



## EUROPEAN CHINA POLICIES: ALIGNING WITH THE RED LINES OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC COMPETITION

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*European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's speech at the meeting organised by the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre revealed a comprehensive and realistic European strategy on China, adjusted to the latest developments (European Commission). These foreshadow the EU's future Economic Security Strategy. The major outstanding European issues in the relationship with China remain on the table: the EU between China and the USA, in the context of the debate about Beijing's usefulness in dealing with Russia and possible arms deliveries; the possibility of concomitant EU decoupling from Russia and China; but above all, the need for real war preparedness of European industries. The refusal to see the competition of democracies with China going to war leads to the rejection of the instrument of real deterrence of Beijing's march towards a new global war. All this while French ambitions and obsession with strategic autonomy (Taylor, 2022) undermine EU unity, and Germany has been forced by Macron's post-Beijing tirades to restore clarity to the European position and red lines on China.*

*Keywords: European Commission; China; economic security strategy; sensitive technologies; strategic autonomy;*



## THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC SECURITY STRATEGY. AN IMPORTANT STEP TOWARDS REALISING THE PROSPECT OF CHINA'S GLOBAL WAR

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen gave a **keynote speech on China** at a meeting organised by the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre. On this occasion, the **EU's strategic approach to China** became very clear. We have thus seen, for the second time in European documents, speeches and policy approaches, after the **policy on stabilising migration in North Africa** in the volume signed by Josep Borrell Fontelles (Fontelles, 2021; ATEF, 2020), a strategy in the full force of the word, a **comprehensive and realistic European strategy on China**, adjusted to the strictly topical developments of Beijing and Xi Jinping's one-man authoritarianism. An extremely pleasant surprise, a profound approach, foreshadowing **the future EU Economic Security Strategy** expected in the second half of this year.

President von der Leyen's speech was framed by the **complication and difficulty of deciphering** today's **global affairs** because **the facts themselves are in question** – a direct allusion to the components of information warfare widely used to **battle public perceptions** of reality (European Commission, 2023). Yet, a good understanding of the world as it is, not as we wish it to be, is a good basis for developing **effective policies based on decrypted accurate information**. And in this key, her speech is dedicated to all those – individuals, institutions, European officials – who have been incorrectly placed on the **Chinese government's sanctions lists**, including a number of MEPs (European Parliament, 2021). **China's assertiveness** heralded by the latest Chinese Communist Party documents from last year's Congress and President Xi Jinping's subsequent statements have reshaped **the relationship of European policies to China** (European Commission, 2019), aimed at managing these developments in the context of the future European economic prosperity and security. The most important concern is **China's level of ambition for 2049** (Overseas Development Institute;

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Nikkei Asia, 2022), when it aims to lead the world through *"an overlay of national power and international influence"*, i.e. making China **the world's most powerful nation. And not with the most benign tools.**

**China's strengthening of its strategic power** has been planned and forcibly developed, with **deliberate amplification of its global strategic posture**, for some time. And it is being achieved through measures and actions **with exponentially increasing assertiveness**. While President Xi's maintenance of *"Friendship without limits"* with Putin's Russia (Cheng, 2022) can be interpreted as **exploiting Moscow's weakness due to the war waged in Ukraine** and a way to increase leverage in relations with Moscow, the **blatant and inverted asymmetry** between the two is already a given and the balance of power has shifted dramatically over the past 30 years.

Of course, the President of the European Commission addresses the issue **of China's responsibility to the principles and values of the UN Charter**, as a permanent member of the Security Council, including towards the **advancement of a just peace**, taking into account the **sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine**. While Beijing mentions principles in its 12-point document (Parley Policy Initiative, 2023), it stops short of **identifying the aggressor, Russia**. Moreover, it argues in its national position that *"both sides have legitimate security concerns"* (Sorgi, 2023), a reason to emphasise a relative equality of responsibility for the war, not an **identification (and consequent sanctioning) of the aggressor**. On this basis, the European Union will also define its relations with China according to **how Beijing interacts with Putin's Russia**, which is the determining factor in bilateral relations (Gabuev, 2023).

