

The Dragonbear and the Grey Rhinos. The European Union Faced with the Rise of the China-Russia Partnership

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Abstract: *China and Russia have been developing a strategic partnership over the last decade or more. This serves them to assert their own perspectives in international relations and cooperation to alter the liberal world order. The article is analysing the dimensions of this partnership, as well as asymmetries between the two partners. Russia does not have too many tools nowadays at its disposal to counter China's rise and the power gap between the two is widening every day. Unlike Russia, which does not have many foreign policy alternatives as relations with the West have worsened drastically, China is often courted by both Westerners and non-Westerners. In this context, the European Union seems to be unprepared, at a time when the EU-US relations have suffered during the Trump administration, and all circles are demanding a reset of the transatlantic relationship. Biden's change in tone regarding the transatlantic relations seems insufficient, as little progress is being made on delicate issues like trade, technology, climate, and China. The EU is unprepared to face the 'grey rhinos', the serious problems generated by the rise of China and of the China-Russia partnership. The article identifies and discusses the most important 'grey rhinos' the EU needs to deal with.*

Keywords: *Sino-Russian relations, China, Russia, EU decline, new world order, transatlantic relations.*

A. Introduction

The Dragonbear, China and Russia partnership on the global scene, has been growingly assertive in the last ten years or so. The term 'Dragonbear' was coined by Velina Tchakarova in 2015 "to mark an emerging new mode of their bilateral relations aimed at shaping the global order in the 21st century" (Tchakarova, 2020). The present article is meant to present the essential facets of this partnership and the challenges it poses to the EU (European Union). Certain effects of this deepened bilateral relations got embodied in problems for the European Union. Some of them are large and obvious. They are the 'grey rhinos'. A 'grey rhino' is a highly probable threat that has not gotten sufficient attention, despite the fact that it is predicted well in advance and often avoidable if acted upon in time (Wucker, 2016). Among the examples given by Michele Wucker, American policy analyst specialized in crisis anticipation, we may mention: the bursting of the housing bubble in 2008, the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the digital technologies that upended the media business, the rising vulnerability to cyber-attacks. They were all foreseeable. But what are the grey rhinos facing the EU as a result of the growing Dragonbear? This is the question we attempt to answer in this article.

The article explores the development of the China-Russia partnership, tracing its roots, and analyses its main dimensions. It problematizes the understanding of this

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bilateral relation in a trilateral or quadrilateral context, and looks at the asymmetries of the relations EU–Russia and EU–China. It emphasizes a series of specific elements that derive from a strengthened China-Russia partnership and its consequences on the EU. In the final part, we identify a few ‘grey rhinos’, obvious threats already present on the EU’s doorstep and even inside it. We are assuming European viewpoints in discussing these issues.

B. The Dragonbear. The development of the China – Russia partnership

The rapprochement between China and Russia has been noticed, documented, and analysed by a series of political scientists. Bekkevold, Bolt, Cheng, Fu Ying, Gabuev, Kaczmarek, Lo, Lukin, Sutter, Tchakarova, Trenin are among the most prominent.

B.1. The beginning of a ‘beautiful friendship’

The beginnings of the new bilateral relationship are placed by some authors as early as the 1980s, others attribute the most important role for the China-Russia rapprochement to the economic crisis of 2008, which showed that the US (United States) and the West are not invincible. The subsequent economic recession led them to limit their international ambitions (Kaczmarek, 2015: 13). Stapleton Roy believes that Sino-Russian relations had been extremely good before the crisis in Ukraine, but after the crisis, Russia gave up its anxieties about China’s rapid growth and was forced to move even closer to it. In addition, Russia was compelled to open up in terms of arms trade, energy trade, and infrastructure development (Stapleton Roy, 2017: 38-40). The crisis in Ukraine has turned the marriage of convenience between Russia and China into a solid partnership (Trenin, 2015). The economic crisis of 2008 determined Russia’s pivot to Asia, and the crisis in Ukraine accelerated it and brought Russia and China even more closely together: “Isolation from the West makes engagement with China more necessary than ever. But at the same time, bad relations with the West have weakened Russia’s bargaining power in Beijing, thus putting significant brakes on Russia’s pivot” (Makocki & Popescu, 2016: 49).

Western actions in Syria, Libya and Iraq have only deepened cooperation between Russia and China; less aggressive Western actions would have slowed this accelerated rapprochement (Lukin, 2018:191). Many authors consider the main catalyst for the development of Sino-Russian relations to be the gradual deterioration of Russia’s relations with Western states. Russia had to reorient its economy to China in order to get out of the isolationism in which it found itself as a result of the crisis in Ukraine. After the crisis, Russia’s dependence on China intensified, removing the economic barriers between the two, Russia needing a new market for its energy exports, but also the Chinese technologies and capital: “Chinese financial institutions are reluctant to ignore Western sanctions, but Moscow and Beijing are developing parallel financial infrastructure that will be immune to sanctions” (Gabuev, 2016).

