

POLICY BRIEF

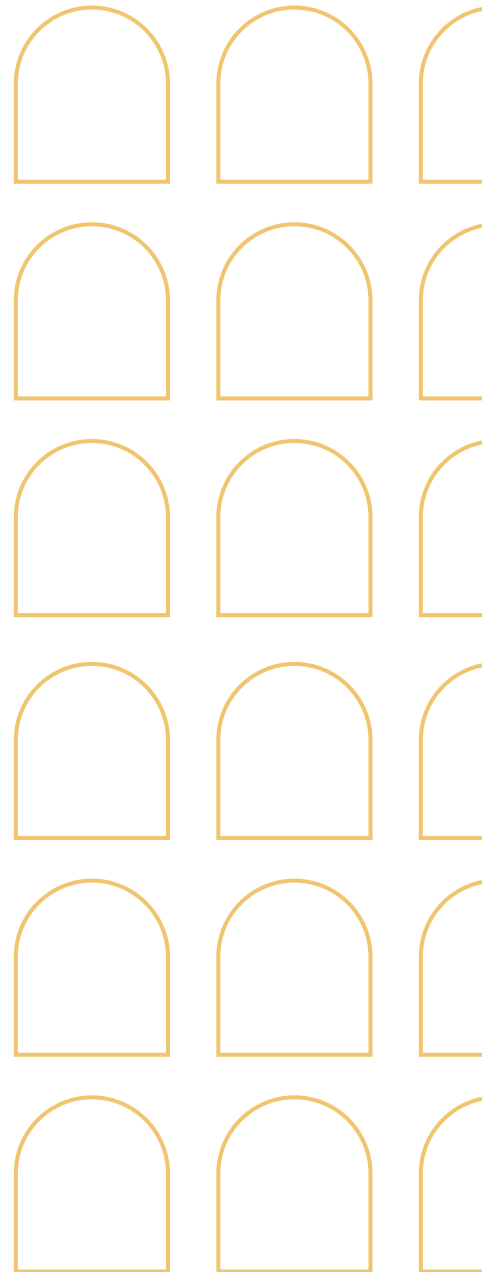
The European Union's China policy: convergences or divergences?

The re-emergence of China as a great power and the emerging US-China competition have marked the return of great power rivalry in world politics, with wide-ranging implications for Europeans. In particular, three overarching trends have shaped the ways in which Europeans have confronted China's rise. First, in the context of the shifting centre of strategic gravity of world politics from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific, the gradual retrenchment of the United States (US) from Europe since the end of the Cold War – coupled with growing doubts about the credibility of US commitments to the continent – has incited Europeans to provide for their own security.¹ Furthermore, sustained by expanding economic, military and technological capabilities, the PRC has displayed an increasingly assertive foreign policy both in the Asia-Pacific and in Europe since the 2010s, which impinges on a broad range

¹ See, for instance, Jolyon Howorth, 'Implications of the US Rebalance toward Asia: European Security and NATO,' in *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Dimensions*, edited by Hugo Meijer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 197-222; Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, 'Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security if the United States Pulls Back,' *International Security* 45, no. 4 (Spring 2021): pp. 7-43; Luis Simón, 'Europe, the Rise of Asia and the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship,' *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): pp. 969-989.

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of European diplomatic, security and economic interests.² Third, the rising global competition between the United States and China has become a structural feature of great power politics in the 21st century, with ramifications across different regions, including Europe.³ In short, stuck between a rock and a hard place, Europeans increasingly doubt the robustness of their US ally's commitment to their security while grappling with China's expanding clout and influence in the larger context of mounting Sino-American rivalry – and they are therefore compelled to define their own position regarding it.

A central question therefore emerges as to whether Europe's major, medium, and smaller powers have displayed converging policies toward the PRC or, on the contrary, whether they maintain differing strategic priorities and policies toward Beijing. Building on interviews with senior EU and national foreign policymakers, this policy brief provides an overview of the conflicting trends currently at play in the European Union in its relationship with China and the broader Asia-Pacific region and, based on this, identifies avenues of future research.

