

EU-China relations

China makes Hungary a model for diplomatic ties in Europe

Xi Jinping's upgrade of ties with Budapest highlights Beijing's willingness to reward loyalty with investment and trade

James Kynge in London YESTERDAY

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By upgrading China's relationship with Hungary, Xi Jinping this week made the central European state led by maverick Prime Minister Viktor Orbán a model he hopes will be followed by others in Europe and beyond, Chinese officials have said.

Visiting Budapest at the end of a five-day, three-nation tour of Europe, Xi hailed what is now officially China and Hungary's "[all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership for the new era](#)", a description the officials said was of much more than mere semantic importance.

Budapest was now a member of what Xi calls Beijing's "circle of friends" — those countries that do most to support [China](#)'s efforts to counter US power and which are increasingly rewarded with investment, trade and diplomatic support, the officials told the Financial Times.

That means the expansion of a relationship previously described as just a "comprehensive strategic partnership" carries a geopolitical message more weighty than Xi's schmaltzy description of ties with Hungary as "as mellow and rich as Tokaji wine".





Beijing sees Budapest as participating in Xi's personal project to lead the construction of 'a global community of shared future'
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Despite Hungary's membership of Nato and the EU, [Orbán](#) is well-known for his antagonism towards Washington and Brussels. Xi praised him for his "independent" foreign policy and for "defying" great power politics.

Now China is delivering its rewards. Chinese companies have invested €16bn in Hungary, making it the country's top investor, Péter Szijjártó, Hungary's foreign minister, said this week. "We look at our co-operation with China as a huge chance and a huge opportunity," he said.

"With this 'all-weather partnership', Hungary is being elevated to the closest circle of friends that China has," said Abigaël Vasselier at Merics, a Berlin-based think-tank.

Analysts said the "all-weather" designation accorded Budapest appeared to mean Hungary's friendship ranks only after ties with Russia and Pakistan in the importance that Beijing accords them.

Moscow remains crucial to Beijing because it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a nuclear power and a rival of the US. Pakistan is important because it is a nuclear power, a neighbour and a rival of India.

How China defines its ties with other nations

Country	Designation
Russia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era
Pakistan	All-weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership
Hungary	All-weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the New Era
Kenya	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership
Germany	All-round Strategic Partnership
France	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
Spain	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Spain	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
Argentina	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
Brazil	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
UK	Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century
US	[No official partnership announced]

Selected countries, ordered by official designations thought to be most favoured by China. Source: FT

The designation of Hungary as an “all-weather” friend also means Budapest is seen by Beijing as participating in Xi’s personal project to lead the construction of what it calls “a global community of shared future”.

A lengthy explanation of this concept, published by China’s State Council, or cabinet last year, combines exhortations to oppose US “hegemony” and the resurgence of a “Cold War mentality” with blander objectives such as the creation of a green and sustainable world economy.

It represents Xi’s vision for how the world should work and reveals a rising level of confidence in Beijing that China’s status as an economic superpower should allow it to start creating a new global order.

“China is feeling rightly confident because of its industrial policies,” said Yu Jie, a China expert at Chatham House, a UK think-tank. “Beijing knows it has very competitive high-end manufacturing industries and a resilient, countrywide supply chain. This adds a crucial component to China’s sense of its own power in the world.”

Hungary’s main appeal to Beijing is that being inside the EU, the country can serve as a manufacturing base for Chinese companies seeking to skirt the bloc’s import tariffs.





Electric vehicles at a Chinese port. An EU anti-subsidy investigation into Chinese EVs is expected to conclude within weeks © Costfoto/NurPhoto/Getty Images

Politically, Orbán’s willingness to criticise the US, maintain close relations with Russia and strike an independent posture with regards to EU policies were the qualities Beijing found most endearing, Chinese officials said.

“The most important qualification for being an ‘all-weather’ partner is loyalty to China’s positions on geopolitical issues,” said one Chinese official, who declined to be identified.

Orbán displayed this characteristic in a news conference with Xi held for carefully selected journalists in his office atop the Buda Castle Hill in Budapest on Thursday.

Other Nato and EU members have sought to push China to reduce its support for Russia following Vladimir Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and have dismissed Beijing’s [call for an immediate ceasefire and peace talks](#) as akin to capitulation. But Orbán struck a very different tone.

“Today, Europe is on the side of war,” he said. “The only exception is Hungary, which calls for an immediate ceasefire and peace negotiations and supports all international efforts that point towards peace . . . We also support the Chinese peace initiative presented by Xi Jinping.”

For many in Europe such defiance of common positions is troubling.

“The EU is now holding its breath about whether Hungary is going to be playing the China card in the European Council,” said Vasselier. “This means whether Budapest will create a lack of unity on any key China-related issues or decisions.”

