

# Europe as a Secondary Theater? Competition with China and the Future of America's European Strategy

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## Abstract

Competition with China has become the main lens through which the United States looks at the world. How will this affect US strategy in Europe? First, Washington's increased focus on China leaves fewer US resources available to influence security developments in and around Europe. This compels US policy makers to seek ways to preserve a favorable regional balance in Europe that require less of the United States. Second, Sino-American competition is leading Washington to view its transatlantic relationships in terms of how they affect its position relative to China. As the Euro-Atlantic area becomes less central to US grand strategy, global—and particularly China-focused—considerations will play an increasingly important role in the context of the transatlantic relationship.

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The United States has steadily shifted strategic attention toward China and Asia since the end of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> However, US strategists long argued that the US and China shared an interest in “sustain[ing] . . . the international . . . system that has enabled [China's] success.”<sup>2</sup> The Trump administration, in contrast, was the first to define America's relationship with China in unambiguously competitive terms, referring to China as a “long-term strategic” competitor seeking to “substantially revise the post-Cold War international order and norms of behavior.”<sup>3</sup> Bipartisan support for this approach means that the decision to put global competition with China at the center of US grand strategy may turn out to be President Trump's main foreign policy legacy.<sup>4</sup> Critically, the notion that the United States finds itself in strategic competition with China appears to have won strong support among Democrats,<sup>5</sup> with

the Obama administration's senior China advisor describing competition with China as "more of a condition than a strategy"<sup>6</sup> and the party's 2020 platform urging that the United States must "stand up to China" to "shape the unfolding Pacific century."<sup>7</sup>

As competition with China becomes increasingly central to US grand strategy, the United States is likely to look at different regions and relationships across the world through the lens of that competition.<sup>8</sup> How is competition with China likely to affect US strategy in Europe? We argue that a stable Europe is a precondition for the US to marshal diplomatic, economic, and military resources to compete with China. This means that the US both seeks to ensure a favorable balance of power in Europe and to enlist European support in its rivalry with China. Thus, two sets of challenges exist for the United States going forward.

First, to influence and maintain a favorable balance of power in Europe, Washington has traditionally relied on a strategy of forward military presence coupled with economic and diplomatic engagement. But US resources are limited, and increasing demand for them in Asia raises new questions about whether Washington can preserve a favorable European regional balance at a lower cost than in the past. In this context, Washington must consider how much influence it is willing to cede to European actors, including Germany, Russia, Britain, France and the European Union (EU).

Second, as Europe becomes a secondary theater in US grand strategy, Washington is compelled to ensure that Europe's key powers and institutions support US interests when it comes to competition with Beijing, or at least that they do not undermine US efforts in this regard. In reframing its relationship with Europe, the US is paying increasing attention to Europe's positions toward China and Asia. Washington recently warned Europeans, for example, about China's efforts to leverage investments and trade to gain technological and related strategic advantages relative to the United States.<sup>9</sup> China-related considerations are also likely to gain relevance in the context of America's calculations vis-à-vis Russia, a country that can play a direct—if limited—strategic role in China's immediate periphery: Central Asia, Northeast Asia, and the Western Pacific. For now, the US continues to look at Russia (primarily) through a European lens and worries about Moscow's potential to threaten US regional interests and upset the European balance. However, as competition with China becomes the focus of US grand strategy, Washington may increasingly consider how Russia can affect that competition—whether through its relationship with China, its ability to strain the European balance of power, or its propensity to create challenges elsewhere in the world.

While it is certainly conceivable that the United States could retain such overwhelming advantages vis-à-vis all its peer competitors, or that China's rise could organically slow or reverse, the US does not seem to be betting on either scenario.<sup>10</sup> The centrality of China in US grand strategy appears to be structural, driven by the broader eastward shift in the distribution of global economic power. It is therefore unsurprising that as the United States becomes increasingly preoccupied with China's rise, it adjusts strategy in other regions accordingly. The fact that Washington has labelled China as a "global" competitor makes it difficult to isolate Sino-American competition in Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific area from what happens in other theaters, particularly Europe.

This article first introduces the notion of Sino-American competition as it relates to Washington's European strategy. Second, we focus on US efforts to maintain a favorable balance of power in Europe and delineate a set of challenges that arise as Washington has fewer resources at its disposal for a proactive role in this regard. Third, we look at Washington's efforts to coordinate with Europeans—allies and adversaries alike—in its rivalry with China. Drawing on an examination of elite discourse, interviews, and existing literature, we demonstrate that Washington's European strategy is today informed by both European and non-European developments. In the conclusion, we briefly summarize our main findings and provide avenues for future research.

