

IT'S NOT VENUS, BUT MINERVA: THE EUROPEAN QUEST FOR RELEVANCE VIS-À-VIS THE CHINA CHALLENGE

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Abstract

In a world driven by US-China competition, American IR literature is disregarding the EU, presenting the struggle in terms of a bipolar zero-sum game and pure military conflict. Using Schweller's terminology, this vision of the hegemonic struggle is urging the EU to adopt a bandwagon position, backing the status-quo "lion" US when facing revisionist "wolf" China. This paper contests this bipolar narrative to introduce the most interesting option for the EU: becoming the balancer. Using the concept of strategic autonomy, this paper argues the EU should overcome internal and external barriers to pursue her own agenda in global affairs. In this context, the China challenge offers an incomparable opportunity for the EU to hold the balance in three areas: economics, security affairs, and the system of values. Embracing this leadership role, the EU would regain her geopolitical relevance, resisting the shakings of American decline, and proving, in global affairs, Minerva's wisdom and strategy are the most precious gifts to hold.

Keywords

European Union, US-China Competition, International Relations Theory, Strategic Autonomy, Balance of Power.

Resumo

Num mundo marcado pela competição entre os EUA e a China, a investigação americana em RI está a ignorar a UE, apresentando a contenda em termos de um jogo bipolar de soma zero e de teor exclusivamente militar. Utilizando a terminologia de Schweller, esta visão da competição hegemónica incita a UE a adotar uma posição de "bandwagon", apoiando o status-quo "leão" dos EUA quando enfrenta o revisionismo "lobo" da China. Este artigo contraria esta narrativa bipolar para apresentar a opção mais interessante para a UE: tornar-se o equilibrador. Utilizando o conceito de autonomia estratégica, este documento defende que a UE deve ultrapassar as barreiras internas e externas para prosseguir a sua própria agenda nos assuntos mundiais. Neste contexto, o desafio da China oferece uma oportunidade incomparável para a UE manter o equilíbrio em três áreas: economia, assuntos de segurança e sistema de valores. Ao abraçar este papel de liderança, a UE recuperaria a sua relevância geopolítica, resistindo aos abalos do declínio americano e provando que, nos assuntos globais, a sabedoria e a estratégia de Minerva são os dons mais preciosos a reter.

Palavras-chave

União Europeia, Competição EUA-China, Teoria das Relações Internacionais, Autonomia Estratégica, Equilíbrio de Poder



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Introduction: The American disdain for the European Union

In 2002, Kagan (2002: 3) asserted that “on major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus”. His actual point in that essay, titled ‘Power and Weakness’ was that, in International Relations (IR), there are two different views over power. While Americans do exercise power in the anarchic Hobbesian world, he perceived that Europeans were “turning away from power”. According to Kagan, Europeans appeal to international law and commercial and economic ties to bind nations, using subtlety, diplomacy, and persuasion. Using provocative language, he explained that American military predominance and Europe’s relative weakness provoked a division of labour, where the United States (US) was “making the dinner” and the Europeans were “doing the dishes” (*ibid.*: 4-9).

This alleged superiority of the US has also had a manifestation in the discipline with the idea the US holds a more qualified understanding of interstate relations since the 1940s. Therefore, world models have tended to illustrate the American perspective over global needs through a narrative of a perpetual struggle for power where satiated good powers need to stop unsatisfied evil nations from subverting the entire system. It is ironic to notice the similarities between this Manichean world vision and the antagonistic standpoint attributed to the Soviet Union by Kennan (1946).

This theoretical discourse has also meant to turn away from the traditional advocacy for the balance of power, entering into a hegemonical narrative that defends it is in the world interest the US occupies the apex of the pyramid. In the “European world” from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century (Jacques, 2009: 1-21), the balance of power was the rule in international affairs. The stability provided by the equilibrium of forces and the continuous negotiation among powers was fundamental for Continental powers in Europe to guarantee their freedom of action (Kissinger, 1964: 271). Additionally, from the precautionary policy of an insular power, like Britain, the continental balance of power ensured no overriding danger would threaten the equilibrium, and, ultimately, its immediate security (*ibid.*: 163).

