Back in the black



A reveller in a balloon hat stands out in the crowd at the so-called black face carnival in Mojiang Hani autonomous county in the city of Puer, southern Yunnan province.

Every summer, thousands of people from the mountainous region's various ethnic groups gather to perform the daubing ritual as part of celebrations for the 1,000-year-old Solar Festival.

Subtropical Mojiang Hani, which traverses the Tropic of Cancer, is known poetically as "the place where the sun turns around" and is famed for its fermented tea and superior produce. Photo: Xinhua

DIPLOMACY

EUROPE IN HIGH-WIRE BARGAINING ACT

EU faces challenge as it prepares to hit negotiating tables for trade deals with Beijing and Washington

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For months, European Union leaders have been warning that they need to move smartly to survive in what they describe as "an era of hyper-competitive and hyper-transactional geopolitics".

Now, as the bloc prepares to hit the negotiating tables with the world's two major superpowers, its deal-making mettle is about to be put to the test.

On one side, it faces off against a China that is on a European charm offensive. Fresh from lifting retaliatory sanctions against some EU lawmakers, Beijing wants to convince Europe and others to unite in tackling US President Donald Trump's tariffs and uphold the multilateral order.

On the other, it faces a United States that wants to force the world to cut their trading ties with China and choose Trump's America, but which has shown little sign of being willing to make concessions for anyone willing to do so.

Caught in the middle, Europe must navigate between two powers from whom it wants to get economic carve-outs, knowing that cutting a deal with one could make it impossible to do so with the other.

Further complicating matters is the fact that the US and China are edging closer to negotiations of their own, with some fearing Europe could be left high and dry. It is no wonder officials in Brussels talk frequently about performing a "high-wire act".

"It's very complicated … the worst of all scenarios for Europe is that out of this triangle the US and China get a quick deal and we're totally out," said Alicia Garcia Herrero, an economist focused on Asia at the French investment bank Natixis.

Europe's priority is a deal with Washington and the latest signs are it is willing to sacrifice ties with China to get one.

On Wednesday, top EU officials told diplomats they would offer to work with Trump on countering China's trade barriers and industrial overcapacity as part of a package the bloc hopes can stave off the deepest of the US tariff cuts, Politico reported.

"A popular narrative right now is that Trump is driving Europe into China's arms. But I won't be surprised if in the coming weeks you see the opposite happening – that there is a joint approach on overcapacity," said an EU official not permitted to speak publicly.

Waiting in the wings, nonetheless, is Beijing. China has been "making all the right noises" in its Europe dealings, which have gathered pace in recent weeks, sources said.

In dropping sanctions on sitting lawmakers on Wednesday, China suggested eagerness to revive a stalled investment pact, the signing of which in 2020 infuriated Washington.

The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) has been frozen at the ratification stage by the European Parliament in response to Beijing's sanctions, which were themselves in response to EU sanctions on Chinese officials for alleged human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

Yet EU officials are sceptical about the pact's revival, given that sanctions on researchers, diplomats and national-level lawmakers remain in place.

A senior official from an EU member state said the agreement was a product of a time when the bloc's thinking about China was dramatically different to today.

"We could not have anything like CAI now. It was done because of Trump last time around, but there has been a lot of learning since," said the official, who pointed to the strain put on EU-China ties by Beijing's close relations with Moscow.

Also being floated is a complex quid pro quo that would see China set a minimum price for its electric vehicle exports to the EU in exchange for a dilution of the anti-subsidy duties slapped on the shipments last year.

On the other side of the bargain, Beijing could agree to do something about persistent EU complaints about its industrial overcapacity and its fears that US tariffs will see affected goods diverted to the EU. Alongside that, the EU wants China to make investments in Europe's electric vehicle supply chain.

"An agreement between the EU and China will only be possible if Beijing offers a lot more. It would need to agree to restrict exports to the EU and make substantial investments. It will have to be something tangible," said Noah Barkin of the Rhodium Group research house.

The upside to being sandwiched between two powers is that the EU believes it has options, but capitalising on the situation will require skilled diplomacy and a united front between Brussels and its often discordant member states, officials and observers say.

U.S.-CHINA TIES

New Rubio role 'may streamline bilateral talks'

Observers note top US diplomat's national security job puts him on par with Wang Yi

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Marco Rubio's appointment as US national security adviser on top of his role as secretary of state could help streamline communications with Beijing despite his hawkish views on China, according to some analysts.

Rubio will be the first secretary of state since Henry Kissinger to hold both roles at the same time and the latest appointment makes him a direct counterpart of China's Wang Yi.

