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# Divided but not Poles Apart: Europe, the US and the Rise of China

*Shaun Breslin*

While differences remain, the gap between US and European debates over the likely impact of China's rise on the global order has narrowed in recent years. At the same time, China's leaders have been more confident in establishing dichotomized distinctions between their view of how the world should be ordered and how China will act as a great power on one hand, and what they depict as the West's preferences and the typical modus operandi of Western powers on the other. Despite evidence of ever clearer dividing lines between different visions of China's impact on the future of the global order, this is not the same as a return to bipolarity. The problems of disentangling transnational economic relations, different levels of followership for potential leaders, and pragmatic considerations of governance efficacy in diverse issue areas all suggest something other than fixed bloc-type alliances on either side of a bipolar divide.

**Keywords:** US-China relations; Europe-China relations; bipolarity; global order; Covid-19 pandemic.

## **Introduction**

Watching Sino-US relations as an outsider has long had something of an otherworldly quality to it. To be sure, there are elements that look like things from one's own reality. Increasingly so in fact. But much of it has a different essential quality to it, and it seems to be

taking place on a plane different from what happens elsewhere. There is an urgency and intensity to both the relationship itself and the way it is spoken about that marks it out as rather different from other sets of bilateral relationships with China. The potential China challenge to the United States seems starker and more fundamental than elsewhere, and the consequences of getting the relationship wrong also appear more extreme. Certainly, the chances of becoming engaged in some sort of military conflict with China has been much more of a live issue in the United States than it has in Europe over the years.

That the United States is a security actor in Asia in the way that European states simply aren't is one good reason for this difference. And when European eyes do turn to the east in search of potential security challenges, they often stop when they reach Russia rather than continuing on to China. There is more to it than just hard military power and security defined in terms of guns, bombs, and bullets. Maybe when you are the predominant global power, you look for (and find) challenges to your supremacy in ways that lesser powers simply don't. And maybe there is a sense that a change in policy in the United States really does have the potential to change the nature of China's rise--a sense of agency and capacity that is missing in most of the rest of the world (if not all of it). And maybe simply being the single most important bilateral relationship in the world really does raise it to a level that makes it exceptional and unique (and difficult to fully understand from the outside).

It is not that European relations with China are irrelevant or without consequences. They are just different. Given this difference, as US-China tensions under Donald Trump and Xi Jinping have evolved to the point that the word "crisis" is often evoked, where does Europe fit into the geopolitical picture? A Europe that has plenty of its own problems and crises to deal with at home: the still lingering legacy of the financial crisis, how Brexit will play out, and not just the public health and economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also the impact on European solidarity (or the lack of it) and being part of a single European

project. But also a Europe that has recently seen a number of key actors rethink the long-term consequences of the way that China has been engaged and encountered in previous decades.

That sense of other worldliness remains. But it has taken on a different dimension. The type of language that is being used to describe the US president's view of China (and some of the media that are chosen to disseminate them) means that it retains a special and unique place and flavor. Indeed, it has become more and more idiosyncratic. No doubt the timing of electoral cycles in the United States plays some sort of role here. And there is absolutely no doubt that the politics of the pandemic – and in particular the politics of blame (and avoiding it) - have been an important shaping context too. But at the same time, many of the underlying critiques and understandings of the consequences of China's rise that lead to this sort of political performance art are increasingly being echoed in other places too. Even if these feelings aren't articulated in the same way, there is a growing consensus among what we might call (for simplicity) the liberal democratic west that there is a need for a new China policy. The gap between basic starting points in Washington and most European capitals certainly seems to have narrowed.

