



INDIA'S WORLD

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS • INDIAN INTERESTS

September 1, 2025

EUROPE'S CHINA TEMPTATIONS

Steven Everts

EUROPE'S CHINA TEMPTATIONS

The article warns that Europe shouldn't react to Trump's unpredictable, confrontational policies by pivoting toward China. Instead, it should strengthen its own strategic autonomy while firmly defending its core values and alliances.

By **Steven Everts**

It is easy to understand why some in Europe feel tempted to deepen ties with China right now. Ever since Donald Trump's return to the White House, he has unleashed unprecedented global uncertainty, mixed with an element of ideological hostility to everything Europeans hold dear. Thus far, his second term has given us renewed tariffs on trade, abrasive rhetoric towards allies, the occasional threat to the territorial integrity of a fellow ally, and a profoundly transactional approach to foreign policy that may ostensibly put America First—and Europe seemingly last.

But Europe must resist the urge to do a knee-jerk 'pivot to China' in response. A tighter embrace of Beijing may seem like a clever hedge, but it is a dangerous distraction. If the European Union allows Trump's tornado to push it into China's orbit,

it will not gain autonomy—it will surrender leverage.

President Trump has wasted no time reasserting his disdain for multilateralism and his scepticism toward the EU, which he claims "was created to screw the US." His decision to slap a minimum of 10% tariffs on all imports—regardless of origin—is a direct threat to European and other exporters. Higher tariffs on specific sectors such as cars, or steel and aluminium only make it worse. He has questioned NATO's mutual defence clause, warning allies not to count on US protection unless they "pay their bills." And he's been vocal in criticising the EU's regulatory model, painting it as hostile to American tech and trade.

This is not just bluster. Ahead of a 9 July deadline that marks the pause on the 'Liberation Day' reciprocal tariffs, European businesses are bracing themselves. Diplomats are working overtime to contain the damage to the transatlantic economic alliance, which is the biggest economic relationship in the world in terms of trade and investment flows.

Then there is the fight on the political front. Given the interference in the political arena and Trump's overt political support for far-right political groupings inside the EU, some policymakers are wondering aloud: if Washington is turning its back on the core tenets of the Atlantic Alliance, shouldn't we talk more seriously to Beijing?

The short answer: no. The long answer is more important. Here is why talk of a 'China option' is misguided.

China would love nothing more than to present itself as Europe's new, steady partner—predictable, pragmatic, still wedded to multilateralism. Beijing has honed the art of strategic charm. In early July, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang



EU–China Summit
 Charles Michel,
 President of the
 European Council,
 and Ursula von der
 Leyen, President of the
 European Commission,
 with Chinese President
 Xi Jinping at the EU–
 China Summit in Beijing
 on 7 December 2023.

Yi visited Brussels to lay the groundwork for the EU-China Summit on 25 July. His message? Mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and deeper cooperation. But beyond the soft tone lay hard truths: there was no movement on trade reciprocity, no reduction in subsidies, and no shift in Beijing's strategic support for Moscow. Wang Yi offered warm words but nothing concrete in terms of policy substance.

Let's not forget what China is actually doing. It continues to support Russia's war economy—in fact, its exports of critical dual-use goods have increased in the past few months, not decreased. It also floods European markets with under-priced goods thanks to state subsidies, coerces smaller EU states, and dismisses Europe's human rights concerns as interference. This is not a reliable partner: it's a systemic rival with its own agenda. Despite endless rounds of dialogue on all issues, Europe's actual influence in shaping China's actions appears very limited. If Europe now draws closer to China, it will not gain concessions. It will lose credibility and possibly invite exploitation. Beijing sees opportunity in Europe's Trump-induced anxiety, and it knows how to play divide and rule.

Amid the drama in Washington, it is worth noting that the transatlantic security bond is not broken. In fact, the recent NATO summit in The Hague offered surprising strength. European allies pledged to increase their defence spending to 5% by 2035; Trump, for his part, recommitted to the Article 5 mutual defence commitment. In short, there was a '5 for 5' deal. Support for Ukraine now counts towards that 5% spending target, and Russia was jointly marked as a long-term threat. All this suggests that the Atlantic alliance still holds and is not collapsing.

More broadly, it is still the US, not China, that shares Europe's core values. Open markets, the rule of law, and individual freedoms are under attack in both democracies, but they are not erased as they have been in China. When push comes to shove, Washington and Brussels still stand closer to each other than either does to Beijing.

Strategically, all these matters. Europe's security architecture depends on NATO. Europe surely needs to prepare to defend itself with less American support, but this requires a coordinated transition, not an abrupt strategic shift.

None of this means Europe should be passive. On the contrary, Trump's return should serve as the ultimate wake-up call to double down on developing its strategic autonomy—reducing strategic dependencies wherever they exist, functionally and



Trump Announces Reciprocal Tariffs

President Donald Trump signs an Executive Order outlining the Administration's reciprocal tariff plans at a "Make America Wealthy Again" event in the White House Rose Garden on April 2, 2025.

Let's not forget what China is actually doing. It continues to support Russia's war economy—in fact, its exports of critical dual-use goods have increased in the past few months, not decreased

geographically. But strategic autonomy must be about capacity, not distance; about the EU's ability to act when and where it must, not a premature rejection of old alliances that need to adapt rather than be squandered for the sake of a false sense of 'equidistance'.

That means investing in a credible European defence effort, securing supply chains, protecting critical infrastructure, and expanding economic links with trusted partners beyond both China and the US. This is where Europe's partnership with India comes in. Since the start of the year, top EU leadership has made a huge investment to—finally—give EU-India relations the strategic quality it deserves. The entire college of European Commissioners flew to New Delhi in February for their first trip of their mandate: choosing India as their

destination was a very significant move.

Concretely, this means closing the FTA negotiations by the end of the year, making sure European and Indian companies work together on clean tech and the energy transition. It also means leveraging Europe's regulatory power and India's tech innovation to jointly shape global standards in ways that reflect our democratic values. And it means investing in joint work on the broad security domain: maritime, cyber, space, etc.

Most of all, autonomy means clarity of purpose. Europe should engage China from a position of strength, not insecurity. And never at the cost of defending its core interests and values.

This month's EU-China Summit on 25 July in Beijing must be approached with clear eyes. China will likely repeat its usual reassurances: it wants cooperation, not confrontation. It respects Europe's choices. It seeks mutual benefit. But words are cheap. What matters is whether Beijing moves on the issues that count: trade imbalances, market access, industrial subsidies, and geopolitical alignment. So far, it shows little sign of doing so.

The EU should treat this summit as a test of credibility—both China's and its own. Concessions must be reciprocal. Cooperation must be conditional. And Europe must be prepared to act if Beijing continues to violate the principles of fair trade and international law.

Trump's presidency may last another three-and-a-half years, but China's rise is a generational challenge. In reacting to the former, Europe must not lose sight of the latter. Trading one dependency for another is not a strategy; it's panic. In this new era of great-power competition, Europe must find its footing by defining its own path, based on its values, interests, and long-term vision. *iw*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEVEN EVERTS

is Director of the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), appointed in 2023. He previously served as Senior Advisor at the European External Action Service and Cabinet Member for HR/VP Catherine Ashton and SG/HR Javier Solana. He also directed the transatlantic programme at the Centre for European Reform. He holds a DPhil from Oxford and an MA from Leiden.