### **Sino-American Competition and US Grand Strategy**

The US's post-Cold War strategic reorientation toward Asia has developed over successive administrations of both parties, benefiting from broad elite support.<sup>11</sup> The rise of Asia was a prominent foreign policy theme during the Bush and (especially) Obama administrations, both of which looked at Asia primarily through the lens of economic opportunity. While the Obama administration noted the risks China's rise and military modernization posed to the region's existing security order, it also clung to the notion that economic liberalization would bring about political liberalization and avoided casting its relationship with Beijing in unambiguously competitive terms.<sup>12</sup>

The Trump administration has, though, particularly emphasized the competitive character of the Sino-American relationship and elevated that competition to the center of US grand strategy.<sup>13</sup> The 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) describes China as challenging "American power, influence, and interests . . . across political, economic, and military arenas," aiming "to change the international order in [its] favor."<sup>14</sup> In addition, the

unclassified synopsis of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) notes that the US seeks to “expand the competitive space” in its relationship with Beijing to “compete, deter, and win.”<sup>15</sup> The NSS highlights China’s attempts to “displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region” and “reorder the region in its favor.”<sup>16</sup> Against that backdrop, the NDS underscores the importance of “maintaining a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific” and reassuring US allies and partners therein.<sup>17</sup>

The Trump administration did not view competition with China as limited to Asia or even the broader Indo-Pacific, nor as solely military.<sup>18</sup> In fact, it prioritized technological competition. US vice president Mike Pence, for example, strongly denounced ongoing efforts by Chinese state-led companies to access—and eventually dominate—global markets in technologies such as fifth generation (5G) cellular network technology and artificial intelligence (AI).<sup>19</sup> The developed economies and lucrative markets of Europe and East Asia are particularly important in this context.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, the 2017 NSS and 2018 NDS identify Russia as a strategic competitor and often lump Russia and China together, thus seeming to confound prioritization.<sup>21</sup> US officials want to reassure allies and avoid the appearance of neglecting other regions (including Europe) for the sake of Asia.<sup>22</sup> Yet in their public statements, both President Trump and his senior advisors periodically identify China as the greatest challenge for the United States and the rules-based international order.<sup>23</sup> Secretary of State Mike Pompeo argued that China, not Russia or Iran, constitutes the greatest threat to the West.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in his remarks to the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2019, former secretary of defense Patrick Shanahan argued that his main priority is to ensure military overmatch worldwide, but particularly with China, which he described as a “whole-of-government threat to the US.”<sup>25</sup> US defense officials have argued that in practice, China is a clear priority.<sup>26</sup> Within the DOD, “Russia is seen as a pretty significant but diminishing threat, whereas China is seen as a growing and long-term threat.”<sup>27</sup>

Although critics often point to alleged inconsistencies in the US’s China strategy, some of its broad contours have remained rather stable. For one thing, the US appears to have abandoned the prospect of China becoming a “responsible stakeholder” in the (US-led) international order.<sup>28</sup> The US has also emphasized its willingness to counter China’s military actions in Asia and across the broader Indo-Pacific region.<sup>29</sup> Such an approach toward Beijing enjoys bipartisan support in Washington, meaning it will likely persist into future administrations—with variations in style but consistency in viewing China as a global competitor.<sup>30</sup>

Because outcompeting China has become its most pressing strategic challenge, Washington is adjusting its policies and relationships elsewhere in the world to ensure that they support competition with Beijing. While the shift has been gradual, it is now apparent; it represents a significant change from the twentieth century when the US went to war twice in Europe and conflicts elsewhere were often driven by the logic of European security. Whereas during the Cold War the US enlisted European allies in a global struggle against a European power, today the US seeks to enlist European allies in a global competition with a non-European power.

To be sure, neither competition with China nor the preservation of a favorable regional balance in the Indo-Pacific fully monopolizes US global strategy. Both the 2017 NSS and the declassified synopsis of the 2018 NDS emphasize America's ongoing commitment to the preservation of "favorable balances of power in Europe and the Middle East."<sup>31</sup> The NSS even refers to Europe as the United States' most "significant trading partner" and notes that America is "safer when Europe is prosperous and stable."<sup>32</sup> Yet there is growing concern in Washington about how China's rise might affect European security. In this regard, the NSS warns about Beijing's supposed efforts to "gain a strategic foothold in Europe by expanding its unfair trade practices and investing in key industries, sensitive technologies and infrastructure."<sup>33</sup> A 2019 task force report published by the bipartisan Asia Society similarly identifies "China's pursuit of a mercantilist high-tech import-substitution industrial policy" and its "economic and diplomatic statecraft to gain a military foothold beyond Asia," including in Europe, as key grand strategic challenges.<sup>34</sup> In other words, because US strategic objectives in Asia and Europe are increasingly interdependent, China and Asia are also becoming increasingly relevant in Washington's dealings with and in Europe. This interdependence complicates America's European strategy in two ways: by underscoring the problem resource trade-offs and by pushing the US to reconcile competing interests across the two regions.