> **The current appointment shows Trump's increasing confidence and trust in Rubio**
>
> PROFESSOR XIAOYU PU

On Thursday, US President Donald Trump said national security adviser Michael Waltz – who has been under pressure since it emerged a journalist had been added to a group chat discussing classified information – would leave his post and had been nominated to become the next US ambassador to the United Nations instead.

"In the interim, Secretary of State Marco Rubio will serve as national security adviser, while continuing his strong leadership at the State Department," Trump said on social media.

Rubio, who has been described as the "secretary of everything" by The New York Times, has also taken control of the US Agency for International Development.

Kissinger, who died last year aged 100, had previously held both jobs for around two years under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford before stepping down as national security adviser in 1975.

Rubio was known for his hawkish views on Russia, China and Iran during his time as a senator, but since joining the Trump administration he has shifted his focus away from human rights to target China's trade practices instead.

On Thursday he told Fox News that China was "our No 1 geopolitical foe", and defended Trump's tariffs, saying they were "hurting the Chinese economy badly".

"The current appointment shows Trump's increasing confidence and trust in Rubio. Despite playing an increasingly bigger role, he still repeatedly emphasised that he was the executor of President Trump's policies, rather than the one who made them," said Xiaoyu Pu, director of graduate studies at the University of Nevada's political science department.

Neil Thomas, a fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute's Centre for China Analysis, agreed, saying: "Being a cabinet member is very different from being a senator. Rubio is now part of the Trump administration and so naturally he will implement the president's policies."

Dali Yang, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, said the shake-up "may help to streamline internal negotiations and actually facilitate additional talks between Rubio and Wang going forward, now that the two countries are publicly talking about possible negotiation".

He said that by contrast Waltz had been more focused on defence issues.

Thomas noted Rubio and Wang Yi were now "direct counterparts", as both held the two most important diplomatic and security posts in their respective governments. "Rubio and Wang already held a call in January, suggesting that Beijing will look past sanctions on US officials if it sees benefit in dialogue," he said.

MILITARY

PLA reveals details of its Type 094 nuclear submarine

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The People's Liberation Army has revealed details of its Type 094 nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine for the first time, during the navy's open day.

The sea-based nuclear deterrent is said to have a submerged displacement of 11,000 tonnes, according to information on display at events to mark the PLA Navy's 76th anniversary last week.

Posters for the open day said the nuclear submarine had a maximum speed of 30 knots and could operate at a maximum depth of 400 metres. That differs from estimates that it had a submerged displacement of 9,000 tonnes, could travel at 20 knots and operate at a depth of 300 metres.

The posters also gave details of the Jin-class submarine's size – about 135 metres long, 13 metres wide, and with a surface displacement of 8,000 tonnes.



The PLA Navy operates at least six of the Type 094 submarines.

It is the first time the military has disclosed specifications of the strategic deterrence submarine since it entered service in 2007, though it was part of naval fleet review ceremonies in 2018 and 2019.

The US Department of Defence has said it regards the Type 094 as the "first credible" sea-based part of China's strategic "nuclear triad" – referring to a military having the ability to launch nuclear weapons from land, sea and air.

The PLA Navy is operating at least six of the Type 094 submarines and is believed to be building more, while also developing a next-generation vessel, the Type 096, according to the Pentagon's latest China military report released last year.

There has been speculation about when the Type 096 might be built – the PLA typically reveals little information about its advanced military hardware until it is near the end of the development stage.

The Pentagon report estimated construction of the Type 096 was likely to begin "soon" or "in the mid-2020s", and that it was expected to enter service in "the late 2020s or early 2030s".

Unlike attack submarines, which play a key role in aircraft carrier strike groups, ballistic missile submarines are designed for stealth and usually deployed on their own. They do not rely on external oxygen or frequent refuelling thanks to the nuclear reactors that power them, so they can remain in the deep ocean for months, on standby to conduct a nuclear strike.

The Type 094 is equipped with 12 JL-2 ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads that have a range of about 7,000km – meaning they could hit the northeast of the United States from waters near the Chinese coast.

Chinese submarines including the Type 094 have had to overcome a noise problem – making them easy to detect, a situation that has been largely remedied.

The latest variation, the Type 094A, in active service since 2020, is reportedly much quieter and carries the more powerful JL-3 ballistic missiles with a range of over 10,000km – covering almost the entire American mainland from the South China Sea.

The Type 096 is likely to carry up to 24 JL-3s, and it is expected it will be quieter still, and equipped with more advanced sensors and weapons.

SPACE

US scientist suffers Nasa blow on moon samples

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American scientists are eager to get their hands on China's Chang'e-5 moon samples – but they will not be allowed to use Nasa funding to study them.

Earlier this month, planetary scientist Timothy Glotch of Stony Brook University was selected by the China National Space Administration (CNSA) to receive a rare set of specimens collected by China's lunar sample return mission in 2020.

