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In the time of COVID-19 China's mask has fallen with regard to Europe

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2020 was forecast to be a busy Chinese-European year from the diplomatic point of view, with many meetings designed to bring to a successful conclusion some crucial and sometimes old issues, in particular an agreement on investments. Of course, negotiations were difficult, but they were ongoing. On the Euro-Chinese agenda was the annual Sino-European summit and a "17+1" conference between China and 17 Balkan and Central European States including 12 members of the European Union. In addition, Angela Merkel promised to hold an additional EU-China Summit, in September in Leipzig on the occasion of the German presidency of the Council of the Union.

The first cases of a new, unknown coronavirus challenged this agenda. The first patients appeared in Wuhan as early as December 2019, and in January 2020 the epidemic spread to Europe. On March 12 the president of the World Health Organisation declared that Covid-19 had become a pandemic, i.e. an epidemic of global spread. At that moment all Sino-European meetings were suspended. The Covid-19 crisis has therefore had a major impact on relations between Europe and China. Which trends, between cooperation, competition and confrontation have prevailed between the two partners and at what point did this occur in the crisis? And what consequences has the pandemic had on the older dynamics of the China-Europe relationship?

The health crisis came at the same time as a debate was taking place in Europe regarding the need to adopt a more united and coherent policy towards China. First observation: at the beginning of the epidemic, initially there was greater cooperation between the European Union and China in terms of supplying medical equipment in the shape of reciprocal aid. Then came China's strong communication on the medical aid it was providing to Europe, and its "mask diplomacy" led to tension. Finally, the Covid-19 crisis revealed the divisions that exist between certain European States in their approach to an increasingly influential China.

1. CHINA AND EUROPE IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: FROM MUTUAL ASSISTANCE TO "DIPLOMACY".

Like the rest of the world, Europe discovered the first cases of a new coronavirus - as yet unknown at the time - from January 2020 on. The epidemic developed in Wuhan (11 million inhabitants), the capital of Hubei province (60 million inhabitants), in central China, a metropolis known as a transport hub and a very dynamic industrial zone. From the European perspective at the time, this new disease appeared first and foremost as a Chinese virus that would not spread beyond the country's borders. The EU's first reaction was to introduce a policy of aid to China. Europe's health aid policy to China typified the month of February 2020.

On 1 February, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, spoke to each other and 12 million tonnes of medical aid from the Member States were sent to China. At the end of February 30 million tonnes of equipment were shipped there by the Member States, while the European Commission decided to co-finance the additional delivery of 25 tonnes of masks, gloves, disinfectants and protective clothing. The donor countries were Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia. A plane left Vienna on 23 February with all the equipment on board after the EU's civil protection mechanism was triggered. Health and food safety commissioner Stella Kyriakides said: "*Health protection for all will always be one of our priorities and we will continue to show*

solidarity with China". On 1 and 2 February, the EU repatriated 447 Europeans from Wuhan, a city where many European companies are based, particularly in the automotive sector.

In addition, some Member States sent medical equipment to China as part of their bilateral relations. The Spanish authorities did so twice in late January and early February. This aid was sent by boat jointly with the United Kingdom. On 18 February, after a telephone exchange between the two presidents, France sent 17 tonnes of medical aid including gloves, hydro-alcoholic gel and 560,000 masks to Wuhan[1].

From March onwards, the health situation changed drastically. All over Europe, the number of cases of contamination and deaths began to increase. Italy and Spain were the worst affected countries. In China, the spread of the virus was officially brought under control and the authorities in Beijing decided to send medical equipment to Europe. The shipments received a lot of media coverage in China, unlike the EU, which had not deployed a dedicated media plan or diplomatic communication on its health aid policy in February. Television images and reports appeared in the European media and on China's main television channel CCTV-1. China's anti-Covid health aid policy and its media coverage is referred to *as mask diplomacy*[2]. Italy, the first country in Europe to be hit very hard by Covid-19, particularly Lombardy, received medical aid from Beijing on several occasions. Teams of Chinese doctors who had worked in Wuhan were sent to Lombardy to share their experience of the disease. In one of his statements, the Chinese president links this aid to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policy called the New Silk Roads, which Italy officially joined on 23 March 2019. "*China is ready to work with Italy to contribute to international cooperation efforts against the epidemic, as well as to the construction of a "Health Silk Road*", Xi Jinping told Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

