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## **Changing world order: The influence of Donald Trump's presidency on the EU's foreign policy towards China**

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### **Citation**

Warmerdam, R. (2024). *Changing world order: The influence of Donald Trump's presidency on the EU's foreign policy towards China*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3762138>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

**Changing world order: The influence of Donald Trump's  
presidency on the EU's foreign policy towards China**

**Master thesis Public Administration**

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Date: 8-3-2024

Word count: 20376

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# Introduction

Historically the United States has been at the forefront of forming and maintaining the international institutions that make up the existing international system. The United States used to be the clear protector of the free world, standing up for human rights and European security (van Ham, 2018, p. 5). While the US attempted to maintain legitimacy in this role it did not always shy away from taking unilateral action. However, with the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president, the United States foreign policy underwent a radical shift away from this policy of balancing interests. Donald Trump showed repeatedly that he had little interest in multilateral initiatives, and rather focused more on bilateral deals driven by short-term pragmatic interests (Kolmaš & Kolmašová, 2019). This was at odds with the continued preference of the EU towards multilateralism to tackle international and global challenges (Duarte & Ferreira-Pereira, 2021).

Trump's actions were mainly based on a transactional approach of international politics based on an 'America first' mentality. A transactional approach of international politics hinders all forms of multilateral cooperation, as it is very difficult to frame a clear 'win' in multilateral cooperation. Trump consistently played into the sensation of the United States always being taken advantage of with clearly one-sided deals (van Ham, 2018).

The actions of Trump on the international stage were also accompanied by a distinctive rhetoric. During his presidency, Trump repeatedly surprised his own advisors by using excessively violent rhetoric or even publicly expressing entirely different preferences than the official stances of the administration (Macdonald, 2018, p. 432). The erratic nature of Trump's views and unpredictable nature of his rhetoric made the US a more unreliable player on the world stage which influences relations and trust in US leadership.

For a long period of time the United States enjoyed the status of single global power, its actions directly affecting the existing world order. This period where United States did not have a serious challenger has ended with the rise of China (Cooper, 2023, p.10). This raises questions on how the west and particularly the United States have to conduct themselves in upholding the liberal international system. Instead of jointly addressing this subject the Trump administration itself constantly criticized the multilateral institutions and values that make up the international system (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019). The way countries conduct politics

with one another is affected if even the former main proponent of the existing structures does not abide by those structures.

For the European Union the above mentioned change in attitude and views from a crucial ally in global politics could change the way it is able to effectively pursue its own interests. Foreign policy is to some degree still decided by member states rather than a European institution. As there is little cohesion between member states, countries outside of the European Union are unsure of what the role of the EU is on the world stage (Millard & Yi, 2018). It would therefore be easier to follow and legitimize US foreign policy on the world stage when the EU agrees with it, rather than defining concrete foreign policy itself.

As the United States drifted from its and the EU's views on the importance of global institutions and cooperation, following the United States on foreign policy may no longer have been a given. If the United States can decreasingly be relied upon as leader of the western world and as main pursuer of western values, the European Union might be inclined to pursue a different and perhaps more independent foreign policy.

Historical examples of when the United States took unilateral actions in foreign policy have shown a change in EU behaviour. A clear example is the Iraq war, after which the European Union developed a new strategy focused on increased strategic autonomy moving away from US interests (Cronberg, 2017). Each time only small incremental steps have been made however. As the Trump administration repeatedly took unilateral action, an interesting question arises of how the European Union foreign policy has evolved further during this change on the global stage. And if there has been any change in foreign policy of the EU, can this be contributed to the influence of Trump on global governance or even the influence of Trump on the EU directly? This thesis will look into this topic, by focusing specifically on the case of EU foreign policy towards China.

### **Research question**

A clear example of EU policy that may have been influenced by the Trump presidency is its policy towards China. During Trump's presidency, the United States attempted to get the European Union to join its strategy towards China (Larres, 2020). Trump believed that China had become a challenger to the United States when it comes to economic and geopolitical power (Larres, 2020). At the same time however tensions between the EU and US increased as Trump deemed EU economic practices as being unfair. The foreign policy of the European Union on China is therefore a good case to find out in what way Trump has tried to influence

the European Union to change its foreign policy, as the relations between all three actors changed in this period.

Therefore the research question of this thesis is: *How has the foreign policy of the European Union towards China as formulated by the European Commission and High Representative been influenced or affected in the face of the Trump administration's foreign policy (and rhetoric)?*

For this thesis the EU foreign policy as formulated by the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs is used, despite the need for unanimity on many foreign policy issues. This is done by focusing on policy that has actually been agreed on and enacted, and by looking at broader EU foreign policy strategies which are often used as guideline for future specific policies.

To answer the question EU foreign policy will be divided into two distinct aspects. The first is economic/industrial policies, and the second is geopolitical policies. Economic/industrial policies will be rather focused on trade, while the geopolitical aspect is much broader and will involve the EU's approach to international governance as well as the hard power related aspect of defence. These aspects are derived from the aims of the EU towards the wider world as established in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty (Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on the European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, 2007). The term influence as phrased in the research question can either be direct influence by the Trump administration towards the European Union or indirect influence. This indirect influence constitutes the European Union having to change its foreign policy as a result of the United States changing attitude and views towards the international rules-based order.

The concepts of critical junctures and incremental change within the broader field of historical institutionalism will be used to answer the question and generate hypotheses. These two concepts relate to the type and extent of the change in a policy or an institution. If a critical juncture has occurred, other policy options are no longer possible or likely (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The direction of development of a policy or institution is determined in crucial moments (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Incremental change on the other hand is change that occurs more slowly through small steps or events, without being a response to a major exogenous shock or event (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). These two concepts are a good fit to determine and score the extent of the change of EU foreign policy (if any) caused by the Trump foreign policy.

The academic relevance of this thesis is mainly that it is focused solely on what the EU has done rather than on what the EU should do or could do. Much of the existing literature focuses mainly on how the EU should respond as the attitude of the United States towards global governance changes. Van Ham (2018) for example notes three distinct strategies the EU could take in response, ranging from increased transatlantic cooperation to developing into an autonomous global player. An understanding of what the EU has actually done and what this has been in response to is lacking however. In order for the academic discussion surrounding an evolving transatlantic relationship to move forward, a broader view is needed on how the European Commission and the High Representative themselves have acted in response to the Trump administration.

This thesis also has practical implications however. Even though this thesis does not concern the question of what the EU should be doing concerning its foreign policy, understanding what it has been doing is an important step in understanding how best to move EU foreign policy forward. The specific view on foreign policy of the EU as formulated by the European Commission and High Representative also sheds light on their general importance on the effective foreign policy of the member states. In order for EU citizens to have any influence on how foreign policy is formed, it is crucial to have an understanding on where it is formed. This thesis is a clear step in gaining this understanding.

The first section of this thesis will outline a review of the relevant literature, and lay the groundwork of the two different aspects of foreign policy that are used in this research. The next chapter is devoted to the theoretical framework. Here the general concepts of historical institutionalism as main theory will be explained, after which the dichotomy between the two concepts of critical junctures and incremental change that are used in this thesis is explained. Using the two aspects of foreign policy and the two theoretical concepts, two hypotheses are generated on the extent of influence Trump has had on foreign policy of the European Union concerning China. Next the research design is presented, and the two concepts are further operationalized. The analysis is performed in two sections. First an assessment is made of economic/industrial policies of the EU and how they might have been influenced, after which the relevant hypothesis is addressed. This is then repeated for the subject of geopolitical policies. Finally in the conclusion the main findings are presented as well as the answer to the research question and the limitations of this thesis.

# Literature review

## Impact of Trump presidency on US-EU relations

Even though there were stark differences between the EU and the United States even before the Trump presidency, according to Aggestam & Hyde-Price (2019) Trump highlighted these differences and thereby made relations even more fragile. Where Larres (2020) concludes that the EU strategy on Trump was mostly one of sitting out the Trump administration, other authors note the increased push for an independent strategy on geopolitical issues, which they coin as Strategic Autonomy (Martin & Sinkkonen, 2022).

Aggestam & Hyde-Price (2019) conclude that relations between the European Union and the United States under Trump appear to be more fragile than ever. They do claim that many of these differences already existed before Trump (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019, p. 114). Trump however highlighted the already existing differences over interests and identities, which troubled relations (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019, p. 124). The same article further notes that this crisis for the transatlantic relationship caused by the Trump administration can in part be countered. The European Union should take more responsibility for its own security and in tackling challenges to the liberal world order (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019, p. 125). This conclusion indicates that according to Aggestam & Hyde-Price (2019) the Trump US foreign policy influences EU foreign policy indirectly, as a changing US attitude on the world stage affects the need for the European Union to bear their own responsibilities in their foreign policy.

Martin & Sinkkonen (2022) mention a similar trend, as they write that the concerns about the reliability of the United States led to EU member states increasingly pushing for what is called Strategic Autonomy for the European Union. This term entails Europe creating a more independent strategy on geopolitical issues, by focusing on its military, economic and technological stance in the world (Martin & Sinkkonen, 2022, p. 100). This means that the change in attitude of the United States according to Martin & Sinkkonen (2022) does affect EU foreign policy in general, as there is increasing awareness that the EU must act independently.

Larres (2020) however does not fully agree with the change in EU foreign policy mentioned above. According to Larres (2020) there was never an overarching strategy within the Trump administration to shape the global order. The only goal was 'winning' against



China and maintaining the status quo with the United States as sole superpower. Meanwhile, Larres (2020) notes that Trump was increasingly sceptical towards Europe. Lack of military capabilities, differing political views and perceived unfair economic practices were important aspects of this scepticism (Larres, 2020). Even though he was less pronounced about the EU compared to his China-rhetoric, the EU was still clearly seen as rival rather than ally in many issues. Even with this negative attitude towards Europe, Larres (2020) concludes that the EU strategy has largely been one of sitting out the Trump administration. A strategy of waiting for different US leadership to improve transatlantic relations rather than changing EU policy is a rather different conclusion than that of Martin & Sinkkonen (2022) who conclude that the EU is changing its foreign policy towards strategic autonomy. Larres (2020) however does state that a continuation of the then existing US approach on foreign policy would severely challenge that status quo, with the European Union increasingly looking at China as a global partner. This conclusion has implications for the US-EU relationship, as it shows that the EU may increasingly show its independence from the United States on foreign affairs.

### **EU-China relations**

According to Larres (2020) the European Union pursued a rather independent strategy towards China. Bindi (2022) notes that there was a change in attitude towards China, but this was largely sparked by vulnerabilities shown by the COVID pandemic. Even though the strategy is largely independent, according to Larres (2020) the EU did increasingly pursue a more hard-line policy just as the Trump administration did. Still Larres (2020) notes that the EU attempted to remain the balancer between the two powers.

Despite Trump's scepticism towards Europe, Larres (2020) writes that the Trump administration attempted to get the European Union to join its strategy towards China. Larres (2020) notes that according to the Trump administration a more hardline strategy towards China was required to maintain the number one place of the US in terms of economic, technological and military power. According to Larres (2020) United States did not really coordinate with the European Union on its China policy however. The article states that the three biggest EU countries along with the EU commission could not agree with Trump's strategy, even though they did agree about the reasoning behind it. The strategy was seen as too uncompromising and fanatic. Larres (2020) concludes that Europe rather focused on being

the balancer between the two powers, in order to both maintain relations with China as important trading partner and de-escalate the EU-US trade conflict (Larres, 2020).

