

The Triangular Relationship Between the European Union, China, And the United States

Jiahong Gong

Department of International Studies, University of Miami, Miami, United States

jxg5239@miami.edu

Abstract. As one of the world's three major economic entities, the European Union (EU) has an unstable triangular relationship of economic interdependence with the other two economic giants, China and the United States. Over the past few decades, the relationship between China and Europe has been described by many media as a "downward spiral" and reached its lowest point with the freezing of the China-EU Comprehensive Trade Agreement in 2021. Human rights accusations, ideological conflicts, industrial competition, and national defense and security have become the main causes of resistance and friction in China-EU relations in recent years, causing Europe to gradually distance itself from China in the triangular relationship and move closer to the United States and NATO. However, since the downturn of the world economy and the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the United States has frequently sacrificed the interests of its European allies to protect its own, leading to disagreements between EU member states, the European Commission, and the European Parliament on China-related issues, creating signs of warming up in China-EU relations.

Keywords: European Union; China; the United States; diplomacy.

1. Introduction

President Emmanuel Macron of France and EU Council President Ursula Von der Leyen concluded their visit to China in early April 2023. In an interview with Politico from their return trip, President Macron emphasized the importance of Europe diminishing its reliance on the United States and steering clear of being entangled in a potential China-U.S. conflict regarding Taiwan. He also underscored that Europe's foremost concern is the risk of being drawn into crises that do not directly concern the continent, hindering its pursuit of strategic autonomy. He highlighted that Europe has been unable to solve the Ukraine crisis, and expressed the belief that a similar situation could arise in the case of the Taiwan Strait crisis [1].

Moreover, Macron's French delegation has reached mutual cooperation agreements with China in the field of high technology. For example, Airbus has committed to establishing a second assembly line in the city of Tianjin to manufacture airplanes in partnership with China. Furthermore, the French container shipping company CMA CGM has made significant purchases of LNG ships made in China.

In stark contrast to President Macron's desire to achieve a deeper partnership with China, on March 30th, Von der Leyen delivered a speech in which she reiterated the EU's stance. The EU's objective, as emphasized, was not seeking to decouple from China but rather to engage in a process of "de-risking" in both economic and political aspects. She stated that the EU should remain skeptical on China and expressed a commitment to aligning with the U.S. on technology sanctions, including advocating to restrict European companies to invest China in sensitive high-tech areas, such as robotics and artificial intelligence.

2. The Relationship between China and the EU

In 1975, Christopher Soames, Vice president of the Commission of the European Economic Community visited Beijing and met with Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and declared the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and the EU. Since then, China became the second socialist state to recognize the European Economic Community as a political entity. The establishment of this relationship was inseparable from the serious diplomatic disputes and

confrontations between China and the Soviet Union as well as threat of war. The EU urgently needed a force strong enough to restrain the Soviet Union, China also sought to repair relations with the west to counter the threat from the north. After the reform and opening up policy, China has become an emerging economy with a large cheap labor force and consumer population. With the large-scale entry and expansion of EU companies into the Chinese market, relations between the two economies have begun to heat up gradually. Negotiations on joining the WTO have also made China-EU relations more important and closer, becoming an important belt for the international community [2].

Since the 1990s, the EU and China maintained a bumpy relationship characterized by both cooperation and competition. However, several factors had the potential to strain their ties and lead to a downward spiral including human rights concern and ideological conflicts. But the major factor, is the growing influence of both the EU and China in international affairs has led to geopolitical competition. The EU and China have divergent approaches in terms of viewing data privacy, intellectual property, and economic tools. Disagreements over issues such as 5G network infrastructure and economic trade barriers could contribute to strained relations.

Differing visions for global governance, economic models, and strategic interests could result in conflicts over influence and resources, as emphasized multiple times in Von der Leyen's speech. The EU has been critical of China's human rights record since its membership in the WTO, and those concerns could lead to increased tension and disagreements between the two entities and become the main causes of friction. After taking office in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping removed the term limits from the Constitution and strictly prohibited any public dissenting voices that opposes him, leading critics within China to liken these actions to "North Koreanization" and a "restoration of monarchy". China's international diplomatic actions have also become more and more outrageous to show its determination to safeguard national unity and territorial integrity, while the EU continues to criticize on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang issues to exert even more pressure on China.

In March 2021, the European Commission aligned with multiple states the U.K., U.S., Canada, Australia to accuse the so-called "illegal detention", "forced labor" and "genocide" against the Uyghur minorities in the administrative region of Xinjiang, restarting the sanction on 4 individuals against China for the first time after 32 years since 1989 in response to the Tiananmen square incident. China expressed firm opposition and condemnation on the same day, stated all the accusations being rumors and imposed sanctions on 10 people from the European side as a reciprocal response. On May 20, 2021, the European Parliament made a decisive vote with 599 members in favor, 30 against, and 58 abstentions. The vote aimed to halt the approval process of the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement until China removed sanctions imposed on EU politicians [3, 4].

