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Russia's pivot to China: Media and policy analysis of Russia's shift to the Chinese energy market

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No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS submitted by:
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The Power of Siberia is the epitome of Sino-Russian relations, marking Russia's pivot to China. Given Russia's recent shift to the Chinese energy market, this thesis has analysed the Sino-Russian energy relations. The aim of the study was to determine the reasons behind Russia's re-orientation from the EU to the Chinese energy market and how this shift fits into Russia's energy security and foreign policy objectives. Policy and media analyses were conducted to examine the discourse surrounding these issues. The thesis investigated the themes and framing of Russia's energy cooperation with China in Russian media. Several Russian media sources were used to provide a representative sample reflecting the state's perceptions and agenda-setting. The latest Russia's official policy documents were reviewed to shed light on the state's changing energy strategy and analyse its justification within the policies. The factors pulling Russia towards the Chinese energy market were economic and geopolitical, indicating that Russia considers China's Belt and Road Initiative investment crucial for its economic and energy security. Russia faces serious challenges on the EU market, compelling it to diversify its energy exports. The economic and infrastructure development of Russia's eastern and Arctic zones is vital for securing long-term demand for fossil fuels, the consumption of which has rapidly increased over the past years in China and is projected to continue to grow. Therefore, Russia's pivot to China underlies an elaborate strategy to maintain its economic and geopolitical position, which will have negative abatement repercussions given Russia's continued reliance on fossil fuels.

Keywords: Sino-Russian energy relations, Power of Siberia, energy security, geopolitics of energy, economic security, natural gas, Russia's energy strategy

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1. Introduction

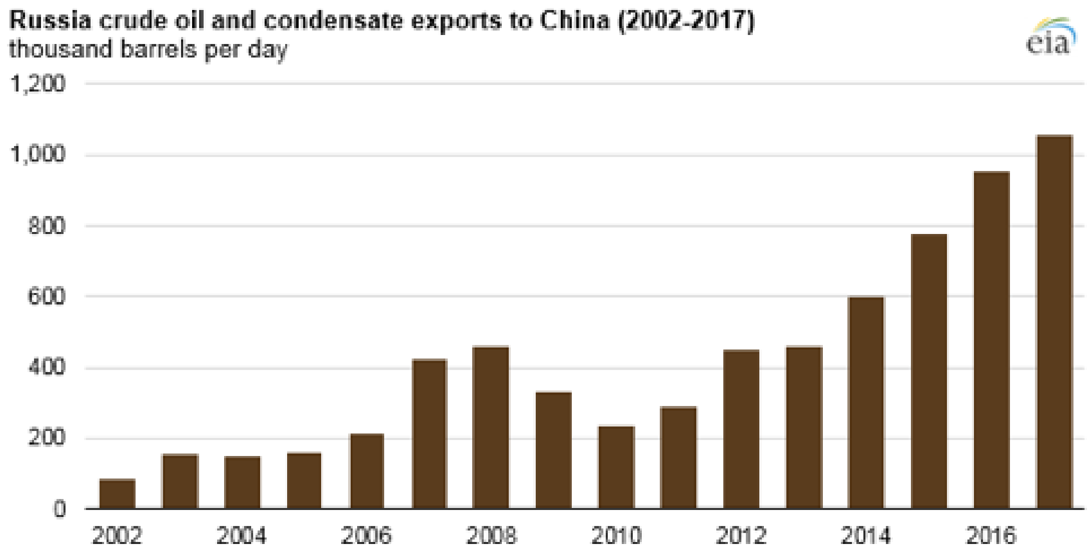
This thesis will analyse what lies behind Russia's increasing re-orientation of its energy exports to the East Asian market, namely that of China. Energy exports are a key component of Russia's economy, with revenues from oil and gas accounting for around 36% of the federal budget revenue (EIA 2017). It follows that any change in Russia's energy strategy will profoundly affect its economic security, domestic stability as well as international energy relations. Considering that Russia was the world's leading exporter of natural gas in 2019 (Statista 2021) and the third oil exporter in 2020 (EIA 2020), it is pivotal to study any significant changes in Russia's energy exports. According to some experts, Russia uses its resource abundance not only to drive its economic growth but also to assert influence in former Soviet territories or political pressure on end-consumers.

Oil exports to the EU accounted for 70% of Russia's oil total exports in 2017 (EIA 2017), indicating a strong economic interdependence between the EU and Russia, which is a highly analysed topic in the field of international energy relations. While the EU has so far been the largest market for Russia's energy imports, China has become one of the fastest-growing export destinations for Russia's energy sources in recent years. From 2014 to 2019, China was Russia's top growing export market, with a total export value growth of 47.3% (OEC 2021). Over the past few years, Russia has ventured into new energy projects that would increase supplies of coal, natural gas, and oil to China, now the world's largest energy consumer. The issue has triggered attention since Sino-Russian relations were renowned for mistrust and reluctance to cooperate.

