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Sino-Russian relations in a geopolitical Europe.

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The close relationship between Russia and China is by no means a solid, long-term alliance, but rather a temporary rapprochement, that has been strengthened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The fragility of this relationship, based on history and structural imbalances, persists and reinforces mutual mistrust. For the European Union, while all discussions with an aggressive and threatening Russia have disappeared, China remains both "[a cooperation and negotiation partner, an economic partner and a systemic rival](#)" with whom we need to maintain a sustained dialogue, commensurate with a Europe that has begun to assert its geopolitical dimension in the last two years.

STRONG TIES BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA

Sino-Russian relations have had their ups and downs over the course of their complex history. In the early 1950s, after a period of "socialist fraternity" between Stalin's USSR and Mao Zedong's young People's Republic of China (PRC), relations turned sour during the period 1960-1980, only to improve considerably with the arrival in power of pragmatic leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow and Deng Xiaoping in Beijing. The rapprochement accelerated with the accession to the presidency of Vladimir Putin in 2000 and Xi Jinping in 2012. A real "personal chemistry" has developed between these two strong men, who have met around forty times to cultivate their hostility to "Western liberalism" and their detestation of the "hegemonism" of the United States.

To this personal factor should be added the political, geostrategic and geo-economic interests between the two countries, based on the [Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation](#)[1] signed in 2001.

MOSCOW'S MASSIVE INVASION OF UKRAINE IN FEBRUARY 2022 HAS CONSIDERABLY STRENGTHENED THIS RELATIONSHIP.

Politically, it has gone beyond the stage of a simple "axis of convenience", to use the

term of the Australian researcher of Chinese origin [Bobo Lo](#), but without becoming a formal alliance involving obligations, such as mutual assistance in the event of aggression, as Moscow would have wished. The two countries have described it in a grandiloquent phrase that is much appreciated in Beijing: "*a comprehensive partnership of strategic interaction in a new era that knows no limits*". A loose alliance, with no reciprocal obligations, but perfectly suited to the needs of both countries.

Russia, subject to Western sanctions and internationally isolated following its invasion of Ukraine, has found in its Chinese partner an understanding interlocutor. However, Putin does not appear to have warned Xi of the scale of his "*special military operation*", while Beijing insists on respect for the principles of international law, which protects territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

However, China, which has its hands full with the "*Taiwan front*" and the South Seas, did not want to deprive itself of the strategic depth provided by its very long border with Russia and the continued supply of raw materials and energy needed for its economic development.

Trade, already strong since Moscow's "*turn to the East*" in the early 2000s, has soared

[1] This treaty is much less binding than the one signed between Stalin and Mao in 1950, which contained articles highly unfavourable to the young PRC created in 1949.

2

since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. In 2023, this trade increased by 26.3% the following year to reach \$240 billion, well above the official target of \$200 billion.

This trend has accentuated the asymmetry of bilateral trade at Moscow's expense, with the vast majority of Russian exports consisting of raw materials and energy. As a result, Russia has become more dependent on the Chinese market, which is not the case for China, which exports consumer and high-tech manufactured goods, [occupying the vacuum left by the departure of western businesses](#)[2].

As a result, Moscow has become Beijing's junior trading partner, imposing conditions and prices on its gas purchases. Chinese investment in Russia, limited to the energy and mining sectors, dried up completely in 2022. Moscow has not benefited from the gigantic invitation of the "[Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#)" launched in 2015.

Under these conditions, some observers do not hesitate to speak of the vassalization of a weakened and dependent Russia by a China that has become the second world power. Apart from the personal relations between the two presidents and their economic ties, the solid foundation of Russian-Chinese relations lies in their shared hostility to the "values" of the West and their desire to perpetuate their respective "*strong regimes*". But it is by no means a solid alliance based on a formal agreement, still less on mutual trust or a cultural or civilisational proximity that does not exist.

THE EUROPEAN UNION FACE TO FACE WITH RUSSIA AND CHINA

It would therefore be wrong for the European Union and its Member States to treat the two countries as one. Admittedly, their rapprochement is destined to last. But the differences between the two countries are undoubtedly deeper than their similarities, and China's attitude to the

Ukrainian conflict is far from unequivocal. Beijing has a certain interest in seeing Russia continue its military operations, which contributes to its fragility but has the advantage of maintaining pressure on the United States and Europe, whose support for Ukraine could, according to Beijing, weaken their military efforts in Asia.

Russia, a country which shares a 2,257km border with the EU, including that of the exclave of Kaliningrad, has been in open confrontation with the former since its invasion of Ukraine and represents "[a direct, lasting threat](#)" to the European Union's security. Together with the United States and other Western countries, the European Union has adopted a position towards Moscow in direct response to this threat. Brussels has therefore suspended all political cooperation, aims to end its energy dependence on Russia and has [adopted 13 sanctions packages](#) targeting fundamental sectors of the Russian economy and the country's political elites. The gulf between the European Union and Russia therefore seems unbridgeable, and for a long time to come.

