

Weekly Commentary 21

The “Axis of Evil” wins : Russia’s Offensive Rolls forward and China’s Diplomacy gains traction

According to the western media, there is now a new ”axis of evil” in the world. This is Russia, China, and Iran, and perhaps North Korea as well. According to the collective west, these are all bad people and are set to turn the tables on those countries promoting democratic values around the world, whether the rest of the world want them or not.

Well, in the last couple of weeks, the Axis of Evil has won some. One victory was on the battlefields of Ukraine, where Russia advanced significantly and has achieved enough momentum to try to capture Kharkiv, the second largest city in the country. On another front, the diplomatic one, China’s president Xi Jinping, launched a charm initiative in Europe and is said to have split the EU along lines which are friendly to the Axis on the one side and those that are vassals of the American hegemon on the other. If you are like me, who don’t think much of the propaganda coming out of western capitals, you would think it has been a good week.

Since the middle of the first quarter 2024,, Russia has changed tactics in the war in Ukraine, adopting a more mobile approach. For the longest time, the Russian army had been conducting an attrition strategy, or active defence, since around the Fall of 2022. That strategy has worked very well. It has resulted in the Ukrainian army running out of men (casualties are estimated at 600,000 both KIA and wounded with one Polish general putting an estimate of more than a million fatalities) as well as munitions, and just before the current Russian offensive, were suffering from a lopsided casualty ratio of about ten to one in favour of the Russians. This was attritional warfare at its worse, and the Kyiv regime is haemorrhaging in the war.

But all this while, the Russians never lost sight of their objective in their special military operation. They were single minded focused on decimating the manpower in the Kyiv army. They were never tempted to capture territory because if they can destroy the manpower in the opposing force, territorial gains would automatically follow. With that said, in recent months, the Kremlin has started to say that Odessa and Kharkiv were Russian cities implying that it was a matter of time before they would attempt to capture those cities and revert them to Moscow’s control especially since both cities had mostly Russian speakers.

Then the French President started to talk tough. For several weeks, he spoke of sending NATO boots on the ground, including 20,000 French Foreign Legion soldiers. A journalist said to be in the know, Stephen Brien, actually published two articles about a week ago, explaining how this would happen:

France sends troops to Ukraine: Russian report

Will the deployment of a Foreign Legion unit commanded by French officers trigger a wider European war?

By STEPHEN BRYEN MAY 4, 2024

Editors' Note, May 6, 2024: The author in an addendum posted on his Substack blog May 6 has discussed the sourcing. The first two paragraphs immediately below accordingly represent a rewrite to update the May 4 article, the thrust of which France has officially denied, and there are additional edits farther down in the text.

(Further update, May 7, 2024: Russia's Pravda has published a detailed article setting forth what Russian military bloggers who specialize in military matters have reported. The article, in English, is available [here](#).)

France has sent its first troops officially to Ukraine – the soldiers drawn from France's 3rd Infantry Regiment, which is one of the main elements of France's Foreign Legion (Légion étrangère), deployed in support of the Ukrainian 54th Independent Mechanized Brigade in Slavyansk – according to a report from the Russian news service Sputnik, itself sourced to the Russian Telegraph channel Military Chronicle.

Top War, another Russian site, notes that there is a slightly different version in which the unit number of the Ukrainian brigade receiving these reinforcements is not the 54th but the 7th. "For our part," cautions Top War, "we can neither confirm nor deny this information, so everything is at your discretion. At the same time, there is no smoke without fire."

In 2022 France had a number of Ukrainians and Russians in the Foreign Legion (Légion étrangère). They were allowed to leave the Legion and, in the case of the Ukrainians, return to Ukraine to join Ukrainian forces. It isn't clear if the Russians returned home.

The Legion today is run by French officers but the rank and file are generally foreigners. Under the current *anonymat* (being anonymous) rule, a volunteer who joins the Legion can decide whether to keep his given name or adopt a new one. Legionnaires serve for five-year terms, after which they can ask for French citizenship. If a legionnaire is wounded, he is entitled to gain French citizenship without any waiting period. There are no women in the Foreign Legion.

The initial group of French troops is reported to number around 100 out of around 1,500 French Foreign Legion soldiers scheduled to arrive in Ukraine.

Posting these troops directly in a hot combat area would be intended to help the Ukrainians resist Russian advances in Donbas. The first 100 are described as artillery and surveillance specialists.

For months French President Emanuel Macron has been threatening to send French troops to Ukraine. He has found little or no support from NATO countries outside of support from Poland and the Baltic States. Allegedly **the US opposes sending NATO soldiers to Ukraine (other than as advisors)**.

One of the questions to immediately arise from France's decision to send soldiers from its 3rd Infantry Regiment is whether this crosses the Russian red line on NATO involvement in Ukraine? **Will the Russians see this as initiating a wider war beyond Ukraine's borders?**

France itself does not have many troops to put on Ukraine's battlelines, should the French government want to do so. According to reports, today France cannot support an overseas deployment of a full division and won't have this capability until 2027 at the earliest.

