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Strategic Appeal of Multipolarity

THE INTERSECTION OF REALPOLITIK
AND NORMATIVE TENSIONS
IN SINO-FRENCH RELATIONS

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Abstract

How is France positioning itself within a multipolar order, and more specifically in relation to China's global rise? What strategic opportunities and constraints emerge from this relationship? And, ultimately, how might Sino-French relations develop within the broader framework of an increasingly multipolar international order? To address these questions, this article adopts a historical-institutionalist approach, examining the historical development of Sino-French relations, their strategic interactions, and the normative tensions that have emerged between them. Overall, France's engagement with China in a multipolar world is shaped by its Gaullist legacy of strategic autonomy, shifting ideas toward pragmatic accommodation, and structural pressures from a fragmented international order. In economic terms, the France–China partnership has brought clear gains through market access and technological collaboration. Strategically, France's strategic partnership with China offers Paris a broader

geopolitical maneuvering space. Moreover, France has sought to balance engagement and caution, especially in the Indo-Pacific, without fully aligning with either the U.S. or China. However, if France truly views multipolarity as both a strategic and ethical goal, it must adopt a more innovative and coherent foreign policy. Otherwise, its current stance of strategic ambiguity risks undermining its global credibility in an increasingly complex world order.

Keywords

French foreign policy; Gaullism; international politics; multipolarity; Sino-French relations

Introduction

Following the Second World War, France's integration into the Western bloc, particularly through its participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its alignment with U.S.-led strategic priorities, generated structural asymmetries that deeply influenced its foreign policy trajectory. The dominance of the United States in transatlantic affairs frequently relegated France to a secondary role, prompting successive French governments to rethink the country's international posture. This strategic reconsideration culminated in the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958, a constitutional reform that significantly enhanced presidential authority and provided the institutional foundation for a more assertive foreign policy. Under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle, France articulated a distinct vision of international politics rooted in national sovereignty, strategic independence, and global influence. De Gaulle's approach was not merely a reaction to Cold War bipolarity but a proactive assertion of France's historical mission as a civilizational and diplomatic actor in its own right. This doctrinal shift often referred to as "Gaullism" laid the groundwork for a foreign policy orientation favorable to multipolarity. Rather than accepting a subordinate status within a bipolar world order, France sought to cultivate a role as a third force capable of mediating between power centers while asserting its own normative and

strategic preferences. As Portes et al. (2008) observe, this orientation has been particularly visible in France's engagement with emerging powers, including the People's Republic of China, which Paris has approached as both a strategic partner and a site of geopolitical recalibration. Against this backdrop, the primary aim of this article is to examine France's foreign policy through the conceptual prism of multipolarity, with specific reference to China's economic and political ascent over the last four decades. This rise, marked by sustained growth, technological innovation, and global ambition, has positioned China not only as a vital economic actor but also as a challenger to established international norms posing complex dilemmas for states like France that seek both engagement and value-based diplomacy.

Accordingly, this article seeks to answer three interrelated questions: How is France positioning itself within a multipolar order, and more specifically in relation to China's global rise? What strategic opportunities and constraints emerge from this relationship? And, ultimately, how might Sino-French relations develop within the broader framework of an increasingly multipolar international order? In its pursuit of a balanced global order, strategic autonomy vis-à-vis U.S. hegemony, and increased leadership within the European Union, France has actively cultivated bilateral relations with China. This has included large-scale economic collaborations, participation in international multilateral platforms such as the G20, and rhetorical support for reforming global governance institutions. However, this strategic rapprochement has frequently clashed with France's normative discourse, which continues to emphasize a Western-centric interpretation of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The coexistence of these often-contradictory impulses pragmatic engagement and normative assertion lies at the heart of France's contemporary foreign policy dilemma.

