

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

APRIL 17, 2026

Europe Still Needs China

Washington, Not Beijing, Is the Bigger Threat

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Washington, Not Beijing, Is the Bigger Threat

In 1969, with the Cultural Revolution raging at home and tensions rising abroad, Chinese leader Mao Zedong instructed four elder military leaders to study the relationships between China and the world's two superpowers. Using Mao's theoretical framework of "contradictions," which states that the struggle between opposing forces is what drives history forward, they posited that the contradiction between the United States and the Soviet Union was greater than that between China and the Soviet Union, which in turn was greater than that between China and the United States. In other words, the most powerful force shaping world politics was the tension between Moscow and Washington, and China needed to adjust accordingly. They advised Mao to "play the American card"—that is, try to improve relations with the United States—which contributed to U.S. President Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing and the rapprochement between the United States and China in the early 1970s.

Nearly 60 years later, the relationships among the major centers of power are again in flux. Today, the three places that will determine the global future are China, Europe, and the United States. In the language of the military leaders who were advising Mao, the U.S.-Chinese contradiction is clearly the most powerful. China, a rising

power, and the United States, the existing hegemon, face deep economic disputes, zero-sum technological competition, and the risk of dangerous geopolitical conflict over Taiwan.

Most observers assume that the next most prominent contradiction is between China and Europe. After all, Europe and the United States have a shared history and culture, and have built powerful security alliances. They also have deep economic ties. In 2024, total trade between the United States and the European Union was about \$1.5 trillion, nearly equaling China's total trade with both of the other powers combined. Over the past decade, Europe also has consistently supported and coordinated with the United States' hard-line policies toward China; in 2019, the European Union even declared China a "systemic rival."

But the growing tension between Europe and the United States calls into question this assumption. Although it seems as if the European-U.S. bond is enduring, the contradiction with the United States could ultimately be far more dangerous for Europe than ongoing challenges with China. The Trump administration's aggressive nationalism threatens the European project itself. But because today's triangular relationship between China, Europe, and the United States is much more intricate than that of the major powers during the Cold War, Europe has not been able to "play the China card" to accelerate a reset in global relations and fulfill its role as a pillar of a multipolar world.

NOT SO FAST

The signs of a challenge to the U.S.-European bond have been growing since the beginning of U.S. President Donald Trump's second term. The United States applied unilateral tariffs on Europe, demanded the sovereignty of Greenland from Denmark, and allowed officials to publicly support right-wing political figures in domestic European elections. In 2025, U.S. Vice President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference announced a profound fracture in

transatlantic relations. Vance claimed that the two sides differed not only on specific policy issues but also on fundamental values. The United States is moving toward nationalism, unilateralism, realism, and traditional Christian values, while the majority of Europe's political and economic establishment, along with its intellectual class, continues to embrace liberalism, postmodernism, and multilateralism. The transatlantic contradiction is rising rapidly and appears to be becoming structural.

The U.S. retreat from global leadership has left Europe and China with more common ground on multilateral cooperation. Both favor a UN-centered international system and are its most stable financial backers. They are the dual engines propelling forward global climate action. And both insist on the role of the World Trade Organization in regulating international commerce and oppose the United States' weaponization of tariffs. On regional flash points like the wars in Iran and Gaza, the gap between China and Europe is smaller than their respective gaps with the United States.

For China and Europe, the growing estrangement between Europe and the United States has raised the possibility that China could "play the Europe card" or that Europe might need to "play the China card" to push back against the United States, as China did against the Soviet Union in the early 1970s. But despite the opening, Chinese-European relations have failed to improve.

China, Europe, and the United States will determine the global future.

The relationship between China and Europe remains plagued by the war in Ukraine. Europe believes that the war is an existential act of aggression, and China has been supporting Russia since the outbreak of the conflict. There is also an economic asymmetry between the two sides. Europe and China have accused each other of restricting firms' access to their respective markets, and Europe

maintains that China's state-led industrial policy gives its enterprises unfair advantages. And the increasing use of economic measures as tools of national security, such as China's measures to control exports of critical minerals, has made European supply chains vulnerable. Over the past year, Europe has been frustrated by the lack of movement in China's stance on either Ukraine or trade.

Disappointment in policy circles in China has grown rapidly, too. Chinese strategists and policymakers perceive that Europe's impulse to pursue strategic autonomy is less about rebalancing its relations with China and the United States and more about maintaining a rhetorical hard line against both while acting exclusively against China. When the United States challenged the sovereignty of Denmark, an EU and NATO member, for instance, with its threats to Greenland, European countries dispatched only a few dozen troops as part of a reconnaissance and scoping mission. Yet Europe continues to criticize China for what it claims are coercive measures around Taiwan and the South China Sea. Countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands have repeatedly sent naval ships to these areas to signal their concern about China's threats to freedom of navigation. And many Chinese analysts believe that Europe's positions on the wars in Gaza and Iran are overly soft. They view Europe as weak and hypocritical rather than the source of hope for resetting global relations.

In July 2025, European Council President António Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited China. But the meeting was frosty; the only tangible outcome of the summit appeared to be a boilerplate joint press statement on climate change, which reiterated support for the Paris Agreement and emphasized a green partnership between China and the EU. The takeaway for many analysts in both China and Europe was that the relationship faced a risk of further decline.

