

**Contradictions between the EU's Policies and Individual Member  
State's Policies towards Transnational Challenges**

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## Abstract

*This paper investigates “vertical coherence and incoherence” between the EU and EU member states, given the presence of horizontal coherence between the EU and the US. This paper will analyze this through a neorealist perspective that takes into account the international layer as well as consider the Supranationalist European Integration theory. This paper will compare the two cases of EU member states signing Memorandums of Understanding with China for the Belt and Road Initiative while the EU rejected to join as a bloc and the US created its own “BUILD Act”; the second case study will be that of vertical coherence as the US, EU, and EU member states all agree to sanction China over the Xinjiang situation. The literature review involves prominent scholarly sources as well as archival government documents. This paper utilizes a small-n neopositivist methodology through analyzing typical double case studies of EU member states and if their policies were synergistic with the EU and US. Within these case studies, I use process tracing and cross case comparisons to further our research and detail causal mechanisms. This paper advances previous research by reassessing the notion that EU member states follow the EU, especially when there are actions by the EU in coordination with the US under the guide of the Liberal International Order.*

**Keywords:** Policymaking, Vertical Coherence, Horizontal Coherence, Supranationalism, Neorealism

## Introduction

The European Union has faced many challenges in the past decade, each of which presented a unique puzzle and different solution from the EU. Each consequent challenge has “upped the ante” so to speak, in terms of how many resources it requires to solve. In the last decade alone, Europe has faced the Eurozone crisis, rising climate change concerns, Brexit, Russian aggression, and now a new competition for global hegemony. However for each crisis, it was crucial to have a unified response from the European Union. Many times, the EU responds to large transnational crises as a unit and as a result can pair its policies synergistically with other nations such as the U.S.

In terms of context, it seems as if an overall trajectory ever since the Second World War has been a growing transatlantic partnership between the US and the EU. Despite the 4 years of Trump having an erratic foreign policy paradigm leading to thoughts of “dis-atlanticism”, it seems as if Biden has been making strides to reverse this trend portrayed to the world. In the context of the long term and short term trajectory of this EU-US transatlantic partnership only getting stronger, it only makes sense to analyze how and why differences between the EU and its own member states occurred when it came to making policy synergistically with the US. It is clear by now that Russia and China are both enemies of the US-EU transatlantic alliance at least politically and hegemonically. Although, out of these “two sides”, the EU and China have the most amicable partnership by a margin.

Overall, I will investigate the explanation behind vertical incoherence between the EU and EU member states when there exists horizontal coherence between the US and EU in transatlantic policy making on the same issues through a neorealist perspective. I will be analyzing the motives driving vertical incoherence or coherence through a neorealist lens. Due to the fact that the main actors in this incoherence/coherence relationship are individual nation-states and a supranational organization that functions similarly but on a higher level than an INGO, the neorealism theory is most appropriate. The research question appropriated to this analysis is: What explains the contradictions between the EU’s policies and individual member state’s policies towards transnational challenges?

Neorealism is similar to realism in that state interests are defined by power and all actions are in the interests of the state. However neorealism is different from classical realism in the sense of focusing on the international system rather than the behavior of a statesman. Neorealism combines the interests and actions of the states and international organizations in a good balancing act.

Neorealism is defined by the Kenneth Waltz dissertation: Waltz gets 3 views from which one can study sources of peace and war in Global Politics. First is human behavior, wars result from

selfishness and aggressive impulses. The second view postulates that internal organization of the state is key to understanding war and peace. The third view centers around the concept of international anarchy: aspects of the international system can cause conflict and thus the structure of the international system is a source of conflict as there is no system of law that is internationally enforceable. Neorealism identifies the third level as key to understanding state behavior. This third level explains why the possibility of vertical incoherences between the EU and EU member states can even exist in the first place. Due to the fact that there is no internationally enforceable law, despite the EU having supranational institutions, EU member states will always retain a great amount of self-determination to conduct their own actions whether they be in opposition to the EU's actions or not.

## Literature Review

This literature review is split into three categories

The first category involves the current transatlantic partnership between the US and EU. To a certain extent, diplomatic relationships form the entire backbone of this relationship which is in turn built off of the complementary policies enacted by both countries. This category will have two sub categories; the first will be an overview of the transatlantic partnership between the US and EU: this viewpoint will include literature that suggests this partnership is still going strong. The second subcategory will be on the same topic however analyze to see if we are seeing a trend of “Disatlanticism”, thus a weakening of this transatlantic partnership.

