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**The Belt and Road Initiative:
An Opportunity or a Threat
for the European Union?**

1. Introduction

In the late 20th century, many scholars believed that the US could still provide a necessary minimum of management of the international system and other states would continue to accept its services, whereas others argued that both friends and foes sooner or later would react to the predominance of the United States by working “to right the balance” (Waltz 1999, 700). The rise of China, since the country joined the WTO in 2001, can be seen as a process of gradual balancing from which also other actors could benefit. However, China’s geographic position in Eurasia may engender fear in its neighbours. Hence, from a geopolitical perspective, we could expect that EU countries and US are likely to cooperate in order to counterbalance China’s power in Eurasia and preserve the status quo.

These statements appear a bit simplistic, as “even the most cursory glance at the historical record reveals many important cases of underbalancing” (Schweller 2006, 1). Indeed, the decision to cooperate in order to prevent another state’s rise is not as automatic as neo-realist thinkers tend to assume and it is influenced by a plethora of different factors. Most notably, Walt (1985) argues that balancing against a state is more likely when that state is perceived as particularly threatening. China’s ascendancy as a global power has prompted a debate among IR scholars on whether US and its liberal allies should envisage the rise of China as an opportunity or as a potential threat. Scholars belonging to the first camp, defined as ‘optimists’, as opposed to the ‘pessimists’ (Walt 2018),

claim that – since China is a major beneficiary of the liberal order, it will not attempt to challenge the latter's existence (Ikenberry 2008, 2014). Others argue that participation in international organizations has socialized this rising power (Johnston 2008). As a consequence, they maintain, rather than attempt to overturn the liberal order, Beijing is likely to try to achieve greater authority within existing institutions (Schweller and Pu 2011). Moreover, some scholars find that these institutions will even strengthen as long as economic interdependence grows (Monteiro 2014; Deudney and Ikenberry 2018). In any case, other observers suggest that liberal institutions function in ways that advantage status-quo oriented actors to the detriment of revisionist powers (Wohlforth 2018, 71).

On the contrary, so-called 'pessimists' maintain that China is likely to sustain the current economic order based on open markets and free investment flows, only as long as the West does not turn to protectionism (Niblett 2017) and others even suggest that – due to its historical, cultural and socio-economic background – Beijing will push for changes that might dramatically alter existing international norms and institutions (Jacques 2009; Kupchan 2014). Hence, China is supposed to reshape the liberal order in ways that reflect its own interests and values rather than those of the West (Pillsbury 2015). Other scholars warn that China will pursue this goal by assisting in the emergence of other competitive great powers, or in the formation of a regional balancing coalition against the US in the Western hemisphere (Mearsheimer 2010, 388).

These different perceptions of China's role in the international system and its objectives as a great power have also shaped EU-China relations during the last decades. Indeed, since 1975, when formal diplomatic ties were established between them, China represented for the EU a huge economic opportunity and EU institutions encouraged Member States to deepen bilateral ties with Beijing in order to increase trade exchange. Despite concerns over violations of human rights – worsened by the 1989 Tiananmen event – EU trusted that China's human rights record would improve with the gradual opening up of its economy (European Commission 1995, 7). This optimistic belief has guided EU's policies toward China until late 2010s, when the latter seems to have abandoned the prior foreign policy principle of 'hiding one's capacity and keeping a low profile' and has, contrastingly, started to rely on a 'going global' strategy aimed at seeking a bigger role in the international system (Chen and Gao 2022, 201). Hence,

as we shall see, EU has come to realize that the inclusion of China into the global economy is not likely to contribute to a fundamental political change in that country, as main liberals have envisaged, and – especially during the last few years – has tried to adopt a more pragmatic, and consequentially competitive, approach in its relations with Beijing.

The launch of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) by Xi Jinping in 2013 has reinvigorated the debate in Europe over the attitude to adopt towards China. Indeed, due to its undisputable ambitious scope and geographical reach, this global infrastructure project is believed to present both opportunities and challenges for the EU. On the one side, in line with the international development goals set mainly by Western-led international institutions, it is supposed to contribute to cooperation and the economic growth of countries in which it is deployed. Yet, on the other side, the BRI is essentially a Sino-centric project, which may also favour the diffusion of alternative practices, whose spread would be facilitated by the establishment of China-led financial institutions (Benabdallah 2019, 93). Since its launch, EU's response to the BRI has oscillated between these two positions, that is from considering this project as an opportunity for economic development in Eurasia to seeing it as a threat to EU's unity, its security and its market system.

This paper discusses the evolution of European reactions to the BRI in the early years after its launch (from 2013 to 2017) and, through the analysis of official documents, publications and policies, shows that at first EU's reaction was more favorable and later, starting from 2016, its attitude changed to become more hostile. Indeed, our analysis shows that EU concerns about Chinese practices increased with the development of first BRI-related projects and that core EU Member States, most notably France and Germany, which represent also a portion of Continental Europe that is more peripheral to the BRI, have increasingly worked for the adoption of a whole of EU approach to China. Factors that have pushed EU to shift toward a more 'protectionist' stance mainly concern the lack of reciprocity and the threat of Chinese control over critical technologies and infrastructure. Yet, the different impact of the BRI in various European regions has reduced EU cohesion, making difficult the establishment of a clear European strategy.

