

# EU-CHINA RELATIONS AND THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: A DOOMED FUTURE?

HANG YUAN

## Introduction

The United States (US) President Donald Trump came into power on 22 January 2017. Although new US presidents are often in the spotlight, President Trump seems to have received a great deal of attention for his controversial remarks on US domestic and foreign policy during his campaign. Furthermore, in its first month the Trump Administration has already demonstrated a determination to bring about changes that are viewed by many as undoing Obama's policy and as anti-establishment in general. So the big question is: what impact will the Trump Administration have for the world?

This contribution focuses on the relevance of US policies for EU-China relations. Specifically, it tries to explore the implications of the Trump Administration for EU-China relations. Through the lens of examining the 'US factor' and counterbalancing factors in EU-China relations, it argues that as the Trump government's desire to change the game will face strong constraints, Washington may not easily shape a doomed negative future for EU-China relations.

## The 'US factor' and the changing landscape: a framework

CEU-China relations have undergone ups and downs due to various factors in recent decades. How to understand the EU-China 'strategic partnership' is a question that has been subject to debate.<sup>1</sup> The factors influencing this relationship include, but are not limited to, the differences between the two sides and the international situation.<sup>2</sup> As one of the most powerful world players, the US may influence EU-China relations in various ways.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the US factor and other factors in EU-China relations are interrelated.

The US factor could be seen as having two levels: the international system level and the agency level. At the system level, for decades the US has shaped international order through various international arrangements led by the West and underpinned by NATO. In a sense, the US shapes the international atmosphere and its allies' foreign policy thinking. The EU's policy towards China is no exception.<sup>4</sup>

Through frequent meetings including those of NATO and the G7, the US often coordinates its allies' China policy by setting baselines in high politics including geopolitics and security. In their dealings with China, the EU does share a great deal of common ground with the US, including cultural background, values and norms as well as the common interest of the West. And while the EU may develop its own China policy, it is unlikely the EU seeks to move too far away from the general western stance toward China.

At agent level, the US may also directly influence both the EU and China respectively. One way is by imposing more direct pressure on the EU on specific issues related to China. For instance, in 2004 when France and Germany supported an improvement in China-Europe relations, the EU agreed to review its 15-year embargo on selling arms to China. However, Washington warned Brussels off relaxing its arms embargo on China.<sup>5</sup> Among other factors, the pressure from Washington to uphold the embargo is one of the most notable factors resulting in a weapons export ban to China until today. This is a typical case of US intervention in EU-China relations on specific issues.

Meanwhile, the impact of the US on EU-China relations may be mediated and/or modified by the changing landscape of EU-China relations. First, the EU member states'

China policy may differ due to their national ties with the latter.<sup>6</sup> For instance, despite the Obama Administration's warning against membership of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), France, Germany and even the UK have joined. Second, despite NATO, the independence of the EU's approach towards China is also evident. One early example is the EU's constructive engagement with China in early 2000s, which differs from the containment policy of the Bush Administration. Another example is the EU's supportive stance toward decisions of its member states such as France and Germany to join the AIIB.<sup>7</sup> The third factor is China's growing influence and strong support for multilateralism and globalisation. Although the EU and China may differ on many specific issues, they share views on promoting multilateralism and global governance in a multipolar world where the current multilateral arrangements should play central roles.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, if the US moves too far towards hegemonic unilateralism, a strong EU-China relationship may play a rectifying role. Fourth, the world is continually changing, with more developing and emerging countries attempting to shape international relations. While the EU is addressing economic recovery, terrorist threats, immigration/refugee crises and geopolitical pressure, emerging markets are busy networking towards the world stage centre. China's initiatives such as the Belt & Road (B&R) are gaining support from many developing economies.

Therefore, the interrelations between the US factor and these four counterbalancing factors/elements may provide us with a lens or framework to examine EU-China relations.

In this sense, examining the implications of the Trump Administration for EU-China relations requires that we look at how the Trump government may change the current configuration of these factors. Before doing so, we will first survey the Trump Administration's foreign policy.

