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America's "China-First" grand strategy and the transatlantic bargain: revisiting the security–economics nexus

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Abstract

Since Washington announced its “rebalance to Asia” in 2011, debates about America’s Europe strategy have centered on whether America’s European allies could defend themselves without the USA. This debate has overlooked a crucial point: Washington’s security commitment to Europe is not only about military power but also hinges on European acquiescence to Washington’s politico-economic leadership position. US policymakers today increasingly view China as the main challenge to the latter. Accordingly, this article’s driving hypothesis is that the more significance the USA assigns to its European allies in the context of its China agenda, the more it will, for better or worse, seek to maintain (some degree of) European security dependence on the USA. Case studies of the Europe strategies of the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations, respectively, serve as a vehicle to probe the plausibility of this argument.

Keywords Transatlantic relations · US foreign policy · US-China competition · Rebalance to Asia

Introduction

How does the rise of China and America’s preoccupation with the balance of power in East Asia impact the USA’s Europe strategy? US scholars continue to debate the extent to which any “China-first” grand strategy requires Washington to draw down military resources in Europe (Colby 2021; Mazarr 2023). Relatedly, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic disagree about the prospect of US military abandonment of Europe, and on the question of whether or not America’s European allies can/or should be able to defend themselves without the USA (Snyder 1984; Biscope 2013; Howorth 2018; Posen 2020; Brooks and Meijer 2021). Such debates have

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become more salient following Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with the most outspoken "Asia-firsters" in the USA arguing that "Ukraine is a distraction from Taiwan" (Colby and Mastro 2022; see also Townshend 2022). But if Washington's security commitment to Europe is truly driven by concerns about the continent's military balance of power, it remains puzzling that various US administrations often reacted lukewarm to European defense integration efforts that aimed to make America's European allies more military capable, independently of the USA (Howorth and Keeler 2003; Fiott 2019; Bergmann and Besch 2023). After all, having more capable European allies would arguably make it easier for the USA to reallocate its scarce resources to China and East Asia. Several observers have made precisely this point and warn that the USA is militarily overstretched (Colby 2021; Ashford et al. 2023). Nonetheless, even the Biden administration, despite its preoccupation with China, has not heeded calls within the USA to fundamentally downscale Washington's role as Europe's security provider and pass the buck to the continent's local powers.

This article argues that much of the debate on what a "China-first" America means for Europe seems to be neglecting a crucial point, namely that the military alliance between both sides of the Atlantic is but one—if a critical—part of a broader transatlantic strategic bargain. Specifically, since the end of World War II, the relationship between the USA and its European allies has been characterized by a hierarchical political order, in which the dominant state (the USA) promised to protect its subordinates (the European allies) from threats, and in exchange demanded the latter to comply with the rules of the dominant state-led order (Lake 1999; 2009). Historical scholarship has long noted that Washington's security commitment to Europe was never only about maintaining a favorable military balance of power on the continent. Rather, it was and remains also partially motivated by a US expectation of European acquiescence to the USA's broader politico-economic leadership position (Ikenberry 2001, 163–214; Leffler 2018a, 2018b; Horovitz 2018; Horovitz and Götz 2020). While this bargain—or, in David Lake's words: "social contract"—of exchanging security provision in exchange for politico-economic influence was never made explicit, it continues to offer a relevant lens to think about the drivers of America's Europe strategy today (Lake 1999; 2009). In light of China's emergence as an economic and technological powerhouse, issues related to trade, investment and technological innovation have become important vectors of Sino-American rivalry (The White House 2017, 2022; US Department of Commerce 2022).¹ If history offers any guide to the future, this suggests that the evolution of Washington's security commitment to Europe is, to some extent, also influenced by the significance it assigns to its European allies in the context of its China agenda. Concretely, the driving hypothesis here is that the more significance the USA assigns to its European allies in the context of its China agenda, the more it will, for better

¹ For diverging views on the sustainability of China's economic model and its ability for technological innovation, see Beckley (2018) *The power of nations: Measuring what matters*. *International Security* 43(2): 7–44; Schmidt (2023) "To Compete with China on Tech, America Needs to Fix Its Immigration System," *Foreign Affairs*, May 16, 2023.



or worse, seek to maintain (some degree of) European security dependence on the USA. Rather than looking at America's evolving Europe strategy through the prism of military abandonment (Snyder 1984), the bargain lens allows for a more comprehensive modeling of this relationship, that recognizes that military, political and economic factors together drive strategy.² In probing this hypothesis, this article fills an important gap in the literature on the impact of America's "China-first" strategy on the transatlantic relationship.

