

IS EUROPE READY FOR A BIPOLAR WORLD?

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of a bipolar world dominated by US-China competition will be one of the most crucial factors shaping global security in the years to come. This evolution will be particularly challenging for Europe and transatlantic relations. In the event of a US-China confrontation, Europeans would face increasing responsibility because the US would need to focus on the East Asian theatre; in the case of a bipolar détente, the US might want to cooperate increasingly with China, possibly at the expense of the transatlantic partnership. With a view to being better prepared for those risks, Europeans should develop their strategic autonomy, reinforce their economic sovereignty and restore their naval power.

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INTRODUCTION

Although some authors argue that US unipolarity is unlikely to erode anytime soon,¹ while others consider the world to be evolving towards multipolarity,² the fact that the global balance of power is increasingly structured around the US-China economic and military competition has contributed to diffusing the view that the world has actually become bipolar.³

Structural realists measure polarity by the distribution of material capabilities.⁴ In a bipolar system, the capabilities of two main powers dwarf those of any other state in the system; bipolarity does not necessarily involve the formation of two alliance blocs. In economic terms, China represents 66% of the US GDP, while the third largest power, Japan, is only at 24% of the US level.⁵ In terms of military capability, China reached 38% of the US defence budget in 2018, while the third-ranked country, Saudi Arabia, was only at 10%.⁶ Overall, the US-China gap is progressively narrowing, while the gap between China and potential third competitors such as Russia or India is growing.⁷ According to some authors, China is already a more serious challenger for the US than the USSR once was, as the Soviet GDP only briefly surpassed 50% of that of the US during the Cold War.⁸

The transition towards bipolarity is likely to have important implications for the dynamics of world politics. On the one hand, a bipolar system is more competitive and subject to recurring crises than a unipolar one. On the other hand, a bipolar system is supposed to be relatively stable because the two superpowers can focus their full attention on each other and rely on their own capabilities to balance their competitor. In contrast, in a multipolar system, “who is a danger to whom is often a most obscure matter” and coalition dynamics

1. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: Why the Sole Superpower Should Not Pull Back from the World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

2. Barry R. Posen, “From unipolarity to multipolarity: transition in sight?,” in G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 317-341; Donette Murray and David Brown (eds), *Multipolarity in the 21st Century: A New World Order*, London, Routledge, 2012.

3. Mark O. Yeisley, “Bipolarity, proxy wars, and the rise of China,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 5:4, 2011, p. 75-91; Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, “Vers une bipolarité fluide États-Unis/Chine ?,” *Revue Défense Nationale*, 781, 2015, p. 58-63; Richard Maher, “Bipolarity and the future of U.S.-China relations,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 133:3, 2018, p. 497-525; Yang Yuan, “Escape both the ‘Thucydides Trap’ and the ‘Churchill Trap’: Finding a third type of great power relations under the bipolar system,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2018, p. 193-235; Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018.

4. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1979, p. 131.

5. 2018, current US\$. Source : the World Bank https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ny.gdp.mktp.cd?most_recent_value_desc=true

6. 2018, current US\$. Source: SPIRI <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

7. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism*, *op. cit.*, p. 77-81; Yang Yuan, “Escape both the ‘Thucydides Trap’ and the ‘Churchill Trap’: Finding a third type of great power relations under the bipolar system,” *op. cit.*, p. 204-206.

8. Richard Maher, “Bipolarity and the future of U.S.-China relations,” *op. cit.*, p. 449; Barry R. Posen, “From unipolarity to multipolarity: transition in sight?,” *op. cit.*, p. 321.

among great powers have a stronger impact on the balance of power, which generates higher uncertainty around risks of defection or alliance shifts.⁹

The transition towards a bipolar world is a crucial issue for the relationship between the US and its European NATO and European Union (EU) partners. Admittedly, the transatlantic link is the product of many factors ranging from shared democratic values to trade ties and cultural backgrounds. However, the polarity of the international system has historically been an important variable affecting the evolution of the strategic relationship between the US and Europe. Several periods can be distinguished:

- Before 1945, in a *multipolar* world, transatlantic relations were characterised by *strategic detachment*. The US could rely on power balancing among European states to prevent the formation of a threatening hegemony without having to become permanently committed in European affairs. Punctual US involvements in European security alternated with periods of isolationism and retrenchment to the Western Hemisphere.
- During the Cold War, in a *bipolar* world between the US and the USSR, transatlantic relations were characterised by *strategic coupling*. The defence of Western Europe through NATO was crucial for the US's capacity to balance Soviet power.
- After the Cold War, in a *unipolar* world, transatlantic relations have been characterised by *partial decoupling*. Because the US no longer had to focus its efforts on balancing Russia and saw its freedom of action considerably increased by the absence of any credible challenger, its commitment to Europe became less predictable. While NATO managed to renew itself, in particular by adding crisis management to its traditional territorial defence missions,¹⁰ transatlantic frictions experienced during the 1990s Balkans crises also encouraged EU members to establish the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to develop their capacity to act autonomously.¹¹

How will the emergence of a new bipolar world between the US and China affect Europe? As US allies located in a region that is peripheral to Asia-centred competition, Europeans will likely see their relationship with the US, their role as allies and thus their strategic position in the world increasingly challenged. For Walt, there is little basis for close transatlantic defence cooperation vis-à-vis China because China's rise threatens US hegemony in Asia much more than it threatens Europeans' security interests and because China has become a key economic partner for the EU.¹² Walt concludes by predicting the future obsolescence of the transatlantic partnership. Similarly, Maher notes not only the absence of a shared transatlantic threat perception vis-à-vis China but also the Europeans' inability

9. Kenneth N. Waltz, "The stability of a bipolar world," *Daedalus*, 93:3, 1964, p. 881-909, see p. 883; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics, op. cit.*, p. 169-170.

10. Sten Rynning, *NATO Renewed: The Power and Purpose of Transatlantic Cooperation*, Basingstoke, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005; Seth A. Johnston, *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.

