CHAPTER 3

EU–US–China Security Relations

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Abstract

This chapter examines the prospects for European Union (EU)–United States (US) security cooperation in relation to China. I argue that since the 2005 melee over European arms sales to China and amidst rising US–China rivalry, Washington's ability to coordinate security cooperation with European capitals on China has been declining. China's rising trade power, the decline of shared liberal norms/transatlantic trust, and key EU states' preference for maintaining privileged relationships with China are key factors that militate against effective US–EU coordination on China. Russian aggression in Ukraine has complicated the picture. Beijing has not outrightly supported Moscow, but neither has it joined the Western-led sanctions nor condemned the Russian action as a violation of international law. The EU has begun to see China not only as a partner, but also as a competitor and 'systemic rival'. But its long-term view of China and its approach to Beijing remain more sanguine than Washington's.

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Introduction

The need for better transatlantic dialogue and coordination on China has been recognized since at least 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). In that year, there were serious and escalating tensions in Sino–American as well as in United States–European relations, both before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

As participants in a year-long dialogue sponsored by two think tanks – the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin – observed in 2003:

China's ascendance on the world stage would signal a major shift in the global political, economic, and security environment. The project assumed further that the ability of the United States and Europe to deal effectively with the challenges associated with China's rise could have far-reaching consequences both for transatlantic relations and for the effective management of China's global emergence (Stimson Center 2003).

> When that project first started, Washington's China policy under the George W. Bush administration was deeply contested, and the future of Sino–American relations appeared highly uncertain – especially after incidents such as the April 2001 crash-landing of a US surveillance aircraft on Hainan Island. Only a few years later, tensions flared across the Atlantic when France, Germany, and the United Kingdom proposed lifting the European Union's (EU) arms embargo on China, shortly after Brussels and Beijing declared a 'strategic partnership' in 2003 (Casarini 2007; Shambaugh 2006).

Fast forward to 2025, and the EU and the United States again find themselves challenged in coordinating China policy. Issues confounding these attempts include Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, US attempts to slow down China's rise in the economic, military, financial and artificial intelligence fields, President Trump's vacillations on supporting Ukraine and pressuring Russia when he assumed his second term in 2025 and the challenges faced by Europeans and Americans in switching from fossil fuels to sustainable energy.

This chapter shows how the EU and the United States have been 'muddling through' in terms of China policy and suggests how they could work together (and with China) more effectively in three major areas: security, trade and climate change.

Security convergence under strain

The war in Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped Europe's threat perceptions and its approach to China. While the European Commission's 2019 Strategic Outlook had already captured the growing ambivalence in Europe's China policy – defining Beijing simultaneously as a cooperation partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival – China's ambiguous stance towards Russia since February 2022 has deepened European mistrust. China has not condemned Russia for its military actions, although it has not recognized Russia's annexations either (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022). Moreover, Beijing has echoed Moscow's attribution of the war to NATO expansion and Western provocations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023). The appointment in early 2025 of Lu Shaye, a former 'wolf warrior' diplomat portrayed by many Western sources as China's special representative for European affairs, further fuelled perceptions of a more assertive Chinese posture and sent ripples of unease across European capitals (Foy and Leahy 2025).

Over time, European attitudes towards China have become increasingly aligned with Washington's assessment: China is now viewed not merely as a systemic rival, but increasingly as a geopolitical actor whose support for Russia undermines European security. In certain respects, the EU's criticism went further than Washington's, labelling China 'a key enabler of Russia's war' (EEAS 2025). The overwhelming rhetorical shift suggests that a return to the earlier accommodationist approach toward Beijing is unlikely (Czin et al. 2025).

The war has simultaneously revitalized the transatlantic security bond, bringing the EU and the United States closer on a range of security agendas, including regional stability in the Indo–Pacific. Key European security advocates such as France, the UK, and Poland have begun linking the development of European security to the credibility of deterrence in Asia, arguing that a Russian victory in Ukraine would embolden Chinese coercion against Taiwan (Matamis 2025). Meanwhile, Washington's strategic reorientation toward the Indo–Pacific has encouraged Europe to assume a greater security role in the region. Europe's growing engagement thus serves as both a gesture of solidarity and a means of easing US pressure on burden-sharing (Abbondanza 2025).