A decision to send Foreign Legionnaires should be seen as a peculiar French compromise. France is not deploying its home army and, besides the small number of officers, the men sent generally are not French citizens.

France's decision has two meanings, beyond the obvious one of potentially triggering a pan-European war.

First of all, **it allows Macron to send troops to Ukraine and act like a tough guy without encountering much home opposition.** With few French citizens being sent and with the lack of conscription or other measures in the offing, the potential fury of Macron's political opponents is reduced.

The second reason is Macron's anger at seeing French troops, almost all from the Legion, getting kicked out of Sahelian Africa and replaced by Russians. Control of Francophone Africa and the riches it provides to French politicians has been broken by the revolt and revolution in Africa and a decisive tilt to Russia – either directly or through PMC Wagner (the Wagner Group), now clearly under Vladimir Putin's direct control.

This "humiliation" is felt in the Élysée Palace and particularly by Macron, who, his opponents say, has lost France's influence and harmed France's overseas mining and business interests.

A particular blow is in Niger, an important supplier of uranium to France. France gets 70 percent of its electrical power from nuclear power generators. Global uranium supplies are tightening and prices rising. With Russia and Kazakhstan, along with Niger, on the top of the heap in terms of supplying uranium for nuclear reactors, France has a home economic security problem. The US decision to ban Russian uranium (but probably not realistically, in the next few years) the Russians could deal a serious blow to France and the United States by cutting off supplies.

Given the risk of losing access to uranium, or at least enough of it to supply France's reactors, Macron has to hope that his troop deployments to Ukraine won't trigger a Russian embargo on sales to France.

It isn't clear how the Legionnaires can help the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians know how to operate artillery, and they have sophisticated intelligence support, some of it generated by their own FPV drones and spies and some of it thanks to US and other NATO intelligence and surveillance assets supporting Ukraine.

Anyway, the Ukrainian issue is not about how to use artillery but where the ammunition is supposed to come from. Ukraine continues to complain it lacks adequate supplies for 155mm howitzers.

A decision to put the Legion soldiers in Slavyansk is extremely provocative and goes against statements from the French side, including Macron, to the effect that if France sent troops they would replace Ukrainian army units in western Ukraine who could, therefore, be moved eastward to fight the Russians. As Slavyansk is on the front line, **this French image of a soft deployment is turning into a war with Russia directly.**

A key question is how NATO will react to the French decision to deploy. As France is acting on its own without NATO's backing, the French cannot claim support from NATO under its famous Article 5, the collective security component of the NATO Treaty.

Should the Russians attack French troops outside of Ukraine it would be justified because France has decided to be a combatant, and forcing an Article 5 vote would seem to be difficult if not impossible.

Of course, NATO members individually could support the French, either by sending their own forces or by backstopping the French logistically and in communications. For example, there is no way Foreign Legion soldiers can go to Ukraine without passing through Poland. Will the Russians see this as evidence they are at war both with France and Poland?

Right now no one can answer any of these questions with any degree of certainty. It is unlikely the Russians will long tolerate a buildup of French army troops, even if they are Foreign Legion soldiers. What Russia will do in response is not certain.

Stephen Bryen served as staff director of the Near East Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as a deputy undersecretary of defense for policy.

The Russians were not happy with the display of French aggression. Macron and several other NATO countries have been upset by the poor performance of the Ukrainian military

and were afraid that the Russians would just continue westwards after they have beaten Kyiv's troops. And Macron was the champion of NATO intervention on behalf of Ukraine. And there were the Brits saying they will send Storm Shadow long range missiles to Ukraine so that they can attack Russia on its home ground. Even the US and Germany were wary to pick a fight with Russia because nobody wanted to exchange blows with the largest nuclear power on the planet, certainly not over Ukraine. So Moscow called in the French and British ambassadors and gave them a severe dressing down. Since that verbal demarche, both countries have not said another word to provoke the Russians.

Russia also announced that it would conduct tactical nuclear exercises...

And in the meantime, the war on the ground in the Donbass has heated up. For too long, the NATO countries have disparaged the Russian military's capabilities, saying that Ukraine is in a stalemate with their larger neighbour and there was no forward movement by the Russians in spite of the fact that Russia is acknowledged to be the more powerful military force. The frontlines have largely remained static for most of the two years of the war. But that changed soon enough.

Since the fall of Avdivka, in Feb 2024, the Russians have been making small but significant gains in territory along several parts of the front. Another several hundred, maybe thousands, sq km of Ukraine have gone over to the Russian army. And it is becoming obvious that the Russians are winning even in terms of territory. The Russian defence ministry has announced that it has begun an "offensive". This is notable as previously, the Russians were calling their actions "active defence". And this has evolved in the last few days into an attack on Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine.

According to the FT, the territorial war has started in earnest:

Russia launches assault on Kharkiv region in north-eastern Ukraine

Moscow uses superior weaponry and manpower in attempt to make gains before arrival of more US military aid

Isobel Koshiw in Kyiv and Ben Hall in London 11 HOURS AGO (Friday, 10 May 2024)

Russian forces have launched an attack on Ukraine's north-eastern Kharkiv region as *Moscow* aims to take advantage of its superior weaponry and manpower before the arrival of more US military aid.

