

POLICY BRIEF

Subject and Object: Europe in Sino-American Competition

This paper discusses the implications of Sino-American competition for Europe through two interrelated lenses: the promise of Europe as a subject – often associated with the European Union (EU) and the concept of European strategic autonomy – and the spectre of Europe as an object or battleground in Sino-American competition.

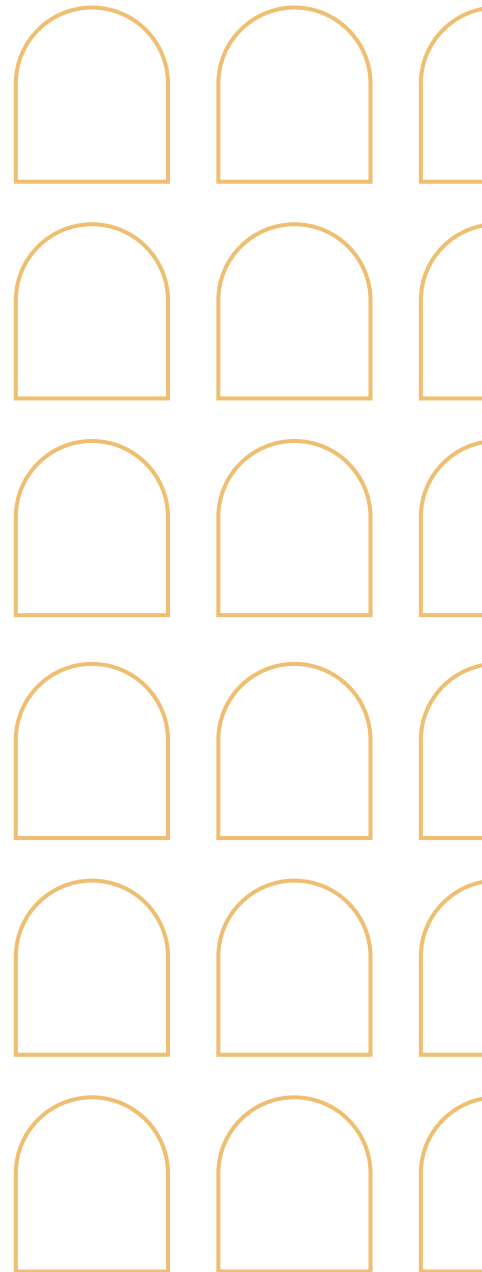
The promise of Europe as a subject relates to the ability of Europeans to formulate their policies towards the United States and China independently. Will Europeans be able to elude pressures to take sides in Sino-American competition, and make decisions regarding their relations with other actors on the basis of their own interests rather than the desires of the United States or China?¹ The answer to this important question hinges in no small part on the extent to which the EU brings to fruition its aspiration to become ‘strategically autonomous’ and emerge as a subject in the international system.² French President Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly warned that, in order to escape a world dominated by Sino-American competition, Europeans must assert their own

1 Josep Borrell, ‘The Sinatra Doctrine: How the EU Should Deal with the US-China Competition,’ IAI Papers 20, 24 September 2020; Sven Biscop, *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

2 See, e.g., Hugo Meijer and Stephen Brooks, ‘Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Achieve Strategic Autonomy if the US Pulls Back,’ *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2021), 7-43; Michael E. Smith, ‘Transatlantic security relations since the European security strategy: what role for the EU in its pursuit of strategic autonomy?’ *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 40, no. 5 (2018), 605-620; Jolyon Howorth, ‘Strategic autonomy and EU-NATO cooperation: threat or opportunity for transatlantic defence relations?’ *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 40, no. 5 (2018), 523-537.

