



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Europe is united in relation to China only regarding Ukraine



The joint arrival of French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Beijing was supposed to be a demonstration of European unity in relation to China. The meeting between France and China was an important one, but only bilateral. The EU was only of the topics, and the President of the EC was just a European "addition" to the China-France summit. The story of the "good and bad cops" going to Beijing to "work" the Chinese leader turned out to be just another failed, Euro-centric stunt that missed the point. Xi Jinping hosted the leaders of three of Europe's four largest economies in just four months. Following the visit of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz last November and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez last March, Emmanuel Macron's visit rounds off a series of major individual Euro-China meetings at the highest level. This is to a large extent meeting the Chinese and not the EU's intentions regarding the further development of relations. China prefers relations with sovereign nations and their leaders, rather than with the 27-member bloc. It wants a partnership with the EU, through individual partnerships with the largest of them, and they accept it. Macron's visit to Beijing has been a good example.

Big deals

The heads of the 50 largest companies from various sectors arrived in Beijing with the French president. According to reports, there were no European commissioners for separate departments accompanying the EC President. Talks in Beijing, followed by a lavish state reception in honour of the French leader, brought major business contracts. Airbus will build a new assembly line at its Tianjin factory, which would double the production capacity of the A320 model. In addition, contracts were made for the sale of 160 Airbus airplanes and 50 helicopters to China. French energy giant EDF renewed its contract with Chinese nuclear leader CGN on the construction of nuclear power plants, and Suez, a water and waste management company, signed a deal for seawater desalination. With this and a series of

other big deals, Emmanuel Macron will undoubtedly cause discomfort to many in Washington, because his preference for doing business with China does not fit in with American efforts to play harder and more cautiously with Beijing. Ursula von der Leyen is closer to the US regarding the EU's relations with China, but her position during the visit to Beijing was overshadowed by the 36 major deals concluded, and the French attitude towards China that Macron demonstrated.

Macron's Strategic Autonomy is close to China

Beijing appreciates Macron's Strategic Autonomy policy, which advocates greater reliance on Europe's own capabilities, including security, as a way to reduce American influence on the continent's politics. Nevertheless, this kind of affection for a soft European approach to China, demonstrated by France, allows Beijing to abuse it and promote its narrative of redefining global relations. As an important part of the talks, the Chinese agency Xinhua highlighted President Xi's call for his country and the EU "to jointly uphold global stability and prosperity, and stand against hegemonism, unilateralism and attempts to decouple economies or sever supply chains". "Macron could have easily avoided the dismal picture of European and transatlantic disunity," Thorsten Benner, director of the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute told the Politico. "Nobody forced Macron to show up with a huge business delegation, repeating disproven illusions of reciprocity and deluding himself about working his personal magic on Xi to get the Chinese leader to turn against Putin."

Europeans united around Ukraine

The French-EU tandem still had a united voice in Beijing when it comes to Russian aggression against Ukraine. It was significant, but still, the

only point where the original idea of demonstrating unity within the EU towards China was realised, which is why the President of the EC went on a trip to China with President Macron. "I know I can count on you to bring Russia to its senses and everyone to the negotiating table," said the French president during a meeting with Xi Jinping last Thursday. After the talks with the Europeans, Xi did not mention that he would talk to the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. The impression remains that the European duo still exerted significant pressure on the Chinese leader to show his proclaimed peace-making position towards the war in Ukraine in action. "It was interesting to hear that President Xi reiterated his willingness to speak [to Zelensky]," Ursula Von der Leyen said after the talks, and added that she heard from Xi that his conversation with Zelensky could happen when the "conditions and time are right". The Europeans insisted that China push Vladimir Putin more decisively towards the cessation of aggression, but their visit to Beijing did not bring a convincing answer as to whether they succeeded in this. The effort of the French president, in combination with large business arrangements, remains visible. He wanted to show China that he, like China, is committed to a peaceful solution to the Ukrainian crisis. The intention to give Xi room to be more decisive regarding the Russian partner carries the risk that Beijing will recognise it as a weakness of the West and continue with the policy of substantial support for Putin. Ursula von der Leyen justified the role of "bad cop", and asked the Chinese leader not to send military aid to Russia because it would have a significant impact on China-EU relations. "We count on China not to provide any military equipment, directly or indirectly, to Russia, because we all know arming the aggressor would be against international law," the EC president told reporters in Beijing.