This paper unfolds in four sections. The first lays out the theoretical framework and methodological approach to studying multipolarity, whereas the second traces the historical evolution of Sino-French relations from the Cold War to the present. The third section analyses contemporary strategic dynamics, economic interdepen-

dence, and diplomatic tensions, and the final section explores how France attempts to reconcile its normative foreign policy identity with the challenges and opportunities of a multipolar world.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework: Theoretical Approaches to Multipolarity in International Relations

In the conventional international relations literature, multipolarity refers to a system in which multiple great powers simultaneously exert influence over the functioning of the international order. In such a configuration, no single state can establish hegemonic dominance; instead, power is distributed among a plurality of actors (Gürcan, 2019; Gürcan, 2020; Gürcan & Otero, 2024).

Multipolarity has been considered a crucial structural feature for the maintenance of peace and stability, particularly within the frameworks of classical and structural realism (D'Aoust & Grondin, 2015). According to Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, the greater the number of poles in the system, the more complex the balancing dynamics among major powers become, thus simultaneously increasing both the risk of conflict and the opportunities for diplomacy (Waltz, 1979). From a neorealist perspective, states seek to maximize their security in an anarchic international system, and mutual balancing among powerful actors can provide the structural conditions necessary for a stable multipolar order. However, offensive realists such as Mearsheimer (2019) argue that multipolar systems inherently involve greater levels of uncertainty and threat perception, thereby raising the probability of conflict.

Beyond the framework of power balancing, multipolarity can also be discussed in terms of cultural and normative pluralism. English School theorists, notably Hedley Bull, emphasize that international order is shaped not only by military and economic capabilities but also through shared norms, institutions, and conceptions of order (Bull in Wilson, 2016). In this sense, multipolarity is not only defined by the number of powerful states but also by the value systems these states promote and embody. For example, the

rise of China has brought forth an alternative vision of global order that challenges Western-centric liberal norms, creating a tension for actors like France whose foreign policy rhetoric strongly emphasizes normative commitments. Post-structuralist and critical theories, by contrast, associate multipolarity with the erosion of hegemonic norms and the emergence of new imaginaries of global order. As Amitav Acharya (2017) has argued, the increasing role of non-Western actors as norm entrepreneurs suggests that multipolarity entails not only a redistribution of power but also a diversification of normative authority. From this perspective, China's rise represents not merely an economic ascent but a foundational challenge to the existing international normative order.

Marxian approaches, most notably articulated through Gürcan's (2019; 2020) post-hegemonic multipolarity thesis, reframe the dominant discourse on multipolarity by moving beyond discursivity as well as the security-centric logic of realism and liberal institutionalism. This thesis draws on historical materialism to analyze how the global order is shaped not just by state interests or institutional norms, but primarily by the contradictions of global capitalism, such as uneven development, dependency, and the hegemonism of core capitalist states. From this standpoint, the current shift toward multipolarity is not merely geopolitical in the traditional sense; it reflects a crisis of neoliberal hegemony and the emergence of new centers of power challenging imperial hierarchies. Rather than viewing multipolarity as a precarious distribution of power prone to conflict and instability, moreover, this perspective suggests that today's multipolar order holds strong potential to foster more inclusive forms of global governance and multilateralism, where discursive practices such as "Asian values" and the "Shanghai spirit" also play a crucial role in mobilizing South-South cooperation. As such, this perspective emphasizes the role of South-South cooperation as a key underlying dynamic, whereby emerging powers in the Global South forge strategic alliances and institutional frameworks that contest hegemonic dominance and promote alternative visions of development and international solidarity. In this view, multipolarity is not merely a redistribution of power, but a transformative oppor-

tunity for constructing a more equitable and cooperative world order (Gürcan, 2019; Gürcan, 2020; Gürcan & Otero, 2024). From this lens, China's rise is seen less as a revisionist threat than as a pivotal force in restructuring global power relations and creating space for alternative developmental and governance models. Likewise, France's pursuit of multipolarity can be interpreted as a pragmatic yet ambivalent attempt to navigate and influence this post-hegemonic transformation, rebalancing its historical alignment with other Western core powers against the backdrop of an ever-deepening hegemonic crisis and emerging opportunities for strategic autonomy.

