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Will Europe Ever Really Confront China?

The Biden administration is gearing up for a long-term struggle in China—but shouldn't expect its closest allies by its side.

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The Biden administration has made no secret of its desire to enlist America's extensive array of allies in the "strategic competition" against China. This approach makes good sense in Asia: Most Asian countries have ample reason to worry about a Chinese drive for regional hegemony, and the United States cannot counter such an attempt without extensive cooperation from Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, and others. Managing these relationships effectively will require attentive U.S. diplomacy, but in the Asian context the common interest in balancing China is obvious.

U.S. President Joe Biden & Co. would also like America's European partners to be part of this effort, however, and that's a rather different kettle of herring. I'm not referring to the recent defense agreement among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, known as AUKUS, which has little to do with a European effort to balance China and everything to do with Britain's desire to preserve its so-called special relationship with America and Canberra's interest in deepening its own ties to Washington. Following America's lead has been a knee-jerk response for every British prime minister since Winston Churchill, but it remains to be seen if London will put more than a token effort into the new partnership.

Moreover, by ticking off the French, AUKUS undermined the effort to bring continental Europe into a broad balancing coalition against China, which was already likely to be an uphill battle. This is not a trivial issue: Most European countries are comparatively wealthy, mostly democratic, important economic players within the European Union context, and capable of producing sophisticated weaponry. Europe also contains two nuclear-armed United Nations Security Council members and more than 500 million people. For these and other reasons, how the nations of Europe line up could make a significant difference in the overall balance of world power.

So: Will Europe balance China or not?

You'll forgive me if I suggest that the best way to think about this is balance of threat theory. Balance of threat theory argues that states typically ally in order to balance the greatest threats they face. The level of threat, in turn, is a combination of four components of threat: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions. Other things being equal, nearby states with a lot of economic and military power are more threatening than those that are far away and thus more likely to prompt states in their neighborhood to ally against them. And again, all things being equal, states with large, offensively oriented militaries are more threatening than states that have modest military capabilities or armed forces designed more for territorial defense than for power projection or conquest. A weaker state judged to have malign intentions might be seen as more threatening than a powerful state that is actively

friendly or at least largely satisfied with the current status quo; if so, the former will trigger more balancing behavior than the latter.

Perceptions of threat can change rapidly if a state with lots of power potential is growing rapidly, acquiring military capabilities well suited to attacking others, and openly seeking to revise existing territorial or political arrangements to benefit itself at others' expense. Because intentions can change quickly and the future is always uncertain, states typically hedge their bets, allying with others against today's danger but keeping other options open should the threat environment change.

From the vantage point of balance of threat theory, current trends in Asia are easy to understand. Contemporary China is ringing alarm bells on all four components of threat, which is why its Asian neighbors are moving together in various ways and seeking to partner more closely with the United States. China's aggregate power has risen dramatically over four decades, and it is translating its growing wealth into an increasingly potent set of military capabilities. It is hardly surprising that nearby states are alarmed by these developments, even though they have all benefited from Chinese economic growth. Moreover, the role of China's military forces is no longer limited to defending mainland China from direct attack and can now be used to project power against its immediate neighbors and eventually even further afield. Lastly, Chinese behavior in the South China and East China seas and toward Taiwan, its adoption of belligerent, "wolf warrior" diplomacy, and President Xi Jinping's repeated claims about making this era a "Chinese century" have raised legitimate concerns about China's long-term intentions. Given all the above, counterbalancing behavior in Asia (and the United States) is hardly surprising.

But what about Europe?

On the one hand, China's rising power and its tendency to use that power to punish other countries for even minor offenses have shifted European attitudes in a sharply negative direction. Twenty years ago, European attitudes toward China were mostly positive; today, the share of the population with an "unfavorable" view of China has reached 63 percent in Spain, 85 percent in Sweden, 70 percent in France, and 71 percent in Germany. China's confrontational diplomatic style and its efforts to impose cultural uniformity by "reeducating" millions of Uyghurs have played poorly in Europe as well. These dimensions of threat—rising aggregate power and growing perceptions that China is a revisionist power that doesn't play nice—have led many European governments to take a warier view of China's growing role on the world stage. Looking ahead, a shared desire to keep a restless, intolerant, and quick-to-anger China from exerting the greatest influence over the core principles of world order is likely to encourage most of Europe (and especially America's closest allies there) to line up with Washington, at least on such issues as trade or basic human rights.

