

Putin's War and Shifts in the European Union-Russia-China Strategic Triangle: Quo Vadis Eurasian Connectivity?

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Abstract

This article uses the lens of the strategic triangle to explore the connectivity interactions between the European Union (EU), Russia and China before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since 2004, the EU's economic dynamics have moved to its Eastern peripheries. Since 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), moving westwards, has shortened the distance between Europe and China. Russia benefitted from its energy exports to both Eurasian powerhouses and began to build up the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, struggling with weak economic performance, Russia played the peripheral role of resource supplier in the EU's and China's increasing Eurasian connectedness. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a response to its self-inflicted weakness, challenges the Eurasian dimension of the BRI. The EU's regulatory liberal capitalism, Russia's territorial aspirations in the post-Soviet space, and China's distributive state capitalism are incompatible with the

EU's connectivity approaches. The EU turned Eurasian connectivity sectors into sanction mechanisms in response to Russia's war. Hence, the question: Quo vadis Eurasian connectivity? The paper's methodological approach, more interpretative than data-driven, derives from the neoclassical realism perspective, tracing these strategic triangle dynamics. An emerging East-West Southern Route circumventing Russia and a Russia-instigated North-South Axis of Eurasian connectivity from the Arctic to South Asia might partly replace the trans-Russian East-West dynamics.

Keywords: *weaponisation of interdependence, international political economy, Transrussia, strategy, neoclassical realism*

1. Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022 profoundly impacted the previously dynamic Eurasian connectivity processes. These consisted of three significant trends whose clashes "Eurasianists" took as minor sideshows in the panorama view of a perceived logical and historical (re)integration towards a Eurasian "supercontinent" (see, for example, Calder, 2019). The European Union's (EU) liberal and regulatory policies were combined with wealth transfers towards its Eastern peripheries; Russia's ambitions to gather land and people in the post-Soviet space; and China's Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) economic security and distributive state capitalist approach to deepen Eurasian continentalism. These contradictory approaches erupted when Russia invaded Ukraine.

The EU, Russia and China all attempted to strengthen their impact on the Eurasian continent in the post-Soviet space. For Russia's President Vladimir Putin, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

(NATO)'s eastern enlargements, including the possibility of Ukraine's membership and the USA's perceived ambition to throw Russia into chaos, left Russia with no choice but to engage in a preemptive war against Ukraine to replace the "fascist" government in Kyiv. The neorealist ("offensive realism") scholar John Mearsheimer seconds that argument (Mearsheimer, 2014), and many pacifists and Putin fans in the world sympathise with this narration. However, there has never been a consistent red line in Putin's Russia concerning NATO. Safranchuk's (2022) argument about the USA not accepting Russia's and China's red lines is misleading and incomparable to the USA's red lines during the Cuba crisis in 1962, which was consistent and traced back to the Monroe Doctrine from 1823. Russia fears a prosperous, democratic and westernising Ukraine, not NATO. For apparent reasons, the NATO argument is widely overblown and used instrumentally by all sides. Instead, this paper finds that the main factor for Russia's invasion was its economic and political marginalisation (or *Transrussiafication*, as I call it) in the Eurasian geographic and geopolitical space relative to the EU and China; a geopolitical tragedy in the wider USA-China hegemonic conflict is that the USA acted instead as a mere *agent provocateur* in a global gamesmanship approach to benefit from looming Eurasian conflicts, so that it can fully concentrate on China.

Former US President Barack Obama's diagnosis after Russia's Crimea annexation in 2014 was probably not to Putin's liking: "Russia is a regional power [...] threatening some of its immediate neighbors, not out of strength but out of weakness [...] We (the United States) have considerable influence on our neighbors. We generally don't need to invade them in order to have a strong cooperative relationship with them [...]" (Reuters, 26th March 2014). Similarly, in December 2014, the German chancellor Angela Merkel said about Putin, "I understand why he has to do this—to prove he's a man [...] He's afraid of his own

weakness. Russia has nothing, no successful politics or economy. All they have is this.” (*The New Yorker*, 24th November 2014).

Responding to Putin’s Ukraine invasion in 2022, the USA and the EU swiftly imposed unprecedented sanctions. Eurasian key connectivity sectors became sanction mechanisms: finance and investment, infrastructure and transport, energy and pipelines, and people-to-people exchanges. The China-Russia “no limits” friendship (proclaimed on the occasion of the Peking Winter Olympics in February 2022) and China’s “neutral support” for Russia’s war ended the moribund EU assumption of stability (or even change) through trade in affairs with Russia and China, who declared that their new relationship was superior to any political or military alliance of the Cold War era, making China a security challenge for the EU.

The ever growing Russian dependency on resource exports, the stagnating domestic economy, and its “identity panicking” in the post-Soviet space are underexplored factors that led Russia to invade Ukraine. How do the implications of Russia’s war shape the future of the Eurasian political economy? To answer this question, this paper examines the rise, shifts, and clashes in the EU-Russia-China Eurasian strategic triangle in three phases: 2004 to 2013, 2014 to 2021, and 2022 and beyond. The approach is interpretative rather than data-driven, pointing to converging, complementary, and diverging trends of three Eurasian integration programs. The underlying theoretical approach derives from neoclassical realism, in contrast to Mearsheimer’s offensive neorealist approach, taking leaders’ perspectives and domestic developments into account in an overall international systemic approach. The paper concludes that Eurasian connectivity will slow down, recalibrate, and further marginalise Russia. Since, in the sense of the strategic triangle, Russia and China made the EU an *outcast*, the EU will reduce its dependency on Russia and China. Russia will stagnate

economically for years to come, as pipeline diversification and rebuilding of the economy takes time, fortifying its role as a trans-economic geographic space with endless political potential for disruption that will sooner or later also pose a challenge for China. The USA will benefit from these clashes in the global system. However, Eurasian peripheral countries in the Southern post-Soviet space might also benefit from newly emerging opportunities, posing a challenge to the EU's normative connectivity approaches, symbolised in the EU's current strategic triangle position as an outcast.

2. Exploring Triangular Eurasian Interdependences and Clashes

The preconditions for a triangular relationship are that each player recognises the strategic relevance of the others and that all sets of relationships between two players matter to the third (Dittmer, 1981). The EU-Russia-China strategic triangle is a recent development on the Eurasian continent. I explore the triangular development from 2004 till 2022. The relations were not yet triangular in 2004, but all three Eurasian powerhouses initiated distinct policies that incrementally led to a triangularisation of their relations. After Russia's Crimea annexation in 2014, triangular relations were fully developed.

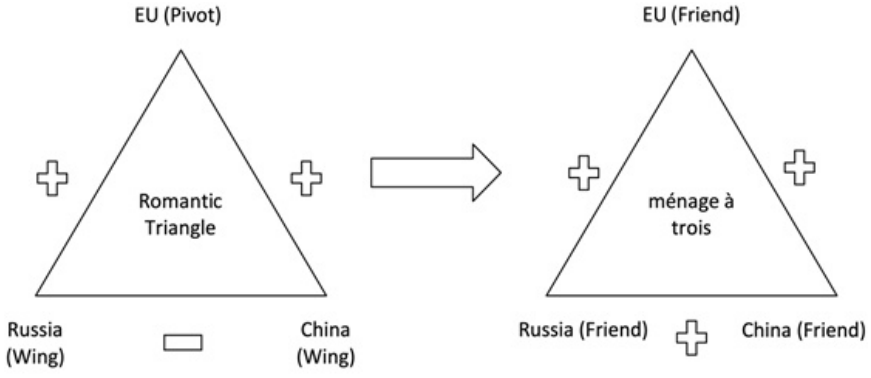
With Eurasian infrastructure, regulatory and trade interconnections increasing, authors in recent years have explored not only the opportunities but also the conflict potentials concerning different regionalisms and their connectivity interactions at bilateral and trilateral levels (Krpec and Wise, 2022; Gurol and Rodriguez, 2022; Gruebler, 2021; Stefanova, 2020; Samokhvalov, 2016; Izotov and Obydenkova, 2021) and evolving identity issues (Tyushka, 2022). That shows the salience and emergence of a Eurasian concept.

