



Europe's Paradoxical Dream After the Trump–Xi Meeting: Wanting Multipolarity, Fearing It.

by Paolo Pontoniere

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t”—this phrase perfectly encapsulates Europe’s response to the recent meeting between Trump and Xi. Coverage from French, German, Italian, Spanish, and British media suggests that this summit wasn’t merely another chapter in the ongoing rivalry between Washington and Beijing; it underscored a fundamental contradiction at the heart of European geopolitics. The European Union yearns for a multipolar world but is deeply apprehensive about what that actually means for its own position.

Three main viewpoints emerged in the European commentary surrounding the meeting. First, there are the Atlanticists—especially prominent in Germany and Britain—who are anxious about a potential U.S.–China rapprochement that could leave Europe politically and economically sidelined. Then there are the sovereigntists, mainly from France and parts of Southern Europe, who argue that this meeting emphasizes the necessity for Europe to push ahead with its long-promised “strategic autonomy.” Finally, the pragmatists hold out hope that any stabilization between these two global giants could lessen the risks of economic fragmentation and military conflict.

A key point of discussion was Xi Jinping’s reference to the “Thucydides Trap,” a theory suggesting that rising powers and established hegemony are inherently set on a collision course. While many in the U.S. interpreted Xi’s comments as a cautionary message directed at Washington to avoid obstructing China’s development, several European commentators took a different stance. They saw it as an opportunity for managed multipolarity and for cooperative international frameworks, rather than a straightforward shift in global dominance.

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This view resonates, albeit paradoxically, with France's and Europe's long-standing desire for a less U.S.-centric international system. French President Emmanuel Macron has often insisted that Europe must not become a "vassal" caught between Washington and Beijing. What was once seen as mere rhetoric about European strategic autonomy is gradually being perceived as a necessity by many thinkers across Europe. However, this is where Europe's dilemma becomes particularly pronounced. The multipolarity that Europe advocates could also diminish its global stature. If the U.S. and China achieve a more stable relationship, Europe risks being pushed to the sidelines, with the most significant global decisions being made between these two superpowers. Various German and British publications have raised warnings about the potential emergence of a "G2" arrangement, where Europe is relegated to a secondary role.

Economically, the situation is just as complex. The EU finds itself heavily reliant on Chinese markets, green technologies, and industrial supply chains, all while depending on American military support and financial stability. A drawn-out confrontation between the U.S. and China could jeopardize European trade and investment, yet a harmonious relationship between the two could be equally perilous if it overlooks European interests.

Russia also finds itself in a complicated position following the summit. In the short term, Moscow stands to gain from the fragmentation of the West and the growing insecurity in Europe. Any thaw in relations between Washington and Beijing may relieve some pressure on China to distance itself from Russia, while it simultaneously exacerbates European anxieties around America's strategic focus. In the long run, however, many European analysts contend that Russia risks becoming increasingly dependent on China, economically and diplomatically, reducing Moscow to a mere junior partner in its alliance with Beijing.

Ultimately, the Trump–Xi meeting revealed more than just the current state of U.S.–China relations; it highlighted Europe's ongoing struggle with its strategic identity. While Europe is eager for a multipolar world, it is acutely aware of the risks that genuine multipolarity could expose—namely, the limitations of its own autonomous power on the global stage. 🌿