This article conducts a plausibility probe of its driving hypothesis through three concise case studies examining the Europe strategies pursued by the Obama, Trump and the Biden administrations. The goal here is not to delve into the intricacies of specific decision-making processes or the domestic political factors constraining successive administrations. Instead, the aim is to highlight the value of the bargain prism to show how the USA's role in Europe's military balance of power is not only driven by military considerations, but also by US interests in the politico-economic sphere. As such, the article traces the efforts of successive administrations to recalibrate their approach to Europe in accordance with their China-centric global agenda. Each case first briefly asserts that Washington indeed adopted a "China-first" grand strategy and describes how much significance it assigned to its European allies in this regard. Afterward, the cases delineate the consequences for successive administration's respective Europe strategies. Concretely, in order to probe the plausibility of the hypothesis, particular focus is directed to the extent to which each administration believed it could leverage its security commitment for influence in non-security related matters, and, in connection with this, the expected implications arising from a scenario where the USA is marginalized within the European (military) balance of power. To do so, the article draws on a combination of primary sources, research interviews and secondary literature.

While modesty is warranted in presenting any decisive conclusions due to the data access limitations that inevitably accompany efforts at analyzing contemporary events, the plausibility probe underscores the value of the bargain lens in grasping the impact of the US preoccupation with China on its Europe strategy. In the case of the Obama administration, its emphasis on prioritizing China and East Asia does appear to be one of the drivers behind its efforts to downgrade the security element of the transatlantic bargain and reduce the US role in the continent's security architecture. Although a reduction in the US role in the continent's military balance of power risked curtailing US influence over its European allies, this does not seem to have been a major concern for Obama. This was the case because the Obama White House did not view the US–Europe relationship as "the central axis" around which to organize responses to global challenges, including within the framework of its "rebalance to Asia" (Jones 2010, 77; Leonard and Kundnani 2013). In contrast, Trump's approach reflected a conviction that Sino-American competition compelled an important readjustment of the US–European arrangement. In spite of all its criticism of European free-riding on the USA for security, the Trump White House did not propose a "restraint-style" pull back from Europe (Posen 2018). Rather, Trump's

² The author thanks one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this point to her attention.



team seemed highly concerned with maintaining influence over Europe, and it sought to more effectively leverage the US security commitment to prevent the adoption of policies by Europeans that it believed would bolster China's rise while undermining Washington's own policy preferences. Finally, the Biden administration has been eager to emphasize the US continued commitment to its role as security provider in Europe and has even modestly increased America's military presence on the continent. To a significant degree, the USA's evolving military posture under the Biden administration should, of course, be assessed within the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. Nonetheless, if Biden were only concerned with military considerations, one might have logically expected him to seek to pass more of the burden onto America's European allies. Instead, Biden has been careful to assert European military dependence on the USA. In essence, Biden seems to view the US military role in Europe as critical for asserting leadership over the "rules-based international order" and expects European support in defending this order against the distinct, yet combined challenge of both Russian *and* Chinese power at the same time (The White House 2022, 8).

By making the case that assessments of what a "China-first" America means for Europe ought to move beyond discussions on the distribution of military resources between regions, this article makes a threefold contribution. First, combining insights from the historical literature on the transatlantic relationship and the literature on political order, the article provides a framework to integrate military, political and economic factors into assessments of America's contemporary Europe strategy. Despite the fact that most scholars and policymakers recognize that non-military factors also drive US strategy, there is a surprising lack of modeling of these factors together in the context of Sino-American rivalry, specifically. In the debate on US grand strategy, for example, advocates of a grand strategy of "restraint" or "offshore balancing" focus on the European military balance above all, and rightly criticize "deep engagers" for downplaying the possibility of military overstretch and backlash effects. At the same time, they also argue that the USA could probably pull back militarily from Europe and not suffer significant consequences with respect to its overall global position (Posen 2014; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016). In making this case, however, they additionally have to grapple with the question of how much influence the USA buys over Europe's broader international outlook, including on politico-economic matters, in exchange for this security commitment. This raises an important question for this argument going forward: Does America's influence over Europe—including Europe's China policy—outmatch the argument of having more resources to spend elsewhere, be it in East Asia or at home?

