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Future Resilience of the European Technology Security

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Abstract

This paper explores vulnerabilities in the European Union's technological security, focusing on Huawei as a case study to illuminate broader security challenges. Amid intensifying US-China tensions, especially under former US President Donald Trump, the EU encountered new risks linked to the strategic positioning of Chinese tech firms within critical European infrastructure. Trump's "America First" policy targeted China with tariffs and trade restrictions to address perceived unfair practices, triggering disruptions in global supply chains that reverberated through the EU economy. For Europe, heavily reliant on secure, stable trade flows, these events highlighted the urgency of reassessing technological dependencies and reinforcing digital security. The paper presents a series of strategic recommendations for the EU to mitigate such vulnerabilities, emphasizing the need for diversified supply chains, rigorous security standards for tech partnerships, and collaborative policies among EU members to strengthen resilience in the face of geopolitical shifts and technological competition.

Keyword: Populism, EU, Framing, US, China, Technology

Introduction

In the increasingly uncertain geopolitical climate, the European Union (EU) is facing the challenge of maintaining its technological resilience while protecting its security and autonomy. The fast-paced international competition for technological leadership is closely tied to the bloc's economic competence and has consequences for its security. Given the importance of transatlantic cooperation in this domain, the upcoming US elections, and the possibility of a second Trump administration should urge policymakers to focus on strengthening the EU's preparedness. This paper addresses the existing vulnerabilities in the EU's technological security through the exemplary case of Huawei and outlines recommendations on how to tackle them.

Connectivity, one of the critical technologies of the rapid Fourth Industrial Revolution, has been at the center of heated discussions in recent years. Several nations identified connectivity to be an essential part of their competitiveness and development and, among others, Huawei emerged at the forefront of advanced technologies. The Chinese-owned ICT provider was among the world leaders in rolling out their next-generation telecommunication networks worldwide. Within the EU, the choice of 5G providers has generated crucial debates. Next to the obvious economic interests, building telecommunication networks came with important security considerations. As the US-China rivalry intensified under President Trump, the EU faced an important vulnerability.

Donald Trump's trade war with China, a key component of his "America First" agenda, had significant repercussions for the EU. By imposing tariffs on Chinese goods, Trump sought to counter what he perceived as unfair trade practices by China. This conflict disrupted global trade and impacted the EU's economy, which is heavily dependent on stable supply chains.

For the EU, the escalating US-China trade tensions presented both challenges and opportunities. While the trade war resulted in market volatility, it also provided Europe with a chance to strengthen its trade relationships with China. The two reached an agreement in principle on a comprehensive agreement on investment (CAI) in 2020 – although it was later put on hold due to the tit-for-tat sanctions. The prospect of deepening ties with China posed a risk of straining transatlantic relations, particularly as Trump urged European nations to collaborate with the US in pressuring Beijing. Trump's populist trade policies thus compelled the EU to carefully balance its relationships with both the US and China while prioritizing its own economic and security interests. It is in this context that the debate around Huawei and the EU's technological security is situated in.

The EU's 5G Rollout: Rhetoric Coercion and Uneven Progress

The European Commission identified the possibilities of 5G early on and adopted an action plan in 2016 to launch 5G services in all member states by the end of 2020 (European Commission, 2024). Although some experts warned that the EU is falling behind in technological transformation, member states quickly began catching up and published their roadmaps. However, progress was uneven and fragmented (5G Observatory Quarterly Report 2, 2019). At that time, Huawei was in a prime position in the European market to support the

5G rollout and was already working with several European providers. By 2019, the Chinese company signed memorandums of understanding with wireless providers in at least 9 EU countries, including Germany, Spain, and France (5G Observatory, 2021). For many, it seemed evident that for the EU to stay competitive and meet the plans for 5G coverage, Huawei was the answer.

In parallel, however, concerns about the security of Huawei equipment began circulating. Against the backdrop of the escalating trade war between the US and China, the former began prompting allies to exclude Huawei from their networks (Woo & O'Keeffe, 2018). President Trump labelled Huawei a security risk and threatened to cut off intelligence and information-sharing with allies using the 'untrustworthy' 5G vendor (Business Standard, 2020).

