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The European Union and Korea between the US and China: geopolitical aspects of connectivity from the soft to hard power approaches

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Abstract

The paper examines the question how the EU and other countries who are in a similar position of “being caught between the US and China”, such as South Korea, will shape their relationship with China and how their strategies complement, or contradict, the policies pursued by the US under the Trump and Biden Administrations. Even though Donald Trump has been more vocal in his bid to oppose China, the paper argues that there might be more continuity between Biden and Trump than Biden and Obama and the other Democratic predecessors. The second part of this paper investigates how the EU and South Korea interact with China’s pre- and post-Covid19 policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The paper explores how BRI has been countered by various forms of connectivity by Brussels and Seoul, how BRI fits within today’s geopolitical landscape and whether and where there is any space for creating synergies between the EU and South Korea to offset it. Furthermore, the paper looks at other types of actions, such as the EU-China investment agreement (CAI) and human rights sanctions and how Beijing responded to these EU initiatives. The paper argues that a combination of soft- and hard-power approaches which Brussels have put forward towards Beijing may in the end work well for the EU as well as the US. The paper concludes by suggesting policy areas where cooperation rather than confrontation between all the actors is possible, such as health, trade, climate action and people-to-people exchanges.

Key Words

EU foreign policy, connectivity, Korean peninsula, China, United States, Covid19

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Introduction

“...The pandemic has reinforced the sense how connected and interdependent we are in strategic domains. As ever, the key question is: who controls these flows and who will set the rules and standards?... The European approach to connectivity with its emphasis on rules, sustainability and local benefits and ownership matches how many in the [Asian] region want to proceed. But this is a competitive field: some big players are moving in a determined way. There is a battle of standards underway... the EU will need a pro-active approach and to leverage its economic and other assets, working with like-minded partners wherever this makes sense.”

Josep Borrell, 12 March 2021

In the quote above from his blog post on the European Union's (EU) strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific (Borrell 2021), the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Vice-President of the European Commission (HRVP) Josep Borrell highlights how he sees the link between connectivity and long-term geo-political and geo-economic challenges for the EU in the Indo-Pacific. Although the world is increasingly connected and interdependent, the resulting situation is not more cooperation but more competition – with Asia-Pacific becoming its center-stage, the United States (US) and China the key rivals and connectivity one of the ways in which the competition manifests itself.

Even if an increasing number of Asian countries appreciates the “European approach” and partnerships with the EU across the region have intensified, the fragility of “a more connected, contested and complex world”, as Borrell's predecessor, HRVP Federica Mogherini, expressed it in her EU Global Strategy (European Union 2016) has become apparent throughout the global pandemic. Once the Covid19 hit, interdependence and interconnectedness between the two continents showed their limits: not only the Coronavirus has been spreading at a rapid speed but also nationalism which was shutting the open borders and protectionism that was shuttering the global supply chains.

Notwithstanding the immediate reaction to the health crisis, the question how the EU will shape its relationship with China, and whether or not European capitals join forces with Washington and others in contesting Beijing's rise, is the elephant in the room that has been looming behind the turmoil brought about by Covid19. On top of this, the EU has been mulling over which parts of its toolkit to employ in its dealing with China– from soft to hard power approaches and from trade deals up to sanctions. It is however not only Europe which has been confronted with such a tough predicament; South Korea – and many other countries in Asia-Pacific – are in a similar position and face an identical dilemma of “being caught between the US and China”. They, too, have been reflecting on what strategy and methods to use.

This paper therefore examines the ways in which the EU (and South Korea) have been responding to China's geopolitical and economic growth and how their reactions complement, or contradict, the policies pursued by the US, first under the Trump and then under the Biden administrations. Even though Donald Trump has been more vocal in his bid to oppose China, the paper argues that there might be more continuity with the new administration than anticipated even if Joe Biden liaises more frequently with his partners in Europe and Asia. His accent on the alliances may, paradoxically, give the EU (and South Korea) more hard time to chart their own independent course. As an example, the paper looks at the first Quad meeting and its implications for both Seoul and Brussels.