I will mainly be using prominent scholarly sources in order to conduct the literature review on the transatlantic partnership between the US and EU as well as its unique aspects such as its trends and how it interacts with EU integration theories. One of the most prominent peer reviewed sources surrounding the academic conversation of this partnership is Zimmerman and Dur, who primarily explain that this transatlantic partnership has been alive for seven decades and as a result became a defining feature in global politics (Zimmerman & Dur, 257). This partnership most notably resulted in the creation of the Marshall Plan and NATO which to this date are historic instances of transatlantic cooperation. Zimmerman and Dur however also note that this journey was not without its bumps as this transatlantic partnership had to endure various trade conflicts, disagreement over the Iraq War, and the presidency of Donald Trump (Zimmerman & Dur, 450). This partnership has been built upon closely linked community values, guaranteeing security, and economic cooperation. Due to the complexity of this partnership as it can be defined by many differing variables, the two main views on this partnership are of a trajectory of an increasingly synergistic partnership and a trend of “disatlanticism”

The first view of a trajectory of an increasingly synergistic partnership stems from the amalgamation of the “Grand Strategy” and “Liberal International Order” concepts. Szewczyk explains that the existence of the Liberal International Order or LIO provides the EU and US joint objectives to promote democracy worldwide and prioritize peace and human rights (Szewczyk, 47). The LIO has made it so in terms of international goals, the EU and US often align naturally and thus can have horizontal coherence in their policy making. This can be seen in other highly cited International Relation studies, as Bennett concludes that in terms of policy making, consensus between the EU and US is oftentimes inevitable (Bennett, 26). If this consensus is not developed naturally through similar views on issues, it is developed through “soft law” guidelines that allow the EU and US a chance to

align their policies before their official stance emerges. Of course this synergy relies upon similar viewpoints and a willingness to compromise if viewpoints differ slightly, however scholars on the side of an increasing transatlantic partnership already believe these points to be true.

The picture of this transatlantic partnership gets clearer when this concept combines with the “Grand Strategy” concept. Grand Strategy was used by Szewczyk to describe an “alignment of infinite ends with finite means: political entities can theoretically pursue a variety of objectives, but are realistically constrained by their material and intangible resources” (Szewczyk, 35) This paints the picture of the US and EU needing to conjoin their finite resources to maximize the possibility that the potential “end” that manifests belongs to their ideology of the Liberal International Order. However the idea of Grand Strategy was first postulated by acclaimed political scientist, John Mearshimer. Mearshimer wrote that the principles that compose the system of power being a zero-sum game encourages states to look for opportunities to maximize their power against/from other states (Mearshimer, 15). When put into this context, the increasingly synergistic partnership seems obvious to be true and increasing as there is increasing competition from rising hegemony, China and Russia who wish to challenge the status quo of the LIO which the EU and US both have a vested interest in upholding.

The other viewpoint on this transatlantic partnership supports the notion that “disatlanticism” is the status quo, where the EU and US are slowly drifting apart in terms of viewpoint and policy objectives in the world which can be shown through various international disagreements between the EU and the US. Abdelal and Krotz maintain that due to instances such as trade conflicts and disagreements over NATO spending, there has been a growing gap between the EU and US (Abdelal, 17) Abdelal and Krotz expand upon this, writing that with the “Pivot to Asia” by Obama and the Trump presidency, it can be seen that the international objectives of the EU and the US simply don’t line up anymore. Problematically, the consensus amongst political scientists for disatlanticism was mostly popular during the Trump presidency, and now two years away from it, the strides Trump made to isolate the US internationally are all being reversed by Biden (Zimmerman & Dur, 366). Moreover, this “Pivot to Asia” is no longer a solely US objective as the EU grows increasingly concerned with China’s rising economic power, human rights violations, and political ties with Russia (The most aggressive actor towards the EU currently)

The second category of the literature review concerns what exactly the EU, US, and EU member states have been doing politically the past few years in terms of facing global challenges and how they intersect. The first subcategory discusses the past foreign policy paradigms by the US that eventually furthered their way into tangible foreign policy action, and ultimately if these actions were adopted by the European Union. The second subcategory is similar to the first subcategory, however,

analyzing the policy making of the EU member states and how synergistic it is with the US' policy making. Reviewing this literature is crucial for my research because if we can see similar objectives exist between these three actors, it is easier to isolate variables that may explain the absence of vertical coherence between the EU and EU member states in the presence of horizontal coherence between the EU and the US. This category will be going over the past strategy of the EU.

