

# Europe's response to China's rise: competing strategic visions

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**Abstract** How should Europe respond to China's growing economic and military capabilities, and to the more assertive foreign policy behavior it has generated? Should it seek to check or even resist China's rise, or should it instead rely on a strategy of engagement and accommodation? Three distinct and coherent strategic visions exist that could guide Europe's policy and strategy toward China and the Asia Pacific over the next 10 or 15 years. These range from narrow commitments to Europe's own security and material prosperity to more ambitious and expansive efforts to shape and influence events in the Asia Pacific. These three strategic visions are (1) balancing, (2) engagement, and (3) retrenchment. After outlining and evaluating each strategic vision, this article then offers a brief review and analysis of Europe's current approach toward China, which is a hodgepodge of engagement and retrenchment. The article concludes by examining what might cause Europe to pursue a clearer and more consistent strategic approach toward China in the years ahead.

## Introduction

China's transition from an impoverished and insular country with limited strategic impact to an increasingly formidable economic, political, and military power has been one of the most important developments in international politics over the past three decades, shaping alliance relations in the Asia Pacific, the structure of the global economy, and the logic and nature of global governance in far-reaching ways. How should Europe respond to China's growing economic and military capabilities, and to the more assertive foreign policy behavior it has generated? Should it help to check or even contain China's growing power and influence in the Asia Pacific, or should it seek to engage with China and accommodate its rise?

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While Europe's expanding trade and investment relationship with China has garnered ample scholarly attention, the strategic implications for Europe of China's rise have attracted far less analysis.<sup>1</sup> Nor has Europe developed a general strategic approach to China's ascent. Strategy provides substance and direction for policy, defining where one wants to go and how to get there. Without a general strategic approach in place, policy tends to be ad hoc and contingent, "made by the drift of events and by the exigencies of budgetary politics" (Art 1991, p. 53).<sup>2</sup>

Any strategy that Europe—here understood as both the EU and individual member states—adopts in response to China and the evolving distribution of power in the Asia Pacific must address three questions: First, what interests and objectives are at stake for Europe? Second, what are the main threats to those interests and objectives? Third, what are the most effective policy instruments to protect those interests and objectives?

Three distinct and coherent strategic visions exist that could guide Europe's policy and strategy toward China and the Asia Pacific over the next 10 or 15 years. These range from narrow commitments to Europe's own security and material prosperity to more ambitious and expansive efforts to shape and influence events in the region. These three strategic visions are (1) balancing, (2) engagement, and (3) retrenchment.

I distinguish these three strategic visions in three ways. First, what are the main aims and objectives of each approach? Second, is China's growing wealth and power seen as mainly stabilizing or as destabilizing forces for the region? Third, what are the preferred political and military instruments of each strategy?

To illustrate some of the real-world implications of each approach, I briefly discuss each strategy's interpretation of and policy recommendations toward China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, arguably the most contentious political and security flash point in the region today. I then examine the political, military, and strategic circumstances under which each strategic approach is more or less likely to emerge, which provide the basis for future theory development and theory testing. Finally, I offer a critique of each strategy, evaluating its potential benefits and drawbacks.

This article argues that more systematic analysis and discussion over Europe's strategic response to China and the changes underway in the Asia Pacific is needed. Europe has a major interest in the security and stability of East Asia, but the region faces a number of potentially destabilizing developments and conflicts, including maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas between China and several of its neighbors, the future of Taiwan, and the US-China relationship, which is becoming more overtly competitive and adversarial. These are complex, long-term challenges, each of which could lead to serious disruptions to global trade, investment, and financial markets.

After outlining and evaluating each strategic vision, the article then offers a brief review and analysis of Europe's current approach toward China, which is a hodgepodge of engagement and retrenchment. The article concludes by examining what might

<sup>1</sup> A good, though now dated, attempt to analyze how Europe should respond to China's rise is Zaborowski (2006). For more recent analysis, see Casarini (2013) and Korteweg (2014). From a Chinese perspective, see Chen (2016).