Second, and in alignment with a call put forth by Horovitz and Götz (2020), this article contributes to a broader effort aimed at investigating the interplay between security and political economy in the study of US foreign affairs. Much of the existing scholarship tends to concentrate on questions related to how states employ economic instruments of statecraft to advance their security objectives (Zielinski et al. 2021). This article turns this logic on its head and looks at how military instruments of statecraft are used in pursuit politico-economic aims (see also Horovitz and Götz 2020). Such a perspective is becoming particularly relevant at a time when long-standing orthodoxies about the relationship between security and economics are



becoming more and more contested on both sides of the Atlantic (Farrell and Newman 2019; Norloff et al. 2020; Weiss 2021). Stated differently, as American policy-makers rethink what mix of security and economic policies is most appropriate to respond to China's rise, it becomes imperative for analysts of US foreign policy to recalibrate their analytical toolkit accordingly.

Third, and on the European side, the bargain lens underlines how hard it is—and will remain—to adopt an independent China strategy for as long as Europe remains dependent on Washington in security affairs. Exchanging security provision for acquiescence to US broader strategic designs makes sense to the extent that what good is for the USA is good for Europe. In other words, for a transatlantic bargain to be strategically sustainable, the dominant state (the USA) ought to provide “just enough political order” to gain the compliance of its subordinate states (the European allies) to the “constraints required to sustain that order (Lake 1999).” If this is not the case, subordinates may choose to defect, and seek more autonomy in security affairs as a precondition for freedom of action on other dossiers. This triggers an important question for Europeans: Is the USA's China policy in the European interest?

The remainder of this article is divided in four sections. The first three sections present case studies of Washington's efforts to reconcile its Europe strategy with its “China-first” grand strategy under the Obama administration, the Trump administration and the Biden administration, respectively. The fourth and final section summarizes the main findings, links them back to the article's main driving hypothesis and suggests avenues for further research.

Obama's rebalance to Asia and the downgrade of the transatlantic bargain

Since at least 2011, successive US administrations have sought to redirect the USA's attention and resources toward the Asia–Pacific region, particularly in response to China's growing economic and military influence in that region. References to the Asia–Pacific as the emerging center of gravity of global politics and economics came early on in the Obama administration, even culminating at some point in Obama's self-proclamation as the USA's first “Pacific President” (Obama 2009; The White House 2010, 2015; Clinton 2011; US Department of Defense 2012). Obama officials always insisted that the so-called “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia was not about any particular country, but more broadly about preserving peace, stability and the free flow of commerce in a vital region (Ratner 2013). Rather than seeking to contain China, the Obama White House accepted China's rising influence in the Asia–Pacific as a premise and combined a strategy of engagement with hedging to encourage Beijing to become a “responsible stakeholder” (Brands and Cooper 2019). This section examines what, if anything, such growing preoccupation with China's growing power in Asia implied for Obama's Europe strategy.

While Asia–Pacific issues did feature occasionally in high-level transatlantic consultations, the general perception in Europe was that the Obama administration did not assign major importance to its European allies in the context of its China agenda



(Transatlantic Security Task Force 2012, 3–4; Smith et al. 2020).³ Indeed, rather than emphasizing the development of a transatlantic joint approach for engaging with China, Obama seemed to favor Europeans concentrating their foreign policy efforts on European regional matters (Wright 2017).⁴ Thus, they would help *enable* but not join the rebalance by allowing the USA to reallocate some of its resources to focus on Asia. For instance, when it came to Obama’s agenda on issues such as global economic stability, Beijing itself was America’s primary counterpart, even if the US–China relationship remained complex (Garrett 2019; Geithner 2014). Geo-economics was also at the core of the rebalance as Obama’s efforts to conclude the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) were, in part, a tool to strengthen ties with China’s immediate and extended periphery to let “America, not China, lead (Obama 2016; Garrett 2019).” While negotiations for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) have by some observers been described through a similar lens, they also agree that Obama was not very committed to TTIP, and TPP was always considered the priority (Garrett 2019). All in all, garnering European support for its politico-economic agenda did not seem a priority for the Obama administration.