The latter did not fail to thank China for its help. According to the official Chinese news agency Xinhua, the Italian Prime Minister said he had noted *"that the Chinese government had acted with determination to control the epidemic, and that the effective measures it had taken were both an encouragement and an example for Italy and for all other countries"*. This statement reflected the Chinese government's reading of how the world public would like to see the epidemic being managed in China. But in March, the debate in Europe also focused on the official fatality figure linked to Covid-19 in Wuhan - nearly 3,300 - which appeared to be very low compared with the 120,000 deaths in Europe.

In any event, mask diplomacy continued. Shipments of medical equipment were either sent at market cost or free of charge in the form of donations, first to the hardest-hit countries and then to Serbia, Ireland and Hungary. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban shared images on Facebook of the arrival of a plane containing masks, tests and fans to greet Chinese aid. *Mask diplomacy* took the form of donations sent by the Chinese government but also flights chartered by large companies such as Huawei or Alibaba. For example, Alibaba's founder, Jack Ma, donated 500,000 masks to Spain mid-March. At the same time, Beijing deployed diplomatic activities by organising exchanges of medical information in the shape of videoconferencing with the European countries of the "17+1" format that have joined the New Silk Road project, later joined by Greece in 2019. A meeting was organised in Belgrade between health authorities, Chinese experts and Serbian leaders of medical institutes, hospitals and members of the government. According to the Chinese media, other contacts of this type took place in Poland, Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Serbia, the President appealed for medical assistance from China in March, since Serbia was not allowed to import medical equipment from EU countries. Declaring a state of emergency in Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic appealed "*to my brother and friend Xi Jinping*", saying "*I believe in China's help*" and that European solidarity is an "illusion". For him, "*the only country that can help us is China*". In response, Xi Jinping said, according to the Chinese news agency Xinhua: "*China and Serbia are strategic partners. The friendship between our two countries and our two peoples must last forever*". Beijing subsequently sent medical and protective equipment to Belgrade and helped Serbia to find Chinese companies that could provide further equipment of this kind. The Serbian President obtained a guarantee from Xi Jinping that a Chinese team of medical experts would be sent, like the teams that had already been sent to Italy and Spain. For its part, the European

[1]IFRI, "Covid-19 and Europe-China relations, A country level analysis", 29 April 2020.
[2]The expression "mask diplomacy" began to be used on 19 March 2020 in the French press, particularly in the Figaro newspaper.

Union decided to send medical aid to Serbia worth €7.5 million. This episode highlights the fact that, for the Chinese authorities, Serbia provided a good opportunity to demonstrate China's solidarity with the "17+1" countries and to extend *mask diplomacy* to a part of Europe that has become a battleground of influence between the EU and China. Especially since, due to the pandemic, the "17+1" summit planned for the spring was cancelled.

2. FROM MASK DIPLOMACY TO THAT OF WOLF WARRIORS

China's *mask diplomacy*, which was an instrument of soft power, gave way to aggressive diplomacy. Chinese diplomats stationed in the EU Member States relayed the official discourse on the pandemic everywhere. The expression "*wolf warrior diplomacy*" emerged to characterise this development. It came from a series of two very popular films in China, entitled *Wolf Warrior*, mentioned as a symbol of the assertion of Chinese nationalism and the internationalisation of China as a player in global security.

This aggressive approach indeed became apparent in Europe in March. Chinese diplomacy sought to discredit States by pointing to and exaggerating their difficulties in combating the epidemic and resolving the health crisis. It demonstrated a determination to impose its narrative, as well as its discourse, at both European and global level. The Chinese narrative was designed to counter what is perceived as hostility coming from the West, as evidenced, in particular, by US criticism of China's lack of transparency at the beginning of the pandemic. This aggressiveness took the form of doubts expressed via tweets sent by Chinese diplomats about the origin of the epidemic. It was the start of the "*blame game*"[3] between China and the United States. A tweet from Hua Chunying, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, suggested that the new coronavirus was brought by US military personnel who came to Wuhan in the fall of 2019 to participate in the Military Olympics. The tweet was written in English and called for a WHO investigation in the United States. In the days that followed, it was picked up by many Chinese embassies in Europe.

