

French and European leaders visit China: How to find a balance between competition?

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French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will visit China on the 5th. Facing the escalating competition between the US and China, how the visit of the French and European leaders will affect the economic, trade and diplomatic relations with China has aroused the attention of public opinion.

French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen will travel to China this week for a three-day state visit. Before they leave, von der Leyen and Macron will first meet in Paris to discuss the Russian-Ukrainian war, energy and other issues.

The two European leaders' trip to China will see Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang in Beijing, and will lead a business mission to Guangdong. The outside world noted that Macron's trip will probably focus on how to help French luxury goods, aviation, green energy and other companies to return to the Chinese market, in order to change the situation of increasing trade deficit between China and France.

Scholars: European leaders to focus on Russia-Ukraine war during trip

Gesine Weber, a researcher on European affairs at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a Washington think tank, told this reporter in an interview that the two European leaders will focus on the war between Russia and Ukraine during their high-level talks with China.

Weber said, "The two leaders will consider the war between Russia and Ukraine as an important issue, and the European leaders hope that China will not continue to move closer to Russia. On the other hand, for Macron, he will also visit southern China, which is seen as part of the reopening of the economy, and Macron wants to revisit his economic interaction with China. The two sides will also discuss the Indo-Pacific issue together. But I don't think the two sides can talk about anything, and I don't think European leaders have the illusion that they 'can change China's Indo-Pacific strategy."

Jason Moyer, a fellow in European affairs at The Wilson Center, another Washington think tank, has a similar view. He told reporters in an interview: "Macron is leading a business delegation that should focus on trade interactions. Von der Leyen, on the other hand, wants to build the EU's interaction with China. Both leaders have made it clear that they want to work with China to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and they also want to cut off China's close ties with Russia. They are particularly concerned that China might supply Russia with weapons in the Russo-Ukrainian war, which would change the dynamics of the battlefield."

Von der Leyen warns China: don't side with the aggressor

On the eve of her visit to China, von der Leyen even publicly called on China to play a responsible role in advancing the peace process in Ukraine, and at the same time warned China not to align itself with Russia in the war: "China has a moral responsibility [to bring justice and peace to the Russo-Ukrainian war] and cannot side with the aggressor."

In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Mao Ning responded at a regular press conference on Tuesday, saying, "China is not a party to the Ukrainian crisis, but a firm supporter and active promoter of a peaceful solution to the crisis. We are willing to communicate and exchange views with the European side on a political solution to the crisis and expect the EU to show strategic autonomy and political wisdom."

China and Europe are building a friendly relationship, but it is difficult to ignore human rights issues

Despite Mao Ning's claim at a regular press conference that "China-EU relations are developing healthily and steadily," the differences between China and Europe on issues such as the war between Russia and Ukraine and human rights are obvious.

China and the European Union were scheduled to sign the China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in 2021, which took seven years and 35 negotiations, and once signed would significantly increase trade interdependence between China and Europe.

However, on the eve of the European Parliament's vote on the agreement, the EU imposed sanctions on Chinese officials related to the Xinjiang Uyghur genocide, and China retaliated by sanctioning a number of MEPs, academics and entities based on retaliation, resulting in the above-mentioned China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment being frozen by the European Parliament.

Scholars: Human Rights Issues Remain an Obstacle to China-EU Relations

The disagreements between the two sides on human rights and other issues have also raised concerns about whether the European leaders' trip can ease the growing tensions between China and Europe.

According to Weber, the results of the European leaders' trip are still difficult to expect, depending on China's position in the Russia-Ukraine war: "Von der Leyen's position on issues such as human rights is very clear, and she made it clear that Europe cannot accept Beijing's current approach. In addition, her position on Sino-Russian interactions is also clear. I think that in this trip, Europe is trying to figure out a third way to interact with China in the midst of great power competition."

For his part, Moyer believes that the warming of China-Europe relations depends on the attitude of the Chinese authorities to the issue of human rights: "Von der Leyen's fierce criticism of the Chinese government in his speech at the Mercator Institute for China Studies last week was seen by China as excessive and would bring Europe into line with the United States in its stance on China. If this is an indicator, von der Leyen is likely to be treated coldly by Chinese officials and will find it difficult to improve Sino-European relations with China."

Scholars: China-EU Comprehensive Investment Agreement will hardly rise from the dead

News broke earlier this year that China was stepping up its lobbying efforts with EU countries to get the China-EU Comprehensive Investment Agreement (CIA), which has been on hold for 2 years, back underway. However, Weber believes that it will be difficult for European leaders to revive the CAI during their visit to China: "I don't think the European Parliament will revive the Agreement as long as the current situation on issues such as human rights remains unchanged. What the future of the Agreement will be, I think, depends more on China's actions in the war between Russia and Ukraine, and on China's interaction with Russia."

Moyer also said that because the Agreement has been terminated for several years, it would be difficult to revive it at this time, but that the Agreement could also be the basis for a new China-Europe trade agreement that would allow China and Europe to jointly focus on issues such as rare earths trade and supply chain resilience in the future.

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