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# The Rise of China in Europe: A Challenge to Integration?

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the impacts of the "rise of China" on European integration. Challenges facing European integration are now among the most important issues followed closely by those who are interested in the development of the European Union. This paper, regarding European integration as a process in which a European "international society" emerges and then evolves, proposes an analytical framework to analyze the rise of China as both a centripetal force for and a centrifugal force against European integration by examining how common interests and conflicts of interests among European countries over such controversial issues as human rights in China, arms embargo against China, and increasing Chinese investment in Europe would affect European countries' efforts to turn Europe into a highly integrated international society. As this paper demonstrates, whether and how either of the two forces for and against European integration will become stronger than the other would determine the direction where European integration might move and therefore is worth more examination in future research.

***Keywords***: *Rise of China, European Union, Sino-European relations, international society*

## 1. Introduction

The rise of China due to its economic reform since the late 1970s has been a popular research topic in the field of international relations. One of the key research questions relevant to the rise of China that scholars try to address is whether and how it has affected and will continue to affect the order of the current international system (Buzan, 2010, 2014, 2018). More specifically, has China been rising as a "revisionist state" that poses a "threat" to the world with its alleged tendency to challenge the status quo of the international system given its growing power? Or, is China more of a "status quo power"

that not only has no intention to challenge the status quo but also provides the world with many "opportunities" for economic growth and political stability on a global scale? To answer these questions, scholars especially like to focus on China's relations with the most powerful country in our world today, the United States (US), and see how their interactions in the international system have evolved (Friedberg, 2005; Sutter, 2018). Also, China's relations with its neighbours in general and those key regional actors around it in particular (e.g., Japan, two Koreas, Taiwan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, India and Russia) are among the most significant research interests of those scholars who study the rise of China (Ali, 2010; Bekkevold and Lo, 2019; Dreyer, 2015; Shambaugh, 2020). These days, the relations between China as a rising power and the "Third World" (e.g., the Middle East, Africa and Latin America) are more and more examined as well (Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 2020; Bernal-Meza and Li, 2020; Evron, 2019)

It is worth noting that, in addition to China's relations with the aforementioned countries and regions in the context of the rise of China, there has been growing attention to Sino-European relations among scholars and diplomats as China's international influences continue to expand from Asia to other regions of the world (Farnell and Irwin Crookes, 2016; Li, 2021; Sverdrup-Thygeson, Lindgren and Lanteigne, 2018). There are many different angles through which to approach the impacts of the rise of China on Europe. In this paper, I will especially focus on its impact on European integration that European countries have been working together to achieve since the end of WWII. More specifically, how has the growing Chinese economic and political presence in Europe affected European integration? Challenges facing European integration are now among the most important issues followed closely by those who are interested in the development of the European Union (EU) when "Brexit," as well as other events like the financial crisis and the migrant crisis, makes people wonder whether Europe is moving toward "disintegration" after decades of effort for integration (Raine 2019; Vollaard, 2018). Here, referring to the English School of international relations theory, this paper proposes an analytical framework for those who are interested in European integration to analyze the impacts of the rise of China on Europe as an "international society." As this paper will demonstrate, the rise of China (regardless of whether it is rising as a revisionist state or a status quo state) seems to have created two contradictory forces affecting European integration, especially the evolution of the EU from an integrated economic entity to a political one. There is a "centripetal force" associated with the rise of China that might strengthen the integration when European countries in general and those EU member states in particular conflict with China over such controversial issues as human rights in China, arms embargo against China, and increasing Chinese investment in Europe. Meanwhile, there

is also a "centrifugal force" that might however pose a potential challenge to the integration when intra-European disputes over those issues emerge. This analytical framework suggests that whether and how either of the two forces affecting European integration will become stronger than the other would determine the direction where European integration might move and therefore is worth more examination in future research.

To make my case, I divide the rest of the paper into five parts. In the next section, I will discuss European integration from a lens of the emergence and the evolution of an "international society," a concept developed by the English School of international relations theory. In the third part of this paper, I will talk about the development of Sino-European relations in the context of the rise of China. In the fourth part, I will demonstrate the rise of China as a centripetal force for European integration by examining how European countries as an international society have shared their common interests about China and tried to jointly engage China in their conflicts with the country over the issues about human rights in China, arms embargo against China, and increasing Chinese investment in Europe. Then, I will also demonstrate the rise of China as a centrifugal force against European integration by examining how common interests about China among European countries are replaced, partially if not completely, with conflicts of interests over China, and therefore the Sino-European conflicts are turned into intra-European disputes over those conflicts. Finally, I will summarize the findings and conclude that how the centripetal and the centrifugal forces will evolve and interact with each other would influence whether and how Europe will become a highly integrated international society, especially a political one, in the future.

## 2. Europe as an "International Society"

One of the best ways to understand the origins and the development of European integration is through the lens of "international society." The concept of "international society," as opposed to that of "international system," has been developed by the so called "English School" of international relations theory (Bull and Watson, 1985; Buzan, 1993: 330–336). According to the English School, although there is no doubt that the international system is anarchical, once states begin to interact with one another in that anarchical system, they would gradually realize that they do share some common interests and therefore start to form a society with some common sets of rules in order to jointly pursue those common interests.

