

France, EU leaders begin China visit with China-France, China-EU ties in focus

By Chen Qingqing (<https://www.globaltimes.cn//author/Reporter-Chen-Qingqing.html>)

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French President Emmanuel Macron speaks during a meeting with China's French community at the residence of France's ambassador in Beijing on April 5, 2023. Photo: AFP

French President Emmanuel Macron arrived in Beijing on Wednesday, embarking on a three-day visit of "restarting exchanges and advancing cooperation," officials and experts said. Macron landed in China shortly ahead of EU chief Ursula von der Leyen as the two European leaders eye balancing economic ties with China and aiming to find some common ground for the yearlong Ukraine crisis that has dragged the EU into an unprecedented security dilemma not seen ever since WWII.

While France sees China as a possible "game changer" in the Ukraine crisis, some experts believe the visit - Macron's first since 2019 - will not only accelerate exchanges between China and France in fields ranging from business to culture, but also set an example for other European countries. Compared to the US-led bloc confrontation that only hurts the interests of the EU and leads the continent into a dangerous path of a new cold war, China plays a significant role in global governance and it always stands on the side of peace. Whether to choose the dangerous path or peaceful development, it is time for the EU to rethink, some experts said.

Ahead of his trip to China, Macron discussed the trip and the Ukraine crisis with US President Joe Biden in a phone call, media reported. Some French

Some Western media described the visit of the two European officials as a "rare arrangement" that seeks to present a united European face, but they have different plans. Some suggested that Macron and von der Leyen may play "good cop, bad cop" on a China visit, considering that von der Leyen struck a firm tone on China over the Ukraine crisis, which raised questions about whether European leaders can manage a balance between trade and geopolitics.

"The visit will first help restart exchanges and advance cooperation, especially after the three-year pandemic that largely reduced such exchanges, as the two sides have seen more misunderstandings about each other after being estranged. Now, it's time to sit down and talk about issues at bilateral and global levels," Cui Hongjian, director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, told the Global Times on Wednesday.

Also, both China-EU relations and China-France relations have strategic significance on global affairs, and interaction among China, the EU and France will send a strong signal to the world that stable China-EU ties will contribute to a multipolar world, which is also a vivid rejection to bloc confrontation, Cui said.

Unique role of China

In his first speech after arriving in Beijing, Macron said at a meeting with French nationals in the Chinese capital that "China could play a major role in finding a path to peace in Ukraine," the AFP reported.

He also said in his speech at the French Embassy in Beijing that Europe must not "separate" from China economically, claiming that France would "commit proactively to continue to have a commercial relationship with China," the media report said.

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Qin Gang met French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna on Wednesday. Qin said China attaches great importance to Macron's visit to China, and is ready to work with France to promote fruitful results of the visit, leading the China-France comprehensive strategic partnership and practical cooperation to a higher level.

In safeguarding multilateralism, the China-France cooperation will inject



Colonna noted that France views France-China relations from a strategic and long-term perspective and adheres to independent decision-making. The French side does not agree with "decoupling" and is committed to dialogue and engagement, she said.

As top Chinese diplomats such as Wang Yi and Qin Gang have talked with both Russia and Ukraine in recent weeks, in addition to the recent trip of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Russia, China is already playing a communicating role, Wang Huiyao, founder and president of the Beijing-based Center for China and Globalization, told the Global Times on Wednesday.

"I believe that China and EU will reach a consensus on the Ukraine crisis. Not like some Western public opinion has hyped, China's stance on the issue is no different from that of Europe," Wang said.

For example, during a meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in November 2022, the Chinese leader urged to prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia, saying that nuclear weapons cannot be used and that nuclear wars must not be fought, the expert noted. Also, both sides will stress the importance of a peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, Wang said.

However, there have been growing divisions inside the EU toward its China policy, especially when it comes to trade rebalancing and the Ukraine crisis. Amid the crisis, the alliance between the EU and the US has reached a record high since the Cold War but it is time to reconsider such alliance as it will not solve Europe's problems, and Washington only considers its own interests.

On the eve of a major EU diplomatic foray into China, the bloc's foreign policy chief on Tuesday lashed out at Beijing for its support of Russia on the Ukraine crisis, and called it "a blatant violation" of its UN commitments, the AP reported.

"There are aggressive voices but also a practical attitude inside the EU. Some people continue pressuring China to take sides, but more realize that it's time to seek solutions rather than exerting pressure or making condemnations," Cui said. Those different voices will not stop us from doing the right thing: To unite more countries and seek peaceful solutions, he noted.

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Leadership Alliance - Club de Madrid, noted at a forum in Beijing on Tuesday that a China-proposed position paper on the peaceful settlement of the Ukraine crisis establishes a conceptual framework within which further steps can be contemplated.

"I don't think that it is wise to reject a well-meaning and comprehensive conceptual framework that China has provided," Türk told the Global Times on Tuesday.

Robust ties

While Macron and von der Leyen appear to have adopted different rhetoric on China-related topics, some European media said Macron has pushed the EU to be more robust in its trade relations with China. During this ongoing visit to China, Macron is accompanied by a delegation of over 50 CEOs, including senior executives from French energy giant EDF, rail transport manufacturer Alstom, and Airbus.

"While the US has been pushing Europe to confront Russia, it has been persuading the continent to 'decouple' from China, but Europe should not be fooled, especially when China-EU trade ties are still very close," Sun Keqin, a research fellow at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, told the Global Times on Wednesday.

France is now facing rising social costs with yellow vest protests and protests against raising the retirement age adding more economic and social difficulties. Under such circumstances, more cooperation with China could help it gain advantages for its economy, particularly in sectors such as tourism and services, Sun said.

It is not in Europe's interest to "decouple" itself fully from China, and the bloc should instead look into diplomatic and economic "de-risking," von der Leyen said in a recent speech about China-EU relations.

"China and Europe coexist with each other, which is the natural result of economic globalization, and this can't be changed by someone's will. Many people in the EU have said the EU's reliance on China is artificially exaggerated, Fu Cong, Chinese envoy to the EU, was quoted in an article published on the website of Mission of China to the European Union.

We hope the EU will follow the trend of economic globalization, earnestly

abide by WTO rules, and be committed to promoting trade liberalization and opening the economy, rather than imposing protectionism, and maintain the positive development of China-EU economic and trade relations, Fu said.



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