Larres (2020) notes that China repeatedly tried to use conflicts between the EU and the United States caused by Trump to further undermine relations between the two. This so called charm offensive of China was not very effective according to Larres (2020), as the EU pursued a rather independent strategy towards China. It continued to expand economic links but did not allow economic interests to drift the European Union away from the United States and towards China in geopolitical affairs (Larres, 2020).

A change of attitude of the European Union towards China did occur according to Bindi (2022), but this can also be explained by the pandemic. Bindi (2022) concludes that the supply chain vulnerabilities shown by the pandemic kickstarted perception in the EU of a systemic rivalry with China (Bindi, 2022, p. 247). The study of Larres (2020) reveals however that even before the pandemic the three largest EU countries and the EU commission were increasingly in favour of a more hard-line China policy. In this period not all EU-actors were convinced of this approach. In the years before the pandemic countries such as Greece, Portugal and Hungary were often unwilling to publicly criticize China due to the financial impulse China provided to their economy (Larres, 2020).

## **Contribution to the literature**

Even though a case might have substantive or concrete relevance when societal importance is concerned, theoretical relevance cannot be assumed (Toshkov, 2016, p. 290). Scientific relevance is shown by contributing to filling certain existing gaps in literature. The literature on both the impact of the Trump administration and the EU-China relations shows that the Trump administration did in general affect EU foreign policy, which according to some authors has led to an increasing awareness in the EU on the importance of an independent or autonomous foreign policy. And on relations with China specifically it has become clear that other factors such as COVID were also important in a shift in foreign policy. The focus of these articles is different from this thesis however. Larres (2020) for example has approached this subject by focusing on the motives and procedures of Trump as well as internal discussions in the administration. Other literature on the implications of US foreign policy on the EU is mainly focused on specific aspects of policy such as defence rather than aiming for a broader view of influence in general. An example of this is

Hellemeier (2019), which focuses specifically on defence cooperation and the dependency on the US due to the procurement of US defence equipment. Some literature does exist on the changing relationship between the United States and Europe due to the influence of Trump. But these articles, such as Martin & Sinkkonen (2022) also focus on what the attitude of the member states has been towards EU foreign policy rather than focusing explicitly on the EU Commission and the High Representative.

The research question of this thesis is a further contribution to the literature as it takes a broader view on the influence of the Trump administration on EU foreign policy not just directly, but also indirectly through Trump's different perspective towards multilateral cooperation. The specific focus on the causal mechanism rather than merely establishing the correlation can shed a light on how exactly the variables are connected (Toshkov, 2016, p. 291). As large-N studies are rarely focused on these causal mechanisms, this research can help in filling the research gap (Toshkov, 2016, p. 291).

Focusing on the European Commission and High Representative means only agreed-to policies and broader strategies can be used, which ensures only conclusions on the general direction of EU foreign policy can be made. This points to the focus of this thesis, as the goal is not to understand the influence of the Trump administration on a single policy but rather on EU foreign policy as a whole.

## **Foreign policy of the European Union**

The explicit focus of this thesis on the EU foreign policy as formulated by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (High Representative) can best be substantiated by looking at who decides general EU foreign policy. The structure as established in the Lisbon Treaty gave the European Union a more significant institutional structure for its external service (Malovec, 2023). This structure included the creation of the role of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Despite the EU gaining a more formal and institutionalized structure to act on foreign policy, the EU lacks power to act quickly and decisively in this policy area. Many policy decisions related to CFSP still require unanimity decision making among the member states. As these member states often disagree in their view on international relations, formulating decisive foreign policy can be difficult (Millard & Yi, 2018, p. 380).

According to Millard & Yi (2018), because of this lack of cohesion between member states third countries outside of the European Union are unsure what the role of the EU is on the world stage. Furthermore, the broad nature of the role of the High Representative prevents this institution from having clear authority on issues concerning foreign policy (Millard & Yi, 2018). For this thesis however the input of the High Representative and the European Commission in deciding EU foreign policy remains highly relevant, as the topic of this thesis strictly involves foreign policy of the European Union as an entity and not the separate member states. Furthermore, reports and communications from the European Commission or the High Representative do often broadly indicate the position of the EU on foreign policy, as ministers and political officials from member states can be included in drafting the reports.

# **Theoretical framework**

This thesis will make use of Historical Institutionalism to examine the influence of the foreign policy of the Trump administration on the China policy of the European Commission and the High Representative. Historical Institutionalism scholars are interested in addressing processes over time. In order to be able to understand big developments of institutions, we need to analyse the historical processes that have led to the current situation and current framework of an institution (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.1)

## **Background Historical Institutionalism**

Historical Institutionalism is part of the broader school of New Institutionalism. This new institutionalism differed from other institutional approaches in its specific focus on the underlying differences of institutions and their effects on the performance of these institutions (Peters, 2019, p.2). In order to understand the behaviour and actions of for example political actors it is crucial to understand the institutional limits on their array of options available.

Historical Institutionalism can be characterized in three main features. It addresses big substantive questions, it takes the element of time seriously and it hypothesizes a combination of effects of institutions and processes rather than just looking at one at a time (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.3). The appropriateness of Historical Institutionalism as a framework for this thesis becomes clear when looking at these three elements.

The first of these elements involves the interest of Historical institutionalists in asking about how or why important events happened and what the context was that could have changed an outcome between similar cases (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.4). But as these large and substantive questions are often too broad to research all at once, historical institutionalists often resort to moving between different cases and questions to test previously established propositions (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.4). Focusing on a specific factor that may have influenced EU foreign policy is an example of such research since it adds a piece of the puzzle for other historical institutionalists to further look at either what other factors may have influenced EU foreign policy or what other actors the Trump administration may have influenced. The benefit of this type of research then is that it often addresses real world questions that are of interest to the academic world. (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.5).

The second element involves the importance of historical processes in answering these substantive questions. Looking at processes over time increases the range of exposure to certain events and makes more data available for observation (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.5). In order to understand how or why a certain policy was decided upon for example, it is crucial to analyse the entire process leading up to the policy. This means analysing over several years or even longer in order to better understand the entire context relevant for how the policy came to be. Looking at a process over several years also increases the range of data available for research (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.5). As the amount of examples relevant for the research topic may be limited, this wide range of data is crucial in generating reliable findings. The relevance of this element to this thesis is that by looking at the effect of the United States on EU foreign policy in general we can better determine what the effect of the Trump presidency could have been as well, as it can help in focusing the research.

Where the second element of Historical Institutionalism focuses on the temporal context, the third element focuses on the spatial context. Historical institutionalists differ from other academics in their focus on the interaction of multiple institutions. An institution never operates in a vacuum, but is influenced by its surroundings (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.12). The stability or rather instability of certain frameworks of institutions is determined by the institutions or actors it comes into contact with. Historical institutionalists can look at how the interplay between institutions may cause change within institutions, but their research can also just involve trying to figure out how a framework of institutions can be explained (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.12). This is related to the topic of this thesis as the only way to distinguish the effect of the foreign policy of the Trump presidency on EU foreign policy is to research and exclude other possible influences on EU foreign policy.

### **Definition Critical Juncture**

The concept of critical junctures entails that the direction of development of a policy or institution is determined in crucial moments. Before these crucial moments, actors still have an array of options to choose from, but after a critical juncture returning to a different option becomes a lot less likely. These critical junctures are therefore the moments wherein significant change is possible, often driven by exogenous events (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). This idea relies on a rather dualist conception of development within institutions,

wherein moments of relative stability and moments of rapid change or development succeed one another.

The importance of critical junctures as a distinct concept lies in the idea that these are the moments wherein new trajectories or paths are established within an institution (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). This concept is related to the idea of path dependency. When a critical juncture has occurred certain feedback mechanisms make a similar step further in the same direction more likely (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.12). An example of this is the integration of the European Union. This institution has repeatedly seen an increased drive for integration during or after a crisis. One of these crises is the Covid-19 pandemic, where an acute crisis led to joint action in the procurement and limiting of export of personal protection equipment (Bown, 2021a).

In order to apply the concept of critical junctures, clarity of the boundaries of this concept is vital. For this thesis the definition of Capoccia & Kelemen (2007) will be applied. This article suggests an approach with an emphasis towards more than just identifying a critical juncture. Rather the focus should instead be on trying to identify the key decisions and the key events influencing the decisions that have changed the direction of an institution or policy (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). By researching not just the choices made but also looking at the alternative choices that were available to the decision maker, a better understanding of critical junctures can be created. This also creates the possibility of negative critical junctures. If during a critical juncture where change is possible that change does not occur, it does not mean that no critical juncture occurred (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The occurrence of a critical juncture then relates to the possibility and plausibility of change rather than the extent of the change itself. The outcome can then still be returning to the status-quo, but now other policy options that may previously have been possible may no longer be possible or less likely.

### **Definition incremental change**

According to Capoccia & Kelemen (2007) sudden transformational change is not the only way an organization can develop. Development of policy or an institution can also be the result of an incremental process. Even though historical institutionalists focus in general on the development of causal processes over a period of time, there tends to be a bias towards processes and events that unfold very rapidly (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p.9). Some changes

however occur more slowly, and materialize through small steps or events that on their own are not substantial but combined add up to significant change. This type of change is incremental. By focusing on incremental change academics may better understand why policies or institutions change even without this change being a response to major exogenous shocks or events (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009).

Van der Heijden & Kuhlmann (2016) however notes that the concept of incremental change lacks analytical power overall and lacks a certain clarity. In overcoming these limits on the application of the concept of incremental change we have to prevent linking concepts to a concrete case in such a way that these concepts are stretched well beyond their original meaning (Van der Heijden & Kuhlmann, 2016). This is difficult as the boundaries of incremental change are not clear. As this thesis focuses on whether or not a single factor is of influence in a change in policy rather than what combined effect may have caused a change in policy, this does not have to be an issue. Therefore the explanation of Mahoney & Thelen (2009) will be applied in identifying incremental change. This will be discussed in more depth in the operationalization section of the thesis.

In order to define incremental change the concept of threshold effects is crucial as well. Threshold effects relate to a process that has little significance until a certain critical mass is reached, after which major change is triggered (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). As this is still a slow moving causal process, it fits the definition of incremental change even though the major change itself can seem sudden.

## **EU foreign policy aims**

Having established the general relations between the three actors, this chapter continues with substantiating the two different aspects that will be researched in this thesis. These aspects are economic/industrial policies and geopolitical policies.

Both aspects are derived from the values and aims of the European Union established in the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 (Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, 2007). Even though more specific aims have been established in policy reports since then, no change in EU treaties has taken place. Therefore these very general aims and values are still the cornerstone of EU foreign policymaking. The establishment of a competitive internal market, promoting scientific



progress and enhancing economic cohesion are just some examples of the values laid out in article 3 of the Lisbon Treaty. (Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, 2007). These aims however are focused on changing the European Union inwards rather than being focused on its position in the rest of the world. Towards the wider world the Lisbon Treaty (2007) establishes that the EU should:

1. Uphold and promote its values and interests
2. Contribute to peace and security and the sustainable development of the earth
3. Contribute to solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights
4. Be in strict observance of international law

These values being cornerstones of EU foreign policy in general, they are suitable to distinguish different aspects of foreign policy of the European Union that could be influenced by US foreign policy.