Finally, this paper argues that, contrary to the expectations of many observers, EU involvement in the BRI has not much affected transat-

lantic relations. As we shall see, even though EU and US have different interests and attitudes towards China, their reactions to the BRI are not so dissimilar. In particular, both actors' responses to this initiative became more hostile when China adopted a more assertive external action and when its practices began to threaten both liberal norms and values and their economic and security interests.

2. *The Belt and Road Initiative: history and purposes*

The Belt and Road Initiative, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), is a global infrastructure project whose stated purpose is to promote integration and cooperation between Asia, China in particular, and European, Middle Eastern and African countries. This project was first set forth by Xi Jinping in two speeches delivered in 2013: addressing an audience in Astana, he announced China's proposal to build a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and during a speech in Indonesia he unveiled the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), to wit the two main components of the BRI. The first component is the modern version of the ancient land network and, like its historical antecedent, it aims at "promoting connectivity, building overland economic corridors [...] and explore possible areas of win-win cooperation" (China Daily, 3 August 2015). The second component's main goal, instead, is to use China's coastal ports to "link the country with Europe through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, and with the South Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea" (Yilmaz and Changming 2018, 257). The initiative was officially launched with a document issued by the National Reform and Development Commission which identified six economic corridors linking the two aforementioned components, the SREB and the MSR.¹ Moreover, the same document established as supporting financial institutions the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, AIIB, and the Silk Road Fund, SRF (Clarke 2018, 84).

¹ "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road", issued by the National Reform and Development Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 28 March 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml.

Whereas China is not the only international player focusing on economic integration of Eurasian countries,² the BRI is unique in its scope and scale, as the Chinese government is expected to spend \$ 1 trillion in total (Wuthnow 2017, 4). Some authors have noted that these figures might be exaggerated, given that investments trumpeted by political leaders are the sum totals of old, new and also aspirational projects (Pantucci 2021, 30). Indeed, this initiative does not come from nowhere: it has integrated a myriad of projects dating back to when the Central Asian states became independent in the early 1990s (Swanström 2005). All of this aside, Beijing signalled the seriousness of its intent by allocating since 2017 \$40 billion for the SREB, \$25 billion for the MSR, \$50 billion for the AIIB, and \$40 billion for the SRF (Ghiasi and Zhou 2017). The geographic coverage of the BRI is impressive as well: the two projects together cover areas generating 55 percent of the world's GNP, 70 percent of the global population, and 75 percent of known energy reserves (Casarini 2015, 2)

As for the scope of the BRI, the White Book defines five major priorities, such as policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade; financial integration, and connecting people.³ Although Chinese authorities tend to frame the BRI in economic, often altruistic, terms, observers have stressed the geopolitical motivations behind the initiative. First, the BRI is supposed to increase Chinese soft power: “the Silk Roads act as a platform for demonstrating the global impact of Chinese civilization” (Winter 2019, 182). This is evidenced by the 36 percent increase in Confucius Institutes in the OBOR countries (Liu, Wan and Huang 2020). Actually, in 2016, the Belt and Road region was the fastest developing in the world: 135 Confucius Institutes and 130 Confucius Classes in the 51 project countries, 460,000 students enrolled in cultural events and an audience of 2.7 million people.⁴ Besides the will to promote Chinese culture and increase its soft-power, observers are particularly concerned by the undeclared for-

² As an example, the EU, the US, Japan and South Korea all launched several projects to this purpose.

³ See note 1.

⁴ *Five Years of Sheer Endeavour: What Data Says about Confucius Institute (2012-2017)*, “Hanban News”, 26 October 2017, http://english.hanban.org/article/2017-10/26/content_703508.htm.

eign policy and geopolitical goals of the BRI and of institutions associated to it, especially the AIIB. Undoubtedly, this initiative is a reflection of China's ascendance as a great power and it is driven by both economic and strategic motivations. Yet, many foreign observers have raised the suspect that the BRI is designed to challenge the current world order and US hegemony (Bhattacharya 2016, 311), that is a grand strategy aimed at ensuring China's continuing economic and political rise (Arase 2015, 30). Others claim that the BRI contributes to create a "network of dependency that will enable [China] to hedge against the USA's alliance structure" (Miller 2017, 31). The last accusation is grounded on the fact that so far Beijing's approach has frequently been to extend loans to partner countries, which would use the funds to build infrastructure employing almost exclusively Chinese firms and work-force (Pantucci 2021, 31). For this reason, some authors have described this approach as 'debt-trap diplomacy', as apparently Beijing seeks to control partner countries' critical infrastructure by driving up their debts to unsustainable levels (Chellaney 2017). In this way, China can manage to consolidate its economic and political dominance in several regions, thus extending its sphere of influence. Chinese presence has grown in North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, all areas that are of major strategic interest to Europe. However, some of the recipient countries have changed their attitudes towards the initiative over time, renegotiating projects and debts. In other states, China's deep penetration has raised concerns over governance and migration (Le Corre 2018). That being said, the Communist Party (CPC) has frequently expressed the desire for new models of international cooperation and the BRI can certainly provide a means to establish the country as a provider of international public goods, thereby elevating it to the centre of world stage (Clarke 2018, 86). As we shall see in the following paragraphs, these concerns, along with others that are peculiar to the EU, have influenced the latter's shift from a more favourable view of the BRI to a more 'pragmatic' and – to a certain extent hostile – approach.