### **The Trump Administration's foreign policy**

Before moving to the analysis of the Trump Administration's foreign policy in general and EU-China relations in particular, here are several caveats. First, it is important to notice the incoherence of Trump's remarks on specific issues. Second, his discourse as a candidate is not to be

taken as the discourse of a US President. Third, his personal remarks on specific issues are not to be taken to reflect the official outlook or policy of his government. Fourth, his term only began in January 2017. Thus it may be too early to provide a comprehensive and thorough analysis of President Trump's foreign policy portfolio. Instead, this paper only tries to draw some tentative insights, which may still look subjective.

The Trump Administration claims to follow an 'America First' foreign policy, with a focus on American interests and national security, emphasising 'peace through strength'.

Although many US governments have based their foreign policy on American interests, the Trump government attaches great significance to reorienting its resources to

meet domestic needs. This inward looking attitude is reflected in Trump's remarks such as 'the US cannot afford to be the world's police; let NATO allies pay'.<sup>9</sup> Washington is now seeking to have their allies share more responsibility in military spending and security capacity. Trump has also criticised multilateral trade arrangements such as the WTO for not serving the interests of 'All Americans'.

This government claims

to fight for 'fair but tough trade deals' and has already withdrawn Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).<sup>10</sup> In addition, Washington is apparently not ready to play an active role in promoting global governance in fields such as climate change. Therefore, the Trump government is likely to lean towards unilateralism, a label that was more closely linked to President Bush Jr. than to Obama.

Although President Trump has not systematically issued policy directly on EU-China relations, his team have made some remarks on the EU and China. Trump's praise for Brexit and negative remarks about NATO, the EU and Germany before his inauguration as US president sent out signals of Euroscepticism and shocked many Europeans who would support European unity and strong transatlantic partnership.<sup>11</sup> Trump's success has also encouraged populist parties in France, Germany and other EU member states. Furthermore, Trump's clear pro-Russia stance had made Europeans wary about the potential improvement of US-Russia relations.

## **THE INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN THE US FACTOR AND THESE FOUR COUNTERBALANCING FACTORS/ELEMENTS MAY PROVIDE US WITH A LENS OR FRAMEWORK TO EXAMINE EU-CHINA RELATIONS.**



Similarly, Trump's rhetoric attacking China irritated many Chinese. He blamed China for many problems facing the US and the world, from 'unfair' trade to regional security and global warming. Moreover, the recent stances and actions of his team on China's core interests, including issues linked to Taiwan and the South China Sea have already rattled many Chinese.<sup>12</sup> Obviously the Chinese are vigilantly looking for signs of any potential rash decisions of the Trump Administration that may affect China's core interest, including sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Therefore, Trump has already sparked a number of uncertainties, misunderstandings, shocks, fears and worries among people outside the US, including America's European allies and broader global audience.

#### **Doomed future?**

Back to our framework for analysing EU-China relations, we will see how the Trump Administration may change the configurations of the US factor and other factors/elements at the system and agent levels.

At system level, Trump's rhetorical attack on globalisation, current multilateral arrangements and broader international order is disturbing the global atmosphere and arousing wide resistance within and outside the US. For instance, Trump's unfavourable stance on the EU, transatlantic alliance and broader international order are not welcome by European leaders. Federica Mogherini, the EU foreign affairs chief, has argued that the world needs 'a principled global security provider, for a superpower that believes in multilateralism and cooperation' and that 'Europe will be more and more an indispensable power'.<sup>13</sup> Under growing pressure from European allies, the Trump Administration has recently altered its discourse on NATO and Europe, by reassuring transatlantic allies of its support for NATO and Europe and vowing to 'hold Russia accountable'.<sup>14</sup> Although whether Europeans could finally encourage US foreign policy towards multilateralism remains to be seen, the EU is demonstrating its determination to assume more responsibility. Thus, the Trump Administration is not so much changing the international order and European foreign policy as awakening the awareness of its European allies to safeguard the established order.

