

# **“Grasping the Nettle”**

## **Deepening Chinese-Russian Ties and the EU’s Need to Respond**

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# Imprint

AIA Discussion Paper 2025#05

Publisher: Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie  
für Internationale Politik gGmbH

Executive Director: Mayssoun Zein Al Din  
Chairman of the Supervisory Board: Harald Hemmer  
Commercial Register Court: Amtsgericht Bonn  
Company registration number: HRB 25581

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ISSN: 2944-2036

## Preface

The return of thinking about world politics in terms of a 'clash of civilisations' can foreclose considering different possible scenarios and prevent an open-minded outlook on the future of international politics. What is normatively desirable is not necessarily realistic or feasible - and vice versa. Since thinking about the strategic future of Europe in a world characterised by growing geopolitical antagonisms often means we have to rely on expertise that is limited to one particular region or cultural sphere, our knowledge always remains incomplete. The discussion paper by Anna Shpakovskaya thus offers a rare opportunity to learn about discussions within two huge and somewhat opaque polities, China and Russia, from an expert with in-depth knowledge of both. Studying and citing original sources, the author explores what a closer Sino-Russian relationship could entail and how the European Union should act on this scenario. This AIA Discussion Paper thus tries to present to its readers with an alternative outlook on a sensitive and important issue of international politics.

Die Wiederkehr des Nachdenkens über die Weltpolitik im Sinne eines „Kampfes der Kulturen“ kann die Betrachtung verschiedener möglicher Szenarien ausschließen und eine aufgeschlossene Sicht auf die Zukunft der internationalen Politik verhindern. Was normativ wünschenswert ist, ist nicht unbedingt realistisch oder machbar - und umgekehrt. Da das Nachdenken über die strategische Zukunft Europas in einer von wachsenden geopolitischen Gegensätzen geprägten Welt oft bedeutet, dass wir uns auf Fachwissen verlassen müssen, das auf eine bestimmte Region oder einen bestimmten Kulturkreis beschränkt ist, bleibt unser Wissen immer unvollständig. Dieses Discussion Paper von Anna Shpakovskaya bietet daher die seltene Gelegenheit, von einer Expertin, die sich in beiden Ländern bestens auskennt, etwas über die Diskussionen in zwei riesigen und etwas undurchsichtigen Staaten, China und Russland, zu erfahren. Anhand von Studien und Originalquellen untersucht die Autorin, was eine engere chinesisch-russische Beziehung bedeuten könnte und wie die Europäische Union auf dieses Szenario reagieren sollte. Dieses AIA Discussion Paper versucht somit, seinen Leser\*innen einen alternativen Blick auf ein sensibles und wichtiges Thema der internationalen Politik zu ermöglichen.

Katja Freistein

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**Abstract:** *The China-Russia partnership post-2022 has not only seen a quantitative increase in trade volumes, but also a qualitative shift towards a more sophisticated partnership in new technologies, innovation, and research and development (R&D) in domains such as artificial intelligence (AI), green hydrogen energy, e-commerce, etc. This may introduce new strategic, economic and security risks for the European Union (EU), posing a serious challenge to the EU's policies of de-risking from China and enhancing its global competitiveness. To respond in a timely and appropriate manner to the new geopolitical and economic configuration, the EU must not only adopt a focused strategy on technological sovereignty, cybersecurity and leadership in AI, but also re-evaluate its current approach towards both China and Russia.*

**Abstract:** *Die chinesisch-russische Partnerschaft nach 2022 ist nicht nur einen quantitativen Anstieg des Handelsvolumens charakterisiert, sondern hat auch zu einem qualitativen Wandel hin zu einer anspruchsvolleren Partnerschaft in den Bereichen neue Technologien, Innovation sowie Forschung und Entwicklung (F&E) in Bereichen wie künstliche Intelligenz (KI), grüne Wasserstoff-Energie, E-Commerce usw. geführt. Dies könnte neue strategische, ökologische und sicherheitspolitische Risiken für die Europäische Union (EU) mit sich bringen und eine ernsthafte Herausforderung für die Politik der EU darstellen, sich von China abzukoppeln und ihre globale Wettbewerbsfähigkeit zu verbessern. Um rechtzeitig und angemessen auf die neue geopolitische und wirtschaftliche Konstellation zu reagieren, muss die EU nicht nur eine gezielte Strategie für technologische Souveränität, Cybersicherheit und eine Führungsrolle im Bereich der künstlichen Intelligenz verfolgen, sondern auch ihren derzeitigen Ansatz gegenüber China und Russland neu bewerten.*

# 1. Introduction

Speaking at the 61st Munich Security Conference on February 14th, 2025, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier stressed that the world is changing rapidly and acknowledged that the EU and the newly elected US administration have "different views of the world". Pointing to China and Russia as the sources of the EU's greatest security threats, Steinmeier reminded the US that in the current geopolitical complexities, "even the strongest countries like the US will need allies in this century." In doing so, the German president embraced the traditional US-EU alliance, despite the conflicting ideological views (BR24 2025).