11. Barry R. Posen, "European Union security and defense policy: response to unipolarity?," *Security Studies*, 15:2, 2006, p. 149-186; Galia Press-Barnathan, "Managing the hegemon: NATO under unipolarity," *Security Studies*, 15:2, 2006, p. 271-309; Moritz Weiss, "Transaction costs and the establishment of the European Security and Defense Policy," *Security Studies*, 21:4, 2012, p. 654-682.

12. Stephen M. Walt, "[There's no partnership in pivot](#)," *Foreign Policy*, 8 July 2014.

to make a meaningful contribution to a US-led balancing coalition against Beijing even if they wanted to.¹³ For Tunsjø US-China bipolarity challenges transatlantic ties because it relegates Europe to a secondary strategic priority for the US.¹⁴ On the other hand, Simón argues that European integration is largely a by-product of US power and that Europeans' lack of strategic autonomy, in particular in terms of nuclear deterrence, means that they cannot afford not to side with the US in the Sino-American competition.¹⁵

Although it is clear that the transition towards a bipolar world will challenge transatlantic relations and encourage European states to adapt, the precise nature of the risks arising from bipolarity to the preservation of Europeans' strategic interests and the required policy adjustments remain to be specified. To do so, it is necessary to take into account the various possible paths that US-China competition might take in the coming years.

BIPOLAR CONFRONTATION OR DÉTENTE?

Bipolar logic certainly implies intense competition between superpowers.¹⁶ However, even the Cold War was marked by episodes of "détente" or "peaceful coexistence", in which the US and the USSR cooperated in the maintenance of peace and security.¹⁷ In the development of US-China bipolarity, there is debate on the kinds of conflicts and cooperation initiatives that can be expected.

Confrontation

The most popular argument supporting a scenario anticipating a violent US-China confrontation is the so-called "Thucydides' Trap". According to Allison, historical records show that when a rising power has accumulated enough power to challenge the established hegemon, the result is likely to be a major war, the most famous example being the Peloponnesian War, in which Sparta sought to oppose the rise of Athens.¹⁸ Indeed, in the case of a large power shift between two states that disagree on a particular issue, it can be rational for the declining state to attack while it can still impose its favourite solution before the rising state becomes more powerful and thus able to exploit its greater bargaining leverage.¹⁹ Following this rationale, the US would at some point launch a preventive war against China.

13. Richard Maher, "The rise of China and the future of the Atlantic Alliance", *Orbis*, 60, 2016, p. 366-381, see p. 375-77.

14. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

15. Luis Simón, "[What is Europe's place in Sino-American competition?](#)," *War on the Rocks*, 14 February 2019.

16. Kenneth N. Waltz, "The stability of a bipolar world," *op. cit.*

17. Richard W. Stevenson, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: Relaxations of Tension in US-Soviet Relations 1953-84*, Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1985.

18. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

19. James D. Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," *International Organization*, 9:3, 1995, p. 379-414; Robert Powell, "War as a commitment problem," *International Organization*, 60:1, 2006, p. 169-203.

The risk of preventive conflict is particularly serious because, unlike the situation in Europe during most of the Cold War, the delineation of territorial rights is highly contested in East Asia between China and US allies.²⁰ Potential sources of tension include the status of Taiwan, rival claims with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands or with the Philippines over the Huangyan Islands/Scarborough Shoal, and more generally, China's claim of most South China Sea waters, which challenges many other states' understanding of their freedom of navigation rights.²¹ In all these issues, China seeks to revise the status quo as understood by the US; in recent years, China has even adopted an increasingly assertive attitude reflecting its growing power position, intensifying maritime patrols in disputed areas and constructing military facilities in the South China Sea.²² This trend could eventually encourage the US to attack before China is powerful enough to impose a new regional order.

Moreover, US military presence, mainly through its naval battle groups and theatre bases in Japan, the Philippines, and Guam, constitutes the main obstacle to the establishment of a Chinese regional hegemony and has been reinforced since the 2011 announcement of the US "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific region by the Obama administration.²³ This US presence has encouraged China to develop Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2-AD) plans relying in particular on ballistic and cruise missiles, seeking to prevent or delay the arrival of additional US military units in the region in case of conflict and to threaten forward deployed forces.²⁴ The objective would be to create a "no-go-zone" within the area of the First Island Chain, in which the US would be unable to project power. This strategy could lead China to seek to strike first, while US forces are unprepared and before they have a chance to be reinforced by additional units.²⁵ Largely in response to growing Chinese A2-AD capabilities, the Pentagon elaborated the "Air-Sea Battle" (ASB) concept, later replaced by the "Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons" (JAM-GC), seeking to develop integrated forces capable of defeating (ideally, of precluding) attempts to deny freedom of action to US forces.²⁶ In case of crisis, both the US and China could thus seek to strike first, while fearing a pre-emptive attack from the other, which would facilitate rapid escalation.

What would a US-China confrontation look like? During the Cold War, because spheres of influence rapidly stabilised in Europe, proxy wars between the two superpowers broke out in other continents. In contrast, because territorial disputes in China's neighbourhood

20. Thomas J. Christensen, "The meaning of the nuclear evolution: China's strategic modernization and US-China security relations," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35:4, 2012, p. 447-487, see p. 472-474.

21. Gregory J. Moore, "Avoiding a Thucydides trap in Sino-American relations (...and 7 reasons why that might be difficult)," *Asian Security*, 13:2, 2017, p. 98-115, see p. 102-104.

22. Michael Yahuda, "China's new assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22:81, 2013, p. 446-459; Aaron L. Friedberg, "The sources of Chinese conduct: explaining Beijing's assertiveness," *Washington Quarterly*, 37:4, 2015, p. 133-150; Oriana Skylar Mastro, "In the shadow of the Thucydides Trap: International relations theory and the prospects for peace," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 24:1, 2019, p. 25-45, see p. 32.

23. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism*, *op. cit.*, p. 159-160.

24. Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested primacy in the Western Pacific: China's rise and the future of U.S. power projection," *International Security*, 38:4, 2014, p. 115-149; Yves-Heng Lim, *China's Naval Power: An Offensive Realist Approach*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, Ch. 7.

25. Gregory J. Moore, "Avoiding a Thucydides trap in Sino-American relations (...and 7 reasons why that might be difficult)," *op. cit.*, p. 107.

26. Michael E. Hutchens, William D. Dries, Jason C. Perdew, Vincent D. Bryant, and Kerry E. Moores, "[Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons: A new joint operational concept](#)," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 84, 2017, p. 134-139.

remain unsettled, a US-China conflict is more likely to occur in East Asia than in peripheral regions.²⁷ Moreover, unlike during the Cold War, superpowers do not confront each other mainly on land but on sea.²⁸ Not only are the US and China separated by water, but the US has no ally directly bordering China. Land borders facilitate invasions, but the “stopping power of water”,²⁹ in particular the difficulty of conducting amphibious operations, tends to make East Asia a defence dominant theatre.³⁰ While during the Cold War, it was assumed that the Soviet army could rapidly invade Western Europe and could only be deterred by a US nuclear threat, a conflict in East Asia is less likely to have rapid and decisive territorial consequences. This factor tends to reduce the US threat to China and the Chinese threat to US allies in Asia. Besides, both the US and China possess nuclear weapons, although it is not clear whether China has secure second strike capability.³¹ The advantage to defence in East Asia tends to make a major US-China war unlikely.

However, precisely because they have less to fear from a direct confrontation, limited wars between the two superpowers could be more likely than during the Cold War. Because they would not expect confrontation to have rapid and decisive territorial consequences, American and Chinese leaders might paradoxically be more willing to take the risk of a limited sea battle in East Asian waters to solve a dispute or to launch a pre-emptive strike against the other’s military capabilities.³² In addition, because the US enjoys conventional superiority and does not need to rely on a strong nuclear threat (such as the Cold War doctrine of “massive retaliation”) to deter a Chinese invasion, the risk of nuclear escalation is also reduced, which might encourage Chinese decision makers to more easily accept the risk of a limited conventional war.³³

Détente

One of the most often cited factors supporting a scenario anticipating peace and cooperation between the US and China is their economic interdependence. This relies, in particular, on the purchase of Chinese exports by US consumers and the purchase of US debt instruments by the Chinese government, a relationship that former Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence Summers described as “mutually assured financial destruction”.³⁴ Not only are the US and China each the main trading partner of the other,³⁵ but the rise of transnational

27. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism*, *op. cit.*, p. 151-152.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 104-105.

29. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, Norton, 2001, p. 114-128.

30. On the offence-defence balance, see Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the security dilemma,” *World Politics*, 30:2, 1978, p. 167-214.

31. Thomas J. Christensen, “The meaning of the nuclear evolution: China’s strategic modernization and US-China security relations,” *op. cit.*; Oriana Skylar Mastro, “In the shadow of the Thucydides Trap: International relations theory and the prospects for peace,” *op. cit.*, p. 37.

32. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

34. Helge Hveem and T. J. Pempel, “China’s rise and economic interdependence,” in Jo Inge Bekkevold and Robert S. Ross (eds), *China in the Era of Xi Jinping: Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2016, p. 196-232.

35. Office of the US Trade representative, “[The People’s Republic of China](#)”.

production and foreign direct investment (FDI) has made US companies more dependent on inputs made in China and Chinese exports more dependent on US investments.³⁶ This situation contrasts with the previous bipolar system, as the US and the USSR had only limited economic interactions.³⁷

However, the implications of this interdependence are ambiguous. On the one hand, it creates a shared interest in avoiding conflict that could harm the US-China relationship and impose costly effects on their economies.³⁸ On the other hand, when it is asymmetric, interdependence can also be a factor of tension because it provides the less dependent partner with a source of power over the more dependent one.³⁹ Indeed, China's surplus tended to make the Trump administration believe that China had more to lose and thus that the US had the upper hand in the recent trade war and could impose its conditions.⁴⁰ In addition, even if exchanges appear *prima facie* to be mutually beneficial between a dominant and a rising state, the dominant state might feel threatened by the rising state's technological progress. This is the case in particular when the dominant state expects the newly acquired technologies to improve the rising state's relative warfighting capability in a potential future conflict.⁴¹ Indeed, the US-China trade war is not just about reducing the US trade deficit but, more importantly, about technological rivalry, as illustrated by the security-motivated increased restrictions on Chinese investments in American technology, by the ban on Huawei products in the US and by the fact that a large portion of the Chinese exports subjected to punitive tariffs by the Trump administration had high-tech elements.⁴²

In this context, what form could a US-China *détente* take? Some authors argue that preventive wars between a declining state and a rising state can be avoided if the sources of the rising state's future relative strength can be partially transferred to or shared with the declining state.⁴³ By freezing the balance of power between the two states, this transfer would seek to guarantee that the rising state will not be able to exploit the declining state in the future and thus removes the latter's incentive to launch a preventive war while it is still strong enough to win it. In the case of US-China relations, this sharing of power resources could pertain to new technologies. Indeed, China's ability to catch up with US power largely relies on its capacity to acquire and create new technologies, which is reflected in

36. Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*, New York, Norton, 2015, p. 42-44.

37. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism*, *op. cit.*, p. 109-110.

38. Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

39. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1977, p. 18.

40. Ben White and Aubree Eliza Weaver, "[Where we are on China](#)," *Politico*, 5 July 2019.

41. Andrew B. Kennedy and Darren J. Lim, "The innovation imperative: technology and US-China rivalry in the twenty-first century," *International Affairs*, 94:3, 2018, p. 553-572.

42. Suisheng Zhao, "Engagement on the defensive: From the mismatched grand bargain to the emerging US-China rivalry," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28:118, 2019, p. 501-518, see p. 507; Aidan Yao, "Trade war? No, the US and China are vying for technological supremacy, and the markets are catching on," *South China Morning Post*, 6 June 2019.