China and the United States, meanwhile, are becoming more aligned in their approaches to governance. Both Beijing and Washington exhibit distinct nationalistic characteristics in their stated development goals: China wants to pursue national rejuvenation, while Trump seeks to “make America great again.” The Trump administration’s preference for strong executive power is closer to that of China than that of most European countries, and both governments have formulated interventionist industrial and technological policies to try to win the innovation race. Of course, conceptual alignment is not equal to strategic alignment, but it is noteworthy to see China and the United States converging as competition between the two countries intensifies.

ACUTE CONTRADICTIONS

Unlike the Cold War triangle of relationships among China, the Soviet Union, and the United States, which was largely a competition based on national power, today’s trilateral balance includes at least three layers: global agendas, social and economic ties, and interstate relations.

At the global level, China and Europe are most closely aligned because of their shared support for multilateral institutions and concerns about international challenges such as climate change. But at the level of economic and social ties, Europe and the United States are still bound by history, culture, and human connections. They constitute an inseparable ecosystem that China’s relationships with either party cannot replicate.

At the level of state-to-state relations, the United States and China are locked in fierce economic and strategic competition, yet their worldviews are increasingly similar and they are trying to find a path toward stabilizing the relationship. Trump and his senior advisers have suggested that he and Chinese leader Xi Jinping may meet bilaterally as many as four times in 2026, which would be an unprecedented

amount of face-to-face communication. There are far fewer geopolitical conflicts between China and Europe. When lofty rhetoric about global governance is translated into concrete policies, however, the two sides remain at odds, especially on policies supporting sectors including electric vehicles and solar panels. The U.S.-European relationship, meanwhile, is becoming more estranged because of friction over Greenland, trade, and the war in Iran.

In a triangular relationship similar to what existed during the Cold War, in which great powers are primarily engaging on a single dimension, each actor can lean on its connections with one side to put pressure on the other. But in a structure in which relationships span multiple levels, leverage in one domain rarely translates to leverage in all of them. China cannot easily pit Europe against the United States, for instance, because its global alignments do not transcend the social ties that bridge the Atlantic. Nor can Europe invoke the “China card” and fully embrace Beijing as a strategic counterweight to the United States.

To function as a true pole, Europe needs a more independent soul.

Even as it has expressed hostility toward Europe, the United States does not wish to lose the continent. In February, one year after Vance’s speech in Munich, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio struck a markedly different tone at the same conference, humbly declaring that “America is a child of Europe.” The

European delegates gave him a standing ovation. On the ground in Munich, one could easily feel that many Europeans were waiting for a positive signal from Washington, which is why Rubio’s speech was so popular among the Europeans who were listening.

Although Rubio’s words sounded reassuring, what he offered was lethal for Europe. Unlike previous U.S. administrations that appealed to liberal internationalism, Rubio emphasized instead that the United

States and Europe belong to Western civilization, share a Christian faith, and have a mutual ancestry. When he listed the great writers, artists, and explorers of Western civilization—all of whom were white—the specter of racism was haunting the Munich hall where the conference was held. Europe is not a single nation. If Europe were to agree to Rubio's call to replace liberalism with nationalism, the foundation of European integration would vanish. And if it were to agree to embrace national sovereignty rather than delegate such authority to international institutions, the European Union would no longer have reason to exist.

Viewed this way, the contradictions between China and Europe are merely disagreements over specific issues, whereas the divisions between the United States and Europe involve the core question of European identity. Conventional wisdom holds that the Chinese-European contradiction is far larger than the U.S.-European one. But this is no longer clearly the case in light of the worldview both Vance and Rubio presented to Europeans. Chinese-European tensions are largely about material interests, whereas those between Europe and the United States concern the soul.

EUROPE'S CHOICE

Europe ultimately must decide how to handle these shifting contradictions. If it wants to be an independent pole in an increasingly multipolar world, European countries must choose to be strong and united around a shared adherence to liberalism rather than move toward fragmentation arising from nationalism and populism. Only a strong and liberal continent would be a sufficiently powerful force to achieve real strategic autonomy in the triangular relationship among China, Europe, and the United States. A more nationalist Europe, in contrast, may cause the triangle to simply cease to exist because Europe would be greatly weakened.

But the prospects of Europe embracing liberalism are grim. Over the past two decades, as Chinese strategists have observed from afar, liberal countries have failed to solve their internal problems and have instead moved toward nationalism and populism. If this continues, it can easily transform into civilizational conflicts in which the world divides along cultural lines, as the international relations scholar Samuel Huntington described in *Foreign Affairs*, or subconscious racial separation, which would further fragment nations across the world. After all, as Aristotle noted, humans are political animals. Distinguishing one other by culture, language, or even appearance is often easier than trying to unite in difficult circumstances.

In May, Beijing is expected to host visits from Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Even as China, Russia, and the United States often disagree with one another, Chinese leaders at least feel that they can usually understand them and their strategic logic. Dealing with Europe, by contrast, frequently leaves Beijing feeling perplexed and frustrated. China envisions Europe as a major pole in a changing global order, and it wants Europe to fulfill that role to further offset pressure exerted by the United States. Yet to function as a true pole, Europe needs more than just physical muscle in the form of greater defense spending. It needs a more independent soul. 🌐