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# The European Union's Place in United States–China Strategic Competition: How Role Dynamics Drive Brussels Towards Washington

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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of intensifying United States–China strategic competition, the European Union (EU) has recently changed course and moved closer to mirroring US rhetoric and action on China. Why has this happened, and how can it be best explained? In this article, it is argued that current role dynamics between the EU and the two rival great powers can help us understand the growing, albeit not full, EU–United States alignment on China. Role theory assumes that co-operation between actors intensifies when their roles become more compatible. Accordingly, it is shown that the EU has recently adjusted its role to be more closely aligned with the United States' position. That is to say, the EU has reshaped its own role conception, whilst the bloc has likewise become more open to meeting US role expectations after EU–United States role-playing turned positive once again under President Joe Biden.

**Keywords:** EU foreign policy behaviour; EU–China relations; EU–United States relations; role theory; United States–China competition

## Introduction

The great-power rivalry between the United States and China keeps intensifying, with a reversal of this trend not appearing likely any time soon. What is more, when such heavy-weights are at loggerheads with one another, third parties are inevitably affected as well, hence being required to react (Shambaugh, 2021). The European Union (EU) is no exception in this regard. This is not least because the bloc's two largest trading partners are the United States and China, whilst most of its member states additionally have close security ties with the United States through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Unlike many other (individual) countries, however, the EU likewise constitutes a potent international force of its own (see, e.g., Gehring et al., 2017) and is thus equipped with some scope for action as to how it wants to position itself within that United States–China strategic competition, which makes the EU case a particularly interesting one. The fact that the latter has some degree of independent agency vis-à-vis the United States and especially China can also be deduced from a good number of strategic and policy initiatives that the bloc has undertaken in recent years, including the 2016 Global Strategy (featuring the concept of 'strategic autonomy'), the 2021 Global Gateway and the 2022 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. Further, a list of new instruments also endows the EU with stronger tools of economic statecraft, such as the Foreign Direct Investment Screening Framework, the Anti-Coercion Instrument, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, the Chips Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act.

Against this backdrop, it is striking that the EU has recently changed course: whilst EU–United States co-operation on China was almost non-existent during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021), Brussels has aligned increasingly strongly, albeit not fully, with Washington on Beijing since the Biden administration took office in mid-January 2021. Even though the EU and US positions on China have not necessarily become identical – just like how EU–United States ties have not become entirely free of tensions, either – the EU has nonetheless moved much closer towards mirroring US rhetoric and behaviour vis-à-vis China; it has also agreed to strengthen transatlantic co-ordination and co-operation on the East Asian country. Why, then, has this policy shift occurred, and how can it be best explained? Addressing these research puzzles makes an important contribution to our understanding of the alignment behaviour of the EU – and beyond – under the condition of ongoing United States–China great-power rivalry and the continued transformation of the international order.

In seeking to explain the EU's recent alignment trajectory, realist approaches may offer an appropriate entry point here in that Europeans seem to be going along with the perception of China as a growing threat (see Walt, 1987). But the EU's current positioning, even now, hardly qualifies as balancing against China. Liberal rationales, meanwhile, could possibly build a case on the polity aspect (i.e., democracies vs. autocracies) (see Bennett, 2006). They, too, fall short, however, in the sense that the EU's present manoeuvring may entail negative impacts on Europe's own prosperity and welfare.

As such, this article turns instead for answers to the world of 'non-material' international relations (IR) theory under the broad umbrella of constructivism. In drawing on role theory, it will be argued that current role dynamics between the EU and the two rival great powers can help us explain why the bloc has come to increasingly align with the United States' position on China. This approach establishes, accordingly, a connection between actors' roles, understood as social positions, and their foreign policy behaviour (Breuning, 2011; Kirste and Maull, 1996), including as regards co-operation or conflict between them. As Gurol and Starkmann (2021), for example, hold, 'cooperation [between actors] intensifies when roles become more compatible' (p. 531). It will therefore be shown that the EU has, at least to some degree, adjusted its own role to be more in line with the United States' outlook, which has in turn led to the realization of increased China-related collaboration between the two sides. To no small extent, the EU's role adjustment has been made possible by the United States' own change of stance towards the EU from the Trump to the Biden administrations. In this sense, a theoretical contribution to the scholarship is hereby made by highlighting a case of what may be coined 'positive role-playing' between the EU and the United States.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: first, the EU's recent foreign policy behaviour regarding United States–China strategic rivalry is studied for three relevant issue areas, thereby illustrating that the bloc has become more aligned with the North American country here. Second, IR role-theoretical approaches are introduced, with a specific focus on interaction and its effects on role dynamics. Third, the three parties' respective meta-roles are delineated in brief. Fourth, based on those roles, the EU's move towards closer role alignment with the United States' own role is analysed in depth. Methodologically, official EU, US and Chinese documents and public statements by key representatives of the three players are examined. Moreover, the EU is deliberately

treated as a unitary actor throughout. In so doing, the article follows other role-theoretic accounts on the bloc (see, e.g., Gurol and Starkmann, 2021; Klose, 2018; Michalski and Pan, 2017).