More concretely, the available data so far suggests that, in Obama’s view, the promise of European support for America’s twenty-first century designs for global order did not necessarily outweigh the costs of America being Europe’s security provider. Driven by a commitment to “rebalance to Asia,” the Obama administration sought (with mixed success) to reallocate US national security resources to East Asia, in part by withdrawing them from other regions, including the Middle East and Europe (US Department of Defense 2012; Flournoy and Davidson 2012).⁵ The consensus view among scholars of the transatlantic relationship is that Obama consistently sought to downgrade the security element of the bargain, with the objective of reducing the US role in the continent’s security architecture (Hallams and Schreer 2012; Simón 2015; Overhaus 2016). This was, in turn, intended to alleviate the USA of what some considered an uneven “burden” and help resource a sustainable rebalance to Asia (Wright 2017).⁶ Obama implemented several policy initiatives that indicate this commitment to reducing the cost of America’s role as Europe’s security provider. On the one hand, Obama, the administration reduced the US national security resource allocation to the region, both in military and in diplomatic terms (Simón 2015). On the other hand, Obama stressed the importance of burden-sharing within NATO, pushing for increased defense spending by other NATO members and referring to his NATO policies as part of an “anti-freerider campaign” (Obama as cited in Goldberg 2016; Krieg 2016; Löffman 2019). In a way, the term burden-shifting may better capture the administration’s approach, as it seemingly sought to reduce the US role within NATO in favor of a more symmetric alliance.⁷ Tellingly, and in contrast to his predecessors, Obama even

³ Interview with US official, October 24, 2019.

⁴ Interview with US official, January 10, 2019.

⁵ Interview with US official, January 10, 2019.

⁶ Interview with US official, January 10, 2019.

⁷ Interview with multiple US officials, December 10, 2020.



welcomed the European Union's (EU) efforts to advance its defense arrangements independently from NATO. Long-standing questions about the implications about any such initiatives for the relations between the EU and NATO, for their part, were temporarily set aside. All in all, Obama appeared more focused on encouraging Europeans to overcome their weaknesses rather than being concerned about Europe become "too strong" (Kandel and Perruche 2011; Bergmann et al. 2021; see also Desmaele 2023).⁸

In hindsight, one can only speculate whether the Obama administration would have opposed EU efforts in defense integration if it believed that Brussels could become sufficiently empowered to challenge US influence, and to upend the long-standing social contract between both sides of the Atlantic accordingly. However, the key issue here is that Obama did not try to obstruct any *limited* defense initiatives by the EU, in contrast to many of his predecessors' actions (Bergmann et al. 2021).⁹ Indeed, proponents of a larger role for the EU in defense matters argued that during Obama's tenure, a critical window of opportunity existed for advancing in this direction (Kandel and Perruche 2011). Importantly, none of this is to say that Obama was entirely uninterested in the European military balance of power. In the aftermath of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, for instance, Washington pledged 1 billion USD to for a military reinforcement program in Europe and deployed additional troops on a rotational basis (BBC 2014; Löffmann 2015). But while speaking of a "unified response," Obama in fact largely allowed Berlin to act as main interlocutor of the West (Löffmann 2015, 325). Overall, therefore, the pattern of behavior that emerges is one of American relative military disengagement and restraint, aimed at solidifying Berlin's position as the emerging—if reluctant and contested—leader of the continent (Siddi 2018). In a way, it is therefore unsurprising that the debate about Europe's ability to defend itself without the USA gained renewed prominence during the Obama era (Biscop 2013).

Taken together, the above analysis suggests that the prioritization of East Asia did incentivize the Obama administration to allocate fewer national security resources to Europe. While a diminished US footprint on the continent may have resulted in a decrease of US influence over its European allies, the lack of substantial importance attributed by Obama to these allies within the framework of its China-related policies indicates that any such reduction in US strategic leverage was likely not viewed as a major concern. In other words, Obama's China agenda did not complicate or conflict with his desire to reduce the cost of the US security commitment to Europe, which in turn implied that the USA might have less influence over Europe. In short, in order to reconcile his approach to Europe with his efforts to reorient the US focus to East Asia, Obama oversaw a *de facto* US downgrade of the transatlantic bargain along both the security and politico-economic dimensions.

⁸ Interview with US official, October 24, 2019.

⁹ Interview with US official, October 24, 2019.