After publishing a book in 2008, “Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics“, in which he evaluated the bilateral relationship as being a conjunctural “axis of convenience”, Bobo Lo abandons this idea in 2018, assessing that between the two countries a strategic partnership has emerged. China and Russia have developed an extremely complex network of political contacts at a higher and lower level. In this regard, there are regular high-level bilateral visits and there is economic and military cooperation between the two countries. Bekkevold and Lo assess that it will rarely be possible to see a political relationship at such a high level as that between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. This bilateral relationship has become: “central to the international system, and one of the few pillars of stability in an otherwise chaotic world” (Lo & Bekkevold, 2018: 5).

B.2. Economic, military, and cooperation in international organizations

The economic profiles of the two countries differ. The Russian economy is based on the export of fuels and mining products (59.4%), manufactures (20.1%) or agricultural products (8.8%), while it mainly imports manufactured (79.5%) and agricultural products (12.4%). The Chinese economy is based on export of manufactured products (93.2%) (WTO, 2018). China ranks first in terms of export of merchandise and second in terms of their import, while Russia is 16th in terms of export and 20th in terms of merchandise import. The main Russian exports to China consist of fuels and arms.

From an economic standpoint, Russia wants Chinese investments to grow in order to mainly develop the Russian Far East and the Arctic area. Nonetheless, China is a cautious economic actor and the Chinese investments do not fully meet the Russian requirements for these areas. In 2017, China became the main importer of oil from Russia with about 60 million tonnes. Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean oil pipeline has seen significant capacity growth and is expected to continue to grow in the coming years. The “Yamal LNG” natural gas project, of which China owns approximately 30%, will open a line with a capacity of 5.5 million tonnes of liquefied natural gas per year. The main export market will be China. In May 2018, 83% of the natural gas pipeline “Power of Siberia” was already built. The Russian-Chinese agreement for this project has been called the “contract of the century”, costing about \$400 billion (Kulintsev, 2018). To a large extent, Russia's economy is dependent on revenues from oil and gas exports, accounting for more than one-third of revenues from the budget of the Russian Federation. The economies of the two are complementary to a certain extent.

On the military level, their interactions accelerated as their relations with the US deteriorated. Military exercise Vostok-2018, the largest Russian military exercise since the end of the Cold War era is relevant. The interoperability of the Russian and Chinese troops alarmed the West (Yang, 2018). Vostok-2018 highlights a turning point for Russia and China's external policy (Osborn, 2018). Russia is sending a message to the West that it no longer considers China a rival, but an important partner: “These joint exercises have grown in scale and sophistication, illustrating a gradual improvement in military ties between China and Russia” (Gabuev, 2018a).

Previously to Vostok, the Sino-Russian military cooperation included the “Joint Sea”, large naval exercises undertaken by the Chinese and Russian navies (2015, Sea of Japan; 2016, the South China Sea; 2017, the Baltic Sea; 2019, the Yellow Sea). „The Russians have not, in the past, proved eager to share tactics and doctrine with other navies, even those which have been customers of their ships” (Goldrick, 2017). These exercises suggest an alignment between China and Russia in relation to China's interests in the South China Sea and Russia's ambitions in the Baltic Sea.

In terms of weapon exports, Russia has a considerable advantage over China, accounting for 22% of the world's weapon exports, while China holds only 5.7%. Russia is a major producer and exporter of weapons worldwide, while China has a much more balanced export-import position (SIPRI, 2018, p. 8). When it comes to nuclear arsenal, Russia holds parity with the US in terms of nuclear warheads, whilst China has a much more limited nuclear stock (SIPRI, 2018, p. 11). The fact that Russia holds such a nuclear force position contributes to its status of great power at the international level.

The continuation of Russian military technology exports to China (Sukhoi SU-35 aircrafts in 2015 and S-400 missile systems in 2018) proves that Sino-Russian military relations are at a very high level. It is believed that Russia will no longer be an arms exporter for China because its arms industry “is advancing by leaps and bounds thanks to massive investment in indigenous R&D” (Gabuev, 2018b). Moreover, Russian

military superiority sustained mainly by nuclear arsenal and military technologies is expected to decline in the face of a China whose main objective is to modernize its armed forces to become a maritime superpower (Kaczmarek, 2015: 22-23). Russian-Chinese military cooperation also involves the training of Chinese personnel in Russia. Regular consultations are also held between Russian and Chinese generals, in which issues such as the development of military relations or military strategies are discussed (Kashin, 2018).

China and Russia have a history of cooperation in different formats, starting with the UNSC (United Nations Security Council), continuing with SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa). They are both involved in efforts to assert their power and spoil the post-World War II liberal order.

