to the world as a successful form of government for the state capitalism that China

practices (Kagan 2019).

Scholars such as Waltz have been arguing from virtually immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union that unipolarity is unsustainable since sooner or later countries that have or are attaining the ‘material resources’ to sustain being a world power will naturally become great powers (Waltz 1993). Layne argued that precisely because of the then existing unipolar moment, turmoil is to be expected since that sort of world order is unsustainable and systemic change with the rise and fall of great powers is bound to take place (Layne 1993). Ikenberry considers international orders to be built around three main features, the first being power, the second legitimacy, and the third is the ability for it to provide functioning returns to the states choosing to engage within it (Ikenberry 2014). Contrary to the realist perspective of Waltz and Layne, Ikenberry insists that since the American order is based on liberal internationalism, it contains features of legitimacy and functionality that are widely accepted and embraced (Ikenberry 2014).

US foreign policy analysts have consistently contended that US hegemony is different from other hegemonies that have occurred throughout history and that the US liberal order through its inclusion, security guarantees, free trade and championing of human rights has distinct characteristics that make it sustainable (Posen 2018). The proliferation of capitalism, democracy and nuclear weapons have undoubtedly contributed to a long peace among great powers however these have also been accompanied by a unique approach to managing hegemony by the United States (Ikenberry 2004). Cooley and Nexon argue that the United States’ continued unipolarity is not coerced but rather stems from consent by those including European and Asian countries who participate in its institutions (Cooley and Nexon 2020).

In many ways these analysts are correct when claiming that the American hegemony is distinct, it is certainly not a traditional imperial order with colonies and an appetite for conquest and expansion. Ikenberry describes the American order as ‘hierarchical order with liberal characteristics’ or a ‘liberal international order with hegemonic characteristics’ without the usual balance of power order (Ikenberry 2014). For Ferguson, the United States is a liberal empire that exerts its power through the upholding of rules and institutions that ensure peace and freedom (Ferguson 2005).

Conversely, Kagan, considers the current liberal order as ‘a great historical aberration’, and that the current state of affairs is not the result of an evolutionary process but rather the direct impact of an anomaly that is not guaranteed to persist

(Kagan 2019). Kennedy at the end of the Cold War considered it almost impossible for the United States not to enter a period of decline due to ‘imperial overstretch’ (Kennedy 1989). For Halper, the so-called ‘Washington consensus’ is now being directly challenged by the ‘Beijing consensus’ that presents an alternative model for the international order (Halper 2010). Realist scholars argue that as the United States’ position on the world stage erodes and as China rises, two events are likely to happen; first Beijing will influence and alter the rules and institutions that currently shape the international system to better serve its interests, and, simultaneously the US as the declining power will increasingly start seeing China as a security threat (Ikenberry 2008).

The first two decades of the 21st century are proving to be a period of fundamental change in the world order that the international community has been accustomed to for decades. Pessimism on the unipolar order was, until the Great Recession, a relatively minority view among scholars of security studies and key US policy makers. The widely accepted conclusion was that the United States hegemony was set to last for a long time (Layne 2012). Haas and Kupchan, as they make their case for the establishment of a new ‘Concert of Powers’, note that with the ascent of Asian powers particularly China, two centuries of Western leadership, first under the guise of the British Empire and eventually under the United States and the institutions that it established are coming to an end (Hass and Kupchan 2021). They argue that the West is losing not only its relative economic supremacy but also its ‘ideological sway’ as many democracies are being increasingly influenced by illiberal sentiments and populism whilst a more confident China is assertively questioning the current order (Hass and Kupchan 2021). In trade for example, unipolarity has already come to an end, with the largest trading bloc now being in East-Asia followed by the European Union. Moreover, in every area except for the military similar shifts are underway with the rest of the world taking a more prominent role when compared to the US (Zakaria 2008).

For Wright, the United States has never faced a competitor as complex as China (Wright 2017). Currently the PRC is the fastest-growing major economy, largest manufacturer, largest saver, second-largest military spender and the second largest consumer in the world (Zakaria 2008). Until recently, China’s rise has occurred with little cause for concern for the West, as for some time, Chinese foreign policy was solely based on its growth strategy and its participation on the world stage was not disruptive. Indeed, it maintained a track record on the UN Security Council that many times included either voting in favour of resolutions or

otherwise abstaining, and rarely voting against resolutions, especially American ones (Zakaria 2008).

However, as from around 2008 and particularly since 2012 and the ascendancy of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese have taken a more assertive stance. In fact, in 2016, the chair of the influential Foreign Affairs Committee of China's National People's Congress, Fu Ying, in her *Financial Times* op-ed entitled 'The US World Order is a Suit That No Longer Fits', argues that the world has moved on from its old ways, alluding to the US international order. Fu also accuses the US of attempting to 'fuel a geopolitical contest by elbowing its way into regional disputes' (Fu 2016). This language would have been unprecedented a decade before and is testament to China's increased confidence on the world stage. Wolf argues that the financial crisis of 2008 proved to be the turning point where the credibility of the US began dwindling and Chinese authority on the global stage started to rise (Wolf 2009). The domestic sentiment is also shifting, evidenced by books with ultra-nationalist sentiments such as 'China is unhappy' becoming top sellers in recent years, accompanied by a more assertive approach by the Chinese intellectual class (Kagan 2019). For example, Chinese scholar Wang Jisi portrays the United States as a threat to Chinese national security and as a disruptor of China's ambitions to achieve its goals and improve its global posture in areas such as the Taiwan question and Chinese claims in the South China Sea (Kagan 2019).

Recently, China has also become a more active multilateral actor through initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum and the 17+1 group of central and eastern European states (Cooley and Nexon 2020). The Belt and Road initiative has also undoubtedly raised Washington's eyebrows with infrastructural projects all across Asia and Eastern Europe (Cooley and Nexon 2020).

How the world will react to this change is still an unknown, Mearsheimer has argued that if China continues its record growth in the coming decades, then there will be a good possibility that an 'intense security competition' will take place with the possibility and potential of war (Mearsheimer 2014). However, liberal scholar Ikenberry contends that the 'liberal ascendancy is not over' and that it is evolving, whilst also highlighting how a liberal international order, despite hegemonic characteristics 'tends to be unusually integrative' (Ikenberry 2011). China's economic system requires access to open trade to sustain growth and that the current rules based order built on relatively effective multilateral institutions is

easy to join but difficult to overturn (Ikenberry 2011).

Overall, current US-China relations tick a number of boxes when it comes to the classic conflict between an established power and a rising one. China feels aggrieved about perceived injustices that it has suffered particularly when it comes to territorial disputes (Wright 2017). The United States and China have fundamentally distinct political regimes, a reality that generates distrust in one another (Wright 2017). This however does not mean that a difficult or perhaps a violent transition is imminent or even necessary, change is occurring in a unique set of circumstances that include nuclear weapons and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) where China can participate extensively and has in fact benefited enormously especially through the WTO (Ikenberry 2008). Furthermore, the current international order is less tied to a single country than previous ones in history. Through broad ownership throughout the West, it is not just the United States that is interested in safeguarding the current order (Ikenberry 2014).

Characterising the transatlantic relationship

This is not the first time that the European and American partnership, the anchor of the Western world and its values, has been re-evaluated. In fact, since the cementing of the transatlantic relationship following World War II, we have seen many instances where the “marriage”, as the relationship was coined by former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, has had its rough patches. Yet throughout time, the partnership has been able to work through any differences that came along (Lemahieu 2015).

The 21st century has so far been a challenging period for transatlantic relations, with terrorism, the digital revolution with the rise of major American conglomerates in IT, the financial crisis and changes in the geopolitical situation. These challenges have made European and American leaders sound out of tune when insisting on *shared values* (Nicholson 2016). From a sociological and cultural perspective there are stark differences in attitudes between Americans and Europeans on key questions such as for example whether individual success is something within their control. Americans in a study by the Pew Research Centre showed more confidence that this is in fact true than Europeans (Silver 2020). This American individualism and European collectivism undoubtedly reflects in the policy decisions made by the representatives of both peoples and partially explains divergences in the transatlantic relationship.

Well before the election of Donald Trump, all administrations since Bill Clinton have shown public concern about Europe's inability to complement US foreign policy priorities (Peterson 2018). Many times, US demands on the EU's foreign policy result in disintegration within the European bloc and this highlights the issues of unity when it comes to a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in Europe. The fact that it is challenging to identify who speaks for Europe makes EU-US collaboration in foreign policy a greater challenge (Smith and Steffenson 2017).

Ever since the end of the Cold War, there have been successive attempts by different US administrations to convince Europeans to increase their defence spending, this has been a consistent American point of contention in NATO. In fact, during the Wales NATO Summit in 2014, the members of the alliance pledged to spend a minimum of 2% of their GDP on defence which Victoria Nuland, then US ambassador to NATO, two months before the summit, referred to as the “unofficial floor” when it comes to defence spending within NATO (Techau 2015). As of 2019, barely any European countries in NATO have reached the 2% threshold, with Germany at 1.3%, France at 1.9% and Italy at 1.4% amongst others (SIPRI 2020).

This disharmony in perspectives between Europeans and Americans is a direct result of elements within Europe's political establishment who are uneasy with hard power. For Kagan, Europe in many ways is taking a step back from power in the formal sense of the word, where strength is measured in terms of hard-power capabilities as expressed through military equipment and the sort, and is moving towards a period coined by Kagan as post-history where Kant's perpetual peace is realised (Kagan 2003). At the same time, the United States still perceives a world of anarchy, where security can only be guaranteed through sheer strength and military might and where international laws and norms are no certainty (Kagan 2003).

In characterising EU-US relations, it is not only governments and diplomatic corps that define the relationship but also the unique and unprecedented people to people relations that there are between Europe and the United States. According to US Census Bureau reports, European diaspora in the US accounts for around 41% of the US population, with the German diaspora being the largest followed by Irish, British, Italian, French and Polish (Zong and Batalova 2015). This will undoubtedly influence the perspective of how people on both sides of the pond look at each other, these views eventually reflect themselves through their elected policy makers. In fact, there are multiple examples in the 20th century of ethnic diasporas

influencing US foreign policy either through their activism as a community or through pandering by US politicians for electoral reasons (Shain 1994). This reality also instils an element of cultural homogeneity between both sides that results in a greater understanding of each other.

However in day to day political discourse, American isolationism is on the rise, sentiment has shifted and the general American public is becoming wary of interventionism and no longer feels that the United States should be burdened with the responsibility of policing the world and maintaining order (Kagan 2019). President Obama in a direct snub to Europeans repeatedly complained on ‘free-riders’ who are dependent on the United States for their defence, this initiated a concern in European capitals that perhaps the American security guarantee is no longer as solid as previously assumed (Kagan 2019).

The recent main areas of contention can be well described by taking into consideration the American realist perspective and contrast it with Europe’s Kantian world. They expose that despite a relationship spanning centuries, the United States and Europe as a bloc have a relationship that, whilst encompassing norms and rules is still subject to state power. Richard Nixon is attributed to have said that “[t]he United States has allies because it has interests”, this undoubtedly remains the maxim that broadly orients the thinking of US’s foreign policy establishment. Despite having sophisticated polities there are instances where both European countries and the United States retreat to the power relations that define realism (Slaughter and Hale 2011). Donald Trump is known for his *America First* maxim, yet it could be concluded that in fact it has always been *America First*. The United States in its efforts to lead multilateral institutions whilst also maintaining its status as a unilateral power actor is constantly facing an internal juxtaposition of attitudes and beliefs towards international relations, this is bound to create an element of apprehension.

The US Pivot to Asia

American involvement in Asia is not a new phenomenon, since the turn of the 20th century, by virtue of its politics and geography, the United States has been a Pacific power (Shambaugh 2013). The current focus on Asia is only relative and not absolute, engagement has been taking place for decades. Both the Obama and Trump administrations were not interventionist. Obama despite his international popularity sought a strategy of retrenchment and in some ways international accommodation to focus on domestic issues (Dueck 2015).

