

ESAANZ Essay prize winner

The Great Game of the twenty-first century: Can Europe compete?

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Abstract

With China's Belt and Road Initiative in full swing, this paper identifies a new "Great Game" in the Eurasian heartland. However, rather than the geopolitical chess of the nineteenth century, the new game is wei qi. In a process of gradual encirclement and subtle coercion, China is outplaying the EU on the Eurasian continent while avoiding direct confrontation. Following the logic of wei qi, China has shown a tendency to occupy the spaces that the EU has neglected – namely the Balkans and the East Mediterranean. Yet the game has not been won yet. Recent crises have undermined China's global image, and hitherto overeager Eastern European countries are now acting with more caution towards Chinese investors. The EU can be an equal player, but it must do more to "bring along" the struggling economies in its periphery, while counterbalancing China's influence with alternative partnerships in the Middle East and Asia.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, EU-China relations, EU foreign policy, geopolitics

Introduction

The "Great Game" trope is a problematic one. First used in reference to the almost century-long competition between the British and Russian empires over Central Asia, the term has since been shoehorned by opportunistic commentators in an attempt to describe nearly every Great Power conflict since. The term endures because of the imagery it evokes: stern men in uniform playing geopolitical chess over a map of the globe. Yet geopolitics is not a chess game. There are no frontlines, there are no coloured-in power blocs on the map. Modern international relationships are diffuse and intertwined.

Yet while the traditional conception of the "Great Game" may no longer apply, some of its underlying premises endure. Notably, with China's Belt and Road Initiative well underway, the importance of Central Asia seems clearer than ever before. Indeed, Chen and Fazilov (2018) refer to a new "Great Game" in the Eurasian Heartland – a nod to Mackinder (1904). With this westward-facing shift in Chinese geostrategy, the European Union is now having to share its backyard with the new superpower. Indeed, the EU now finds itself in a competition for influence, not only in its near-Asian periphery, but also – seemingly – in many disillusioned Eastern and Southern

European nations. China has a tendency to go wherever the EU is not: former Soviet nations distrustful of the West or struggling Mediterranean economies that blame Brussels for years of neglect. In these already drifting regions, the EU risks falling into irrelevance.

This begs the question: is China outperforming the EU in a new “great game” of soft power influence? This notion is particularly troubling because, according to Biscop (2020), the EU still lacks a coherent, unified approach to China – remaining distracted by internal divisions and strife. If the EU is to remain a coherent actor in the face of China’s Belt and Road Initiative – a partner rather than a pawn – and if it wants to be, as Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen (2019) says, “more geopolitical”, it needs to develop a coherent strategy for the defining geopolitical relationship of our time. This paper, then, seeks to argue that, while China might have a head start on the EU, Europe still has the opportunity to be a meaningful global player.

To this end, this paper shall first delineate the nature of the new “Great Game”, and how it is played. It shall then consider how this has unfolded in the European context, whether Chinese influence is potentially outperforming that of the EU, as well as the specific dynamics that are hampering the EU’s response. To contrast this, the paper will identify areas where Chinese influence has failed to make headway, and where it has made missteps. This will allow the paper to give an indication of the opportunities that remain open for the EU, and thus potentially provide entry points for a coherent EU policy response to China. In doing so, this paper shall demonstrate that while the EU may be a step behind China in the new great game, it has ample opportunity to catch up.

Defining the New Great Game

Brzezinski’s (1997) notion of a “Grand Chessboard” with Central Asia as the key pivot is fraught with problems. For one, it typifies the sort of two-dimensional, confrontational thinking that renders realist perceptions of international relations into a self-fulfilling prophecy (McNeilly, 2014). Yet the underlying premise of Brzezinski’s thought – the importance of Central Asia – appears to hold true. An early indication of this was the forming of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001. Djalal (2006, p. 43) described the SCO as an example of the “geopolitics of cooperation”, where critical regions are stabilised through multilateral partnership, rather than through unilateral force. According to Manuel (2017, p. 127–128), this is similarly the goal of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia and the Middle East. To Chen and Fazilov (2018, p. 3) this strategy is very much the new “Great Game”. Unlike the old game, however, China has sought to bring places of the world that have been historically disillusioned with the West into its sphere of influence through mutual partnerships and infrastructure investment (Sachs, 2018, p. 60–61). Rather than being a competition in the traditional sense, then, China has shown a tendency to “softly go” wherever the EU – and the West at-large – is not.

