

## Prospects & Perspectives



One may regret that France has not upgraded its China policy sooner, but it seems that the French president is now clear-eyed that it is not enough to only have a good relationship with Beijing, it is also necessary to reinstate the balance of power.

Picture source: Xinhua News Agency, May 8, 2024, <[http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/headline/202405/t20240508\\_12618637.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/headline/202405/t20240508_12618637.htm)>.

### Macron's China Policy: Dropping Illusions and Bringing Back Realpolitik

*By Marc Julienne*

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ith reasonable expectations prior to the visit, one can assess that Xi Jinping's May 6-7 state visit to France was a success — at least not a failure.

While the visit may not have yielded tangible results on issues such as



Ukraine or trade disputes, it does mark a significant shift in President Emmanuel Macron's approach to China.

Just a year ago, in April 2023, the French president went to China with a positive agenda in order to bring the bilateral relationship back on track after three years of COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from Ukraine, the priority of the visit was business, regardless of the meager crop of contracts France eventually signed. In addition, Macron's "friendship" with Xi was overexposed during a visit where China's propaganda had a full hand. Finally, on his way back to France, the French president made highly [controversial comments](#) blaming the United States for fueling tensions in East Asia, and sounding like he disregarded the consequences that a crisis in the region would have for France's interests.

In stark contrast, this year's visit was marked by a more austere tone. Macron, respectful and cordial with his counterpart, was no longer overly friendly and overly smiling compared to last year. He was more distant and straightforward, refraining from making any controversial statement or aiming friendly fire at France's allies and partners. The agenda was heavily political, even when dealing with economic issues, underscoring the gravity of the issues at stake.

Yet, Macron did invite Xi to the land of his childhood, the Pyrenees Mountains in southern France. Macron wanted to show his counterpart that he values high-level dialogue with him and remains open and constructive to China, but that France's interests in terms of security and economics will be preserved at all costs.

## **Ukraine**

On Ukraine, the Elysée surprisingly maintained the same twofold contradictory goal to convince Xi to use his leverage on Putin on the one hand, and to deter him from providing weapons or direct military aid to Russia on the other. A more accurate analysis indicates that China's main interest is to stay out of the war. Therefore, it is not going to help the EU against its Russian strategic partner, and it is unlikely to provide arms to Putin and face economic sanctions from the West.

In Paris, Xi sounded annoyed by the Europeans' attempts to involve China



in the war. During a press meeting at the Elysée, he stated he [opposed](#): “the use of the Ukrainian crisis to blame others, smear a third country and start a new Cold War,” an even stronger wording compared to what he wrote in his op-ed in [Le Figaro](#): “China is neither at the origin of the crisis, nor a party to it.”

Although China does not provide lethal weapons to Russia, France has no illusion that China’s overall economic support is critical for the Russian war effort in Ukraine. The French president and [European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen](#) called China to curtail delivery of dual-use goods to Russia that eventually end up on the Ukrainian front. They also made clear that this was affecting EU-China relations.

At least, Xi has supported Macron’s proposal of a truce during the Paris Olympics this summer. He also agreed to coordinate with the French president before he hosts Vladimir Putin in China in the coming weeks. These are meager outcomes and empty of commitments, but China seems to take Paris more seriously when it says the war in Ukraine is an existential threat to the EU’s security, and that Ukraine cannot lose.

Hence, there was no joint declaration on Ukraine, although there was a rather interesting [one on the situation in the Middle East](#), where shared positions are clearer: protection of civilians, opposition to the Israeli offensive on Rafah and forced displacement of civilians, immediate ceasefire, and the promotion of a two-state solution.

### **No illusion on trade**

The most significant shift lies in Macron’s economic bilateral relationship with China. Drifting away from the previous engagement and business-oriented policy, the French president emphasized imbalances in trade, investment and market access, as well as unfair competition.

France finds itself at the forefront of EU’s trade dispute with China. Paris openly supports the EU’s “de-risking” approach to China, and makes no secret of its concerns about Chinese subsidized electric vehicles (EVs) flooding the EU market, and putting the French automotive industry at risk.

Consequently, Beijing holds France as the instigator of the European



Commission's investigation into subsidies in the Chinese EV sector and an active promoter of European industrial protectionist policies. In retaliation, China has launched an anti-subsidy investigation into European brandies, in which 96% of the volume exported to China comes from France. China denies any connection between the European and Chinese investigations, while France and the EU have no doubt they are intertwined.

Macron now knows that there is no alternative to an economic balance of power with China. A trade war is undesirable, but France and the EU must be ready and are getting ready for it.

### **Confronting views on Europe**

Blatant, although unspoken, is the European agenda that both heads of state put forward. Macron remained very consistent in placing France's bilateral relationship with China within the broader framework of the EU. He invited von der Leyen for a trilateral meeting at the Elysée, just like he did last year in China, and in Paris in 2019 with Jean-Claude Juncker and Angela Merkel. This way he wants to send a message of European unity to Xi.

In stark contrast, Xi chose Europe's most illiberal, EU-skeptic, anti-U.S. countries for the rest of his European tour: Serbia and Hungary. In Serbia, a non-EU country, he commemorated the 25th anniversary of the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by U.S. aircraft during Operation Allied Force. In Hungary, an EU member state, he exploited European dissent by promoting Prime Minister Orban through a three-day state visit (one more than France) and significant economic cooperation.

### **What's next for France-China relations?**

The economic disputes are significant and will not be solved overnight or by France alone. This is a long and difficult dialogue between the EU and China that has just started in Paris. Fortunately, the EU has more and more teeth to be credible in front of Beijing and to face Chinese economic statecraft.

Some important issues are yet to be raised by France. There was no public statement about the situation in the Taiwan Strait, or about Chinese interference in France and Europe. The latter issue is especially problematic as many cases of Chinese espionage and influence have come to light lately, including the



attempt by Chinese police to forcibly repatriate a Chinese dissident from France in March, as well as the hacking of seven members of the French Parliament by the Chinese government-linked APT31 hacker group.

Altogether, one may regret that France has not upgraded its China policy sooner, but it seems that the French president is now clear-eyed that it is not enough to only have a good relationship with Beijing, it is also necessary to reinstate the balance of power.

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