While these theoretical perspectives help illuminate the broader structural and normative implications of multipolarity, they require grounding in a concrete empirical context to fully grasp their relevance and application. France's evolving relationship with China offers such a context, serving as a revealing case through which to examine how competing ideas, interests, and institutional constraints interact within a post-hegemonic multipolar landscape. To analytically bridge theory and empirical inquiry, this study adopts a historical institutionalist approach that integrates the structural insights of realism, the normative concerns of the English School, and the critical sensibilities of post-structural and Marxian perspectives.

Historical institutionalism, with its integrative focus on institutions, ideas, and agents study (Bannerman & Blayne Haggart, 2015), offers a methodological framework capable of bridging the rational-choice orientation of realism with the culturally informed analyses of the English School and poststructuralism as well as the holistic approach of Marxism. Broadly speaking, the historical institutionalist method involves six steps: selecting case studies and time periods; identifying relevant institutions, actors, and ideas; analyzing the mechanisms that strengthen or weaken these elements; and, finally, assessing who benefits or loses from the institutional arrangements under study (Bannerman & Blayne Haggart, 2015). Accordingly, this research focuses on the case of France–China relations across the postwar to contemporary period, identifying the relevant institu-

tions such as the French Fifth Republic's presidential system and bilateral strategic partnerships; analyzing the primary actors including French and Chinese leaders and diplomatic elites; and examining the core ideas of multipolarity, strategic autonomy, and normative diplomacy. The study then explores mechanisms of continuity and change, and evolving alliance strategies, before finally addressing distributive outcomes, particularly how France navigates between normative commitments and strategic interests, revealing tensions and trade-offs in its foreign policy identity. Through this approach, the study demonstrates how institutional legacies, ideational shifts, and international structures collectively shape France's engagement with China in a multipolar setting.

Historical Background: A Brief Overview of Sino-French Relations

For France, multipolarity has long constituted both a historical aspiration and a strategic imperative, forming a cornerstone of its foreign policy vision. This approach, shaped largely during the leadership of De Gaulle, is based on the ideal of France asserting itself as an independent power rather than aligning with either unipolar or bipolar systems (Romano, 2017). Accordingly, France perceives its relations with emerging powers such as China not merely as avenues for commercial and strategic engagement, but as instruments to promote a more balanced distribution of power within the international system (Hellendorff, 2017; Testard-Vaillant, 2021; Boniface, 2019). Indeed, the rise of China and France's responses to it reflect not only the trajectory of bilateral relations but also broader questions concerning the future configuration of global order in the 21st century (Jones & Smith, 2019).

To fully grasp the foundations of this strategic orientation and its implications for contemporary multipolarity, however, a more historically grounded perspective on Sino-French relations is necessary. Although the roots of Sino-French interactions can be traced to intellectual and cultural exchanges as early as the 17th and 18th centuries with Jesuit missionaries, Enlightenment philosophers, and

French travelers producing significant bodies of knowledge on Chinese civilization, the political substance of Sino-French relations only acquired a distinct strategic dimension in the latter half of the 20th century. During the Qing Dynasty, French Jesuits such as Joseph-Marie Amiot and intellectuals including Voltaire and Montesquieu expressed fascination with the Confucian model of governance and the administrative sophistication of the Chinese empire. China was perceived not only as a cultural other but also as an object of emulation within French elite circles (Cabestan, 2015). However, these intellectual engagements remained largely abstract and disconnected from the geopolitical realities that would come to define France's official stance toward China in the modern era.

In the early stages of the Cold War, while France was formally embedded within the Western bloc under the NATO umbrella, it increasingly distanced itself from a U.S. centric foreign policy model. De Gaulle's tenure as president (1959–1969) marked a turning point in French diplomacy. His insistence on *la grandeur de la France* (France's national greatness) translated into a vision of foreign policy that rejected binary Cold War logic and sought to reassert French sovereignty on the world stage. In this context, France's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1964 was both bold and symbolic: it made France the first major Western nation to extend diplomatic recognition to communist China well before the United States or most of Western Europe (Bari, 2021). This move simultaneously legitimized Beijing in the international system and challenged the dominance of Taiwan's representation as "China" in Western diplomatic forums. It also signaled France's commitment to shaping a more pluralistic global order that moved beyond bipolar constraints (Zanier, 2016).