In addition to its relationship with Putin, **Beijing's assertive approach to its own neighbourhood** – the demonstrations of military force in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, the undermining of the legitimate interests of the EU's partners – is added to the **list of irritants and criteria defining the relationship with China**, the dominant component of cooperation, strategic competition and direct conflict, peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait – **serious human rights violations in Xinjiang**, as well as China's **rampant but solidly reinforced military build-up, policies of disinformation and economic and trade coercion**, especially the deliberate use of dependencies and economic leverage against small states (Kausikan, 2023; Foreign Affairs, 2023).



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The conclusions from the actions evoked underscore escalatory actions to the point where **China has become more repressive at home and more assertive internationally**, turning the page from an era of *"reform and opening up"* to one of giving rise to **security threats and excessive control** over its own people and the world. On this list is the habit of forcing, by law, all Chinese companies to **collect information for the Chinese state in secret**, but also the inclination to make **China less dependent on the world and global trade** and the **world much more dependent on China** as a state policy or, as President Xi Jinping has explicitly said, China must control international supply chains and dependence on China in order to have **a strong countermeasure and deterrence capability against all** (Pomfret, Pottinger, 2023).

The President of the European Commission's **trenchant assessment of China's situation to date**, based on information from all the European and national institutions of the EU states, continues with the **darkest aspirational trails**. Control of current production chains is **critical for emerging technologies and the economy of the future**, as well as for national security, and is achieved through quantum computing, robotics and artificial intelligence, among other means. Beyond the security component, these actions fundamentally affect **the logic of the free market and free trade** that China is cheating and distorting (Terrabianca, 2020; Small, 2020). In addition, we can add **President Xi Jinping's exhortation to the Chinese people to prepare for battle**, an important indicator of the mission he is preparing for the Chinese nation, once the Chinese Communist Party has taken on the clear goal of **systemic change in the international order to place China at the centre of the world, of imposed rules and global control over all**, with human rights subordinate to national security at home and around the world, and with security and economics taking precedence over civil and political rights. That is a **complete undermining of democracy**, wherever it develops, with Chinese-controlled institutions carving out a **parallel, underground world to rival the current international system** and rules-based world (Ib.).

Of course, after such a starkly explained reality and ambitions, the speech also touched on the themes **of a realistic stance towards China and the EU's reaction** in this context. And these options start with the struggle to **strengthen the international system** itself, strengthening institutions and systems in which states can compete and cooperate



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and gain mutual benefits. **Diplomatic stability and open communication with China** are part of the European solution, because decoupling from China is neither viable for Europe nor in its interest, so the interest is in **eliminating or mitigating risks**, not in economically decoupling the EU from China, which is impossible in the age of globalisation.

The EU does not want to **sever economic, societal, political or scientific ties** with China, which is a vital trading partner, accounting for 9% of the EU exports and more than 20% of imports of goods into the European market. Of course, **imbalances are growing in the balances of payments of European countries and with the EU** as a whole, but if the rules of fair competition are to be enforced, trade in goods and services with China is **a mutual benefit and is largely non-discriminatory**. Of course, the imbalance comes from and is increasingly affected by the **distortions created by China in the capitalist system**, hence the need to rebalance the relationship on the basis of transparency, predictability and reciprocity by **eliminating economic risks**. At the same time, free trade does not concern the **merging elements of China's military and commercial sectors** and especially with regard to **sensitive technologies** such as dual-use goods or even investments that come with the forced transfer of technology and knowledge to China. And this capacity depends on **the EU's own resilience and dependencies**, particularly in the area of its defence industrial base.

On **solutions**, President Ursula von der Leyen presents four points. First, making the economy and industry **more competitive and resilient by eliminating dependence on China** as the sole supplier of 98% of rare metals, 93% of magnesium and 97% of lithium, and the list goes on. Then, **better use** must be made **of the trade instruments** at the EU's disposal. **Developing defensive instruments** in certain critical sectors is also important, in the context of China's latest policy changes, especially in high-tech sensitive areas such as **microelectronics, quantum computing, robotics, artificial intelligence, biotechnologies** etc. Last but not least, the de-risking strategy requires **cooperation and alignment with other partners**, especially democratic states and the G7 and G20 partners in particular, with whom we have most in common (European Commission, 2023).