In the same month, the European Parliament passed a resolution against the affairs of Hong Kong, urging the Hong Kong government to immediately release the "political prisoners" arrested and convicted for participating in the "anti-extradition protests" in 2019 and drop all their charges; the resolution also called for a sanction on Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee Ka-Chiu and other Chinese officials accused of "suppressing human rights". The also demanded the abolition of the "National Security Law" [5]. A number of such disturbances, resulted in the freezing of the China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), which was considered as a low point of Sino-EU relations.

3. Discussion and Suggestions

In late February 2022, Russia brazenly launched an invasion attack on Ukraine under the guise of a "special military operation." This immediately created a significant geopolitical security threat for the EU. While accepting Ukrainian refugees displaced by the war, EU member states began to provide military assistance to Ukraine within the overlapping NATO framework so that Ukrainians could be armed with advanced weapons to resist the Russian army.

As a military alliance led by the U.S. to achieve strategic balance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, although NATO and the EU were separate entities, they often worked in parallel as most

EU member states were also part of NATO. The Von der Leyen Commission had been committed to creating “strategic autonomy”, which is a strategy that ensures the EU has the ability to defend Europe and take military action in neighboring countries without being overly dependent on the United States, and France has been a staunch supporter [6]. However, before the Russia-Ukraine conflict, there was a perception suggesting that this autonomy “is no longer acute” in the face of Russia’s war threat [7]. It recommended that EU member states temporarily abandon this autonomy and work closely with the United States to counter Russia.

However, as traditional allies of the U.S., not all EU members have chosen to stand definitely with the United States in the face of the geopolitical threat. Instead, differences have emerged, especially regarding China. The attitudes of von der Leyen and Macron were very different. Furthermore, President Macron’s open declaration to reduce dependence on the U.S. seems to be re-emphasizing the EU Strategic Autonomy, a perception that it is “no longer acute” after Biden’s administration and the Russian invasion on Ukraine might be subverted. In other words, France seems unwilling to be a staunch supporter of the United States in its fight against Ukraine.

In her report following her 2022 visit to China, Von der Leyen pointed out that the EU was still concerned about China’s military movements in the Taiwan Strait, the display of military strength in the South China Sea and East China Sea, as well as actions along the border with India. Additionally, the EU expressed reservations about China’s “economic and trade coercion”, including “retaliatory measures” taken against the Lithuanian government for establishing a diplomatic office in Taiwan and against EU officials who had raised concerns about human rights issues in Xinjiang [8]. Most importantly, she expressed strong dissatisfaction with China for maintaining a close relationship with Russia after its invasion war of Ukraine. She rejected China’s proposed peace agreement as well as its unwillingness to restart the China-EU investment agreement [9]. However, Macron’s opposition towards Von der Leyen suggests that a few European member states and officials have begun to change their attitudes towards China and have objections to the EU commission in terms of its China policy.

As the president of one of the EU’s vital leading member states, Macron holds significant influence over the future of EU foreign policy. His recent actions could lead to responses from other member states and potentially cause the EU to be more alienated from the US while aligning more closely to China in the EU-US-China relationship triangle. The former EU strategy of close cooperation with the United States and confrontation with China may encounter a potential turning point.

On September 26, 2022, the Nord Stream II natural gas pipeline encountered an explosion, destroying the pipeline and causing severe energy shortages in Germany. This led to skyrocketing natural gas prices and protests against the increase in natural gas prices about six times higher than the long-term average. In addition to the bombing, the continuous interest rate hikes by the U.S. Federal Reserve have placed significant burdens on many EU member states [10].

Energy shortages, combined with the increased demand for home heating and industrial gas during winter, could result in more than 100,000 additional deaths across Europe, according to Al Jazeera. However, the U.S. was not willing to help its NATO allies during the energy crisis, instead charging Europe high prices for natural gas, approximately four times the U.S. domestic price. As the desperate attitudes of the U.S. in the aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian war began to appear, the European allies face heavy losses.

4. Conclusion

Macron’s recent statements and the shifting dynamics within the Triangular Relationship can be attributed primarily to the United States’ refusal to consider Europe as an ally in arms, treating it more as a potential sacrificial pawn to safeguard its own interests. This stance has started to create fault lines within the NATO framework, causing problems in strategic mutual trust between Europe and the United States.

Under Macron's leadership, an increasing number of EU member states are beginning to reassess the concept of strategic autonomy, emphasizing the need to reduce dependence on the United States. Consequently, Europe is recalibrating its position within the relationship triangle. This recalibration has the potential to create conditions conducive to the recovery and strengthening of China-EU relationship. The evolving Triangular Relationship will undoubtedly have far-reaching implications for international diplomacy, trade, and security. It remains to be seen how this recalibration will impact global dynamics and whether it can ultimately lead to a more balanced and stable international order.

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