Japan-France-Australia-U.S. naval exercise La Pérouse conducted in 2019 (Photo courtesy of the French Navy)

Chapter 1

World Politics amid Great Power Competition

The Pacific and European Experiences during COVID-19 Crisis

ISHIHARA Yusuke (Lead author, Sections 1 and 2)
TANAKA Ryosuke (Section 3)

Summary

The pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in 2020 has further stimulated the existing debate on the transition of the international order. This chapter focuses not on the United States and China and their great power relations that tend to dominate discussions on this topic; the emphasis is rather on developments in other major powers and small and medium-sized countries. Scholars have differing views on the options available to non-U.S. and Chinese countries and the role they will play in the future international order.

Section 1 of this chapter presents and analyzes two leading views about the role of non-U.S. and Chinese countries. On the one hand, many scholars argue that the world is being divided into a U.S.-China bipolar order, and that countries other than these two great powers ultimately have little choice but to make their positions clear, either to cooperate with the United States against China or to value their relations with China and distance themselves from the United States. On the other hand, many scholars also point out that the world is becoming multipolar or "pluralistic," and that non-U.S. and Chinese countries have options that are increasingly diverse and promote self-initiative. This section contends that a trend toward "pluralization" in international politics continues to be observed, even amid the divisive pressures of U.S.-China competition in recent years, and that this trend is driven by the determination of many countries to defend and promote their autonomy.

Sections 2 and 3 explain efforts undertaken by countries other than the United States and China toward "pluralization" and their struggle for agency and autonomy. The analyses focus on the international affairs situations of the Pacific region, including Australia, as well as Europe centered on the European Union (EU). Australia in the Pacific region has been affected by the competition between the United States and China but continues to develop its own regionalism and promote regional cooperation on the COVID-19 response. Meanwhile, European countries are searching for "strategic autonomy," and in doing so, seek to manage their relations with the great powers of the United States and China that entail increasingly complex issues. For discussions on Sino-U.S. relations and COVID-19-related developments in countries and regions other than the Pacific and Europe, please refer to the analyses in Chapter 2 onwards.

1. Division or Pluralization?

(1) The Transformation of World Politics and the COVID-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 crisis that escalated in 2020 is further intensifying the existing debate over the transition of postwar international order.[1] In this context, many scholars have noted the trend of waning U.S. leadership. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, notes that the rise of authoritarian states including China is challenging the power and leadership of the United States on which the traditional "liberal world order" has been sustained, asserting, "[e]ven the best-managed order comes to an end."[2] Haass adds that COVID-19 will further "accelerate" existing trends, including "waning American leadership." C. Raja Mohan, former member of the National Security Advisory Board of India and current Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies at National University of Singapore, also points out the diminishing U.S. leadership, giving greater focus to the economic aspects. According to Mohan, there had already been a movement in the United States and elsewhere since the beginning of the 21st century to question the "Washington Consensus" (policies favoring economic liberalization and globalization promoted by international institutions established after World War II), and the COVID-19 crisis is accelerating such long-term trends and putting unprecedented "stress" on the traditional "borderless world."[3]

Of course, this is by no means the first time that the "crisis" of the international order or a "waning" of U.S. leadership has been pointed out in the last 75 years since the end of World War II. In the 1970s, for example, the "United States-led order" that had been maintained following World War II was under duress, and a sweeping transformation of this order was a subject of lively debate.[4] In the immediate aftermath of the war, the United States accounted for 40% of the world economy, and its overwhelming national strength supported the growth of Western economies and security arrangements. By the end of the 1970s, however, the U.S. share of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) declined to about 25%, while Japan and Germany, which recovered and rose from the devastation of the war, accounted for about 10% each.[5] In the security field, the Soviet Union continued to build up a wide range of armaments in the 1970s, including nuclear weapons and naval power. As a result, "It cannot necessarily be said that the United States is superior in all areas of weaponry, including strategic nuclear weapons, theater nuclear weapons, and naval and air force capabilities" (*Defense of Japan 1979*).[6] Against this backdrop, the 1970s remains an important subject of study for understanding the period of the shake-up in the United States-led order. Yet, the ongoing transition of the international order in the 21st century is clearly distinctive from the past experiences, including the ones in the 1970s, particularly in the following two regards.

First, the main competitors for the United States have significantly different national strengths and international economic standings now compared to back then. In the 1970s, the United States faced the economic rise of its allies, such as European countries and Japan, while at the same time facing the apparent buildup of Soviet military capabilities. In 2020, China is the leading competitor for the United States in both the economic and security fields.[7] According to the World Bank, the U.S. and Chinese shares of the global nominal GDP were overwhelmingly disparate at the start of the century in 2001, at about 32% and 4%, respectively. In 2019, they were at about 24% and 16%, respectively, with China's share increasing to 70% of the U.S. share.[8] In contrast, the Soviet share is assessed to have peaked out at around 50% of the U.S. share (although even that is a high estimate) when the economy was at its highest in the mid-1970s. The Soviet economy since saw a downward trend.[9]

The second difference is the U.S. approach toward multilateralism. The United States' disinterest in existing multilateral institutions was particularly salient during the Trump administration. Since its inauguration in 2017, the Trump administration made it clear that it was skeptical of existing multilateralism, withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal without regard for the concerns of its allies. Furthermore, the administration continued to decline to support the filling of vacancies on the World Trade Organization's Appellate Body for dispute settlement. The

Trump administration likewise disregarded many other existing institutions, deciding to withdraw from the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. On top of this, it presented no alternative vision for multilateral cooperation. In contrast, the U.S. administrations of the 1970s continued to play an important role in building new multilateral cooperation, at least in the areas of currency, trade, and cooperation among developed countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and related international developments did not so much as create but reaffirm the continuation of the above two trends. First, the trend toward a narrowing of the gap in economic power between the United States and China has not been reversed since the outbreak of COVID-19.[10] Indeed, China's economy declined by 6.8% year-on-year in the first quarter of 2020 partly due to the pandemic. Yet, the Chinese economy returned to positive growth of 3.2% year-on-year in the second quarter of 2020 when the spread of the disease was halted, and grew 4.9% and 6.5% in the third and fourth quarters, resulting in positive growth of 2.3% for the full year. On the other hand, the United States, which had the world's largest number of COVID-19 cases at the time of this writing, suffered steepest quarter-on-quarter economic declines on record, -1.3% in the first quarter and -9.0% in the second quarter.[11] The U.S. economy showed signs of a rapid recovery in the third quarter at 7.4% (-2.9% year-on-year), but the country is seeing a resurgence in COVID-19 cases and the prospects for continued recovery in the fourth quarter are uncertain at the time of this writing. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) outlook for 2020, China achieved positive growth of 1.9% for the full year of 2020 and is projected to achieve 8.2% positive growth in 2021. On the other hand, the United States is expected to post negative growth of -4.3% for the full year of 2020 and positive growth of 3.1% in 2021, both significantly lower than the growth rates of the Chinese economy.[12] If these estimates are correct, the pandemic could narrow the disparity in economic leverage between the United States and China, at least at a faster pace than in the past few years.

Second, COVID-19 has reaffirmed the Trump administration's lukewarm attitude toward multilateralism. Ever since the pandemic spread globally, the Trump administration criticized the World Health Organization (WHO) for coming under the influence of China. It announced the United States would halt payment of contributions to the organization in April 2020 and withdraw from the organization in May, indicating the possibility of establishing new international institutions but never disclosed anything concrete.[13] The United States is certainly not the only country that expressed dissatisfaction with the role played by WHO in the pandemic and the organization's mechanisms. As members of WHO, however, many of these countries have made ongoing efforts to reform WHO and carry out an inquiry into the international response to COVID-19 as much as possible, marking a divergence from the U.S. policy.

Along with confirming these trends, the outbreak of the pandemic has moved the United States and China in the direction of further great power competition. As is known, the U.S.-China relationship has become more competitive over recent years to the extent that it is called the "New Cold War" or "Cold War 2.0." This is compounded by the COVID-19 crisis that has created a new point of contention between the two great powers. The Trump administration claimed that China mishandled the initial response in Wuhan and the sharing of information with the rest of the world, which in turn made the global pandemic considerably more serious, and declared that China must be held "accountable."[14] China responded that it has not been confirmed as the origin of the outbreak and condemned the administration for "shifting the blame" for the U.S. mishandling of the disease to another country.[15] In addition, the U.S.-China standoff over COVID-19 intensified over Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly as an observer. The Trump administration supported giving observer status at the World Health Assembly to Taiwan, one of the successful examples of combating COVID-19. The dispute with China, which objected to Taiwan's participation, unfolded at the World Health Assembly in May 2020 and in the international negotiations for its resumed session in November.