Kyiv's defence ministry said Russian armoured units attempted to break through Ukrainian defensive lines early on Friday after conducting artillery and air strikes around Vovchansk, a town 70km north-east of Kharkiv city.

"As of now, these attacks have been repelled; battles of varying intensity continue," the ministry said on the social media platform X. "Reserve units have been deployed to strengthen the defence in this area. The Defense Forces of Ukraine continue to hold back the enemy's offensive." (This is the Ukrainian narrative which has always proven to be lies.)

Commenting on the Russian attack, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said: “Ukraine met them there with our troops, brigades and artillery. It is important that they can increase and pull up more forces in this direction, but our military, our command knew about this and calculated their forces to meet the enemy with fire. Now there is a fierce battle in this direction.” (Give it a few more days, and it is likely the story will change.)

Oleh Syniehubov, governor of Kharkiv region, said “unsuccessful attempts by sabotage and reconnaissance groups to break through the line” followed a nightlong bombardment of the area with artillery and glide bombs. Ukrainian officials and western analysts have anticipated for some weeks that Russian forces could launch an offensive across the border into the Kharkiv or Sumy regions of Ukraine. Until now, Russia has concentrated its offensives in the eastern Donetsk region, particularly around the strategically important town of Chasiv Yar.

John Kirby, a spokesperson for the US National Security Council, told reporters Russia was likely to increase the “intensity” of its operations near Kharkiv, in an attempt to create a “shallow buffer zone” along the Ukrainian border with Russia.

While Moscow had some advantages because of the lapse in US funding for Ukraine earlier in the year, he said he did not expect it to make any “breakthroughs” now that US military aid was flowing again, and predicted Ukraine would “withstand” Russian attacks this year.

A Ukrainian military official told the Financial Times on Wednesday that Russia was preparing for offensives along the north-eastern frontline in order to draw Ukrainian forces away from Donetsk where, heavily outgunned and outmanned, they are struggling to hold their defensive lines.

Parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, collectively known as the Donbas, have been occupied since 2014. Major General Vadym Skibitsky, the deputy head of Ukraine’s GUR military intelligence service, told The Economist last week that Russia had 35,000 troops from its northern grouping based across the border from Kharkiv and was looking to increase the number to up to 50,000.

He said this would not be sufficient to seize Kharkiv but could enable Moscow to conduct a “quick operation to come in and out”. Analysts said a Russian offensive of this kind would be either intended to create a buffer zone along the border or as a “fixing operation” intended to force Ukraine to divert forces from its main defensive effort in the Donbas region.

Frontelligence, an analytical group run by a former Ukrainian officer, said Russian forces had crossed the border near the Ukrainian village of Strilecha, west of Vovchansk, and had seized a number of settlements nearby. (This is most likely the actual situation on the ground.)

“It’s an anticipated manoeuvre to divert Ukrainian resources from the main Russian offensive in Donbas. Considering manpower shortages, Ukraine will be forced to

redeploy some personnel,” the group posted on X. Russian forces would likely “deploy more units to penetrate additional border areas or to reinforce initial successes” but had not yet breached Ukraine’s main line of defence, which sits further back from the frontier, it added.

Russian is likely trying to exploit the lag between US Congressional approval of \$61bn of aid for Ukraine last month and US weaponry and ammunition reaching the frontlines. There have also been delays in European supplies. Czech President Petr Pavel earlier this week said an emergency consignment of artillery munitions crowd-funded by EU countries was now due to arrive in Ukraine in June. Czech-led procurement efforts had been delayed by Russian “countermeasures”, he told Germany’s ARD television.

Ukraine is also due to expand its mobilisation efforts to raise more soldiers for its armed forces, with new laws coming into effect later this month.

China is separately chalking up brownie points, when President Xi went on a charm offensive in Europe, visiting the continent for the first time in five years. He first stopped in Paris, where he met with President Emmanuel Macron. This is probably a continuation of a rapport between the two leaders since they had a good meeting in China when Macron was on a state visit several months ago. This report was found in CGTN:

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Europe demonstrated that China has become a responsible major country with greater international influence, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Saturday.

President Xi paid state visits to France, Serbia and Hungary from May 5 to 10 at the invitation of French President Emmanuel Macron, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, and Hungarian President Tamas Sulyok and Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Xi's French President Emmanuel Macron held talks with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on Monday that focused on trade disputes — including lifting immediate tariff threats on Cognac exports — and Ukraine-related diplomatic efforts.

Xi was in France for a two-day state visit to open his European tour.

Speaking alongside Xi after their meeting at the Elysee presidential palace, Macron said that France hopes China's influence on Moscow would help to move Russia toward ending the war in Ukraine.

“We welcome the Chinese authorities’ commitments to refrain from selling any weapons or aid” and to “strictly control” sales of products and technologies that can be used for both civilian and military purposes, Macron said.

