

# The emerging new world order from an EU perspective

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*Where will be the place of the European Union in the emerging world order? There are two ways ahead of the EU: accept the emerging geopolitical status quo as a policy-taker, or actively participate in its evolution as a policy-shaper. In what way can the Washington-Moscow-Beijing triangle race have an impact on Europe, and what are the lines Europe should build its policy on in the three-pole world order? The present study seeks to address the above issues while presenting European interests from a narrative of three pillars: economy, security policy, and climate policy.*

**For the EU, the forthcoming period will be a time when it has to evaluate the economic benefits of strengthening its Eastern relations and analyse the risks and geopolitical concerns of China's unstoppable rise as a great power. The changing world order requires careful consideration in several aspects from the EU: besides the unquestionable importance of the transatlantic relations in terms of security policy, there is the economic interdependence with China, and there is Russia remaining an unavoidable actor in providing energy security for the continent.**

**The present study seeks to provide a guideline for the future world order from the EU's point of view, reviewing the crucial economic, security, and environmental aspects, essential in terms of the Union's advocacy and opportunities.**

## Historical context

To understand the geopolitical tectonics of today's superpowers, it is worth taking a look back to the Cold War period, when between the opposing parties, Beijing earned a special attention as a geopolitical balancing tool. As a result, when US President Nixon saw open conflict between the two communist regimes<sup>1</sup> he interpreted it as a unique opportunity for the US to weaken Moscow's systemic position. The resumption of US diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China had resulted in a "triangulation" of superpower policy, which led to achieving agreements between the Soviet Union and the US on the control of nuclear arms proliferation (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and an Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty).<sup>2</sup>

While Kissinger's foreign policy sought to weaken Moscow's position by resuming diplomatic relations with Beijing, decades later, history repeated itself, but in a reverse format. The phrase from the '70s *"If only Nixon could go to China"*, nowadays might sound like *"anyone can go to Russia except Trump."*<sup>3</sup> In his foreign policy, former US President Trump considered Moscow as a possible tool of exerting pressure on Beijing, which, over the past 30 years has evolved from a geopolitical sphere of influence to a great power of the multipolar world. The US's unipolar moment is over, simultaneously the Cold War seems to be returning now with the competition of three parties: Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Based on the foreign policy discourse of the last two US administrations, the economic-driven sanctions applied by both the US and China (US-China trade war started during Trump's term) are being replaced by ideological opposition of the parties (represented by President Biden's administration).<sup>1</sup>

## **"The East is rising, and the West is declining"**<sup>4</sup>

### **Europe's place in the new world order**<sup>2</sup>

The transatlantic commitment of Europe since World War II is unquestionable. The most obvious and unified field of cooperation with the US is that of the security policy

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<sup>1</sup> US President Trump's sanctions against China were rather economic-oriented, while in President Biden's case, the ideological opposition of democratic and autocratic systems comes to the fore. (WRIGHT, Thomas: Joe Biden Worries That China Might Win. In: The Atlantic, 09.11.2021., <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/06/joe-biden-foreign-policy/619130/> (13.11.2021)

<sup>2</sup> In the present study, the term Europe refers to the European Union

(NATO). However, the ongoing transformation of the unipolar world order necessarily led to the broadening of the EU's foreign policy focus, and maintaining a value- and economy-based balance between the West and the East became a leading foreign policy issue.

Multilateral institutions cover almost all fields of EU-US cooperation today, and there is a tremendous amount of declarations of mutually shared principles like democracy or respect for fundamental freedoms. These are the guidelines for Europe's global orientation. At the same time, it is easy to see that a stable relationship with all the leading powers of the emerging new world order is essential for the EU to successfully advocate its interests.

The European Union's foreign policy towards China can be defined by three coordinates: economic policy, security policy, and climate policy, framed by a value-based, ideological approach — in line with the American positions. The EU has only a few uniformly accepted conventions and declarations concerning China however, the three above-mentioned areas appear in different interpretations by the member states, which results in Europe being divided rather than unified on the matter of foreign policy towards the East.