US Policy towards China under Donald Trump: Framing as a Strategic Tool

Donald Trump's political rise is often analyzed through the lens of populism and framing theory, both of which help explain his appeal and communication strategies. Populism, broadly defined, refers to a political approach that pits the "common people" against a perceived corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). Trump's rhetoric embodies this populist style, as he frequently claims to speak for ordinary Americans against the political establishment. His 2016 campaign, for instance, centered on "draining the swamp" in Washington, positioning himself as an outsider who would challenge entrenched elites. During the 2024 election, he is still using this populist communication, by portraying himself as "one of the people", like in one of his recent tweets where he works for one shift in McDonalds.

One of the key aspects of Trump's populism is his use of framing. He does not only use it on a national level for criticizing his opponents but also in relation to foreign policy issues. Framing theory, as defined by Entman (1993), involves highlighting certain aspects of a reality while downplaying others, effectively shaping how an issue is understood by the public. Trump's framing of China is a prime example. Throughout his presidency and during his campaigns, Trump consistently framed China as a threat to American economic interests and national security. By doing so, he shaped public discourse and channeled public frustrations about job losses and trade imbalances into hostility toward China.

A prominent example of Trump's framing of China came during his trade war with the country. He portrayed China as an "unfair" player in global trade, accusing it of "stealing" American jobs and intellectual property. In a 2019 speech, Trump stated, "China has taken advantage of the United States for many, many years. And those days are over." This framing was effective in galvanizing his political base, particularly among working-class voters who felt economically marginalized by globalization (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). By framing the issue as a battle between patriotic Americans and a foreign adversary, Trump reinforced his populist credentials.

Trump's framing of China intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, where he repeatedly blamed China for the spread of the virus, referring to it as the "China virus" and the "Kung flu" (The New York Times, 2020). By doing so, he shifted public discourse to portray China as responsible not only for the economic challenges faced by the US but also for the public health crisis, a narrative that resonated with many of his supporters. A notable example of this framing came in March 2020, when Trump tweeted, "The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus." This statement reported widely in the media, sparked accusations of racism and xenophobia (CNN, 2020). However, Trump defended his rhetoric, arguing that it was necessary to hold China accountable for the pandemic's global spread. His framing successfully linked the frustrations over COVID-19 to broader concerns about China's role in the world economy, feeding into his populist narrative of protecting American interests.

Framing theory is particularly relevant here because it highlights how political actors shape public perception by focusing on certain narratives. As Entman (2007) notes, framing involves selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in communication. Trump's framing of China as both an economic competitor and a national security threat played a significant role in justifying his tariffs and aggressive foreign policy stance. Moreover, Trump's use of this frame was amplified by the media, contributing to rising anti-China sentiments in the US (Goffman, 1974).

By framing China as a direct threat to American prosperity, Trump not only advanced his populist message but also reshaped political discourse, making foreign policy a central issue for many voters. Through this, he created the basis of US trade policy against foreign companies deemed as a threat and towards allies who seemed hesitant to follow this approach.

With all this, the EU faced a two-fold dilemma: giving in to Trump's strategy and losing out on competitiveness while appearing to have little strategic autonomy or seizing the opportunities with Huawei but straining the transatlantic relationship while potentially endangering critical infrastructure. As of 2024, the EU's answer has been fragmented and disunited. Only 10 of the 27 member states have excluded Huawei and although almost all states put in place some kind of restrictions, only a handful of them implemented it (European Commission, 2023a). President Trump's approach of pressuring allies and threatening to cut off intelligence-sharing may have been counterproductive, but it exposed an important weakness of the EU.

What Next – The Way Forward

With the US elections approaching, the EU has a window of opportunity to address this dilemma. The possibility of a second Trump administration brings the risk of further aggravating the US-China ties and putting the EU into an even more uncomfortable position. The war in Ukraine has heightened the EU's need and dependence on intelligence-sharing with the US. Upcoming challenges in transatlantic relations are likely to have significant repercussions for the EU's security. At the same time, the EU-China relations are also at a heightened risk of entering into a trade war as the latest developments around the export of Chinese electric vehicles demonstrate. The economic vulnerability of certain European member states to Chinese pressure adds another dimension to the complex nature of achieving united European approaches. Essentially, the EU needs to safeguard its autonomy against unilateral actions while maintaining its competitiveness and ensuring the security of its critical infrastructure. To do that, policymakers should consider the following scenarios and the presented policy recommendations.

