

REPORT

GO VS. BLITZ: AN ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN-CHINESE INFLUENCE CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE



EUROPEAN VALUES

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While the Russian Federation and China as individual actors may be able to exert a massive influence in the European context, the outcomes and subsequent trajectory of their cooperation is limited.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This comparative study explores various scenarios of cooperation and confrontation between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China in Europe. It identifies the specific sectors and geographic areas where interests clash and strategic competition may result. Simultaneously, it considers where economic and other interests are mutually beneficial, affording both adversaries a geopolitical advantage. So addressed, the authors provide threat assessments for individual European states and the European Union with particular consideration to their respective vulnerabilities and resiliency.

Having so assessed, the present analysis addresses the similarities and differences in Russia and China's respective conduct of political influence warfare.

In summary, the authors conclude that:

- While the Russian Federation and China as individual actors may be able to exert a massive influence in the European context, the outcomes and subsequent trajectory of their cooperation is limited by their respective strategic priorities as demonstrated in the development of their bilateral cooperation both in China and Russia as well as their relentless competition in Africa and Central Asia where China has systematically prevailed.
- These strategic priorities are characterized by incompatible contingencies. When Sino-Russian co-operation occurs, it is in the context of what we have defined as power triangulation in Europe.¹
- The fundamentally competitive aspects of Russian and Chinese strategic interests in Europe will result in eventual failure and consequent termination of their co-operative efforts.

Methodology

Between September and November 2020, the European Values Center for Security Policy (EVCSP) developed a SWOT questionnaire that was submitted to 20 international experts from Sweden, Germany, Czech Republic, Great Britain and the U.S. This body of experts comprised intelligence analysts, defense analysts, diplomats and academics. Their answers, which included suggested readings and statistical data, were compiled for representation in the below chart and formulated in chapter two.

¹ EVC analysts have borrowed the definition of power triangulation within psychology: Triangulation is a manipulation tactic where one person will not communicate directly with another person, instead using a third person to relay communication to the second, thus forming a triangle. It also refers to a form of splitting in which one person manipulates a relationship between two parties by controlling communication between them. Triangulation is a technique of manipulation to foment discord between two entities known as divide and conquer or playing one (person) or state against another.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude comparative explore différents scénarios de coopération et de confrontation entre la Fédération de Russie et la République populaire de Chine en Europe. Elle identifie les secteurs et les zones géographiques spécifiques où les intérêts s'affrontent et où une concurrence stratégique peut en résulter. En parallèle, elle examine les cas où les intérêts économiques et divers sont mutuellement bénéfiques, procurant aux deux adversaires un avantage géopolitique. Les auteurs fournissent des évaluations des enjeux pour les différents états européens ainsi que l'Union européenne, en tenant compte de leurs vulnérabilités et de leur résilience respectives.

Se basant sur cette évaluation, l'analyse traite dans ce qui suit des similitudes et des différences dans la conduite respective de la guerre d'influence politique par la Russie et la Chine.

En résumé, les auteurs concluent que:

- Si la Fédération de Russie et la Chine, en tant qu'acteurs individuels, peuvent exercer une influence massive dans le contexte européen, les résultats et la trajectoire ultérieure de leur coopération sont limités par leurs priorités stratégiques respectives, comme le démontrent le développement de leur coopération bilatérale tant en Chine qu'en Russie ainsi que leur concurrence intensive en Afrique et en Asie centrale où la Chine s'est systématiquement imposée.
- Ces priorités stratégiques sont caractérisées par des contingences incompatibles. La coopération sino-russe s'inscrit dans le contexte de ce que nous avons défini comme la triangulation des pouvoirs en Europe.²
- Les aspects fondamentalement compétitifs des intérêts stratégiques russes et chinois en Europe entraîneront à terme l'échec et, par conséquent, l'arrêt de leurs efforts de coopération.

Méthodologie

Entre septembre et novembre 2020, le European Values Center for Security Policy a élaboré un questionnaire SWOT qui a été soumis à 20 experts internationaux originaires de Suède, d'Allemagne, de République tchèque, de Grande-Bretagne et des États-Unis. Ce groupe d'experts comprenait des analystes du renseignement, des analystes de la défense, des diplomates et des universitaires. Leurs réponses, qui comprenaient des suggestions de lectures et des données statistiques, ont été compilées pour être représentées dans un tableau et formulées dans le chapitre 2.

² Les analystes de l'EVC ont emprunté la définition de la triangulation des pouvoirs à la psychologie: La triangulation est une tactique de manipulation où une personne ne communique pas directement avec une autre, mais utilise une troisième personne pour relayer la communication à la seconde, formant ainsi un triangle. Elle fait également référence à une forme de dédoublement dans laquelle une personne manipule une relation entre deux parties en contrôlant la communication entre elles. La triangulation est une technique de manipulation visant à fomenter la discorde entre deux entités connue sous le nom de "diviser pour mieux régner" ou "jouer l'un (personne) ou un état contre un autre".

INTERNAL MEMO DEVELOPED BY EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY,³ 16.10.2020