## **I. The EU's Recent Foreign Policy Behaviour vis-à-vis the United States and China**

The ongoing United States–China strategic competition is truly comprehensive in nature, spanning military, political, economic and cultural issue areas alike. Three policy fields – viz., technology, regional security in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ and human rights (see also, Yang, 2020) – have been in focus ever since the United States–China rupture became openly visible during the Trump administration's time in office, whose 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) branded the East Asian country a ‘revisionist’ power seeking to build ‘a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests’ (White House, 2017, p. 25). In all three of these domains, the EU has moved closer to, whilst not necessarily catching up with, US positions on China and has deepened its co-ordination and co-operation with the North American country. The decisive turning point herein came when, as noted, Biden took over from Trump as president in January 2021.

### *Technology*

In 2018, Trump launched a ‘trade war’ with China, which escalated through the following year. Whilst much of the early heat was centred on the United States imposing tariffs on China aimed at reducing the two countries’ massive trade imbalance, it soon turned out that technology competition between Washington and Beijing was the United States’ actual core concern here. The Trump administration therefore increasingly attacked Chinese practices of forced technology transfer and intellectual property theft and adopted measures to prevent the latter’s state-controlled enterprises from acquiring US technology. The United States–China battle for global leadership regarding key technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence and semiconductors has reached a new level of intensity under Biden. Since the second half of 2022, his administration has taken a series of steps, including overseeing significant subsidies and sweeping export controls, aimed at cutting off China’s access to and supply of advanced microchips (Bown and Kolb, 2023).

By the time that the Trump administration made its perhaps most pivotal move against China’s growing technological prowess in effectively barring Huawei equipment from use in US telecommunication networks in May 2019 (Bown and Kolb, 2023), the EU had already come to the conclusion that China was ‘an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership’ (European Commission, 2019a, p. 1). Strikingly, however, this similar transatlantic assessment did not spur any meaningful EU–United States co-ordination, let alone co-operation, on the matter. Rather, Trump and his team repeatedly made public threats to the United States’ European allies to fall in line with Washington’s Huawei approach; otherwise, intelligence co-operation might be withheld. Whilst his administration’s ‘insistent prodding’ yielded some results, especially amongst Central and Eastern European EU member countries, its aggressive and confrontational manner likewise failed to garner the support of the entire bloc, including key members such as Germany and Italy (Scott, 2021). That is not to say the EU was completely oblivious to the potential security risks posed by Huawei. The bloc first issued a risk assessment report

in October 2019, with a toolbox of risk-mitigating measures then released in January of the following year. Both documents were meant to provide guidelines on the cybersecurity of 5G networks in EU member states. They did not, however, mention Huawei directly, nor did they argue for outright bans, thus following an approach different from, and uncoordinated with, that of the Trump administration (see European Commission, 2019b, 2020a).

As mentioned, EU–United States economic relations have not been entirely free from tensions since Biden came to office either, as the transatlantic row over the US Inflation Reduction Act demonstrates (Brussels Times, 2022). However, there has also been some progress in economic co-operation. Most importantly, Brussels and Washington launched, at the EU–United States joint summit in June 2021, the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) ‘to coordinate approaches to key global trade, economic and technology issues, and to deepen transatlantic trade and economic relations based on shared democratic values’ (European Commission, 2021b). A closer look at its 10 working groups, including technology standards, secure supply chains, export controls and investment screening, reveals that the TTC is also a mechanism for transatlantic collaboration on China. Consequently, the joint statement issued at the Council’s third meeting in December 2022 noted that the two sides would

continue building a shared understanding of China’s economic and industrial directives and other non-market policies and practices, and develop coordinated action to foster supply chain diversification, build resilience to economic coercion, and reduce dependencies. (European Commission, 2022b)

To be sure, such EU–United States co-operation on China is still a far cry from US endeavours to leverage the TTC as a way to make Brussels follow Washington’s strategic export controls against China. But the EU has been cautiously moving in this direction as well. In a section specifically dedicated to China, the EU–United States joint statement coming out of the two sides’ most recent summit, held on 20 October 2023, recognized ‘the necessity of protecting certain advanced technologies that could be used to threaten global peace and security’ (White House, 2023).