43. James D. Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," *op. cit.*, p. 406-407; Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, "Uneven power and the pursuit of peace: How regional power transitions motivate integration," *Comparative European Politics*, 6, 2008, p. 102-142.

the priorities of the “Made in China 2025” programme issued in 2015.⁴⁴ Arguably, China is already leading or close to leading the race in strategic frontier technologies such as 5G telecommunications,⁴⁵ artificial intelligence and big data,⁴⁶ quantum computing,⁴⁷ and space technologies,⁴⁸ which all have important security and defence implications. It could be in China’s interest to accept sharing its future advances and its growth potential in these areas with the US through, for example, US-Chinese joint research programmes and joint ventures to appease American fears that these technologies could shift the balance of power or be used against the US in a conflict. This solution would alleviate the risk of a preventive war and, by deepening US-China interdependence, curb US interest in hindering China’s technological development.

More generally, in the long term, a US-China détente could rely on the fact that both powers have a joint interest in avoiding costly conflicts between them but also that they have sufficient combined power to be able to respond to pressing global challenges such as climate change, nuclear non-proliferation or cybersecurity.⁴⁹ This evolution would correspond to the concept of “New Type of Major Power Relations” (NTMPR) promoted by President Xi in 2012, which emphasises mutual benefits.⁵⁰ In the security domain, the détente could involve a “grand bargain” in East Asia, though which the US would end its commitment to defend Taiwan in exchange for China’s agreement to renounce exclusive control over disputed territories in the South and East China Seas (for example, through the establishment of a joint governance framework with its neighbours) and to recognise the long-term US security role in the region.⁵¹ This transaction would greatly alleviate the risk of military escalation between the US and China, as much of the concerns about China’s A2/AD strategy focus on its ability to reduce US capacity to come to Taiwan’s aid.⁵² At the extreme, a US-China détente could lead to a form of “co-ruling”.⁵³ Instead of reproducing Cold War-type well-demarcated and antagonist spheres of influence, the two superpowers would establish joint domination over smaller powers. This co-ruling logic would rely on the functional specialisation of superpowers: while China, in the wake of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), would be the main provider of economic cooperation with smaller powers, the US would remain the main provider of security assurance.⁵⁴

44. Andrew B. Kennedy and Darren J. Lim, “The innovation imperative: technology and US-China rivalry in the twenty-first century,” *op. cit.*, p. 555-556.

45. Stu Woo, “[In the race to dominate 5G, China sprints ahead.](#)” *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 September 2019.

46. Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.

47. Jeanne Whalen, “[The quantum revolution is coming, and Chinese scientists are at the forefront.](#)” *The Washington Post*, 18 August 2019.

48. Greg Autry and Steve Kwast, “[America is losing the second space race to China.](#)” *Foreign Policy*, 22 August 2019.

49. Zbigniew Brzezinski, “[The Group of Two that could change the world.](#)” *The Financial Times*, 13 January 2009.

50. Lam Peng Er, “China, the United States, alliances, and war: Avoiding the Thucydides Trap?,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 43:2, 2016, p. 36-46, see p. 39-40.

51. Charles L. Glaser, “A U.S.-China grand bargain? The hard choice between military competition and accommodation,” *International Security*, 39:4, 2015, p. 49-90.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 69-70.

53. Yang Yuan, “Escape both the ‘Thucydides Trap’ and the ‘Churchill Trap’: Finding a third type of great power relations under the bipolar system,” *op. cit.*

54. *Ibid.*, p. 229-233.

THE RISKS FOR EUROPE

Bipolarity can evolve towards confrontation or détente, or it can alternate between the two. However, the specific implications of both modes must be taken into account to assess the strategic risks that Europe might have to face in the years to come.

The risks entailed by confrontation

Europeans heavily rely on the US for their security. The US is the main provider of security assurance vis-à-vis the Russian threat through NATO and bilateral cooperation covered by the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), and it is also the main leader of ad hoc coalition efforts in Europe's neighbourhood, as illustrated by the war against the Islamic State in the Middle East. The main risks entailed by a potential US-China confrontation would thus come from its impact on US commitment to Europe's security.

As we have seen, a likely scenario for a US-China conflict would be direct but limited confrontation in East Asia's waters involving primarily air and sea capabilities. Because of the stopping power of water, confrontation on land is more unlikely. In case of crisis with its main global competitor, the US would thus be encouraged to refocus most of its air and sea capabilities to the Asian theatre, which would likely affect the capabilities of the US 6th Fleet based in Europe. Already competing for resources with US forces based in the West Pacific theatre, the 6th Fleet finds it increasingly hard to convince the Joint Staff to send additional ships to Europe in a context marked by the growing Russian presence in the Atlantic and Arctic oceans and in the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean seas.⁵⁵ A US-China confrontation could thus make it more difficult to control European waters in the future. However, because massive land operations in East Asia are unlikely, the deterrence capacity of US army deployments in Europe would probably be less directly affected.

At the political level, if the US were to be constrained by a military crisis in East Asia, this would likely reinforce American reluctance to take the lead in crisis management operations in Europe's neighbourhood. This reluctance was already evidenced under Obama, particularly during the Libya war, which the US insisted should primarily be a European mission.⁵⁶ It was confirmed by President Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria, which he justified by saying that the conflict "has nothing to do with us".⁵⁷ In a context of growing bipolar tension, future US administrations, even when sympathetic to Europe, would likely prioritise the preservation of their global margin for manoeuvre.⁵⁸ If crises were to occur simultaneously in East Asia and in Europe's neighbourhood, the

55. Megan Eckstein, "[Admiral: U.S. needs more ships in Europe to counter growing Russian threats.](#)" *US Naval Institute News*, 1st October 2019.

56. Jolyon Howorth, "Implications of the US rebalance toward Asia: European Security and NATO," in Hugo Meijer (ed.), *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Dimensions*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 197-222.

57. Peter Baker and Catie Edmondson, "[Trump lashes out on Syria as republicans rebuke him in House vote.](#)" *The New York Times*, 16 October 2019.