## **Economic policy**

In economic terms, the co-dependence of the world's three largest traders is unquestionable. In 2020, the EU, the US and China together contributed 45% of all imports and exports of goods.<sup>5</sup> China was the EU's biggest import partner and its third-biggest export market, besides, the EU was China's largest trading partner.<sup>6</sup> The EU-China import volume increased by 26% since 2010, while export grew by 44% to EUR 202 billion, with a deficit increase of 0.05%.<sup>7</sup> Washington remained the main export partner for the EU, and the second largest import partner in 2020.<sup>8</sup>

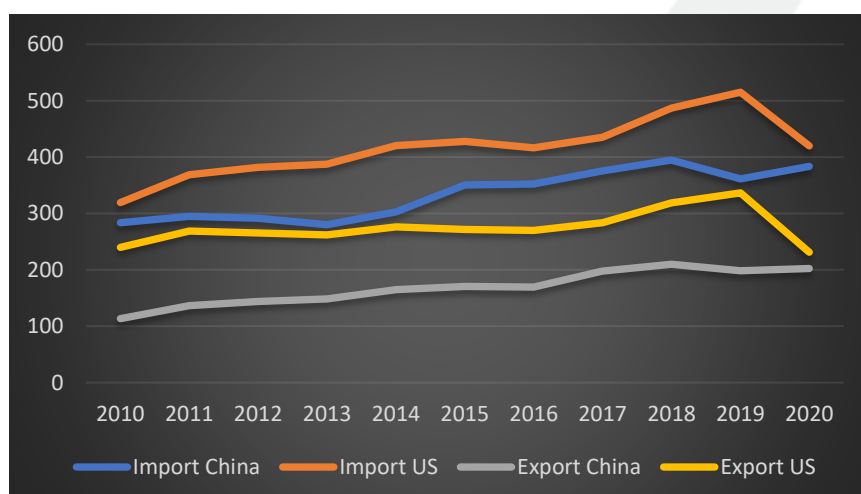
However, in addition to the continuation of Europe's transatlantic commitment, the gradual shift in trade trends cannot be ignored. The system of American-European economic relations has been significantly affected by the bilateral, intergovernmental approach of the Trump administration and the harsh criticism of multilateral global organisations from its side. Economic cooperation between Washington and Brussels has been severely affected by the suspension of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations and the US's overtly protectionist

economic policy moves. These have resulted in reciprocally imposing tariffs with Europe on each other's products, moreover, actors from the EU market responded to US protectionism by looking for other free trade partners.<sup>9</sup>

The Chinese economy has grown more than fortyfold since its partial opening-up in 1978<sup>10</sup> and the country intends to secure its growing global role by means of its assertive investment strategy, manifested in projects like the “Going Global” and “Made in China 2025” policies, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and 17 + 1 cooperation framework.

The EU’s approach towards China was set out in a Strategy adopted in 2016<sup>11</sup>, which was updated in 2019.<sup>12</sup> The document points out the EU's four-dimensional approach to China, simultaneously considering Beijing as a cooperation partner, a negotiation partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival.<sup>13</sup> As an attempt to expand EU-Beijing economic relations in 2021, the parties agreed to sign a bilateral trade agreement (Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, CAI) earlier this year,<sup>14</sup> however, due to the intervention of the United States, the agreement is not expected to be finalised in the near future.

Future EU-US relations will be significantly affected by the fruitfulness of the dialogue between the parties, which is increasingly the case in the relations with China too. The EU declares Washington to be the most important and closest strategic partner while emphasising the importance of its own independence, both economically and in terms of defence policy. The transatlantic link for European trade remains unquestionable, but the declining “gravity” of Washington’s economic power and the rapid expansion of the Asian market are already strongly outlining the challenges of future market trends.



Trade balance of the European Union with China and the US from 2010 to 2020 (in billion euros) – declining US volume, growing trade indicators with China. Source: Statista<sup>15</sup>

## Security policy – old allies, new challenges

If there is one area where the commitment to cooperation between Brussels and Washington is reflected, then it is undoubtedly the field of defence policy. China challenges the international order based on Western values, which inevitably puts the confrontation of worldviews between East and West in the centre.

