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**Beyond Divide and Rule: Advocating a Respect-Based Chinese Policy Toward the
EU**

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Abstract

As China continues to rise as a global power, its relationship with the European Union (EU) has become increasingly pivotal in shaping a multipolar international order. This paper argues that China's approach to the EU must move beyond outdated notions of "divide and rule" and embrace a respect-based, transparent policy that fully acknowledges the EU's internal unity and its deep-rooted transatlantic partnership with the United States. However, despite some positive engagement, China-EU relations are under growing strain. From a European perspective, China is a dividing force in Europe. On the one hand, through the 16+1 format and other forms, China is trying to use the divisions within Europe to weaken the EU's unified position on issues such as trade, technological security, and human rights. On the other hand, China is also trying to divide Europe from the United States. This study does not deny the existence of this "divide and rule" strategy, but believes that it is short-sighted and dangerous. First, the divergent interests and debates on governance models within the EU do not negate its collective Western identity, shaped by shared values and historical experiences that China cannot easily match. Second, the transatlantic partnership remains deeply ingrained in the strategic thinking of European elites. NATO functions as the military extension of the West, while the EU often mirrors its economic logic. Together, they reinforce a Euro-American ideological and institutional alliance. The article advocates for a recalibrated Chinese strategy that emphasizes respect for the EU's autonomy and solidarity. Some existing mechanisms could be improved to support this: expanding direct cooperation with EU institutions in Brussels, rather than sub-regional channels; enhancing transparency in economic initiatives, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative, by aligning with EU standards on procurement, environment, and labor; and promoting trilateral China-EU-US summits on more global challenges.

Introduction

As the 21st century reconfigures the international order, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the European Union (EU) has emerged as a pivotal axis. The interaction between the world's rising superpower and the world's most integrated economic and regulatory bloc is no longer a peripheral concern but a central theater where the future of multilateralism, global governance, and systemic competition will be shaped. This relationship, which officially began in 1975, has evolved from a simple economic engagement into a complex, multidimensional, and increasingly strained strategic partnership.

From a European perspective, a core source of this strain is the pervasive perception that China is actively pursuing a "divide and rule" (*divide et impera*) strategy toward the continent. This is not a new or fringe concern. As early as 2017, then-German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel issued a public call for China to adopt a "One Europe policy," a deliberate and pointed reversal of Beijing's own "One China" doctrine. Gabriel warned, "If we do not succeed in developing a single strategy towards China, then China will succeed in dividing Europe".¹ This sentiment has since become a central theme in European policy and academic discourse, which frequently identifies Chinese foreign policy as a dividing force that utilizes fragmentation as a strategic tool. This "divide and rule" approach, as perceived by Europe, operates on two distinct fronts. Internally, China is seen as attempting to weaken EU unity by leveraging sub-regional formats, such as the "16+1"² initiative, and by cultivating bilateral economic relationships with specific member states to undermine unified EU positions on trade, security, and human rights. Externally, China is seen as attempting to drive a wedge between Europe and the United States, encouraging EU "strategic autonomy" not as a means of European self-empowerment, but as a mechanism to fracture the transatlantic partnership and weaken the West's collective stance.

This paper argues that China's persistent "divide and rule" strategy is not merely an irritant but a short-sighted and dangerous strategic error. It is a policy founded on two profoundly flawed premises. The first is a fundamental underestimation of the EU's internal coherence, which is rooted not only in political expedience but in a deep-seated collective Western identity, a shared Community of Law, and a powerful, values-based regulatory model. The second is a fundamental misreading of the institutional, ideological, and strategic depth of

¹ 'Berlin Calls for a "One-Europe Policy"', 11 September 2017 <<https://www.german-foreign-policy.com/en/news/detail/7382>> [accessed 6 September 2025].

² Following the withdrawal of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from the "17+1" (previously "16+1") cooperation framework in 2022, the mechanism has since evolved into the "14+1" format.

the EU-US transatlantic partnership, which finds its ultimate expression in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as the military extension of the West.

This paper will demonstrate that this flawed strategy is counter-productive. Far from achieving its goals, it has actively accelerated EU unity and cemented transatlantic convergence on the "China challenge," to the direct detriment of China's own long-term interests. To establish this thesis, the paper is structured in three parts. Chapter I will deconstruct the empirical mechanisms of the "divide and rule" strategy, examining both its internal and external prongs. Chapter II will examine two flawed premises underpinning China's approach: first, its misreading of the European Union's internal, normative, and institutional resilience; and second, its misreading of the enduring strategic bond between the EU and the United States. Finally, Chapter III will advocate for a recalibrated Chinese strategy, a respect-based policy, as a pragmatic alternative, moving beyond division to embrace transparency, multilateral engagement with Brussels, and constructive trilateralism on global challenges.