Simplified comparison of Russian and Chinese influence operations in Europe

			Russian regime position	Chinese regime position
Main strategic objectives			Stay in power as long as possible by limiting threat of domestic revolution via effectively controlling Eastern European region, diminishing Western influence and pressure; restore Russian dominance in Central and Eastern Europe	Stay in power by externally legitimizing the regime fully controlled by Chinese Communist Party; build power to create Chinese-led international order by 2049
Horizontal ideal end-goal scenarios in Europe, listed as synergic efforts (what is the actor trying to achieve = best case result)	Strategic Effort #1: Revenge against the U.S.	Fully shared end-goal	Unifying domestic propaganda platform: revenge against the U.S. after "1990s humiliation"	Unifying domestic propaganda platform: revenge against the U.S. after "Century of Humiliation"
	Strategic Effort #2: Decouple U.S. & Europe	Fully shared end-goal with expected future synergy	Decouple U.S. & Europe so Europe is not a "U.S. zone of influence"	Decouple U.S. & Europe so U.S. is strategically isolated from its key allies
	Effort #3: Aggressive external posturing towards Europe in order to prevent effective European resistance	Current synergy: Russia uses non-military escalation for silencing European resistance to its aggression, China copies it but it kills Chinese "positive" soft power strategy	Russia knows Europe will not effectively punish it for aggressive influence and intimidation campaigns. Russia uses strategic reflective control: Knowing European appeasement mindset, more aggressive Russia doesn't trigger European hard response but de-escalation efforts (Russia can offer its political proxies ⁴)	China saw Europe did not effectively punish Russia for aggressive influence campaigns, so China copies this modus operandi yet without careful planning so that 'Wolf Warrior' efforts diminish positive and non-threatening image of China in Europe
	Effort #4: Split within Five Eyes	China leads, Russia welcomes	Russia welcomes Chinese efforts but cannot effectively achieve it (Russia can offer its human intelligence capabilities)	Use elite capture in UK, NZ, CA to push Huawei into 5G and create loss of trust within Five Eyes community
	Effort #5: Push for rewriting of global rules in favor of dictatorships	China leads, Russia supports	Russia shares Chinese aim to change "liberal world order norms" such as internet governance and "recognized spheres of influence" mindset (Russia can offer its state proxies)	Europe does not provide effective resistance to Chinese "globalization 2.0" (and human rights abuses or Taiwan-related issues)
	Effort #6: Tech and business dominance as dependence leverage	China leads, Russia carefully tolerates	Russia accepts Chinese tech dominance, (possible clash #1) possible conflict of interest when China enters energy domain which Russia uses as political leverage (Russia can horse-trade its energy deals and capabilities)	Europe is dependent on Chinese tech (future: 5G) and business which China will leverage for political blackmail of Europe
	Effort #7: Use of energy projects for elite capture	Russia leads, China learns	Europe financially sponsors the Russian regime through strategic corruption & elite capture energy projects like Nord Stream 2 (Russia can offer its political and influence proxies)	China learns from Russian strategic corruption & elite capture projects in Europe and often also targets ("second handed") the same political proxies
	Effort #8: Make Eastern European countries Russian puppets	Russia leads, China learns	Eastern European countries adopt Belarussian governance model (= threat of colored revolution diminishes by exiling the young generation) (Russia can offer its political proxies)	China learns from elite capture and puppet mastering in Eastern Europe and yet does not challenge it
	Effort #9: Suppression of European resistance against norm-breaking behavior	Russia leads, China observes Russian non-success	End of European sanctions against Russia	China learns from Russian non-success in eliminating European sanctions against Russian aggression

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⁴ In blue, we are explaining where Russia can offer something strategic to China in particular efforts, in a possible trade-off if such strategic deals are struck

<p>Regional ideal end-goal scenarios on Europe, listed as synergic efforts (what is the actor trying to achieve = best case result)</p>	<p>Effort #10: Disconnect Central Europe from "U.S. sphere of influence"</p>	<p>Fully shared end-goal</p>	<p>Belt of "neutral" or puppet Central European states (AT, SK, HU, CZ) (Russia can offer its political and influence proxies)</p>	<p>Central Europe and Western Balkans effectively serves as Chinese proxies on selected issues (17+1)</p>
	<p>Effort #11: Hungary and Serbia as regional safe entry-points to Central Europe and Western Balkans</p>	<p>Fully shared end-goal</p>	<p>HU and RS as safe harbors of Russian intelligence operations against Central Europe and Western Balkans (Russia can horse-trade its energy deals and security capabilities)</p>	<p>HU and RS as safe harbors of Chinese influence operations against Central Europe and Western Balkans, (possible clash #2) possible clash of interests when China tries to overtake RB in energy domain and security sector</p>
	<p>Effort #12: Supporting anti-Americanism in Germany to achieve strategic decoupling</p>	<p>Fully shared end-goal</p>	<p>Long-term strategy of supporting anti-Americanism in Germany to undermine trust of German population and political establishment in U.S. government (Russia can offer its political and influence proxies)</p>	<p>Learning from Russian strategy and first signs of support of anti-Americanism in Germany to grasp German appeasement reflex by using fake neutrality argument ("European can stay aside of U.S.-China confrontation")</p>
	<p>Effort #13: Strategy to isolate Poland as the regional adversary in Central Europe</p>	<p>Russia leads, China likely to follow</p>	<p>Poland as anti-Russian leader is isolated from other major European powers (DE, FR) (Russia can offer its detailed knowledge and human intelligence capabilities)</p>	<p>China is still trying to penetrate Polish establishment, but losing ground and likely to follow Russian approach to Poland</p>
	<p>Effort #14: Russia aims to make Eastern European countries its puppets</p>	<p>Eastern Europe and Central Asia as Russian spheres of influence where China is also gaining influence</p>	<p>Use of elite capture and strategic dependence to make Eastern European and Central Asian countries puppets of Russia (Russia can horse trade political and influence proxies)</p>	<p>Penetration of Eastern European and Central Asian countries via elite capture efforts and tech domination which could lead to future power tensions or influence horse trading with Russia (possible clash #3)</p>
	<p>Effort #15: Push-back against EU and NATO "expansion" to Eastern Europe and Western Balkans</p>	<p>Russia has a clear containment/roll-back strategy, China develops its approach</p>	<p>End of EU/NATO "expansion" in Eastern Europe and regress of NATO membership in Western Balkans (Russia can offer its detailed knowledge and human intelligence capabilities)</p>	<p>China doesn't object to EU enlargement yet because it believes that it can be penetrated and controlled. Might change in the future. No strategic Chinese stance on NATO in Eastern Europe or Western Balkans yet, likely to be negative (possible clash #4)</p>
	<p>Effort #16: Effective control of Balkans as a leverage against Europe</p>	<p>Russia sees Balkans as tool against Europe, China wants to control it</p>	<p>Destabilization of Balkans as a possible leverage tool against Europe (Russia can give up on its destabilisation efforts)</p>	<p>China prefers stability and control of Balkan countries because China knows it can penetrate and control them via elite capture (possible clash #5)</p>
	<p>Effort #17: Approach to prevent Europe from resisting Russian and Chinese objectives in Africa</p>	<p>China has clear strategy in Africa, Russia can leverage its limited capabilities</p>	<p>Russia has selected and limited interests in Africa which it can flexibly leverage and horse-trade with China (Russia can electively horse-trade its security capabilities)</p>	<p>Europe does not effectively counter Chinese influence in Africa</p>