However, the isolation that geography provides the US with, in comparison to other great powers, clearly gives American elites this sensation that hegemony could work better for



their interests. Hegemony means only one power, the US, rules the system, while the European powers are considered secondary, but necessary allies (Schwarzenberger, 1960: 159). Even NATO, which symbolized Transatlantic relations after 1948, mainly protects American interests, disregarding Europe. The best example of this is Lord Ismay's words about NATO keeping "the Russians out [the European continent], the Americans in, and the Germans down" (Flockhart, 2010: 5).

This inequality between the Western North-Atlantic allies has obliged the European powers to reinvent themselves geo-strategically, towards a more strategic European Union (EU), although unity has not changed her consideration as a minor party in the hegemonical struggle. The current challenge China poses over the American predominant position globally is provoking a shift in US grand strategy attention to the Pacific theatre (Simón *et al.*, 2021: 91). The most immediate outcome is that the current hegemonic narrative in the US is disregarding the EU as a global strategic actor.

This paper is rooted in the idea that the situation with China offers an incomparable opportunity for the EU to be strategically independent while regaining relevance in the hegemonic competition. In the first section, the correlation of the American discourse with the theory is explained, denouncing that the literature has progressively subordinated the EU to a secondary role in the discipline. Secondly, and thanks to the balance of power, the role to be represented by the EU as the balancer is introduced, alerting about the four challenges the EU should overcome to hold the balance. Finally, a route map for EU-China relations to act as the "arbiter" of the current US-China hegemonic struggle will be exposed in the fields of economics, security affairs and culture.

The EU from the theory: Just a lamb fearing the China bad wolf?

When the realist research program became hegemonic in IR Theory, the world started to be depicted as a division of states struggling for power and resorting to conflict to pursue their interests in a self-help system. However, the nuclear capabilities of the US and the Soviet Union in the late 1940s provoked a change in the scope of the theoretical literature. The discipline could no longer be satisfied with explaining interstate relations in conflictual terms, since preventing major wars to happen should be the litmus test.

In this period, Classical Realism devoted considerable attention to the balance of power as the finest world model to maintain stability in global affairs. Originally founded on the idea of equal right-to-exist among the units (Morgenthau, 1949: 125-126), the aspiration of this model was "equilibrium or a distribution of power between two opponents in which neither side has attained a position of superiority or supremacy" (Wolfers, 1959: 2). The logic was tremendously simple: without holding power superiority, none of the forces will have enough confidence in their victory and then the conflict would be avoided.

The balance-of-power model served as the preferable situation in world affairs until the late 1950s. The unrelenting Western discourse about Soviet evil intentions and the fructiferous Transatlantic alliance with Europe allowed a turn in theoretical terms, as



simple parity with the Communist bloc was no longer desirable. However, to eliminate any suspicion over this aspiration to disrupt the equilibrium, a new concept was introduced: the “defenders of the peace and law of the world community” (Wolfers, 1959: 3-5), the status-quo powers. In the hands of these Western democratic status-quo powers, led by the US, indisputable hegemony was ideal to preserve world stability.

In 1958, Organski introduced the power-transition theory as a critique of the balance of power. He stated that equilibrium was not equal to peace, since the modern greatest wars took place in situations of power parity (Organski, 1958: 291-292). Consequently, he developed a model according to which the best scenario would be an uneven distribution of power, a hierarchical system dominated by a dominant status-quo nation able to resist the challenging dissatisfied powers (Organski, 1958: 313-337). Organski was probably envisioning a cyclical succession of world orders as later presented by Modelski & Thompson (1989: 36), but his terms were used differently. They served to consolidate two patterns of great power behaviour in IR literature: the status-quo US and Europe vis-à-vis the revisionist Soviet Union and Red China (Wolfers, 1959: 11). This power-transition literature was then biased to argue that world stability had to rely on the superiority of Western powers.