I. Deconstructing "Divide and Rule": China's Two-Pronged Strategy in Europe

1.1 The Internal Wedge: Sub-regionalism and Economic Clientelism

The perception of a Chinese "divide and rule" strategy is grounded in observable policy actions. This approach is not monolithic but operates through two distinct, yet complementary, vectors: an internal wedge designed to fragment the EU from within, and an external wedge designed to sever the EU from its transatlantic partner, the United States.

The primary political instrument of China's internal wedge strategy has been the creation of bespoke, sub-regional diplomatic frameworks that operate parallel to, and often in friction with, the EU's institutional structures. The most prominent example is the "Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries" (China-CEEC), launched in Warsaw in 2012. Initially known as the "16+1" format (later expanding to 17+1 with Greece in 2019, and shrinking to 14+1 after the exit of the Baltic states), this initiative was framed by Beijing as an innovative platform to intensify cooperation with 11 EU member states and five Balkan countries. However, its *de facto* effect was the creation of a geographical division of Europe that deliberately excluded Brussels and other Western European capitals.³ This strategy did not create divisions *ex nihilo* but rather skillfully exploited pre-existing

³ Brian F. G. Fabrègue and Christiaan Vermorken, 'Central and Eastern Europe between Brussels and Beijing: To BRI or Not to BRI?', in *The Dragon at the Gates of Europe: Chinese Presence in the Balkans and Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. by Andrea Bogoni and Brian F.G. Fabrègue (Blue Europe, 2023), pp. 11–40.

fragmentation within the EU. Academic analysis, employing core-periphery theory, suggests that the spatial position of nations within Europe shapes their outlook on China.⁴ Countries on the EU's semi-periphery (e.g., Hungary) have been shown to be more dissatisfied with their position within the EU and thus more receptive to Chinese overtures, which they perceive as an alternative source of investment and political validation. Conversely, core countries (e.g., Germany) have tended to adopt a more critical stance. China's strategy, therefore, was to leverage this core-periphery tension, offering economic incentives to semi-periphery states in exchange for political alignment.

While the format's stated goals were economic, its results in this area have been underwhelming. Initial promises of \$100 billion in investment failed to materialize.⁵ Empirical evidence shows that China-CEEC trade increased at a much slower pace after 2012 than in the three years preceding it, and the trade that did occur was heavily tilted in favour of China.⁶ Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) remained highly concentrated in a few large CEECs and accounted for an extremely low share of total FDI stock. The promised 10 billion EUR investment fund launched in 2016 remained largely China-controlled, with few CEE states willing to contribute.⁷ The true impact was not economic but political. The format provided a powerful bargaining chip for member states like Hungary and Greece to use against Brussels. In return for Chinese investment, or the promise of it, some CEE states were perceived to "give priority to Chinese political interests over EU interests".⁸ This manifested in several high-profile instances where these states broke EU consensus, holding dissenting positions on unified statements regarding China's human rights record, the South China Sea arbitration ruling, and the creation of an EU-level FDI screening mechanism.⁹

The EU's response was one of wary "bser'ation. While the EU was eventually granted "observer" status at 16+1 summits, the 2019 Joint Communication *EU-China – A strategic outlook* delivered a clear institutional rebuke. It explicitly stated that all Member States, "individually and within sub-regional cooperation frameworks, such as the 16+1 format,

⁴ Katja Levy and Ágota Révész, 'No Common Ground: A Spatial-Relational Analysis of EU-China Relations', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 27.3 (2022), pp. 457–91, doi:10.1007/s11366-021-09769-w.

⁵ Gisela Grieger, *China, the 16+1 Format and the EU*, Briefing PE 625.173 (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2018).

⁶ Grieger, *China, the 16+1 Format and the EU*.

⁷ Agatha Kratz and others, *China's Investment in Influence: The Future of 16+1 Cooperation* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016).

⁸ Grieger, *China, the 16+1 Format and the EU*.

⁹ Philippe Le Corre, *A Divided Europe's China Challenge | East Asia Forum | East Asia Forum*, China, 26 November 2019 <<https://eastasiaforum.org/2019/11/26/a-divided-europe-china-challenge/>> [accessed 6 September 2025].

have a responsibility to ensure consistency with EU law, rules and policies".¹⁰ The message was clear: sub-regional engagement that bypassed or undermined EU unity was no longer acceptable.