So does this point toward a new bipolarity and an end of the exceptionalism of the US-China relationship? It is certainly not that hard to find evidence of clear lines of demarcation that result in a dichotomization around different values and different preferences for how the world should be ordered. There is a level of "othering" on both sides of the divide that doesn't suggest that this will be a blip or a short-term affair, but could instead shape the contestation for order for many years to come. Even so, while positions on China are hardening and coalescing, I remain unconvinced that polarity perspectives – neither bipolar nor multipolar ones - are particularly helpful in understanding where we are and where we might be going. They do not seem to explain the way that multiple and non-fixed types of alliances (and fissures) evolve in different issue areas. Neither do they seem to

explain the willingness of followers to align themselves to potential leaders. And in the case of the United States, there is the added question of whether there is a desire to lead at all.

### **Divisions and Dichotomization**

When it comes to global leadership – either actual or projected into the future - the relationship between the United States and China is often described in language that suggests a zero-sum game. What the United States loses or deliberately abandons automatically results in Chinese gains. And there are good reasons for thinking in this way. US policy under Trump has clearly created gaps in global leadership in some issue areas that China’s leaders have actively sought to occupy. Global health leadership is one obvious example. China’s leaders also don't often miss the opportunity to point to how many UN peacekeepers they provide relative to the other four UN Security Council permanent members. And read the now rather extensive Chinese-language discussions of how Chinese wisdom and Chinese successes might generate “China Solutions” or the “China Plan” (Zhongguo fang’an: 中国方案) for the world, which address a whole range of issue areas such as climate change, poverty reduction, economic development, cybersecurity, and new “frontier” areas that will require governance in the future like the deep sea, space, and the polar regions.

In establishing the superiority of Chinese approaches to resolving a number of global issues, what China can offer is often explained through a process of “Occidentalism.” This entails establishing an essentialized idea of what the West is and stands for that is the antithesis of an equally essentialized China. For example, on its own it is facile and glib to say that China favors peace, partnerships, and dialogue. It only has significance if others don't favor and want these things. The same is true of the oft repeated statements that China will never seek hegemony, or interfere in other countries’ internal issues, or impose its will and policies on others, or bully the weak. In all of these examples, the “other” that doesn't (favor peace and harmony) and does (pursue power politics bullying) is the West--either

individual Western countries or the West as some sort of aggregated whole. Of course, this is not a universal position and many Chinese scholars and foreign policy officials would be very unhappy with such an agglomeration of all things western into a single entity. But it is an argument and methodology that has been made on numerous occasions, including by senior Chinese officials, often alongside references to the “outdated Cold-War mentality and zero-sum mindset” that guide Western states.

But if there is dichotomization going on, it is not only coming from one side. The position adopted by the Trump administration makes it very clear that China is now thought of as a strategic competitor, so clearly so that the reasons why and the proposed policy response do not need repeating here. What might need a little more elucidation instead is that positions on China have hardened in other parts of the world too. This includes in some parts of Europe where China’s rise had previously been seen as creating more opportunities and possibilities than challenges and threats. It is no coincidence that the rise of more skeptical voices coincided with the growth of overseas Chinese investment, particularly in the mid- to late 2010s. At the most basic level, the word “reciprocity” became one of the most used in discussions of the relationship, though actually, the lack of it was the problem. Considerable frustration had built over the years because engaging China and building strategic partnerships had not resulted in the same access to the Chinese economy for Europeans that Chinese actors were finding in Europe. Indeed, Beijing’s “Made in China 2025” initiative seemed to be making the playing field even more uneven. As Chinese merger and acquisition activities in Europe increased, this frustration evolved into a more specific concern that China was seeking to gain leadership and control in some key technology sectors.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and particularly the 16/17+**1** process<sup>1</sup> also raised the specter of a new economic geography designed to move the locus of economic power from west to east in support of Chinese strategic objectives. China’s willingness to promote

its understanding of the nature of human rights (and the willingness of others to sign up to it) also pointed toward cleavages in fundamental normative starting points. The US government has been more proactive than most in trying to reduce the presumed influence of Confucius Institutes, and it's probably fair to say that the debate over Chinese political influence has been louder in both North America and Australasia than it has been in Europe. But less noisy is not the same as silent, and that debate is a live one in Europe, and one that is increasing in volume.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, France was home to one of the first Confucius Institutes to be closed (in 2013),<sup>3</sup> and Sweden became the first country to close all of its *Hanban*-funded institutes in 2020. China has also been added to Russia as one of the foreign sources of “disinformation” designed to “undermine our democracies and the credibility of the EU” (European Commission 2020).