Nevertheless, the end of the Cold War brought some changes to this conception. The global pressure on China after Tiananmen and the Russian rapprochement towards the West after the dissolution of the Soviet Union eliminated all potential rivals to the US hegemony. Therefore, the US did not have to rely any longer on the Transatlantic alliance. During the Cold War, the US had sustained NATO despite French concerns about the overdependence on the US and even supported European nuclear ambitions while convenient. However, given the new events, it was no longer in the American interest to deal with the EU as an equal partner, as evidenced in inferiority speeches like the so-called “Kissinger question” about who would be answering the phone in Europe, which created serious concern in the EU.

Given the control of the IR Theory narrative, this US policy also found support in the theory. Continuing the tradition of power-transition theory, Schweller introduced the bandwagoning for profit in the status-quo/revisionist dimension. In his work, he identifies four patterns of state behaviour in the *continuum* of satisfaction-dissatisfaction: lions, lambs, jackals, and wolves (Schweller, 1994: 100-104). Lions, as kings of the jungle, rule and manage the international system and need to frighten voracious (revisionist) wolves from aggression or fight to defeat them. Yet, the most important part of this contribution is how weak states are portrayed as lambs if they bandwagon to appease threats, or jackals if they bandwagon to rely on others’ victories.

Although Schweller never referred to specific states when presenting these roles, it is shocking how the definition of lambs perfectly suits the American vision over the EU. The American protection the EU searched for during the Cold War (Ratti, 2012: 92) has been sustained and even increased with the end of the Cold War, despite the lack of direct threat. Additionally, the US Pivot to Asia in 2011 has thrown the EU into a secondary role in hegemonic terms when attention is focused on Asia-Pacific.



This shift is manifesting also more assertiveness towards the EU, as evidenced by Trump's threats over the dismantlement of NATO. Despite the change of tone, Biden has not engaged in a more promising dialogue with the EU about global affairs. On the challenge posed by China, the US would like the EU to support American interests in their competition with Beijing, or at least not undermine their efforts (Simón *et al.*, 2021: 91). Concerning China, the US seems to be asking the EU to be a small power (Toje, 2011: 47) that joins the lion to avoid being fed by the China bad wolf. But what happens with European interests then? Who is taking care of them if the EU is a lamb in this anarchical jungle?

Honding the US-China balance: The answer for European relevance

This American disdain for the EU has been problematic in the European continent for decades. It was one of the reasons behind the French abandonment of NATO in 1967, as the security alliance ultimately meant dependence on the American military forces to solve purely European security affairs. This is the foundation also of the idea of strategic autonomy, probably the most important concept in European foreign affairs in the last decade. According to Damen (2022: 1), strategic autonomy "refers to the capacity of the EU to act autonomously – that is, without being dependent on other countries – in strategically important policy areas, [ranging] from defence policy to the economy, and the capacity to uphold democratic values". It was the result of the EU's realization that she needed to rely on herself, considering the episodes going on with Brexit, Trump's America First, and China's assertiveness.

In a system where the units are looking inwards, the EU needs to make a stance to pursue a more integrative approach among the European nations to strengthen the union on the outside. The common security and defence policy (CSDP) was, at the time, the initiative that most symbolized the ambition to act as a Union, diplomatically, economically and militarily (Toje, 2011: 44). However, the time has evidenced the CSDP was not enough to achieve the autonomy that was originally pursued. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has still raised the strategic dependence on the US when defending European values in the European continent. On the other hand, the existing complex interdependence between the US and the EU, as main economic and technological partners and members of the main strategic military alliance in the world, provokes a still decisive relationship between both powers, despite the increasing importance of China.

