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EUROPE'S MIDDLE POWERS AFTER THE XI-TRUMP SUMMIT

BIPOLAR CONSOLIDATION, STRATEGIC ASYMMETRY, AND THE DISCIPLINE OF POWER POLITICS

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AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION

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For Europe’s strongest middle powers, the summit between Xi Jinping and Donald Trump is a structural marker of the international system’s consolidation into bipolarity. The symbolism of two leaders negotiating trade, technology controls, crisis management, and geopolitical red lines underscores a reality that European policymakers have been slow to internalise. The gravitational Center of Global Politics lies in Washington and Beijing. Europe’s agency and strategic autonomy is consequential but conditional.

The persistent belief in an emerging multipolar order has provided intellectual comfort in Brussels, Berlin, and Paris. It has justified hedging strategies and rhetorical commitments to strategic autonomy. Yet, recent scholarship has challenged this premise. Lind argues that claims of multipolarity mask a deeper concentration of material capability in the hands of the United States and China (Lind, 2026). Mohan similarly critiques what he calls the multipolar delusion, noting that middle powers frequently mistake diplomatic activism for structural influence (Mohan, 2026a and 2026b). Nagy emphasises that bipolarity remains the organising principle of global politics because only Washington and Beijing possess the combined economic scale, technological ecosystems, military reach, and alliance networks capable of shaping systemic outcomes (Nagy, 2025). The Xi–Trump summit reinforces hierarchy. Major adjustments to tariffs, export controls, and crisis management frameworks will be negotiated between two actors. European states will react, adapt, and absorb spillovers.

Chinese official narratives interpret such summitry as responsible major power management. The State Council’s white paper on a global community of shared future frames China’s rise as inclusive, rejecting hegemonism while advocating cooperative governance (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). The Global Security Initiative concept paper criticises unilateral sanctions and alliance politics, proposing indivisible security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2025). Yan Xuetong’s moral realism argues that sustainable leadership rests on ethical authority rather than coercive domination (Yan, 2023). Cui’s discussion of discourse power highlights Beijing’s ambition to shape normative frameworks in global development governance (Cui, 2022). Chinese discourse does not view bipolar engagement as destabilising. It sees recognition and parity. Europe, by contrast, experiences parity as marginalisation.

The European Union remains a formidable normative and regulatory actor, yet normative power has not translated into consistent geopolitical initiative. The Lithuanian case illustrates this vulnerability. When Vilnius allowed Taiwan to establish a representative office, Beijing restricted trade and pressured multinationals to remove Lithuanian inputs from supply chains (Goodman & Reynolds, 2022). The EU’s Anti-Coercion Instrument represents innovation in collective economic defence, but credibility requires to demonstrate unity, which asymmetric exposure inhibits.

Empirical data sharpens these structural observations. The European Commission's European Economic Security Strategy identifies critical dependencies in semiconductors, rare earths, and pharmaceuticals, noting that the EU sources 98% of its rare earth supply from China (European Commission, 2023). Eurostat data for 2023 show that the EU's trade deficit with China reached approximately 292 billion euros, reflecting persistent structural imbalances despite political rhetoric about de-risking (Eurostat, 2024). Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe has declined from peaks exceeding 37 billion euros in 2016 to under 8 billion euros in 2022, according to Rhodium Group and MERICS analysis, yet remaining investments concentrate in strategically sensitive sectors including ports, energy infrastructure, and advanced manufacturing (Rhodium Group & MERICS, 2023). AmCham (American Chamber of Commerce China) China's business climate surveys consistently report that European and American firms operating in China face increasing regulatory uncertainty while remaining reluctant to divest due to market scale (AmCham China, 2024).