1. OBJECTIVES OF CHINESE AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN EUROPE

Russia's main strategic objective

The main strategic objective of the ruling class in the Kremlin is to stay in power as long as possible by limiting the threat of a domestic revolution. In order to do so, it intends to exercise control over Central and Eastern Europe which it perceives as a security guarantee. The goal is to establish a buffer zone; i.e. a sphere of influence preventing the region from becoming an agent of change. The second goal is to diminish Western influence and pressure, preventing the region from complying with European democratic values. The ultimate goal is to restore total Russian dominance in Central and Eastern Europe.

If wholly successful, Russia will have decoupled the US from Europe by building a continental security structure from Lisbon to Vladivostok, arguing that the EU is not a proxy territory and making the transatlantic security alliance redundant. It also aims at achieving a quasi-Finlandization of Eastern Europe, encouraging a Lukashenko-style governance and vassal type of security system. An immediate economic priority of the Kremlin is to eliminate all EU sanctions against the Russian Federation and to have Europe financially sponsor the Russian regime via energy projects such as NS2. Furthermore, both the siloviki and Kremlin oligarchs intend to continue enjoying unrestricted freedoms in Western Europe.

China's main strategic objective

The PRC aims at staying in power by externally legitimizing the regime, fully controlled by the CCP. Its declared goal is to build a stable geopolitical power structure able to establish a Chinese-led international order by 2049.

If successful, China will achieve a total decoupling of the US from Europe and make sure that the US is strategically isolated from its Western allies. In this model, Europe would serve as a strategic springboard against other nations, allowing full deployment of Chinese economic influence. Consequently, Europe would become a market for Chinese technology and business, thus creating total dependence. As a geostrategic actor, Europe would be politically non-aligned or even a potential ad hoc ally of China against the US on single, isolated trade issues. Ultimately, Europe would espouse or at least tolerate the concept of a Chinese Globalization 2.0.

1.1. Regional operational objectives of strategic influence operations

Russia

Influence operations will aim at exacerbating tensions between the US and Germany by ensuring that Germany and Russia are at odds with the US and each other. In this model, Western Europe is thought to be effectively tolerating Central and Eastern Europe as a sphere of Russian influence. To establish this influence, a belt of puppet or 'neutral' Central European states (Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic) will be securing Russian territorial influence over Europe.

Poland poses a threat to this model. Accordingly, it is a goal of Russian influence operations to make sure that Warsaw remains strategically isolated. Russia designs the same for the UK, identifying it as a potential resistance actor against Russian aggression. A reinforced cultivation of French and German political elites who are strategically relevant is to be expected. This will seek an end to political discourse surrounding EU and NATO expansion in the Western Balkans.

China

Influence operations seek to achieve a full strategic decoupling of Europe from the US in all China-related issues. They will also ensure that a neutralized Europe does not project power outside of its borders and permits predominant Chinese influence in Africa. These operations will also aim at transforming the region of Central Europe and the Balkans into Chinese proxies through venues such as the 17+1 Group. China's efforts to persuade (or coerce) European states into adopting Huawei in 5G networks is a top priority. Beijing further endeavors to exacerbate increasingly fraught relations among the Five Eyes community concerning Huawei issues.

EU States such as Portugal and Italy have become Chinese proxy actors as a result of the interdependence policy sought in the framework of influence operations. A non-aligned Europe would be eventually intimidated into submission on human rights and Taiwan related issues.

1.2. Post-2018 modus operandi status

Russia

Moscow initiates strategic blackmail deals (NS2, Paks2) and successfully manages to achieve a decoupling of security and trade issues.

Russia knows that Europe will not effectively retaliate against its aggressive activities. The Kremlin is therefore encouraged to conduct even more aggressive influence campaigns. It will extend its influence over much of the European far-right, and far-left, thus garnering strategic influence successes (IT, AT, HU). It successfully completes its operations of neutralization in some respects (UK, FR, DE) but also registers midterm tactical losses (MC, ME, SE).

China

China knows Europe will not effectively sanction it for aggressive activities, therefore the CCP runs more aggressive influence campaigns. China largely established its leverage of influence throughout Europe although it encountered some PR disappointments in certain European states. Through its combative public diplomacy (similar to the Russian variety), it reaches a high impact influence but such operations are run by distinct entities (see below). China deploys massive efforts in co-optation tactics, implementing a policy of strategic blackmail via interdependence of businesses, drawing the focus on Huawei and Taiwan issues and ultimately decoupling security from trade interests.