(2) A Pluralist World?

The transformation of U.S.-China relations and the outbreak of COVID-19 have further intensified the debate on the transition of the international order. A variety of views on this issue have been put forward by experts, among which the following two are particularly representative. One of them is the bipolarity discourse.[16] Although there are various definitions of what exactly is meant by bipolarity, many experts who discuss the future international order envision that the increased competition between the United States and China will divide the world into blocs or spheres of influence with the two countries at their core.[17] They anticipate many countries in the world will be forced to choose sides between one or the other as the rivalry between the two countries intensifies. This may be more accurately described as a "divided" world image, i.e., a world divided into two. Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University notes that Sino-U.S. competition is creating "pressure [on other countries] of taking sides with either the United States or China."[18] Yuen Foong Khong of the National University of Singapore notes, even if small and medium-sized countries like Southeast Asian nations do not confront a decisive choice between the United States and China, their cumulative day-to-day policy choices will elucidate which of the two camps they will ultimately align with.[19] This question of "choosing" China or the United States has long been a subject of intense debate in East Asia. In recent years, it has also entered the discourse on Sino-U.S. competition in more geographically distant regions, including Europe.[20]

On the other hand, a number of arguments also emphasize the tendency toward multipolarization of international politics rather than the risk of "division." The classical image of a multipolar world is one where multiple states enter into military cooperation or alliances to maintain balance, aiming to prevent a dominant state or coalition of states from emerging.[21] Accordingly, any change in the distribution of military power results in an overhaul of alliance partners. Moreover, when discussing the future international order, many advocates of "multipolarity" are using the term "multipolar" not necessarily to argue that many more countries than the United States and China would compete and balance militarily against each other and thereby constitute a multipolar structure per se. For example, former Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan proposes "asymmetric, dynamic multipolarity" based on a multilateral perspective on power.[22] "Asymmetric" implies candid acknowledgement that both the United States and China have comprehensive national strengths, including military might superior to those of other countries, and that their bilateral relationship forms the central axis of international politics. "Dynamic multipolarity" means non-U.S. and Chinese countries have a broader range of choices and roles than simply collaborating with the United States against China, or cooperating with China to distance themselves from the United States. As Nakanishi Hiroshi of Kyoto University suggests, "pluralization" is a more accurate description of the tendency of the instruments of international politics to be diverse and not limited to military capabilities.[23] Hosoya Yuichi of Keio University points out that non-U.S. and Chinese countries, such as Japan and European countries, may play a more important role in the post-COVID-19 world. The power envisaged here is, again, a pluralistic one that encompasses not only military capabilities but also the ability to earn the respect of other countries and promote multilateral cooperation.[24]

As mentioned above, unlike the scholars and practitioners who project the "divided" world image, those who conceive of the world image as "pluralist" discuss prospects for the future international order with more importance given to the roles and agency of the players other than the great powers of the United States and China. The "pluralist" world image offers a variety of arguments, and it is impossible to list them all. The following are three representative examples of the concepts being developed related to the options of non-U.S. and Chinese countries.[25] First, according to Bruce Jentleson of Duke University, one of the concepts is the "pluralization" of diplomacy. This refers to the policy of avoiding overdependence on a single great power as much as possible by building multilateral relationships with other countries, thereby limiting the influence of the great power. A second notion is that maintaining strategic "ambiguity" is becoming a convenient choice for many countries. By refraining from clarifying their positions, countries are more likely to avoid or delay a situation where

they are forced to make a clear choice between the great powers of the United States and China. The third is the most classic example of the "pluralist" world image, the idea of many countries other than the great powers protecting multilateralism. Non-U.S. and Chinese countries work together to protect and strengthen multilateral cooperation and principles, which provides a basis for promoting international cooperation in areas where the national interests of the United States and China coincide. It is also thought to enable protection of multilateral frameworks even as U.S.-China confrontation continues. "Pluralist" thinkers believe that many countries are protecting their autonomy by utilizing either of these three choices or their combination, and consequently, the world will not simply be divided into a U.S.-China bipolar structure.

Observations of the international politics surrounding COVID-19 suggest that countries other than the United States and China are playing a creative role in more instances, as noted by those who emphasize the "pluralist" world image. The World Health Assembly in May 2020 adopted a resolution that articulated an intention to review the international response and cooperation on the COVID-19 crisis. China initially adopted the position that an inquiry should not be conducted while the pandemic was continuing. Nonetheless, as negotiations on the draft resolution were carried out under the EU's leading role, China ultimately joined, and the resolution was submitted and adopted by over 130 co-sponsoring countries.[26] Steps are gradually being taken to implement the resolution, and an inquiry is under way with the appointment of former prime minister of New Zealand Helen Clark and former president of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as co-chairs of the inquiry panel. Clark described the panel's mandate as "mission impossible" and acknowledged that there are limits on the extent to which an adequate inquiry can be conducted. Knowing the challenges of an inquiry, many countries that co-sponsored the resolution are still focusing on reforming WHO and sharing facts and lessons surrounding the pandemic as much as possible.[27] This approach is markedly different from that of the Trump administration that had notified its withdrawal from WHO. Furthermore, the COVAX Facility has been established for the development of COVID-19 vaccines with the participation of developed and developing countries, including Japan, European countries, and Australia. Under the COVAX Facility, mechanisms are being developed to encourage companies to expand their vaccine development and manufacturing capabilities and to ensure equitable access to vaccines for all countries, including developing countries that lack sufficient funds.[28] This initiative has been noted as a good example of a growing win-win network based on broad multilateral cooperation—an alternative to the power politics approach that uses homegrown vaccines as diplomatic leverage.

Of course, such observations of "pluralist" international politics do not imply that the U.S.-China confrontation is no longer intensifying, or that countries are no longer struggling to find their place between the two great powers. Building on the observation by Soeya Yoshihide of Keio University, international politics at the end of 2020 appears to be in a "hybrid" situation comprised of both "divisive" pressures and "pluralist" phenomena.[29] Various factors may explain why a clearly divided world has not yet emerged despite the intensifying U.S.-China competition. What they hint at is that many countries other than the two great powers are intent on acting autonomously as their own national interests, values, and principles guide their foreign policy. Based on this awareness of the issues, we leave it to Chapter 2 onwards to examine the affairs of the countries and regions dealt with annually in the *East Asian Strategic Review*. This chapter, instead, analyzes two other important regions, the South Pacific and Europe. Section 2 discusses developments in the South Pacific with a focus on Australia, while Section 3 discusses the international activities of Europe. The discussions shed light on the challenges facing non-U.S. and Chinese countries and how they search for autonomy as the international order reaches a turning point.

2. Australia-China Competition and the South Pacific

(1) Pluralist Order in the South Pacific

The South Pacific is dotted with nations large and small that can be classified into

three broad categories. The first is the South Pacific island countries, which have a relatively limited land area and small population but a vast exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Most of the countries do not have military forces, with the exceptions of Fiji, which has a military force of about 3,500 personnel, and Tonga, which has a military force of about 500 personnel.[30] The second category is France and the United States, which have territorial and defense commitments in the South Pacific but whose mainland is located outside the region. France possesses French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna. It stations about 3,000 troops, seven vessels, including Floréal-class patrol frigates, and nine fixed-wing aircraft, including the Falcon patrol aircraft, for monitoring and surveillance of the French territories. In addition, it regularly hosts the international disaster relief exercise Croix du Sud.[31] In recent years, the country has annually published the *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* report, and French presence in the region is regaining attention.[32] The United States possesses the Hawaiian Islands at the northern apex of Polynesia, along with American Samoa, and maintains agreements to assume responsibility for the defense of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau.[33] Secretary of Defense Mark Esper visited Palau in August 2020 and Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite in October. The Palauan government made a proposal to build some military facilities and realize their joint use, and this is now under consideration.[34] The third category is the developed countries of New Zealand and Australia, the major regional powers in Oceania. New Zealand is currently in the process of introducing four P-8 Poseidon patrol aircraft and continues to provide capacity building assistance for the maritime surveillance of island countries. According to the *Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018*, New Zealand places the same level of priority on maritime stability in the South Pacific as it does on defending its territory.[35] Australia is the largest military and economic player in Oceania, having the 13th largest GDP in the world and maintaining a defense budget of approximately 3 trillion yen and a defense force of about 60,000 personnel.[36] In this section, security in Oceania is analyzed with focus given to the Australian perspective. As necessary, it refers to Papua New Guinea, a member of the Pacific

Islands Forum (PIF), although the country is an exception that does not fit into any of the three broad categories above.

