



Europe, the US and China: A love-hate triangle?

by Sophia Besch, Ian Bond and Leonard Schuette

21 September 2020

The COVID-19 crisis has worsened relations between the US and China, but Europe must avoid being caught between the two rival superpowers. It needs to find common ground with like-minded democratic states and take a firmer line with China, without following the US unquestioningly into a contest for global hegemony. That's the crux of a new Centre for European Reform (CER) research paper, ['Europe, the US and China: A love-hate triangle?'](#) which examines the relationship between the world's three economic powerhouses.

The rise of China as an increasingly assertive economic and military power under Communist Party chief Xi Jinping has brought the Asian giant into direct conflict with the US on trade, foreign policy, and ideology. The EU's relations with China have also come under strain over trade and intellectual property disputes, and because of growing disquiet over China's human rights record. Donald Trump's hostility to multilateral co-operation in general and the EU in particular has made it harder for the EU to co-ordinate with Washington on its approach to Beijing. China's efforts to carve out a global role have also created a dilemma for the EU, which is instinctively multilateralist but sees that Beijing's priorities and values do not coincide with its own.

Against this backdrop, ['Europe, the US and China: A love-hate triangle?'](#) offers a series of recommendations for how the EU can protect its interests and prosper. Its starting point must be deeper knowledge of the US and China as a basis for better and more realistic policy-making. It is time for Europe to take China more seriously as a security risk, but the EU must also hedge against a less reliable partnership with Washington, even if Joe Biden becomes president.

The paper argues that Europe should work more intensively to prevent an escalation of tension between the US and China. At the same time, it must set boundaries on what constitutes tolerable Chinese behaviour, and be ready to push back against Beijing more forcefully if it contravenes international norms. European governments must not undermine EU unity for short-term national gain. After labelling China a systemic rival, Europe must show by example that its model of democratic governance is superior.

"Europe has not made up its mind whether China poses a direct security threat, or what Europe's stance on the US-China rivalry should be" said Sophia Besch, a senior research fellow at the CER and co-author of the report.

"The triangular relationships between China, the EU and the US are bound to include elements of attraction and elements of hostility. The EU's best option is to work with the other two to stop tension escalating and maintain stability" said Ian Bond, director of foreign policy at the CER and co-author of the report.

"In today's increasingly multipolar world third parties like the EU can potentially exert significant influence on both the US and China" said Leonard Schuette, a researcher at the University of Maastricht and a former Clara Marina O'Donnell fellow at the CER and co-author of the report..

Note for editors:

To request an interview on the research paper with Ian Bond, Sophia Besch, or Leonard Schuette, please contact Rosie Giorgi in the CER press office on pressoffice@cer.eu or +44 (207) 233 1199.

The Centre for European Reform is a think-tank devoted to making the EU work better and strengthening its role in the world. The CER is pro-European but not uncritical. Follow us on Twitter: [@CER_EU](https://twitter.com/CER_EU) [@SophiaBesch](https://twitter.com/SophiaBesch) [@CER_IanBond](https://twitter.com/CER_IanBond) [@LeoSchuette](https://twitter.com/LeoSchuette)