



**HAL**  
open science

# Together, China and the EU can be better prepared for a Trump return

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa, James F. Downes

► **To cite this version:**

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa, James F. Downes. Together, China and the EU can be better prepared for a Trump return. 2024. hal-04508380

**HAL Id: hal-04508380**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04508380>**

Submitted on 18 Mar 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Source: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/united-states/article/3254154/together-china-and-eu-can-be-better-prepared-trump-return>



Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa and James F. Downes

## Together, China and the EU can be better prepared for a Trump return

- A second Trump administration is likely to escalate hostilities against China and the EU, with higher tariffs and a possible US exit from Nato
- To prepare, Beijing and Brussels must start tackling the geopolitical, security and trade issues that separate them

[Listen to this article](#)



Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa and James F. Downes  
Published: 8:30pm, 6 Mar, 2024

[Why you can trust SCMP](#)



Illustration: Craig Stephens

As the countdown to the [US presidential election](#) begins, China and the European Union must prepare themselves for Donald Trump's potential second term. While individual efforts are essential, true power lies in the ability of China and the EU to develop a coordinated response.

Collaboration must be bolstered across three crucial fronts: mitigating security risks, addressing key geopolitical issues, and strengthening economic and trade relations.

The security standpoint deserves special consideration in light of Trump's contentious attitudes towards China and the EU. He is likely to intensify the hostilities seen in his first presidency, from the [trade war with China](#) to scepticism over EU alliances.

Trump has consistently displayed antagonism towards Europe, declaring that the EU took advantage of the US and reportedly comparing it unfavourably to China. His [support for Brexit](#) also suggested a desire for EU disintegration, which would undermine America's long-standing partnership with Europe.

Recently, Trump said he would “encourage” Russia to attack Nato members who fail to meet their defence spending commitments, calling them “delinquent”. His words caused massive concern.

True, the US outspends all other countries on defence in maintaining a network of 750 bases across 80 countries, but Trump appears to conveniently overlook that this is America’s own strategic decision.



Then president Donald Trump gestures at a Nato summit on December 4, 2019. Last year, 11 of the 31 Nato members met the commitment to spend at least 2 per cent of their gross domestic product on defence, including the US at 3.5 per cent and Poland at nearly 4 per cent. This year, 18 Nato allies are expected to meet the commitment. Photo: AP

In reality, Nato operates on a modest budget – this year’s military expenditure is set at €2.03 billion (US\$2.2 billion) when the combined defence spending of Nato members is over US\$1 trillion.

EVERY SATURDAY  
**GLOBAL IMPACT** 

A weekly curated round-up of social, political and economic stories from China and how they impact the world.

By submitting, you consent to receiving marketing emails from SCMP. If you don't want these, tick here

[GET OUR NEWSLETTER](#)

By registering, you agree to our [T&C](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)

But truth and reason have never been obstacles and Trump’s message is clear: as president, he is [likely to withdraw support](#) for Ukraine and could withdraw the US itself from Nato.

This would not only affect Europe but also favour China, with ramifications for their relationship. First, America’s exit from Nato would force the EU to establish a [collective European defence structure](#) with operational objectives and stronger intelligence, bringing to fruition EU [strategic autonomy](#) – a plan long endorsed by China.

Second, a US-influenced faction within Nato has been [trying to pressure](#) its European members into confronting China. America’s exit would calm this aggression, benefiting China.



■ Nato leaders slam China over Russia ties and Taiwan threats in bloc’s strongest rebuke yet

Third, this transition could substantially reshape the Sino-European dynamic. A Nato without the US could weaken Russia's justification for invading Ukraine and enable Chinese President Xi Jinping to urge Russian President Vladimir Putin towards a war settlement. Without US pressure, the EU might even explore alternative arms markets.

Could these synergies eventually affect China's ties with Russia? To what extent might it prompt a re-evaluation of the security partnership?

It's hard to say how the geopolitical scenarios under a new Trump presidency may tip the scales. It could pave the way for diplomatic resolutions or escalate tensions among the major world powers.