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autonomy.³ In a similar vein, High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell and EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton have referred to the importance of the EU being a “player in world geopolitics, particularly in the face of growing tensions between the United States and China,” and of “protecting (the EU’s) strategic activities from the predation of non-European players.”⁴

External predation evokes the problem of Europe as an object or battleground in Sino-American competition. There is a booming literature on Chinese investment and influence in Europe, and the broader question of whether Beijing is able to exploit intra-European divisions to its own advantage and drive wedges within Europe and between Europe and the United States.⁵ Throughout the Trump years, there was also significant attention paid to US pressures on Europeans to adopt a tough stance against Chinese investment and penetration in key technological areas like 5-G and artificial intelligence.⁶ This debate has underscored Washington’s temptation to deal with European countries bilaterally rather than collectively (i.e. through the EU framework) and to leverage NATO and its extended deterrence commitments in Europe for non-security purposes, i.e. to get Europeans in line diplomatically or economically vis-à-vis China.⁷ Whereas the Biden administration appears to be following a more soft-handed approach to the transatlantic relationship, its emphasis on ‘extreme competition’ with China means that getting Europeans in line when it comes to competition with Beijing will remain a strategic priority for Washington going forward.⁸

The first part of this brief discusses the evolving relationship between Sino-American competition and the international order and ponders how this relationship may affect Europe. The second part addresses the question of whether Europeans are in a position to reject the frame of Sino-American competition and links the discussion to the concept of European strategic autonomy.

Sino-American Competition and the Future of the International Order

The notion that ‘long-term competition’ between the United States and China is the single most important variable in international politics has become an article of faith among scholars, pundits and policymakers in recent years.⁹ Certainly, much of the emphasis is on how China’s rise can upset America’s preponderant position in east Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.¹⁰ However, because east Asia has become the world’s most important region economically and militarily, and because US dominance there constitutes a brake against Chinese expansion elsewhere, the regional and global levels of Sino-American competition can hardly be disentangled. In fact, China’s global outreach is already challenging US influence around the world,¹¹ and threatens to divert US resources away from east Asia itself.

Sino-American competition is ultimately about power. Its military, economic, normative, diplomatic and technological aspects should therefore be seen as deeply intertwined, i.e. as different tools at the service of a competition that is political in nature. Certainly, the very concept of competition does not

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- 3 Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, Emmanuel Macron speaks at the UN General Assembly (22 Sept. 2020), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/news-and-events/united-nations-general-assembly/unga-s-75th-session/article/emmanuel-macron-speaks-at-un-general-assembly-22-sept-2020>.
 - 4 Josep Borrell and Thierry Breton, ‘For a united, resilient and sovereign Europe,’ European Commission, 10 June 2020.
 - 5 Philippe Le Corre and Alain Sepulchre, *China’s Offensive in Europe* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2016).
 - 6 Andres Ortega Klein, *The U.S.-China Race and the Fate of Transatlantic Relations: Tech, Values and Competition* (Center for Strategic and International Studies: Washington, D.C., January 2020).
 - 7 On the growing purchase of China-related debates within NATO, see Francois Heisbourg, ‘NATO 4.0: The Atlantic Alliance and the Rise of China,’ *Survival*, Vol. 62, no. 2 (2020), 83-102.
 - 8 ‘Joe Biden: expect ‘extreme competition’ between US and China,’ BBC News, 7 February 2021. See also Julianne Smith et al, ‘Charting a Transatlantic Course to Address China,’ Center for a New American Security, 20 October 2020. See also Luis Simón, Linde Desmaele and Jordan Becker, ‘Europe as a Secondary Theater? Competition with China and the Future of America’s European Strategy,’ *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 15, no. 1 (2021), 90-115.
 - 9 See, e.g., The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 2017); Christopher Layne, ‘The US-Chinese power shift and the end of the Pax Americana,’ *International Affairs* 94:1 (2018), pp. 89-111; Evan Medeiros, ‘The Changing Fundamentals of US-China Relations,’ *The Washington Quarterly* 42:3 (2019), pp. 93-119.
 - 10 See, e.g., Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011); Evan B. Montgomery, ‘Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection,’ *International Security* 38:4 (2014), pp. 115–149. Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, ‘Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia,’ *International Security* 41:1 (2016), pp. 7-48. For a critique of the Indo-Pacific concept, see Van Jackson, ‘America’s Indo-Pacific Folly,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 12 March 2021.
 - 11 David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

deny the possibility of cooperation.¹² Just as the United States and the Soviet Union had incentives to cooperate on issues like arms control to prevent unwarranted escalations,¹³ so can the United States and China cooperate on certain issues. However, the importance of competition in the context of American and Chinese grand strategy and the oversized influence of these two powers mean that few aspects of international politics are likely to be immune from Sino-American competition.