### *Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific*

In the 2017 NSS, it is stated that ‘China seeks to displace the United States from the Indo-Pacific region’ (White House, 2017, p. 25). Consequently, the Trump administration rolled out a new ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ concept in late 2017, aimed at maintaining US supremacy in the region. In February 2022, meanwhile, Biden and his team announced their own Indo-Pacific strategy, with it placing greater emphasis on co-operation with regional allies and partners but nonetheless retaining a distinctly anti-China undertone (see White House, 2022a).

Interestingly, the EU and its member states – with the notable exception of France – did not officially echo the United States’ use of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ until 2020. As set in train by the national Indo-Pacific guidelines promulgated in Germany and the Netherlands in the autumn of 2020, which followed on from France’s 2018 strategic concept, it was only in April and September 2021 that Brussels would first adopt conclusions and then publish its ‘EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’ (European

Commission, 2021a). The strategy proclaimed that ‘the EU intends to increase its engagement with the region to build partnerships that reinforce the rules-based international order’ (European Commission, 2021a, p. 1). The document also sought to highlight that the bloc’s approach was inclusive and ‘one of cooperation not confrontation’ (European Commission, 2021a). On the one hand, and unlike the United States, the EU did not single out China as a target. However, it has also been argued reasonably that ‘the use of terms such as Indo-Pacific or “rules-based order” are [sic] not neutral, and to some, these concepts have become shorthand for anti-China. [The EU, by adopting them,] is generating tension and positioning itself towards [the United States]’ (Alonso Butcher, 2021).

Within the Indo-Pacific region, Taiwan has (re-)emerged as the major security flashpoint in recent years. For the United States, the island nation is important, not least as a beacon of democracy and a critical producer of microchips. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the ‘Taiwan question’ has received even more attention; concerns have increased in Washington that Beijing could move against the island militarily much sooner than previously expected (New York Times, 2022). As a consequence, the North American country has ramped up its support for Taiwan; Biden, for example, has repeatedly said that US forces would defend the latter from any Chinese attack (The Guardian, 2022).

Contrariwise, the EU’s support for Taiwan has long been relatively muted. Yet amidst rising tensions and the Biden administration’s stepped-up policy, the bloc has at least increased its rhetorical support for Taiwan. The EU Parliament has been at the forefront of this recently developing trend. For instance, it adopted a joint motion for a resolution on the situation in the Taiwan Strait in September 2022, referring to Taiwan as a ‘like-minded partner that share[s] the common values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law’; consequently, the supranational body ‘[c]alls for the EU to assume a stronger role when it comes to the situation in the Taiwan Strait [and] [e]ncourages increased economic, scientific, cultural and political interaction between the EU and Taiwan, including at the most senior levels possible’ (EU Parliament, 2022b). Similarly, Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated in September 2022: ‘Let me be clear on this: the One China Policy does not prevent [the EU] from persisting and intensifying our cooperation with Taiwan’ [European External Action Service (EEAS), 2022a]. In April 2023, he even urged European governments to send warships to the Taiwan Strait (Deutsche Welle, 2023).

### *Human Rights*

In 2019 and the first half of 2020, Hong Kong saw a nearly unprecedented wave of repeated protests increasingly linked to democratic reform and the city’s autonomy from mainland China. As the demonstrations progressed, the Hong Kong police resorted to excessive use of force against protestors, whilst China’s central government was accused of employing additional intimidation tactics (Deutsche Welle, 2019). Human rights have long been a consistent, but also conflictual, matter in the EU’s and the United States’ bilateral relationships with China. Regarding the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, however, there was no meaningful EU–United States co-ordinated response.

When the EU eventually broke its silence on the protests in August 2019, it notably did so in the form of a joint statement with Canada, not the United States (EEAS, 2019).



Conversely, when Trump in November of the same year signed into law the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which threatens sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials considered responsible for human rights abuses in Hong Kong (U.S. Congress, 2019), this move was not in any way matched by the EU. Following China's enactment on 30 June 2020 of the Hong Kong National Security Law, deemed in the West to undermine Hong Kong's autonomy, the same picture emerged – i.e., a similar understanding of the issue in principle but still no co-ordinated response. Instead, after the death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black American, at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis in June 2020, the EU Parliament (2020) adopted a resolution calling on the US authorities to address structural racism, criticized police crackdowns on peaceful protesters and journalists in the North American country and in particular denounced Trump's 'inflammatory rhetoric'.