In his Munich speech, President Steinmeier noted that "diplomacy is not a cage fight" (BR24 2025). It certainly is not, but the speed with which the ideological rift between the US and the EU is growing could suggest otherwise. It may not yet be a "cage fight" after all, but what we are undoubtedly witnessing is a rapid reconfiguration of the world's politics driven by countries' national priorities and interests. This global reconfiguration appears strongly dynamic and even forceful, and without a clear strategy may be a 'nettle' for Europe to grasp. This is particularly because the EU is not only facing tensions with the Trump administration, but also because it is accompanied by the EU's current policy of economic "de-risking" from China and Europe's disengagement from Russia. In such a configuration, the EU seems to be on a sideline and might have to stand alone in simultaneously balancing between several world powers and facing increasing economic, political and security risks.

Against this geopolitical backdrop, China and Russia have significantly strengthened their strategic partnership post-2022, bringing it now to a new level. What may at first appear as a mere increase in the volume of trade between the two countries is an emerging qualitative shift towards a more sophisticated cooperation. Specifically, the new cooperation programmes and projects developed by China and Russia have a dual objective: not only to strengthen economic ties between the two countries, but also to reshape the existing economic and political order at regional and global levels. The China-Russian coalition also seeks to present an alternative model of economic and political development for the developing world through organisations such as BRICS. For example, at the January 2025 online meeting between China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping pointed out that:

"The China-Russia relations are constantly exhibiting new vigour [...] through close cooperation China and Russia together will bring more positive energy for the reform and construction of the global governance system." (CCTV 2025)

The Xi-Putin online meeting took place shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump, who famously promised to end the war in Ukraine within 24 hours of taking office. Both Xi and Putin apparently wanted to signal to the world that despite the international diplomatic isolation of Russia as part of the anti-war sanctions against Russia, despite the international pressure on China for its seemingly "pro-Russian neutrality," and despite the

growing geopolitical uncertainties that the new US administration may bring, China and Russia will maintain their evergreen relations and vitality.

In light of this geopolitical reality, Trump's outreach to Russia initiating the "US-Russia Talks" should be understood not only as an attempt to push for a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine, but above all as a broader effort to split the current China-Russia alliance and shift the initiative back to the US by rebalancing global power according to US national interests. This action reflects the US' historical comprehension of the potential geopolitical implications of the China-Russia partnership, particularly considering the increased interactions of the current Russian government with North Korea and Iran.

This realisation of the potentials of China-Russia strategic alliance is also growing among European politicians. Both China and Russia figure as focal actors in several EU policies. For example, according to Ursula von der Leyen's speech in Brussels in 2023 followed by the "Strategy on China" issued by the German Federal Government in 2023, China is considered to be a partner, competitor and systemic rival, and the EU must de-risk its economy from China, as China's deepening its relations with Russia, as stated in the "Strategy on China", "has direct security implications for Germany" (Federal Foreign Office 2023).

Furthermore, in early 2025 the European Commission issued the "White Paper for European Defence-Readiness 2030" aiming at rearmament of the EU in the face of potential military aggression by Russia. In the words of Ursula von der Leyen, the EU will not have any kind of engagement with Russia until the Russian government completely withdraws its military from Ukraine.

Similarly, in another EU policy document, the Competitiveness Compass, also published in January 2025, the European Commission announces a new strategy to regain the EU's competitiveness in the global market. The strategy points to the EU's energy dependence on Russia and the need to transition to alternative energy sources, too. It also acknowledges China's successful acquisition of leadership in "certain new growth areas" and urges the EU to address the problem of over-regulation to encourage business and technological innovation.

Ursula von der Leyen's push for Europe's de-risking, the shifting strategic alliance between China and Russia, and the unpredictability emanating from the Trump administration together represent a challenging configuration that can affect all parts of the globe. For Europe in particular, this reconfiguration raises the following urgent questions: How will the strategic alliance between China and Russia affect Europe's economic de-risking and competitiveness efforts? And what should the EU do to respond in a timely and appropriate manner to the emerging challenges?

In this paper I seek to address these questions by analysing official and academic discourses, policy documents, state media reports and expert opinions in the Chinese, Russian, and English languages.

## 2. “You can’t stop the sun from rising” - popular narratives

The “abandonment” narrative tells a story of how Russia, as the result of its attack on Ukraine, has been economically punished by the EU sanctions and how Russia has thus de facto been “abandoned” by the Western world and pushed into the arms of China (Bochkov 2020). Under sanctions, Russia has lost its previous access to EU markets and to compensate for its loss, Russia is currently undertaking a *razvorot*<sup>1</sup> (pivot) to the East, which essentially implies Russia’s full-fledged political and economic pivot towards China.

Similarly, in China some claim that the post-2022 China-Russia friendship is a geostrategic move that is a direct consequence of the increased tensions between China and the US, pointing not only at the trade war, but also at the possible future military conflict in Taiwan. By the “abandonment” analogy, the dominating narrative in China goes as follows: it is the US that is no longer willing to maintain a friendly relationship with China (US abandoning China), thus China has no other option but to ally with Russia in order to resist NATO and safeguard its territorial integrity (Baidu 2023a, 2023b).

