



Xi Jinping's Visit to France: Stumbling Blocks Pile Up on the Path of Bilateral Cooperation

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► Key Takeaways

- On May 6 and 7, Chinese President Xi Jinping will make a state visit to France, his first to Europe since 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic. After France, Xi will visit Serbia and Hungary.
- Emmanuel Macron and Xi Jinping will celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations at a moment when the bilateral relationship is officially perceived as positive on both sides.
- Yet, beneath the diplomatic varnish, obstacles are piling up and the space for cooperation between the two countries is receding.
- Four major areas of cooperation are on the agenda for the visit: Ukraine, economic relations, human and cultural exchanges, and global issues. The first three are already facing significant limitations.
- Some sensitive but crucial issues remain absent from the discussions: the Taiwan Strait, nuclear arms control and Chinese interference in Europe. However, they will have to be addressed sooner or later.

On May 6 and 7, Chinese President Xi Jinping will pay a state visit to France, his first to Europe since 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic. Emmanuel Macron and Xi Jinping will celebrate Franco-Chinese friendship and the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between their two countries. It comes at a time when the bilateral relationship is officially perceived as positive on both sides, especially after the French President's visit to China in April 2023. However, beneath the diplomatic varnish, obstacles are piling up, and the space for cooperation between the two countries is receding.

Of the four major areas of cooperation on the visit's agenda – international security issues, economic relations, human and cultural exchanges, and global challenges – the first three are already facing significant limitations. Beyond the strictly bilateral relationship, the two heads of state have radically different visions of and for Europe. Finally, there is a number of issues that remain absent from the discussions, which are not likely to ease tensions: the Taiwan Strait, nuclear arms control and Chinese interference in Europe. They will need to be addressed sooner or later.

Ukraine: understanding China's position

Ukraine remains the top priority for French diplomacy, which considers the threat posed to the security of the European Union (EU) by the war to be existential.

However, the French authorities are pursuing two ultimately contradictory objectives: on the one hand, to convince Xi that it is in his interest to help the Europeans put pressure on Vladimir Putin to end the war, and, on the other, to dissuade the Chinese President from delivering arms to his Russian friend. In short, we believe that Xi can help us while simultaneously fearing that he could help Putin.

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This approach reveals a lack of understanding of Beijing's interests and strategy: since the beginning of the war, China has done everything possible to keep its distance from the conflict. It has no interest in getting further involved, either by supporting the Europeans or by providing military support to Russia. Beijing also openly believes that Europeans and Americans share a heavy responsibility for the "root causes" that led to the conflict.

China thus implicitly exonerates Vladimir Putin, while still not condoning the invasion or recognizing the territories claimed by the Kremlin as Russian (Crimea) or independent (Donbass).

In short, Beijing considers the war in Ukraine to be none of its concern and refuses to get involved. Initiatives such as the publication of government positions or the appointment of a special envoy for Eurasia seek to flesh out the official narrative, which

presents China as a “neutral” and “constructive” player but are not intended to have any real influence on the conflict.

This analysis does not, of course, preclude dialogue with Beijing on the question of the war. More particularly, it does not exclude reminding the Chinese side of the flagrant contradictions of its position between defending the United Nations (UN) Charter on the one hand and failing to condemn Vladimir Putin on the other; between claiming to be a constructive player and failing to take any concrete action, even on the humanitarian front.

Tensions over the economy

On the economic front, the golden age of major contracts in the aeronautics, civil nuclear and automotive sectors is bygone. Now, after months of arduous negotiation, it's time to appeal for the opening of the Chinese market for the export of agricultural products, particularly meat and dairy products. Although important, these contracts will not make up for the trade deficit, which exceeded 40 billion euros in 2023.

Moreover, dissension at the more structural level is disrupting the relationship. First and foremost, there is the issue of Chinese electric vehicles (EVs): the incoming wave of imports that is about to surge into the European market is of great concern for French automakers. The Chinese hold France as the instigator of the investigation launched by the European Commission into subsidies for the sector in China.