The onset and the process of European integration can be examined as the emergence and the evolution of an international society (Buzan, 2004: 190–195). A "coexistence interstate society" (or a "pluralist international society") emerged in Europe when the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 turned

the region into an "anarchical society of states" (Bull, 1977) where European countries began to follow such sovereign norms as equality of states and non-intervention in order to maintain peace among themselves. That coexistence interstate society was transformed into a "cooperative interstate society" (or a "solidarist international society") in the wake of WWII when European countries began to seek not only "coexistence" but also "cooperation." Having interacted with one another either positively or negatively for so long, European countries, though still regarding "order" as the major common interest that they should jointly pursue, began to realize that they actually had even more common interests (such as economic gain, human rights, environmentalism, and so on), which in turn would help maintain peace. To pursue those common interests, they began to not only preserve the existing institutions for coexistence but also create new institutions for cooperation. This is how the European Coal and Steel Community emerged in 1951, and a series of cooperation since then (such as the creation of the European Atomic Energy Community and the European Economic Community in 1957, as well as the creation of the European Community in 1967) eventually led to the establishment of the EU in 1993. The emergence and the development of the EU, alongside the creation of the eurozone in 1999, have been changing the European international society from a "cooperative interstate society" further into a "convergence interstate society." Simply speaking, the interactions during the period of "coexistence" and that of "cooperation" have brought European countries so many common interests in terms of culture, politics and economics that they now want to apply similar political, legal and economic rules and are willing to give up part of their state sovereignty to a higher European authority that could monitor and implement those rules. In other words, European countries as an international society have begun to modify sovereign norms and are now moving beyond "cooperation" (not to mention "coexistence") toward "convergence."

Examining the development of Sino-European relations alongside the English School's interpretation of European integration, we can find that European countries have developed common interests in issues about China and tried to jointly deal with these issues as a European whole, as revealed by the conflicts between China on the one side and European countries together on the other over such issues as arms embargo, human rights, trade and investment, etc. While these Sino-European conflicts might destabilize Sino-European relations from time to time, they have arguably played a role in facilitating and strengthening a sense of community among European countries and therefore contributed to the evolution of the European international society depicted by the English School. However, the rise of China at the same time might also be a potential challenge to European integration as those common interests among European countries with regard

to China are turned into conflicts of interests between them when some of the European countries, facing the growing economic opportunities brought by China's trade and investment, begin to accommodate China and water down their voices against China (or even support it) in those Sino-European conflicts. Simply speaking, with the rise of China, we are seeing not only Sino-European conflicts that have a positive effect on European integration but also internal conflicts between European countries over those Sino-European conflicts that have a negative effect on it. While the former might help facilitate the change of the European international society from a society of cooperation to a society of convergence, the latter might actually slow down the evolution of the European international society into a convergence interstate society, especially a political one.

## 3. Development of Sino-European Relations in the Context of a Rising China

Contemporary Sino-European relations began in 1949 when the post-WWII Chinese civil war ended with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by Mao Zedong in the Chinese mainland and the relocation of the Republic of China (ROC) to Taiwan by Chiang Kai-shek. Since then, more and more European countries have shifted their recognition of the Chinese regime from the latter to the former. Today, all but one European country (i.e., Vatican) have "normalized" their relations with China. However, it is worth noting that China and European countries, in the post-1949 era, did not have many significant interactions until the late 1970s when China began to move away from its communist ideologies and embrace capitalist ideas as a result of its economic reform launched by the then Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping. With China's economic reform leading to rapid growth of its economy, the economic ties between China and Europe started to increase, which in turn encouraged more political and other interactions between them as well.

### *3.1. Growing Sino-European Economic Ties*

The European Commission of the European Communities (EC) (which existed from 1967 to 1993) established its diplomatic tie with the PRC government in 1975. Then, the drastic change of China's economic system made by Deng ushered in the first trade agreement between China and the EC in 1978 (Algieri, 2002: 64). With China's economic reform continuing to unfold, that trade agreement was replaced with a bigger economic agreement named "Agreement on Trade and Economic Co-operation between the EC and China" in 1985, and in 1988, the European Commission of the EC opened its first representation in Beijing (Algieri, 2002: 64; Men, 2012: 333). Due to the new

agreement, the trade between the two sides continued to grow and more FDI (foreign direct investment) from European countries entered China's Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which were created by the Chinese government back then to attract foreign capital and technologies to China for its economic development (Taube, 2002: 101).

The suppression of the pro-democracy protest at the Tiananmen Square by the Chinese government in 1989 (i.e., the Tiananmen Incident) led major European countries (along with the US) to impose economic sanctions against China, and many western companies decided to reduce their investment in China after the incident accordingly. However, due to the growing economic interests that European countries had had in China, the economic ties between China and Europe were largely normalized very shortly after the Tiananmen Incident (Algieri, 2002: 64). The establishment of the EU in 1993, as well as the enlargement of the union after that, not only strengthened the interconnectivity between countries within Europe but also increased the economic ties between China and Europe (Karkanis, 2018: 1158). For example, from 1995 to 2003, trade between China and the EU was doubled, and since then, China has surpassed Switzerland as the EU's second largest trading partner following the US only (Men, 2012: 334). Also, over the next decade, not only did China's trade with the EU continue to grow, China's investment in the EU also significantly increased due to China's "go-out" policy implemented in 1999 to encourage Chinese enterprises to invest abroad. Between 2005 and 2016, China poured nearly $164 billion of investment into Europe as compared to its $103 billion of investment in the US during the same period of time (Wade, 2017). Currently, Europe as a whole is the biggest distention of China's outward FDI (European Commission, 2017; Men, 2012, 333–343).