The new “Great Game”, then, is not chess. In fact, it resembles more the Chinese game of *wei qi*. Henry Kissinger (2011, p. 23) himself argues that where Western strategies resembles those of chess, Chinese strategy resembles that of *wei qi*. In *wei qi*, the goal is to outmanoeuvre one’s opponent without direct confrontation, and to flow into – and occupy – the spaces between the opponent’s pieces. According to Pan (2016), the game fosters a more “relational” way of thinking; identifying complex and intertwined

connections, as opposed to entrenched Black-White power blocs. This process of gradual encirclement, identifying subtle connections, and avoiding confrontation, starkly resembles the course of the BRI.

Europe on the back foot?

In Central Asia, and now in Europe, China is playing *wei qi*, and Europe has yet to properly respond. The clearest demonstration of this is the way China has effectively “flowed into” the spaces that the EU has left empty. Rustemi et al. (2019, p. 89–91) note how Chinese investment has been focused on areas that have historically been at odds with Western Europe: Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro. These countries have been described as having both a “favourable economic climate” for investment as well as particularly “high readiness” of political elites for cooperation with China (Brattberg & Etienne, 2018, p. 1; Rustemi et al., 2019, p. 93). In these areas, Chinese investment – initiated through the “17+1” forum of 17 European economies – has taken the typical form of loans and infrastructure development common of the BRI. Noteworthy projects include the Belgrade-Budapest Railway, the revitalisation of the Zelezara Smederevo Steel Mill, the acquisition of the Tirana airport in Albania, and the controversial development of the region’s telecommunications by Huawei and ZTE (Rustemi et al., 2019, p. 93–97). Further, Chinese investment has taken advantage of countries affected by the eurozone crisis, most famously with the acquisition of the Piraeus port in Greece (Brattberg & Etienne, 2018, p. 1).

These economic investments have bought China clear diplomatic gains. Brattberg and Etienne (2018, p. 2) note that both Greece and Hungary – two BRI countries – have broken with the EU in recent times, blocking critique of Chinese activity in the South China Sea, as well as a statement condemning crackdowns on Chinese activists (Rustemi et al., 2019, p. 102). The popularity of Chinese investment in the Balkans has also led to Italy entering bilateral talks for infrastructure and cultural cooperation with China (Brattberg & Etienne, 2018, p. 2). At the same time, China has also encouraged non-EU positions in the Balkans – notably in its rejection to recognise both Kosovo and North Macedonia (Rustemi et al., 2019, p. 99).

Nonetheless, while China’s efforts in the Balkans are undoubtedly Sino-centric, they are not necessarily malicious (Manuel, 2017, 126; Sachs, 2018, p. 60–61). Rustemi et al. (2019, p. 105) note that “there is no strong indication that China will seek to use its economic influence to cause political instability in the region, as this could negatively impact Chinese BRI.” Rather, the risk is that these countries – either EU members or candidates for membership – could pose long-term “backdoor” impediments to European interests and stymie the global reach of Europe’s strategic capabilities (Geeraerts, 2019, p. 2). Particularly, there is concern Chinese lending will lead to ‘debt trap diplomacy’ in the Balkans, leaving these countries even more susceptible to Chinese normative influence (Geeraerts, 2019, p. 3). Indeed, according to Rustemi et al. (2019, p. 90) there is a concerning attitude among Balkan governments that “we will worry about it later” regarding their mounting debt dependence on China. According to Gehrke (2019, p. 4), there is also a concern that the “17+1” mechanism will be used as a “bargaining chip” by China in Brussels, “offering less intensive [17+1] engagement in return for political support on other portfolios”.