An America under Trump is likely to move away from multilateralism and international organisations. China may take the opportunity to expand its allies and power base, which would benefit its long-term standing in global governance. But a Trump presidency is also expected to be unpredictable and the risks may eclipse the potential benefits.

Given Beijing's mistrust of Trump, his [ambiguity](#) over whether he would commit the US to the defence of Taiwan could be seen as one of his calculated distractions. And Chinese officials prefer certainty to surprises.

In Europe, a second Trump term could push the EU to finally adopt a clearer geopolitical stance. This would present another opportunity for an urgent mediation between China and the EU, especially over conflicts such as the [war in Ukraine](#), fostering a deeper understanding.



With the [European parliament elections](#) set for June, changes in the EU leadership could have a big influence on its relations with China. Beijing's [efforts in brokering peace](#) in the Ukraine war could serve as a reconciliatory gesture and spark a definitive shift in the EU's China policy.

Economically, China and the EU must strengthen their roles as vital trade partners by addressing [challenges](#) such as trade imbalances and ensuring fair market access. Additionally, levelling the playing field for European investments in China is crucial, and activating the provisions of the [China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment](#) could be a solution.

Furthermore, China and the EU could consider jointly establishing a list of strategic resources to be included in the [EU's de-risking agenda](#). It would mitigate any potential economic vulnerabilities and enhance resilience in the face of uncertainties.

This is particularly important for China as escalating US trade barriers highlight the need to enhance business ties with the EU to facilitate trade growth, which necessitates the consideration of key European concerns.

The US trade war against China, which has intensified under the Biden administration, is set to go further as Trump threatens to raise tariffs to **60 per cent or more** for China if elected – and 10 per cent for everyone else, including Europe.

Trump, as president for a second time, would have more political experience and that could mean greater assertiveness, with retaliation against alleged adversaries expected to be a prominent feature of his administration. This could be compounded by the recruitment of a more aligned and loyal team, potentially restricting the space for rational dialogue.

In the eight months leading up to the US presidential election and the more than 11 months until the next president takes office, China and the EU must aim to resolve the critical issues that separate them. Passive observation is not an option with the election outcome likely to profoundly affect both sides and shape the path of their relations.

**Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa is a geopolitics analyst with a specialisation in EU-Asia relations**

**Dr James F. Downes is head of the Politics and Public Administration Programme at Hong Kong Metropolitan University**

The screenshot shows a social media interface with a vertical sidebar of icons on the left: Listen (headphones), Facebook (f), a crossed-out icon, WhatsApp, Telegram, a magnifying glass, an envelope, a printer, a speech bubble with a red notification badge, a bookmark, and an upward arrow. The main content area features a yellow header for 'CONVERSATIONS (11)'. Below this are two profile cards. The first card is for Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa, with a circular profile picture, a '+ FOLLOW' button, and a bio: 'Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa is a geopolitics analyst with a specialisation in EU-Asia relations, who serves as a consultant for public- and private-sector organisations, in particular think tanks. His consultancy work spans a spectrum of geopolitical and policy areas, encompassing impact analysis and strategic advice. His expertise covers Sino-European relations, geopolitics, great power competition, and critical raw materials. Furthermore, Sebastian possesses extensive regional expertise in EU law and institutions. He is an AsiaGlobal Fellow at the University of Hong Kong.' The second card is for James F. Downes, also with a circular profile picture and a '+ FOLLOW' button, with a bio: 'Dr James F. Downes is head of the Politics and Public Administration Programme at Hong Kong Metropolitan University. His latest research examines Populism in Europe, EU-China Economic Relations, and China's BRI Project. He is also a research fellow at the Global Europe Centre, at the University of Kent. James is an award-winning teacher who recently received the Chinese University of Hong Kong Vice-Chancellor's Exemplary Teaching Award (2022). His forthcoming book, written with Dr Valerio Alfonso Bruno and Dr Alessio Scopelliti, titled: "The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy" will be published in 2024.'