



## **President Macron's Visit to China: Shaping New Partnership**

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French President Emmanuel Macron paid a state visit to China from 8 to 10 January 2018 at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping. He was the first head of state to visit China in 2018 as well as the first European leader to go to the country since the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), held in October 2017. The French President started his visit from the historical city of Xi'an in Shaanxi province of central China. Historically, it was the capital of various dynasties, including Zhou, Qin, Han and Tang.<sup>1</sup> It is also the hometown of President Xi Jinping.

Though the focus of the French President's visit was on improving the bilateral ties, especially economic, the stature and role of the two countries in regional and global affairs necessarily makes their leaders' meeting significant from international dimensions as well. President Macron discussed the bilateral issues with President Xi within the framework of Sino-French 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' and sought Beijing's cooperation on regional and global issues.<sup>2</sup> The visit seems important in not only shaping Sino-French relations but also addressing the issues pertaining to the European Union (EU's) relations with China. Although historically France has been playing a significant role in dealing with global security and development challenges, now in the broader framework of multilateralism, it is also keen to expand cooperation with China to deal with issues of common concerns.

The French President raised issues of bilateral trade such as access to Chinese market and the trade imbalance. Putting France's foreign policy objective within the regional framework, he also raised EU's perspectives about China's trade practices and investment prospects. Currently, France, under Macron's leadership, is emerging as a leading voice of Europe. Following the elections in Germany, the negotiations for forming a 'grand coalition' for a stable government has been a complex political process. Another leading European power, the UK, is fully engrossed in finding a way out of the EU Brexit maze. Macron, on the other hand, got elected including on EU agenda and he has been constantly supporting deeper European integration and reforms in EU

institutions. He has argued for a greater role of Europe in global politics and his active role has been observed in dealing with multiple global issues, including climate change, and defusing crises in West Asia. It is also considered that he has some political understanding with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in this context. The French President has taken the lead in seeking cooperation with China on some global issues but also raising the European countries' concerns including on restrictions on foreign access to domestic market, state-sponsored nature of Chinese model of business in Europe.

### **France-China Relations**

The current Sino-French diplomatic relations started with France's recognition of the People's Republic of China on 27 January 1964. However, the relationship has much deeper background. In the 1920s going from China to Europe for education and training was much in vogue. France was considered an example of liberty and freedom.<sup>3</sup> Many Chinese, including those who later became revolution leaders, including Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, had prior engagements with France. Considerable parts of their life were spent in Europe. Deng stayed in France for five years where he became politically active and joined the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>4</sup>

The bilateral relations between China and France were elevated to the level of "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2004.<sup>5</sup> Political interactions between the two countries have been increasing and both have widened their dialogue on a range of issues of global and regional importance. Previously, French President Francois Hollande visited China twice in his presidential tenure. President Macron has pledged to visit China at least once every year while he is in the office. He has expressed his determination to "get the Europe-China relationship into the 21st Century." Earlier, outlining the foreign policy priorities in his speech at the Ambassador Week 2017, President Macron sought partnership with China in the framework of multilateralism as well as based on history and prospective cooperation on global security.<sup>6</sup> He had also underlined the importance of China in addressing the issues such as climate change and international security.

Similarly, Chinese leadership also accords adequate political attention to France. Both President Xi Jinping and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang have undertaken visits to France. During President Macron's visit to China, Chinese President Xi Jinping said, "Bilateral ties stand at a new starting point." He added, "China stands ready to promote exchanges and enhance mutual trust and cooperation with France in order to inject new impetus into the development of the China-France comprehensive strategic partnership."<sup>7</sup>

China and France enjoy deep economic engagement. Statistically, China is one of the major trade partners of France in the world. Their bilateral trade accounted for US\$ 68.6 billion euro in 2016. Recent trends in the bilateral trade suggest that a sharp increase of 9.3 per cent was registered in 2015, however, a downturn of 4.2 per cent was noticed in 2016.<sup>8</sup> France is the world's 6<sup>th</sup> largest export economy.<sup>9</sup> China is the largest trading partner in Asia for France and the 8<sup>th</sup> largest export market. It is the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest supplier to France. Computer, electronic, optical, textile

and leather products are the main exports and 700 Chinese and Hong Kong based businesses are present in France, representing 45,000 jobs. France is also the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest receiver of job-creating Chinese investments in Europe, which is at par with the UK. For China, France is the third largest European trading partner and first European agricultural supplier.<sup>10</sup>

France-China investment interface is long-standing. French investment accounts for €33 billion in 2016 and it is almost in all sectors of the Chinese economy, including agri-food, industry, transport, urban development, major retail and financial services. More than 1,100 French companies are present in China at 4,200 locations. On the other hand, Chinese investments in France have seen strong growth in recent years, and Chinese investment stock is around €6 billion in France.<sup>11</sup>

Chinese tourists have emerged as a good source of income for many French people. France is the second most preferred Chinese tourist destination outside Asia and about 2.2 million Chinese visited France only in 2015.