The second part of this paper examines how the EU and South Korea interact with China's policies towards Europe and Asia, including its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The paper explores how BRI has been countered by various forms of connectivity by Brussels and Seoul who view them from different angles, how BRI fits within today's geopolitical landscape and whether and where there is any space for creating synergies between the EU and South Korea but also with others to offset it. Furthermore, the paper investigates other types of EU policies from trade to sanctions, how they have shaped the EU's relationship with China and how Beijing responded to the EU's initiatives. The paper argues that a combination of soft- and hard-power approaches which Brussels have put forward may in the end work well for the EU and others, including the US. Throughout the text, where possible, the paper indicates when and how North Korea could be included into the equation. To conclude, the paper suggests policy areas where cooperation rather than confrontation between all the actors is possible, proposing the fields of health, trade, climate action and people-to-people exchanges.

From Trump to Biden:

Europe (and South Korea) Caught between the US and China

The European view on how the Trump Administration has approached the Covid19 pandemics and China more broadly – has been, to put it mildly, ambivalent at best. On the one hand, Brussels has shared Washington’s concerns about uncertain origins of the Coronavirus and handling of the illness by Beijing, including the lack of transparency by the Chinese authorities at the beginning of the epidemic. Even though the Europeans may have disliked President Trump’s rhetoric about “China virus”, Beijing didn’t endear itself to them by a rather clumsy “mask diplomacy” towards various EU Member States and aggressive statements and steps against any critics condemning the Chinese intransigent approach, both at home and abroad.

On the other hand, the ineffectual response to the dangers of Covid19 by the Trump Administration was compounded by uncoordinated actions, such as the US travel ban on European countries whose leaders did not receive any advance notice. In a similar vein, the American attempt to buy off and monopolize the CureVac, a German company that was at that time the frontrunner for a Covid-19 vaccine (Hernández-Morales 2020), has made the US a dubious leader and ally in the fight against the common enemy – Coronavirus – in the eyes of many Europeans. According to a Pew poll (Gramlich 2020) from late September 2020, a staggering 84% of the Europeans (and 93% of the South Koreans) thought that the US had done a bad job dealing with the Coronavirus outbreak, whilst China received an average of 40.3%¹ for handling Covid-19 well among the surveyed Europeans (but only 20% among the South Koreans).

These developments induced by the worldwide Covid19 emergency have nonetheless been accompanied by tendencies that could have been observed for some time. The rise of China throughout the preceding decades and its demands to have a seat at the table while suggesting that Beijing is ready to take on greater responsibilities commensurate with its increased weight created tensions over who will set the standards of global trade already under previous US administrations. After all, it was President Barack Obama who proposed the Trans-Pacific (TPP) and Transatlantic (TTIP) partnerships in order to reduce the growing Chinese economic clout and to foster open trading rules in tandem with Washington’s closest partners, such as the EU (Morin et al. 2015).

In spite of a temporary truce due to the “phase one” trade deal in early 2020, the Sino-American trade frictions persisted throughout Donald Trump’s tenure. Although the Trump Administration was concerned about the issues such as level-playing field, access for American companies to the Chinese market and protection of the intellectual property rights, it put the main emphasis

¹ Author’s own calculations, based on Pew Research (Gramlich, 2020).

on the bilateral trade deficit. Since President Biden took office in January 2021, despite his determination to distinguish himself from his predecessor as much as possible, the US-China trade war has not been stopped. Although the Biden team may have a more nuanced view of the US priorities when it comes to trade with China – as well as with other counterparts, such as the EU and South Korea – given the economic repercussions of the Covid19 crisis and the predictions of a protracted economic recovery, it is not very likely to end anytime soon.

When we turn from geoeconomics to geopolitics, the overall Biden's approach seems not too different. At the time of writing, there is no new US "China Strategy" yet. Nonetheless, there are various indications that, on China, there might be more of continuity between Biden and Trump rather than between Biden and Obama. That despite the fact that a number of nominees who have been chosen to posts at the US Department of State, National Security Council and other bodies have been veterans of the Obama as well as previous Democratic administrations. In fact, in his Address to the Joint Session of Congress in late April 2021 (Biden 2021) which was otherwise prevalently focused on the domestic economic, social and health situation, Joe Biden mentioned China and President Xi seven times, whereas other US adversaries received much less attention: Russia and Vladimir Putin three times, Iran and North Korea once each.