2. CHINA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION: PARTNERS, NOT ALLIES

Lauded by Chinese propaganda, recent examples of Sino-Russian cooperation find detailed coverage in Chinese language media as well as extensive endorsement in its international outlets.⁵ Between 2013 and 2019, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met 30 times. Several landmark projects have been achieved in the framework of bilateral agreements such as the Siberia gas pipeline, sustained joint military co-operation like China's participation in the Vostok military exercise, and joint technology and research projects. The designation of China and the Russian Federation as great power competitors hit with sanctions by the US and the EU has been

⁵ Yeping, Ying. 2020. "Strengthening of China-Russia technological cooperation is crucial: envoy". Global Times, September 8, 2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200296.shtml>.

used by both the Kremlin and the CCP as an opportunity to intensify their bilateral relations in order to renew and strengthen their strategic partnership. The latter was initiated ‘for the sake of global stability and confidence’ according to the CCP, a narrative that is systematically repeated by Chinese officials.

Using a similar narrative while espousing the Primakov doctrine, the Kremlin has also prioritized the intensification of the Sino-Russian partnership, especially in the field of arms, AI research and modern technologies. Vladimir Putin even stated that, “It is mutual interest – and not money - that really counts.”⁶

In this pursuit, the Kremlin declared 2020 as “The Year of Russian-Chinese Scientific, Technical and Innovation Cooperation,” planning approximately 800 bilateral events through to 2021. Accordingly, the Russian government launched a series of bilateral efforts involving almost all Russian regions, as well as projects related to research of new technologies meant to boost Russia’s IT ecosystem.

The initiative did result in some noteworthy examples of development of high-tech research. Examples include the joint-development of a fast-neutron reactor fueled by ROSATOM;⁷ collaboration on a wide-body long-range jet; the relocation of Huawei’s Technological Academy;⁸ and the general expansion of Chinese business in Russia’s IT sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic only bolstered its importance from Moscow’s point of view. Nonetheless, the spirit of cooperation did not prevent the Russian Federation from unilaterally closing its borders to China in response to COVID’s virulent spread. Tellingly, it did so without consultation with Beijing.

From the beginning, this “cooperative” year seemed one-sided and reflected the asymmetrical nature of the relations. Chinese corporations did not refrain from using their vast networks of researchers for aggressive information gathering via hacks that were immediately detected by Russian counterintelligence. Several high-ranking Russian officials were also found to have accepted bribes to facilitate bilateral projects. Even if some accusations in the past remain highly debatable (e.g. the case of Roskosmos researcher Vladimir Lapygin),⁹ a pattern is detectable. Consider accusations made earlier this year against Valery Mitko, the President of the St Petersburg Arctic Academy of Social Science, selling classified information to Chinese military intelligence.¹⁰ Similarly, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Khalil Arslanov was accused of fraud for orchestrating the delivery of cheap, Chinese-manufactured counterfeits of Russian military equipment to RF armed forces.¹¹ The cases involved the GRU and FSB, suggesting that they have intensified the monitoring of Chinese nationals on Russian soil.

6 Integrated Foreign Economic Portal of the Russian Federation. 2019. “Mutual interest not money key to Russia-China cooperation in AI, says Vladimir Putin”. Integrated Foreign Economic Portal of the Russian Federation, February 2, 2019. <http://www.ved.gov.ru/eng/general/news/19/26068.html>.

7 World Nuclear News. 2019. “TVEL to supply fuel for China’s fast-neutron reactor.” World Nuclear News, January 10, 2019. <https://world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/TVEL-to-supply-fuel-for-Chinas-fast-neutron-react>.

8 Ishnakova, Olga. 2019. “MTUCI and Huawei will open the first national ICT Academy in Russia.” International Forum: Security and Safety Technologies, July 30, 2019. <https://eng.tbforum.ru/blog/mtuci-and-huawei-will-open-the-first-national-ict-academy-in-russia>.

9 Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty. 2020. “Russian Court Grants Early Release To Scientist Convicted Of Treason.” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, June 11, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-court-grants-early-release-to-scientist-convicted-of-treason/30665148.html>.

10 Ilyushina, Mary. 2020. “Russia accuses arctic researcher of spying for China.” CNN World, June 17, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/17/europe/russia-china-spying-allegation-intl/index.html>.

11 The Warsaw Institute. 2020. “Deputy Chief of Russia’s General Staff Arrested: The FSB Hits the Military.” The Warsaw Institute, February 10, 2020. <https://warsawinstitute.org/deputy-chief-russias-general-staff-arrested-fsb-hits-military>.

Russian defense analysts suspect that these incidents are only the tip of the iceberg. One example: A ROSTEC official was recently quoted as saying that more than 500 cases of unauthorized copying by China have been identified in the past 17 years.¹² In sum, intensified cooperation means intensified espionage.

Russian counterintelligence is especially worried about issues of fraud, corruption and intellectual property theft already endemic in the Russian Federation. Several such incidents make clear that the Chinese-Russian relations are entirely interest-driven; mutual trust is absent. Without shared, fundamental values, it follows that the realization of what some have feared as a “normative alliance against democratic and liberal norms” will eventually turn detrimental to China and Russia’s security interests.

Furthermore, it seems clear that both the Kremlin and the CCP have been openly messaging about the necessity of engaging Europe in scientific cooperation as a way to improve diplomatic relations of their respective countries. Several aspects of a policy of triangulation demonstrate how Russia is playing the European card against China, and China the same against Russia.

2.1. Establishing a Global Information Network in Partnership

This distrust does not prevent both actors from forming tactical agreements in the sphere of information warfare. High-ranking Chinese and Russian government officials pursue aggressive outreach efforts to win European target audiences’ hearts and minds. Standard vehicles are high-profile PR campaigns and sponsorships. To date, Gazprom and Huawei have undertaken PR activities in Europe to their benefit, garnering a level of respectability.¹³ Russian hubs of influence such as Vladimir Yakunin’s Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institutes have openly engaged with Chinese representatives in European capitals and China.¹⁴ These activities reveal an intention to reaffirm the Sino-Russian partnership in the European context; however, they characteristically differ in the Kremlin’s public diplomacy regarding Beijing’s diplomatic maneuverings. Where Beijing’s domineering ambitions are clear, however, is in the digital information technology market.