<sup>2</sup> By "strategy," I mean how a state (or group of states such as the EU) may protect its security and promote its other interests. As Stephen Walt says, "Strategy relates ends and means; it identifies the steps that should be taken to achieve a specified objective" (Walt 1987, p. 141).

cause Europe to pursue a clearer and more consistent strategic approach toward China in the years ahead.

## Balancing

A balancing strategy requires Europe to help act as a counterweight in the region to China's growing economic and military capabilities. China's rising military spending, attempts at territorial expansion, and modernization of its nuclear arsenal indicates that it could someday seek to challenge US military primacy in the Asia Pacific (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2015).<sup>3</sup> A more visible European presence would help to deter China from taking actions that would threaten regional peace and stability.

### Aims, perceptions, and policy instruments of a balancing strategy

The purpose of a balancing strategy is to help ensure that the regional security environment in East Asia remains stable and benign. China's expanding capabilities and more assertive foreign policy behavior threaten to inflame regional security dilemma dynamics, setting in motion conflict spirals that could lead to misperceptions or miscalculations that lead to war.<sup>4</sup> A balancing strategy would serve as an additional deterrent against Chinese attempts to expand territorially or to exert economic or political control over its neighbors.

Balancing strategies can vary in intensity from low to high. Low-intensity balancing allows the possibility of maintaining a constructive relationship with the target state, while high-intensity balancing is a component of a more adversarial relationship (Roy 2005, p. 306). At least initially, Europe would adopt a low-intensity balancing approach to China but could shift to a high-intensity one—or even to an outright containment strategy—if China's behavior becomes more assertive and confrontational, or if Beijing pursues a more openly expansionist foreign policy or military strategy.

A balancing strategy thus anticipates the possibility that China will turn into an openly revisionist, destabilizing power over the next decade, as well as the potential for Beijing to seek to push the USA out of East Asia as it makes a bid for regional hegemony. As realists have long noted, material capabilities tend to shape states' intentions and behavior (Morgenthau 1973, p. 5). In the words of Robert Gilpin, as a state's material capabilities grow, it will “try to expand its economic, political, and territorial control; it will try to change the international system in accordance with its own interests” (Gilpin 1984, pp. 94–95). China's growing economic and military capabilities give it the incentive and, increasingly, the ability to challenge the status quo in the Asia Pacific.

Balancing strategies can be pursued by either internal or external means—that is, either through building up one's one military capacity or by entering into alliance partnerships with other countries (Waltz 1979). Internal balancing would require Europe to enhance and reposition military assets and resources to the Asia Pacific, including the deployment of personnel and air and naval assets. While inferior to the

<sup>3</sup> China may seek to expand its influence not just for material reasons but also for status, pride, and prestige.

<sup>4</sup> The classic study of conflict spirals is Jervis (1978).

resources that the USA can mobilize and deploy, Europe possesses considerable power projection capabilities.<sup>5</sup> European militaries, especially those of Britain and France, also have experience operating in theaters far from home. To take advantage of economies of scale and to become a more formidable foreign policy and military actor, balancing would also require Europe to scale up its capabilities in collective defense and military crisis management.

External balancing would require Europe to bolster security cooperation with the USA in the Asia Pacific and to build security partnerships with countries such as Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Rather than taking steps aimed directly against China, a low-intensity balancing approach would lead Europe to steps to engage China's neighbors. Bolstering these relationships would thus serve an important strategic purpose. As part of a balancing strategy, Europe would participate in multinational military-to-military planning and take part in regular aerial and naval training exercises with the USA and Asian partners.

China's actions in the South China Sea, especially its land reclamation projects, are a cause of growing alarm and concern and are indicative of a more assertive Chinese foreign policy. China considers more than 80% of the South China Sea to be its sovereign territory and is aggressively building up and militarizing islands in contested waters. A balancing strategy would require European navies to have a more visible presence in the South China Sea, including conducting regular naval patrols through it.