## FRENCH AMBITIONS UNDERMINE EU UNITY IN CHINA POLICIES

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen correctly identifies that the **Chinese state has become "more repressive at home and much more assertive abroad"**, that security and control substantially outweigh any other concerns of the regime, and that **Beijing is very easily resorting to political and economic coercion and control**, exploiting other states' dependencies on China, which China even encourages in order to **create new and new levers of influence**. Equally correct and straightforward is President Xi Jinping's preparation of China for **a long-term struggle, with violent components, with the United States of America**, to achieve his **"very clear goal" of "systemic change of the international order with China at its centre"**. In fact, as much of the press rightly notes, no other leader has presented such a clear dissection of Xi Jinping's agenda, which will underpin European policies towards China.

As clear as this message was, the **position of many countries** that rushed to Beijing after the vote to extend President Xi's mandate, practically for life, **by reintroducing the third term after more than 30 years, was ambiguous and distinct**. They were joined in March by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who became the first leader to meet Xi after his summit with the Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. Next came the duo of Emmanuel Macron, President of France, and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission. Later, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock arrived in Beijing. The big winner of this sarabande was the Chinese president, who not only **made no concessions on key European issues**, but also managed to divide European leaders, mainly by exploiting Emmanuel Macron's weaknesses and his exaggerated level of ambition.

So Xi Jinping offered **a three-day official state visit to Macron**, including a six-hour bilateral meeting and countless economic contracts to French firms. In return, the European Commission President had a few brief protocol meetings with little pomp and circumstance. In **their joint meetings, the two European officials demonstrated unity** (Sorgi), but more on **a variant of role-sharing**, Macron's good cop and the European Commission President's bad cop (Wong, 2023).



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The result was also a public variant of splitting the perception of the two, with the French President appearing to maintain **the illusion of the possibility of real reciprocity in bilateral relations**, while the impact of advocating fundamental European interests was not done with much heart. Moreover, on **Taiwan**, President Macron appeared to make the USA solely responsible for the rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait and to attempt **a false insularity between China, Taiwan and the United States of America** (Benner, 2023). And the ambiguity comes from the approach he associated with France as *puissance d'équilibres*, **Balancing Power**, which ended up, however, only reverberating on the balancing elements of the United States of America and **even sliding into an anti-American agenda** that even ended up discrediting the last traces of rationality in the concept of **"European sovereignty" he introduced**.

Despite the Joint Communication of the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament on **relations with China** of March 2019, European states maintain **diverse relations with China** and the European Union still has important steps to take before it can **establish an EU consensus on Xi Jinping's current China** and even implement what has already been agreed in its relations with China. The European Union is in the process of **defining its own red lines**, and von der Leyen's speech is very eloquent on their content, but until the **EU's Economic Security Strategy** is presented, in the second half of the year, various slippages by various states as well as attempts by Beijing to create rifts between Europeans will continue.

Most EU Member States are effectively leaning towards de-risking **China** rather than **de-coupling from China**. The variant presented during Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Beijing was very clear, involving criticism of **human rights and treatment in Xinjiang province** in relation to the Uighur population and **China's relationship with Taiwan**, as well as of **China's domestic issues** with its own population – mass surveillance, control. And China's discouragement agenda on Taiwan is based on the same German and European Union document advocacy in place.

## MACRON AND CHINA: FRANCE'S LEVEL OF EXCESSIVE AMBITION, WITH EUROPE ON THE BACK FOOT

It must now be made very clear that **French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to China** is hardly open to criticism in substance, perhaps only in terms of politeness towards Ursula von der Leyen, whom he invited to join him, and the **ineffectiveness of his positioning**. Otherwise, the positive elements were mainly in his overall objective of **getting concessions from Xi Jinping on the stance towards Ukraine and Russia** and **"bringing Russia to its senses"**.

Unfortunately, **Emmanuel Macron has achieved nothing** on this issue, and the failure has been described as such by the French press as **"a cold shower"**. He did, however, win support on the **nuclear issue, on Russia's avoidance of nuclear weapons in Belarus**, a theme that was echoed in Xi Jinping's statements. The need to **respect humanitarian law** and strengthen efforts to **combat impunity** and **respect for UN principles** (sovereignty, territorial integrity, respect for human rights), the **imperative need to end the war in Ukraine, while respecting its sovereignty and integrity**, were also endorsed. Of course, he did not get a word from his Chinese counterpart for criticising Russia for violating these principles.