*“I don’t think the overwhelming majority of countries in the world would recognise that the universal values advocated by the United States or that the opinion of the United States could represent international public opinion,” (...)* *“And those countries would not recognise that the rules made by a small number of people would serve as the basis for the international order.”*<sup>16</sup> – said Mr. Yang Jiechi, director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office of the Communist Party of China at Anchorage meeting between the leaders of Washington and Beijing in March 2021.<sup>17</sup> The failure of the first in-person meeting of leading American and Chinese diplomats since President Joe Biden’s inauguration makes it plain, that the US (and the Western world as a whole) will have difficulties managing Chinese activities openly challenging the American mindset of the “rules-based international order” comparing it to the logic of the “more equal animal” from Orwell’s Animal Farm.<sup>18</sup>

From an EU point of view, the growing US-China rivalry could be as challenging as the security issues in East Asia itself, as each would negatively affect Europe's strategic interests, and the stability of the trading environment. The EU has increased its security engagement in the East Asian region, cooperating with the US and by the adopting several initiatives. The European perspective considers North Korea and the South China Sea as the major security flashpoints in East Asia:<sup>19</sup> the evolution of the Guidelines on the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy (adopted in 2007 and revised in 2012) shows that the South China Sea is gaining attention from the EU in addition to the concerns regarding North Korea’s nuclear programme and the situation of Taiwan. In 2018, the EEAS (European External Action Service) enhanced the „EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia”,<sup>20</sup> declaring a commitment towards security cooperation with Asian partners and to contribute to a rules-based order and security in the continent. Europe's approach to East Asian security is increasingly embedded in the

new balance of power: maintain the existing security balance, and at the same time prevent any turbulence, which could jeopardise Europe's growing strategic interests in the area, such as the emerging economic relations.

The EU is an independent player in shaping the security policy of the region, - mainly through soft power measures<sup>3</sup> - however, regarding the involvement of military force it clearly relies on the NATO framework.

AUKUS, the new trilateral security partnership between the US, Australia, and the UK announced in October 2021, aimed at strengthening and stabilising the South Pacific-Indian Ocean region, affected not only Beijing, but also NATO's oldest allies badly.<sup>21</sup> The security pact has fundamentally shaken NATO's allied system as it not only ignores but also violates the economic and security-strategic interests of the US' oldest military allies.<sup>22</sup>

The EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy<sup>23</sup> – released the same day as AUKUS – expresses the willingness of the EU to expand its presence in the Indo-Pacific according to US requests, moreover, the EU is ready to jointly represent its co-operational (but not confrontational) approach to the region.<sup>24</sup> The lack of coherence, coordination, and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, which has previously been blamed on the EU, already applies to NATO's allied system itself.

From a security policy perspective, therefore, Europe is not just facing challenges caused by China's economic and military activities in the Indo-Pacific and worldwide, but by the need for a redefinition of the transatlantic partnership that hopefully may serve as the security foundation of the new world order.

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<sup>3</sup> The EU's diplomatic efforts to find a communication and cooperation platform with China: EU-China High Level Strategic Dialogue since 2010, between the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) and the Chinese State Councillor responsible for foreign affairs, since 2011 yearly meeting between the EU's HR and the Chinese Defence Minister, dialogue on military affairs between the Chair of the EU Military Committee and his/ her counterpart in the People's Liberation Army. Besides, the EU and Japan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement on regional and global matters in 2018, since 2011 EU-Korea High-Level Political Dialogue has been in place between the EEAS Deputy Secretary General and South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister. In 2019, Strategic Partnership on maritime security has been established between the EU and the ASEAN countries, moreover, the EU is a strong supporter of establishing a China, Japan, and South Korea trilateral cooperation platform since 2011. (CASARINI, Nicola: Rising to the Challenge: Europe's Security Policy in East Asia amid US-China Rivalry., In: The International Spectator., 2020. Vol 55, No 1., <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/casarini.pdf> (13.11.2021) p. 82-86)