3. The impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on European regions

Europe is likely to represent a crucial actor for the success of the BRI, since it is the western terminal point of this project and Beijing's largest

trading partner. Whereas the huge investments Chinese government is expected to make are believed to greatly influence trade relations between Europe and Asia, their effects will not be homogeneous across Eurasia. While the building of railroad networks will favour inner regions, like Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), port infrastructure will more likely positively affect the economy of coastal areas (*ibidem*), that is Southern Europe. Yet, as we shall see, also the economies of countries from continental Europe are likely to be interested by Chinese investments.

As for land trade, China and the EU are located at the two ends of the Eurasian continent and the two borders are separated by 4.500 kilometres. While in the past this distance has represented a barrier to strengthening bilateral trade relations, during the last decades the land mass separating these two regions is acting more as a bridge than as a natural obstacle between them. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, trade among countries of the Eurasian continent has increased steadily and the construction of new land routes could contribute to the economic development of countries and regions that have no access to the sea and that have historically been less wealthy than their coastal counterparts. Among EU Member States, CEECs will be the most likely beneficiaries of the projects of the SREB, that is those related to the construction of railroads. Actually, China started to consider this region as an entry point for the European market especially when most of CEECs became EU members during the 2000s. At the same time, these countries became more interested in seeking relations with China as the latter became a major player in world politics and especially after the economic and financial crisis of 2008, which induced many of them to look eastward (Szunomár 2018, 74). Cooperation between China and CEECs was reinforced first in 2012 with the establishment of the 16+1 format, a Chinese initiated-platform aiming at expanding cooperation between the promoter, 11 EU member states and 5 Balkan countries.⁵ This cooperation framework was incorporated into the BRI in 2014, producing as the main result so far the Belgrade-Budapest high speed rail project, which was envisioned to boost trade in the Balkans and connect CEECs

⁵ In 2019, with the entry of Greece, this framework was renamed 17+1.

with the Chinese-owned port of Piraeus in Greece (Cornell and Swansström 2020, 34).

The second main component of the BRI, the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road, is supposed to benefit mostly the countries of Southern Europe that have ports on the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, during the last years Chinese investments in seaport management have significantly increased and they have been mainly directed to 13 EU Mediterranean ports (e.g. in Spain, Italy, France and especially in Greece) but also in northern European ports, like those of Rotterdam and Antwerp (Hache and Mérigot 2017). Chinese's enterprises investments in EU states were especially welcomed after the Euro crisis, when influx of foreign capital was much needed. The purchase of 51 percent stake in the Piraeus Port Authority in 2016 for 280.5 million EUR is among the most relevant examples of China's investment in European ports (Oziewicz and Bednarz 2019, 114-115). As mentioned, the port of Piraeus is of great strategic relevance for China since it is aimed at the construction of a transport corridor from the Mediterranean to Central and Eastern Europe (ibidem). Hence, once these projects are completed, Chinese goods will go from the Suez Canal directly to Piraeus, and then they will be loaded onto trains to continental Europe, cutting transit times from roughly 30 to 20 days (Casarini 2015, 4). The possibility that once the Port of Piraeus become linked to Central Europe by train trade would bypass Italian ports on the Adriatic Sea has induced Italy to join the BRI in 2019 (Fardella and Prodi 2017).

In addition to infrastructure aimed at increasing trade relations with CEECs and Mediterranean countries, Chinese companies appear interested in funding projects like the Rovaniemi-Kirkenes railway and the Helsinki-Tallinn tunnel, which aim at connecting the Arctic with the EU (Oziewicz and Bednarz 2019, 115). However, the inclusion of northern European ports in the BRI and the prospect of crossing the Arctic do not create another geopolitical sub-region for which a common impact can be identified in the context of the EU. If a third sub-region emerges in addition to the Eastern and Southern ones, it is what we might call Continental Europe, which revolves around the Franco-German axis. France and Germany are two core European states and have direct interests in Mediterranean and Central and Eastern Europe respectively. Contrary to other sub-regions, Continental Europe is more peripheral to the BRI. In

the first couple of years after the launch of this initiative, France was not even considered as a potential target of this project. However, in 2016 a train connecting Lyon and Wuhan was tested with a first journey. Moreover, also the cities of Le Havre and Marseille tend to look at the BRI as an opportunity for economic development (Nicolas 2021). As for Germany, even though it is an important partner in its implementation, mainly thanks to five German-Chinese railway connections (Li and Taube 2019), the BRI has not yielded infrastructure investment in the country, since these projects had been planned long before this initiative was launched and were only later rebranded as part of the BRI (Gaspers 2016).

Against this background, it is not a coincidence that CEECs and Mediterranean countries have developed a more favourable approach to the BRI, whereas Member States in which the economic impact of the BRI is marginal adopted a more cautious attitude towards these projects, and – especially France and Germany, due to their economic and political weight – have promoted a unified European policy towards this project, shaping EU's response to the BRI.

4. EU's response to the launch of the BRI

EU institutions' reaction to the BRI has changed over time, shifting from tacit acceptance punctuated by periods of more enthusiastic reception to widespread scepticism and sometimes even harsh criticism. According to some observers, EU's attitudes toward this initiative can be grouped into three different stages: when the BRI was launched in 2013, EU institutions adopted a 'wait-and-see' stance, which was followed by a period in which they tried to deepen cooperation with China, creating synergies between European investment plans and the BRI. During the last phase, starting in 2016, EU became more cautious, taking a preventative position and strengthening protection of its markets and interests (Zuokui 2018, 147). These developments took place in parallel with what happened in the United States, but they respond, as we shall see, mainly to internal transformations. Indeed, it seems that EU's shift from acceptance of the BRI to increased 'protectionism' reflects a change in the perception of China's external policy occurred not only at the EU but also at Member States' level. As will be discussed, if during the first

two years after its launch, the BRI appeared as a carrier of opportunities for development, when the first BRI-related projects were implemented, both EU and Member States started to see it as a threat not only from an economic, but also from a political and security perspective.