Trump's competition with China and the purported correction in America's Europe strategy

The link between the US reorientation toward East Asia and concerns about China's rise, specifically, has become ever more explicit over the years, as evidenced by the Trump and Biden administration's labeling of China as a "strategic competitor" (McCourt 2021; The White House 2022). While the Obama administration avoided casting the US–China relationship in competitive terms, the Trump administration elevated the notion of Sino-American competition to the center of US grand strategy (Simón et al. 2021). Even if strategic documents published by the Trump administration often lumped China and Russia together, the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) distinguishes China from Russia on two counts. First, whereas Russia is described by the Trump administration as primarily a military threat, China is described as a military and economic threat (The White House 2017, 8, 21). The 2017 NSS, for instance, described China as challenging "American power, influence, and interests ... across political, economic, and military arenas," aiming "to change the international order in [its] favor." A second difference is that China is described as "seeking to displace the USA in the Indo-Pacific region (...) and reorder the region in its favor," whereas Russia is perceived to be *just* seeking to "restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders (The White House 2017, 25)." How did such preoccupation with Sino-American rivalry impact the Trump administration's Europe strategy?

It is true that during Trump's tenure, the perception in much of the US strategic community was that Europe was years behind in adapting to the "new realities" of great power politics of the twenty-first century (Small et al. 2022). At the same time, and importantly, the Trump administration's criticism of Europeans' trade and security practices also indicated an awareness in Washington that Europe's actions on the global stage had significance and could not just be dismissed. Andrew Small, for instance, wrote in 2019 that as US–China rivalry expanded beyond the military realm to encompass issues like technology, trade and economics, the EU also gained more significance for Washington due to its power in those areas (Small 2019). The key goal of the Trump administration seemed to try and prevent the EU's power from being available to Beijing in a way that might support China's ambitions vis-à-vis the USA (Desmaele 2022). Trump therefore put forward a course correction of the transatlantic bargain to ensure that America's allies' policies would strengthen rather than undermine US power. Thus, Trump's focus on China did not result in a military abandonment of Europe; instead, it prompted him to seek and optimize the politico-economic element of the transatlantic bargain.

On the one hand, Trump was unafraid to express his dislike for the terms of the US security commitment to its European allies (Schreer 2019). Indeed, a key theme of Trump's Europe strategy was that the USA's long-standing Atlanticist foreign policy outlook was simply not paying off for the USA. Despite having held up its end of the transatlantic bargain through its role as security provider,



Trump appeared convinced that America had been getting too little in return from its European counterparts (Mead 2019). While Trump may have shared with Obama a frustration about what they viewed as European free-riding on the USA, his administration was unequivocal in its opposition to any type of EU-defense scheme. Without negating the confounding effect of domestic political considerations, it still seems evident that the Trump White House was concerned about Russia's military power and adventurism in Europe (The White House 2017, 35). Trump's team also constantly complained about Europeans not spending enough on defense. Whenever European countries undertook initiatives within the EU to enhance defense cooperation, or to better organize and increase national investments in the EU's defense sphere, however, Washington privately and publicly expressed its disapproval (Hutchinson 2018; Sondland 2019). To be sure, some scholars have made the argument that the USA cannot afford to significantly downscale its security commitment to the continent because they argue that Europeans are today unable to defend themselves against any large-scale Russian aggression (Brooks and Meijer 2021). Even if one accepts that analysis, it remains puzzling that Washington would push back against European efforts to strengthen their military capabilities and contribute more significantly to the overall military balance on the continent in the longer term. This is all the more the case in light of Washington's designation of both Moscow and Beijing as major military threats.

Essentially, rather than seeking to decrease European security dependence on the USA, the main modus operandi of the Trump administration was one in which Washington used American laws and military or economic leverage to address US grievances and stiff-arm allies on a case-by-case basis into following in line (Desmaele 2022). Stated differently, Trump's efforts to seek and undermine European unity, both in matters of defense and beyond, appeared at least in part driven by concerns about US influence over its allies. After all, a more united Europe would surely be more resilient against Russian or Chinese pressure, but it would also become less receptive to the influence of the USA (Pisani-Ferry 2018). Reflective of the Trump administration's efforts to renegotiate the post-World War II transatlantic bargain are the recurring signals that any constructive US–Europe relationship in matters of security was conditional upon Europe's acquiescence to the administration's broader political preferences. For instance, when it comes to China specifically, Washington's repeatedly warned Europeans that using technology from Chinese telecommunications manufacturer Huawei could hurt their intelligence sharing with the USA. When several Europeans did not comply with this request to ban the use of Huawei technology, the USA announced sanctions "to restrict foreign tech manufacturers of selling computer chips built with US technology" to Huawei leaving several European countries little choice but to reject Huawei after all (Delcker 2020; Desmaele 2022, 186). In addition, Trump's top envoy for arms control, Marshall Billingslea, reportedly pushed Europeans to pressure China over its nuclear weapons program (Salama 2020). Washington also aimed its pressure campaigns at particular countries on a case-by-case basis, like when it sought to prevent Portugal from granting a 50-year concession of the new Sines container terminal to China or when it pushed the UK to reconsider Chinese involvement in the construction