If Trump Wins

First, in case of a Trump victory, Europeans have to embrace another period of uncertainty. A second Trump Administration will renew concerns about US support for NATO while the protectionist policies will put direct pressure on transatlantic trade relations. It is expected that President Trump will continue his previous hardline approach towards China leading to an intensified trade war and a bigger volume of Chinese exports being dumped on the European market. All the while, Europeans will increasingly be pulled into a trade and technology war with the Eastern power amid calls from the US to reduce relations. In this scenario, Trump's rhetorical pressure, as in the previous case of calling to exclude Huawei from the 5G rollout to maintain intelligence-sharing, might turn into actual policies. In 2025, this would come with a huge price given the EU's dependence on the American intelligence infrastructure to help Ukraine defend itself against Russia's war. Any threats thus must be taken seriously and addressed accordingly.

Next to that, internally, Trump's success would galvanize far-right, populist figures and movements. His ideological allies in Europe, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Polish President Andrzej Duda would be emboldened to continue their path after a Trump victory. Far-right, populist politicians would find renewed reassurance to oppose more European integration. Consequently, reaching unity on crucial foreign policy questions might further be hindered.

Faced with the prospect of this challenging situation, European policymakers would do well to address the potential pitfalls early on. Given the foreseeable fragmentations, **the EU must strengthen and implement the framework it already has agreed upon (such as the 5G Cybersecurity Toolbox and the Digital Services Act)**. According to the latest assessment of the 5G Toolbox, which was adopted to mitigate security risks, only 10 out of the 27 Member States have restricted or excluded high-risk suppliers from their 5G networks (European Commission, 2023b). Based on its own and Member States' independent analyses, the European Commission considers Huawei along with another Chinese company, ZTE, to 'pose materially higher risk than other 5G providers.' Dependency on these providers for critical infrastructure, which the 5G network is considered, creates a serious risk across the Union. Considering the level of interconnectedness between EU

fragmented policy could jeopardize the entire bloc's security. For instance, last year Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó highlighted Hungary's development of 5G networks with the help of Huawei, next to signing additional cooperation agreements with the company (Szijjártó Péter, 2023).

To address the diverging approaches, the EU should develop a mechanism to actively encourage Member States to implement the existing framework and use the available tools. It should also hold Member States accountable for doing so. Considering the weight of risks in the EU's technological security, policymakers should call for an EU-wide regulation with clear and urgent deadlines. This would support the EU's autonomy in making security-related decisions as assessments of risks are done both by Member States and by the European Commission. Transatlantic relations are likely to become more friendly as a result and the EU's security would increase. One of the downsides of this approach, however, is the expected response from Beijing. China is likely to retaliate for a European policy naming and restricting its companies from the market. Besides, reaching this agreement on a European level will not be easy as Member States' security priorities and relations with China differ significantly. Nevertheless, this approach offers the EU a starting point to be a proactive actor.

If Harris Wins

If Americans choose a Harris administration for the next four years, the EU would find itself in a similar position as they were during Biden's administration assuming that Harris will take up a similar approach against China. Despite their opposition to each other, President Joe Biden had taken a similar approach to his Republican predecessor. Biden ordered heavy tariffs on Chinese imports of high-tech items such as semiconductor chips while diversifying its sources for imports such as the EU and Mexico (Davis, 2024; Lovely et al., 2024). In doing so, the United States has become less dependent on China for all types of imported manufactured goods since 2018, according to recently released 2023 customs data (Lovely et al., 2024).

The EU and China, however, have maintained or increased their reliance on each other for almost all types of imported goods" (Lovely et al., 2024). As such, the EU could potentially clash with the US by maintaining this dependence which showcases some form of limited autonomy. On the one hand, the EU exercises its agency to shift towards maintaining and deepening ties with China. However, on the other hand, the EU's agency is somewhat limited given its trade dependency with China which may compel it to act in favor of Beijing on certain issues.

A Harris administration would likely maintain the use of tariffs, particularly targeting China, to counter perceived unfair competition as emphasized by Trump, and to drive progress in the US energy transition, supporting its emissions reduction goals. This was evident during the presidential debate between Harris and Trump in September 2024. She highlighted Trump's failed attempt to subdue China as an economic powerhouse arguing that "under Donald Trump's presidency, he ended up selling American chips to China to help them improve and modernize their military" (Butts, 2024). She concluded with the statement, "[he] basically sold us out when a policy about China should be in making sure the United States of America wins the competition for the 21st century" (Butts, 2024). This comment indicates to the EU and other US allies that Harris is likely to continue Biden's approach if she wins the presidential race.