Both China and Russia are members of the UNSC. Russia is the country that used its veto right the most, blocking no less than 100 resolutions since the creation of the council in 1945 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018). China started to use the veto right more frequently in the last few years. Both states learnt a lesson after the Libyan Crisis in 2011, when they decided to stay neutral: "After being tricked once, we were not ready to be tricked again by the West in order to support the sanctions of UN Security Council or the military intervention against Syria" (Chaziza, 2014: 252). After the Syrian government allegedly used chemical weapons against its own citizens, a condemning resolution was rejected by Russia and China. The crisis in Ukraine found China adopting a neutral position, despite the EU's efforts to bring China on its side. China avoided criticizing Russia directly and withheld its vote at the UN. China and Russia were on the same side again on the occasion of the crisis in Venezuela (Nichols, 2019).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, mainly focuses on security and fighting the „three evils”: terrorism, separatism and extremism. The Sino-Russian partnership in Central Asia is based on preventing „colour revolutions” in the region, and limiting the US influence. SCO is traditionally dominated by China, and to a smaller degree by Russia: „Chinese official newspapers and netizens have described the organization as a forum for China to explore and implement a new model of international relations” (Grace, 2018). The organisation has an agenda based on security, economic development and humanitarian cooperation. Apart from China's interest in security, the Central Asia region could provide China with transportation routes for oil and gas from Central Asia to China. Also, China can use the region as an export market for its products. Russia's role has been extremely significant, helping China to enter this region, which had been historically dominated by it. Neither Russia, nor China, is interested at all in changing the authoritarian regimes in the region. SCO has been an extremely effective tool for correlating security interests for both China and Russia. China has begun to provide loans to Central Asian states bilaterally through its banks, and Russia has been unable to oppose it, as it was lacking such funds to compete with Beijing (Gabuev, 2017).

In 2015, Putin (and not the president of EAEU - Eurasian Economic Union) signed an agreement on the coordination of the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) and EAEU. In 2016, he presented the idea of a „Greater Eurasian Partnership” (GEP) which would supposedly encompass the EAEU, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries. However, a research conducted on Russia and Kazakhstan in 2019 indicates that „BRI has had a much more forceful impact on local elites than Russia's idea of „Greater Eurasian Partnership” (Shakhanova, Garlick, 2020: 33).

BRICS, launched in 2009 upon Russia's initiative, claims that its aim is the creation of a more equitable, democratic and multipolar world order. Behind this idea is the criticism of the West's continued control over the large international financial institutions. The West was considered over-represented in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. From its beginnings, BRICS wanted to reform international financial institutions to create greater voice and representation for emerging economies", being united by their growth potential (Ayles, 2017). The BRICS member states hold about 43% of the global population, generate about 23% of gross domestic product worldwide and have contributed more than 50% to global economic growth over the past 10 years (BRICS, 2017). For Russia and China, this powerful bloc of emerging economies is a perfect tool to show to the Western world that the developing countries are not secluded. During the sixth BRICS Summit in Fortaleza (2014), the leaders signed the agreement establishing the New Development Bank (NDB), meant to mobilize resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other emerging economies, as well as in developing countries (NDB, 2021).

B.3. Common views, interests, and actions of the Dragonbear

Their views on the international system are often identical. Both criticize American unilateralism, Western interventionism and the aggressive promotion of democracy. Russia and China are the promoters of a world in which emerging powers should enjoy greater representation in the global system (Lo & Bekkevold, 2018: 6). Promoting a multipolar world and defending the role of the UN (United Nations) globally were among the most important elements of a common vision of the international order. Most likely, there will be two worlds, one Western, being controlled by the US and the EU, and the other one non-Western, being controlled by Russia, China and other developing countries that are dissatisfied with the current status quo and the role they play globally, thus providing an alternative to the Western course (Bolt & Cross, 2018: 291).

In a Joint Statement of the two ministers of foreign affairs, Wang and Lavrov, important ideological stances can be spotted. Two fragments draw attention in this sense: (1) "All human rights are universal, indivisible and interrelated. Sustainable development is the basis for improving the standard of living and quality of life of the population of each state, and thus contributes to respect for all human rights;" (2) "[T] here is no single standard for a democratic model. The legitimate right of sovereign states to independently determine their own trajectory of development needs to be respected. Interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the pretext of 'promoting democracy' is unacceptable" (Joint Declaration, 2021). The first one is alluding to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in tune with the Dragonbear's paramount emphasis on the United Nations. Articles 22-27 of the Declaration refer to a series of economic and social rights (right to work, just and favourable conditions of work, right to rest and leisure, health and education). The Dragonbear interpretation of this Declaration considers these articles to be paramount, in contrast with the West, which put emphasis on rights and liberties as expressed in the first part of the Declaration. The second fragment refers to an interpretation of democracy as 'popular democracy', in which the value of economic equality trumps individual freedoms. These two elements: the importance of welfare for the people and 'popular democracy' are main ideological tenets of the Dragonbear.

In harmony with the common interest to erode the power of the West, China and Russia embarked on a series of actions meant to do exactly that, to erode the institutions and practices of the West in the international arena. One of the means to do this is to cooperate in alternative international organizations and institutions

(SCO, BRICS, NDB, AIIB²). Another one is to attack the USD. The intention of Russia and China to use the national currency in the trade between them was announced in September 2018 (Miracola, Ambrosetti, 2018). After new sanctions were imposed by the US, Russia sold \$100 billion of its reserves to buy euro and yuan: “Russia is making a strategic shift in its reserves towards holding fewer dollars and more assets in other currencies” (Doff & Andrianova, 2019). Russia and China are among the largest gold producers, accumulating huge gold reserves as a strategy to put pressure on the US dollar and put an end to its hegemony. (Chossudovsky, 2018). Within BRICS a single payment system, BRICS Pay, was established, as part of the drive to establish a common system for retail payments and transactions between the member countries. The gradual introduction of the digital Renminbi serves the same purpose.