When the BRI was launched in 2013, EU did not appear much interested nor concerned with this initiative because the widespread impression at the time was that it targeted mostly countries at the periphery of China and the latter was engaging with Europe mainly through bilateral and multilateral initiatives, like the cooperation framework with CEECs countries, which was only later incorporated into the BRI. It has to be noted that when the BRI was launched also the Chinese side seemed to prioritize Asian countries rather than Europe and only at a later stage African and European states gained prominence in China's new geopolitical vision (Zeng 2017). As a confirmation of this, during the 16th EU-China Summit held in November 2013 the BRI was not even mentioned and references to the OBOR were absent in the EU-China Strategic Agenda for Cooperation. Only in 2014 in an official statement the Chinese deputy minister of foreign affairs Zhang Yesui affirmed that the purpose of this initiative was to connect Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Western Asia and even a part of Europe (Zeng 2017, 9). During the same year, it was made clear that CEECs would be involved in this initiative.

After this stage of tacit acceptance, in 2015 EU institutions tried to seize the opportunities offered by the Chinese initiative and announced through the mouth of the EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker the EU willingness to create synergies between the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and the BRI (Casarini 2016, 103). Actually, these initiatives share a number of similarities, given that both will be investing heavily in infrastructure construction (Pavličević 2015). For this reason, in May 2015 President Juncker confirmed that he did not see any significant obstacles in integrating his fund with the BRI, adding that both parts should engage "to make sure that [their] plans fit at both the macro level and the operational level" (Zuokui 2017, 22). Similar views were expressed during the 17th China-EU Business Summit in June 2015, when Chinese Premier declared that China was ready to co-ordinate its development agenda with the EFSI in order to build important infrastructure jointly. Indeed, on that occasion, both parts put forward a series of measures aimed at the integration of the BRI and the Juncker

Investment Plan, and the establishment of a platform for connectivity between China and the EU (Zuokui 2018, 147).

Later that year, during the EU-China High-Level Trade and Economic Dialogue (HED), held in Beijing on 28 September 2015, potential areas of cooperation between the two parts were explored (European Commission 2015). On that occasion, EU Commission and the Chinese government signed a Memorandum of Understanding which launched the EU-China Connectivity Platform, an initiative aimed at facilitating the discussion on cooperation strategies, improving transparency, as well as enhancing synergies between the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and the BRI (Di Donato 2020; European Commission 2015).⁶ Already during this stage, Germany – although still adopting a pretty favourable position towards the BRI – pushed for using this platform to ensure the conformity of Chinese BRI-related investments in Europe with EU practices and standards. Moreover, for German officials the Connectivity Platform represented an important tool to align Chinese infrastructure plans in the European neighbourhood with those of EU member states (Ederer 2016).

During these early years, besides cooperation between China and European institutions, also EU member states strengthened their ties with Beijing. Indeed, when in 2014 the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was set up, observers would not expect that several major Western European countries, including UK, France, Germany and Italy would join one after another. Also for this reason, the establishment of the AIIB has been seen as an important foreign policy achievement, signalling the emergence of an alternative to the American hegemony in international financial institutions (Baark 2019, 9). In fact, Washington considered the AIIB as a potential rival to the US-based World Bank and urged European allies not to join it. Yet, several accounts highlight that the participation

⁶ TEN-T endorses projects of infrastructure construction or related to equipment, technology and standards. Based on the Regulation (EU) n. 1315/2013, the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) is project launched in to develop a Europe-wide network of railway lines, roads, inland waterways, maritime shipping routes, ports, airports and railroad terminals. The aim is to improve connectivity between all the European Regions and strengthen social, economic and territorial cohesion in the EU.

of EU countries can be seen as an indirect attempt to shape through multilateral settings, rather than bilateral agreements, China's BRI-related activities in Eurasia (Gaspers 2016). Reportedly, France's decision to join the AIIB was motivated by the conviction that it would constitute a way of exerting pressure on the institution "so that it would abide by the rules in terms of social and environmental standards" (Nicolas 2021). In a similar fashion, despite concerns that AIIB serves Chinese geopolitical interests, apparently Germany seeks to shape it into a genuine international financial institution, instead of being a bank with "Chinese characteristics" (Stanzel 2017).

As we have seen, until 2015 – besides these attempts to influence the implementation of BRI projects – EU and Member States' reactions to this initiative were all but hostile. Still, with the EU's understanding of the initiative getting deep, starting from 2016 its attitude began to shift to an 'active self-protection' stance (Zuokui 2018, 147). Even though annual summits, ministerial meetings and sectoral dialogue aiming at deepening cooperation between EU and China take place on a regular basis, the implementation of first projects related to the BRI has been received with both appraisal and scepticism. Both EU institutions, some Member States and business actors have expressed several worries, mainly concerning the allocation of construction contracts, the respect of international trade and standard norms, the economic sustainability of BRI-related projects, the takeover of critical infrastructure in European states and the establishment of bilateral agreements regarding the BRI between China and EU members, which is deemed to reduce EU cohesion.

