

# The Pandemic Of Covid-19 And Its Implication To The Sino-European Relation: Political Resilience Put To The Test

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## Abstract

In recent years, the growing assertiveness of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have drastically shifted the dynamics of the Sino-European relationship. With European values weakening due to the former US Trump administration, Brexit and Ukrainian war, the EU needs PRC's international engagement to build a resilient international political community. PRC also needs access to the European market to expand outwardly via Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to overcome the stagnation of its domestic economy. In this sensitive phase of Sino-European relations, the pandemic of Covid-19 hit the world. According to Nye and Keohane's complex interdependence theory, the social and economic interconnectedness of the world transcends intergovernmental relationships. During the pandemic, it rather brought a negative impact and weakened political resilience. European countries began to re-examine negative effects of complex interdependence, especially with PRC. The objective of this paper is to examine if the unique phenomenon of the pandemic has altered the trajectory of Sino-European relations. This literature is significant as there has been a lack of scholars in the Social Sciences exploring Sino-European relations specifically from an angle of the Covid-19 pandemic. Actors in question include PRC, the EU and EU member state governments, ambassadors, State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), and private firms. There is no clear theory on how actors react to pandemics in the complex interdependent modern era. Hence, I take an inductive approach by gathering relevant evidence. The main conclusion and implications of this literature are that the actual data shows a decline of Chinese FDIs (Foreign Direct Investments) in Europe after the pandemic. However, the EU increasingly recognizes PRC as a systematic rival and involved parties are raising concern on PRC's influence over Europe.

## History of Pandemics and Political resilience

To understand my research question, attention must be paid to how pandemics have affected political resilience in the past. The 2016 EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy defined political resilience as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crisis" (European Union, 2016).

Pandemics such as smallpox, cholera, measles, malaria, plague and polio have historically impacted political resilience. For example, the plague of Cyprian was one of decisive elements for the fall of Roman empire (Drezner, 2020), whilst Spain's invasion into Aztec and Inca civilisations was accelerated by a lethal combination of smallpox and measles. Due to the lack of immunity to yellow fever, Napoleon and his French army allowed Haiti's independence in 1812 (Snowden, 2019).

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In the modern era, an increase in human population, expansion into wildlife areas, and increased population densities have led to some medical experts emphasizing a thread of zoonotic spillover is now two or three times higher than 40 years ago, with approximately 200 events occurring annually. (Berger & Behn, 2020). Liberalists and neo-liberalists eagerly supported complex interdependence theory, especially since the globalisation in 1980s (Newman & Farrell, 2020). It suggested that international relations are not only driven by intergovernmental interactions with the focus on “security”, but also by trans- and non-governmental interactions through “economy and societies”. Additionally, states have incentives to reconcile issues through negotiation and settlement to avoid the damage of disrupted relations such as war (Keohane & Nye, 1997).

In the outburst of modern pandemics, this interdependence has brought a negative impact, with the dependence on the exchange of people and goods within the manufacturing process weakening political resilience. Some events in the 21st century include SARS in 2003, H1N1 in 2009, MERS in 2012, Ebola in 2014, and Zika in 2016 (Ma et al., 2020; Jamison et al., 2017; Berger & Behn, 2020; Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic was declared officially on March 11, 2020 (Bolder, 2020). COVID-19 brought over 557.9 million cases and took lives of over 6.3 million people globally as of July 2022 (World Health Organization, 2022). This re-opened a discussion to consider how to build a resilient political and economic entity in the face of pandemics. However, there is no clear theory on how actors react to pandemics in the complex interdependent modern era. Hence, I take an inductive approach by gathering relevant evidence from academic papers and journals.

## **Sino-European relation before the pandemic**

To analyze the research question, we need to understand the previous state of Sino-European relation. Their contemporary relation can be divided into 5 major time phases: Before 2003; 2003-2005; 2006-2009; 2010-2015; 2016 onwards.

### **1. Before 2003**

Tiananmen square incident in 1989 caused a rupture of the diplomatic relation until the late 1990s when the EU took an initiative to assist PRC towards modernisation such as its participation in WTO in 2001 (Chen, 2016) (European Commission, 1993). PRC continued its growth by applying “five principles of peaceful co-existence” and Deng’s Market reform and open-door policy (Xiaoping, 1974; Hu Jintao, 2009; Michalski and Pan, 2017).