These issues have been the focus of EU policy response thus far. A European Commission (2018) report stressed the need for rapid infrastructure investment in

Europe's East and South, to provide an alternative to the BRI. Similarly, another report (European Commission, 2019), acknowledged that Beijing was becoming a systemic rival in some areas, while also a strategic partner in others. Yet despite this, a coherent, collaborative foreign policy direction has yet to emerge between the Union's Member States. According to Biscop (2020, p. 6), there remain deep divisions between Member States on foreign policy issues, particularly regarding China. Moreover, this has been further compounded by ongoing domestic instability in Europe – from Brexit, to the *gilets jaunes*, to the weakening of the Merkel Coalition in the 2017 German election (Smith & Taussig, 2020). Europe is thus divided at multiple levels, complicating the emergence of a proactive and unified foreign policy.

Another key problem is that, thus far, EU offerings to Balkan countries have been so meagre that they have made any offer from Beijing look attractive (Financial Times, 2019; Biscop, 2020, p. 5). French President Emmanuel Macron himself, in a recent interview with the Financial Times (Mallet & Khalaf, 2020), accused Northern European countries of failing to fulfil their responsibilities to their Southern, less developed, counterparts. Macron (Mallet & Khalaf, 2020) suggested that the EU has done nothing but dictate requirements to struggling Eastern and Southern European governments, shouldering them with the continent's burdens, while offering them little assistance in return. Further, Kavalski and Mayer (2019) note the hypocrisy of Western European nations that criticise the 17+1 mechanism, despite the biggest beneficiaries of Chinese investment being Germany, France and the UK. This hypocrisy is not lost on the nations of Europe's South and East, adding to their disillusionment with Brussels. Such attitudes have thus increased these nations' vulnerability to Chinese interests, providing ample opportunity for China to "fill the void". If this were a *wei qi* game, Europe seems to have already ceded much of the board.

European wariness and China's missteps

Nonetheless, China's influence is not as pronounced as it might at first seem. Many beneficiary nations of Chinese investment are still resisting Beijing's attempts at political influence. Poland and Czechia – two 17+1 countries – both recently announced that they were banning Huawei from involvement in developing their respective 5G networks (Kavalski & Mayer, 2019). Last year, Prague broke its sister-city ties with Beijing over heavy-handed attempts by the latter to incorporate a "One China" recognition statement in their agreement (Lau, 2019). Such examples suggest that European nations are not ignorant of the quid-pro-quo political influence that Beijing is trying to wield over them. In response, BRI investment in Europe has been quietly toned down, and Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Europe has fallen by almost 70%, with only one new 17+1 project – a tire factory in Serbia – resulting from the most recent BRI forum (Gehrke, 2019, p. 1; Kavalski & Mayer, 2019).

In addition, early indications suggest that the current COVID-19 crisis isn't playing out well for China's soft power image. Despite some early success, China's attempts at – what has now been dubbed – "mask diplomacy" have backfired. Beijing's initial shipments of medical supplies to Europe have been widely criticised as a mere propaganda stunt, and much of the equipment has since been found to be faulty or of poor quality (Crawford & Martin, 2020; Lane, 2020; Van Leeuwen, 2020). At the same time, allegations have emerged of Chinese price-gouging of other medical supplies – leading German Green Party member, Reinhard Bütikofer, to emphatically remark "China has lost Europe" (Crawford & Martin, 2020). China's over eagerness to promote

its own self-image as a stabilising force in the current crisis has thus somewhat backfired. According to Crawford and Martin (2020) the crisis, if anything, has spurred discussions about decreasing Europe's trade dependence on China. Beijing's influence in Europe is thus far less pronounced than might immediately seem evident. European nations are not so susceptible to foreign interference, and rising Chinese investment is beginning to be met with unease (Gehrke, 2019, p. 1). While China might have the upper-hand, Europe has not lost control of the *wei qi* board yet.

Playing the game

The European Union can still regain its footing in the new Great Game. To do so it needs to realise its role as an equal player with distinct interests, lest it become caught in the middle of a new Great Power struggle. To Gehrke (2019, p. 7), this will be the EU's greatest challenge in the coming decade. At the same time, it needs to seek common ground with China, and not merely become "hostage to partisan conspiracy theories" and fear mongering of a new "Red Peril" (Kavalski & Mayer, 2019). Similarly, the EU should not regard the relationship as a simple "power game", but instead recognise the complex interdependencies that it has with China, and work towards shaping and balancing these (Geeraerts, 2019, p. 4–5). In playing *wei qi*, then, the EU should not seek to "win" – like the empires sought in the Great Game of old – but simply to "keep up"; to be an equal, and autonomous partner.