of nuclear power plants (Esteban and Otero-Iglesias 2020). Even in the absence of explicit threats to reduce the US security commitment to the continent, the prevailing sentiment in many European capitals was that with Trump as the commander-in-chief and the USA as their main security provider, countries could simply not risk displeasing Washington (Esteban and Otero-Iglesias 2020). Meanwhile, the Trump administration was careful to ensure that it retained a seat at the table in European discussions on Beijing. For instance, and in spite of its confusing rhetoric about the value of NATO to the USA, it pushed its allies to formally include Beijing on the Alliance's agenda (Heisbourg 2020). Relatedly, in 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also famously proposed to launch an "Alliance of Democracies" against China (Pompeo 2020). Yet, rather than viewing this as an invitation for participation in a joint venture, the general perception in many European countries remained that they were under pressure to join in on "a China strategy they did not fully believe in" themselves (Small et al. 2022, 8).

When assessed in its totality, the pattern of behavior outlined above appears to provide support for the hypothesis that Washington's security commitment to Europe is partially contingent upon the relevance it assigns to Europe in the context of its China agenda. In spite of Trump's complaints that the USA was being exploited by its allies, his administration did not propose for the USA to "come home" and pass the buck to Europe's local powers in the way that proponents of a grand strategy of restraint or offshore balancing are. Rather, accessible data on the driver of Trump's policies so far reflects a preoccupation with maintaining influence over Europe, including on issues related to technology, trade and economics. Put differently, in order to align its Europe strategy with its efforts to outcompete China, the Trump administration sought to correct the transatlantic bargain to more explicitly and effectively leverage its security commitment on the continent to get Europeans in line on all things related to China.

China, Russia and Biden's quest to assert American leadership of the "rules-based international order"

The Biden administration has maintained the trajectory set by its predecessor and declared US–China competition as its foreign policy priority. It is particularly noteworthy, in this regard, that key strategic documents released by the administration *after* the start of Russia re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 explicitly identify China as the primary challenger for the USA. Specifically, the 2022 National Security Strategy states that the USA will prioritize "maintaining an enduring competitive edge over the PRC while constraining a still profoundly dangerous Russia." (The White House 2022, 23; see also US Department of Defense 2022). It further describes China as "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it" (The White House 2022, 23) In other words, the "rebalance to Asia" may have experienced a temporary reduction in intensity under the Biden administration due to developments in Europe, but it has by no means been abandoned.



Since the beginning of his presidency, Biden has consistently emphasized the importance of America's European allies in the context of Sino-American competition (Sullivan 2019; Biden 2021; Haar 2021). He has doubled down on the politico-element of the transatlantic bargain, in particular. Among other, under Biden, the USA and the EU have established various dialogues and institutional structures, including the Trade and Technology Council (TTC), the EU-US Dialogue on China and the EU-US Dialogue on the Indo-Pacific. Importantly, even when these initiatives are framed in broader terms rather than exclusively targeting China, observers agree that Biden considers them essential components of his China strategy (Congressional Research Service 2023c). Furthermore, the Biden administration has not shied away from pressuring its European allies regarding various China-related issues. Its criticism of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) and efforts to convince the Netherlands to block ASML from selling chipmaking machines to China are but two prominent examples (Kandel 2021; Race 2023). On top of that, Washington has also pushed to make China a more central issue on the NATO agenda, even if several European countries remain skeptical on whether NATO is the appropriate forum to address issues related to Beijing (Haroché and Quencez 2022).