The reformation of a series of international organizations, like IMF (International Monetary Fund) or WTO (World Trade Organization), also finds the Dragonbear in contrary positions with the West. Both China and Russia gain out of the erosion of the Western power, both display pragmatism, direct or indirect attacks on liberal democratic values. They attack the liberal world order as dominated by Western powers, by the Global North. Their regimes themselves are autocracies and they project values contrary to liberal democracies, they act against the present international order. “[T]he main common denominator of the Dragonbear is the geostrategic goal of disrupting the influence of the USA by all available means (...) they aim to establish and consolidate an Eurasian land connectivity as a response to the American maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific realm” (Tchakarova, 2020).

Thus, China and Russia have developed a close relationship in the last decade or so, which can confidently be characterized as a strategic partnership. This partnership encompasses strengthened bilateral economic relations, intensified energy cooperation, enhanced military exchanges and exercises, and strengthened cooperation in international organizations (UNSC, BRICS, SCO, and others) in view of asserting their interests in the international arena and eroding the power of the liberal world order embodied in international regimes, dominated by the West, particularly the US. According to Andrei Kortunov: “Strategically, the two countries should match their views of the desired future world order and coordinate efforts to create it” (Kortunov, 2019).

B.4. Asymmetries between China and Russia

So far, we investigated the common elements connecting the Dragon and the Bear. But, historically, the Sino-Russian relations have been more strained and asymmetrical than harmonious. The gap between the two powers is considerable and growing, with China dominating the relationship. The rapprochement with China offers an economic and strategic alternative for Russia at a time when it is vulnerable, but at the same time leaves it with fewer tools in its relationship with China.

The confrontation between Russia, on the one hand, and the US and the EU, on the other, led to a spoiled relationship between Russia and the West. Therefore, Russia today needs China more than the other way around. Russian businessmen have completely lost confidence in the West as an economic partner, many of whom have been hit by EU or US sanctions. This prevents politicians and business people alike from seeing a return to the state of EU-Russia relations to the pre-Ukrainian crisis (Lukin, 2018). While Russia has gained room for manoeuvre in its relations with the West, it has lost it in its relations with China (Kaczmarek, 2015).

A considerable gap may be noted in respect to the economic profiles of China

² The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiated by China, started to work in 2015. It has 103 international member states, the US not being one of them.

and Russia. The Russian economy is dependent on natural resources export – a sign of a precarious state. At the same time, by certain parameters, China's economy overtook the biggest economy in the world, the American, even though in terms of GDP/capita China features as a developing country (West, 2018). The economic crisis of 2008 showed that China has gradually begun to become the dominant party in the Sino-Russian relationship. China's supportive actions during the Eurozone crisis of buying European bonds from most-hit EU countries, showed its power, as 30% of Beijing's total foreign currency reserves are euro-assets (Popescu, Brinza, 2018: 22). According to the WTO, the role of China and Russia in the other's economy is very disproportionate. While China is for Russia the main economic partner after the European Union, Russia is not even in the top ten states as economic partners for China. At the same time, the GDP of China is at approximately 14 trillion USD, whilst the Russian GDP is at approximately 1.7 trillion USD (WTO, 2019).

In the opinion of Paul Goble, the Russian economy is a disaster because Russia has one of the biggest gaps between the poor and the rich and because the Russian state is being unable to provide a decent living standard for its citizens. Moreover, the infrastructure is a catastrophe, Paul Goble arguing that: "Russia has fewer miles of paved highway than does the US state of Virginia" (Goble, 2017). Meanwhile, China has been the largest contributor to global growth, since the financial crisis in 2008. Yet, China is still a developing country, with per capita income at a low level in comparison with the advanced economies, and some of the reforms being still incomplete (World Bank, 2019).

From the standpoint of military expenditures, the gap between the two states is getting bigger. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China spent \$266.449 billion in 2019, while Russia spent \$64.144 billion. The US military expenditures in 2019 were \$718.689 billion (SIPRI, 2019). Russian military superiority sustained mainly by its nuclear arsenal and military technologies is expected to decline in the face of China.

There is a discrepancy between China and Russia in terms of their way of projecting their respective power. China's BRI bets on the power of loans and investments not only on the traditional Silk Road, but also in Europe, particularly Eastern and Central Europe. The financial support for projects and governments in Africa is also notable. By contrast, Russia intervenes as a spoiler in its relationship with the West (military involvement, cyberattacks, disinformation etc). In Africa, Russia intervened militarily, similarly with its involvement in the Middle East, in contrast with China's prevailing economic involvement. Incapable to compete on the economic spectrum, Russia is clinging to international political activities such as Iran's or North Korea's nuclear program, the Syrian civil war, in its desire to be still considered a global power.