The US historically has been framed as an actor with exponentially increasing global presence in the past century. Literature seems to point to the US turning their vision to Asia in terms of posturing politically and making impactful multilateral alliances (Zimmerman & Dur, 451). For context, the Obama presidency had its policy shift to target investment and alliances in East Asia, and following that, the Trump presidency famously featured the trade war with China. Szewczyk writes that the past decade has shown the US' policy objectives worldwide remain promoting democracy either through leading by example, or intervention framed as a human rights mission (Szewczyk, 13). The US has remained consistent in the aspect of tacitly supporting the LIO and making security commitments to the EU. The Trump presidency displayed a level of isolationism unseen recently, however it seems to be a mere blip in the US' objectives as Biden has now continued what his predecessors excluding Trump have done globally. Two major foreign policy actions the US have conducted are commitments towards NATO increasing fiscally and increasing political aggression towards China. Although in the past it does not seem as such, EU member states and the US have achieved synergistic policy when it comes to NATO. Previously, the fiscal commitments to NATO from the US vastly outweighed those by the EU, however after the Russian aggression towards Crimea in 2014 and now the invasion of Ukraine, NATO commitments from the EU have gone up by 8.3% both times, indicating an alignment of visions (Standaert, 2). As in this scenario, the US and EU member states had a similar viewpoint, it would only make sense that the EU would have a similar viewpoint, thus achieving both horizontal and vertical coherence. Due to a common enemy, many political scientists suggest that the existential threat of Russia and its allies (China amongst others), any issues were smoothed out and this time the international visions aligned.

The third category examines the current and past political climate of the world in order to investigate which transnational challenges should be chosen for case studies in which the EU and US either did or did not have transatlantic coherence on. Along the same lines, this category will provide context to fundamental EU integration theories which will play a part in certain parts of my research such as transnational coherence.

Supranationalism is the EU integration theory that postulates that EU integration is unique from other types of multilateral treaties and organizations as the EU member states not only share

sovereignty but also cede certain powers to the EU such as judicial powers that can supersede national jurisdiction at times (Sweet, 16). The EU has multiple supranational institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank. Scholars agree that the supranational nature of the EU makes vertical incoherence improbably both structurally and ideologically. This is the unique aspect that Supranationalism contributes to the discourse of coherence in the EU : Vertical incoherence while existent is rare due to the policies of the member states contradicting the EU policies not making it out of the legislative state as well as member states letting the EU dictate the united stance internationally frequently (Brack, 25). In this case, many scholars agree that vertical incoherence between the EU and EU member states mostly manifests in discourse and never in the legitimate policies that constitute if there is coherence or not.



## **Conceptualization and operationalization**

Prior to the case study type and operationalization, I will define the main points of my research. The coherence as used so frequently throughout this paper shall be defined as “a coordinated behavior where comparable and compatible methods are used in pursuit of a single objective and result in an contradictory (foreign) policy ”(Krenzler, & Schneider, 134) The specific type of coherence I will use throughout this research are vertical coherence, vertical incoherence, and horizontal coherence. They can be specified as follows: the absence of contradictions as a negative definition for both vertical and horizontal coherence, vertical would be between the EU and its member states while horizontal is between the US and the EU. Vertical incoherence would be contradictory foreign policy between the EU and EU member states.

I use a typical double case study of scenarios where the EU and US passed policy synergistically and then investigate the relationship between the event and if EU member states acted in accordance/had vertical coherence in their own policy making. This typical double case study approach fits my small-*n* neopositivist approach well, as not only do I not spread ourselves thin analyzing multiple cases and having to give a slew of superficial comparisons between many cases, these cases are not exactly comparable to other cases. They are unique in that they are so far the most impactful actions taken in this “hegemonic battle” and consequently a limited number of case studies, in this case two, would be the only research design that fits.

I additionally use process tracing to detail the causal mechanisms as well as the timeline in order to give a whole picture of our research and analysis. The benefits of using process tracing is that it allows us to focus on the specific case studies and the timeline of these policies passed and where the synergy or absence thereof surfaced. I will add in cross-case comparisons where I would have to find parallels between the policies passed in terms of stances being similar towards China however small disagreements surfaced.