If the 16+1 format was the political scaffolding for internal wedge, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provided concrete projects. No project better illustrates the friction between China's bilateral approach and the EU's unified legal framework than the Budapest-Belgrade railway. Announced in 2013, the railway's modernization was touted as the "signature project" of the 16+1 framework and a key component of the BRI.¹¹ Its geopolitical logic was clear: the railway would create a "land bridge" for Chinese goods flowing from the Chinese-owned port of Piraeus in Greece, through the Balkans, and into the heart of the EU common market.¹² However, the project immediately became a lightening rod for controversy.¹³ The key challenge emerged from the project's starkly different progress on either side of the EU border. On the Serbian (non-EU) side, work proceeded. On the Hungarian (EU) side, the project stalled for years. The reason was a direct clash with EU law. In 2017, the European Commission launched an investigation into the project's financial viability and, most critically, whether it violated EU laws by not calling for a public tender. China's model: a bilateral deal, financed by an 85% loan from the Chinese Exim Bank, and awarded to Chinese state-owned enterprises without open competition, was fundamentally incompatible with the EU's foundational rules on public procurement and state aid.¹⁴ The project's opacity further fueled concerns. The Hungarian government classified the project's feasibility study for ten years, preventing public scrutiny of its economic rationale. This secrecy led to widespread criticism regarding corruption and financial non-viability, with some estimates calculating a potential payoff period of 979 years.¹⁵

The Budapest-Belgrade railway serves as a perfect microcosm of the "divide and rule" approach in practice. It represented a direct attempt to use a bilateral deal with a "friendly" member state to build strategic infrastructure that prioritized Beijing's geopolitical targets

¹⁰ EU-China – A Strategic Outlook, JOIN(2019) 5 final (European Commission, 2019).

¹¹ Matt Ferchen, 'China's Troubled Hungary-Serbia Railway Project: A Case Study', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2018 <<https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/12/chinas-troubled-hungary-serbia-railway-project-a-case-study?lang=en>> [accessed 6 September 2025].

¹² Flora Rencz, *The BRI in Europe and the Budapest-Belgrade Railway Link* (European Institute for Asian Studies, 2019).

¹³ Ferchen, 'China's Troubled Hungary-Serbia Railway Project'.

¹⁴ Francesca Ghiretti, Jacob Gunter, and Gregor Sebastian, *Chinese Investments in European Non-Maritime Transport Infrastructure* (European Parliament, 2023).

¹⁵ Attila Kálmán, 'From Budapest to Belgrade: A Railway Line Increases Chinese Influence in the Balkans', Investigate Europe, 28 December 2021 <<https://www.investigate-europe.eu/posts/from-budapest-to-belgrade-a-railway-line-increases-chinese-influence-in-the-balkans>> [accessed 6 September 2025].

while actively bypassing the EU's institutional and legal norms on transparency, procurement, and competition.

1.2 The External Wedge: Exploiting the "Strategic Autonomy" Debate

The second prong of China's strategy is external: the attempt to divide Europe from the United States. Beijing's diplomatic language has consistently supported the concept of EU "strategic autonomy".¹⁶ From a Chinese perspective, a more autonomous Europe is seen as a reinsurance policy against U.S. global dominance.¹⁷ Chinese leaders have openly encouraged this dynamic, believing it has the potential to divide the U.S. and the EU. This strategy is not passive. Analysis of Chinese strategic thought reveals that Beijing's preferred scenario for European defense integration, such as the Permanent Structured Co-operation, is one in which it succeeds at the heavy cost of splits between Brussels, London and Washington. In this ideal scenario, a less militarily capable NATO would be marginalized, and the EU would emerge as a separate, weaker regional pole for China to play against the United States.¹⁸

China's gambit was to force European states to choose between their American security partner and their Chinese economic one. The strategy achieved a tactical, short-term success: it created a significant rift in the already fragile transatlantic relationship and exposed deep divisions within Europe itself. Taking the application of 5G technology in Europe as an example. The German government remained deeply divided;¹⁹ France opted for a partial, time-limited ban;²⁰ and the UK initially approved Huawei before reversing its decision under intense U.S. pressure.²¹ By leveraging its technological and economic dominance in 5G, China attempted to achieve a major geostrategic objective: severing Europe's critical infrastructure from American influence and cementing a permanent transatlantic wedge.

However, the external wedge strategy was never solely technological. The 5G controversy was merely the most visible symptom of a broader Chinese effort to reshape Europe's strategic orientation. By positioning itself as an indispensable economic partner and an alternative to U.S. power politics, Beijing sought to recast the transatlantic partnership as an

¹⁶ Nicola Casarini, 'A European Strategic "Third Way?" The European Union between the Traditional Transatlantic Alliance and the Pull of the Chinese Market', *China International Strategy Review*, 4.1 (2022), pp. 91–107, doi:10.1007/s42533-022-00095-1.

¹⁷ Scott W. Harold, *Chinese Views on European Defense Integration* (MERICS, 2018).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hans von der Burchard, Mathieu Pollet, and Jürgen Klöckner, 'Germany Goes Soft on China, Dragging out Huawei Ban until 2029', POLITICO, 10 July 2024 <<https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-china-huawei-ban-2029-5g-networks-government-greens-lawmaker-4g-strand/>> [accessed 7 September 2025].

²⁰ John Lee, '5G and Huawei: The UK and EU Decide', 15 February 2020

<<https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/5g-and-huawei-the-uk-and-eu-decide/>> [accessed 7 September 2025].