IR scholars continue to debate on the relationship between polarity and China's rise, and the very idea of an emerging bipolar structure in the international system remains widely contested.¹⁴ This, however, is certainly compatible with the notion that a bipolar structure is emerging in the critical region of east Asia, and US-China competition is beginning to impinge on geopolitical dynamics in other regions, especially Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, but also Europe.¹⁵ More broadly, and most importantly perhaps, Sino-American competition is coming into debates on the future of the international order, as scholars debate whether China is creating an alternative frame to the US-led 'liberal international order,' contesting this order from within, or a combination of both.¹⁶ In other words, the notion that (US) unipolarity is still holding is compatible with that of Sino-American competition becoming the structuring vector in international politics.

But to what extent, if at all, does Sino-American competition matter for Europe? Even if we were to accept the idea that Sino-American competition has become the main structuring vector in international politics, it is unclear to what extent such competition may really structure Europe's own reality, especially

if we take into account the fact that the epicentre of Sino-American competition is in east Asia, and that Europeans may not feel they have such a direct stake in some of the core elements in Sino-American competition, such as military ones. This markedly contrasts with US-Soviet competition, which had its centre of gravity in Europe and had a clear military component for Europeans.

Critically, European policymakers have begun to refer to Sino-American competition as a defining feature of the international system, often noting with regret that the growing rivalry between these two great powers could represent a blow to the so-called multilateral order they hold so dear.¹⁷ European awareness of the dangers inherent in Sino-American competition became only more apparent following the Covid-19 pandemic, which was widely perceived in Europe as an accelerator of ongoing trends such as "de-globalisation" and "great power competition."¹⁸ Europeans are particularly interested in how Sino-American competition is manifesting itself in areas like global governance, trade, technology and infrastructure development. Indeed, if looked at through this prism, Sino-American competition can have more of a "structuring" impact than US-Soviet competition on both international politics and Europe's foreign policy, not least given the centrality of multilateralism and questions related to the future of global order in European foreign policy debates.¹⁹ The fact that China has decided to integrate in the various institutions and fora that make up the so-called international order – a domain the Soviets arguably conceded to the United States – is most relevant in this regard.²⁰

12 Stephen Peter Rosen, 'Competitive Strategies: Theoretical Foundations, Limits, and Extensions,' in Thomas G. Mahnken (ed.), *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History and Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 12-27; Bradford Lee, 'Strategic Interaction: Theory and Practice for Practitioners,' in Mahnken, *Competitive Strategies*, 28-46.

13 Gordon S. Barrass, 'U.S. Competitive Strategy during the Cold War,' in Mahnken, *Competitive Strategies*, 71-89.

14 Stephen Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position,' *International Security* 40:3 (2015/16), pp. 7-53; Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Only Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

15 See Steve Chan, *Looking for Balance: China, the United States and Power Balancing in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), and Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*.

16 Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, *Exit From Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,' *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (2019), 395-241; Evelyn Goh, 'Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in East Asia,' *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (2019), 614-644.

17 Borrell and Breton, 'For a united, resilient and sovereign Europe.'

18 See, e.g., Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci, 'The European Union in a COVID World,' *IAI Papers*, Vol. 20, no. 34 (2020).

19 Oriol Costa and Knud E. Jorgensen (eds.), *The Influence of International Institutions on the EU: When Multilateralism Hits Brussels* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Oriol Costa, 'A force for and because of multilateralism: when is the EU a multilateralist actor in world society?' *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 20, no. 8 (2013), 1213-1228; Caroline Bouchard, John Peterson and Nathalie Tocci (eds.), *Multilateralism in the 21st Century: Europe's Quest for Effectiveness* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014). Mike Smith, 'The EU, the US and the crisis of contemporary multilateralism,' *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 40:5 (2018), 539-553.

20 Ikenberry and Nexon, 'Hegemony Studies 3.0'; Cooley and Nexon, *Exit From Hegemony*.

The relationship between great power competition and international order is very different today from what it was during the Cold War, when the current liberal international order was created and took root. Unlike during the Cold War period, America's main geopolitical competitor today (China) is engaging vigorously, if selectively, with market capitalism both at home and internationally. Internationally, China has apparently embraced many of the principles, norms and institutions that make up the current order. This has led to concerns in some U.S. quarters that Beijing has come to the conclusion that integrating into, and selectively supporting, the existing international order is the best way to subvert or transform a normative and institutional infrastructure that has for so long advanced U.S. interests and hindered China's development as a great power. In contrast to the Soviet Union, China appears to be mounting a challenge to the U.S.-led international order from within. Moreover, and also to a much greater extent than the Soviet Union, China has the economic mass and potential to give the United States a good run for its money. Its pragmatic strategy of selective engagement provides Beijing with a platform to lure other countries into its orbit and away from the United States.

