

**EU-China relations**

## Spain calls for EU to forge China policy without US

'Europe must take its own decisions', says foreign minister José Manuel Albares



José Manuel Albares, foreign minister of Spain, said when China 'can be a partner — let's take advantage of that' © Michel Euler/AP

**Henry Foy** and **Laura Dubois** in Brussels, **Barney Jopson** in Madrid and **Joe Leahy** in Beijing 12 HOURS AGO

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The EU should craft its own China policy and not ape the Trump administration's confrontational stance, Spain's foreign minister has said, as Brussels tries to adapt to Washington's recent hostility towards European allies.

Some EU capitals have suggested embracing the US's hawkish stance on China to curry favour with President Donald Trump, but others warn against jeopardising the bloc's [economic relations](#) with Beijing.

"Europe must take its own decisions, on its own. And we have to decide when China can be a partner and when China is a competitor," José Manuel Albares told the Financial Times.

"We can have certainly a dialogue with the country that I think is our natural ally, the United States. But Europe must take its own decisions," he said.

A rift between Trump and Europe deepened in recent days after the US president's outreach to Russia and scathing remarks about Ukraine and its leader [Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#). The Trump administration has also suggested it could pull its security guarantees from Europe and played down the Russian threat to the continent.

The EU's 27 member states do not have a unified position on China, but the bloc's

relationship has been strained by trade issues and Beijing's support for Russia in its war in Ukraine.

During Trump's first term in office and even under his predecessor Joe Biden, the European Commission and key capitals were under pressure to take a more hawkish stance towards Beijing. The bloc labelled China a "systemic rival" in 2019.

But in a sign of a potential EU-China thaw, commission president Ursula von der Leyen this month called for a new effort to improve relations between Brussels and Beijing.



European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and China's leader Xi Jinping last year in Beijing © Pool Union Europeenne/ Agence Hans Lucas/Hans Lucas/Reuters Connect

Pedro Sánchez, prime minister of [Spain](#), has been actively courting Chinese investment, meeting President Xi Jinping twice in Beijing in the past two years and generating unease in some European capitals with his warm overtures.

Last October the EU imposed tariffs of up to 45 per cent on [Chinese electric vehicles](#), but the move caused deep divisions in the bloc. Sánchez in September said the plan should be "reconsidered" and Spain eventually abstained in the key vote. Germany and Hungary voted against the tariffs.

When China "can be a partner — let's take advantage of that", Albares said. "When we can be a competitor, we have to protect our citizens and our industry."

"Let's not forget that China, because of their demography, their size, [being] a

permanent member of the Security Council, is also indispensable for things as vital as climate change, for instance. So we need to have an engagement.”

Another senior Spanish official said “we are not going to pick sides” between the US and China. But some EU allies are concerned the Socialist-led government has not studied China as thoroughly as other EU powers.

Madrid, which is concerned about the future of its car industry, has been delighted by two Chinese investments in lithium battery production. China’s CATL in December said it would build a €4bn plant with Stellantis in Zaragoza while AESC, owned by China’s Envision, is planning a factory in Cáceres.

Madrid is also eager to avoid disruption to its exports of pork products to China, which imported more of the meat from Spain than anywhere else last year.

Chinese officials regularly scold their European counterparts for not being sufficiently independent in their foreign policy from the US and seek to divide opinion among countries in the EU on China.

During a visit to Europe last year, Xi lavished praise on China-friendly governments in Serbia and Hungary, the latter of which has received large Chinese investments in the automotive industry.

Some Chinese scholars said Beijing would be wary of EU members launching attempts to renew their ties with the country, seeing such moves as a “hedging tactic” against Trump.

“This would be some sort of pressure tactic by Europe against the American side: ‘If you push me too hard, I will lean towards China. During the first Trump administration, the same situation also took place,” said Zhu Feng, dean of the School of International Studies at Nanjing University.

“I don’t think the Trump shock will eventually completely configure great power relations. I think China will keep a cool head,” he said.

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