The seminal 2011 article *America's Pacific Century* in Foreign Policy by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her use of the term 'pivot to Asia' generated waves of uneasiness throughout European capitals due to its implication that the United States will be reorienting its focus on Asia to the detriment of European security (Clinton 2011). The term *pivot* implied that the attention of the United States on the Asia-Pacific region will be at the cost of other regions including Europe (Shambaugh 2013).

American scholars and activists have been advocating for more intense engagement with China and the region. Former US National Security Advisor and political scientist Zbigniew Brezinski advocated for the US to establish a more intimate 'G2' relationship with China, which according to Howorth would naturally come at the expense of the transatlantic relationship (Howorth 2016).

The 'pivot to Asia' or the 'rebalancing' as it was later referred to is a recognition by the United States that the lion's share of economic and political history of the 21st Century will be written in that part of the world (Campbell and Andrews 2013). President Obama legitimised the pivot and America's role in Asia through the long history of American presence in the region and its role in providing peace and stability. In an address to the Australian parliament, Obama tied the American story with an Asian narrative, emphasising the United States' historical role within the region to rationalise its role within the region:

“The United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation. Asian immigrants helped build America, and millions of American families, including my own, cherish our ties to this region. From the bombing of Darwin to the liberation of Pacific islands, from the rice paddies of Southeast Asia to a cold Korean Peninsula, generations of Americans have served here, and died here—so democracies could take root; so economic miracles could lift hundreds of millions to prosperity” (Obama 2011).

The change in priorities for the United States is also leading to US officials encouraging Europeans to be more active in their own security (Simón 2015a). Stumbaum argues that European countries must realise that there is not as much political appetite in the United States to continue indefinitely financing and manning European security (Stumbaum 2015). A 2012, US Department of Defence report titled “Sustaining US Global Leadership Priorities for the 21st Century” accentuated:

“US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the US military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia Pacific region” (US Department of Defence 2012).

In fact, the US Army is increasing its presence in Okinawa, Guam and in Darwin, Australia. This is accompanied by the signing of an ‘enhanced defence cooperation agreement’ with the Philippines (Meijer 2015). The Pentagon has in fact made clear that it intends to reallocate the US Navy’s presence and distribution from the current 50/50 between the Atlantic and Pacific to a 40/60, with an increased focus on the Pacific (Meijer 2015).

During the Obama administration efforts were made to maintain and improve existing alliances in the Pacific and also approach less traditional allies in the region (Campbell and Andrews 2013). In fact, during the Obama years, the United States improved relations with countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam, whilst further strengthening alliances with Singapore and New Zealand (Campbell and Andrews 2013). President Obama was also the first US President to join the East Asian Summit and the ASEAN leaders’ meetings (Shambaugh 2013). The US is now a signatory of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and is therefore now a full participant in the East Asian Summit. Realist oriented academic circles acknowledged Obama’s pivot as a positive step that was however implemented in a poorly-coordinated piecemeal fashion (Beeson 2020).

Shambaugh remarks that current US engagement with China is intense, the US and Chinese governments have more than 60 annual official dialogue mechanisms and the US Embassy in Beijing is its largest in the world, staffed with over 1400 diplomats (Shambaugh 2013).

Ross argues that China is being misinterpreted, its actions are not stemming from newly found confidence but rather from an ingrained insecurity about its limitations and therefore the current reaction by the United States is misplaced and can serve to further aggravate tensions (Ross 2012). For Ross, Beijing’s ‘tough diplomacy’ stems from a sense of insecurity following years of increased social unrest and slower growth, whereby the Chinese government is increasingly dependent on nationalist manifestations to sustain its legitimacy (Ross 2012).

Whilst dismissing the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement with Pacific countries, the Trump administrations still sought to contain China and extend

American influence in the Pacific. The ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) vision of the Trump administration signals the realisation of a more assertive effort to engage within the region through bilateral rather than multilateral means (Storey and Cook 2018).

Kolmas and Kolmasova while criticising the pivot as ineffective remark that the Obama and Trump administrations had more in common than what meets the eye. In fact, it is argued that Trump, using a different approach, continued Obama’s legacy when it comes to Asia despite many times acting in an erratic manner with short-term goals in mind (Kolmaš and Kolmašová 2019). Trump’s foreign policy was at times incoherent and was also considered as void of any particular regional considerations, preferring to engage on a bilateral basis.

The Trump administration inherited a wide range of long established relationships within the region that are vulnerable to China’s interest. Despite the fact that the Trump administration recognised China as a US adversary particularly when it comes to trade, it still sought a transactional relationship with partners in Asia (Beeson 2020). The Trump administration also took a more confrontational approach to China, for example in a US-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, the US insisted that the Chinese dismantle a missile defence system on the Spratly Islands within the contested South China Sea, with this being considered a non-negotiable confrontation on Chinese sovereignty within the region (Beeson 2020). Whilst it is inconceivable that the EU would side with China in a geopolitical dispute, as of yet the EU does not have a coherent geopolitical strategy when it comes to China, preferring instead to focus on trade and investment (Armstrong 2013). Furthermore, individual member states are in some instances working closely with China in a manner that makes US official uncomfortable.

The transatlantic relationship in a new world order

Upon the fall of Nazi Germany, with a confident Soviet Union advancing in eastern Europe, the US came to the conclusion that for the Soviets to be contained, it will have to act as a long term guarantor of western Europe’s security. In fact, for decades the US has underwritten European security. This led to a plethora of institutions and arrangements including the Marshall plan, the OEEC (now OECD) and NATO that sealed what became known as the ‘west’. The transatlantic partnership is therefore intrinsically tied to sustaining a world order, this implies that as this order shifts, the partnership must adapt accordingly.

Fiott argues that it is in the interests of the EU that the current world order is maintained, since the EU's very existence as a multilateral institution is based on it (Fiott 2021). A key issue that Europe will face is managing its interdependencies in trade, especially when considering that global trade policy is increasingly being determined in light of the rising US-China rivalry (Weil et al. 2021).

The Cold War took place in a less interconnected world, the US-China rivalry will undoubtedly be more complex due to the implications of globalisation. A new Cold War will be more heavily contested over the economy, trade and influence in multilateral institutions. Posen contends that whilst it is understandable that one would consider the EU, in its current format, as a limited partner in the military sphere, there are other areas where the EU could potentially have a major role in maintaining the western dominance despite multipolarity (Posen 2021).

Economic and technological dependencies have the potential to become tools for geopolitical leverage by adversaries, a prime example of this is the rolling out of 5G in Europe. In a recent study, Deutsche Bank concluded that if a full-blown technological war between both sides of the Pacific, with competing standards and incompatible technology, took place it would cost the world economy \$5tn. This would undoubtedly also come at a significant cost to European industry and will limit market access for companies that will have to make a mutually exclusive choice between either an American or a Chinese standard (Walia and Analysts 2020).

Europe faces the challenge that Member States, particularly Germany, still do not perceive the realist aspect of international relations, it is still not in Europe's lexicon to discuss relations with other countries in terms of conflicting interests (Giegerich 2021). In a Pacific Century, this could be a luxury that Europe may no longer afford. Hooft argues that although the US might remain willing to assist Europe in matters of security and defence, it may no longer be able to (van Hooft 2021). In the 21st century, strategic autonomy is not about breaking with Washington but rather about ensuring that in a challenging geopolitical environment there is sufficient burden sharing. The rise of China requires the Americans to divert resources to the Pacific. This is already seen with the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' and the Trump administration's hostile rhetoric with Beijing. Even though China might not be able to compete with the US militarily as of yet, it has raised the cost of American power projection in the Pacific. Even if one were to ignore the rhetoric from successive administrations, it is logical to speculate that the European theatre will no longer remain a US

priority ([van Hooft 2021](#)).

Thygeson et. al. present four approaches that Europe may take when it comes to its relationship with the United States in light of China's rise ([Sverdrup-Thygeson et al. 2016](#)). The first approach is to have the EU developing its own pivot to Asia in close coordination with the United States such that it is complementary with the American pivot, the second approach could be to have a division of responsibilities between the United States and Europe, whereby Europeans are more involved in soft power initiatives whilst relying on the United States for its hard power capabilities. The third approach is to have the EU go its own way and establish 'the third way' within the international system, this would be a route of non-alignment that is increasingly becoming popular within European academic circles. The fourth option, would be for the EU to actually align itself with China as a rising power, discarding its transatlantic relationship, this is however an unrealistic scenario due to the values based connection between Europe and the United States ([Sverdrup-Thygeson et al. 2016](#)).

Conclusion

It is clear that following the financial crisis of 2008, a shift in power dynamics is taking place, yet whether this will actually materialise into a shift in the world's centre of influence is still to be determined. The current world order has characteristics that are distinct from any other in history, and this adds an element of uncertainty as there are certainly no previous cases that can be used to draw parallels with the current process.

Despite there being a wide academic debate on the possible shift in power between the United States and China, there has been a relatively limited analysis of how this shift in power is affecting European countries, especially European Union member states.

It would be unreasonable to presume that such a major historical shift would not in any way affect relationships between western countries. The transatlantic relationship in its current format stemming from a set of circumstances following World War II, is based on a security guarantee that was born out of a bipolar world and was eventually extended in an American hegemony. The rise of a multi-polar world is bound to generate a discussion on the purpose and role of the transatlantic relationship.

The United States is reckoning with this shift and is reacting through its pivot to Asia, in its various forms in successive administrations. This is not necessarily due to a conscious decision but rather due to a change in circumstances.

Considering present relevance but also the historical weight of the transatlantic relationship, any analysis of the shift in world order and the corresponding shift in priorities of the United States' foreign policy would be incomplete without taking into account the European factor. Furthermore, inversely, any comprehensive analysis of EU foreign policy would also be incomplete without considering the surrounding context of the Sino-American rivalry. This is a gap in literature that this dissertation will attempt to address.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter shall discuss the objectives of this dissertation and describe the methodology undertaken to tackle the related research questions. This study involves a multi-variable analysis of two actors in light of the emergence of another actor. Specifically, this dissertation is an attempt to understand the changes in the dynamics of the transatlantic partnership in light of changes in priority in US foreign policy. The motivation behind this study is to observe how the transatlantic partnership permeates into the EU's foreign policy vis-a-vis other actors, particularly in this case China.

Research Questions

The overarching objective of this dissertation is to analyse the shift in priorities of US foreign policy in light of the new challenges in the Asia-Pacific region due to the rise of China, and then to evaluate the way in which the EU reacted to these changes in the period 2009-2019.

The research questions identified aim to structure the analysis by partitioning it into three main areas. The purpose of this dissertation is to identify shifts in US foreign policy and the motivation for this, find the corresponding effect of this change on the transatlantic relationship and highlight the European reaction to the rising Sino-American rivalry. These questions when considered sequentially flesh out the substance underlying the core argument of this study.

The research questions are the following:

1. Are the foreign policy priorities of the United States changing? What is causing this change?
2. What are the effects of this change on the transatlantic relationship?
3. How is the EU reacting to these changes in its policy towards China?

The time period chosen, 2009-2019, is such that two contrasting Presidents of the United States, coming from the two main parties, with diametrically opposite views are considered. The Obama and Trump administrations although having distinct policies are good subjects to show certain consistencies in US foreign policy throughout this period.

The first question is tackled by addressing the geopolitical context and the theoretical work of various academics in international relations on hegemony and the polarisation of geopolitics. Here the causes of US priorities in foreign policy were presented as not necessarily a conscious choice, despite there being instances of deliberate isolationism, but mainly as a result of a natural reaction to a change in power dynamics in the current world order.

The second question requires extensive use of primary sources, since as discussed in the literature review there has been limited academic analysis as to how the rise of China as a world power, with the complementary consequences that this has on the American outlook, is impacting transatlantic relations. Here literature from both sides of the Atlantic will be analysed alongside primary sources.