Although Trump's presidency has been clearly marked by a harsh anti-Chinese rhetoric, the Biden-Harris team's policies on China might be based on as much – if not even more – hard power approach than that of their immediate forerunner. However, in contrast to Trump's "America First" policy, and perhaps more in tune with the pre-Obama Democratic Presidents, the Biden Administration has been very vocal in drumming up support for its containment of China among its allies – both in Europe and Asia. Perhaps the clearest sign yet has come from Biden's reinvigoration of the Quad – a quadruple alliance between the US, Japan, Australia and India – which has been quite unequivocally aimed at strengthening the US position in the Indo-Pacific while limiting any space for Chinese economic and political expansion. In fact, even the continued use of the expression "Indo-Pacific" is a signal that it may not only be the terminology which will survive from the Trump to Biden years.

For South Korea, however, any participation in a Quad+ arrangement is difficult, partly because of its apprehension of alienating China and partly because of the prominent position of Japan within the Quad which, for historical reasons, has been Korea's (and particularly its progressive governments') historical archnemesis. To paraphrase Lord Ismay's famous saying about the purpose of NATO, for Seoul to be able to join the Quad as a nucleus of "Asia's NATO", it would have to meet three conditions: to keep North Korea in on the agenda, to keep China out of its main rationale and to keep Japan's influence down as much as possible. Korea's triple wish is nonetheless not very likely to happen as illustrated by the Quad's leaders first statement on

“The Spirit of the Quad” from March 2021 (White House 2021). The announcement explicitly refers to “complete denuclearization of North Korea” rather than of the “Korean peninsula” which has been a standard phrase advocated by Seoul and used in various North Korea-related declarations since at least the 1990s, including the April 2018 Moon-Kim Panmunjom Declaration and the June 2018 Trump-Kim Singapore Statement.

Even though the specific results of the US North Korea policy review have not been unveiled yet, should the “denuclearization of North Korea” remain in place as a new strategy, any progress with the DPRK on the matter is going to be *a priori* improbable, as words by North Korea’s first vice-minister Choe Son Hui about US Secretary Blinken’s “lunatic theory” and “groundless rhetoric about complete denuclearization” illustrated (KCNA 2021). Having been aware of such a potentially rocky start for any US-DPRK negotiations, South Korea’s foreign minister Chung was at pains to explain that denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is “more correct” at a press briefing after a 2+2 meeting, standing next to Secretary of State Blinken who came together with Secretary of Defense Austin for his first overseas trip after having visited Japan.

Apart from this perhaps just linguistic slip of a tongue, the Quad statement nevertheless highlights another Tokyo’s political priority vis-à-vis the DPRK, i.e. solving the abductee issue. As much as it might be painful for the relatives of those Japanese who were kidnapped by North Korean agents in the 1970s to 1980s, it is a topic that Seoul (and surely Pyongyang) would want to go away rather than playing any substantial role in the US policy towards NE Asia. Similarly to Donald Trump who had a better rapport with his Japanese rather than South Korean counterparts, it seems that the Biden Administration may have the same preferences – to the chagrin of Seoul and despite the fact that both the White and Blue House are occupied by two progressive presidents.

But the Quad statement could also be seen as controversial from the European perspective. Even though the EU has acknowledged how the Biden’s team rectified the previous mismanaged handling of Covid19 in the US, and European countries have so far been envious of the rapid deployment of vaccinations within Biden’s first 100 days, the EU has also advocated an equitable access to Coronavirus shots and their manufacturing by poorer countries around the world through the COVAX mechanism. The US has however banned any export of Covid19 vaccines and raw materials needed for their production before the American population is sufficiently inoculated. Although the Quad Vaccine Partnership promises to “flood” Asia with at least 1 billion vaccines by 2022, it is not clear how quickly, who and how will decide which country will get how many and what jabs. This incites suspicion that there is a political calculation behind the Quad’s humanitarian zeal – to outflank China (Heath 2021) in Beijing’s own

“vaccine diplomacy” – while simultaneously neglecting multilateral solutions such as the WHO-led and EU-backed COVAX.

