

Re-framing of the U.S. Global Strategy and Its Possible Impact on the European Approach toward China

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June 2021 was a busy month for some U.S. officials. At the beginning of June, the U.S. senators passed the U.S. Competition and Innovation Act of 2021. Then the U.S. president Joe Biden conducted his first presidential trip to Europe, during which, he had participated in a series of summits and activities jointly held between the U.S. and European countries. The U.S. leader took the opportunity of this trip to reaffirm his previous claim that “America is back”.

The purpose of the presidential tour was clear: strengthening cooperation with the U.S. allies and partners in Europe to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, reinvigorating the transatlantic relationship, laying a ground for the U.S. relations with Europe throughout Biden’s term, re-framing the U.S. global strategy to sustain the U.S. leadership and competency in a number of core issue areas through managing properly of various challenges including the potential challenges posed by China.

Then, about less than two weeks following Biden’s trip to Europe, the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken paid another visit to Europe in order to consolidate the influence of president Biden’s trip to Europe. The U.S. Secretary made a number of remarks, one of which, noticeably compared to Biden’s a little more forceful approach, was that the U.S. doesn’t ask its European allies to take sides between China and the U.S., but if they can act collectively, the actions would be more effective.

Before, during, and after the visits made by the U.S. president and Secretary of States to Europe, there were some discussions among the media and also the academic circle - Some analysts indicated that china needs to be prepared for the likelihood that certain European countries might alter their strategies toward China in the U.S. favour. There were also observers arguing that even though the U.S. has managed, through various means, to reach a series of consensuses with its European partners, the implementation of which in the next steps will be challenging. Then, how to understand the outcomes of the events held between the U.S. and its European counterparts in June from a strategic perspective? And how likely would Europe alter its approach toward China in general terms against the backdrop that the U.S. tends to re-frame its global strategy? This analytical piece will attempt to answer these questions.

This analysis doesn’t intend to comprehensively cover all the outcomes of the U.S.

interactions with its European allies and partners through the series of summits held in June. Rather, it only aims to analyse a few of them, which, from the author's view, can reflect the U.S. foreign policy priorities and direction, and also that how likely the U.S. would attempt to formulate and implement them.

Re-framing of the U.S. Global Strategy and Its Possible Outcomes

It has been more than five months already since the U.S. president assumed office. If at the beginning of the year, it wasn't quite clear in what possible means the U.S. planned to approach its partners and allies, and to re-frame and implement its new global strategy, it appeared to have more clearance along with Biden's first presidential trip to Europe - the U.S. intended to follow a combination of a realist- and a liberal institutionalist approach to re-frame its new global strategy. A realist strategy involves containment; and under a liberal institutionalist approach, a range of institutions, organizations, groups, and mechanisms would be expected to be more active in helping plant the U.S. influence and rally its allies and partners around. In line with the U.S. new global strategy, the functions of certain institutions would be reformed; and the role of some organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would possibly be expanded. These missions will have to be carried out under the U.S. leadership.

Previously, the U.S. ever described China as a cooperative partner, a competitor, and a rival. More recently, the phrase of "Systemic Rival" has appeared in the U.S. Competition and Innovation Act of 2021 as well as in the relevant remarks and statements alongside the U.S. president activities in Europe. The new description of China also reflected the greater significance attached by the current U.S. administration to the matter of system and institutions. From the U.S. perspective, as far as the system and relevant core institutions are able to function in favour of the U.S., the U.S. interests and influence can be sustained.

In addition, one of the notable positive outcomes upon the U.S. president's trip to Europe was a 5-year suspension of the EU-U.S. 17-year dispute over subsidies to Airbus by the EU and to Boeing by the U.S.. Making certain concessions without losing control under the current circumstance should be one of the alternative means for the U.S. to approach its European partners, through which, to ease tension - even temporarily - and rally them around the U.S. leadership once again.

While acknowledging the good gestures shown by the U.S. and the EU toward settling the Airbus-Boeing dispute, there is also a need to note that so far it has been the longest trade dispute in the WTO history. From this, we can sense that even though the U.S. and some European countries do share the similar values in politics, economics, culture, and civilization etc, the similarities in these aspects between them didn't prevent the two sides from having the longest unsettled trade dispute. Likewise to a larger extent, in history, the similarities on values among certain countries also hadn't stopped them from fighting with each other. These scenarios can tell that, there should be other more significant factors

than values, in international politics, to decide whether or not states choose to cooperate or co-exist. One of the most important factors is directly related to national interest.

Values very often appear to matter more crucially in domestic politics than they do in international politics, as states in some occasions do depend on the same cultural and civilizational values to bind their citizens together to make the societies more united; meanwhile most of the citizens within the domestic societies would have the natural inclination to be bound by the same values without being forced to do so, because individuals, in contrast to state actors, sense the issue of culture and values more from a sentimental perspective. Hence, in international politics, values, though being very significant as well, in comparison to national interest, apparently can only play a secondary crucial role in influencing inter-state relations and in deciding whether and how certain disputes can be properly solved.

Another notable phenomenon appeared from the U.S. engagements with its European partners is that, in reaction to the U.S. attempt to persuade or press some European countries to accommodate the U.S. new strategy, certain European leaders have shown an ambivalent or reluctant attitude, mostly because they have no interest in being dragged into a new Cold War. This ambivalent attitude could also reflect that certain European countries are not certain about the internal and external situations they will have to face, as well as the not-so-easy choices they may have to make.

