

China

Tea with Xi: Macron gets personal touch as China visit highlights EU differences

Beijing exploits European disunity despite presence of commission president Ursula von der Leyen



Emmanuel Macron and Xi Jinping in Guangzhou on the last day of the French president's state visit to China © AP

Edward White in Seoul, **Sam Fleming** in Brussels and **Yuan Yang** in Rome YESTERDAY

French president Emmanuel Macron rounded off his state visit to China on Friday by taking tea with counterpart Xi Jinping in Guangzhou, the manufacturing megacity at the heart of China's export-led economy.

The choice of Guangzhou, where Xi's father was a senior official, conveyed a personal touch by the Chinese leader towards [Macron](#). But it also nodded towards French interest in maintaining economic and trade interests with China, despite western outrage over Xi's support for Vladimir Putin and failure to oppose Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Macron, who was accompanied to [China](#) by dozens of French business leaders, was joined for part of his three-day visit by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in a gesture of common European purpose towards Beijing. Yet any sense of unity was undercut by arrangements that flattered the French leader with a banquet, military parade and other trappings of a state visit, while von der Leyen was excluded from several of the lavish events.

John Delury, a China expert with Yonsei University in Seoul, said the visit reflected "two ends of the of the European spectrum, in terms of how to message towards China".

“Xi’s strategy is: Macron is coming with his hands outstretched so they’re embracing him; [von der Leyen] is articulating the harder European position, and they’re trying to put her out at the margins,” he said.



Macron was joined for part of his visit by Ursula von der Leyen, but the European Commission president was pointedly excluded from several events © Ludovic Marin/Reuters

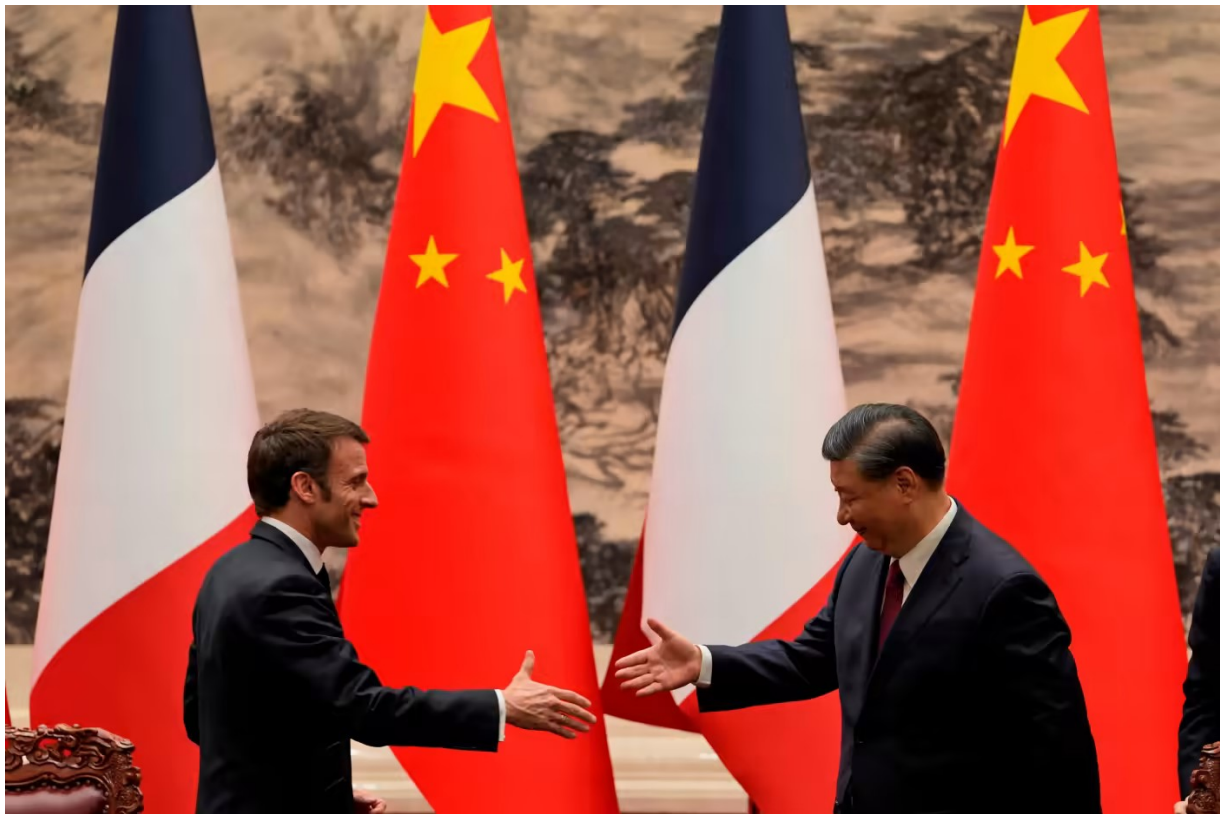
Noah Barkin, an analyst at Rhodium Group, said Macron missed an opportunity to use Europe’s collective economic leverage to get more from the Chinese in the meetings. Any hopes in Paris that the trip would foster the sense of a united front in Europe’s China policy had proven to be forlorn, he said.