### **2. 2003-2005**

After the announcement of the EU on a comprehensive strategic partnership with China in 2003, PRC began to place its demand for the EU’s abidance by the One-China principle and non-interference on the domestic politics, regarding issues like Taiwan, Tibet, and Dalai clique’s separatist activities (Foreign Ministry of China, 2003; Michalski & Pan, 2017). PRC was disappointed by the EU’s failure to lift the arms export ban in 2005, and market economy status not being accorded despite PRC being the EU’s biggest trade partner (Brown, 2018).

### **3. 2006-2009**

The decision in 2008-2009 of French, German and Danish Prime Minister meeting Dalai Lama caused a temporal break-down of the relation (Jakimów, 2019). The EU was struck by the

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financial crisis which weakened the EU's credibility as a cohesive political actor due to the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone. The EU began to be more accommodating towards PRC. PRC also has accelerated its FDI into European territory (Wang, 2020).

#### **4. 2010-2015**

With the solar panel conflict (2012-2014), PRC tactically deployed a well-targeted probe on the imports of European wine (The Financial Times, 2013; Li, 2013). It threatened to place an official trade complaint over luxury cars from the EU (Pepermans, 2017). It led the German government to turn against the EU Commission (Maull, 2016), and Beijing to treat Berlin as a proxy for Brussels (Kundnani & Parello-Plesner, 2012).

#### **5. 2016 onwards**

The 2016 Communication was influenced by the world's shift into the era of eroding confidence in international liberal and democratic order (Brown, 2018). The EU required more than ever China's engagement in the resilient multilateral order in the fear US abandonment (Maher, 2017).

### **Characteristics of Sino-European relations and Chinese FDI before the pandemic**

Leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic the PRC has displayed increased assertiveness in its relationship with the EU, whilst European policies towards PRC are driven by complex and often contradictory commercial considerations (Stumbaum, 2010). The EU was under the fear that its failure to act in a coordinated way reflects the broader trend towards re-nationalisation within the EU. Maull (2017) argues that the characteristics of the EU as a polity *sui generis*, that consists of sovereign member states, demonstrate a different quality of incoherence from what appears in national foreign policies. It leads to a structural asymmetry in favour of China. China's economic power is perceived by the European wider public as a threat to employment (Stokes & Studdart, 2014), but at the same time, certain business, national and local governments are keen to attract it (Maull, 2017). Chinese FDI hit a record high in 2016 with an increase of 37%, exceeding 200 billion USD between 2005 and 2016 (Christiansen & Maher, 2017). They invested heavily on infrastructure projects such as ports, airports, the energy sector, telecommunications, and real estate as well as the high value-added area and high-tech companies such as robotics, chemical and semi-conductors (Holslag, 2017). The EU began to recognize a need to protect its strategic sectors like infrastructure and high tech.

### **Sino-European relation after the pandemic**

#### **Overall political atmosphere from Pro- to Anti-China**

The pandemic of Covid-19 accelerated the trend of this already uncertain Sino-European relation. Stock markets suffered their worst first quarter since the 2008 financial crisis, with a 21% fall (Georgiadis et al., 2020). China was a producer of supplies of essential medical goods. Over half of the world's medical masks before COVID-19 were produced in China, who effectively bought up the country's entire supply at the time of incident. China also imported a considerable quantity of respirators and other medical supplies from abroad

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(Farrell & Newman, 2020). EU's trade ministers on 16th April 2020 agreed on the importance of diversifying source reducing heavy reliance on external countries for key supply (The Japan Times, 2020).

The EU shifted its policy from pro- to anti-China at the first peak of pandemic in 2020. When Wuhan was hit hardest, the EU provided nearly 60 tonnes of medical material to PRC discreetly at Beijing's request (Small, 2020). When COVID-19 began to reach Europe, PRC lent aid with propaganda causing inflammation of anti-EU sentiments, questioning the very *raison d'être* for the EU (Seaman, 2020; Bolder et al., 2020; Rankin, 2020). Frontier controls among member states returned (Bolder, 2020). Member states criticized the EU at the beginning of the pandemic for failing to deliver its promise of solidarity over their common fate as it did in the aftermath of WWII.