One of the main criticism Chinese investments in EU have attracted comes from European construction companies that are seeking to secure infrastructure deals and that accuse China to favour Chinese companies, especially state-owned ones. This raises the issue of reciprocity, since – whereas Chinese companies find an open-door environment in Europe – European companies have little chances to win contracts to build infrastructure projects in mainland China (Casarini 2015). Concerns about the respect of free trade rules have been voiced by some EU governments as well. Most notably, during a visit to China, French President Macron stated that the BRI could not be a "one-way" trade road leading to "hegemony, which would transform [recipient countries] into vassals" and also

called for a new start in EU-Chinese relations based on “balanced rules” to address “legitimate questions” about China in Europe (quoted in Brattberg and Soula 2018, webpage). Similar concerns were expressed by then German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who warned that China’s BRI-related activities were “not being conducted in the spirit of free trade” (*ibidem*).

Another major concern relates to debt sustainability. Whereas Chinese financed infrastructures have been welcomed in many BRI countries, accepting Chinese lending entails severe risks given that some of the credit that has been extended is lent without due diligence and on terms that are potentially injurious to borrowers. This could leave countries so indebted to China that they could be forced to make it unwanted concessions (Tybring-Gjedde 2020, 6).

Furthermore, EU institutions are especially concerned with initiatives like the 17+1 platform and the signing of MoUs between China and EU member states. These initiatives are deemed to reduce EU unity. Actually, on several occasions, special relations established between Beijing and EU members seem to have influenced EU policies. As an example, in June 2017, Greece blocked an EU statement at the UN Human Rights Council criticizing China’s human rights record. This was the first time that the EU failed to make a joint statement in that forum. Earlier the same year, Hungary broke EU consensus, refusing not to sign a joint letter denouncing the reported torture of detained lawyers in China (Brattberg and Soula 2018). Moreover, in the EU Council on 5 March 2019, previous Italian government comprising 5 Star Movement and Salvini’s League voted against the draft text of the investment screening mechanism, reversing the position of the previous centre-left Gentiloni government, which had joined Germany and France in sending a letter to the European Commission in February 2017 to back calls for an EU intervention on this matter (Casarini 2020, 103).⁷ Another matter of con-

⁷ Indeed, this ‘friendly’ posture towards China is part of a series of efforts of various Italian governments to establish a special relationship with Beijing. Actually, in 2014, Italy’s sovereign wealth fund, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP), already partnered with the Bank of China (BoC) to support Italian enterprises in the Chinese market. Three years later, they created the Sino-Italian Co-Investment Fund with a capital of 100 million euros (Bilotta, 2021). Finally, in 2019, Italy became a BRI country.

cern is that CEECs and countries that have signed MoUs with Beijing have become increasingly critical of European norms and bureaucracy.⁸ Hence, China-led initiatives are believed to undermine EU cohesion by promoting alternative models of governance and a less transparent use of finance (Di Donato 2020, webpage).

A final issue concerns the race for technological dominance and the threat of Chinese control over critical technologies and infrastructure. More generally, at issue is the nexus between technology, national security, and the defence of shared values.

In order to tackle these problems, in 2016 the EU updated its strategy on China and, along with old commitments, for the first time it raised the issue of 'reciprocity' in relations with Beijing, seeking a level playing field and emphasizing the importance of fair competition across all areas of co-operation (European Commission 2016). Moreover, the new strategy states unambiguously that it represents a "further policy shift towards a more realistic, assertive, and multi-faceted approach", in order to set relations with China "on a fair, balanced and mutually beneficial course" (ivi, 1). In approval of this strategic paper, the Council of the EU further asserted its determination on "the constructive management of differences" (European Council 2016; Fanoulis and Song 2021, 2). Other official documents confirm the EU increased scepticism toward cooperation with China. In 2017, the European Commission, led by calls from Germany, France and Italy, proposed to establish a framework to screen foreign direct investment in the EU (European Commission 2017). The screening mechanism for foreign investments in sensitive sectors (e.g. critical infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications, and defence technologies), adopted in 2019, allows the EC to voice opinions on FDI affecting the EU as a whole or multiple Member States. Hence, EC could help European governments to evaluate whether a foreign investor is controlled by a third country government or whether he has previously been involved in activities affecting security or public order, and also if

⁸ The correlation between pro-Chinese policies and Euroscepticism of some European governments is clearly highlighted in the dossiers produced by the European Parliament, for example China, the I6+1 format and the EU, at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625173/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)625173_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625173/EPRS_BRI(2018)625173_EN.pdf).

there is a “serious risk” that he engages in illegal activity (Regulation 2019/452, 2019). Though the regulation explicitly calls for non-discrimination against the investment’s country of origin, it is undeniable that its application would make more difficult for Chinese companies to acquire expertise and technology that could be used to produce goods at lower prices and harm European companies (Casarini 2019, 12).

The European Commission has also tried to promote a European alternative to the Chinese approach, adopting a plan to improve trade and economic and political ties between Europe and Asia. In contrast with China’s BRI, it stresses the importance of establishing a rule-based international system for connectivity projects, based on the respect of environmental and social standards and of norms of free trade and of fiscal sustainability of investments (Di Donato 2020, webpage).

European increased assertiveness toward China is proven by the EU-China Strategic Outlook published by the European Commission in 2019, which states that the EU’s goal is to maintain the international rules-based order, to pursue sustainable development at a global level and recognizes the differences between EU’s and China’s methods in pursuing these objectives. EU’s current approach to China can be synthesized with this statement: “China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, 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. This requires a flexible and pragmatic whole of EU approach enabling a principled defence of interests and values” (Ntousas and Minas 2021, 4; EU Commission 2019).