The formation and development of the Australian state has always been closely linked with the security of the South Pacific. In 1901, several colonies on the Australian continent united to form the foundation of the current continental federation. This was triggered by the increasing presence of non-British imperial powers in the South Pacific, which in turn led to importance being placed on the unification and self-governance of colonies to ensure the security of the Australian continent.[37] The country has traditionally disfavored the military presence of external powers in the South Pacific, and these security perceptions have been consistently found even after the end of the Cold War. This is demonstrated, for example, in *Defence 2000*, a historic document that significantly influenced the basic framework of Australia's defense policy in the first 15 years of the 21st century. This white paper lists the determinants of the force structure of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), which include not only direct defense of the Australian continent but also ensuring "stability in the nearer region" centered around the South Pacific.[38] One of the reasons cited is to prevent external powers from maintaining a military presence in Australia's neighborhood.

Indeed, Australia has continued to play a leading military role in the South Pacific region in an ongoing effort to forestall the possibility of full-scale intervention by external powers. For example, when a stabilization and peace-building operation was launched in then East Timor in 1999, ADF led the UN peacekeeping force and became the largest force provider, deploying some 5,500 troops.[39] Australia's involvement in Timor-Leste's independence and stability was a sticky foreign policy situation in the context of its relations with the northern giant, Indonesia. The fact that Australia managed this issue and engaged in large-scale military involvement confirmed the country's determination to play a leading role in the "immediate neighbourhood."[40] Furthermore, Australia led a task force consisting of troops contributed by Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tonga for the stabilization operation, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). RAMSI began in 2003 at the request of

the government of the Solomon Islands, which continued to experience political instability at the time.[41] The second pillar of Australia's military involvement, in addition to these stabilization operations, is to assist South Pacific countries in managing their territorial waters and EEZs. After the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was adopted in 1982, it became a critical regional issue that South Pacific island countries with small populations and economies effectively manage their vast territorial waters and EEZs. Australia has provided support to these countries and implemented the ADF-led Pacific Patrol Boat Program to maintain order under UNCLOS in the South Pacific.[42] The program provides South Pacific countries with patrol boats, stations personnel in the region, and offers ongoing support for patrol boat operation training and maintenance and management. Since the first patrol boat was provided to Papua New Guinea in 1987, the program has extended capacity building assistance to many countries. With the initially provided Pacific-class patrol boats due to reach the end of their service life, the program has recently begun providing new Guardian-class patrol boats. According to the *Defence White Paper 2009*, it is important that Australia play a "leading" role not only from a "humanitarian perspective," but also from a "strategic perspective" in preventing external powers from increasing their influence over the immediate neighbourhood.[43]

Australia recognizes that over-emphasizing its leading role in the South Pacific may cause island countries to see it as intrusive assistance and create resentment. A range of policies have been put in place to manage such sentiments and ensure Australia's engagement is welcomed. Among them, building regionalism through the PIF has been regarded as offering a vital opportunity. In 2000, the PIF issued the Biketawa Declaration, which affirmed region-wide support for stability in South Pacific countries. This provided a regional basis for legitimizing Australia's subsequent stabilization operations and played a particularly important role in RAMSI in the Solomon Islands discussed above. At the time, the Solomon Islands maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and securing a mandate for stabilization operations via the UN was considered unviable.[44] Therefore, forces were provided by member countries under a regional mandate of the PIF, and regionalism in the South Pacific played a concrete role serving as a source of legitimacy for security operations. Alongside security, regionalism also has a role in the areas of economic cooperation among South Pacific countries. A series of regional agreements have been implemented to deepen economic relations between the island countries and Australia and New Zealand. In this way, the South Pacific has developed a pluralist order in which Australia, New Zealand, and island countries, rather than the great powers outside the South Pacific, utilize multilateralism to promote regional stability and prosperity.

In the last few years, however, Australia has become apprehensive about China's growing economic presence that could cast a long shadow over this Australia-led pluralist regional order in the South Pacific. Since 2014, China has become the largest trading partner for South Pacific island countries along with Australia, and according to a study by the Lowy Institute for International Policy, China surpassed Japan to become the third largest donor of aid to South Pacific island countries for the five-year period from 2014 to 2018.[45] China also appears to be gradually translating its growing economic presence into political influence. In 2019, both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati agreed to switch diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China.[46] In recent years, Australian media and think tanks have warned that China's growing economic presence may gradually lead to a growing military presence. In 2018, there were reports that negotiations were in progress for China to build a military facility in Vanuatu, about 2,000 kilometers from the Australian continent. When the government of Australia confirmed with the government of Vanuatu, then Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull denied the fact.[47] Although the reported facility has not materialized so far, the Australian government's quick denial of the reports and the lively discussion that ensued in the Australian policy community confirmed the high level of interest in these issues. Also in 2018, the governments of Australia and Papua New Guinea agreed to expand a base facility for joint use by the Australian navy on Manus Island, which belongs to Papua New Guinea. As one Australian expert explained, the intention was to preempt China's growing influence in the South Pacific and was "preventative."[48] Construction at Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island has

already begun, where Australia is set to carry out a project to help build up Papua New Guinea's maritime management capacity.

Despite Australia's gradually increasing alarm over China's growing presence in the South Pacific, the basis for Australia's leading role has remained firm and steadfast, at least to date, from the following three perspectives. First, Australia maintains a commanding presence in the development assistance sector.[49] A comparison of 2018 aid commitments shows that Australia's was $920 million, while China's was only about a quarter of that at $240 million. In 2018, Prime Minister Scott Morrison unveiled a series of programs called "Pacific Step-up" and announced Australia will increase its development assistance funding. The aid disparity between Australia and China may thus widen even further.[50]

Second, there is still a stark difference in the scale and quality of Australian and Chinese engagement in the security field. Since 2010, China has sent the hospital ship *Peace Ark* to various parts of the world to provide medical assistance and conduct friendship visits. In recent years, it has also been conducting activities in the South Pacific to strengthen relations with island countries.[51] In comparison, ADF's involvement is wide-ranging. In addition to the maritime capacity building assistance and peace operations already mentioned, it continues to demonstrate its presence as a first responder in the areas of medical assistance and disaster relief. When Cyclone Harold struck the South Pacific in April 2020, causing severe damage in Fiji and Vanuatu in particular, Australian and New Zealand forces each transported more than 200 tons of relief supplies.[52] This assistance reaffirmed that the two countries, which are geographically close to the South Pacific island countries and maintain high-quality military forces, have an important presence in disaster assistance. So far, it cannot be confirmed that Chinese forces have led disaster relief efforts as first responders in the South Pacific.

Third, Australia coordinates with other players more closely than China in the South Pacific region. Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States have formed the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group to cooperate and coordinate maritime surveillance in the South Pacific and support fisheries monitoring by the PIF.[53] New Zealand, in particular, provided more aid than China in 2018. It also launched a program of enhanced engagement called "Pacific Reset" and has expressed opposition to "militarization" of the South Pacific.[54] New Zealand has launched the Pacific Maritime Safety Programme since 2011 and has strengthened its capacity building assistance efforts for island countries in the areas of legislative development and search and rescue. Both the Australian and New Zealand governments have agreed to pursue closer coordination between Australia's "Pacific Step-up" policy and New Zealand's "Pacific Reset."[55] In addition, France has further expanded its coordination with Australia, New Zealand, and island countries in the area of multilateral cooperation in the South Pacific, successfully admitting New Caledonia and French Polynesia to the PIF in 2016 and including the representative of the former in the PIF leaders' retreat for the first time in 2018. Furthermore, negotiations for an agreement to strengthen economic ties between the French territories and Australia are currently under consideration.[56] As is evident, the quality and breadth of Australia-New Zealand cooperation and Australia-France cooperation in the South Pacific region far exceeds that of cooperation between these countries and China. In light of the above, it can be assessed that although China's economic presence has expanded in recent years, the pluralist order and Australia's leading position in the South Pacific remain intact.