## Climate policy

Last but not least, there is one issue connecting the EU, the US and China in addition to economic and security interdependence: they are the largest GHG (Greenhouse Gas) emitters of the world.<sup>25</sup>

The global value and significance of the Paris Agreement (PA) signed in 2015 was overshadowed by the US withdrawal from it in 2017, and the emerging cooperation vacuum has strengthened EU-China cooperation on climate policy. The narrative of China's climate policy has changed significantly over the past 10 years: before the PA, China strongly appealed to the “rising developing country” card, by which it expressed its right to economic development, requesting financial and technical support from countries with historical responsibility on this issue. However, following the PA, Beijing predicts its openness to climate partnerships showing its “strong power face” and acting as a policy maker.<sup>26</sup>

The EU since the early days of international climate politics considers itself as a leading actor, moreover, as a bridge-building actor between developed (and large-scale emitters) and developing countries. The EU-China climate relations started with launching a Partnership on Climate Change in 2005, followed by the 2012 Joint Declaration on Energy Security and the 2013 EU–China Strategic Agenda. Since 2015 the enhanced cooperation between Beijing and Brussels resulted in a Declaration, and also a Statement on Climate Change and Clean Energy in 2018 „*underlining their highest political commitment to the effective implementation of the PA in all its aspects*”.<sup>27</sup> In 2020, the EU and China announced the establishment of a High-Level Environment and Climate Dialogue (HECD), creating a key bilateral platform to fight against climate change.<sup>28</sup>

Absence of the Chinese President from the UN Climate Change Conference (UNCCC) called COP26 in 2021, which is the leading global platform on climate change issues; and the refusal to join an agreement to limit methane was strongly criticised by the US, that in the meantime declared that it is willing to return into climate diplomacy by President Biden who was personally present. The unexpected announcement of the US-China agreement to boost climate cooperation over the next decade<sup>29</sup> was warmly welcomed by the EU, even if it means a narrowing leverage for Europe to advocate its own interests. By accelerating its Green Deal Policy, the EU is willing to take leadership in global environmental governance, becoming the first climate-neutral continent by



2050. One of the means to achieve European ambition is the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)<sup>30</sup>, intending the implementation of an extra cost of carbon-intensive imports from countries with less strict climate regulations, thereby preventing European companies from moving their production to less climate-conscious nations and ensuring fair competition in the single market.<sup>31</sup> This measure provoked strong criticism from Beijing and Washington, claiming that climate change *“should not become a geopolitical chip, a target for attacking other countries or an excuse for trade barriers”*.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the joint implementation of American and Chinese climate policy ideas may be a challenge for the EU in the future, which can easily hamper the realisation of its large-scale commitments.

## V4-China relations

As a key internal group in the EU, the Visegrád countries can achieve the most favourable position in the emerging new world order by simultaneously approaching the main actors, and in this view formulating a clear and efficient China policy will be key in the future.

The cooperation between the V4 member states and Beijing is framed by the group's membership in the EU and transatlantic institutions, supplemented by the state-level designated economic expectations. The starting point of the V4's joint approach towards China was launching political consultations between the Deputy Foreign Ministers of the Visegrád Group and the Chinese Foreign Minister in 2018.<sup>33</sup> The V4 declared its interest to join the Beijing-led “Belt and Road Initiative”<sup>34</sup> and to become members of the 17+1 format in 2012<sup>4</sup>, yet the Visegrád countries are divided by the measure of their engagement in the cooperation with China.