## **Methodology**

This paper will analyze the coherence between the EU and its member states in the presence of horizontal coherence between the US and EU on the same issue, with the help of a small-n, neo-positivist design. This design is appropriate and beneficial because it focuses on depth over breadth. Therefore, it allows the researcher to go into considerable detail about single or multiple organizations and understand the patterns and mechanisms of those countries. I preferred a neo-positivist research design additionally due to concepts needing to be operationalized to produce variables for measuring phenomena and for assembling data sets (on the same unit of analysis) for subsequent statistical assessments.

The premise of this project is to examine the EU and EU member states vertical coherence when it came to Xinjiang sanctions and declining to join the BRI as a most-similar comparative case study. These two events have so much in common yet the difference was the coherence between the EU and EU member states. Both were displays of politically motivated backlash against China spearheaded by the US and adopted by the EU. One main assumption is that due to the nature of a supranationalist institution like the EU, one usually assumes that there is usually vertical coherence between most policies of the EU and EU member states; this notion is only exponentiated when there is horizontal coherence between the EU and other large countries that provide an equal to the supranational institution such as the US.

## Analysis and Findings

The first case study in which there was vertical incoherence between the EU and EU member states while the EU and US had horizontal coherence was the stance towards China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative is a global development initiative launched by Chinese President Xi Ji Ping in 2013. This initiative consists of a project called the "Silk Road Economic Belt – a trans-continental passage that links China with south east Asia, south Asia, Central Asia, Russia and Europe by land – and a 21st century Maritime Silk Road, a sea route connecting China's coastal regions with south east and south Asia, the South Pacific, the Middle East and Eastern Africa, all the way to Europe." (Shapiro, 88) Throughout this paper, the Belt and Road Initiative will be referred to as the BRI. The BRI mainly has infrastructure and economic goals and is inherently a long-term political project for China: financial success is not the main objective. Modern China is a country that has been through tumultuous periods of change and revolution in the past century and is now seeking to reforge its identity as a global hegemon. China seeks to become a glorious "great modern socialist nation" by 2049, and so the BRI will function as a global influence operation (Masood, 14).

The EU rejected the offer to join the BRI as a bloc, while its member states joined individually. This is indicative of standard European pressure towards China, as with two other transatlantic issues, the EU has not acted against China policy-wise. I will note that the EU did not exactly act synergistically with the US during the trade war with China, however that could be pointed to Trump's erratic foreign policy paradigm that often put the EU into its crossfires. The case study more specifically, would be the 16+1 countries from the EU that all signed Memorandums of Understandings with China that would allow China to build infrastructure with them through the Belt and Road Initiative, understanding that this would additionally be a political move. When China asked the EU to join the BRI as a bloc, the EU as a whole refused; as a result mostly the Southern and Eastern EU countries joined the BRI individually. The EU countries in the BRI currently are: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (Inskeep, 49).

Prior to this, the stance from the EU during the trade war was that the EU joining the Belt and Road Initiative would undermine the US's efforts in their trade war with China. That is why Hormats argues that the US's future negotiations with the EU could include the US asking the EU to not participate in BRI projects or not further pursue ties with China, especially in light of the recent freeze in escalation of the trade war as doing so would radically shift the negotiation's power dynamics (Hormats, 5) This analysis is empirically proven as Trump has systematically used the threat of wielding the U.S.'s formidable economic leverage to try and alter EU behavior. Trigkas corroborates

that negotiations between the EU and China could “push trigger-happy Trump to unleash tariffs against European exporters at a moment when the EU has just found its economic pace (Trigkas, 3).

Through a neorealist perspective the international layer is the third level as dictated by Waltz; this layer states that the international realm that deals with supranational entities is by nature anarchic as there is no system of law that is internationally enforceable. As such, the vertical incoherence could be analyzed as a difference of self-interest; if there is no system of international law that is enforceable, it is logically to do an action in which the IGO did not do rather than an action that is contradictory. In essence, the non-action of the EU in not joining the BRI could have been the catalyst that gave the “okay” for the other EU member states as the EU member states would have been less likely to join if the EU instead directly opposed China by doing an action such as joining the US’ “BUILD Act” The reason this analysis could be probable is that with a system where no international law is enforceable, the images and posturing of countries and international powers matter a lot more; as a result doing a contradictory action rather than acting in the presence of inaction from the larger power could be construed as worse. The reason in which these countries would have risked potential backlash from the EU or US in the first place to join the BRI is because they have a lot to gain economically. The only negative of infrastructure projects from the BRI is that there are sometimes debt traps involved, however the EU countries that joined will not suffer from these as not only are their economies much more well structured than South Asian countries that took a hit from debt traps, but also the European Banking Authority and its Single Supervisory Mechanism make new debt impossible to balloon without economic restructuring. The positives additionally outweigh as the Southern EU countries are in a more precarious position economically compared to the countries that did not join the BRI and in a recession, infrastructure provides 5 times as much stimulus compared to other sources of economic growth per dollar invested (Stone, 17).