The construction of the Power of Siberia pipeline, Russia's most ambitious energy project so far, has marked its pivot to China, gaining the spotlight in international media. The $55 billion pipeline is Russia's largest energy project since the collapse of the Soviet Union and will annually deliver 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China for the duration of 30 years, an unprecedented deal in the history of Sino-Russian relations (Gazprom 2021a). The 3,000 km long pipeline stretches through various terrains of Siberia, which has made its construction extremely challenging and expensive (Kontorovich et al. 2018). Furthermore, recently Gazprom has approved a feasibility study of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline project, an extension of the Power of Siberia pipeline, that will pump more than 50 billion cubic meters of gas to China, accounting for one-third of the Power of Siberia current capacity (Gazprom 2021b).

The complexity and scope of these energy projects indicate Russia's changing strategy, which experts and policymakers should pay attention to because of the many potential implications for the international energy system. Given the breadth of the topic and the significance of the Power of Siberia projects in the strengthening Sino-Russian energy relations, this thesis will focus primarily on the role of natural gas in Russia's pivot to China. The circumstances of Russia's increasing shift to the Chinese energy market are worth exploring for several reasons. As shown in the graph below, Russia's oil and gas exports to China have seen exponential growth since 2014, which has been linked to the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU on Russia for the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Figure 1: Russia's energy exports to China for the period 2002-2017



Source: EIA (2017)

This correlation indicates that geopolitical push-factors exist behind Russia's rapidly growing energy exports to China, which will be examined further in this thesis. Evidence from neorealist studies of international energy relations suggests that power, competition, and national interests are key drivers of a state's actions. Hence geopolitics will play a crucial role in this thesis.

According to a BP study, the demand for oil and natural gas is expected to significantly decrease in the EU because of the Green Deal (BP 2019). There could be a correlation between the anticipated stagnation of the EU energy imports and Russia's perceived need to address this stagnation by turning to China to maintain its export revenues. Therefore, a vital issue to explore in this thesis will be the potential economic drivers of Russia's shift to the Chinese rapidly growing energy market. In addition, several related questions which are under-explored in the academic literature will be touched upon, namely why is China's demand for Russia's natural gas increasing, can Russia meet China's energy demand, and what implications do the new energy ventures bear for reaching carbon neutrality by 2050? The environmental aspect of Sino-Russian relations will, thus, be an important area of study in this thesis.

Natural gas demand is projected to continue growing globally, partly due to the coal phase-out. The capitalisation of oil and gas constitutes $5 trillion compared to the renewables' $777 billion (IRENA 2018). It would, therefore, be wrong to shift the academic attention towards green energy only, making this research a valuable contribution to the study of fossil fuels and energy relations. Although China has adopted a developmental state strategy towards renewable energy, fossil fuels such as oil and gas are estimated to remain an indispensable part of its energy mix in the future, with Russia as a potential beneficiary of China's rapidly growing energy demand. There is extensive academic literature examining the EU-Russia energy relations and the instruments Russia uses to exert political pressure on the EU. However, studies focusing on the Sino-Russian energy relations are more limited and do not enjoy such spotlight in the media as the EU-Russia energy relations.

Given the significance of the research areas, this thesis aims to analyse Sino-Russian energy relations to address the recent phenomena of Russia's developing gas infrastructure projects in the East Asian direction and its growing energy exports to China. More specifically, the thesis will primarily try to answer the following interdependent questions:

- Why is Russia increasingly shifting its energy exports to China?
- How does this shift fit into Russia's energy strategy, energy security and foreign policy goals?
- Is the relationship strong enough to help Russia deliver on its strategic goals?

Given that this thesis bridges the fields of energy security, international energy relations and energy politics, it will lean on the international relations theories of neorealism and neoliberalism. Thus, the author will analyse data gathered from policy documents and media through these theoretical lenses to establish what purpose do contemporary Sino-Russian energy relations serve Russia and whether the developing partnership will help Russia fulfil its aims set out in its strategic and policy documents. This thesis will take a novel approach to analysing media sources, paying attention to the framing of energy coverage. Since Russian media are not independent, they reflect state agenda, and therefore the discourse the media set will be crucial to understanding how Russia's partnership with China is perceived and what the state aims to achieve through this partnership. Based on the literature review and the theoretical framework adopted, the perspectives on why Russia is increasingly shifting to the Chinese energy market will be divided into the following three categories: 1) economic, 2) foreign policy, and 3) environmental.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

As this thesis sets out to explore the reasons behind Russia's re-orientation from the EU to the Chinese energy market, it bridges several key academic debates, spanning across the fields of political economy, security, and international relations. Two clashing strands of thought dominate the literature on Russia's energy - realism and liberalism. These perspectives diverge in their assumptions about the world, and thus their focal points of analysis vary and have different implications for policy agendas. Therefore, the literature review will, first and foremost, clarify the difference between these schools of thought in relation to energy and, more importantly, Sino-Russian cooperation. With a long history of mutual mistrust, lacking political and ideological convergence, and competition for regional hegemony, no less than two decades ago scholars deemed an alliance between Russia and China unthinkable. Thus, to shed light on the changing dynamics in the Sino-Russian relationship, the next part will briefly examine the development of the Sino-Russian energy relations over the past decades. Then, the review will scrutinise previous research on Sino-Russian relations, demonstrating that much scholarly attention has been paid to security, economic and diplomatic aspects of the relations. Finally, a part of this chapter will be dedicated to the research gaps identified in this review and the implications for this thesis.