### **Preserving the European Balance of Power**

Ensuring that no single state or coalition of states would dominate either Europe or East Asia has been a top geostrategic priority for the United States since at least the First World War.<sup>35</sup> Europe and East Asia represent the world's greatest concentration of latent power in terms of wealth, demographics, and military-industrial potential.<sup>36</sup> They are also the two parts of the Eurasian "rimland" that have the easiest and most direct access to the continental United States via the Atlantic and Pacific

Oceans.<sup>37</sup> If a single power managed to dominate the resources of either region, it would be in a strong position to challenge the US's global economic and strategic influence and freedom of action. While there has been an isolationist strand in foreign policy thinking since the birth of the United States, successive postwar administrations have embraced the view that maintaining a network of forward bases and alliances in Europe and East Asia is the most efficient way to preserve a favorable balance of power in those regions and mitigate the risk of such a challenge. The primary alternative of “offshore balancing”—basing forces in the US and responding to emergencies as they arise—has not gained much adherence in the US government or with either political party, as it is seen as riskier and more expensive.<sup>38</sup> Scholars who advocate for offshore balancing also recognize this fact, even as they often portray events like the end of the Cold War or the 2008 financial crisis as a window of opportunity for the US to adopt a strategy in line with their prescriptions.

For most of the twentieth century, the US clearly elected not to pursue an offshore balancing strategy in Europe. Since the end of the Second World War, in particular, the United States adopted a proactive, forward-leaning grand strategy in Europe as it sought to manage the only two powers deemed to have the potential to dominate the system: Russia and Germany. After defeating Germany militarily in the Second World War, Washington's immediate priority was to ensure that it would not be in a position to threaten the continental balance again. Yet with Germany militarily and industrially devastated, divided between East and West, and East Germany and most of Eastern and Central Europe under Soviet influence, attention turned toward Moscow—now the greatest threat to the European balance. The United States soon concluded that a friendly and submissive (yet adequately armed) West Germany was the most cost-effective way of balancing the power of Soviet Russia in Central Europe and thus promoted West Germany's reindustrialization and remilitarization.<sup>39</sup> But this strategy required significant US investment and presence in Europe to reassure the rest of the Continent's states: Secretary of State Dean Acheson was concerned about Germany acting as “the balance of power in Europe,” and many European allies preferred Germany never to rearm.<sup>40</sup>

Critically, by advancing NATO and the European Community (EC) as mechanisms to oversee the process of West German rearmament and reindustrialization, the United States (and its British and French allies) would ensure that Bonn's potential would work for and not against its interests. America's Cold War European strategy thus followed a logic of

dual containment: the Soviet Union through alliances and deterrence and West Germany by socializing it into the nascent transatlantic community.<sup>41</sup> As the Soviet Union grew more threatening and West Germany socialized into the West, the United States focused increasingly on the need to keep the Soviets out rather than keeping the Germans down. In any event, the preservation of a balance of power in Europe was America's chief global concern throughout the Cold War. This is not to say that Washington did not pay attention to other regions, especially East Asia. But because the strategic competition with Moscow was identified as the top priority of US grand strategy, because Moscow's power base was firmly anchored in Europe, and because Europe was the world's most economically dynamic region outside North America, few US resources were spared when it came to the primary objective of preserving the European balance.<sup>42</sup>

With the implosion of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Europe began to progressively lose the centrality it had enjoyed in US grand strategy during the Cold War. But even absent an immediate threat to the balance of power in Europe, policy makers did not seek to shift to a strategy of offshore balancing. After all, Washington's forward presence in Europe continued to provide it with positive leverage over its allies' strategic direction. It also served as a launching pad for US activities elsewhere, especially in the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> In any case, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the United States seemed to enjoy such overwhelming advantages vis-à-vis all its potential competitors that discussions on resource trade-offs between regions appeared unnecessary. There was a widespread sense that Washington could do anything, everywhere, any time.<sup>44</sup> This unipolar era appears to be waning. The 2017 NSS and 2018 NDS herald the return of great power competition, identifying China and Russia as long-term strategic competitors that are challenging US interests and the balance of power in Europe and the Indo-Pacific simultaneously.<sup>45</sup> More broadly, the United States faces a much less permissive international environment than was the case during the immediate post-Cold War period.<sup>46</sup> Against this backdrop, resource prioritization is an increasingly salient issue.

Additionally, most scholars and experts agree that China poses a more comprehensive long-term challenge for American power than Russia does. Already in 2014, John Ikenberry wrote that it was China's rise that would inevitably bring the United States' unipolar moment to an end.<sup>47</sup> For his part, John Mearsheimer refers to Russia as "by far the weakest of the three great powers for the foreseeable future, unless either the US or Chinese economy encounters major long-term problems." The key question, according to him, is "to determine which side, if any, Russia will take

in the US-China rivalry.”<sup>48</sup> But as the United States continues to shift its gaze further eastward, can the stability and presence of friendly powers in Europe be guaranteed without a strong US engagement?