The third question addresses the current EU China policy, an extensive discussion will take place on the differences there currently are between Member States and the fragmentation of policies across the EU. This required the analysis of documents such as national security strategies of different Member States, of particular note were those of France and Germany. In answering this question this study also brings out the disadvantages of having foreign policy remaining a prerogative of Member States in a globalised multi-polar world. Fundamentally, when addressing this question, one can find the heavy influence that the transatlantic alliance has in the minds of European policy makers when determining their relationship with other actors. In this case, as the US increased the ante when it comes to its relationship with China, Europe's perspective correspondingly shifted.

Research Design

The method employed when doing research for this dissertation is qualitative. In particular, a phenomenological approach was used. This is being done by shining light on the perceptions and experiences of both the United States and Europe and using this data as the foundation for further analysis.

A qualitative approach is necessary in such a context since it is a complex multi-variable reality that cannot be quantified and requires a detailed discussion on the context surrounding the issues that are addressed (Queirós et al. 2017). The methodology used is appropriate and justified when considering that behaviours of social groups vis-a-vis each other, in this case the United States and Europe in the context of an evolving rivalry between the United State and China, are being examined.

This dissertation will not attempt to generalise and is tackling a specific case-study without making overtures to more abstract theoretical conclusions. The research is characterising the relationship between two particular actors, the United States and the European Union and is then, through an understanding of this relationship, attempting to see its evolution as the world order evolves with the rise of China as an external actor.

The research undertaken can be classified as a parallel case study since it considers transatlantic relations within a broader simultaneous context of a classic power struggle between an established power, the United States, and a rising one, China (Starman 2013).

A document based research approach is taken. When analysing the European perspective, considering the less extensive academic debate as discussed in the previous chapter, it is mostly primary sources that are used. These sources include Council conclusions, policy documents from European institutions and governments and also speeches and remarks by key policy makers. These texts will be used as the premise behind the analysis that will be made throughout this dissertation and therefore a judgement on the source is made before it is incorporated in this dissertation. Smith identifies four criteria that are necessary when approaching a document: authenticity; credibility; representativeness; and meaning (Scott 2014). These are all considered throughout, especially in the second and third research questions. As Bryman suggests, caution is taken when handling documents from supposedly objective sources such as those derived from the state/institutions, however any detected biases are also interesting in their own right and are valuable for analysis (Bryman 2016).

Data of a quantitative nature is also at times used, such as for example the SIPRI statistics on military expenditure, this is useful to substantiate and prove what is found in policy documents, statements and literature in general. Where appropriate, particularly in the literature review, secondary sources were used. These sources mostly consisted of widely cited scholars in international relations and political science.

Limitations

Marsh and Stoker argue that document based research is bound to have an element of ‘selection bias’, this has however been somehow subdued due to the advent of vast online repositories that are well indexed (Marsh and Stoker 1995). However, in practice, due to the fact that only texts in English were considered, a mostly western perspective was taken. When it comes to incorporating for example a Chinese, German or French perspective, only texts that were available in English were considered.

This study is also limited due to having no access to any classified documents of relevance, including for example Council meetings minutes, that might shine more light on the perspectives of EU Member States and other actors.

Bryman criticises qualitative research as being too subjective, even the narrowing of the research questions themselves imply a preference, this sort of research is also difficult to replicate and confirm (Marsh and Stoker 1995). In case studies it is also difficult to establish cause-effect connections and it is hard to generalise, therefore any conclusions must be considered solely on the basis of this particular context and no further inferences are made (Queirós et al. 2017).

Due to limitations in time and length, the scope of this dissertation has been limited to the response of the EU to major shifts in US foreign policy in light of China’s rise to superpower status primarily in the area of security and defence. To this effect, the dissertation tackles the fundamental salient points within the specified context and is not to be considered as a comprehensive overview of transatlantic relations.

Conclusion

Through a qualitative desk-based research, this dissertation aims to characterise the transatlantic relationship within a broader geopolitical context. Despite the already discussed limitations, this study gives an insight into the interconnected

interests of the EU and the US whilst also highlighting the divergences and internal conflicts as they react to the rise of China to superpower status. Overall, the chosen research method proved to be sufficient to answer the research questions and reach the objectives of this study.

Chapter 4

Trends in Transatlantic Relations

Introduction

The transatlantic partnership between the US and European states has been of great importance to both sides of the Atlantic since the end of World War II. In fact, cooperation started off with the Marshall Plan that reconstructed Europe's economy and infrastructure. This set the foundation for the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), now referred to as the OECD. Stirred by the Berlin blockade, eventually in 1949, NATO was set-up. Through this alliance, the US guaranteed Europe's safety from Soviet aggression for decades. Yet, even then, disagreements came along, with issues such as the re-armament of Germany and de Gaulle's vision of a more autonomous and independent Europe leading to French withdrawal from NATO's centralised command (Green Cowles Egan, 2016).

The influence of the US over the European project is substantial and multifaceted. There are primarily two sources of influence, firstly, the composition and institutions of the American federal state were an inspiration to the European founding fathers such as Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. Secondly, the European project, especially from a Franco-Gaullist perspective is seen in some elements of the European political class as a possible 'third force' in international relations world wide (Smith and Steffenson 2017). The EU's intimate and historical relationship with the US means that the US conditions much of its effectiveness on the global stage. Yet this subordination, as will be discussed below, will not necessarily remain the status quo for years to come. The Obama and Trump administrations despite having contrasting characteristics, both in their own way had a policy of restraint when it comes to Europe.

This is not the first time, that the possibility of the demise of transatlanticism has been discussed, and yet following every single setback and divergence the partnership persisted. The upending of the current world order, especially since the financial crisis of 2008/9, will prove to be another challenge that is profoundly affecting the political dynamics across the Atlantic.

Obama’s frustrations with Europe

At the start of the period being investigated in this dissertation, transatlantic relations had been going adrift for the best part of President Bush’s two terms especially following the rupture caused by the Iraq war (Duke 2016). In the run-up to the 2007 Presidential election in the United States, Europe went through what some have referred to as *Obamamania*, which is peculiar when considering that then Senator Obama, in his campaign barely mentioned Europe prior to a highly touted Berlin Speech (Nielsen, 2013). Obama although open to the contribution of multilateral institutions, joined the pantheon of American Presidents who insist on American exceptionalism and find international norms and institutions as constraints. In fact in a 2012 debate, Obama stated “America remains firmly the one indispensable nation, and the world needs a strong America” (Nielsen, 2013). The Obama Administration also had realist tendencies, its reset policy towards Russia in the Medvedev years and the engagement with India, China and Brazil, can be interpreted as an element of American re-engagement with great powers (Nielsen, 2013). Despite being warmer to multilateral solutions, President Obama repeatedly expressed his dissatisfaction with NATO’s and the EU’s productivity and results when it came to safeguarding common interests (Peterson, 2018).

President Obama also famously snubbed the EU-US summit in Madrid and had expressed frustration towards Brussels’ tendency for frequent summitry, reportedly being unimpressed with the lack of results from the 2009 Prague summit (MacAskill and Watt 2010). The Obama White House’s concern with excessive ceremony had some truth to it as these summits had a reputation of being relatively unproductive, with a stronger emphasis on protocol rather than productivity (Politico 2016). The complex institutional architecture was also considered by the Obama administration as a barrier in enhancing EU-US relations. Obama retrospectively refers to “the unresolved contradictions at the heart of Europe’s decades-long march towards greater integration” as a challenge (Obama 2020). This lack of enthusiasm towards European summits contrasts with his persistent presence in the ASEAN summit and his inaugural visit to the East-Asian summit. Obama, who styled himself as

America’s “first Pacific President” also hosted the first ASEAN summit in the United States (Obama 2009a).

The Obama administration in 2011 sought to reduce its military’s permanent presence in Europe and in fact announced a reduction in the numbers of brigades to three, down from four (Dombey 2011). The calculus behind this decision changed later on in his second term when Russian aggression in Europe particularly following the annexation of Crimea led to a decision in 2016 to restore the previous troop cuts (Ackerman 2016). However, the first decision still signals a general trend to reduce American commitment in Europe. This move was in fact regarded at the time as congruent with Obama’s general policy that aims to make sure that Europeans take greater responsibility for their regional security and it is only when great-power politics were involved that this decision was rescinded. The decision encompasses the *modus operandi* of the Obama administration - promote European responsibility whilst still recognising that the US continues to play a role in ensuring European security (Dombey 2011).

As argued in the previous chapter, the US in the 21st century came to an understanding that Europe is no longer a security priority as it was during the Cold War (Shapiro and Witney 2009). President Obama, in his first visit to France in a press conference with President Sarkozy insisted that “[w]e’re not looking to be the patron of Europe. We’re looking to be partners with Europe” (Obama 2009b). The Department of Defence Report “Sustaining US Global Leadership Priorities for the 21st Century”, emphasises the shift in priority for the United States:

“The United States has enduring interests in supporting peace and prosperity in Europe as well as bolstering the strength and vitality of NATO, which is critical to the security of Europe and beyond. Most European countries are now producers of security rather than consumers of it. Combined with the drawdown in Iraq and Afghanistan, this has created a strategic opportunity to rebalance the U.S. military investment in Europe, moving from a focus on current conflicts toward a focus on future capabilities. In keeping with this evolving strategic landscape, our posture in Europe must also evolve” (Department of Defense 2012).

This ‘strategic opportunity to re-balance’ makes clear that Europe should expect a smaller American presence within its borders, this is further exacerbated by the fact that the US was winding down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan where European bases were used as intermediaries.

US influence in Europe when it comes to security and defense has many times been projected through NATO. The relationship between NATO and the EU has been sometimes somewhat uneasy and historically both organisations have had difficulties in establishing effective cooperation (Mix 2013). When it comes to security and defence, the US has always been adamant with Europeans that there should be a strict division of labour between NATO and the EU. In fact, following the signing of the St. Malo Franco-British declaration that established what is now known as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright insisted on the three ‘Ds’, that is “no diminution of NATO, no discrimination and no duplication” (Albright 1998). US Policy has evolved since the 1990s, especially following two burgeoning simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The first signs of a shift were apparent in 2008, when in the twilight days of the Bush administration, then US NATO Ambassador Victoria Nuland called for a Europe “that is as strong and united as possible, ready and willing to bear its full measure of responsibility for defending our common security and advancing our shared values” (Nuland 2008).

This increase in US tolerance for a role for the EU in defence peaked during the Obama administration. As a matter of fact, the 2015 US National Security Strategy commits to deepening its relationship with the EU in areas related to security and enhancing EU-NATO ties (The Obama White House 2015). As a general rule, the Obama administration consistently sought to increase the delegation of tasks in its foreign policy, especially in Europe (Duke 2016). Furthermore, the Obama administration has welcomed on multiple occasions further European integration including in defence and endorsed the Lisbon Treaty by stating “I believe that a strengthened and renewed EU will be an even better transatlantic partner with the United States” (The Telegraph 2009). Secretary Clinton went a step further and remarked that “we will look back on the Lisbon Treaty and the maturation of the EU that it represents as a major milestone in our world’s history” (Clinton 2010).

The US under the Obama administration has come to recognise that the CSDP may be a meaningful way to help build European capabilities (Mix 2013). NATO has sought to cooperate with the EU in security and defence through what it termed as ‘smart defence’. Through this concept, NATO encourages its members to cooperate in pooling and sharing capabilities to ensure that the alliance has the required military capacities (NATO 2012). The emphasis on smart defence, that after all mostly refers to collaboration between NATO’s European members, can also be interpreted as a desire by the US to withdraw from the front-lines of

managing the international crises, particularly in Europe’s neighbourhood as it pursues its interests in the Asia-Pacific (Bogzeanu et al. 2012).