In this scenario, the EU faces a more predictable transatlantic landscape. This, however, may prove more perilous. Albeit Harris will follow a hardline approach to China and the pressure on allies to not share advanced technology with Beijing will remain, she is unlikely to strongly push the EU. In contrast to the Trump administration, instead of coercive rhetoric, she is likely to use softer means of persuasion. This carries in itself the risk that the EU will sit on its hands for too long instead of addressing the legitimate security threats that China poses. **To ensure that the resilience of technological security remains a priority, the European Parliament should establish a sub-committee of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE).** The sub-committee should deal with the security considerations that come with technologies and equipment from third countries and should ensure that the interests of European citizens are considered in tech security-related questions. This would address the risks of de-prioritization and would contribute to enhanced and more nuanced debates. Considering the viewpoints of Members of the Parliament directly through the sub-committee could help the European Commission to propose regulations that are more likely to enjoy support. The only constraining factor to consider is the budget of setting up the sub-committee but the

should outweigh that.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted the importance of European technology security and looked at different scenarios European leaders will face during the US presidential election. The example of the rollout of the 5G technology in the EU and the debates around using Chinese Huawei as the technology provider illustrated the EU's vulnerability when it comes to maintaining its autonomy and competitiveness in the tech sector. In the rapidly changing global landscape, EU leaders are facing a crucial dilemma about the way forward. To maintain technological competitiveness, the EU may have no choice but to rely on Chinese partners while to ensure the continent's security and stability, it cannot afford to alienate its key transatlantic partner. At the same time, legitimate security risks should not be overlooked and considered as subordinate to trade relations.

This paper offers a concise depiction of the main factors EU leaders should consider as Americans head to the polls. In either scenario, what is crucial for the EU is to be prepared and engage in collective planning. A second Trump administration is likely to bring about a more hectic and turbulent period. His framing of China as a security threat could lead to more pressure on European allies to cut ties with Beijing while his victory could galvanize European populists making it harder to achieve consensus on the European level. To offset this, the paper recommends taking concrete steps to implement the already existing framework and strengthen the available toolbox. In case of a Harris victory, the EU can expect reasonable continuity. Perhaps an important challenge the bloc will face will be finding the impetus to keep the technology security issue in focus. The paper argues that one way to do that would be to set up a dedicated sub-committee within the European Parliament to keep the issue on the agenda and ensure the interests of European citizens.

Authors' Biographies

Anton Miguel De Vera is an MA student in International Business and Economic Diplomacy at IMC FH Krems. He previously earned a bachelor's degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from Central European University in Vienna, where he specialized in International Relations and Economics. His thesis examined the dynamics of Philippine agency within the US-Philippine security alliance and its nuanced relationship with China, entitled "The Faces of Philippine Agency in Foreign Affairs: The Philippines and the United States Security Alliances". Currently based in Vienna, Anton works at Raiffeisen Bank International, where he combines his academic expertise with practical experience in finance and international relations.

Viktoriia Hamaïunova is a Ph.D. candidate at Newcastle University (UK), where she investigates the role of legal culture in shaping fair trial standards within ECHR member states, focusing on the integration of mediation into judicial systems to enhance human rights protections. Her research combines doctrinal and non-doctrinal approaches, incorporating thematic analysis and insights from interviews with ECtHR judges to examine how legal culture influences judicial reform and access to justice. Viktoriia Hamaïunova holds an MA in International Law and Human Rights from the University of Tartu, enriched by academic exchanges at Masaryk University and Comenius University. Her legal career includes in-house experience and ECtHR traineeship. An accredited mediator and published author, Viktoriia Hamaïunova has presented her work at prominent conferences, including SLSA Annual Conference and the Human Rights Law Conference at the University of Cambridge. With extensive teaching experience, she leads discussions on topics spanning international law to mediation practices. As an interdisciplinary researcher, Viktoriia Hamaïunova is committed to culturally informed legal reforms, fostering development and facilitating discussions on effective judicial systems and dispute resolution.

Réka Koleszár is an independent researcher focusing on the relations between the European Union and Asia, in particular East Asia. Her experience spans international organizations and think tanks including working for the Council of the European Union and the European Policy Centre. Réka holds an MSc in Political Science from Leiden University, an MA in International Relations specializing in East Asian studies from the University of Groningen, and a diploma in the Art of Diplomacy from the European Academy of Diplomacy.

Giada Pasquettaz is a doctoral student at the Chair of Political Science and International Politics of Prof. Dr.

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