At agent level, while the ways in which the Trump government may directly influence specific issues involving EU-China relations remains to be seen, it is facing constraints from both the EU and China. The constraints on Washington's wish to depart from the established

international order and widely enshrined norms including multilateralism exist at both the EU and China side. For instance, at multilateral events such as the 2016 G20 Summit in Hangzhou, the 2016 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting in Peru and Davos 2017, the Chinese government sent clear signals to the world that despite setbacks and difficulties, China will continue

## **THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT SENT CLEAR SIGNALS TO THE WORLD THAT CHINA WILL CONTINUE TO SUPPORT FREE TRADE, GLOBALISATION AND ECONOMIC OPENNESS.**

to support free trade, globalisation and economic openness, and that there is 'no winner in trade war'.<sup>15</sup> Beijing is apparently not seeking confrontation with Washington, emphasising that 'both [have] a responsibility to safeguard world peace and stability, and promote global development and prosperity'.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Beijing is urging Washington to strengthen pragmatic cooperation to push forward the China-US relations.<sup>17</sup> Beijing seemingly has great patience when it comes to bringing Washington back to the path of dialogue and cooperation.

Finally, the four factors/elements balancing the US factor in our framework remain robust. First, Europeans and Chinese apparently find more common ground to enhance their relations thanks to the Trump shock. Key EU member states such as Germany, France and Italy have recently expressed their expectation to further advance their bilateral ties with China to promote world peace and security as well as common interests in areas including trade and climate change.<sup>18</sup> Second, when transatlantic allies differ on NATO military spending, the EU tends to stress the significance of its relations with China. Federica Mogherini said, '[u]nder the current international situation, strengthening cooperation between the EU and China becomes more important than ever before'.<sup>19</sup> Third, Trump's 'America First' stance gives Beijing the opportunity to show the world that China is a defender of globalisation, free trade and multilateralism. Fourth, China's initiatives including the OBOR and the AIIB have recently attracted more developing economies from Asia, Europe, and Africa to begin bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation. China is expected to further promote international connectedness and



globalisation in 2017 when it hosts a series of important summits, including the International Cooperation Summit Forum on OBOR and BRICS Summit.

## Conclusion

This article explores the implications of the Trump Administration for EU-China relations through the lens of the interrelations between the US factor and other elements/constraints. The findings indicate that Washington is unlikely to bring the whole world around to the so-call

'America First' direction. Although the US remains a hegemonic superpower in many ways, it is faced with strong counterbalancing influences from other players in favour of multilateralism, cooperation and win-win solutions. If the US moves closer towards hegemonic unilateralism and further away from worldwide aspirations for peace and cooperation, the EU and China may forge a stronger relationship to rectify this. Even in the era of the Trump Administration, EU-China relations are not necessarily doomed to have a gloomy future. ☉

