



## ***THE REAL PROBLEM WITH EUROPE'S CONFUSION ON BEIJING***

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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Talk about mixed messages! Days after European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen made one of the toughest speeches ever on China by an EU official, French President Emmanuel Macron visited that country with a delegation of business leaders.

Macron's visit saw him meeting with supreme leader Xi Jinping, emphasizing points of convergence with Chinese proposals to end the Ukraine war and touting Europe's "strategic autonomy"—diplomatic speak for creating distance from the United States on important policy matters.

It's music to Chinese ears. Beijing is eager to exploit those differences to dilute any consensus on China policy within Europe and widen gaps between it and Washington to prevent the emergence of a unified position toward China.

European incoherence is worrying and not for just obvious reasons. Internal differences deprive the world of a credible alternative to the hard line toward China that dominates thinking in the United States. This is especially troubling for Japan, whose logic in many ways mirrors that of Europe.

In a speech the week before Macron's visit, von der Leyen said that Xi "essentially wants China to become the world's most powerful nation," and that had been accompanied by a "deliberate hardening" of China's strategic stance, with the country becoming "more repressive at home and more assertive abroad." She pulled no punches, noting that "Just as China has been ramping up its military posture, it has also ramped up its policies of disinformation and economic and trade coercion. This is a deliberate policy targeting other countries to ensure they comply and conform."

The EU identified China as a "systemic rival" in its 2019 strategic outlook. That label takes on special significance given von der Leyen's pledge "to ensure that our companies' capital, expertise and knowledge are not used to enhance the military and intelligence capabilities of those who are also systemic rivals."

For her, however, and in distinction from US policy, the preferred policy is to de-risk trade with China, not to decouple. "We do not want to cut economic, societal, political or scientific ties. ... But our relationship is unbalanced and increasingly affected by distortions created by China's state capitalist system. So we need to rebalance this relationship on the basis of transparency, predictability and reciprocity."

That means recognizing Chinese ambitions for what they truly are, rather than what some might want them to be—or as they may be presented—and promoting competitiveness and resilience within EU economies and businesses. That means reducing vulnerabilities created by reliance on single suppliers for critical or essential materials. That means employing defensive measures, like the trade controls mentioned above.

Her tough words contrasted with Macron's message. He and Xi issued a joint communique in which they agreed to "improve market access" for each other's businesses and designated 2024 as a "China-France Year of Culture and Tourism," a move intended to get Chinese tourists to visit France as pandemic travel restrictions are eased. They also closed a deal to open a second production line for Airbus in China, another boost to the company's ambitions in that market.

Macron emphasized the need to promote Europe's "strategic autonomy," or as he explained in an interview during his visit, reducing dependence on the United States and preventing Europe from getting "caught up in crises that are not ours." Addressing the Taiwan situation, he added that "the worst thing" would be for Europeans to "become followers on this topic and take our cue from the US agenda and a Chinese overreaction." Those comments generated considerable pushback in Europe; the Biden administration focused instead on cooperation with France.

China welcomed Macron; von der Leyen, a member of Macron's group, not so much. Politico contrasted the treatment given the two. Macron was met on the airport tarmac by the foreign minister; von der Leyen got the ecology minister at the regular passenger exit. Macron's schedule was overflowing, von der Leyen's was bare-bones. Macron had a glittery state banquet with Xi while von der Leyen held a news conference at EU delegation headquarters. As Politico summarized the atmosphere, "While state media trumpeted the Sino-French relationship, Chinese social media demonized von der Leyen as an American puppet."

If all that was too subtle, Fu Cong, China's ambassador to the EU, was blunt in remarks to the Financial Times the day of von der Leyen's speech. "We do hope that the European governments and the European politicians can see where their interests lie and then resist the unwarranted pressure from the US," adding "it will only be at their own peril." After all, he noted, "Who in their right mind would abandon such a thriving market as big as China?"

The easy explanation for EU schizophrenia is "good cop, bad cop." That assumes a level of foresight and coherence in European diplomacy that seems unduly optimistic. Most observers concede that there are, as Mikko Huotari, director of the Mercator Institute for China Studies explained, substantive differences between von der Leyen and the major EU governments on how to handle EU-China relations.

There is also a self-serving element to Macron's statements: In this and similar formulations, European

strategic autonomy would be led by France. In his typically incisive and caustic analysis, Tufts University professor Dan Drezner writes that "Macron is playing his part of the French president and trying to call attention to himself." According to Drezner, the appropriate "considered response is a polite shrug."

Still, there is a real cost to Europe's incoherence but it isn't the one that typically comes to mind. A European position that is both clear-eyed about China while acknowledging the need for engagement would provide an important counterweight to the narrow-minded consensus that dominates thinking in the United States.

Writing in *The National Interest* last month, Paul Heer, a former American national intelligence officer for Northeast Asia, worried about the "bipartisan consensus on the nature and scope of the threat from China," challenging the validity of the premises upon which those judgments are based and warning of groupthink that could lead US policy dangerously astray.

Heer agrees that China is a formidable and ruthless opponent and one that requires a comprehensive, whole-of-government competitive US response. Still, he rejects — citing the Annual Threat Assessment of the US intelligence community — that it is "an 'existential' winner-take-all threat to US global power and influence or to the American way of life, requiring a wholly adversarial cold war US response."

His conclusion matches that of Harry Hannah, another former American intelligence official, who argues in a Stimson Center Red Cell report that a fixation on China risks repeating Cold War mistakes, especially that of ignoring or underplaying other developments that could be equally if not more important to US national security. Hannah is especially keen to empower other actors whose interests and values align with that of the United States, even though they may not be identical. Ignoring them or forcing them to toe the US line, he argues, plays to Beijing's preference for a great power "Group of Two" that marginalizes other countries—many of which are US allies or partners.

A united Europe, one with a coherent and consistent policy toward China, could, in this conception of global order, balance China without going to the US extreme. While Europe alone can't check China, its approach approximates that of Japan and together they offer a more inviting alternative to those skeptical of the all-or-nothing US policy. It is a credible option for those in Washington uncomfortable with the prevailing hard line, too.

Europe can't replace the United States on issues of Indo-Pacific security. Forging a framework for constructively engaging one of the world's superpowers is just as vital, however. Brussels can't do that alone. Only by working with Tokyo and other like-minded countries can Europe succeed.

Japan has been reaching out to Europe for some time now, a process that began two decades ago and accelerated under the Trump administration as Tokyo and Brussels sought allies to gird an international order weakened by Beijing, Moscow and, sadly, Washington. Japan and the EU signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement, the Economic Partnership Agreement and the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure to strengthen their cooperation and counter the forces of revisionism.

The United States needs to adopt a more flexible approach to its allies and partners, giving them the space to maneuver as they see fit—as long as they work toward the same goals. But this demands that those allies step up as well. Recent events show that Brussels understands the challenge; meeting it remains beyond its grasp.

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