As the “abandonment” narrative proceeds, just as in arranged marriage—or as the former US National Security Council advisor John Kirby called it, a “marriage of convenience, not affection” (CNN 2023)—there is no true love. Both sides, although they gain some benefits, are destined to suffer for years. Accordingly, some believe that in the long term, Russia’s abandonment by the West would mainly benefit China (cheaper deals on oil and gas) and will be unfavourable for Russia’s economy – for Russia will gradually grow fully dependent on China due to its exclusion from alternative markets (the EU in particular) and eventually will have to submit wholly to its authoritarian Asian friend, both politically and economically. Others believe that the “marriage” will not really work for China either: China’s political and economic support of Russia, particularly on the issue of Ukraine, will only further jeopardise China’s business ties with the Western world, something that Russia alone can never substitute either politically or economically. The risks seem too high for both.

Of course, such grim narration of China and Russia being forced into a friendship is not a mere discursive trick of Western journalism to weaken the seemingly blooming alliance. It is well known that numerous concerns about overly close relations between the two countries have been actively debated for some years in China and Russia, including prior to the war in Ukraine. The debate about Russia’s *razvorot* to the East became particularly popular in Russia in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008 and during the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Torkunov et al. 2020). For example, in their 2021 analysis, Vladimir Kolosov and Maria Zotova convincingly demonstrated how, on the one hand, Russian political leadership pushed the narrative of a strong China and of how much Russia would benefit from its cooperation with China. The goal was to convince the Russian public that the pivot to the East was the correct policy choice. On the other hand, however, as Kolosov and Zotova showed, expert and public opinion in Russia diverged considerably from the official narratives of high politics, exposing growing scepticism and disappointment

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<sup>1</sup> *Razvorot* from Russian “разворот” – a pivot to, a turn away from something towards something, a transition to.

and deeply questioning the hidden risks for Russia partnering with China (Kolosov/Zotova 2021).

To counter the rapidly spreading narrative of abandonment and ease the mounting doubts, another vision on the political-economic partnership between Russia and China has been popularised in Russia and China. It implies that the closeness between the two countries is not due to Western sanctions and the war in Ukraine but is rather a manifestation of a continuing historical process of the rise and fall of global powers. This narrative is strongly present in official statements by Russia's president Vladimir Putin. For example, in a controversial interview to American journalist Tucker Carlson in early 2024, Putin emphasised that China and Russia not only share a border of thousands of kilometres and centuries of cooperation, but are also at the heart of the changing world order in which BRICS countries are rising and challenging the political and economic hegemony of the West, the US in particular. "You cannot stop the sun from rising" – says Putin – pointing at the inevitability of the current global political and economic developments (Kremlin 2024). On multiple occasions, Putin clarified that the unprecedented growth of China-Russia cooperation is neither a result of the conflict in Ukraine nor the sanctions, but that it is a steady continuing process. In his 2023 interview to the China Media Group, Putin stressed: "China-Russia relations are not driven by the current international circumstances or a response to world politics. Rather it has been carefully nurtured and steadily developed over the past two decades" (CGTN 2023). This sentiment of the historical significance of the China-Russia partnership and the changing geopolitical realities of today's worlds is deeply shared by the Chinese top leadership. At the end of the official visit to Russia in March 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping famously told Vladimir Putin that China and Russia together are driving changes that the world has not seen in a century (Al Jazeera 2023).

It is not my objective to validate either narrative of abandonment vs historical continuity, rather I would agree that both contribute to the complexity of developments that we are witnessing today. Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to assume that the partnership between China and Russia has indeed been accelerated by the Western sanctions, but this acceleration is built upon the foundation that China and Russia have been laying together over several decades of cooperation. This synergy of both factors led to an unprecedented growth in trade volumes in the last few years, for instance. It is essentially crucial to understand whether the exchange between China and Russia signifies a quantitative jump only (an increase in trade volumes), or whether it is a drive towards a new qualitative change? Put differently, I would rather ask if the quality of China-Russia relation is changing? Also, if the shift is qualitative, then how might it potentially affect the EU's quest for de-risking and global competitiveness?

### 3. Policy context

To understand the current dynamics of the China-Russia partnership, it is necessary to first look at the core national policies that conceptualise the vision for future national development in China and Russia. In this respect, the Chinese and Russian governments have very similar policies on strategic technological development and sovereignty, seen in



both countries as the main drivers of national economic development. In China, Prime Minister Li Qiang's work report to the National People's Congress in 2024 highlighted the development of technology and innovation as the driving force behind the transition to high-quality growth (Government of China 2024). In April 2025, at the 20th study session of the Politburo Central Committee, President Xi Jinping repeatedly stressed the leading role of AI in China's economic transformation (Government of China 2025). The newly established AI Industry Investment Fund of more than USD 8 billion further underpins this central policy (Global Times 2025). Similarly, as part of national strategic planning in 2023 the Russian government approved the "Concept of Technological Development 2030" that put technological sovereignty as its main priority. According to the document, this shall be achieved by implementing three targets:

- ensuring national control over critical and cross-cutting technologies based on own development lines;
- transition to innovation-led economic growth; and
- ensuring sustainable development of production systems (Government of Russia 2023).

