

Europe should behave more like China does if it wants to survive this age of chaos

Mark Leonard, The Guardian, 11 May 2026

The US and Israel may have started the war in Iran, but – apart from the belligerents themselves – it is China and Europe that stand to lose the most from it. Yet while European leaders watch like rabbits caught in the headlights as energy prices shoot through the roof, China has responded to the crisis with remarkable equanimity. It is striking how self-confident Beijing is ahead of this week's Trump-Xi summit.

That's because China is better prepared for what I call an age of "un-order". This is not the same as disorder, where rules exist but are broken. Un-order is a world where the rules themselves have simply ceased to matter. While European governments have been obsessed with preserving order, China has been working out how to survive chaos. [...]

Rather than relying on external rules to defend it or thinking it could order the world, China selectively walled off its vast internal market from foreign companies. At the same time it anticipated where the world was going and positioned itself to benefit.

Europe now needs to do the same thing – the window before its manufacturers lose out to China permanently is closing rapidly. Europeans must stop their capital from going overseas to the US and use it for a massive investment drive on green technologies, AI and defence. They must build strategic critical minerals stockpiles to make Europe's defence industry a bit more crisis-proof. Countries should make clear political commitments to buy European-made batteries and exclude Chinese wind turbines from their infrastructure.

But de-risking is not enough. Europeans must realise that they can pull levers of their own. For one, there is the EU's famous "trade bazooka", or anti-coercion instrument, which governments have been loth to use until recently. Momentum might finally be moving in the right direction. Clément Beaune, France's high commissioner for strategy and planning, has recently argued that 30% across-the-board tariffs on Chinese goods ought to be on the table (this figure is well in excess of the French government's formal position). The EU's Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act, known mostly as a source of irritation for Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, could also be used to limit TikTok's parent company ByteDance, Tencent and Alibaba's operations in Europe. And even more aggressive options exist: few realise that Europe could ground more than half of all Chinese commercial planes by withholding software updates for China's Airbus fleet.

This toolkit could put Europe and China on a more equal footing, but its benefits go well beyond the EU-China relationship. It would also equip Europe to stand up to Trump if he makes another move on Greenland, turns the screws on Ukraine or threatens to cut off European access to US tech. Once European governments start trying to survive chaos rather than preserving order, they will be better able to withstand the full range of threats that emerge in our age of un-order.

*•Mark Leonard is director of the European Council on Foreign Relations and author of **Surviving Chaos: Geopolitics When the Rules Fail***