



HAL
open science

What does EU Commission President Von der Leyen's Second Term Herald for Europe's US-China Policy?

Brian Y. S. Wong, Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa

► **To cite this version:**

Brian Y. S. Wong, Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa. What does EU Commission President Von der Leyen's Second Term Herald for Europe's US-China Policy?. 2024. hal-04747357

HAL Id: hal-04747357

<https://hal.science/hal-04747357v1>

Submitted on 22 Oct 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.

What does EU Commission President Von der Leyen's Second Term Herald for Europe's US-China Policy?

Oct 18, 2024

Like 4

Share

Tweet



Brian Wong

Assistant Professor in Philosophy and Fellow at Centre on Contemporary China and the World, HKU and Rhodes Scholar



Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa

Geopolitics Analyst in EU-Asia Relations and AsiaGlobal Fellow, The University of Hong Kong



(From L) Chinese President Xi Jinping, France's President Emmanuel Macron, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen hold a trilateral meeting as part of the Chinese president's two-day state visit, at the Elysee Palace in Paris, on May 6, 2024. (Photo by Gonzalo Fuentes / POOL / AFP)

In a world increasingly shaped by protectionism, economic security concerns, and rising geopolitical tensions, the European Commission's new team for 2024-2029 is tasked with guiding Europe through an uncertain future. Indeed, a core part of their challenge will be to develop a cohesive and robust response to one of the most complex geopolitical challenges of the century – navigating the rivalry between China and the U.S., which behoves the EU to establish a “U.S.-China Policy” of its own.

Following the European Parliament elections and the rise of right-leaning national governments, the Commission has moved further politically to the right. This is reflected in its composition, with 15 commissioners from the European People's Party, five liberals, four socialists, two from far-right parties, and one independent linked to Slovakia's national populist leadership. Much of this reflects a broader pivot in the complex mass sentiments in Europe – from Giorgia Meloni in Italy to Geert Wilders in the Netherlands – as European voters find themselves dissatisfied and disillusioned by the systemic economic malaise of their states, as well as the looming uncertainty of the prolonged war in Ukraine.

This shift has also led to adjustments in Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's policies. Having already toughened her stance on immigration and scaled back her green agenda, she now turns to the [Draghi report](#) for further policy adjustments, emphatically embracing its criticisms of the EU's major policy shortcomings, such as implementing climate policy without a corresponding industrial strategy. Such a balancing act – undergirded by a fundamental attempt to mollify domestic criticisms and pushbacks – is by no means straightforward. Indeed, despite securing re-election with support from across the spectrum, including the European Greens, the Commission President's reduction of environmental initiatives presents a contradiction that could undermine her leadership.

To this effect, von der Leyen has deliberately sidelined key figures who once balanced her power, excluding Frans Timmermans (Netherlands), Josep Borrell (Spain), and Thierry Breton (France), who had previously acted as counterweights to her more unilateral governance style. Breton notably accused her of manipulation and [questioned](#) her leadership. Against all odds, the President has cleared the path for her central objective: a more concerted, aggressive stance on China.

Beyond the Great Woman: Understanding EU's China Policy through Lenses of Inter-Bureaucratic Politics.

It would be tempting, albeit equally erroneous, to assume that the EU's China policy should be interpreted as the sole prerogative of an individual leader alone. Competition and negotiation between bureau, departments, and Commissioners – even ones with broadly aligned geopolitical instincts – could yield substantially divergent and unpredictable results. Short of a fundamental overhaul to the Commission's bureaucracy, no leader, not even von der Leyen, could drive through drastic resets to member states' industrial, trade, economic, and security policies.

Indeed, the Commission's newly [designate structure](#) has overlapping and perplexing portfolios, leading to confusion over specific responsibilities and concerns over prospective redundancy. A notable example is Spain's Teresa Ribera, whose role, on paper, covers "Clean, Just, and Competitive Transition", yet she is overshadowed by other commissioners for Climate & Net-Zero, Environment & Water Resilience, and Energy. This division of climate-related issues into four separate portfolios threatens to dilute their impact. Furthermore, Ribera, once a climate activist, shifted from declaring that "[nuclear is not green, sorry](#)" to accepting the EU's reclassification of nuclear as "green". Now, she has to balance decarbonisation with economic competitiveness, all whilst being constrained by the limited scope of her administrative power, which primarily revolves around competition law.

The dysfunction within the Commission is further evident in other poorly defined and overlapping roles. There is a Commissioner for the Mediterranean and a separate one for Migration, along with portfolios like Intergenerational Fairness, Health, and Animal Welfare. Additionally, Raffaele Fitto,

Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, was [described](#) by the Bari Civil Court of Appeal in 2021 as “radically detached from democracy and legality”, casting further doubt on the team’s ability to uphold European values.

In another controversial move, in her proposed cabinet, von der Leyen has eliminated key portfolios related to European principles. The roles of Commissioners for Values and Transparency have been scrapped, along with the symbolically significant (albeit substantively confusing) “Promoting our European Way of Life” portfolio that had been in place from 2019 – 2024. Additionally, the gender equality portfolio has been merged with “Crisis Management”, thereby bundling women’s rights up with disaster aid. Overall, these decisions indicate that the Union’s social and welfare dimension and more pressing policies within the domain could well be deprioritised until 2029. The bureaucratic shuffles indicate that economic security and ‘de-risking’ could well dominate the European agenda for the five years to come.

