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SYNOPSIS

The international geopolitical landscape has undergone important shifts in recent years. These shifts are having profound implications for the foreign policy choices of China and Europe and relations between them. This paper will first outline three major shifts in the international landscape. It will then discuss their implications for China and Europe's foreign policy choices. Finally, it will discuss what this means for the development of China-Europe relations.

COMMENTARY

Changes in the International Geopolitical Landscape

In recent years, three important developments have changed the international geopolitical landscape: the escalation of China-US tensions, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the growing estrangement between the US and Europe.

China-US tension

The escalation of China-US tensions has become the defining geopolitical development of the 21st century. The rivalry between these two global powers spans multiple domains, including trade, technology, military capabilities, and ideological influence. The US has increasingly viewed China as a strategic competitor and undertaken measures such as tariffs, trade restrictions, and technology controls to curb China's rise. China has struck back in kind. The intensification of their competition has created increasing pressure on countries around the world. They have to navigate their relationships with both the US and China, balancing economic interests with security and ideological considerations.

Russia-Ukraine war

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began in 2022, has further complicated the international landscape. The war has exposed deep divisions in Europe and beyond, as countries took sides either in support of Ukraine or in alignment with Russia. Confronted with this situation, China has undertaken a delicate balancing act. While trying to maintain friendly relations with Russia, it also finds it necessary to refrain from condoning Russia's annexation of Ukraine's territories by force, which violates the key principles of the UN Charter and international law.

US-Europe alienation

More recently, relations between the US and its European allies have undergone rapid deterioration. The Donald Trump administration's "America First" tariff wars against Europe and other countries, the sharp and unexpected change in its approach to the Russia-Ukraine war, and its professed intention to take over the Panama Canal, Greenland, and Canada have brought its relations with Europe to a tipping point. Increasingly, Europeans question their dependence on the US and ponder the need for a new way to pursue security and economic prosperity.

Implications for China and Europe

These changes in the international landscape have prompted both China and Europe to reassess their foreign policy options.

China

US containment policies – whether through tariffs, technological restrictions (such as on 5G technology and semiconductor production), or military alliances in Asia – present a direct challenge to China's economic development and national security. Accordingly, China reciprocated with high tariffs against imports from the US, stepped up its efforts to develop its indigenous technologies, built stronger ties with other countries, and proactively confronted issues like Taiwan and the South China Sea.

The Russia-Ukraine war has placed China in a delicate position. While it finds it necessary to bolster Russia strategically, it is also deeply concerned about the implications of Russia's violation of the principles China has long upheld, such as non-interference in a country's internal affairs and no use of force in resolving international disputes. In addition, China also finds it important to maintain its economic relationship with Europe, which is at the forefront in opposing Russia's war against Ukraine.

The growing rift between the US and Europe offers China an opportunity to undermine US efforts to rally Europe to contain China and deepen its economic and diplomatic ties with Europe. After all, China and Europe share many interests and stakes in their economic relations and in jointly addressing various global challenges ranging from climate change to nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

In a word, the interwoven pressures of US-China competition, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the evolving relationship between the US and Europe have directly impacted the shaping of Chinese foreign policy choices.

Europe

Historically, alliance obligations and shared values have been critical in Europe's alignment with the United States. However, Trump's tariffs and threats to annex Greenland and Canada have created distress among the Europeans. Many are questioning the nature of their relationship with the US. Moreover, the way President Trump handled the Russia-Ukraine conflict has added to their dismay. Increasingly, Europeans feel that the US is pursuing its own agenda at the expense of European priorities. According to a study of the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, amongst European states, it is only in Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania that the US is more popular than China.

Against this background, Europeans increasingly question their alignment with the US in their foreign policy. There is a growing belief that Europe must reduce its reliance on the US in security and economic matters, diversify its international partnerships, and seek stronger ties with other global powers.

China and Europe: Increased Willingness to Cooperate

Despite their political differences over the Russia-Ukraine war and the challenges faced, China and Europe are increasingly willing to patch up difficulties in their relationships and cooperate.

Change in foreign policy priorities

Issues such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan remain points of contention between China and Europe. However, the shifts in the geopolitical landscape are changing European priorities and compelling them to adopt a more pragmatic approach in managing their foreign relations and to make greater efforts to cooperate with other countries in areas where their interests align. Recent positive comments on Europe-China relations by European leaders testify to this sentiment.

The Russia-Ukraine war remains an obstacle

The Russia-Ukraine war remains a significant obstacle to better China-Europe relations. Europe's strong stance against Russia's invasion of Ukraine clashes with China's nuanced neutral position. However, in the context of the sharp reversal of US policy on the war under President Trump, both sides find it necessary to engage in dialogue and consultation to contain the spillover effects of the war on their relationship.

More willingness to cooperate

There is a growing recognition in both China and Europe that their mutual interests in trade, investment, and multilateral cooperation far outweigh the differences that divide them. In addition, as they take a fresh look at their respective interests, they also find that they share much in common on international cooperation to meet various global challenges, ranging from climate change, a free and open trading system, and pandemics to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Conclusion

The shifts in the international landscape, including the China-US confrontation, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the evolving US-Europe estrangement, have been altering the dynamics of China-Europe relations. While many differences remain, both sides are increasingly open to cooperation, recognising the importance of collaboration in maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship and addressing global challenges. As China seeks to balance its principles and geopolitical interests, and Europe adjusts to a more independent foreign policy, the prospect for deeper China-Europe relations is improving.

Jia Qingguo is a professor and former Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University. He is also the Director of the Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding and Director of Global Governance at Peking University. Professor Jia visited the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in October 2024 during which he delivered the S.T. Lee Distinguished Annual Lecture.

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