### **Circumstances that could give rise to a balancing strategy**

Europe may opt to pursue a low-intensity balancing strategy against China for one of two main reasons. First, European countries converge around the view that China is an increasingly revisionist and destabilizing power, impervious to engagement or accommodation, and a growing threat to regional peace and stability. It is necessary to balance China to dampen Beijing's foreign policy and military ambitions, deter any aggressive impulses it may have, and preserve peace and stability in the Asia Pacific. China's actions, especially in the South China Sea, endanger Europe's material interests as well as principles and values it seeks to uphold, such as freedom of navigation and respect for international law. Closer security cooperation with the USA and countries in East and Southeast Asia is essential to preserving those interests.

Second, Europe may pursue a low-intensity balancing strategy if European leaders come to fear US abandonment.<sup>6</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the USA has shifted its strategic focus away from Europe and increasingly toward East Asia and the western Pacific. To avoid the costs and risks of US abandonment, European countries may opt to pursue a low-intensity balancing strategy against China, thereby showing that it can continue to be a reliable and effective ally and security partner for the USA. A *quid pro quo* could even emerge: European countries help the USA balance China in Asia and the USA continues to underwrite Europe's own security.

<sup>5</sup> Three of the top eight global military spenders are European. On European military spending and capabilities, see IISS (2016, chapter 4).

<sup>6</sup> On "abandonment," see Snyder (1984).

## Critique of a balancing strategy

A balancing strategy—even a low-intensity one—would send a powerful signal to Beijing that attempts at territorial expansion or the coercion or domination of its neighbors would be met with opposition or even outright resistance, and not just from the USA and countries in the Asia Pacific. A closer alignment between the USA and Europe in the Asia Pacific would raise the costs for China if it attempted to upset the peace and stability of the region, thereby making it less likely that China would become an overtly revisionist power.

European leaders and publics have not shown that they would be ready to assume the costs and risks associated with a balancing strategy against China, however, or that they are prepared to devote the resources necessary to shape or influence the strategic environment in the Asia Pacific in a meaningful way. They are wary of the burdens and risks of military commitments far from home, and would likely resist attempts to become more deeply involved in the region's security dynamics. This is especially true today, a time when there are bigger and more immediate problems and threats closer to home, including a resurgent and revanchist Russia, and political instability in North Africa and the Middle East, which has led to an unprecedented migrant and refugee influx into Europe over the past 2 years.

The internal balancing component of this strategy would require Europe to significantly upgrade its military capabilities, and thus its military spending. In particular, Europe would have to commit to higher investment in strategic transport; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and command and control (C2) systems. It would also likely require greater coordination in the areas of defense planning, procurement, and multinational training. At a time when most Europeans perceive that the most immediate threats to their security and stability originate on their immediate periphery, it would require the diversion of scarce military assets and capabilities away from Europe and toward the Asia Pacific.

Military budgets have been falling across the continent for the past decade, however. Moreover, in a period of economic sluggishness and high public debt, higher defense spending and added security commitments and responsibilities would be a tough sell for European governments and publics alike, who have shown no appetite to expand their involvement in the Asia Pacific's complex security environment. Moreover, it is not clear whether Europe could sustain a low-intensity balancing strategy even if it wanted to. The 2011 intervention in Libya, for example, taxed the capacities of European militaries (Chivvis 2013: 110–118).

Additionally, powerful, well-connected groups and individuals in Europe want to maintain good relations with China. They would likely oppose any policy or strategy that might jeopardize the lucrative trade and investment relationship that has developed, making a political consensus for a balancing strategy even more difficult to mobilize and sustain.

## Engagement

An engagement strategy seeks to shape China's external and even its internal behavior by multiplying and intensifying economic, diplomatic, and political contacts with Chinese leaders. Engagement thus aims to influence China's political alignment and

security considerations, not just to expand the robust bilateral trade and investment relationship that already exists between Europe and China. Through broader and deeper interaction, China would become increasingly socialized and accommodated into the existing international order.