China works with Russian digital media to advance its image and agenda. Through various news-content sharing agreements, Moscow and Beijing jointly endeavor to protect their systems by denying access to accurate information. Simultaneously, they cooperate to produce false content to flood democratic states’ media space. Bi-lateral news-content sharing agreements allow authoritarian states/media agencies to gain a competitive advantage over international news coverage without resorting to major Western news agencies. For example, in April 2017, an agreement to share news content between Sputnik and Global Times was signed;¹⁵ it was followed soon after by another between the Alibaba Culture and Sputnik news agencies.¹⁶ In September 2018, Sputnik and the Chinese Media Group signed a similar news-sharing agreement. In addition to these memoranda, the two sides pledged to continue strengthening their cooperation under the framework of the

12 Aliyev, Nurlan. “Military Cooperation Between Russia and China: The Military Alliance Without an Agreement?” International Centre for Defence and Security, July 1, 2020. <https://icds.ee/en/military-cooperation-between-russia-and-china-the-military-alliance-without-an-agreement>.

13 CEPA China Influence Monitor. 2020. “Germany takes the lead.” CEPA China Influence Monitor, November 12, 2020. <https://mailchi.mp/cepa.org/announcing-china-influence-monitor-tracking-the-ccps-westward-footprint-565750>.

14 Yakunin, Vladimir. “[2015 Shanghai Forum - Keynote Speech] Vladimir Yakunin.” Youtube video, March 15, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAHP3FNb0Pw>.

15 Global Times. 2017. “Global Times begins cooperation with Sputnik.” Global Times, April 19, 2017. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1043165.shtml>.

16 Sputnik News. 2017. “Sputnik News Agency, Alibaba Group Sign Memorandum of Strategic Cooperation.” Sputnik News, September 6, 2019. <https://sputniknews.com/world/201709061057129948-sputnik-alibaba-memorandum-cooperation>.

Media Council of the China-Russia Friendship, Peace, and Development Committee.¹⁷

In October 2019, Sputnik and Xinhua officials, among other representatives, signed a joint letter which laid the framework for a future agreement sealing the sharing of broadcast and digital programming in Spanish and Arabic. This joint letter was signed during the 4th BRICS High-Level Media Forum by the co-delegates of the forum, including minister and editor-in-chief of Xinhua News Agency He Ping, the President of CMA Group of Brazil José Juan Sanchez, Dmitri Gornostaev, deputy editor-in-chief of International News Agency and Radio Sputnik of Russia, and Ananthakrishnan Gopalakrishnan, senior associate editor of The Hindu of India. The authors were represented at the forum by The Hindy's Brazil correspondent Shobhan Saxena and Lutfia Vayej, group executive for marketing and communication at Independent Media of South Africa. Interestingly, the text also stressed the demand to implement a joint fact-checking system to avoid fake news and other suggestions. Given the latest developments in the political rivalry between the PRC and India, it is difficult to predict on what basis this agreement could actually be implemented.

However, this ambitious first multilateral test model had already shown its limitations when Sputnik expanded its news content via a bilateral exchange with China's regional media organizations. This agreement led analysts to conclude that the Kremlin constituted a global media conglomerate attempting to pull countries around the world into Russia's digital influence sphere. It has also become clear to these observers that Russia uses its information space "to expand its influence around the world, mask the Kremlin's aggression, and spread disinformation that undermines the U.S. and the West."¹⁸

Furthermore, growing concern from Russian intelligence about the use of Chinese technologies, specifically the recent repeat cyberattacks targeting the Russian Federation, leads analysts to believe that the Russian government is becoming increasingly worried about Chinese operations against Russian targets.^{19,20}

The past competition of respective propaganda agendas in Central Asia also leads analysts to believe that this cooperation could remain limited, declaratory, and serve a particular propaganda purpose in Europe.²¹

17 CGTN. 2018. "China Media Group signs cooperation agreement with Russian news agency." CGTN, September 15, 2018. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d774e7851544d7a457a6333566d54/index.html>.

18 Bugayova, Nataliya, and George Barros. 2020. "THE KREMLIN'S EXPANDING MEDIA CONGLOMERATE." Institute for the Study of War, January 15, 2020. <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-expanding-media-conglomerate>.

19 Kommersant. 2020. "Chinese hackers have invested in development: Winnti group attacks the creators of software for banks." Kommersant, September 7, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4482448>.

20 Kommersant. 2019. "Hackers embedded in the system: Russian government agencies attacked from China for years." Kommersant, May 13, 2019. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/>.

21 Vavra, Shannon, and Sean Lyngaas. 2020. "Chinese hackers suspected in cyber-espionage operation against Russia, India." CYBERSCOOP, October 7, 2019. <https://www.cyberscoop.com/chinese-hackers-espionage-russia-india-dhs-cisa-alert>.

3. HOW WILL THESE INFLUENCE OPERATIONS BE CONDUCTED? EIGHT KEY ELEMENTS OF INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN COMPARISON

To characterize the two approaches to operations, consider the game Go compared to Blitz Chess. The Chinese approach to influence operations in Europe focuses on protracted encirclement tactics, akin to Go. In contrast, the Russian approach utilizes tactics of immediate gain through aggressive movement – Blitz chess.

According to several intelligence analysts consulted for this study, the nature of Chinese operations is human-centric, while Russian operations are effect-centric. This typology appears to be essential in developing the correct tools to counter hostile influence properly.

Three distinctions can be made between Russian and Chinese influence operations, particularly within European modus operandi:²²

- Set-piece operations vs. Playing-the-man
- Service-led operations vs. service-facilitated operations
- Agents of influence vs. influenced agents

Beijing's operations in Taiwan indicate a growing similarity to the Kremlin's methods of influence. An operational comparison suggests that China and the Russian Federation consider active measures as a standard means of engaging in the world political scene following the Leninist revolutionary propaganda toolbox. However, while Russia operates to disrupt EU/European relations, China has never been detected attempting the same on a large scale.²³

3.1. Set-Piece Operations vs. Playing-the-Man

While the intelligence officer class rules in Beijing and Moscow, their approaches to handling influence operations differ significantly.