Paris does not conceal its support for the EU's “de-risking” policy, nor its fear that Chinese EVs will flood the European market thanks to a competitiveness made possible by unfair practices. However, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen did not wait for Paris's supposed injunctions to implement her “de-risking” agenda on China, which is, in fact, part of the EU's broader economic security strategy, published in June 2023. Incidentally, the investigation into the EV sector is just one of many measures taken by the Commission in recent months. Anti-subsidy investigations have also been launched in the solar, wind and rail sectors, as well as an investigation into access to public procurement contracts for medical materials.

Beijing has launched a retaliatory investigation into subsidies for the European brandy sector. Considering that 96% of these European brandies exported to China come from France, Beijing's message of intimidation against Paris is received loud and clear. But officially, China continues to deny any link between the European investigation into EVs and its own investigation into brandies and refutes targeting France without fooling anyone.

Europe's role

This visit also has a European dimension and clearly illustrates the contradictory visions and ambitions of the two heads of state for Europe.

Emmanuel Macron has shown great consistency in this area, placing the bilateral relationship with China within the European framework. In March 2019, during Xi Jinping's last visit to France, the French President invited Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and German Chancellor Angela Merkel for an exchange at the Élysée Palace that was concluded with joint statements to the press. The same year, in November, the European Commissioner for Trade and the German Minister for Education and Research accompanied Emmanuel Macron on a trip to Shanghai for the Import-Export Expo.

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During his state visit to China in April 2023, he imposed a trilateral EU-China discussion together with President von der Leyen, who had come specifically for the occasion. Unsurprisingly, this year too, Emmanuel Macron has invited Ms. von der Leyen to the Élysée Palace for a discussion in the same format, to be held on May 6.

The fact remains that this message of European unity sent to China cannot be credible if it is carried only by France. We can only regret Germany's lack of reciprocity and the absence of a European dimension during Chancellor Scholz's visit to China in April.

For his part, by choosing France, Serbia and Hungary for his first European tour since 2019, Xi Jinping is clearly outlining his strategy towards Europe. France is seen for its strategic autonomy, mistakenly understood in Beijing as a desire to distance itself from the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In Serbia, the Chinese President will join his counterpart Aleksandar Vučić in commemorating the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on May 7, 1999, by American aircraft operating within the framework of NATO. Finally, he will pay a three-day state visit (one more than in France) to Hungary, Beijing's privileged partner in the EU as well as the most illiberal and dissenting member state of European institutions. Xi Jinping's message is clear: opposition to NATO, a struggle for influence with the Americans in Europe, and support for illiberal regimes.

Missing topics: the Taiwan Strait, nuclear arsenals and interference

At least three crucial issues are missing from the public agenda of bilateral exchanges and the Chinese President's state visit.

The Taiwan Strait

The first concerns the Taiwan Strait. Stretching 180 kilometers (km) at its widest point and less than 400 km long, the Strait handles a significant proportion of global commerce. It is a vital artery for trade, particularly for the EU's supply chains and its exports to East Asia.

Yet no one can deny the objective deterioration of the security situation in the area, regardless of who is deemed responsible. France's position on the Taiwan question and its recognition of the People's Republic of China at the expense of the Republic of China based in Taiwan has been consistent since 1964. This position rests on the one-China policy, on the opposition to any unilateral change of the status quo by force, and on the promotion of the peaceful settlement of disputes.

However, Paris would be well within its right to voice its legitimate concerns about the deteriorating security environment and the crucial interests it, and the EU, hold in this international maritime route, and to call for peace and stability to be maintained in the region.

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Control of nuclear arsenals

The second subject, which is not in the public eye and which, in fact, hardly leaves expert circles, is the drastic increase in China's nuclear arsenal. Various objective sources (satellite images in particular) attest to the construction of some 300 intercontinental ballistic missile silos in the north of the country – a 15-fold increase, and a number now greater than that of Russia.¹ This expansion of the arsenal has not been accompanied by any communication from the Chinese Communist Party, raising serious questions about its intentions.