Biden's policies have frustrated scholars of the restraint and offshore balancing school of US grand strategy, who have long advocated a reduction of the US military role in Europe. Recently, in light of China's rise, these scholars have found new allies among what can be called the "Asia-firsters." The latter argue that the USA should today urgently shift at least part of its military resources away from Europe and direct them toward China in East Asia instead (Colby and Mastro 2022; Mazarr 2023). Biden has done nothing of the like, however. On the contrary, after February 2022, the Biden administration deployed additional troops to NATO allies in Eastern Europe to offer reassurance amid concerns that the Russo-Ukrainian war might spill over their border (Congressional Research Service 2023b). The Biden administration has also played a leading role in providing military and financial assistance to Ukraine (Congressional Research Service 2023a). Although it has continued to advocate for European countries to increase their defense spending, it appears to view such efforts as complementary rather than replacements for US contributions (Bergmann and Besch 2023). In other words, and in contrast to the Obama administration, Biden's policies have signaled a commitment not to burden-*shifting* but to bolstering NATO's military strength at the aggregate level. The fact that the new US-EU dialogue on security and defense cooperation, established in 2021, has as its stated goal to raise "the level of ambition" for the EU-NATO partnership is indicative of this approach (US Department of State 2021; Barigazzi 2021).

Against a background of ongoing war in Ukraine, Biden's emphasis on bolstering NATO's capabilities may seem unsurprising. However, it is important to note that Biden has not deviated from the recurring US inclination to push back against any initiatives that risk its marginalization within the European military balance of power. Indeed, while the Biden administration has not resorted to the Trump administration's forceful rhetoric and interventions, it has nevertheless signaled ambivalence when it comes to European defense cooperation. Among others, it has been eager to conclude an administration agreement that provides the USA increased



access to EU-defense funding (Bergmann and Besch 2023). Julliane Smith, the US ambassador to NATO, has likewise expressed some muted disappointment that American firms were unable to take part in the EU's new initiative for joint ammunition procurement (Grieco and Jourdain 2023). In summary, and in spite of its identification of China as its foreign policy priority, the Biden administration has chosen not to pass the buck, but rather to reaffirm US leadership and influence within NATO and matters of European security (Porter 2023; Menon and DePetris 2023).

Rather than viewing the transatlantic relationship as an explicit "security for diplomatic and economic support" quid pro quo, as was seemingly the case under Trump, the Biden administration appears to have adopted a more nuanced approach. At its core, Biden's grand strategy centers on using US power, especially military power, to uphold what the administration refers to as the "rules-based international order" (Biden 2023; Beinart 2021; The White House 2022, 8, 16, 18, 38, 42). According to Biden, the sustainability of this order is inherently linked to the US military alliances that underpin it. Biden has refrained from framing global politics solely in terms of raw power, however. Instead, Biden officials consistently refer to notions such as "rules of the road" or "the competition for order" (The White House 2022, 4; Blinken 2022; Biden 2023). China and Russia, for their part, are seen as each posing a "distinct," yet highly related challenge to the rules-based order (The White House 2022, 23).

Through its efforts to boost the credibility of US security assurances to Europe, Biden has aimed to reinforce US leadership of said rules-based order (Garamone 2022; Biden 2023). Concurrently, as previously mentioned, Biden has also attempted to pull Europeans into America's competition with China as a means of defending this order. Importantly, by framing the challenge as a combined Sino-Russian threat to the rules-based international order, it becomes politically easier for Europeans (and the EU) to cooperate with the USA in countering China, without fully embracing Washington's more hawkish rhetoric. This approach of framing global competition through the lens of order building further also serves to underscore that Europeans stand to benefit from Washington's efforts as well. Thus, just as the USA is helping Europeans in their efforts to counter Moscow, it also expects Europeans countries to push back against China (Lynch et al. 2023; Tierney 2023). In fact, if one accepts Biden's framework, refusing to confront China can be seen as not endorsing the rules-based international order.