The 1970s saw a cautious yet persistent development of bilateral ties, constrained by the ideological rigidity of the Cold War. Economic cooperation remained limited but strategically important, with France being among the few Western countries to maintain diplomatic consistency during China's more isolated years (Heng-Lim, 2014; He & Jacquemin, 2016). The transformative moment, however, arrived in the 1980s with Deng Xiaoping's sweeping

economic reforms and his policy of *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening). Having personally spent time in France as a young man during the 1920s, Deng harbored a deep familiarity with French culture and political traditions, which helped facilitate warmer diplomatic exchanges and an ideological bridge between Paris and Beijing (Vogel, 2011). While the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident led to a temporary diplomatic freeze and a wave of moral condemnation from Western capitals, including Paris, the broader momentum of engagement was not permanently derailed. By the mid-1990s, bilateral relations had not only recovered but entered a new phase of formalized cooperation. Under President Jacques Chirac, France became the first Western power to establish a *partenariat global* (global partnership) with China a framework that reflected strategic convergence on issues such as multipolarity, global governance, and resistance to U.S. unilateralism (Wellons, 1994; Védérine, 2006). France increasingly viewed China not as a rival to be contained but as a counterbalancing force that could help dilute American pre-eminence in the international system. Chinese leaders, in turn, saw France as a gateway to broader European influence, and as a valuable interlocutor with an independent voice in global affairs. Throughout the 2000s, Sino-French relations diversified across economic, technological, and cultural domains. Major French corporations such as Airbus, Alstom, and EDF signed landmark agreements with Chinese counterparts, while China became a key partner in joint ventures involving nuclear energy, aerospace, and high-speed rail. Politically, France expressed qualified support for the “One Country, Two Systems” principle in Hong Kong and often refrained from openly challenging China on its “core interests,” including Tibet and Taiwan. Yet this approach drew domestic criticism, particularly from human rights organizations and segments of the French public who viewed such policies as an erosion of France’s normative commitments (Bensacq-Tixier, 2008; Hellendorff, 2017). The duality of strategic cooperation and normative ambivalence became a structural feature of the bilateral relationship.

During Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency (2007–2012), this delicate balance was severely tested. France’s re-entry into NATO’s inte-

grated military command and its arms sales to Taiwan triggered sharp rebukes from Beijing, resulting in diplomatic setbacks and suspended summits. Nevertheless, the Hollande administration (2012–2017) re-engaged with China on more stable terms, emphasizing mutual respect and strategic coordination. Under Emmanuel Macron, France’s approach evolved further. While Macron has emphasized European strategic autonomy, he has also stressed the need for a “sovereign and united” Europe in its engagement with China suggesting a shift from bilateralism toward a more coordinated EU-level China policy.

Today, Sino-French relations are shaped by a complex dual logic. On one hand, there is a strategic convergence rooted in a shared preference for a multipolar international order that resists U.S. hegemony. On the other hand, there remains a normative distance shaped by France’s liberal democratic identity and its principled stances on human rights, freedom of expression, and global governance reform. Contemporary French discourse often oscillates between cautious partnership and normative critique, particularly in response to issues such as Xinjiang, civil society organizations, and China’s assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific (Lincot, 2021; Liang, 2023; Bärtschneider, 2025). This evolving relationship underscores a broader truth: multipolarity is not merely a redistribution of material power but a contested architecture of values, institutions, and worldviews. For France, navigating the Sino-French axis involves constant negotiation between geopolitical interest and ideological integrity. The ability to sustain this balance will shape not only the future of bilateral relations, but also France’s broader role in defining a stable and pluralistic global order.