This diplomatic trend was not just a temporary one. Previously, Chinese diplomats led by Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his predecessor Yang Jiechi had already gradually established Chinese positions on sensitive issues, such as the situation in the South China Sea, the Huawei dossier, the situation in Xinjiang or Hong Kong. Every diplomat adopted the policy defined by the political authorities in China. This assumed, aggressive diplomacy was backed by the highest authorities, in any case, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs in mid-May, at a time when tension with the United States peaked regarding the origin of the virus. Questioned on this point at a conference after the Beijing meeting of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in the spring, Wang Yi defended the "*wolf warrior*" diplomats and their combative attitude: "*We will defend ourselves forcefully against malicious slander and defend our national honour and dignity. We will let the simple truth contradict gratuitous slander and we will firmly uphold justice*."

In Paris, articles were published on the website of the Chinese embassy developing an aggressive line of argument disparaging Western democracies and presenting the Chinese model as victorious in the management of the epidemic. An op-ed by an anonymous diplomat was published on the Chinese embassy's website on 12 April under the title "*Re-establishing distorted facts - observations by a Chinese diplomat posted in Paris*". In particular Westerners were accused of unjustly denigrating China after describing Covid-19 as a "mild kind of flu" at the beginning of the epidemic. One commentary unjustly accused the French nursing staff in old people's homes (Ehpad) of having "*abandoned their posts overnight (...), leaving their residents to die of hunger and disease*". The article led to the French foreign minister summoning the Chinese ambassador.

3. MASK DIPLOMACY UNMASKED

"*Wolf warrior diplomacy*", "*mask diplomacy*": these various aspects of the Chinese initiative have proven their limits. Firstly, because some of the equipment sold by private Chinese companies turned out to be defective. Even though these products were not directly related to the official medical aid provided by the Chinese government, they damaged China's international image. For example, in the

[3]*The USA and China accused each other of being the source of COVID-19.*

Netherlands, the authorities had to recall 600,000 masks that had been distributed to hospitals because they were the wrong size and would not close properly. In addition, their filters were porous. The Spanish government ordered testing kits from a Chinese company in Shenzhen, but the results were only 30% accurate! After an investigation, the tests in question had not been authorised for export to the EU by the Chinese health authorities.

China's communication strategy emphasising its role as both a global donor and supplier of medical equipment achieved mixed results and even seems to have been counterproductive. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Professor of Political Science at the Hong Kong Baptist University, believes that "*"mask diplomacy" has turned against Beijing because it is too aggressive and contradictory, while denying its own responsibility [in the origin of the pandemic]: Beijing's message mixed too much generosity with propaganda at a time when democracies were facing a health crisis*"[4].

Moreover, mask diplomacy coupled with a critical narrative regarding the management of the pandemic by Europe's democracies annoyed the European States and institutions in the extreme. The German Chancellor felt it necessary to recall on 18 March that "*the European Union sent medical equipment to China when China asked for help. What we are seeing today is reciprocity. At a time when we are facing a crisis at the moment, we are very happy to see China helping us*"[5] Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel called for more transparency from China and cautioned against being naïve about its handling of the pandemic.

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs, published a geopolitical analysis of the situation on his official blog. For him, "*a global battle of narratives (on Covid-19) is underway in which timing is a crucial factor*" and this at a time when attention shifted from Europe helping China to the opposite phenomenon, i.e. China helping Europe. "*China is aggressively promoting the message that, unlike the United States, it is a responsible and reliable partner. In this battle of narratives, we have witnessed attempts to discredit the European Union as such and Europeans who have been stigmatised as if they were all carriers of the virus. ... The key point for Europe is that we can be sure that perceptions will continue to change as the pandemic and our response to it evolve. But we must be aware that there is a geopolitical component including a battle for influence through policies of generosity. Armed with facts, we must defend Europe against its critics*."