China's grand economic strategy today on the basis of its "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), which was firstly announced in 2013, has brought and will continue to bring China and Europe even economically closer. With the BRI, China has been trying to strengthen its economic ties with countries in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Europe by providing them with financial aids for the building of local and international transportation networks and infrastructure as well as many other projects for their economic development. In the same year when the BRI was officially announced, China and the EU jointly endorsed the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* through which the two sides agreed to "strengthen cooperation in developing smart, upgraded and fully interconnected infrastructure systems" and "expand cooperation in interoperability of seamless supply chain logistics networks between Asia and Europe, maritime markets and routes, rail services, logistics, safety and energy efficiency" (Delegation of the European Union to China, 2013: 8). As of today,

the EU, using its own words, still "seeks to make the most of opportunities to promote sustainable connectivity in line with its own interest through interaction with China's BRI" (European External Action Service, 2018).

### *3.2. Sino-European Strategic Partnership*

With the growth of Sino-European economic ties, the political and other interactions between China and European countries have been increasing as well. In July 1994, the European Commission of the EU published its first Asia policy paper, *Towards a New Asia Strategy*. Given the strong economic performance that China had had by then, the EU indicated in the paper that relations with China should constitute one of the most important parts of its policy toward Asia (Algieri, 2002: 76). The next year, the EU published its first China policy paper, *A Long-term Policy for China-Europe Relations* (Men, 2012: 334). Then, in 1996, the first Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was held in Thailand, which was among the first institutionalized channels through which China and European countries could work together to not only strengthen their economic ties but also deal with such issues as food security, migration, sustainable development, etc. (Lanteigne, 2006: 86–87, 92; Zhu, 2006: 170).

The relations between China and European countries reached a whole new level when the EU revealed for the first time in another China policy paper released in March 1998 that it would pursue a "comprehensive partnership" with China, and then the first international meeting specifically dedicated to Sino-European relations (i.e., the first EU-China Summit) was held in London the following month of the same year. Five years later, in mid-October 2003, the EU went so far as to indicate in the other China policy paper that Sino-European relations were reaching a "maturing partnership." This statement was echoed by the first EU policy paper that China published (in mid-October 2003 as well), in which China committed itself to a "long-term, stable, and full partnership" with the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, 2003).

Their relations nevertheless became tense in 2008 when protests against the 2008 Beijing Olympics erupted in many places around the world including European cities. The political tension even made the 11th EU-China Summit for that year cancelled (which had been held every year since 1998) (Men, 2012: 346). However, notwithstanding the aforementioned tension, Sino-European relations were back to normal very shortly with the 11th EU-China Summit being rescheduled to May 2009, which was immediately followed by the 12th EU-China Summit in November of the same year.

Despite the turmoil in the late 2000s, the Sino-European strategic partnership continued to grow in the 2010s. The 16th EU-China Summit

held in Beijing in November 2013 involved an unprecedented long meeting between the EU leaders and President Xi Jinping of China, which at the end resulted in the joint announcement of the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* (Fabrizi, 2015: 100). According to that strategic agenda, "as important actors in a multipolar world, the EU and China share responsibility for promoting peace, prosperity and sustainable development for the benefit of all" (Delegation of the European Union to China, 2013: 2). Also, they agreed to "continue to consolidate and develop their strategic partnership to the benefit of both sides, based on the principles of equality, respect and trust." In 2014, President Xi paid his first-ever visit to Brussels (also, the first visit paid by a Chinese head of state to the EU), and then China and the EU issued a joint statement to "deepen the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for mutual benefit" (European Council, 2014; Fabrizi, 2015: 103). The EU-China joint statement released in the wake of their 20th summit held in Beijing in July 2018, during which they celebrated the 15th anniversary of their "comprehensive strategic partnership," reaffirmed the two sides' "commitment to deepening their partnership for peace, growth, reform and civilization, based on the principles of mutual respect, trust, equality and mutual benefit, by comprehensively implementing the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*" (European Council, 2018: 1).

## 4. Rise of China as a Centripetal Force for European Integration

Despite the development of Sino-European relations discussed in the previous section, which has brought about a strategic partnership between China and the EU since 2003, there are still conflicts, including both political and economic ones, between China on the one side and European countries in general and the EU in particular on the other. That being said, while these conflicts might cause damage to Sino-European relations from time to time, they have however contributed to the integration of Europe as an international society when European countries seek joint efforts to deal with China based on their common interests, which in turn further help develop a sense of community among them.