But it has won from China a certain kind of **support for France and its own agenda** of strategic autonomy, albeit a controversial approach at EU level, support for improving global governance in a multipolar world by **rejecting the bloc-based logic**, as Xi Jinping has called it, support from China for the **EU as "an independent pole in a multipolar world"** and, above all, readiness to support France's efforts to **achieve strategic autonomy**. For the European Union, he explicitly **called for restraint and reason to avoid escalation, especially nuclear escalation**, and the **need for a rapid relaunch of peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia**, leading to the realisation of an effective and lasting peace and security architecture in Europe.

On the **negative side**, Emmanuel Macron exhibited a certain **French unilateralism**, betraying the fact that he went to Beijing to sign advantageous contracts with China and took the EU President with him only as a **measure to legitimise his own positions**, not to fully respect the European position. His constant harping on the **need**



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*In an interview with the newspaper Les Echos the President of France launched himself into a tirade of rhetoric about strategic autonomy, which he wants to achieve sui generis, at all costs. And the difficulty of defending these positions stems above all from the opposition to the USA of its own position, which undermines its own European position because of the lack of confidence in a European leadership of France against America.*

for EU strategic autonomy, a divisive issue in the European Union, is shaping up as an obsession of his own, and the great failure remains the fact that the **Chinese President has not offered concessions on Ukraine and the relationship with Russia** (Kyiv Post). The Chinese leader's remarks during the visit repeated without addition or nuance what constitutes the official Chinese line on the war: a **call for peace negotiations, condemnation of the use – or threat of use – of nuclear and chemical weapons, but no express condemnation of the Russian aggression**. The absence from the French President's public discourse of the **issue of disengagement from China**, in whatever form, and his **reluctance to comment on the question of Taiwan** remain notable.

But perhaps **China's most ominous approach** came immediately after his return to the country, in an interview with the newspaper *Les Echos*, where the President of France launched himself into a **tirade of rhetoric about strategic autonomy**, which he wants to achieve **sui generis, at all costs**. And the difficulty of defending these positions stems above all from the **opposition to the USA of its own position**, which **undermines its own European position** because of the **lack of confidence in a European leadership of France against America**. Even the example in the subsidiary about the **memory (and perspective) of the Trump administration proves insufficient**.

**Macron's obsession with strategic autonomy** is pushed so assertively to the forefront also because of a certain **embarrassed reserve on the part of Europeans**, including those in the East, to give Macron a reply, which is seen by the Elysée as a **manifestation of constructive ambiguity**, if not **positive acquiescence to Macron's French ambitions**, cut off from French reality and completely detached from European and world reality. Clearly, his statements constitute a real **act of splitting European unity** by pronouncing in the name of Europe on unconventional issues: **the relationship with the USA, the relationship with China** in a variant far from or even contrary to those agreed in the 2019 Joint Communication, in force, and EU documents. These forms of **French unilateralism and exceptionalism** are counterproductive both to European unity and to the prospect of resolving the Ukrainian problem. The very reference to the **new European security framework including Russia, i.e. involving China**, is a prospect of obvious division among EU member states.

Macron's **third way of positioning himself** becomes a crack in the European, Euro-Atlantic unity of democracies. **The lessons learned during the Cold War about the politics of non-alignment** seem to be missing from the panoply of sophisticated French diplomacy around the president at a **time of deep polarisation and war** (McGee, 2022). You cannot be indifferent or neutral between victim and aggressor, **you cannot defend democratic principles and values sequentially or infrequently**. In addition, Emmanuel Macron managed to formulate on this occasion **his first explicit public position towards the United States of America**, whether or not he wished to express it publicly in this way. And **his policy of argumentation** is rather *cherry picking* – only arguments favourable to his claims are chosen.