How have the Covid-19 crisis and China's mask diplomacy influenced the latter's image in Europe? Did the increase in Chinese aid improved perceptions of the country? It is too early to see the results of any European opinion surveys that were undertaken since the health crisis is not yet over. At the end of 2019, the Pew Research Center published the results of a survey entitled "*People around the world are divided on their opinions about China*". Between May and October 2019, 57% of respondents (Greece, Spain, United Kingdom, Italy, Netherlands, France, Sweden, Germany) had an unfavourable opinion of China, compared with 37% who had a good opinion. China's image was generally more favourable in Bulgaria, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic: 43% of respondents had a good opinion of China in comparison with 36% who had an unfavourable opinion. In France, the survey showed that only 33% of the population had a favourable opinion, a result down 8 points compared to 2018. This shows a deterioration in China's image in France, even before the Covid-19 crisis. In Spain, perceptions of China were dual in nature the 41st Elcano Institute barometer was carried out in March 2020[6] but it is difficult to say whether it already took into account the possible repercussions of the health crisis on Spanish public opinion. However, it does show contradictory trends. On the one hand, there has been a rise in the perception of China as a threat between 2018 and 2020 (to 5.5 points on a scale of 10), but China is also perceived as Spain's second-best ally outside the European Union. It will be interesting to see how European public opinion evolves in 2021 with more hindsight on the crisis. The latest studies show a deterioration in China's image in Europe.

How should Euro-Chinese relations be assessed? Although Beijing has built up a humanitarian and supportive image with certain countries in the Western Balkans, at the same time it has criticised the European management of the pandemic, as if Chinese diplomacy had decided to play on the political dissensions and oppositions that have characterised European societies since the beginning of 2010, by fighting a head-on, arduous battle over the

[4] *« Coronavirus : comment la diplomatie du masque s'est retournée contre Pékin », Marianne, 22 April 2020*

[5] *"Coronavirus: Germany's Angela Merkel plays down China's providing medical supplies to hard-hit European countries", South China Morning Post, 18 March 2020*

[6] *Spain-China relations and COVID-19: the bright and dark sides of a necessary partnership for Spain, Real Instituto Elcano, 6 May 2020, p. 6 et 7.*

narrative surrounding the health crisis. It is a kind of propaganda to drown out legitimate questions about the responsibility and failures of the Chinese communist regime in the development of the epidemic and its mutation into a pandemic. But it is also an unprecedented intrusion into the public and political sphere of Western democracies in general, and European democracies in particular. Until now, in Europe, this type of policy aimed to propose a specific counter narrative, and influencing public debate has been Russia's prerogative. If this practice were to be confirmed in the long term, it would be a major inflection in Sino-European relations. This is why this unprecedented period makes the EU's drive to redefine its trade policy much more acute and crucial. Indeed, with the pandemic, Beijing's European policy has emerged from its ambiguity. It has become unfriendly, hostile even. It is clearly and blatantly a policy that aims to favour unilateral gains rather than a policy of win-win relations.

4. THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF SINO-EUROPEAN RELATIONS BY THE COMMUNIST REGIME

The Chinese government has an instrumental vision of Europe. The aim is to use European policy to serve public policies that contribute to the consolidation of the social order shaped by the Chinese communist regime. This is characterised by the development of living conditions and prosperity for the greatest number of people through the Sinicisation and use of minorities, the centralisation and organisation of social and political life by the Communist Party of China (CCP)[7], the primacy of the state, an ad hoc, biased, largely CCP-led market economy that drives the largest companies, and the mobilisation of society through nationalist and Maoist propaganda.

Overall, Chinese companies benefit from distorted competition in the Chinese market and the support of banks and State capital in export markets[8]. The lack of political and social pluralism goes hand in hand with the development of urban areas.

This social and political order favours the acceptance of low wages (stagnant from 2000 to 2015), growing inequality, weak social protection and harsh working conditions without which Chinese enterprises would be less competitive. To consolidate this order, the CCP leadership, and thus the State, is trying to speed up, not so much an energy and ecological transition, but a reduction of what most threatens its acceptance under the constraint of the police state: air pollution and diseases caused by the specific type of industrial and urban development pattern desired by the CCP[9].