Strategic Partnership or Strategic Ambiguity

The relationship between France and China has evolved from the diplomatic rapprochement initiated by France’s recognition of the People’s Republic of China in 1964 into a policy domain that increasingly embodies the vision of a multipolar world in the 21st century. For France, this relationship is not only a response to

China's economic rise, but also a strategic effort to create alternative power balances in opposition to U.S. dominance. For China, France represents a privileged partner in Europe due to its historical status, nuclear capabilities, and permanent membership in the UN Security Council (Cabestan, 2004).

As mentioned in the previous section, the establishment of a "partenariat global" in 1997 under President Jacques Chirac marked a turning point in this multidimensional cooperation, laying the institutional foundation for closer economic and geopolitical ties. This partnership materialized particularly in sectors such as aviation (Airbus), nuclear energy, infrastructure development, and high technology. Compared to the EU's more cautious stance toward China, the Sino-French partnership has often followed a pragmatic and flexible path, aligning with France's vision of European strategic autonomy. However, this strategic convergence has frequently drifted into a realm of strategic ambiguity. France's foreign policy principles, anchored in universal human rights, freedom of expression, and international law, stand in contrast to China's political structure. The pro-Tibet protests in Paris prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the visit of the Dalai Lama to France were perceived by Beijing as interference in its internal affairs, leading to a serious diplomatic rift. In such moments of tension, French political elites have often sought to maintain a "delicate balance" between values and interests (Fayet, 2024). As Cabestan (2010) aptly puts it, "*La France est condamnée à une diplomatie d'équilibriste entre principes et pragmatisme*" (France is bound to pursue a tightrope diplomacy between principles and pragmatism). This observation encapsulates the core dilemma at the heart of France's foreign policy, especially in its bilateral relations with rising powers such as China. The persistent tension between normative discourse anchored in human rights, democracy, and the rule of law and pragmatic considerations driven by strategic autonomy, economic opportunity, and geopolitical relevance has compelled France to maintain a precarious balance. This balancing act becomes particularly evident in the Sino-French relationship, where the desire to preserve national and European influence in a multipolar world

often coexists uneasily with the need to uphold liberal-democratic values. Cabestan’s (2010) characterization thus provides a succinct yet powerful lens through which to interpret the structural contradictions of France’s global engagement.

While the Chinese market offers vast opportunities for French businesses, perceived problems such as violations of intellectual property rights, lack of transparency in public procurement, and restrictions on foreign investments have led to growing protectionist sentiments in France. President Emmanuel Macron’s statement during his 2019 visit to China, “L’époque de la naïveté européenne est révolue” (The era of European naivety is over), reflects a notable shift in attitude (Bloomberg, 2019). These words signaled that the strategic partnership with China could no longer be viewed through rose-colored glasses. Multipolarity, in this context, entails not only the emergence of alternative centers of power but also the multiplication of new risk domains. Furthermore, France’s relationship with China is also tested in the context of its transatlantic alliances. During the Sarkozy presidency, France’s reintegration into NATO’s military command, its arms sales to Taiwan, and Sarkozy’s meeting with the Dalai Lama were interpreted by China as a drift toward Atlanticism. As such, France continues to strive for a dual role: to act as a counterbalance to U.S. hegemony while simultaneously championing Western normative values. Yet, this duality renders France vulnerable to criticism from both Chinese and Western publics for inconsistency and lack of strategic clarity.

Table 1. France-Taiwan Arms Sales in the First Half of the 1990s
(SIPRI, 2025; Singh, 2000; Cabestan, 2004; Grimmet, 1999; Taipei Times; 2020)

Year	Weapon System	Estimated Value (Billion €)
1991	Mirage 2000 Fighter Jets	2,5
1992	La Fayette-Class Frigates	0,8
1993	Magic-II Missiles	0,4
1994	Combat Training Aircraft	0,6
1995	Underwater Assault Systems	0,4

One of the most critical turning points in Sino-French diplomatic relations was France’s arms sales to Taiwan during the 1990s. In 1991, France sold approximately 60 Mirage 2000 fighter jets to

Taiwan, followed by the delivery of La Fayette-class frigates in 1992. These actions were regarded by the People's Republic of China as a direct violation of the "One China" policy. In response, the Chinese government suspended diplomatic relations with France and issued threats of economic sanctions. Under mounting pressure, the French government decided in 1995 to halt major arms sales to Taiwan, initiating a process of normalization in its relations with Beijing. Since then, there has been no record of large-scale, publicly acknowledged French military exports to Taiwan. This shift reflects France's broader effort to pursue a more balanced foreign policy in line with its strategic partnership goals with China (Cabestan, 2010).