Are the international order and U.S. geopolitical interests parting ways? Should the United States try to reform and protect the existing international order? Or should it conclude that the order that served it so well in its competition with the Soviets is unsuitable in the context of the competition with China and pull the plug? The Trump and Biden administrations appear to have reached rather different conclusions in this regard. The Trump administration saw the multilateral order and the transatlantic relationship as liabilities in the context of competition with China. It repeatedly criticised Europe's multilateral bent as naïve and dangerous, and warned about China's ability to game the so-called multilateral order and bend its agenda, norms and institutions to its liking.²¹ In turn, the Biden administration intends to portray itself as Europe's go to partner on multilateralism and seeks to renovate and leverage the multilateral order in the context of competition with China.²²

Europeans themselves have a particular interest

in the question of how Sino-American competition may affect the different institutions and norms that make up the so-called liberal international order.²³ In this matter, the comparison with the Cold War cuts the other way. Back then, Europeans did not quite aspire to autonomy from the United States or the NATO framework when it came to deterring the Soviet Union. Nor do they today when it comes to deterring a revisionist Russia militarily. It is when it comes to broader issues relating to the future of global governance, diplomacy, trade and technology that Europeans want to assert their autonomy, not least because the EU enjoys exclusive competences in many of those areas. In this regard, we can argue that Sino-American competition is not only more structuring than U.S.-Soviet competition; it is also arguably more relevant to Europe's subject vs. object tension.

The European response: Rejecting the rivalry frame and embracing strategic autonomy

How, then, may Europeans position themselves in the context of the unfolding global competition between the United States and China? Interestingly, most European foreign policy experts and officials seem to either provide an ambiguous answer to the question (i.e. not 'choosing' either side) or reject the premise of the question altogether. Certainly, the depth of the political, historical and cultural bonds between Europe and America means that the notion that Europeans can be equidistant in Sino-American competition was never a realistic one.²⁴ The EU's attitude to the problem of Sino-American competition is slightly more nuanced: the point is not so much about claiming equidistance but rather rejecting the frame of Sino-American competition itself, and rejecting the idea that Sino-American competition should be a referent at all for EU foreign policy, not least because it is a framework that imposes a binary choice on Europeans. And it underscores the notion of Europe as an object.

Instead, or so the argument goes, Europeans should strive for a new framework, namely the preservation of the liberal rules-based order. This is what High Representative Josep Borrell refers to as the Sinatra doctrine: Europe should go its own

21 See G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order,' *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), 7-23; Layne, 'The US-Chinese power shift'; Doug Stokes, 'Trump, American hegemony and the future of the liberal international order,' *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), 133-150.

22 See, e.g., Julie Smith et. al., 'Charting a Transatlantic Course to Address China,' Center for a New American Security, 20 October 2020.

23 Borrell, 'The Sinatra Doctrine'; Barbara Lippert and Volker Perthes (eds.), 'Strategic Rivalry Between United States and China: Causes, Trajectories and Implications for Europe,' *SWP Research Paper 4*, April 2020.

24 Sven Biscop, 'No Peace from Corona: Defining EU strategy for the 2020s,' *Journal of European Integration*, JEI Annual Lecture, 29 December 2020.

way, and not China's way or America's way. Since the EU's way is a multilateral way, it requires bringing the United States back into the fold of the liberal rules-based international order, but also China. But does the EU have the cohesion and power to reject the frame of Sino-American competition, let alone advance a new frame? Relatedly, and given the increasingly antagonistic relationship between the US and China, is it realistic to expect that a widely accepted rules-based international order is even possible?