“Macron seems to have thought that by bringing von der Leyen along he was sending a message of EU unity, even if the two of them were sending different messages when they were in Beijing,” he said. “It looks like Macron misplayed his hand.”

In a notably hawkish speech last week ahead of the visit [von der Leyen warned Xi](#) that China’s interactions with Putin’s war “will be a determining factor for EU-China relations”. She had also noted a “deliberate hardening” of China’s strategic stance, as she added that Beijing was becoming “more repressive at home and more assertive abroad”.

While stressing her repeated goal of “de-risking” trade with China, instead of a US-style “decoupling” von der Leyen vowed greater vigilance in protecting European

style accoupling, von der Leyen vowed greater vigilance in protecting European interests and ensuring a more equal playing field for EU businesses wanting to trade with the country.



Macron and Xi after meeting the press in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing © Ng Han Guan/AP

In China she struck a downbeat note about economic relations, warning of “unfair practices” that were putting European companies at a significant disadvantage.

Macron, meanwhile, sought to reject any sense of an “inescapable spiral” of tensions with Beijing.

Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, author of *Europe, China, and the Limits of Normative Power*, said while von der Leyen had been “assertive” in trying to hold Xi to account for his support of Putin, the European leaders had ultimately failed in forming a united front.

“China is so clear and strong on its own red lines. We don’t have that strength when we speak with China on our own issues,” Ferenczy said.

“Beijing has always preferred dealing with member states . . . and to undermine European decisions and the European Union as a whole,” she added.

The difference in the ceremony accorded Macron and the far more low-key reception for von der Leyen, who went on a commercial flight to Beijing, partly reflected the fact that the French president was on a state visit to the country.

that the French president was on a state visit to the country.

In a joint communiqué, the two governments agreed to “improve market access” for one another’s enterprises.

France would also treat Chinese enterprises’ licence applications in the realm of the digital economy and 5G “fairly and without discrimination”. The impact of such a pledge remains unclear given that France has already put restrictions on Chinese telecoms equipment provider Huawei.



Emmanuel Macron, left, and Xi Jinping at a tea ceremony in Guangzhou on the last day of the French president’s state visit to China © Thibault Camus/AP

The two sides agreed to designate 2024 as a “China-France Year of Culture and Tourism” with partnerships between various French and Chinese cultural sites. France has been hoping to woo back big-spending Chinese tourists since the loosening of pandemic travel restrictions.