58. Sven Bernhard Gareis and Reinhard Wolf, "Home alone? The US pivot to Asia and its implications for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy," *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 2:3/1, 2016, p. 133-150, see p. 142-143.

US would likely expect Europeans to provide the bulk of the effort required to maintain stability in their own region.⁵⁹

The risks associated with a crisis in East Asia could be made even more serious by Russia's opportunism. Indeed, Russia might be tempted to take advantage of the US's focus on its confrontation with China to expand its power in Europe's neighbourhood.⁶⁰ Russia might try, in particular, to strengthen its position in regions in which the US commitment is uncertain or decreasing, as already illustrated by its military deployments in Syria but also in Africa,⁶¹ where the establishment of a Russian naval base on Eritrea's coast has been announced.⁶² A US-China confrontation might encourage Russians to be even more assertive because it would place them in a favourable strategic position. Indeed, a conflict with the US would encourage Beijing to seek the support of Russia, its main strategic partner;⁶³ however, it could also incentivise the US to accommodate Russia to isolate China and avoid a two-front conflict, in a "Henry Kissinger in reverse" strategy.⁶⁴ As Walt put it, "a revitalized Russia would be a more useful ally against a rising China" than Europeans.⁶⁵ Courted by both superpowers, Russia could seek to take advantage of the situation by demanding recognition of its geopolitical ambitions, possibly at the expense of Europeans.

One of the most serious issues European states would have to face in the case of a crisis in East Asia would be adopting a position on the US-China conflict itself. Indeed, the US would ask its European allies to show unequivocal political support and perhaps even to contribute militarily to its effort. On the one hand, siding with the US would probably be the *sine qua non* condition for continued US security assurance in Europe; on the other hand, alignment with Washington would risk triggering retaliatory measures from Beijing.⁶⁶

This situation would be even more difficult because of China's economic influence in Europe. China's investments in southern European states hit by the economic crisis, such as Greece, Portugal and Italy, which all joined the BRI, and in Eastern Europe through the "17+1" format established in 2012, could allow Beijing to pursue a "wedge" strategy aimed at dividing Europeans and breaking the transatlantic alliance apart.⁶⁷ For example, in July 2016, when the Permanent Court of Arbitration issued a ruling in favour of the Philippines against China on a South China Sea dispute, it took three days of protracted negotiations for the EU to adopt a position. Eventually, the EU did not support the court's decision but

59. Richard Maher, "The rise of China and the future of the Atlantic Alliance", *op. cit.*, p. 380.

60. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism*, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

61. Paul Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa*, Washington, D.C., Carnegie, 16 October 2019.

62. Abdi Latif Dahir, "[Russia is the latest world power eyeing the Horn of Africa](#)," *Quartz Africa*, 3 September 2018.

63. Fu Ying, "How China sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow are close, but not allies," *Foreign Affairs*, 95:1, 2016, p. 96-105.

64. Mark Leonard, "[The Chinese are wary of Donald Trump's creative destruction](#)," *The Financial Times*, 24 July 2018.

65. Stephen M. Walt, "[The ties that fray: Why Europe and America are drifting apart](#)," *The National Interest*, 1 December 1998.

66. Martin Wagener, "Power shifts and tensions in East Asia: Implications for European security," *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 21:3/1, 2016, p. 81-98, see p. 91.

67. François Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, *China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, London, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017.

only “acknowledged” it due to the opposition of Greece, Hungary, and Croatia.⁶⁸ These three countries were all recipients of BRI investments, and Beijing had intensively lobbied individual member states before the decision. Similarly, in 2017, both Hungary and Greece broke the EU consensus on the violation of human rights by China.⁶⁹ In the event of a US-China conflict, a major risk would thus be a division among Europeans, which could paralyse both the EU and NATO.

Finally, even if they decided to side with the US, European states that heavily depend on China’s investments and technologies might no longer be considered reliable partners by Washington. For example, the US considers European allies buying 5G equipment from Beijing-controlled Huawei to be a source of vulnerability.⁷⁰ In case of crisis, Americans could thus decide to cut intelligence and defence cooperation with these states, which would, again, threaten NATO’s unity.

The risks arising from détente

Prima facie, a US-China détente seems to be a much safer scenario for Europeans than confrontation. Indeed, the main perils represented by US disengagement, Russian opportunism and China’s wedge strategy would be considerably alleviated. However, détente among superpowers is not without risks. During the Cold War, Europeans sometimes feared the establishment of a “US-Soviet condominium” that would sacrifice their vital interests.⁷¹ Indeed, in times of bipolar détente, the two superpowers are less in need of allies’ support to balance each other; allies can even be perceived as a liability and a potential source of entrapment in unwanted conflicts. The 1956 Suez crisis, in which both the Soviet Union and the US pressured France and the UK to put an end to their joint intervention in Egypt, is an example of how superpowers can protect “peaceful coexistence” at the expense of their allies. The main risk of détente is thus the formation of a “G2”, as advocated by Zbigniew Brzezinski,⁷² which would impose its decisions on the rest of the world in every domain of global governance.⁷³

In the economic arena, a US-China détente would rely on a bilateral trade deal outside of the established multilateral rules and would thus be unlikely to take into account the interests of other countries.⁷⁴ The situation would be even more difficult for European economies because, if the US resolved its disputes with China, it would have the opportunity to fully refocus its trade wars against the EU, a trend already visible during the Trump admin-

68. Theresa Fallon, [“The EU, the South China Sea and China’s successful wedge strategy,”](#) *Asia maritime transparency initiative*, 13 October 2016.

69. Thorsten Benner and Jan Weidenfeld, [“Europe, don’t let China divide and conquer,”](#) *Politico Europe*, 19 March 2018.