Key elements of the Russian disinformation architecture, as subcontracted to military and civilian agencies, have carried out set-piece operations like their predecessors in the Soviet Union. Among tried-and-true tactics include updated versions of forgery, including Deepfakes, smear campaigning, and the extensive use of kompromat, maskirovka, and provokatsiya.

The Soviet directorates and successors in charge of psychological warfare use a scale to evaluate the impact of information operations known as reflexive control. This matrix stems from psychological research and cybernetics, incorporating the techniques of operational research into decision-making. After determining how an opponent perceived and framed problems and subsequently processed information, Russian intelligence services calibrate operations to steer the adversary's

²² Mattis, Peter. 2018. "CONTRASTING CHINA'S AND RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE OPERATIONS." War on the Rocks, January 16, 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/contrasting-chinas-russias-influence-operations>.

²³ Latest developments in Central Europe however show that Chinese activities tend to follow the Russian toolbox. According to the Director of Slovak intelligence Service Vladimír Pcolinský: Chinese intelligence targets parliamentarians, MEPs, government officials and advisors by offering free trips to China and offering prostitutes in Slovakia ('it is very embarrassing then') See: Pčolinský, Vladimír. 2020. "Riaditeľ SIS: Kočner montoval kameru aj do kúpeľne a toho človeka následne vydieral." TVNOVINY.SK, November 19, 2020. <https://www.tvnoviny.sk/na-telo/2013418-riaditel-sis-kocner-montoval-kameru-aj-do-kupelne-a-toho-cloveka-nasledne-vydieral>.

decisions in an advantageous direction.

Chinese intelligence services alternatively prefer the long-term cultivation of individual targets, endeavoring to shape the private context of HUMINT rather than strengthening short term operational tactics. Such person-to-person relationships are the quintessence of Chinese information operations and are often delegated to nonintelligence operatives. This element poses a challenge to counterintelligence. It makes tracking hostile intelligence operations extremely difficult as it involves –on the surface – nonintelligence affiliated operatives.²⁴

3.2. Service-led operations vs. service-facilitated operations

Although born of the same Leninist totalitarian ideology, Russian and Chinese intelligence services do not have the same understanding of the structure, mission, and purpose of political warfare. For Moscow, intelligence services have an essential function partly because of their broader clandestine operations. The Chinese approach to influence operations leads intelligence services to become enablers, liaising between persons of interests they have previously identified, rather than directly engaging in clandestine influence operations themselves. The actual influence-exerting organizations – the Liaison Department of the PLA's Political Work Department and the United Front Work Department – report to the Politburo through a completely separate chain of command that deals primarily with party affairs.

The services and influence organizations – particularly the Liaison Department and the United Front Work Department – are the principal architects of the network facilitating the activities of multiplier vectors such as the myriad of friendship, sports, academic, student, research, and cultural associations.²⁵

Chinese nationals participating in such events are seldom employees of security structures themselves, but rather top CCP members who espouse the party's international strategy and have been trained in managing foreign audiences.

3.3. Agents of Influence vs. Influenced Agents

The influence activities of Russian intelligence services are articulated around their officers' ability to socialize, self-promote, and operate their recruited agents, sometimes to implement active measures directly.

Chinese intelligence services play a less visible role in the state apparatus when planning and conducting influence operations. More common than intelligence officers are influential CCP members linked to multipliers facilitating inroads and working as door-openers for foreigners to China.

Their intended goals differ as well. According to German analyst Tatlow, China does not deploy intelligence resources to foment unrest in Europe as it would be deemed counterproductive in the framework of broader economic cooperation. In fact, China has never been caught directly fomenting political unrest in domestic politics by creating crises or exploiting European trade partners' domestic issues. Instead, it aims at cleverly creating interdependence, mutually beneficial at first. In this regard, its intelligence apparatus is less instrumental than the network of the United Front. By comparison, Russia is classified by Tatlow as a troublemaker while

²⁴ Mattis, Peter. 2015. "A GUIDE TO CHINESE INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS." War on the Rocks, August 18, 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/08/a-guide-to-chinese-intelligence-operations>.

²⁵ Hannas, William, and Didi Kirsten Tatlow. 2020. China's Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge. 114-115.

China is a builder. However, this operation pattern might change, as exemplified by China's involvement in cyber-influence operations in the context of the 2020 U.S. election.²⁶

3.4. Military-Civil Fusion

The concept of military-civil fusion is an essential part of China's national strategy. Beijing's policy focuses on reinforcing the PRC's ability to build the country into a technological, economic, and military superpower by leveraging its military and civil-industrial resources. The strategy aims to promote the sharing of resources and collaboration in scientific research, which benefits economic and national defense development. To accomplish these goals, civil society actors engage in information collecting as well as analyzing structures and insights passed on to the military level. This data collection pipeline can even operate without resorting to more aggressive forms of espionage and can secure the transfer of licit or – as more often the case – illicit technology. The chain of information can start with a Chinese exchange student at a Western university and end with technology theft by coordinated military units. The CCP's ideology serves as a cement between the actors in its model.

3.5. Use of SIGINT in influence operations

Even Russia's and China's deployment of cyberwarfare diverge, according to U.S. and German analysts. While the Russian government subcontracts troll farms to conduct influence operations linked to Russian intelligence online, China does not need to do this. It has unlimited human resources at its disposal and can resort to millions of volunteers for data collection. German analyst Tatlow assesses that around five million ethnic Chinese living in North America could be easily organized into a network of volunteers for whatever political purpose decided by the CCP; This has not happened yet. Russia has no such resource and therefore has to resort to cyber-guerrilla warfare, i.e., single-targeted, hard-hitting actions.