All of this contrasts sharply with joint EU–United States endeavours linked to the situation in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region since Biden entered the Oval Office. The Chinese government has for many years been accused of committing serious human rights abuses against its Uyghur Muslim minority. Over the last couple of years, growing allegations about mass detentions and concentration camps have increasingly turned the spotlight on Xinjiang. On 19 January 2021, Trump's final day in office, the U.S. State Department declared China's repression of the Uyghurs to be a 'genocide' – an assessment shared by incoming Secretary of State Antony Blinken (New York Times, 2021). Whilst Brussels did not immediately and wholly follow Washington's lead on this particular matter – the EU Parliament (2022a) later, in June 2022, adopted a resolution determining instead that there was a 'serious risk of genocide' – the EU–United States consensus on sanctioning China would come about swiftly. On 22 March 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on China, targeting four individuals and one entity believed to be involved in the alleged human rights violations against the Uyghurs (Euronews, 2021). Notably, these sanctions were part of a co-ordinated strategy with the United States, which itself put in place punitive measures against the same Chinese individuals (Euronews, 2021). Blinken (2021) tweeted the same day that '[w]e stand united with the UK, Canada, and the EU in promoting accountability for those who abuse human rights'.

In addition, there has also been cautious alignment with regard to banning forced-labour goods originating from Xinjiang's factories. In the United States, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act took effect in June 2022, with Blinken saying that his country was rallying allies against such abusive practices in the region (Euractiv, 2022). In the same month, the EU Parliament's (2022a) resolution on the human rights situation in Xinjiang called on the European Commission 'to propose an import ban on all products produced by forced labour [in the region]'. In September 2022, the Commission then released a 'Proposal for the Regulation on Prohibiting Products Made with Forced Labour on the Union Market' (European Commission, 2022a). How, then, can role theory help us make sense of this alignment trajectory?

## II. Role-Theoretical Approaches in IR

Generally speaking, roles are 'social positions' (Harnisch, 2011, p. 8) linked to 'patterns of expected appropriate behavior' (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2012, p. 94). The first endeavours to connect role theory and foreign policy behaviour date back to the 1970s

(Holsti, 1970). Since then, role-theoretical approaches, as employed in the realm of IR and especially its subfield of foreign policy analysis, have evolved; nowadays, they rest on certain key analytical concepts. *Role conceptions* encompass an actor's ideas about her place in the international system and about proper behaviour, based on domestic values, culture and historical legacies (ego dimension), and her perception of the role expectations of others (alter dimension). Meanwhile, *role expectations* are not only relevant in the alter dimension of an actor's role conceptions (ego expectations) but also include the implicit or explicit demands placed upon this actor by others (alter expectations). Finally, *role performance* denotes the actual foreign policy behaviour of a given actor. Taken together, role theory expects an actor's foreign policy performance to be the result of her assumed role(s), as constituted by both her role conception(s) and others' role expectation(s) (see, e.g., Bengtsson and Elgström, 2011, 2012; Gurol and Starkmann, 2021; Harnisch, 2011; Kirste and Maull, 1996; Thies and Breuning, 2012).

These basic principles have significant implications. For one thing, it has long been established within role theory that actors can hold multiple roles at the same time (Breuning, 2011; Holsti, 1970). In an attempt to better arrange those diverse roles, Bengtsson and Elgström (2011) helpfully suggest that we differentiate between meta-roles and context-specific roles. Whilst the former is a 'generalized role, often based on an actor's material or immaterial power resources, that entails expectations of consistent role behavior across issue areas and/or over time', the latter is 'associated with expectations of behavior that are particular to a certain policy area or geographical region' (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2011, p. 114). Meta-roles will be the focus of concern in the following.

For another thing, even though meta-roles tend to be relatively persistent, in an environment characterized by social interaction, they are also inherently contested and not generally set in stone (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2012; Harnisch, 2011). As a matter of fact, it is a fundamental rationale of the so-called 'interactionist' take on role theory that when states interact, role conceptions can change and role expectations may be affected as well (Klose, 2018; Michalski and Pan, 2017). Thies (2012) therefore introduced the notion of a 'socialization game' to describe the setting in which an actor's foreign policy takes place; Michalski and Pan (2017), meanwhile, elaborated on the mechanisms of such socialization in the context of a changing world order. Based on Checkel (2005), Michalski and Pan (2017) emphasize 'role-playing' – i.e., the adoption of new roles with a shallow level of internalization. As actors engage in such role-playing – to assert their identities, enhance their position and status within the international system and seek recognition of their roles – they essentially place explicit role expectations on one another and may even resort to 'altercasting', understood as the imposition of alternative roles on another actor (Michalski and Pan, 2017). Whilst Michalski and Pan (2017) stress the 'competitive' character of such role-playing and demonstrate its damaging impact on co-operation, this article illustrates that 'positive role-playing', which features mutual role recognition and leads to converging role expectations, can conversely help increase co-operation.