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<sup>4</sup> Originally the format was established as „16+1” in 2012 with 16 member states, and extended to “17+1” after Greece joined to it in 2019. (CIURTIN, Horia: The “16+1” Becomes the “17+1”: Greece Joins China's Dwindling Cooperation Framework in Central and Eastern Europe. In: Jamestown Foundation, China Brief Vol 19, Issue 10., 29.05.2019., <https://jamestown.org/program/the-161-becomes-the-171-greece-joins-chinas-dwindling-cooperation-framework-in-central-and-eastern-europe/> (13.11.2021))

On February 2021, Lithuania's parliamentary committee on foreign affairs agreed to leave the 17+1 format, urging reconsideration of the China-Europe relations, as current cooperation has “almost no benefits” for Lithuania. GERDZIUNAS, Benas: Lithuanian FM: ‘17+1’ format with China divides Europe. In: Euractiv, 03.03.2021., [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/lithuanian-fm-171-format-with-china-divides-europe/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/lithuanian-fm-171-format-with-china-divides-europe/) (13.11.2021))

If we want to measure the Visegrád countries on a scale according to their attitude towards China, Hungary would take the most pro-China position, which is manifested on a bilateral level (by accommodating Beijing's soft power tools<sup>35</sup>, in particular agreeing to open a Chinese university campus in Budapest<sup>36</sup>) and also on multilateral level (by its pro-China position channelled into EU mechanisms).<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Hungary is the only Visegrád member, to build 5G network infrastructures in the country in cooperation with China,<sup>38</sup> unlike the other three parties, which declared to be US allies in favour of 5G security.<sup>39</sup>

Poland's approach represents the next "stage" on the scale of the V4's attitude towards China, whereas in this case soft power efforts are not, but the expected economic benefits were enough to build an enthusiastic relationship with the Eastern power. On the one hand, Warsaw aims to boost its economic and trade activity relying on the participation in the Belt and Road Initiative benefiting from Poland's favourable geopolitical position (located at the opposite end of the Eurasian bridge), also, to expand its influence on a global scale.<sup>40</sup> However, disproportionality at the trading volumes should constrain Warsaw to caution, since China is Poland's largest Asian trading partner, however, with extreme disparity in the trade balance.<sup>41</sup>

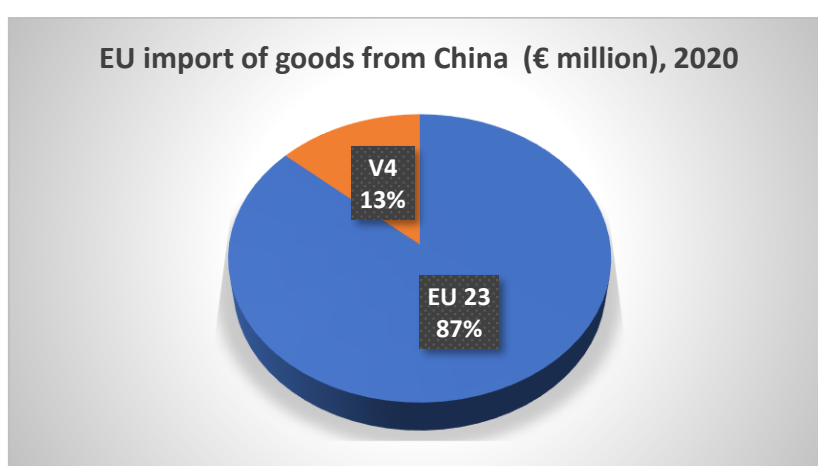
The foreign policy attitudes of Slovakia and the Czech Republic towards China are similar in a sense that they can be divided into two eras, in which the diplomatic dynamics are opposite. For Slovakia these are the passive era, or in diplomatic terms, unfriendly China approach (demonstrated by the visit of the Dalai lama to Slovakia in 2015<sup>42</sup>) and the era of improving political relations with China for economic purposes<sup>43</sup> (starting with the adaptation of a China strategy<sup>44</sup> in 2017).

Reversely, the Czech Republic's foreign policy dynamics moved from a pro-Beijing approach (between 2013-2017) to unfavourable views of China,<sup>45</sup> fuelled by the growing US-China tensions. In this context, loose economic cooperation between the Czech Republic and China also contributes to the political discourse of "we have nothing to lose".