China claims neutrality in the war.

“History has repeatedly proven that any conflict can ultimately be resolved only through negotiation,” Xi said. “We call on all parties to restart contact and dialogue.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently announced plans to visit China this month.

Last year, Macron appealed to Xi to “bring Russia to its senses,” but the call wasn’t followed by any apparent action by Beijing.

Both leaders also expressed their concerns regarding the situation in the Middle East, where Macron said France and China share the “same goals,” that is “to achieve an immediate cease-fire to release hostages, protect the populations, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, encourage a regional deescalation and reopen a political perspective.”

Xi called the Israel-Hamas war a “tragedy” that is “a test of human conscience.”

“The international community must do something. We call for an immediate, comprehensive and sustainable cease-fire in Gaza,” he said.

In addition, Xi expressed China’s willingness to work with France “to take the Paris Olympics as an opportunity to advocate a global cease-fire and cessation of war during the Games.”

Macron advocates for making the Paris Games “a diplomatic moment of peace” and respect the Olympic Truce.

Trade issues also were at the top of the agenda as Macron denounced the trade practices of China as shoring up protections and subsidies.

Macron thanked Xi for his “openness about the provisional measures toward French Cognac.” The remark came after China opened an anti-dumping investigation into Cognac and other European brandy earlier this year.

A French top diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive talks, said that Xi agreed not to apply tariffs in the short-term pending further investigation.

French gifts to the Chinese president on Monday included luxury bottles of Cognac. Xi reciprocated with Chinese-language editions of “Madame Bovary” and other classic French novels.

France hopes to be able to continue to export its products, including brandy and cosmetics, to the Chinese market.

Earlier, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen joined both leaders for a meeting meant to address broader European Union concerns.

The EU launched an investigation last year into Chinese subsidies and could impose tariffs on electric vehicles exported from China. The 27-member bloc last month opened another inquiry into Chinese wind turbine makers.

“For trade to be fair, access to both markets needs to be reciprocal,” von der Leyen said after the meeting. “Our market is and remains open to fair competition and to investments, but it is not good for Europe if it harms our security and makes us vulnerable.”

She said that Europe “will not waver from making tough decisions needed to protect its economy and its security.”

The discussions were expected to be closely watched from Washington, a month before U.S. President Joe Biden is expected to pay his own state visit to France.

Xi’s European trip, the first in five years, seeks to rebuild relations at a time of global tensions. After France, he will head to Serbia and Hungary.

Xi’s visit marks the 60th anniversary of France-China diplomatic relations, and follows Macron’s trip to China in April 2023. Macron prompted controversy on that trip when he said that France wouldn’t blindly follow the U.S. in getting involved in crises that aren’t its concern, apparently referring to China’s demands for unification with Taiwan.

Several groups — including International Campaign for Tibet and France’s Human Rights League — urged Macron to put human rights issues at the heart of his talks with Xi. Protesters demonstrated in Paris as Xi arrived on Sunday, calling for a free Tibet.

Amnesty International called on Macron to demand the release of Uyghur economics professor Ilham Tohti, who was jailed in China for life in 2014 on charges of promoting separatism, and other imprisoned activists.

On Monday, media watchdog Reporters Without Borders staged a protest in front of the Arc de Triomphe monument to denounce Xi’s visit, calling the Chinese president “one of the greatest predators of press freedom.” The group says 119 journalists are imprisoned in the country.

Macron said in an interview published Sunday that he would raise human rights concerns. He didn’t mention the issue in his public comments Monday.

The second day of the visit is meant to be more personal. Macron has invited Xi to visit the Tourmalet Pass in the Pyrenees mountains, where the French leader spent time as a child to see his grandmother. The trip is meant to be a reciprocal gesture after Xi took Macron last year to the residence of the governor of Guangdong province, where his father once lived.

Barbara Surk in Nice, Angela Charlton in Paris and Fu Ting in Washington contributed to this story.

Xi's visit exposes fault lines in European unity

Tara Varma

May 8, 2024

French President Emmanuel Macron's ambition to transform his country's relationship with China isn't new. Macron's first visit to China dates to 2018, mere months after he was elected president. He then vowed to come back at least once a year to cement Franco-Chinese ties. The following year, he hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping in Paris, alongside Angela Merkel, then Germany's chancellor, and Jean-Claude Juncker, then the president of the European Commission.

Xi's 2019 visit came right after the European Commission published its new EU-China strategy, which formalized the triptych systemic rival-competitor-partner relationship, as it would come to be characterized. Even back then, Macron wanted to give Xi's visit to France a European flavor. He reiterated the same willingness when he visited China in 2023 with Ursula von der Leyen, the current president of the European Commission. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic had occurred in the meantime, precipitating Europe's reckoning with its dependencies on China, and the subsequent weaponization of those dependencies by Beijing.