### *4.1. Economic Issues*

Although the growth of Sino-European economic ties has brought China and European countries closer to each other, it has however led to some conflicts at the same time. According to a policy paper published by the EU in 2006 about its economic relations with China, the EU regarded China as the "single most important challenge for EU trade policy" and urged China to "reject anticompetitive trading practices and policies" (Commission of the

European Communities, 2006; Men, 2012: 335). Simply speaking, the EU has become increasingly worried about its rising trade deficit with China and has accused China of dumping its products to the European markets at times. On the Chinese side, China has become increasingly unsatisfied with the EU's refusal to grant China the "market economy status" (MES) in the World Trade Organization (WTO), which has made it easier for the EU to win anti-dumping cases against China within the WTO framework.

On top of their conflicts over trade, controversies over foreign investment have become obvious, too. While Europe has become the biggest destination for China's foreign investment, European countries' investment in China seems to have much room for growth. To European countries, the problem lies in their concern that the Chinese market for European investment (and trade) is not as open as the European market for Chinese investment (and trade) (Commission of the European Communities, 2006). As a result, in 2013, China and the EU began to negotiate over an EU-China agreement on investment that, as indicated in their jointly endorsed *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*, "will provide for progressive liberalization of investment and the elimination of restrictions for investors to each other's market" (Delegation of the European Union to China, 2013: 5).

Concluding and then implementing what they call a "Comprehensive Agreement on Investment" is now among the most important economic issues that China and the EU are working on. According to its China policy paper published in June 2016 (entitled *Elements for a New EU Strategy on China*), that agreement is the "EU's immediate priority towards the objective of deepening and rebalancing our economic relationship with China" (European Commission, 2016: 8). In the joint statement released at the end of the 2019 EU-China Summit, China and the EU confirmed that the two sides were achieving the "decisive progress" for the "conclusion of an ambitious EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement in 2020" (European Council, 2019: 1). The two sides officially concluded the agreement in principle in December 2020. However, the disputes still continue, and the agreement has been blocked by the European Parliament since May 2021 (Ewing, 2021).

### *4.2. Arms Embargo*

In addition to the economic conflicts unfolding along with the growth of Sino-European economic ties, there are also political conflicts emerging between them as their relations in general continue to develop. Among the Sino-European political conflicts, the controversy over the major European countries' arms embargo against China in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident is arguably the most significant one.

To punish China for brutally crushing the protesters with its military force in that incident, European countries imposed on China not only economic sanctions but also an arms embargo. On June 26, 1989, twenty days after the Tiananmen Incident, the European Council of Ministers for the EC released a declaration on China which condemned the "brutal repression taking place in China" (European Council, 1989). Furthermore, the declaration also required the member states of the EC to put off their "military cooperation" with China and implement "an embargo on trade in arms with China" (European Council, 1989; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2012).

China has been urging European countries to remove their arms embargo against China, especially since the official establishment of the Sino-EU strategic partnership in 2003. However, despite China's constant protests, the European Council of the EU (which replaced the EC in 1993) made public the EU's "Common Positions" on arms exports in December 2008, which provided even more specific guidelines for the EC's arms embargo against China imposed in 1989. Though not singling out China, the "Common Positions" introduced, among other things, eight criteria that the EU member states have to take into account when exporting arms to any country (Council of the European Union, 2008). On the basis of the EU China policy published in 2016, which re-emphasized that the "EU exports to China are governed by the arms embargo established by the European Council Conclusions of 1989 and the eight criteria established under the Council Common Position on exports of military technology and equipment" (European Commission, 2016: 12), the EU-wide arms embargo against China remains largely intact to the present day.

### *4.3. Human Rights*

Not only did the 1989 Tiananmen Incident bring about a conflict between China and major European countries over the European arms embargo against China. The incident also triggered the Sino-European conflict over China's human rights violations (Baker, 2002: 47; Kinzelbach and Thelle, 2011: 60). The declaration mentioned above that imposed the arms embargo also urged China to "respect human rights" and to "take into account the hopes for freedom and democracy deeply felt by the population" (European Council, 1989). Most importantly, the declaration suggested that the member states of the EC respond to the incident by "raising the issue of human rights in China in the appropriate international fora" (Baker, 2002: 50; European Council, 1989).

Following the declaration, the member states of the EC worked together to influence the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities under the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) to adopt in August 1989 a resolution criticizing the human rights situation in China (Baker, 2002: 51–52). In August 1991, they managed to

have another resolution related to China (which was about human rights in Tibet under the Chinese rule) passed by the Sub-Commission (Baker, 2002: 52). In addition to going through the aforementioned Sub-Commission, beginning in 1992, member states of the EU (which replaced the EC in 1993) also tried to have a resolution about China's human rights record directly passed by the UNCHR itself. However, due to China's large, if not dominant, influence in the UN, especially over those developing and underdeveloped countries, as well as the help from its allies like Russia, all of the draft resolutions against China's human rights violations co-sponsored by the EU member states were immediately blocked by a no-action resolution, except for the draft resolution in 1995 (which was still not passed at the end) (Baker, 2002: 53). On the Sub-Commission front, European countries also faced similar difficulties: the Sub-Commission no longer adopted any resolution against China after the 1991 resolution (Baker, 2002: 53).