China is a nuclear-weapon state and a member of the UN Security Council, and the point here is not to question this status. However, France can legitimately ask China to explain the motivations and objectives of such inflation, coming from a country that has always advocated for disarmament and claimed a “minimal and limited” deterrence. On this point, and more broadly on arms control in the context of Russia's nuclear threats, dialogue with China is crucial, and France is undoubtedly the best-placed member of the Security Council to engage in this dialogue. Indeed, Beijing is too distrustful of the Americans in this area; the British are too closely associated with the Americans; and Russia is, of course, excluded because of its destabilizing activities. France, for its part,

1. M. Korda and H. Kristensen, “A Closer Look at China's Missile Silo Construction”, Federation of American Scientists, November 2, 2021, available at: <https://fas.org>; M. Korda and H. Kristensen, “China Is Building A Second Nuclear Missile Silo Field”, Federation of American Scientists, July 26, 2021, available at: <https://fas.org>.

benefits from the image of an independent and credible power in terms of deterrence and is relatively transparent about its arsenal and deterrence policy.

Chinese interference in Europe

The third topic is the question of Chinese interference in mainland France and its overseas territories, as well as in the rest of the EU. Despite China's long-standing policy and constant assertion of non-interference in the internal affairs of third countries, cases of espionage, corruption and influence operations emanating from the Chinese Communist Party are multiplying at an alarming rate.

In 2022, the Safeguard Defenders organization revealed the existence of 110 clandestine Chinese police stations around the world, including some thirty in the EU, and three in France.² The magazines *Challenges* and *Envoyé Spécial* just revealed that the Chinese police had failed to forcibly repatriate a Chinese dissident in France from Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport in March. In April 2024 alone, complaints were filed by a former French senator and a member of parliament for spying on their computer equipment.³ In Belgium, the Chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Belgian Chamber of Deputies, Els Van Hoof, was also the target of Beijing's espionage.⁴ In Germany, three Chinese nationals were just arrested on espionage charges, as was an assistant to German MEP Maximilian Krah, head of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) list in the European elections.⁵ The question of Chinese interference in Europe must, therefore, be the subject of a frank dialogue with Beijing as soon as possible.

Areas of cooperation to be preserved and deepened

There are still areas of cooperation that we mustn't be neglected as we enter the seventh decade of our bilateral relationship. These include, in particular, cultural and human exchanges, as well as global issues.

Limited cultural exchanges

Cultural and human exchanges are absolutely essential to enable societies to forge links, independently of and beyond official exchanges. But in this field too, we can only deplore

2. "110 OVERSEAS: Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild", Safeguard Defenders, September 2022, available at: <https://safeguarddefenders.com>.

3. J. André, « Victime de hackers chinois, l'ex-sénateur André Gattolin porte plainte », *Le Point*, April 3, 2024, available at: www.lepoint.fr.

4. J.-P. Stroobants, « La Chine mise en cause à Bruxelles pour le piratage de l'ordinateur d'une parlementaire », *Le Monde*, April 25, 2024, available: www.lemonde.fr.

5. « L'assistant d'un député européen arrêté pour espionnage en faveur de la Chine », *Le Soir*, April 23, 2024, available at: www.lesoir.be.

the growing difficulties of cooperation in the face of ever-increasing demands and “politicization” of culture coming from Beijing. What’s more, China has lost the extraordinary appeal it enjoyed just five years ago among French students.

Global challenges: a decisive common ground

Global challenges particularly concern the fight against climate change, the protection of biodiversity and the oceans, or the question of how to deal with the debt of poor countries. Around the world, France is listened to on these issues, and China itself is open and often constructive. It chaired the COP15 on biodiversity, with a summit held in Kunming in October 2021 and a second in Montreal in December 2022.

Given the critical importance of these issues for the planet, it is crucial for the bilateral relationship and global governance in general to pursue these efforts. Franco-Chinese coordination in this area could prove decisive.

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