



HAL
open science

EU's Kaleidoscope Crisis: Struggling for a Geopolitical Identity

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa

► **To cite this version:**

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa. EU's Kaleidoscope Crisis: Struggling for a Geopolitical Identity. *Taihe Institute Observer*, 2025, 51 (Dec 2024), pp.12-19. hal-04861296

HAL Id: hal-04861296

<https://hal.science/hal-04861296v1>

Submitted on 2 Jan 2025

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.

EU's Kaleidoscope Crisis: Struggling for a Geopolitical Identity

Sebastian Contin
Trillo-Figueroa



- Geopolitics Analyst
- EU-Asia Consultant

The European Union (EU) is constrained by internal dysfunctions and external pressures, vividly highlighted in 2024. Following the June elections, it took six arduous months to assemble a European Commission aligned with the preferences of re-elected President Ursula von der Leyen, featuring the EU's bureaucratic inertia and its devastating repercussions.

Meanwhile, geopolitical players like China and the US have continued to advance their agendas, capitalizing on the EU's indecision. The BRICS+ has focused on strengthening its influence in a shifting global order, while Russia and Israel expanded their military campaigns in Ukraine, Africa, Gaza, and the broader Middle East. These developments underscore a deeper issue: Europe's inability to match the rapid evolution of global powers.

As a result, the EU finds itself entangled in a complex trilemma.

First, Europeans face the repercussions of escalating US-China competition, exacerbated by their dependence on Washington - a vulnerability amplified by the past European Commission leadership's choices. With Donald Trump set to return to office, this reliance becomes even more precarious, given his well-documented animosity toward Europe.

Second, the EU's failure to prioritize core policies has led to paralysis. Three defining moments in 2024 reflected this: the Draghi report, the contentious tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs), and the bankruptcy of lithium-ion battery maker Northvolt. Collectively, these setbacks reflected Europe's waning competitiveness amid mounting global pressures and persistent internal inefficiencies.

Notwithstanding significant buzz in Brussels, former European Central Bank president and former Prime Minister of Italy Mario Draghi's recommendations to address the EU's key policy failings have sparked minimal action. Europe's attempt to balance climate goals with countering China's industrial influence faltered with EV tariffs - a measure meant to be assertive that ultimately exposed an inability to reconcile conflicting priorities. Northvolt's bankruptcy in November, despite significant backing from major governments and partners like Volkswagen, revealed the EU's broader powerlessness to nurture and scale its green tech sector.

Third, Eastern European states have gained influence across the EU's agenda over the past three years, eclipsing Western European priorities as the Russia-Ukraine war takes center stage. While support for Ukraine's defense is widespread in Europe, this singular focus has sidelined broader strategic imperatives, leaving the EU's response fragmented and reactive. Efforts to forge a coherent geopolitical plan have been stalled by internal divisions and excessive political micromanagement.

Unyielding Necessity of a Unified EU Policy on US-China Relations

Amid the myriad of solutions leaders could pursue, one approach stands out as most compelling: To regain influence, Europe must craft a clear, unified, and coherent US-China policy.¹ This strategy would not only enable Brussels to handle the evolving relationship between Washington and Beijing, but also empower the EU to anticipate and respond to changes in their policies toward each other - and toward Europe itself.

Considering both global giants together offers the EU several advantages. First, a unified stance enhances EU leverage in geopolitical negotiations, positioning it as a key mediator between the US and China. Second, policy alignment minimizes contradictions that could alienate

¹ Brian Wong Yueshun and Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa, "What Does EU Commission President Von der Leyen's Second Term Herald for Europe's US-China Policy?," *China-US Focus*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/what-does-eu-commission-president-von-der-leyen-second-term-herald-for-europes-us-china-policy>.

either power, safeguarding economic stability amid great power rivalry while also mitigating potential marginalization. Third, clarity in objectives empowers the EU to assert its own priorities or adapt them in response to shifting trends.

Thus far, the EU's internal disarray reflects its failure to develop a cohesive strategy. Its reliance on NATO for defense, though revitalized, leaves the EU misaligned as the alliance's priorities shift misguidedly, currently pivoting toward East Asia and diverging from its established Euro-Atlantic focus. Concurrently, mounting trade tensions with China, currently fueled by stricter economic security measures, deepen divisions. Beijing's relocation of production related to the green and digital transitions to certain EU states further highlights the bloc's fractured approach.

However, momentum will wane as Trump re-enters office in January 2025. His political blueprint, marked by protectionism, isolationism, and nationalism, would freeze multilateralism and refocus American resources on domestic priorities - cornering the EU into difficult choices.² This pressure may be beyond Europe's control unless decisive action is taken, potentially deepening fractures within institutions and member states. Such a scenario could lead to five distinct outcomes, each with far-reaching implications for Europe's cohesion and global influence.