The Europeans may have been “enchanted” (Pacheco Pardo and Reiterer 2021) by President Biden’s promise of America “being back” and “building back better” not only his country at home but also partnerships abroad. Yet his stress on utilizing the alliances selectively to pursue the American interests – in this case, confronting China – may prove to be a bigger challenge leaders in Seoul, Brussels and elsewhere in Europe and Asia than Trump’s outright heavy-handed bullying. After all, it is at times easier to refuse to work with your colleague if you feel coerced into it than if you are asked politely.

From Investment and Connectivity to Sanctions:

Europe and (South Korea) Caught between China and the US

It is however not only the US which has been putting pressure on the EU as well as others – in Asia and beyond. Since at least the Coronavirus outbreak, Chinese Communist Party leaders have clearly become more assertive and not shied away from using combative language particularly on social media, including trolls, propaganda and statements by “wolf warrior” diplomats posted to third country capitals, as well as violence to deliver the same message of strength on the ground. Beijing’s attempts to suppress the protests against the extradition and national security laws in Hong Kong, and confrontational words against anyone who stands up for the Hong Kongers, including the UK and other governments, are the cases in point.

Brussels, and particularly the German EU rotating presidency in the second half of 2020, have been trying to restore the balance with Beijing while using the window of opportunity to push China on trade issues. Even though Chancellor Merkel’s brainchild, an in-person meeting between President Xi and 27 EU heads of states and governments scheduled for September 2020 in Leipzig, had to be cancelled due to sanitary concerns, the EU held, in an unprecedented way, three virtual summits with the Chinese side (one of them as a substitute for the scrapped Leipzig’s get-together) within the time-span of about six months. Shortly before the year’s end, Beijing and Brussels (with a vehement support of Berlin but also Paris) have eventually agreed in principle on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) that has been in the works for nearly nine years since the decision to launch EU-China negotiations in February 2012 that began later in 2013.

The resulting EU-China investment agreement should ensure improved market access in China for European businesses in areas from automotive industry and manufacturing through financial and telecommunications services up to health and R&D, curb the forced technology

transfers and subsidies for Chinese state-owned enterprises and embed sustainable development provisions, including labor and environmental standards. For Chancellor Merkel, CAI would have been the crown jewel of both her last EU Presidency, but also of her 16 years at the helm of Germany (and, some would say, of Europe).

Although the final push to conclude CAI undoubtedly came from Berlin, the motivation was not only to help the German (and other European) industries improve their standing on the Chinese market, particularly because of the need for Europe to recover their economies after the Covid19 pandemic. By an equal measure, the investment agreement should put the European businesses on an equivalent footing with what Washington had achieved in creating better conditions for the American companies via the US-China “phase one deal” – before the new Biden administration was about to come in. In other words, the CAI has been “an effort to level the playing field with the United States” (Friedlander 2020) as much as – if not more than – with China.

From the long-term perspective, CAI has been operationalization of one of the streams in the EU’s overall three-pronged approach to Beijing that was first announced in the “EU-China Strategic Outlook” in March 2019 (European Commission and EEAS 2019). According to this joint communication, China should be simultaneously looked at as a cooperation and negotiating partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival. The investment deal falls mainly into the first and second categories of this “EU China Strategy”. Its underlying logic, however, corresponds with another preceding EU plan, i.e. the “EU’s Connectivity Strategy” (European Commission and EEAS 2018) which, although it pre-dates the China outlook, has been inspired by Beijing’s growing economic power and political influence. The EU published its connectivity strategy in 2018 as an implementation of its Global Strategy, partly in response to the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and partly as the EU’s own blueprint setting the standards for a values- and rules-based approach to connectivity.