Realizing the ineffectiveness of its effort since 1989 to press China over human rights through formal resolutions in the UN framework, the EU began to change its strategy in the second half of the 1990s during which it stopped working on the aforementioned resolutions and started to seek opportunities to have dialogues with China about human rights. The first Sino-European dialogue on human rights was held in 1995, and it has been institutionalized and held on a regular basis since 1997 (Baker, 2002: 58; Kinzelbach and Thelle, 2011: 61).

Despite the regular dialogue between China and the EU on human rights, which did produce some positive outcomes as both China and the EU see it, conflicts between them over the human rights situations in China continue to the present day. Although the EU has stopped pushing for formal UN resolutions against China, it continues to release joint statements about China's human rights record on a regular basis during the sessions of the UN Human Rights Council (which replaced the UNCHR in 2006), an action that China has criticized as an interference with China's domestic affairs. Most importantly, when it comes to China's human rights record, while the EU pays more attention to China's violations of political and civil rights, China emphasizes its effort to promote socio-economic rights among Chinese people with its economic reform and sees EU's effort to promote political and civil rights in China as a violation of China's sovereignty (European External Action Service, 2019; Men, 2012, 347).

## 5. Rise of China as a Centrifugal Force against European Integration

As the previous section has demonstrated, while Sino-European conflicts over economic issues, arms embargo, and human rights might cause turmoil in Sino-European relations from time to time, those conflicts have shaped

and reshaped common interests in China shared by European countries and cultivated a sense of community among them, all of which have contributed to the integration of Europe as a cooperative interstate society evolving into a convergence interstate society. That being said, as this section will reveal, the rise of China at the same time might also be a potential challenge to European integration as it sometimes changes, partially if not completely, the aforementioned European common interests in China into conflicts of interests between European countries.

More specifically, because of the rise of China, as revealed by the growing economic power and influences of China, some European countries including some EU member states have begun to weigh their own interests (especially the economic ones) in their bilateral relations with China much more than the collective interests of Europe as a whole in the context of Sino-European relations. This in turn has made it difficult for Europe to come up with a coherent China policy as an integrated supra-national entity when some European countries begin to conflict with others over how to deal with China (Baker, 2002: 47; Sandschneider, 2002: 33–34, 42–44).

### *5.1. Intra-European Disputes over Arms Embargo*

Although, as mentioned, the European Council of the EC required its member states to impose an arms embargo against China in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, it did not come up with any specific EC-wide guideline for the embargo. Instead, the scope of the embargo was left for interpretation by each member state. Here, it is worth noting that, expecting the growth of Chinese demand for advanced military weapons and technologies as a result of its rapid economic development, European countries like the United Kingdom (UK) and France that export arms abroad have had no intention to impose a full arms embargo against China since the very beginning. To them, the embargo should include only lethal military items and major weapons platforms instead of everything with potential military applications (Gupta, 2004; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2012; UK Government, 1995).

With Sino-European relations continuing to develop, which eventually led to an EU-China strategic partnership in 2003, there are not only disputes among the European countries over how to interpret the arms embargo imposed by the EU (which replaced the EC in 1993) but also voices against the embargo itself. In 2004, following Chinese president Hu Jintao's visit to France, French president Jacques Chirac made public France's opposition to the arms embargo. Seeing the significant growth of Sino-European relations in general and their economic ties in particular, France regarded the 15-year-old embargo as anachronistic and began to urge the EU member states to work

together to lift it once and for all. France's explicit opposition to the arms embargo against China since 2004 resulted in the first big debate among the EU member states over the embargo (Gupta, 2004; Shambaugh, 2005). While France argued for a complete removal of the embargo, the Scandinavian countries were largely supportive of the embargo. Many countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK were in between, taking an open but cautious attitude toward the issue. With no consensus reached in the debate, the EU arms embargo against China remained.

The debate without specific conclusion however encouraged the EU member states to come up with the EU's "Common Positions" on arms exports in December 2008 that I have discussed in the previous section. Although the "Common Positions" did provide the EU member states with better guidelines for their exports of arms to other countries including China, it did not stop the intra-EU friction over the issue about the arms embargo against China. They still interpreted the relevant criteria offered by the "Common Positions" in different ways when it comes to China, and some countries like France continued to push for the lifting of the embargo (Scimia, 2017).

In 2010, another debate among the EU member states over the EU arms embargo against China emerged. The debate turned out to be as severe as the previous one. While Spain, along with France and Greece, led the force against the arms embargo, the UK, supported by some of the new EU members from the former Soviet bloc, was against the immediate removal of the embargo on the human rights grounds although it was open to any possibility in the long run (Weitz, 2012). Like the previous debate, this debate ended with no consensus reached. As a result, the status quo lasts, and the EU arms embargo against China is still intact to the present day.

To sum up, the issue about the EU arms embargo against China has become not only a source of Sino-European conflict but also that of intra-EU friction. As a political action in the first place that was jointly taken by European countries against China's using force to repress the Chinese protesters in the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, it then became an economic issue as well when China's eagerness to modernize its military capabilities as a result of its economic growth began to direct the attention of countries like France to China's huge market for arms deals. Today, the issue of the EU arms embargo against China is becoming very political again. To the European countries opposing the embargo, beside losing economic benefits from China which are very much needed by Europe especially after the 2007–2010 global financial crisis (Weitz, 2012), the arms embargo is now one of the key Sino-European political fractures that is preventing their partnership from moving forward and therefore should be completely removed.