The United States currently faces a strategic dilemma in Europe. On the one hand, the prioritization of China and Asia constrains Washington’s ability to engage in Europe, incentivizing it to adopt a more indirect and flexible approach.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, a significant retrenchment of US power in Europe could leave “too much” space for other players, spurring a process of geopolitical competition that could be damaging to US economic and political interests or, worse still, result in the rise of a dominant power in the Continent. While such risks appear manageable at low cost to offshore balancers, US policy makers disagree. Three powers are particularly relevant in this regard: Russia, Germany, and the prospect of a politically united and strategically autonomous EU.<sup>50</sup>

Europe experts in the United States call attention to the continued importance of Europe-related challenges for US security and prosperity.<sup>51</sup> However, such challenges are no longer at the top of America’s grand strategic hierarchy. As the US adopts an increasingly indirect approach to European security, Washington will devote fewer resources and attention to the achievement of its strategic objectives there. Three challenges stand out: ensuring that Russia and Germany do not become either too strong or too weak, ensuring that the Russian-German relationship is neither too cooperative nor too conflictual, and empowering key allies in Western Europe (notably Britain and France) and helping them preserve a regional balance of power. Below, we address each of these challenges in turn.

### ***Preserving a Favorable European Balance: Neither Too Strong nor Too Weak***

To preserve the European balance, the US has long sought to ensure that Germany and Russia are neither too strong nor too weak. While German power is comfortably anchored in the institutional architecture of the current international order and a broader “transatlantic orientation,” excessive German power in relation to the rest of Europe remains a concern noted by actors ranging from Trump’s trade advisor Peter Navarro to the leader of the German Social Democratic Party.<sup>52</sup> Rising power in both Germany and Russia could lead to mutual apprehension and increase the risk of tensions. On the other hand, weakness in one could excessively embolden the other, which would risk disturbing the regional balance.<sup>53</sup> Either development could draw the US into unwanted and costly confrontation in Europe. Its increasing focus on the balance of



power in Asia constrains its flexibility and footprint to manage these less pressing risks in Europe.<sup>54</sup>

For one thing, growing Russian assertiveness militates against significant US disengagement from European geopolitics. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow's push to reestablish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe has even led some observers to warn of an emerging "New Cold War" in Europe.<sup>55</sup> While there is vibrant debate about how durable Russian power may be, previous US administrations have considered Russia to be severely constrained by structural, economic, and demographic problems.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the presence of NATO and the EU along its western border, growing Chinese influence across Central Asia and Siberia, and ongoing instability in the Middle East have led Moscow to spread its resources across several fronts, limiting its ability to meaningfully threaten the European balance of power.<sup>57</sup> Yet Washington currently sees Russian aggression as a real risk and believes that credibly deterring Russia—and, critically, reassuring regional allies—requires some form of US military presence in Europe. In fact, since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the US has reinforced its military posture on the Continent. At the same time, its prioritization of China has led the United States to reassess the relative importance of certain subregions within Europe. It has constrained its engagement in areas like the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and the Caucasus while prioritizing the Baltic and Black Sea areas.<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, Germany has become, since the end of the Cold War, the economic and financial leader of the EU. Reunification and the enlargement of NATO and the EU to Eastern Europe brought additional security, autonomy, and economic opportunities for Berlin, reducing its strategic dependence on the US and NATO and even reinforcing its position vis-à-vis France and Britain.<sup>59</sup> Germany's centrality to the EU's response to the 2008 global financial crisis and in EU policy toward Russia since 2014 illustrate its rise.<sup>60</sup> But the need to negotiate decisions with multiple partners and institutions in the context of the EU still constrains Germany as well. France and the UK (perhaps less so after Brexit) also remain important political counterweights to German leadership within Europe. Moreover, while Germany has taken on a stronger leadership role in European foreign policy in recent years on the diplomatic front, the German electorate's discomfort with military force limits the country's ability to play a leading security role.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to previous US administrations, however, the Trump administration did not think of the EU as a constraint on Berlin. Instead, it saw the EU as a mechanism to further German interests and power and even

supported anti-EU initiatives and movements, including Brexit.<sup>62</sup> This approach is not purely ideological: Washington faces a long-standing dilemma with regard to European integration.<sup>63</sup> To the extent that European integration promotes political cooperation, stimulates economic growth, and helps balance Russian power while harnessing German power, it is positive for US interests. However, if the EU were to become either too strong or dominated by a single power, US interests in European balance would be at risk.<sup>64</sup> Washington's attitude toward defense cooperation in an EU framework is a good example: the United States welcomes EU efforts aimed at strengthening defense capabilities as positive contributions to the transatlantic security relationship.<sup>65</sup> However, it is suspicious about attempts in the EU to develop an exclusive approach toward defense policy both on industrial and geostrategic grounds, as it could prove harmful to the position of US defense companies on the European market while constraining US leadership in the transatlantic community.<sup>66</sup>

