

Summits and Sanctions, War and Peace: Is the EU Still in the Game?

Sven Biscop

As I set out for Beijing in early July, to teach my annual summer course on grand strategy and great powers, I knew in advance what all my Chinese interlocutors would make fun of: Mark Rutte's and Donald Trump's embarrassing "Daddy moment" at the NATO Summit in The Hague, epitomising European subservience to the United States. While I was still in Beijing, the EU-China Summit produced the expected non-result. That didn't seem to bother my Chinese contacts, or so they pretended. And shortly after returning to Brussels, Ursula von der Leyen and Trump announced the EU-US trade deal – a bad deal whose main merit is that it avoided an even worse one. Even the EU's claim to be a strong and unified economic player, as opposed to its often divided diplomatic and military posture, begins to sound hollow. One has to wonder: is the EU still in the game of great power politics?

For a while, I saw a worst-case scenario looming: Trump making a deal with Xi Jinping and with Vladimir Putin (about Ukraine or regardless of it), but not with the EU, to which he is ideologically opposed (which he is not to the other two). That, fortunately, has not materialised. But the EU could still find itself in a very awkward position. If after a potential settlement of the Russo-Ukraine War, Trump would normalise relations with Russia, Europe would certainly not follow him. I can also easily imagine Trump making a "big beautiful deal" with China (at least in his own mind), while the EU's economic differences with Beijing would remain unresolved, and its economic relations with Trump's US would remain fractious. Europe could also end up being the only one who guarantees

Ukraine's security, if the war comes to a close, or who continues to support Ukraine, if it does not. The EU could be isolated.

Are we prepared? It seems to me that we are not. The EU has made crucial strategic choices, but does not seem to know how to turn its vision into reality. It has made Ukraine a candidate for EU membership, but produced no strategy to end the war. It has claimed strategic autonomy in the field of defence, but its Member States' armed forces remain dependent on American strategic enablers. In the economic field, it has chosen de-risking over decoupling and free trade over tariffs, but failed to bring about good deals. The EU continues to advertise the Global Gateway as its main project for the world, but after four years it has yet to really take off.

That does not mean the other great powers are doing swimmingly. Russia has not lost, but neither has it won its war against Ukraine, in spite of enormous costs. The benefits of China's wait and see attitude towards the war may be coming to an end, and it is struggling with severe economic difficulties. Trump is undermining America's democracy and economy, and its global influence. But the issue is that Trump has forced Europe into a reactive mode. As Trump is undermining the Transatlantic alliance and the multilateral system, and potentially isolating us, we must regain the initiative.

European leaders must reassess our strategic position, therefore. Not to overturn the EU's choices – they are the right ones – but to produce a pragmatic strategy for their implementation. Europe needs more Realpolitik.

FOR UKRAINE – WITH CHINA?

The need for Realpolitik is most obvious with regard to the Russo-Ukrainian War. European financial and military support enables Ukraine to fight on, and the promise of EU membership provides an end-state beyond survival. But more than three years of war has shown that liberating all of Ukraine is not militarily possible – unless all of Europe goes to war against Russia, or the Russian regime implodes, of which there is no sign. By refusing, nevertheless, to discuss any other scenario, and rejecting the possibility of negotiating with Putin, the EU unnecessarily constrained itself. It ceded the initiative, and Trump grabbed it the moment he came back into office.

Meanwhile, the EU did become ever more severe towards China, labelling it (as NATO does) the enabler of Russia's war economy. That is true, of course: two thirds of the world continue to trade with Russia, but China is its most important trade partner by far. But EU tactics have been poor. Having appeared to reach out to China earlier this year, von der Leyen then took a harsh line again at the G7 Summit in Canada in June, which made it appear as a way of pleasing Trump. Shortly before going to China, she made another harsh speech in the European Parliament. That only served to antagonise China, without increasing the EU's leverage. Indeed, it has no leverage, because it demands the unfeasible.

China "should unequivocally condemn Russia's gross violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and internationally recognized borders. And act accordingly", said von der Leyen in the Parliament. But for China, Russia is an indispensable partner to counterbalance the US; it considers that a vital interest. Therefore, the EU has successfully demanded that China not give direct military support to Russia; but China will not drop Russia, even though it does not approve of its large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Just like France, Germany, and Belgium, though they did strongly condemn the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, never considered limiting trade or suspending the alliance. Of course not, they would say. Great powers do swap alliances – one thinks of Italy in 1915 – but only to obtain

a great reward or avert grave punishment. The EU has promised neither. And China will not change its strategy just because the EU says it would be the right thing to do. By nevertheless making this a precondition for talks in many other areas, the EU's Ukraine and China policies have started to operate at cross-purposes.