### *5.2. Intra-European Disputes over Human Rights*

As mentioned in the previous section, to promote human rights in China after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, member states of the EC worked together to influence the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities under the UNCHR to adopt two resolutions against China's human rights violations, one in 1989 and the other in 1991. Starting in 1992, member states of the EU (which replaced the EC in 1993) began to directly co-sponsor resolutions against China in the UNCHR (which all failed at the end). This strategy of shaming was eventually replaced by the strategy of so called "constructive dialogues" in 1997 when the EU member states stopped co-sponsoring any UNCHR resolution against China and the conversations between China and the EU on human rights that began in 1995 were institutionalized and became the regularly held EU-China Human Rights Dialogue (Kinzelbach and Thelle, 2011: 61).

This change actually involved an intra-EU friction. Due to the growth of China's economy, there were more and more economic benefits that European countries could get from China. As a result, with the constant political showdown between European countries and China on the issue of human rights (at least once every year in the UNCHR), some of the former began to worry that a frequent political conflict like that would sooner or later cause huge damage to their economic interests in China. France fired the first shot with such a concern in 1997, which eventually led to the change.

Trying to secure an Airbus deal (Bloomberg News, 1997; Sandschneider, 2002: 43), France decided to show goodwill to China by, among other things, declining to co-sponsor the UNCHR resolution introduced by Denmark and the Netherlands in April 1997. France's decision was then followed by similar ones from Germany, Italy, Spain and Greece (Baker, 2002: 62). Eventually, the resolution was only co-sponsored by Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and the UK. As many observers argue, this intra-EU friction in 1997 ended the common approach that European countries had been taking toward the issue about human rights in China since 1989 (Baker, 2002: 55-66; Kinzelbach and Thelle, 2001: 61). In June 1998, the Council of the EU officially decided to promote human rights in China through the EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights (Baker, 2002: 57), and since then, there has been no joint resolution against China proposed by the EU member states in the UNCHR and its successor, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

The EU's new approach toward the issue about human rights in China, nevertheless, did not dissolve their conflict with China over the issue. As mentioned in the previous section, although the EU member states stopped in 1998 pushing for a joint UN resolution against China in terms of its human

rights violations, they have been issuing a joint statement on a regular basis since then during the meetings of UNCHR and its successor UNHRC to direct people's attention to China's human rights record. However, it is also worth noting that the intra-EU dispute over human rights in China did not disappear, either. For example, the EU member states failed to issue a joint statement about China's human rights record in June 2017 during a UNHRC session due to the objection from Greece to release such a statement. This was the first time that the EU did not issue such a statement in the UNHRC (which replaced the UNCHR in 2006) (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Tonchev and Davarinou, 2017).

Greece's objection was regarded by EU diplomats as "dishonorable," and many believed that it was a result of Greece's effort to maintain good relations with China in order to strengthen their bilateral economic ties in general and attract more Chinese investment in particular (Smith, 2017). By the time of that objection from Greece, China had acquired, among other things, a 51% stake in Greece's largest port (i.e., Port of Piraeus) and a 51% share of Greece's public power corporation's grid operator (Smith, 2017). With the continuous growth of China's economic presence in Europe which has become the biggest destination for China's foreign investment, as well as the increasing economic ties between the two sides in general, it is reasonable to argue that there might be more and more European countries economically benefiting from China and therefore becoming more inclined to defend the interests of China instead of the interests of Europe as a whole. This, in turn, would make it hard for the EU to maintain a coherent policy toward China over arms embargo and human rights, as well as issues about Sino-European economic ties.

### *5.3. Intra-European Disputes over Economic Issues*

As mentioned, there have been more and more economic disputes between China and Europe as their economic ties continue to grow. However, it is worth mentioning that, when it comes to Sino-European relations, economic issues are now no longer purely economic. Growing Sino-European economic ties, as discussed above, have influenced some European countries' political decisions about China. Although the EU, in its China policy paper published in 2016, reminded its member states that "mutual economic and commercial interests are strong but should not prevent the EU from upholding its values in its relations with China" (European Commission, 2016), there seem to be European countries, especially those in the "periphery" of the EU, that try to take as much advantage as possible of the economic opportunities that China could offer.

Realizing the difficulty in economically penetrating the European "core," China has kept a close eye on its "periphery" as an entrance to major European economies. Iceland (which is not an EU member) was among the first targets for China's "side door approach" toward the European core (Lanteigne, 2010: 362). Hoping to enter larger European markets through the small and medium-sized ones, China began its negotiations with Iceland over a preferential trade agreement (PTA) in 2006, which was China's first attempt to pursue a PTA in Europe (Lanteigne, 2010: 363–364, 378). These negotiations eventually led to the signing of a free trade agreement (FTA) between the two sides in April 2013, China's first FTA with a European country.

