
China. How to interpret the Red Dragon's de-polarisation in the wake of Xi Jinping's European tour

Now that he is back in Beijing, it's time to reflect on Xi's recently concluded European tour. But rather than assessing how it went, it is necessary to decipher the message it sent out. Dismissing it as a misguided attempt to undermine the Euro-Atlantic framework would be inaccurate if understood from a zero-sum perspective aimed at removing supporters of US hegemony. Rather, it should be interpreted in the light of the dynamic reshaping of the US approach, to which China is responding through its bilateral interactions, attaching symbolic significance that needs to be addressed on a global scale. In attempting to identify these challenges, the starting point must be Washington's fatigue with having to face a global arena that is increasingly uncomfortable with the uniformity demanded by a unipolar world order. As a result, current challenges are framed within a reductionist, fundamentally dualistic context. To some extent, if only temporarily, the United States seems to be rekindling the containment theorists who saw in the Cold War division of the world a convenient framework for focusing their efforts on a single target and simplifying the options of the opposing camp with blunt alternatives. This had the advantage of imposing exclusive allegiance (at least in their representations) on all the supporting factions of the main contending party, thereby forcing the opponent to act in a symmetrical manner in order to achieve, through mutual imperviousness, the containment of the opponent and the control of the respective sphere of influence at the same time. This was the purpose of the Iron Curtain, which also tolerated covert or sectoral cross-party behaviour. Now that the enthusiasm for the New American Century heralded by the collapse of the Soviet Union has been exhausted, we are witnessing protectionist measures and trade wars. The rearming partners are being mobilised to join together in a two-ocean NATO (from the Atlantic to the Pacific), thus closing ranks and sharing a burden that the US can no longer sustain on its own. Moreover, the US is well aware of its advantage over China, which is positioned on the other side of the barricade: confined to a dichotomous configuration, China does not enjoy the advantages of a hegemonic bloc backed by an assertive leadership. It is precisely from this notion that Beijing is determined to withdraw, knowing that its success over its rivals is based on its tentacle-like ability to establish "secular" and polyhedral relations in the name of multipolarism, without barriers and immune to dualistic views. This is reflected in the response to Blinken's ultimatum: to those who threatened retaliation at the end of April if China did not stop flooding the market with products at overcompetitive prices, the Chinese government responded with the allegory of the shirt that was buttoned backwards: unreasonable demands from parties seeking to portray China as a global enemy against which all Western countries should focus their energies. This fact alone points to the de-polarising nature of the European tour, which revolved around buzzwords such as 'cross-sectoral approach', 'cooperation', 'integration', 'sovereign independence' and 'strategic autonomy'. The countries selected for Xi's visit, namely France, Serbia and Hungary, were chosen on the basis of such criteria, each of which was to be addressed according to its own peculiarities - making use of anniversaries that could prove useful in conveying a consistent message. Each of these European countries perceives its role within the Western world in a different way. Paris is a founding member of both the EU and NATO, Belgrade wants to be a member of the former but not the latter, while Budapest participates in both with a critical attitude. Relations with Russia are equally diverse, ranging from hostility to NATO standards to (Slavic) fraternal feelings to pragmatism. Xi does not see this diversity as an obstacle to relations with the Red Dragon, which flaunts its neutrality in the face of exclusivist "jealousies", as long as the sovereign decisions of other parties are respected. By defining its friendship with Moscow as "unconstrained", Beijing implicitly wishes to preserve its unrestricted freedom to cooperate on a sectoral basis even with the Kremlin's enemies. It is customary for the Chinese President to publish articles in the newspapers of the host countries in advance of his visits, to which he attaches pedagogical importance. This was the case for his stopover in Paris, preceded