Five Potential Scenarios

Firstly, should US-EU relations improve, Europe would increasingly align with Washington's policies on China, trading transatlantic cooperation for a reduction in hostile US tariffs. As a result, this could exacerbate EU divisions, particularly between states like Germany - heavily dependent on Chinese trade - or France, which champions EU strategic autonomy. Such a shift could ultimately backfire, as China may perceive this as a threat, prompting a more defensive posture and retaliatory trade measures to safeguard interests.

Secondly, if US-EU relations deteriorate, particularly with Europe resisting Trump's push to choose sides against China, internal divisions within the EU would likely widen. Countries like Poland and the Baltic states would advocate for closer ties with Washington, while the smallest EU states might favor a more independent EU-China policy, distanced

² Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa, "How Trump's Isolationist US Will Open Doors for China," *South China Morning Post*, November 18, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/china-opinion/article/3286441/how-trumps-isolationist-us-will-open-doors-china>.

from American influence. Conversely, China could view Europe's stance as an opportunity for deeper economic and strategic engagement, solidifying its foothold within the market.

Thirdly, with better US-China relations, Europe could be caught off guard. Trump's US-China phase-one economic and trade agreement (2020) sidelined the EU, and Biden's administration obstructed the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), illustrating Europe's vulnerability when excluded from major US-China decisions. Paradoxically, while better US-China ties could bring global benefits, they would distress Europe's role; without a cohesive strategy, Brussels risks being viewed by both Washington and Beijing as a declining player.

Fourthly, in the event of deteriorating US-China relations, Europe would face tough choices: align with Washington or confront it, engage with Beijing or de-risk, or endanger being trapped between both powers, unable to adopt a strategy akin to ASEAN's "bamboo diplomacy" - flexible and resilient. While precarious, this scenario also offers an opportunity for Europe to position itself as a pragmatic balancer between the two giants. To succeed, EU states must overcome internal divisions and present a unified stance with a coordinated foreign policy.

Lastly, improved US-Russia relations could complicate Europe's stance. Eastern European countries, wary of Putin's threats, might resist adjusting to this new dynamic. Meanwhile, Western Europe might pursue renewed diplomatic engagement with Moscow, contingent on the establishment of a viable peace agreement over Ukraine. For China, a loosening bond with Russia presents both obstacles and possibilities. While reduced leverage over bilateral ties with Moscow poses a setback, Beijing might use it to strengthen relations with the EU - either as a bloc or with individual states more amenable to its initiatives - prioritizing alignment over division.

Externally, most scenarios point to greater political fragmentation for the EU, not unity. Mismanagement could leave Europe exposed - neither exempt from American tariffs with a weakened NATO unable to guarantee European defense, nor capable of preserving trading with China, jeopardizing access to critical strategic assets. Internally, the EU's failure to formulate a unified response to Trump's policies and China's adaptation would undermine its geopolitical objectives.

Overall, without an independent US-China policy, Europe risks further alienation from the global powers it requires to influence, entrapping itself in an uncontrollable geopolitical balancing act.

EU's Internal Strains and the Path Forward

The EU's future hinges not only on the referred external challenges but also on internal fault lines. Europe's "kaleidoscope crisis" reflects the deep fractures across key member states and institutions.

Major states are grappling with fundamental inflection points: Germany trapped in a leadership quagmire and governance dysfunctions, France struggling with economic mismanagement and political vacancy, Spain's government mired in corruption scandals, and Romania cycling through repeated elections. These intertwined crises epitomize a uniquely European "internal polycrisis," eroding unity and paralyzing decision-making.

Meanwhile, the 2024-2029 European Commission is coping with dwindling political capital, as von der Leyen has deliberately avoided stronger political figures who once provided a counterbalance, leaving the current Commissioners with diminished influence and authority, overlapping roles, and internal dysfunctions - elements elsewhere branded as the "Committee of Confusion."³

Additionally, the 2024 European Parliament elections revealed a receding base of traditional EU supporters, underscoring a strategic fragility. Von der Leyen's razor-thin re-election, secured with just 54% support, signals growing institutional instability. Her leadership style, coupled with more reactive Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), propels the EU toward systemic fragmentation, rendering the approach to US and China relations increasingly ineffectual.