Macron's visit to China last year made waves when he told reporters that Europe must resist pressure to become America's vassal, giving the impression that Europe was caught between America and China. This modus operandi is characteristic of Macron, who is adept at pushing sensitive buttons and sometimes too eager to have difficult conversations. His trip last year happened not only after COVID-19, but also while Russia, a very close partner to China, was—and still is—waging war against Ukraine. Before his trip, Macron asserted that he wanted to convince Xi to get Putin to back down. That was to no avail.

Xi's visit and Macron's goals

This is Xi's first trip to Europe in five years. Macron's charm offensive during Xi's visit to Paris (which is Xi's first stop before Serbia and Hungary) is characteristic of the French leader in that it aims to achieve at least two separate goals. One is to convince Xi to end, or decrease, his support for Putin in Russia's war against Ukraine, and notably not to provide Russia with key military materiel. The second is a corollary to the first: to form a closer personal relationship with Xi. To advance this goal, Macron took Xi and his wife, Peng Liyuan, to the southwest of France to visit

the home of Macron's late grandmother, whom he was very close to. Macron occasionally resorts to such shows of personal contact, like when he hosted Putin at the Fort of Brégançon in 2019. France and China are also celebrating the 60th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations.

Xi's visit to Paris came at a time when the war in Ukraine has increasingly become a meat grinder, as Putin relentlessly attacks Ukraine's infrastructure and civilian population. As Ukraine only recently revealed that it foiled a Russian plot to assassinate President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, time is of the essence.

Macron invited von der Leyen once again to the Xi meeting in Paris.

They discussed international crises, particularly the war in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East, as well as trade and people-to-people contacts. Other topics included common action on addressing global issues, such as climate change, protecting biodiversity, and alleviating poor countries' financial burdens. The situation in the Middle East warranted a separate bilateral communiqué, in which both France and China called for a cease-fire in Gaza, among other issues.

Having von der Leyen at the table was key to sending a common European message, especially as she is known to be tougher on trade issues, having initiated the European Commission's first economic security strategy last year—which was professedly country-agnostic but quite clearly directed at China. Notwithstanding Von der Leyen's presence, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's absence was notable. Scholz visited China twice in the past two years and rebuffed Macron's proposition to join him on these visits, similar to how he turned down Macron's invitation to participate in the meeting with Xi and von der Leyen in Paris this week. Macron and Scholz did, however, meet on May 2 in Paris to prepare for Xi's visit. These mixed messages seem to undermine impressions of European unity.

Deliverables and what comes next

For Xi, the visit has domestic importance, as he wants to demonstrate to the Chinese public that he is still fêted in Europe. Xi also sought to encourage Macron's ambition for European strategic autonomy, an element that was already present in Macron's visit to China last year. Xi's interpretation of strategic autonomy is one where Europe turns away from the United States and moves toward other partners, particularly China. But this is not France's or Europe's interpretation. Europeans' vision of strategic autonomy intends for Europe to build greater capacity and the ability to act, from a political, economic, and security and defense standpoint, to reinforce the trans-Atlantic link with Washington. By contrast, Xi's goal is to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe and to show that there are limits to trans-Atlantic unity on China.

For Macron, the return on investment of his charm offensive might be even lower than expected, whether on trade or foreign policy. Macron doesn't want to give up on convincing Xi to do less with Putin, but there is no indication that Xi will do so.

The rest of Xi's European tour suggests no inclination to such compromise, nor any larger willingness to curtail Russia's action.

Indeed, Xi has now moved [from France to Serbia](#), where he will mark the 25th anniversary of NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. From there, Xi will travel to Hungary, where Viktor Orbán will host him in pomp, and contribute to undermining European unity on China, particularly as Orbán seeks to entice Chinese electric vehicle manufacturing.

Maintaining European unity on China is key, but Macron and von der Leyen can't do it alone. One may fear that what remains of Xi's Europe trip will be the Chinese president's capacity to divide and conquer.

After the success in France, Xi Jinping went to Hungary and Serbia, both of which are more friendly to China than the rank and file EU member.

Analysis: Is the West losing a battle with China for Serbia's heart?

May 09, 2024 9:00 PM

- By [Rade Rankovic](#)
- [Jovana Djurovic](#)

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Serbia this week brought out a crowd waving Serbian and Chinese flags and praising the "ironclad" friendship of two countries. Elsewhere in the West, it raised many questions about Serbia's future role in Europe.

Analysts say that was exactly the idea. At a time of global rivalry between Beijing and Washington, the messages Xi delivered from Belgrade appeared aimed at a much wider audience.

Xi and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic signed a number of bilateral agreements on Wednesday, which followed the 25th anniversary of NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during NATO's 1999 campaign to halt the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo. The U.S. apologized for that action, calling it "a mistake."

David Shullman, an expert on China with the Washington-based Atlantic Council, told VOA that Xi's arrival in Belgrade on the May 7 anniversary was aimed at sending a broader message in the context of the war in Ukraine: that China is not a "warmonger" like the U.S. and NATO.