70. Robin Emmott, [“U.S. warns European allies not to use Chinese gear for 5G networks,”](#) *Reuters*, 5 February 2019.

71. Richard W Stevenson, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: Relaxations of Tension in US-Soviet Relations 1953-84*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

72. Zbigniew Brzezinski, [“The Group of Two that could change the world,”](#) *op. cit.*

73. Ramon Pacheco Pardo, [“Return of the G2: Can US and China run the world?,”](#) *The Telegraph*, 12 November 2014.

74. Editorial Board, [“Dangers of a G2 US-China trade deal for the rest of us,”](#) *East Asia Forum*, 20 May 2019.

istration's trade negotiations with Beijing.⁷⁵ If US-China cooperation took a more ambitious path in the high-tech sectors in particular, it would marginalise competitors. Combining the size of their domestic markets, the dynamism of their innovation ecosystems, the power of their giant tech companies and their regulatory capacity, the US and China would be able to impose their standards worldwide. Whereas in a three-way contest between US, Chinese and EU norms, Brussels could be able to diffuse its own approach to internet regulation and data protection rules, a G2 would likely crush the EU's ambition to be a global rule-maker for digital technology and could enshrine Europeans' vulnerability to external surveillance systems.⁷⁶

In the area of security, a bipolar détente might lead the US to increasingly coordinate its foreign policy with China at the expense of the transatlantic dialogue. The rationale would be that global stability would be better served by cooperation among superpowers and that a bilateral format is easier to handle and more effective than complex multilateral discussions. For example, in the Middle East and Africa, the logic of "co-ruling" could imply a convergence between US military power and China's growing economic influence to uphold shared strategic interests in these regions.⁷⁷ This trend would considerably reduce Europeans' ability to influence Washington to take their interests into account. On the other hand, in a context of détente, Russia would be encouraged to behave much more prudently because Moscow would have no leverage on superpowers and the US would not be constrained by the fear of a two-front conflict. Eventually, a US-China G2 could stimulate EU-Russia rapprochement to contest the superpowers' exclusive domination on world affairs.

GETTING EUROPE READY

In sum, in a US-China conflict, European states would confront increasing responsibility and difficult demands from their US ally, which they would not necessarily be able to satisfy; in contrast, a bipolar détente would tend to reduce the strategic relevance of the transatlantic partnership in favour of a more decisive G2 and to weaken Europeans' influence on global affairs. In both cases, transatlantic relations would be tested. A smart European response to the rise of a new bipolar world should be a "hedging" strategy⁷⁸ that allows Europeans to be better prepared for the risks arising from both the confrontation and the détente scenarios.

75. Victor Mallet, James Politi and Jim Brunsten, "[Trump says he is prepared to wait to strike US-China trade deal](#)," *The Financial Times*, 3 December 2019.

76. Alan Beattie, "[Technology: how the US, EU and China compete to set industry standards](#)," *The Financial Times*, 24 July 2019.

77. Yun Sun and Jane Olin-Ammentorp, "[The US and China in Africa: Competition or cooperation?](#)," Brookings, 28 April 2014; Jonathan Fulton, *China's Changing Role in the Middle East*, Washington, D.C., Atlantic Council, 2019, p. 14-15.

78. Robert J. Art, "Europe hedges its security bets," in T.V. Paul, J.J. Wirtz, and M. Fortmann (eds), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 179-213.

Strategic autonomy

The concept of European strategic autonomy (ESA) has been promoted in particular in the 2016 EU Global Strategy⁷⁹ and a partial implementation has begun with the launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF) and non-EU initiatives, such as the European Intervention Initiative (EI2). The definition of the concept and its implications have been much debated, but its core lies in increasing Europeans' capacity to act without the US, whether in the name of burden sharing or in anticipation of potential US disengagement.⁸⁰ Washington's reactions have been generally negative, arguing that ESA could divert resources from NATO and discriminate against the US defence industry.⁸¹ Similarly, some states in Eastern Europe fear that the promotion of ESA could actually encourage the US to disengage from Europe.⁸²

The rise of bipolarity could eventually simplify this debate by making ESA the condition for the very survival of the transatlantic partnership. First, in the event of a US-China confrontation, Europeans' military contribution to the war in East Asia, if any, would be of secondary importance. The main way Europeans could support the US effort would be through a division of labour in which they would take more responsibility for their security and that of their neighbourhood, allowing the US to focus more effectively on East Asia. This would require Europeans to considerably increase their ability to take the lead in a crisis affecting their region.⁸³ Conversely, if, in the context of a confrontation in Asia, Europeans were left to try to limit the US pivot to Asia or to entrap Americans in regional crises in which they do not want involvement as the primary actor, Europeans' strategic dependence would soon be seen as a major hindrance by Washington. Second, in the case of a US-China détente, the US could be tempted to focus on its strategic cooperation with China at the expense of its partnership with Europe. Only by showing that they are able to have some impact and offer added value on key security crises and global challenges will Europeans be able to demonstrate that the transatlantic partnership remains a relevant and attractive cooperation framework and avoid the concentration of decisions in a potential G2.

This means that instead of debating whether ESA is good or bad for transatlantic relations, Europeans and Americans should engage in a more practical dialogue identifying the kinds of crises and missions in which, in the future, Europeans should aim to take the lead because the US will no longer be able or willing to do so due to its growing commitment in East Asia. This coordination would allow Europeans to better plan their capability investments by having a clearer view of their future needs and to better justify the increase in their defence spending to their citizens. Whether with a view to increasing the US global

79. European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy*, Brussels, 2016.

80. Daniel Fiott, "[Strategic autonomy: towards 'European sovereignty' in defence?](#)" *EUISS Brief*, 30 November 2018; Pauli Järvenpää, Claudia Major and Sven Sakkov, *European Strategic Autonomy: Operationalising a Buzzword*, Tallinn, International Centre for Defence and Security, 2019.

81. Jack Thompson, "[European strategic autonomy and the US.](#)" *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, 248, 2019.

82. Pauli Järvenpää, Claudia Major and Sven Sakkov, *European Strategic Autonomy: Operationalising a Buzzword*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

83. Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

margin for manoeuvres or one to better influencing Washington when it could be tempted to focus on more powerful partners, more ESA will be the main condition for a sustainable transatlantic alliance.