In addition to Iceland as a side door on the west, China has also been making a lot of efforts to enter the European "core" through a side door on the east, i.e., Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Xi's visit to CEE in 2009 (as the Chinese vice president back then) ushered in the economic cooperation between China and the 16 CEE countries (which include 11 EU members). The first official summit for the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), or the so-called "16+1," was held in Warsaw, Poland, in 2012 (Hutt, 2017; Pavlićević, 2018: 688; Vuksanovic, 2017; Witthoeft, 2018). Despite the EU's concern about this China-initiated regional cooperation and its effort to prevent the institutionalization of such cooperation which involves 11 of its members, the "16+1" summit has been held annually since 2012, and the CEEC has expanded to include not only trade and investment but also such fields as connectivity, infrastructure, finance, logistics, tourism, culture, education and health care (Fabrizi, 2015: 101; Jakóbowski, 2018: 666; Vangeli, 2018: 680; Xinhua News Agency, 2017).

The CEEC is especially important to China in its effort to promote its BRI given that CEE is located in the region through which the two routes of BRI (i.e., the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road") enter the European continent. As of now, all of the 16 CEE countries have expressed their official support for China's BRI, showing their interests in benefiting from the BRI with their status as the "Eurasian land bridge" (Fabrizi, 2015: 101).

Among all of the CEE countries, Hungary (an EU member) has been one of the most important allies for China in the region. When China began to make significant efforts to promote China-CEE relations in the early 2010s, Hungary immediately responded with an "Eastern Opening" policy in 2012 (Hutt, 2017). Then, in 2013, it introduced a "residency bond" to grant foreigners who buy 250,000 euros worth of these bonds (many of them have turned out to be wealthy Chinese) a residence status in Hungary, which in turn allows them to move freely within the EU boundary (Hutt, 2017; Jóźwiak, 2017). On the Chinese side, China announced in 2013 a plan for a Chinese-funded upgrade of the railway connecting the capital of Hungary (i.e.,

Budapest) to that of Serbia (i.e., Belgrade), which since then has become one of the most critical projects for China's BRI (Hutt, 2017). Many agreements associated with that 350-km upgraded railroad project were signed in 2014, and the Bank of China established its regional headquarters in Budapest at the end of the same year (Jóźwiak, 2017). Up until 2015, Hungary had received about 80% of all Chinese investment in the region (Hutt, 2017). Therefore, it is no coincidence that Hungary in 2015 became the first European country officially endorsing China's BRI, and its foreign minister back then said in 2016 that "when the Chinese think about the economy and Europe, then it is Hungary that mostly comes to their minds now" (Hutt, 2017).

The year of 2016 is arguably one of the most important years for China's relations with CEE since the CEEC was initiated in 2012, during which China began to significantly expand its economic presence from Hungary to many other countries in the region. For example, the visit of President Xi to Serbia in that year brought the country 5.5 billion euros worth of Chinese investment in its infrastructure (Vuksanovic, 2017). In the same year, China also increased its investment, largely in the form of loans, in many other countries in the region such as North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro (Vuksanovic, 2017).

Among all of the development in 2016, China's acquiring a 51% stake in the largest Greek seaport (i.e., the Port of Piraeus) attracted most of the attention (Denyer, 2017; Krastev, 2018; Vuksanovic, 2017). Actually, as early as 2008 when Greece was suffering from the financial crisis, China already moved to seize the opportunity to secure a 35-year concession from the Greek government to operate two of the docks within the Port of Piraeus (Vuksanovic, 2017). Greece has been regarded by China as an important country that could help China economically reach the European "core" through the CEE countries. The aforementioned 350-km upgraded railway between Hungary and Serbia is actually part of China's strategy to establish a transportation link between Greece and the "heart of Europe" through which the Chinese goods shipped to Greece via the Suez Canal could be more easily delivered to those major European markets (Hosken and Kasapi, 2017; Hutt, 2017; Tonchev and Davarinou, 2017: 22; Topaloff, 2018; Vörös, 2018; Vuksanovic, 2017). So far, China has invested nearly half a billion euros in the port (Horowitz and Alderman, 2017), transforming what it calls a "dragon head" of BRI into the busiest port on the Mediterranean Sea and the seventh busiest in Europe as a whole (Horowitz and Alderman, 2017; Hosken and Kasapi, 2017; Linden, 2018; Zou, 2016).

The growth of Chinese economic presence in the aforementioned CEE countries, as well as Greece, has boosted China's influences over there. For example, showing goodwill to China, the president of the Czech Republic once described his country as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier for China in

Europe" (Witthoeft, 2018). Croatian officials have also expressed their interests in integrating China's BRI with the "Three Seas Initiative" promoted by Croatia and other countries in the region (Xinhua News Agency, 2018). Similarly, the Serbian ambassador to China has depicted Sino-Serbian relations as "iron friendship" while its deputy prime minister has called Serbia "China's biggest partner in the Balkan region" (Vuksanovic, 2017). In a similar tone, the prime minister of North Macedonia has thanked China for helping North Macedonia's economic development with the Chinese investment in its highway construction (Krastev, 2018). Like those leaders in the CEE countries, the Greek prime minister in 2015 also openly expressed Greece's interest in being "China's gateway into Europe" (Horowitz and Alderman, 2017). The aforementioned political statements of course should not be taken at face value, and it is also worth noting that there are actually many different views on China within these countries (Matura, 2018). Therefore, the above examples do not mean that those countries have completely become pro-China. That being said, they do reveal the fact that there are voices for China emerging in the region as a result of China's growing economic presence over there, and thus, more future studies should be conducted to see how the pro-China rhetoric will evolve and interact with other different views on China.