What are then the possibilities for the EU to still be relevant in hegemonic terms? As mentioned above, the gradual American hegemonic interests have been accompanied by a progressive correlation in the IR Theory literature, with the preference for the power-transition theory over an equilibrium based on the balance of power. Nevertheless, the China challenge is offering a new turning point in this theoretical construction, as the Western decline and China's ascent are causing a recent shift in the discipline. Certain voices are advocating for a balance of power (Swaine, 2015: 146; Lukin, 2021: 375) or cooperation between the US and China (Weiss, 2022: 41; Rodrik & Walt, 2022: 150) to



escape from the Thucydides' Trap, which is simply a captivating term for Organski's original power-transition theory. The US is pushing away the hegemonical discourse to prevent an escalation leading to a major war based on theoretical grounds.

This renewed strength of the balance of power offers very fertile soil to raise the foundations of European strategic ambitions and find the EU's place in this early Asian century. Concretely, Morgenthau (1948: 142-145) explains that, apart from the two scales composing the balance, there is a third element, named the "holder" of the balance, whose objective within the system is simply the maintenance of the balance. The holder of the balance should support the weaker scale to avoid the domination of the other and maintain equilibrium. Therefore, the balancer "must refuse to enter into permanent ties with either side", and this isolation, and even condemnation on moral grounds, is the price to be paid to sustain stability in the system. This key role as "arbiter" of the system was majestically represented by Great Britain until the late 19th century.

Morgenthau (1948: 145) stated that "this variety of the balance of power seems to have disappeared in recent years with the decline of British, and the growth of American and Russian, power". In this Cold War context, no force was perceived as strong enough to hold the balance while not aligning with the Western or Eastern blocs. Additionally, Organski (1958: 297) severely criticized the concept itself of the "balancer" since no single nation would disregard their self-interest to maintain the balance, not even Great Britain. However, as Kissinger (1964: 171) recognized, the political equilibrium in the continent was an end in itself for the insular power to preserve her particular safety. Because of that, Britain's role as the balancer would "more likely encourage divisions in the Continent than ameliorate them" (Kissinger, 1964: 313).

While divisions could hardly be more enhanced between the US and China in the current scenario, the EU can play this balancer role, adopting a more tenacious position in the world system instead of forging permanent alliances with any of the contenders. The European "isolationist" position towards a potential conflict in Asia-Pacific allows certain indifference over the domination of the region, providing the ground to decide who will win and who will lose in every dispute. This role would certainly give the EU a decisive standpoint in the region where global hegemony is to be decided, but also three important assets commonly attributed to the balancer: certainty over her independence, responsibility for the independence of the other nations, and the option to extract the highest price from those whom she supports (Morgenthau, 1948: 143).

These key decisions to be made would push the EU to become the most powerful actor within the system, since the US and China would, in a certain way, depend on the EU's choices. This unparalleled position as the holder of the balance would certainly come with the cost of facing, at least, four major challenges for the EU in her quest for relevance. These are: (1) overcoming the domestic barriers in the search of true internal cohesion in foreign affairs; (2) breaking the regular military, economic, and political alliance with the US; (3) starting from scratch as a strategic geopolitical actor in the current multipolar global system; and (4) reversing the unconstructive rhetoric over China to create mutual trust in other domains apart from the economic.



In the first place, the EU has never been able to agree on a truly common foreign policy. In the end, the credibility of external power depends on the deployment of resources (Aron, 2003: 49), which ultimately involve the intricated EU decision-making process, the different national foreign agendas, and the need to stay firm with the final decision made. Any blockade on this situation or unilateral positions, as currently shown with the practice of bilateral energy agreements with Russia, could be fatal for this common position. Finally, the challenge posed by Hungary and Poland when giving voice to anti-European views demands the search for accommodation within the European system to these opposing attitudes. This search for compromise to avoid revisionism and unilateral decisions is the only way to effectively tackle this issue and prove the "unity in diversity" that inspires the entire EU model.