Finally, it is important for the purposes of this study to note that the impact of respective parties' interactions on roles is not a one-way street. As Gurol and Starkmann (2021) show, 'the relationship between interaction and roles and role performance is mutually reinforcing' (p. 521). In other words, role dynamics likewise have an influence on the



evolution of interaction, in the sense that co-operation between actors ‘emerges and intensifies when their roles and role performance become more compatible, and ebbs when their roles diverge’ (Gurol and Starkmann, 2021, p. 518). Whilst this link between role dynamics and the form and intensity of interaction has previously been examined only in bilateral contexts (see, e.g., Gurol and Starkmann, 2021; Malici and Walker, 2016; Michalski and Pan, 2017), this logic is now extended here to a trilateral setting.

### III. The Meta-Roles of the EU, the United States and China

In order to grasp the various role dynamics to be examined in the next section, it is useful to first have a look at our three players’ respective meta-roles. The EU is a complex actor, with a number of different roles making up its overall set. But the most prominent and most comprehensive role conception the EU has long held of itself, at least until recently, is that of a ‘normative great power [which] influences the thinking of other actors in the international system rather than acting through coercive means to achieve its goals’ (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2012, p. 95; see also Manners, 2002). Even though this self-perception has witnessed contestation internally and has not always met the role expectations that third parties projected onto the EU, it has become widely accepted in both academic and policy circles to label the bloc a normative great power (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2012). What is more, constructing this self-image of being a normative great power also entailed the EU’s external promotion of values deemed desirable and in sync with more context-specific sub-roles such as ‘advocate of freedom and democracy’, ‘liberal trade power’ and ‘champion of multilateralism’ (Michalski and Pan, 2017). As we will see, however, this role conception has undergone a notable shift of late.

The US equivalent to the EU’s meta-role is ‘global hegemon’ (Malici and Walker, 2016; Maull, 2011; Walker et al., 2016). According to Maull (2011), this overarching US role conception, grounded in the country’s deep-seated belief in American exceptionalism and involving a strong sense of mission, has been simultaneously both quite stable and somewhat malleable. That is to say, on the one hand, the US global hegemon role has been based on certain core themes characterized by their remarkable continuity. These include the United States being the ‘leader of the world’, a ‘pragmatically internationalist power’ (supporting international institutions but refusing to be bound by their rules), an ‘ego-centric maximizer of national interest’, an ‘enforcer’ (reserving the right to use force) and a ‘democratizer’ (spreading its own ideals in the world) (Maull, 2011). On the other hand, successive US administrations have been able to put varying emphases on those different themes, thereby affecting whether others’ role expectations of the North American country have been met.

Compared with the EU and the United States, China’s self-image has been subject to more controversial internal debate. Based on an analysis of Chinese-language resources, Noesselt (2014) therefore argued that ‘China’s actor identity is composed of various partly contradictory role conceptions’ (p. 1309) – ones spanning historical legacies and modern nation-state features. These role conceptions are all linked to the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimization strategies pursued vis-à-vis domestic players and, simultaneously, the international community. They have comprised to date such ideas of China as ‘a new type of socialist great power’, ‘developing great power’, ‘civilizational great power’, ‘responsible great power’, ‘Asian great power’ (Noesselt, 2014) and, more

recently, ‘global power’. In light of these various role conceptions, it is not easy to find a descriptor for China’s generalized international role which is universally accepted. Nonetheless a useful suggestion here comes from Michalski and Pan (2017), namely, ‘rising power remembering its past’ (p. 6).

#### IV. The EU’s Role Alignment With the United States’ Role

As already mentioned, an actor’s foreign policy behaviour, according to role theory, is constituted by both her own role conception(s) and others’ role expectation(s). In order to explain why the EU has come to increasingly follow US positions on China, it must therefore be highlighted how the bloc has adjusted its role in such a way as to become more similar in nature to the United States’ role. Consequently, we must analyse how far the EU’s role conception, particularly in its ego dimension, and the United States’ role expectations of the bloc have undergone revision.

##### *The Transformation of the EU’s Role Conception*

As previously stated, roles, including role conceptions, are not static but can be reshaped through social interaction. The EU’s dealings with China under the consolidated rule of President Xi Jinping since 2017 and with the United States under Trump have indeed caused Brussels to rethink some of the core components of its self-identified role. To begin with, when the EU and China formed a ‘strategic partnership’ in 2003, the former, in sync with its self-perception at the time as a ‘normative great power’, was confident about its ability to eventually socialize the latter into the existing ‘liberal international order’, hence demanding China ‘fully embrace democracy, free market principles and the rule of law’ (European Commission, 2003, p. 3).