Glotch said he hoped to compare properties of the soil and rock samples to Apollo-era rocks. His goal was to help answer long-standing questions about the moon's volcanic past, diverse surface materials and how they had been altered by billions of years in space.

But unlike most US research involving lunar samples, his project will not be supported by Nasa. The reason is the Wolf Amendment, a congressional restriction that bars Nasa and its grantees from direct cooperation with Chinese government entities like CNSA.

"I'm grateful to my institution for providing funds for me to travel to China and to my research collaborators' institutions to carry out our proposed work," Glotch said.

While the process is still in its early stages, he will collaborate with scientists from the University of Hong Kong and San Francisco State University to analyse the samples. Stony Brook officials still had to sign the loan agreement with CNSA before the samples could be shipped, Glotch added.

The Chang'e-5 spacecraft returned to Earth in December 2020, landing in Inner Mongolia with the first lunar material collected since 1976. The 1,731 grams of rock and soil came from Mons Rumker, a volcanic formation in the Oceanus Procellarum.

Since then, Chinese researchers have made surprising findings about these samples. A major discovery was that the dominating basaltic material – hardened lava – is significantly younger than anything brought back by the Apollo or Soviet Luna missions, suggesting that the moon's volcanoes remained active much longer than previously thought.

Glotch said his team would use the soil sample to measure how it emits heat in a simulated lunar environment and compare the results with satellite observations and Apollo data. They would also study its magnetic properties to better understand how long the soil had been exposed to space and how it had changed over time.

The ultra-thin rock slice would be examined under high-powered microscopes in search of unusual fragments, which may offer clues to the rock's origin and composition that could deepen scientists' understanding of the moon's geological complexity, he said.



A visitor looks at lunar soil samples collected by China's Chang'e moon missions at the Osaka Expo in Japan last month. Photo: Xinhua

One of Glotch's collaborators, planetary geologist Qian Yuqi of HKU, said he was thrilled to be part of the project. For years, he had wanted to do side-by-side studies of Chang'e-5 and Apollo samples but said it was only meaningful if both sets were analysed in the same lab under the same conditions.

The Wolf Amendment, he noted, had blocked Chinese scientists – including those in Hong Kong – from accessing Apollo materials. "I tried to reach Nasa some time ago, but their answer was definitely no," Qian said. Now that China was opening its vault to American researchers, he hoped Nasa would consider doing the same.

"If the US and Soviet Union could work together on the International Space Station during the Cold War, there's no reason why China and the US can't collaborate on common goals in space today," Qian said.

Commerce deputy pick in rally call for industry

Nominee tells senators United States must end its reliance on China in critical technologies

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America must re-industrialise and cut its reliance on China in critical technologies such as semiconductors, 6G and quantum computing, US President Donald Trump's nominee for deputy secretary of commerce has told senators.

Paul Dabbar's confirmation hearing before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation came as bipartisan efforts mount in Washington to limit Beijing's influence over global supply chains and emerging technologies.

With China expanding its dominance in electric vehicles, telecommunications infrastructure and advanced manufacturing, US lawmakers are pressing the Department of Commerce to adopt policies that reinforce domestic industry and tech leadership – even if it means pulling back from global integration.

"The accession of China to the WTO was very, very poor for the US economy," said Dabbar, a former senior energy department official and co-founder of a quantum cybersecurity firm.

"We lost about 25 to 30 million jobs in this country as a result."

Dabbar said the US needed to reframe its trade strategy with China around four goals: national security, re-industrialisation, tariff leverage and revenue.

"When we talk about the PRC", national security and re-industrialisation are "going to be much more focused as a likely outcome of negotiations", he testified.

Republicans on the panel echoed that emphasis. US senator Ted Cruz of Texas, the committee's chairman, said Washington faced a critical test over whether it would lead in the next generation of telecommunications or cede control to Chinese firms.

"If we find ourselves in a world where China and Huawei [Technologies] provide the global architecture for telecommunications, that would do enormous damage to our economic security and our national security," said Cruz, referring to the mainland telecoms giant.

Dabbar replied by highlighting satellite-based 6G development as a "next competitive battlefield with the PRC". In a similar vein of wariness towards Beijing, Democrats pressed Dabbar on how the commerce department would manage tensions between innovation and security.

US senator Maria Cantwell of Washington, the panel's senior Democrat, warned that China was "already taking advantage of us in fisheries and satellites" and urged a coherent technology strategy.

Beyond trade and telecoms, Dabbar spoke of threats in quantum computing, particularly from "harvest now, decrypt later" strategies in which adversaries collect encrypted data with the expectation that future quantum machines will break it.

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