For some in Europe, this attitude of eluding sides and rejecting frames emanates out of frustration with the Trump administration's repeated attempts to divide Europeans and treat Europe as an object, frustration with Trump's attitude to the EU specifically, which he labelled a "foe of the United States" and "almost as bad as China."²⁵ For others, however, it runs deeper than Trump: it is about asserting European strategic autonomy, and the promise of Europe as a subject, and should be pursued regardless of who is in the White House.²⁶ But is the European Union even capable of autonomy in the conduct of its security policy and foreign affairs? Or, in other words, can the EU be a subject in Sino-American competition?

The concept of European strategic autonomy constitutes the underlying theme of the 2016 *European Global Strategy* and has framed most discussions on E.U. foreign and security policy in Brussels in recent years. But it is not a new concept. Ever since the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy was launched in 1999, most discussions on strategic autonomy were associated with the idea that the union should be autonomous from NATO and the United States when conducting external crisis-management operations.²⁷ The theme of strategic autonomy was thus intimately associated with that of out-of-area operations. However, the world has come a long way since the early days of the Common Security and Defence Policy and Europe's emphasis on out-of-area operations. Criti-

cally, the return of great power competition globally is shifting the emphasis away from expeditionary operations in secondary theatres and toward great power deterrence and defence.²⁸ This means that any serious discussion on European strategic autonomy must take on the challenge of deterrence and defence.

When it comes to deterrence or defence, the nuclear question immediately comes up. A power can only deter – and have a credible defence – if it is able to match its opponent's (potential) moves at every step up the escalation ladder, from hybrid to conventional warfare to nuclear. Deterrence can hardly be compartmentalised. And Russia's annexation of Crimea has put deterrence and defence back on Europe's security agenda.²⁹ In addition, Moscow's ongoing efforts to modernise its nuclear arsenal underscore the renewed importance of nuclear weapons for European security. This raises a challenging question for Europeans: given the widespread reluctance around the idea of a German nuclear deterrent, are Paris and Berlin ready to reach some sort of sharing agreement over the French nuclear deterrent, whether bilaterally or through some sort of EU proxy? This is unlikely.

The idea of national strategic autonomy is embedded in France's political DNA, and an independent nuclear deterrent is the jewel in France's autonomy crown.³⁰ For its part, Germany may have come to terms with its de facto strategic subordination to the United States through NATO, but is unlikely to sign off on a serious European defence scheme if its role is to be relegated to playing second fiddle to France, let alone Britain.³¹ This red line was already set by former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt during the Cold War. For Brandt, any European defence scheme independent of NATO would require a serious discussion about the modalities for including West Germany in the process of decision-making concerning the French nuclear deterrent. Germany's role could not be restricted to infantry tasks.³²

25 Jean Pisani-Ferry, 'Is Europe America's Friend or Foe?' Bruegel, 30 July 2018.

26 For a discussion of how the debate on European strategic autonomy relates to transatlantic relations, see, e.g., Sophia Besch and Luigi Scazzieri, 'European Strategic Autonomy and a New Transatlantic Bargain,' CER Policy Brief, 11 December 2020.

27 Jolyon Howorth, 'European Integration and Defence: The Ultimate Challenge?' *Chaillot Papers*, no. 43 (2000).

28 Hal Brands and Evan Brayden Montgomery, 'One War is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great Power Competition,' *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (2020), 80-92.

29 Matthew Kroenig, 'Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War,' *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 1 (2015), 49-70.

30 See, e.g., Bruno Tertrais, *La France et la dissuasion nucléaire: concept, moyens, avenir* (Paris: La Documentation Française 2007).

31 For a detailed discussion on the opportunities and challenges of Franco-German nuclear cooperation, see Barbara Kunz, 'Switching Umbrellas in Berlin? The Implications of Franco-German Nuclear Cooperation,' *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 43, no. 3 (2000), 63-77.

32 Wilfried Loth, 'European Political Co-operation and European Security in the Policies of George Pompidou and Willy Brandt,' in Jan van der Harst (ed.), *Beyond the Customs Union: The European Community's Quest for Deepening, Widening and Completion, 1969-1975* (Brussels: Bruylant 2007).