Thus, **Macron's claims** are as follows: the worst-case scenario for Europeans would be **to find themselves in the position of following and adapting to American and Chinese dynamics**. Europe must not use the pace imposed by others and must assess its own interests, because the **European priority must not be to adapt to the agendas of different actors** in certain regions of the world; Europe is building its strategic position and **must avoid the pitfalls of global deregulation and crises that do not belong to it** – with reference to Taiwan; in the event of an **escalation of the US-China relationship**, Europe will not have the time and the means to finance its strategic autonomy and **will become "vassal" to the USA**; Europe needs a few years to **build itself as a global third power**. In addition, Macron's claim is that **France has won the ideological battle in Europe over strategic autonomy**, evidenced by recent developments in the idea of European defence, the Chips Act, Net Zero Industry and the Critical Raw Material Act. **Strategic autonomy** must be Europe's goal in order not to depend on others in critical areas. Without **choice in energy, defence, social networks or artificial intelligence**, because of lack in necessary infrastructure, Europe could be out of history, says Macron.

In the same vein of the **need to present more important achievements in foreign policy at home**, in order to cover as much as possible the noise of public demonstrations against his otherwise useful and compulsory pensions policy, President Macron also claims that, from a doctrinal, legal and political perspective, **there has never before been such a major acceleration of European power**,



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*Public analyses have suggested that France's positioning and a possible similar positioning of Europe at a distance from the USA and China risk annoying the USA and some Europeans, while at the same time being misunderstood by the French, who could see this approach as a pact with the Chinese dictatorship.*

the foundations of which were laid before the pandemic crisis by the **Franco-German concerted action** that enabled progress to be made in terms of **European financial and budgetary solidarity**. **The American influence on Europe has increased in the context of growing energy dependence**, necessary in the logic of diversification of sources (USA, Qatar, but also other countries) to eliminate Russian gas, Macron also admits.

One could see a certain **level of reserve**, including among those close to **him, even in commenting** on this public interview. Public analyses have suggested that **France's positioning** and a possible similar positioning of Europe at a distance from the USA and China **risk annoying the USA and some Europeans**, while at the same time **being misunderstood by the French**, who could see this approach as a **pact with the Chinese dictatorship**. Analysts qualify their assessment on France's position by placing it in a particular geopolitical context, dominated by **growing hostility between Washington and Beijing**, which is progressing towards a (potentially warming) cold war. This **first public detailing of France's position on US policy towards China** cannot help European unity, indeed it **singles out France on this dimension** (Mazarr, 2023).

### THE MAJOR OUTSTANDING EUROPEAN ISSUES IN RELATIONS WITH CHINA

With or without Macronist approaches, however, Europe faces a set of pending issues, with the potential to divide member states, and all are linked to the relationship with China. A situation that will have to be **debated, then decided** very clearly and, above all, **followed up by all member states**. How does the **EU position itself between China and the USA?** Such a discussion was settled at the beginning of the current Commission's mandate, when the High Representative for Foreign and Defence Policy, Josep Borrell, came back to make the point that the **EU is a meeting of democratic states**, and that it **can never be in the middle between the USA and China**, obviously standing by its democratic partner overseas.

Nor is the argument of a need for a **benevolent approach by China to resolve the situation regarding Russia** an acceptable explanation for a contrary behaviour. And the past cannot be revisited even when the fundamental issue at stake is the **relationship between China**

**and Russia**, and the question is whether **China will deliver arms to Russia**. President von der Leyen's position is very clear here. **The assertion that China would deliver military aid to Russia**, even if it were true, it does not really cover a **transfer of Chinese military capabilities to Moscow**, but only much more sequential elements, know-how support and elements that do not single it out and damage its prestige, especially vis-à-vis the Global South, or **make Beijing pay for Russia's war-adventure** in Ukraine.

Then there is the open debate about possible **simultaneous decoupling from Russia and China**, which the United States of America would suggest. This is not the case, nor **has the USA done so**, trade volumes have increased even after **the economic war of taxation launched by Donald Trump**, but it does not mean that **measures** should not be taken **to avoid the risks associated with relations with China** that have already been revealed. **The EU-China Investment Agreement** has been halted and it is to be reviewed, **political differences and the EU's assumed systemic rivalry** are facts, while the **sanctioning of some MEPs who have criticised China's treatment of the Uighurs** is making any kind of more robust rapprochement even more difficult.