This paper perceives the triangular developments in the Eurasian political economy as primary factors that led Russia to intervene in Ukraine. Still, neoclassical realism also acknowledges that Russia's domestic strategic culture and its leader's perceptions play an essential explanatory factor. This approach also assumes that China's rise in the post-Soviet space, in a tragic contradiction to the promulgated strategic partnership, further increased Russia's incentives to invade Ukraine to gather land and people and fortify the "Russian world" idea (25 million Russians, according to Putin, live outside Russia). In distinction to neorealists, who ignore domestic factors and the national level, neoclassical realists argue that while states respond largely to the limitations and constraints of the international system when they conduct their foreign policies, domestic factors such as the nature of their domestic political regimes, strategic culture, and leader perceptions also shape their actions (Ripsman, 2011). This acknowledges that states do not always perceive systemic stimuli correctly and that the international system does not always present clear signals about threats and opportunities.

There are three distinct pattern dynamics within the triangle. In a *ménage à trois*, all are "friends"; in a *marriage*, two partners act against an "outcast"; in a romantic triangle, a "pivot" is courted by two "wings"; in a unit veto, the players are all "foes" (Wu, 2017: 200). Each of these pattern dynamics has specific rules of rational play. With the four ideal types of strategic triangles and six roles, a triangular situation can be analysed to visualise the structure of the triangular game. Players can fill six roles within these ideal types: friend, partner, outcast, wing, pivot or foe. Players consider their amity with other players always preferable, but also think the other two players' mutual enmity to be preferable to their amity. The preferred role would be that of pivot, where the player

has friendly relations with the other two players while they are at odds with each other.

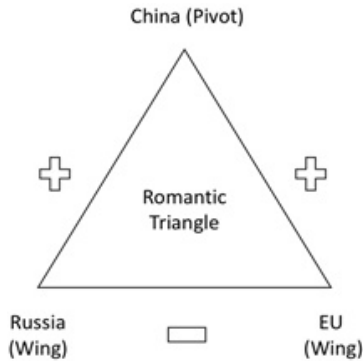
Figure 1 First Phase of Triangular Relations (2004-2013)



This paper interprets how the triangular ties between the EU, China and Russia developed from 2004 till 2022. It argues that between 2004 and 2014, the EU was the pivot and Russia and China the wings in an evolving triangle. The EU had amicable relations with both and dominated the Eurasian dynamics with its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. Meanwhile, Russia-China relations warmed and, before the Crimea crisis of 2014, the triangular relations came closer to a *ménage à trois* with triangular amicable relations. Russia's Crimea annexation marked a critical juncture that accelerated the EU-Russia estrangement in this crossover phase. Germany tried to take the lead in rebalancing the West's relations with Russia (Biedermann, 2015) and uphold amicable relations with Russia based on gas pipelines and agreements on the status of Ukrainian territories (see Figure 1). Dittmer finds that the shift from one pattern dynamic to another is a function of the players' attempts to freeze a given configuration through a

commitment to a treaty or a common ideology, interacting with periodic crises to test their commitments.

Figure 2 Second Phase of Triangular Relations (2014-2021)

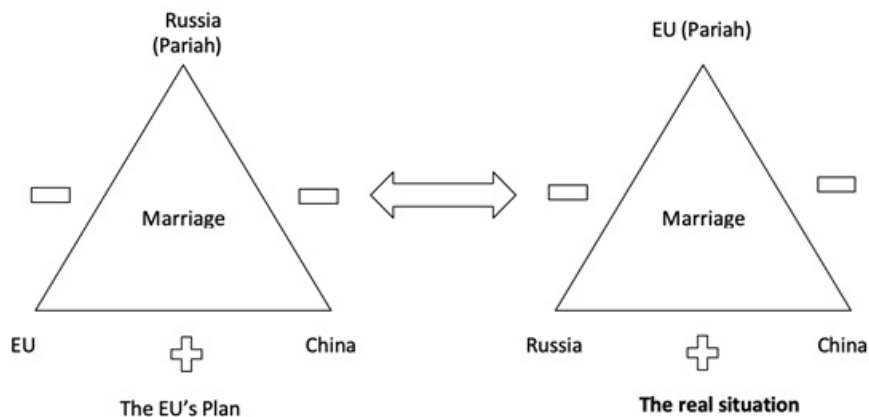


China replaced the EU and entered a pivot position in the second phase between 2014 and 2021. It instigated dynamics with the BRI and initiated the China+Central and Eastern European 1+17 process (already in 2012), which challenged the EU's impact on its Eastern and Southeastern peripheries, for instance, concerning the EU's public procurement rules. Only China had amicable relations with Russia *and* the EU (see Figure 2). EU-Russian relations deteriorated but were still good enough to engage in trading essential commodities until the collapse of the relations in 2022. In the third phase, since Russia's full invasion of Ukraine, the EU tried to *court* the pivot China to participate in the sanctions and made Russia the *outcast*, but to no avail.

The relations between Russia and China are in a stable *marriage*. De facto, the EU became the *outcast* in this triangle, making China a perceived security challenge for the EU (see Figure 3). Russia's primary strategy of Eurasian connectivity, bolstering the Russian world by

gathering land and people, will change the Eurasian connectivity dynamics. However, China is in a tragic marriage with its gasoline station. That challenges the BRI's geopolitical goals sooner or later. The discussion section elaborates on these weaknesses using Mark Leonard's (2021) "weaponisation of interdependence" concepts. Leonard (2021) dubbed the USA, the European Union and China the three hyperpowers in connectivity. He grouped Russia with countries like Turkey and Brazil in the fourth world, signifying Russia's comparative weakness. The conclusion summarises the results and provides an outlook.

Figure 3 The Eurasian Clash 2022



3. Analysis: The Development of Triangular Relations 2004-2014

The Eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004 transformed the politico-economic space between the EU and Russia. The simultaneous accessions made Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the three Baltic states Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (former Soviet Republics)

EU member states. The EU was pivotal and had amicable relations with Russia and China in a *ménage à trois*. As a response, Russia initiated the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in the post-Soviet space, while China strategised its “going-out” policies. The two wings of the pivotal EU, Russia and China, put their differences aside. The *ménage à trois* became a romantic triangle at the end of this phase, as EU-Russia relations deteriorated.

3.1. The EU’s Eastern Enlargement and Russia’s EAEU: Converging or Incompatible?

Since 2004, the EU’s economic dynamics have moved eastwards. The new member states implemented the EU’s Acquis Communautaire, comprising some 80,000 pages of rules of the European Single Market. The Copenhagen European Council of December 2002 committed to Poland, the largest recipient, for 2004-2006 ca. 8.3 billion euros under the EU Structural Fund and 4.2 billion euros under the Cohesion Fund, representing approximately 1.8 per cent of the Polish GDP for that period. Private investments followed. By 2015, there were over 6000 German companies with 300,000 employees in Poland, comparable to Hungary (*Focus on Business*, 29th June 2015; *Budapest Business Journal*, 1st August 2019). Poland’s GDP increased from US\$255 billion in 2004 to US\$533 billion in 2008. In Czechia, the German carmaker Volkswagen alone employs over 30,000 people. In 2020, Germany exported and imported more to and from Poland (5.12 per cent; 6.6 per cent) and Czechia (3.18 per cent; 5.48 per cent) together than to and from China (8.1 per cent; 10.01 per cent) (OECD, 2020). Conditions for the EU funds are transparency on which programs the funding goes to and adherence to the democratic standards of the EU (which puts some of the funding to the test concerning the newer member states). Poland received EU funding under the cohesion policy

of EUR 91.3 billion under the 2014-2020 programmes (all figures from October 2022), Hungary 27.2 billion euros, the Slovak Republic 16.6 billion, and Czechia 25.8 billion. From 2021 till 2027, Poland might receive 78.3 billion euros from the cohesion funding after the government has finished negotiations for four out of six national operational programmes (“investment in jobs and growth”), Hungary will receive 22.5 billion; the Slovak Republic 13 billion; Czechia 21 billion, and so on. In the second phase of the triangle (see below) the EU became increasingly concerned about whether China would subvert these standards when dealing with individual member states.