### **The International Politics of the Pandemic**

These disinformation strategies were specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic. And while the rethink on China was well underway before the virus began to affect Europe, the politics and the pandemic did not exactly shine a positive light on China. Far from it. As in the United States, various European politicians found at least some blame in Chinese action (and inaction) for the emergence of the virus in its human form in the first place, the way in which it spread in and from Wuhan, and the way that the extent of the problem was communicated to others. Even when Chinese supplies became so important for Europeans in fighting the pandemic, this didn't always help China's image either. Supplies from China seemed to be accompanied with a demand for gratitude, not just for the equipment itself but for the efforts of the Chinese people in giving others time to prepare—a time and space that Europeans were largely described as wasting.

Was it appropriate to look for thanks for things that were often supplied on a commercial basis rather than given as aid, sometimes didn't work, and might not have been needed under other circumstances? Supplies of some of the same things that had gone in the other direction when China first started to deal with the virus? There was a feeling in some European quarters that it definitely wasn't appropriate, and that this was really about trying to politicize a narrative of the pandemic that saw China as a success and solution rather than the source of the problem in the first place. This lack of an inclination to express gratitude was compounded by the rather aggressive defensive tone of some official statements (or statements by officials at least) that took the demand for thanks a step further. It was not China that needed to apologize to the West, so the argument and narrative went, but the West that needed to apologize to China for its "campaign of stigmatization."<sup>4</sup> And if Europeans (and others) were irked by that sort of language, then some were considerably more than irked by what at times sounded like a triumphalist comparison of China's successes with European weaknesses, unsubstantiated hints that the virus might have originated in Italy rather than China (Global Times 2020), the call to circulate conspiracy theories about other non-Chinese origins of the virus (Zhao 2020), and accusations by an unnamed Chinese diplomat in France that local health workers had abandoned their patients and left them to die (Anon 2020). China's pivotal position in supply chains of many medical supplies that were in short supply also focused attention on the longer term potential economic security challenges of having so many eggs in (or passing through) a Chinese basket.

For those already looking for evidence of a China challenge and European vulnerabilities, the corona crisis made them pretty easy to find. Rather than think of the pandemic as generating new positions on China, it is probably best to think of an acceleration and concentration of existing trends and thinking. To be sure, some have probably reached conclusions that they would otherwise have taken longer to arrive at, and others might have



been forced to come off the fence. But the general trend in the direction of travel was already established. While there is still no single view in individual European states (let alone in Europe as a whole) on China, there are more people who are prepared to say more negative things (and say them more loudly) than just a few years ago. As a result, although the language being used to describe skeptical and negative perceptions of China in Europe might remain somewhat different from that used by the US president, there is perhaps less distance in fundamental perceptions of China than there was as recently as when Trump was elected.

### **Dichotomizations and Alliances**

So we have a China that increasingly positions itself as not just an alternative to the West, but as the direct opposite of the West. Conversely, there is a group of countries that consistently takes a common position in opposition to China on at least some issue areas. Divisions over the basic understanding of how human rights should be defined and understood as a basis for political action in the UN is a good example. The United Kingdom foreign minister Dominic Raab's (2020) call for a coalition of countries with "a likeminded attachment to the rule of law" to oppose China's new National Security Law for Hong Kong in June 2020 is another--or at least it points to an aspiration for a value-based alliance if not an actual one on practice. There also seems to be a coalescing of perceptions of the nature of a China challenge to national interests and potentially the global order in the United States, Europe, and other liberal democracies (including Canada, New Zealand, Australia).

