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Geopolitical Models of the Russian-Chinese Partnership in the Studies of the French Liberal-Conservative School

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Abstract. Against the background of continuous growth of the importance of geopolitical issues in the study of foreign policy processes of the 21st century, its reflection in the materials of numerous Western expert and analytical centers deserves attention. In this regard, the French website *diploweb.com* *La revue géopolitique* is of interest, performing a kind of “umbrella” role for several ideologically close structures. Created in 2000, it is positioned by its management and scientific council as the “First Francophone site on geopolitics”. Its positions are based on commitment to liberal-conservative ideology with its inherent differences from universalist globalism and opposition to national populism, on the one hand, and authoritarianism, on the other. One of the constant themes of the materials published on the site concerns the geopolitics of Russia-Chinese relations. The article shows that their interpretation comes down to three conceptual models: “Alliance of Authoritarianisms”, “Vassalization of Russia” and “Duopoly for three, the fourth in ambush”. Based on the textual approach and discourse analysis, it is concluded that the views expressed on the site do not confirm the ideological pluralism declared by its Charter. Rather, they are characterized by ideological intransigence towards other points of view, characteristic of liberal conservatism. What dominates are not attempts at an objective study of foreign policy processes concerning the Russia-Chinese partnership, as the desire to contribute to the attitudes of the ruling establishment in the EU and the decisions it makes in this area.

Keywords: Russia-Chinese partnership, geopolitics, French think tanks, liberal conservatism, ideological intransigence, attitudes of the ruling establishment

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Современные геополитические модели в прикладном исследовании международных процессов: анализ российско-китайского партнерства во французской либерально-консервативной школе

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Аннотация. На фоне непрерывного роста значения геополитической проблематики в исследовании внешнеполитических процессов XXI века заслуживает внимания ее отражение в материалах многочисленных западных экспертно-аналитических центров. В данной связи представляет интерес французский веб-сайт *diploweb.com La revue géopolitique*, выполняющий своего рода «зонтичную» роль для целого ряда идейно близких ему структур. Созданный в 2000 г., он позиционируется его руководством и научным советом как «Первый франкофонный сайт по геополитике». В основе его позиций лежит приверженность либерально-консервативной идеологии со свойственными ей отличиями от универсалистского глобализма и противостоянием национал-популизму, с одной стороны, и авторитаризму — с другой. Одна из постоянных тем публикуемых на сайте материалов касается геополитики российско-китайских отношений. Показано, что их трактовка сводится к трем концептуальным моделям: «Альянс авторитаризмов», «Вассализация России» и «Дуополь на троих, четвертый в засаде». На основе текстологического подхода и дискурс-анализа сделан вывод о том, что высказываемые на сайте взгляды не подтверждают декларируемого его Хартией идейного плюрализма. Скорее их характеризует свойственная либеральному консерватизму идейная непримиримость по отношению к иной точке зрения. Доминирующими являются не столько попытки объективного исследования внешнеполитических процессов, касающихся российско-китайского партнерства, сколько стремление вносить вклад в установки правящего в ЕС истеблишмента и принимаемые им решения на данном направлении.

Ключевые слова: российско-китайское партнерство, геополитика, французские экспертно-аналитические центры, либеральный-консерватизм, идейная непримиримость, установки правящего истеблишмента

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Introduction

In the kaleidoscope of current events leading to a new configuration of the international system, the topic of the Russian-Chinese partnership and its relevance for both nations and world politics is, not unexpectedly, prominent in Western, notably European think tanks. This particular attention to the state of Russian-Chinese relations arises not just from the weight of both nations on the world stage, but also from European concerns about retaining its influence in the Eurasian region and global politics in general. In this context, French think tanks' perspectives on Russian-Chinese relations are of relevance.

Russian-Chinese cooperation and its impact on global politics is one of the priority topics of the website *Diploweb.com*. *La revue géopolitique*, founded in 2000, has since become a prominent think tank on foreign policy in France, Belgium, and Switzerland.¹

The purpose of this article is to test the Charter's declaration of a "pluralism of ideas as a guarantee of the quality of citizens' information and the essential necessity of democracy".² The research hypothesis is that *Diploweb's* publications are intended to support the narratives of the ruling establishment in France and the EU, justifying and promoting its decisions, while simultaneously convincing it of the need to strengthen "European solidarity" in the face of the threat posed by "united autocracies". An examination of the site's materials and those of other similar think tanks — both private and public, or involving state structures — with which it closely collaborates, suggests that their content demonstrates an ideological "monolithicity" concerning the foreign policy positions of Russia and China.

To investigate this problem, textual criticism and empirical discourse analysis are applied. Textual critics examine "the nature of the texts themselves, the purposes for which they were compiled, the reasons for their modifications, etc., within the context" [Likhachev 1964: 10]. In this case, it is important that it allows for the identification of objective features that provide grounds for examining materials from *Diploweb.com* "as a text united by a single concept (both in content and form) and changing as a single whole" [Likhachev 1964: 6]. Discourse analysis considers the text as one of the types (units) of a broader category of utterances through which social meaning is conveyed and of which ideologies are a part. In this regard, texts can be considered as social microprocesses, and their impact on the social environment — for instance, on the arguments of social actors (such as government leaders or political parties) — can be studied on the basis of "text-oriented discourse analysis" [Larsen 1997: 14–16].