China left an impression that outsiders to the EU were more helpful than the bloc itself. When Italy called for the EU to use its fiscal tools such as its bailout rescue fund, it was met with skepticism (R. Yacoub & El-Zomor, 2020). It demonstrated the difference in values between northern and southern member states which had already pre-existed before COVID-19. China seized an opportunity to provide relief to the worst hit European countries aiming to polish up the Communist Party's image. Since mid-March in 2020, Chinese medical teams, masks and ventilators draped with Chinese flags arrived at European airports (Brattberg & Corre, 2020).

Italian Foreign Minister, Luigi di Maio, posted a video on facebook praising China for its "solidarity spirit". On the same day, China hosted a video conference for the 17+1 (Current 16+1) group sharing lessons on combatting Covid-19 with Central and Eastern European states. Spain agreed to purchase over half a million masks, 5.5 million test kits and 950 respirators. Other European countries such as Greece, Belgium the Czech Republic, France, Austria and Serbia received help from China as well. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez also praised China at which point, the European Commission was forced to issue statements that "France and Germany have donated more masks than China did" (European Commission, 2020). A call between Chinese health officials and 10 European countries took place few days later, during which China leveraged its own supposedly successful response and its resilience against the virus presenting its governance model based on social control and harsh confinement and surveillance. It helped to deflect attention away from the fact that COVID-19 originated in Wuhan and its delay in informing WHO (Brattberg & Le Corre, 2020).

Chinese ambassadors across Europe became highly visible (Bolder et al., 2020). Many of the embassies in Europe recently are run increasingly by hardliners, such as Lu Shaye, an ambassador to France and Monaco since August 2019 (Brattberg & Le Corre, 2020). Lu accused the nursing staffs of abandoning their posts at the elderly housings overnight leaving their elderly patients to die. The President of the EU Chamber of Commerce in China, Joerg Wuttke, stated that the atmosphere in Europe regarding China is toxic due to the extremely aggressive stance and hard-line propaganda taken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing demonstrating the superiority of Communist party rule over democracy (Small, 2020).

### **Impact on PRC's FDI in Europe**

However, the major concern of the EU is the Chinese purchase of European strategic assets and sectors via SOEs. There is no agreed definition of SOE in international relations today.

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However, the closest one was provided in the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the EU and PRC, which is not yet signed as of today. The CAI refers to SOEs as “Covered Entities” with criteria to recognize them (Dadush & Sapir, 2021). It includes the power of the state to appoint directors, control the decision of the enterprise through “any other ownership interest” or even “without any ownership stakes”. The definition applies at “all levels of government”, including local and regional government (Dadush & Sapir, 2021).

Ortega (2020) argued that while the EU wishes China to follow a one Europe policy, EU member states differ in their interests towards China, making it difficult for the EU to excuse a unified policy. Some European countries signed memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with China to participate in BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). It often used a tactic of debt-trap, where it finances infrastructure projects in exchange for use of those space. China will claim an ownership of those spaces in case the loans cannot be repaid. Those investments often neglect socioeconomic and financial stability and result in high indebtedness and a transfer of control over strategic assets and resources where China could potentially station its troops (Bolder, 2020; Silver, Devlin, Huang, 2020; Lišanin & Vukasovic, 2020). Chinese SOEs now control 10% of European port container capacity and are active in the aspiring EU member states of the Western Balkans.

### **EU member states differ in their interests for Chinese FDI**

French President Emmanuel Macron emphasized the necessity to tackle it as one united EU (Ortega, 2020). However, in the event of crises, countries have more tendencies to encourage FDI, especially less developed countries that have less means to compensate for economic losses resulting from the pandemic. For example, the Hungarian government rushed through the Belgrade-Budapest railway deal financed by the Export Bank of China under emergency legislation enacted in response to the pandemic. Riecke (2020) discovered that M&A specialists confirm that SOEs are looking for bargains in Europe. The European Commission issued guidelines for implementation of a common EU investment screen framework adding to the already established an extensive FDI screening process in 2020 (Tonchev, 2020). The EU commissioner and the NATO secretary general warned governments to be extra vigilant in efforts to protect infrastructure and sensitive technologies to enhance resilience against Chinese FDI (Small, 2020). China is pushing its program “Made in China 2025”, whereby Beijing aspires to become the world leader in key technologies (Holslag, 2017). The use and development of technologies, such as 5G and AI, accelerated a pre-existing debate in Europe regarding the privacy protection and user and the protection of sensitive governmental information (Klonowska & Bindt, 2020).