Both China and Russia see technological innovation, particularly in the field of AI, as the main driver of national development. Priority is given to the transition to new models of economic growth and technological sovereignty. This shared vision shapes the context in which Sino-Russian cooperation is unfolding today. For example, one of the priorities is to take the partnership to a new level not only through closer dialogue, common management and operational frameworks, but also through the development and deployment of new technologies in these areas. AI plays a central role in this, and there seems to be a common understanding in China and Russia of the importance of AI as a propeller for cooperation. For example, following the international 'Journey to the World of Artificial Intelligence' (AIJ 2025) conference in December 2024 in Moscow, Vladimir Putin specifically requested the Russian government to "ensure further cooperation with the People's Republic of China in conducting technological research and development in the field of artificial intelligence" (Kremlin 2023b). The goal is to take the strategic partnership to a qualitatively new level of cooperation, and it is long-term. This was apparently met with enthusiasm by the Chinese side. Shortly after President Putin's request, Zeng Yi, Professor at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and member of the UN Advisory Body on AI, told the Russian media agency TASS in March 2025:

"We follow how Russia holds the international conference AI Journey every year. ... As a Chinese scientist and practitioner in the field of AI, I welcome more [representatives] of Russian enterprises and specialists to come to China for cooperation and exchanges." (TASS 2025)

That said, despite being driven by a shared philosophy of AI-driven development and cooperation, China and Russia face two main challenges. Firstly, the current sizes of the Chinese and Russian economies and high-tech capacities are clearly unequal, and China and Russia are not peer economies. In general, Russia is recognised in China as one of the ten most technologically advanced countries. However, as Professor Ge Xinrong points out, despite increased funding, reforms in higher education and policy support for innovation and R&D by the Russian government in recent years, Russia's overall technological

capacity lags significantly behind developed countries. Interestingly, Russia's current technological backwardness is often presented as an opportunity for deeper cooperation. For example, Ge emphasises that cooperation in science and technology has a lot of potential and will undoubtedly become the key area of cooperation between Russia and China in the future (Ge 2022). Secondly, the partnership is undermined by a persistent lack of trust, rooted in the legacy of the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s, which continues to manifest itself in practical cooperation on the ground. In the last three years, the two countries have been able to overcome some of the imbalance and mistrust and have evolved into what Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova calls a "perfect imbalance" relationship (Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2022). However, as I will show in this paper, these two challenges remain a significant problem.

To sum up, the Sino-Russian partnership takes place against three backdrops: massive geopolitical shifts due to the ongoing war in Ukraine and Western sanctions against Russia; strong government-led policy focus on innovation, research and development; and the official narrative of the historical significance of the Sino-Russian partnership. Nevertheless, the partnership faces several fundamental challenges, including asymmetries in economic size and persistent mutual distrust.

## 4. New emerging terrains in the China-Russian partnership

### 4.1 Energy

Since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022, Chinese observers have been mostly preoccupied with two questions. Their attention fell initially on Russia's capacity to economically withstand the US and EU sanctions. For example, in his extensive analysis, Xu Poling, researcher at the Institute of Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, suggests that in contrast to the expectations of the US and Europe, sanctions failed to cause any serious instability, crisis or collapse of the Russian economy. Xu explains that this is mainly due to the structural specifics of the Russian economy and the state's capacity to steer the economy in times of crisis. According to Xu, there are also "obvious flaws" in the design of the sanctions themselves. However, in case the Western countries continue their sanctions, the Russian economy will face high risks in the long term. Xu predicts that long-term sanctioning will slow down economic growth and weaken Russia's capacity to compete on the international market. Russia will not be able to transit to any advanced model of economic growth and will survive economically only by its exports of natural resources (Xu 2022).

The second question concerns the long-term economic consequences of what Professor of Economics Zhang Rui calls Europe's "decoupling" from Russia's cheap resources. Zhang shows that a *de-Russification* of Europe's energy supplies will create several challenges for Europe. These include growing inflation; high market competition that will further increase the prices of oil and gas; insufficient infrastructure particularly for the

transportation of natural gas; and difficulties in replacing nuclear technologies and nuclear fuel that have been traditionally imported from Russia (Zhang 2022).

In Russia, on the one hand, there seems to be a silent consensus on the depth of negative implications of Europe's sanctions for the Russian economy. As Professors of Asian Studies at Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Dmitry Streltsov and Anatoly Torkunov suggest that although trade with China has increased, it has not yet compensated Russia's loss of access to Western technologies and capital markets (Streltsov/Torkunov 2023). Moreover, Russia is now facing a new situation of China assertively dictating the rules of cooperation and deciding often one-sidedly on the prices. Anna Tsivileva, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Kolmar Group, calls this phenomenon a price dictatorship and shows how it functions in coal trade:

"China is now offering us deals at substantial discounts on our coal, that we consider unfair. Because of the limited sales channel, competition between the companies has become unproductive. Due to the constant discounting, Russia is losing money intended for the budget. We should not be selling our products at any price. We need to protect our national interests by uniting ourselves and consolidating other suppliers of coking coal." (Primamedia 2022)

Streltsov and Torkunov continue that the export of oil and gas to China is more vital to Moscow than it is to Beijing, and Russian suppliers must compete with other nations for the Chinese market. German Handelsblatt journalists Sabine Gusbeth and Mareike Mueller highlight this point and note that the relationship between China and Russia has indeed become closer, but it has also become "more asymmetrical than ever before in history" (Gusbeth/Mueller 2023). Such asymmetry and Russia's overreliance on oil and gas trade, Streltsov and Torkunov agree, cannot build a solid foundation for cooperation in the future (Streltsov/Torkunov 2023).