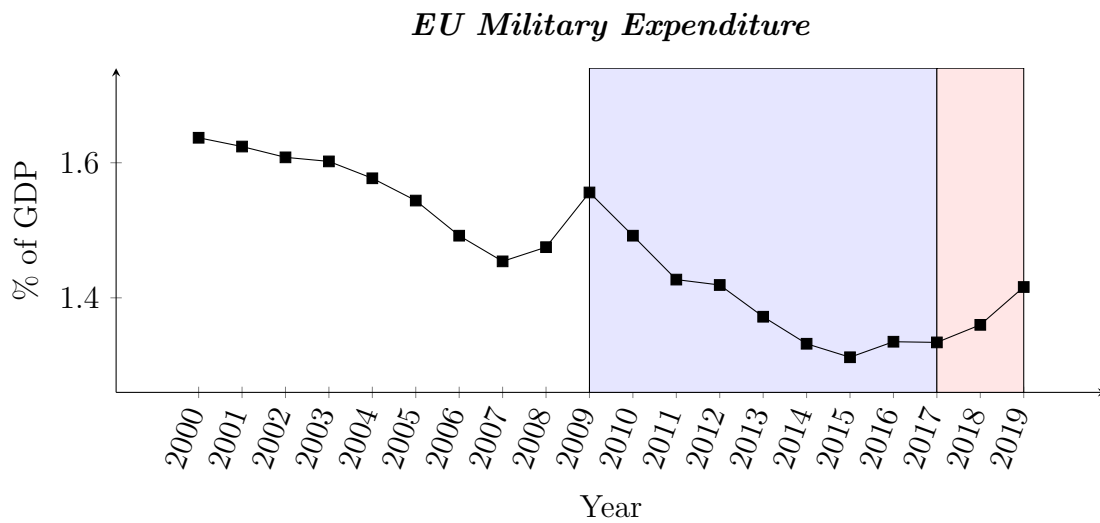


FIGURE 4.1: EU military expenditure as a % of GDP from 2000 to 2019 (SIPRI 2020)

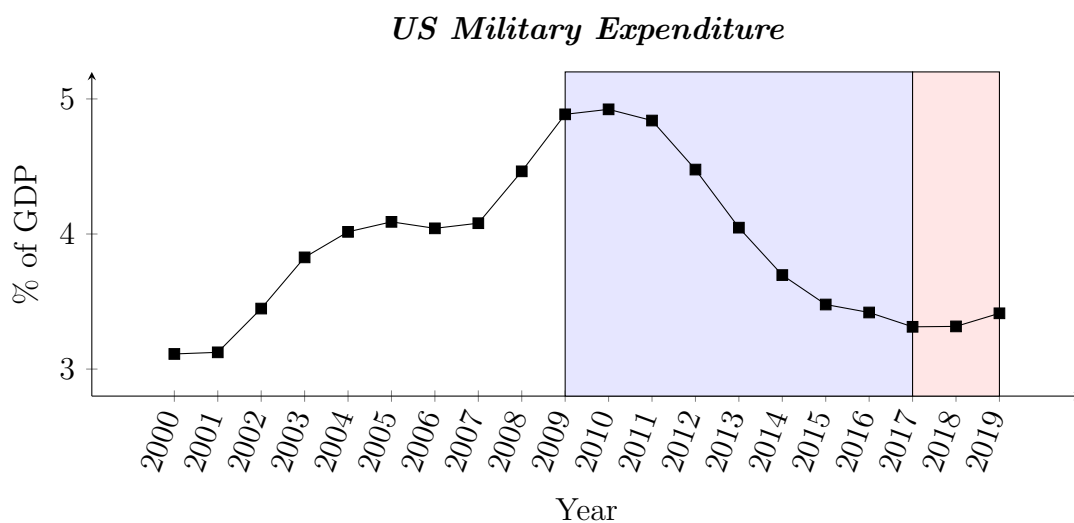


FIGURE 4.2: US military expenditure as a % of GDP from 2000 to 2019 (SIPRI 2020)

In the November 2013 Council Conclusions there also seems to be recognition amongst Member States that more must be done in defence cooperation to compensate for new realities of financial austerity, in fact:

“The Council underlines that a more systematic and longer-term approach to European defence cooperation has become essential to preserve and develop military capabilities, as well as the technological and

industrial base that underpins them, especially in the context of today’s financial austerity” (Council of the EU 2013).

As can be seen in Figure 4.1, the EU’s military expenditure following the 2009 financial crisis underwent significant cuts and it was only towards the end of the Obama administration that this trend was starting to be reversed.¹ This is empirical evidence that Europeans have indeed reduced their commitment to their own defence.

Figure 4.2 in turn shows the drastic reductions of the Obama administration in US defence spending as it sought to return spending levels to more reasonable levels. Defence spending cuts together with the already discussed re-orientation of its strategy, focusing on the Asia-Pacific, exacerbated by a clear hesitancy in Europe to do its part, were bound to generate frustrations.

This frustration was clear when outgoing Secretary of Defence Robert Gates in June 2011 in his farewell speech to NATO gave a blistering assessment of the where the transatlantic relationship was heading. Here Gates, insisted on how the defense engagement and investment of the US is set to increase in Asia whilst highlighting the waning domestic political support for the continued propping up of European defence.

“With respect to Europe... [t]he blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress – and in the American body politic writ large – to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense” (Gates 2011).

The EU during the Obama administration faced its inadequacy in addressing even those objectives that Member States had set out in its 2003 European Security Strategy, where regional security in its neighbourhood is one its core objectives (SG/HR 2003). HRVP Catherine Ashton when presenting the EU’s strategic overview of the US to Council recognised that the EU and its Member States must do more to be “an efficient and reliable partner” so that “the US takes us seriously” (Duke 2016).

It is therefore clear that as the US during the Obama administration underwent a strategic shift in its priorities towards Asia it adjusted the transatlantic partnership

¹The region marked in blue denotes the Obama administration, the one in red denotes the Trump administration.

in a way that encourages a new era of European self confidence. At first glance one could come to the conclusion that Europe’s reaction to this was rather muted, however one has to consider that the first four years since the signing of the Lisbon Treaty were occupied with the Union establishing its own institutional tools that the Treaty provided for, this includes the European External Action Service (Duke 2016). There were however internal pressures within the EU to extend Europe’s role in its own defence. In fact, the European Council Summit of December 2013 saw European leaders discuss the ‘hard power’ aspects of CSDP for the first time in five years (Council of the EU 2013),

In 2013 HR/VP Baroness Catherine Ashton in preparation to this same December 2013 summit, published a report that sought to reform and strengthen the CSDP. Here Ashton argued that:

“Europe’s strategic environment today is marked by increased regional and global volatility, emerging security challenges, *the US rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific* and the impact of the financial crisis” (Ashton 2013, emphasis added).

In this report Baroness Ashton, whilst insisting that the “transatlantic relationship is still essential”, recognises the American pivot to Asia as a motivation for reform of the CSDP and as an opportunity to ensure that Europe has the capabilities required to act decisively.

The Military Intervention in Libya

The 2011 military intervention in Libya was the first instance of the Obama doctrine in practice (Howorth 2014). This conflict was deemed to be a European affair in Europe’s backyard and therefore did not merit the leadership of the United States. The approach taken with the Libyan conflict constituted a stark shift from the transatlantic arrangements of the past within a context of different international priorities for the United States. Here the US made clear that whilst its commitments to ‘wars of necessity’ remain, so called ‘wars of choice’ in Europe or its backyard will be a European responsibility (Hallams and Schreer 2012).

In this operation, the Americans sought to ‘lead from behind’ (Lizza 2011), with a State Department official describing the intended role of the US when joining as ‘not allowing the operation to fail’ through a military backup and the provision of niche weapons (Valasek 2011).

US officials at the time also saw the intervention in Libya as proof of the waning commitment of the transatlantic alliance that is also too dependent on the US. Secretary Gates commented that “[t]he mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country – yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions” (Gates 2011). There were also complaints by officials in the US that members of NATO were taking an *à la carte* approach to the alliance, with a number of them choosing to not participate in the campaign (Valasek 2011).

Simón argues that what should have been a European intervention with US support ended up practically being an operation led by the US with European support (Simón 2015b). In fact, the US flew the vast majority of the aerial tankers needed to sustain 100 sorties a day and supplied the coalition with its precision-guided munitions (Simón 2015b). In fact Gates criticises European capabilities, claiming that “[t]he most advanced fighter aircraft are little use if allies do not have the means to identify, process and strike targets as part of an integrated campaign” (Gates 2011).

During the conflict, the EU also faced a lack of internal consensus on whether or not to intervene in Libya, with France and the UK leading on intervention both within the EU and the UN Security Council and Germany choosing to abstain in the UN Security Council resolution. The German abstention must be considered beyond the Libya issue, even during their two-year tenure in the UN Security Council, the Germans continued to express hesitancy to commit to greater leadership when it comes to military engagements despite broad European support including from the UK and France (Miskimmon 2012).

Germany’s reservations resulted in an irrelevant EU during the conflict despite the CFSP and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Bucher et al. 2013). An EU diplomat, in the aftermath of the Libyan conflict remarked that Libya proved that the EU was ill-equipped to handle such situations, it would have taken Brussels months of preparation instead of the available few days and, that “[t]he CFSP died in Libya, we just have to pick a sand dune under which we can bury it” (Benitez 2011).

Overall, from the Libyan intervention it is evident, that while the US is not leaving Europe behind, Europe is a region of lesser importance and strategic priority in this newly emerging world order (Nicoll 2011). This campaign also took place within a context of significant budget pressures on the military by the Obama administration, a fiscal consequence of the Great Recession. It therefore became

much harder for US policy makers to justify the underwriting of European security to the same degree as before. (Nicoll 2011)

NATO's cohesion was challenged by this conflict yet the alliance still managed to function, the EU on the other hand proved to be gravely ill-equipped and incoherent to handle these sort of crises (Koenig 2011). The EU in this conflict suffered not only from discrepancies in the positions of Member States but also between the different 'voices' within the EU's institutions, in fact HRVP Catherine Ashton and European Council President Herman von Rompuy in their diverging statements on Libya proved that in the transatlantic relationship, NATO still 'prepares dinner' and the EU 'washes the dishes' (Koenig 2011).

The Libyan revolution was the sort of regional crisis that the CSDP was designed for, it was militarily straight forward and of a relatively small scale (Howorth 2013). The fact that EU Member States were ill-equipped, the CSDP was of no use and the EU lacked institutional coherence were a clear sign that the EU had by then not reacted properly to a changing world. Libya was also evidence that the American security guarantee in Europe was now no longer unconditional and that the transatlantic relationship had indeed evolved.

The EU Global Strategy

In 2016, following Brexit and the rise of populist sentiments in Europe and the US, the EU Global Strategy was launched. This was the first comprehensive EU response to the new world order discussed previously. The EUGS is in some ways also a product of a transatlantic relationship that has changed, it is Europe's reckoning with a new multipolar world that demands a foreign and security policy that is no longer as dependent on the US. The strategy aspires to have a Europe that is able to influence its neighbourhood for its own security and it marks a more mature EU that has grown from the days where it could, under the guise of American hard power, espouse an optimistic and normative agenda on the world stage.

A principal theme within the document is the concept of *strategic autonomy*, this is one of the most discussed aspects of the EUGS. Strategic autonomy did not make its debut in the EUGS and has been a part of EU jargon since at least the 2013 Council Conclusions on Common Security and Defence Policy. The St. Malo declaration in 1999 also made references to 'decision-making' autonomy. The explicit mention of strategic autonomy as an outright objective of the Union marks

a significant shift in what is considered the norm in European institutions and is an important step in the evolution of European strategic thinking (Biscop 2019).

The EUGS recognises that individually Member States do not have sufficient resources to protect their citizens effectively or to act in their own interests within their neighbourhood as seen in Libya. However it also recognises that there is hidden potential in collaboration and sharing of resources, this is especially important when considering that Europeans can no longer take the external guarantor of their security for granted (Tocci 2017). It is argued that whilst European Member States spend in total around half of the US defence budget, they do not have half the capabilities of the US due to fragmentation that results in costly duplication and gaping holes in resources (Tocci 2017).