Despite shared threat perceptions, a central challenge to EU–US coordination is the divergent approaches to a peace settlement in the Ukraine conflict. The second

Trump administration prioritizes immediate military containment of Russia and deterrence of further aggression, while European governments emphasize the need for a sustainable post-war security order in Europe. To bridge this divergence, Europe has sought to multitask – combining short-term endorsement of Washington's goals of ceasefire and containment with a long-term vision of peace underpinned by robust guarantees for Kyiv (Sabbagh 2025).

This recalibration has produced a wave of European security initiatives aimed at complementing – if not hedging against – American dominance in Ukraine's defence and reconstruction. Proposals include an expanded Franco–British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (Lagneau 2025), a European Reassurance Force for Ukraine under EU auspices (Barry et al. 2025), and a 'coalition of the willing' designed to provide training, logistics, and defence support to Ukrainian forces (Atlantic Council 2025). Together, these efforts signal Europe's intent to play a more autonomous yet compatible security role.

However, the credibility of these initiatives still hinges on US participation. Trump's campaign pledge to 'radically reorient' America's security commitments in Europe has injected deep uncertainty into European planning (Hirsh, 2024). France and the UK have sought formal US endorsement of their coalition frameworks, but Washington has so far limited itself to ad hoc assistance without long-term guarantees (Gatinois and Ricard 2025). European structural dependence on US defence systems has exacerbated the strategic dilemma. Despite the EU's initiatives to strengthen its defence industrial base – through the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – the reality of procurement remains deeply transatlantic. US-made platforms such as the F–35 fighter jet, HIMARS rocket launchers, and Patriot missile systems form the core of Europe's military capability, with only France remaining a partial exception due to its robust domestic industry and nuclear deterrent (Clark 2025).

Ultimately, the coherence of the transatlantic partnership – and its alignment on China – will largely hinge on the resolution of the Ukraine question. The US ambiguity over Ukraine in transatlantic security cooperation will further limit Europe's ability to turn its strategic ambition into tangible security capacity. By extension, a frozen Ukraine conflict would only limit Europe's ability to act autonomously in shaping security relations and sustain a coherent approach with Washington toward Beijing.

Economic security amid geopolitical tensions

As economic interdependence and sovereignty have become increasingly securitized amid heightened geopolitical tensions, the transatlantic cooperation on China has been complicated by oscillations between economic pragmatism and security anxiety. Shared concerns in Brussels and Washington over China's industrial overcapacity, non-reciprocal subsidies, and strategic dependencies have fostered a growing consensus that the previous liberal approach to engagement with Beijing is no longer tenable. Yet the absence of meaningful de-escalatory gestures among the three powers has reinforced the perception that expectations of 'reciprocal openness' were illusory.

It is notable that both the EU–China and the US–China trade dialogues have largely stagnated. Despite high expectations, the 25th EU–China Summit in mid-2025 produced little beyond diplomatic courtesies and a joint statement on climate cooperation (European Council 2025). Flagship initiatives such as the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), frozen since 2021, remain stalled. While both sides publicly reaffirmed their willingness to re-engage, neither was prepared to make concessions on core issues – technology transfers, market access or export controls. A similar stalemate characterizes US–China negotiations: the 19 September 2025 phone call between President Trump and President Xi yielded only tentative progress on a possible TikTok divestment deal, without breakthroughs on tariffs or semiconductor restrictions (Froman 2025).

Europe's unrelenting trade policy toward China contrasts with its tactical realignment with Washington's strategic calculus. On 27 July 2025, the United States and the EU reached a long-awaited trade arrangement that removed tariffs on selected sectors – steel, aluminium, copper, pharmaceuticals, and semiconductors (European Commission 2025b). A follow-up EU–US Joint Statement on 21 August 2025 further institutionalized this rapprochement, declaring that the accord reflected the parties' 'joint determination to resolve our trade imbalances and unleash the full potential of our combined economic power' (European Commission 2025a).

The reconciliation between Brussels and Washington at least represented a symbolic re-assertion of the transatlantic partnership as an economic bloc in its own right, responding to the perceived expansion of Chinese economic influence. Nevertheless, the goodwill shown in managing trade conflicts was, to some extent, met with scepticism on the European side. Some European observers dismissed it as an attempt to 'please Washington' in exchange for US leniency in ongoing tariff negotiations (Zimmermann 2025), while others regarded it as an act of humiliation at the hands of the Americans (Liboreiro 2025).