Chinese Assertiveness and the EU's Emerging China Policy

The European Union appears to have hardened its stance vis-à-vis Beijing. As a senior EU official put it, in the 2010s “Chinese assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific but also globally – including closer to Europe – became ever more manifest and, as a result, there

has been a greater convergence around the need for a more robust and hard-nosed approach vis-à-vis China.”⁴ The EU adopted a common strategy for the Indo-Pacific and increasingly emphasised as its core regional policy goals the preservation of the central norms of the rules-based order (freedom of navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputes) and regional stability.⁵ Concurrently, the EU has developed a threefold policy which looks at China as a partner, a competitor and a systemic rival.⁶ It has thereby sought to develop an autonomous position amidst rising US-China competition, one that would not aim at containing China, or at systematic alignment with the US, or at equidistance between Washington and Beijing – because of its closer position to the US on many issues.

In the words of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell, “this US-China strategic rivalry will probably be the dominant organising principle for global politics” and in this context the EU should follow its “own path,” which “does not mean [it] should be equidistant from the two protagonists.”⁷ In essence, according to a senior advisor to HR/VP Borrell, the EU has aimed to pragmatically position itself depending on the issue area, e.g. trade, investments, digital technologies/5G, human rights, Asia-Pacific security, etc.⁸ For instance, supported by member state initiatives, it developed new policy instruments such as, among others, the EU FDI screening mechanism, the EU 5G Toolbox and sanctions

2 On Chinese assertiveness after 2009, see among others Michael Yahuda, ‘China’s New Assertiveness in the South China Sea,’ *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (2013): pp. 446-459; Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu and Alastair Iain Johnston, ‘Debating China’s Assertiveness,’ *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2014): pp. 176-183; Nien-Chung Chang Lao, ‘The Sources of China’s Assertiveness: the System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?,’ *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): pp. 817-833; Janka Oertel, ‘The New China Consensus: How Europe is Growing Wary of Beijing,’ *ECFR Policy Brief*, September 2020; Julianne Smith and Torrey Taussig, ‘The Old World and the Middle Kingdom: Europe Wakes Up to China’s Rise,’ *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019; Peter Ferdinand, ‘Westward Ho – The China Dream and ‘One Belt, One Road’: Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping,’ *International Affairs* 92, no 4 (2016): pp. 941-957. For a different periodisation, see Andrew Chubb, ‘PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970-2015,’ *International Security* 45, no. 3 (2021): pp. 79-121.

3 See, e.g., Aaron L. Friedberg, ‘Competing with China,’ *Survival* 60, no. 3 (2018): pp. 7-64; Iskander Rehman (chair), ‘Policy Roundtable: Are the United States and China in a New Cold War?,’ *Texas National Security Review*, 15 May 2018; Huiyun Feng and Kai He, eds., *US-China Competition and the South China Sea Disputes* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Yuen Foong Khong, ‘Primacy or World Order? The United States and China’s Rise – A Review Essay,’ *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013/14): pp. 153-175; Minghao Zhao, ‘Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition,’ *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no. 3 (2019): pp. 371–394.

4 Interview, 6 March 2020. See also European Commission and HR/VP, 2019, p. 1.

5 European External Action Service (EEAS), ‘EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,’ Factsheet, 19 April 2021. After France and Germany, also the Netherlands developed an Indo-Pacific strategy. See Sebastian Strangio, ‘Following France and Germany, the Netherlands Pivots to the Indo-Pacific,’ *The Diplomat*, 18 November 2020. On the EU’s policy goals in the region, see also Council of the European Union, ‘Guidelines on the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia,’ Brussels, 15 June 2012; CE 2016, p. 6; Council of the European Union, ‘Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia,’ Council Conclusions, 28 May 2018, p. 4; European Parliament, Report on the State of EU-China Relations, Committee on Foreign Affairs, 7 October 2018, p. 21; and European Parliament, Challenges to Freedom of the Seas and Maritime Rivalry in Asia, Directorate-General for External Policies Department, March 2017; Josep Borrell, ‘The EU Needs a Strategic Approach for the Indo-Pacific,’ Blog by HR/VP Josep Borrell ‘A Window on the World,’ 12 March 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/94898/eu-needs-strategic-approach-indo-pacific_en; Josep Borrell, ‘What the EU Can Do In and With the Indo-Pacific,’ Groupe d’études géopolitiques, 2021b, <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2021/06/22/what-the-eu-can-do-in-and-with-the-indo-pacific/>