Some note that COVID-19 is further fueling Australia-China competition for aid to South Pacific island countries. China provided medical supplies, such as masks and protective gear, as well as medical treatment information from an early stage, and also contributed $1.9 million to establish the China-Pacific Island Countries Anti-COVID-19 Cooperation Fund. This fund reportedly can be used not only for direct responses to COVID-19 but also to promote trade and investment relations between China and South Pacific island countries.[57] Similarly, Australia has decided to "focus" its international assistance on South Pacific island countries. In cooperation with WHO and the World Food Programme, the Royal Australian Air Force C-17 aircraft is transporting supplies and experts to help ensure that medical services and food supplies in island countries are not disrupted

A Royal Australian Air Force C-17 aircraft arriving in Port Vila, Vanuatu with disaster relief supplies (Australian Department of Defence/Australian Defence Force)

even after flight routes are reduced. Australia is also providing information and technical training through the Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.[58] While both Australia and China have stepped up to assist in the COVID-19 response in the South Pacific, Australia's efforts may be considered superior to China's in the following two ways. One is the use of regionalism. The PIF Foreign Ministers' Meeting held online in April 2020 decided to invoke the 2000 Biketawa Declaration that had been used to legitimize peace operations. The meeting viewed responding to COVID-19 as posing a "real and extreme danger" to regional security and stressed the importance of member states working in solidarity as part of the "Pacific Islands extended family." Secondly, Australia has made a greater financial commitment. In addition to its regular budget, Australia established a new fund of more than A$300 million, exceeding China's, to help prevent and respond to the pandemic in the Pacific for realizing the policies discussed above.[59]

In recent years, the United States has continued to express high expectations for Australia, which still maintains a leading position in the South Pacific. Under a policy called the "Pacific Pledge" of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Trump administration committed more than $300 million in its budget to Pacific island countries for boosting development assistance, support for domestic governance, including election management, and capacity building assistance for coast guard agencies.[60] In addition, the United States has announced its intention to cooperate with Australia in the construction of the naval base on Manus Island mentioned above, and is providing technical, material, and financial assistance to the South Pacific region in coordination with Australia for the region's COVID-19 response. For example, Japan-U.S.-Australia cooperation is being pursued for an undersea cable project in Palau's periphery, where the U.S. forces is considering strengthening its deployment.[61] However, the South Pacific policies of the United States and Australia differ clearly in their position on the following two points. First, the U.S. and Australian policies differ on China-Taiwan competition over diplomatic relations with South Pacific countries. In October 2019, the Trump administration launched a formal U.S.-Taiwan dialogue on the South Pacific, and Sandra Oudkirk, deputy assistant secretary of state for Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands, stated during her visit to Taiwan, "we firmly support Taiwan's relationships with Pacific Island nations."[62] Furthermore, when W. Patrick Murphy, acting assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, visited Australia in May 2019 and stated that he encourages South Pacific countries to maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Australian prime minister Morrison stated soon afterward that it was for the South Pacific countries themselves to decide and emphasized Australia's stance of not intervening in this issue.[63] Second, differences in the U.S. and Australian positions on multilateralism are also becoming more manifest. As already mentioned in Section 1, the Trump administration halted contributions to WHO and announced its intention to withdraw from the organization. Australia has maintained a critical stance toward the administration's decisions while choosing its words carefully. As Australian minister for foreign affairs Marise Payne noted, Australia is working closely with WHO's regional office in providing international assistance for combating COVID-19, mainly to the South Pacific, and the country has praised the role of WHO. Considering the above two points, the (sometimes circulated) discourse that Australia is countering China as a proxy of the United States in the South Pacific is misleadingly simplistic. As this section has examined, Australia's primary reason for remaining wary of the presence of external great powers in the South Pacific is its own perception of national security based on history and is not support of the United States. From this perspective, Canberra seeks to protect the Australia-led pluralist order in the

South Pacific by pursuing its own measures against China's growing presence, while being careful not to be inadvertently influenced by U.S. policy toward China.

(2) Deterioration of Australia-China Relations

As was outlined in (1), Australia has been wary of China that is expanding its presence in the periphery region in recent years. Underlying this wariness is widespread distrust of China that extends beyond the South Pacific. In particular, the factor that most exacerbated Australia's perception of China in 2020 was the bilateral conflict over the response to COVID-19. The direct trigger of the issue was Foreign Minister Payne's comments regarding the COVID-19 response.[64] In an interview with an Australian media outlet in April 2020, Foreign Minister Payne urged for "transparency" in the initial response to the virus that originated in Wuhan and that an "independent" and international review was needed. The Chinese ambassador to Australia refuted immediately that China had not been confirmed as the origin of the virus and that the review should wait until the response to the pandemic was under control.[65] The ambassador also noted that the comments of the Australian government could give the Chinese public an unfavorable impression of Australia, suggesting that under such circumstances, Chinese people may not wish to buy Australian products or study or travel in Australia. On the grounds that the remarks by the Chinese senior official could be construed as blatant economic "blackmail," they aroused widespread controversy among the Australian media and policy community.[66]

And, as if to give credence to the statements of the ambassador, the Chinese government continued to put forward measures intermittently to review its economic relationship with Australia. In summary, first, the Chinese government announced in May 2020 that it would impose high tariffs on Australian barley.[67] With China being the largest importing country of Australian barley, concerns heightened in Australia that the country would be shut out of the Chinese market, which could lead to significant business losses. In addition, in June 2020, the Chinese government warned its people that traveling to Australia to sightsee or study could put them at risk of racial discrimination.[68] Travel between Australia and China has become severely restricted due to the pandemic's outbreak, and it remains unclear what effect the Chinese government's warnings will have in practice. At the very least, both tourism and study in Australia rely heavily on Chinese visitors, and this has raised concerns over economic losses in the two industries. Specifically, for the full year of 2018, China was the top country from which people visited Australia and generated an estimated A$12 billion in economic impact.[69] This amount far exceeds that of the second top country the United States (about A$4 billion), making Australia's high level of dependence on China most apparent.[70] Similarly, of the approximately 750,000 international students in Australia in 2019, Chinese students were the largest group by country, accounting for 28% of the total, significantly ahead that of the second top country India at 15%.[71] The Chinese government's warnings that could deter tourists and students from coming could have serious implications for the Australian economy. In November 2020, it was reported that Chinese authorities halted imports of Australian copper, coal, barley, wine, sugar, lobster, and logs.[72] Australian trade minister Simon Birmingham noted that the suspension of imports does not apply to all of the reported supplies and that imports were being delayed due to changes in administration regulations.[73] Conversely, these statements confirmed that imports of some items and products would be suspended or delayed. As Australian exports to China undergo a review in a variety of sectors, the Morrison government has called for intergovernmental ministerial talks, which the Chinese government has not agreed to so far. In this context, the Australian government has urged its export industries to diversify their export markets, and its education arm is working to review its over-reliance on international students for income.

The Morrison government has not lost its willingness to hold dialogue with China. Nevertheless, stabilizing Australia-China relations will no longer be an easy task.[74] Even if the countries succeed to some extent in defusing the conflicts over the COVID-19 response and trade relations, many other issues remain between Australia and China that involve sensitive matters which are politically

difficult to deal with. In particular, the management of the Australia-China relationship in recent years has been made more challenging by fundamental disagreements over political values. First, there has been ongoing debate and criticism in Australia of what is often characterized as Chinese infiltration into Australian politics and society. In 2017, senator Sam Dastyari of the largest opposition Labor Party resigned after a scandal over his links to Chinese supporters. Australia then strengthened its legal infrastructure to combat foreign government interference in 2018. In recent years, investigations and controversies under the law have spilled over even into Australian local politics. In June 2020, the office of Shaoquett Moselmane, member of the New South Wales Legislative Council, was raided by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).[75] According to the announcement by Moselmane, he was not the target of the investigation and Chinese-Australian John Zhang, one of his office staff, was the suspect. According to Australian media reports, Zhang had publicly stated the need to have more pro-China politicians in Australia and is suspected of being under the influence of the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In connection with this case, it has also been reported that a Chinese consul to Australia and Chinese diplomats have been targeted for investigation.[76] In response, the Consulate General of China in Sydney reprinted, on its website, an article from the English edition of *Global Times*, effectively condemning the Australian government's investigation by citing that it was "barbaric acts" against Chinese "journalists."[77] Furthermore, in November 2020, it was learned Di Sanh Duong, an Australian of Chinese and Vietnamese descent, became a target of investigation by AFP and ASIO and was arrested and charged.[78] This was the first instance that foreign interference laws enacted in 2018 were applied. Duong's arrest was meant to prevent illegal activities from taking place, according to AFP. However, the specifics have yet to be made public.[79] According to the Australian media, Duong is a member of the Liberal Party who was a candidate in the Victorian state parliamentary election and had recently been engaged in political activities.

Second, in recent years Australia has become increasingly critical of the human rights situation in China. In particular, the Australian media has published a series of reports regarding the situation in Hong Kong and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region since 2019. The Morrison government has expressed deep concern over Hong Kong's National Security Law, saying that it infringes on various rights, including human rights, and on the high degree of autonomy guaranteed under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, and has openly criticized the Chinese government for its arbitrary detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.[80] In addition, the treatment of Australians in China has developed into a political issue. In August 2020, the Australian government announced that Cheng Lei, an Australian anchor on the Chinese state-run television network CGTN, was detained by Chinese authorities.[81] In September 2020, two Australian journalists in China sought protection from the Australian consulate in China and returned to Australia. According to reports, local police in China approached and questioned them about Cheng, and it is known that Australian diplomats in China advised the two to return to Australia.[82] Regarding this case, Foreign Minister Payne stated that freedom of the press should be protected and that it was disappointing there would not be Australian journalists present in China.