The EUGS makes clear that Europeans aspire to act autonomously. The strategy also insists that a more capable Europe is a requirement that is also expected by the US and is a core component of the transatlantic partnership. In fact, the EUGS highlights how:

“European security and defence efforts should enable the EU to act autonomously while also contributing to and undertaking actions in cooperation with NATO. A more credible European defence is essential also for the sake of a healthy transatlantic partnership with the United States” (HR/VP 2016).

The above quote is perhaps the clearest indication of the Obama administration’s relative success in getting Europeans to recognise that they must also do their part. In the US, the reaction in the security and defence establishment has been somewhat negative, viewing this move as an attempt to undermine NATO (Biscop 2019). However, over all, the debate in the US is incoherent and narrow, this is a niche area that Americans do not particularly tend to follow, concerns usually revolve around NATO and the ability of the US defence industry to compete in Europe (Thompson 2019).

Donald Trump’s unconventional world view

The election of Donald Trump undoubtedly shocked many across the world, including in Europe. Trump’s foreign policy is unconventional yet at the same time he accentuated certain American impulses. This can be seen in his rhetoric and policy on China. President Trump consistently and persistently attacked China on its trade policies and deployed a much more confrontational approach to Beijing.

At the core of Trump’s policies there is a transactional component, dismissing multilateral solutions and instead opting for primitive tit-for-tat where trade deficits and US military expenditure are not perceived as influence and power projection but rather as a burdensome and unnecessary expense. This differs from the Obama administration’s grander strategies of a ‘pivot to Asia’. At the same time when it comes to Europe, there is a continuation if not an exacerbation of the region’s reducing relevance. The suspicions in Europe about the American commitment to European security were confirmed by Trump’s approach and rhetoric. The collapse of TPIP negotiations in 2019 that had been faltering since the Obama administration, are also another example of the significant divergences that exist on both sides of the Atlantic ([Council of the EU 2019a](#)).

It is true that the Trump administration shied away from other multilateral initiatives including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement that was intended for the US to be able to shape trade in Asia before the Chinese ([Holland and Rascoe 2017](#)), yet this does not paint the full picture. The 2017 National Security Strategy of the Trump administration describes the Indo-Pacific as the theatre where “[a] geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place” and in fact gives the impression that this region is now of greater strategic importance to the US than Europe or the Middle East ([The Trump White House 2017](#)). In its 2018 National Defense Strategy, the Trump White House re-iterates that “European allies are to fulfill their commitments to increase defense and modernization spending to bolster the alliance in the face of our shared security concerns” ([Department of Defense 2018](#)). It is therefore clear that despite changes in style, the Trump and Obama administrations had more in common when it came to the substance of their foreign policy and their world view than one might think at first glance.

Then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in a 2017 address reiterated the American policy that had started to set-off in the Obama years that after all China is indeed a rival of the US:

“China’s provocative actions in the South China Sea directly challenge the international law and norms that the United States and India both stand for. The United States seeks constructive relations with China, but we will not shrink from China’s challenges to the rules-based order and where China subverts the sovereignty of neighboring countries and disadvantages the U.S. and our friends” ([Tillerson 2017](#)).

This quote by Tillerson is evidence that the Trump administration is recognising that we are once more living in a world of spheres of influence, this time centered in Asia rather than Europe, where the US is bound to protect its allies in the region in light of perceived increased Chinese aggression. This antagonism was further expressed in a speech addressing the Trump administration’s China policy by Vice-President Mike Pence where he repudiated China’s behaviour and condemned Chinese interference in other states (Pence 2018). The Trump version of the ‘pivot to Asia’ is the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) agenda, where the Indo-Pacific region is considered as a key area that determines the future of American prosperity and security (Heiduk and Wacker 2020).

Therefore the previous logic applied by the Obama administration, that as the US re-balances its priorities towards Asia, Europe will no longer continue to have the same strategic priority, in a way remains valid during the Trump years. In the long term, with the exception of recent maneuvers as a reaction to Russian aggression, Europe no longer remains a major security concern as it traditional was for the US. In fact, the Trump administration rather than trying to engage with Europeans to thoroughly address the rise of China, sought a unilateral approach whilst starting trade disputes with Europeans, risking further alienation (Fly 2018). US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper at the Munich Security Conference, referring to this rising reality of multiple spheres of influence, called on US allies to make a choice between the United States and China (Esper 2020). Addressing Europeans on their engagement with China economically, especially in light of decision related to the use of Chinese equipment for 5G telephony, Esper stated that “[t]he reality of the 21st century is that many economic decisions are also national security decisions” (Esper 2020). In fact, the EU has increasingly been at odds with the US regarding the access of Chinese companies such as Huawei in European markets. Moreover, French, Dutch and German leaders have shied away from trade disputes with China despite US pressures (Deutsche Welle 2019).

Europe’s reckoning with a new world order

Almost since the end of World War II, there has been an ongoing debate as to what extent are Europeans to be given the faculty to defend themselves independently of the US and NATO (Puglierin 2021). Despite changing circumstances, the US remains the most important security partner for Europe and this is widely recognised by all Member States.

It is unjust to conclude that the EU and its Member States during the Obama and Trump administrations did not recognise their inadequacy when it comes to security and defence. One has to consider that 2009 saw the ratification of the ground breaking Lisbon Treaty that reformed the EU drastically, building the institutions and norms required time and a period of transition. The innovations of Lisbon when it comes to external action started bearing fruit during the Juncker Commission. The EU's room for maneuver in security and defence also benefited from the departure of the UK, a former Member State, that has traditionally always been a stalwart of NATO and persistently resisted attempts by the EU to delve too deeply into security and defence (Mills 2019). In fact the Bratislava Declaration, that was signed following the Brexit referendum includes security and defence as an area that the EU should strengthen and serve as a forum for cooperation (European Council 2016).

The French government, in its published review of national defence in a document titled 'Defence and National Security Strategy', insists on further European and French autonomy, the strategy argues that this is necessary in light of *inter alia* the emerging multipolarity and the surfacing of new international rivalries - a clear allusion to China's rise and the repercussions that this brings vis-a-vis the US (Gougeon et al. 2017). The Strategy also mentions the US's predisposition to resort to unilateral action and its uneasiness with multilateral institutions and instruments such as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban-Treaty as another reason why France and the EU should be having a more direct role in upholding the current international order and its norms (Gougeon et al. 2017). The French committed to furthering European strategic autonomy as "Europeans are finding themselves slightly more alone than in the past" (Gougeon et al. 2017).

The German Federal Government in its 'White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr' also recognises that the international system is moving towards a new multipolar era and the "global distribution of power is... shifting within the international community" with the rise of China being identified as one major example of this phenomenon (Federal Government of Germany 2016). In contrast to the French perspective, the German White Paper emphasises and promotes EU cohesion with NATO, with no particular emphasis on EU strategic autonomy, however it commits to a long term goal of a European Security and Defence Union (Federal Government of Germany 2016). At the same time, the paper recognises that "[t]he transatlantic security partnership will grow

closer and become more productive the more we Europeans are prepared to shoulder a larger share of the common burden” (Federal Government of Germany 2016).

The European defence industry also has significant structural flaws that need to be addressed before Europeans can hope to have feasible defence capabilities. Currently European countries have 178 distinct weapon systems, an untenable number when considering that the US has just 30 (Camporini et al. 2017). This fragmentation has its consequences, in fact when considering the top 10 arms companies in the world, the US accounts for 7 of them, the average US firm is also 35% larger than its competitor in Europe (Hartley 2017). This means that any attempt to make Europe more capable in defending itself had to be accompanied by an attempt to reform the industry supporting it.

The US is aware of its competitive advantage in the defence industry and in fact Europe’s venture towards streamlining has been met with concern. The US expressed concern about the activation of PESCO and the possibility of having US manufacturers being left out of European projects, in fact US officials insisted that non-EU countries should be allowed to participate in “a European defence pact” (Gotev 2018). NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also expressed concern in the 2018 Munich Security Conference by stating that certain European defence initiatives, while welcome run “[t]he risk of weakening the transatlantic bond, the risk of duplicating what NATO is already doing and the risk of discriminating against non-EU members of the NATO Alliance” (Stoltenberg 2018).

Trump in many ways has emboldened the EU to find its foreign policy identity and has rekindled the aspiration for it to become a full blown actor on the world stage (Hornát et al. 2019). In fact, in a NATO summit in 2018, President Trump insisted with other NATO members that should there not be an increase in their defence spending, US membership in NATO, and therefore its guaranteed protection are in doubt (Herszenhorn and Bayer 2018). Trump is reported to have seriously discussed pulling the US out of NATO within his administration (Barnes and Cooper 2019). This lackluster commitment to Europe’s security, unprecedented in transatlantic relations since World War II, sent shock waves across European capitals and this further emboldened Member States insisting on strategic autonomy.

President Juncker in his 2016 State of the Union address emphasised that Europeans “need to toughen up” especially when it comes to defence policy (Juncker 2016). The Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) of November 2016, also committed to “strengthening the Union’s ability to act as a security provider and to enhance the

Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as an essential part of the Union’s external action” with the target of having the EU able to have a global strategic role and act *autonomously* (Foreign Affairs Council 2016). Donald Trump’s election had a direct effect on the EU and instilled in its institutions and Member States a sense of self-determination.

Trump made clear to Europe and the rest of the world that the United States is willing to retreat to its borders, the choice of the American people was an expression of their desire to bring back a time where two friendly neighbours in the north and south and being in between two vast oceans meant that the US is a safe haven far off from the world’s problems. President Trump is the first American president since the start of the American world order to disregard the belief that the preservation of European unity is an endeavour worth pursuing (Shapiro and Pardijs 2017). Trump did not only reject core principles of the EU’s member states’ foreign policy but also its very format and structure. In fact in his 2018 UN speech to the General Assembly, he noted “America will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control, and domination” (Trump 2018). In 2018, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas argued that “[t]he European Union must become a cornerstone of the international order, a partner for all those who are committed to it” and that he foresees a role for the EU to “...form a counterweight when the US crosses the line. Where we put our weight when America retreats” (Maas 2018).

In November 2016, weeks after the US presidential election, the Commission presented the European Defence Action Plan (EDAP). Here the Commission played to the EU’s strengths and sought to make use of the internal market, where the EU has the bureaucracy and experience in managing, to implement a European Defence Fund (EDF). These changes, whilst they might be considered of limited influence at this stage, have the potential to upend the transatlantic partnership. The EU is taking its first steps towards true strategic autonomy.

Despite concerning rhetoric, not all is bleak. It is true that Donald Trump has harmed the transatlantic partnership and has caused trust issues between the two sides of the Atlantic, however during his term, the transatlantic partnership remained and when necessary the US still continued to support Europe, especially in light of increased Russian aggression. In fact, the Trump administration in 2018 increased the funds allocated to the European Reassurance Initiative by 41% (Shapiro and Pardijs 2017). Even in foreign policy, US response and support does not solely depend on the presidency, for example, new sanctions on Russia passed

through the US Congress comfortably despite objections from Trump ([Zengerle 2019](#)).

Conclusion

Overall, the trajectory in transatlantic relations is clear, the US throughout both the Obama and Trump administrations has shown that its strategic priority from a geopolitical perspective is in Asia. This has been noticed in Europe and has led to increased activity within the EU to venture forth with the so called *strategic autonomy*. This is primarily seen through its ‘global strategy’ and also through the launch of a European Defence Union by the Juncker Commission and the activation of PESCO. The intervention in Libya showed the first signs of the US ‘leading from behind’, with an ad hoc European group of countries taking the lead, however Libya also exposed the inadequacy of the EU’s CSDP and Member States’ lack of sufficient capabilities. Throughout both the Obama and Trump administrations there has been a repeated call for an increase in European budgets on defence especially amongst NATO members, many of whom have failed to reach the agreed-on 2% target.