The state of relations between the European Union and China is different. In the 1980s and 1990s, Europe was euphoric about China's emergence from its long Maoist period, strongly supporting its entry into the WTO in the hope that it would become a market economy and that its commitment to globalisation would lead to a liberalisation of its domestic policies. But this hope was dashed, and in December 2016 the European Union refused to recognise China's status as a market economy. Three years later, it published a communication setting out a new strategy towards China. In this document, China was described as a "*cooperation partner with whom the Union shares closely integrated objectives*", as well as a "*negotiating partner with whom the Union must strike a fair balance of interests*", as an "*economic competitor in the race for technological dominance*", and finally as a "*systemic rival in the promotion of other models of governance*".

[2] China is Russia's leading trading partner, while in the opposite direction, Russia ranks only 10th or 11th among China's trading partners.

In 2020, after seven years of negotiations, Brussels and Beijing signed a comprehensive agreement on investment aimed at reducing the imbalance created by massive Chinese investment in European countries hit by the 2008 crisis. But this text was [suspended](#) the following year following the non-ratification by the European Parliament.

The situation deteriorated somewhat when, in 2021, the EU adopted sanctions against China for its repression of the Uyghurs and, in 2022, in the face of the [measures taken by Beijing against Lithuania](#), after the latter's decision to withdraw from the Euro-Chinese forum "17+1" and open a representation in Taiwan (global strategic coordination partnership of the new era).

Finally, there was the Ukrainian affair, when China's "*pro-Russian neutrality*" led it to ignore the European sanctions introduced against Moscow. During his visit to Moscow in March 2023, Xi Jinping signed a [Joint Declaration](#) with his Russian counterpart, on deepening the global strategic coordination partnership of the new era. Nevertheless, the grandiloquent and rather hollow wording of this text did little to bolster a confident and genuine Russian-Chinese alliance.

EURO-CHINESE DIALOGUE REMAINS DIFFICULT.

The EU-China summit in April 2022 failed to make any headway in the dialogue on Beijing's implementation of European sanctions. The same occurred during the [December 2023 Summit](#), when the European Union insisted on the need for China to refrain from supplying lethal weapons to Russia and to prevent sanctions from being circumvented, in particular by Chinese and foreign companies operating on its territory.

[Relations between the European Union and China](#) are also experiencing trade friction. Brussels has criticised Beijing for impeding access to its market and investment. By 2022, European exports to

China had risen by 3.2%, while in the opposite direction the increase was 32.3%. The trade deficit in favour of Beijing had reached €396 billion, an increase of 58.2%. However, in other areas such as climate change, the indebtedness of developing countries, health issues and sustainable finance, the two sides continue their dialogue.

According to Josep Borrell, Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, China does not pose the same threat to Europeans' national security as Russia. [In his opinion](#), "*we should not resist China's rise. China will become a great power whether we like it or not. What matters is how it manages its strength*".

2024 SHOULD BE THE YEAR OF RENEWED COMMITMENT TO EURO-CHINESE RELATIONS.

In addition to the ongoing war in Ukraine, elections in several Member States, the European Parliament as well as in the United States, the crises in the neighbourhood, and in particular, in the Middle East, will have a clear impact on these relations.

Once formed, the new Commission will have to define its China policy, encouraging Beijing to use its strong influence to put pressure on Moscow to stop its aggression against Ukraine. In terms of trade, the Commission will use the resources provided by the "[defensive tool box](#)" to address market distortions and lack of reciprocity from Beijing. In this context, and in virtue of the "[regulation on foreign subsidies](#)", Brussels has launched an investigation into subsidies allegedly benefiting Chinese exporters of electric vehicles, as well as an [in-depth inquiry](#) concerning a public procurement procedure in Bulgaria, to which a Chinese public-sector manufacturer, CRRC Qingdao Sifang Locomotive Co. responded.

Brussels is insisting that these initiatives should be better coordinated with those of the Member States, in a bid to avoid any rivalry in the conquest

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of the Chinese market, particularly between Chancellor Scholz, who puts German economic interests first, and President Macron, who is seeking a “[third way](#)” between China and the USA. The ideas set out by the French Head of State are similar to those put forward by [Josep Borrell](#).

The Chinese seem very much attached to their relationship with the European Union and in particular to their access to its market. In the last six months, Foreign Minister Li Qiang has visited Ireland, France and Germany and met Ursula von der Leyen in Davos, while President Xi had a telephone conversation with his Finnish counterpart. He also held talks with President Zelensky on 26 April, the first contact between the two leaders since the invasion of Ukraine. As well as continuing the dialogue, the main aim of these contacts is to allow China to present itself

as a partner in a peace process in Ukraine that will one day emerge.

Whatever its complexity, dialogue between the European Union and China is essential whilst Europe has been asserting its geopolitical power for the past two years, particularly in the face of Russia. As [Josep Borrell explains](#), “*cooperation, competition and rivalry will continue to be at the centre of China's EU policy [...] It is clear that the rivalry aspect has become more prominent in recent years. China's political assertiveness has become much stronger and sometimes aggressive*”. And this dialogue will undoubtedly be anything but linear.

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