Australia presents the interpretation that the overall deterioration of its relations with China was a secondary effect of the intensifying great power competition between the United States and China. In his August and November 2020 speeches, Prime Minister Morrison noted that all of Australia's policy choices tend to be understood through "the lens of the strategic competition between China and the United States," and as a result, it "needlessly deteriorates" Australia-China relations.[83] In consideration of these issues, the Morrison government has made it clear that it does not agree with all of the Trump administration's policies on China, and has emphasized to China that Australia is not a pawn of the United States and is an "independent sovereign state." In fact, at the press conference of the Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) held in July 2020, Foreign Minister Payne indicated that Australia and the United States do not agree on all aspects of their policies on China, and clarified Australia's stance of maintaining a certain distance from the U.S.-China

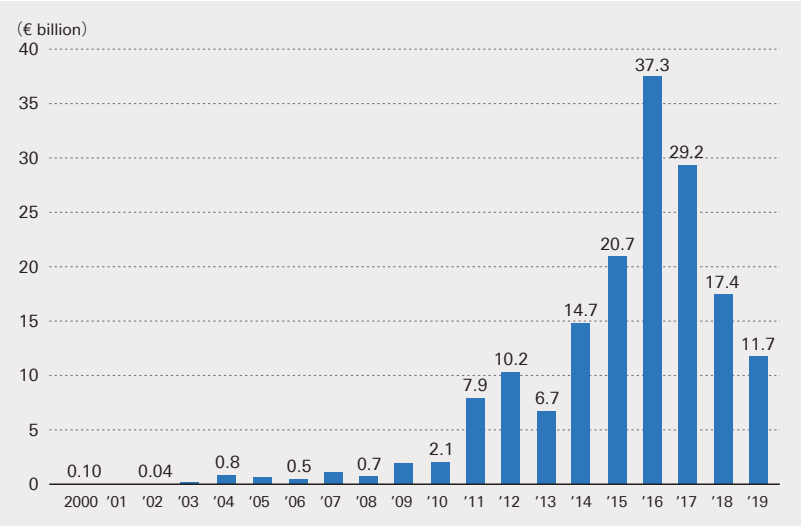
great power competition.[84] Despite these efforts, Australia has not succeeded in changing China's perception. From the "14 grievances (provisional name)," a document about Australia-China relations which the Chinese embassy in Canberra reportedly distributed to the Australian media in November 2020, it can be inferred that, as China sees it, Australia did America's "bidding" in criticizing China's COVID-19 response.[85] There are no signs that the deterioration of Australia-China relations will come to a halt as of the end of 2020. In light of the above, it can be assessed that so far, Australia's efforts to reassert its agency in the face of intensifying competition between the United States and China have not necessarily led to concrete results.

3. The Transition and Current State of Europe-China Relations: The Broadening Meaning of "Strategic Autonomy"

(1) The Beginning and Development of the Sino-European Relationship

The year 2020 was the 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the EU and China. Diplomatic ties were formally established on May 6, 1975, and since then, the relationship between the two sides has developed mainly in economic terms, especially trade relations. In 1998, the EU identified one of the priorities of its relations with China as: "engaging China further, through an upgraded political dialogue, in the international community."[86] In 2003, the EU established the aim to strengthen relations with China based on the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership."[87] Ten years later, in 2013, the "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation" (hereinafter, "2020 Strategic Agenda") was unveiled.[88] The 2020 Strategic Agenda outlines a total of 92 cooperation initiatives in four priority target areas: "Peace and Security"; "Prosperity"; "Sustainable Development"; and "People-to-People Exchanges." The largest number of initiatives was allocated to "Trade and Investment" under "Prosperity," which includes economic cooperation. Thereafter, EU-China ties continued to develop mainly in the economic field, rather than in legal and political frameworks where there

Figure 1.1. Chinese FDI in the EU



Source: Agatha Kratz, Mikko Huotari, Thilo Hanemann, and Rebecca Arcesati, "Chinese FDI in Europe: 2019 Update," Mercator Institute for China Studies and Rhodium Group (April 2020), 9.

are noted differences between the two sides in their perceptions of human rights and the rule of law.

Alongside the growth in trade between the EU and China, it is worth giving attention to the sharp increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) from China to the EU from around this time in 2010. This increase in China's outward FDI was initially driven by domestic factors. Since 1997, in addition to introducing foreign capital, China has set forth the "Go Global" policy that encourages Chinese companies to expand their overseas operations, articulated as a national strategy in 2001.[89] From then on, China gradually increased its outward FDI, and in around 2008, began to make outward FDI into mega markets, such as the United States and the EU.[90]

Notably, Chinese FDI in the EU has grown at a remarkable rate, increasing about 15-fold from 2008 to 2012, as seen in Figure 1.1. This is attributed

to the global economic crisis in September 2008. Moreover, in Europe, the sovereign debt crisis from October 2009 worsened the fiscal situation. Despite the significant stagnation in global FDI activity during this period, Chinese FDI in the EU surged, as mentioned above. Against this backdrop, cooperation on investment was also given focus in the 2020 Strategic Agenda, and negotiations on the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) were launched in 2014.

Sophie Meunier of Princeton University points out that the series of economic crises contributed to the increase in Chinese FDI in the EU.[91] The reason: China had the world's largest foreign exchange reserves and had the economic capacity to continue outward FDI, while the economic crisis originating in the United States made China aware of the need to diversify assets denominated mostly in dollars.[92] Based on these circumstances, it is believed that China proceeded to acquire real assets in Europe, such as infrastructure and corporations, which it considered to have high returns.

On the other hand, Meunier notes that political changes in the EU also contributed to the surge in China's outward FDI. First, following the economic crisis, European countries, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, all pinned hopes for Chinese FDI and began to appeal to China to invest in their countries. As a result, by around 2012, most EU countries had relaxed their regulations on inward FDI.[93] With regard to regulations on inward FDI, their implementation at the EU level was discussed from before, and in fact, the Treaty of Lisbon which entered into force in 2009 stipulated the regulations at the EU level.[94] However, as Chinese FDI became essential due to the economic crisis, European countries scrambled to ease regulations to attract FDI from China, and the implementation of inward FDI regulations at the EU level was delayed.[95]

Around Europe, the expansion of China-led economic cooperation with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (including the Baltic and Balkan countries) has attracted particular attention. Reeling from stagnant economies due to the spillover effects of the sovereign debt crisis, CEE countries were looking for partners with which to establish new economic ties to revitalize their

economies. That was when China was flagged as a candidate partner.[96] The first summit between China and CEE countries was held in Poland in 2012, and since then, the framework has evolved into the 16+1 framework between China and 16 CEE countries (became 17+1 after Greece joined in 2019; hereinafter referred to as "17+1") aiming to promote trade and investment relations.

The deepening of EU-China ties can also be observed in other major initiatives. First, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013 extends westwards to Europe, and as is evident, the initiative became a core concept for the subsequent development of Sino-EU relations. In addition, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) for infrastructure investments in Asia, including projects related to BRI, was established under China's leadership, and European countries, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, announced their accession in March 2015. European countries were believed to have joined for good governance of the bank, including ensuring the transparency of loan procedures.[97] In that sense, Europe's membership in the AIIB can be seen as a continuation of the EU's efforts in the 1990s for "engaging China further...in the international community." On the other hand, Europe's participation can also be understood as a manifestation of the growing strength of the Chinese economy and the development of relations between China and the EU or European countries, which in turn facilitated or even compelled European countries to participate in the AIIB.

(2) Europe's Reconsideration of Its Stance toward China: The COVID-19 Factor

EU-China relations deepened during the global economic crisis in around 2010 on the one hand. On the other, it is a fact that caution prevailed on China's initiatives from their inception. For example, 12 of the 17 CEE countries in the 17+1 are EU member states, raising suspicions that China was pursuing a "divide and rule" strategy in Europe.[98] Similar to when European countries joined the AIIB, skepticism pervaded the narratives of the media, namely, that China aims to leverage the differences in countries' stances on building relations with China

and encourage divisions in the EU. In contrast, the announcements made by the governments of CEE countries at the dawn of the 17+1 expressed favorable perceptions of China overall and visible intent to welcome opportunities that would arise from close cooperation with China.[99]

Nonetheless, the EU raised problems with 17+1 from the beginning. Anticipating the EU's doubts, China shared with it the draft joint communique of the China-CEE summit in 2012 when the 17+1 was formed. However, the EU still expressed opposition to the 17+1 becoming permanent or institutionalized.[100] The EU's concerns may stem from the following reasons. Firstly, China's current engagement in the CEE is ostensibly carried out in economic terms, with BRI being a leading means.[101] If CEE countries become economically dependent on China, this would inevitably increase China's political influence in the region which consists of many EU member states, and by extension, expand China's influence on the EU itself. Simply put, the EU has concerns that 17+1 would make CEE countries a "Trojan horse" for China to enlarge its political and economic presence in the region.