To be sure, these are not universally held positions, and it is relatively easy to find dissenting voices. But enough people that matter in enough places seem to share the same fundamental starting point for it to be considered to represent a new consensus of sorts. When the EU's most senior foreign affairs representative argues that the time is coming for Europe

to “choose sides” and be “more robust” when it comes to China, that sounds very much like the sort of dichotomization that leads to bipolar-type alliances (Wintour 2020).

So can US-China tensions be viewed through more than just bilateral lenses? Are they a manifestation of a broader division of the world into two opposing camps? The first steps in the creation of a new bipolar order that has echoes of previous eras of great-power competition in the twentieth century with the United States acting as representatives of a broader liberal alliance? Maybe. But we need to exercise considerable caution before assuming that our bipolar past tells us what our global future will be.

### **Alliances, Leadership and Followership**

There are very good reasons for expecting China to be viewed in different ways in different places. But to simply assume that China will be able to lead dismisses the importance of followership. While at one level of generalization there might be a common-sense acceptance that Chinese positions are representative of a broader non-Western critique of the liberal global order, it is a big step from there to the idea of a Sinocentric bloc. Those who share China’s dissatisfaction with the existing order do so with different degrees of enthusiasm. Moreover, sharing a dissatisfaction with something doesn’t automatically result in a shared preference for what an alternative might look like. China’s global order goals have primarily been articulated in general aspirational terms that are rather difficult to oppose. Who wouldn’t want to live in a world of peace and harmony where morality and righteousness guide actions towards mutually beneficial outcomes? But opposing inequities is not the same thing as establishing working and effective alternatives. And how others respond to the overall ambitions of a rising power is likely to be somewhat different from their response to the concrete ambitions of a risen one.

Considerable evidence of a lack of enthusiasm to align with China from a number of other non-Western states in a number of issue areas already exists. When it comes to changing real world economic geographies (along the Belt and Road for example), or establishing and defending China's self-proclaimed core interests and territorial claims, there are already some things that other non-western states have found quite easy to oppose. India might be one of China's more important partners when it comes to challenging the status quo in terms of global governance in general and the provision of global financial public goods in particular—such as through the BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) process and the New Development Bank. But various forms of India-China military confrontation are also quite common in disputed border areas, including one that resulted in casualties on both sides in June 2020. As another example, while responses to the Covid-19 pandemic suggested that many developing countries were looking to China for help and leadership that the United States and Europe were not providing, reports of discrimination against African residents of Guangzhou in April 2020 soon qualified this response in a number of African states (Marks 2020). Of course, this did not derail the totality of all China-Africa relations. But it does suggest that assumptions of inevitable solidarity and alliances are sometimes simply just assumptions, and assumptions do not always stand up to scrutiny.

It is not just that those who share China's view of the status quo ante can end up on the opposite sides of policy cleavages in some policy arenas. When the EU produced a new strategy paper on China in 2019, much of the emphasis was on the designation of China as a "systemic rival." And quite rightly so. This was a very strong statement and one that marked a clear distinction from the "comprehensive strategic partnership" that the EU first claimed to have with China in 2003 and which was at the heart of the 2013 "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation" that still had a year to run at the time. But important as this new

rival designation is, it is not one that sees China as a competitor to be resisted across the board. Rather:

China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance (European Commission 2019)

So those who oppose China in some issue areas and perceive it as a systemic rival nevertheless at times find themselves working with China to attain a common purpose. For example, many (though not all) of the same states that oppose China's human rights definition and/or China's cybergovernance initiatives were among the first to move to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to work with China to provide developmental public goods. There also seems to be a widespread acceptance that effective global governance solutions are not possible without Chinese participation.

