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Paris, the EU, and China's Foreign Policy

Why China must stand with the EU at this moment of reckoning.

By Shi Zhiqin, Lai Suetyi, Vasilis Trigkas
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In January 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping foresaw the rising complexity of China's international environment. Almost a year later his assessment seems valid. Accelerated geopolitical competition with the United States in Asia, the drama of the eurozone crisis and its adverse effects on Chinese exports, and turbulence in the Middle East (China's main source of oil) could create new condundrums for economic growth and social harmony in the Middle Kingdom. Meanwhile, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism could exacerbate Chinese internal security issues in Xinjiang.

The terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13 have now added even more complexity to China's international environment, for they could influence both the political identity of France and, most importantly, the vision of the European integration project. An increasingly insulated "fortress Europe" with rising nationalistic demagoguery could disrupt Chinese economic growth and undermine Beijing's grand vision for a Eurasian economic space sponsored in the One Belt, One Road mega-initiative.

However, a more strategically inclined EU, drawing on its state-of-the-art technology and educated manpower to secure the Middle East and neutralize the influence of opportunistic "state building" actors, could complement China's vision for a peaceful, multipolar world. For that

reason, China must stand with the EU at this moment of reckoning and proactively participate in the debate about the European future.

From Market Forces to the Imperative of Security

In Europe, a postwar aversion to talk of strategic visions and core political ideas has evolved into a consensus among elites that market forces and “economic determinism” would make Europe a *sui generis* political entity, with borders abolished and a continent that spawned two apocalyptic world wars now peacefully united.

With the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the “market imperative” came crashing down, unleashing the Eurozone crisis. Nonetheless, myopic political elites in Europe failed to diagnose the new landscape and calibrate their policies. Questions over fiscal federalism, which demands political structural reform, were erroneously substituted with monetarist economic prescriptions that led the EU into prolonged stagnation, triggering record unemployment rates and tearing up the social fabric of European society.

Not only internally, but externally too, European elites failed to act decisively and secure their periphery, the EU’s soft belly. While China warned about the potentially destabilizing effects of immature democratic movements that could easily be hijacked by extremists in the Middle East, many EU countries allied with the United States in toppling regimes. The EU’s actions in Libya and Syria stand as prime examples of how not to conduct foreign policy. In both cases, Europe undermined its own security by creating political vacuums in which fundamentalists could flourish and plot attacks against European targets.

In Syria in particular, France and Britain have followed a disastrous strategy that has empowered ISIS and created the largest post-WWII humanitarian catastrophe in Europe, with millions of impoverished Syrian refugees flooding the ports of Greece and Italy.

This influx of people combined with the Paris terrorist attacks could structurally reshape the identity of France and the EU, from a market-driven to a security-driven project. That is, security and survival will become priorities for national governments and the EU alike. While some could argue that the Algerian crisis hardly shaped the identity of France and Europe back in the late 50s, things today are different. Then France was fighting a colonial war and experiencing the repercussions of being a colonial power; today France is fighting a war within its borders unleashed by extremists that hate all things French and all things European.

Reflection on Ideology and Policy

While the Charlie Hebdo attack was a targeted act directed at journalists who were seen by the terrorists as sources of “blasphemy,” the November 13 attacks were indiscriminate. These were not just a strike against a republican symbol of free speech and satire, they were an attack on the *modus vivendi* of Europeans. The terrorists were also French citizens. As in the Charlie Hebdo case, most of the terrorists were known to French security services. Operationally, it seems that the French authorities had the intelligence sources, yet lacked the political and judicial authority

to prevent terror. Committed to multiculturalism as a panacea, France and Europe have been very sensitive about undertaking preemptive security operations.

It seems that this will now change. France, at least in the short term, will adopt a stricter legal framework, limiting the number of refugees (who do not meet asylum criteria), and perhaps even reforming laws on French citizenship. In addition to internal security dynamics, it is also expected that the EU could find an incentive to reinvent its long stagnated Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker has previously called on members to empower a European army and increase their security commitment. Those calls might now be heard. In reaction to the terrorist attacks, the Europeans now have the opportunity to move forward with integration and engage in joint military operations under a EU command, always in agreement with UN Security Council resolutions.

Therein lies a puzzle. The EU's CFSP is currently tied to NATO and the United States. This creates a conflict within EU's strategic imperatives in the Middle East, and perhaps in Ukraine and U.S. interventionist foreign policy. France paid a heavy price for aligning with US policies in Syria. It is essential now that the EU develop an independent security strategy and protect its own core national interests.