To achieve this, the EU needs to both contest the spaces China is seeking to occupy, and – at the same time – flow to the spaces where Chinese influence remains absent. Regarding the former, the EU should increase its commitment – and investments – to improving infrastructure networks in its under-developed South-East and in the Western Balkans (Biscop, 2020, p. 5). To Gehrke (2019, p. 5), a necessary component of this involves leveraging the resources of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development – which could begin to credibly shape market standards in the region. In addition, the EU needs to develop robust investment screening, "raising awareness" of the potential risks of Chinese investment, and – while not directly interfering in their decisions – offering advice and guidelines to beneficiary nations (Biscop, 2020, p. 2; Gehrke, 2019, p. 2; Smith & Taussig, 2020). Further, the EU should seek to "level the playing field" by strengthening competition laws, as well as consider the establishment of state-backed EU firms to compete with Chinese state enterprises (Biscop, 2020, p. 5; Gehrke, 2019, p. 3; Smith & Taussig, 2020). Finally, the EU needs to work towards building a more compelling narrative of its achievements. As much as 70% of FDI in Serbia does in fact come from the EU, yet despite this the country continues to warm to China, and popular perceptions of the Union have continued to decline (Gehrke, 2019, p. 6). The EU thus needs to sell its image better – especially given that China has become remarkably good at using a range of platforms and diplomatic channels to broadcast its own achievements (Gehrke, 2019, p. 6). These measures will enable the EU not only to compete at the same level as China in Europe's South-East, but also to potentially influence Chinese firms by better shaping market standards and practices in the region.

The second essential aspect of the EU's strategy is to start asserting its interests in the spaces where China has remained absent. Geranmayeh (2018, p. 8) notes that both China and the EU have been largely sidelined by Russia and the US in the Gulf and Middle East. Yet this creates an opportunity – especially given the steady withdrawal of the US – for the EU to begin exercising its own distinct interests in the region

(Geranmayeh, 2018, p. 9). Particularly, the EU should sustain its commitment to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the Iran nuclear deal – which Washington has sought to unravel, while also avoiding the destabilisation of Iran domestically with over-zealous sanctions (Geranmayeh, 2018, p. 11–13). At the same time, the EU should utilise its many bilateral partnerships in the Middle East to foster a multilateral dialogue for de-escalation (Biscop, 2020, p. 5; Geranmayeh, 2018, p. 13). The EU is perhaps uniquely placed to do this because of its historical and cultural ties with Turkey, Israel, and the Gulf States. In addition, the EU should seek to preserve and extend its global multilateral partnerships as counterweights to increasing dependence on China (Biscop, 2020, p. 6). Recent free trade agreements with other East Asian economies – including Japan and Singapore – as well as membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), have so far been steps in the right direction (Biscop, 2020, p. 2; Geeraerts, 2019, p. 4). The former decreases those economies' dependence on either China or the US, and the latter allows the EU an opportunity to contribute to future order-shaping.

Such measures would serve to firmly establish the EU as a distinct player in the new Great Game, with its own distinct interests and proven willingness to uphold them, rather than simply being another playing piece.

Conclusion

Our world is one of unprecedented interconnectedness, decentralisation, and risk. The Great Power chess games of old have been replaced with the complex flow and counter-flow of *wei qi*. So far, the European Union has seemed largely on the back foot, compared to a forward-thinking China that has already mastered the rules of the new game. If the EU fails to assert itself soon, it risks being sidelined into the foreseeable future.

The opportunity for this does remain. China has overextended itself in Europe's periphery, pushing too hard, and failing to gain traction. The ongoing COVID crisis, moreover, continues to erode China's imposing façade in Europe. The European Union should capitalise on this chance to regain its momentum and become an equal partner in what is in many ways the defining geopolitical relationship of our era.

Nonetheless, the EU should be conscious of succumbing to “the American language of rivalry” (Biscop, 2020, p. 1). It should recognise that mutually positive relationships will need to be fostered with China, it just needs to approach these from a position of unity and equality, rather than inferiority and division. In the new game of *wei qi*, Europe needs to be an equal player, not an obscure huddle of pieces on the far side of the board.

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