¹ *Diploweb.com*. *La revue géopolitique*. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/>

² *Charte du site géopolitique*. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-charte-du-diploweb-com.html>

The article is organised into multiple sections. The institutional, political, and ideological environment in which *Diploweb.com* functions is first briefly examined. The models found in the materials on the Russian-Chinese partnership that are posted on the website are then looked at. Following M.A. Khrustalev, a model here is considered as “a logical construction that reflects certain (usually essential) properties of the object of study” [Khrustalev 2008: 205]. With relation to *Diploweb.com*, the article identifies three informal (verbal) models: “Alliance of Authoritarianisms,” “Vassalization of Russia,” and “Duopoly for Three, the Fourth in Ambush.” The final part summarises the primary evidence supporting the hypothesis about the ideological commitment of each of the identified models and showing the incompatibility of interpretations of the geopolitical discourse of *Diploweb.com* the values expressed in its Charter.

The Ideological, Political, and Institutional Framework of the Geopolitical Discourse of the Diploweb.com Website

The ideological and political background in which the *Diploweb.com* website operates is characterised by a liberal-conservative philosophy,³ the roots of which stretch back to the Enlightenment [Gadzhiev 2015]. It is currently the most powerful political force in France, the majority of EU member states, and its leadership. Liberal conservatism’s specific expressions differ from nation to nation, but generally speaking, its policies and viewpoints are similar to globalism’s universalist ideology, which holds that a nation’s degree of democracy is determined by uniform standards created by Western civilisation.

However, it differs from globalism in three ways: first, it emphasises the preservation of the shared cultural heritage and traditions of European nations; second, it highlights the need to protect them from the expansion of historically and culturally alien “autocracies” rather than exporting universal Western values (though this theme has persisted); and third, it opposes global corporations, which often confuse political objectives with financial and economic profit. An important feature of liberal conservatism is that, while proclaiming the superiority of common ideals over the “private” interests of individual democracies and national economies, it simultaneously resolutely

³ For more on the specifics of liberal-conservative ideology in Western countries, see: Lev Sokolshchik. *Conservatism in the US: Guarding the Liberal Empire?* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/konservatizm-v-ssha-na-strazhe-liberalnoy-imperii/>; Characteristics of conservative movements in Europe. (In Russian). Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://katehon.com/ru/article/osobennosti-konservativnyh-dvizheniy-v-evrope>

opposes the ideology of right-wing (or national) populism, which advocates limiting the functions of pan-European institutions and preserving the national (state) identity of EU member states.⁴ In Europe, discussions among liberal conservatives about the content and varieties of populism essentially boil down to justifying assertions that the fight against it represents a kind of “internal front” at the level of individual countries (such as, for example, the AfD party in Germany, the National Rally in France, the Northern League in Italy, Podemos in Spain) and the European Union (for example, the ruling forces in Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland).⁵ Populism is viewed as a “flawed democracy”, a “shadow of European democracy”, i.e., as a primarily internal challenge that must and can be overcome on the path to further pluralization [Müller 2016]. At the same time, its danger is associated with the main external threat to European ideals and way of life, allegedly emanating from Russia and China, which are trying by all means, including through support for populist movements and leaders, to destabilize the European Union, seize control of individual countries, and dominate them in their own interests.⁶

Such narratives are supported and substantiated by numerous consulting and expert geopolitical foundations, laboratories, and other “think tanks” collaborating with each other. According to *Global Go To Think Tanks Index* (GGTTTI Index), France had 197 think tanks in 2017, ranking it 6th in the world for the number of such “idea labs”. At the same time, *l’Observatoire Européen des Think Tanks* (OETT) cited a more modest figure of 53 think tanks.⁷ This discrepancy in estimates is explained by the fact that GGTTTI’s research is conducted by the University of Pennsylvania, while OETT is a government organization in France that tends to prioritise those think tanks that meet the criteria for non-profit activity, have public benefit status, or is in the process of obtaining it.

⁴ There is no unified understanding of the term populism in the academic community, leading experts to even speak of the crisis nature of research into this phenomenon (Report No. 365–2019. *Right-wing populism in the European Union*. [monograph] / P.V. Oskolkov). The general features and national characteristics of populism are examined in detail in the IMEMO Analytical Report “*The Phenomenon of Right-Wing and Left-Wing Populism in EU Countries*”. (In Russian). Retrieved September 24, 2025, from https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/ru/materials/Fenomen_doklad.pdf

⁵ *Les Carnets du CAPS n°25: Populismes — Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères*. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/le-ministere-et-son-reseau/le-centre-d-analyse-de-prevision-et-de-strategie/publications-les-carnets-du-caps/les-carnets-du-caps-no25-populismes/>

⁶ Andrea Capussela. *Notes pour une autonomie républicaine européenne*. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/08/08/trump-autonomie-republicaine-europe/>

⁷ *Les principaux think tanks français*. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from https://www.challenges.fr/economie/les-principaux-think-tanks-francais_64327/

According to the *Challenges* Institute, think tanks are among the categories of organisations trusted by 57% of French people. This percentage places them much ahead of the media (28%) and political parties (12%), whom they nevertheless feed with their ideas,⁸ whom they nevertheless feed with their ideas, and nearly on pace with NGOs (60%).