In contrast to BRI which has been blamed for generating “debt traps” for countries along the modern-day Silk Road that are unable to meet their financial obligations (He 2020), the EU’s connectivity strategy aims at promoting transparent and sustainable financing of infrastructure investment in the areas of transport, energy, digital and others all across Asia. The EU’s extensive experience with comprehensive yet targeted sponsoring of infrastructure projects – whether within the EU through structural funds or in the EU’s candidate states via pre-accession assistance (Copsey and Haughton 2009, Novotná 2015) – is the key advantage of the EU’s involvement with connectivity. Yet nowadays even the Chinese side seems to be at the verge of reckoning with the consequences of the BRI’s framework which produces debt dependency that is untenable both for the creditor and borrower. According to a Boston University database, lending to BRI’s “project of the century” by China’s banks collapsed a year before

the Covid19 hit and Beijing currently finds itself mired in debt renegotiations with a number of countries along the road (Kynge and Wheatley 2020).

The EU's connectivity strategy, on the other hand, chimes well with South Korea. President Moon has been pursuing his own version of it through his New Northern Policy via the DPRK, Russia and Central Asia and, in particular, through his New Southern Policy (NSP) via South East (SE) Asia (Yeo 2020). Especially in its upgraded "Plus" version, the NSP complements well the EU's soft power values-based approach with Korea's focus on openness and inclusivity and areas of public health, trade, digitalization, smart cities, tourism and culture. Similarly to Brussels that has elevated its relationship with ASEAN by naming it its 11th Strategic Partner in December 2020, Seoul has been looking at the ways in which it can work with countries in SE Asia to find like-minded partners and economically decouple from China. South Korea joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) together with ASEAN, albeit China (as well as Japan) are on board of the RCEP too, could potentially be interpreted in a similar manner (Pacheco Pardo 2020).

Apart from the goal of economic diversification from China by teaming up with others, Seoul has been expanding its outreach to the ASEAN states because most of the SE Asian countries have good diplomatic relations with the DPRK with some exceptions, such as a tense period between North Korea and Malaysia due to the murder of Kim Jong Nam, a half-brother of Pyongyang's leader, at the Kuala Lumpur airport (Fifield 2019) in 2017. Even if a number of the NSP projects must have been provisionally suspended due to Covid19, the NSP Plus might turn into the second most significant legacy of Moon Jae-in's presidency next to his efforts for inter-Korean reconciliation (Hoo 2021), particularly if the NSP helps Seoul achieve the main government's objective of fostering peace on the Korean peninsula. In addition, if South Korea could exert political and economic pressure on the Myanmar's military junta that took power in a coup in February 2021 to alleviate the critical situation in the country, Seoul's soft power approach which encouraged many Korean companies to pursue their business interests in Myanmar can give the NSP a hard-power edge. A South Korean intervention to support a return to democracy in Naypyidaw would surely be welcome both in Brussels and Washington (Kim 2021) but would also highlight the geopolitical importance of connectivity in areas outside of economics.

Even though there is as of now no specific arrangement between Brussels and Seoul to intertwine their respective connectivity strategies, the EU has already concluded a "connectivity partnership" with Japan in 2019, albeit there is no grand joint project yet, and another similar association with India in May 2021. If Seoul and Brussels were to deepen their strategic partnership that celebrated its tenth anniversary in October 2020, adding the connectivity to the mix of free trade and security agreements would be a good ingredient. Such a new additive

would be especially appropriate since the EU plans to expand its connectivity strategy to the global level. Moreover, connectivity has by now become one of the key takeaways (Pejsova 2021) in the recently-devised the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy – the third (and so far final) EU document focused on the power competition within Asia.

Apart from the multifaceted connectivity policy, the EU has also put the third element of its China strategy – the systemic rivalry – into action. Based on its newly minted “European Magnitsky Act” to prosecute human rights violations around the world, in March 2021, the EU member states (Council of the European Union 2021) agreed on targeted sanctions against four Chinese individuals and one entity who were deemed to be directly responsible for mistreatment of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. China was not the only country to be listed under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime – there were previous designations against several Russian nationals and, out of Asia, the Myanmar military and three North Korean officials – ministers for state security and social security and the DPRK's public prosecutor – were explicitly named by the Council as those conducting state-sponsored killings, torture and forced labor.