Despite the US’s enthusiasm for greater participation by Europeans in their own security and defence, there has been mixed-feelings about having the EU playing a larger role in this area. Fears in Washington stem around the possibility of NATO duplication and the possibility of having American arms manufacturers being left out of European procurement procedures.

In the 1970s, Henry Kissinger, classified the then European Community as a regional and civilian power; 50 years on, this remains the case. As seen in Libya, the EU has a significant credibility issue when it comes to having the world perceive it as a serious and effective player in security and defence. The famous rhetorical question “[w]ho do I call if I want to speak to Europe?”, often attributed to Kissinger, remains till this very day at the core of the American political establishment’s psyche when it comes to engaging with the EU in issues of foreign policy and security. The lack of a common position on certain key-issues means that as the US tries to engage with the EU on issues of foreign policy and defence, especially in a moment of need that requires a rapid response, the more pronounced the internal differences between Member States become.

The transatlantic troubles during the Trump presidency are evident and clear. Donald Trump’s disregard of multilateral solutions, his questioning of the *raison d’être* of NATO, outright attacks on the EU through his support for Brexit, and

the tough rhetoric towards European allies has had its toll on US-EU relations. However, when considering the initial European reaction to the election of Barack Obama as US President, the outcomes were in comparison to expectations muted and limited despite hope of a transatlantic renewal. This past decade has shown that the pattern of disengagement noticed during the Bush presidency is not a matter of style but rather a seemingly permanent strategic choice. This does not mean that the interests of the US and European countries no longer align, but rather that they are both recognising that in certain instances considering the significant differences in approach, European autonomy can be desirable.

Overall, the financial crisis can be considered as the point where American hegemony was dealt a great blow to its credibility. The repercussions of the crisis from budget limitations to the rise of populism in both the US and the EU are a historic turning point that set the trajectory for the US-EU alliance for the foreseeable future. Defence cuts by the Obama administration followed by the administration's policy of a 'pivot to Asia' can be regarded as the point where the US committed to reconsidering its role in Europe.

The Juncker Commission move towards having a European Defence Union and increasing talk of strategic autonomy has made clear that Europeans are indeed reckoning with a new world order, one where Europe will have to be ready to fend on its own.

Through disagreements and partnerships, the EU-US relationship is one full of contradictions. The EU's role worldwide is in many ways conditioned and enabled by the US due to the nature of America's position in the world. At the same time however, this reality in itself can be stifling and has made it harder for the EU to assert itself independently and autonomously.

Chapter 5

The EU's China Policy and Transatlantic Relations

Introduction

In previous chapters, the impact of the rise of China on the foreign policy priorities of the US and in turn on the evolution of the transatlantic partnership was discussed. This chapter will set out how this relationship is bidirectional and how US-EU relations have also influenced the EU's China policy.

The EU's policy towards the PRC necessitated further engagement in light of its rise to great power politics as described previously. This shift in the global balance of power is also recognised by the Chinese government, when in its 2019 white paper titled *China's National Defense in the New Era*, it recognised that:

“As the realignment of international powers accelerates and the strength of emerging markets and developing countries keeps growing, the configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced” (PRC State Council 2019).

An analysis on EU-China relations would be incomplete without considering the underlying emerging context of Sino-American rivalry that has the potential to set the course of the rest of the 21st century. As will be discussed below, the EU is not immune to the consequences both positive and negative that will result from this new reality. The aim of this chapter is not to fully characterise all aspects of the EU-China relationship but rather to attempt to frame this relationship within this context. In a world of geopolitical rivalry, the transatlantic relationship between the EU and the US also comes into play when the EU is dealing with China.

The period under investigation is also interesting due to two realities that the EU had to contend with sequentially, these being the Great Recession and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. The Great Recession left Europeans more open to accepting Chinese investment even in particularly sensitive sectors. On the other hand as discussed in the previous chapter, a Trump Presidency made Europeans strive for further autonomy, this was also an opportunity for Europe to assert itself more strongly on the world stage.

For the EU, relevance in the Asia-Pacific, including in China is seen as a necessary prerequisite to sustaining relevance in the transatlantic partnership. HR/VP Ashton in 2010 warned that there is a risk that US-EU relations dwindle if the EU does not tackle its ‘strategic weakness’ in the region ([Rettman 2010](#)).

The economic ties between China and Europe are immense and are of great importance for both sides. In fact, the EU in 2019 exported €363 billion in goods up from €245.4 in 2010 ([Eurostat 2021](#)). One has to also consider that there are vast disparities between the different Member States when it comes to their trade relationship with China. For example Germany, particularly with its high-end automotive industry, had a trade surplus in 2020 of €14 billion whilst France and Italy, despite both countries also having significant manufacturing industries had a trade deficit of €18.5 billion and €19.3 billion respectively ([Eurostat 2021](#)). Having these different voices and perspectives around the table undoubtedly make finding a common ground harder to achieve. Lehne argues that the EU has struggled to form a coherent policy towards China and this has allowed the Chinese to play to Europe’s weaknesses ([Lehne 2017](#)).

The economic dimension of the relationship is a core component that is required to understand the perspective of most Member States within the EU. A core issue that the EU has been trying to collectively tackle when it comes to China is the need for reciprocity, that is a relationship that is not one-way but benefits both sides, especially in an era where China with its closed markets rejects the need to recognise the responsibility that comes with economic growth ([Godement and Vasselier 2017](#)). This is an area where the EU can struggle since unlike the US, the institutional characteristics of the EU are such that the foreign policy and economic dimensions exist separately from each other.

In November 2013, the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation was launched, this was a concrete and genuine commitment to intensify cooperation based on three pillars: peace and security; prosperity and; sustainable development ([EEAS 2013](#)). Overall the agenda included 94 key initiatives, however despite a

series of meetings and statements there have been few tangible results ([Godement and Vasselier 2017](#)).

The strategic outlook coupled with the general approach taken with the EUGS, shows that Europe is slowly aligning with American sentiments and is taking a more realist perspective. The EU is recognising that it must now turn to realism, reject the illusion that it can somehow change China and instead focus on tackling the issues that are the direct interests of Europeans.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Europe

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive infrastructural project announced by President Xi in 2013 that is a clear sign of the PRC’s geopolitical ambitions. The project aims to make a vast number of infrastructural developments including railways, highways and pipelines from East Asia all the way to Eastern Europe ([Chatzky and McBride 2020](#)). In some ways the BRI is China’s retaliation to the American pivot to Asia through a massive economic outreach program.

The BRI has a number of implications including the locking of other countries into a Chinese sphere of influence through its technology and technical standards. These project also leave countries vulnerable to Chinese political pressure and allow state-owned Chinese companies to integrate themselves into their markets ([Hillman and Tippett 2021](#)).

The United States during the Obama administration initially reacted with cautious optimism towards the BRI, and President Obama in 2015 commented that Chinese capital in development projects in the Asia-Pacific region is a ‘positive’ ([Lawrence and Nelson 2015](#)). Then Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian affairs Nisha Desai Biswal further clarified the American position at the time that their “only stipulation is that trade should be inclusive, multi-directional, and rules-based” ([Biswal 2015](#)). During the Trump administration the US approach to the BRI became more confrontational and in August 2020 the US government sanctioned a number of state backed Chinese entities that participated in building and operating the BRI ([Sutter et al. 2021](#)).

The European Parliament in a 2015 resolution took note of the BRI and remarked that considering the ‘geostrategic’ relevance of the initiative, it should be tackled in a ‘multilateral way’ ([European Parliament 2015](#)). In the context of post great recession austerity, Chinese investment was seen by a number of European countries as a welcome boost. The EUGS state that the EU ‘will pursue a coherent approach to China’s connectivity drive westwards’ through, amongst others, the

EU-China Connectivity Platform (HR/VP 2016). This ‘platform’ mostly consists of an MoU signed between the Juncker Commission and China that aims to create synergies between China’s BRI and the EU’s Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). Through the platform, the Commission and the PRC also committed to pursue joint investments in the BRI, foreseeing also the possibility of joint-ventures beyond the EU’s borders (Ghiassy and Zhou 2017). This marks an approach by the EU that recognises the potential of the BRI for Europe’s growth and an attempt to influence the direction of China’s activity within European territory (Bormans 2019).

The BRI, despite prioritising the Asia-Pacific region, has a significant footprint in Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Two-thirds of EU Member States are formal partners to the BRI and the Chinese have funded projects across Europe from a port in Greece to energy sector investments in Portugal, going beyond the confines of Eastern Europe (Hillman and Tippett 2021). The BRI is even infiltrating Italy, a G7 member and one of Europe’s larger economies, this resulted in a significant rebuke from the US, with a spokesman for the White House’s national security advisers stating that there is ‘no need’ for Italy to legitimize China’s ‘vanity’ project (Balmer 2019). In 10 years from 2008 till 2018, the Chinese bought or invested in assets that exceed \$318 billion all over Europe, this massive investment that also includes critical infrastructure and strategically important high-tech companies has raised eyebrows in European capitals (Tartar et al. 2018).

The BRI is having an impact on EU cohesion and could have serious implications for the European project. The Chinese are identifying and targeting particularly vulnerable countries such as Italy and Greece that have been battered by years of austerity (Mohan 2018). This is now causing security concerns, with episodes such as that seen in 2017, where the Greek port of Piraeus, managed by PRC-owned China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), was visited by Chinese warships in a so-called ‘courtesy call’ (Mohan 2018). This when considered with Sino-Russian war games in the Baltic Sea, results in a sinister picture for European security. Following the war drills, a NATO official remarked that this was a clear sign of China’s increasing military capabilities and its emerging global role (Higgins 2017). The PRC is also investing in other sensitive infrastructure such as European power grids and energy supplies as can be seen in Greece, Portugal and Italy (Godement and Vasselier 2017).

The increase in Chinese investment in Europe, especially in sensitive sectors

as seen in the Chinese acquisition of German robot-maker Kuka ([Zalan 2017](#)), has generated momentum towards having the Commission involved in screening foreign investment in strategic sectors within the EU. The 2016 EU Strategy on China whilst welcoming Chinese investment in Europe called for “[t]he possibility of establishing a common minimum definition of what constitutes critical national infrastructure” ([European Commission 2016](#)). In October 2017, the Commission presented a proposal to the Council and the European Parliament that if approved gives the Commission the right to screen investments in sectors where it subsidises technology and in sensitive sectors ([Godement and Vasselier 2017](#)). This found significant resistance from Member States such as Portugal and Greece. This proposal was nevertheless implemented and became fully operational in October 2020 following the adoption of an FDI screening regulation in March 2019. Through the framework set-up by the regulation, the Commission and Member States now have a system through which they can coordinate screening effectively.

Analysts are concluding that Chinese investment in Europe is undermining European effectiveness when it comes to the projection of values. Countries such as Greece and Hungary are influencing the EU’s common position on issues such as the South China Sea and China’s human rights violations by watering down relevant statements. Greece in fact blocked an EU statement in the UN criticising China’s human rights violations, undermining the EU’s efforts to tackle the PRC’s oppression of activists and dissidents whilst Hungary made maneuvers to tone down the EU’s collective language ([Emmott and Koutantou 2017](#)).

The BRI risks drifting the United States and Europe away from each other, since EU economic interdependence with Asia could reduce the relevance of the transatlantic partnership ([Ghiasi and Zhou 2017](#)). The different approaches being taken by the United States and Europe also stem from the fact that both have different roles in the initiative, whilst the US is not involved in the infrastructural projects, Europe is the end point and destination of the BRI. European countries are also eligible for loans and investments from the Chinese.