### **The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the trend of decreasing Chinese FDI**

Despite of the high cautions vocalized above, BRI and other Chinese FDI have stalled worldwide after the pandemic. According to the analysis conducted by MERICS, PRC’s global outbound M&A activity marked a 14-year low in 2021 with a total M&A transactions just 20 billion EUR, 22% drop from the already weak 2020 (MERICS, 2022). Chinese FDI in 2021 specifically in Europe (EU member states and the UK) increased in comparison to 2020. However, it remained on its multi-year downward trajectory since 2016. The share of Chinese SOEs fell into a 20-year low in Europe, decreasing 10% from 2020. A new trend is that there are



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more investments on greenfield projects, accounting for a third of all Chinese FDI (MERICS, 2022). Thinktank Bruegel's research (Gracia Herrero, 2022) also shows that the pandemic caused complications for the PRC in evaluating, negotiating and concluding new deals as most in-person exchanges were cut off due to on-going draconian lockdowns in China. Many BRI projects underway before the pandemic appear to have been abandoned with 15 projects worth over 2.4 billion USD facing financial difficulties in 2020. PRC appear to be downsizing BRI projects. These demonstrate the pandemic simply added to the already existing trend of decrease in volume for FDI and other BRI projects.

## Implication and Conclusion

Under these circumstances, we must contemplate how the EU is able to establish a resilient Europe. The first action required is to reintegrate American presence into the international order with the Biden administration as well as incorporating like-minded countries who face some threat by PRC such as Australia, New Zealand, India, Taiwan, Canada, South Korea, and Japan. It must become an initiator and opinion maker to organize opportunities to discuss PRC, and not only rely on the G7 or G20 summits and NATO. The UK is another key partner as some studies show that it has more consistently seen PRC as an economic opportunity than a security threat (Reilly & Lee, 2013). However, it is the time for the UK to reconsider its positioning as per Russian invasion in Ukraine and China's stance not to criticize Putin. EU can re-approach the UK putting an end to Euroscepticism. Alliance for multilateralism is currently led by Germany and France. EU must take a lead to solicit other member states in this movement to show resilience instead of the individual movement like Lithuania<sup>1</sup>. Finally, EU must continue to engage the PRC on shared challenges such as climate change, counter-piracy, North Korea, and peacekeeping operation so as not to isolate it, fully deploying a "pull and push" effect.

To summarize, my inductive approach to my research question showed the following theory. The actual trend of Chinese FDI in Europe does not equate with the amount of attention the EU and EU member states pay to PRC. The pandemic of Covid-19 had accelerated the existing trends of two things: 1) decrease in any form of Chinese FDI in Europe and 2) the EU recognizing PRC as a systematic rival. Chinese economy is highly likely to be crippled if the governments were to keep enforcing the stringent draconian lockdowns in major cities as it significantly affects the supply chains. Strategies regarding the pandemic management diverged between the EU and PRC. However, from the complex interdependence perspective, it is not ideal simply to close countries because it could weaken not only economic resilience but also solidarity as seen within the EU. Further research is required if the lockdowns and other measures that limited trans- and non- governmental interactions of societies and economy are the direct cause of the toxicity of the current Sino-European relation. States are motivated to stabilize economic uncertainty caused by the recent events including the Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, as the complex interdependency theory shows, both the EU and PRC are open for a negotiation with the proof of the 23rd EU-China summit that took place on 1 April 2022 (European Commission, 2022). For both the EU and PRC government to build stronger political resilience they will need to learn from the success stories of their counterpart to maneuver their way out of the pandemic. All parties must recognize our

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1 In November 2021, Lithuania opened a "Taiwan Representative Office" in Vilnius. Since "Taiwan" was used instead of "Taipei", PRC considered it to be a violation of its One China principle, which led PRC to impose a series of economic coercion and for Lithuania to withdraw from then 17+1 (Andrijauskas, 2022).

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common fate by defining our common enemy as the virus and not as each other while un-naively building a way to hedge risks and increase resilience in this complex interdependent world.

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