Since 2009, the EU's Eastern Partnership Policy has aimed to deepen and strengthen relations between the EU and its six Eastern neighbours: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The goals are strengthening institutions and good governance; economic development and market opportunities; connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change; and mobility and people-to-people contacts. Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (PCAs) structure bilateral cooperation and lead to negotiations on Association Agreements (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. These three countries have been potential EU candidates for years. Even though these negotiations face unpredictable governments, they display dynamics that EU-Russian ties themselves have never witnessed institutionally.

In contrast, since 1997, EU-Russian ties have been based on a bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. No regulatory convergence occurred between the EU and Russia. Russia followed a different integration and enlargement concept. In 2001, Putin expressed that “the Russian world” spreads far beyond Russia's geographical borders, targeting the diaspora or all expatriates to post-Soviet countries

and their Russian and non-Russian descendants (Gronsky, 2017). In 2005, in a State of the Nation Address, he said that the collapse of the Soviet Union “was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”, with many Russians living outside Russia (*NBC News*, 26th April 2005). Lacking a more attractive narration, Russia’s most potent tool exploits energy dependencies towards these “Russian world” countries with which the EU negotiates AAs. In the global energy market, Russia has a share of 8 per cent of oil, 18 per cent of gas, 20 per cent of coal and 21 per cent of uranium (Saiymova *et al.*, 2020). When Kyiv demanded higher transit fees and lower gas prices, Russia disrupted gas transit through Ukraine to Europe and, in January 2006, cut off gas supplies. However, this economic coercion had a detrimental political effect. Gronsky (2017) found that all Ukrainian political forces perceive the “Russian world” negatively.

The EAEU was founded by post-Soviet states on 29th May 2014. Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are members. Uzbekistan is an observer. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan abstained. It is a single market of 184 million people with a GDP of US\$2 billion in 2021; almost 90 per cent of the collective GDP comes from Russia. Energy connectivity drives this organisation. However, the organisation creates little extra welfare. The member states benefit from remittances from migrant workers in Russia and cooperate on economic and regulatory issues, coordinate economic agendas, remove non-tariff trade barriers and align the laws and regulations. Common institutionalisation, supervision and dispute settlement have remained weak or non-existent. Still, the EAEU has free trade agreements with Iran and Vietnam and is negotiating with India, Egypt, and Thailand.

Scholarly interpretations concerning EU-EAEU complementarity differ. Sakwa (2016) found that President Putin planned compatibility between the EAEU and the EU, connecting two regional macroeconomic

blocs: creating a “greater Europe” from the Atlantic to the Pacific and a “greater Asia” from Brussels to Beijing. Samokhvalov (2016) suggested that Eurasian regionalism would consist of the core and outer circle, where the outer circle features overlapping regional arrangements, the growing presence of external powers, and a growing number of trade flows linking this Eurasian periphery with the West and Asia. Orenstein (2015) found that the EAEU would aim to rival the EU. However, unlike in the Cold War, Russia’s position is much weaker, and the other EAEU members do not share Russia’s interests.

In contrast, Van der Loo and Van Elsuwege (2012) found that Russia’s paths of regional economic integration and the EU-DCFTA preclude Ukraine’s full EAEU participation. And indeed, Russia’s opposition to Ukraine entering an AA with the EU became explicitly assertive in 2013, imposing restrictions on Ukrainian goods and warning that signing the AA would be “suicidal” for Ukraine (*Politico*, 17th September 2014). Moscow fears an AA would lead to Ukraine’s EU membership and ruled out the possibility that Ukraine can simultaneously join the EU and the Russian-led Customs Union (Böhlke and Davydchuk, 2013). Molchanov (2016) suggested that Ukraine would find a better path to economic modernisation in the EAEU and that Ukraine’s choice of DCFTA over membership in the EAEU plunged the country into chaos. This argument appears futile for three reasons: neither did Russia’s economy diversify and develop in the subsequent years, nor did Russia contribute to the development and economic diversification of other EAEU members. Above all, it was Russia that plunged the country into chaos.

The EU’s more recent (post-Crimea 2014 crisis) compromising acceptance of dual memberships may derive from the fact that the EAEU remained weak. Armenia is a small country inhabited by three million people and energy-dependent on Russia. Yerevan decided to join

the customs union EAEU and simultaneously turned down the offer and opportunity of an AA with the EU. Armenia has been a member of the EAEU since 2015. Ter-Matevosyan *et al.* (2017) found that Russian pressure, geopolitical constraints, and socio-political problems coincided with an assertive expansion of Russia's foreign policy. Chatham House concludes that the ambition to progress towards a more sophisticated economic union has yet to be realised (Wolczuk *et al.*, 2022).

The EU ran the show of integration in its Eastern periphery, while the EAEU remained an incomplete challenger after its foundation in 2014. Economically, nothing very dynamic came from Russia. Between 2004 and 2008, Russia's GDP increased from US\$591 billion to US\$1660 billion; in 2013, Russia's GDP peaked at US\$2292 billion, which has never been topped since then. Russia's formation of the EAEU signified that the former amicable relations between the EU and Russia became more competitive, as no convergence was aspired to by either side. The EU's internal balancing and prosperity growth increased fears in Russia about further losing its grip in the post-Soviet space.

3.2. China's Re-emergence as a Eurasian Actor

China developed three distinct strategies to integrate Eurasia. First, the "going-out" strategy (走出去战略), which includes energy cooperation with Central Asia in the post-Soviet space; second, China's strategic and privileged partnership with Russia; and third, China's Initiative for cooperation with the central and eastern European states, which include EU members and non-members alike. Since 2013, the BRI has become part of going-out. From a politico-economic perspective, its unregulated distributive state capitalism (Calder, 2019) formally contrasts with the EU's regulatory and normative liberal capitalism approach.

In 1999, China initiated its going-out strategy. The motives for this policy were complex and partly served as internal balancing. In the 11th

Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), the government encouraged companies to “go further outwards” (進一步走出去). For Beijing, the global financial crisis in 2008 warned Beijing not solely to rely on export to Western countries but to develop the domestic consumer market. Policymakers argued that China must invest more in domestic infrastructure and social services, particularly in rural and western domestic areas, rather than securing energy and raw materials further to heat the export industries of the eastern urban centres, increasing the inner-Chinese gap. China turned its attention to the inner domestic provinces, as China's 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) aimed to address these issues by turning to “inclusive growth” (Nash, 2012).

In 2001, President Jiang Zemin of China and Vladimir Putin signed the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation and committed to promoting and establishing a just and fair new world order and to “endeavour to enhance relations between the two countries to a completely new level”. Most substantially, they settled border conflicts. In 2004, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Fradkov declared strengthening energy cooperation. China approved the Market Access Agreement on Russia's Accession to the WTO. However, when acceding to the WTO, Russia further specialised in fuels and raw materials, missing the chance to develop and diversify trade flows, in contrast to China (Tajoli, 2022). At the same time, the EU used cheap fossil imports from Russia to industrialise the EU's Eastern peripheries. In 2013, the two presidents had five meetings and extended to each other even firmer support on sovereignty, security, territorial integrity and other core interests. The same year, Xi announced the BRI in Astana, Kazakhstan. China's focus was on gas imports from central Asia. Since then, Chinese state petroleum and gas companies have bought stakes in Russian Novatek in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2019.

The third building block of China's Eurasian strategy is the cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries, which includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia – countries inside and outside the EU. The declared goals are the promotion of the BRI and cooperation in infrastructure, transportation, logistics, trade and investment. The format was founded in 2012 in Budapest. Undeclared goals are the economic subversion of the EU's regulatory clout and the political infiltration of the EU.

China's approach to Eurasian integration in this phase was compatible with Russia and the Central and Eastern European states, who welcomed China's Initiative. In this 2004-2013 phase, the EU ran the show; Russia was defensive, consolidating its relations with China, while China outlined its significant new Eurasian policies. The mutually developing amicable relations turned the *ménage à trois* into a *romantic triangle*.

4. The Crimea Crisis 2014: A Triangular Crossover Phase

Russia intervened militarily in Georgia in 2008 and kept various conflicts in the post-Soviet space “frozen” so that affected countries, including Moldova, could not develop politically and economically. Before the annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich lost power in a revolt that began when he U-turned over signing the AA with the EU because of severe pressure from Russia. Russia attempted to coerce Ukraine into joining the EAEU using gas as a weapon (*The Guardian*, 26th June 2014). Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the EU's sanctions shifted EU-EAEU relations. Before this event, Russia could keep Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova in

check with military or economic coercion. However, that changed after 2014, as the EU became a much more substantial trade partner than Russia for all four countries.