The instrumentalisation of Sino-European relations by the Chinese government carries with it a feature that the Chinese policy of fighting the pandemic has unambiguously demonstrated: divide and conquer to better achieve its ends. During the first two decades of the 21st century, the inclination of Chinese players to favour bilateral relations and to take advantage of differences between Member States was favoured by the Europeans' preference for pluralism and competition. Chinese leaders have been able, without offending their European counterparts, to play both sides: to institutionalise relations to encourage development, in the context of concrete projects organised through bilateral relations, trade, investment and mobility. And so, Europeans agreed together on the definition and negotiation of an EU-China framework with the aim of organising competition not only between companies but also between European countries and regions.

This collective choice was based on an error of appreciation of the Chinese situation as much as it reflects their ideology. The Europeans wanted to take advantage of the opportunities of Chinese development: the opening up and modernisation initiated under Deng Xiaoping corresponded in the eyes of the Europeans to the belief in the virtues, for humanity, of the development of a global market economy. In fact, without admitting it, Europeans believed that the Chinese authorities and society would aim to develop like Europe. They hoped that the leaders' goal was to make the Chinese economy a market economy with the same practices and rules as in Europe. They underestimated the fact that public policies are at the service of a policy of development and strengthening of the State and the Party. In the eyes of their leaders and members, the latter, in turn, require a policy that uses global space at the service of China's supposed national interests. This does not mean defining a new universalism or a global mission that is supposed to benefit humanity. When the Chinese ruling class engages a world vision and not a single representation of the world space in the prism of Chinese interests, it engages the third world and

[7]"The COVID-19 crisis reminds us, in concrete terms, of the omnipresence of the Communist Party at all levels of society, including hospitals, universities, schools, residential complexes. The CCP has 90 million members and has continued to recruit - including from medical personnel during the crisis. The system of social and political control, which remains shaped by the Mao era (1949-1976), has been extensively used in recent months, and has been consolidated". Alice Ekman, Diploweb, 17 May 2020.

[8] For The Economist, "President Xi Jinping is reinventing state capitalism (...). This "Xinomic", a mixture of autocracy and technology, could bring growth over several years. (...) The United States and the West must prepare for a long confrontation with Beijing. Unlike the former USSR, China has a sophisticated economy that is integrated with the rest of the world". Published by the weekly Challenges n°663, 27 August 2020

[9] In its March 2019 communication, the European Commission diplomatically characterises China as "a strategic partner in the fight against climate change and the transition to clean energy, with which [the EU] must continue to build a strong relationship": China is both the largest emitter of GHGs and the largest investor in renewable energy.

Marxist discourse as its predecessors have done since the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung (1955). In this vision of the world, relations with China offer an alternative to relations with the West, but also with Russia and even India, both of which are part of an imperialist paradigm, albeit in a specific and highly differentiated way. It is in this way, in particular, that the absence of conditionality on development aid from China should be understood. This is how it differs from that of the Europeans, the Japanese or the Americans, and hence from the World Bank. If Chinese companies do not attach so-called political conditions to the granting of this aid, the counterpart of this aid is that the exports of raw materials that they favour must be destined for the Chinese market as a matter of priority. Indeed, China's rise as a global player in various regions of the world turns the universal values that Europeans promote and on which they base their policies - free trade, free competition, pluralism and freedom, all of which are governed by law - into particularism or regionalism.

5. EUROPE'S POLICY TOWARDS CHINA – A TURNING POINT CRYSTALLISED BY COVID-19

Europeans deem that their Chinese policy over the last decade or two does not contribute to the adoption of its values in China and also that it puts them at a disadvantage, not only in bilateral relations, but also in several regions of the world, such as Africa. Europeans are therefore changing the way they represent China. One interesting aspect is that the mask and wolf warrior diplomacies did not trigger this change. They have crystallised it. The evidence of this new diplomacy is in fact much more visible in the public arena than those of its trade or its public procurement policies, and even that of the new Silk Roads. In fact, the inflection of Chinese policy in Europe dates from the beginning of 2019, one year before the emergence of Sars-Cov 2. In March 2019, the European Commission explained why it refused to describe China as a "market economy", qualifying it as "an economic competitor" and "systemic rival".

In March 2020, with the appropriate lens, Europeans were able to perceive Beijing's aggressive, unfriendly inflection during the pandemic. As part of this new path, in June 2020 the Commission published a White Paper proposing a set of measures that will extend European legislation on State aid to companies from third countries operating on the European market[10]. The aim is to prevent unfair competition from Chinese companies in European public procurement markets and in their plans to build transport and communication infrastructure as part of the New Silk Roads policy.