As time progressed, however, the EU’s confidence in its likely achievement of these objectives dwindled, and so the bloc had to lower its expectations of China. Meanwhile, for its part, the East Asian country became more and more assertive in placing its own expectations on the EU and in altercasting the bloc according to its own identity and worldview. This mutual behaviour has long resulted in competitive role-playing between the two sides (Michalski and Pan, 2017), which is now intensifying in the context of growing United States–China tensions since the Trump years.

On the one hand, faced with a more confrontational approach from the United States, Beijing’s altercasting attempts aimed at drawing the EU into the ‘China camp’. China’s 2018 policy paper on the bloc is particularly revealing in this regard. Therein, China deemed the two sides ‘indispensable partners [who] share extensive common interests in upholding world peace and stability, promoting global prosperity and sustainable development’. In addition, hinting at the worsening United States–China relationship, the paper stated that ‘China and the EU have no fundamental strategic conflicts but share much more common ground than differences’. Consequently, in order to contest Trump’s ‘America First’ approach, ‘China and the EU need to stand firmly against unilateralism and protectionism’ and ‘push for a more open, inclusive and balanced economic globalization’ (Foreign Ministry of China, 2018).

On the other hand, the EU not only rejected China’s altercasting endeavours but has, in fact, also since moved in the opposite direction. That is to say, Brussels itself has turned to

altercasting China in new and more antagonistic ways, thereby pointing out its growing frustration – disillusionment even – with the latter's role performance as a rising power steadfastly resisting EU socialization attempts geared towards transforming it into a Western-style democratic and market-economy country. Consequently, with the release in March 2019 of a joint communication titled 'EU-China – A Strategic Outlook', the EU adjusted its perception of China as a partner by announcing that henceforth

China is simultaneously [...] a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. (European Commission, 2019a, p. 1)

What is more, ever since invoking this tripartite China approach the EU's perception of China has only drifted further away from partnership. As Borrell pointed out in October 2022, the central component of the bloc's understanding of China today is, rather, as a competitor (EEAS, 2022b). In the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during an important speech given on EU–China relations in late March 2023, the East Asian country 'is becoming more repressive at home and more assertive abroad' and seeks to 'promote an alternative vision of the world order', which is why 'our relations have become more distant and more difficult in the last few years' (European Commission, 2023b). China has tried to push back, with its highest ranked diplomat, Wang Yi, repeatedly underlining that his country and the EU 'are partners, not rivals' (see, e.g., Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2023). But from Brussels' perspective, how the most recent EU–China summit, held on 7 December 2023, played out once again justified the bloc's assessment: Beijing remains unwilling to address the EU's major concerns, such as soaring trade imbalances between the two sides and speaking out against Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Council of the EU, 2023).

Meanwhile, in the period between 2017 and 2020, increasingly antagonistic role-playing with China was not the only challenge to some of the bloc's long-held beliefs. During the Trump presidency, interactions between the EU and the United States also experienced unprecedented role dynamics. In particular, Trump's notorious 'America First' approach made him pursue a highly unilateralist and hyper-nationalist foreign policy, which in turn led him to criticize multilateral trade agreements, consider NATO obsolete, withdraw from a number of international treaties and United Nations (UN) sub-organizations and repeatedly flatter non-democratic leaders (Macdonald, 2018). As a result, Trump also held a very inimical view of the EU specifically. At one point, he actually named the bloc America's 'biggest foe globally' (BBC, 2018); at another, Trump claimed the EU was 'formed to take advantage of the United States' (Business Insider, 2020).

In light of these increasingly demanding interactions – antagonistic role-playing with China alongside the Trump administration's hostile stance, both occurring in the context of growing United States–China tensions – the EU drew far-reaching lessons that also affected its own role conception. In December 2019, von der Leyen, on the verge of taking office, pledged to lead a 'geopolitical Commission' (cited in Politico, 2019). Subsequently, in February 2020, Borrell (2020) highlighted that

We Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be [...]. To avoid being the losers in today's US-China competition, we

must relearn the language of power and conceive of Europe as a top-tier geostrategic actor.

Half a year later, in August, he then promoted the idea of an EU ‘Sinatra Doctrine’ for dealing with the rival great powers:

If the EU does not want to remain entrenched in the dispute between the US and China, it must look at the world from its own point of view and act to defend its values and interests, which do not always coincide with those of the US. In short, [...] the EU has to do things ‘its own way’. (EEAS, 2020)

The 2022 Strategic Compass, additionally influenced by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, has brought this new line of reasoning to a head as of now. The document makes clear that ‘major geopolitical shifts are challenging our ability to promote our vision and defend our interests’ (EU, 2022, p. 10). It goes on to emphasize that ‘[i]n this highly confrontational system, the EU and its Member States must invest more in their security and defence to be a stronger political and security actor’ (EU, 2022, p. 15) in pursuit of ‘the EU’s strategic autonomy and its ability [...] to safeguard its values and interests’ (EU, 2022, p. 23). Bengtsson and Elgström (2012) once opined that the notion of ‘normative power Europe’ does not necessarily imply the use of civilian means to achieve goals but is rather related to ‘civilizing’ others. As the various quotes above reveal, however, the EU has become increasingly passive and unconfident vis-à-vis influencing others, especially great powers. Simultaneously, it has also felt the need to put heightened emphasis on the defence of its own vision to protect it from the malevolent influence of others. For this purpose, the bloc has not least turned to enhancing its military capabilities.