France's strategy of *proximité contrôlée* (controlled proximity) with China has also echoed within the European Union. While France employs a hybrid discourse that frames China as both a partner and a systemic rival, other EU member states, such as Germany, tend to adopt more cautious, trade-focused approaches. Ultimately, France's ambivalent stance complicates the EU's attempts to articulate a coherent and unified strategy toward China.

Multipolarity and Normative Dilemmas: Strategic Interests Tested by the Burden of Ideals

France's vision of a multipolar world is rooted in a historical Gaullist tradition that emphasizes strategic autonomy and independence in foreign policy (Vratimos, 2023; Gaffney, 2013). However, this vision increasingly encounters normative tensions when applied to strategic relations with non-Western states such as China. The Sino-French relationship is not merely a matter of power balancing; it constitutes a complex nexus where international norms, cultural worldviews, and economic interests intersect. In this context, France's China policy reflects a delicate oscillation between normative commitments and strategic calculations.

Strategic Appeal of Multipolarity

Table 2. Sino-French Foreign Trade Data

(Eurostat, 2023; INSEE, 2023; United Nations, 2023, World Bank, 2023)

Year	Exports (€ Billion)	Imports (€ Billion)	Trade Balance
2010	14.2	27.8	-13.6
2011	15.1	30.2	-15.1
2012	16.0	32.7	-16.7
2013	17.4	36.1	-18.7
2014	18.3	39.4	-21.1
2015	19.5	42.6	-23.1
2016	20.1	45.7	-25.6
2017	21.3	49.1	-27.8
2018	22.6	53.4	-30.8
2019	23.8	56.2	-32.4
2020	24.5	58.8	-34.3
2021	25.3	61.6	-36.3
2022	26.1	63.9	-37.8

The establishment of diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1964 marked a turning point through which France, distinct from the rest of the Western bloc, materialized its long-standing vision of a multipolar order (Jia, 2023). This decision was not merely geopolitical but laid the foundation for deepening economic and cultural engagement with China. Over time, these relations intensified, especially in terms of economic interdependence. France’s exports to China rose from €14.2 billion in 2010 to €25.3 billion in 2022, while imports from China surged from €27.8 billion to €61.6 billion during the same period, significantly widening the trade deficit. As visual data and graphs demonstrate, this imbalance has become structurally entrenched. As Kucera and Jiang (2018) notes, the growing volume of China–EU trade has served as a major engine of growth for both sides, but it has also exerted pressure on the EU to adopt greater normative flexibility as dependence on China increased.

The Sino-French relationship is shaped not only by macro-economic indicators but also by cultural codes and institutional interactions. As Badiane et al. (2024) emphasize, cultural differences and distinct business practices play a critical role in bilateral cooperation. France’s universalist diplomatic discourse often clashes with China’s collectivist cultural logic. Nonetheless, both parties have adopted strategic patience and a form of “pragmatic cultural accommodation” to overcome these differences, which refers to an

approach that prioritizes mutual interests, avoids direct conflict, and develops flexible accommodation strategies to sustain long-term cooperation between two different cultural and ideological systems.

