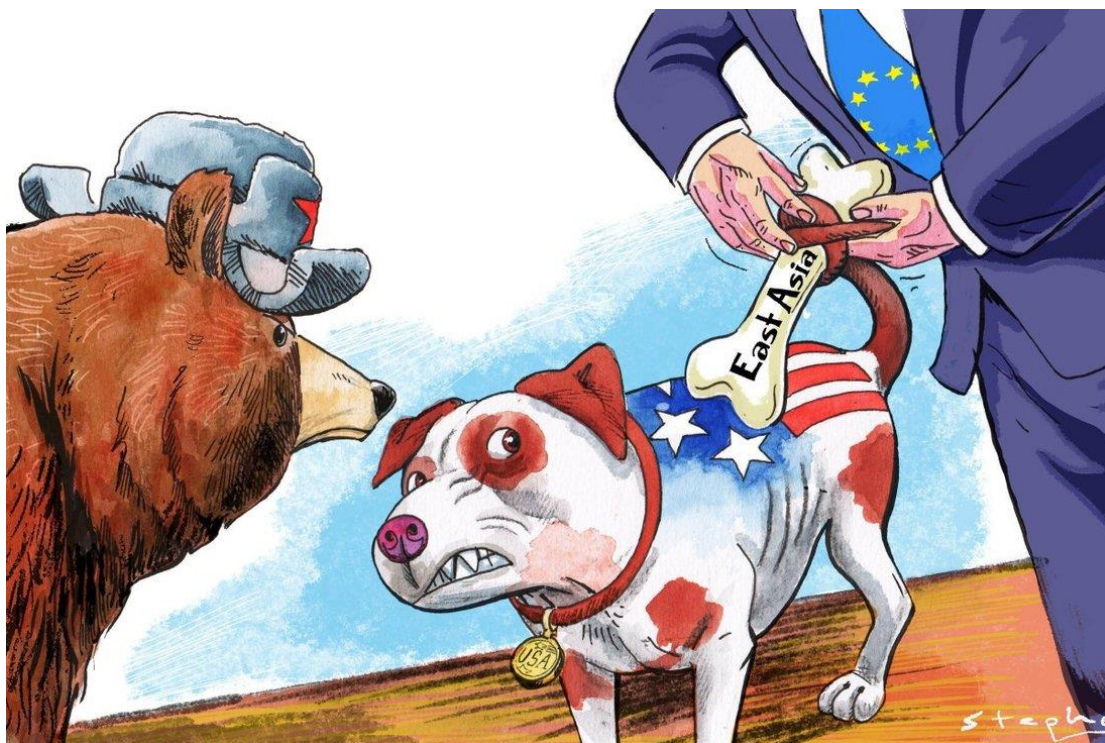


## Is Europe using China as part of a wag-the-dog manoeuvre on the US?



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By Terry Su  
23 May, 2022

As Washington enjoys the effect of its swift and draconian sanctions on Russia for the invasion of Ukraine, alliances are a prominent aspect of its triumphant stocktaking. The Biden administration is known to consider the role of alliances in the pursuit of the US' worldwide interests a top priority, in stark contrast to former US president Donald Trump who championed "America first".

Indeed, Washington is perfectly in its element because of the Ukraine crisis. Nato, topping its list of allies, has been significantly strengthened, despite being deemed a vitiated coalition not long ago.

Europe duly cooperated with the United States on joint initiatives to thwart Russia, although doing so would mean hopes for "European autonomy" are dashed once again.

European leaders put a halt to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline linking Russian gas to Europe via Germany, expelled many Russian banks from Swift and increased their defence budgets (especially in the case of Germany). The European Union recently proposed to cut itself off from Russia's oil and gas supply by the end of the year. European countries provided Ukrainians with weapons on an increasing scale and scope. Finland and Sweden, two long-time neutral states, have formally applied to join Nato.

"Nato has never, never been more united than it is today", said US President Joe Biden in March – admittedly with a touch of boastfulness, but one can hardly blame him.

Beneath all these moves and the rhetoric, however, Europe's angst of another kind runs real and deep. The severing of ties with Russia hurts, resulting in soaring inflation, disruptions to production and hardships in daily life. But none of these problems are comparable to the havoc wreaked on peace.

After all, Europe was the main battlefield of the two world wars. Now it is on the brink of a new catastrophe. In Ukraine, the de facto military confrontation between Russia and Nato, both armed with nuclear weapons, rages on.

Britain's Prince William caused outrage for being racist and tone-deaf when he deplored that it was "very alien" to see a war in Europe while it was normal to witness conflict in Asia and Africa. Yet his lament reflects how very frustrated Europeans are that, just as they thought gargantuan lessons had been well learned, history seems to be coming back to haunt them.

It is therefore not inconceivable that they may aspire to divert US attention away from Europe to East Asia, so that they have a chance to work out the Ukraine issue with Russia, and even patch their rift and continue to push for an integrated Europe, in the words of Charles de Gaulle "from the Atlantic to the Urals".

Hence, when Washington wasted no time in pointing the finger at China for allegedly siding with Moscow and planning to do to Taiwan what Russia is doing to Ukraine, not only did London follow suit, but continental Europe concurred as well.

Senior American and British officials held confidential meetings in early March on how they could cooperate more closely over Taiwan and explore conflict contingency plans, according to *Financial Times*.

Liz Truss, UK foreign secretary, warned at a G7 meeting in April that failure to play by global rules would cut short China's rise as a superpower. She asserted that Nato should play a role in Asia "to pre-empt threats in the Indo-Pacific" and got specific in her China-bashing: "We must ensure that democracies like Taiwan are able to defend themselves."

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in a speech to a forum in India in April, insinuated a link between China's "no limits" friendship with Russia and the latter's invasion of Ukraine, adding that it was equally important for the Indo-Pacific and Europe that "borders are respected and that spheres of influence are rejected".

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz went to Japan for his first Asia visit, breaking the tradition set by his long-serving predecessor Angela Merkel of visiting China first, declaring that "Germany and the European Union will continue and intensify their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region", and adding that making supply chains less dependent on China was "a task that is more relevant than ever".

Even as the US and its allies seem bent on giving China the cold shoulder, there appears to be a tacit agreement to exercise prudence in dealing with Russia. The US was unequivocal about its position of not engaging Russian troops head-on amid its assistance to Kyiv. US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin called his Russian counterpart on May 13 and emphasised "the importance of maintaining lines of communication". Then, on May 19, General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his Russian counterpart spoke over the phone.

The most telling gesture so far came from French President Emmanuel Macron. After his re-election, he called Russian President Vladimir Putin for a two-hour chat that did not yield concrete results. In his address to the European Parliament on May 10, he appealed for Putin not to be humiliated, for Europe to be peaceful, and even for Britain's re-entry into the EU to be welcomed.

This phalanx of developments, therefore, can be read as Europe's tail-wagging-the-dog manoeuvre. If the US and China lock horns over Taiwan, the Americans may have their work cut out for them in dealing with both Beijing and Moscow, in which case the EU will be afforded precious wiggle room to mend fences with a like-minded Russia and plan for a new Europe.

Let's not forget how Helmut Kohl, then chancellor of West Germany, grasped the fleeting historic opportunity that suddenly presented itself in 1989-1990 amid an unexpected chain of geopolitical events and managed to achieve German

reunification at lightning speed, despite the misgivings of leaders such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK and François Mitterrand in France, and before many woke up to its repercussions, which are still being felt today.

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From: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3178500/europe-using-china-part-wag-dog-manoeuvre-us>