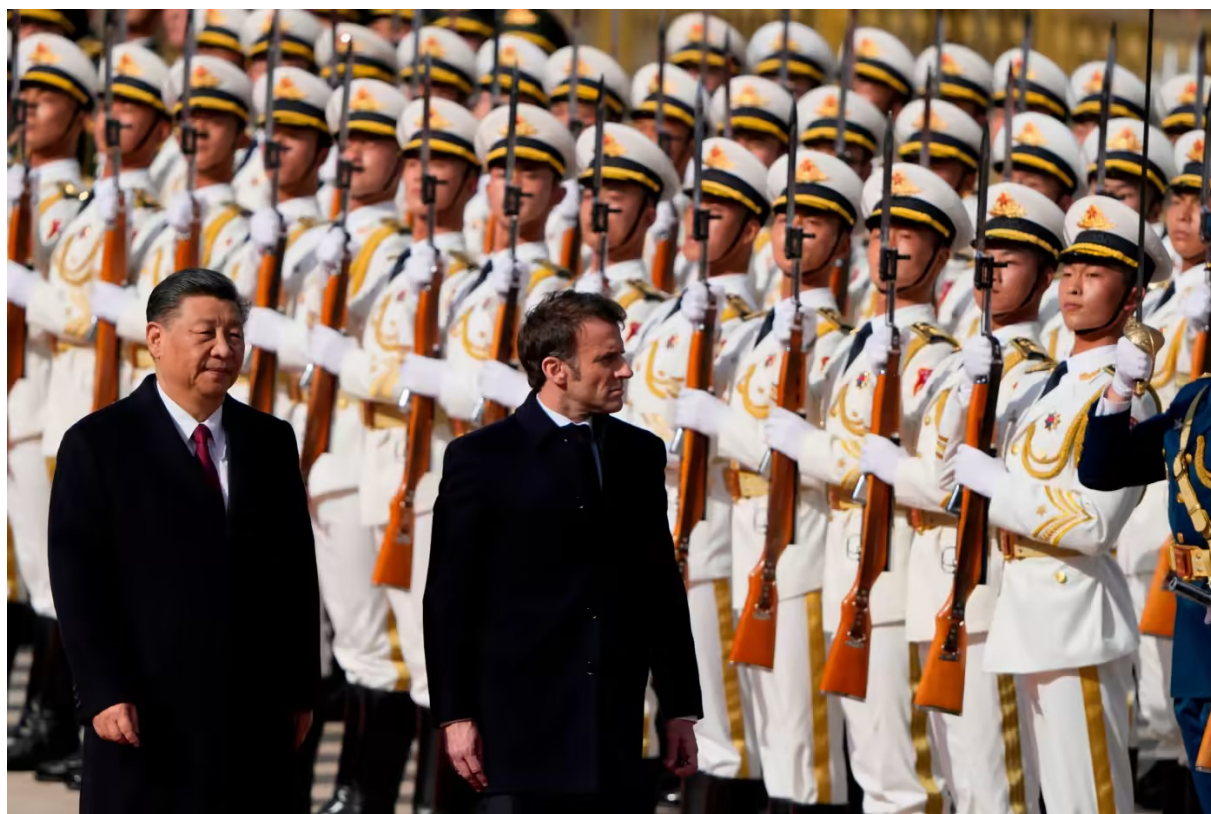
Neither the differences in ceremony nor the communiqué enhanced the unity the EU hoped to project at a time when it is under intense US pressure to steer a tougher course on China relations.

Mikko Huotari, director of the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin, said it was to be expected that Beijing would “exploit” the differences in diplomatic style that resulted from the two Europeans’ differing roles, and that it was important therefore not to overstate this aspect.

But Huotari added that there were substantive differences between the commission president and major EU capitals on how to handle EU-China relations.

“Both Berlin and Paris, and other capitals, will still need to be convinced of the “de-risking” approach outlined by von der Leyen and its implications,” he said.

On Ukraine, Macron said he was counting on Xi to “bring Russia to its senses” over the war, and French diplomats had earlier said they hoped the discussions with Xi could help lay groundwork for future peace talks, if and when Ukraine and Russia begin them.



Macron was hoping to persuade China to change its stance over Russia, but Xi did not budge from his support of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine © Ng Han Guan/AP

But Xi did not change his language on the conflict, nor suggest he would use his influence over Putin, and stopped short of committing to speaking to Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

“China has not budged from its support of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine since the onset of the war, so the latest visits by the European leaders are not likely to move the needle,” said Soo Kim, a former CIA analyst now with LMI, a US consultancy.

Yonsei's Delury said that in the longer-term Macron's approach may have merit. Following Beijing's brokering of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the west should

not preclude China “providing the setting” for talks between Ukraine and Russia, he said.

“[The French] have their own economic interests in their China relationships and have not bought into the decoupling theory. And in the case that China does play a role down the road it’ll be good to have a relationship to leverage there,” he said.

Additional reporting from Leila Abboud in Paris

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.