Secondly, being the balancer, the EU should be open to becoming a temporal foe of the US if her interests require so. To achieve this, moving away from American interests ought to be a priority, but the US-EU's existing complex interdependence would certainly hinder the process. Fortunately, in the last years, the US has incurred certain behaviours that may lighten up this pressure over the EU, as shown by Trump's actions and rhetoric over the Old Continent or Biden's unilateral decision to withdraw American troops from Iraq. Domestic upheavals in the US and the idea of the Western decline are manifesting the inner contradictions of the American system. Escaping from these earthquakes by building a stronger society that abstains to see the US as a role model internally and externally should be a main concern for European institutions, facilitating a potential split in strategic affairs.

The existing interdependence means strategic disengagement with the US would hardly condition a dramatic transformation in the economic and political relations between both sides of the North Atlantic. However, this move would certainly jeopardize the most vulnerable and obvious domain for the EU: the dependence on the US military forces. Nevertheless, Russia's assertiveness over Eastern Europe has recently emphasized again the benefits for the US when being present in Europe. Consequently, even with European strategic autonomy, it would be in the interest of both sides to maintain NATO, as the two parties would be enjoying the advantages of this alliance among traditional friends.

In this context, the EU could gain this strategic autonomy by officially recognizing the EU's "insular" neutral position over a potential confrontation in Asia-Pacific, using rhetoric based on the balance of power between the US and China. This isolationist policy would not be an existential threat to the Transatlantic alliance while making clear the EU would not be subordinated to the White House's dictates regarding China. Contrary to this ideal scenario for the EU, the most recent NATO Strategic Concept moved on the opposite direction when identifying China as a challenge to Euro-Atlantic interests, security, and values (NATO, 2022: 5). In future NATO agreements, the EU needs to limit the inclusion of US grand strategy in the Pacific if she wants to maintain the alliance while regaining freedom of action to progressively approach China.

The third challenge for the EU in the quest for relevance, that is, finding her new role in the system, is certainly demanding since it would mean abandoning the bipolar discourse.



The multipolar narrative assigns the EU a prominent position in international affairs, but the EU needs to initiate the route to discover her separate part in the current hegemonic competition. The EU has traditionally been perceived by other parties as an economic actor since economy was the primary bond for the EU in her origins. Economics is an area that allows bonding among European states while not calling for external enmity if the rest's shares remain untouched. Embarked on a win-win logic when offering a common free market to potential partners, the EU has enjoyed a prominent character, by promoting internal unity and becoming a role model in the domain where cooperation is less troublesome.

However, the hegemonic relevance the EU is seeking would oblige the organization to adopt a more substantial role in security affairs, where cooperation is harder and, as already warned, internal and external constraints can easily be involved. Therefore, the EU's new position to regain relevance in hegemonic terms should only be referred to as freeing herself from the American interests and policies towards China and adopting a new strategy on China. The latter is our fourth challenge and is developed in the following section.

The China challenge as an opportunity: How to make it happen?

In 1948, Morgenthau (1948: 273-274) identified the disappearance of the balancer as a change in the new balance of power that was occurring at the time. According to him, Great Britain could no longer be able to perform this role as her naval strength had been surpassed by the US, and modern warfare was challenging the uncontested mastery of the seas, as well as the invulnerability of the British Isles. Furthermore, when justifying France's impossibility to play this position in the aftermath of World War II, he gave the three main conditions to hold the balance: (1) being "geographically remote from the centers of friction and conflict", (2) having "no vital interests in the stakes of these conflicts as such", and (3) having "the opportunity of satisfying its aspirations for power in areas beyond the reach of the main contenders for power" (*ibid.*: 275).

The EU's success when separating from American interests will precisely depend on the ability to justify whether these three conditions are met if the US and China engage in conflict in Asia-Pacific. Geographically remoteness is no longer a real condition for neutrality with the current warfare. However, based on the experience in both World Wars, the US knows that struggling on another continent gives you freedom of action to decide when to be involved. The vital aspirations of Europe are not played in this US-China competition in Asia-Pacific, despite the growing interest in partnerships with the Indo-Pacific region, involving India in economic calculations. In fact, the extension of the concept from the Pacific to the Indo-Pacific talks about this need to expand the "power center of global politics" to invoke more interests, as it searches the US with the Quad and China with the attempt to expand her economic and strategic influence in the Indian Ocean (Saeed, 2017: 502-504).