The West sanctioned Russian corporations and individuals, intensifying Russia's relations with China, which also led to joint projects in the Arctic (Biedermann, 2022). The EU suspended some of the policy dialogues and mechanisms of cooperation and adopted restrictive measures that target four economic sectors: access to finance, arms, dual-use goods and specific oil production and exploration technologies. In response, Russia introduced a ban on imports of a range of EU agricultural and food products, which the EU extended in October 2017. The EU also suspended the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

On 1st September 2014, the AA entered into force after the Parliament of Ukraine and the European Parliament ratified it. It is the most comprehensive international agreement ever concluded by the EU. It defines a new relations format based on "political association and economic integration" and serves as a strategic guideline for systematic socio-economic reforms in Ukraine. The chapter on DCFTA defines the legal framework for the free movement of goods, services, capital and partly labour force and regulatory convergence, aimed at the gradual integration of Ukraine into the EU common market. In 2016, the AAs between the EU and Moldova and the EU and Georgia entered into force. In March 2021, the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) entered into force (EEAS, 28th February 2021), despite Armenia's membership in Russia's EAEU. Unlike accession agreements, these agreements do not come with significant monetary transfers. Still, the EU is the largest development cooperation donor in Armenia. To help Armenia implement CEPA effectively, the EU gave financial assistance of 211 million euros for 2017-2020 (EEAS,

21st July 2021), which is little compared to the cohesion funding that regular yet-to-develop EU members receive. The agreement shall modernise Armenia through legislative approximation to EU norms and contribute to deepening and strengthening the EU's relations with Armenia and the other countries. That indicates that the EU sees no challenge in the EAEU. Generally, countries in the post-Soviet space with weak governance structures tend to be interested more in economic development but less in implementing the political conditions for EU approximation. The EU established bodies to monitor progress in implementing AAs: Sub-Committees, Cooperation Committees and Cooperation Councils. For each country, so-called Single Support Frameworks are designed. The goals are: Promoting democracy, the rule of law and supporting reforms; closer political association; economic integration; easier mobility; creating jobs, more trade, and more business opportunities.

With several countries in the post-Soviet space, the EU PCAs remained active and partly enhanced, such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. What complicates the procedure is the clause on respecting human rights and democratic principles, which was systematically included in 1995. The EU and Belarus signed a PCA in 1995 but never ratified it. With Uzbekistan, an enhanced PCA is under negotiation. Association agreements replace cooperation agreements, thereby intensifying the relations. With Kazakhstan, the EU has a PCA replaced by the Enhanced Political Cooperation Agreement in 2020.

Despite the sanctions, Russia remained one of the leading trade partners of the EU, whereas China could not replace the essential role of the EU for Russia. In 2020, the EU was Russia's first trade partner, accounting for 37.3 per cent of the country's total trade in goods with the world. 36.5 per cent of Russia's imports came from the EU, and 37.9 per cent of its exports went to the EU. Besides, the EU was also the largest

investor in Russia. The EU FDI in Russia amounted to 311.4 billion euros, while Russia's FDI stock in the EU was estimated at 136 billion euros. In 2021, bilateral trade in goods amounted to 257.5 billion euros. The EU's imports were valued at 158.5 billion euros and were dominated by fuel and mining products – especially mineral fuels (98.9 billion euros, 62 per cent, see Table 1). The EU's exports in 2021 totalled 99 billion euros. The exports were relatively diverse. In 2021, Russia was the fifth most significant partner for EU exports of goods with 4.1 per cent and the third largest partner for EU imports of goods with 7.5 per cent. However, trade relations reveal a power imbalance. Russia, the EU's 5th largest trade partner, represents 5.8 per cent of the EU's total trade in goods with the world. With China, the EU trades five times as much, with 16 per cent of the EU's trade with the world (2021). Despite Brexit (the UK leaving the EU), the EU reached an all-time high in its GDP in 2021 (see Table 2), while Russia further lost ground, despite its growing trade with China.

Table 1 The EU's Natural Gas Import Dependency from Russia
(Eurostat figures)

	2004		2014		2020	
	percent	terajoule	percent	terajoule	percent	terajoule
Germany	41.7	1,468,430	41.4	1,450,370	66.1	2,045,449
France	20.7	384,910	14.3	267,760	16.9	324,908
Italy	34.8	900,074	43.1	915,773	43.3	1,094,082
Poland	62.3	236,370	75.8	342,143	54.8	368,988
Hungary	80.6	347,748	95.0	328,641	95	450,167
Slovakia	100	264,166	100	184,049	85.4	143,086
Czechia	73.6	245,182	90.4	250,213	100	291,233
Estonia	100	36,032	100	20,262	93	7,920
Latvia	100	80,880	100	36,231	100	42,387
Lithuania	100	108,989	94.6	94,691	41.8	46,315
Finland	100	184,220	100	116,925	97.6	66,485

Table 2 Gross Domestic Products of EU, Russia, and China
(World Bank figures, in trillion US\$)

	European Union	Russia	China
2010	14.56	1.52	6.09
2014	15.65	2.06	10.48
2021	17.09 (without UK)	1.78	17.73

After the critical juncture of 2014, the EU's overall dependency on energy imports, especially natural gas, increased. The EU measures dependency by the extent to which an economy relies upon imports to meet energy needs, which is the share of net imports in overall inland energy consumption. Gas is a "bridge" energy carrier for Germany, replacing nuclear energy. In 2020, 43 per cent of natural gas in the EU came from Russia, followed by Norway (21 per cent), Algeria (8 per cent) and Qatar (5 per cent). In 2000 in the EU, the dependency rate was equal to 58 per cent. Over half of the EU's energy came from abroad. Twenty years earlier, it was 56 per cent. The import dependency rate ranges from over 90 per cent in Malta to 10 per cent in Estonia.

The China-Russia strategic partnership became central to the Eurasian BRI dimension as it would boost development by spurring infrastructure, connectivity, and innovation (Yilmaz and Liu, 2020). Russia forms a crucial part of China's BRI, depending on Chinese investments to fund and develop all infrastructure, as Western investments have been forbidden since 2014 (Bennett, 2016). The Moscow-Kazan high-speed railway and the Yamal liquefied natural gas plant became core investment projects after 2014. The Trans-Siberian corridor is the most developed and used among all the railway connections between China and Europe. Western sanctions significantly limited the opportunities to develop this route (Czerewacz-Filipowicz,

2019), while Russian BRI participation is limited to political declarations with little diversified economic interaction with China (Nosov, 2020).

While China's BRI in Russia primarily advances energy and infrastructure partnerships, the BRI investments in Europe are more upscale. China's President Xi expressed that China and Germany, at opposite ends of the belt, are the driving engines for economic growth in Asia and Europe (*China.org.cn*, 30th March 2014). For Russia, the Western sanctions amplified the motive to counter China's BRI influence on Central Asia with the EAEU. Instead, in May 2018, China and the EAEU announced a trade and cooperation agreement. It remained of symbolic value rather than actual economic benefit. Russia's true Eurasian ambitions became apparent with the invasion of Ukraine to enlarge or reunite the "Russian world" in 2022. Russia, transformed into a transit state and objectified as a gasoline station for East and West, aspired to hit back and actively trans-Russify what it perceives as the Russian world to seek compensation with land and people.

5. Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in February 2022

In a historically ambitious article by Russian President Putin (2021), he argued that modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era and that all Ukrainian-acquired territories in this era would be subject to discussion and negotiations. He wrote that the USA and the EU were pursuing an anti-Russian project, which millions of Ukrainians would have rejected. In his article, he widely ignored security issues and that Ukraine would not be the poorest European country if the Ukrainian political elite were to cut economic relations with Russia and conduct an anti-Russian policy. He wrote:

I recall that long ago, well before 2014, the U.S. and EU countries systematically and consistently pushed Ukraine to curtail and limit economic cooperation with Russia. We, as the largest trade and economic partner of Ukraine, suggested discussing the emerging problems in the Ukraine-Russia-EU format. But every time we were told that Russia had nothing to do with it and that the issue concerned only the EU and Ukraine. De facto Western countries rejected Russia's repeated calls for dialogue.

