

EU-US to seek shared tech rules despite French ire

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High-level talks will begin in the US city of Pittsburgh on Wednesday despite efforts by Paris to delay the meeting in retaliation for a pact between the US, Australia and Britain.

The EU and US will this week embark on a tricky effort to deepen ties

on tech regulation, but with France resisting the project in the wake of a row with Washington over a submarine deal.

High-level talks will begin in the US city of Pittsburgh on Wednesday despite efforts by Paris to delay the meeting in retaliation for a pact between the US, Australia and Britain—dubbed AUKUS—that saw Canberra scrap a multi-billion-dollar submarine order from France.

The EU-US Trade and Tech Council was set up after a summit in June to look at issues including trying to attune their strategies on regulating internet giants and defend democratic values.

The council came at the request of the Europeans, who are seeking concrete signs of increased transatlantic cooperation after years of tension under former president Donald Trump, especially over trade.

President Joe Biden's administration will be represented by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo.

On the European side, EU executive vice presidents Margrethe Vestager and Valdis Dombrovskis will lead talks.

Vestager, the EU's tech policy supremo, said the talks would attempt to enhance cooperation "in the areas where there is a shared sense of values being two big, old democracies."

Unspoken in her comments was the rise of China, with Washington understood to be pressing its EU partners to join forces in isolating Beijing on the global stage.

This is being resisted in Europe, where powerful member states France and Germany are reluctant to blindly follow Washington's increasing

assertiveness.

"European officials want to avoid the TTC simply becoming an unproductive exercise at China-bashing," said former EU trade boss Cecilia Malmstrom and analyst Chad Bown in a paper for the Peterson Institute in Washington.

The talks in Pittsburgh, a rust-belt city that has grown into a tech hub, are only the first instalment of the Trade and Tech Council, with another round expected in the spring, Vestager said.

EU diplomats said France sharply criticised the talks at a meeting on Friday, reminding member states that previous attempts to deepen trade ties with Washington led nowhere.

'No place in a democracy'

Dombrovskis, who is also the EU's trade commissioner, cautioned that the new effort was not an attempt to clinch a trade deal, with memories still fresh of the failed attempt to strike an ambitious accord during the Obama administration.

The European Commission, which handles trade policy for the EU's 27 member states, also failed to finalise a smaller scale deal with Donald Trump, beyond a zero-tariff pact on lobsters.

"It's not like a free trade agreement," the former Latvian prime minister told reporters. "It's more about long-term benefits."

Dombrovskis pointed to potential cooperation on banning unwanted foreign investments or tackling supply chain problems, such as with microchips.

The talks will be broken into 10 working groups on a wide range of issues, with Vestager looking to find common ground on how to curb Big Brother—such as in preventing excesses in artificial intelligence.

"We do not find that these practices should have a home in a democracy," she said. "I have a strong feeling that this is something that is really shared with the Americans."

The talks will take place while both sides remain at loggerheads over the steel and aluminium tariffs that were imposed by Trump, but which Biden has yet to remove.

On the tariffs, Dombrovskis said: "We are engaging very seriously with the US and we are mindful also (of the) timelines, that by December 1, this issue should be solved."

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