While the prospect of a politically and strategically integrated Europe is not exclusively dependent on Germany, Berlin's active participation and leadership (in cooperation with France) is indispensable for any real breakthrough in that regard. That means that German power and the specter of a strategically and politically united Europe are two interrelated challenges for US grand strategy.<sup>67</sup> In this regard, as Washington rebalances its attention toward China and the Indo-Pacific, ensuring that the European integration process does not decouple from the wider transatlantic framework and advance in a direction harmful to US interests promises to become increasingly challenging.

### ***Balancing between Intra-European Cooperation and Conflict***

The US has traditionally sought to ensure that the relationship between Germany and Russia is neither too cooperative nor too conflictual. This is the case because too much German-Russian cooperation could lead to some form of condominium between the two and upset the European balance, thereby undermining US regional influence and freedom of action.<sup>68</sup> A key illustration of this dynamic is US opposition to the construction of Nord Stream 2, a 1,200-kilometer-long offshore natural gas pipeline between Russia and Germany. US officials accuse Berlin of ignoring the interests of its allies by filling Russia's coffers and bypassing Central and Eastern European countries, leaving them vulnerable to Russian pressure.<sup>69</sup> They fear that Nord Stream 2 would allow Moscow to threaten credibly to cut off gas supplies in Eastern Europe without undermining its business with Western Europe.<sup>70</sup> Because Nord Stream 2 would make Germany the

key transit country in continental Europe, critics have accused Berlin of profiting at the expense of its neighbors, who would find themselves paying more at the end of the transport route through Germany.<sup>71</sup> Chancellor Merkel's government continues to defend the project as a purely commercial initiative, however, if less energetically following pressure from allies resulting from the poisoning of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny.

Even as US policy makers are wary of a cooperative German-Russian relationship, conflict in Europe is an entanglement risk that the US would prefer to avoid.<sup>72</sup> If anything, this dilemma is likely to become more salient as the US strives to keep its engagement in Europe relatively contained. Thus, as Washington continues to shift its attention toward China and the Indo-Pacific, it will likely seek engagement in Europe that is sufficient to influence the strategic interaction between Germany and Russia. Such proactive engagement in Europe, even if somewhat costly, may prove to be an effective insurance policy against costlier risks.

### ***Keeping a Strong Anchor in Western Europe***

Finally, the existence of strong and independent countries in Western Europe firmly allied with the United States geopolitically has historically given Washington strategic reach in the region. In particular, a strong alliance with nuclear powers Britain and France is key from a US perspective, as their strategic autonomy supports a European balance of power. During the Second World War, Britain's ability to withstand an invasion was essential to the logistics supporting Europe's liberation. During the Cold War, the UK and France played important roles in both nuclear and conventional deterrence. Both remain today an important buffer against the specter of German economic and diplomatic dominance in Europe.<sup>73</sup> Critically, their status as Europe's most capable conventional and only nuclear powers allows France and the UK to guide Germany in security matters while also deterring Russia.

If anything, the importance of France and the UK, and their role in managing German and Russian power in Europe, is likely to increase as the US shifts its focus to Asia. At the same time, the 2011 Libya intervention highlighted that British and French influence in and around Europe is more effective with US support. Thus, as it prioritizes China and the Indo-Pacific, the United States may strive to find a balance between delegating greater responsibility to Britain and France in Europe and ensuring a sufficient level of engagement to support those two countries. For example, France leans on the United States to balance resources required to manage terrorism-related challenges in the Sahel while also supporting

NATO efforts to deter Russia and defend the Baltic States. Yet resource constraints and a potentially unbalanced Europe are no longer the only challenge for America's European strategy. An increasingly important challenge relates to ensuring that Europe's key actors and institutions support—or at least do not hinder—US efforts in the context of its competition with China.

### **The US-China Rivalry: Coordinating with Europe**

It has become rather commonplace in US scholarly circles to assert that Europe's global importance is decreasing. Experts in grand strategy are less and less interested in Europe-related developments, while China and Asia experts are increasingly in demand.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the European continent is not immune from Sino-American competition. In fact, in (re)framing its European strategy, Washington has started to think beyond its traditional concern with preserving a regional balance of power and seeks to ensure that Europe's key powers and institutions are on its side when it comes to competition with Beijing. This important consideration is increasingly affecting how the United States interacts with its European allies and competitors.