²¹ Ibid.

outdated Cold War artifact.²² Chinese diplomatic discourse, particularly through the Belt and Road and Global Development Initiative (GDI), presented a narrative of “multipolar cooperation” and “mutual respect,” implicitly contrasting this with what it characterized as the United States’ hegemonic interference. This rhetorical framing was designed to appeal to segments of European elites and policymakers who were already questioning Washington’s reliability, especially in the wake of the Trump administration’s unilateral tariffs on EU exports, withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, and threats to impose sanctions over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

In this sense, Beijing’s approach was not to alienate Europe abruptly, but to encourage gradual estrangement by amplifying European doubts about U.S. leadership. Chinese scholars and officials repeatedly invoked Charles de Gaulle’s notion of “Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals,”²³ emphasizing continental independence. The goal was to normalize the idea that Europe could pursue a “balanced” foreign policy: maintaining formal ties with Washington while engaging in comprehensive strategic cooperation with Beijing.²⁴ This rhetorical dualism masked a deeper strategic logic: if Europe could be persuaded to treat China as a partner rather than a systemic rival, the United States would lose its ability to mobilize a unified Western response to Chinese assertiveness in global governance, technology standards, and the Indo-Pacific.

The success of this external wedge, however, was limited by structural and normative constraints. While the idea of “strategic autonomy” resonated with some European leaders, most notably Emmanuel Macron, it encountered skepticism among Central and Eastern European states, which continued to view NATO and the U.S. security umbrella as existentially indispensable. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further accelerated this divergence. China’s ambiguous stance, marked by rhetorical neutrality but de facto alignment with Moscow, sharply undermined its credibility as a “benign” power.²⁵ The same European capitals that had once courted Chinese investment began reassessing the costs of overreliance. The EU’s 2019

²² Gary J. Schmitt, Craig Kennedy, and Reinhard Bütkofer, ‘China’s Transatlantic Wedge Strategy’, The American Enterprise Institute, *American Enterprise Institute - AEI*, 3 February 2021 <<https://www.aei.org/articles/chinas-transatlantic-wedge-strategy/>> [accessed 7 November 2025].

²³ Éric ANCEAU, ‘De Gaulle and Europe | EHNE’, Digital Encyclopedia of European History, 22 June 2020 <<https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/international-relations/arbiters-and-arbitration-in-europe-beginning-modern-times/de-gaulle-and-europe>> [accessed 7 September 2025].

²⁴ Ruolin Su and Hongsong Liu, ‘Cautious Optimism: Unravelling Chinese Views on European Strategic Autonomy’, *Journal of European Integration*, 47.6 (2025), pp. 865–83, doi:10.1080/07036337.2025.2537373.

²⁵ Björn Düben, ‘China’s Reaction to the Russia-Ukraine War: A Test Case for a Global “Pax Sinica”?’’, *Global Policy*, Vol.15.No.4 (2024), pp. 773–77.

designation of China as a “systemic rival,” initially a symbolic gesture, gained renewed weight as European debates on de-risking intensified.²⁶

Washington skillfully capitalized on this moment. The Biden administration’s renewed transatlantic engagement, via the Trade and Technology Council (TTC), the G7’s “Build Back Better World” initiative, and coordinated export controls on semiconductors, offered Europe a framework to synchronize economic security with strategic alignment. By 2023, the Chinese “divide and rule” approach had begun to yield diminishing returns. The 16+1 platform effectively collapsed after the Baltic states’ withdrawal,²⁷ and high-level dialogues between Beijing and Brussels became increasingly transactional. Yet, China did not abandon its long-term objective. Instead, it recalibrated its tactics: emphasizing “strategic complementarity” with Europe in climate policy, digital governance, and Global South engagement, while continuing to warn against “external manipulation”.²⁸ In this recalibrated approach, Beijing seeks to exploit normative asymmetry: the tension between Europe’s economic pragmatism and its proclaimed values-based foreign policy. Chinese diplomacy thus continues to emphasize shared interests in multilateralism and global stability, aiming to dilute transatlantic unity not through overt confrontation but through incremental normative capture.²⁹ The contest is therefore not merely geopolitical but epistemological, a struggle over the definition of “strategic autonomy” itself. In European discourse, it denotes a quest for policy independence within an alliance system; in Beijing’s lexicon, it implies strategic equidistance, or even emancipation, from the United States.

II. The Two Flawed Premise

2.1 Misreading the Resilience of a Collective European Identity

The political project of European integration in the twentieth century, though unprecedented in its institutional design, did not emerge *ex nihilo*. It represents the culmination of a longue durée of intellectual and cultural development: a slow, often interrupted process of articulating what it means to be “European.” This collective identity was first forged in spiritual terms, later

²⁶ *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*.