For Russia, the relationship with China is central, even though the latest security strategy of Russia nuances this (Security Strategy of Russia, 2021). Unlike Russia, China does not see the relationship with Russia as the main concern, focusing on modernization, the relationship with the US, the events in Southeast Asia, and the relationship with the EU. China now plays a dominant role in G20 and BRICS. Russia's interests could best be pursued if it could become a bridge between China and the West, but Moscow's poor relations with the West put an end to these geostrategic aspirations (Bolt & Cross, 2018: 297).

Although the gap between Russia and China has become considerable, their cooperation has expanded. However, in terms of security, the latest strategy of Russia from July 2021 indicates certain limits to the partnership. Denisov believes that changes in this new National Security Strategy (NSS) of Russia look groundbreaking. "Relations

with India and China are combined in just one paragraph in the 2021 NSS, while in the 2009 and 2015 versions they were treated separately, with China preceding India. This suggests that balancing relations with China is becoming increasingly important for the Russian political elite” (Denisov, 2021).

Despite the close relations between China and Russia, and attempts to coordinate the BRI and the EAEU, Moscow elites see China’s growing normative power in Central Asia as a competitor for the official vision of a Russian-led “Greater Eurasian Partnership” (Shakhanova, Garlick, 2020: 50). As the BRI and the AIIB became more developed, Russia had more and more difficulties managing China’s rise. In order to promote its interests in Central Asia, China did not necessarily need SCO anymore (Chang, 2018). Ambitious projects of development of commerce, infrastructure and investments are supported now by huge Chinese financing commitments (Gillholm, 2015). Russia does not currently have the ability to compete with China in terms of investments in the region. With China’s power unchecked by Russia, there exists fears that the countries within the region will become too dependent on China.

The two countries are uneasy partners and their differences are significant and much analyzed by Europe, the US, and other actors (Caba Maria, Georgescu, Muresan, Musetescu, 2020: 153). It seems that the rapprochement has a tactical rather than a strategic nature, following the maxim: “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer” (Tchakarova, 2020: 7).

C. EU relationships with China and Russia

C.1. *A triangle or a quadrilateral?*

‘The West’ is not a simple equation either, despite the fact that the Dragonbear narrative treats it as its global adversary. One may think of it as of an EagleDove or MarsVenus³ but tensions within ‘the West’ arose as early as of 2003⁴, when “the coalition of the willing” was formed and “old Europe” opposed USA’s Iraq action. In actual fact, the main opponent of the Dragonbear is the US, given its weight in the international order, in institutional economic, financial and military terms. The EU shares values and partakes with the US in the Bretton Woods institutional architecture advantages. It sanctions according to the same values built on the free market and human rights and liberties. The EU, however, is a powerful economic actor on the global scene in itself. It is true, without having a strong foreign policy of its own, let alone defence policy. Tensions in the transatlantic relationship increased after the Asia pivoting decided by president Obama.

A great deal of experts in the Sino-Russian relationship devoted time and effort to analyzing the triangle USA – China – Russia. According to most, the United States remains the most important variable for the current and future state of Sino-Russian relations. In fact, there are only a few articles or books that talk about the Sino-Russian relationship without including the United States at all. Lo and Bekkevold believe that when Sino-US relations develop in a positive way, Russia will suffer in its relations with China. But if Sino-US relations continue to be conflicting, Sino-Russian relations will mature (Lo & Bekkevold, 2018:12). The current rapprochement between China and Russia will probably depend on domestic stability in Russia, China and even the United States. Instability in any of them may alter the existing trend. For now cooperation between Russia and China remains the main source of a stable and emerging multipolar world (Lukin, 2018: 192). “Following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the ‘strategic triangle’ has lost its significance in terms of military balance;

³ Formula inspired from Rober Kagan’s idea that US is from Mars and EU from Venus (2004).

⁴ If we disregard the tensions related to the Balkan wars in the 1990s.

however, (...) both China and Russia still consider relations with the US the top priority in their respective foreign policy agendas, and their respective relations with the US remain very important factors affecting their bilateral relationship” (Cheng, 2016: 222).

Fu Ying also sees China-US-Russia relations as a scalene triangle, and in this triangle, Russia-China relations are the most stable: “[B]oth Beijing and Moscow object to Washington’s use of force against and imposition of sanctions on other countries and to the double standards the United States applies in its foreign policies” (Ying, 2016). Robert Sutter believes that in this strategic triangle, China’s position has improved considerably compared to that of the United States, which is deteriorating in the absence of coherent and effective policies. The rupture of relations between Russia and the West and the subsequent formation of the Russia-China entente gave China the advantageous position in this strategic triangle (Sutter, 2017: p.VI). With Xi Jinping’s rise to power, China’s attitude has changed and become much more ambitious and aggressive.

Russia’s pivoting towards Asia has become a reality and despite unsatisfactory results or difficulties, this process is becoming irreversible. Lukin assesses that Russia’s pivoting to Asia was a response not only to the worsening relations with the US and EU but as a result of the rise of Beijing as “the center of world economics and politics, and Russia’s strategic goal of developing its Siberian and Far Eastern regions” (Lukin, 2018:174). Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky and Aleksandar Vladicic remark that this Russian pivot to Asia did not exist in 2014 (Rumer et al., 2020). Asia is a region that has not aligned itself to the Western sanctions imposed on Russia. “Asia-Pacific emerged as a new export market for hydrocarbons and weapons, as the leading supplier of state-of-art technology and as the main alternative to Western capital” (Shagina, 2020). In order to combat excessive dependence on China, Moscow is today trying to diversify its relations with other Asian states.