The first aspect will include all economic/industrial policies related to foreign affairs. This relates to the third value of free and fair trade, as well as the first value of promoting its values and interests. While free trade is a separate value that the EU promotes, this is not always in the interest of the European Union. Protecting certain aspects of the EU economy such as technological advancements interferes with free trade, and this economic/ industrial aspect will reflect the European policies in balancing these conflicting values. This aspect therefore forms the bridge between EU domestic policies mentioned earlier such as promoting economic cohesion, and policies related to protecting EU interests through for example trade deals.

The second aspect focuses fully on EU policies and viewpoints concerning geopolitics. Geopolitics for this thesis covers a broad spectrum of policies involving the relations between countries, focusing on the aspects of global influence and power. The distinction with the first aspect is subsequently that economic and industrial policies are more related to domestic economic protection, and geopolitical policies involve political power. Geopolitical policies include the way the European Union acts through multilateral cooperation, as well as the position of the European Commission on different geopolitical issues. This aspect is connected to the second value of contributing to peace and security, as well as similar inward values of peace and security for the EU itself. As multilateral cooperation is seen as part of

geopolitics in this thesis, this aspect also relates to the fourth value of observing international law. For the European Union that means cooperating multilaterally in protecting the existing framework of the rules-based international order. This rules-based international order should in turn contribute to the third value of contributing to mutual respect among peoples.

### **Hypotheses about EU foreign policy aims towards China**

In the next section of the literature review two hypotheses are outlined based on the aspects mentioned above. As each aspect is based on a distinct part of EU foreign policy, the hypotheses will be substantiated using existing literature on US foreign policy influence on the EU in general or specifically the influence on EU foreign policy on China.

#### **Economic/Industrial policies**

According to Larres (2020) the European Union mostly aligned with the United States on their concern with allowing China access to crucial knowledge industries. The article shows this by noting that both the United States and the European Union implemented measures to prevent companies from being bought by Chinese counterparts (Larres, 2020, p. 109).

According to Larres (2020), in 2019 there was a clear shift in the EU attitude towards trade negotiations with both the US and China. As one of the goals of the European Union is the establishment and protection of the internal market, economic foreign policy is crucial in safeguarding fair trade practices. The EU supposedly increased pressure towards China on gaining access to its market, while at the same time changing their attitude towards the United States as well. Larres (2020) writes that this was mainly a reaction to the Trump administration as it continued to try to get the EU to agree to a disadvantageous trade deal (Larres, 2020, p. 124).

Even though the EU increased pressure towards China on policy areas such as access to their market, according to Bindi (2022) the European Union remains less confrontational than the United States. Instead the increased prevalence of Strategic Autonomy also applies to the economic/industrial aspect. As mentioned, Bindi (2022) states that the supply chain vulnerabilities uncovered by the COVID pandemic are an important factor in this. According to Bindi (2022), this shift towards strategic autonomy shows a possible decrease in reliance on the United States in determining the relations with China (Bindi, 2022, p. 247).

Other authors such as Sverdrup-Thygeson (2017) put limits on this perceived autonomy, as they write that the United States is a considerable formative factor in shaping EU-China relations. According to this article the United States does not shy away from asserting its influence on the European Union in shaping foreign policy (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017). However, over the last decade the United States continued to shift its focus away from Europe towards Asia in terms of military and economic engagement, according to (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017). They write that this shift prompted the European Union to try and reassert its relevance towards the United States as the EU increasingly focuses on cooperation in Asia as well (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017). The article therefore concludes that the European policies are still quite distinct from those of the United States.

Even though according to Bindi (2022) the European Union remained less confrontational than the United States, the EU mostly aligned with the United States in adopting measures to prevent Chinese access to certain knowledge industries (Larres, 2020). However, the main reason for this shift according to the literature is not US influence but rather vulnerabilities uncovered by the COVID pandemic. Therefore the hypothesis is: *As EU foreign policy towards China on trade and combatting economic vulnerabilities already mirrored US interests, the Trump foreign policy only contributed to incremental change in EU economic foreign policy.* This hypothesis is underlined by the arguments of Sverdrup-Thygeson (2017) that the attempts of the EU to reassert itself in increasing engagement with China and Asia started before the Trump presidency, and not because of it.

### **Geopolitical policies**

One of the main ways Trump influences EU foreign policy in general according to De Jonquières (2017) is that his presidency has greatly contributed to a destabilizing international system. He adds however that Trump did not see the importance of the role of the US as protector of the international rules based system (De Jonquières, 2017). Trump's very campaign was based on criticism towards a multitude of international organizations and trade agreements (De Jonquières, 2017). Furthermore, according to Gaenssmantel et al. (2023) Trump for example did not maintain the previous active role of the United States in the UN Human Rights Council. The book mentions that The European Union did try to preserve the existing rules based international order, but was faced with a changing power dynamic in the world that favoured China (Gaenssmantel et al, 2023, p. 49). The EU trying to preserve the rules based international order shows that the new attitude of the United States towards geopolitics and multilateralism differs immensely from that of the EU. Duarte & Ferreira-

Pereira (2021) write that the EU's take on multilateralism is trying to project its role as being a responsible actor who strives for a better outcome for the world.

According to Cronberg (2017) multilateralism for the United States is simply a means to an end, where for Europe multilateralism is a goal in its own right. Even before the Trump presidency this attitude was ever present. An example of this is the UN Security Council which according to Cronberg (2017) is seen by the EU as global authority in its role where the United States does not deem its approval essential (Cronberg, 2017, p. 245).

Cronberg (2017) does mention however that even before Trump the United States both acted and was criticized for acting unilaterally. An example of this is the US-led Iraq war. In 2003 the European Union adopted the 2003 European Security Strategy based on the very principle of a rule-based international order as being essential for establishing effective multilateralism (Cronberg, 2017). According to Cronberg (2017), a senior EU official underlined in 2015 that 'Effective multilateralism was an explicit critique of the US behaviour in Iraq.' The preference towards unilateral action according to the literature is therefore not just a feature of Trump's presidency, rather of US foreign policy in general.

China for the most part agrees with Europe on the importance of multilateralism to tackle global challenges. In recent decades China has taken an active interest in shaping the world order and in introducing an international system to replace the existing Westphalian order (Duarte & Ferreira-Pereira, 2021). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) then can be seen as the way for China to move from a rule-taker to a rule-maker (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Multilateralism for China however according to Feng (2020) is a means to serve China's vision for the world (Feng, 2020, p. 131).

As the United States under the Trump presidency seemed unwilling to maintain its role as protector of the global order, other nations or actors might fill this void. China is very willing to replace the United States as well, and according to Feng (2020) remains a constructive participant in multilateralism (Feng, 2020, p. 132). In the last decades China has been keen to show that it wants to share prosperity, peace and progress with the world (Duarte & Ferreira-Pereira, 2021). It accepts some of the current institutions, but attempts to reform to better reflect the world order. Therefore according to Li (2021) the EU and China remain intertwined in an ongoing process of shaping the international system (Li, 2021, p. 109).

Another aspect of geopolitical policies is defence. As the European Commission cannot act in this area except for expressing its perspective, this is only relevant as a part of

geopolitical policies in general. Concerning China, the main defence related foreign policy aspect with China is the policy on the South China Sea. Specifically on China, Mishin (2021) notes that the United States during the Trump presidency concluded that they needed to include European allies in their patrolling operations in that area. Operations by the US alone were deemed inadequate. According to Mishin (2021) for European nations the participation in these operations had the objective of demonstrating transatlantic solidarity, demonstrating their military capabilities and defending international maritime law (Mishin 2021, p. 167).

The US view that EU members should join in patrolling in the South Chinese sea could indicate that the US tried to influence EU policies and its relation with China in general. As the Chinese view on geopolitics and multilateralism is mainly to serve China's vision for the world, the expectation can be formulated that engaging and cooperating with China is not always in the interest of the EU. Nevertheless, the absence of the United States as protector of the international system as can be derived from the literature could be perceived as an indirect influence on EU foreign policy. China and the EU, according to Li (2021) are both trying to shape the international system as the US is less interested in being a factor of importance.

Therefore the hypothesis can be formulated that The absence of US leadership and the criticism of the US towards multilateral cooperation causes a critical juncture in EU foreign policy as the EU becomes more autonomous in trying to preserve the current international system from China's perspective on multilateralism.

# Research Design

## Research methods

The research method being used to find out how the EU foreign policy has been influenced by the Trump presidency is a qualitative single-case study. A single case study is different from other types of research in how explanations are obtained and which type of evidence is used (Toshkov, 2016, p. 285). Single case studies tend to examine a wide range of evidence on a single unit rather than looking across cases.

The analysis of this thesis will be within-case rather than across case. ‘Within’ refers to the level of analysis, which looks at different types of evidence about a single event. The difference lies in the focus on within-case observations. These observations are much more in depth and of a much larger scope than research focusing on cross-case comparison, as there the focus is more towards the use of a large number of observations linked to a small number of variables in cross-case research (Toshkov, 2016, p. 286). The case chosen for this analysis is specifically the foreign policy towards China of the EU as formulated by the European Commission and the High Representative of the European Union. Researching the effect of the foreign policy of the Trump presidency on this case specifically limits the scope of the research and ensures a more in depth focus on the influence of the Trump foreign policy on EU foreign policy.

In order to determine how the Trump administration influenced European Union foreign policy the method of process tracing will be applied. Process tracing is used to find the conditions necessary in which certain events came to be, and the order in which these conditions occurred (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 142). This is then used to identify causal chains and conjunctions, as well as the causal mechanisms behind certain outcomes such as policy decisions (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 142). It is a fitting tool, as causal observations can be used to discover whether a specific cause made a difference (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 142). This method should therefore find the link between the Trump administration and EU foreign policy if one exists.

A clear characteristic of causal process tracing is that it is oriented towards the dependent variable rather than the independent variable (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 80). This means looking at the multitude of possible causes of an outcome rather than looking at the range of effects of a single cause. Often research questions involving causal process

tracing involve looking at multiple possible causal factors that could have caused a certain outcome (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 80). The focus of this thesis is mainly on the Trump presidency as a single causal factor (X) and its influence on EU foreign policy. Causal process tracing is a fitting method for this thesis, as in order to determine the causal effect of the Trump presidency, we have to condition for other causal factors.

The focus of process tracing on multiple causes or the context shows the relevance for historical institutionalist research. The spatial context as defined in historical institutionalism is relevant for process tracing as well. Determining a temporal order in which a series of causal events takes place is crucial in finding out both the background in which the process takes place as well as determining the context (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 85). As historical institutionalism involves taking all dimensions and contexts into account when researching a topic, any causality should not just be established by merely showing a correlation between two variables (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). Rather it should also be established why any correlation should exist.

In order to identify the ‘why’ of a correlation, it is necessary to identify categories under which evidence can be classified. Firstly, evidence can be individually necessary. Individually necessary relates to any evidence that, if absent, would be enough evidence that a correlation is not present (Toshkov, 2016, p. 155). Secondly, evidence can be jointly sufficient. This type of evidence would on its own be enough to indicate the correlation (Toshkov, 2016, p. 156). It is rarely possible to make an absolute determination for either type of evidence, but even a general application of this typology can lead to an adequate result in proving a correlation for a within-case study (Toshkov, 2016, p. 156).

## **Data sources**

Both primary and secondary data sources will be used to establish any influence between the Trump foreign policy and EU foreign policy on China. In order to determine the influence of Trump foreign policy first the relevant US policy on China has to be made clear. As this is not the topic of the research itself, mainly secondary sources will be used as well as statements made by US officials and for example trade agreements made by the Trump administration.