²⁷ Pepijn Bergsen and Valdonė Šniukaitė, ‘Central and Eastern Europe Become Hawkish on China | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank’, Chatham House, 16 September 2022 <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/central-and-eastern-europe-become-hawkish-china>> [accessed 7 November 2025].

²⁸ A euphemism for U.S. influence.

²⁹ Jing Huang, ‘China’s Role in the EU’s Search for Strategic Autonomy: Nonhegemonic Power Relations during World Order Transition’, *China International Strategy Review*, 6.2 (2024), pp. 254–84, doi:10.1007/s42533-024-00174-5.

redefined by philosophy, and ultimately codified in the first political blueprints for continental peace.

The earliest conception of “Europe” as a unified entity was neither political, geographical, nor economic; it was spiritual and cultural. In his seminal 1932 study *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the History of European Unity*, historian Christopher Dawson advanced a compelling thesis on this formative stage of integration. He argued that the so-called “Dark Ages” were, in fact, the “ages of dawn,” during which the fragmented, warring peoples of the continent were gradually forged into a coherent civilization.³⁰ Dawson identified the *Respublica Christiana* as the first true supranational entity. Though it was neither a state nor an empire in the modern sense, it achieved a remarkable degree of cohesion by transcending Europe’s linguistic, cultural, and tribal divisions through a universal framework. This framework, according to Dawson, rested on four pillars: “a common faith, a common intellectual education, a common moral law, and a common system of organisation.”³¹ Centered on the Roman Catholic Church, this structure provided a common scholarly language³², a shared moral and legal order³³, and an integrated intellectual tradition uniting scholars, clerics, and rulers from Ireland to Poland. In advancing this historical argument, Dawson made a contemporary claim: that Europe’s unity is neither racial nor political, but moral and spiritual. “No concept of Europe, medieval or modern,” he insisted, “would begin to make sense” without the common ecclesiastical and moral foundation of Christendom.³⁴ Europe, in its earliest incarnation, was not united by conquest or contract, but by spirit.

The second great root of European unity emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the Enlightenment, which supplied a new, explicitly secular worldview. The Enlightenment sought to synthesize ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and humanity into a system grounded in the use and celebration of reason. This intellectual revolution was a direct response to the long crisis born of the Reformation, which had exhausted the universalist models of Church and Empire in the crucible of religious war. In the aftermath, Enlightenment thinkers redefined Europe in legal, cultural, and civilizational terms. Their key innovation was the secularization of unity: the theological notion of “Christendom” gave way to the sociological concept of “civilization.” Coined by Mirabeau in his 1756 *L’Ami des hommes*,

³⁰ Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the History of European Unity* (Sheed and Ward, 1934), p.168.

³¹ Ibid., pp.76-79.

³² Latin

³³ Canon law

³⁴ Dawson, *The Making of Europe*, p. 202.

“civilization” came to denote humanity’s collective progress from barbarism, a teleological mission that Europe claimed as its own.³⁵ This new identity rested not on faith but on philosophical individualism and the idea of inalienable natural rights, articulated by thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and Immanuel Kant. Thus, Europe was reimagined as a civilization of reason, law, and progress, anchored in universal, supranational principles such as human rights, tolerance, and the rule of law. These Enlightenment ideals form the moral and intellectual bedrock of the modern European Union.

The Enlightenment’s intellectual ferment, coupled with the continent’s endemic warfare, produced the first political blueprints for a unified Europe. As Europe remained mired in a “war of all against all,” its thinkers proposed rational and legal mechanisms to achieve perpetual peace. These projects envisioned a Europe not as a universal empire, but as a contractual federation of sovereign states, bound by dialogue and peaceful arbitration. This shift from theology to legality was embodied in the works of the abbé de Saint-Pierre, Rousseau’s 1761 commentary on Saint-Pierre’s plan, and, most profoundly, Kant’s *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*. Kant’s model of peace rested on three interlocking principles: republican constitutions within states, international law based on a federation of free republics, and a cosmopolitan right grounded in universal hospitality.³⁶

These intellectual roots, however, remained largely theoretical. The practical necessity of 1945, following Europe’s total moral, political, and physical collapse, finally supplied the will to begin construction. The postwar project of integration was not animated by abstract idealism but by an existential determination to prevent another self-inflicted catastrophe. The simple, universal vow, “Never again”, became the animating spirit of a new political generation. After two world wars and 60 million dead, after genocide and devastation, peace was no longer utopian but imperative. The “Founding Fathers” of European integration: Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi, were not visionaries in ivory towers, but pragmatic statesmen shaped by borders, wars, and loss. As Adenauer had already concluded after the First World War, “lasting peace could only be achieved through a united Europe.”³⁷

The internal drive for peace was the engine of integration, but its speed and direction were decisively influenced by external pressures. The 1950 Schuman Plan, pooling Europe’s coal and steel industries, was feasible only because the Marshall Plan (1948–1951) simultaneously supplied the capital to rebuild them. The United States sought a prosperous,

³⁵ Victor de Riquetti Mirabeau, with Francois Quesnay, *L’ami Des Hommes*. (London, 1759). pp. 59

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*. (Los Angeles, 1932).