Even though both Russia's and China's military intelligence agencies conduct hacking operations, the main differences are their use of collected data. China has a vast reservoir of politically reliable and well-educated analysts, whereas Russia does not, neither in number nor in quality. In Europe, massive and repeated cyber hacking attacks from China have been directed at research institutions, all aimed at stealing military-grade or high-tech intelligence to gain a competitive market advantage. While also targeting research and academia, Russian cyberattacks more often aim to damage infrastructure, political institutions, or decision-making circles. The GRU attacks on the Bundestag, political parties, and individuals critical of the Kremlin were politically motivated data theft serving potential influence operations.²⁷

China has created its own version of the Internet, which allows the country to limit user access, monitor usage and habits, and collect user data, gathering a massive amount of SIGINT. Comparatively, Russia has not developed such an extensive, sophisticated, ideologically legitimized surveillance architecture. Here too, Russia lacks the ideological oversight of citizens' internet usage – an advantage that the CCP has kept.

Chinese hackers operate in full conformity with CCP ideology so as not to diverge from the party line. It is especially noteworthy in the context of their activities

²⁶ Tatlow, Didi Kirsten. 2020. "Exclusive: 600 U.S. Groups Linked to Chinese Communist Party Influence Effort with Ambition Beyond Election." Newsweek, November 13, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/2020/11/13/exclusive-600-us-groups-linked-chinese-communist-party-influence-effort-ambition-beyond-1541624.html>.

²⁷ Tatlow summarizes this operational approach, quoting McCallum, Head of the Mi5: 'Russia brings a burst of bad weather; China wants to change the climate.'

against targets in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Chinese cyber-hacking operations and theft of private data are yet to be thoroughly analyzed; moreover, analysts fear that the results of such operations will be exploited over decades. While tied to their country's intelligence, Russian hackers are often cyber mercenaries who have no personal political convictions or ideological motives. For example, troll factories have been revealed by defectors who never or no longer espoused the political agenda behind such activities.²⁸

3.6. The art of creating dependence and profiting from an adversary

The concept of dependence is the main tactical difference between Russian and China in major influence operations. Russia generates dependence as a geostrategic tool in Europe via its energy policy, whereas China does this by creating a need. China's concept of independence appeals to a mutual European-Chinese benefit. It avoids an atmosphere of subjugation, which would be deemed detrimental to the business climate. Beijing has understood that market attractiveness is the condition sine qua non to the EU's power projection and tries to avoid any form of frontal coercion. Information warfare in Europe around the Belt and Road initiative demonstrates that an effort is being made to reach out to all parties, not leaving out any actor or bypassing any government, even at the local level. By comparison, the Kremlin has been doing precisely the opposite through its European energy projects, violating EU legislation from the start.

If China has been unchallenged in the art of creating dependence in Europe, it appears that it is experiencing its first defeats. The examples of deteriorating business climate in Vietnam and Africa due to the poor handling of human relations have shown the limitations of this policy, echoed in Europe. China, most Western analysts note, is by definition unskilled at handling contradiction due to its domestic communist doctrine. It is also unable to counter any roll-back of influence operations based on economic dependence.

CCP ideology does not provide the necessary diplomatic toolbox to handle such situations. In such cases, the CCP's reaction comes across as unprofessional and clumsy.²⁹ This explains the sudden uncontrolled outbursts by Chinese diplomats when challenged by free Western media and Chinese officials' political bullying of some of their foreign counterparts. The ideological framework that is operationally so helpful in coordinating immense human capital is powerless when countering contradiction. Consequently, the CCP resorts to its brutal and totalitarian tactics. China's diplomatic offensive to counter confrontation by media and within decision-making circles in Europe yields meager results. Several examples of failed public diplomacy related to the official handling of COVID-19 ended in fiasco in EU countries. In Germany, domestic intelligence agencies had to issue warnings after Chinese officials tried to influence high ranking German officials and large corporations' leadership to deliver positive assessments of Beijing's policies.

3.7. Market liquidity as a tool of influence

Financial and market liquidity has allowed China to weaponize the lines of credit they provide to their trade partners. China's ability to provide financing for business deals provides a sizeable competitive advantage over Russia and other competitors. This strategy has proven successful in Africa and Central Asia, where Russian

²⁸ MacFarquhar, Neil. 2018. "Inside the Russian Troll Factory: Zombies and a Breakneck Pace." The New York Times, February 18, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/russia-troll-factory.html>.

²⁹ Erlanger, Steven. 2020. "Global Backlash Builds Against China Over Coronavirus." The New York Times, May 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/03/world/europe/backlash-china-coronavirus.html>.

influence has been largely replaced by China's. The Russian economy is in no position of committing such financial support to trade deals.

3.8. Use of the diaspora

Both the Russian Federation and China have successfully developed structures aiming at coordinating their respective diaspora; however, results speak in favor of the PRC. Analysts argue that the Chinese have a larger, more thoroughly organized force at their disposal in both number and socio-economic profile. Their use of association, GONGOS, students, and journalists abroad demonstrates clear coordination of the United Front and full surveillance of their respective activities. The concept of grass-roots organization does not exist in the Chinese culture.

4. THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S PERCEPTION OF THE EU AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER

Even if the EU remains the top trade partner of the Russian Federation,³⁰ the Russian government appears to be acknowledging the EU's political weight in the context of the EU-U.S.-Russia triangle. The EU's firm stance on the respect of human rights and individual liberties and its use of political conditionality makes it a challenging partner for the Russian Federation at the bilateral level. The perceived structural weakness of the EU foreign and security policy makes it at the same time vulnerable, missing the dimension of power projection in the eyes of most Kremlin-affiliated analysts. This weakness is exploited through influence operations in countries where criticism of Brussels' bureaucracy and alleged illegitimacy are part and parcel of domestic political discourse. Russian influence operations aimed at consolidating the most radical fringes of the political landscape and rallying them behind a separatist agenda (e.g., Catalonia) or empowering the most nationalist parties by granting them financial credits (e.g., with France's former Front National), or the co-opting political elites like in Hungary, Austria, Greece, Cyprus, Czech Republic and, to some extent, Germany.