### **Aims, perceptions, and policy instruments of an engagement strategy**

An engagement strategy aims to increase China's incentives to remain committed to the existing open, rules-based international order. Engagement would encourage China to respect the sovereignty of its neighbors and commit to peaceful negotiations to resolve territorial and maritime disputes it has with several of them. In addition to moderating its external behavior, engagement would also seek to shape and influence China's internal political development by encouraging China to adopt more liberal norms and practices domestically, including democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and transparency.

An engagement strategy is based on the belief that China's rise need not be inherently threatening or destabilizing. At least for the next decade, China has little incentive to overturn the existing regional or international order, from which it has benefited so greatly. Over the short and medium term, China will remain focused on economic growth and development and on maintaining its internal social and political cohesion. China's grievances with the existing regional and international order are not fundamental and can be accommodated or resolved through diplomacy and negotiation.

An engagement strategy would seek broader and deeper transnational and intergovernmental linkages and interaction across various domains. In addition to strengthening the lucrative commercial and investment relationship that has developed between Europe and China over the past two decades, an engagement strategy would promote scientific and technical cooperation, civil society initiatives, educational and cultural exchanges, and participation in multilateral institutions.<sup>7</sup> An engagement strategy may also ultimately lead Europe eventually to lift the arms embargo imposed on China following the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown.<sup>8</sup>

With respect to the South China Sea, an engagement strategy would lead Europe to encourage the peaceful resolution of disputes between China and other claimants, while also accommodating China's legitimate economic and security interests in the area. Europe would encourage China to abide by rulings by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague and stipulations contained in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

### **Circumstances that could give rise to an engagement strategy**

An engagement strategy could emerge for one of two reasons. First, European governments recognize that, by giving China a bigger stake in the existing international order, it is the best—or even the only—way to shape and influence its external behavior and internal political development. A balancing strategy would antagonize China and

<sup>7</sup> EU-China summits and various sectoral dialogues now cover virtually the full range of issues that affect their bilateral relations (see European Commission 2016a, c).

<sup>8</sup> On European export controls and transfers to China, see Bräuner et al. (2015, chapter 3).

confirm its fears and suspicions that Western powers are seeking to encircle it and to slow its rise, raising the likelihood that China would become a dangerous, destabilizing, and revisionist power. Nor can China be contained politically and militarily the way the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. There is already deep economic interdependence between Europe and China and the USA and China, features that were missing from Western relations with the Soviet Union.

A second rationale would be to prevent the development of a closer Sino-Russian strategic alignment. Russia has emerged as a more unpredictable actor in recent years. It is modernizing its military forces and engaging in provocative military actions, exemplified by the seizure and annexation of Crimea in March 2014 (Lo 2015.) Russia and China, despite longstanding historical grievances, have exhibited a willingness to pursue deeper economic, diplomatic, and even military cooperation (Rozman 2014). A closer China-Russia alignment would be a serious threat for European interests and security, possibly encouraging Russia to pursue a bolder and more threatening strategy toward Europe. An engagement strategy could weaken Chinese leaders' perception of the need and utility of a closer economic and especially political relationship with Russia.

### **Critique of an engagement strategy**

There are good reasons for Europe to pursue an engagement strategy toward China. There is already a high degree of economic interdependence linking Europe and China together. While European companies want access to China's vast internal market, China needs Europe's technology and investment capital to maintain its economic growth and development. Engagement gives China a stake in the international order and incentives to embrace the norms, rules, and institutions that have come to define it. Engagement would show that cooperation and consultation, not confrontation and intimidation, is the best way for China to advance its interests and agenda in international politics.

An engagement strategy would also likely garner robust and long-term support among European publics. It is not as provocative or expensive as a balancing strategy. Nor would it lead to disengagement from the region's political and security evolution, and a corresponding loss of European influence to shape the region's security environment, the way a policy of retrenchment would. An engagement strategy could also forestall any potential long-term threat posed by Russia to European interests or security.