Diploweb.com partners with non-governmental and government agencies in the country. It also closely collaborates with a number of reputable European non-governmental think tanks. These include, for example, the Paris- and Brussels-based *Thomas More Institute* (2004), which describes itself as “a laboratory of innovative solutions, a centre of expertise and a centre of influence”,⁹ *the Institut Montaigne* (2000), “a benchmark in France and Europe and a place of reflection and action, ideas and solutions”,¹⁰ *Fondapol* (2004) — “a liberal, progressive and European think tank”,¹¹ *Le Grand Continent*¹² — an online journal published since 1919 in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Polish by the European and French *Groupe d'études géopolitiques* (GED)¹³, *Synopia — Laboratory of Governance*, created in 2012 and listed as a “recognised scientific organisation of general interest”.¹⁴ Among the state (or state-sponsored) structures in France are the Institute for Strategic Studies of the Military School (IRSEM),¹⁵ the Mediterranean Foundation for Strategic Studies (FMES),¹⁶ founded in 1996 with the assistance of Inalco and Sciences Po, the online magazine *Regard sur l'Est (Looking East)*,¹⁷ and many other French and Francophone European expert structures and institutes for international and strategic studies. From July 2000 to the present, on the website *Diploweb.com* the center has posted approximately 35,000 materials from 300 experts. Its subscribers include Internet users from 94 countries (71% are citizens of France, Belgium, and Switzerland).

⁸ *Quels sont les meilleurs think tank de France?* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from https://www.challenges.fr/economie/quels-sont-les-meilleurs-think-tank-de-france_455063

⁹ *Qui sommes-nous?* Institut Thomas More. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://institut-thomas-more.org/qui-sommes-nous/#staffTab0>

¹⁰ *Accueil.* Institut Montaigne. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/>

¹¹ *Présentation de la Fondapol: équipe, statuts, charte déontologique.* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.fondapol.org/>

¹² *Le Grand Continent.* Accueil. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/>

¹³ *Groupe d'études géopolitiques. Annuaire des «think tanks» et centres de recherche sur les affaires européennes.* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://ue.delegfrance.org/annuaire-des-think-tanks-et>

¹⁴ *Synopia. Le laboratoire des gouvernances.* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://synopia.fr/>

¹⁵ *Présentation de l'Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire.* L'IRSEM. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.irsem.fr/institut.html>

¹⁶ *Fondation Méditerranéenne d'Études Stratégiques.* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://fmes-france.org/>

¹⁷ *Regard sur l'Est.* Revue. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://regard-est.com/>

The site has 35,000 followers on social media and receives 1.2 million visits annually. The materials posted on the site not only reflect but also, to a certain extent, shape the positions of a significant portion of the political elite, academic circles, and the general public interested in global politics. At least, this is the goal of the center's leadership and scientific council, "offering keys to understanding the modern world".¹⁸

Analytical materials, reviews, and interviews in text and video formats are written by professors from prestigious universities, French *Grands Écoles*, international journalists, prominent French and foreign politicians, high-ranking current and retired government officials and diplomats, as well as military, police, and intelligence agency representatives. Pierre Verluise, a distinguished professor at Paris-IV Sorbonne University (UPS), founded the site, co-owns the domain name, and owns the brand.¹⁹ *Diploweb's* readership is highly educated, 84% of whom hold a master's degree (15.3%) or higher (68.6%), and a third have a monthly income of over €3,000 (23% do not declare their income). Finally, 62% of readers are university professors and scientists, current and retired government officials, military and police officers, businesspeople, and members of the liberal professions, and another 16% are students.²⁰ *Diploweb.com's* materials are occasionally published in book format. In particular, two substantial papers were dedicated to this topic in 2016 and 2018 [Verluise 2016; 2018]. In 2017–18, Amazon.fr distributed seven books under the *Diploweb* moniker. All of this provides grounds for considering *Diploweb.com* materials to be typical in terms of their position in the country's and the EU's political science communities, as well as the emphasis they place on the topic of Russian-Chinese relations.

There are discrepancies in the interpretation of Russian-Chinese cooperation. Thus, proponents of radical positions tend to deny that both China and Russia have any legitimate grounds for their own interests and values in relations with the West. This is evidenced by the general content of the majority of publications by authors collaborating with *Diploweb.com*, such as Donnet [2021], Chamontin, Facon [Chamontin, Facon 2022], Gourdin [2019], Mongrenier [2020; 2024], Thom [2024]. More moderate positions are held by Ekman [2018], Marchand [2017], de Tinguy [2022]... There are debates on China and Russia's strategic potential, role in regional politics, and influence on the development of the world order. Despite these variances, attitudes on all of the above topics are similar, as summarised in three geopolitical models.