However, in both Russia and China, there are also those who see business opportunities. For example, at the 2022 Saint-Petersburg Economic Forum Alexey Chekunkov, Head of the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East, expressed that exchanging Russia's natural resources for Chinese capital has a very promising future. Chekunkov called Asian capital supply "limitless", and Russia's goal would be to get access to these limitless sources. Chekunkov said:

"Historically, we have been somehow ashamed of being a "raw materials appendage". Is it embarrassing? No. It seems fine to me. This money should be earned and invested in the development of human capital in Russia." (Primamedia 2022)

Sergey Tverdokhle, at the time CEO of EuroChem Mineral and Chemical Company, argues similarly. Tverdokhle believes that Russia will have to sell its products at a discount in the next years, but he also believes that Russia can benefit from doing that. Firstly, Russia can use cheaper product prices to get access to markets (and gain strategic market shares) more easily. Secondly, trading with China can boost domestic production and stimulate better implementation of new projects in Russia. Tverdokhle explains:

“We are unlikely to be able to integrate into the international carbon markets quickly, but we can offer a product with a reduced carbon footprint at a much lower price than our competitors from the Western countries. For this low carbon price, we can implement climate projects in our country.” (Primamedia 2022)

Contemporary public opinion in Russia is deeply fragmented. On the one hand, sanctions have meant that Russia had to re-orient its exports to China (as well as to India) and the government and business elite are well aware of the risks of overreliance on China. On the other hand, many remain optimistic and agree that if navigated strategically and accurately, Russia’s razvorot to China promises profits for Russia in the long term. Mikhail Degtyarev, governor of the Khabarovsk region, gave a friendly warning to Russian businessmen:

“Those businesses that do not turn to the East in time will turn poor. And those who have already done so, will not lose their investments.” (Primamedia 2022)

Zhou Xu, a Chinese scholar specialising in energy law, adds further nuance to the discussion by presenting an alternative perspective. In contrast to the mainstream argument of Russia’s overdependence on China, Zhou suggests that China has for a long time been put in the weak position of a “requester/consumer” (需求者) of Russian production, while Russia has been maintaining the privileged status of a “giver/provider” (供应者). The power balance between the requester and the giver is unevenly distributed. Conceptually, Russia represents “abundance” and thus has a “strength advantage” (实力优势), while China represents “scarcity” that is perceived as a “strength disadvantage” (实力劣势). Therefore, it is China that has been competing for Russian resources and not the other way around. This competition has always been difficult for the Chinese companies for two reasons. Firstly, Zhou argues that in Russia there has traditionally been a lack of trust towards Chinese companies. Secondly, other actors, such as Japan and Korea, often interfere with the China-Russia cooperation; it is not unusual for Russia to terminate negotiations and cooperation projects with China due to interference by other countries. This power asymmetry is expected to change to a more balanced cooperation.

Zhou continues that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has increased China’s say (话语权) in pricing in the last decade. In addition, Russia now has very limited access to the European market. According to Zhou, all of these factors will re-shape attitudes and perceptions in China and Russia. Zhou suggests two shifts in the near future. Firstly, a conceptual shift from the uneven cooperation between requester and provider to a more balanced partnership. Secondly, a qualitative transition from the traditional to a new model of cooperation that will focus foremost on researching and developing new green energy (Zhou 2022).

Similarly, Li Fubin et al. demonstrate growing opportunities for China-Russia cooperation in the upstream segment of the oil and gas industry. China is actively seeking to modernise the sector through innovations and digitalisation (China National Petroleum Corporation 2021) and cooperation with Russia is believed to facilitate infrastructure building, exploration, and research in this area. That is also seen as contributing to the

development of renewable energy technologies and the introduction of new models of co-operation. The authors further emphasise that the China-Russia cooperation became very important in the context of reshaping global energy markets as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Li et al. 2022).