6. The role of member States in the European response to the BRI

Two considerations help us understand the different European reactions to the BRI. On the one side, China’s pressure on Europe has been a key component of the BRI. Over the past decade, China has shifted from a focus on developing countries with rich natural resources and its Asian neighbours to advanced economies with manufacturing and technology partnerships. Since the official launch of BRI in 2013, Europe has been

seen as a bridgehead for the so-called “going global” strategy pursued by Xi in Eurasia (Yin 2018, 288-9). In this general context, as already underlined, Eastern and Southern Europe have been seen as more open to Chinese influence, penetration, and leverage, than their northern fellows. In Eastern Europe, in particular, the former 17+1 framework has often been referenced as a Chinese strategy to divide the EU (Ghiretti 2021). Regarding Southern Europe, Italy was the last European State to become a BRI country in 2019, but it was also the first among the G7 nations. The Chinese pressures on the Eastern and Southern borders have impacted European strategic posture. Indeed, besides the fact that EU has always shown an ideological aversion towards investment restrictiveness, the Euro crisis further softened political resistance to Chinese investments. High unemployment rates and the need to find buyers for IMF-mandated privatization plans led several EU Members to court Chinese investors (Meunier 2019).

On the other side, since same 2013, the EU has pushed forward a narrative of greater strategic autonomy and a reinvigoration of the rules-based international order and multilateral consensus.⁹ Strategic autonomy is still seen as an effort to defend regional interests with a more integrated, innovative, and competitive defence technological and industrial base, and Germany and France have historically taken the lead in this process. The Franco-German duo is a sine qua non for European strategic autonomy in the field of defence. This collaboration led to the signing of a bilateral treaty on military cooperation in 2019.¹⁰ Furthermore, the two countries have tried to lead this process while maintaining good economic relations in Eurasia and their special role in bilateral interactions with China. In particular, big contracts in areas such as energy

⁹ See the *Conclusion* of the European Council of 19/20 December 2013, at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/140245.pdf.

¹⁰ The bilateral treaty signed between France and Germany in January 2019 reaffirms the friendship between the countries. It builds on the Élysée Treaty signed by French and German leaders in 1963. See <https://www.europeansources.info/record/treaty-of-franco-german-cooperation-and-integration-aachen-treaty/#:~:text=Bilateral%20treaty%20signed%20between%20France%20and%20Germany%20in,signed%20by%20French%20and%20German%20leaders%20in%201963>.

and transport have historically dominated economic relations between France and China, while small and medium-sized businesses have represented Germany (Weske 2007). Whereas historically France has been politically and Germany economically more important to China, since the launch of the BRI France has sought to become more attractive from an economic perspective, while Germany, on the contrary, has tried to gain a prominent political role.

As far as the position of France regarding China is concerned, it has to be stressed that it has traditionally been the only European country with a strategic interest to counterbalance China's influence in Asia.¹¹ This position made it more difficult for Paris than for Berlin to play the new role in the economic field. During President Xi Jinping's official visit to France in March 2013, the two countries agreed to a framework for reinforced political dialogue and people-to-people exchanges but also vowed to work towards a rebalancing of economic relations "within the spirit of reciprocity" (Ekman and Seaman 2015, 25-26). In a broad sense, France's approach became more transactional than strategic. However, initially the country was not considered a target of the Chinese initiative and Sino-French cooperation under the banner of BRI remained largely theoretical. As mentioned, the only concrete interaction emerged in April 2016 when the French city of Lyon welcomed its first delivery of freight from the Chinese city of Wuhan (Seaman and Ekman 2016, 21). Anyway, the transition from a more political-strategic to a more economic-transactional approach changed the country's role in European policy towards China. Since 2016, France has opposed certain types of Chinese investments, particularly in high-tech sectors. Working with Germany in the European context, "this shift has led Paris to take a more vocal stance in favour of common procedures for screening foreign investment in the EU" (Seaman 2017, 60). Moreover, the French government – in line with a French Senate's report on BRI – has emphasized the need for transparency and reciprocity and has called for the prevention of debt distress (Nicolas 2021). In particular, Paris has put much emphasis on

¹¹ On the French strategy in the Indo-Pacific, see *France's IndoPacific Strategy* at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_v2_rvb_cle432726.pdf

the need to follow the 2017 “G20 Operational Guidelines for Sustainable Financing”, whose objective is to ensure that lending and borrowing practices facilitate sustainable public debt levels (ibidem). Besides this, France, along with Germany, has consistently called for a joint response to the BRI based on the principle of ‘strong multilateralism’ and ‘fair and balanced’ trade. French President Emmanuel Macron in the EU meeting 2019 asserted that the “time of European naïveté” in China had “come to an end because for many years we had an uncoordinated approach and China took advantage of our divisions” (cited in Fuentes 2019).

As far as the position of Germany is concerned, it has to be highlighted that its core interest in engaging China has traditionally been the promotion of exports and securing the presence of national companies in China according to a “pragmatic perspective” (Huotari 2015, 35). It is noteworthy to mention that the strategic partnership between Germany and China was established only in 2010, while China announced a member-state-level deal with the UK, France, and other EU member states in southern Europe between 2003 and 2005. The Sino-German partnership took place only during the 2008 economic crisis, when it became clear that China and CEECs would be more inclined to enhance cooperation with each other (Zhou 2017, 16). Like France, Germany is more peripheral to BRI projects than CEECs and Southern European countries. Yet, even though BRI-related activities to Germany have been limited to a slimline of railway operation projects, Berlin’s initial perceptions of BRI were positive. The government saw the BRI as a tool to secure Chinese investments in Germany and eastern Europe’s neighbourhood. In a speech delivered in Beijing in October 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel praised BRI’s long-term strategic outlook by stating that “the European Union also wants to be part of this endeavour” (Gasper 2016, 26). Since then, as previously discussed, Germany has been a keen advocate of using the EU-China Cooperation Platform as a tool to ensure the conformity of Chinese BRI-related investments in Europe with EU rules and standards.