¹⁸ *La charte du diplomweb.com*. 1er mars 2001. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-charte-du-diploweb-com.html>

¹⁹ Pierre Verluise. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from https://www.diploweb.com/_Pierre-VERLUISE-1_.html

²⁰ *La charte du diplomweb.com*. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-charte-du-diploweb-com.html>

The Origins and Foundations of the Russia-China Partnership: The “Alliance of Autocracies” Model

Regarding the origins and foundations of Russia-China cooperation, the prevailing view is that Russia and China are united by a shared hostility toward the West, historical passions, and grievances.²¹ The rapprochement between the two countries is facilitated by their political traditions of Eastern despotism, autocratic methods of governance in domestic politics, and imperial practices in international relations.²² Therefore, even today, the Russia-China partnership is primarily seen as an alliance between autocracies, a new “red axis” of states that, by definition, tend to pursue an aggressive foreign policy towards their neighbors.²³ Both countries are alien to democratic values and exhibit “legal nihilism”, disregarding international law.²⁴ Ultimately, both Russia and China are “predators”, posing a threat not only to the West but to the entire planet.²⁵ All this, according to the authors of the *Diploweb*, is a compelling reason for further strengthening Western pressure on both countries.²⁶

For proponents of liberal conservatism, the Russian-Chinese partnership poses a particular threat to the European Union. They believe China is using massive industrial espionage networks created by its diplomatic structures, conducting aggressive disinformation

²¹ *Comment caractériser la place de la Russie dans le monde?* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Comment-caracteriser-la-place-de-la-Russie-dans-le-monde-Entretien-avec-J-S-Mongrenier.html>

²² *Découvrir l'Atlas historique de la Russie. D'Ivan III à Vladimir Poutine.* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Decouvrir-l-Atlas-historique-de-la-Russie-D-Ivan-III-a-Vladimir-Poutine-Entretien-avec-F-X-Nerard.html>; *La Russie dans le monde: quelles singularités?* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-Russie-dans-le-monde-queelles-singularites.html>; *Approches historiques et politiques de la guerre en Ukraine.* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Approches-historiques-et-politiques-de-la-guerre-en-Ukraine.html>; *Quel est le projet géopolitique de la Chine de Xi Jinping?* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Planisphere-Quel-est-le-projet-geopolitique-de-la-Chine-de-Xi-Jinping-Avec-C-Meyer.html>

²³ *Le partenariat Chine-Russie: vers une alliance entre autoritarismes? Les grands dossiers de diplomatie n° 73; Les relations stratégiques sino-russes, Xi Jinping et Vladimir Poutine: un nouvel axe rouge?* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Les-relations-strategiques-sino-russes-Xi-Jinping-et-Vladimir-Poutine-un-nouvel-axe-rouge-Entretien.html>

²⁴ Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier. *Le “nihilisme juridique” russe et la géopolitique Russie-Occident.* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Le-nihilisme-juridique-russe-et-la.html>

²⁵ Donner, P.-A. *Chine, le grand prédateur. Un défi pour la planète. Pourquoi?* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Chine-le-grand-predateur-Un-defi-pour-la-planete-Pourquoi-Entretien-avec-Pierre-Antoine-Donnet.html> ; *Les prédateurs du Kremlin (1917–2009).* Hélène Blanc, Renata Lesnik, éd. Seuil. Ilios Yannakakis. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Les-predateurs-du-Kremlin-1907.html>; *Le géant empêtré. La Russie et le monde de la fin de l'URSS à l'invasion de l'Ukraine.* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Le-geant-empetre-La-Russie-et-le-monde-de-la-fin-de-l-URSS-a-l-invasion-de-l-Ukraine-Entretien-avec.html>; *Scénarios pour la Chine.* Ludovic Woets. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Scenarios-pour-la-Chine.html>

²⁶ *Les États-Unis et la nouvelle Guerre froide: la fin des illusions?* Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Les-Etats-Unis-et-la-nouvelle-Guerre-froide-la-fin-des-illusions.html>

through its official media, and, thanks to massive high-tech investments, is carrying out the largest-ever political and economic conquest through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²⁷ Russia, in addition to its military challenge, supports the far right and attacks constitutional democracies in Europe.²⁸ *Diploweb* authors already saw a threat in Europe's cooperation with Russia in the early 2000s, believing it was fraught with the risk of a “rebalancing” of relations both within the EU and in its interactions with the United States, which would be detrimental to the EU.²⁹