To determine the EU foreign policy before, during and after the Trump foreign policy EU policy papers will be used. The yearly “General report on the activities of the European

Union' will be used to determine general changes in policy or conduct of the European Union. Additionally, more specific China strategies of the EU from before and after the Trump presidency will be analysed. This will be complemented with input of the High Representative and its external action service.

In order to prevent selection bias, secondary literature will be used to judge whether any planned change in policy actually materialized as planned.

Using the mentioned data sources on EU foreign policy, other possible factors in influencing EU foreign policy have to be identified as well. As establishing a timeline of major global events would be too extensive for the scope of this research, any context or other influencing factors will be determined by analysing the policy papers and speeches as well as secondary literature.

## **Operationalization**

In order to be able to research the concepts laid out in the theoretical framework, they have to be made measurable. The two concepts used in this thesis are the concept of critical juncture and the concept of incremental change. In order to be able to measure these concepts it is necessary to determine which type of evidence can indicate the relevance of one of the concepts.

The concept of critical juncture is explained in this thesis as an event after which significant change is possible, driven by exogenous events (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). A variety of alternatives that existed previously have thus disappeared. For this thesis this can be operationalized as such. Evidence indicating a critical juncture must show that other options are no longer possible or likely. As this thesis is mainly focused on whether or not the single factor of Trump foreign policy has at least contributed to the outcome or direction of EU foreign policy, it is important to block or condition for other factors. This is the only way to determine that in case of a critical juncture, whether or not the Trump presidency was one of the key events in influencing it. Here we have to be aware of negative critical junctures as well. Even if EU foreign policy did not change as much a critical juncture influenced by the Trump presidency may still have occurred, as the range of policy options of the EU may now have diminished. If change was possible but was in the end rejected, we can still conclude that



a critical juncture occurred and subsequently note whether or not the Trump presidency has influenced the occurrence of that critical juncture.

The second concept is incremental change. As stated in the theoretical framework the general conceptualisation of Mahoney & Thelen (2009) will be used to operationalize this concept. Mahoney & Thelen (2009) define 4 modal types of incremental change to determine institutional evolution. The first modal type of incremental change according to Mahoney & Thelen (2009) is displacement: the existing rules being replaced by old ones (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). While this can happen under a critical juncture, it can be a slow process as well. An example of incremental change is when a new institution is created which then competes with the old ones that are still in use rather than the new replacing the old (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Gradual displacement then occurs when slowly actors defect to the new institution and it gains legitimacy at the expense of the old one, thus gradually replacing it. The second modal type is layering. Layering is defined as introducing new rules that complement existing rules, and in doing so changing how the original structure of rules behaves in practice (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Drift, the third modal type, takes place when the impact of existing rules changes because of external factors rather than a change in the rules themselves. Finally the fourth modal type is conversion, which occurs when existing rules are strategically interpreted differently (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Here it is actors actively exploiting existing rules that cause change rather than actors neglecting existing rules as is the case with modal type drift. If we can find evidence that can be linked to one of these four factors we might conclude that incremental change has taken place.

### **Reliability and validity of the research**

Before the analysis can be performed, a few considerations have to be noted concerning the reliability and validity of the research. The reliability of measures relates to the manner in which measurement is performed to ensure that repeating the measurement would lead to the same results (Toshkov, 2016, p. 117). As the scope of this thesis means only a limited number of cases can be researched in determining a causal relationship, ensuring reliability is difficult. This thesis must therefore refrain from drawing very specific conclusions but should rather maintain a general focus on how EU foreign policy on China has been influenced by the Trump administration. Furthermore, the very choice of cases in this qualitative research could point to a form of confirmation bias. These types of biases

relate to the inclination of people to only look for information or in this instance choose cases or subjects in analysing the two aspects that confirm a hypothesis (Toshkov, 2016, p. 11). Any cases or subjects that might contradict the hypothesis might then be ruled out (Toshkov, 2016, p. 11). In order to prevent this it is important to supplement specific cases or subjects with more broad ones as well, which decreases the chance that contradicting evidence is ruled out.

A major function of causal process tracing is increasing the internal validity of causal inference (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 88). The internal validity of this research can be enhanced by touching upon other contextual information (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 98). In order to understand both the certainty and reliability of certain pieces of evidence, contextual information is crucial (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 98). Therefore it is important not just to look at the Trump administration as a factor that might be influencing EU foreign policy on China, but also other important factors. Finally the external validity relates to the generalization of the results of this research to similar cases (Toshkov, 2016, p. 173). Even though the Trump presidency has ended, policies formed by the European Commission during the Trump administration still have lasting effects. While the specific case of Trump may not always be generalizable to other situations, the conclusions concerning the extent to which a radical change in leadership in one global actor can influence a different global actor is very relevant for other cases.

## **Analysis**

This chapter will provide an analysis based on the two aspects of foreign policy that have been described. Both the collection of data and testing of the hypotheses will occur based on the two separate aspects. Using these two aspects finally the research question can be answered.

### **Economic / Industrial policy**

The foreign policy aspect of economic policy mainly concerns trade relations with third countries. The European Union carries the responsibility for the trade policy for its member countries, and performs trade negotiations with third countries according to the rules set out in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2008). This responsibility includes legislating on trade matters and concluding international trade agreements, albeit based on the World Trade Organisation rules (*External Trade*, n.d.). For the EU, the main goal is to protect EU companies from obstacles to trade. These obstacles can be market access related, but can also include issues concerning intellectual property and foreign direct investment (*External Trade*, n.d.).

### **Protectionism**

Many of the economic and industrial policies which relate to foreign policy have to do with protectionism. The topic of protectionism can be very broad, but for the purpose of this section it refers to the use of financial or other types of measures to protect one's own industry. China, the United States and Europe have all implemented some form of protectionist policies, but the focus of this section is on the extent to which these policies have evolved during the period of the Trump administration.

In terms of protectionist policies or trade policies, in some aspects the European Commission is still rather immature as a global actor. This can partially be explained by the fact that the European Union has only been responsible for handling direct foreign investment policies since 2009 (*Investment*, n.d.). The first few years of the EU being responsible for these policies were needed to transition from bilateral investment agreements between individual member states and third parties to agreements that align with EU policy (*Investment*, n.d.). While the focus in this period was on removing barriers for trade, the goal

of the EU was not limitless free trade. The then-president of the European Commission Juncker stated in 2014 about negotiating a trade agreement with America that he would not sacrifice the safety and social and data protection standards in the name of free trade (European Commission, 2017, p. 51).

In general EU economic policy with China before the Trump presidency was guided by the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation established in 2013 (EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, 2013). This agenda was adopted by both China and the European Union. It included the goal of establishing a comprehensive Investment Agreement (CAI), and focused on establishing international standards related to equal market access (EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, 2013). The focus of the EU-China Strategic Agenda is mainly on removing barriers for trade in general, and not specifically on addressing perceived unfair trade practices.

By 2019, the focus of EU foreign policy had shifted more towards attempting to address perceived unfair trade practices. In the eyes of the European Union, the economic and protectionist practices of China affect the way EU companies can compete with their Chinese counterparts. The 2019 EU-China strategic outlook for example notes the lack of a level playing field concerning EU and other countries' companies competing on the Chinese market (European Commission, 2019a). The Chinese government shields its businesses from competition, subsidizes them heavily and severely limits access for foreign companies or forces them to undergo a joint venture with Chinese companies (European Commission, 2019a, p. 6).

Throughout the years of the Trump presidency the EU has been undertaking steps to counter these perceived trade imbalances. In April 2019 a new European-wide framework for screening foreign investments was established which started operations in October 2020. This framework enables EU member states but also the EU commission to address any security concerns linked to investments from countries outside of the European Union (European Commission, 2020a, p. 74). Another step in countering China has been the anti-dumping measures the EU imposed on among other things steel from China. The yearly General Reports on EU activities of 2016, 2017 and 2018 all mention the discussion and implementation of anti-dumping measures (European Commission, 2017, 2018c, 2019c).

Besides anti-dumping measures, the policy towards China has increasingly included tackling other disruptive aspects of Chinese businesses on foreign markets. As mentioned in

the overview, the 2019 trilateral trade talks between The United States, the European Union and Japan included talks on countries such as China who subsidize state-owned enterprises and attempt to dominate the global market or disrupt other markets (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2019).

Both the European and US attitude towards China shifted during the Trump administration, and the Trump administration had similar goals of combatting perceived trade imbalances. The approach the United States took in implementing similar and much more extreme measures led to a different outcome however. During the Trump administration the United States and China became involved in a trade war with both countries implementing severe tariffs in order to attempt to influence one another (Larres, 2020). Where the EU approach was to change their own policies to protect from unfair economic practices as shown with the examples mentioned above, the United States actively attempted to force China to agree on trade conditions more favourable to the United States. This has been a more general trend of Trump's approach to foreign economic policy, as Trump also targeted the EU by implementing tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from the EU in 2018 (Harte, 2018). The EU responded with a complaint at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and by instituting rebalancing measures on specific US exports (Harte, 2018).

In 2017 the Trump administration and China concluded a preliminary trade deal related to, among other things, market access for US industries in China (Denyer & Paletta, 2017). according to Larres (2020) this trade deal turned out to have little effect, and trade disputes between China and the United States continued throughout the Trump presidency (Larres, 2020). The EU did not follow the United States in its clash with China however, as the earlier mentioned CAI agreement also shows. Even when the United States in 2020 threatened China with further sanctions over the tighter Chinese control over Hongkong, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Joseph Borrell did not think implementing sanctions would be the solution (Lau et al., 2020).

Another reason for the EU to institute more protectionist policies was the COVID pandemic. The pandemic highlighted the fragility of the global market and the impact it can have on the EU, as China restricted the exports of personal protective equipment which caused major shortages in the European Union and the rest of the world (Bown, 2021a). The European Union started several EU-level projects to combat the shortage and restricted the export of personal protective equipment (European Commission, 2021a, 2022). This course of action can still be seen as the increase of measures to combat trade imbalances with China.

Yet they are also stand-alone protectionist measures from the EU itself to protect certain crucial aspects of the industry, signalling the ever present contention between the value of free trade and the protection of domestic interests. Secondly, the increase in authority granted to the EU to act in this regard during COVID could further indicate the perceived necessity for joint strategic action in the EU (Borrell, 2020). As the 2019 EU-China strategic outlook already explicitly mentions the perceived unfair trade practices, COVID only confirmed the relevance of the already existing shift in policy. The increase in protectionist policies of the EU and US in combatting perceived unfair trade practices of China cannot be explained by COVID.

Another example which shows that a clear shift in policy took place during the Trump presidency is the Strategic Action Plan on batteries, adopted in 2018 (European Commission, 2019a, p. 9). This plan is aimed at creating a more competitive and sustainable battery industry in Europe, which is of strategic importance in modernizing EU Industry (European Commission, 2019a, p. 9). Interestingly, the reasoning behind the plan is mostly aimed at increasing the competitiveness of EU industry and increasing the sustainability of production (European Commission, 2018a). Diversifying the supply, which relates to the influence a supplying country can have due to their strong hold on the global market is only mentioned once. This signals that in 2018 this was not yet perceived as a priority. This attitude changed during the Trump presidency however, with the 2020 Industrial Strategy of the EU explicitly mentioning retaining EU's sovereignty and strategic autonomy as reasoning for a joint industrial strategy (European Commission, 2020b). As this strategy was finalized in March 2020, the fragility of the global market as became apparent with COVID could not yet have been the reason for adopting it.

