

## **China's resurgence and its effects on transatlantic relations** by Rosemary Foot

*Dr. Rosemary Foot ([rosemary.foot@sant.ox.ac.uk](mailto:rosemary.foot@sant.ox.ac.uk)) is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, and an Emeritus Fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford. This piece originally appeared in the [Dahrendorf Forum](#) and used content from the memorandum produced for the Dahrendorf All Working Group Meeting in Berlin in December 2015.*

China's resurgence, particularly since the turn of the century, has had global repercussions, as any number of studies of this phenomenon attest. The longer-term implications for one of the most significant coalitions in global history – transatlantic relations – are potentially profound, and potentially profoundly disruptive. The China phenomenon is frequently depicted at official and unofficial levels as having put European-US ties under strain, mostly arising from a confluence of the growing significance of Asia in US economic and strategic policy; Europe's political and economic malaise; and China's more confident and assertive external policies that include the prospect of enhanced financial and economic ties between major European countries and China.

How should we characterize transatlantic relations in this era of increased Chinese influence? Are we witnessing a slow fracturing in this alignment as a result of both a perception in the United States of the growing irrelevance of Europe, as well as Europe's increased interest in being associated with China as it progresses toward becoming the world's largest economy? Or is something far more contingent taking place? Should we view these strains as temporary fissures that are issue-specific, and that will be re-shaped as a result of anticipated and unanticipated developments elsewhere in global and in domestic politics?

Contingency and issue-specificity are crucial variables in understanding this relationship. Undoubtedly, developments associated with Russia, including how the China-Russia relationship itself evolves, will influence the direction of travel for transatlantic relations. So too will the frequency of terrorist attacks on Western civilian targets. Such developments remind both the US and Europe that they share deep institutional, historical, and societal ties rooted in a range of common values. Moreover, both Russian actions and the terrorist menace remind those on both sides of the Atlantic that NATO remains the world's only serious multilateral security organization, retains its relevance in the post-Cold War era, and has a key role to play in reference to the core security threats facing the West.

On the domestic level, the advent of the Obama administration has led to a greater compatibility in US-European relations, at least at governing elite levels.

Europeans have generally perceived a greater closeness in values when compared with the President George W. Bush era. European governments and peoples largely approve of President Obama's greater respect for multilateralism, emphasis on nontraditional security areas such as climate change, and attempts to privilege diplomacy over more coercive mechanisms. Those sentiments would likely continue were Hillary Clinton to assume the presidency.

However, if a more isolationist or nationalist president emerges from the 2016 electoral process in the US, and European electors give ever higher levels of support for nationalist-oriented parties, then we have little reason to expect partnership on foreign policy issues, and even fewer reasons to expect multilateral responses to global problems. The evidence is so far mixed with respect to these domestic political trends.

This combination of contingency, deep-rooted relations, as well as the presence of multilateral security structures that function more effectively than others elsewhere in the world, suggest the need for caution when assessing whether bonds have fractured as a result of China's resurgence. Nevertheless, the sense of strain noted earlier has the potential to go beyond the divergences in transatlantic ties we have witnessed in earlier decades (notably in the Cold War era) and a growing sentiment that we are on the cusp of a possibly more significant transformation in the US-European relationship.

Were the tensions in China-US relations to tip over into conflict, involving Taiwan, maritime sovereignty disputes, or North Korea for example, transatlantic ties would face a hard test. At present, neither side in this allied relationship is likely to be confident about how those bonds will play out in such circumstances. While Europeans have few strategic assets in the Asia-Pacific region, the US will expect other forms of support, probably to include economic and diplomatic sanctions. In the absence of that support, the strain in ties is likely to evolve into a deep fracture. The broad commonalities referred to earlier will probably not be enough to prevent a serious breach.

Meanwhile, in the areas where the China-US relationship are generating most tension (notably cyber security and maritime sovereignty disputes that Americans believe raise freedom of navigation issues) European states, either together or singly, need to make clear their interest in a satisfactory resolution of these questions. But Europe and the US also need to explore why and where they define these issues somewhat differently from each other. And the EU needs to question why it avoided mention of such topics in its June 2015 joint EU-China statement. Above all, the US and European governments need to figure out where their divergences truly matter, and where they can be tolerated. At a minimum this requires commitment to advancing what was billed as a

regular and high-level dialogue on the full-range of matters thrown up by China's significantly increased global and regional influence, as outlined in the Ashton-Clinton Joint Statement of 2012. While there have been high level meetings, by all accounts discussion tends regularly to be derailed by the "crises du jour" such as those involving Libya, Syria, or the Ukraine.

Even before these dialogues over specific Asia-Pacific related issues are reinvigorated, however, European and US governments and elites need to articulate more strongly and in combination a broad vision of what they deem necessary to sustaining a peaceful, lawful, and legitimate international order. Such a vision could form the basis from which US and European policies towards China can be productively advanced, thereby reducing strains in transatlantic ties.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*