However, the EU's position in the world is not depending on the Chinese expansion in the Indo-Pacific area or the ability of the US to rebalance China. A potential conflict could provoke a reversal in the economic possibilities of the European national governments, but that does not mean the EU as a strategic actor is genuinely interested in the events occurring in the Indo-Pacific. Actually, her remoteness could be key to rising as a hegemonic actor when having no vital interests in the region and finding other areas to exert influence, for example, in Central Asia. But first, the EU should look for the satisfaction of her power aspirations from the inside, with the unity of the European powers as a common front in foreign affairs. Achieving this, the EU would be a relevant actor in hegemonic terms, away from the "main center of friction and conflict", and with enough autonomy to draft her own policy in the world.

However, these favourable conditions are dependent on the ability of the EU to separate herself from American interests and build a constructive relationship with China, acting as a real balancer. The challenge China is posing to American hegemony is an unparalleled opportunity for the EU to act as arbiter between the hegemon and the rising power. Becoming the holder of the global balance of power leads, apart from the deterioration of the traditional strategic bond across the Atlantic, to the fourth challenge for the EU on the road to becoming a hegemonic power: reversing the negative interaction with China. The trial behind this policy is evidenced by the division in the West on whether China should be considered a "threat" or a "challenge". However, what might be a threat to the US national interests in the Pacific could not mean a direct menace for the EU, as it was proven by the pragmatic approach that EU member states seem to have adopted to China due to economic possibilities. In fact, this association could be reinforced by China's view of the EU as a crucial player in the global society and the idea of the EU-China relationship as a "new model of major-power relations (新型大国关系)", away from confrontation and hostility (Li & He, 2022: 442).

This turn in EU-China relations should be performed following the EU priorities in strategic autonomy, to be coherent with the order the EU seeks to arbitrate as the global balancer. In this regard, the European Parliament (2022: 1) and countries like Spain and the Netherlands (2021: 1) have identified three main fields to achieve strategic autonomy while preserving peace and international stability: economics, security affairs, and the upholding of democratic values. This resonates with the traditional distinction in IR Theory between the three basic forms of social power: economic, political, and cultural, using the definitions provided by Caldusch Cervera (1991) that will be developed below.

Economic power is defined as the "form of social power developed among the members of an economic process on their condition of producers, distributors, or consumers" (*ibid.*: 6). Within this global economic system, China is currently the first commercial power in the world, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offering a common economic framework in the Eurasian continent under Chinese principles. For the EU, the top priority would be creating a common policy toward the BRI, avoiding unilateral signatures between the giant dragon and the EU member states. To achieve this, it would be required to convince existing signers to revoke their partnerships in favour of a partnership between the entire EU and China within the BRI framework. Therefore, the EU would avoid individual



conditions with her member states, while China will add more territories and markets to her most ambitious project in economic terms.

A European united front in economic terms could enhance the European position in the negotiations with China, opting for a more equal standpoint for both parties to ensure the win-win approach China is selling to the world. This approach could be applicable within the BRI framework, but also to the Global Gateway project the EU is developing, which affects critical resources such as digital technology. In the past, challenges from China have been reported in the EU in terms of economic security, especially connected with Huawei or the 5G networks, but it is important also to separate security threats, which affect the survival of the actor, from the mere protection of economic interests, which can be achieved otherwise. To do so, the EU needs to become a more self-sufficient actor to avoid dependency on critical resources and fear of supply chain disruptions from China. This autonomous EU policy may create some concern in the US, which is currently coordinating with the EU in several policy areas, including growing the bilateral trade and investment relationship, to contain China economically (Li & He, 2022: 446).