Chinese messaging, Shullman said, "parrots Russia's messaging about the war in Ukraine, about not putting a blame on Russia, but putting a **blame on the U.S.**,

NATO for 'fanning the flames' of the war, (It is quite simple really, it is telling that the Americans are sending weapons to Taiwan, when it claims to acknowledge that Taiwan is part of China, is in fact war mongering as they did when they were sending weapons to Ukraine way before 2022) continuing to support the Ukrainians, and that China is the one that's the force for peace and stability. ...

"There is an awareness in the Chinese system [that] this is a key binding point between China and Serbia, and it fits into that message that China has been pushing about NATO and the U.S."

China's president referred to the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in an op-ed published Tuesday in Serbia's pro-government newspaper *Politika*: "The people of China value peace, but they will never allow a historical tragedy to happen again."

Paul McCarthy, director for Europe at the International Republican Institute in Washington, agreed that the timing of Xi's visit was no accident.

"I think that Xi's entire visit to Europe was organized around the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing," he said. "It is too symbolic an opportunity for the Chinese to miss and underlines, so to speak, the position of Serbia and the strategic disagreement with the West that has been going on for 25 years."

Xi and Vucic signed a statement on the two countries' "shared future," which the Serbian president described as being a level above the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership the two countries agreed to in 2016.

According to the Atlantic Council's Shullman, Xi has often used the phrase "shared future" to indicate he wants a new balance of power in the world.

"The story of a shared future is how China wants to establish a global order that is less U.S.-led, that is multipolar, that is a more 'democratic' international order — as the Chinese say," he said.

"In essence, it is an order that is no longer led by the U.S. and in which China plays a more significant role."

He added: "The fact that Serbia is spoken of as the first European country that will be part of the community and 'common future' shows that for Chinese leaders, especially Xi, Serbia is of great importance ... as an economic partner and as a country that is a candidate for the EU."

In addition, Xi's visit to Serbia signaled to Washington that China has reliable partners in Europe and that the U.S. "will not be able to completely win over Europe to its side."

China owns mines and factories across Serbia and has provided billions of dollars' worth of funding for roads, bridges and various facilities, becoming Serbia's key partner in much-needed infrastructure development.

Still, some experts say the future of cooperation between Belgrade and Beijing is uncertain, given the complicated relations between the U.S. and China.

Vuk Vuksanovic, a senior researcher at the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, told VOA that broadening cooperation between Serbia and China from a strategic partnership to the level of "building a community of Serbia and China with a common future in the new era" is little more than a diplomatic game that suits both governments at the moment.

He added that the future relationship depends much more on Beijing than on Belgrade.

"The previous strategic partnership agreement was a joint statement from 2009 that had warm rhetoric but did not actually bring about any monumental transformation of those relations," he said.

"And that was until the moment when China showed greater interest in the Balkans due to the Belt and Road Initiative," a massive, Chinese-led global infrastructure development strategy. "I think the key question for the U.S. will be whether that cooperation will include some major project in the field of defense and high technology."

The International Republican Institute's McCarthy said it is unclear how the agreements between Serbia and China and the plans for a "common future" will affect Serbia's relationship with the West.

Still, he noted, a free-trade agreement between China and Serbia that comes into force in July "turns Serbia more towards the East," raising the question of "how serious is Serbia on its European path."

He added: "I have to say that, from Washington's perspective, they might feel like they're losing the battle for Serbia's heart, so to speak."

This article originated in VOA's Serbian Service with contributions from Dino Jahic, Marko Protic and Stefan Miljus.

Over to HUNGAR...Y

BY BELA SZANDELSKY

Updated 3:45 AM GMT+8, May 9, 2024

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in Hungary late Wednesday, the final stop on his five-day European tour, where he's expected to

finalize a number of agreements with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán that will deepen China's economic footprint in the region.

Xi is set to spend two nights in the Hungarian capital Budapest where he will meet with Orbán and Hungarian President Tamás Sulyok. Talks will center on future Chinese investments in the Central European country, which has courted deep economic ties with Beijing even as mainstream European leaders have pursued more protectionist policies to limit its reach on the continent.

Orbán, a nationalist populist whose illiberal policies have pushed him to the fringes of the European Union, made his country the first in the 27-member bloc to participate in Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative. Hungary has straddled a middle ground between its membership in the EU and NATO and a willingness to establish diplomatic and trade relationships with autocratic governments outside those groupings.

Hungary's foreign minister, Péter Szijjártó, told a news conference on Monday that Xi and Hungarian officials would sign at least 16 bilateral agreements during the visit, Xi's first to the country as president.

Szijjártó called the visit "historic," and pointed out that **China had provided more foreign investment to Hungary than any other country in 2023**. He added that some of the agreements to be signed would involve expansion of Belt and Road in Hungary, and could include investments in infrastructure and energy.

Xi's arrival in Budapest came after a two-day visit to Serbia's capital Belgrade, where he signed an agreement on building a "shared future" with the Balkan country which, like Hungary, is considered friendly to Russia's Vladimir Putin.