There are limits to the possible scope and depth of engagement between Europe and China, however. There remain stubborn differences over political values, foreign policy priorities, and even conceptions of international order, all of which complicate Europe-China relations in various ways (Maher 2016a). An engagement strategy may thus be based on an overly benign assessment of China's intentions and motivations, and overestimate the degree to which China can be accommodated and incorporated into the existing international order. Recent Chinese behavior suggests that it may want more than simply to be accommodated. It may want the rules, norms, and institutions of the current international order to more closely reflect its own interests and preferences.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> As Aaron Friedberg states, "Rising powers typically want to change things for reasons of pride and prestige, as well as rational material calculation" (Friedberg 2015, p. 102).

Engagement and accommodation could also harm Europe's relationship with the USA. Just like with *Ostpolitik* toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the USA would worry that deep EU-China engagement would gradually weaken the bonds of the Atlantic Alliance. White House officials during the Obama administration criticized Britain and other European powers for what they saw as the "constant accommodation" of China. They were also concerned that growing trade and investment ties with China would constrain European states' ability or willingness to take tough policy choices toward Beijing.<sup>10</sup>

Europe still relies on the US security guarantee, especially in the wake of Russia's military buildup. Even if the Atlantic Alliance is no longer the lodestar of either American or European strategic thinking, it remains a key for realizing many of their common aims and ambitions, from the promotion of democracy and human rights, to preserving the open, rule-based international order they build and maintained since the end of World War II.

## Retrenchment

Retrenchment is the least ambitious strategy for Europe of the three outlined here. Under a retrenchment strategy, European leaders pursue a narrow view of European interests and objectives in the Asia Pacific, minimally focused on immediate threats to their own sovereignty and territorial integrity. Unlike balancing and engagement, Europe would avoid any attempt to shape or influence China's external or internal behavior. Retrenchment only refers to Europe's involvement in the Asia Pacific's security dynamics, however. It does not entail disengagement from investment and trade opportunities with China. As such, it is compatible with maintaining extensive economic interaction with China.

### Aims, perceptions, and policy instruments of a retrenchment strategy

A retrenchment strategy aims to keep Europe out of the complicated and complex security dynamics in the Asia Pacific. The costs and risks are too high, and with more immediate security concerns closer to home, involvement in faraway regions is neither warranted nor justified. Moreover, Europe lacks the capacity to make much of an impact. Instead, Europe should focus on its own economic and political challenges, and on problems and threats closer to home, including violence and instability in North Africa and the Middle East, and a resurgent Russia.<sup>11</sup>

China's rise does not pose a fundamental threat to European interests in the Asia Pacific or elsewhere. Europe has no territorial or maritime claims in the region that China is likely to threaten. Nor is China a revisionist or destabilizing power, intent on displacing the USA from the western Pacific and making a bid for regional hegemony, as some of the more alarmist forecasts predict. China's aims over the course of the next one or two decades is to continue its economic growth and development and to

<sup>10</sup> On the implications of China's rise for the Atlantic Alliance, see Maher (2016b).

<sup>11</sup> For an argument along these lines, see Tunsjø (2013).

maintain its internal political and social cohesion. Regional peace and stability are vital for that to happen.

Under a retrenchment strategy, Europe would continue to pursue trade and investment opportunities with China but would avoid any attempt to shape or influence its external behavior or internal political development. The promotion of values like democracy and human rights is often ineffective and, by generating opposition and resentment among Chinese officials, can even be counterproductive.

Europe has little it can do in response to China's actions in the South China Sea. Even if Europe wanted to do something, it does not currently possess the capabilities to sustain a permanent naval presence in the area. The USA and China's Asian neighbors are better positioned—and have much more incentive—to balance or even contain Chinese actions and aspirations.

### **Circumstances that could give rise to a retrenchment strategy**

A retrenchment approach could emerge through two main ways. First, it could appear more or less by default. Few countries reveal EU member states' differences the way China does. There is no consensus in Europe today over which strategy should guide its approach toward China. European countries have very different capabilities, foreign policy experience, and global ambitions, especially when it comes to the balance of power in East Asia. Since everything is done by consensus, it is hard for the EU to address major geopolitical issues. Retrenchment could also be the default option if military spending continues to fall across European capitals, and European defense and power-projection capabilities continue to erode.