A perfect case study in this regard is the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), which was concluded, right before the Biden administration was in place, due to some remarkably appealing Chinese concessions (Bergsen, 2021: 24). The US has not only opposed to the CAI but even pressured the EU to dismiss it in the base of its global disadvantages. While the agreement is officially frozen due to the situation in Xinjiang, it evidenced the pull of the Chinese market in Europe (Casirini, 2022: 101-103). The final ratification would be a signal of developing an EU policy on China unhearing American preferences, with a positive impact on economic and political affairs for the EU and China. These moves would probably be strengthening Chinese economic power but would also provide more possibilities for the EU to use Chinese investments for her profit and under her terms, given the EU's stronger position in the international system.

A similar pattern of behaviour could be performed in political power, defined as the "established social power to organize cohabitation and guarantee society's security and independence" (Calduch Cervera, 1991: 6). This political power is then critically impacted by security affairs, that is, the use of the military to guarantee the state's survival and the consecution of the national interests. In this regard, with the US-led NATO and China's Global Security Initiative as the two poles that could eventually collide in the Indo-Pacific. The inclusion of China as a "security threat" to NATO means that, in the case of a direct US-China confrontation, the EU could be involved if invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. For the US, it is a priority referring the US-China competition in military terms to ensure European involvement, as well as the use of the rhetorical confrontation between responsible democratic Western nations and revisionist authoritarian non-Western powers (Peters *et al.*, 2020: 1502). In both cases, the already-exposed EU's strategy of isolating herself from the Indo-Pacific military theatre could be successful in the creation of her own narrative and security policy.



The construction of a new common framework of reference in security affairs would ensure the continuation of the NATO alliance while reaching certain autonomy over the US grand strategy. As stated, this policy could be harder because of the US-EU's complex interdependence, but it would be the only road to being more strategically independent in this multipolar world. This disengagement with the US could mean, for example, the adherence to the One China policy regarding Taiwan, as requested by China. The EU needs to assemble and decide if, contrary to US ambiguity, she would act in case of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, where no vital interests of the EU are involved. Holding a common policy on the Taiwan issue and creating a narrative around it could impact revealing the military escalation between the US and China is actually over becoming the linchpin in the global system, not on the stability of the latter.

Finally, cultural power is defined by Calduch Cervera (1991: 6) as the "acquired form of the social power that is based on the existence of a community of values, knowledge, ideologies or experiences among the members of a society". In this "community of values", one of the most pressing cultural concerns for the EU is the Chinese disregard for human rights. This matter has been tremendously problematic in China-EU relations since 1995 (Dosch, 2018: 188-189), but achieved a point of no return when the narrative on Eastern values was raised (Davison, 2018: 304-310). This disdain for human rights in China is repetitively addressed by Western officials, linked to accusations of censorship, abuses against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and repression in Hong Kong. Despite the repulsive character of these policies in all places, the US has a policy of selective condemnation of human rights violations depending on their foreign agenda. This was demonstrated in the promoted diplomatic boycott over the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games, while the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was not perceived as problematic whatsoever.

In this cultural projection, the EU has commonly adopted a more coherent position towards the respect of human rights, being critical of violations everywhere, regardless of the economic or political interests involved. In a certain way, the EU has embraced being the "voice of conscience" as part of her international credibility and her aspirations to "exercise global normative leadership" (de Búrca, 2011:690). Therefore, the options for the EU would not allow a more flexible stance towards China's human rights violations since it would mean a reverse in the European position as a global human rights actor. This is particularly true in the case of Xinjiang, where the EU should act as Jiminy Cricket and whisper in China's ears to get a reversal of the governmental policies in the region and an improvement in the conditions of the Uyghurs. Through the rapprochement in other spheres of power, the EU could adopt a more privileged position to try to use her normative force to impact and obtain concessions from China in terms of the embracement of societal values like human rights.