The leaders of the three major European economies including Britain, France, and Germany in various ways expressed their concerns regarding the U.S. endeavour to draw Europe into an united position against China. During the NATO summit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel weighed the significance of always finding a political solution to address issues related to China.¹ French President Emmanuel Macron warned the biases in western relations with China.² British Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressed his anti-new Cold War position.³ The discrepancies between the U.S. and the major European players over issues having a relevance to China can be a manifestation that framing and implementing the U.S. new global strategy through developing traditional alliance relationships will likely face more uncertainties and challenges.

Apart from the above, in the NATO summit, the potential functions of this organization in the coming years also drew some attention. The U.S. obviously wants NATO to play a more crucial role in supporting the U.S. new strategy by turning it into an organization which not only focuses on traditional security but also possibly has a linkage to issues like climate change and technological innovation and so on.

NATO was a product of the Cold War. The Cold War has ended for 30 years already. Some have been skeptical about NATO's functions in the new era, and already raised a question of whether there is still a necessity for NATO to exist. In order to make NATO more relevant to addressing today's challenges, and more crucially to make it better serve the U.S. adjusted global strategy under the new situation, the U.S. has managed to extend NATO's role to

cover a range of issues beyond NATO's usual agenda. In this year's summit, NATO pledged to adjust its mandate. It is not clear what it is planning to do toward China in the next steps, yet in general terms, NATO claimed to strengthen cooperation with the EU as well as to connect NATO's priorities with those of the G7. Apparently the issues covered by both the EU and the G7 have more linkages with China.

Given the big membership size of NATO, the U.S. expects NATO to play a more tangible role in contributing to the building of a broader and reformed network designed by the U.S., together with other various actors consisting of the U.S. close allies and partners, the relevant organizations, institutions, and other kinds of entities, to help raise the U.S. competitiveness in core issue areas and sustain the U.S. preponderance.

Some observers already indicated that the brief consensus reached and the relevant statements made during the series of summits held in June between the U.S. and European countries were mostly of a pile of rhetoric. Nevertheless, for the Biden administration, the symbolic rhetoric is very important at the current stage. The U.S. needs the symbolic messages to claim American leadership. The U.S. president himself also needs them to win more support of the U.S. domestic audiences.

In the next steps of Biden's tenure, the U.S. will make efforts to turn the relevant rhetoric and statements into more tangible outcomes. Nonetheless, in the process of carrying out the newly framed foreign policy priorities, there is a need to be aware that designing a grand strategy is always easier than implementing it. The U.S. government intends to apply a liberal institutionalist approach plus a realist containment strategy to develop a broader network, through which, to rally a larger number of members around the United States. However, it is not certain whether the U.S. would still be able to keep them around, once the consensus reached is put into the implementation process, given that a variety of interests held by different parties will be involved in it, and that more variables will also likely emerge. It is also early to say whether the bigger size of membership and network will turn out to be an asset to help gather strength or to be a weakness to compromise effectiveness, when it comes to addressing specific issues.

How Likely Would the U.S. New Global Strategy Affect the European Approach toward China?

Generally, we'll likely see a fluctuation of some European countries' positions toward China. As usual, these will be determined by both internal and external variables faced by them. On issues related to democratic and human rights values, security, and intelligence etc., they will more likely share similar views with the United States. Occasionally, they will continue to criticize China's human rights practices, and raise issues in relation to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang; whereas on other range of issues such as climate change, technology, finance and investment, as well as trade and economic affairs, European countries would diversify their choices of cooperation. As far as there is a convergence of

interests between Europe and China on these areas of issues, cooperation will be further deepened.

The European business and other various sectors will affect government policy-making and policy implementation as well. Though the U.S. and European politicians for geopolitical purposes have managed to reach a set of rhetoric on China, if the conduction of them poses challenges to the interests of European businesses in China, relevant policies and measures under the rhetoric will be subject to adjust.

Generally, the key European players will be expected to play a more constructive role in helping prevent the escalation of major power competition. This should be one of the new means to augment their influence on the global stage as well.

For the side of China, as many Chinese officials and experts have already indicated, following China's own schedule and managing properly of China's internal affairs are of the most crucial matter. In response to the new situation, the Chinese government has already adopted a dual circulation policy, which would emphasize the function of the Chinese domestic market, while at the same also let domestic and overseas markets re-enforce each other. The dual circulation policy measure would enable China to be more resilient in facing the potential uncertainties and challenges.

In order to achieve more tangible outcomes in line with the dual circulation strategy, it is in need for China to take into account the facilitation of a more enabling environment for the development of both Chinese and foreign businesses. Measures to create a sound environment not only involve in the kind of policy support in financing and monetary terms; in line with China's development conditions, the types of policy measures in relation to empowering certain business sectors more space and allowing them to apply, create, and develop are also very encouraging. An enabling environment of China would further increase the competitiveness of the Chinese market. In the meantime, it also means limited chance for the U.S. to isolate China from a wide variety of global networks.

Notes

1. Heath, Ryan (2021). "Decoding the NATO Summit", *Politico*, 14 June, <http://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/14/decoding-biden-nato-summit-494379>
2. GT Staff Reporters (2021). "Blinken's China Containment Agenda 'Shaky' in Europe Trip", *Global Times*, 24 June, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1226947.shtml>
3. Heath, Ryan (2021). "Decoding the NATO Summit", *Politico*, 14 June, <http://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/14/decoding-biden-nato-summit-494379>