Beijing, for its part, has not remained passive amid this realignment. In the wake of renewed US tariffs on Indo–Pacific economies, China launched an extensive diplomatic and economic outreach campaign in April 2025. President Xi's state visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia resulted in 108 bilateral agreements covering infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity (Xinhua 2025). This 'charm offensive' sought to consolidate China's centrality in Asian supply chains, project an image of reliability, and strengthen the traditional ties of 'comrades and brothers' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2025) amid Western protectionism.

The timing of President Xi's visits was telling. As transatlantic coordination intensified, Beijing deepened ties in the Indo–Pacific to demonstrate that US and European containment efforts could be offset by diversifying trade partnerships. Moreover, China's message to Europe was implicit but marked: as Washington weaponizes tariffs and reshapes global industrial networks, Beijing offers stability and continued market access. In this sense, China's global outreach not only counterbalances US pressure but also exploits latent divisions within Europe. It also amplifies the perception in the region that excessive alignment with Washington might limit the EU's self-image as an autonomous 'regulatory superpower'.

However, the deeply intertwined trade relations between Europe and China continue to hinder the formation of an effective 'economic front' of the United States and Europe against China. China remains among the EU's largest trading partners, accounting for over one-fifth of total EU imports (21.3%) and ranking as the third-largest export destination for EU goods exports (8.3%) in 2024 (Eurostat 2025). Conversely, Europe supplies China with advanced technology, investment and critical know-how that remains difficult to replicate domestically.

This dense network of supply-chain linkages creates a paradox. While Europe perceives China as a systemic rival, its prosperity still depends on a degree of mutual engagement that cannot easily be replaced. Hence, Brussels' preference for 'de-risking' over Washington's 'decoupling', a rhetorical distinction that signals strategic caution, economic pragmatism and fear of retaliatory Chinese measures against key European sectors.

A further obstacle to coherent transatlantic trade alignment is the volatility of US policy toward China under the Trump administration. Trump's oscillation between confrontational and transactional stances has created confusion among allies and adversaries alike (Besch and Varma 2025). The unpredictability has greatly constrained the EU's room for manoeuvre in terms of formulating a consistent tone on China. This ambivalence was evident in the shift in tone of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen between her stark warning at the June 2025 Summit of the Group of 7 (G7) nations about a new 'China shock' and her notably softer UN General Assembly speech three months later, urging Beijing to 'use its influence to help bring an end to the killing' in Ukraine (Bermingham 2025).

Inconsistencies also persist within the EU. The July 2025 trade deal was hailed in Washington as evidence of Western solidarity, but reactions in Europe were muted. France and Germany in particular voiced concern that tariff eliminations in sensitive sectors could disproportionately favour the United States at the expense of European producers (Atkinson and Gozzi 2025). This internal fragmentation may risk weakening the EU's collective leverage, allowing both Beijing and Washington to question Europe's autonomy to design its own industrial strategy.

Trade thus illustrates both the progress and the limits of the transatlantic rapprochement on China. The post-Ukraine geopolitical environment has encouraged unprecedented coordination between Brussels and Washington in confronting Chinese overcapacity and industrial distortions. Yet the underlying structure of global interdependence, Europe's internal heterogeneity, and Beijing's adept diplomatic counter-moves continue to prevent the formation of a fully unified economic front.

Climate security as fragmented fronts

The climate and green transition agendas expose one of the most irreconcilable dimensions of transatlantic cooperation on China. Beyond the deep supply-chain interdependence, both the EU and China share a devoted commitment to multilateralism and global climate action. By contrast, the Trump administration's return to office has brought renewed scepticism toward green energy transitions and multilateral environmental governance. Trump's statements dismissing renewable energy as a 'scam' stand in sharp contrast to China's increasing diplomatic and industrial commitment to green growth (Schonhardt 2025).

The revival of climate scepticism from the other side of the Atlantic has provoked unease within the transatlantic partnership. The tendency to compromise with the United States on the climate agenda has already sparked intense backlash across Europe. For instance, Brussels' promise to purchase more US fossil fuels in exchange for a trade truce has been widely criticized in Europe as detrimental to the EU's environmental leadership (Diab 2025). In contrast, Beijing has seized the opportunity to cast itself as a leader in global climate governance. Chinese officials have repeatedly emphasized the country's adherence to the Paris goals and its massive investments in renewable energy and green infrastructure (Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China 2024). The diplomatic discourse is powerful in portraying China as a responsible stakeholder at a moment when multilateralism seems to be retreating.