The shared neo-imperial geopolitics of China and Russia, as the authors of the *Diploweb* argue, pose a challenge and threat not only to the European Union and the United Kingdom, but also to NATO. J.S. Mongrenier, Research Director at the More Institute, has published particularly extensively on this topic on his website. Although the titles of most of his articles and interviews are devoted to Russia, it is characteristic that he describes its geopolitics in close connection with that of China. In his view, the two countries' aggressiveness manifests itself differently regionally: Russia and Eurasia's territorial claims are in the West, while China's claims are in the East. At the same time, globally, both powers are pursuing a coordinated policy aimed at pressuring NATO and hindering its actions. For the West, this is unacceptable, as it “runs counter to the expansion of the boundaries of freedom”. In the face of such ambitions of the Russian-Chinese “axis of chaos”, Mongrenier argues, the global stakes are the creation of a “geopolitical Europe” from the Atlantic Ocean to the Don River basin, from the Arctic to the Sicilian Sea.³⁰ Josephine Staron, Director of Research and International Relations at the non-governmental think tank Synopia, and C. Burgdorff, Senior Analyst at the state-run Institute of Advanced National Defense Studies, also say that the European Union, in light of the challenges from Russia and China, must decisively move towards becoming a global geopolitical player, playing the role of an independent force (alongside or in spite of America).³¹

²⁷ *Chine: le grand prédateur*. Retrieved September 24, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Chine-le-grand-predateur-Un-defi-pour-la-planete-Pourquoi-Entretien-avec-Pierre-Antoine-Donnet.html>

²⁸ *Pièces de doctrines L'Europe face à Trump: que faire? Notes pour une autonomie républicaine européenne*. Retrieved October 10, 2025, from <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/08/08/trump-autonomie-republicaine-europe/>

²⁹ *La politique de sécurité de la Russie. Entre continuité et rupture*, Yves Boyer et Isabelle Facon (dir.) Pierre Verluise. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-politique-de-securite-de-la.html>

³⁰ *Comment comprendre les relations transatlantiques? Avec J-S Mongrenier*. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Planisphere-Comment-comprendre-les-relations-transatlantiques-Avec-JS-Mongrenier.html>

³¹ Staron, J. *Pourquoi l'UE doit-elle enfin se penser comme une puissance?* Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Planisphere-Pourquoi-l-Union-europeenne-doit-elle-enfin-se-penser-comme-une-puissance-Avec-J-Staron.html>; C. Burgdorff. *Vers une Europe géopolitique?* Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Vers-une-Europe-geopolitique-Entretien-avec-C-Burgdorff.html>

However, according to *Diploweb* experts, Russian-Chinese cooperation cannot be sustainable in the long term.³² Mutual distrust exists even when their interests objectively coincide. The declared policy of aligning the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) by the two countries' leaderships is doomed to failure due to the imbalance in their potential.³³ This line of reasoning underlies the model of China's "vassalization" of Russia, which is quite common among European experts.

Interpretations of the Motives and Contradictions of Partnership: the Model of "Vassalization Of Russia"

According to the majority of *Diploweb.com* authors, China and Russia lack sufficient motivation to continue cooperation in the future. For example, the desire to jointly overcome Western hegemony and balance its political and economic power, as well as the mutually beneficial cooperation in energy and economic activities, cannot conceal the "unnatural" nature of their alliance. The Sino-Russian rapprochement, according to *Diploweb.com* experts, is primarily a political demonstration, since in reality it faces numerous obstacles. Among the reasons for the, at least, ambiguous future of Sino-Russian relations are China's claims to Russia's vast Far Eastern territories; its gigantic demographic mass and enormous needs for raw materials, which contrast sharply with the sparse population and abundance of raw materials in Russia's Eastern Siberia. Furthermore, there is a divergence of interests between Beijing and Moscow in the Trans-Urals and Central Asia; the incompatibility of geo-economic projects and geopolitical behaviour; the incomparability of the economic, technological and financial levels of the two countries; and finally, their mutual suspicions associated with these factors.

The combination of these factors, according to military experts, suggests that the alliance between Russia and China is unnatural and will not last. The current relations of "boundless friendship" between China and Russia, according

³² *La Russie après Poutine: quels scénarios de transformation?* Par Laurent Chamontin. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-Russie-apres-Poutine-quels.html>

³³ *Les relations stratégiques sino-russes, Xi Jinping et Vladimir Poutine: un nouvel axe rouge?* Par Thierry Fortin, Thomas Billebault. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Les-relations-strategiques-sino-russes-Xi-Jinping-et-Vladimir-Poutine-un-nouvel-axe-rouge-Entretien.html>; *Russie-Chine: des relations ambivalentes.* Par Pierre Andrieu. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Russie-Chine-des-relations-ambivalentes.html>; *Quelle est la place du spatial dans la stratégie militaire russe?* Par Anne Maurin. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Quelle-est-la-place-du-spatial-dans-la-strategie-militaire-russe.html>; *La Russie a-t-elle les moyens économiques de ses ambitions géopolitiques?* Cyrille Bret, Michaël Begorre-Bret. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-Russie-a-t-elle-les-moyens.html>

to an official of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, are only an ephemeral moment, similar to the Mao-Stalin period. “Passions and grievances”, emphasizes J.-S. Mongrenier, “are important historical and political factors”, while the current state of relations between the two countries is characterized by increasingly obvious concessions on the part of Russia to China’s economic and political priorities. This asymmetry in relations has already led to China’s “creeping vassalization” of Russia [Montgrenier 2024].