The Clear Beijing Focus amongst Key Personnel on the Commission

Amidst all the confusion, there is only one clear direction and point of continuity that emerges from von der Leyen’s new team – and that concerns the European policy on China. There will be no major shifts; in fact, the European stance may veer continually towards a more bellicose and assertive stance.

Maroš Šefčovič, now responsible for both trade and economic security, is expected to push for a more assertive approach that aligns closely with the Commission leadership—and Washington’s—stance on China. In the [“mission letter”](#) sent to Šefčovič, von der Leyen has explicitly directed him to “manage trade and economic relations with China, in line with our policy of de-risking”, while addressing “the spillover of non-market policies, market distortions, and harmful overcapacities” – terms that conspicuously position the EU as locked in a strategic competition and fraught relationship with China. Additionally, he is tasked with leading a “new economic security doctrine”, cooperating “on export controls”, and tackling the risks of “outbound investments”, shaping what will become the EU’s new roadmap against Chinese products.

Even in competition law, antitrust measures such as the regulation of foreign subsidies have been used to counter China’s influence and are expected to gain more prominence. In von der Leyen’s letter to [Ribera](#), she emphasises the need to “vigorously enforce the Foreign Subsidies Regulation, including by proactively mapping the most problematic practices that could lead to competition distortions”.

The nominee for the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas received a [letter](#) where China was notably absent. This omission speaks volumes given her role as the de facto chief diplomat for China. It could imply an intention to either de-escalate relations or pursue a more confrontational approach in foreign policy—one that is typically not openly communicated. Given the circumstances, it appears the latter is a more plausible interpretation. Kallas’ role will be crucial; her known stance on Russia means that China’s evolving position in the Ukraine war will likely influence her perceptions of Beijing.

Finally, unsurprisingly, the Taiwan card emerges. Andrius Kubilius, the proposed Commissioner for Defense and Space and former Prime Minister of Lithuania, is a well-known advocate for Taiwan and outspoken on cross-straits relations. He was part of the first European Parliament delegation to visit Taiwan in 2021 and has consistently supported Taipei, including its bid for WHO

membership—an initiative that the Mainland firmly opposes. As a member of the assertive Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, Kubišius is **committed** to reforming policy along value-centric lines, “promoting democracy and addressing threats to the rules-based and human rights systems posed by the rise of China”.

The 26 nominees will now undergo hearings at the European Parliament, which has historically asserted its limited power by rejecting certain Commissioners to demonstrate its authority—most notably in 2019, when France, Romania, and Hungary had to change their candidates. Given the current setup, some Commissioners may not last long.

EU's Next China Policy: A Recipe for Division or Diplomacy?

Ultimately, the EU appears set on a trajectory toward a more confrontational stance with China, potentially hardening relations. As von der Leyen steers from the “Geopolitical Commission” to the “Committee of Confusion”, her 2.0 strategy risks not only muddled priorities but also a precarious future in dealing with China. The more aggressive China policy to come is likely to mirror the existing approach, which could exacerbate conflicting objectives within Europe. This ongoing division undermines the Union’s ability to present a united front in negotiations with China. Over the past decade, these fractures have allowed Beijing to exploit internal discord, emboldening China to pursue more assertive policies with significant economic repercussions.

This uncertainty is further complicated by external factors, particularly the upcoming U.S. presidential election. The next President’s decisions on China policy could ironically upend von der Leyen’s plans, forcing her to adopt a more conciliatory approach. If a new U.S. administration implements a radically different strategy toward China—or Europe itself—it could undermine her efforts, leaving Europe vulnerable and without a coherent plan. In this tangled web of shifting strategies and internal discord, the EU risks becoming a mere spectator in global geopolitics, where confrontational postures may deepen divides and erode its influence over increasingly resourceful U.S. and China’s ambitions.

What the EU needs, and sorely lacks, today – is a coherent ‘U.S.-China policy’: a strategy that enables it to make sense of, deal with, and preempt changes in both Washington and Beijing’s approaches towards one another, and the EU. At a time with the greatest land invasion to occur to continental Europe since World War 2, it is only understandable that the U.S. serves as a military, security, and intelligence partner to the EU. Yet Brussels should thus not forego its ability to deepen relations with China, and play up the incompatibilities or divergences between China and Europe. Furthermore, Brussels must be wary of a fundamental oversight and failure to recognise the innate risks embedded in the rising protectionism from Washington, for inaction in face of the U.S.’ industrial policy would kneecap European countries’ abilities to fend for their own citizens’ long-term economic interests.

European strategic autonomy should not be a much-derided slogan, or a romanticised fantasy. Indeed, it is the only tenable position for Europe given an increasingly inward-looking and domestically oriented Washington, and a Beijing that is seeking to consolidate and revive its ailing economy. Europe needs to understand that it is, in fact, a third and independent actor in a multi-player strategic game – and act accordingly.