Secondly, the EU is concerned about not only China but also CEE countries. CEE countries have tended to disregard rules on competitive bidding, such as procurement in single markets. These are rules to be prioritized by EU member states when attracting business from China, and the stance of CEE countries was heightening the EU's caution.[102] Other reasons discussed include the fear of a "debt trap," where a country receives huge loans from China and has trouble repaying the debt and the creditor country applies diplomatic pressure on the debtor country. A leading example in Europe is the highway construction project in Montenegro, a candidate for EU membership.[103] However, some studies suggest it is too early to conclude that this case is a "debt trap," taking into account the financial situation and borrower liability.[104] In any event, it is a fact that not only the EU's member states but also member state candidates are becoming dependent on Chinese funding, and the EU has begun taking a more aggressive stance toward expanding membership to the Western Balkans.

In reality, the projects that China has committed to the 17+1 countries have

not progressed as much as the CEE countries had expected, and many of the infrastructure projects in the region that China has financed are behind schedule or have not even begun construction work. The reasons for this situation are a combination of the following factors. First, several of the projects financed mainly by China may be in violation of EU regulations on procurement processes, requiring investigations and tenders.[105] It has also been pointed out that the original project plans themselves were unrealistic.[106] Furthermore, the expected Chinese FDI for the 17+1 countries has been limited, and the lack of progress is gradually becoming apparent.[107]

Chinese FDI in Europe is destined mainly for Western European countries. The countries themselves had favorable views toward the large increase in Chinese FDI in the first half of the 2010s.[108] By around 2016, however, when China's annual FDI in the EU reached €37.3 billion, investments tended to shift from infrastructure, which traditionally received FDI, to acquisitions of companies with advanced technologies. The acquisitions of KUKA, a manufacturer of industrial robots, and AIXTRON, a manufacturer of semiconductor deposition equipment, are often cited in this context. KUKA manufactures robots for military use in Europe and the United States, and the acquisition was agreed upon despite an investigation into the acquisition at one point. Conversely, the acquisition of AIXTRON by Fujian Grand Chip Investment Fund was blocked after intervention by the Barack Obama administration on the grounds that the technology may be used for military purposes.[109] Such expansion of Chinese outward FDI and changes in investment areas have raised concerns among European countries. China also worried about excessive capital outflows and imposed tighter control over outward FDI. Under these influences, China's FDI in Europe has been declining since 2017, as can be seen from Figure 1.1.[110]

As illustrated, China's use of economic instruments has generated political concerns. Given China's stance, the EU and its member states have recently showed a marked inclination to reconsider their stance toward China. In September 2017, the European Commission proposed the establishment of an EU-wide framework for screening FDI inflows, which had previously not made strides due to member

states' conflicting stances toward China. The proposal warned that, if state-owned or government-controlled companies in third countries acquire European companies with advanced technologies, it would allow the countries to use such technologies, which could be harmful to the EU security and public order.[111] Subsequently, the establishment of an EU system for screening FDI was agreed upon in November 2018, and it entered into force as FDI Screening Regulation on April 10, 2019.

It can be said that Western Europe's wariness of China's political influence through its economic leverage, coupled with CEE's frustration with the lack of progress in Chinese economic support, gradually converged to the EU's reconsideration of its stance toward China. In April 2018, the EU ambassadors to China signed a document that contained criticism of BRI.[112] However, it was never made public, partly because the Hungarian ambassador alone refused to sign it.[113] In any case, it suggests that most EU member states have a negative view of BRI and China's growing political and economic clout. On the other hand, the EU indeed attaches importance to connectivity with Asia. In September 2018, it formulated a policy document called, "Connecting Europe and Asia: Building Blocks for an EU Strategy," which has since become known as the EU's Connectivity Strategy.[114] This strategy aims to contribute to connectivity between the two regions, including in the infrastructure, energy, and digital sectors. Nonetheless, the document unmistakably had China's BRI in mind.

Tensions in EU-China relations can also be observed at recent summits and in policy documents. For example, the 2016 EU-China summit failed to produce a joint statement of the summit for the first time due to significant differences, mainly over issues relating to the South China Sea and non-market economy status.[115] A similar situation occurred in the following year at the 19th EU-China summit. The failure to produce a joint statement for the second year in a row made the confrontation between the EU and China more conspicuous.[116]

Furthermore, in March 2019, the European Commission and the high representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy/vice president of the European Commission (hereinafter, "HR/VP") formulated a policy document on China entitled, "EU-China: A Strategic Outlook," presenting the view that the balance of "challenges and opportunities" offered by Sino-European relations is shifting.[117] It even noted that, while China is a "cooperation partner," it is an "economic competitor" and "systemic rival."[118] Zhang Ming, China's ambassador to the EU, argued against the term "systemic rival," saying it creates a worse impression than during the Cold War.[119] Put differently, some assess that China increasingly accepts that it is a competitor of the EU, though it emphasizes "healthy competition."[120] As demonstrated, the EU-China relationship has been in a state of tension since around the latter half of the 2010s.

This situation was spurred by the spread of COVID-19 in 2020 and China's subsequent response. The coronavirus took hold in Europe to the extent that by March, WHO said it was "now epicenter of the pandemic." However, the EU was initially unable to take effective measures against it. This was because the EU's authority over health services and medical care is limited to promoting cooperation among member states in the procurement of supplies, and the primary responsibility for response lies with the government of each member state.[121] Therefore, as the outbreak spread in member states, their governments were busy dealing with COVID-19 in their own countries, including France and Germany that temporarily banned the export of masks. Hence, it took time to achieve a coordinated response at the EU level. As a result, strong criticism erupted over the EU, especially in southern Europe where COVID-19 was spreading.

That was when China came forward to support the European countries. Even before the global outbreak of COVID-19, China had a large share of the global market for personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks and protective clothing. Already as of 2018, Chinese products accounted for 43% of the global PPE market, and 50% of the PPE distributed in the EU was imported from China.[122] In addition, since the pandemic began, China had expanded its domestic mask production capabilities 12-fold over the pre-pandemic level by the end of February 2020, with daily production reaching 116 million masks.[123] From February to March, Chinese PPE, which had become capable of further

mass production, was sent to Europe, the epicenter of the pandemic. Furthermore, medical experts and others who had responded to the situation in Wuhan, where the virus spread earlier, were sent to Europe along with PPE.[124] The media prominently reported that China's so-called "mask diplomacy" was received favorably, especially in Italy and the Western Balkans which initially did not receive support from the EU.[125]

Contrary to China's motive, however, the perception of the country continued to deteriorate in Europe. The main reason given is China's hostile diplomatic stance toward the pandemic. China rejects criticism that concealment of information and other factors may have delayed its initial response in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. Instead, China emphasizes that it is playing a constructive role, providing support to the international community. As demonstrated in the text posted by the Chinese embassy in France, China asserts that the spread of the coronavirus was a European blunder.[126] China's stance has resulted in a deterioration of sentiment toward China in the EU. HR/VP Josep Borrell condemned that China's support and narratives related to the pandemic in Europe are causing a rift in the EU, and stressed that it needs to prepare for a "struggle for influence" in the battle of narratives. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen called attention to the fact that a number of EU countries have also provided support and urged caution in the narrative being shaped by China.[127]

(3) The Broadening Meaning of the EU's "Strategic Autonomy"

European Commissioner for Trade Phil Hogan stated that the EU needs to think about how to ensure its "strategic autonomy," recognizing that the EU faces the above-mentioned challenge of correcting the external dependence that has been elicited as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.[128] Moreover, autonomy in this context does not mean self-sufficiency and seems to be primarily concerned with reducing dependence on China. The commissioner referred to, for example, resilient supply chains based on diversification and strengthening strategic stockpiling.[129]

The "strategic autonomy" concept itself is not a new one and is a term that originally appeared in discourse on relations with the United States, especially in the field of security.[130] "Strategic autonomy" came into use in the EU due to its inability to deal with the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s for institutional and capacity reasons. The EU recognized then that it needed capabilities to act autonomously. Moreover, the outbreak of the Iraq War in 2003 caused a rift in the U.S.-EU relationship, and the need for the EU's "strategic autonomy" became a subject of discussion once again. In the same year, the discussion paved the way for the realization of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), the predecessor of the current Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).[131]

The United States did not oppose Europe having capabilities to take a more autonomous approach to security policy, although conditions were attached, such as avoiding duplication with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As a result, the debate on "strategic autonomy" between the United States and the EU, as well as even within the EU, fell into a temporary disarray. But as the U.S.-EU relationship recovered, the debate on "strategic autonomy" appeared to have settled down. However, this was only because it was difficult for European countries to adopt a unified security or defense industrial policy, and because CSDP and capability development had stagnated under defense spending cuts caused by the economic crisis and other factors. Meanwhile, in the United States, there were constant calls for European countries to develop self-reliance in defense.