Indeed, even as political frictions intensify in other domains, the EU and China – both claiming leadership in promoting global sustainable development – have deepened cooperation in green industries and technologies. After several years of decline following the pandemic and the tightening of investment screening mechanisms, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the EU and the United Kingdom rebounded strongly in 2024, reaching approximately €10 billion, the first significant recovery since 2016 (Kratz et al. 2025). This resurgence was driven primarily by greenfield investments in electric vehicles (EVs), battery technologies and related areas.

Beyond financial flows, the deepening green industrial integration between European and Chinese firms is reshaping the clean-tech value chain. EV manufacturing provides a prime example of a synergistic 'European car tech + Chinese battery' model of cooperation. When the Chinese battery manufacturer and technology company CATL established its first global EV battery plant in Thuringia, Germany, in 2019, BMW followed five years later with a new investment worth 20 billion yuan in its Shenyang production base in Northeast China's Liaoning province (Yong et al. 2024). Other European brands – Citroën, MG Motors, Smart, Volvo and Volkswagen – are expanding assembly lines across China, from Shijiazhuang to Ningbo and Chengdu (Colaluce 2024). This investment reflects a pattern of complementarity rather than substitution. While China has developed comparative advantages in battery chemistry and smart software systems, Europe retains strengths in traditional vehicle design and power systems (Tagliapietra et al. 2025).

Hence, unlike the security and trade domains where transatlantic coordination has visibly strengthened, the climate sphere presents an area of divergence within the transatlantic alliance. In this evolving configuration, transatlantic unity on climate change mitigation remains elusive, leaving many European officials looking for constructive interlocutors in Beijing rather than in Washington. Europe and China share normative commitments to greener growth; these shared norms offer opportunities for both sides to work bilaterally and at multilateral fora to promote climate justice on a global level.

Recalibrating Europe's strategic balance

Viewed through a security lens, Europe and the United States are largely muddling through their transatlantic relationship vis-à-vis China. The challenge extends beyond traditional military coordination to encompass economic and climate security. In practice, Europe finds itself caught between two competing imperatives: the transatlantic relationship remains existential, while the relationship with China is instrumental. Managing this asymmetry is now the fundamental test of European foreign policy.

To work more effectively with Washington, Brussels must rethink the transatlantic bargain and resist the temptation to appease the United States at the expense of its own interests – whether in security, trade or climate governance. A sustainable partnership must rest on reciprocity and mutual respect, rather than one-sided alignment. By investing in its defence capabilities and industrial base, Europe can emerge as a stronger and more credible partner within the alliance – capable of meeting US expectations on burden-sharing while retaining strategic autonomy in foreign policy. This strengthening would bolster Washington's trust in Europe's reliability, without locking Brussels into strategic dependency.

At the institutional level, the EU should also reinforce the mechanisms that underpin transatlantic coordination – through NATO, Strategic Compass, the EU–US Trade and Technology Council, G7 frameworks and joint working groups on export controls, energy transition and emerging technologies. Such instruments can help stabilize the partnership beyond leadership cycles and confine political volatility in institutionalized ties.

Concerning China, a stable and constructive EU–China relationship continues to hold significant strategic value in the long run. It offers not only opportunities for economic complementarity and shared leadership on global agendas, but also joint contributions to global growth and sustainable development. In this sense, both sides should avoid allowing the relationship to deteriorate into a purely ideological or zero-sum confrontation. Rather, they should pursue a pragmatic, interest-based engagement, addressing unfair economic practices where necessary while keeping diplomatic channels open to manage areas of mutual benefit.

Ultimately, the EU's core challenge is to avoid becoming a passive object in great-power competition, whether it involves US–Russia or US–China relations. To navigate the US–China rivalry, Brussels should refrain from mechanically aligning with American containment logic and instead pursue a balanced, autonomous strategy, using diplomacy to de-escalate tensions and safeguard its own room for manoeuvre between Washington and Beijing. To that end, Europe must diversify its global partnerships, deepening relations with like-minded economies. This diversification would broaden Europe's strategic options and reduce its exposure to external pressure from either superpower. At the same time, as a normative power, the EU should continue to anchor its external action in international law, multilateral institutions and global norms to constrain great-power behaviour and reinforce the rule-based order. This approach would not only reaffirm Europe's identity as a civilian power but also grant it moral and political authority in managing the triangular relationship between the United States and China.

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