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How greater EU autonomy can boost relations with China

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► **To cite this version:**

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa. How greater EU autonomy can boost relations with China. 2024.
hal-04568481

HAL Id: hal-04568481

<https://hal.science/hal-04568481>

Submitted on 5 May 2024

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Source: <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/world-opinion/article/3261128/how-greater-eu-autonomy-can-boost-relations-china>



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How greater EU autonomy can boost relations with China

- Prioritising 'strategic autonomy' will let Europe engage with Beijing on its own terms and avoid being held hostage to fluctuations in American leadership
- Internal divisions within Europe, budget constraints and geopolitical challenges must be overcome to realise a new path forward

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Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa [+ FOLLOW](#)

Published: 7:30pm, 3 May 2024 -

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Illustration: Stephen Case

Is Europe being overshadowed by the tempestuous US-China rivalry? French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) has indicated this may indeed be so. In a dramatic address last month, he outlined a survival strategy for the [European Union](#) (EU).

Macron's overall strategy reflects the inclination for Europe to autonomously manage ties with China, independent of the United States. Amid uncertainties in US politics, Europe now hesitates to prioritise Washington's interests over its own, signalling a noteworthy shift.

Macron has been making the visionary call for European "strategic autonomy" since 2017, and has more recently promoted the positioning of the EU as a "third superpower" alongside China and the US. While geopolitical developments validate Macron's foresight, the concept of strategic autonomy – now integral to the EU's geopolitical identity – still lacks tangible action.

Indeed, rallying unanimous support among member states, each with varying priorities on threats and security, poses significant hurdles. In this regard, Germany has been notably hesitant, with an apparent absence of EU leadership.

This could soon change, as German Chancellor [Olaf Scholz](#) tweeted and Macron anticipated. The timing of Macron's vision is tied to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the [war in Gaza](#) and the potential re-election of Donald Trump as US president. Moreover, concerns about the [North Atlantic Treaty](#)

Organisation (Nato) have emerged due to the US' confrontational approach and potential outcomes of the war in Ukraine.

Advancing deeper EU integration by fostering a more sovereign and united bloc signals a stride towards greater federalisation to mitigate the impact of volatile geopolitics.

Building this unity is no longer a matter of debate; it is an imperative necessity. This entails developing a credible defence and other concrete measures proposed by Macron to fortify EU military capabilities. After all, "Europe is mortal. It can die," as he said. To avert this fate, an autonomous defence is necessary for several reasons.



Sailors prepare a French Rubis-class submarine at Toulon naval base in southern France on April 15. Photo: AP

First, relying on the protection of another power is outdated – the EU must ensure its own security independently. Such independence would elevate the bloc's geopolitical role and fulfil key security functions of being "credible, dissuasive [and] present". As such, Europe need not be held hostage to fluctuating American leadership every four years.

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In line with these objectives, Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy through deeper integration and a common defence would carry significant implications for its interactions with the US, Nato and China.

Second, Macron did not conceal his intentions during his address: to forge a Europe that is not a US vassal. He also criticised the influence of American culture in Europe. Consequently, one significant outcome of his strategy would be the progressive alteration of the EU's transatlantic approach, veering from US policies incongruent with European interests.

Additionally, it carries repercussions for Nato, which remains the bedrock of the European security architecture. Countries may aim to bolster defence capabilities and cooperation autonomously and, contingent on Trump's stance, maintain a commitment to collective defence within the alliance's framework.



A screen shows Chinese President Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron, at the Beijing International Automotive Exhibition in Beijing on April 25.
Photo: Reuters

Lastly, prioritising strategic autonomy will empower Europe to engage with China on its own terms, liberated from external influences, fostering a more balanced approach, enabling Brussels to pursue its economic, trade, political and security interests more independently.

These three shifts align with Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#)'s geopolitical interests and could significantly impact China-EU relations. However, conflicting views on China persist between Germany, France and European Commission President [Ursula von der Leyen](#) – who, amid re-election aspirations, remained unmentioned in Macron's speech.

China highly values France's foresight and prioritisation of national interests over ideology, publicly endorsing the EU's strategic autonomy. Amid tensions with the US, Beijing [appreciates France's resolute stance](#) of pragmatism. Xi's imminent visit to Paris signals recognition of aligned strategic interests. Meanwhile, with Germany, it's all about ensuring business will continue as usual.

Macron urges, however, a re-evaluation of trade policies, a sentiment echoed by frequent references to China during his address, mainly regarding trade. His efforts to safeguard European industry and lessen dependency on Chinese production hint at possible shifts in economic ties, including reshoring or diversification. Indeed, Macron's proactive stance is evident as he has been instrumental in bolstering [the EU's investigation into Chinese electric vehicles](#).



■ Russia-Ukraine war discussed in Chinese and EU leaders' meeting amid rising tensions

This potential transition may lead to a more assertive and pragmatic China policy, driven by realpolitik, progressively reducing the weight of the economy and trade on the EU's strategy. Such a shift could pave the way for the EU and China to perceive each other as peers in terms of power.

Until now, their relationship has been conditioned by differing political ideologies and approaches to international relations. The EU has adhered to a liberal framework, contrasting with China's realist political stance, which has constricted their relationship to trade.

Thus, Macron’s vision holds the potential to shape Europe’s role and its relations with both superpowers, yet this strategy is not without challenges. The US’ traditional sway, Europe’s internal divisions, budget constraints and geopolitical limits pose formidable obstacles to realising any ambitious agenda. Pragmatic solutions are needed to chart a new path forward.

Before implementing this new vision, confidence-building measures are necessary, such as restarting China-EU bilateral trade talks with clear objectives. Structured negotiations should tackle market access barriers and ensure reciprocity. Setting up a green technology partnership would be crucial for mitigating the economic weaponisation of clean energy.

While the US prioritises “America first, and China”, Europe stands at a crossroads. Embracing strategic autonomy isn’t merely a policy shift – it is Europe’s declaration of sovereignty, shaping its own destiny with renewed determination in an ever-changing world.



The image shows a LinkedIn profile for Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa. On the left is a vertical sidebar with social media icons: Listen (blue), Facebook (dark blue), X (blue), WhatsApp (green), Telegram (blue), Messenger (blue), Email (blue), Print (blue), a red notification badge, a bookmark icon, and a home icon. The main profile area has a blue header with the text "Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa is a geopolitics analyst with a specialisation in EU-Asia relations". Below this is a yellow "CONVERSATIONS (7)" button with a speech bubble icon. The profile picture shows a man in a suit. Below the photo is a "+ FOLLOW" button. The bio text reads: "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." At the bottom, a grey box lists related topics: European Union (+), US-China relations (+) | China-France relations (+) | China-Germany relations (+) | Emmanuel Macron (+) | Xi Jinping (+) | Olaf Scholz (+) | Ukraine war (+) | Nato (+) | United States (+) | China economy (+) | China trade (+).