In the same spirit, in a way that is already part of the framework of its existing prerogatives, the Commission has decided to equip itself with a new tool in its defence strategy against Chinese subsidies. It will thus apply customs duties to fibreglass fabrics from Egypt that are in fact produced in China by subsidised Chinese companies. The glass fibres transit through the Suez Trade and Economic Cooperation Zone in Egypt and are shipped back to the European market. This kind of replicable decision for other products is a good sign of the more comprehensive overhaul of European trade policy that is now underway.

This shift by Europeans towards China has also helped them draw on other experiences they have gained since 2010: those of Russia's European policies since 2014, and those of the United States since 2017.

6. CAN EUROPE'S EXPERIENCE OF RUSSIA HELP IT OVERCOME CHINA WHICH PRIVILEGES FORCE OVER LAW?

Several elements of China's regional policy echo some features of Russia's regional policy. On 30 June 2020 the new security law came into force. It effectively and unilaterally abolished the "one country, two systems" principle that had been in force in Hong Kong since 1997; it is akin to territorial annexation and pays little heed to international law, under which the retrocession treaty signed with the United Kingdom in 1997 was based. The British government made no mistake: it stopped granting the former autonomous territory the trade and banking privileges it had enjoyed. On 28 July, the European Council took two measures: the restriction of exports of surveillance, law enforcement and repression equipment to Hong Kong and the facilitation of visas. "*We have been divided and weak for a very long time. (...) the time for naivety is over and I think we saw this at the last summit between the European Union and China in June, the tone is firmer*," commented Clément Beaune, French Secretary

[10]*"The problem is that our companies are being penalised for playing by the rules, while companies in China and other third countries are receiving excessive public funding". Thierry Breton, Internal Market Commissioner, interview with Ouest France, 18 June 2020. The latter and Margrethe Vestager, Commissioner for Competition, are in charge of this white paper and the directive it is preparing.*

of State for European Affairs[11]. It remains to be seen whether these two measures, which are unlikely to change the Chinese State' s policy towards Hong Kong, will herald a new era in Europe' s policy towards China. Have they confirmed or blurred the shift in the latter's policy since March 2019?

Could this shift lead to a firmness equivalent to that implemented with the European Union's sanctions against Russia in reaction to the annexation of the Crimea? The emerging reorientation of the European Union's China policy already faces other geopolitical tests. The most notable is military activism in the China Sea. This has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and will reach a peak in 2020. It highlighted the extent to which the independence of the Republic of China - Taiwan - has never been recognised or accepted by Beijing; its absorption remains an essential objective for the People's Republic and Xi Jinping makes this known by regularly violating Taiwanese spaces. As a result, one cannot but consider the possibility of war between the two Chinas and, consequently, because of the pressure caused by this eventuality, if not by its materialisation, of a remodelling of the East Asian region by the Chinese State and army.

The mask diplomacy and that of wolf-warriors were understood all the more by the Europeans because they were concomitant with an unvarnished accentuation of China's policy of control over South-East Asia and of a policy of the *fait accompli* which broke away from the diplomatic codes and legal traditions hitherto in force. To put it bluntly, in the Europeans' opinion, Xi Jinping's regional policy has taken on a Russo-Putinian hue[12]. If we work by analogy, the repression of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs echoes that of Chechnya; the bringing of Hong Kong to heel, the annexation of the Crimea and the support of a counter-revolution in the East of Ukraine; the violation of Taiwanese air and sea space by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese army, echoes that of the Baltic States by the Russian armed forces, the pressure and intimidation exerted on Taiwanese society being reminiscent of that exerted on Swedish, Estonian and Latvian society in connection with the idea that the Baltic States are destined to reintegrate either Russian territory or post-Soviet Russian space.