Step by step, Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a springboard against Russia. Inevitably, there came a time when the concept of "Ukraine is not Russia" was no longer an option. There was a need for the "anti-Russia" concept which we will never accept.

In Putin's more than 6000-word-long article, NATO and NATO enlargement did not appear once. Mearsheimer's neorealist and determinist NATO argumentation is futile. Putin justified his aggression with historical, cultural, identity and economic issues and the perceived Western support for an anti-Russian Ukraine. Putin's article is the most authoritative statement and justification for war. Russia's ad hoc placed NATO argumentation has been used tactically to weaken the West's cohesiveness and get China on board with its bipolar psychopathic fixation on a "Cold War mentality".

5.1. Instead of Becoming the Pariah (Outcast): Russia's in a Stable Marriage with China

In a phone call between Xi and Putin on 25th February 2022, one day after Russia's Ukraine invasion, Xi thanked Putin once again for coming to China to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Winter

Games. Xi demanded an effective and sustainable European security mechanism to solve the conflict through negotiation. Xi said, “China has long held the basic position of respecting all countries’ sovereignty and territorial integrity and abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter”. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 25th February 2022).

On the day of Russia’s invasion, China’s foreign minister Wang Yi said in a phone call with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, “China will continue to hold an objective and impartial position”. Lavrov said that “the United States and NATO broke their commitments, continued to expand eastward, refused to implement the Minsk-2 agreement, and violated UN Security Council Resolution 2202, and Russia was forced to take necessary measures to safeguard its rights and interests.” Wang Yi, contradicting himself, said, “China always respects all countries’ sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the same time, we also see a complex and unique historical context on the Ukraine issue and understand Russia’s legitimate concerns on security issues. China believes that the Cold War mentality should be completely abandoned”, and repeated Xi’s comments on a European security mechanism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 24th February 2022).

On 2nd March 2022, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution ES-11/1 and condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Resolution demanded a complete withdrawal of Russian forces and a reversal of its decision to recognise the self-declared People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Ninety-six countries sponsored this Resolution, 141 voted in favour, five against, and 35 abstained, China among them. Of the Southeast Asian Nations, Vietnam and Laos also abstained. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (EAEU), and Tajikistan abstained, and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were “absent”. EAEU and EU-AA connected Armenia also abstained. Belarus supported Russia. On the Eurasian “supercontinent”, only the EU and other European states,

Turkey, and most Eastern and Southeastern Asian (geographic) peripheries supported the UN Resolution.

Russia and China lived their marriage through Russia's fateful decision, making the EU the *outcast* in this triangle (see Figure 3), as shown by bilateral declarations and China's "neutral" support for Russia.

On 15 September 2022, Xi and Putin met for the first time in person after Russia's invasion during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Xi did not repeat the "no limits" friendship declaration of February. Putin said he "highly appreciates the balanced position of our Chinese friends in connection with the Ukrainian crisis". Gurtov (2022) wrote that Putin expressed disappointment that China failed to deliver on their "friendship". Xi said China would "work with Russia to extend strong support on issues concerning each other's core interests".

That indicates that the strategic partnership continues as if nothing happened. In Xi's phone call with Putin on 30th December 2022, Xi emphasised that "the world has now come to another historical crossroads". Xi framed the conflict as being part of a Cold War mentality:

To revert to a Cold War mentality, provoke division and antagonism, and stoke confrontation between blocs, or to act out of the common good of humanity to promote equality, mutual respect and win-win cooperation — the tug of war between these two trends is testing the wisdom of statesmen in major countries as well as the reason of the entire humanity. Facts have repeatedly proven that containment and suppression is [sic] unpopular, and sanction and interference is [sic] doomed to fail. China stands ready to join hands with Russia and all other progressive forces around the world who oppose hegemony and power politics, to reject any unilateralism, protectionism and bullying,

firmly safeguard the sovereignty, security and development interests of the two countries and uphold international fairness and justice.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 30th December 2022)

Xi also declared that trade between Russia and China reached a record high in 2022, and investment cooperation improved and integrated. Energy cooperation continued to “serve as an anchor” while cooperation projects “in key areas are moving forward steadily”.

However, Xi has red lines that limit strategic friendship. Neither does a full integration of Ukraine by Russia seem acceptable for China, as China also emphasises sovereignty, while nuclear bombs are a no-go, contrasting Putin’s nuclear bomb gamesmanship to threaten the West. When German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met Xi Jinping in Beijing in November 2022 during the first in-person talks, Xi made the call to “reject the threat of nuclear weapons” and advocate against nuclear war to prevent a “crisis on the Eurasian continent.” (*Global Times*, 1st November 2022). Besides, Xi also urged for peace talks.

5.2. The EU's Sanction Policies to Turn Connectivity Mechanisms to Sanction Mechanisms

The EU has adopted unprecedented sanctions to significantly weaken Russia’s economic base, depriving it of critical technologies and markets. The EU aims to curtail Moscow’s ability to wage war. This section will focus on the sanctions applied and what they mean for the EU’s position in the EU-Russia-China triangle. The EU justified the sanctions with Putin’s “unprovoked and unjustified military aggression” and his decision to recognise the non-government-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblast as independent entities. The EU has imposed different types of sanctions:

- **On individuals:** Individual restrictive measures; economic sanctions; diplomatic measures; restrictions on media; economic relations with Crimea and Sevastopol; on economic relations with the non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk; restrictions on economic cooperation.
- **Financial sector:** In the financial sector, restrictions include access to EU primary and secondary capital markets for certain Russian banks and companies, the prohibition on transactions with the Russian Central Bank and the Central Bank of Belarus; the SWIFT ban for certain Russian and Belarussian banks, the prohibition on the provision of euro-denominated banknotes to Russia and Belarus, the prohibition on public financing or investment in Russia. Furthermore, the prohibition on public investment in and contribution to projects co-financed by the Russian Direct Investment Fund.
- **Transport:** EU airspace was closed to all Russian-owned and Russia-registered aircraft in transit. The EU closed its ports to Russian vessels and prohibited Russian and Belarussian road transport operators from entering the EU. The EU prohibited exports to Russia of goods and technology in the aviation, maritime, and space industries.
- **Raw materials:** Concerning raw materials, the EU prohibited imports of iron, steel, wood, cement, seafood, and liquor. Also included are luxury goods exports to Russia and Russian-origin gold imports. The EU prohibited coal imports from Russia and oil with limited exceptions. Also prohibited are exports to Russia of goods and technologies in the oil refining sector and new investments in the energy sector.
- **Defence:** In the defence sector, the EU prohibited exports to Russia of dual-use goods and technology items that could contribute to Russia's defence and security capabilities. Trade in arms is generally blacklisted.

These are core sectors for connectivity processes. The EU turned Eurasian connectivity sectors into sanction mechanisms.

On 26th September, unknown undersea bombing attacks damaged the German-Russian gas pipelines Nordstream I and Nordstream II on Swedish sea territory in the Baltic Sea. Conveniently, the new Baltic pipeline, connecting Norwegian gas riches with Germany and Poland through Denmark, began its deliveries only one day later. The decades-long German and West European hypotheses of European integration and pipeline interdependence with Russia finally collapsed.

The internal cohesion of the EU is not perfect but solid. Some EU members are more exposed to energy imports from Russia than others. Hungary's President Viktor Orban criticised the sanctions for having a worse impact on European economies than Russia. Economically, the sanctions brought the EU a massive trade deficit with Russia. From January to September 2022, the EU imported goods from Russia (primarily energy and raw materials) worth 167.7 billion euros, more than 53 per cent up on the previous year. Whereas the exports strongly decreased, the EU recorded a trade deficit of 125.7 billion euros, financing Russia's war. Orban assumes that the sanctions are making European people poorer, and that Europe has shot itself in the foot (Reuters, 26th September 2022).

