

Caught in the Middle?

How Europe can maintain control over its future

China-US relations are shaping up to be the divisive power struggle of the 21st century. There are both similarities and differences with the Cold War of the twentieth century. Similar is the fact that we are already acquainted with a world divided in two blocs. But there is a big difference too. During the Cold War, the level of trade between the Soviet Union and the West was minimal. By imposing tough commercial sanctions on the Warsaw Pact, Western democracies faced little tension. They could focus on protecting and advancing their political-military interests and values without notable commercial sacrifice. Today, there is potentially a



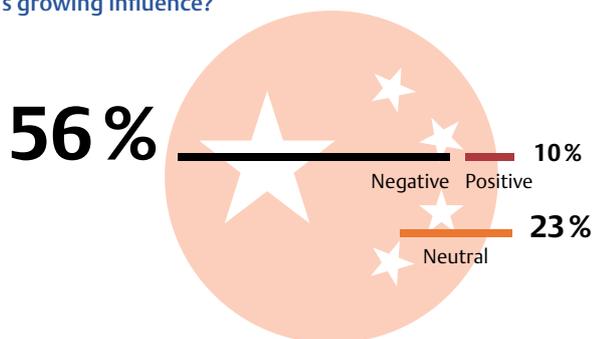
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high commercial price to pay if globalization goes into reverse, and with COVID-19 leaving behind a significant aftermath and big economic challenges of its own.

Moreover, the East-West political frontier in the Cold War went straight through the middle of Europe. This kept Europeans focussed on their political survival as free societies and created the same imperative for the United States. Discipline was injected into the Atlantic alliance and its military embodiment NATO, which kept us on track despite transatlantic differences. This transatlantic discipline is lacking today. The geography of the

 UK respondents:
What is your view of
China's growing influence?



challenge of China makes it much less compelling for Europeans while the United States – or at least the Trump administration – conducts policy on a largely unilateral basis in which allies are pressurized to conform without sharing in policy-making. This is self-defeating. China can, will and has exploited the absence of Western solidarity. It is to be hoped that the next US-administration will change the way in which American policy towards China is made.

All that said, Xi Jinping's policies are helping the Allies to converge in their attitudes towards China. There are plenty of examples: the forced transfer and theft of industrial intellectual property by cyber and other means; the breaking of international agreements and norms (Hong Kong is one of the more flagrant examples); the treatment of the Uighurs; the suppression of domestic freedoms; the lack of transparency over COVID-19 when millions of lives are at stake. Combined with a continuing lack of transparency over the corporate governance of companies like Huawei, this has led directly to the beginning of what has come to be known as 'decoupling'. In consequence, western governments started with the reversal of integrated manufacturing, the breaking of supply chains as over 5G, increased onshoring of manufacturing and restrictions on inward Chinese investment.

So how far should we let this go? Europeans and Americans may be coming closer together about China and taking similar policy steps in some areas. But this does not amount to a shared strategy about ends or means. Policies without frameworks tend to be led by events and the more this is the case, the greater the danger of military incidents having unintentional but serious consequences. China's military capability is significantly smaller than that of the United States but this does not prevent the world – and the South China Sea in particular – from becoming a more dangerous place.

We Europeans, not being principal players, risk being caught in the middle of a contest controlled by others. We should not let authority over our future be taken from us, ending up as 'pig in the middle'. For this, we need to act. European countries, including the United Kingdom joining her

traditional EU partners, should make a sustained approach in Washington. Their common goal should be to arrest the current downward trend in transatlantic relations by formulating a joint strategy towards China, one that also promotes and supports democratic values worldwide. This strategy should also include an agreed conditionality in relation to third countries when they fail to meet criteria. Such a strategy would avoid being uniquely aimed at Beijing. The dual-track approach adopted by the West during the Cold War is relevant here. If we cannot achieve this larger objective, we need to work out a Europe-wide policy and encourage democracies like Japan and Australia to join us. Germany and the United Kingdom have a lot of shared interests and attitudes. Without getting involved in angry institutional debates, it should be possible to agree on some national security norms. This could be a contribution to a wider strategy and involve matters, such as export control, inward investment and – a big issue for the future – international research cooperation in science and technology. The stakes for us all are high. ✖

