

Opinion – Weakened US Relations Is Pushing Europe Towards China

Written by Ali Mammadov

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ALI MAMMADOV, APR 6 2025

In 2022, NATO declared China a strategic priority for the next decade for the first time in its history, citing growing security challenges. Until then, the alliance had focused primarily on the Soviet Union and later Russia as its main threat. Adding China to the list signaled a shift in NATO's strategic direction. While the U.S. and its European allies appeared to agree on this move, whether that consensus will hold in the coming years remains to be seen.

For Europeans, Russia has long been a greater threat than China. Russia is geographically closer, has history of military aggression in Europe, and, most recently, invaded Ukraine demonstrating its willingness to expand influence through force. For the United States, however, China has been the more pressing long-term concern, given its growing power in the international system. As a country that experienced the unipolar moment and viewed itself as the leader of the liberal order, the U.S. sees China's rise primarily as a great power rivalry rather than just a security threat.

European states, by contrast, have not viewed themselves in such terms for a long time. Having experienced multilateralism firsthand through the European Union, they have been more open to a world order in which multiple powers share leadership and address global challenges collectively. While Europe has had its own disputes with China—including over electric vehicles—it has generally taken a softer stance than the U.S. on broader issues concerning Beijing. Given that the EV issue is already getting resolved, it is likely that the relations may become even less tense.

Today, European states are increasingly anxious about security as U.S. officials signal a reluctance to maintain their current level of support. In response, European governments are preparing for a future potentially without U.S. backing in NATO, exploring alternative security arrangements, and signing bilateral defense agreements. While Russia remains the primary threat, Europe may struggle to manage two major adversaries without American support. As a result, a diminished U.S. role in European security could push European states to strengthen ties with China and even seek cooperation on key issues. China also views this shift favorably. In February, the Chinese Foreign Ministry proposed deeper cooperation with Europe to address rising "global challenges." Earlier this year, during a phone call between the Chinese and European Council presidents, both sides acknowledged the need for a fresh start in their relationship and greater collaboration. Even in Europe, politicians who were previously more hawkish toward China, including Ursula von der Leyen, are now signaling a greater openness to cooperation amid growing uncertainties about Europe's future. Given the tariffs imposed by the US on EU and China, economic cooperation, namely increased trade, with China may become the primary area of cooperation.

Cooperating with China could also serve as a strategic lever for Europe, pressuring the U.S. to reconsider its level of engagement. While Washington may not be as focused on Europe as in the past, a Europe moving closer to China would be far from desirable for American security interests, as it would further constrain U.S. global influence. Collaboration could become a bargaining chip for Europe in its efforts to keep the U.S. invested in the continent's security.

The level of China-Europe cooperation will be determined by several factors. One of them is the ending of the war in

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Ukraine. While it is likely that the distrust between the US and Russia will remain to a certain degree, if the ending of the war in Ukraine results in a closer cooperation between Russia and the United States, this will make both China and Europe less secure. Europe will see an emboldened Russia, and China will lose control of an ally and a neighbor. This can potentially lead to even a less secure Europe, more aggressive China, and higher levels of cooperation between the two, potentially beyond economic cooperation in the long run.

European states will need to navigate this chaotic period with caution. Given Europe's current vulnerabilities, the temptation to accept mutually beneficial deals from any willing partner is understandable. However, the primary risk is that such agreements could lead to excessive dependence on China. This risk is real—Europe faces an aging population, fragmented capital markets, limited investment opportunities, and a lack of independent energy sources. The current crisis has exposed deeper structural weaknesses, and overreliance on China would provide only a temporary solution.

Instead, this moment may also serve as a wake-up call for European states to enhance their competitiveness in key areas such as the economy, sustainable energy, artificial intelligence, industry, and defense, as deeper cooperation in these fields with China could pose national security risks. Another critical concern is that as one of the last strongholds of a rules-based order, Europe may become less vigilant in upholding international law if it grows too dependent on China.

Another approach may be finding different partners to diversify partnerships as much as possible. Highly diversified partnerships may successfully prevent the European states from depending on one or two great powers. The recent meeting between the EU leaders and the leaders of Central Asian leaders, the recently signed strategic partnership between France and Uzbekistan, the trip to Armenia and Azerbaijan by the President of Germany, and the inclusion of Turkey in European security discussions sign that the Europeans are already seeking new partnerships. However, this will never be a replacement for increasing capacity from within, as a Europe without sufficient capacity will always be affected by geopolitical shifts.

Europe needs to engage with global partners, including China on global challenges, as they demand international cooperation. However, as the current situation demonstrates, overdependence on any single actor will leave Europe vulnerable to external pressures. The key is strategic autonomy and a balanced approach to global partnerships.

About the author:

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