by an article in *Le Figaro* celebrating the 60th anniversary of Sino-French diplomatic relations and praising the figure of De Gaulle for his courage in crossing the Iron Curtain with a far-sighted vision of the future without renouncing his own Western identity. The quotation from Confucius, according to whom a man of true moral integrity is one who does not contradict his own convictions, but does not allow himself to be guided by prejudices or conditioned by the power of others, is particularly telling. Today's France is the France of Macron, who in 2019 said that NATO was in the throes of "brain death" due to the exhaustion of its anti-Soviet role, and blamed NATO for hindering the geopolitical autonomy of the EU. Today, on the other hand, with the war in Ukraine having providentially renewed the Alliance's *raison d'être*, Macron is in favour of Euro-Atlantic rearmament. The same Macron who, until last year, pushed for negotiations by reining in Johnson and Stoltenberg's escalatory statements, is now contemplating sending troops. Despite appearances, it is still the same strategic inspiration which, now as in the past, is seeking the opportunity to give France the role of regional hegemon and to make the Elysée Palace the sole White House agent with responsibility for Europe. In doing so, it foreshadows the decline of the German locomotive and seeks to gain ground with an ambitious agenda to confront Poland's competition. Perhaps, having lost its exclusive control over *Françafrique*, France is seeking to gain more space in the Mediterranean by highlighting Turkey's unreliability in Washington's eyes. A specific analysis would be necessary in order to have a more in-depth understanding of the logic of Macron's strategic shifts. However, as far as the present case is concerned, the French need to remain reliable to China's commercial interests in the face of intercontinental competition, but without betraying Brussels (which, in any case, Beijing is not asking for). This is the reason why Macron gave the thumbs up to von der Leyen during the trilateral meeting with Xi. Nor did he call for restraint when, shortly before his visit, she threatened a trade war against Chinese companies in Europe, accusing them of exposing the continent to the risk of de-industrialisation. The Commission's gaze is fixed on the electric vehicle, photovoltaic and wind power manufacturers allegedly receiving subsidies from the Beijing government. This would drive Europe's leading Green Revolution out of business due to increased competitiveness: Europe, which thought it was ahead of the game in the economic component of the new energy paradigm, has since last year been subject to the gravitational pull of investment in the US caused by White House incentives, while in terms of de-industrialisation it is paying the price for years of Western financialisation. And yet the public rebukes did not prevent Macron from receiving Xi at the mansion in the Pyrenees, far away from the microphones, and before bidding him farewell he did not leave the economy empty-handed: in addition to the prospect of welcoming China's electric vehicle giant BYD, businesses from both countries signed various agreements aimed at integrating their respective battery, hydrogen and solar energy production, as well as nuclear and aerospace agreements and a memorandum between *Crédit Agricole* and the Bank of China. The visit to Serbia was likewise heralded by an article written by Xi, published in the daily *Politika*, in which he underlined the friendship between the two peoples and the duty of the great powers to respect international law with credible consistency in the pursuit of national interests. In particular, it commemorated the 25th anniversary of the bombing (7 May 1999) of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade: a technical error, according to Washington, which Beijing never believed, seeing it as a retaliatory strike. At the time, China and Russia prevented the NATO attack from being authorised by voting against it in the Security Council. What matters is the symbolic breakthrough that this disagreement brought about. Prior to that, Russia and China had repeatedly voted with the US in the belief that the end of the Cold War would allow them to be integrated into a new order on an equal or quasi-equal footing, which would have granted them a certain degree of influence alongside others, including in areas of compliance. The attack on Serbia was the testing ground that disproved such expectations, as Belgrade was linked to Moscow by Slavic kinship, while Beijing preserved the solidarity-based ties it had established with Yugoslavia among the non-aligned countries. Vučić's Serbia, which rolled out the red carpet for Xi and welcomed him with cheering crowds, is a candidate for EU membership. China can capitalise on its need for growth, which Belgrade could use to counterbalance Brussels' conditionalities and increase its attractiveness,

instead of being welcomed like an indebted Cinderella. This presupposes a competitive rationale within European governance, which considers it more intelligent to establish systematic relations with the country than to push it into the arms of the Red Dragon, thereby enduring the presence of one of its exclusive satellites on the European continent. The ingredients for this scenario are already in place, as Serbia, a member of the New Silk Road, has a free trade agreement with China and has seen its trade increase eightfold in the last 10 years, while local production by Chinese industrial groups is boosting Serbian exports. Xi's visit only reinforced the overall strategic partnership, resulting in 28 agreements in metallurgy, mining, transport infrastructure, energy, security, the digital economy, research and technological development, health, tourism, culture and the defence industry. The same format was followed in Budapest: anniversary (75 years of relations), article, red carpet and cheering crowds. Hungary is the first European state to join the Belt and Road initiative, and Orbán has a vested interest in the strengthening of Ostpolitik as a means of compensating for friction with the EU. This is especially true today, as the Visegrad Group, on which the prime minister has relied for various matters, has been disrupted by disagreements over anti-Russian measures. Hungary has China as its largest foreign investor (58%) and will benefit from a visa-free travel agreement until 2025. The memoranda signed on Thursday confirm the advantageous relationship, with China reinforcing its presence in the electric vehicle and photovoltaic sectors, while progress is being made on the financing of the domestic high-speed railway and the Budapest-Belgrade railway project, and from there to Piraeus in Greece, which will help make Hungary an infrastructural trade route connecting Europe with Asia. The message of the entire European tour was summed up by the Chinese ambassador's remarks in Budapest: China offered a blueprint for what it sees as its understanding of bilateral cooperation with the West. By celebrating the anniversaries of its inception, Xi suggested that it predates US unipolarism - which in fact never really came into being. They now serve to debunk the bipolar narrative as Washington's second-best rearguard option. The two adversaries' moves will also be played out in terms of this conceptual challenge - with very concrete consequences for global assets.

Giuseppe Casale