All in all, this ‘geopolitical awakening’ of Europe, as Borrell has called it (EU, 2022, p. 4), can well be interpreted as a farewell to the EU’s self-perception as a (predominantly) ‘normative great power’. At the same time, it also indicates the latter’s replacement by a new role conception according to which, as outlined, the EU sees itself (far more) as a ‘geostrategic’ or ‘geopolitical’ actor. Whilst the EU’s (2016) Global Strategy also mentioned that describing ‘Europe [as] an exclusively “civilian power” does not do justice to an evolving reality’ (p. 4), references to the bloc having an emerging ‘geostrategic’ or ‘geopolitical’ character were still absent at the time.

Significantly, with those connotations now evoked, the EU’s own role conception has also become more similar in nature to the United States’ self-perception as the ‘global hegemon’. For example, both role conceptions involve an emphasis on (various dimensions of) security and, not least, see hard power as a necessary means to achieving one’s goals. For greater transatlantic alignment with China, however, EU–United States role-playing had to undergo a transformation, too. In particular, and as a starting point, it was necessary that the United States’ stance on the EU turn (more) affirmative.

### *Changing EU–United States Role-Playing*

Whilst Biden and his team have upheld, if not intensified, the United States’ confrontational China policy, unlike his predecessor, the incumbent has emphasized the need for the support of the North American country’s allies and partners here, marking a major shift in approach (see White House, 2021). As a consequence, US role-playing vis-à-vis the EU changed swiftly and extensively post-January 2021. Whilst Trump had

referred to the EU as a foe, the Biden administration has vowed to ‘deepen the alliance with Europe’ and highlighted that ‘[w]ith a relationship rooted in shared democratic values, common interests, and historic ties, the transatlantic relationship is a vital platform on which many other elements of our foreign policy are built’ (White House, 2022b, p. 38). The EU itself has been altercast as an ‘indispensable partner’ in the United States’ ‘fundamental commitment to the pursuit of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace’ (White House, 2022b, p. 39).

This new US approach has generally resonated well with the EU, which, for its part, indicated early on that it would be ‘ready to revive our [transatlantic] partnership’ under the incoming president (EEAS, 2021). In ‘A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change’, immediately released in the wake of Biden’s electoral victory over Trump in November 2020, the bloc voiced its hopes for more harmonious transatlantic role dynamics going forward, stating that the ‘relationship between the European Union and the United States is unique and built on shared history, shared values and shared interests’ (European Commission, 2020b, p. 1). Against the backdrop of such mutually positive signalling, the EU and the United States also held a summit meeting only 6 months into Biden’s presidency (none was ever convened under Trump). The joint declaration emerging out of it noted the aim of promoting a new transatlantic ‘we-feeling’ and ‘[b]uild[ing] a more democratic, peaceful and secure world’. Hinting at a specific China focus here, the document underlined that

Together, the European Union and the United States are an anchor for democracy, peace, and security around the world, [...] uphold the rule of law and international law, and promote human rights for all [...]. We reject authoritarianism in all its forms around the globe. (Council of the EU, 2021)

In a nutshell, EU–United States role-playing has become much more positive since Biden took office. Together with the EU previously starting to align its own role conception more closely to that of the United States, this new situation has created opportunities for heightened collaboration, including with China. And this is where mutual role expectations now come in, for which the reinvigorated transatlantic partnership has likewise provided a fresh and more conducive context.

As for EU alter expectations of the United States, Washington has scored a few points in Brussels by returning to a number of international organizations and treaties, most notably the UN Human Rights Council, the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Accords. This has signalled a course correction in Washington broadly in line with the EU’s own multilateral character, outlook and agenda (EEAS, 2021). Additionally, Biden reconfirmed the United States’ commitment to NATO early on in his tenure, and in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the United States and the EU have collaborated resolutely on countering Moscow’s aggression (European Commission, 2023a). Moreover, it has been interesting to observe that whilst the EU has steadfastly rejected the US (and mostly Trumpian) notion of ‘de-coupling’ from China, when the bloc came up instead with its own, seemingly less aggressive, economic strategy of ‘de-risking’ (European Commission, 2023b), the Biden administration was quick to embrace the term (Bloomberg, 2023). Consequently, incidents such as the furore surrounding the US Inflation Reduction Act have not tipped the balance in the EU against the United States, as was the case during Trump’s tenure.