The second pathway could emerge via a deliberate Chinese wedge strategy. China expands and intensifies efforts to play a divide-and-rule strategy in Europe by cultivating special relationships with individual EU countries. China routinely offers EU countries different levels of access and investment based on their level of political cooperation and acquiescence (Le Corre and Sepulchre 2016). As a result, EU countries often compete with each other for commercial advantage with China, further exacerbating and intensifying Europe's internal divisions.

### **Critique of a retrenchment strategy**

Retrenchment or disengagement from the security dynamics in the Asia Pacific would save Europe money and other resources that it could use to manage its own internal challenges and to address the more immediate and geographically proximate threats it currently faces. Not only does Europe today confront the unprecedented threat of disintegration, it is also situated next to some of the most unstable and violent regions of the world. The biggest priorities for Europe today are either internal or on its own periphery—Ukraine, Russia, North Africa, and the Middle East. There is little energy, resources, or time left to think about strategic developments in East Asia and the western Pacific.

Retrenchment would allow Europe to avoid or limit its entanglement in the Asia Pacific's complex security dynamics. In addition, since Europe already has minimal involvement in the security affairs of the Asia Pacific, it would not require a major strategic shift. As former European Council President Herman Van Rompuy bluntly put

it: “Europe is clearly not a Pacific power and will not become one” (European Council 2012a). A retrenchment approach would also allow Europe to avoid a contentious foreign policy debate that could further divide the bloc. A stable balance of power in the Asia Pacific will emerge without Europe’s own “rebalancing” or “pivot” toward the region. Europe can leave it to countries that are more directly affected and threatened by China’s growing military capabilities to deter and defend against it.

A retrenchment strategy would mean that Europe would lose influence and leverage over the shape and character of the power balance in East Asia, however. It would also signal a retreat from world politics. Europe would not have a voice on major questions of strategy or of war and peace in the region and would have little influence over major decisions that could deeply affect its own interests, values, and material prosperity. As the last several years have shown, Europe cannot isolate itself from what happens in other countries or other regions.

There is a tension in having a global and international outlook on trade and investment, but disengaging on fundamental security and political questions. Preserving the global maritime commons is a major interest for Europe. A sustained disruption to trade would have major economic and possibly social consequences for Europe. Balancing and engagement impose burdens and risks, but disengagement imposes its own set of costs and risks. Europe would forgo international influence for limited cost savings. Given the potential stakes in the Asia Pacific, the trade-off could turn out to be a bad one for Europe.

## Europe’s current approach to China’s rise

Europe today lacks an organizing framework to guide its strategic response to China’s rise. In 2003, the EU announced a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with China, which was intended to elevate the relationship beyond economics and trade to address political and even security issues. In addition to broadening and deepening bilateral economic cooperation, this strategic concept envisioned China becoming a more reliable diplomatic partner for Europe (Shambaugh 2004; Grant 2008). Rhetoric outpaced reality, however. More than a decade later, a comprehensive strategic partnership linking the EU and China seems as elusive as ever. While an EU-China High-level Strategic Dialogue was established in 2010, China does not take Europe seriously as a security actor. Moreover, the closest the EU and China have come to security cooperation is antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia.<sup>12</sup>

In June 2012, the European External Action Service (EEAS) released new guidelines for EU foreign and security policy in East Asia (European Council 2012b). The report identified the range of Europe’s interests and economic stakes in the region, as well as key challenges and opportunities confronting Europe, but avoided any discussion of how or even whether Europe should seek to help shape the region’s balance of power in any meaningful way. In June 2016, the EU released an updated global security strategy, its first since 2003 (Mogherini 2016). Compared to other global concerns and

<sup>12</sup> This is a multinational flotilla that even includes cooperation between China and Japan. On EU-China security cooperation, see Kirchner et al. (2016).

issues, however, the challenges and implications produced by China's rise played a small role in the document.