### **The Political Economy of Decoupling**

And then there is the question of economics. During the Cold War, there was, more or less, a correlation between security alliances and economic ones. Some, like China, tried to tread a middle line between the two poles, and others at times defected from their camp. But, for example, if you were allied with the United States and looked to it for security guarantees against the Warsaw Pact countries, then you were unlikely (to say the least) to have strong economic relations with the Soviet Union and the COMECON economies (and vice versa). This is not the situation today. It is entirely possible to have a deep economic relationship with China while simultaneously viewing the United States as the most important security partner. Or for China to be the main security threat to a specific country and also its main

economic partner. Or for those where security is not a clear and present issue, to oppose China's normative agenda but at the same time to have significant economic interactions with a range of Chinese actors.

It is exactly this economic importance of China (and dependence on it) that repatriating economic activity back to the United States is meant to redress, and reduce. In the wake of the pandemic, similar arguments about rethinking the wisdom of having deep and extensive economic relations with China have been made by other governments too. And if this does occur to a significant degree, then we will indeed be living in a very different world. But how likely is a fundamental decoupling with China irrespective of what politicians might want and say?

Preventing Chinese investment into other countries is relatively easy. However, this is only one small part of the story of China's global economic significance. It is companies that make investment and production decisions, not governments. Indeed, one of the key reasons that the US economy (and others) is so intertwined with China's is because US-based companies moved their production to China to produce goods at prices that were attractive to US consumers. Of course, they do not act in a political void, and there is a lot that governments can do to attract investment (as Chinese authorities successfully did) or to prevent/regulate financial and commodity flows. Those governments that have extensive state procurement programmes are also free to decide to pay more for what they need (assuming that it is being produced where they want it to come from) in ways that could theoretically impact on global supplies (rather than just their own finances).

It will be a big ask, though, for governments to provide either the penalties or the incentives (or both) that will persuade producers to abandon China and move production back home or to more politically trusted economies. Or to find sources of supplies that either currently come from China, or pass through China, or—as will increasingly be the case—are

produced by Chinese entities in other countries. It will also be very expensive too, and expensive at a time when governments across the world will have large amounts of debt to deal with as a result of dealing with the pandemic.

Things will clearly change. Production patterns would have shifted in any case. Some production has already moved out of China to other even cheaper sites in even later developing economies, and more will follow. Political pressure and government preferences will likely play some role too. But I suspect that economic realities in a post-pandemic world are not going to make it easy for governments to always follow their political preferences. Unless goods can be sourced at the same (or lower) price from other locations, a turn toward economic bipolarity that sees China isolated from the West seems a distant prospect.

### **In Support of Grayness**

If followership matters – and I think it does – it is not just China that needs to have it. And if neither China nor the United States has it, where does this leave the idea of a zero-sum game? Let's take the pandemic as an example. Much of the language of the international politics of the pandemic paints black and white alternatives. But in reality, I suspect that many of us live in various shades of gray, seeing faults and omissions in different places across the whole spectrum of different global actors.

We don't have to make firm dichotomized decisions, and many of us don't. It is entirely possible, for example, to blame domestic politicians for failings and mistakes in their response while recognizing that the original outbreak wasn't their fault in the first place. Or, to think that the domestic response of the United States is hugely flawed while at the same time being critical of how the virus first spread in China. Or, to have the same negative view of the Chinese and US responses, and also be unhappy with what your own and other

governments have done as well. (We can't all be lucky enough to be led by New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern.) Or, to think all of the above and also think that European solidarity was found sadly wanting too. Or, to agree with some of the questions that are asked about the initial outbreak, while thinking that the way that they are being asked is unhelpful, and designed to deflect attention away from domestic failings. Or, to agree with President Trump that there are issues with the power configuration in the World Health Organization (WHO) and China's relations with it, while simultaneously agreeing with the editor of *The Lancet* that responding by cutting funding and relations in the midst of a pandemic is irresponsible—or in his words, “a crime against humanity” (Horton 2020). It's also possible to be impressed by the medical support that China has given to others and the money it has donated to the WHO, and at the same time be offended by the way that this has been politicized. Or to be deeply grateful for all the personal offers of help and supplies from friends in China while simultaneously being appalled by some of the language used by representatives of China's foreign ministry as they too attempt to control the narrative and deflect blame. It is also possible to think that what happened in China in late December 2019 and January 2020 exposed some deep systemic problems in the Chinese political system, while recognizing that it is that very same political system with the very same objectives and incentive structures that allowed for the effective response that followed in late January, February and March.