Consequently, economic relations were high on the agenda of the leaders' meetings. President Macron was accompanied by a large business delegation from his country. During the visit, the China General Nuclear Power Corporation (CGN), the largest nuclear power operator in China, signed an agreement to deepen cooperation on nuclear power technology with the French Alternative Energy and Atomic Energy Commission (CEA).<sup>12</sup> It was also expected that France and China would finalise the Airbus deal. President Macron said he had confirmation from Chinese President Xi Jinping that a contract would be 'finalized shortly' for China to order 184 short-haul Airbus A320s. At Airbus list prices for the single-aisle planes, the deal could be worth at least €15 billion.<sup>13</sup> The joint declaration notes that both the countries desire to continue their cooperation in the aeronautical field. President Macron and Chinese President Xi Jinping invited Airbus and its Chinese partners to hold discussions for new cooperation on A330, A350 and A380. It is noted in the joint declaration that China, in line with the development needs of its air transport market, wishes to continue its purchase of Airbus aircraft on the basis of mutually beneficial and friendly negotiations with the French side.<sup>14</sup> However, the delay in concluding the Airbus deal has been seen as a Chinese policy to maintain a commercial balance between Boeing and Airbus, the corporations of the US and Europe respectively. China divides its demands between Airbus and its rival Boeing, but now Boeing has received more orders from China.<sup>15</sup> Report also suggests that Airbus bought by China Southern Airlines was not commercially profitable, therefore, China as of now, may think about the return from France for Airbus deal. To serve the middle class passengers, China prefers middle range airbuses, which are domestically manufactured by the state-owned Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China, (Comac). Chinese air operators have placed large orders to Comac. China also wants that Airbus should start production of aircrafts in collaboration with Chinese companies. Agreement has also been signed but actual production would take time.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, one of the chief executives who travelled to China as part of Macron's business delegation, Sebastien Bazin, the Chief Executive of AccorHotels, said, the trip had been “extremely helpful” for French corporate sector.<sup>17</sup>

France is seeking to balance the trade with China, which is highly in favour of the latter. The visiting side tried to seek new trade deals and sought greater access to the Chinese domestic market. French President Emmanuel Macron urged China to further open its markets or face a protectionist backlash. Underlining the trade imbalance, he noted, “France imports 45 billion from China but only exports 15 billion, so we have access to markets which is unbalanced, unsatisfying. If we don't deal with this responsibly, the first, natural, reaction, the one we've had for too long, will be to close up on both sides.”<sup>18</sup> Trade imbalance between France and China persists and China accounts for the largest French bilateral trade deficit, ahead of Germany €30.4 billion in 2016. In order to rebalance bilateral economic and trade relations, France expects greater reciprocity from China, particularly in terms of market access and intellectual property protection.<sup>19</sup> The joint declaration notes that China and France would cooperate to facilitate open global economy and globalization. The Declaration also states that they will “combat all forms of protectionism by ensuring a level playing field; and foster an economic globalization process that is more open, inclusive and balanced and brings benefits to all.”<sup>20</sup>

There are also some concerns about the Chinese investment in Europe. European governments have been taking initiatives for greater securitization of Chinese investment in the continent. Better interaction and improved engagement at the political levels are important to hammer out any differences in the perceptions about the either side.

### **China and France in Regional Dynamics**

France is keen to expand economic ties with Asia, particularly rising economies and big markets, including China. Besides strengthening their bilateral ties, the two countries are also exploring the possibilities of expanding their economic cooperation in the respective regions in Europe and Asia. China has been making deep inroads with its infrastructure development projects under the banner of One Belt and One Road initiative. The country is infusing huge financial resources and proactively complementing that with diplomatic resources and initiatives. The ambitious Chinese project has the potential to reshape the trade and peoples' interactions across the Eurasian landmass.

European countries attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in May 2017 in China. Several heads of governments and states namely Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban, then Prime Minister of Poland Beata Szydło, Czech Republic President Milos Zeman, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, President of the Government of Spain Mariano Rajoy Brey, Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, and Special Envoy of the President of France Jean-Pierre Raffarin.