It should also be noted that in 2016 there was a change in perception in the German public, media, and policymaking circles. A rapid increase in technology acquisitions spurred heated debates about the sale of critical or security-sensitive technologies (Huotari 2017). The debate about the appropriate balance between principled openness

and targeted protection, as well as about the necessary measures to achieve policy goals including technological leadership, industrial competitiveness, and reciprocity in investments relations with China is far from concluded. However, changes in attitude occurred between 2016 and 2017 and influenced the policies of European institutions, which started to see China not only as a 'systemic competitor' but also as a 'systemic rival' in 2019. At the time the German government took a more political-strategic stance and along with France, it pledged to reinforce efforts to support a greater alignment of the different EU member state positions on China. In particular, German officials have sought an alliance with France and Italy on EU FDI investment screening legislation. Indeed, also other relevant actors in Germany highlighted the need to develop a more comprehensive approach to regulating at the EU level commercial and financial relations with China (Ian et.al. 2021, 43): the Federation of German Industries emphasized that "no EU Member State can on its own cope with the economic and political challenges posed by China. Answers can only come from a strong, reformed Europe speaking with one voice' (BDI 2019, 1).

We can explain the role of Germany in influencing the development of European policies by considering that China's authoritarianism remains the main obstacle to an overall positive view of China in that country, which is Europe's largest economy (Pongratz 2021). The traditional hard power issues of economic growth and military might are not the only sources of fear in Europe about the rising of China. Underlying them is often a deeper set of questions concerning identity and shared values (Barr 2011). The influence of Germany has weighed on many European countries, both in Eastern Europe, except for Hungary (Ghiretti 2021), and in Southern Europe, particularly in Spain, that, after an initial support for the BRI, decided not to join this project. That being said, the German government's attitude on the BRI has been essentially pragmatic and it was able to count on the support of France. Even though the two countries have worked to develop a whole of EU approach towards China and the BRI, aimed at inducing Beijing to adhere more strictly to international norms, in doing so they have not lost sight of the fact their Southern and Eastern European fellows could benefit from China's infrastructure construction and investments. This particular attention to the east and south of Europe

is especially true for Germany. Also for this reason, previous German government – stressing the ‘partner’ component of the EU definition of China – has pushed for finalizing a Comprehensive Agreement on Investments with China in December 2020, without even consulting with the US newly elected President Joe Biden.

7. US’ response to the launch of the BRI

Due to its status as a global power, US has always looked at China’s rise with more suspicion than EU and considers the Asian power as a threat to US hegemony. Yet, Washington’s perception of the OBOR initiative has not always been so negative and, like that of the EU, has varied considerably over the years, for reasons only partially overlapping with those of the EU. Even though US has never appeared truly enthusiastic of this global infrastructure project, when the BRI was launched, Obama’s official response was fairly benign, commenting that “Asia needs infrastructure [...] so to the extent that China wants to put capital into development projects around the region, that’s a good thing” (Dyer 2015, webpage). Few months later, during Xi’s visit to Washington in September 2015, a White House press statement remarked that US “welcomes China’s growing contributions to financing development and infrastructure in Asia and beyond” (White House 2015).

Under the Obama administration, officials noted that China’s BRI plans mirrored the intent of the US New Silk Road 2011 Initiative (NSR) and argued the BRI could be mutually reinforcing of US efforts to support peace, stability, and prosperity through economic opportunity and connectivity in one of the least-economically integrated regions of the world (Chang 2017, webpage). Contrary to the expectations raised during the Presidential electoral campaign, the early Trump administration adopted a similar stance towards the BRI, even “recogni[zing] the importance” of this initiative (Young 2018, 389). Moreover, a senior US official attending the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in 2017 remarked that “US firms have a long and successful track record in global infrastructure development, and are ready to participate in Belt and Road projects” (Strait Times, May 14 2017). Yet, he warned that the initiative’s success would depend on several factors, not least “transparency in government pro-

curement, high-quality financing to avoid unsustainable debt burdens and broad participation” (*ibidem*).

However, US’ response to the BRI became more concerned due to alleged China’s unfair economic practice and industrial policy. The publication of Made in China 2025 policy is a case in point, since Beijing has allocated billions of dollars in order to allow state-owned and private enterprises to catch up with Western technological expertise in advanced democracies. The use of state subsidies to enhance national companies’ competitiveness has been vehemently criticized by the US, as it is supposed to undermine international trade rules (Ashbee 2020). In addition, Washington expressed concerns about Chinese foreign policy growing assertiveness. In late 2017, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson accused Beijing that its infrastructure development projects were causing several problems to recipient countries, since they relied extensively on Chinese workforce and burdened states with “enormous levels of debt” (Tillerson 2017, 7-8). Other officials expressed disappointment with the signature of MoUs between China and European countries and the incorporation of the 17+1 cooperation agreement into the BRI (Ashbee 2020).