Nevertheless, Budapest was able to carve out some exemptions, most notably on the bloc's oil embargo (*Euronews*, 20th October 2022). In the ninth round of sanctions of December 2022, individual EU member states will be free to unfreeze money from Russian fertiliser and chemicals corporations if it is strictly needed to bankroll food and fertiliser shipments, especially for Africa. Derogations for food security and fertiliser, goods not affected by EU sanctions, had been pushed by France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Portugal, countries with large transit ports. The six countries found that the

existing sanctions regime made it too difficult to supply fertilisers to third countries, increasing the danger of famine in Africa (*Euractiv*, 16th December 2022).

Russia's invasion led to a drastic change in the EU's Russia relations and a messy divorce. Besides, the EU's sanctions lack of real success during 2022 also hints that the EU's economic clout is weaker than aspired. The Russian society, trained for generations to improvise, seems to be able to compensate for the blockades partly. That also empirically fortifies the EU's theoretical position as an outcast in the strategic triangle. For 2022, Russia even reported economic growth. How did China position itself in the strategic triangle concerning the EU?

5.3. China's Alignment with Russia and Estrangement from the EU

EU-China ties have deteriorated in recent years for various reasons, such as China's counter-measures to EU sanctions on human rights, economic coercion and trade measures against the single market. The EU Commission hopes to converge China's BRI standards with the EU. However, the EU's China strategy from 2019 perceives China as a "systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance" (European Commission, 2019), which indicates that standards do not converge. The EU demands that all member states, "individually and within sub-regional cooperation frameworks, such as the 16+1 format, have a responsibility to ensure consistency with EU law, rules and policies". The EU is critically interested in strengthening resilience and fully adhering to EU values, norms and standards, especially regarding the rule of law, public procurement, environment, energy, infrastructure and competition. This involves fully implementing legally binding international agreements and political reforms concerning future EU enlargement into the Balkans and the post-Soviet space. The EU

monitors BRI projects such as the BRI-funded high-speed railways between Budapest and Belgrade (Serbia) and the Peljesac bridge in Croatia. Chinese corporations are interested in participation in EU-financed transport infrastructure projects. They have invested in several ports, such as Antwerp and Piraeus, and most recently in Hamburg, which spurred a heated public debate in Germany. The key principles of the EU's engagement in connectivity are social, environmental and financial sustainability, transparent public procurement and a level playing field. The EU's Commission's emphasis shows indirectly that the EU does not perceive China as willing to abide by these rules and is trying to challenge them in the European peripheries.

The European Parliament turned down the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) ratification with China in early 2021 and decided on several resolutions supporting Taiwan, signifying deteriorating bilateral relations. Lithuania allowed a "Taiwanese Representative Office" (駐立陶宛台灣代表), the first office in the world that used the term "Taiwanese". China reacted harshly, withdrew its ambassador, and pressed multinationals to sever ties with the country or face exclusion from its markets. China's actions led the European Commission to propose a so-called "anti-coercion instrument", which would give the Commission eminent powers to impose punitive sanctions on individuals, companies and countries seeking to influence its political policies through economic pressure. In May 2021, Lithuania officially confirmed it was withdrawing from the 17+1 group. Once warmly welcomed by the European states, China's BRI and China+16 led to disappointments as the investment and trade relations did not develop as hoped and frustrated the Europeans (Turcsányi, 2020). For instance, as of 2020, Chinese investments in Czechia created only 3000 new jobs compared to the tens of thousands of German businesses created there, a small number.

The EU-China summit in April 2022 was overshadowed by the Russian war and China's propagandistic support of Russia's arguments. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission, expressed:

... in practice, Beijing's attitude has been one of pro-Russian neutrality. China does not condone Russia's behaviour – it abstained in the UN General Assembly votes – but it does support Russia's justifications of the war, i.e. the claim that the root causes lie in 'Cold War thinking' and especially NATO enlargement.

... Russia and China have made clear that they believe that great powers are entitled to a zone of influence in their respective neighbourhoods. We instead believe that the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act enshrine the right to [sic] of countries to make their own, sovereign choices. The joint Russia-China statement of 4 February is, at heart, a revisionist manifesto as I said at the Munich Security Conference on 20 February 2022.

(EEAS, 6th April 2022)

The heads of the EU, President of the European Council Charles Michel, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and High Representative Josep Borrell met Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang and Chinese President Xi Jinping separately via video calls on 1st April. There was no joint statement and no "business as usual" (*ibid.*). Charles Michel expressed: "As major global powers, the EU and China must work together on stopping Russia's war in Ukraine as soon as possible. We have a common responsibility to maintain peace and stability, and a safe and sustainable world." Ursula von der Leyen said: "There must be respect for international law, as well as for Ukraine's

sovereignty and territorial integrity. China, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has a special responsibility.” (European Council, 1st April 2022)

The EU reaffirmed the one-China policy while it raised its concerns about increased cross-Strait tensions. The EU called on China to support efforts to bring about an immediate end to the bloodshed in Ukraine “and its uniquely close relations with Russia” (*ibid.*).

The EU further expressed disappointment with China’s sanctions, including against members of the European Parliament, and its coercive measures against the EU single market and member states. The three EU leaders called on China to cease such actions for a more productive engagement to benefit both sides (*ibid.*).

Due to China’s growing aggressive rhetoric, behaviour and close partnership with Russia, the EU is rethinking its relations with China. The EU perceives itself as too dependent on China in many sectors and is striving for more strategic autonomy. One such sector is semiconductors. Although the most sophisticated ones come from Taiwan, the EU wants strong home production. To deepen technological autonomy, the EU Commission proposed the European Chips Act in February 2022, which shall mobilise €43 billion in “policy-driven investment” for the EU’s semiconductor sector by 2030. The EU has already attracted Intel and Taiwanese interest in European chip manufacturing. This aspect of internal balancing aims at strengthening the core in times of crisis across the Eurasian continent and China’s attitude.

In an ongoing exploration, Yale University Management Professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld counted over 1000 companies publicly announcing that they had voluntarily curtailed operations in Russia. Sonnenfeld concluded that the new world economy no longer needed Russia. Unlike Iran, China has not supplied Russia with weapons like military drones.

The Chinese company DJI even suspended selling drones in Russia (see Table 3). Several Chinese Banks involved in the BRI scaled back from the Russian market. Highly symbolic is the withdrawal of the “BRI Bank” Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Overall, China had planned to increase doing business with Russia.

Table 3 Chinese Corporations in Russia and Their Reactions to Western Sanctions (data tabulated from Professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld’s research team databank, Yale University <<https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/over-1000-companies-have-curtailed-operations-russia-some-remain>>)

STRATEGY	COMPANY	INFO
Business as usual	Air China	
	China Communications Construction Company	Planning new infrastructural projects
	China Construction Bank	Russian companies open accounts
	China Life Insurance Company	Actively looks for new employees
	China Minmetals	Discuss investments with Chinese government
	China Mobile	
	China National Petroleum Corporation	
	China Railway Construction Corporation	Continues to build Vladivostok highway
	China Railway Engineering Corporation	
	China State Construction Engineering	Contractor to the Russian state
	China State Railway Group Company	Increasing coal shipments from Russia
	China United Network Communications	
	Industrial Bank	Offices operating in Moscow
	Power China	Cooperating with a Russian bank on off-shore projects
	SAIC Motor	Plans to increase export
	State Grid Corporation of China	
	Tencent	
	The China Coal Transportation and Distribution Association	Plans to increase bilateral trade
	ZTE	
Suspension	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank	Curtail Russian access to capital markets
	Bank of China	Curtail Russian access to capital markets
	DJI	Stop selling drones in Russia
Scaling Back	ICBC	Curtail Russian access to capital markets
	New Development Bank	Curtail Russian access to capital markets
	Sinopec	Suspend \$500 million in investments
Buying Time	Binance	Restrict accounts with over 10 000 euros
	Huawei	Send new orders and furlough some staff
	Union Pay	Suspending issuing bank cards to Russian banks
	Xiaomi	Reported to suspend operations in Moscow

While the EU tried to make Russia the *outcast* in the strategic triangle, the EU became the *outcast* instead. These clashes and strategic shifts in the strategic triangle will affect the Eurasian connectivity processes. China’s BRI is still compatible with Russia’s EAEU.