The second case study would be the EU and US both putting on concerted sanctions against China for Xinjiang. The context behind these sanctions would be the Chinese government maintaining a vast network of data on its citizens. As Mozur explains, “Chinese authorities maintain a vast surveillance net, including tracking people’s DNA and advanced facial recognition technology.”(Mozur, 3)

However, this information has ushered in a new era of automated racism that infringes on basic human rights. Mozur furthers, “China rounds up muslim-minority Uighurs for mandatory biometric data collections, information that is used to monitor the population.”(Mazur, 5) Now, over one million Uighurs have disappeared into forced-labor camps. This surveillance state and internment camp situation was first heard of by the UN in 2018, and after many investigations including a

confirmation from the Australian government of over 380 alleged detention facilities, the EU and US along with other countries started to sanction China (Putz, 17). The US adopted sanctions similar to the Magnitsky style sanctions adopted against Russia as well as general import-based sanctions similar to those adopted against Venezuela. Similarly, the EU and EU member states adopted sanctions against China; the EU sanctioned China based on the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime mechanism. Not a single EU country signed the human rights letter in support of China and defending their Uighur policies. Essentially in this case, the US, EU, and EU member states all adopted the same collective stance against China with sanctions even though it hurts all of them economically. The cross case comparison is that in both the case studies, the EU member states would gain economically from siding with China however in the Xinjiang case, the EU member states stood with the EU and US and consequently lost economic power.

When considering the level of individual nation objectives, it may seem as if the US merely will use any excuse to punish China as both have been at odds economically and politically for a while, and on the other hand the EU prioritizes humanitarian assistance and human rights as part of its international image and thus would go against China for Xinjiang. However, when combining individual objectives with international consideration and how the EU and US historically act together, these individual reasons may not have taken as big of a role as previously thought. The reasoning behind the presence of vertical coherence may link back to the idea of neorealism. Due to the fact that there is no system of law that is internationally enforceable, state actions are indeed dictated by this as the EU and EU member states stand for a certain set of values that include anti-human rights abuses. The EU member states would feel the need to be the ones to stand against China's growing hegemonic powers enabling human rights abuses as there is no one else to hold them accountable, as such they would suffer economically to stand with the Supranational EU and the US. Moreover, the fact that the EU is integrated supranationally means that its international stances against other hegemonic powers such as China are usually adopted by its member states. The cross case comparison is that in this case, the EU did an action which was sanctioning China in which its member states then felt like they had to follow up on, rather than inaction by the EU.

## Conclusion

Applying a neorealist viewpoint on the two case studies proved apt as it provided the third layer of international structure in the political scientist's eyes which would be the fact that international law is not enforceable. I investigated the explanation behind vertical incoherence between the EU and EU member states when there exists horizontal coherence between the US and EU in transatlantic policy making on the same issues through a neorealist perspective and analyzed the motives driving vertical incoherence or coherence through a neorealist lens. I found that the cross case comparisons were quite significant, with both being stances towards China and being on China's side would have resulted in economic benefit in both scenarios for the EU member states although the EU and US both took negative stances towards China in those cases. The three factors isolated through the neorealist lens were: Primarily, the lack of enforceable international law made it so whenever the EU and US took action rather than inaction, the EU member states usually would follow up. Secondly, no enforceable international law meant that EU member states would have to stand up for what they believe in as there is no international arbiter of justice, as a result the EU member states felt it was necessary to stand against Chinese human rights abuses in Xinjiang as opposed to the absence of problematic behavior in the BRI. The last factor would be supranationalist identity of the EU meant that more often than not, the EU member states would follow the EU in their policies especially if they aligned with the US as well, as they ceded their sovereignty in dictating international hegemonic stances to the EU. In future research, I would improve this by taking into account the US' role in vertical coherence more, rather than using it as a supplement to why the EU and EU member states should have vertical coherence. I would additionally add more case studies where there are outsider countries other than China involved to expand the scope of this investigation and to isolate the variable of vertical coherence.

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