As part of its overarching transition to a high-quality economic growth model, China is seeking to deepen its cooperation with Russia's renewable energy sector to facilitate its transition to green energy. More specifically, the Chinese government invests considerable resources in the development of hydrogen technologies. From a policy standpoint, the development of hydrogen energy is incorporated in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) as one of the six industries for focused advancement (Nakano 2022). According to the "Plan on the development of hydrogen energy in 2021-2035", the Chinese government aims to reduce production costs and widely popularise hydrogen energy across China (Government of China 2022). Similarly, in 2020 the Russian government approved an action plan for the development of hydrogen energy in 2020-2024 (Delovoy Profil Group 2021). China and Russia are already developing potential schemes for cooperation in the hydrogen energy sector. Xu Lixin, Vice Chairman of Guohua Energy Investment Company of the National Energy Group, recently expressed his high hopes for such cooperation:

"In recent years, China's hydrogen energy industry has accelerated the pace of green development, and renewable energy hydrogen production projects have been launched under the support of policies. Meanwhile, Russia's hydrogen energy industry has outstanding locational advantages in terms of resources, and it can build a clean hydrogen energy industry chain relying on the existing natural gas pipeline network to create a Sino-Russian green hydrogen energy base." (China Foreign Trade Magazine 2023)

In December 2023 at the 20th meeting of the China-Russia Energy Cooperation Committee, Chinese Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang called for the creation of a 'high quality' energy cooperation with Russia with a strong focus on green energy sources and hydrogen in particular, along with the necessary supply chain and infrastructure building. Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak expressed his full support, opening a new chapter in China-Russia energy cooperation (Government of China 2023).

## 4.2 Agriculture

Russia has significantly expanded its exports of agricultural products to China in recent years. To maintain the trend, Vladimir Putin instructed the government to prepare a new agreement with China on the "New Russia-China Grain Corridor" project by October 1st, 2023 (Leiba 2023). That should allow for an increased production of grain in Siberia, the Far East and the Ural, an increase in agricultural exports and the build-up of new transport infrastructure. Experts predict that China's demand for organic products such as grain, soybeans and rapeseed will increase in the future. China's growing appetite is seen as an opportunity for business and development in Russia. Alexey Maslov, Director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Moscow State University, predicted with confidence that:

“...if Russia has a normal harvest and no failures in agriculture, it will soon become the biggest supplier of products to China. This will ensure that there is sufficient demand for the products of Altai, Krasnodar and Irkutsk producers.” (MK 2022)

Moreover, one of the long-term goals of Russian agriculture businesses is not only to increase export volumes but also to improve the quality of production through cooperation in research and innovation. For example, Karen Ovsepyan, the CEO of Zabaikalsky Grain Terminal, outlined the future growth trajectory in grain export to China:

“In the next three years, we will give \$4 billion plus, and the potential is \$20 billion a year. The most important thing is that we are not only talking about exporting from the country, we are talking about a science-based approach to increasing production.” (Primamedia 2022)

While demand for organic agricultural products is increasing in China, Russia and its Far East region are seeking investment. This trend does not go unnoticed by Chinese companies that sense business opportunities. Yuan Linlin and Zhang Guoli, for example, call Russia the hot spot for agriculture investments (农业投资热土). Interestingly, Yuan and Zhang also share the idea of Chinese investors competing for the Russian market. The authors state that Japan and Korea are also actively investing in agroindustry in Russia's Far East and Siberian regions. They are seen as China's main competitors. Yuan and Zhang, despite their warnings of the risks that Chinese investors may face due to current economic instability in Russia, call for a full-fledged expansion of Chinese investments in Russian regions (Yuan/Zhang 2022).

### 4.3 E-commerce

E-commerce is another rapidly growing area for business between China and Russia. In Xi Jinping's March 2023 visit to Moscow, the two heads of state identified eight fields of cooperation, with e-commerce being one of the priorities (RBC 2023). According to the “China E-Commerce Report (2022)” issued by China's Ministry of Commerce, the domestic e-commerce transaction volume reached 43.83 trillion RMB in 2022 and cross-border e-commerce volumes hit 2.11 trillion RMB, which is an annual increase of 9.8%. In 2022, e-commerce accounted for 5.0% of total imports and exports in China (CTIPA 2023). Due to the steady growth of Russia's household consumption expenditure as recorded in 2022 (CEIC 2024), with further increase also predicted for 2023 (Trading Economics 2024), China generally considers the Russian market for e-commerce to be growing rapidly and with robust potential. For example, Zhu Mingming and Lin Zihua acknowledge the positive impact of increased e-commerce for trade, infrastructure building and economic development for the Russian cities bordering with China (Zhu/Lin 2022). However, as Li Dongrong shows, despite its rapid growth, e-commerce is facing numerous challenges including the absence of a unified operations system, lack of professional expertise and trained employees, insufficient legal framework, and a “very poor” logistics network (on the Russian side) (Li 2023). These problems are also acknowledged in Russia. For example, Mikhail Zubov and Nikolai Ivashov point out the lack of accurate economic forecasts (Zubov and Ivashov 2023), which is accompanied by insufficient funding, negligence, and incompetence (Iarex

2023). That said, e-commerce has become an important part of the economic agenda in China and Russia.

## 4.4 Banking and finance

Chinese analysts have been very closely observing and analysing Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT international banking system as part of the sanction packages by Western countries. For example, Zhou Wen and Hu Die analyse the response of Russian banks to this exclusion and propose several warnings to the Chinese banking sector. Firstly, the authors point at the – in their perspective – high degree of arbitrary politicisation and weaponisation of the international banking system. The authors advise that in such a situation, Chinese banks and individuals alike must thoroughly re-evaluate their trust in the impartiality of international financial institutions and the risks of engaging with foreign banks. Secondly, Zhou and Hu propose two solutions to de-risk China's engagement with the international financial system. To minimise their risk exposure, Chinese banks must diversify their engagement by 1) creating their own new international banking system and eventually depart from transactions in USD and EURO, and; 2) maintain continuous presence in other traditional international systems, such as INSTEX (Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges) that can be activated in times of crisis (Zhou/Hu 2022).