The examples show that during the Trump presidency the EU implemented several measures to protect itself from perceived unfair trade practices by China. While the US and EU had similar complaints over China's trade practices, the EU did not follow the United States in escalating to a trade war with China.

However, comparing two reports on the EU-China relations from the European Commission aimed at the European Parliament and Council from 2016 and 2019 does give an indication that the Trump presidency affected EU economic policy on China. The 2016 report only portrays the EU's conditions for fair economic practices, with no mention of any repercussions if China would not abide by these conditions (European Commission, 2016a). The 2019 report does explicitly mention that the EU should now 'seek more balanced and

reciprocal conditions governing the economic relationship' (European Commission, 2019a, p. 1). The timing of this change in attitude is further exemplified by the earlier mentioned measures the EU adopted. This suggests that there may have been an indirect effect on EU foreign economic policy caused by the changing geopolitical situation as a result of the attitude of the Trump administration towards China.

### **Comprehensive agreement on Investment**

One of the main agreements established during the Trump presidency between China and the European Union is the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). The two actors concluded negotiations on this agreement in December 2020 (European Commission, 2020a). This deal should ensure greater access to and more fair treatment on the Chinese market for EU companies. The deal also involves an agreement of China on more sustainable development and a commitment on combatting forced labour (European Commission, 2020a). Von der Leyen stated that the agreement was important in rebalancing the economic relationship with China, and an important landmark for the values-based trade agenda (European Commission, 2020a). This is therefore a good case to gauge what the attitude of the Trump administration was towards this deal and trade deals with China in general. Knowing the attitude of the Trump administration is key in concluding on what the influence of Trump has been on EU foreign policy towards China.

The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) was an agreement intended to level the playing field for EU companies in their access to the Chinese market compared to their Chinese counterparts' access in Europe (Grieger, 2020). The goal for the EU in negotiating the agreement was to obtain at least the same concessions from China that were agreed in the Phase One deal between China and the United States (Grieger, 2020).

The Phase One deal was struck by the Trump Administration in early 2020 (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2020). For the United States the goal of the Phase One deal was to obtain enforceable commitments from China in changing their economic and trade regime (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2020). The deal included a chapter on the protection of intellectual property rights, and prohibits the Chinese policy of forced transfer of technology from US companies to Chinese corporations when operating in China (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2020).

Even though the United States had already achieved an agreement with China, whether or not China would abide by it was still unclear when the European Union was still negotiating the CAI (Grieger, 2020). In September 2020 the European Parliament's committee on International Trade stated in a briefing that the impact of the final agreement was expected to be limited (Grieger, 2020). The briefing concludes this by looking at similar Chinese negotiations with other countries where the type of agreements the EU was looking for were mostly missing. Furthermore the argument was made that as it was still unknown whether the similar US-China Phase One deal that Trump made could be enforced, getting reliable concessions from China would be difficult (Grieger, 2020). Despite this, on December 2020 China and the European Union were able to agree to the Agreement on Investment (CAI) (European Commission, 2020a).

Whether or not CAI would have had any significant impact is unknown, as the European Parliament never ratified CAI due to the deteriorating relations between China and the EU the following year. In March 2021 the European Union issued sanctions on Chinese officials who were involved with the internment camps in Xinjiang, in a joint action with the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (Yuen Yee, 2022). China responded with retaliatory sanctions against EU officials, after which the European Union suspended ratification talks in May of 2021 (Yuen Yee, 2022). This was not a formal suspension, but it was mostly caused by the main political parties in the European Parliament refusing to even debate the ratification as long as the sanctions were in place (Euronews, 2021). The initial sanctioning of Chinese officials can be seen as the first spark which eventually escalated to at least delaying the ratification.

Even though the CAI was never ratified, the relevance of the initial agreement on CAI lies in the negative reaction that followed from the United States shortly after the conclusion of negotiations in December 2020. The deputy national security advisor of Trump heavily criticized the deal, stating that the deal shows that it was not Trump that was the barrier for increased transatlantic cooperation, but rather key European officials (Greene, 2021).

The negative response from the United States is notable because, as previously mentioned, the United States and China signed the US-China Phase One deal in early 2020. According to Bown (2021b) of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, this deal had objectives similar to those of the CAI deal with the European Union (Bown, 2021b). The negative response of the US may therefore in part not be related to the content of the deal, but rather purely to the lack of consultation between the United States and Europe on finalizing



CAI. Some authors even see this as a strategic victory for China as it drives a wedge between the US and EU (Grieger, 2021)(Dempsey, 2021)(Barfield, 2021 This viewpoint is included in a briefing to the European Parliament, with for example Noah Barkin stating that the EU and US differ in the view that economic and broader strategic interests can be separated (Barkin, 2021, as cited in Grieger, 2021). He goes on to state that the deal is a clear sign of the EU embracing strategic autonomy after four years of Trump (Grieger, 2021). Claude Barfield (2021) even goes as far as stating that the agreement hinders the possible reset of transatlantic relations with the Biden Administration (Barfield, 2021, as cited in Grieger, 2021).

The reaction from the then Biden's to-be national security advisor Jake Sullivan on Twitter underlines Barfield's point. On X/Twitter Sullivan reacted to a Reuters article that the CAI was almost finalized, stating that "The Biden-Harris administration would welcome early consultations with our European partners on our common concerns about China's economic practices" (Sullivan, 2020). These and other remarks made by US officials create the vain that the EU has tried to rush the finalization of CAI to make sure the deal was done before Biden took office (Mitchell & Manson, 2021). EU officials have refuted this however, stating that the German Chancellor communicated early on that the deal must get done in 2020 (Mitchell & Manson, 2021).

Even though these comments were made by a future Biden-official rather than Trump-official, it shows that there is a general expectation that the United States is consulted in these type of trade deals. This difference in expectation of US actors and new geopolitical reality shows that there is indeed a significant change in how EU conducts its foreign economic policy. The earlier mentioned comments by some actors framing this as a win for China by driving a wedge between the EU and US further underline the significance of the change in policy.

There are indications that the comment by Sullivan affected EU actors, with the Polish foreign minister stating about CAI on Twitter/X later on the same day that "we need more consultations and transparency bringing our transatlantic allies on board" (Rau, 2020). As there was no consultation between the US and EU on finalizing the deal, there was no direct influence from the Trump presidency or the United States in general in this course of action of the EU. Even the joint US-EU sanctions in March 2021 that led to suspension of ratification cannot be framed as a US ploy to cancel the deal, as the EU led the way in initiating the sanctions (Al Jazeera, 2021) (Muhammad, 2021)(Wintour, 2021).What it does show however,

is that during and after the Trump presidency the EU aimed for increased autonomy in its foreign policy.

### **Intellectual property rights**

Chinese companies try to gain advantage on the global market through the theft of intellectual property rights (IPR). The infringement of IPR is facilitated by the forced transfer of knowledge in China itself. This happens when foreign companies coming to the Chinese market are forced by the Chinese government to grant ownership or usage rights of their technology to Chinese corporations (European Union External Action Service, 2018).

Both the European Union and the United States have accused China or at least Chinese companies of unfair practices related to IPR. In the years before the Trump presidency however, for the EU the approach in combatting this was mainly related to cooperation with China. The 'EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda' agreed to by the two actors in 2013 already mentioned IPR protections, but here the focus is merely on the practice of IPR violations in society without any mention of the Chinese government being the cause of it (EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, 2013). Four years later the EU in 2017 report maintains a similar tone, focusing on assistance programs with China to combat the infringement of IPR (European Commission, 2018c, p.64). In 2017 the European Commission even launched the programme IPKEY China to enhance EU-China cooperation and attempt to converge Chinese IPR standards to those of the EU (EUIPO, 2022). These reports show the focus of the EU on cooperation with China in combatting IPR violations in that period. Another example is the 2016 strategy of the EU on foreign policy, where the EU states it seeks greater cooperation with China on high-end technology (European Commission, 2016b, p. 38).

For the Trump administration, the infringement of IPR was seen as a more deliberate aspect of the Chinese approach to international trade. In 2017, the Trump administration started an investigation of Chinese laws and practices on this subject (*President Donald J. Trump is protecting*, 2020). The reasoning behind this was that according to the administration China had implemented laws and practices to encourage the transfer of US technology and intellectual property to Chinese enterprises (*President Donald J. Trump is protecting*, 2020). In the same year Trump agreed to a trade deal with China, but here the issue of intellectual property was not really addressed (Larres, 2020). This shows that cooperation on specific issues was still possible. According to Larres (2020) the implications of the deal were very

minor even though Trump framed the deal as the most consequential US-Chinese engagement in history (Boak, 2017).

During the Trump presidency, the attitude of the EU evolved somewhat towards a more direct approach in combatting IPR infringements. In 2018 the EU used the WTO dispute settle mechanism to launch a procedure related to the transfer of technology, which relates to China forcing companies aspiring to enter the Chinese market to effectively share the relevant technology with Chinese firms (European Commission, n.d.-a).

The EU still attempted to combat IPR infringements through direct cooperation with China however. In 2019 China and the EU concluded negotiations on an agreement related to intellectual property rights. The negotiations led to a bilateral agreement to protect 100 European so called Geographical Indications in China, and likewise 100 Chinese counterparts in the European Union. Geographical Indications are specific types of products, and the treaty is made to try and ensure the quality of these products as consumers must continue to be able to trust the authenticity and origin of the products. This cooperation already started in 2006 and was expanded in 2020 (European Commission, 2019b). Important to note is that this agreement mainly involved agricultural products and was less related to high-tech or other crucial industries.

Despite this agreement, there is a clear shift in EU approach towards China in protecting the IPR of its companies. In finalizing the Horizon Europe programme, EU's research and innovation framework programme for 2021-2027, a specific article was added aimed at protecting EU's strategic assets. In order to be able to safeguard these assets and the autonomy and security of the EU, the Horizon Programme may limit participation to third countries. The programme does involve cooperation with China, but it for the first time explicitly mentions that excluding countries is allowed in the name of safeguarding EU interests and the promotion of EU strategic autonomy (European Commission, n.d.-b). This new attitude of the European Union shows a convergence towards the stance of the Trump administration on IPR.

In 2020 the Trump administration took more direct action in combatting IPR infringements by focusing on the aspects that could be addressed by domestic laws. This was done by blocking access to the United States for certain Chinese graduate level (or above) nationals (*President Donald J. Trump is protecting*, 2020). This was done as the Trump administrations suspected that China used graduate students to steal intellectual property and

technology from the United States (*President Donald J. Trump is protecting*, 2020). Combatting IPR infringements was also included in the Phase One trade deal which the United States and China agreed to in 2020 (Economic And Trade Agreement, 2020). As earlier commitments of China towards respecting the intellectual property rights of US companies lacked enforcement, this agreement should have remedied this. The agreement states that China is required to issue an action plan indicating how and when it will implement the obligations related to intellectual property rights (Goodman et al., 2020). While this shows that not just the EU but also the US was capable of getting to an agreement with China, it remains important to note that this was only done after several years of economic conflict.