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, J. Holslag, 'The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2011, pp.293-313; J. Men, 'Is There A Strategic Partnership between the EU and China?', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol.19,no.3, 2014, pp.5-17; A. Michalski & Z. Pan, 'Role Dynamics in a Structured Relationship: The EU-China Strategic Partnership', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2016, pp.1-17. <sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Zhou Hong, 'Lun Zhongguo Guanxi zhong de buduichengxing yu duichengxing' [Sino-European Partnership: Symmetries above asymmetries], *Qizhou Yanjiu* [Chinese Journal of European Studies], vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 1-15; J. Men, 'The EU and China: Mismatched Partners?', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 2, no. 74, 2012, pp. 333-349; Z. Pan, Conceptual gaps in China-EU relations: global governance, human rights and strategic partnerships, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; R. Maher, 'The Elusive EU-China Strategic Partnership', *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 4, 2016, pp. 959-976. <sup>3</sup> A. Small, 'The US Factor', in S. Crossick & E. Reuter (eds.), *China-EU: A Common Future*, World Scientific, 2007, pp. 73-80. <sup>4</sup> Xiaoyuankai, Meiguo yinsu: yingxiang zhongguo guanxi de hengding yinsu: [The US factor: a constant in the EU-China relations], *Qizhou Yanjiu* [Chinese Journal of European Studies], no. 4, 2000, pp. 75-81. <sup>5</sup> 'Rice Warns EU off Lifting China Arms Ban', *EurActiv*, 21 March 2005, retrieved 13 February 2017, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/security/news/rice-warns-eu-off-lifting-china-arms-ban/>. <sup>6</sup> J. Farnell & P. Crookes, 'The Elephant in the Room: The Role of the USA in EU-China Relations', in J. Farnell & P. Crookes (eds.), *The Politics of EU-China Economic Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016, pp.199-215. <sup>7</sup> 'EU members' AIB Enthusiasm Welcomed in Brussels', *China Daily*, 20 March 2015, retrieved 18 February 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-03/20/content\\_19668091.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-03/20/content_19668091.htm). <sup>8</sup> China-EU 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, 2013. <sup>9</sup> See, for instance, 'America first and last: Donald Trump's foreign policy', *The Economist*, 2017, vol. 422, no. 9026, p16. <sup>10</sup> 'America First Foreign Policy', The White House, retrieved 20 February 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/america-first-foreign-policy>. <sup>11</sup> K. McNamara, 'Trump Takes Aim at the European Union', *Foreign Affairs*, 2017, 24 January 2017, retrieved 20 February 2017, <https://foreignaffairs.org/articles/europe/2017-01-24/trump-takes-aim-european-union>. <sup>12</sup> 'Trump Playing with Fire with His Taiwan Game', Editorials, *China Daily*, 16 January 2017, retrieved 18 January 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-01/16/content\\_27961270.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-01/16/content_27961270.htm). <sup>13</sup> 'Mogherini Calls EU A Peace "Superpower", in Wake of Trump Win', *EurActiv*, 11 November 2016, retrieved 16 February 2017, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/security/news/mogherini-calls-eu-a-peace-superpower-in-wake-of-trump-win/>. <sup>14</sup> 'US vice President Pence Seeks to Reassure Transatlantic Allies', *Euronews*, 18 February 2017, retrieved 18 February 2017, <http://www.euronews.com/2017/02/18/us-vice-president-pence-to-reassure-allies-over-transatlantic-partnership>. <sup>15</sup> See, for instance, 'China Advocates APEC Leadership in Economic Globalization Despite Setbacks', *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, 21 November 2016, retrieved 17 February 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/20161121/content\\_27444032.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/20161121/content_27444032.htm); 'Xi Jinping: There Will Be No Winners in A Trade War', Sam Dean, *The Telegraph*, 17 January 2017, retrieved 16 February 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2017/01/17/davos-2017-breaking-news-updates-world-economic-forum-begins/?playlist=structure%3AAbusiness%2FEconomy>. <sup>16</sup> 'China Appreciates Trump's Greetings on Chinese Lantern Festival', *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, 9 February 2017, retrieved 17 February 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-02/09/content\\_28152949.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-02/09/content_28152949.htm). <sup>17</sup> 'Chinese State Councilor Urges China, US to Step up Ties', *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, 22 February 2017, retrieved 22 February 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-02/22/content\\_28298713.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-02/22/content_28298713.htm). <sup>18</sup> 'Jiliber waizhang zai yu zhongguo waizhang wangyi huitan hou fabiao shengming' [Statement by Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel after talk with Chinese Foreign Minister Wangyi], 17 February 2017, Deguo zhuhua shiguan [Germany Embassy in China], [http://www.china.diplo.de/Vertretung/china/zh/\\_pr/2016/politik/170217pressestatement.html](http://www.china.diplo.de/Vertretung/china/zh/_pr/2016/politik/170217pressestatement.html); 'Hollande Applauds Stable China-France Ties', *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, 13 January 2017, retrieved 18 February 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-01/13/content\\_27945403.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-01/13/content_27945403.htm); 'French PM Speaks on Unity with China During Official Visit', *Wang Qingyun*, *China Daily*, 21 February 2017, retrieved 22 February 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-02/21/content\\_28293057.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-02/21/content_28293057.htm); 'Wang Yi Meets with Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Angelino Alfano of Italy', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 22 February 2017, retrieved 22 February 2017, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/t1440662.shtml>. <sup>19</sup> 'Wang Yi Meets with High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 17 February 2017, retrieved 18 February 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1440215.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1440215.shtml).



Hang YUAN

## BIO

Dr. Hang Yuan is a Lecturer of International Relations and Research Fellow of European Studies at Sichuan University (China), and Associated Researcher at Ghent University (Belgium). He holds a PhD in EU Studies from Ghent University where he completed the research project in 2015 on the social dimension of the EU-China relationship, with the scholarship of Erasmus Mundus from the European Commission. His research interests include the EU-China relations, EU external social policy, China's external relations, as well as global social governance. He has published academic and policy papers and presented his research work at academic conferences including the UIACES, EISA, ECPR, and WISC. He is leading a research project on the EU in global social governance, funded with support from Chinese National Social Science Fund (CNSSF).