Eastern European countries seek to expand economic engagement with China. They see the country as a new source of investment. China, along with Central and Eastern European Countries, has established the 16+1 mechanism to shape its engagement with these countries. Trade between the two sides reached US\$ 58 billion in 2016 almost doubled from 2009. Investment in acquisition and infrastructure building remain the main focus of China in the CEE region. However, EU expressed some cautions about the Chinese ambition. Vice President of European Commission Jyrki Katainen stressed principles including openness based on market rules and international standards, complementary to existing networks and policies, transparency and sustainability in the scheme connecting Asia and Europe.<sup>21</sup>

The new Silk Roads are also considered to be ‘a tool to promote new international standards, rules and norms’ which may not be similar to norms and standards practiced by France and other European countries.”<sup>22</sup> France also recognizes the economic and strategic importance of One Road and One Belt project for Europe. Paris has been supporting the Belt and Road (BAR) project and the French President said that France would play its role in the initiative. He emphasized on cooperation and multilateral aspects of global trade and connectivity projects. In an interview with china.org.cn, President Macron said, *“The Belt and Road Initiative, launched by President Xi Jinping, is very important. I’m convinced that it can play a major role in structuring the Eurasian region and that it represents a real opportunity to create bridges, through exchange, between countries and civilizations, just as the ancient silk routes once did. ...France is ready to play a leading role in this. We must identify concrete projects to implement together in Europe, in Asia and in third countries.”*<sup>23</sup>

President Macron starting his China visit from the city of Xi’an also underlines the importance of the project, which also starts from this historical location. However, he also took this opportunity to mention that multilateral efforts are essential to determine the global ambitions. In a speech at Daming Palace, the former royal residence during China’s Tang Dynasty, President Macron noted that the ancient Silk Roads were never only Chinese. He noted, “By definition these roads can only be shared.” He further added, “If they are roads, they cannot be one-way.”<sup>24</sup>

Although China has been making investments in Europe, it is not being welcomed in all sections of Europe. Opposition to it has also begun and China has also started facing challenges on this front. Some politicians in Europe exploit the fear and drum up votes by depicting China's investments as a scheme to steal EU's high technology and its BAR initiative as a conspiracy to undermine Europe's security.<sup>25</sup> Though Europe has not been one voice in response to China, the French President tried to project a united face of Europe. He noted, “Europe has often shown itself divided about China. And China won't respect a continent, a power, when some member states let their doors freely open.” In a speech at a start-up incubator, with Alibaba Founder Jack Ma at his side, along with other French and Chinese companies, President Macron talked about the possibilities the bilateral cooperation could bring and warned about the looming threat of protectionism if adjustments were not made. Previously, France had also tried to push the EU to

impose more stringent anti-dumping rules against imports of cheap Chinese steel. France even urged the European Commission to build a system for screening investments in strategic sectors from outside the EU, which was criticized by China.<sup>26</sup> President Francois Hollande of France had warned the Chinese hotel group Jin Jiang against trying to acquire a majority in the French hotel chain Accor.<sup>27</sup> Aixtron is among the growing number of European businesses with cutting-edge technologies that have recently been targeted by a surge in Chinese overseas investments in Europe, to which concerns were raised and the takeover was halted by Germany.<sup>28</sup> When Chinese state-owned ChemChina purchased the Swiss agrochemical giant Syngenta for US\$ 43 billion in 2017, which was the largest Chinese overseas takeover to date, France and Germany were reportedly unhappy that the European Commission approved the takeover.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, it would be difficult for President Macron to push the idea of foreign investments in strategic sectors in Europe to be screened at the EU level because many EU member states seek Chinese investments and they have sought to water it down. Chinese companies have provided a source of 'fresh capital' for European enterprises, such as the Swedish carmaker Volvo, the Italian tire maker Pirelli, the French resort operator Club Med, and to the port in Piraeus, Greece.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, he said, "China, which is a great power, does not respect a country that sells its essential infrastructures to the lowest bidder."<sup>31</sup> Europe fears that if more Chinese state-firms purchase its leading developers of advanced technology then it will put the continent at an economic and technological disadvantage. The German government introduced regulations that can stop purchases of German strategic firms by foreign companies. The new regulations permit German government to stop takeovers if there is a risk of important know-how being transferred abroad.<sup>32</sup>

### **France, China: Meeting Global Challenges Together**

During the visit to China, President of France Emmanuel Macron advocated a greater role for France and Europe in dealing with the global political, economic and environmental challenges. Contrary to the approaches of far-right parties in Europe, which are on the ascent in the continent, the French President pursues a globalist agenda based on the ethos of multilateralism and international cooperation in dealing with the challenges faced by the world. At the Sorbonne University in September 2017, President Macron had expressed concerns on the global challenges including climate change to digital transition, migration and terrorism, he noted, "We cannot afford to keep the same policies, the same habits, the same procedures and the same budget. No more can we choose to turn inwards within national borders."<sup>33</sup> In the same speech, he talked about deeper political integration to win back the support of disgruntled citizens and profound change in the EU, such as common EU policies on defence, asylum and tax, called for the formation of European universities, etc. He suggested the creation of a European intelligence academy to better fight against international terrorism, and a joint civil protection force.<sup>34</sup>