The steps taken by the European Union and the United States show a converging of approaches towards combatting IPR infringements by China. The European Union before the Trump presidency was mainly focused on bettering trade conditions with China through cooperation which it perceived as being beneficial for both actors. Later however the EU approach evolved towards more direct attempts to persuade China to alter course. The Trump administration from the start directly blamed the Chinese government itself for the infringements, but did in the end attempt to come to a bilateral agreement.

The steps outlined in this section also show the lack of coordination between the EU and US on this issue. The two actors did pledge to coordinate with one another and the WTO in combatting what they perceived as unfair trade practices concerning IPR in a 2018 meeting between Trump and the president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker (European Commission, 2018b). After both the US and EU's separate WTO procedures against China were launched no mutually agreed solutions were formulated however (Busch, 2020). A year later during the 2019 trilateral meeting between the EU, US and Japan a joint statement did repeat the concerns of the three actors on this issue. The statement mentioned their concerns on forced technology transfer policies in general, but did not even directly name China (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2019). On the topic of intellectual property rights the conclusion can therefore be made that as there was no cooperation on IPR infringements there was no real influence from the Trump administration on EU's IPR policies towards China.

### **What type of change has occurred & addressing the hypothesis**

In establishing whether or not the Trump administration influenced the foreign policy of the European Commission towards China, first the concepts of critical juncture and incremental change have to be applied to assess the extent of the change in policy that occurred. In all three subjects used to determine economic/trade policies a convergence of US and European policy has become apparent. There has been a change in EU foreign economic and industrial policy towards China, but this change has not been sufficient to determine that a critical juncture has occurred. Even though the general tendency of EU policy has shifted away somewhat from cooperation with and towards protection from China, the European Union is still willing to cooperate where possible. The CAI is a clear example of this. The eventual cancellation of CAI is not relevant here as it was cancelled for reasons other than concerns on economic cooperation (Yuen Yee, 2022). The shift towards more protectionist policies aimed at China that occurred during the Trump presidency was therefore not irreversible. Subsequently, returning to a different policy option is not a lot less likely than before which means a clear indicator of a critical juncture is lacking (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007).

This may have changed with the shift in economic policies towards China due to more geopolitical reasons such as the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, after which European countries have reassessed their connections and dependency with China (Bo, 2022). This reassessment of relations with China as noted by Bo (2022) could point towards a next step in a feedback mechanism, in which continuous worsening of relations with China are more likely (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p. 12). There is however not sufficient evidence to conclude that the policies implemented by the EU during the relevant period of the Trump administration have caused or are a consequence of a feedback mechanism. The conclusion that no critical juncture occurred is reinforced by the apparent lack of coordination between the United States and the European Union on economic and trade policies concerning China. The direct development of a policy is determined in crucial moments (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). As no coordination took place, no real direct influence can be determined and therefore the Trump administration did not cause a critical moment of policy change.

This line of reasoning does not yet explain whether or not a negative critical juncture occurred however. The combined effect of the Trump administration, COVID and other factors may still have increased the possibility and plausibility of change, which could indicate a negative critical juncture (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Even if this has been the

case, it would not merely be because of the Trump administration but also because of COVID and the increasing political and economic power of China. The empirical evidence does not point towards the possibility of change decreasing merely because of the influence of the Trump administration.

Having established that no critical juncture occurred, the hypothesis related to economic/industrial policies can be addressed further. This was: *As EU foreign policy towards China on trade and combatting economic vulnerabilities already mirrored US interests, the Trump foreign policy only contributed to incremental change in EU economic foreign policy.*

During the Trump presidency there have been several indications that EU foreign policy has changed. As it happened without being in response to a major exogenous shock or event, this change could be categorized as incremental change (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The changes in policy of the European Commission that have become apparent in the internal documents and the yearly progress reports are not substantial enough separately to constitute a major change. Nevertheless the conclusion can be reached that a threshold effect occurred as the combined effect of the changes in foreign policy are sufficient to substantiate a clear shift in policy (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). An example of this is the shift in focus towards addressing perceived unfair trade practices rather than on removing barriers on trade, when comparing the 2013 strategic agenda and the 2019 EU-China strategic outlook. Comparing the 2020 industrial strategy and the 2018 action plan on batteries shows a similar shift towards focusing on sovereignty and strategic autonomy where this was less relevant before. This can be characterised as the modal type displacement, as existing rules are being replaced by old ones (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). There is also evidence of layering, where new rules complement existing rules and in doing so change how the structure of rules behaves in practice (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). During the Trump administration the European Commission gradually implemented more protectionist policies while at the same time continuing existing programs such as the IPKEY focused on enhancing EU-China cooperation on IPR standards.

Finally to test the hypothesis an assessment is needed on whether the Trump administration sufficiently contributed to the previously established incremental change of the foreign economic/industrial policy of the European Commission. As much of the changes in foreign policy occurred before the COVID pandemic highlighted further fragilities in the global market, COVID alone cannot explain the change in foreign policy by the EU.

Even though there has been little to no cooperation between the EU and US on foreign and economic policies towards China, the policies of the European Commission have moved closer to those of the United States. The CAI agreement and the 2019 bilateral agreement on 100 Geographical Indications show that the European Union continues to attempt to cooperate with China towards addressing the perceived trade imbalances, despite the increased focus on protectionist measures by the EU. As the United States had a similar approach as shown by the Phase One Trade deal, the interests of the European Union increasingly do mirror the interests of the United States.

This means that the hypothesis can be confirmed, and the Trump administration did contribute to incremental change in EU foreign policy. Obtaining at least the same concessions of China as the US has got in the Phase One deal was the very goal of the EU in negotiating the CAI agreement, which shows the influence of the Trump administration on EU foreign economic policy. The way in which the CAI agreement was reached strengthens this conclusion. The disdain of US officials on the EU deciding on CAI without consulting the United States shows that the change in EU foreign policy towards focusing on autonomy directly relates to a change in relations between the United States and the European Union. As the burden of proof here does not involve proving that the Trump administration was the only or even the main influence on EU foreign policy, this is sufficient in confirming the hypothesis.

## **Geopolitics**

Even before the Trump administration started, the European Commission already had the ambition to play a more important role in geopolitics. There are multitude of reasons for this ambition, one of the reasons being the Ukraine crisis and subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Novaky, 2015, p.244). According to Novaky (2015), the EU's actions after the 2014 crisis such as the deployment of a civilian mission do show a geopolitical logic as driver of the actions of the European Union (Novaky, 2015, p.247). These ambitions may have been hindered however by ongoing disagreement on foreign policy between member states which limited the EU's ability to act decisively.

In order to get a complete picture of the influence of the Trump administration on EU geopolitical policies, three different aspects will be discussed. First the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative will be used as a case to determine the EU's policies towards this Chinese

geopolitical project and how these policies relate to those of the United States. The second aspect is multilateral cooperation, focused on how the EU conducted itself towards China in international affairs but also in cooperation with China in a changing international order. Finally, the topic of the South China Sea will be discussed as most relevant case related to defence and security.

### **Belt and Road Initiative**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) comprises a collection of political, economic and cultural projects. It was launched in 2013, and as of 2023 more than 100 countries and 31 international organizations have signed documents or agreements related to aspects of the BRI (Amineh, 2023, p.2). A few of the main goals of BRI are to integrate Europe and Asia on trade, finance and policy coordination (Amineh, 2023, p.2). According to Amineh (2023) the BRI is considered to be China's alternative to the existing neoliberal model of globalization. According to Bin et al., (2019) the United States and other western nations are anxious about BRI, as there are concerns that China has strategic motivations for the promotion of BRI. It is therefore a suitable case to understand to what extent foreign policy of the EU towards this geopolitical strategy of China has been influenced by the Trump administration.

### **US position and policies on BRI**

According to Ye (2022), the first few years after BRI was launched US analysts mostly dismissed the significance of BRI. As it became clear that BRI was actively being pursued by China in Asia and the rest of the world, observers in the US focused extensively on BRI and categorized the initiative as a Chinese policy linked to expansionist ideas aimed at undermining geopolitical interests of the United States (Ye, 2022, p. 120). During the Trump administration the United States reacted even more alarmingly and negatively towards BRI, underscoring perceived military involvements in projects related to BRI (Ye, 2022, p. 120). In the 2018 National Defence Strategy, China is referred to as a 'strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours...' (Mattis, 2018). This specific label of military involvement was useful for the United States as it enabled the US to penalize commercial actors by pointing towards national security concerns (Ye, 2022, p. 120).

This alarming rhetoric did not translate into a coherent strategy however. Quite the opposite, as Trump withdrew from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) on his first day in office



(Meltzer, 2017). The TPP was a trade agreement between 12 nations finalized by the Obama administration, with the goal of expanding trade and investment (Meltzer, 2017). The TPP was a critical part of the US effort to establish its own rules in the region involving trade. By withdrawing from the TPP, the Trump administration therefore lost an ability to curtail the strategic influence of BRI on third countries (Meltzer, 2017).

Furthermore, while closing a trade deal with China in May 2017 the United States agreed to send a delegation to the One Belt One Road Summit which took place in the same month (Phillips, 2017)(Donnan & Mitchell, 2017). In a list of initial actions agreed to by the US and China after a trade related dialogue in May 2017 the US mentions that it recognizes the importance of BRI (Office of Public Affairs, 2017). In doing so, the Trump administration effectively embraced the project diplomatically or at least contributed to its legitimacy.

Besides spurring up negative perceptions of BRI, the Trump administration has not formed a coherent strategy for countries that are in need for funding or infrastructure and are therefore vulnerable for BRI (Bader et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there have been limited efforts by the Trump administration to provide policy alternatives for BRI in third countries. The first main example of this is the Build Act, which focuses on assisting developing countries while at the same time promoting foreign policy objectives of the United States (Bandura & Runde, 2018). A second policy initiative was prosper Africa, aimed at increasing trade and investment between the United States and Africa (USAID, n.d.)(Ashbee, 2020). According to Ashbee (2020) these policies show that while the Trump administration defined itself through unilateralist ideas of hard power, it had to fall back to some extent to multilateralism and soft power strategies. Ashbee (2020) concludes however that the policy efforts of Trump were too limited and fragmented in character.

#### European position and policies on BRI

The European answer to the BRI has been the Global Gateway in 2021, preceded by the Connectivity Strategy in 2018 (Okano-Heijmans, 2023, p.23). The Global Gateway focuses on the challenges caused by a rising and developing China, with more specific focus on the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (Okano-Heijmans, 2023, p. 23). It attempts to provide countries that have an urgent need for major financing on for example climate and infrastructure with fair and favourable terms to limit the risk of increased debt (European Commission, 2021b). Especially the section in the 2019 Global Gateway stating ‘It aims to

forge links and not create dependencies” shows that this strategy is aimed towards the risks associated with BRI (European Commission, 2021b).

One of the main goals of the Connectivity Strategy has been to enhance the perspective that ‘infrastructure projects should be about creating fair economic opportunities, not about geopolitics’ (European Union External Action Service, 2019). With the implementation of these strategies, the European Union has continued to balance economic interests of the EU with geopolitics. The 2019 progress report on the 2016 Global Strategy provides proof of this, as it notes the challenges in trying to reap the benefits of cooperating with China while simultaneously managing the issues posed by China being a superpower and systemic competitor (European Union External Action Service, 2019).