The strategic nature of this relationship is further reinforced by cooperation in defense and technology transfers. In the 1990s, France's €4.7 billion arms sales to Taiwan led to a diplomatic crisis with China. However, by the 2000s, France had openly endorsed China's "One China" policy, leading to a normalization of relations. Projects such as the establishment of Airbus's fourth assembly line in Tianjin exemplify the two countries' deepening high-tech cooperation. As of 2023, Airbus's aircraft delivery contract to China amounts to €20 billion for 160 units (Airbus, 2023). Furthermore, the French nuclear giant EDF has shared technological know-how in the development of EPR reactors in China. Nevertheless, such strategic rapprochements increasingly test France's normative foreign policy identity. On matters such as Xinjiang, the expansion of China's digital influence, and Hong Kong, France has largely opted for "quiet diplomacy" over direct condemnation. This stance has sparked criticism that France's normative credibility is eroding. As Fisman et al. (2014) suggest, in times of heightened nationalist reflexes, economic relations with non-Western countries such as China are especially fragile.

Meanwhile, France's Indo-Pacific strategy is reframing its strategic cooperation with China. As Nguyen and Vo (2023) argue, France seeks not only to act as a regional counterbalance to China but also to promote strategic autonomy through regional alliances. This indicates that France views its engagement with China not as boundless alignment, but as a form of "calibrated partnership". The Sino-French relationship thus embodies a pattern oscillating between the opportunities afforded by multipolarity and the constraints of values-based foreign policy. How France manages this relationship will be decisive not only for the coherence of its foreign policy but also for assessing whether multipolarity can yield an ethically and politically sustainable world order. Multipolarity implies not only the multiplication of power centers but also an escalation in normative complexity and diplomatic tensions.

After more than half a century, the Sino-French relationship should be regarded not simply as a historic diplomatic achievement, but as a strategic model that helps define reorientations in the multipolar world of the 21st century (Van der Putten & Shulong, 2011; Hellman, 2023). As China continues its steady ascent in economic and technological domains, France is not only striving to maintain geopolitical balance but also confronting the challenge of redefining its foreign policy identity. In this regard, the future of Sino-French relations will continue to revolve around three core axes: strategic positioning, economic resilience, and normative governance identity.

The first axis, strategic positioning, pertains to France's balancing act between transatlantic alliances (particularly with the U.S. and NATO) and new power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific. France's Indo-Pacific strategy exemplifies this approach. Deepening ties with China could enhance France's economic and diplomatic presence in the region, yet excessive closeness risks undermining its relationships with key transatlantic allies. Therefore, France's China strategy may evolve into a model of "constrained proximity" defined by a balancing-power logic. As Nguyen and Vo (2023) note, France aims to expand its regional influence through "soft power" policies.

The second axis, economic resilience, concerns managing dependence on China. As the trade data demonstrate, France's trade deficit with China continues to grow. Moreover, excessive integration with China in areas such as technology transfer and critical infrastructure (e.g., 5G, nuclear cooperation) could compromise France's strategic autonomy. In line with the EU's agenda sector-specific protectionist tendencies (Pajon et al., 2024; Duggal, 2022). Limiting collaboration with China in defense industries and digital infrastructure may become a persisting policy shift by 2030.

The third axis involves the reconstruction of France's normative foreign policy identity. France seeks to be viewed not only as a strategic actor but also as a producer of global norms. While "quiet diplomacy" may yield short-term commercial benefits, it risks undermining France's international image and the coherence of its

diplomatic discourse (Pajon et al., 2024). If this silence persists, more normatively proactive European actors, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries, may replace France as discursive leaders.

At the intersection of these three axes lies the central question confronting France: Can Paris maintain normative coherence while exercising leadership in a multipolar order, or will it settle for the role of a pragmatic “balancer” in global affairs? The answer to this question will determine not only the trajectory of Sino-French relations but also whether multipolarity can generate a values-based global order. If France believes that multipolarity is not only strategic but also ethical, it must reflect this conviction more decisively in its foreign policy practice (Keerle, 2023). Otherwise, its current stance of “strategic ambiguity” may relegate France to the position of a global actor incapable of taking clear stances in an increasingly complex international system.