6 European Commission and HR/VP, 2019, p. 1.

7 Josep Borrell, ‘China, the United States and Us,’ Blog by HR/VP Josep Borrell ‘A Window on the World,’ 31 September 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/83644/china-united-states-and-us_en.

8 Zaki Laïdi, Senior adviser to the HR/VP Josep Borrell, interview, 29 March 2021.

on Beijing's human rights violations, while seeking to rebalance the overall investment relationship through the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investments.⁹ Likewise, the EU has aimed to expand its security ties with its Asian-Pacific partners through "tailor-made cooperation with an initial set of five pilot countries" (i.e. India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Vietnam) in areas such as maritime security, crisis management and cyber-security, although with a meagre budget of €8.5 million.¹⁰ It has also worked towards the establishment of an EU-ASEAN 'strategic partnership,' bolstered cooperation with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), applied for observer status in the ADMM+ with the goal of becoming a fully-fledged member and sought membership of the East Asia Summit (EAS).¹¹ With the United States, the EU first proposed and then in 2020 launched the EU-US China Dialogue between the US Secretary of State and the EU HR/VP, a mechanism for discussing security concerns over China on both sides of the Atlantic.¹² Overall, the European Union therefore appears to have developed an increasingly coherent policy framework to conduct its relations with China and the 'Indo-Pacific' region.

Constraints on a Common China Policy: Capability Shortfalls and Diverging Strategic Priorities

On the other hand, however, the Union has faced two interrelated challenges to the formulation of a common policy toward Beijing and the Indo-Pacific: profound shortfalls and discrepancies in defence capabilities across the EU, which have been further amplified by Brexit, and persistently differing priorities vis-à-vis China among EU member states. In combination, these two constraints, which mutually feed one another, raise questions about the capacity of the EU to forge a cohesive China policy.¹³

First, the capacity of EU member states to project power in the 'Indo-Pacific' has been hindered by severe capability shortfalls and asymmetries. This applies to the major powers, but even more so to the medium and smaller powers. Building on different colonial and post-colonial trajectories in the region, France, Germany and the UK have displayed profoundly discrepant defence capacities, with France maintaining the largest military footprint in the Indo-Pacific, followed by the UK, while Germany lacks any direct presence in the region. After Brexit, France is the only EU country with a military presence in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁴ These discrepancies have been further exacerbated by the post-