All these concerns were amplified in the National Security Strategy published in December 2017, in which China was accused of “using economic inducements and penalties [...] to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda” (White House 2017, 46). Moreover, with an implicit reference to the BRI, the document stated that “China’s infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations” (*ibidem*). Actually, the document explicitly criticizes China for “gaining a strategic foothold in Europe by expanding its unfair trade practices and investing in key industries, sensitive technologies, and infrastructure” (*ivi*, 47). In what appears like an open challenge to the BRI, the Strategy highlights that in the area of foreign infrastructure development, the US could “offer a stark contrast to the corrupt, opaque, exploitative, and low-quality deals offered by authoritarian states” (*ivi*, 39).

In summary, the White House opposition to the BRI focuses on two main issues: first, the number of accusations US authorities have made over violations of free trade norms highlights the concern that China’s infrastructure projects – and its rise as a global power at a more general level – can undermine the international rules-based system. Second, China’s penetration in Europe along with the use of its economic and

financial power to increase the level of national debt of less developed countries along the Belt and Road, thus making them dependent on China, has raised concerns for US strategic position relative to Beijing and fosters fears of displacement by China's rise (Young 2018, 389-390).

Despite these concerns, neither Obama nor Trump have developed a viable alternative to the OBOR, thus convincing their allies to drift away from China or have made real pressures to European states not to join the BRI. Indeed, perhaps mindful that his criticism to the AIIB had left US isolated, given that many EU member states raced to join the body, Obama acquiesced to the launch of the BRI (Ashbee 2020, 375). In a similar fashion, despite the Trump administration's critiques of China's growing assertiveness, there have been very few signs that the US would significantly increase funding for competing infrastructure development projects (Haider 2017). One explanation for US' restraint on competing with China in this area is related to the considerable budget cuts that the Trump administration made in several areas relevant to the construction of foreign infrastructure and to international financial institutions, like the World Bank. Undoubtedly, these cuts put into question both the capacity and the willingness to fully-fund potential alternatives to the BRI. In addition, since 2017 there has been an American disengagement not only with China but also with Europe. Another factor that could have induced the White House to adopt a somewhat milder stance towards the OBOR is related to the economic opportunities that many major US companies are expected to seek through BRI projects (Wuthnow 2018, webpage).

8. *Conclusion*

Today technological dominance appears to be a strategic dimension of the US competition with China. It will probably impact transatlantic relations because of the nexus between technology, national security, and the defence of shared values. The problem is that "the arrival of China in the upper echelons of fields such as AI and biotechnology, for so long dominated by the United States, has provoked a certain alarm in the West" (Ortega 2020, 5). However, as we have seen, the US did not oppose the BRI and did not put great pressure on Europe. If anything, the fact is

that similarly to the US, most European countries no longer see China as a developing country but as an emerging global power that has become a competitor or even a rival, as stated in the 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook.

The reference to the values of freedom and democracy in opposition to the Chinese communist regime fuels the fear of foreign influence and control over technologies and critical infrastructure as ports and railways. As this paper has shown, also violations of international trade norms and China's use of its economic power to increase its political influence in Europe, undermining EU's cohesion, have contributed to the hardening of Brussels' stance towards Beijing. However, EU's inherent 'fragmented' nature has so far impeded Brussels from adopting a single position in defence of its shared values. As a matter of fact, in formulating a China policy, the EU has to take into consideration that its member states have different interests and that – although the United States remains its most important economic partner – Europe's Eurasian trade and value chain is increasingly dependent on China. Therefore, it cannot consider Beijing merely as a 'rival' or as a 'competitor', but also as a vital 'negotiating partner'. Also for this reason, rather than seeking a balance against China, in the early years after the launch of the BRI (2013-2017), European countries appeared interested in finding their advantage in the context of integration of Eurasian economy and greater autonomy from the transatlantic partnership.

Our argument is that in the aftermath of the 2010 euro crisis, European rulers have in some way welcomed the emergence of a potential new provider of global public goods and opted for not balancing against it. The BRI offered European governments and institutions a new opportunity for economic growth. Even though concerns about the rise of China had already emerged after its entry into the WTO and few years later China began to be the primary target for accusations and complaints from the EU (Zhou 2017, 14), the latter, affected by the global financial crisis, decided to strengthen its cooperation with Beijing in the new framework of the BRI. Nonetheless, besides threatening the functioning of the current rules-based global economic system, China's initiative undermined EU's unity, as it led to the emergence of three sub-regions with different interests: namely, Central and Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and Continental Europe. As we have discussed, Beijing has succeeded in ex-

erting pressure on the first two regions. But continental Europe, led by France and especially Germany, progressively adopted a more cautious if not veiled hostile stance toward China by letting political-strategic considerations prevail over economic interests.

This shows also that the geographical location of global powers is not of secondary importance in the process of hegemonic competition. At first, geographical proximity favoured a policy of economic integration in Eurasia in the aftermath of the economic crisis. Seeking the strategic autonomy of the EU, France and Germany reacted to the BRI by converging on an open position, without perceiving a direct threat to the European borders, but attempting to redefine their bilateral relationship with China. Later, politics prevailed over economics, and the EU changed its stance towards China, moving closer to the US. While avoiding a conflict that could have harmed European unity, France and Germany have tried to defend European values and integration in contrast with China. Yet, it is worthy of note that this process was inspired by Germany and France following the principle of EU strategic autonomy and that Brussels and Washington positions towards China still differ on a number of issues.

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