The debate on "strategic autonomy" resurfaced in the EU in around 2016. The trigger was the release of the EU's strategy document, the "EU Global Strategy" (EUGS), in June 2016, which makes repeated references to the pursuit of "strategic autonomy."[132] Among its various definitions, Special Advisor to HR/VP Nathalie Tocci, who was in charge of drafting the EUGS, defines "strategic autonomy" as: "[t]he ability of the Union to decide autonomously and have the means to act upon its decisions."[133] Subsequently, the EUGS philosophy resulted in the launch of the EU's own security policy, the Permanent Structured

Cooperation (PESCO).

The following two variables, which occurred around the same time as the formulation of the EUGS, also helped to drive the EU's pursuit of "strategic autonomy." The first was the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU (Brexit). The United Kingdom was traditionally opposed to the EU's moves to pursue "strategic autonomy," and the country's decision to leave the EU inevitably increased the momentum for the pursuit of "strategic autonomy" enshrined in the EUGS. The second factor was the establishment of the Trump administration in the United States. As the Trump administration was initially critical of NATO, the EU could not fully trust the U.S. commitment, forcing them to pursue "strategic autonomy" as Plan B.[134] In addition, U.S.-European relations were still not outright favorable in light of the impact on NATO internal politics of the planned reduction of U.S. forces in Germany announced in June 2020.[135]

Rather than the security context, U.S.-EU relations deteriorated in practice under the Trump administration in areas such as trade and climate change where international cooperation is important. The Trump administration, a promoter of protectionist trade policies, did not participate in the negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the EU launched in 2013. Furthermore, tensions persisted, including trade frictions. On the issue of climate change, President Trump formally notified in November 2019 that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Agreement, an international framework that came into effect in 2016.[136] It is clear these policies of the Trump administration based on the America First doctrine sparked the deterioration of U.S.-European relations.

These upheavals in U.S.-European ties led to an emphasis on Sino-European cooperation in some areas. For example, shortly after the United States formally notified its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, President Emmanuel Macron of France visited China. He and President Xi Jinping adopted a joint statement on coordinating efforts to address climate change, including the Paris Agreement, underscoring Europe-China cooperation.[137] At the EU-China summit, which failed to produce a joint statement in 2016 and 2017, the two sides reached an agreement to issue a joint statement that contains an anti-protectionism provision in 2018 and 2019. Such joint statements by the EU and China of recent years reveal their intention to resist the Trump administration's unilateralism in trade and climate change.[138] Thus, as the United States continues to put itself first and withdraws from international frameworks, China's aim seems to be to emphasize that it is Europe's true partner with shared values.[139]

Notwithstanding this, Commissioner Hogan urged in April that the EU needs to ensure "strategic autonomy" in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent deterioration of relations with China, as was already mentioned. And in June, Commissioner Hogan reiterated the importance of autonomy via the concept of "open strategic autonomy."[140] This is a vague concept and may not sound attractive, as the commissioner admitted, but at the very least it shows that the EU is newly pursuing a diversified trade policy. The commissioner's speech also referred to the proposal for the €750 billion "Next Generation EU" recovery plan from COVID-19 that was agreed in July, and emphasized recovering the economy from the pandemic.[141] In short, the key points of "open strategic autonomy" going forward will be EU unity, represented by self-recovery through the EU's recovery instrument, and the revival of the economy through strengthened trade policies aimed at diversification.

In addition, the commissioner mentioned that "open strategic autonomy" is in line with the objectives of a "geopolitical" European Commission. "A geopolitical commission" was described by President von der Leyen in her pre-inauguration speech in September 2019 as a "a geopolitical Commission committed to sustainable policies," and is a term that has since come into vogue.[142] The president also mentioned building the EU's partnership with the United States and redefining its relations with an increasingly self-assertive China. The EU's stance to redefine its position in Sino-U.S. relations is evident in the EU's external policy in 2020.

For example, the 22nd EU-China summit was held online in June 2020. This was the first summit meeting held with China since the new EU leadership took office, including European Commission President von der Leyen. However, the

meeting ended with little result and without the adoption of a joint statement. This can be attributed to differences between the EU and China around the coronavirus discourse and China's hardline diplomatic posture toward Europe.[143] In particular, China's decision at the end of May to enforce the Hong Kong National Security Law clearly factored into the hardened stance of the EU.

The leaders of China and 27 EU member states would have held a special meeting in Leipzig, Germany in September, had it not been for the COVID-19 outbreak, and may have signed the EU-China CAI under negotiations since 2014. Instead, an EU-China summit was held online in September. There were serious differences between the two sides concerning the pandemic and the situation in Hong Kong, and no real progress was made. Nonetheless, the EU and China sought to conclude the negotiations on the CAI by the end of the year and reached an agreement in principle on December 30, 2020.[144]

In terms of investment, the EU framework for screening of FDI, which entered into force in April 2019, became fully operational on October 11, 2020.[145] While the framework is not binding, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission Valdis Dombrovskis explained that the EU needs to work together in line with the framework if it is to achieve an "open strategic autonomy."[146] Having taken measures for inward FDI, the EU is likely to pursue a fairer investment and trade regime with China. In addition, the EU has agreed with the United States to commence a senior officials' dialogue on China issues. The EU's stance may reflect expectations for cooperation with the United States on policies toward China.

European Council President Charles Michel (right) and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (left) who attended the 22nd EU-China summit held online (Pignatelli/ROPI via ZUMA Press/Kyodo News Images)

Apart from "open strategic autonomy," Europe has been considering the concept of "digital strategic autonomy" as a region caught in the middle of the U.S.-China confrontation in the digital sector. This is a theme that had already begun to gain widespread recognition in Europe by around 2018 to 2019, when the U.S.-European rift on Huawei grew more serious. In the rollout of 5G networks, European countries determined that they ought to consider the use of Chinese products, which the United States advocate banning based on cybersecurity risks. These circumstances have reaffirmed Europe's vulnerability to "digital strategic autonomy," and discussions have unfolded on the need for Europe to retain its own digital capabilities.[147]

This issue has become even more contentious after the United States imposed additional sanctions on Huawei, including a tighter embargo, in May 2020, causing European countries to change their stances. Since July, European countries have shifted their policies to exclude or restrict Huawei from their 5G networks, make the screening process more rigorous seemingly with Huawei in mind, or give preferential treatment to European companies. This move started in the United Kingdom and France and has spread to Germany and Scandinavia.[148] The main underlying reason for this shift is the additional U.S. sanctions and the resulting technical issues. However, it may also be an outcome that took into account the European sentiment toward China, which has worsened as a result of the pandemic. If the United States and Europe remove Huawei, they will be relying primarily on two companies, Nokia and Ericsson, for 5G products. In fact, in October 2020, it was reported that the government of Belgium, where the EU and NATO are headquartered, decided to procure 5G-related products from the two companies.[149] Similar moves are expected to be seen in European countries in the future as well. If Europe pursues "digital strategic autonomy," it is anticipated to make Nokia and Ericsson the core suppliers for its 5G networks.

(4) The EU's Modus Operandi in U.S.-China Relations

Up to this point, this section has analyzed the EU's actions relating to U.S.-China relations from the perspectives of "open strategic autonomy" and "digital strategic autonomy" of recent years. Here, the EU's policy on China is outlined

from the standpoint of foreign affairs and security, an essential area of the original "strategic autonomy" concept of the EU. As noted at the beginning of (3), the EU has traditionally continued to pursue "strategic autonomy" in its relations with the United States. However, this did not ultimately work. The reason is that the principle of unanimity is basically applied to decision-making in foreign affairs and security, despite the obvious significant differences in member states' perception of national interests and strategic cultures in this area. As a result, differences in vision, especially between the United Kingdom, which has left the EU, and France and Germany often led to the EU's foreign and security policy failing in significant situations.