In addition to learning from Russia's SWIFT exclusion, Chinese cooperation with Russia is shifting in two main directions: digitalisation of the Ruble and a *de-dollarisation* of trade. In Russia, as Tatyana Nesterenko, Chairwoman of the Board of PJSC Bank FC Otkritie, confirms, China's support in digitalising the Ruble is highly appreciated as currency digitalisation is commonly perceived as an important facilitator of transactions and trade (Primamedia 2022). In contrast, a full de-dollarisation of trade is viewed with caution in Russia. Alexey Maslov, Director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Moscow State University, elaborates in detail on this. In his assessment, the abandonment of the US Dollar will mean that Russia will have to trade in Chinese RMB. However, prioritising the RMB over the Ruble (as the Ruble is weaker) can cause another power imbalance. Departing from these concerns, Russian officials suggest the introduction of a new supranational common currency that is neither the RMB nor the Ruble. This supranational currency could be first used for transactions within BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), allowing all members of BRICS and SCO, and not only China, an equal say in transactions (MK 2022).

This hesitation in the face of the dominant RMB seems to be shared by other BRICS countries. As an alternative to one dominating currency, the idea of 'liberating' BRICS from the USD has been repeatedly voiced. For example, Brazilian economist Paulo Nogueira Batista Jr. is widely quoted for his analysis of what he calls the dysfunctionality of the international monetary system that has created an environment for de-dollarisation (Batista Jr. 2023a). According to Batista Jr., Western sanctions on Russia, particularly the freezing of Russian official reserves of over 300 billion USD, have exposed the privileged position of the USD and the abuse of the international monetary system in times of conflict, and the consequential loss of legitimacy and erosion of confidence in the USD (Batista Jr. 2023b). Thus, de-dollarisation by introducing a shared currency is becoming increasingly



appealing among the BRICS leaders. At the 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, the introduction of the 5R currency (based on the first letters of the currencies of the five BRICS countries: Real, Ruble, Rupee, Renminbi, Rand) was discussed and it was agreed that the countries' ministers would submit their concrete strategies for 5R application at the following BRICS Summit in the Russian city of Kazan in October 2024. Moreover, some other countries in the Global South (for example BRICS non-member countries in Northern Africa) are watching the progress of 5R closely (Hill 2023).

## 4.5 Geopolitical strategic partnership

*Strategic partnership* has become a buzz word in official rhetoric on China-Russia partnership. However, for a long time the word *strategic* was mainly limited to a close military partnership between two countries and cooperation in other fields seemed to be always either lacking or absent. In Russia, thus, one would often hear about joint military training with China, "strategic pragmatism" (Kuzmak 2023), deepening Russian-Chinese military-strategic interaction (Tang 2022), etc.

However, since 2022 we have been observing something akin to a conceptual make-over of the term strategic partnership in official discourse in both Russia and China, with the alliance between China and Russia now acquiring new meanings. Firstly, it is set to expand beyond traditional military to economic cooperation, also covering the areas of innovation, new technologies, research, etc. In his 2023 address to the Chinese people as published by People's Daily, President Vladimir Putin described the current China-Russia partnership as follows:

"The progress made in bilateral ties is impressive. Russian-Chinese relations have reached the highest level in their history and continue to grow stronger; they are superior in quality to the military-political alliances of the Cold War era; there is no master or slave, and no restrictive or taboo topics. Our political dialogue has become extremely trusting, our strategic interaction comprehensive and ushering in a new era." (Kremlin 2023a)

Shortly after Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in March 2023, Russia and China issued a joint statement on the nature of their relationship:

"Mature, stable, autonomous and resilient, China-Russia relations have withstood the test of the COVID-19 pandemic and international storms and clouds and are free from external influences, demonstrating vitality and dynamism. Russia needs a prosperous and stable China, and China needs a strong and successful Russia." (Beijing Daily 2023)

During his visit, Xi Jinping also met Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin who in his address pointed at the areas in which the two countries "need" each other. Mishustin promised President Xi that trade turnover between China and Russia in 2023 would increase to USD 200 billion. Mishustin stressed:

"We are talking about aircraft building, machine building, machine tool construction, space research, as well as end-to-end technologies aimed at creating innovative products and providing services. I am convinced that the



expansion of innovation cooperation will strengthen the technological sovereignty of Russia and China.” (TVBRICS 2023)

Egor Prokhin from Russia’s Higher School of Economics further exemplifies the expansion of China-Russia cooperation:

“China is currently Russia's main strategic partner. Thanks to the established infrastructure, 78 projects between Russia and China worth \$160 billion are now being implemented. New projects in different fields are planned in the future. Both countries are looking forward to accelerating industrial cooperation.” (Prokhin 2022)