The emergence of the Moscow-Beijing axis will exert an ever-growing influence on European and transatlantic interests, both economically and in terms of security (Gabuev 2021). Given the powerful economic relations of both China and Russia with the EU, the triangle is rather a quadrilateral. The EU is now being caught between its transatlantic relationship with the US and the Dragonbear, but at the same time the EU has its own autonomous means of action. The competition in global governance between the United States and China is for a new global order, including influence on the vast Global South (Gracikov, 2020). It looks like the competition is more complex, involving both the EU and Russia, each on different sides. While the United States sees China as a bigger challenge than Russia, Europe has strained relations with Russia and has an uncertain but mostly positive attitude toward China.

In this quadrilateral there are a few aspects to be noticed: the mutual fear of mutual dependence between China and Russia; the economic interdependence between China and the US; the economic interdependence between the EU and Russia; the high interest of the EU to expand its investments in China, as the CAI agreement signed by EU and China in 2020 shows it⁵.

C.2. Asymmetries between EU’s relationship with China and EU’s relationship with Russia

Let us first note the coincidence of the EU’s increased political involvement with China and the gradual erosion of the EU’s relationship with Russia. As Russia started to worry about the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2004, and about the so-called ‘colour revolutions’ in its European ‘near abroad’ (the Orange Revolution is conspicuous), the EU was inaugurating a new era of closeness with China. The

⁵ We are grateful to Ambassador Doru Costea for discussions highlighting these issues.

creation of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership dates back to October 2003. In 2006, Russia started to weaponize energy in relation to the EU, halting gas transportation through Ukraine towards European countries. The EU – Russia relation suddenly worsened at the end of 2013. The EU sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the perpetuation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine broke the bilateral partnership. Meanwhile, the EU-27 and China launched the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue (April 2008), the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation was adopted (November 2013), and the MoU EU - China Connectivity Platform was signed (September 2015), to “enhance synergies” between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, launched in 2013) and the EU’s own Investment Plan for Europe (the so-called “Juncker Plan”).

Whilst the EU – Russia relations reached their lowest in the post-Cold War period (2014 – present), the EU became more involved in developing its relations with China. The asymmetries in trade and investments between China and the EU are conspicuous (Popescu and Brinza, 2018: 23-24), the EU adopted the EU-China Strategic Outlook, in which the EU takes a more assertive and multi-faceted approach that defines China simultaneously as a competitor, a negotiating partner, and a systemic rival (Joint Communication, 2019). China is now the EU’s second trading partner behind the US. The EU is China’s biggest trading partner and is a favourite destination for Chinese investors. Thus, their commercial interdependence is high. However, there is a pronounced asymmetry in terms of the EU’s opportunities to invest in China. “Despite promises to level the playing field, European companies continue to face major formal and informal investment restrictions in the Chinese market, especially in sectors with high growth opportunities” (Hanemann, Huotari, 2018: 9). Annual Chinese outbound FDI (foreign direct investments) in the 28 EU economies has grown from EUR 700 million in 2008 to EUR 35 billion in 2016 (Hanemann, Huotari, 2018: 10), but subsequently OFDI (outward foreign direct investments) decreased to a ten years low in 2020, “due to domestic constraints on outbound capital flows and tighter scrutiny of Chinese investments abroad. The Covid-19 pandemic accentuated the fall in China’s outbound activity by hindering normal business activity” (Kratz, Zenglein, Sebastian, 2021).

Due to intense seven years’ negotiations, on 30th December 2020 “the EU and China reached an agreement in principle on a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment [CAI]. It will improve the market access conditions for EU companies in China. It will also help rebalance the current asymmetry in our respective market openness” (China and the EU, 2020). Many commentators were harsher, assessing that the agreement is a modest advance, and that strategically it might have been a mistake (Small, 2021). The European Parliament “froze” the ratification of CAI, condemning “in the strongest possible terms the baseless and arbitrary sanctions recently imposed by the Chinese authorities on several European individuals and entities, including five MEPs” (EP Press Release, 2021).

The EU is Russia’s first trading partner and Russia is the EU’s fifth trading partner. (Facts and figures about EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS, 2021). Thus, it looks like the centripetal power of Brussels is still functioning: both China and Russia have the EU as their first trading partner. Russia’s exports to the EU are mainly fuel, mining products, raw materials, whereas the EU is exporting mainly machinery and transport equipment, chemicals, and manufactured goods. Despite the limited access to EU capital markets for certain Russian banks and companies, as a result of the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia starting in 2014, millions of Schengen visas are issued in Russia yearly (in 2019, more than 4 million) and Russian students are the first beneficiaries of Erasmus+ university exchanges (Facts and figures about EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS,

2021). The EU is by far the largest foreign investor in Russia, 277 billion euros in 2018 (The European Union and the Russian Federation, 2021). The EU's political relations with Russia are basically frozen, the institutionalized mechanisms of communication are frozen, and sanctions with economic and trade effects are in place and rolling. Looking at the parallel evolution of the EU and Russia in the post-Soviet period, one may notice that “the centrifugal force created by the disintegration of the USSR (the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) was compensated by the centripetal force of the European Union. The economic phenomenon of ‘trade diversion; (...) has attracted to its orbit the Central and Eastern European states, former Soviet satellites” (Popescu, 2012). Moreover, it further attracted the common neighbourhood countries.

