

EU foreign policy

European Council president to visit China next week for summit with Xi

Charles Michel's trip is likely to highlight EU divisions on how to engage with superpower



Charles Michel is set to visit Beijing on December 1 © Reuters

Henry Foy in Brussels 4 HOURS AGO

European Council president Charles Michel will travel to Beijing for a meeting with Xi Jinping next week, in a move likely to highlight European divisions on how to engage with China.

Michel, who represents the leaders of the EU's 27 member states, will visit Beijing on December 1 to meet Xi and other senior Chinese officials, the first time an EU president has met Xi in China since 2018.

The trip, first reported by the Financial Times, comes at an acutely sensitive time for relations between China and western powers. Ties have been strained by Beijing's failure to condemn Russia's war against Ukraine, its posture towards Taiwan and its crackdown in Hong Kong.

The Xi-Michel meeting follows a strategic discussion among EU leaders last month on how to adjust the bloc's relationship with China in light of Xi's increasingly hardline policies and deepening rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

Proponents of what one person briefed on the meeting said would involve the "full-blown red carpet treatment" said it was part of efforts to keep lines of communication open to China despite the rising tension with western capitals.

“Against the backdrop of a tense geopolitical and economic environment, the visit is a timely opportunity for both EU and China to engage. The EU and Chinese leaders will discuss global challenges as well as subjects of common interest,” Michel’s office said.

The visit follows [a state visit by Germany’s chancellor Olaf Scholz](#) earlier this month that prompted disquiet among other EU member states, as the bloc wrestles with how to toughen its approach to Beijing.

It also follows a three-hour meeting between Xi and Joe Biden on the eve of the G20 summit in Bali this month, where the [US president](#) said he was seeking to responsibly manage the relationship with Beijing.

Under pressure from the US to adhere to its more hardline stance, Brussels is rethinking its engagement with China, with the aim of reducing [a heavy economic reliance](#) on Beijing. Washington and hawkish EU states see that as a major vulnerability for European economies.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has prompted soul-searching within the EU about its relationship with China, as capitals realise that their concept of economic interdependence with Moscow totally failed to give them any leverage over Vladimir Putin’s regime.

The EU must recalibrate its attitude to China and view it as an all-out competitor with limited areas of potential engagement, [Brussels urged member states](#) last month.

“China has become an even stronger global competitor for the EU, the US and other like-minded partners,” the commission’s foreign policy arm told capitals. “It is therefore essential to assess how best to respond to current and foreseeable challenges.”

Michel, who held a video call with Xi in April, said at the Bali summit that the EU needed to “rebalance” the relationship with China, but that it was “important to listen to each other, to develop a better understanding”.

Human rights, climate change, economic relations and global health issues are likely to form part of the talks, Michel suggested in October after the EU leaders’ discussion.

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