**The most complicated point of the European dilemmas** paradoxically links Russia and China. It is about the lesson learned from supporting Ukraine in Russia's full-scale war of aggression and the need to have **armies, resources and reserves, and mass military production capable of sustaining large-scale war over long periods of time**, hence war production. **The prospect of a confrontation with China** (Pomfret, Pottinger) that would draw the entire free and democratic world, including EU member states, into the conflict points to the need for **this leap, complicated by the scale of the investment to be made, to be achieved as quickly as possible**, given the time needed to fill empty stockpiles, to provide the necessities for a long-term war to its own armies and to support allies, including the United States and Asia-Pacific partners. **Actual war preparedness**, even if only in the perspective of creating **the conditions for global deterrence of China**, remains the thorniest issue to be debated, publicly communicated and funded in the period ahead.



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## GERMANY AND ANNALENA BAERBOCK: RESTORING THE EUROPEAN CLARITY ON CHINA POLICIES

Of course, the current review of EU-China relations could not pass without addressing the subject of **German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's visit to Beijing**. And its importance is all the more relevant as it had the role of clarifying all EU positions after the **ambiguity of President Macron's previous visit**, but especially after the public statements he made. And the German Foreign Minister appeared unabashedly, in the familiar vein given by Chancellor Scholz, claiming that, **as far as EU-China relations are concerned**, China remains **"partner, competitor, systemic rival"**, according to the Strategic Compass in force. The novelty comes from the German Foreign Minister's other communication, when she told Chinese partners that **the direction in which the needle of the European relationship with China moves will be determined by China's choices and options**. She stressed that neither Germany nor the EU as a whole **"can be indifferent to the current China-Taiwan tensions"**, warning China to de-escalate these tensions because **a war in the region would have disastrous consequences not only for China but for the whole world**. **"A military escalation in the Taiwan Strait, through which 50% of the world's trade passes every day, would be a horror scenario for the whole world"** (Oltermann, 2023), said Annalena Baerbock at a press conference in Beijing with her Chinese counterpart Qin Gang (Reuters, 2023). These claims are consistent with bilateral interests, especially since, in the case of any war with such an impact, the first to be affected are **the states dependent on foreign trade**, especially China and Germany. Moreover, the EU's position on Taiwan was directly evoked as **"consistent and clear"** without having changed: the **EU "remains fully committed to the <One China policy>"**, which recognises the Chinese government as **"the sole legal government of China"**, but reserving the right and assuming **to develop cooperation in various fields with Taiwan**. To these public remarks, the Chinese side replied that **"China once supported the reunification of Germany and hopes and believes that Germany will also support the peaceful unification of China"** (Xie, 2023; European Commission, 2019).

Of course, the German Foreign Minister also addressed the **EU's position on China's respect for human rights**, again focusing on the themes of competitiveness, trade and a fair economy: **"when**

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**companies gain advantages at the expense of human rights, we are not dealing with fair competition"** (Camut, Burchard, 2023), insisting that Germany has noted with concern that human rights are increasingly being diminished or ignored in China.

As for Ukraine, also in a public format, Annalena Baerbock insisted that she wondered why the Chinese position did not include **a call to the aggressor state Russia "to stop the war"** while, on the other hand, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Defence Policy, Josep Borrell, asked President Xi Jinping to have a conversation with his Ukrainian counterpart, **Volodymyr Zelensky**.

In the run-up to the adoption of Germany's own (first) National Security Strategy, the Chinese side also publicly requested at the press conference that **Germany should not be too critical of the strategy being developed** (Oltermann; Deutsche Welle, 2023). Alongside human rights and trade issues, the subject of Ukraine was among those that highlighted the divergence between Germany and China, with the **European Union's clear positions on the various issues of divergence** being mentioned each time.

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THINKING

*The German Foreign Minister also addressed the EU's position on China's respect for human rights, again focusing on the themes of competitiveness, trade and a fair economy: "when companies gain advantages at the expense of human rights, we are not dealing with fair competition", insisting that Germany has noted with concern that human rights are increasingly being diminished or ignored in China.*



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