For the V4, the rise of China as a global power is an inevitable phenomenon, to which it must provide a response that will ensure the future economic prosperity of the group, however, strengthening Eastern relations must not isolate it from its historical Western allies. From a Chinese foreign policy point of view, the cooperation with the V4 might

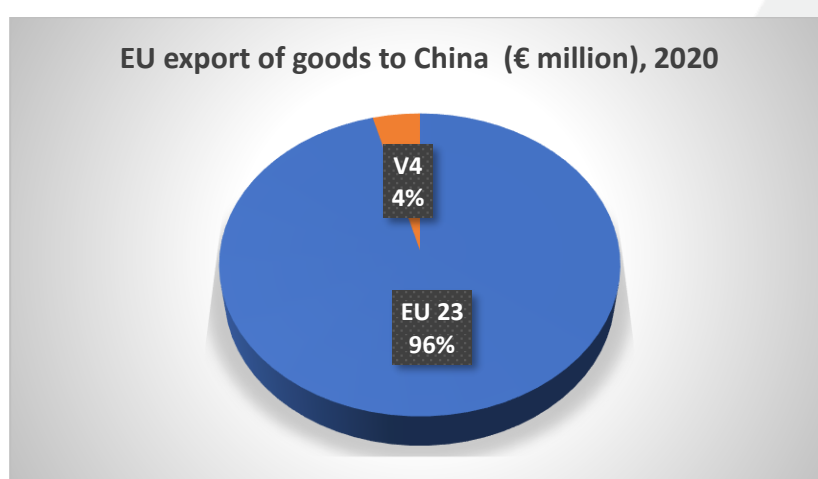
be a valuable complementary channel of contact with the EU, by “*playing a constructive role in China-Europe relations*” and “*prompting Europe to formulate friendlier policies towards China*”.<sup>46</sup>

For future cooperation, the V4+China format would be flexible enough to prevent the V4 from acting as a „Trojan horse” for China in the extension of its influence to Europe, and at the same time, a suitable platform to develop relationships in the field of education (mobility programmes granted by the Visegrád Fund), research (science, technology, and innovation), diplomatic relations (establishing V4 Trade Houses in China), culture and tourism (developing the „Visegrád brand”).<sup>47</sup>



The V4 as a group is the third-largest importer of goods from China within the EU.

Source: Eurostat<sup>48</sup>



The V4 as a group is the sixth-largest exporter of goods to China within the EU.

Source: Eurostat<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusions

With the ongoing reorganisation of the global world order, China's rise from a developing country to a leading power poses several challenges to the EU. The European Union's foreign policy toward China, unalienable from Washington's position, is defined by economic policy (mutually beneficial, regulated development), security policy, and climate policy (possible and necessary cooperation platform). In a sense, both the US and China can be identified as problematic parties in terms of EU interests: while the transformation of the security policy aspect challenges the US-EU relations; in the case of China, the EU's economic security is at stake.

Europe's military protection previously provided by the US since the Trump era<sup>5</sup> is no longer self-evident,<sup>6</sup> besides, the conclusion of the new security treaty (AUKUS) with the complete omission of Europe also sends a serious message. China's relationship-building strategy based on a bilateral logic (One Belt One Road and 17+1 Initiative) may challenge the unity of the EU in the future, as the EU member states are divided by their engagement towards the cooperation with China. In addition to the current asymmetry in economic relations and China's specific interpretation of trade principles require an answer from the Western community the-sooner-the-better.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> MCGEE, Meghan: Europe Needs to Push Back Against Trump. In: Foreign Policy, 10.07.2020., <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/10/trump-europe-nato-transatlantic-push-back/> (13.11.2021)

<sup>6</sup> Linking NATO defence guarantees to military spending started to be emphasised during the Trump administration. As a consequence, Washington even envisaged a punishment for those members that do not meet the commonly agreed minimum defence expenditure of 2% of the GDP, by threatening with reorganisation and withdrawals that would significantly weaken Europe's security umbrella that is historically provided by the NATO. These new developments brought the need for strengthening European independent defence capabilities to the forefront.

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