Even though the EU's restrictive measures were carefully calibrated to focus on alleged mid-to high-ranking officials in Xinjiang rather than top-level decision-makers in Beijing and, particularly in the case of the North Koreans, the human rights sanctions have primarily a symbolic value (Zwirko 2021), China reacted with a furor and retaliatory countermeasures of a different degree: it designated several members of the European Parliament (EP), including the chair of its China Delegation and the entire Human Rights Subcommittee, the EU's Political and Security Committee which consists of 27 ambassadors of all member states, several members of national parliaments and Swedish, Danish and German academics and think tanks.

The designated Europeans and their families may not have had any plans to travel or to conduct business in China soon anyway. However, by sanctioning the members of the EP who will at some point vote on the EU-China investment deal, China may have resorted to a highly counterproductive action instead of waging a “resolute” and “swift counterattack” as labeled by the Chinese state-run outlet, the Global Times (Global Times 2021). Given the culture of “saving one's face”, it will be hard for Beijing to step back from any escalation as the case of two Canadians who were arbitrarily detained in retaliation for arresting Huawei's CFO Meng Wanzhou demonstrates. After about two and half years, they still keep languishing in the Chinese prison (VanderKlippe and Chase 2021).

On the other hand, even before Beijing's exaggerated reaction, the approval of CAI in the EP which is required for the deal to come into force was far from certain due to MEPs' concerns about insufficient guarantees over forced labour in Xinjiang. Here the experience with the EU-Korea FTA may serve as a positive example of the EU's “trade conditionality”. Particularly

South Korea's conservative governments have been reluctant to ratify four ILO conventions, including those on forced labour, making the EU to invoke a dispute settlement mechanism under the FTA's sustainable development chapter (Novotná 2020). Only after a panel of experts ruled that Seoul is in breach of its commitments under the EU-Korea trade agreement in January 2021, and after the president's progressives received an overwhelming majority in national elections several months before that, did the South Korean National Assembly pass three out of four ILO conventions in February 2021 (Yonhap News 2021).

Whether Beijing could be compelled to follow in Seoul's footsteps in case it won't voluntarily commit to these international rules, and whether their ratification would make any difference on the ground even if it did, is currently hard to assess, especially since there have been credible reports about forced labour and abuses of Chinese workers not only in Xinjiang but along the BRI (Kuo and Chen 2021). It is however pretty much evident that the European Parliament is unlikely to assent to an investment agreement with China when its members and sub-entities are under Beijing's sanctions. No matter whether President Xi has been aware of the intricacies of the EU's decision-making, he should have realized that a deal with Angela Merkel (and Emmanuel Macron) doesn't automatically mean a deal with everyone else in Europe.

Similarly to TTIP that was not abandoned but did not go anywhere after Donald Trump took office, CAI may end up being "put in a freezer" as the former EU trade Commissioner formulated it (Malmström 2017). The key difference nonetheless is that the EU could have waited for a new administration in the White House to revive any trade talks with the US; there is not much chance of any similar changeover happening in Beijing. Above all, however, if President Xi's goal was to force the EU to "distance itself from Washington's extreme policies to contain China" (Global Times 2021), the Chinese hostile overreaction may have achieved just that.

Conclusion: Facing a New Cold War, or Working for A Hot Peace?

Even though there are at the moment of writing only about four months into Joe Biden's Presidency, the danger that an antagonistic relationship between the US and China may turn into a systemic long-term competition and a new Cold War which will define the years to come is definitely there. A rancorous first meeting between American and Chinese foreign affairs envoys in Alaska in March 2021 was a strong hint at that possibility (Nikkei Asia 2021). It is equally likely that China will keep asserting itself more forcefully, both domestically and towards others in its immediate neighbourhood, but increasingly so towards anyone across the globe. BRI is only one of its devices; other techniques range from an old-style intelligence (e.g. a suspected espionage by a former EU Ambassador to South Korea and his Chinese partner)

through modern-day assaults on critics of Beijing in the cyberspace (often using Twitter and other social media that are banned back in China) up to tools like weaponization of trade.