During the President's visit to China, both France and China strived to find more and more common grounds on major issues, such as climate change, anti-terrorism and global governance reform. In an interview with china.org.cn, the French President said, "*Multilateralism*

*is currently undergoing a crisis. We have to give it a new dynamic by constructing responses to crises through dialogue, by fighting climate change, by defining the best rules for commercial exchange. I'm convinced that France and China, which are two powers of multilateralism deeply attached to their independence, can work together in changing the situation. Because the challenges that we must confront, most specifically climate change, are creating a need for global coordination, for the first time in the history of mankind.”<sup>35</sup>*

In addition to climate change, the two countries also addressed the threat of international terrorism. Today, European countries are more concerned about the growing challenges of international terrorism and extremism. The Global Terrorism Index notes that while terror threats have reduced in some parts of the world, it has increased in Europe and the European countries have faced comparatively more terror threats in 2016.<sup>36</sup> China on its part has also been suffering from terrorism and separatism, particularly in its western area, the Xinjiang autonomous region. Terrorism has not remained limited to certain geography and it affects nations in multiple ways. The Joint Statement issued by France and China states that threat of terrorism goes beyond borders. The two countries supported the central coordinating role of UN in international cooperation.<sup>37</sup> Both France and China are veto wielding permanent member of UN Security Council, therefore, they have greater responsibility in ensuring peace and security through effective cooperation in the multilateral agencies, including the UN, and developing a common approach for security related issues, such as Syria.

As China is seeking to widen its economic presence in Europe and play a global role, its partnership with France would be crucial. Europe has not only an important role in the success of overseas Chinese projects but also crucial in shaping the Chinese ambition of setting new norms and standards. So far, Europe itself has been the norm-setter and it continues to play a substantial role in defining global political and financial orders. In the context of political issues, the Joint Declaration notes that France and China would continue their cooperation on regional and international issues including the Middle East, Africa, Korean Peninsula, and non-proliferation issues. China and France supported the efforts of the UN in the Geneva process towards a political solution under the framework of Security Council Resolution 2254 in Syria. They also supported the Iran Nuclear Deal and called on all parties to implement their commitments and to fulfill all their international obligations.<sup>38</sup> The joint declaration also notes that China and France support regional and sub-regional organizations to deal with security challenges and maintaining the peace and security and fight against international terrorism.<sup>39</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The contemporary global politics is in a flux. Rise of the East has effected change in the gravity of economic power, and subsequently, political power has also started shifting. Though the US President maintains that America first does not mean America alone, his policies are perceived as protectionist and isolationist or selective engagement. His approach has created some sort of differences and divergence in trans-Atlantic partnership. Europe itself has been witnessing internal and external changes. Ideas and hopes inspired by peace and prosperity in the continent

through integration and common and collective approaches are contested and political constellations in the domestic space have changed in some member states. President Macron himself faced challenges from a far-right party active in the country. Now, he is a leading voice for reforming the EU and making European stance stronger in world affairs. Externally, Europe faces challenges from Russia and political instability and disorder in the Middle East, both have implications for European security and society, including the influx of refugees.

In this evolving global and regional politics, French President Macron's visit was important for bilateral France-China relations as well as EU-China relations. He raised not only bilateral issues but also underlined the areas of concerns in EU-China relations. Europe needs Chinese support for dealing issues of climate change and international security, the US has announced to withdraw itself from the Paris climate deal and it is not inclined to take greater security risks to deploy more troops in restive areas. Europe recognizes the importance of China in dealing with climate change and ensuring new global peace and security. European countries, particularly Central European countries, are keen to increasing economic linkages and seek more investment from growing China. European technological advancement, markets and European countries' role in ensuring peace and stability in strategically important regions such as Middle East, are crucial from Chinese point view. Expanding business deals with increased political synergies on global and regional issues would be crucial in shaping the new partnership.

Nevertheless, European countries are certainly concerned about Chinese trade practices. President Macron tried to send a signal to China that Europe is changing and would come out of tendencies of inward looking. In the quest for a new relationship, France and the EU maintain that more reciprocity and 'a balanced approach' are required from China. An act of balance is hinted in Europe's perspective towards China's human rights records. European claim as bastion of 'liberal democracy' and human right seems to be put on the backburner. President Macron failed to register strongly his concerns over the alleged human rights records in China as it is only vaguely referred to in the end of the joint statement.

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 Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>36</sup> Nastassja Shtrauchler, “Global Terrorism Index: Death Toll Drops Globally but Rise in Europe,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 15, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/global-terrorism-index-death-toll-drops-globally-but-rise-in-europe/a-41385199> (Accessed on January 15, 2018)

<sup>37</sup> Full Text of Joint Declaration between China and France.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.