Russia has been pleading for a long time for a multipolar world, to replace US hegemony and West's dominance on the world scene. Now that the long awaited and wanted multipolar world has arrived, Moscow does not know how to behave; very few members of the Russian elite understand the EU, most believed that the EU would dismantle after Brexit (Kadri Liik, 2021). Recently, Russia adopted a new National Security Strategy (July 2021) and according to Dmitri Trenin, the main feature of the updated Strategy is its focus on Russia itself (2021).

Within the European Union there are differing views and interests among member states on how the EU should treat its relations with Russia and China. A unity or common approach in the near future regarding these sensitive subjects is very unlikely. For example, Hungary is trying to maintain positive relations with both China and Russia even to the detriment of its relationship with the EU. When it comes to Germany, its privileged relationship with Russia and the construction of North Stream 2 pipeline has also stirred much controversy in the West even though Germany works more silently with Russia if compared to Hungary.

The dynamic of the triangle EU – Russia – China is well characterized by Alexander Gabuev, when he writes that “by the early 2030s, the Chinese presence in the Russian economy may be similar to the European influence in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s if the current trends persist” (Gabuev, 2021). Right now, the commercial, technological, and financial ties between Russia and EU are significantly stronger than the ones between Russia and China, but the trend is tilting in favour of China. The EU's share in Russia's foreign trade is steadily declining, while China's shares in Russia's foreign trade nearly doubled between 2013 – 2021. The Russia-EU trade is twice as big as Russia-China commerce at the moment, “but it was a fivefold difference just seven years ago, and many elements suggest that this trend will continue” (Gabuev, 2021). At the same time, Chinese investment in Russia is increasing as the European FDI is decreasing.

China developed into a systemic rival for the EU, whereas Russia, a reputable military power and neighbour of Europe, is economically weakening. Both China and Russia have autocratic regimes and both are trying to make inroads into the legitimacy of EU's liberal-democratic values, attracting more states from the Global South in this illiberal race, and even segments of population within the EU. The EU, as a distinct political entity seems to be rather paralysed in this landscape of assault to its liberal and economic power.

C.3. The grey rhinos facing the EU

China's rising power threatens the EU's position in the world. China's “emergence as an economic competitor has reinforced the EU's insecurities about its own future economic position in the world” (Bergsen, 2021). China's slow replacement of the EU in Russia's trade and investment is just one important aspect to bear in mind. As many authors underline, China succeeded in finding the right strategy and actions to accommodate Russia's interests and sensibilities in many areas, including Central

Asia or the post-soviet space (Belarus being an eloquent example). The question is: To what extent the EU elite is perceiving China's rise as insecurity? Referring to the Munich Security Conference 2021, and to the American perception of the rise of the couple Russia-China, Janka Oertel remarks: "the European response seemed very timid, it seemed very small", "there was no vision either on the side of Merkel, Macron; both of them seemed restrained in their responses (Oertel, 2021). She adds that: "there is no real strategy so far in figuring out what the new approach to China looks like, it all seems rather haphazard, very short termist, not very focused on longer term, where are we in terms of systemic rivalry" (Oertel, 2021). It seems that this very lack of specific concern with the rise of China's economic and political power is accompanied by a lack of specific concern with the Russia-China entente.

Thus, there are two grey rhinos in the EU space, two big problems which are here and need to be recognized and thought of: (1) the rise of China as an economic and political power, and (2) the rise of the Dragonbear, of the China-Russia partnership. They are here, they have been developing for some time already. The joint presence on the world scene of the common views and perspectives of both China and Russia, their acting in coordination, in consensus, be it at the UN level, or when it comes to reforming international institutions, ought to make EU elites think, strategize, and act. What ought to be done in the face of this colossal ascent? Perhaps it has to do with the dwarfish common foreign policy of the EU, with the 27 foreign policies uncoordinated in this subject, it may have to do with the difficulty to accept that the liberal world order as it used to function during the post-WWII and the post-Cold war is shaking under the joint attack.

The first EU security strategy (2003) particularly mentioned that a multipolar world is desirable. EU's wish has been fulfilled. It is not only Russia which does not know what to do in a multipolar world (Liik, 2021), but the European Union seems to have difficulty in knowing what to do. There are timid preoccupations with the rise of China and of the Dragonbear as challengers to the world order at the EU level.