### ***America's European Allies and Competition with China***

The relationship between Washington's European partners and its competition with China is largely technological and economic. Current efforts by Chinese state-led companies to access—and eventually dominate—global markets in key technologies like 5G and AI raise important strategic as well as privacy- and competition-related issues. China's disinterest in Western standards, coupled with lack of reciprocity and other barriers to foreign companies operating in the Chinese market, makes these challenges even more acute. The lack of a level playing field ultimately means that China could leverage global supply chains and infrastructure nodes to game the current international order against American power. Europe's advanced economies are an important prize in that context.

Against this background, several Trump administration officials warned Europeans that using technology from Chinese telecommunications manufacturer Huawei could hurt their relationship with the United States. Washington accused Huawei of being a Trojan horse for Chinese intelligence and has tried to check its influence.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, most Europeans appear to believe that the security risks are manageable, proposing additional security requirements rather than a complete ban.<sup>76</sup> In response,

Washington warned that the inclusion of Huawei equipment in next-generation mobile networks could curtail intelligence sharing and hurt relations with the US.<sup>77</sup> It also announced sanctions to those foreign tech manufacturers that sell computer chips built with American technology to Huawei.<sup>78</sup> Although there was some domestic criticism of Trump's transactionalist approach to the issue, a bipartisan effort is underway to stimulate smaller non-Chinese companies to make individual pieces of networking equipment that interact with one another, breaking Huawei's market dominance.<sup>79</sup> This effort further underlines the United States' preoccupation with the prospect of Chinese dominance in this field. And in any case, dependence on Chinese 5G solutions would make Europeans vulnerable to Chinese sabotage of different sorts.

Beyond 5G, which has become a particularly contentious issue in transatlantic relations as of late, Washington is increasingly worried about China's growing economic and political influence across Europe.<sup>80</sup> One concern is the 16+1 (17+1 since the formal inclusion of Greece in April 2019), a forum involving China and a number of Central and Eastern European countries to discuss issues relating to investment, economic, and trade cooperation. After the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the 17+1 format turned into a platform for China to develop infrastructure projects to connect China to Europe. It aimed to facilitate Chinese access to European markets and export its excess capital and labor while building its economic reach on the Continent.<sup>81</sup> The 17+1 format has allowed China to bypass the EU as a bloc and strengthen its diplomatic and political influence over individual countries. For instance, when Hungary broke the EU's consensus on human rights violations in March 2017 by refusing to sign a joint letter denouncing China's alleged torture of detained lawyers, some observers were quick to link this to increased Chinese investment in the country.<sup>82</sup> Similar reactions emerged in July 2016, when Hungary and Greece blocked a reference to Beijing in a Brussels statement on the illegality of Chinese claims in the South China Sea.<sup>83</sup>

Over the past decade, the economic and migration crises have exacerbated several cleavages within and between European countries, among which the North-South and East-West divides stand out. As the 17+1 platform illustrates, China has proven quite adept at drawing on those divisions while leveraging its financial and economic largesse to increase economic presence and political influence in Europe.<sup>84</sup> This strategy has caused alarm in the United States. In a 2018 speech at the Heritage Foundation, former assistant secretary of state for European affairs A. Wess Mitchell alluded to parts of Europe as a new playground for China.<sup>85</sup> Relatedly, ac-

According to a senior White House official, “China poses an even greater threat to Europe than Russia does” because Russia’s interests and behavior in the old continent are “relatively predictable,” whereas China’s are unpredictable, making China “a highly disruptive force in Europe.”<sup>86</sup> Russia’s economic weakness and thirst for European capital empower European countries vis-à-vis Moscow, opening up the possibility of employing sanctions and other tools of economic statecraft. Yet it is unclear to what extent Europeans are able or willing to adopt similar strategies with Beijing.

The United States is concerned about China’s growing economic and political influence *within* Europe for two reasons. First, it enables China to amass European financial or market access support for its bid to dominate key technologies such as 5G, neutralizing potential European support for the United States in the context of its long-term strategic competition with Beijing, or even allowing Beijing to gather support in some instances. Second, China’s ability to engage with European countries bilaterally or through subregional clusters challenges European cohesion. The 17+1 framework is particularly striking, as it encroaches into core EU competences like trade or infrastructure. Traditionally, US policy makers have viewed European cohesion as an important enabler of US power. Since sowing divisions and instability is cheaper for China than it is for the United States and its European allies to redress such divisions, China’s policies are deemed problematic. Admittedly, the Trump administration has departed from the long-standing American tendency to consider European cohesion as an end of US strategy.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, US leadership considers a Europe divided on Chinese terms a risk for Washington.<sup>88</sup>