Leadership, authority, legitimacy, and followership that are lost by one power – or deliberately given up - does not simply and automatically transfer to its rival. For those who are unhappy with China's role in the pandemic (for whatever reason), it is not always easy to find solace in US policy either. Even those who have come to share with the Trump presidency many of the broader concerns over what Chinese global power might mean in the future do not always find it easy to align with US policy, or to support (or echo) the way that policy objectives are articulated. If there is a need to make a choice as Borrell suggests, it is a

choice on where you stand on China, and that is not the same thing as choosing between China and the United States. To be sure, some leaders might need to be more decisive in deciding to align themselves with the United States rather than others. The need for a post-Brexit trade deal with the United States, for example, might lead to US security considerations and other preferences having more purchase in London than in other European capitals. In general, though, just as the absence of US leadership in global health governance does not automatically lead to its being replaced by China, neither does a common concern with consequences of China's rise automatically lead to followership for all that current US China policy seems to stand for. The longstanding desire for Europe to forge its own independent global role has been made somewhat easier by US policy and rhetoric in recent years, even when there is a strong common position that a closer alliance could be built on.

The language of polarity and zero-sum games creates – or maybe reflects - a way of looking at the world that is easy to understand. And simplicity can be good. At a very general level, the idea of a new bipolarity (and even maybe a new Cold War) captures the megatrends of the moment and condenses the idea of oppositional sets of values and approaches to global order into an easily digestible form. But simplicity only takes us so far, and we begin to encounter problems if this simplicity results in expectations that won't be met--for example, if it leads us to expect that the future world will see a repeat of the past, a world where, by and large, groups of countries came together and stayed together, taking common positions across issue areas, and where attraction to one pole by definition resulted in repulsion to/by the other.

The future is unlikely to be neat and easily defined and described. Rather, it is likely to be rather messy. Or that's the way it seems from this part of Europe at least. Establishing shots in movies often start with a close-up, and then pull back to show you the bigger picture. What you first thought you saw proves not to be true at all, or perhaps only part of a much



bigger picture. Similarly, what might look like bipolarity when you focus in on dichotomized positions in any specific issue area or on US-China relations alone might look like something else altogether when you pull back and look at the bigger picture--when you compare how power, principle, and pragmatic self-interest result in different constellations of alliances in different policy domains. To talk about a global order having bipolar characteristics as well as multi- and even non-polar ones at the same time is of course a contradiction in terms that makes no sense. But for some reason, it is a nonsense that seems to work when looking at the Sino-US relationship from the outside, and thinking about how this bilateralism fits with the way that other relations with China might evolve in the rest of the world as well.

## **Notes**

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## **Bio**

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<sup>1</sup> The 16+1 process actually preceded the creation of the BRI. It was established in 2012 to provide a new platform for relations between China (the +1) and a group of 16 Central and Eastern European countries. It became the 17+1 process with the addition of Greece in 2019. 12 of the 17 are EU members and the other five candidate countries. With the exception of Greece, they were all either formerly Communist Party States, or constituent parts of larger ones.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of these debates, see Benner, Gaspers, Ohlberg, Poggetti, Lucrezia and Shi-Kupfer (2018).

<sup>3</sup> By the University of Lyon in September. Macmaster University in Canada was the first to cancel its contract in February 2013.

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese Ambassador to the UK provided one example of the type (Liu 2020)