China has claimed neutrality in the Ukraine conflict, but has refused to call the Russian assault an invasion and has been accused of bolstering Russia's military capacity. Hungary has condemned the Russian invasion but threatened to block EU sanctions against Moscow and refused to provide Kyiv with military support.

Xi and Orbán are likely to discuss the war in Ukraine, Hungary's neighbor to the east. Hungary's government has vocally urged China to take a leading role in brokering peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, and expressed its support for a China-proposed peace plan.

Before Xi's arrival on Wednesday, a number of demonstrators gathered in central Budapest to protest his visit and call for autonomy for Tibet, which lies under Chinese control.

Tibor Hendrey, a representative for the Tibet Aid Society, said that doing business with China is important for Hungary's economy, but highlighted the dangers of a relationship with a country with a spotty democratic and human rights records.

"We need a good relationship with a great empire, that's not a problem. The problem is that China has a completely different culture, a completely different approach to

human rights,” Hendrey said. “I feel that they want to export this kind of thinking here to Hungary, and that the Hungarian government is willing to accept that.”

CHINA / DIPLOMACY

China, Hungary elevate ties during Xi's visit in Budapest

Mutual respect, cooperative approach play decisive role: experts

By

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China and Hungary decided Thursday to elevate bilateral relations to all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to this Central and Eastern European country, which experts say is a result of fruitful cooperation between the two sides and carries significance to China-Europe relations.

The announcement was made after Xi held talks with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. They jointly witnessed exchange of cooperation documents and met with the press.

The China-Hungary relationship is now at its best in history, Xi said earlier on Thursday when meeting with Hungarian President Tamas Sulyok at the Sandor Palace in Budapest.

The bilateral relationship has stood the test of the changing international landscape and continued to grow in depth from a friendship across the continent to a friendly and cooperative partnership and then to a comprehensive strategic partnership, Xi said.

Xi arrived in Budapest on Wednesday, on the last leg of his three-nation European trip. Xi previously visited Hungary 15 years ago.

He was warmly welcomed by Orban and his wife at Budapest Airport upon arrival. The Hungarian Air Force sent fighter jets to escort Xi's plane after it entered the country's airspace.

Ju Weiwei, deputy director of the Central and Eastern Europe Office, Institute of European Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the Global Times on Thursday that elevate bilateral relations to all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era is a big achievement of bilateral relations and is a result of fruitful cooperation between China and Hungary in all aspects such as infrastructure, investment and culture as well as respect for each other's core interests and the solid basis of public opinion in both countries.

"This has positive significance to future China-Europe relations and cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe," said Ju.

Both Chinese and Hungarian experts believe mutual respect and a cooperative approach with no ideological strings attached have played decisive roles in bilateral relations.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of China-Hungary diplomatic relations. Hungary was one of the first countries in the world to establish official relations with China.

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said in a recent interview with the Global Times that it's a great honor that the two countries celebrate the 75th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic ties with a presidential visit. He believes that this is positive feedback showing that China and Hungary are on the right track and this is very important to Hungary.

Mutual respect

Since the establishment of their diplomatic ties, China and Hungary have always respected each other, treated each other as equals, and pursued mutual benefit, Xi said when meeting with the Hungarian president.

Szijjarto told the Global Times that mutual respect, which is currently missing in international politics, is a really strong and stable basis for the successful cooperation between China and Hungary.

Over the years, China-Hungary cooperation has been developing in a steady manner. In 2015, Hungary became the first European country to join the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative. In 2017, the bilateral relationship was elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership. The Hungary-Serbia railway that is under construction is the flagship project of the BRI in Central and Eastern Europe.

On world affairs, China and Hungary often share similar stances. Despite being an EU member state and a NATO member, Hungary has remained committed to not sending any weapons to Ukraine.

Levente Horvath, director of the Eurasia Center of John von Neumann University and chief advisor to the governor of the Central Bank of Hungary, told the Global Times that **the relationship between Hungary and China is getting increasingly close because they think similarly about international relations.**

"Hungary seeks cooperation with countries based on its own national interests. It recognizes that pragmatic cooperation can bring promising prospects while confrontation and sanctions can only bring lose-lose scenarios and be exploited by those with ulterior motives," Ju told the Global Times.

Bridge linking East and West

In 2010, Hungary began implementing the "Opening to the East" policy, underlining the fact that **the wind is blowing from the East in the world economy.**

In recent years, Hungary has become a major logistics hub for China-Europe trade. Hungary is also Europe's electric vehicle hub — Chinese EV maker BYD announced in late 2023 that it will build its first European electric vehicle production base in Hungary and the plant will produce EVs and plug-in hybrids for the Europe market.

Hungary's connectivity strategy makes it a key country to connect West and East. Experts also believe that Hungary can play a facilitating role in bridging China and Europe.

On several occasions, Hungary has stood aside from or opposed EU positions against China. For instance, in 2021, Hungary blocked an EU statement criticizing China's National Security Law for Hong Kong.

"Hungary is special among the EU. It does not oppose the bloc every time when it comes to China-related issues, but it has played a special role in China-Europe relations. Hungary is a partner China should seriously cooperate with," Sun Keqin, a research fellow at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, told the Global Times.