The eloquent titles of published articles and interviews are intended to convince us of the precariousness of the Sino-Russian rapprochement: “The Sino-Russian “Honeymoon” in the Face of (Incompatible) Interaction between the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative”; “Russia-China: Ambivalence of Relations”³⁴; “Sino-Russian Strategic Relations. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin: The New Red Axis?”³⁵; “Does China’s Geopolitical Behavior Correspond to Russia’s Behavior?”.

It’s worth noting that, overall, such assertions contain nothing fundamentally new. They merely reflect, in a modified form, the problems and contradictions that actually exist in the alignment of Russian and Chinese integration projects. A significant body of academic literature exists on this topic [Lukin 2020; Denisov, Lukin 2021; Torkunov, Streltsov 2023], and it is widely discussed by experts, officials, and politicians in both countries. Both Russia and China have their own, diverging interests in the world. Russia is in no hurry to open all its markets to Chinese goods, seeking to preserve sufficient space for domestic producers. Fearing American “secondary sanctions”, China’s state-owned companies are refusing to buy Russian oil, which is depressing global prices.

³⁴ Russie-Chine: des relations ambivalentes. Par Pierre Andrieu. Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Russie-Chine-des-relations-ambivalentes.html>

³⁵ *Le partenariat Chine-Russie : vers une alliance entre autoritarismes ? Les grands dossiers de diplomatie n° 73. avril - mai 2023; Les relations stratégiques sino-russes, Xi Jinping et Vladimir Poutine : un nouvel axe rouge ? Entretien avec Thierry Fortin, le 3 août 2020. URL : <https://www.diploweb.com/Les-relations-strategiques-sino-russes-Xi-Jinping-et-Vladimir-Poutine-un-nouvel-axe-rouge-Entretien.html> (дата обращения: 24.09.2025); Maslov, A. *Russia and China: strategic partnership in the context of global changes*. April 3, 2025. Retrieved September 19, 2025 from: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/rossiya-i-kitay-strategicheskoe-partnyerstvo-v-usloviyakh-globalnykh-peremen/>; Bordachev, T. *Eastern Turn at a New Stage: The WEF Assesses Russia-Asia Relations*. (In Russian). Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vostochnyy-povorot-na-novom-etape/>; *Russian-Chinese dialogue: Model 2022*. Report of the Russian International Affairs Council, the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of International Relations of Fudan University No. 78 / 2022. (In Russian). Retrieved September 9, 2025, from <https://russiancouncil.ru/activity/publications/rossiysko-kitayskiy-dialog-model-2022/>; Maslov, A. *Russia and China: Strategic Partnership in the Context of Global Change*. (In Russian). Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/rossiya-i-kitay-strategicheskoe-partnyerstvo-v-usloviyakh-globalnykh-peremen/>*

Beijing wants to receive Russian gas at prices close to domestic Russian prices and not finance the pipeline's construction, but such conditions deprive the project of economic viability for Russia.³⁶ There are disagreements regarding economic and transport projects in the Arctic and Central Asia, the structure of mutual trade, and a number of other issues. In the “Russian-Chinese Dialogue” reports, published since 2014, experts from the Russian International Affairs Council, the Institute of Crystallography and Analytical Systems of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Fudan University present the results of annual monitoring of the development of bilateral cooperation. Based on an analysis of problems and difficulties in interactions in trade, economics, finance, banking, transport, logistics, and humanitarian spheres, recommendations are formulated for relevant ministries and agencies on how to resolve them.³⁷ The alignment of the BRI and the EAEU is a subject of constant attention.³⁸ In other words, the difficulties and contradictions do not appear insurmountable; instead, ongoing work is underway to advance cooperation while taking into account and respecting the interests of each party. Differences in their understanding of a just world order and its structure do not pose a fundamental obstacle to the two countries' partnership.

Assessing the Strategic Prospects of the China-Russia Partnership: the “Duopoly for Three, the Fourth in Ambush” Model

Nevertheless, materials published on *Diploweb* on this topic suggest an “a priori irreconcilability” and even “conceptual incompatibility” of the two countries' strategic interests. Some *Diploweb* experts believe that in technological and especially military matters, Russia's primary Asian partner is not China, but India. Russia and India are linked by several of the world's most advanced weapons programmes. Therefore, the Russian-Indian partnership could potentially become a true Eurasian technological axis. This is facilitated by the fact that there are no disputes between Russia and India,

³⁶ Reuters reported that Chinese state-owned companies are refusing to buy Russian oil due to US sanctions. (In Russian). Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/532719-reuters-soobsil-ob-otkaze-goskompanij-kitaa-ot-rossijskoj-nefti-iz-za-sankcij-ssa>; China explained its reluctance to buy Russian gas via the new route. (In Russian). Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://news.mail.ru/economics/65839778/?from=swap&swap=2>

³⁷ Gavrilova, S.M. (Ed.). (2024). *Russian-Chinese Dialogue: Model 2024: Report No. 94/2024*. K.V. Babayev, Li Jianmin, Yu.Yu. Melnikova et al. (In Russian); *Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*. Moscow: NP RIAC. (In Russian).