Conclusion

The trajectory of Sino-French relations offers a revealing case study for understanding the inherent tensions and contradictions embedded within the evolving architecture of 21st-century multipolarity. As this analysis has shown, France aspires to project itself as both a strategically autonomous power and a normatively principled actor. This dual ambition, however, becomes increasingly difficult to sustain in the context of deepening ties with a geopolitical actor such as China, whose global rise is accompanied by markedly different political values, governance models, and strategic interests. From an economic standpoint, the France–China partnership has yielded tangible benefits, particularly in terms of market access, large-scale industrial projects, and technological cooperation. Flagship collaborations with firms like Airbus, EDF, and Total Energies have not only bolstered France’s industrial presence in the global economy but also embedded it more firmly into the complex fabric of Sino-centric economic networks. Yet, this growing interdependence has engendered critical structural vulnerabilities. The

widening trade deficit with China, illustrated clearly by statistical trends, signals a shift in economic equilibrium, in which France's relative leverage is diminishing. Moreover, dependence on Chinese manufacturing and supply chains raises significant concerns regarding national economic sovereignty, especially in critical sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and digital technologies.

Strategically, France has attempted to walk a tightrope between confrontation and accommodation. Its Indo-Pacific strategy reflects a desire to assert influence in a geopolitically sensitive region without falling into the binary logic of U.S.–China rivalry. In this regard, France's Indo-Pacific presence, marked by military deployments, strategic partnerships with India, Japan, and Australia, and policy coordination with the EU, serves as a spatial and strategic buffer that allows Paris to engage with China without appearing fully aligned or antagonistic. Nonetheless, such a balancing act remains fragile, particularly as tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait escalate and the international system becomes increasingly polarized. The most profound contradiction, however, lies not in the realm of economics or strategy, but in the normative dimension of foreign policy. In its diplomatic dealings with China, France has adopted what may be termed a normative flexibility, an adaptive framework that permits selective engagement and quiet diplomacy in lieu of open confrontation.

At first sight, France's Gaullist tradition of strategic autonomy, especially its efforts to balance between the U.S. and China, seems to align well with the realist logic of power balancing in an anarchic system. Yet, this framework downplays France's normative tensions and cultural-historical engagements with China. It treats France's actions as materially driven, ignoring the ideological ambivalence and normative dilemmas that are central to the case, which can be better understood within the framework of the English School's concern with legitimacy, institutions, and diplomacy.

However, the Sino-French relationship cannot be adequately explained through either a purely realist lens, focused on national interest and power maximization or an idealist paradigm that foregrounds values and cooperation. Rather, it reveals a layered and

dialectical process in which France must continuously negotiate the contradictions between normative posturing and geopolitical expediency. This dialectic exposes the limits of France's capacity to serve as both a moral compass and a strategic player in a rapidly transforming global order, which offers an illustrative case for what Gürcan (2020) calls "post-hegemonic multipolarity". Rather than framing multipolarity as a stable or normative alternative to U.S. hegemony, Gürcan conceptualizes the current international order as post-hegemonic in the sense that it is structurally unsettled, marked by ambiguous alignments, overlapping alternatives, and the erosion of singular hegemonic authority. From this perspective, France's pursuit of multipolarity—grounded in Gaullist traditions of strategic autonomy—resonates with the post-hegemonic condition: it seeks room for maneuver between major poles of power, notably the U.S. and China, without fully committing to either. Yet, France's oscillation between liberal-democratic values and pragmatic engagement underscores the normative and strategic incoherence that characterizes post-hegemonic multipolarity. In this view, France's role is less that of a counter-hegemonic power and more that of a post-hegemonic middle power navigating a transitional, uncertain global landscape, where the rules of engagement and hierarchies of influence are increasingly fluid and contested. Ultimately, one could conclude that whether multipolarity evolves into a more just and stable international framework will greatly depend on how middle powers like France manage such contradictions. If France succeeds in reconciling its strategic ambitions with its normative commitments, through innovative diplomacy, alliance-building, and institutional leadership, it could help shape a form of multipolarity that is not merely about the redistribution of power, but about the re-articulation of global governance along more ethical, pluralistic, and cooperative lines. However, failure to do so may consign France's foreign policy to a position of strategic incoherence, diminished influence, and normative inconsistency.

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