A Europe that is dependent on Chinese capital to fund its infrastructure can weaken transatlantic relations and the West’s collective response to China since views will be more difficult to align ([Hillman and Tippett 2021](#)). Overall the BRI, especially during the Trump years, shows the contrast in approach between the US and Europe to China, whilst the Americans are in a direct hard-line confrontation with the PRC, Europeans generally, are more inclined to take a pragmatic approach whilst recognising the potential problems that the BRI might bring ([Brattberg](#)

and Soula 2018). Europe’s engagement with the BRI especially when it comes to Eastern and Southern Europe is evidence that both sides of the Atlantic have a different view on how to engage within a new multi-polar world.

The EU Arms Embargo on China

An arms embargo was imposed on China by the US and the EU following the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. The exact interpretation of this embargo varies between Member States and the agreement is non-binding. In fact in 1989, the ‘Declaration on China’ annexed to the June 1989 Council Conclusions did not define what the embargo constitutes and Member States had no common position on what is covered (European Council 1989). For the Chinese, Europe’s arms embargo does not only pose a practical limitation but also a symbolic indignity. In fact, in a 2012 EU-China Summit, Chinese premier Wen Jinbao chose to make a strong emphasis on this issue (Gardner 2014).

The EU’s attitude towards the embargo is highly influenced by the US, in fact the US has heavily lobbied the EU throughout the years to maintain this embargo in place. The arms embargo has in some ways become more of a transatlantic issue rather than a Sino-European one. In 2004, which was the last instance where this issue was seriously discussed, it was American pressure,¹ that ensured that the embargo is not lifted when Gaullist French President Jacques Chirac was leading the way in having the EU lifting the embargo (Charlemagne 2010).

Then HR/VP Catherine Ashton is reported to have recommended the dropping of the arms embargo in 2010 and considered it as a ‘major impediment for developing EU-China relations’ (Rettman 2010). In 2010, the Spanish considered opening the question on the embargo again during their Council presidency, this was met with a muted response from Member States and was not pursued further (Oklestkova and Bondiguel 2010).

US officials have always maintained that as long as there is insufficient progress when it comes human rights and democracy in China, the arms embargo should stay in place. This American conviction was also hardened by the increasing Chinese aggression in the Pacific. In an interview, US Assistant Secretary within

¹US pressure took various forms, some initiatives included the US Congress. In May 2004, the US House of Representatives passed H.R. 1815, the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2006 (H.R. 1815) that imposes procurement sanctions on any foreign person that transfers military items to China, this would have barred the Pentagon from purchasing from the EU defence industry should the embargo be lifted. In this case the House ‘receded in its language’ in negotiations with the Senate (Archick et al. 2005).

the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Gordon insisted that “given that the United States is primarily responsible for maintaining security in Asia, I don’t think [lifting the arms embargo] would be welcomed in Washington or understood in Washington or across the United States as a whole if Europe were to lift the embargo at a time of military challenges and tensions in Asia” (Gordon 2011).

Nevertheless the EU still engages with China within the military sphere. Despite the embargo, there is still marginal trade in defence exports between the EU and China since the embargo allows the European defence industry to maintain contracts that were in effect prior to 1989, this has however been deemed by American observers as insignificant in modernising the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) (Sumbaum 2012).

The arms embargo and the transatlantic quarrels over it are a clear sign of the differences between the US and the EU in their perception of China. The instinct of the EU’s 27 member states tends to be to look at their national interests and it is not within the foreign policy culture of most of them to delve into geopolitical deliberations.

Climate

The Trump administration’s decision on June 1st 2017 on the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, led to a vacuum in world leadership when it comes to climate action. The Chinese took the opportunity to take a moral high ground vis-a-vis the US and in fact in his address to the World Economic Forum in Davos, President Xi said that when it comes to the Paris Accord “all signatories should stick to [the Paris agreement] instead of walking away from it, as this is a responsibility we must assume for future generations” (Shankleman 2017).

By 2017, the EU and China had been attempting to collaborate on climate for over a decade, starting with the ‘EU and China Partnership on Climate Change in 2005’ that set-up a high-level political framework for dialogue and cooperation (EU, PRC 2005). This also coincides with a time where due to the reducing price of renewable energy, economic growth and emissions are decoupling, for years in a row the global economy is growing whilst emissions are not rising (Deese 2017). Therefore China no longer has to make a compromise between its economic prosperity and its responsibility towards the environment.

The day after the announcement by President Trump which coincided with the EU-China summit in Brussels, Council President Tusk made clear that:

“[t]oday, we are stepping up our cooperation on climate change with China. Which means that today, China and Europe have demonstrated solidarity with future generations and responsibility for the whole planet. We are convinced that yesterday’s decision by the United States to leave the Paris Agreement is a big mistake...” (Tusk 2017).

This commitment was further emphasised in a subsequent 2018 EU-China summit in Beijing where in the Leaders’ Statement, the EU and China commit to implementing the Paris Accord (EU, PRC 2018). During this summit, both parties also agreed on an MoU on enhanced cooperation in emissions trading.

This does not mean however that the EU and China due to US disengagement on climate during the Trump administration stopped having disagreements on environmental issues. Europeans have repeatedly called on the PRC to halt the commissioning of more coal fired power stations and considers this as undermining the collective global effort to reaching the goals set by the Paris Accord (European Commission et al. 2019).

Overall, Trump’s withdrawal opened up an opportunity for the Chinese to make inroads with Europeans and vice-versa. The vacuum in climate leadership also created a platform for the EU to make use of its normative influence and its credibility in multilateralism to assert its climate agenda independent of the US.

Huawei

5G technology has heralded a capabilities race between the US and China as to which country’s industry will be powering the future of telephony and connectivity across the world. The US has for decades enjoyed a competitive advantage in IT and engineering, this is however increasingly being challenged by the Chinese (Parakilas 2021). 5G is in some ways the modern *Sputnik* race, here China’s industry has managed to leap ahead of the West. By 2018, Huawei, a Chinese tech giant, had signed 25 agreements with telecoms operators across the globe to trial its 5G technology (Kharpal 2018). Concerns about the conglomerate stem from the fact that its leadership is well connected with the top brass of the Chinese Communist Party and how, as is common place with most Chinese companies, the Party is formally represented within the company with over 300 party cells (Rühlig et al. 2019).

With this scenario in place it is tempting to start drawing parallels between the current situation and the Cold War that dominated the 20th century. However,

excluding Chinese technology from the West in a new 21st century Cold War is a much more complicated endeavour in today’s globalised world of global value chains and the deep integration of Chinese industry in world trade (Alden 2019). Huawei put European governments in a vulnerable position, since on one hand the United States is its security guarantor whilst on the other China is a fundamental piece in its technology value chains. In fact, before 5G, Huawei already had a significant presence in Europe’s cellular networks. Apart from the Huawei issue, in 2018, the majority of Chinese FDI in engineering and technology was in Europe, an investment that European leaders would want to keep and sustain (Ortega 2020). Both American and Chinese officials made competing threats to Europeans on the consequences of their decision on Huawei and Europeans have a real risk of becoming mere chess-pieces in the geopolitical game unfolding (Rühlig et al. 2019).

The lack of cohesion in the EU not only when it comes to foreign policy and security but also in its critical infrastructure creates challenges that are not found elsewhere. Whilst China and the US have a small number of telecoms operators, Europe has over a 100 due to its fragmented digital market and the inability of operators in one Member State to sell in the other (The Economist 2020). This means that different Member States are affected differently by a potential decision to stop Huawei from accessing European markets. Whilst some, including Germany, have operators that are highly reliant on Huawei technology, others are less affected (The Economist 2020).

In 2018, the US started heavily lobbying with its allies to avoid Huawei technology following concerns that having a Chinese company integrated into 5G networks might render countries vulnerable to cyberattacks and espionage (Woo and O’Keeffe 2018). Analysts and experts in the US have testified to the US Congress that the Chinese intelligence services have a significant legal foothold over companies like Huawei (Gallagher and DeVine 2019). This is exacerbated by the fact that the Chinese government considers Chinese companies operating beyond its borders as still subject to Chinese law coupled with the complete access that Chinese intelligence agencies have to telecoms operators (Mulvenon 2018). As a result of this and in the midst of a raging trade dispute with China, the Trump administration heavily restricted Huawei’s activity in the US (BBC 2019b).

Then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, made outright and significant public pressure on European leaders to dismiss Huawei. In a visit to central and eastern Europe, Pompeo lobbied Polish and Hungarian officials to avoid engagement with Huawei especially in light of the company’s plans to establish a European logistics

centre in Hungary and following the arrest of a Chinese employee of Huawei in Poland on spying charges (Wroughton 2019). In May 2019, Pompeo, in a sign of rising transatlantic tensions over the issue, made clear to German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas that whilst respecting the right of European countries to make ‘sovereign decisions’ on their choice of equipment, these decision would have consequences (Brunstrom 2019). Pompeo emphasised that:

“in the case of Huawei, our concern [is] that it is not possible to mitigate those [security risks] anywhere inside of a 5G network and continue to view that as a trusted network... we’ll have to change our behavior in light of the fact that we can’t permit private citizen data from the United States or national security data from the United States to go across networks that we don’t have confidence, that we don’t view as trusted networks” (Pompeo 2019).

Decision makers in different European capitals, when contemplating what technology to authorise for their network, apart from considering the security concerns raised, were also taking into account other interests. When it comes to 5G, unilateralism once more disrupted the EU’s collective response. Germany’s deep trade relationship with China, with its hefty trade surplus, is constantly in the German Chancellor’s mind when taking decisions that might irk the Chinese government, retaliation from Beijing towards Germany can be costly. In fact, the German Federal Government, despite concerns made by German officials and pressure from the US (Barkin 2018), did not bar Huawei from participating in tenders for its 5G mobile network (BBC 2019a).

Here the EU has come to recognise the risk posed by China, in fact the Council expressed support for a report by the Commission on a ‘concerted approach to the security of 5G networks’ (Council of the EU 2019b). A joint report between the European Commission and the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity recognises that:

“Threats posed by States or State-backed actors, are perceived to be of highest relevance. They represent indeed the most serious as well as the most likely threat actors, as they can have the motivation, intent and most importantly the capability to conduct persistent and sophisticated attacks on the security of 5G networks” (ENISA 2019).

This report was based on the national risk assessments of all EU Member States, this was the basis of a ‘toolbox’ that was eventually published in January 2020.

The toolbox set-out how Member States are to handle ‘high-risk’ suppliers and it shows a compromise agreement between Member States by allowing exclusions though giving each Member State to make its own risk profile and act accordingly (Cerulus 2020).

The European Parliament in a resolution also recognised the threats of Chinese technology in European networks and called on the European Commission to coordinate on the matter (European Parliament 2019). The Parliament was especially wary of Chinese state security laws that obliges Chinese enterprises to cooperate in issues of Chinese ‘national security’ (European Parliament 2019). However in its recommendations on 5G, the Commission, whilst recognising the threats to the so-called ‘European sovereignty’ posed by ‘foreign’ investment in strategic sectors, stopped short of asking Member States to outright ban the participation of Chinese technology in European markets (European Commission 2019).

The attempt by the US in limiting Huawei technology in Europe, despite setbacks, also had its successes. In the Prague 5G Security Conference 32 countries alongside NATO and the EU agreed on a cybersecurity framework. The principles agreed on in Prague, albeit being non-binding, despite not mentioning any company by name, if followed would exclude the presence of Huawei (Kahn and Lopatka 2019). In fact the Prague proposals includes taking into account the ‘overall influence on a supplier by a third country’ through said country’s model of governance (Prague Security Conference 2019). Poland and the US signed an agreement to cooperate on 5G technology that build on the Prague Proposals to combat the influence of Huawei (Shotter 2019).

The Czech Republic was dubbed as ‘Europe’s loudest Huawei critic’ after a declaration by its cybersecurity agency that Huawei equipment posed a security threat (Allen-Ebrahimian 2020). The cases of Poland and the Czech Republic are part of a broader pattern in Eastern Europe that seems to be more inclined to align itself with the US when it comes to security matters, this is understandable considering that, for historical reasons, sovereignty in these countries is many times tied to an American presence close to or within their borders. This is however not absolute, for example, Hungary and Greece initially were very hesitant about blocking Huawei in Europe (Hillman and Tippett 2021).