Beyond China’s influence, Europe’s place in Sino-American competition is also about how Europeans may facilitate or hinder Chinese influence in other regions, most notably along the Indo-Pacific maritime axis.<sup>89</sup> Some US officials expect European allies to play a more proactive role in the Indo-Pacific, stepping up their diplomatic and military presence there and joining forces with Washington and its Asian allies, including in territorial disputes with China.<sup>90</sup> Former US secretary of defense Leon Panetta, in his farewell speech in Europe, urged US European allies to accompany Washington as it rebalanced its strategic attention to Asia.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the decision to strengthen deterrence in Eastern Europe may be affecting America’s calculus, as facing two “long-term strategic competitors” (China and Russia) and a constrained resource environment forces the United States to prioritize. Against this backdrop, there is a growing feeling amid US defense officials that the most efficient way to use the resources and capabilities of

US European allies is to deter Russia and provide security in their own continent (and its immediate neighborhood), thus (partly) relieving Washington of its burden there as it prioritizes Asia and the Indo-Pacific.<sup>92</sup> In the words of one US defense official, European allies “should focus on holding the line in Eastern Europe” and let “the United States and its East Asian allies guarantee security in Asia and the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>93</sup> At the same time, however, US policy makers also realize that Europeans have their own interests in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Thus, a key challenge for the United States going forward is how to steer the activities of its European allies in the Indo-Pacific in a fruitful direction from the viewpoint of its competition with China.

How could Washington’s European allies assist the US in its competition with China in the primary Indo-Pacific front, contributing to a favorable balance of power there? One important challenge is ensuring that European technology does not fuel China’s military modernization. For several decades, Washington has exerted considerable pressure on the EU to maintain its arms embargo against the PRC, even threatening adverse consequences for transatlantic defense industrial relations.<sup>94</sup> As competition with China becomes more salient, the United States is also paying increasing attention to Europe’s transfer of “dual-use” technology to China and has urged some of its allies (in particular the French) to scrutinize more carefully their technology and capability transfers to China.<sup>95</sup>

Beyond the issue of arms transfers, the United States is devoting increasing attention to the security role that countries like Britain or France can play across the Indo-Pacific, as both possess an important infrastructure of overseas bases across the region, powerful navies, and growing strategic ties with key US allies and partners in the region.<sup>96</sup> Thus, Washington is encouraging greater military-to-military interaction with Britain and France in the Indo-Pacific as well as supporting greater connectivity between those two countries and its key allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, the United States is worried about European signs of support to Chinese efforts to reorder Asia and the Indo-Pacific region in its favor. In this regard, in 2015, Britain, Germany, France, and Italy decided to join the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), ignoring pleas from the Obama administration not to do so.<sup>97</sup> To manage this problem, the United States has recently sought to elevate the question of China and the US-China competition to the top of the transatlantic political agenda, as illustrated by the summit of NATO heads of state and government in Washington, DC, in April 2019 and the leaders’ meeting in November 2019.<sup>98</sup>

### ***Competition with China and the Future of US-Russia Relations***

The China factor will also become increasingly important in US strategic calculations vis-à-vis Russia. The growing Sino-Russian relationship poses a significant challenge for the US—while it will certainly seek to avoid a China-Russia alignment, it is unlikely that the US would align with either against the other in the current environment, as some have argued. Russia's connection to Asia and to the broader process of Sino-American competition is perhaps clearer than that of other European states. It is through Russia that the connections between the European and Asian theaters become most apparent. Russian fears about China's growing influence in Central Asia, Eastern Siberia, or even the Arctic could offer an opportunity for a US-Russia rapprochement—analogueous to the US opening to China during the Cold War, which forced the USSR to divide its attention and resources across Europe and Asia. In this regard, Richard Betts argues that since “the rise of China is ultimately a more serious security challenge than Russian reassertion . . . realists should hope for a way to achieve a US rapprochement with Russia.”<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, Putin's regime identifies the United States as the main threat to its security, and Russia has made its relationship with China a strategic and geo-economic priority. Their 1997 border agreement, coupled with both countries' seeming determination to sooth existing frictions, has ensured an amicable relationship in recent years, enabling both parties to focus on competition with the US. From a US viewpoint, a hostile Russia can cause mischief but remains “weak and sufferable.”<sup>100</sup> Russia and China together, however, are a much tougher challenge.

From a Russian viewpoint, the more Moscow signals to Washington that its relationship with Beijing is strong, the higher the price the US may be willing to pay politically to pry Russia away from China. US officials are by and large skeptical of America's ability to manipulate the Sino-Russian relationship. However, there is a growing recognition in Washington that an excessively confrontational approach toward Russia in Europe could push Moscow closer to Beijing, compromising America's broader geopolitical standing.<sup>101</sup> This scenario creates an important dilemma for the United States, as Russia could conclude that touting its strategic ties with China could help extract geopolitical concessions from the US.<sup>102</sup> Yet as Washington prioritizes its competition with Beijing, preventing the consolidation of a Sino-Russian bloc becomes important. Should, then, the US accept Russian interests in Europe or the Middle East in exchange for Russia's cooperation in limiting Chinese influence in regions like Central Asia, the Arctic, or the Western Pacific or even Russian



neutrality in Asian geopolitics? More broadly, what can Russia do for or against the US in Asia and in relation to China more specifically?