Despite aspirations for a more assertive role, the European Commission from 2019 to 2024 faltered under presidentialism, erratic China policies, and an overreliance on the US. This left the EU without a cohesive strategy to address the challenges of the coming decade. Much of this cannot be solely attributed to poor management by the Commission; the EU remains doubtful on whether to pursue a more federal model, where decision-making does not rely on unanimous consent from all 27 states. While the creation of the first-ever defense portfolio is a step

³ Wong and Contín Trillo-Figueroa, "Von der Leyen's Second Term."

forward, its lack of real competence underscores the reluctance to cede more authority.

Indeed, Joseph Borrell, former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, recently acknowledged Europe's persistent failure to consolidate geopolitical influence. Reflecting on his five-year tenure, he highlighted the bloc's troubles to act swiftly and cohesively in the face of global defies, which he cited as a fundamental barrier to aspirations of becoming a true geopolitical power. At the November 2024 EU Foreign Affairs Council, he stressed that to speak the "language of power," the EU must first be united:

You cannot pretend to be a geopolitical power if you are taking days and weeks and months to reach agreements to act. ... The [world's] events do not wait for you.⁴

In the same month, Kaja Kallas - Borrell's successor - described China as "partly" malign,⁵ a term fit for a horror script. Beyond accusing Beijing of "weaponizing interdependencies," she offered no specifics on which policies required such concern. Furthermore, she categorized Russia, Iran, and North Korea as fully "malign," citing external influence and threats. This suggests that while China may warrant a place in the same basket, it remains less threatening in the current Commission's view - just enough to keep the ambiguity intact. This stance reflects continuity in Europe's relations with both the US and China, with Washington still regarded as the "most consequential partner and ally," oblivious to the uncertainties of a Trump 2.0 administration.

Meanwhile, fear-driven narratives are taking shape. Leading think tanks advocate for a more radical approach to Beijing, suggesting the introduction of a "fourth category" to the 2019 Commission's tripartite framework that classifies China as a cooperation partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival. Despite acknowledging that China "has been consistent since the start of the war in not providing lethal weapons to Russia," Beijing's "support" for Moscow in Ukraine justifies labeling China as a "security threat."⁶ This self-contradictory proposal, likely to gain traction in the absence of alternatives, oversimplifies geopolitical intricacies by prioritizing US demands over European interests and hastily transforms China into an antagonist without substantive justification.

4 Josep Borrell, "Press Remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell Ahead of the Meeting," transcript of speech delivered ahead of the meeting of EU Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, November 18, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-affairs-council-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-ahead-meeting-0_en.

5 Kaja Kallas, "Questionnaire to the Commissioner-Designate Kaja Kallas, High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy," *European Parliament*, October 22, 2024, https://hearings.elections.europa.eu/documents/kallas/kallas_writtenquestionsandanswers_en.pdf.

6 Natalie Sabanadze, Abigaël Vasselier, and Gunnar Wiegand, *China-Russia Alignment: A Threat to Europe's Security*, (Berlin: MERICS, Chatham House, and German Marshall Fund, 2024), https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Chatham%20House%20GMF%20MERICS%20Report%20China-Russia%20alignment_06-2024.pdf.

Indeed, no European voice convincingly articulates the alleged China threat beyond recycled American rhetoric. Overall, NATO still allocates defense budgets that are fivefold China's. A telling example is former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's interview in September 2024.⁷ When asked how many countries China has invaded in the last 40 years, Stoltenberg mentioned conflicts between China and Vietnam in 1979. The journalist countered, "The answer is zero," leaving Stoltenberg visibly unsettled and unable to justify why China poses a danger to Europe. On military bases, he claimed China had "a few," which was also corrected: China has one (Djibouti), compared to the US, which according to the interviewer, "has attacked 13 countries in the same period and maintains 750 military bases across 80 nations," many near China. "Do you still believe China poses a threat?" Stoltenberg responded: "China is becoming increasingly stronger militarily ... breaking international law ... cracking down democracy in Hong Kong."

Overall, Europe's future is clouded by uncertainty. Internal divisions, strategic incoherence, and an inconsistent approach to global powers threaten to relegate the EU to bystander status in a world shaped by others. European ambivalence toward China, over-reliance on the US, and failure to craft an independent, fact-based narrative reveal geopolitical vulnerabilities. Europe must urgently redefine its role, preparing to navigate the US-China rivalry - the defining geopolitical contest of the 21st century - by establishing a clear and unified US-China policy before the kaleidoscope of crises hardens into a mosaic of decline. **TI**

⁷ Jens Stoltenberg, full interview on NRK TV, *Rumble*, September 29, 2024, <https://rumble.com/v5h44cj-nato-chief-jens-stoltenberg-full-interview-on-nrk-tv-september-29-2024.html>.