The Trump administration’s hostility towards Europe when it comes to trade and the number of Member States that do not yet perceive China as a ‘strategic rival’ meant that coordinated transatlantic action towards Chinese domination in

5G was and remains limited (Brattberg and Le Corre 2018). What is interesting about this conflict is that the EU does not seem to be taking advantage of the fact that when it comes to 5G, the only major competitors to China’s Huawei are within its borders these being Sweden’s Ericsson and Finland’s Nokia. In this area the EU was theoretically in a much better position than the US.

Conclusion

Despite taking a more realist perspective in recent years, in general, the EU continues to pursue its foreign policy primarily through normative terms (Manners 2008), this is also the case in EU-China relations. The EU’s strategy on China highlights this clearly, and frames EU-China relations on the promotion of “democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for the principles of the UN Charter and international law” (European Commission 2016). This presents its challenges especially since fundamentally the PRC does not share the same political values on which the EU is founded. However at the same time the EU cannot discard its normative characteristics since these define its purpose and shared identity. The EU’s Member States are recognising that as China grew, it became more sensitive about attempts on influencing what it considers as its internal policies and domestic affairs and it now has the economic clout to resist (Mattlin 2012).

The inadequacies of the current European institutional order to handle a multipolar world are clear when considering Europe’s relationship with China. When it comes to foreign policy, the EU can rarely be considered as a homogeneous entity. Despite the institutional enhancements brought by Lisbon, every Member State still has its own priorities and concerns (Lehne 2017). The current institutional set-up limits the possibility of having the one common voice that the Commission and the HR/VP have consistently strived for. The EU’s unity predicament is well known to the Chinese and the “17+1” forum between China and Eastern and Central European countries can be interpreted as a prime example of an attempt towards a divide and rule strategy. This is in fact considered as a key principle of engagement in the EU’s 2016 EU strategy (European Commission 2016). The Commission recognised the issue of cohesion when in the EU-China strategic outlook it remarked:

“Neither the EU nor any of its Member States can effectively achieve their aims with China without full unity. In cooperating with China, all Member States, individually and within sub-regional cooperation

frameworks, such as the 16+1 format, have a responsibility to ensure consistency with EU law, rules and policies ([European Commission et al. 2019](#))”.

The EU’s relationship with China encompasses both the strengths and the weaknesses of the EU as an actor in international relations. Whilst in some instances, when there are converging views amongst Member States, it is able to amplify those positions, on issues lacking consensus EU foreign policy tends to disintegrate and become ineffective. It is for this reason that at this stage, merely taking into consideration the unified EU perspective, that is many times the lowest common denominator of the positions of all Member States, will result in an incomplete analysis that is devoid of the nuances that make all the difference in EU external action policy making.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, during the period under investigation, Europeans have made notable steps forward in their ability to unite when determining their foreign policy. Donald Trump and his antagonism towards the international world order might have been one of the most influential elements in building further ties between Europe and China throughout the last decade. However, this also implies that the resultant EU-China collaborations in areas such as climate are in some ways marriages of convenience that are based on a shared disapproval of Trump policies rather than because of common values and principles ([Casarini 2017](#)). Despite multiple areas of collaboration, the EU-China relationship, whilst useful for Europeans, can and will never replace the deep bonds of the transatlantic partnership. The greatest challenge that the EU faces when it comes to its relationship with China, is how it will navigate through this rising Sino-American rivalry.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Ever since the dawn of US hegemony, some analysts had already started predicting its end and foreseeing the rise of a multipolar world. The consequences of the Iraq war on American credibility and the Great Financial Crisis are most probably the opening scene to a classic drama consisting of a clash of great powers spanning over decades. This dissertation attributes the major shifts in US foreign policy to the emergence of China as a global superpower. China's rise coincided with a vulnerable period in American history that created a space in the world order for an upcoming superpower to exert influence. This shift from unipolarity to bipolarity has a two-way effect on Europe's world view, whereby the rise of China influences the transatlantic partnership internally whilst at the same time, the US-EU relationship also conditions Europe's approach towards China.

The general purpose of this dissertation is to discuss and analyse how this shift is affecting EU policy and to examine Europe's role in a multipolar world.

Revisiting the research questions

The primary objective of this dissertation is to analyse the shift in priorities of US foreign policy, in the context of a rising China and disruption in the Pacific, and how the EU is reacting to these changes both within the transatlantic alliance and also in its relationship with the PRC. This is achieved by splitting the analysis into the determined three research questions that untangle the complexity of a multi-variable relationship into simpler and more definite terms.

Are the foreign policy priorities of the United States changing? What is causing this change?

In the literature review, the theoretical foundation and mechanics behind shifts in world order were discussed. The literature presented makes clear that the US hegemony is dwindling and that we are entering an unprecedented period that could be the start of a new Cold War in a time of interconnectedness that is unprecedented in history. The cost of rivalry and conflict between the world's great powers is now a much more expensive endeavour, with Deutsche Bank estimating that a digital divide alone would cost the world economy \$5tn.

As Kagan professed, the jungle is indeed growing back and the US is adapting its policy to multipolarity. The reorientation of US foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific is evident in various policy documents including the Obama administration's National Security Strategy. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her seminal article "America's Pacific Century" coined the term "pivot to Asia" and argued that the future of politics will be determined in the region.

The Obama White House made a great effort in setting the stage for America to present itself as a Pacific power, with an intensive programme of engagement with partners in the Asia-Pacific. The US increased its engagement with ASEAN leaders and President Obama attended multiple summits in the region, pledging American support against China's assertive maneuvers in sensitive areas such as the South China Sea.

The Trump administration rehashed the 'pivot to Asia' to a policy in favour of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) and articulated the rising Sino-American rivalry in more definite terms. The US-China trade war during his administration drew the lines of the emerging geopolitical contest. The 2017 National Security Strategy of the Trump White House makes clear that the Indo-Pacific will be the arena for geopolitical competition between two different visions for the world.

Despite the stark differences in policy and general worldview of the Obama and Trump administrations, it is clear that there are common features in both presidencies that allude to a new approach towards China. The era of containment is giving way to a time of direct confrontation. There has only been a recent American re-engagement in Eastern Europe primarily due to increasing volatility in Russia's behaviour in the former Soviet sphere particularly in Ukraine, however this is bound to be a temporary uptick in an overall downward trend. All in all, the US no longer sees the same strategic value in Europe as it once did.

What are the effects of this change on the transatlantic relationship?

The intervention in Libya during the Arab Spring, saw the US choosing to “lead from behind” and allow Europeans to handle regional conflicts in their own backyard. In his parting comments to NATO, then US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates insisted with European allies on the dwindling appetite in the US political class towards continued military support in Europe.

A factor that contributed to a rethink of American foreign policy is the Great Financial Crisis and the fiscal implications this had on the US defence budget. As seen in Figure 4.2, from 2009 onwards the US saw a significant decrease in its military expenditure. Therefore, American influence in the Asia-Pacific region naturally implies a re-allocation of resources from other regions.

Baroness Ashton, then HR/VP, reacted to this pivot by insisting that the transatlantic relationship was still essential; however this rebalance should be seen as an opportunity for reform of the CSDP and a motivation to ensure that Europe has the capabilities required to act independently.

The European Union Global Strategy of 2016, emphasises the need for strategic autonomy. This can be interpreted as Europe’s reckoning that even though the US may wish to assist, it will not always be able to do so and Europe must ensure that there are sufficient capabilities to act autonomously. The activation of PESCO, the launch of the European Defence Fund are some of the initiatives taken by the EU that are evidence that this time round there seems to be recognition that more must be done at a European level to ensure the security and defence of the Union.

These pro-autonomy sentiments are not a new phenomenon in Europe, they find their root in Gaulist ideology, the current changes are however accentuating an already existent element in Europe’s psyche. This is not a straightforward endeavour when considering the NATO factor that is bound to be a fundamental aspect when rethinking European defence. Madeleine Albright’s 3 Ds still reverberate in any discussion on the matter and the fine line between what should be a NATO and EU initiative is blurry.

In the defence strategy documents of multiple Member States one finds both a recognition of a new rising world power and also the need for enhancing European defence capabilities. At the same time there are also contrasts. Whilst the French perspective in its 2017 ‘Defence and National Security Strategy’ places heavy emphasis on European autonomy, the German 2016 ‘White Paper on German Security Policy and the future of the Bundeswehr’ promotes EU cohesion with NATO, with no particular reference to autonomy.

This encapsulates the major impediment to the EU's role as a security actor, EU Member States still do not converge on fundamental areas of their foreign and security policy. Despite the changes brought by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the EU still cannot act as a unified actor and thus any American maneuver will generally not result in one response but rather 27, each with their own nuances and priorities.

The American political class on both sides of the partisan divide agrees that Europe must do more in its defence spending. Successive US administrations have insisted with the European NATO members that they must increase their defence spending to 2% of GDP. This was especially so in the Trump years, where the then President reportedly was even willing to withdraw the US from NATO should there not be greater burden sharing.

How is the EU reacting to these changes in its policy towards China?

In its relations with China, the EU is proving that whilst it is taking a more realist approach to geopolitics, it is still primarily a normative power. The lack of a coherent approach amongst Member States has resulted in a fragmented front on issues where unity would be ideal. On the issue of Huawei, different Member States had different perspectives to the detriment of a common European voice. When it came to the Belt and Road Initiative, which saw Chinese investment in key European infrastructure, the EU was also incoherent. There is also a clear attempt by the PRC to 'divide and rule' through its 17+1 forum. Here, the EU consistently maintained the need for a united front in multiple strategies that it has published during the period under investigation. Despite internal pressures from various sources including high-ranking officials in European institutions, the EU has largely kept its arms embargo on China.

The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Paris Accord, left a leadership vacuum that EU Member States sought to fill. In the EU-China summit that coincidentally took place on the day of President Trump's decision announcement on the withdrawal, then President of the European Council Donald Tusk committed to EU-China cooperation on climate to mitigate the American decision and uphold the Paris Agreement.

By classifying China as a rival, partner and competitor at the same time, one can conclude that as of yet there the EU in its position is attempting to walk a tight-rope between ensuring that the relationship's economic dimension is sustained whilst tackling China's assertiveness within its region and around the world.

Conclusions

This dissertation is by no means a complete analysis, further work can include, for example, an investigation on the divides in the transatlantic alliance during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis on the transatlantic partnership during the Biden administration and whether the pattern noticed during the Obama and Trump administration continues would also be an interesting addition.

In a new multipolar world, strategic autonomy is not enough, the interdependencies of the world economy requires that European independence must be seen beyond the realm of security and defence. To avoid being the victim of the Sino-American rivalry, Europe must ensure that it has enough clout that would earn Europeans a seat on the table.

The announcement of a ‘geopolitical Commission’ at the start of the von der Leyen Commission shows that the EU is coming to realise that we are indeed entering into a new world order. The US will remain Europe’s indispensable partner however strategic autonomy is never about severing the transatlantic partnership but rather about allowing Europe to act when the US is unable to intervene. This is the sort of strategic thinking that Europeans have had the luxury to ignore since the end of World War II.

Strategic sovereignty implies a revisiting of the contract between the European institutions, Member States and European citizens. This new multipolar reality requires that the process of European integration is accelerated to ensure that EU Member States will be on the table of great powers as they deliberate the course of this century. A G2 consisting of China and the US, with Europe sidelined, would be in the interest of no Member State.

Foreign policy, security and defence are considered as areas of high politics, the last bastions of state sovereignty, this explains the slow-moving pace towards a true common foreign and security policy. The current model of governance is flawed and will be rendered futile in a world of rising giants. The development of the European Union in this regard is a necessary exercise in patience, yet time is running out.

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