China's growing economic ties with the aforementioned European countries have brought China not only economic influences and benefits but also political ones when some of those countries began to conflict with other European countries over issues with regard to China. Take the South China Sea for example. In the wake of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea's ruling against China's claim over the South China Sea in July 2016, Hungary and Greece thwarted a proposed joint EU statement significantly supporting the ruling, and as a result, the EU ended up releasing a relatively vague statement instead (Fallon, 2016; Horowitz and Alderman, 2017; Tonchev and Davarinou, 2017: 53). The issue about China's human rights record is another example. It is worth noting that, because of China's concern, human rights have never been on the agenda for any CEEC meeting (Fabrizi, 2015: 101–102), and now the impact is moving beyond the region of CEE. In February 2017, Hungary prevented the EU from signing a joint letter as a bloc which condemned the detention and torture of Chinese human rights lawyers by the Chinese government (Denyer, 2017; Witthoeft, 2018). A similar situation happened in June 2017 when Greece blocked an EU statement on China's human rights record for the UNHRC, which marked the first absence of such an EU statement for that UN body (Horowitz and Alderman, 2017; Smith, 2017; Tonchev and Davarinou, 2017: 53; Witthoeft, 2018). Responding to questions about Greece's decision, Geek officials called the proposed EU statement "unconstructive criticism of China" and said

that "unproductive, and in many cases selective, criticism against specific countries does not facilitate the promotion of human rights in these states, nor the development of their relations with the EU" (Denyer, 2017). Again, the above examples do not mean that those European countries have become unwaveringly pro-China. From time to time, they still sided with the EU on issues against China. For instance, all 27 EU members, including Hungary and Greece, did agree to impose the EU sanctions against China over Xinjiang in March 2021 (Emmott, 2021). That being said, those examples presented do reveal the political side effects of China's growing economic presence in Europe that can be observed at times, if not always.

China's growing economic ties with the European "periphery" as a result of China's "check-book diplomacy" are catching European leaders' attention, especially those in the "core" (Fallon, 2016; Horowitz and Alderman, 2017; Smith, 2017; Tonchev and Davarinou, 2017; Witthoeft, 2018). While some like the German chancellor have expressed their worry regarding the "economic relations being linked with political questions," others like the French president (despite France's opposition to the arms embargo against China) have gone so far as to warn that some European countries seem to be more open to Chinese interests "at the expense of a European interest" (Krastev, 2018). Simply speaking, as demonstrated, along with the growing Sino-European economic ties, there have been not only economic disputes between China and Europe but also frictions between European countries themselves, especially those between the "core" and the "periphery" as revealed by the concerns of the former about the latter's getting more economically (and then politically) closer to China as opposed to the EU.

## 6. Conclusion

China's successful economic reform initiated in the late 1970s has increased the Sino-European economic ties and, since 2003, has led to a strategic partnership between the two sides. However, on the other hand, Sino-European relations still involve many political and economic conflicts between them as revealed by their disputes over the Sino-European economic ties, the European arms embargo against China, and China's human rights record.

As this paper has demonstrated, while those Sino-European conflicts might destabilize Sino-European relations from time to time, they have however contributed to European integration by shaping and reshaping common interests in China shared by European countries and cultivating a sense of community among them. That being said, with the continuous rise of China, each European country has been having more and more of its own economic interests in China. As a result, some of the European countries began to have friction with other European countries over the aforementioned

Sino-European conflicts when they revealed a more compromising attitude toward China in order to maintain decent bilateral relations with it for their economic interests. Simply speaking, the rise of China has created both a centripetal force for and a centrifugal force against European integration. This finding suggests that an analytical framework that takes both of the forces into account is necessary since whether and how either of the two forces for and against European integration will become stronger than the other would determine the direction where European integration might move.

It of course remains to be seen how exactly the trend of integration among European countries will be affected. Europe as an international society might continue to move further toward the goal of becoming a political convergence interstate society in the context of the rise of China if the centripetal force for the integration ends up being stronger than the centrifugal one against the integration. Or, it might still be just a cooperative interstate society at most when facing China if the two forces remain equally powerful. Or, it might actually be changed back into nothing more than a coexistence interstate society when it comes to the issues about China if the centrifugal force turns out to be stronger than the centripetal one. Therefore, more research on whether and how these scenarios will realize is undoubtedly worth doing as new development in Sino-European relations unfolds in the future.

In any case, as this paper has demonstrated, China's growing influences have triggered intra-European disputes over how to deal with the rising power. While some of the European countries including some EU members seem to, at times, have no problem engaging China in a bilateral way that can best serve their own national interests (even at the expense of the EU), the EU has emphasized that "dealing with such a comprehensive strategic partner as China requires a 'whole-of-EU' approach" and urged its members to "reinforce agreed EU positions in their bilateral relations with China" (European Commission, 2016: 17). How this European debate about China will evolve in the future would arguably give us a good glimpse into the changes of strength in those two contradictory China-related forces for and against European integration that I have discussed throughout this paper.

## Note

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