And this is now being observed in the Europe-China relationship. The EU's joint statement condemning China's stance on the 2016 South China Sea arbitration award failed to materialize due to opposition from Hungary and Greece. Furthermore, opposition from Hungary prevented the EU from issuing a joint statement in response to the 2017 UN report on the human rights situation in China.[150] The idea of reviewing unanimous decision-making in foreign affairs and security has been discussed for some time. Recently, President von der Leyen reiterated that a review was needed, given the time that was required to decide on sanctions against Belarus.[151] The possibility of introducing EU Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) for foreign affairs and security decisions has been discussed in the past. However, it has not materialized because of the EU's tendency to emphasize unity in foreign policy, among other reasons. Even if QMV were introduced, the EU would still seek consensus, leaving difficulties such as coordinating with member states that oppose a decision. This issue will have a major impact on the fate of not only traditional "strategic autonomy" but also "open strategic autonomy" and "digital strategic autonomy," and future developments will be closely watched.

Based on the previous discussion, this chapter lastly examines how the EU's behavior amidst the U.S.-China confrontation can be understood. This section described that, since 2016, the EU's pursuit of "strategic autonomy" due to deteriorating U.S.-Europe relations led to the launch of EU security initiatives, such as PESCO. In terms of foreign policy, it explained that it resulted in highlighting cooperation with China with which the EU has established favorable economic relations since around 2010. These outcomes, at the same time, signify that economic powerhouse China has an inevitably larger degree of political influence on the EU. Accordingly, the EU's "strategic autonomy" unavoidably pertains not only to the United States but now also to China. In addition, disputes in areas where the EU cannot make concessions, including democracy and human rights, became more manifest in 2020 than ever before.

This format though is not a new one. In the past, the EU has gotten closer to China when the United States appeared to be positioning itself against multilateral cooperation. In particular, the EU-U.S. and EU-China relationships around 2003 were very similar to the relations after 2016. When the United States adopted a notably unilateralist stance during the Iraq War in 2003, the EU pursued "strategic autonomy" and realized its own CSDP, as was described above. In addition, in terms of its policy on China, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, the EU sought to strengthen its relations with China based on a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2003, a move that some believe was the result of the EU and China joining hands in the face of the threat of U.S. unilateralism.[152] However, even at that time, the difference in perceptions between the EU and China regarding norms was already hindering the development of their relations.

The fundamental factor that nonetheless made EU-China cooperation possible is that they both implement foreign and security policies by observing the world through the prism of multipolarity or pluralization. Both the EU and China have promoted multipolarity in the post-Cold War world where the East-West bipolarity has eroded, and precisely this factor has made it possible for the EU and China to approach each other if the United States tended to adopt a unilateralist or America First approach. However, there is a structural problem: the development of EU-China relations will reach its limits when China's behavior seriously challenges EU norms. Even then, the EU can be understood as acting as a single pole, not necessarily as a U.S.-European bloc against China.

This attitude of the EU is exemplified in the recent comment by HR/VP Borrell: "in the European Union there is not apparent tendency towards a strategic rivalry that could lead to a kind of new 'Cold War.'"[153] Therefore, there is room for the EU and China to continue to cooperate depending on the area if the United States positions itself against multilateral cooperation.

While such similarities exist, there are also marked differences between the past and now. First, as was expressed in the "responsible stakeholder" speech in 2005, the United States at the time accepted China's growth, and simultaneously, expected China as a great power to contribute to international stability and security. This was similar to the EU's perception around that time of "engaging China further, through an upgraded political dialogue, in the international community." Both the United States and Europe still perceived that rising China could be integrated into the existing international order. Now, however, the confrontation between the United States and China is more intense, while the EU has decided not to join the new Cold War. It cannot be denied that their deep down view of China as a "systemic rival" has not been dispelled and has even gained greater traction.

Second, the composition of EU member states is different. Most of the states in the 17+1 became EU members after 2004. From this time, there have been concerns that increasing the number of member states could lead to a loss of speed and flexibility in the external actions of the EU, which requires security decisions to be made unanimously in principle. However, this arrangement may not have envisioned the penetration of Chinese influence into the member states of CEE. With such a situation emerging, the EU, which aims to expand its membership to the Balkans, will be sought to continue to pursue policies that balance expansion and unity. In addition, in terms of the composition of member states, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU has brought about changes. The United Kingdom's standing as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and its close relationship with the United States were no doubt important assets for EU diplomacy. In particular, with the Hong Kong issue becoming a matter of concern between the EU and China, it is clear that the withdrawal of the United Kingdom, which has historical ties with Hong Kong, was a major loss for the EU's diplomacy with Asia.

The third difference, related to the second point, is the engagement of European countries in the security of the Indo-Pacific. The United Kingdom has not formulated an official government strategy for the Indo-Pacific but is making strides in security cooperation with the Gulf States, Southeast Asia, and Japan. In the EU, France established its first policy document containing Indo-Pacific in the title in May 2018, Germany in September 2020, and the Netherlands in November 2020.[154] Furthermore, in June 2019, France formulated a strategy document named, "France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific." Where these documents are positioned and the format of the documents vary by country; however, at the very least, they reveal that European countries have showed an intention to engage in the Indo-Pacific with a certain vision and have begun to actually demonstrate readiness to dispatch assets to the region, representing a new trend of recent years.[155] In the meantime, the EU has not yet released a document on the Indo-Pacific, and its involvement in the region is concentrated in the Gulf States and off the coast of Somalia. The EU is expected to become more engaged through the above-mentioned connectivity strategy and the "EU Maritime Security Strategy" that enshrines the protection of freedom of navigation.[156]

Fourthly, the fundamental cause of the above differences lies in considerable variations in the degree of internationalization. This can be seen in a wide range of areas, such as trade and investment among the United States, China, and the EU as well as in the development of the digital sector and security linkages. As a consequence, the EU's concept of "strategic autonomy" has expanded to include "open strategic autonomy" and "digital strategic autonomy."

Needless to say, these changes from the past have made it difficult for the EU and European countries to find a simple balance between the United States and China in an era of great power competition. While the EU has said publicly that it will not join the U.S.-China confrontation, it likely has not been able to shake off its perception of China as a "systemic rival" either. Whether the U.S.-Europe

relationship can be maintained on good terms and what kind of U.S.-Europe cooperation on China is possible will also depend on the relationship with the next U.S. administration.

At the time of this writing on December 31, 2020, preparations are under way for transitioning to the Joseph Biden administration to take office on January 20, 2021. In general, the Biden administration is expected to stand for multilateralism, including returning to the Paris Agreement. As for the U.S.-Europe relationship, momentum is building for the United States to withdraw the proposed troop reductions in Germany, coupled with expectations that the U.S.-Europe alliance will be strengthened through NATO. In terms of trade relations with the EU, it is speculated that the limited sectoral negotiations already under way will continue, even without returning to negotiations for comprehensive free trade agreements (FTAs), such as the TTIP. In anticipation of the incoming Biden administration, the EU formulated a document about its policy toward the United States on December 2 entitled, "A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change," which reaffirms the need for EU-U.S. cooperation on a wide range of areas, including climate change, trade, technology, and security.[157]

However, the document, while espousing the need to jointly deal with an increasingly assertive China, also noted that Europe and the United States have different ways of addressing this. Such differences had already begun to be pointed out before the Biden administration. For example, there are reports that U.S. officials criticized the EU-China CAI agreed upon in principle on December 30, noting that the accord could strengthen the state-led Chinese economy.[158] The EU has responded by claiming that the investment agreement with China does not interfere with EU-U.S. cooperation. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that it underscored the subtle differences between Europe and the United States in their stance toward China, and that there was a problem of timing given how the CAI was reached just as the Biden administration was expected to restore U.S.-Europe relations. Furthermore, because Germany rushed to conclude the agreement, there were reportedly discrepancies between Germany and other EU member states skeptical of the accord. As such, the agreement also sheds light on the longstanding differences among European countries.[159]

The EU's posture can be understood in the context of its pursuit of "strategic autonomy" and related challenges in great power competition. Under the Trump administration, the extreme deterioration of Europe-U.S. relations at times put the spotlight on Europe-China relations. Under the Biden administration, the Europe-U.S. relationship may be restored, and opportunities for cooperation between the two sides may increase in relative terms. However, this does not necessarily mean that the EU will be in step with the United States, and it cannot be denied that the EU will give consideration to relations with China in some sectors. Whether this is a reflection of the EU's intention or the result of a compromise due to discrepancies among member states will depend on the situation. It is not realistic to eliminate differences in foreign and security policies among member states, which has been a longstanding problem. Nonetheless, it remains that "strategic autonomy" is a necessary means of achieving a delicate balance in great power competition, and for this purpose, the search for ways to minimize policy differences among member states is needed more than ever before.

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