³⁷ Konrad Adenauer, *Erinnerungen* (Deutsche Verl.-Anst., 1965). pp.407.

cohesive Western Europe as both a bulwark against Soviet expansion and a reliable trading partner. The humiliation of Britain and France in the 1956 Suez Crisis further underscored the end of Europe's global primacy. From Paris to Brussels and Berlin, leaders reached a sobering conclusion: geopolitical relevance could only be restored through unity.

In this light, China must recognize that the European Union, formally institutionalized only in 1993, rests upon a millennium of intellectual tradition and political practice. It embodies the path to peace that Europeans discovered through centuries of fratricidal conflict. Beijing's "divide and rule" approach rests on a profound misreading: the assumption that the EU is merely a transactional, interest-driven construct, easily fractured by material inducements. This view neglects the deep, resilient sources of European coherence. In a striking irony, it was China's own assertive behavior during the 2010s that reawakened this dormant unity and exposed the flaw in its strategy.

For decades, the EU's China policy, much like Germany's, was guided by the principle of *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade). This doctrine, which championed China's 2001 entry into the WTO, was rooted in the neoliberal assumption that economic integration would inevitably lead to political and social liberalization in China. The 2010s, however, brought a final farewell to *Wandel durch Handel*.³⁸ The shift was driven by two parallel developments. For Europeans, China's internal political trajectory under president Xi moved toward deepening authoritarianism and the comprehensive reassertion of the role of the CCP throughout societal and economic life, extinguishing European hopes for "meaningful reform".³⁹ At the same time, China's external "divide and rule" tactics generated widespread anxiety in Brussels and core EU capitals like Berlin and Paris. The convergence of these two factors, internal repression and external assertiveness, forced the EU to unify in response. The result was the 2019 Joint Communication *EU-China – A strategic outlook*. It institutionalized a new, unified, and much harder-line EU approach, famously codified in the "partner, competitor, systemic rival" triptych.⁴⁰

This framework, often dismissed by Chinese media as "contradictory,"⁴¹ is in fact a nuanced and coherent risk-management strategy. It rests on three interlinked pillars. As a

³⁸ Janka Oertel, 'The End of Germany's China Illusion', ECFR, 15 September 2023 <<https://ecfr.eu/article/the-end-of-germanys-china-illusion/>> [accessed 7 September 2025].

³⁹ Katja Levy and Ágota Révész, 'No Common Ground: A Spatial-Relational Analysis of EU-China Relations', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 27.3 (2022), pp. 457–91, doi:10.1007/s11366-021-09769-w.

⁴⁰ *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*.

⁴¹ 環球新聞時訊報, 社評: 歐盟, 請放下你的矛盾與糾結, 11 September 2025 <<https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/4OGrpDvT5nv>> [accessed 8 September 2025].

partner, the EU continues to pursue cooperation with China on global challenges where mutual interests align, such as climate change and sustainable development. As a competitor, the EU acknowledges China’s growing economic power and is developing new instruments to ensure a fair and level playing field. Most significantly, as a systemic rival, the EU formally recognizes that China promotes alternative models of governance that challenge the Union’s core values, its rights-based political order, and the broader rules-based international system. Over time, the balance among these dimensions has shifted: the “competitor” and “systemic rival” aspects have come to dominate the relationship, while the “partner” dimension has waned. The freezing of the *EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment* (CAI) epitomizes this evolution. Although the CAI, agreed in principle in late 2020, represented the peak of cooperative engagement, it was swiftly derailed in 2021 when Beijing retaliated against EU human rights sanctions with disproportionate countermeasures targeting Members of the European Parliament and EU institutions. The European Parliament’s overwhelming decision to freeze the CAI underscored a decisive truth: when compelled to choose between economic opportunity and its foundational principles, the EU’s collective Western identity, and its commitment to values over expediency, prevailed.

2.2 Misreading the Enduring Transatlantic Strategic Partnership

The second, and arguably more critical, flaw in China’s “divide and rule” strategy lies in its profound underestimation of the transatlantic partnership. Beijing’s hope to “play” the European Union against the United States by encouraging strategic autonomy is premised on a misreading of both European strategic culture and the indivisible nature of Western security.

At the heart of this miscalculation lies a misunderstanding of NATO’s role. The EU’s pursuit of strategic autonomy, a notion most forcefully advanced by France, for the vast majority of European states, is not a quest for independence from Washington. Rather, it is the pursuit of the capacity to act decisively: autonomously if and when necessary, but ideally and primarily in concert with the United States. The EU–NATO relationship is not one of rivalry but of deep, institutionalized, and mutually reinforcing cooperation. Both organizations officially describe their partnership as indispensable, and this is no mere diplomatic courtesy. Cooperation is operational and grounded in shared principles of transparency, mutual openness, inclusiveness, reciprocity, and respect for decision-making autonomy. They coordinate on issues ranging from military mobility and cyber exercises to aligning capability development planning in order to avoid duplication.