According to Okano-Heijmans (2023) implementation on the 2018 Strategy was lagging in actual progress, which is why the 2021 Global Gateway was launched to once again focus the agenda on this issue. This point would indicate that during the Trump presidency the EU has not been able to book significant progress in shaping trade and countering BRI, as the Trump presidency ended in January 2021. As the focus of this thesis is on policies of the European Commission and not specifically on their implementation by the European Council, the Parliament or member states, the mere adoption of the strategy in 2018 is sufficient to show the European efforts.

#### US influence on EU policy towards BRI

The literature on the US reaction towards the BRI shows that even though the Trump administration has publicly criticized the BRI, there is no coherent strategy on countering BRI. This also means that no coherent plan exists to cooperate with the EU or influence the EU into countering the Belt and Road initiative. Any influence on what the EU attitude and policies towards BRI have been are therefore merely related to the absence of US leadership on this issue.

In order to establish whether there has been indirect influence, evidence is needed to ensure that either the adoption of the Connectivity Strategy and the Global Gateway or its contents have been influenced by the Trump administration. However the 2016 Global Strategy already noted the ambition of the EU to pursue a coherent approach to China’s ‘connectivity drives westwards’ (European Commission, 2016b). As this is a mere 3 years after China announced BRI, the adoption of the Global Gateway and the Connectivity Strategy seem to be more direct responses to the effects of BRI rather than indirect responses towards Trump’s position

on BRI. This would indicate that the Trump administration is not the main reason for the EU's aspiration to develop rival trade and investment strategies.

The importance of the EU's strategies has increased however because of the Trump administration. According to Okano-Heijmans (2023) the development of the strategies indicates that the EU is becoming more autonomous from the US, and that it was in part Trump's attitude towards global governance that initiated this trend. This conclusion can also be reached by looking at the strategies themselves, as cooperation with the United States is rarely mentioned in either the Connectivity Strategy or the Global Gateway (European Commission, 2018d, 2021b). Both do include a mention of the United States, but in neither the US is mentioned as a partner in improving connections with Asia or in trying to shape infrastructure investment and conditions for trade with third countries. This exemplifies the more autonomous posture of the EU towards countering BRI, as there is little coordination with the United States.

The conclusion that can be drawn is that the adoption of the Connectivity Strategy and Global Gateway on its own does not constitute major policy change by the EU. The Trump administration did however influence the importance of the strategies and its contents, as the strategies show that the EU is becoming more autonomous in its foreign policy towards China.

### **Multilateral cooperation**

While countries and actors can have a different understanding of the concept, multilateral cooperation in general refers to the way countries and actors engage with one another through alliances in pursuing a shared goal. The attitude of the Trump administration towards multilateral cooperation was radically different from that of the European Union, as Trump criticized many key multilateral institutions (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019). Instead Trump preferred bilateral deals driven by short term-interests (Kolmaš & Kolmašová, 2019). As according to Feng (2020) China is eager to replace the US as constructive participant in multilateralism, the US could indirectly influence how the EU conducts itself internationally in response to this shift in relations.

### **US position and policies on multilateral cooperation & China**

The transactional views of the Trump administration have changed the way the United States conducts itself on the global stage. Schreer (2019) sums up the attitude of the Trump administration towards Europe with the quote: ‘‘The Trump administration has proceeded to criticise the very foundation of the liberal international order while simultaneously calling for European allies to accept and follow the US’s new leadership model based on a narrow, nationalistic ‘America First’ posture’’ (Schreer, 2019, p.12).

### EU’s position and policies on multilateral cooperation & China

Generally the European Union has been very supportive of multilateral cooperation through international organizations. The 2016 Global Strategy notes the interest of the EU in contributing to a peaceful and sustainable world based on the key principle of multilateralism and defended by the United Nations as main institution (European Commission, 2016b, p. 8). This shows that around the time the Trump presidency started, the EU was very much supportive of the rules-based global order. As the EU is made up of medium to small-sized countries the European Union notes the importance of this system in order to contain power politics (European Commission, 2016b, p.15).

The 2019 report reviewing the 2016 Global Strategy shows that the EU perceives a change in international relations. According to the report, there are no longer clear groups of like-minded nations working together as allies on all issues. Rather, pragmatic partnerships for a specific issue can work in getting to solutions (European Union External Action Service, 2019, p. 20). This would indicate that the EU perceives that there are no longer clear allies in multilateral cooperation or protecting the international system. As the latter is especially deemed important by the EU, the 2019 report also notes that the EU has increased its financial contribution to the United Nations (European Union External Action Service, 2019, p. 15).

The 2019 report reviewing the 2016 Global Strategy explicitly mentions the increased contribution ‘at a time when others have reduced or cancelled their contributions’’ (European Union External Action Service, 2019, p.15). This comment is explicitly aimed at the United States, as the 2019 report only mentions one example of EU funding for the United Nations. This example is funding for the UN program UNRWA, the exact program for which the Trump administration eliminated funding in 2018 (Bruton & de Luce, 2018)(European Union External Action Service, 2019, p.15).

In the same 2019 report a different attitude of the European Commission towards China becomes clear as well, as China is dubbed a ‘systemic competitor’ (European Union External

Action Service 2019, p. 15). The same term is used again in the 2019 EU-China Strategic outlook (European Commission, 2019a, p.1). The strategic outlook makes clear that China is to be regarded as a key global actor and leading technological power, and no longer as a developing country (European Commission, 2019a, p.1). The use of the term systemic competitor is notable, as the 2016 Global Report was less critical of China. In the Global Report the EU merely expressed that it aimed for ‘A coherent approach to China’s connectivity drives westwards’ (European Commission, 2016b, p. 37-38).

While by 2019 China was seen as a systemic competitor, the EU continued to regard China as a strategic partner on many issues and as important actor in contributing to maintaining the rules-based international order (European Commission, 2019a, p.1). In 2018 it continued to deliberate with China on issues related to their common security interests (European Commission, 2019c, p.118). This involved the Iran nuclear deal, Afghanistan and North Korea. In the EU in 2020 report the EU even called the EU-China cooperation as a major factor in securing the Iran nuclear agreement (European Commission, 2021a, p.97).

In 2020 the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Joseph Borrell stated that “China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner” (Borrell, 2020). According to Borrell there is a geopolitical component of China’s willingness to help Europe during the Covid outbreak. A struggle for influence is occurring with different actors trying to push their narrative. In this struggle Borrell also stated that the EU has seen attempts to discredit the European Union and even some instances in which a stigma was created involving the myth that all Europeans were carriers of the virus (Borrell, 2020).

The criticism of the EU on China’s behaviour in international relations goes much further than merely critique on China’s discrediting of the EU. In the 2019 EU-China Strategic outlook there is a clear criticism of the EU towards China in pointing out biases in China’s commitment to upholding a fair and equitable global governance (European Commission, 2019a, p.2). Even though the EU continued with their commitment to engaging with China in upholding the rules-based international order, the Union was of the opinion that China’s view on multilateralism is sometimes based on a different understanding of the rules-based order. The 2019 Strategic Outlook does underline that the EU and thereby the European Commission is of the opinion that some of China’s requests for reform are based on legitimate concerns (European Commission, 2019a, p. 2). However, the report notes that China has not been willing to accept the rules related to the responsibility and accountability that it should have in its new role as rule-maker (European Commission, 2019a, p. 2).

This shift towards more direct criticism in the direction of China is also apparent from the rhetoric of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Joseph Borrell. In a letter to EU foreign ministers in 2019 Borrell wrote that there has been a rebirth of geostrategic competition (Barigazzi, 2019). According to Borrell the EU had the choice of 'becoming a player, a truly geostrategic actor, or being mostly in the background' (Borrell, 2019, as cited in Barigazzi, 2019).

While all the earlier-mentioned changes in policy and attitude towards are a definite shift, the shift itself is not as sudden as it would appear. As for example the reports noting China as a systemic rival are released in 2019, it coincides with a change in administration at the European Commission. In 2019 Ursula von der Leyen became Commission president, leading a new College of Commissioners (Bayer, 2019). From the start von der Leyen made clear that she would lead a more geopolitical Commission, taking time to focus on external action during each week's Commissioners meeting (Bayer, 2019). This translates to a push for a more autonomous EU as well, as the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 states that the EU should "increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future" (European Council, 2019).

#### US influence on EU's position on multilateral cooperation & China

The start of a new Commission administration could normally be seen as a critical juncture in EU foreign policy towards China, as significant change is possible after an election. Instead it is more a type of threshold effect, as the changes come in a response to a more slowly changing climate of international relations. As the attitude of the new Commission can subsequently be influenced by the geopolitical situation, Trump could still have been a factor of influence. Since the attitude and policies of the EU, United States and China towards specific international institutions have not been analysed, it is difficult to draw a distinct conclusion. While it is clear that the increased geostrategic competition mentioned by Borrell is partially caused by Trump, this link on its own is not enough to substantiate influence.

#### Defence & South China Sea

Even though there is extensive cooperation between member states, the European Union and thereby the European Commission has limited authority in the policy area of defence. But since defence and military engagement are critical aspects of geopolitical policies, including

the evolution of defence policy is relevant. The topic of South China Sea is a suitable lens to observe these policies, as the Chinese actions related to this subject are clear examples of the Chinese perspective on multilateralism. These Chinese actions are based on disputes between China and other countries in the region over ownership of the South China Sea. These disputes involve Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam (Chang, 2020).

### US policies and actions in South China Sea

Even though earlier examples have shown a lack of leadership by the US under the Trump administration, with US involvement in security and the South China Sea this has not been the case. During the Obama presidency, the US policy towards the maritime disputes in the South China Sea already became firmer. This was shown by the resumption of freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea (Chang, 2020). While the Trump administration briefly halted these exercises, they were resumed and significantly expanded when relations between the two countries worsened (Chang, 2020). Furthermore, the US started to react more directly to Chinese actions in the region. In April 2019 for example the US reacted with a showing of military force when Chinese coast guard ships harassed Malaysian ships in Malaysia's own exclusive economic zone (Chang, 2020).

In the latter years of the Trump presidency this attitude continued with more and larger military exercises and finally culminated in the US formally rejecting Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea in 2020 (Chang, 2020).

The US and EU share similar viewpoints on China's actions in the South China Sea. This topic was mentioned in the joint foreign ministers communique after G7 meetings in 2017, 2018, and 2019. The contents of these communiqués are similar throughout these years, underlining the shared concern on the situation in the South China Sea (G7 Foreign Ministers Communiqué, 2017, 2018, 2019). The communiqués remain rather general and vague however, merely noting the risk unilateral actions have on undermining the international rules-based maritime order. While the communiqués don't mention any specific countries, the 2018 and 2019 communique include examples of instability. These examples include the threat of force and large-scale land reclamation and building of outposts (G7 Foreign Ministers Communiqué, 2017, 2018, 2019). As China is perceived to be guilty of both these examples, the communiqués make clear that China's actions increase tensions and are in violation of international law.

## EU policies and actions in South China Sea

As the European Union as an institution does not have a military of its own, its attitude towards China cannot be measured in actions but merely in policies. The 2016 Global Strategy already hints at geopolitical aspirations considering defence in general, as it states that “for the EU soft power and hard power go hand in hand”. The reasoning behind this view is that hard power is needed to maintain credibility in engaging with other global actors (European Commission, 2016b, p.4). Specifically credibility towards the US is mentioned as well, as the Strategy notes that a more viable and coherent European Defence is necessary to maintain the transatlantic relationship (European Commission, 2016b, p.20). This credibility can be gained by building a more credible defence and security by increasing expenditure (European Commission, 2016b, p.44). Still the Global Strategy maintains that the EU will continue with its focus towards soft power as well, as it ‘has always prided itself’ on this focus (European Commission, 2016b, p.4).