Of course, this type of action by China does not seem feasible in Europe: within the doctrine of the Chinese State, no area of European territory is part of the Chinese world. Europe appears to them as a market, a tourist and university basin, a productive area and a specialised supply area for certain goods and services, a territory providing flow, storage and communication infrastructures. In fact, the Chinese market relies heavily, and increasingly so, on the European economy, not only because of the size of its consumer market but also because of its production of intermediate goods present in the value chain of European manufactured goods. Seen from China, Europe is an area of resources and the Chinese authorities seek to exploit them for its own benefit through different types of networks. This vision is notably based on the representation that Europe's prosperity and the era of Western domination would not be what they are if the Europeans had not diverted and captured the resources of Chinese territory over the course of a century and colonised part of the world. Developments in Europe's Chinese policy since the beginning of 2019 indicate that European players have become aware of this situation and representation.
But there are still few clues as to the ability of European leaders to project themselves into a policy that takes account of this "Russian-Putinisation" of Chinese foreign policy. 2020 marks an aggressive turning point in Beijing's foreign policy. It comes on top of the fact that China is developing an increasingly asymmetrical market penetration strategy, while renouncing the WTO's market economy status and disqualifying human rights critics in an increasingly undiplomatic manner. The fact that the expressions of this aggressiveness are taking place in Asia and not in Europe does not mean that the Europeans can ignore it.

Europeans have a maritime domain and territories in the Asia-Pacific area, such as New Caledonia for example. They also have partners and allies there. And they base their diplomacy on respect for international law and human rights, as well as on negotiation, pluralism and interdependence. The Commission's strategy paper on China has not overlooked these issues. The fact that China is not a State based on the rule of law, but instead a State of police force, arbitrary arrests, surveillance and fear, without judicial independence and pluralism, is part of the qualification of China as a "systemic rival". The Sinicisation

[11]*Matinale - Radio France Inter, 29 July.*
[12] *This image is not only used from the European angle. Thus, for Pierre Grosser, historian of the Cold War and East Asia, "from now on, there is talk of a 'putinisation' of Chinese diplomacy", in "Pékin a l'impression de se faire voler sa victoire", interview in Le Monde, 14 May 2020.*

of Xinjiang and Tibet as well as the repression and the forced and systematic acculturation of the Uyghurs as a people have been condemned by the various European institutions which have called on the Chinese government to break with these practices[13]. The European Parliament awarded the 2019 Sakharov Prize to Ilham Tohti, an emblematic activist in the struggle for the rights of imprisoned Uighurs.

However, this criticism remains diplomatic. The enforcement of the security law in Hong Kong is no longer "only" an internal affair of the Chinese territory. The militarisation of the China Sea and the intimidation practised against Taiwan are similar to a threat to a sovereign democratic State which shares the same values as those of the Union and of which it is a de facto partner on almost the same level as South Korea and Japan. In 2018 as in 2015, the European Parliament called for "*the launch of negotiations for an investment agreement with Taiwan* ", which the Commission has announced on several occasions, without taking action[14].

In 2019, the Commission's strategy paper on China set the tone for a new inflection and hinted at a strategic turning point. But now it appears incomplete, partial and dated. It is as if the regime of the People's Republic of China had taken advantage of the health crisis to speed up this nascent European strategic turning point, as it has tightened its grip on investment, state aid, unfair competition and the 5G market with the double diplomacy of masks and wolf warrior, and, by bringing Hong Kong to heel and threatening Taiwan, thereby straining the European Union's credibility to act in the global arena in the name of the values on which it is founded.. This credibility has been called into question especially because, by failing to be proactive and imaginative about Asia, Europeans have been caught in a vice between Chinese and American policy.

Indeed, the tenuous nature of the measures adopted at the end of July regarding Hong Kong makes the vigour and determination of the European White Paper published in June less clear-cut. The latter testifies to Europe's unity with China in one area - economic relations - in which the Chinese regime has become accustomed to playing skilfully on the dual track of China-EU relations and bilateral relations with disunited European countries. Like the Russian authorities before it, the Chinese have favoured bilateral relations; they have gone further by successfully proposing ad hoc formats: the 17+1 in the name of the implementation of the European segments of the BRI - (the Russian government is proposing ad hoc multilateral formats outside the EU around gas infrastructure projects); beyond 17+1, Portugal, Luxembourg and Italy are part of the BRI; several European countries are participating in the Asian Investment Bank for Infrastructure (BAII), one of the institutions built by communist China to finance projects developed in the new Silk Roads (BRI). As in all other regions of the world, the Chinese authorities are keeping their bilateral relations in the open; this practice is favoured by the fact that Europeans have not hitherto considered it necessary to coordinate on the subject and build a European response, due to the interdependence that is generally beneficial to both economies and the benefits of competition.