The article so far indicated the proportions of the China-Russia partnership and its manifold manifestations: economic, military, international organizations, common ideological and political positioning in international affairs, joint activities in terms of reforming international organizations (like the IMF and WTO). Both Russia and China are internally organized as autocratic regimes, each with specific features. There are no signs that the autocratic regimes in the two countries are going away soon. Both tend to support laws, values, and practices that go against liberal values, individual freedoms and rights. A number of Global South states are presently led by these two autocracies, promoting a model of democracy rooted in 'popular democracy' for China (legitimized by alleviating poverty and providing welfare to the majority) and in 'sovereign democracy' for Russia (focused on internal sovereignty and non-interference from outside).

Both China and Russia are trying to influence the reformation of important international organizations – like, the World Trade Organization – so that their respective state-controlled economical and political structures would be reflected in the multilateral regulations. This is the way in which they are trying to change the liberal order, by changing the substance, the content of the regulations. The WTO reform is stifled because of the difference in the governance systems – state-driven China and free-market oriented USA (Hoekman & Wolfe, 2020). The fracture between US+EU and China+Russia runs deep. Both China and Russia are using the free-trade and liberal world international regulations to insert illiberal practices and regulations that favour their economic and political ends.

There are already governments in the EU that succumbed to illiberal legislation,

policies, and practices. They are affecting the liberties and rights of significant segments of population (women in Poland, LGBTIQ in Hungary and Poland – to take the most obvious examples). The Turkish government (still an EU candidate) dropped its commitment to the CoE Istanbul Convention that protects women rights and non-violence legislation. Russia is the EU's neighbour and adopted illiberal and antidemocratic legislation and practices. The Chinese model is even tougher from the rights and liberties perspective. Therefore, as Europeans, we could also question the degree to which such an illiberal wave has something to do with the rise of China and with the growing strategic partnership between China and Russia. It may be proven difficult if not impossible to measure such links. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile the connections. The erosion of liberal Europe is yet another maturing grey rhino present inside the EU for some time which begs to be thought about.

The Dragonbear has been making wide steps to conquer the Western Balkans. The proportions of China's and Russia's involvement in the economy and politics of these states is well documented (Clingendael Report 2020; Shopov, 2021; Mardell, 2021). "A triangle of outside forces seems to have taken shape with the Balkans, in general, and the Western Balkans, in particular, in the centre; the Euro-Atlantic community stands for one side, while the other two are Russia and China" (Costea & Dinu, 2021: 37). Shopov remarks on the gaps in development between the EU and Western Balkan countries and the challenging character of the situation for the EU. Third parties seem to be welcome in these countries by default and, as a consequence, they develop purely transactional approaches to foreign policy, so that they grasp any economic opportunity in order to develop. "Western inaction, at times verging on nonchalance, will continue to create openings for strategically minded external actors. The Western world is no longer entirely the master of its own destiny – in the sense that these actors increasingly influence other players, institutions, and strategies" (Shopov, 2021: 22). On the other hand, "China is gradually but consistently laying the groundwork for a long-term, extensive and deep presence in the WB (Western Balkans) region" (Clingendael Report, 2020: 37). The Western Balkans situation is thus, another spin off grey rhino.

There are a series of arguments brought in favour of a renewal of the transatlantic relation. The Serbia-Kosovo negotiations require U.S.'s cooperation and partnership with the EU and the countries of the region through economic integration and political cooperation (Haddad, 2021); countering China's new instruments for economic coercion that create barriers for the EU, require close alignment of EU, US, and "like-minded partners, from Japan to India and Australia [...] This is one of many reasons why it is important to rebuild the transatlantic relationship" (Hackenbroich, 2021). A closer relationship between the EU and US would be beneficial in order to jointly promote liberal values and to defend common interests in a number of international organizations. However, there are areas in which closeness is faced with difficult or insurmountable hurdles. "Effective transatlantic cooperation on China in trade and investment is [...] likely to continue to be hindered by the fundamentally different world views and policy preferences of the EU and the US" (Bergsen, 2021: 26).

D. Conclusions

The rise of the China-Russia partnership is real and in full process of development. This new joint venture on the global scene, the Dragonbear, represents a great challenge for the EU, in need of full acknowledgement on the part of the EU's elite. The strategic conversation on the link between Russia and China is absent at the top of the European Union. There is an enormous reluctance to engage with the subject, including at the intellectual level (Oertel, 2021). The strategic compass in

process of preparation in the laboratories of the European External Action Service (due to be presented in November 2021) may touch upon this issue (Towards a Strategic Compass, 2021). Or not. But the China-Russia strategic partnership poses more challenges to the EU than each of the two bilateral EU-Russia and EU-China relationships in than the combination of the two. Thus, the big grey rhino in the EU's yard is the rise of the Dragonbear and its consequences in terms of pressure to change the content of the economic and political international regimes at global level. Major spinoff grey rhinos identified in the article are: the peril of Beijing replacing Brussels as an economic centripetal power center; the strengthening among EU citizens of a worldview favourable to autocracies and detrimental to liberal rights and freedoms; the occupation of the void left by EU's hesitant policies in Western Balkans (and perhaps other parts) by both China and Russia. Once more, the Dragonbear rise puts pressure on the EU to strengthen its transatlantic relation with the US and puts pressure on the EU to act more coherently and pertinently as a foreign policy actor.

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