Specifically on the topic of the South China Sea the 2016 Global Strategy notes the aspiration of the European Union to contribute to maritime security in that region (European Commission, 2016b, p. 41). The goal of this aspiration is to contribute to the implementation of the UN Convention on the Law and the Sea. Specific disputes with this UN Convention are not mentioned in the 2016 Global Strategy. As contributing to the implementation of the UN Convention is the clear objective, the EU stance towards Chinese claims in the China Sea is made clear with this aspiration. The statement shows the caution in the EU attitude on this topic, deliberately avoiding to take side in territorial disputes in the South China Sea while still maintaining their support for international law (Duchâtel, 2016).

This attitude shifted during the period of the Trump presidency however. The 2019 Strategic Outlook of the EU does specifically mention the Chinese maritime claims, as well as the Chinese refusal to accept the arbitration rulings concerning the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (European Commission, 2019a, p.3). The outlook also sees these tensions as ‘standing in contrast to’ the Chinese insistence for representation on issues concerning the Arctic (European Commission, 2019a, p.3). The report on EU activities of 2020 again mentions EU support for a peaceful settlement of the South China Sea disputes, in accordance with the UN Convention on the law of the sea. Maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight are mentioned as well (European Commission, 2021a). In this report then the EU is no longer hesitant to directly name China as the culpable actor in this issue, a clear shift from 2016.



In 2020 the High Representative of the EU Joseph Borrell held a videoconference with foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in which he talked about among other things the South China Sea disputes (Borrell, 2020b). In this conference Borrell attempted to align with ASEAN by stating that the EU shares the will not to align with China or the US when it comes to the strategic rivalry between them (Borrell, 2020b). Borrell went on to state that the EU supports the efforts of ASEAN in constructing a legally binding Code of Conduct for the South China Sea (Borrell, 2020b). Here once again the aspiration of the European Commission to be an autonomous geopolitical actor becomes clear, as a position separate from the US and China is maintained on this issue. Borrell further mentions that both the EU and ASEAN want to maintain security and trade based on international agreements, and not with the principle of what Borrell (2020b) called ‘‘might makes right’’ (Borrell, 2020b).

#### US influence on EU policies

The G-7 example has shown that before and throughout the Trump presidency there were similarities in the EU and US policy and views towards the actions of China in the South China Sea. Yet, even though Borrell’s stance in the ASEAN conference shows that the EU aspired to be unaligned and autonomous on this issue, the policies of the US and EU on this issue are quite similar.

Similarity in views and policies does not indicate US influence on the EU however. During the Trump presidency, even the increased presence of US military activities in the South China Sea was deemed by experts to be inadequate. The conclusion of the US during the Trump presidency was therefore that allies were needed to perform these freedom of navigation exercises (Mishin, 2021, p.166). This form of cooperation does not indicate support for multilateral cooperation, as cooperation in this instance is rather bilateral and informal. This led to mainly France and Britain joining the freedom of navigation exercises, aiming to counter the claims of China over the South China Sea (Mishin, 2021, p. 166). While this does show that the Trump administration exerted influence in rallying support from the EU member state France, the actions of France were aligned with what was already established to be EU policy. As the EU already aspired to gain credibility by engaging in hard power politics as mentioned previously, France joining the freedom of navigation exercises does not constitute EU policy being influenced. This observation negates the need to further look into whether the institution of the European Commission was at all involved in the French decision to join, as influence is not established.

The convergence of EU and US policies and attitude towards China is therefore not caused by influence exerted by the Trump administration about this specific topic. The EU and its members simply lack the military capabilities to act on their values were the US is better capable to do so (Duchâtel, 2016). This lack of capabilities prevents the EU from being an autonomous actor on this issue.

The increasing power and assertiveness of China towards neighbouring countries may better explain the change in EU policy (Casarini, 2020). A separate reason for the change in policy of the EU towards China between the 2016 Global Strategy and the 2019 Strategic Outlook may also be the arbitration case started by the Philippines. In 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that China does not exercise exclusive control over the region, and that there is no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources in the area (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). Previously, the EU could note the importance of adhering to international law without naming a culpable party. With the arbitration that position would be untenable, as for the EU to uphold international law they have to adhere to the decisions of the arbitration as well. This change in impact of existing rules is an indication of the modal type drift, as change occurs due to external factors rather than a change in rules themselves (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009).

### **What type of change has occurred & addressing the hypothesis**

With the documentation that has been researched concerning geopolitics, it has become clear that during the period of the Trump administration EU foreign policy towards China has shifted even when observed separately from mere economic policies.

All three topics researched for this section show that this shift constitutes incremental change. Firstly the combined changes in rhetoric and in the different strategies comprised by the Commission show a threshold effect in the period of the Trump administration. The change in attitude and policy of the new Commission compared to the old one exemplifies this, as this is the result of existing changes in international relations. Secondly, the strategies adopted by the EU in trying to provide financing for third countries and thereby counter BRI further show layering as modal type of incremental change. This is a clear example of new rules being introduced to complement existing rules (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Finally, a combination of the continued actions of China, the arbitration case, shared views between EU and US and aspirations for more defensive capabilities by the EU culminate in the shift in attitude of the

EU towards China on the subject of the South China Sea. This again looks to be a threshold effect rather than a critical juncture, and therefore constitutes incremental change.

As there is no indication of a critical juncture, this means that the hypothesis related to geopolitics has been disproven. Instead the change in EU policy towards more autonomy has been incremental. This hypothesis was: The absence of US leadership and the criticism of the US towards multilateral cooperation causes a critical juncture in EU foreign policy as the EU becomes more autonomous in trying to preserve the current international system from China's perspective on multilateralism.

In order to answer the research question it needs to be established whether or not this incremental change has been at least partially caused by the Trump administration. With the topic of multilateral cooperation, no clear influence can be established. While it is not possible to determine that there has been no influence whatsoever, the start of a new EU commission and other geopolitical factors largely overshadow any influence exerted directly or indirectly by the Trump administration.

The section on multilateral cooperation did conclude however that the Trump administration contributed to the increased geostrategic competition. While this is not enough to establish influence when solely taking multilateral cooperation into account, it does align with the analysis of BRI. The course set by the European Commission in countering BRI through Global Gateway shows that the EU perceives the need to be more autonomous in its foreign policy towards China. The lack of cooperation with the United States is notable, and underlines the indirect influence of the Trump administration in the EU foreign policy towards China. This is exemplified by the course set by the European Commission in countering BRI through the Connectivity Strategy and Global Gateway. This course shows that the EU perceives the need to be more autonomous in its foreign policy towards China. The indirect influence therefore exists solely due to the absence of US leadership and the lack of coherent strategy of the US on the topic of BRI.

This lack of leadership is not visible on the topic of the South China Sea however. Here the Trump administration largely continued and even expanded the approach of the previous administration by performing freedom of navigation exercises. Even though the US maintained its leadership on this issue, EU views and policies towards China shifted towards more direct confrontation. Yet with the existing similarities on views and policies of the EU

and US combined with the arbitration case significant influence by the Trump administration on EU policies on this issue cannot be established.

While the BRI analysis did show influence of the Trump administration on EU foreign policy, this on its own is insufficient. The analyses of multilateral cooperation and the South China Sea did not lead to a clear conclusion of influence, and the BRI merely indicated indirect influence. Therefore this analysis cannot establish that the Trump administration has been a relevant factor in influencing EU policies concerning geopolitics.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined the influence of the Trump administration on the foreign policy of the EU due to either direct influence or indirect influence through Trump's attitude towards multilateralism and the international system. By taking a narrower focus on specifically the policies of the European Commission, a general stance and attitude of the European Union in international cooperation in both the economic and geopolitical realm has become clear. The general application of historical institutionalism combined with the concepts of critical junctures and incremental change has proven an adequate framework in including EU policies from before and during the Trump presidency and how these might have evolved.

The Trump administration surely has not been the only factor of influence in the EU's change in foreign policies towards China. The rising influence of China and other global trends and events such as the COVID pandemic have contributed to a changing perspective in the EU towards combatting perceived fragilities in the economy and be more assertive in international relations. The latter is visible through the adoption of the EU strategies providing an alternative for China's BRI.

By combining the results that have been established of both how the EU's economic/industrial policies and geopolitical-related policies have evolved the conclusion can however be reached that the Trump administration did have some effect on the EU's foreign policy towards China. The changes in these policies have been incremental, as the addition of new policies have rather complemented instead of replaced older institutions. Furthermore, it cannot be stated that the shift in EU foreign policy would not have taken place without the influence of the Trump administration.

Concerning economic/industrial policies separately, the influence of the Trump presidency on the incremental change of EU trade/industrial policy towards China can be established. Even though there has been no single massive change that shows the influence of the Trump administration, the changes towards protectionism cannot merely be explained by COVID and the increasing economic and political influence of China. The convergence of US and EU trade policy towards China and the goal of the EU to obtain similar concessions in negotiating CAI that the US acquired shows a degree of influence. The incremental change of EU economic/industrial policies away from merely cooperation with China and more towards

protection from China can therefore be attributed to the indirect influence of the attitude of the Trump administration towards China specifically and multilateral cooperation generally.

While the analysis on geopolitical policies has established an incremental change of EU policies, it cannot be concluded that this shift has really been influenced by the Trump administration. In just one of the three aspects of geopolitical policies analysed in this thesis has any influence become clear. This is the aspect of BRI, where the increased autonomy of the EU on this subject has been indirectly influenced by the Trump administration and its lack of leadership on the global stage. As BRI is a geopolitical strategy consisting of economic policies, this indirect influence does fit the conclusion of the analysis of economic policies mentioned before. When analysed as being part of geopolitical policies this conclusion cannot be reached however, as no influence has been established in the other two aspects of geopolitical policies. Other factors such as the increasing assertiveness of China can better explain the shift in EU geopolitical policies that occurred during the period of the Trump administration.

Even though the European Union does establish a foreign policy on many global issues, it often lacks the ability to act on them as the member states still have the final say on many foreign policy topics. Especially concerning defence the real life impact of the EU as an institution is still limited. Therefore any influence of the Trump administration on the EU does not by default translate in influence on how the EU or its member states act in practice. The conclusion of this thesis should therefore only be used as a general understanding of how the European Commission and thereby the EU itself perceives the role it aspires to play in international relations, and how this has changed because of the Trump administration.

A different limitation of this research has to do with the narrow focus on the European Commission as actor within the institutions that are involved in forming EU foreign policy. Influence from the Trump administration may still have taken place indirectly through US engagement with member states. Ministers of member states are often included in drafting general strategies of the European Commission, therefore additional indirect influence by the US on foreign policy of the European Union as formulated by the European Commission may have taken place through different means. As this research has not specifically included engagements between the Trump administration and member states, this type of indirect influence would have to be researched separately.

This limitation also has implications for the application of the theoretical concepts used in this thesis. The main sources of this thesis being general strategies and policies from the European Commission means that influence of the Trump administration is mainly concluded through circumstantial inferences. This limitation decreases the possibility of observing a critical juncture, as the adoption of more specific policies may still have become less or more likely because of the Trump administration even if there is no direct mention of changing international relations, increased autonomy or cooperation with the United States.

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