However, the EU should always check not crossing the line of sovereignty to prevent China from perceiving European interference in domestic affairs that could lead to higher secrecy on Chinese affairs. Therefore, two courses of action for the EU could be followed to avoid the naming and shaming towards China while maintaining her global normative front-runner: (1) a more critical approach to other countries neither respecting human rights, which would reduce pressure on China and, at the same time, pursue a fairer



defence of human rights globally; and (2) drawing a line and not letting politics to be involved against China in other cultural aspects like Chinese brands or sports events, as Macron defended regarding the Beijing 2022 boycott. Both policies would provoke a positive reaction from Beijing over this change in the EU discourse, easing the path to becoming the balancer in the existing hegemonic US-China competition.

Conclusions and food for thought: Minerva as a role model

This study has addressed the European concerns of strategic autonomy and hegemonic relevance, using the challenge posed by China as a far-fetched opportunity to obtain independence from the American global interests and adopt her own common policy without further interference. If the EU simply pursues the trail of American officials in her relationship with China, it will become an irrelevant actor in geopolitical terms, and this is why the EU should enjoy this chance to raise her voice toward China. In this sense, the Chinese policy of resisting American hegemony could be interesting for the EU to avoid being a mere puppet in foreign affairs, but the solution can neither be Chinese hegemony. The most preferable scenario for the EU would be a global balance of power with the US and China on each of the scales, and the EU holding the balance.

To achieve this goal, it is fundamental to coordinate the policy toward China and overcome internal and external barriers, especially in the always-challenging Transatlantic alliance. Further actions have been drafted in the economic arena, security affairs, and the defence of democratic values, but the main challenge would certainly be maintaining the relationship with the US despite the interference (by omission) in American policy in the Indo-Pacific. As Morgenthau (1948: 143) stated, the ambivalent role of the balancer comes with moral condemnation, but also with a key position as the "arbiter" of the system. For the balancer, using Lord Palmerston's words, there are no eternal allies or perpetual enemies, just the interests to be followed are eternal and perpetual. Therefore, it seems to be in the EU's interests to be accused by the US of negotiating with the "enemy", as a jackal bandwagoning for profit, if these could finally be on the negotiation table.

The possibilities on the other side are promising, especially if being able to act externally as a bloc. Strategic autonomy comes with the price of ceding sovereignty, but the alternative is global irrelevance in a world progressively dominated by Washington and Beijing. The EU should learn from the Cold War period and emphasize the importance of a tripolar global order, as envisioned by China in her aspiration of a three-superpower system (三超多强), ruled by the US, China, and the EU. This system is an interesting option for China because it would guarantee developing countries would ask for her help, with the subsequent positive economic effect on China. But, even more, it is the best option for the EU, whose relevance would be notable when arbitrating the US-China competition in the Pacific.

This entire framework for strategic autonomy during the China challenge opposes the position the US has been asking the EU to hold in this hegemonic confrontation, and



questions Kagan's assertion about Americans coming from Mars and Europeans coming from Venus. This caricatural differentiation between Mars, the masculine god of war and father of Rome's founders, and Venus, the female goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, permeated the IR literature (Brown, 2002: 481). However, the achievement of EU strategic autonomy and the policies previously drafted to hold the global balance of power would make clear those outdated roles do not represent the current EU status and strategic planning no longer pertains only to Americans.

Status-quo and revisionist powers, lions and wolves, and Mars and Venus are all terms coming from a Manichean vision of the international order that perpetuates the conflictual nature of interstate relations and mutual distrust. Current global issues require cooperation between the nations in a stable system where world poles of power are not defined by such outdated and antagonistic roles. The EU needs an order where her voice can be heard, but to achieve this goal, the effort should be put into obtaining strategic autonomy from the US and strengthening her independent position towards China. Holding the balance of hegemonical power, the EU would certainly resemble Minerva, a member of the Capitoline Triad, goddess of wisdom, justice and strategy, and patron of defensive war, in contrast to Mars' violence and battle lust.

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