The EU’s defense initiatives, such as PESCO,⁴² are framed by member states as mechanisms to strengthen the “European pillar within NATO.” The goal is not to create a rival bloc—China’s preferred scenario, but to enhance Europe’s contribution to collective defense and transatlantic burden-sharing. For most European policymakers, NATO remains the primary framework and cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security. Beijing’s search for a “wedge” in this relationship thus misfires; it seeks to exploit a division that, in any meaningful strategic sense, does not exist.

For decades, the United States and Europe viewed China through different lenses. The U.S., a Pacific power, approached China as a strategic and security competitor, while the EU, as a civilian and trading power, prioritized economic engagement. China’s “divide and rule” strategy sought to exploit this asymmetry. Ironically, it is Beijing’s own behavior that has catalyzed a historic convergence across the Atlantic.

This process unfolded in two stages. The first was the shock of the first Trump administration. President Trump’s hostility toward the EU and his unilateralist approach opened a temporary transatlantic rift that China sought to exploit. Yet, under President Biden, Washington’s concerted outreach to European allies to build a common front on China began to close that gap. President Trump’s second term has once again placed the transatlantic relationship under extreme stress. This shift reminds us that understanding America’s grand strategy requires looking beyond individual presidential terms and instead considering longer historical cycles. From Harry Truman to George H. W. Bush, U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War underwent constant change: at times pursuing détente, and at other times engaging in intense competition. Yet the strategy of containment remained consistent throughout. In fact, it could be said that different presidents merely implemented the same containment policy in distinct contexts, adapting it to the circumstances of their times. The same logic applies to today’s great-power competition. European countries, including Russia, are no longer capable of threatening America’s status as the world’s dominant power. At the same time, the U.S. will not tolerate the emergence of another state that rivals it in economic strength, military power, and global influence. Trump is now demanding that NATO members significantly increase their military spending. He is calling for a stronger NATO, not a weaker one.

The second and decisive stage came with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. China’s response is its “no-limits partnership” with Moscow. China refused to

⁴² Permanent Structured Cooperation

condemn the invasion, and its material support for Russia's defense-industrial base, fused European and Indo-Pacific security in the minds of European elites. What had long seemed an abstract systemic rivalry became a concrete and immediate strategic threat. The clearest evidence of this shift is NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the Madrid Summit. For the first time in its history, NATO's guiding document mentioned the People's Republic of China, whereas the 2010 version did not. It declared that China's stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge Western interests, security, and values.⁴³ Most notably, it identified the deepening strategic partnership between China and Russia as a joint effort to undercut the rules-based international order, thereby institutionalizing the view of China as a systemic challenge. This language echoed the EU's 2019 designation of China as a "systemic rival," underscoring a complete alignment of transatlantic strategic thinking.

This convergence has since extended from security into economics. The EU's 2020 framework for screening foreign direct investment was a direct response to Chinese acquisitions in critical technologies and infrastructure, creating an EU-wide mechanism comparable to the U.S. Committee on Foreign Investment. The EU–U.S. Trade and Technology Council, established in 2021, now serves as the primary platform for coordinating defensive economic tools, securing supply chains, especially for semiconductors, and setting democratic standards for emerging technologies. Although framed in country-neutral terms, its purpose is unmistakably to counter Beijing's economic and technological influence.

Friction persists within this new consensus. Washington has expressed frustration at Europe's reluctance to leverage the TTC more assertively against China, while Brussels has bristled at the "Buy American" provisions of the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act, fearing an outflow of investment. Yet these are family quarrels, not symptoms of a strategic divorce. Both sides remain bound by a shared worldview that now identifies China as the primary, long-term systemic challenge to the West. Beijing's "external wedge" strategy, designed to divide Europe and America, has instead achieved the opposite result: it has hammered the two sides of the Atlantic closer together, transforming a once-fragmented perception of China into a unified transatlantic front.

⁴³ *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept* (NATO, 2022) <https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>.

III. A Recalibrated Chinese Strategy: From Division to Respect-Based Engagement

China's "divide and rule" strategy toward Europe has proven counterproductive. Rather than weakening the European Union or driving a wedge between Brussels and Washington, it has poisoned the political atmosphere, accelerated Europe's "de-risking" and defensive agenda, and consolidated the very transatlantic unity that Beijing sought to prevent. A continuation of this approach is therefore not merely short-sighted but actively detrimental to China's own long-term interest in a stable and productive relationship with Europe. What is required instead is a pragmatic recalibration: a respect-based policy grounded not in moral idealism but in a realistic appraisal of the European Union's nature and evolution as a coherent, law-bound polity.