However, the EU perceives China's connectivity strategies as increasingly incompatible with the EU's policies. China's pro-neutral support and anti-Western rhetoric have led to a further deterioration in relations.

6. Discussion: The Eurasian Weaponisation of Interdependence and Its Effects

Already before Russia's Ukraine invasion, incrementally as reported, the disparate logics of Eurasian integration led to a "weaponisation of interdependence" (Galeotti, 2022) and characterised an emerging "Age of Unpeace" (Leonard, 2021). As Leonard (2021: 139) argued, in these emerging non-military clashes, supply chains, trade routes, pipelines, railways, roads, cables, and the flows of people, goods, money, and data are becoming part of the currency of power. Ultimately that strengthened the cores, or as Leonard put it: "There is a tendency to turn the world into cores and peripheries – the more power is spread to the periphery, the more powerful the core must become". While the EU strengthened Russia materially with the colossal fossil fuel demand, it made the EU's peripheries economically comparably yet stronger in Central and Eastern Europe. This made the new EU member states more considerable trade partners for Germany than China since these deals energised their industrialisation.

However, the relative power discrepancy between the EU and Russia grew. After the annexation of Crimea, the EU cancelled the partnership agreement with Russia, and EU-Russia relations entered an anarchic constellation where "relative gains are more important than absolute gains" (Waltz, 1959: 198). The EU is a connectivity power since it structures its single market and has used its economic power for 20 years concerning the post-Soviet space. Leonard identified seven

strategies the connectivity powers can use. Only three blocs would be armed with enough connections, money and institutional power to be able to weaponise the whole system: these are the USA, China, and the EU (Leonard, 2021: 142). Russia would belong to the fourth world, as Russia could only weaponise a few sectors. The seven fields are *Centrality (1)*, which puts a country in a position where other countries are needed more than vice versa. On the Eurasian chessboard, the EU, Russia and China compete for that position with their distinct comparative advantages. The European energy dependency on Russia is a prime example. Essentials also include *Gatekeeping (2)*: who is in and who is out. The Western world and the EU act as a gatekeeper in many ways. The SWIFT payment system is one specific example of gatekeeping. It is challenging for countries excluded from that system to make regular trans-border payments or even get money from ATMs.

The Western sanctions excluded Russia from SWIFT. The EU's (albeit shrinking) global regulatory power in its neighbourhood and overall power *in* and *through* trade acts as a gatekeeper that Russia perceives as hostile. The EU has a weaker influence in the post-Soviet space when connections are not based on memberships and wealth transfers. Russia has little to mobilise against the EU's dominance, except in the fields of *Data mining (3)* and *Subversion (4)* (to spread disinformation through propaganda outlets), the last traditional Soviet-Russian and Communist Chinese strongholds. Putin's "Russian world" concept is part of subversion. Russia is also using the "refugee and migration weapon", like Turkey, a typical weapon of the fourth world (Russia's military adventures in Syria have brought hundreds of thousands of mostly young men to Germany and Europe since 2015, aiming at subverting and destabilising Germany). China and Russia spread misinformation about the origins of COVID-19, the Western vaccinations, and the origins of war. The results for Russia, however, are

bifurcated. While Russia manipulates the “professional” ethnic Russians in the post-Soviet space, who are often uneducated, it is losing educated Russian professionals seeking better lives abroad. *Infiltration* (5), *Rule-Making* (6) and *Independence-Seeking* (7) are other essentials in the weaponisation of interdependence. What is not emphasised in Leonard’s concept is the fact that lesser connectivity powers like Russia also might turn to a hot war to compensate for their weakness.

As emphasised, the EU’s strengths are based on wealth transfers to its peripheries, mainly inside the EU, and outside on a much more limited scale, while market access to the EU is an essential incentive. Of course, less EU finance provides better opportunities for competitors and the target states to pick and choose. Geopolitical and geoeconomic conflicts play out in these geographically “liminal” areas between the great powers. Without wise manoeuvring, potential conflicts become a reality. However, the EU perceives China also as challenging its power with its format with Central and Eastern European states. This perception stems from the EU’s comfortable pivot position in the early years after the EU Eastern enlargement. Since 2012, China’s rise and going-out strategy have challenged this self-understanding. For internal balancing means, the EU also weaponised interdependence. As the populist-nationalist Polish government has not fulfilled the conditions regarding judicial independence, a long-term dispute between Brussels and Warsaw, the European Commission will freeze the refunds for the payments proposed by Poland in the country’s partnership agreement (*Euractiv*, 18th October 2022). Although rules-based and following the rules of the club, this weaponisation is technically equivalent to Russia using the gas weapon in the post-Soviet space. China’s BRI investments in the 16+1 countries are comparatively small, as the economies are less complementary, which explains why this format has become stagnant. The EU tries to be a regulatory gatekeeper against China’s unregulated

state distributive capitalism, which seems to work, despite some spectacular Chinese purchases in the infrastructure.

Russia is enjoying a stable marriage with China, although it is a periphery for China economically. And Russia, as it lacks monetary funds to organise wealth transfers to its peripheries, can also not withdraw money but gas, resort to nationalistic “Russian world” ideology and implement it finally with military means when the politico-economic leverage is too small. Between 2010 and 2020, Russia’s economy shrunk by 2.4 per cent. At the same time, China’s GDP grew by 141 per cent. In 2020, 48.5 per cent of Russian exports to China were crude petroleum, followed by refined petroleum 4.42 per cent, coal briquettes (3.85 per cent), petroleum gas (2.59 per cent), and so on. In 2022, these figures strongly increased. China *must* bolster its relations with Russia to cover the fact that, for China, Russia is mainly a resource supplier and facilitator of EU-China connectivity, “hyped” as a partner against what it perceives as Western or US hegemony. Still, as politics trumps economics in this emerging great power competition, we have the paradoxical triangle situation in which the EU is the *outcast* as China frames the Russian invasion through a Cold War lens.

Russia did not intervene militarily in Ukraine when US President George Bush suggested Ukraine’s NATO membership in 2008 (after Russia’s invasion of Georgia and when the Ukraine military was much weaker). Back then, Germany and France were against Ukraine’s NATO membership. The widespread argument that the NATO enlargements have caused the war is exaggerated. NATO enlargements, understandably not welcomed by Russia, nevertheless mostly act as Moscow’s rhetoric chimaera to cover Russia’s weakening situation on the Eurasian continent, which made Russia a transit state for the EU’s and China’s enormous energy trade and transit operations. When Ukraine planned to sign an AA with the EU, which, *à la longue*, could

have meant a regulatory wall between Russia and Ukraine, at least from Russia's perception, Russia responded militarily. Russia might also fear a "second" Poland, namely Ukraine, becoming prosperous because of its EU alignment. Many signs were written on the wall, like Putin's nationalistic "Russian world" rhetoric, but they were widely ignored in Western Europe, especially in Germany, different to Eastern Europe. Ukraine, sidelined by the BRI due to Russia's annexation of Crimea, is nevertheless strategically located in the BRI, near the intersection of Europe and Asia, rendering a potential "gateway to Europe" for China (Mendez *et al.*, 2022). Russia will no longer be able to weaponise gas supplies against the EU, as Norway, Qatar, and the USA will replace them. In 2020, 29 per cent of the EU's oil imports came from Russia. Other considerable exporters to the EU are the USA (9 per cent), Norway (8 per cent), Saudi Arabia and the UK (both 7 per cent).

Also, Kazakhstan and Nigeria are essential sources. Of the solid fossil fuels (predominantly coal), the EU received 54 per cent from Russia, 16 per cent from the USA, and 14 per cent from Australia. However, the announced ban on coal imports in the first sanction package from April from Russia was enacted in August 2022. Imports from Columbia, the USA and Australia replaced coal imports. Countries were given some time to adjust their import structure. Russia replaced the demand from Europe by shipping more coal to Asia. Shagina (2022) writes that Western sanctions, the EU's energy transition and Russia's limited pivot to Asia will have profound implications for the country's oil and gas industry. Moscow will become ever more reliant on Beijing. That is not only not in Russia's interest but not in the long-term interest of the EU either.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine poses numerous challenges for China and the BRI. Three developments set back the Initiative: fewer funding options, less international cooperation, and geopolitical shocks. Trade is

affected, as the war is causing global disruptions of value chains, weakening free trade and sharpening global food and energy security. In October 2022, at the party convention of the Communist Party in Beijing, Chairman Xi Jinping emphasised the risks and drastic changes in the international environment, especially with external attempts at blackmailing, containment, blockades, and maximal pressure. But China is interested in further developing the trans-Russian railroads as an alternative to the sea routes and the Malacca dilemma.