Economic sovereignty

In emerging bipolar competition, geopolitics and geo-economics tend to converge. The time in which US military and economic policies vis-à-vis China could be totally disconnected is over.⁸⁴ This convergence will also be crucial in the case of Europe, where the rise of China is mainly experienced through its growing economic power.⁸⁵ This means that the debate on strategic autonomy should focus not only on Europe's operational, capability and industrial defence dimensions but also its implications for economic sovereignty.⁸⁶ Indeed, in addition to the immediate economic and security-related costs associated with Chinese investors' practices in Europe,⁸⁷ longer-term risks for Europeans include either being unable to respond cohesively in case of US-China confrontation due to China's wedge strategy, or losing their ability to influence international norms because of their overdependence on giant US and Chinese companies, in case of détente.

The main challenge for the EU will be better integrating strategic considerations into its economic policies. President Ursula von der Leyen's ambition to lead a "geopolitical Commission" could fit with this objective. The process has already started with the 12 March 2019 joint communication on EU-China relations, which notably promotes a common approach to the security of 5G networks, and the recent EU regulation on the screening of FDI based on security risks.⁸⁸

This approach could be reinforced and extended. For example, the EU regulation on investment screening adopted in March 2019 introduces cooperation and information-sharing mechanisms and allows the Commission to issue opinions when an investment threatens EU security.⁸⁹ Because the final decision remains national, this framework cannot prevent Chinese "divide and rule" strategies targeting vulnerable member states. As a consequence, the cohesion and strategic autonomy of the entire EU could be threatened by a few governments acting under the influence of Chinese investments and failing to establish a proper screening mechanism at the national level. To respond to that risk, the EU Council should be granted the power to veto a foreign investment by acting on a Commission's proposal by qualified majority.⁹⁰ Similarly, the logic of introducing security considerations into economic policies could be extended to EU competition policy, which is currently being

84. Michael Lind, "Cold War II," *National Review*, 10 May 2018.

85. Jonathan Holslag, *The Silk Road Trap: How China's Trade Ambitions Challenge Europe*, Cambridge, Polity, 2019.

86. Mark Leonard, Jean Pisani-Ferry, Elina Ribakova, Jeremy Shapiro and Guntram Wolff, "Securing Europe's economic sovereignty," *Survival*, 61:5, 2019, p. 75-98.

87. François Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, *China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, *op. cit.*, p. 52-53.

88. European Commission and HR/VP, "EU-China – A strategic outlook," 12 March 2019.

89. European Commission, "EU foreign investment screening regulation enters into force," 10 April 2019.

90. Mark Leonard, Jean Pisani-Ferry, Elina Ribakova, Jeremy Shapiro and Guntram Wolff, "Securing Europe's economic sovereignty," *op. cit.*, p. 85.

reviewed.⁹¹ In some cases, antitrust rules could be relaxed based on security interests, particularly when disallowing a merger would lead to dependence on external actors in a strategic sector.⁹² This would partially respond to France's and Germany's call on the EU to allow the emergence of European champions capable of competing with giant US and Chinese companies.⁹³

Finally, Europe's economic sovereignty is not just about "technological sovereignty" in strategic sectors such as artificial intelligence⁹⁴ but also concerns *prima facie* non-strategic sectors, in which dependence on investments by foreign powers could have indirect strategic implications. For example, the 2008 financial crisis created opportunities for Chinese investments in Europe and encouraged national governments to compete to attract these investments.⁹⁵ In countries such as Greece and Portugal, the selling of key state assets to Chinese investors often came in direct response to debt restructuring programmes imposed by the EU.⁹⁶ These same countries eventually opposed the establishment of an EU-level investment screening mechanism. In the future, a more strategic approach to EU budgetary policy and Eurozone reform should better take into account the geopolitical implications of adopted measures. By focusing the debate exclusively on its economic dimension, the EU risks neglecting the fact that austerity tends to increase member states' vulnerability to Chinese influence, which could eventually, in a context of rising bipolar competition, threaten the cohesion of both the EU and NATO and the viability of the transatlantic partnership.

Naval power

In a world increasingly structured by the US-China competition, naval power will be of crucial importance. This will particularly be true for Europe. First, in case of crisis, the US is likely to reduce its naval forces in Europe to reinforce its capabilities in the West Pacific theatre, which raises the question of how Europeans could compensate for this loss. US land forces in Europe would probably be less affected. Second, if Europeans have to take the lead in responding to a crisis in their neighbourhood (e.g., in the Middle East or in the Mediterranean) while the US is engaged in East Asia, this could also require important naval capabilities. Third, if Europeans are asked and willing to contribute to US military effort in East Asia, this would primarily involve naval capabilities. Fourth, in recent years, the Chinese navy started to deploy closer to Europe's neighbourhood, including in the

91. Foo Yun Chee, "[EU regulators to review rules defining companies' market power](#)," Reuters, 9 December 2019.

92. Mark Leonard, Jean Pisani-Ferry, Elina Ribakova, Jeremy Shapiro and Guntram Wolff, "Securing Europe's economic sovereignty," *op. cit.*, p. 84.

93. Jorge Valero, "[France and Germany prepare plan to create European champions](#)," EURACTIV, 13 February 2019.

94. Mark Scott, "[What's driving Europe's new aggressive stance on tech](#)," Politico Europe, 27 October 2019.

95. Sophie Meunier, "'Beggars can't be choosers': The European crisis and Chinese direct investment in the European Union," *Journal of European Integration*, 36:3, 2014, p. 283-302.

96. Laurens Cerulus and Jakob Hanke, "[Enter the dragon](#)," Politico Europe, 10 April 2017.

Red Sea, with a naval base established in Djibouti in 2017,⁹⁷ and in the Mediterranean;⁹⁸ the Arctic is probably the next step.⁹⁹ For Europeans, these deployments constitute the closest Chinese military presence.