After the EU-China Summit, however, von der Leyen put out a different message, on X: "We asked China to use its influence to ask Russia to accept a ceasefire, enter peace talks and put an end to the bloodshed". That is a realistic objective. The EU could have attempted much earlier to induce China to abandon its stance of "holding ready to facilitate peace" (which in effect means: wait and see), not by asking it to drop Russia, but by taking it at its word and inviting it to undertake a joint diplomatic effort to bring Russia to the table.

The EU itself must accept, however, that at this moment a fair settlement is, alas, impossible, because any settlement will reflect the military situation on the ground. What Russia has conquered it will keep, for now, though Ukraine and the EU need not recognise any "annexations". Only when Trump suddenly announced that he would meet Putin in Alaska on 15 August did European leaders change tack and state (on 10 August) that "The current line of contact should be the starting point of negotiations", rather than total victory, out of fear that Trump would go even further and accept Russia's demand that Ukraine give up as yet unconquered territory.

What to do? Once Trump resumed the initiative, the EU and the UK did successfully impose themselves, joining Volodymyr Zelensky in the White House on 18 August and making sure that Trump heard their position. But nobody can guarantee what Trump will tell Putin next time they are in the room together, even with Zelensky present, while an EU presence does not seem to be in the offing. The EU must continue to exert pressure, therefore, to shape the negotiations indirectly. That means reaffirming the four strong positions that it took in reaction to Trump's early policy statements in February 2025: to continue the process of EU accession for Ukraine; to decide itself if and how it will end sanctions against Russia; to permanently

support Ukraine militarily; and to offer as strong a [security guarantee](#) as possible, with or without the US. Russia's frozen assets could serve as collateral: any violation of the potential agreement should see them seized. To increase the pressure on Russia, the EU should push to pull in China and the other Permanent Members of the UN Security Council as signatories of any agreement, thus making them co-responsible for upholding it.

I would argue that, by now, an end to the war and a return to stability is in China's interest: The economic concessions it has extracted from Russia thanks to its dependence have probably reached a ceiling (so a normalisation of US-Russia relations would put Moscow overall in a stronger position vis-à-vis Beijing again, but the latter would not lose many concrete benefits). China has lost influence over North Korea, which has used the war to gain Russian support, potentially upsetting the fragile balance on the Korean peninsula. As the war lasts what China asserts is its neutral stance becomes increasingly difficult to maintain; in practice China is pulled more and more into the Russian camp, which is constraining its freedom of action. That is precisely the opposite of what it sought to achieve: giving Russia sufficient support to maintain the partnership but without imperilling relations with the EU and the US. In reality, the war has come to nearly completely overshadow China's relations with the EU, and a number of Chinese companies are under EU sanctions. Just like the EU ceded the initiative on the war to the US, so China in effect has ceded it to Russia.

There is the argument that the [South China Morning Post](#) attributed to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, when he visited Brussels before the EU-China Summit: that Beijing does not want to see Russia lose the war for fear that then the US would be able to fully focus on China. During my stay in China, everybody hastened to tell me that so sophisticated a diplomat as Wang could never have said that. Nonetheless, Western officials tend to treat it as China's real view. In any case, the argument does not hold. Europeans strongly feel that, in spite of the war, the US has never ceased to concentrate on China. The war has just given American China hawks another reason to be anti-Chinese.

DOES CHINA CARE?

China must take Europe seriously, though. First of all, China too has to remember the nature of great power politics: once a great power identifies a national security concern, it will not let it go. This is what the war in Ukraine has become for the EU and NATO, because if Russian military expansionism is not halted there, Putin will almost definitely target another country, until, ultimately, we become the target ourselves (which we already are for a broad range of hybrid actions). China and Russia must accept that the EU, having made it a candidate for membership, will not drop Ukraine.

One gets the feeling, though, that China treats the EU as *quantité négligeable*: a player that can safely be ignored. That could be a negotiating tactic, aiming to force the EU into making concessions. But if it is a strategic conviction, it is highly problematic because, to start with, it is objectively wrong. China needs Europe as an export market, at the very least. Yet in the economic dimension, where progress could have been made in spite of the war, given the enormous interests at stake for both sides, nothing was achieved. Instead, China greatly upset the EU by including it in its blanket export controls on rare earths, offering Brussels nothing but insincere regrets that it had become collateral damage of a measure aimed at the US. The irony is that since then China and the US have come to an arrangement, so the Europeans now face more restrictions than the Americans. Perhaps China sees this as a bargaining chip to reduce European export controls in the chips sector or tariffs on electric cars. Is it China's idea that, in the end, Europeans will always follow the money, and give in, or will always follow the Americans? In neither case, they merit serious talks.

Again, what to do? The status quo suits China fine, so lack of progress in economic negotiations does not bother it. Perhaps the EU should use its leverage more offensively and threaten specific consequences if specific economic disputes are not resolved by a certain deadline. If Beijing nevertheless continues in the same vein, China and the EU may ultimately be nothing but competitors, through legal and legitimate means – that is the essence of politics

and economics. There are important elements of rivalry as well: illegal actions such as China's claim to the South China Sea, and its own hybrid actions against Europe, but they will not be all-out rivals like the EU and Russia are. But they will also not be partners, for partnership, much more than dialogue, means joint action. Such an evolution will only push both sides to step up de-risking, and risks furthering weakening ties that have already been strained since the pandemic. Not the worst situation, but not good enough either, in view of the challenges for global stability that we are facing.