There are already signs suggesting that China and Asia may be increasingly relevant to US-Russia relations. Analysts have argued that the US decision to withdraw from the bilateral Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) with Russia followed a realization that Beijing (which was not part of the treaty) was making gains at the expense of both Washington and Moscow.<sup>103</sup> Despite official insistence that European security concerns drove the decision to suspend its obligations under the INF, many experts have argued that the decision was actually driven by a desire to develop and deploy systems prohibited under the INF to counter Chinese capabilities. Since Beijing is no party to the arms control treaty, US officials have argued that the People's Liberation Army has an advantage there.<sup>104</sup> This raises an important question: Is the United States willing to embrace decisions that might be detrimental to the security of its European allies and interests for the sake of the higher-order objective of out-competing China?

In the short term, however, three factors are likely to complicate US-Russia rapprochement. First, the US electorate remains suspicious of Russia—investigations of Russian influence in the 2016 US presidential election remain salient. Second, alliances in Europe still shape US behavior, and Russia poses an immediate threat to some US regional allies. Finally, Russia's behavior challenges American values as well as US security interests in Europe. As a matter of fact, both Republicans and Democrats are generally reluctant to accommodate Russia for the sake of balancing against China and deeply mistrust Moscow. The combination of the above factors complicates fundamental change. Nonetheless, as Washington looks at Russia through both a European and an Asian lens, and through the specific lens of the Sino-American competition, a delicate balancing act lies ahead.

## **Conclusion**

Competition with China has become the United States' top grand strategic priority. In examining how Sino-American competition, both in Asia and globally, affects the US European strategy, we identified two sets of challenges for Washington going forward. The first relates to resource trade-offs and the evolving Europe versus Asia hierarchy in US grand strategy. Because resources are scarce and US strategy prioritizes competition with China, Washington will have fewer resources for a proactive role in Europe, enabling other actors (Germany, Russia, Britain, France, and

the EU) to increase their influence. The US is increasingly weighting its prioritization of the Indo-Pacific against the need to stay engaged in Europe, with a view to preserving a favorable regional balance of power. Going forward, US engagement will likely seek to prevent Germany, the EU, and Russia from becoming either too strong or too weak; to ensure that the relationship between those three actors is neither too cooperative nor too conflictual; and to enable Britain and France to remain strong enough to help Washington preserve a regional balance of power.

The second set of challenges relates to the United States expanding its traditional concern with preserving the European balance of power. It now also wants to be assured that Europe's key powers and institutions are on its side regarding competition with Beijing—or at least that they do not hinder US strategic objectives in terms of China and Asia. Toward this end, US strategy challenges that lie ahead in Europe include ensuring that European allies do not enable Chinese superiority in key technologies (including 5G or AI), ensuring that European activities in the Indo-Pacific support US strategic objectives, countering Chinese attempts to create division in Europe, and preventing Russia from becoming too close to China.

These conclusions have important implications for future research and policy analysis. We have based them on a simple premise: the prioritization of competition with China makes Europe a secondary theater for US grand strategy. We surely acknowledge that, when it comes to US China policy, different administrations will aim to strike their own balance between cooperation and competition and may thus make different choices regarding specific policies. However, there appears to be a broad consensus within the United States that competition with China is a structural phenomenon and is likely to be the key strategic challenge for Washington in the coming years or even decades. Against that backdrop, it is important for scholars to start thinking about what a China-first strategy means for US strategy elsewhere. Herein, we have sought to open that discussion through an analysis of America's European strategy.

Our analysis also has policy implications for the United States and Europe. We have outlined the broad contours of what Europe as a secondary theater means for US strategy on that continent. In particular, we have outlined the importance of reconciling the pressure on the US to downsize in Europe to focus on the Indo-Pacific with the need to maintain sufficient engagement to preserve a favorable regional balance of power in Europe. What kind of military posture, diplomatic strategy, or economic presence would that reconciliation require? We have barely scratched the surface of

that discussion, which is likely to remain key for US policy makers and scholars in the years to come. For their part, Europeans still need to come to terms with the notion that Sino-American competition may well become the ordering principle of international politics. As they do, they must also ascertain how they will position themselves in that context: Will they pick a side or, instead, emphasize European strategic autonomy and reject the frame of Sino-American competition? Experts and policy makers have only just begun to debate this question.<sup>105</sup> Their answers may well determine the shape and relevance of the transatlantic relationship in the twenty-first century. **SSQ**

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