In a similar vein, but with use of Chinese official language, the China-Russia partnership shall be raised to a new high-quality mode of cooperation. It is a long-term endeavour, and it is continuously emphasised that the partnership is built on the countries’ common vision for the future. This shared vision is to be realised through commonly shared channels. Specifically, BRICS and SCO are viewed as the main cooperation platforms and the BRI as a connecting framework for such cooperation, through which China and Russia seek to jointly influence the development, decisions and choices of the countries in Asia, South America and Africa. The BRI and close cooperation between China and Russia is re-designed in a way that it can offer a new alternative format for countries around the world. The key feature of this format is its resilience capacity: the BRI is to become a “sanction-proof” framework for economic cooperation foremostly in Asia but also globally. Overall, the ultimate goal shared by China and Russia, as revealed in the Kazan Declaration of the BRICS Summit in 2025, is to create through BRICS a “more just, equitable, democratic and balanced multipolar world order” (XVI BRICS Summit Kazan Declaration 2025). In return, SCO offers a platform for cooperation tailored to address specific issues, especially in Central Asia. These include, for example, the China-Russia-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan four-party format to coordinate action on the Afghan issue and a “China-Russia-India” trilateral model to manage regional security (Xu 2024).

In summary, the strategic partnership between China and Russia is being reconceptualised to go beyond traditional military cooperation and increasingly focus on long-term economic and political goals. The second meaning that has been given to the term strategic partnership is the conceptualisation of the China-Russia partnership as a driving force for change in Asia and globally towards the creation of a multipolar world, as opposed to the global configuration driven mainly by US interests.

## 5. Conclusion: The need for strategic diplomacy

The evolving China-Russia partnership, compounded by shifting dynamics in US foreign policy following the Trump administration, presents a multifaceted and complex challenge to the EU. This could include new risks in the following areas:

1. Through mutual cooperation and knowledge exchange, China and Russia are emerging as two technological superpowers, posing significant cybersecurity risks to the EU.
2. The combined political and economic leverage of China and Russia may exert greater pressure on third countries to limit their engagement with the EU, thus challenging the EU's capacity to efficiently establish future international partnerships.
3. China–Russia cooperation could further develop into an appealing alternative governance model, challenging the democratic paradigm.

Given the complexity of the current geopolitical landscape, Europe appears uncertain as to how to formulate an effective response to China and Russia. This uncertainty is further exacerbated by inconsistencies in policy and practice. For instance, while Ursula von der Leyen stated at Davos in 2025 that Europe had "traded out its security for cheap Russian oil and gas" and that it was "time for a fundamental change" (European Commission 2025), the EU simultaneously imported 837,300 metric tons of Russian natural gas during the first weeks of 2025, at a rate deemed "unprecedented" (Politico 2025). Similarly, the EU's newly released "Competitiveness Compass", though ambitious in its calls for deregulation, innovation and economic and energy independence from China and Russia, fails to clearly articulate mechanisms for financing, thereby potentially generating confusion among European industries and businesses.

In the light of these contradictions, strategic recalibration is imperative. The EU must prioritise the reinforcement of transatlantic ties with the US and the expansion of partnerships with technologically advanced nations such as Japan, South Korea, and India, thus strengthening its global network in AI and cybersecurity. Moreover, it is crucial to recognise and capitalise on the underlying tensions within the China–Russia alliance. Although, as Emil Avdaliani observes, "Russia feels far more comfortable in the world order that China is attempting to construct" (Avdaliani 2023), mutual distrust persists beneath the surface. A revised diplomatic approach towards China—one that avoids the "lecturing" tone perceived by Chinese officials as "bullying" (Global Times 2021, Li et al 2023)—is necessary. Concepts such as "de-risking" should be reframed in more neutral terms such as "economic self-sufficiency" to foster a cooperative dialogue. Rochelle Terman's analysis underscores that human rights discourse, when employed primarily as a geopolitical instrument, often backfires, becoming a form of "shaming" that undermines its intended effects (Terman 2023). Thus, the EU must adopt a balanced approach that maintains its normative commitments without alienating key partners.

In parallel, the EU must consider a long-term strategy of gradual re-engagement with Russia once peace is restored in Ukraine. While the current disengagement was an expected response to Russia's military aggression, prolonged isolation risks deepening Russia's dependence on China, thereby weakening Europe's strategic position. Renewed economic and energy cooperation could provide Russia with an alternative to an exclusive partnership with China and help secure affordable resources critical for Europe's green transition. Furthermore, re-engagement would challenge the prevailing narrative of an emerging China–Russia anti-Western bloc and foster a more balanced global order.

Today, Europe must prioritise proactive strategic diplomacy over reactive confrontation. In a currently highly sensitive geopolitical environment, diplomacy - which requires patience, compromise, long-term strategic thinking and thoughtful language formulations - is not only preferable but essential. As China's former Premier Zhou Enlai put it back in 1954, "all diplomacy is a continuation of war by other means" (Saturday Evening Post 1954). Only through diplomatic engagement can the EU effectively address emerging challenges and strengthen its global standing. And only a robust and competitive Europe can contribute to a more stable and peaceful international system.

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