But on the other hand, Europe is a very far from China, and Beijing poses no threat to the territorial integrity of any European states or to other basic elements of their national security. China is not going to invade Europe, attack it with nuclear weapons, or sponsor large-scale terrorist attacks there. Even a vastly more powerful Chinese navy is not going to sail halfway around the world and try to impose a blockade. Nor is China about to send millions of refugees to Europe's borders. So what is there for Europe to balance against?

Historically, balancing coalitions in Europe have formed to stop a single European power from dominating the others and establishing itself as the continental hegemon. Think of the

coalitions that ultimately defeated Napoleonic France or Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, or the NATO alliance that contained and eventually outlasted the Soviet empire. One might imagine a similar coalition forming were a potentially hegemonic Russia to reemerge (or, even more improbably, a resurgent Germany or France), but such prospects are exceedingly remote. Indeed, to the extent that divisions within Europe impede European "strategic autonomy," it is because there is no hegemonic threat to Europe, and everyone there knows it. For the foreseeable future, the prospect of Chinese hegemony over Europe approaches the impossible.

If this is true, then why would it be in Europe's interest (or France's, or Germany's, or Britain's, or Spain's, etc.) to take sides in a military contest with China? Consider what French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said just this week: "The United States wants to confront China. The European Union wants to engage China." He added that the key issue for Europe is to become "independent from the United States, able to defend its own interests, whether economic or strategic interests." Even now, most European countries are understandably reluctant to jeopardize their economic ties to China—whose share of German exports has increased from only 1.6 percent in 2000 to more than 7 percent in 2018, while America's share fell from 10.3 percent to 8.7 percent over the same period—creating a further disincentive to balance China militarily.

Despite these obstacles, some European nations may still be willing to balance China for other reasons. They might do so because they have their own interests in Asia—for example, France has extensive maritime possessions and more than a million citizens in the Pacific, though I doubt metropolitan France could defend its far-flung holdings against a determined aggressor. Or, as I've suggested before, Europe might join a U.S.-led balancing coalition because it understood that Americans won't go on protecting them if they opt for neutrality vis-à-vis China. But in this scenario Europe would do only the minimum necessary to appease American opinion, and my guess is that it won't amount to much.

The Biden administration (and especially Biden himself) appears to believe that shared democratic values can bind Europe and the United States together in a grand anti-Chinese coalition. So do hawkish Europeans such as former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, whose repeated calls for an "alliance of democracies" have yet to yield tangible results. Hopes such as these are likely to be disappointed: Why would Europe make a serious military effort to defend or promote democracy on the other side of the world, when the EU cannot even figure out how to respond to the erosion of democracy in Hungary and Poland and the active suppression of democracy in Belarus?

And let's not forget that parlous state of democracy in the United States. It's hard to unite the world's democracies when one of America's two major parties is openly undermining the existing democratic order and trying to secure permanent minority rule, and when evidence of democratic dysfunction appears every single day. Moreover, if the Republican Party succeeds in derailing a serious U.S. effort to address climate change—a danger that Europeans take seriously (and rightly so)—that additional element of disharmony will make it even harder to form a common front against China.

So what are the prospects for meaningful trans-Atlantic cooperation to balance China? I'm not sure. My best guess is that the United States and Europe will continue to line up on a lot of soft power issues: human rights, public health, nonproliferation, some (but not all) efforts to reform the global economic order, and the like. We might see occasional joint freedom of

navigation operations through the South China Sea and sustained discussions on what (some) European states might do should a genuine crisis involving China to occur. Both sides of the Atlantic will be willing to impose symbolic sanctions on perceived troublemakers from time to time. And I am sure the United States will continue to insist that Europe work hard to keep sensitive technology with military applications out of Beijing's hands.

But I don't see much more beyond that. According to balance of threat theory, Europeans are going to focus primarily on dangers arising closer to home, and most European countries will be deeply reluctant to put lives or prosperity at risk to help maintain the regional balance of power in Asia.

It may be tempting for Americans to see European reluctance to balance China as a sign of cowardice, misplaced idealism, or strategic myopia, but such indictments are too harsh. What is really at work here is a structural change in the distribution of power (and threats), which has been unfolding gradually ever since the Soviet Union imploded. It has taken decades to manifest itself, in part because the unipolar era (1993-2009) obscured what was happening beneath the surface. Today's world is one of lopsided multipolarity, which means a more ambiguous threat environment for many states and a range of different choices for great and medium powers alike. Trans-Atlantic solidarity was ultimately the product of the bipolar Cold War, and it would be unrealistic to expect relations and commitments established in one geopolitical context to endure once that context has been transformed.

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