As European and Chinese leaders prepare to meet in Beijing on July 24 to mark 50 years of diplomatic relations, expectations for a breakthrough in China-EU relations remain low. Despite months of diplomatic overtures, deep structural differences—in trade, security, and values—continue to cast a long shadow over any hopes for a rapprochement.

The upcoming China-EU summit comes at a moment of strain in transatlantic relations. Under the second Trump administration, Washington's unpredictable stance on Ukraine and aggressive trade policies toward Europe—most recently a sweeping 30 percent tariff on EU imports announced on July 12—have fueled calls in some European capitals for "strategic autonomy." Sensing an opportunity, Beijing has launched a charm offensive, urging Europe to distance itself from the United States with the message that "your best friend has abandoned you."

Chinese officials, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi, have toured Europe over the past months, promoting the revival of the stalled Comprehensive Agreement on Investment and lobbying for the lifting of EU sanctions. However, European leaders have grown increasingly skeptical, citing Beijing's unwillingness to address fundamental economic and security concerns.

Trade Frictions and Economic Barriers

At the heart of Europe's frustration are longstanding economic grievances. The EU's trade deficit with China surged past €300 billion ($350 billion) in 2024, driven by market asymmetries, forced technology transfers, and what Brussels calls Beijing's "unfair trade practices." Chinese industrial overcapacity—bolstered by state subsidies—has triggered a flood of low-cost exports into Europe, prompting the EU to impose anti-dumping penalties of up to 45 percent on Chinese electric vehicles.

Yet Chinese companies are increasingly building production plants within EU borders to circumvent such measures, raising fears for European industries. Access to the Chinese market also remains restricted, with European businesses facing opaque regulations and limited participation in government procurement.

The EU recently deployed its new International Procurement Instrument for the first

time, barring Chinese medical device manufacturers from the European public procurement market for five years—a sign of Brussels' hardening stance. Meanwhile, tensions are mounting over China's slow-rolled rare earth export licenses, critical to Europe's automotive, defense, and renewable energy sectors.

Security Tensions and the Ukraine War

Beyond trade, Beijing's close ties with Moscow loom large over EU-China relations. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has repeatedly condemned China's "de facto enabling of Russia's war economy," warning that Beijing's support for Moscow will define the future of bilateral relations.

China, however, appears unwilling to change course. Wang Yi recently told EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas that a Russian defeat would shift U.S. strategic focus back to Asia—an outcome Beijing seeks to avoid.

This alignment with Moscow has reinforced European concerns that China is not merely a competitor but a "systemic rival."

A Summit with Low Expectations

In recent months, Brussels has signaled its frustration by skipping the usual High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue, underscoring skepticism about Beijing's promises. Despite phone calls, high-level visits, and a partial lifting of diplomatic restrictions, China has not offered substantive concessions.

The summit's symbolic backdrop—the celebration of half a century of diplomatic ties—will do little to bridge the widening gulf. "How China continues to interact with Putin's war will be a determining factor for China-EU relations going forward," von der Leyen has warned, hinting at a hardening European position.

For all the talk of "strategic autonomy," European policymakers are increasingly reminded that, despite tensions with Washington, the EU's values remain aligned with the United States—democracy, human rights, free markets, and the rule of law—principles fundamentally at odds with China's authoritarian model.

The summit, held within sight of China’s ancient Great Wall, is likely to underscore a symbolic reality: a figurative wall still separates Europe and China, built from incompatible values, diverging interests, and Beijing’s refusal to reform its economic and security posture.