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- 9 Official Journal of the European Union, 'Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing a Framework for the Screening of Foreign Direct Investments into the Union,' 19 March 2019; European Commission, 'Secure 5G Deployment in the EU – Implementing the EU Toolbox,' Communication COM(2020) 50 final, 29 January 2020; European Commission, 'EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI),' News Archive, 22 January 2021a, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2237>. On US-EU sanctions on China for large-scale arbitrary detentions of, in particular, Uyghurs in Xinjiang, see Council of the EU, 'EU Imposes Further Sanctions over Serious Violations of Human Rights Around the World,' Press Release, 22 March 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/22/eu-imposes-further-sanctions-over-serious-violations-of-human-rights-around-the-world/>.
- 10 The initiative was intended to be expanded to a wider range of partners including Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia, among others, in one or more of these issue areas (European Commission, 'Implementing Decision on the Financing of the 2019 Partnership Instrument Annual Action Programme,' C(2019) 3277 final, 6 May 2019c, 'Annex 3: Action Document for "Security cooperation in and with Asia,"' p. 5). On the strengthening of EU political and security ties with partners in the Asia-Pacific, see also Council of the European Union, 2018b; European Commission, 'Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI),' 2019b, https://ec.europa.eu/fpi/content/partnership-instrument-annual-action-programme-2019_en ('Annex 12: EU-Malaysia and EU-Singapore Partnership Facility' and 'Annex 9: Policy Dialogue Support Facility India'); European External Action Service, 'The Republic of Korea and the EU,' Updated 10 May 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/south-korea_en/8789/The_Republic_of_Korea_and_the_EU; EEAS, 'Australia and the EU,' Updated 17 July 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/australia/610/australia-and-eu_en; and Sunghoon Park and Jae-Seung Lee, 'EU's Strategic Partnerships with Asian Countries,' Special Issue, *Asia-Europe Journal* 17, no. 3 (2019).
- 11 With ASEAN, the EU has also run high-level dialogues on maritime security and co-chaired Intersessional Meetings on Maritime Security in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). On these various initiatives, see European Commission, 'Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI),' 2019b, Annex 3: Action Document for "Security cooperation in and with Asia," p. 3, https://ec.europa.eu/fpi/content/partnership-instrument-annual-action-programme-2019_en; ASEAN, 'ASEAN-EU Plan of Action 2018-2022,' 6 August 2017; European Commission, 'The EU and ASEAN: A Partnership with a Strategic Purpose,' Joint Communication JOIN(2015) 22 final, 18 May 2015; Council of the European Union, 'Joint Statement of the 22nd EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting,' Press Release, 21 January 2019; European Commission, 'Implementing Decision on the Financing of the 2020 Partnership Instrument Annual Action Programme,' C(2020) 2779 final, 5 May 2020h, 'Annex 12 – Action Document for Enhancing EU's Role in Multilateral Fora in Asia.' See also Park and Lee, 2019.
- 12 Josep Borrell, 'China, the United States and Us'. Blog by HR/VP Josep Borrell 'A Window on the World', 31 September 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/83644/china-united-states-and-us_en; US Secretary of State, 'A New Transatlantic Dialogue,' Speech at the German Marshall Fund's Brussels Forum, Washington DC, 25 June 2020.
- 13 Profound capability gaps and diverging strategic priorities similarly hinder Europe's broader defence capacity. See Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, 'Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security if the United States Pulls Back,' *International Security* 45, no. 4 (Spring 2021): pp. 7-43.
- 14 Hugo Meijer, 'Pulled East: The Rise of China, Europe and French Security Policy in the Asia-Pacific,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming, 2021).

Cold War sharp decline in European overall defence capabilities and by persistent capability gaps, most markedly in Germany but also in France and the UK.¹⁵ Competing regional priorities have imposed additional constraints. The diplomatic and defence means devoted to contingencies closer to the European continent, e.g. Libya, Syria and Ukraine (and Afghanistan), have compelled the three countries to engage in difficult trade-offs in regional prioritisation and, crucially, in the allocation of scarce resources. Overall, the capabilities that the three major European powers have been able to deploy in the region – most notably in the naval domain – have been very limited (see Table 1). However, the defence capabilities of other EU member states are even more constrained. For instance, very few European countries have the naval capability – not to mention the political will – to conduct naval deployments in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the UK’s exit from the European Union deprived the EU of the country with the largest defence budget in Europe and one of the two largest R&D spenders (the other being France).¹⁶ Brexit has thus further curtailed the political and defence capabilities that the EU could leverage vis-à-vis China and in the Asia-Pacific. As a result, a major challenge to the development of an EU policy in the region, as an EU official explained, is how “to marshal resources which are very much in short supply, particularly in the hard security domain.”¹⁷

Table 1
Big Three Power-Projection Units Capable of Deployment in the Asia-Pacific, 2018

| | France | United Kingdom | Germany |
|--|--------|----------------|---------|
| Aircraft Carriers | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Amphibious Assault Ships | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| Destroyers | 4 | 6 | 7 |
| Frigates | 12 | 13 | 2 |
| Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarines | 6 | 6 | 0 |
| Auxiliary Support Ships | 3 | 7 | 3 |