³⁸ Petrovsky, V., Kulintsev, Yu., Larionova, A., Chai Yu Wang, & Chenxing Jiang Jing. “The Conjugation of the EAEU and the BRI: Problems and Prospects”. *Policy Brief 29/2020*. (In Russian). Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/EAEU-BRI-PolicyBrief29.pdf>

unlike in Russian-Chinese relations [Marchand 2017]. As for China, for it, Russia is “not Asian enough”, and given Moscow’s desire for independence and China’s enormous geopolitical ambitions, any cooperation in defense and the strategically important areas of cybersecurity and nuclear energy will impose limitations on their collaboration.³⁹

For liberal-conservative geopolitical scientists, all of this serves as an additional reason for the profound differences between the two countries regarding the role and goals of Russian-Chinese cooperation in the changing world order. In this regard, they argue that while Russia clearly wants to overcome its unipolar configuration and offer an alternative view of the international system, China merely seeks to balance Western power in Beijing’s interests, without challenging it. Moscow needs China more than the other way around, not only economically but also in terms of seeking diplomatic counterweights. At the same time, it has no real interest in a formal strategic alliance, which, in addition to threatening its sovereignty, could harm its multilateral cooperation with other states.

Since there is no formal alliance between the two powers, only a “soft alliance”, this means that their shared strategic interests apply only to the medium term. The long-term national interests of Russia and China diverge over the structure of the new world order. Moscow views future strategic developments as a tripolar world with China and the United States, while Beijing envisions an international system fundamentally bipolar with Washington.⁴⁰ Ultimately, according to P. Orcier of the Institute of the Mediterranean Foundation of Strategic Studies (FMES), the complex game looks like this: China and the United States challenge each other, attempting to weaken one another through alliances and sanctions, while simultaneously cooperating closely economically. Russia is playing a confrontational game, hoping to take advantage of a possible Sino-American overmatch. Its only strength today lies in its military potential (weakened, however, by the war in Ukraine), including a gigantic nuclear arsenal equivalent to that of the United States. At the same time, India is entering this competition, having long supported Russia but now possessing the potential to develop its own comprehensive power strategy and gain a foothold. While maintaining a balanced position, it simultaneously seeks “to avoid becoming subservient to the Chinese leadership, to make itself indispensable, and finally

³⁹ *Les relations stratégiques sino-russes, Xi Jinping et Vladimir Poutine: un nouvel axe rouge?* Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Les-relations-strategiques-sino-russes-Xi-Jinping-et-Vladimir-Poutine-un-nouvel-axe-rouge-Entretien.html>

⁴⁰ *La “lune de miel” sino-russe face à l’(incompatible) interaction entre l’Union Economique Eurasienne et la “Belt & Road Initiative”*. Par Mathieu Boulegue. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-lune-de-miel-sino-russe-face-a-l-incompatible-interaction-entre-l-Union-Economique-Eurasienne-et.html>

to secure a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.” As a result, the configuration of the future world order is presented in the form of an original formula: “A duopoly of three, with a fourth in ambush.”⁴¹ In other words, none of the great powers is striving for multipolarity; on the contrary, they seek to achieve leadership positions at the expense of others, including developing countries. This idea is expressed most radically in the articles and interviews of J.-S. Montgrenier. In his view, the very term “multipolarity”, conceived and developed by Yevgeny Primakov, is nothing more than a “combat doctrine”. It expresses post-Soviet Russia’s hidden desire to organize a broad and united front against the West. The central pillar of this front, its axis, is the alliance between Moscow and Beijing. Therefore, the West must do everything possible to counter this axis, particularly in the Arctic, Eurasia, and Africa.⁴²

Conclusion

Thus, over a period spanning a quarter of a century, the topic of Russian-Chinese rapprochement has remained a constant focus of the “first French-language website on geopolitics”. On the contrary, it has attracted noticeably increasing attention from its management, scientific council, and contributors. A comparison of the views expressed on the site reveals a diversity of topics, the nature of the arguments presented, and the depth of immersion in various aspects of the topic under study. Some fairly realistic arguments about the motives for China and Russia’s rapprochement are found not in terms of autocracy and aggressiveness, but rather based on a shared political vision of global stability, concern over NATO expansion, and the overall “encirclement strategy” designed to significantly limit their spheres of influence.⁴³ Many note the high level of Chinese-Russian economic cooperation, particularly in the military-technical and energy sectors. It is also rightly emphasized that bilateral relations are officially based on the fundamental principles of equality and non-interference in internal affairs.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Carte. Rivalités entre grandes puissances, un duopole à trois, le quatrième en embuscade.* Par Institut FMES, Pascal Orcier. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Carte-Rivalites-entre-grandes-puissances-un-duopole-a-trois-le-quatrieme-en-embuscade.html>"<https://www.diploweb.com/Carte-Rivalites-entre-grandes-puissances-un-duopole-a-trois-le-quatrieme-en-embuscade.html>

⁴² *Géopolitique de la Russie dans le monde en 2024.* J.S. Mongrenier. Interestingly, Mongrenier's idea that slander alone is not enough to destroy such a foundation is interesting. Indeed, there are many examples of such slander: see, for example, A. de Tinguay's assertions that Russia is behind the Nord Stream explosions, or Françoise Thom's publications on the “numerous war crimes” committed during the war in Ukraine.