Germany embodies the tension between economic gravity and strategic vulnerability. China remained Germany's single largest trading partner for goods for seven consecutive years before 2024. Automotive exports, machinery, and chemicals are deeply integrated into Chinese demand. This structural exposure creates caution in Berlin's approach to de-risking. Simultaneously, Germany depends on the United States for extended deterrence. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data shows German military expenditure at approximately 1.5% of GDP in 2023, well below the NATO guideline despite Berlin's announced *Zeitenwende* and 100-billion-euro special fund (SIPRI, 2024). Procurement delays and bureaucratic constraints have slowed transformation. Germany thus occupies a precarious triangle of economic reliance on China, security reliance on the United States, and political commitment to Ukraine.

France articulates the most coherent vision of European strategic autonomy. Paris argues that Europe must develop independent capacity to act in a world defined by superpower rivalry. France maintains nuclear deterrence and expeditionary capability, spending approximately 2.1% of GDP on defence in 2023 (SIPRI, 2024). Yet, fiscal pressures constrain expansion. French firms in aerospace, agriculture, and luxury goods rely substantially on Chinese markets. Paris has supported Ukraine robustly, yet strategic ambition exceeds collective European material capacity.

The United Kingdom remains deeply embedded in transatlantic defence and intelligence networks. Defence spending reached approximately 2.1% of GDP in 2023, with commitments to increase toward 2.5% (SIPRI, 2024). British support for Ukraine has been substantial. Yet, exposure to China in finance and higher education persists. Britain's posture privilege alliance cohesion over autonomy, offering security at the cost of maneuvering space.

Italy illustrates the vulnerabilities of constrained fiscal flexibility. Defence expenditure remained approximately 1.5% of GDP in 2023 (SIPRI, 2024). Earlier participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reflected economic pragmatism, and while Rome has recalibrated engagement, Italian firms remain attentive to Chinese market access. Strategic posture oscillates between Atlantic commitment and economic caution.

Poland occupies the strongest relative position among Europe's leading middle powers. SIPRI data confirm Polish military expenditure reached approximately 3.9% of GDP in 2023, among the highest in NATO and reflecting sustained political consensus on deterrence (SIPRI, 2024). Trade dependence on China is significantly lower than that of Germany, France, the United Kingdom, or Italy. The Kiel Institute's Ukraine Support Tracker shows Poland among the most generous bilateral supporters of Ukraine relative to GDP (Kiel Institute, 2024). Poland combines lower vulnerability to Chinese economic leverage with high alignment credibility in Washington. This does not grant systemic influence equivalent to Germany's economic weight, but it strengthens Warsaw's leverage within transatlantic institutions.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine remains the central fault line in European security. European unity on sanctions has been significant, yet disparities in military contributions persist. Chinese official discourse emphasises sovereignty and opposition to bloc confrontation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). European governments interpret Russian aggression as a direct assault on territorial integrity. Any recalibration of US commitments discussed at a Xi–Trump summit would immediately test Europe's capacity to compensate collectively.

The central structural constraint for the European Union lies in differentiated dependency. Chinese academic analysis of hedging behaviour underscores how economic asymmetries create leverage during great power competition (Cao, 2021). Without harmonisation of exposure and burden sharing, Europe will remain strategically fragmented. Coordinated de-risking grounded in supply chain vulnerability assessments, credible operationalisation of the Anti-Coercion Instrument, sustained defence investment across major economies, strategic literacy regarding Chinese intellectual frameworks (Cui, 2022; Yan, 2023), and proactive coalition building with middle powers such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea are prerequisites for a European agency.

The Xi–Trump summit reveals hierarchy rather than transformation. Bipolarity disciplines middle powers, forcing clarity regarding exposure, capability, and commitment. Poland demonstrates the clearest alignment between threat perception, defence investment, and economic insulation. Germany wields scale but faces vulnerability. France articulates autonomy yet must finance it. The United Kingdom secures alliance depth at the expense of flexibility. Italy navigates fragility. Until Europe's strongest middle powers align economic policy, defence spending, and strategic intent, future summits between Washington and Beijing will define Europe's operating environment more than Europe defines theirs.

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