However, Europeans are not well prepared for a world dominated by competition on the sea. Most European states do not have a proper maritime culture and often underestimate the value of naval power, a tendency commonly referred to as “sea blindness”.¹⁰⁰ Their naval capabilities have considerably decreased since the end of the Cold War and have often been treated as a budgetary adjustment variable after the 2008 financial crisis.¹⁰¹ Moreover, European navies suffer from severe availability issues.¹⁰² As a result, most naval forces in Europe “are barely able to fulfil the military, diplomatic, and policing roles they are called upon to perform”.¹⁰³ If Europeans had to conduct a major maritime security operation on their own today, they would face considerable capability deficits.¹⁰⁴ Finally, Brexit means that the EU will lose one of its few active naval powers.

Maritime issues have been a subject of growing focus at the EU level, as illustrated by operations Atalanta off the coasts of Somalia (since 2010) and Sophia in the Mediterranean (since 2015) as well as by the 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), which promotes the rule-based governance of the maritime Global Commons.¹⁰⁵ More recently, the European External Action Service proposed the establishment of a “Coordinated Maritime Presence” (CMP) in areas of strategic interest. The CMP would rely on national naval assets “that would be put together on a voluntary basis by member states and would remain under the chain of command of national authorities, but that would agree to share information, awareness, analysis and also would promote together international cooperation at sea”.¹⁰⁶ Although this project could contribute to the formation of a shared maritime strategic culture, more ambitious steps should be taken to prepare Europe for future naval challenges.

European states should clearly make the strengthening of their naval power a priority. Establishing an EU naval headquarters (EUNHQ) could enshrine this priority into EU institutions. The EUNHQ could have three main missions: first, stimulating the debate on the strengthening of Europeans’ capabilities and advocating that priority be given to naval forces by contributing to the reflection of the EU Military Staff (EUMS) and to the Capability Development Plan (CDP) prepared by the European Defence Agency (EDA); second, for

97. Tyler Headley, “China’s Djibouti base: A one year update,” *The Diplomat*, 4 December 2018.

98. James R. Holmes, “Why are Chinese and Russian ships prowling the Mediterranean?,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 May 2015.

99. Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, “Pentagon warns on risk of Chinese submarines in Arctic,” Reuters, 2 May 2019.

100. Jeremy Stöhs, “Into the abyss? European naval power in the post-Cold War era,” *Naval War College Review*, 77:3, 2018, p. 13-40, see p. 14.

101. Jeremy Stöhs, *The Decline of European Naval Forces: Challenges to Sea Power in an Age of Fiscal Austerity and Political Uncertainty*, Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2018.

102. Sebastian Sprenger, “All of Germany’s submarines are currently down,” *Defense News*, 20 October 2017.

103. Jeremy Stöhs, *The Decline of European Naval Forces: Challenges to Sea Power in an Age of Fiscal Austerity and Political Uncertainty*, op. cit., p. 197.

104. Douglas Barrie, Ben Barry, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, Henry Boyd, Nick Childs and Bastian Giegerich, *Defending Europe: Scenario-Based Capability Requirements for NATO’s European Members*, London, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 14.

105. Marianne Riddervold, *The Maritime Turn in EU Foreign and Security Policies*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, ch. 4.

106. [Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini](#), Helsinki, 28 August 2019.

each maritime area of strategic interest (e.g., the Gulf of Guinea, the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea), developing a shared understanding of potential threats and risks, defining common objectives in accordance with the EUMSS and an assessment of the required forces and capabilities; third, planning and conducting EU naval operations as well as the joint presence of naval forces that member states would make available in areas of strategic interest, in continuation of the logic of the CMP.

While the NATO Maritime Command (MARCOM) would continue to be responsible for the defence of Europe, the EUNHQ would mainly conduct low-intensity missions related to maritime security. The EU is a great economic power, and it would make sense for it to focus on the protection of global sea lines of communication (SLOCs), on which it depends even more than the US does. The EUNHQ's added value would lie in its ability to coordinate with the EU's foreign policy through naval diplomacy, particularly vis-à-vis partners in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Japan, Australia and India, and to cooperate with third countries through capacity building to promote the EU's "Integrated Approach" to global security.¹⁰⁷

In the case of US-China confrontation, the establishment of the EUNHQ would help European states to be better prepared to contribute to naval operations in whatever ad hoc or institutional framework and in any region necessary by stimulating their investment in naval capabilities and experience in naval missions. In the case of détente, the EUNHQ would help to promote Europeans' autonomous contribution to global security and to prevent their marginalisation by US-China bilateral cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of a bipolar world will be one of the most crucial factors shaping global security in the years to come. For Europeans, this evolution is particularly challenging because it confronts them with the fact that their region and its neighbourhood are no longer the main focus of great powers. More often than in the past, major international security issues will have their roots far from Europe. Bipolarity will also challenge transatlantic relations, as Europe and its neighbourhood will increasingly be relegated to a secondary strategic priority for the US.

Bipolarity can generate episodes of both confrontation and détente. However, both cases present some risks for Europeans. In the case of confrontation, Europeans will face increasing responsibility, as the US will need to focus on the East Asian theatre; in the case of détente, the US might want to cooperate increasingly with China, possibly at the expense of the transatlantic partnership. With a view to being better prepared for those risks, Europeans should develop their strategic autonomy so that they can respond to those crises where the US is no longer able to hold primary responsibility. They will also need to reinforce their economic sovereignty to be able to remain united in the face of China's

107. European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy*, op. cit., p. 28.

influence. In addition, both strategic autonomy and economic sovereignty would allow Europeans to better resist the global domination of a potential G2, in the case of détente. Finally, Europeans will need to restore their naval power if they are to be able to defend their interests in a world increasingly dominated by maritime competition.

Bipolarity will confront Europeans with the question of their dependence, whether it is their military dependence on an ally or their economic dependence on a competitor. Only by mobilising their capabilities to prevent overdependence on external powers can Europeans preserve their position in the world and avoid being reduced to strategic insignificance.

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