China rhetorically emphasises wealth transfers with its going-out strategy, the BRI, and penetrative win-win (technically proclamations of wealth transfers) cooperations. However, unlike the EU's funding, China's comes with debt trap risks. China's options in this critical juncture are limited, as domestic problems also demand much attention from the government (Kawashima, 2022). For Julienne (2022), China's refusal to engage in the Ukrainian conflict in 2022 and exercise restraint is linked to China's weakened international position. China wants to avoid secondary sanctions it perceives as a high risk for its globally exposed corporations (Bo, 2022). China's appeal concerning the 16+1 platform was already waning in the Central and Eastern European states before Russia's invasion (Turcsányi, 2020). Lastly, China has also carefully considered how its involvement in Russia's Ukraine war impacts its position in Central Asia and regionally concerning Taiwan (Gurtov, 2022). If China acknowledges historical reasons for Russia to infringe on Ukraine's sovereignty, what about historical reasons to infringe on China's sovereignty over Taiwan? In sum, China's BRI as a Eurasian connectivity project is also at a crossroads (Mendez *et al.*, 2022).

Germany's Russia connections have been criticised for good reasons; however, as mentioned, they strengthened the EU relatively more than Russia. On 26th September, underwater bombings destroyed

parts of Nordstream II and Nordstream I. Nordstream II was already filled with gas but not under operation. For Germany and the EU, gas imports from Russia meant low prices and secure delivery (as transit through Ukraine was regarded as unreliable) at a critical juncture during Germany's energy transition towards a nuclear-free and more sustainable energy system based on renewables.

What are the effects of the Russian war and the EU's sanctions on the BRI railways connecting China with Europe? In the first half of 2022, China Railway announced that the Trans-Siberian corridor railways grew by only 2 per cent compared to the previous year. Usually, the growth rates were in the double-digit range. That was 7453 trains and 720,000 containers. The (Southern) middle corridor will grow in the coming years, but it will take time until it is a solid alternative to the Trans-Siberian railroads, which transported 1.5 million containers in 2021. In the first quarter of 2022, a mere 20,000 containers were sent through Kazakhstan to the Caspian harbours in Aktau and Kuryk. The EU did not impose sanctions on the railroads, which shows Russia's transit character between the EU and China. While in 2021 some 50 trains per week connected Duisburg, the world's biggest domestic harbour, it went down to 30, irrelevant in global logistics. A train fits 80 containers, while a freight ship can load up to 24,000 (FAZ, 30th November 2022).

The Southern corridor will partly replace the Trans-Russian corridor, benefitting West Asian countries like Turkey. Another rising power, India, might even perceive the sanctions against Russia as an opportunity, as they increase India's value for Russia and fortify India's "(re)connection to Eurasia" (Mukhia and Zou, 2022). India will also play a growing role for Russia in its attempt to return to the Indian Ocean (Gurjar, 2022) and play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific (Mohapatra, 2022). However, North-South pipelines to replace the pipelines to

Europe will take many years and need funds that do not come from China. These future dynamics on the Eurasian continent will give middle-sized and smaller countries new hedging opportunities. For instance, Armenia, with its approximation with the EU and strategic partnership with Russia, proven insufficient in security issues, might also be able to engage more with India. Also, other countries in Russia's Southern periphery might likewise have more hedging opportunities, amplifying Russia's and China's impact and the EU's.

Looking beyond the EU-Russia-China strategic triangle, a new facet of Eurasian cultural-civilizational connectivity can be observed by examining UN voting behaviour on resolutions concerning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The UN General Assembly decided on three resolutions (on Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine on 2nd March, Russia's referendums in Eastern Ukraine on 12th October, and reparations on 14th November 2022) that overwhelmingly support Ukraine. However, on the Eurasian tableau, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (post-Soviet countries) "abstained" regularly from voting against Russia. However, also India abstained. This voting attitude is probably also motivated by potential threats from Russia. It displays a third way that might politico-culturally substantiate a new Eurasian South-North axis of connectivity. As an emerging great power, India will provide countries in the post-Soviet space with new hedging opportunities beyond a polarising world. The EU should take these signals seriously if it aspires to strategic autonomy.

7. Conclusion

Since 2004, the EU's economic dynamics have moved to Central and Eastern Europe. In the phase between 2004 and 2014, the EU was in a pivotal position. Russia and China were the wings, who had just begun

to set up their bilateral political and economic relations on a new level. After the Crimea crisis, China's BRI shortened the distance between Europe and China politico-economically. In the second phase, between 2014 and 2021, the ties entered a romantic triangle position with three amicable relations, while Russia-China relations strengthened more as EU-Russia relations deteriorated. The relations between the EU and Russia worsened politically, but economically, apart from limited sanctions, developed further. Russia might have hoped that a swift victory against Ukraine in February 2022 would result in business as usual with the EU. That did not happen. The EU tried to court China to make Russia a pariah state in this triangle – to no avail. Paradoxically, the EU became the pariah – in that triangle. However, as stable as the marriage between Russia and China might appear, China's support for Russia has limitations.

Russia benefited from its energy exports to both Eurasian powerhouses but stagnated economically in its development compared to the EU and China. From several perspectives, Russia became a peripheral state for both Eurasian economic powerhouses, such as Leonard's weaponisation of interdependence scheme, and also from Immanuel Wallerstein's famous theory, which divided the world into the core, semiperiphery, and periphery. It is easier for the core to replace a peripheral state than for a peripheral state to replace the core. The EU was a core actor for Russia that is hard to replace. The EU has already gone far to purchase energy from elsewhere, while Russia has difficulties looking for new markets, especially concerning pipeline-bound exports. While China is developing out of the semiperiphery and becoming a Eurasian and global core country, Russia is in danger of developing backwards as the sanctions impede or harden technological development. One might observe a stronger reliance by Russia in the future on resource exports. Russia's plans to cooperate more on a North-

South axis need much funding and many years, if not decades, of construction. Russia's dependency on China will increase, and China will negotiate lower material prices. At the same time, the West implements a price regime on global Russian oil exports, which is also beneficial for China. There are opportunities for a country like India to become a more interesting partner for Russia, since India has interests in Russia's resources.

After 2014, although with support from China, Russia could not compensate for the weakened EU economic links. Hence, China-EU economic dynamics practically transformed Russia and the EAEU into a function of Eurasian connectivity in this imbalanced triangle. It became *Transrussia*, a highway for purchasing and shipping raw materials and commodities. Russia's *Transrussiafication* has two dimensions. First, it is a geographic transit state for resources and an object for China and the EU. Second, to compensate for that weakness, Russia attempts to culturally and politically *Trans-Russian* the post-Soviet space and beyond as a subject in Putin's "Russian world" ideology. Those two dimensions are an inseparable equation. Russia's weaponisation of culture contrasts with the EU's weaponisation of democracy, conditionality and wealth transfers, leading to Russia's invasion. Led by trans-Russian ideology, Russia invaded Ukraine to gather land, people, and resources to compensate for the relative losses. According to reports, Russia kidnapped thousands of young Ukrainians during the war to make them Russians. Russia's war also questions the transcontinental Eurasian dimension of the BRI. The EU's normative regulatory liberal capitalism, China's unregulated and distributive state capitalism, and Russia's cultural-geopolitical aspiration to gather land and people and coerce economically are incompatible on a triangular level-playing field. These clashes detect the assumption in the literature of ever-closer Eurasian connectivity as wishful thinking. Eurasian connectivity is not

dead, but the different Eurasian connectivities will continue to shape the continent at lower growth rates. The route dynamics might change, as the EU disconnected its energy imports from Russia. All wars end at some point, and not least, the EU's policymakers should take the problems, preferences, perceptions and ideas of non-Western countries seriously if they want the EU to be a competitive, truly cooperative and peace-contributing actor in this emerging multipolar world.

Note

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