For the Kremlin, the EU is a crucial element of the U.S.-dominated, value-driven Euro-Atlantic Alliance posing a threat to the Kremlin's concept of "sovereign democracy" domestically. Moreover, it challenges Putin's concept of sphere of influence over the post-Soviet space. The perceived EU advance towards Russian borders via association agreements and neighborhood policies is deliberately misread as aggression that Moscow uses to justify the "necessity" of influence operations against targeted governments. Several reports of intelligence agencies in Europe confirm their extensive use against their respective countries. They all unanimously conclude that the Kremlin has deployed massive resources in developing strategies to block the promotion of an EU economic and political value-based model on its Eastern flank.

The EU's agenda towards Russia is dominated by a bifurcated policy of engagement and sometimes sanctions intending to affirm the EU value-based stance while incentivizing the Kremlin to adhere to the rule of domestic and, more generally, international law. This mixed messaging from EU institutions appears to invite more Russian disinformation. Accordingly, the resultant confusion provides fertile ground for influence operations

³⁰ Nota bene: Russia is the EU's fifth largest trading partner and the EU is Russia's largest trading partner, with a two-way trade in goods value of €232 billion in 2019. In 2019 Russia was the origin of ca. 40% of EU imports of gas and 27% of EU imports of oil. Due to the large value these imports, EU's trade deficit with Russia (€ 57 billion in 2019) is only second to EU's trade deficit with China. Source: European Parliament. n. d. "Facts Sheets on European Union – Russia." Last modified December 2020. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/177/russia>.

5. CHINA'S PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A TRADE PARTNER

Like the Russian Federation, China appears to view the EU as a non-actor in respect to European security while it reaffirms Beijing's importance in trade. When it comes to the European Union, the CCP's approach to defense issues is highly ideological and is in conjunction with its American rivalry. When co-operation happens, it is always in the bilateral context of medical and relief assistance. Examples include the latest German-Chinese COMBINED AID19 maneuvers and the very symbolic, multilateral China-EU cooperation in the ATLANTA counter-piracy operations.

The EU's normative, value-based policy on human and individual rights poses a threat to the core value of the CCP's totalitarian state; nonetheless, Beijing's pragmatic approach prevails for now. China's implementation of its full engagement trade policy contrasts with its systematic ignoring of the EU's calls to respect human rights. Even when the EU inserts clauses of conditionality to its negotiations, China does not openly retaliate. Still, China has made it clear that it will not negotiate on the CCP's understanding of multipolar world order, Chinese national sovereignty, or non-interference in its domestic affairs (a principle that China itself does not apply to Taiwan.)

When it comes to economic issues, the EU is seen as an indispensable partner for China, deserving care from the CCP. Sole economic considerations dominate China's policy towards the European Union, whose market is of immense importance to China.³¹ The EU remains China's top trade partner.³²

Politically speaking, China's approach to the EU's role demonstrates its view of one pole within the Chinese conception of a multipolar world and a potential partner in the U.S.'s rivalry. This exemplifies Beijing's often hard-to-detect tactics of triangulation, an approach that Chinese propagandists have been trying to exploit via the COVID-19 pandemic. When the EU Commission challenges the White House, like on the COP 21 agreement, multilateralism, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Iran, North Korea, or disagrees on the policy of sanctions, China welcomes and supports the EU perspective. China often seeks to disrupt EU unity by privileging diplomatic relations to certain maverick states whose current governments are reactionary towards Brussels.

31 Hirsch, Cornelius. 2020. "China's influence in Europe — by the numbers." Politico, September 14, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/mo-money-mo-pandas-chinas-influence-in-europe-by-the-numbers>.

32 Nota Bene: China is the EU's biggest source of imports and its second-biggest export market. China and Europe trade on average over €1 billion a day

- EU's main imports from China are industrial and consumer goods, machinery and equipment, and footwear and clothing
- EU main exports to China are: machinery and equipment, motor vehicles, aircraft, and chemicals
- EU-China trade in services amounts to more than 10% of total trade in goods, and the EU's exports of services make up 19% of EU's total exports of goods

European Commission. n. d. "Trade – Policy – Countries and regions – China." Last modified June 11, 2020. <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/china>.

6. DISMANTLING THE SINO-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP IN THE EU?

Currently, China's and Russia's agendas converge to varying degrees; however, they are not found to be systematically cooperating when approaching the EU as a single actor. Multiple analysts maintain that China is not interested in a collapse of the European Union, as its key trade partner status prevails; moreover, this ignores the political or security dimension. Contrary to China, Russia deliberately attempts to weaken EU cohesion and prevent the development of a common security policy. While China relies on the EU as a unified and stable trade partner, Russia prefers to act unilaterally. In the context of triangulation with the EU, China-Russia relations remain asymmetric, with Russia being the junior partner in economic affairs. Trying to break Sino-Russia cooperation by attracting one or the other a partner appears pointless since neither Russia nor China seems to view one another as a genuine partner when dealing with the EU as a single entity. These tactics could only reinforce Kremlin strategists' reflexive control and justify the need for bilateral co-operation to fence off a perceived interference. Since the strongest argument in the Chinese-EU relation is commercial in nature, market access and regulation should be used to influence China.

An efficient tool to use is a coordinated strategy in confronting China's substantial financial resources and Russian know-how in corrupting European decision-making circles and preventing triangulation tactics.

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