In summary, Biden's prioritization of China has so far not led it to significantly reduce its role in Europe's military balance of power. Instead, this role has taken on a pivotal function as a means to assert American leadership over "the rules-based international order." It is crucial to acknowledge that Biden's European strategy is, to a significant extent, a response to ongoing events in Ukraine. At the same time, if Biden's European strategy were only driven by concerns about the continent's military balance of power, one might logically expect Biden to encourage Europeans to assume a larger role in European regional geopolitics, independently of the USA. This is not the path that Biden appears to be pursuing. In fact, Biden's China policy seems to caution against such burden-shifting. Biden's overarching goal has remained similar to that of the Trump administration: Getting Europeans in line on all matters related to China. The key difference lies in the means by which Biden is



pursuing this objective. In contrast to Trump, the Biden administration has sought to emphasize its leadership of the “rules-based international order” in order to upgrade both elements of the transatlantic bargain—military and politico-economic. Biden has presented them as mutually reinforcing because they both serve to uphold and defense the “rules-based international order” against the “deepening Sino-Russian partnership” and challenge to the order (NATO 2022, 5; Ettinger 2023).

Conclusion

This article has sought to advance understanding of the impact of “China first” on America’s Europe strategy. Existing debates on this issue often center either on questions of regional tradeoffs in the allocation of military resources, or on questions related to economics, but rarely model these factors together. Considering them together, through the prism of a transatlantic bargain, clarifies how the USA’s security commitment to Europe remains tied to an (often implicit) expectation of European support for broader American politico-economic designs. The latter have become increasingly intertwined with China in recent decades, as issues like trade, investment and technological innovation have become vectors of Sino-American competition. With this in mind, it becomes much less surprising that Washington has often reacted lukewarm to, if not outwardly opposed, European efforts aimed at advancing cooperation in defense matters without the USA. Instead, the article’s main hypothesis is that the more significance the USA assigns to its European allies in the context of its China agenda, the more it will, for better or worse, seek to maintain (some degree of) European security dependence on the USA. Three case studies of the Europe strategies pursued by the Obama, Trump and the Biden administration served as a vehicle to test the plausibility of this hypothesis.

The findings of the case studies provide preliminary support for the hypothesis. Trump and Biden, in particular, both regard(ed) Europe as crucial to their China agendas. While the specific way in which they linked the US security commitment to Europe to their efforts to counter Chinese power differed, the overarching goal remained consistent. In both cases, the seeming desire for influence over Europe led them to take (some) precautions to prevent the marginalization of the USA in the European military balance of power. In contrast, Obama did not appear to view Europe as central to his China agenda. Consequently, he showed less concern about maintaining influence over Europe and placed a higher priority on burden-shifting over burden-sharing. In other words, Obama placed reduced emphasis on preserving a significant US role in Europe’s military balance of power. The key take-away here is that Washington’s ability to influence Europeans’ foreign policy vis-à-vis China, by virtue of its security commitment to the region, has at times discouraged efforts to make the NATO alliance more reliant on European military power.

The analysis presented in this paper has some limitations and provides avenues for future research. Most importantly, as already mentioned, there is the challenge of accessing reliable data on contemporary events. In addition, it remains difficult to disentangle the relative weight of various factors driving US policy decisions. For example, the analysis certainly does not rule out the possibility that US



policymakers may have genuine concerns about the ability of Europeans to defend themselves without US support. That being said, the case studies do indicate that a desire for US leverage over Europe in a broader politico-economic context plays some role in US calculations. While the US agenda in this regard goes much beyond China, this article has only sought to illustrate how Europe matters in Sino-American competition, specifically. Moreover, the analysis has alluded to a recent renewed US effort to extend NATO's relevance beyond the Euro-Atlantic theater, particularly in response to China's rising power. While the idea of a "global NATO" is not new, its previous prominence during the immediate post-Cold War period and the War on Terror was an era during which Russia was not considered as a major problem. This is no longer the case. In today's landscape, a crucial question arises about how Biden, and a potential successor, will strike a balance in designing policies to counter the influence of both Russia and China simultaneously within NATO. This question underscores the relevance of a growing debate within the US strategic community about the connections, or lack thereof, between various regions and competitors within US grand strategy (Cohen 2023). It also underscores the need for Europeans to assess the credibility and sustainability of their continued security dependence on the USA.

In addition, and relatedly, the article has highlighted the (implicit) link between security and politico-economic factors in America's Europe strategy. In the past, however, both of these elements were targeted at the same adversary, the Soviet Union. This is no longer the case either. As a consequence, the question arises on how to redefine the transatlantic bargain in a less US-centric world. This article hopes to have helped provide a framework for discussions on these important topics. More work is needed on how to model military and politico-economic factors together in assessment of how Sino-American competition plays out in regions that are not the immediate neighborhood of Washington and Beijing.

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Declarations

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