⁴³ *Quelles perspectives pour le partenariat stratégique sino-russe?* Par Sébastien Fontaine. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Quelles-perspectives-pour-le.html>; “Saisir le vent chinois dans les voiles russes” (Vladimir Poutine). Par Pascal Marchand. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Geopolitique-de-la-Russie.html>

⁴⁴ *La relation Russie-OTAN: entre le marteau et l'enclume.* Par Mathieu Boulegue. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-relation-Russie-OTAN-entre-le.html>

Nevertheless, a text-oriented analysis does not support the “clash of positions, calm and respectful discussions, and diversity of approaches”⁴⁵ declared in the *Diploweb Charter*. A recourse to informal (verbal) models, despite the inevitable simplifications in such cases, reveals that the essence of the published materials boils down to variations of three recurring themes. First, the only strong and relatively stable motive for the partnership between Russia and China, as two autocracies, is the struggle against Western leadership and its ideals of democracy. Second, the asymmetry of mutual relations deprives the Russian-Chinese alliance of strategic perspective. Third, despite all its contradictions, this alliance poses a threat to the West, as Moscow and Beijing are united by a desire to reshape the post-bipolar world order to their advantage.

The increasingly overtly hostile nature of the anti-Russian and anti-Chinese rhetoric published on the website demonstrates the authors’ concern about the influence of China and Russia in 21st-century global politics, amid growing socioeconomic difficulties in Europe. Another goal, outlined by the current mainstream European policy in this area, is also quite clearly evident: to consolidate the EU and the transatlantic community as a whole around the threat posed by “united authoritarianisms”, relying on liberal-conservative principles.

However, in early 2025, the European political elite encountered unexpected difficulties along this path. Joe Biden’s globalism, while not identical to, but in many ways close to, the EU’s principles, gave way to Donald Trump’s national egotism under the slogan “Make America Great Again”, strengthening the position of right-wing populist tendencies within the EU itself. While previously, disagreements between the EU and the US had not touched on such sensitive issues as shared transatlantic security and a united front against the Moscow-Beijing alliance, the situation had now changed. As a result, problems with the EU’s internal unity worsened, and its position on the international stage was seriously weakened.

Against this backdrop, the website’s materials on the Russian-Chinese partnership are noticeably shifting in emphasis. *Diploweb* experts are asking new questions. Does Trump’s policies truly leave the European Union in a “heartbreaking loneliness” in the face of challenges from the autocracies of China and Russia?⁴⁶ How can we continue the already extensive critique of Trump’s particularism without losing America’s support in the confrontation with Russia in Ukraine and with China’s financial, economic, and technological “expansion”? Is it possible to simultaneously suppress Russia’s informational “interference” as the basis for the spread of “pro-Putin sentiment” within the EU itself and the growing right-wing populist political

⁴⁵ *Charte du site géopolitique Diploweb.com*. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/La-charte-du-diploweb-com.html>

⁴⁶ *L’Union européenne est désormais seule*. Par Raoul Delcorde. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/L-Union-europeenne-est-desormais-seule.html>

tendencies within it?⁴⁷ On the other hand, how can we emerge from the EU's state of "strategic uncertainty" in the face of American dominance diplomacy and the transatlantic rift over values?

The dilemmas seem intractable. Discussions on *Diploweb* suggest that, despite the apparent anti-American backlash, participants have recently been trying to predict Trump's policy toward the Russian-Chinese partnership. Will he seek to restore ties with Russia with the goal of separating it from China, or will he attempt to engineer a rapprochement with China to separate it from Russia, repeating the "Nixon-Kissinger maneuver" of 1972? Amid the "American hegemonic delusion" and the possible decline in US investment in Europe's security and economic development, both its attempts to influence Trump toward a more anti-Russian and anti-Chinese policy and calls for the "Europeanization of NATO" are intensifying.⁴⁸ At the same time, the fact remains that the material and moral potential for "Europe's strategic autonomy" is insufficient. In this context, the *Diploweb.com* platform performs the important task of strengthening it by producing geopolitical images and meanings aimed, among other things, at weakening and discrediting the Russian-Chinese partnership.

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⁴⁷ *Géopolitique de l'ingérence russe. La stratégie du chaos?* Par C. Dugoin-Clément. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Geopolitique-de-l-ingerence-russe-La-strategie-du-chaos-Entretien-avec-C-Dugoin-Clement.html>

⁴⁸ *La puissance américaine est-elle en péril?* Par M. Quessard. Retrieved September 19, 2025, from <https://www.diploweb.com/Planisphere-La-puissance-americaine-est-elle-en-peril-Avec-M-Quessard.html>

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