Another reading of this[15] leads to the diagnosis that, economically, the Chinese State is entering Europe through fragile gateways, consolidating and repairing them with its companies and financial means that give it the right to manage and use them according to its interests. While 94% of the volume of Sino-European trade in goods is carried out by sea freight, the purchase of the Greek port of Piraeus in 2016 by Cosco, with the consent of a Troika obsessed with reducing the Greek State's debt, is an emblematic, but not the only case in point,[16]. Metaphorically, the Czech president welcomed his Chinese counterpart in 2016 with the proposal that the country be China's gateway to Europe.

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The year 2019 was a tipping point: the sequence opened by the identification of China as a systemic rival continues with the White Paper, the regulation regarding the screening of foreign investors dated April 2019 and the barriers placed by several countries on Huawei's entry into the 5G market. It covered and contained to minimum effect the signature of the protocol for Italy's accession to the New Silk Roads (BRI) in March 2019. In the same month, the Europeans' new capacity to move towards greater cohesion and firmness in their economic relations

[13]See in particular the resolution voted by the European Parliament on 19 December 2019, as well as its report on the state of relations between the European Union and China of 10 July 2018.

[14] Point 47 of this report https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0252_EN.html

[15]Laïdi, Zaki. « L'Europe au défi du moment gaullien », Le Débat, vol. 206, no. 4, 2019, pp. 48-59. " If the United States is a rival for China, Europe is a prey. An industrial prey offering two advantages: that of having both a single market and divided States in all non-communitarised areas. All it has to do is find a door that is poorly closed (Greece, Portugal) or deliberately opened (Italy) to enter the European home."

[16] Foucher, Michel. « Yidai Yilu ou les nouvelles routes de la soie », Tous urbains, vol. 23, no. 3, 2018, pp. 41-43 The BIS is the "major continental and maritime project launched by President Xi Jinping in Astana (Kazakhstan, 7 September 2013), whose interest for its Chinese initiator - to open markets - can be clearly measured, and the risks of which are still underestimated in the recipient countries if they are unable to establish reciprocity and, in concrete terms, to fill the containers in the direction of the return journey to the East".

with China was signalled by the transformation of a bilateral meeting in Paris between the French and Chinese presidents into a four-way meeting with the German Chancellor and the President of the European Commission. But the measures adopted on 28 July 2020 by the Europeans in retaliation for China's brutal and unilateral end to the "one country, two systems" principle in Hong Kong are typified, *a contrario* and once again, by a lack of European cohesion, and therefore by weak firmness and a vague, hesitant doctrine. The 27 Member States have not agreed on sanctions of either the type immediately decided by the US government or the type on which they have been unanimous against Russia since the annexation of the Crimea. And they agreed to leave it up to each party to decide for itself how it will implement measures to stop the export of surveillance and law enforcement equipment and, until proven otherwise, policies for granting (or not) visas to Hong Kong nationals and facilitating (or not) their mobility towards Europe.

At the same time, the Chinese authorities are making sure that they are placing their European policy on a legal and juridical register. In doing so, Chinese State actors, including companies financed by the Chinese State, make no secret of their objective of penetrating, or even dominating, the European market; until the health crisis, they did so by playing by the rules to which Europeans adhere and by returning the use of those laid down by the Union to their benefit, whether in terms of competition, trade or internal market policies. Since the pandemic, they are no longer even trying to have China acknowledged as a "market economy" at the WTO. At the same time, Chinese leaders are challenging Europeans in new ways - mask diplomacy, wolf warrior diplomacy, bringing Hong Kong to heel, threats to Taiwan - as if to test their claim to greater cohesion, firmness and symmetry in Euro-Chinese economic relations. Once again, the Chinese authorities are acting faster and differently from the way the Europeans seem to have anticipated.

Will the Europeans be able to find the means to position themselves in order to convince the Chinese leaders to (re)come to a more balanced, less asymmetrical European policy that is more respectful of their interests? And thereby place themselves in the situation of a State entity and a territory with influence? The game is an open one.

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