While the security-based scenario for EU integration seems a "positive" for China's long-term goal of a multipolar world, great risk remains. Instead of an EU-wide security concept, the security agenda could be hijacked by political demagogues. Instead of joint security ventures, the rise of nationalism could annihilate the Schengen agreement, disrupt the European economy, and send shocks rippling through markets, with implications for China's own economy. A fortress Europe could raise walls against trade, exacerbate intra-European ideological division, and even lead to the unraveling of the European project. ISIS would have successfully created an area of conflict from the Middle East to the Atlantic to the Urals.

The Rise of Russia's Influence

A second potential outcome of the Paris attacks is an enhanced role for Russia in European affairs. This could arise if Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to display skill in acting as the leader of the West against barbarity, aided by the support that the terrorist attacks in Paris and the bombing of Russian flight in Egypt lend to Putin's arguments. The Russian president could become the leader of last resort in Europe. While Putin has long argued for a concerted European effort to annihilate ISIS and support a second-best scenario of Assad staying in power, at least for a transitory period, the French and most EU governments have rebuffed him. Yet Putin is not entirely alone. On the contrary, he enjoys support among strong and rising political forces within the EU, eminent among them Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front in France.

Le Pen has built an ideological "holly alliance" with Putin, arguing that the Russian president is the sole leader who gets things right and protects the West from the plague of Islamic fundamentalism. If she wins the 2017 presidential election in France, Le Pen seems determined to upgrade the ideological alliance with France to a full-fledged political alliance, creating a powerful axis between Moscow and Paris for the first time since WWII. The implications of such a geopolitical shift could be massive for Europe and the world, as French technology and

financial knowhow would complement Russia's military strength, natural resources, and strategic foresight. And this brings us to the crucial question of the internal political debate in France and the 2017 presidential elections.

President Le Pen in 2017?

As noted, the Paris attacks could drive French people to support a candidate who they believe is best able to protect their everyday security. Marine Le Pen has for some years been the sole French politician who has been arguing for security reform, safe borders, an enhanced laic identity of the French republic, and stronger military and intelligence forces. In addition, Le Pen has strategically pursued a policy of diversification in the ideological identity of her party, insulating the National Front from the extreme positions of her father (Jean-Marie Le Pen) on anti-Semitism and historical revisionism.

These efforts have paid off – her party won the European Parliament elections in May 2014. As *The Economist* notes, the National Front's political disguise has given the party record 41 percent support among working class voters, compared with just 24 percent for the Socialist Party, which is in second place. This progress will soon be tested at the local elections in Nord-Pas-de-Calais-Picardie region and in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur.

To be sure, much could happen in the eighteen months that remain to the French presidential elections. Francois Hollande – by some measures the least popular president in modern France – could restore his image if he builds a strong reputation as a president in crisis. It is nonetheless true that Le Pen is now enjoying significant power as an agenda setter in the political debate within France – perhaps even within Europe. This is a powerful boost for her political authority in 2017. Even French Prime Minister Manuel Valls has endorsed one of Le Pen's main suggestions: expelling radical imams preaching violence and hatred.

China's Proactive Response

China must respond to any shifts in Europe with strategic foresight and proactive diplomacy. For instance, it could reach out to accelerate the partnerships between the EU's Juncker 400 billion euro investment fund and China's Silk Road fund. Creating economic opportunity that increases employment in Europe might be the best antidote to extremist voices, safeguarding social stability and securing long-term trade relations.

In addition, building on its already positive relations with Russia, France and the UK, China could support a UN Security Council resolution for a peacekeeping force that will exterminate ISIS and stabilize Iraq and Syria. This short-term solution must be accompanied by an overarching long-term strategy to rebuild Syria and repatriate impoverished refugees. As Syria is part of the One Belt, One Road initiative, both the EU and China could engage in joint developmental ventures once the area is secure. The political transition of Syria to a post-Assad era would be a long-term process and not a first order condition. A peaceful and prosperous Middle East is good for the entire world and this must be the primary imperative of intervention.

China should not be an “events taker” but an “events setter,” particularly in core strategic issues like multipolarity, energy security, and economic vibrancy. China’s interests in a strong EU remain as evident as ever and in the case of Syria perhaps China’s “striving for achievement” foreign policy as shaped by President Xi Jinping could find some space for exemplary application by working together with the EU always under UN mandate.

As a European philosopher once put it, “nothing unites a nation faster than a common enemy.” The Europeans now have a prime opportunity to consolidate their solidarity fighting a common enemy – fundamentalist terrorism – without losing their humanism. It is also an opportunity for the international community to establish substantial cooperation in fighting terrorism and supporting the impoverished and innocent Syrian refugees. It is an indisputable responsibility of all countries to respect and support each other in building a peaceful and diverse world.