On July 1, Hungary will take over the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU. Foreign Minister Szijjarto believes Hungary can use the opportunity to influence the EU's policy toward China.

"We will be able to share with our European colleagues in a very credible manner how helpful, how useful and how profitable it can be to work together with China," Szijjarto told the Global Times in the interview.

There is another commentary on the diplomacy that is ongoing from the South China Morning Post:

Chinese leader Xi Jinping's Serbia trip 'timed to increase tensions' with West, US envoy says

- Xi's arrival and remarks published in Serbia coincided with 25th anniversary of US air strike that killed three Chinese journalists
- Timing remarks underscores Beijing's close ties with Serbia since siding with the former Yugoslavia against Nato's air campaign in the 1990s

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By: Finbarr Bermingham in Brussels

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SCMP

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Serbia on the 25th anniversary of the Nato bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was "timed to increase tensions" with the West, a senior US official has said.

Xi touched down in the Serbian capital on Tuesday as part of a three-stop tour of Europe, his first visit to the continent since 2019.

His arrival in Belgrade on May 7, the date a US air strike hit China's embassy in the country in 1999, was seen as a pointed move that would ensure the trip had a geopolitical edge.

"Twenty-five years ago today, Nato flagrantly bombed the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia, killing three Chinese journalists—Ms. Shao Yunhuan, Mr. Xu Xinghu and his wife Zhu Ying. This we should never forget," Xi wrote in an article placed in Serbian newspaper Politika on Tuesday.

In an online briefing on Wednesday to mark the end of his tenure in Belgrade, Gabriel Escobar, Washington's outgoing special envoy for the Western Balkans, criticised the timing of Xi's visit.

"The visit was timed to increase tensions between Serbia and the rest of the Western community, and it's unhelpful," he said.

"We – the United States has said that the bombing of the Chinese embassy in 1999, was an accident," Escobar explained. "We've apologised. I believe we've actually even paid reparations to the families. But... I do believe that the timing of the visit was unfortunate but deliberate."

The strike was part of Nato's military campaign in the former Yugoslavia, setting off a diplomatic crisis between Beijing and Washington as well as the biggest anti-US protests across China in decades.

The US and its Nato allies insisted the "entirely unintended" strike had meant to target a Yugoslav military facility and the embassy had been misidentified in a "tragic mistake".

However, many in China – including government officials – rejected that characterisation and remain unconvinced.

China has maintained close ties with Serbia since siding with the former Yugoslavia against Nato's air campaign in the 1990s.

On Wednesday, Xi reaffirmed his "ironclad" support for Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, with the two leaders backing each other's territorial claims over Taiwan and Kosovo, respectively.

China, as part of the United Nations' Security Council, has helped ensure that Kosovo, which the Serbian government views as a breakaway province, from receiving official recognition at the body.

"We have a clear and simple position regarding Chinese territorial integrity. Yes, Taiwan is China," Vucic said on Wednesday, addressing a crowd estimated to number 20,000 people, alongside the Chinese leader.

The pair signed an agreement boosting their strategic partnership to a "community with a shared future in new era", while a free-trade agreement is set to kick in on July 1.

Serbia is a candidate country for European Union membership, but the EU did not immediately respond to questions about whether Belgrade's expanded ties with Beijing would affect relations with Brussels.

The long-standing Hungarian leader has been a stumbling block to European unity over Ukraine and a strong backer of Chinese positions on human rights and economic issues.

In a separate article in the pro-Orban newspaper Magyar Nemzet on Wednesday, Xi wrote that "China and Hungary share similar views and positions close to each other on international and regional issues."

"We have embarked on the right path of independent and autonomous friendly foreign relations of sovereign countries," he continued.

Escobar, who is imminently departing from his role as deputy assistant secretary of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, said that Xi had chosen countries "that are open to challenging the unity of the Euro-Atlantic community".

The Biden administration has had a troubled relationship with populist Orban, who has openly expressed his wish to see former President Donald Trump to win in November's US election.

"We caution all of our partners and all of our interlocutors to be very aware of China's agenda in Europe and China's agenda with regard to the Euro-Atlantic community," Escobar said.

To conclude, Xi's diplomacy has a strategy. Firstly, two of the three countries don't buy into the idea that all Europe should have the same foreign policy as the United States. In France, China was establishing a relationship that would survive the pressures of a US hegemon forcing the Europeans to adhere to its politics. In Serbia, China was all about trade and an expansion of the BRI, since Serbia is on the extreme right flank of the EU and if the fast railways and roads end there, it would be the right place to start off a Europe based BRI, replacing Italy which quit the BRI on America's persuasion. Finally, the deals being forged with Hungary, includes a factory for BYD, which is how EVs will enter the EU without tariffs or any restrictions that can be put on Chinese exports.

So it seems that the Chinese have got it all worked out. Let's see how von der Leyen has "tools" to restrict Hungary's freedom to make its own friends, when China brings more benefits to the country more than the EU can provide it.

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