Source: IISS, Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment (London: IISS, 2018), ch. ‘European Navies and Regional Security,’ pp. 123, 126

Persistently differing priorities among EU member states constitute the second challenge. Because of their strong economic ties with the PRC, many countries in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe have remained disinclined to support policies that could alienate Beijing.¹⁸ In fact, the PRC has sought to leverage its economic ties with these countries so as to influence their policy positions (largely through bilateral channels), inhibit intra-European coordination and discourage the formulation of policies that would threaten Chinese interests.¹⁹ One notable instance of the capacity of Beijing’s wedge strategy to exploit existing fragmentation in Europe was when the EU member states negotiated a common reaction to the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling on the Philippines’ case against China. Because of

15 On the capability shortfalls of British, French and German armed forces, see for instance National Audit Office, The Equipment Plan 2019 to 2029, 27 February 2020a, p. 6. NAO, Defence Capabilities: Delivering What Was Promised, 18 March 2020b, pp. 8-11; Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces, Annual Report to the Bundestag – 2019, 28 February 2020, p. 43; Senate, *Australie : quelle place pour la France dans le Nouveau monde ?*, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces, Report no. 222, 2016, pp. 78-80 and 117-118; Regaud, Nicolas. ‘France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and its Overseas Territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans: Characteristics, Capabilities, Constraints and Avenues for Deepening the Franco-Australian Strategic Partnership’, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 25 June 2021, p. 21, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/frances-indo-pacific-strategy-and-its-overseas-territories-indian-and-pacific-oceans>.

16 On the implications of Brexit for EU defence capabilities, see Bastian Giegerich and Christian Mölling, ‘The United Kingdom’s Contribution to European Security and Defence,’ IISS/DGAP (February 2018), p. 7-8.

17 Interview, 6 March 2020.

18 On Chinese economic statecraft in Europe, see among others James Reilly, *Orchestration: China’s Economic Statecraft Across Asia and Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Philippe Le Corre and Alain Sepulchre, *China’s Offensive in Europe* (Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2016); Ramon Pacheco Pardo, ‘Europe’s Financial Security and Chinese Economic Statecraft: The Case of the Belt and Road Initiative,’ *Asia-Europe Journal* 16, no. 3 (2018): pp. 237-250.

19 Although some countries have expressed disappointment with regard to the opportunities initially expected from the ‘16+1’ (previously ‘17+1’) mechanism, China’s economic influence in central and eastern European countries remains important. See among others Sophie Meunier, ‘Divide and Conquer? China and the Cacophony of Foreign Investment Rules in the EU,’ *Journal of European Public Policy* 21, no. 7 (2014): pp. 996-1016; Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner and Uwe Wissenbach, *The European Union and China* (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), p. 139; François Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, *China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017), pp. 64-74; and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Statement Prepared for the Hearing ‘China’s Expanding Influence in Europe and Eurasia,’ US House Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy and the Environment, 9 May 2019. On disillusionment with regard to the ‘17+1’ mechanism, see Grzegorz Stec, ‘Central and Eastern Europe and Joint European China Policy: Threat or Opportunity?’ MERICS Short Analysis, 1 October 2020.

Beijing's economic and political leverage over Hungary, Greece and Croatia, these three countries opposed any strong language (e.g. 'support' or 'welcome' the tribunal's decision).²⁰ As a result, the final EU statement was considerably diluted and merely "acknowledged" the Tribunal's ruling.²¹

