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China's Geopolitical Interests beyond the Middle East: Implications for Europe

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Abstract

This paper analyses the shifting dynamics of contemporary international relations, focusing on the expansion of China's geopolitical and economic influence beyond the Middle East into Europe. Amidst intensifying Sino-American strategic competition and growing transatlantic tensions—exacerbated by shifting United States foreign policies and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war—European nations face complex systemic challenges. By leveraging flagship initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and robust soft-power mechanisms, Beijing has firmly established itself as a critical trading partner and infrastructure investor across the European continent. This study evaluates how Europe navigates the delicate balance between maintaining vital economic interdependencies with China while safeguarding its national security, strategic interests, and political autonomy within an emerging multipolar world order.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Transatlantic Relations; Sino-European Interdependence; Multipolarity.

1. Introduction: The Evolution of China's Global Status

Historically perceived at the close of the twentieth century primarily as a destination for low-cost labor and manufacturing, the People's Republic of China has since become the world's second-largest economy. Having achieved peak developmental milestones, China's contemporary technological superiority is globally recognized, firmly establishing the nation as a major geopolitical actor. Driven by rapid technological advancement, rising domestic living standards, continuous innovation, and large-scale state projects, China's domestic demand—particularly for energy resources—has surged, prompting Beijing to project its strategic focus robustly toward the Middle East and beyond. In doing so, China increasingly seeks to compete with, and potentially displace, the geopolitical hegemony of the United States.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a Soft Power Tool

Central to Beijing's global strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a flagship project that enables China to execute its geopolitical ambitions on the global stage. This overarching success has allowed China to leverage its soft power mechanisms to expand its influence far beyond the Middle East and impact Western nations. The framework of the BRI aims to interconnect Asia, Africa, and Europe by integrating transport networks and essential infrastructure. The initiative encompasses the construction of maritime ports, railways, logistical hubs, and highways. Notable examples include extensive infrastructure developments in Georgia—comprising highways, bridges, and tunnels—as well as major projects within Europe itself, such as Greece's Piraeus Port, where China acquired a dominant financial stake, thereby gaining critical strategic leverage in the Mediterranean region.

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3. Sino-European Economic Interdependence and Transatlantic Tensions

China's infrastructure projects and financial investments have become increasingly attractive globally, facilitating deeper state-to-state cooperation, technology sharing, and enhanced bilateral trade. Consequently, sovereign states have widely endorsed Beijing's foreign policy approach, granting China substantial influence within Europe. This geopolitical shift intensified significantly following the imposition of economic sanctions and the initiation of a trade war against China by the Trump administration. Furthermore, Washington's implementation of tariffs on European goods and its withdrawal from key international agreements served as a turning point, reshaping the dynamics of Europe-China cooperation.

Today, China has evolved to become arguably Europe's most critical and largest trading partner. Numerous European nations remain deeply dependent on the Chinese market, particularly regarding industrial products, technology components, and export channels. While Europe actively exports its goods to China—as evidenced by Germany's substantial profits from automotive sales—the European market continues to import high volumes of Chinese electronics, solar panels, and rare earth minerals. Historically, the European market also opened its doors to Chinese telecommunications giants like Huawei and ZTE, which gained prominence through 5G network development; however, recent European discourse has increasingly scrutinized these firms over national security concerns.

4. Geopolitical Realignment and the War in Ukraine

The political friction generated by the Trump administration's foreign policy sparked extensive debate among high-ranking European officials regarding the necessity of deepening ties with China. US policies, such as imposing tariffs on European steel and aluminum and withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord, strained transatlantic relations. This instability was further exacerbated by the US exit from the Iran nuclear deal, which catalyzed conflict in the Middle East—a development viewed skeptically by Europe, creating profound uncertainty regarding Washington's strategic objectives.

Consequently, many European policymakers argue for a more autonomous economic policy. This sentiment is driven by Europe's precarious position amidst concurrent crises, including the Russia-Ukraine war occurring in the heart of Europe. European perspectives suggest that the United States has failed to take decisive, effective measures to halt the aggression or adequately bolster Ukraine's defense capabilities, thereby nudging European states toward partnerships with nations perceived as reliable contract fulfillers.

In this geopolitical climate, China has strategically sought to reassure Europe of its reliability. Although Beijing has refrained from condemning Russian aggression—thereby reinforcing perceptions of a strategic partnership with Moscow—such neutrality was highly predictable. China currently occupies a dual-advantageous position, benefiting economically from European market integration while securing critical natural resources from Russia. This economic synergy allows Beijing to strengthen its domestic economy while maintaining its status as Europe's primary trading partner, complicating European policy alignment. Beyond commerce, Chinese influence in Europe has expanded into cultural and educational spheres through student exchange programs, loan systems, and fully funded university scholarships.

5. Future Perspectives: Strategic Autonomy and Multipolarity

Current geopolitical trajectories suggest an inevitable deepening of trade and economic relations between Europe and China. As China's economic power continues to ascend, Europe may pivot more decisively toward Chinese economic structures unless the United States recalibrates its foreign policy toward its European allies. Concurrently, Western nations are expected to enhance their competitiveness in technology and security sectors to prevent asymmetrical dependency on Beijing, while strategically maintaining access to the vast Chinese consumer market.

In conclusion, the strategic competition between the United States and China, coupled with Washington's perceived decoupling from European interests, has paved the way for expanded Chinese influence. Sino-European relations have thus emerged as a pivotal axis in contemporary international relations. Regardless of external pressures or US-imposed restrictions, Europe remains unable to fully sever its economic cooperation with Beijing or abstain from the infrastructure networks embedded within the Belt and Road Initiative. Confronted with the legacy of shifting US policies, Europe faces the complex task of balancing economic benefits derived from China with the imperative of safeguarding its national security, strategic interests, and political autonomy. Ultimately, relations between Europe and

China are poised to deepen as global discourse shifts toward a multipolar international order, with China positioned as a leading global power.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the article demonstrates that amid intensifying US-China strategic competition and shifting transatlantic dynamics, Europe is increasingly embedding itself within China's economic and infrastructure frameworks, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, making a complete economic decoupling infeasible. As European nations navigate the complex realities of the Russia-Ukraine war and potential security risks, they are forced to strike a delicate balance between leveraging Chinese financial opportunities and safeguarding their own political autonomy. This article will benefit society by providing policymakers, academics, and the public with a critical framework for understanding the risks and realities of an emerging multipolar world order, highlighting that the way forward requires Western nations to bolster their technological competitiveness and to engineer a more resilient, strategically autonomous foreign policy.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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