A respect-based Chinese policy would begin with a fundamental recognition of the EU's unity. The 16+1 framework (now 14+1) was conceived as a means to deepen engagement with Central and Eastern Europe, but it has become a symbol of distrust. Its economic yield was meager, while its political cost was immense. The Baltic states' withdrawal from the format between 2021 and 2022 marked the moment of definitive collapse. Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis called the 17+1 mechanism "divisive from an EU viewpoint," urging instead a "27+1 approach" that would strengthen Europe's unity and, by extension, China's credibility as a partner.⁴⁴ Beijing, however, responded to Lithuania's exit with coercion—imposing de facto trade blockages and pressuring European companies to cut ties. The result was the opposite of what China intended. The EU rallied in defense of Lithuania, launched a WTO case against Beijing, and accelerated the adoption of the Anti-Coercion Instrument, a powerful legal tool designed to deter precisely this kind of pressure. The lesson is unmistakable: coercing one member state is now understood in Brussels as an assault on the Single Market itself, demanding a collective response. A respect-based Chinese approach would absorb this lesson and formally abandon sub-regional formats that undermine EU coherence. Instead, Beijing should elevate its engagement to the EU level: what Europeans have long called a "One Europe policy." Treating the EU as a single interlocutor would not only rebuild trust but also align China's diplomacy with the institutional reality of twenty-first-century Europe.

A second dimension of recalibration concerns standards and transparency. Much of the tension surrounding Chinese investment in Europe stems not from ideological hostility but

⁴⁴ 'Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis: If We Drop the EU27-China Format, We Will Lose on so Many Fronts', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 3 September 2021 <<https://www.urm.lt/en/news/928/lithuanias-foreign-minister-gabrielius-landsbergis-if-we-drop-the-eu27-china-format-we-will-lose-on-so-many-fronts:34733>> [accessed 8 September 2025].

from incompatibility with the EU's legal and regulatory order. The Budapest–Belgrade Railway project, criticized for violating EU procurement and environmental rules, became a case study in why Chinese projects face increasing scrutiny. The EU's response, the Global Gateway, explicitly aims to compete with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) not through volume but through quality. It markets itself as a "values-driven, high-standard, and transparent" alternative, appealing to European publics and parliaments that demand accountability. For Chinese initiatives to remain viable and competitive, alignment with EU norms is not a concession but a strategic necessity. Adhering to open public tender laws, complying with environmental requirements such as the "Do No Significant Harm" principle, and observing the new Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive would not weaken China's position. On the contrary, they would strengthen its credibility, ensure market access, and demonstrate that Chinese investment can coexist with Europe's "Community of Law." By meeting these standards voluntarily, China would transform the BRI's perception from a geopolitical instrument into a legitimate, high-quality development partner.

A third element of a respect-based policy would be to transcend the zero-sum logic that has long guided Beijing's view of the transatlantic relationship. Rather than seeking to exploit differences between Europe and the United States, China should engage both simultaneously in structured, issue-specific trilateral dialogues. The EU's "systemic rival" designation, while symbolically significant, was never intended to preclude cooperation. Its own official framing, "partner, competitor, and systemic rival", explicitly allows for pragmatic engagement on global challenges. Climate change is the most obvious area for such trilateral coordination. No serious progress on emissions, carbon pricing, or green technology can be achieved without the combined leadership of China, the EU, and the United States. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the high cost of fragmented responses. A permanent trilateral mechanism for global health cooperation would serve the collective interest of all three powers. In emerging domains such as artificial intelligence, where the EU and U.S. are already developing shared norms through their Trade and Technology Council, China's inclusion in a broader framework could help prevent escalation and establish global "rules of the road." Such engagement would not erase profound disagreements on human rights, trade, or Taiwan, but it would build a stable floor under great-power competition—transforming rivalry into managed coexistence.

The strategic logic of a respect-based approach is therefore clear. China's "divide and rule" tactics were crafted for a nineteenth-century world of fragmented sovereignties, not for a twenty-first-century Europe defined by legal integration and transatlantic interdependence. Its

“internal wedge,” embodied in the 16+1 format and non-compliant BRI projects, provoked European unity rather than division. Its “external wedge,” the effort to play Brussels against Washington, only reinforced transatlantic solidarity, culminating in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept that identifies China as a “systemic challenge.” Far from fragmenting the West, Beijing’s strategy helped forge the very convergence it feared.

Continuing down this path is strategically illogical. A pragmatic and respect-based alternative would acknowledge the EU’s institutional reality, align with its regulatory standards, and embrace trilateral cooperation with Europe and the United States on shared existential challenges. Such a shift would not signify weakness or concession, but maturity and realism. For China to achieve the stable, predictable, and constructive relationship with the EU that is indispensable to a functioning multipolar world, it must move beyond the anachronistic habits of division and adopt a diplomacy of strategic respect.

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