In that area, South Korea became one of the first China's trial balloons that felt the heat after the Blue House had allowed deployment of the US-made THAAD anti-ballistic missile system in 2017. Beijing punished South Korea's move with a trade and tourism boycott, costing Seoul billions of dollars in lost revenues (Hemmings 2021). More recently, Canada and Australia suffered a similar fate: Canberra after advocating for a thorough investigation of the Covid19 origins in China, while Ottawa as another price for apprehending Huawei's Meng Wanzhou. If the EU continues to speak up and, even more so, to take actions against any ill-treatments within China and Hong Kong, especially if CAI is put on ice, the Europeans should be aware that they might be the next in the line. The extreme retaliation against the EU's human rights sanctions was Beijing's explicit warning. There are other clues though, such as an ire by the Chinese consumers and their shunning of European brands like H&M which refuse to use "Xinjiang cotton" in their supply chains.

This paper explored various ways in which the EU (and South Korea) have so far been navigating the Sino-American rivalry. Such a compound geopolitical situation leaves them – as well as other "middle powers" – in an unappealing predicament of having to chart a course between the two superpowers. Neither Brussels nor Seoul are keen on following a hard-power approach to China as Washington would have liked them – unless they are compelled to do so by circumstances. They both have tried to use more subtle ways, or to combine the two, sometimes with more and sometimes with less success. However, not all is lost and there are still areas where a mutual cooperation is possible if not desirable.

Firstly, instead of running a "vaccine diplomacy" as Beijing was accused of, while hoarding vaccines and raw materials for their production as Washington does, Brussels and Seoul could encourage the two to work together on making sure that everyone comes out of the woods of Covid19 pandemic as soon as possible. To that end, using multilateral solutions such as the COVAX facility as the EU has been pleading for could be the easiest way out. The dire situation in India may help accomplish that, but other countries successful in fighting Covid19 (Park 2021) and COVAX supporters, such as South Korea, could be instrumental in bringing the US and China into the fold. Moreover, prioritizing COVAX is in the interest of the Blue House not only because of the global power dynamic and its own difficulties with the inoculation stocks, but also because North Korea has applied for its fair share. Participation of the DPRK in an international vaccination mechanism with Washington onboard could help Seoul restart the engagement with Pyongyang (Novotná 2020).

Secondly, as much as there has been complementarity in connectivity strategies between Brussels and Seoul, albeit more synchronization would be helpful, the overlap between the

European and Korean Green Deals has been visible, too. By re-joining the Paris Accord and launching his own initiatives, such as climate package and summit in April 2021, Joe Biden also exhibited a renewed US “green leadership”, whereas President Xi has been open to collaboration in this regard. Climate action therefore seems to be the area most prone to a quadri- and multilateral dialogue.

Thirdly, despite all the trade frictions, the EU and South Korea are intertwined thanks to their bilateral FTA, but also through the web of other arrangements that they are a part of, especially with their partners in Asia-Pacific. Even though revamping of the international trading system, including the WTO reform and unblocking of the WTO’s appellate body would be the best prospect, expanding on inter-regional and plurilateral trade agreements could serve as a fitting substitute. RCEP, CPTTP and possibly an EU deal with ASEAN and the US would be a good way forward. If nothing else, the US and China but also the EU and South Korea should be preparing how to stave off any shocks in trade should another disease outbreak happen in the future. Last but not least, for any bilateral relationship to function, an intensive interaction between civil societies is the key. People-to-people exchanges should therefore not get restricted but be kept on and further expanded even if political relationships are frosty.

Whether or not the Sino-American rivalry may deescalate will become obvious in the next several months. At this moment, it nonetheless seems that the Biden Administration may be trying to go the “European way” in its approach towards China. In his opening statement at the Alaska meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang, US Secretary of State Blinken appropriated the EU’s triad of China being simultaneously “a negotiating partner, economic competitor and systemic rival” when he characterized Washington’s relationship with Beijing as “competitive where it should be, collaborative where it can be and adversarial where it must be” (Nikkei Asia 2021). To conclude, this paper proposed several areas where collaboration rather than competitiveness and adversity between the US and China might be feasible. For the sake of Washington and Beijing but also everyone else, the best prospect would be if, instead of facing a new Cold War, all parties start working for – albeit hot – peace.

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