These divergences are well recognised by both EU and national policymakers. As one senior EU official put it, "the differing perspectives within the EU on China and the Asia-Pacific can be categorised along two axes: countries that give more prominence to security interests or to economic interests; and countries that have a more regional outlook versus countries with a globalist outlook. With Brexit, the EU lost a globalist security-oriented member state, and there are not many."²² A senior foreign policy adviser to the German president similarly argued that the misalignment of positions on China in the EU is rooted in different threat perceptions and economic incentives vis-à-vis China:²³ On the economic side, "the short-term gain of having positive economic relations with China bilaterally can create a long-term damage to the unity of the European Union;" and on the security side, "the countries in the European Union have different regional priorities, they care about the wider world to very different degrees. Some smaller countries may look at their foreign policy challenges through the prism of Europe or of their immediate neighbourhood, and may be less directly interested in China or in an Indo-Pacific strategy. Eastern European countries may focus more on Russia than on China. And some larger countries may have more pronounced security policy interests and postures across the globe, and may care more about China and the Indo-Pacific."²⁴

As a result, "the combination of economic and security considerations that shape how countries define their China policy are naturally very different from country to country. You cannot and you will not completely align national perspectives. So the key to forge a unified approach is really to strengthen the awareness of the costs of non-Europe."²⁵ Likewise, according to a former French diplomat, "within the European Union there are a certain number of countries, mostly from eastern and southern Europe, which are accommodating towards China; they look favourably to economic inflows from China, and this creates leverage for Beijing."²⁶

20 Theresa Fallon, 'The EU, the South China Sea and China's Successful Wedge Strategy,' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 15 October 2016; Philippe Le Corre, 'On China's Expanding Influence in Europe and Eurasia,' Testimony Before the House of Representatives, Foreign Affairs Committee, 9 May 2019.

21 Council of the European Union, 'Declaration on the Award Rendered in the Arbitration between the Philippines and China,' Press Release, 15 July 2016.

22 Interview, 8 January 2021.

23 Thomas Bagger, former Head of Policy Planning at the German Federal Foreign Office (2011-2017) and then Director of Foreign Policy in the Office of President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2017-present), interview, 20 January 2021.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Interview, 10 March 2020.

The formulation of the EU's China policy is thus the result of a complex mixture of converging and diverging trends. Recent studies have shown that, whereas in the 1990s and 2000s Europe's three major powers (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) looked at the PRC primarily through economic lenses, China's growing assertiveness after 2009 – and national policymakers' perceptions of it – has been a key driver of change in their policies toward Beijing.²⁷ Throughout the 2010s, heightened threat perceptions of China, coupled with increasingly competitive bilateral economic relations with the PRC, gradually and cumulatively caused a hardening of their policy goals, which in turn translated into the formulation of new policy instruments to confront this challenge. In short, as a result of Beijing's growing assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific, in Europe and beyond, the three major European powers have woken up to the security challenges posed by its rise.²⁸ Building on these insights and on existing studies on individual European countries' China policies, future research should broaden the comparative analysis to also encompass the China policies of medium and smaller European powers.²⁹ Such cross-European comparisons would shed light on the larger trends of convergence (or fragmentation) in national responses to China's rise across the whole European Union and thereby gauge the extent to which the EU has been able to match its ambition to “project a strong, clear and unified voice in its approach to China.”³⁰

27 Hugo Meijer, *Awakening to China's Rise. European Foreign and Security Policies toward the People's Republic of China* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

28 *Ibid.*

29 See, among others, Francesca Ghirelli, 'The Belt and Road Initiative in Italy: The Ports of Genoa and Trieste,' *Istituto Affari Internazionali, IAI Papers*, April 2021; Dragan Pavličević and Anastas Vangeli, 'New Perspectives on China – Central and Eastern Europe Relations,' *Asia-Europe Journal* 17, no. 4 (2019), Special Issue; Giulio Pugliese, 'Italy and China: Much Ado about an MoU,' *East Asian Policy* 12, no. 4 (2020): pp. 73-89; Weiqing Song (ed.), *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From 'Old Comrades' to New Partners* (New York: Routledge, 2017); John Seaman, Mikko Huotari and Miguel Otero-Iglesias (eds), *Chinese Investment in Europe. A Country-Level Approach* (Paris: French Institute of International Relations, 2017); Mario Esteban et alii, eds., *Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry*, European Think-tank Network on China, January 2020.

30 European Council, 'EU Strategy on China,' Council conclusions, 18 July 2016, p. 8.

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