Meanwhile, and unsurprisingly, US alter role expectations of the EU have primarily revolved around China. Given the EU's self-conceived role as a nascent 'geostrategic actor' allied with the United States, Washington has high hopes of seeing Brussels act accordingly. In other words, the Biden administration has from the outset sought to get the EU to toe the United States' tougher line on the East Asian country (Politico, 2023a). In this sense, the United States has tried to convince Europeans that in the context of the Ukraine war, 'the United States and Europe are confronted with a single Eurasian theater – rather than distinct fronts in Europe and the Indo-Pacific – that will demand ever closer cooperation' in the light of growing Sino–Russian 'strategic alignment' (Barkin, 2022). Subsequently, the EU has warned China not to send weapons to Russia unless it wants its ties with Brussels to be significantly harmed (Politico, 2023b). Another example is that the Biden administration is intent on using the previously mentioned TTC as a tool for co-ordinating and implementing joint United States–EU strategic export controls against China. Whilst Brussels has remained hesitant to follow Washington's lead here, it has agreed to this matter being on the agenda at least.

All of this makes the changing nature of EU–United States role dynamics since Biden came to office quite evident. During the Trump years, the US side was at times also interested in getting Europeans to be tough on China (e.g., on Huawei). But given that he altercast the EU as a foe, the bloc's incentives to co-operate with Trump on China were rather thin on the ground. Under his successor, however, the EU and the United States have reverted to seeing one another as important partners in turbulent times. Despite the fact that the October 2023 EU–United States summit did not resolve economic tensions between the transatlantic partners, the meeting still conveyed a message of geopolitical unity, including on China: their joint statement emphasized that the two sides 'are more united than ever' (White House, 2023). As a part of this positive role-playing, Washington and Brussels have also become more willing to accommodate each other's alter role expectations. For the EU, notably, this has involved closer alignment with the United States on China.

## Conclusion

This article set out to explain why the EU has come to increasingly align with the United States on China policy. For this purpose, it employed role theory; specifically, the argument was made that role compatibility breeds co-operation between actors. Consequently, it was demonstrated that, in recent years, the EU has gradually adjusted its meta-role, making it more similar in nature to the United States' role: for one thing, the ego dimension in the EU's role conception has undergone a significant transformation. The bloc's long-held identity has shifted from 'normative great power' to being or becoming a 'geostrategic' or 'geopolitical' actor, which is generally closer to the United States' meta-role of 'global hegemon'. For another thing, the role-playing between Brussels and Washington has also changed substantially, from extremely negative under Trump to quite positive under Biden. The United States' change of tack regarding the EU has, in turn, made the bloc more open to meeting growing US role expectations with regard to standing up to China. Altogether, these various role dynamics have resulted in enhanced transatlantic co-ordination and co-operation on China.



Meanwhile, however, it was also shown that the EU has not aligned with the United States on China in full. This choice is related to the EU's own upheld agency, as also reflected in the role dynamics analysed. That is to say, during the process of reshaping its own role conception, as influenced by the antagonistic role-playing with both China and the United States under Trump, the EU has come to put increasing emphasis on its own 'strategic autonomy'. Whilst it may be hard to fully implement this goal in practice (consider, e.g., Europe's military dependence on the United States), the bloc has nonetheless realized that its own interests are not automatically aligned with those of the United States – not even under Biden. In this regard, it is also imperative to be mindful of the differing roles that the EU and the United States, respectively, ascribe to China: for Brussels, Beijing is still also a partner; not so for Washington (see White House, 2022b). Further, the currently positive role-playing between the EU and the United States, which has been essential for the two sides' increased alignment on China, may well turn out to be short-lived if Trump returns to the White House.

Lastly, through the use of role theory to explain the EU's recent alignment behaviour vis-à-vis the United States and China, this article has provided important insights where 'material' IR theories traditionally focused on cost–benefit calculations would have a hard time delivering results. As states and regional groupings around the world are all in growing need of reacting to the deepening United States–China rivalry, role theory seems to be a promising avenue for analysing other cases of such alignment behaviour as well. Doing so could even turn out to be cross-fertilizing. Whilst role theory has typically been applied to dyadic relationships, more studies on role dynamics in triangular settings may well contribute to further theory building. As was earlier outlined, emerging role compatibility between two actors may spur bilateral co-operation, which can also be directed against a third party with whom they share relatively few role similarities.

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