GLOBAL ORDER?

A major issue is emerging: will some effective form of global governance remain possible if the US continues to retreat from the multilateral rules and institutions that it has itself created? The US withdrawing from UNESCO (again) is not the end of the rules-based order (though it is bad enough). But nobody knows how far Trump will go, and his use of tariffs as the default instrument of strategy is already gravely undermining the economic order. If the US ceases to be the main underwriter of the public good which is the international multilateral system, can other powers step in?

Arguably, China has as much of an interest as the EU in a stable global environment in which to pursue its geoeconomic Grand Strategy. China and the EU perhaps have different understandings of multilateralism, but at least both reject unilateralism, as a Chinese colleague pointed out. The issue is not that China tries to shape multilateralism according to its views: as long as it pursues that aim in legitimate ways, that is normal political competition. The problem is that China is a very selective multilateralist, often applying the rules only when it suits it. At this stage, it is very questionable whether the EU and China can develop a joint agenda for the multilateral system. But that should not stop the EU from acting and propose its own agenda.

Meanwhile, all states have been scrambling to stabilise their bilateral economic relationship with the US, with little or no coordination. That is a missed opportunity: a

united front (pun intended) of the EU, Japan, and others, perhaps even China, would have strengthened everyone's leverage. Certain states likely didn't want to jeopardise their relations with the US even more; others probably felt the EU does not carry enough weight anyway to make the attempt worthwhile. In the end, for everybody, it's first and foremost about the US.

IT'S ABOUT THE US

For Europeans too, the economic and defence relations with the US have absolute priority – which led us to surrender too much too fast. At the [NATO Summit](#), the European Allies not only signed up to the defence spending target of 3.5% of GDP, based on the calculations of the NATO military staff, but also to an additional 1.5% for resilience, infrastructure, etc., just because Trump thought 5% is a nice number. The image of a subservient Europe was confirmed once again. Nothing of substance was discussed, for fear of provoking Trump's ire. What the Europeans ought to do very urgently, is to pool a significant part of the additional defence expenditure to build their own strategic enablers, so that their forces can deploy independently from the US. As long as Europeans have not built a militarily autonomous pillar within NATO, they will never feel confident enough to assert themselves vis-à-vis the US, even when it is necessary.

Holding court at his golf course in Scotland (adding to the image of the ruler summoning his vassals), Trump did not hesitate to use this leverage. As usual, he crafted an inflated image of the EU-US deal: Europeans were going to buy American energy and weapons anyway, but the EU cannot actually guarantee for how much money; the same applies to the announced European investment in the US. But accepting a 15% unilateral tariff contrasts sharply with the Union's earlier defiance. Many Member States actively pushed for this as the price to pay for stability, thereby weakening the hand of the Commission in the area where it has the most weight. I dare not say whether escalating by taking countermeasures would have been effective – but neither dare I be confident that Trump will stick to his end of the deal. I can easily see him threatening additional tariffs anyway if the EU or a Member State

takes a decision he does not like. Meanwhile, China used its leverage, trading export controls on rare earths for an intermediate deal with the US (and avoiding secondary sanctions over Ukraine). What the EU must do is use its leverage too, and retaliate against the US the moment it does not live up to its end of the (bad) deal.

All of this proves once again that it is easier to bully your friends than your enemies. The effect is to weaken the former and bolster the latter – but Trump probably does not care, since he does not see the EU as a friend in the first place. In that light, and given that Trump II might well be followed by Vance I and II, the EU had better strengthen its position.

CONCLUSION

Europe's role on the world stage clearly can no longer just be that of most loyal ally of the US, as many of our leaders once thought (and those who still think this way, must urgently stop dreaming). Europe has actually been bold: offering EU membership as well as a security guarantee to Ukraine is a very bold move, to name just one example. Boldness cannot be risk-free. That is part of Europe's problem: when the implications of our boldness become clear, we recoil from doing what we said we would – witness the Turnberry Golf Course. That is one of the reasons why our different strategic decisions, though each in itself is sound, no longer cohere into one consistent approach. One bold stroke cannot restore Europe's position, therefore. Rather, the EU needs to decide what its role is, build up strength and thus autonomy, and then use the leverage that it does have to act. Only in this way can Europe gain confidence in itself and respect from others. Holding firm on Ukraine is the immediate test of whether we can play the game or not.

Great power politics is not a dinner party, where one gets invited because of one's witty conversation. Those who count are invited to a summit because they are indispensable to produce an outcome and make it work. Let us make ourselves indispensable then.

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