Admittedly, intra-European differences continue to hamper European defence cooperation and cast a shadow on the concept of European strategic autonomy.³³ Conversely, the fact that the interface between technology, industrial policy, trade and investment appears to be such a critical front in Sino-American competition underscores the EU's relevance as an international actor, given its ample and exclusive competences in these areas. However, it is unclear to what extent it is possible to compartmentalise or confine 'autonomy' to individual policy areas, especially in an international context characterised by intensifying geopolitical competition. Great powers tend to look for issue linkages, e.g. by leveraging their security patronage over lesser states or actors to extract concessions in other areas such as trade or diplomacy.³⁴ Notably, many European countries (especially in central and eastern Europe) see their bilateral relationship with the United States as the foundation of their security and political autonomy, and thus have a higher strategic allegiance to Washington than even Brussels. This sets limits on the notion of European strategic autonomy, and underscores the reality of the EU as a part-time subject, i.e. autonomous in some contexts or areas, such as trade, and dependent or accommodating in others, such as security and foreign policy.

Ultimately, the debate over European strategic autonomy forces Europeans to grapple with such questions as the need for a Euro-deterrent or, for that matter, for European technological-industrial champions that are able to compete with American or Chinese ones – an issue that is considered by many the real barometer of strategic autonomy in the era of big data and artificial intelligence.

Will (most) Europeans agree to yield Europe's nuclear or technological command to any given (European) country? If yes, which one? If not, are Europe's key powers ready to accept their dissolution into a European super-state?

Ever since the beginning of the European integration process, the answer to all these questions has been a resounding 'not now, but perhaps in the future.' Time has passed, but the answer remains unchanged: not now, perhaps in the future. Insofar as autonomy is a relative concept, Europeans will arguably continue to lever their economic and

security policies (including through the European Union) to mitigate the spectre of total dependence on Washington. However, as long as they are not ready to sign off on a European state, their strategic relationship with the United States, and the broader framework of the West, remains for them the worst possible path with the exception of all others.

33 See, e.g., Luis Simón, Neorealism, Security Cooperation, and Europe's Relative Gains Dilemma, *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, no. 2 (2017), 185-212; Meijer and Brooks, 'Illusions of Autonomy.'

34 On issue linkage, see Ernst B. Haas, 'Why collaborate? Issue linkage and international regimes,' *World Politics*, 32:3 (1980), 357-407; Michael D. McGinnis, 'Issue Linkage and the Evolution of International Cooperation,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 30, no. 1 (1986), 141-170.

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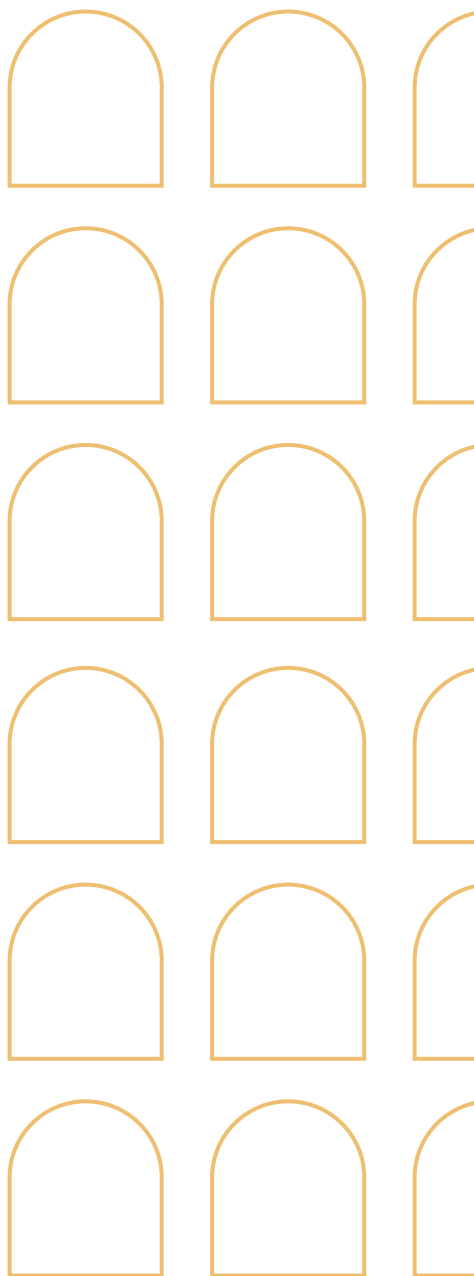
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