A comparison with the USA is revealing. Among scholars, commentators, and policymakers in the USA, a growing consensus is emerging that China will present a long-term challenge to US interests in East Asia, the western Pacific, and perhaps beyond (Friedberg 2011; Blackwill and Tellis 2015). In response, the USA has committed to a "rebalancing" toward the Asia Pacific and has bolstered its economic, political, and military presence in the region over the past decade (Campbell 2016). There has been no comparable rebalancing toward the Asia Pacific for the EU or the major European powers, however. The EU does have strategic interests in the region, but they are more of what Arnold Wolfers (1962, pp. 73–76) once called "milieu" goals, such as freedom of navigation and open access to the maritime commons, rather than "possession" goals, such as the defense of Taiwan and Japan, for example.

Though the EU does not take an official position on sovereignty claims in the region, various European officials have criticized China's actions in the South China Sea. The European Commission has stated that, "With regard to the large volume of international trade passing through the region's waters, the EU has a strong and legitimate interest in the continuation of free navigation and overflight" (European Commission 2016b). Speaking at the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian encouraged other EU countries to coordinate naval patrols in the South China Sea to ensure a "regular and visible" presence in the waters. "If we want to contain the risk of conflict, we must defend this right and defend it ourselves" (Le Drian 2016).<sup>13</sup>

What might cause Europe to commit to a more coherent strategic approach toward China? A number of obstacles would confront any attempt to implement one of the strategic approaches outlined in this article. There is no consensus among European countries over the implications of China's growing economic and military capabilities or over how to respond to the evolving strategic environment in the Asia Pacific. Europe has developed general economic approaches and policies toward China but has not yet converged around strategic or military ones (European Commission 2016a; see also European Commission 2016c).

The security situation in the Asia Pacific would have to erode considerably, and China would likely have to become a much more destabilizing actor than it is today, for Europe to become more deeply involved in the region's security environment. This is possible but not likely over the next 10 to 15 years. So long as China seems to accept the basic features of the political and security order in the Asia Pacific, there will be little incentive for Europe to define and implement a more coherent strategic approach to China's rise.

Britain's exit from the EU, while unlikely to lead to tectonic shifts in the Europe-China relationship, will likely have some effect over both Europe's willingness and its ability to project power beyond its borders, even if they are as yet unclear (Heisbourg 2016). Without Britain, the biggest military spender and most capable defense power in the EU, the EU will have less clout in foreign policy and especially defense. Moreover, the EU will likely be involved in long, complex, and perhaps acrimonious negotiations

<sup>13</sup> See also Fallon (2016). French naval vessels pass through the South China Sea several times per year.

over Britain's exit from the EU, further diminishing its willingness and ability to get deeply involved in the Asia Pacific's security environment.

## Conclusions

Two centuries ago, Napoleon famously warned that China would shake the world when it awoke. China has awoken, with important and far-reaching implications for the balance of power in the Asia Pacific and beyond. This article has outlined the range of strategies Europe could adopt in response to China's rise, the conditions and circumstances that would make the emergence of each strategy more or less likely to emerge, and the benefits and drawbacks of each approach.

Each strategy carries risks and opportunities. While Europe's current approach to China contains elements and aspects from different strategic visions outlined in this article (mainly engagement and retrenchment), the three remain distinct and cannot be easily combined. They differ over the main aims and objectives at stake for Europe, whether China's rise is inherently destabilizing, and the preferred policy instruments best suited to protect Europe's interests.

It is precisely on questions like this that Europe struggles the most. Despite its historic advances in economic and political integration over the past six decades, Europe's decision-making mechanisms in foreign policy, strategy, and defense remain fragmented, slow, and complex. As a result, Europe often fails to speak with a single voice on major security issues. Moreover, many Europeans today seem indifferent to playing a major role in world politics. They do not see Europe as a pivotal global power, or one that could or should play a major role on fundamental questions of war and peace (Sheehan 2008).

It is nevertheless important to identify and evaluate the range of strategic options available to Europe, especially while it still, in principle, has a choice and an opportunity to commit to one of these strategies. This article has identified and clarified Europe's available options, which for now may be the extent of what is possible.

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