2.2. International relations perspectives in energy studies

There are two dominant perspectives, realism and neoliberalism, through which scholars study political decisions on energy matters. These perspectives are then reflected in different expert interpretations of international conflicts and cooperation between states. Since this thesis focuses on the drivers of Russia’s expansion of gas exports to East Asia, namely China, understanding these frameworks will be crucial to the purposes of this study. Realism has historically been the dominant framework in international energy relations, especially in the 20th century. Realism posits that for states, “control over, and access to, energy resources - by any means necessary - becomes a central policy priority” (Kuzemko et al. 2016, 8). For example, following the 1970s oil crisis, a shortage of oil began to be viewed as a severe threat to states as it is vital for maintaining economic, military, and social security (Yu and Dai 2012). States are thus driven to maximise their power in an anarchical system with no guarantees of the actions of other states. As a result, the key assumption of this framework is that power is a zero-sum game, with states being the only actors of significance in world politics. With its focus on security and power maximisation, realism dominates debates on energy security, which in the case of Russia implies security of energy supply. Apart from classical realism, which sees the international system only in terms of inter-state power struggles, structural realism (neorealism) acknowledges the existence of limited cooperation between states but only if the cooperation advances national self-interests, explaining the existence of energy regimes.

Liberalism goes in stark contrast with realism, challenging its critical assumptions about the world and international energy relations. The end of the Cold War and the globalisation of the world economy have caused liberal theories of international relations to take precedence, focusing on institutions, regimes, and interdependence. Unlike realists, who believe in relative gains, liberals are concerned about maximising their absolute gains, thus seeking cooperation to enhance their interests. Institutions exist in a range of policy areas to mitigate anarchy by encouraging cooperative habits and enforcing compliance, giving rise to different regimes, for example environmental regimes. As such, according to liberals, states are perfectly capable of collectively managing their energy relations and security concerns (Kuzemko et al. 2016). States mitigate conflict incurred by competing for scarce energy resources through continuously strengthening economic interdependence and mutual energy cooperation (Klare 2002). While neorealist admit that states do engage in cooperation, they do so only if they are expected to gain more than their rivals.

Although there are stark differences between these two perspectives, it is vital to realise that most academic literature incorporates both frameworks as none of them can alone explain the complex phenomena and relations of the international energy system. Trying to understand energy security through international relations theories, Yu and Dai (2012) look at the oil crisis and the consequent securitisation of oil through multiple international relations theories. They demonstrate how the perceptions of the academic community had evolved since the 1970s crisis from realism to liberalism due to a change in the international political and economic situation. Their study suggests that energy security can be comprehensively understood only by studying energy issues simultaneously from the political, economic, military, diplomatic, environmental, and social points of view, ergo from both the neoliberal and neorealist perspectives. The studies discussed below will demonstrate that only a few of them are predominantly realist or liberal in nature and most of them combine features of both.

2.3. Sino-Russian energy relations

The importance of China's gas imports for Russia is being increasingly acknowledged and explored in the academic literature. Russia’s relationship with China has a complex history known for periods of mutual mistrust, friendship and tensions or even outright hostility, corresponding to their complementary economies and ambitions to be the key global actors. Several academics have observed the dramatic change in Russia's relationship with China, claiming the Russia-China relations have been more robust than ever before, especially due to the improving bilateral trade in energy resources (Eder 2013; Henderson and Mitrova 2016). A reluctant engagement with China, characteristic for the 2000s, has changed into what many nowadays refer to as a "strategic partnership" (Roseth 2017). While some scholars disagree about the scope of the Sino-Russian energy partnership, the stark difference between the levels of bilateral cooperation between the early 2000s and the present is undeniable. Furthermore, while the increase in Russian energy exports to China over the past 15 years is irrefutable, the interpretations of the circumstances leading to this change vary among scholars, depending on the framework chosen to interpret the data.

2.3.1. Liberalism

Several scholars examine Russia's eastward re-orientation, yet each comes to a different conclusion on what stands behind the sudden emerging of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. One, less prevalent strand of studies is characteristic for its use of a neoliberal framework to interpret data. The central theme is often international cooperation aimed at maximising economic growth. For instance, Kutcherov et al. (2020) examine the challenges and opportunities of Russia's natural gas exports to Asia. They argue that it is economically more beneficial for Russia to re-orient its natural gas exports from Europe to Asia, given the geopolitical challenges the country faces in the EU and the vast capacity of the emergent Asian markets to accommodate Russia's natural gas. The authors describe the opportunities of the Asian market for Russia mainly in economic terms, paying little attention to geopolitical or foreign policy incentives. The study of Zhang and Serdar (2017) similarly focuses on the commercial potential of Sino-Russian cooperation since Russia is the world's leading gas exporter and China is the third-largest gas importer. Thus, they argue that it is only natural and mutually beneficial for the countries to engage in energy trade, providing energy security and stable economic development. While this study incorporates the concept of energy security and frames Russia and China as global powers only to gain from cooperation, the authors refrain from geopolitical explanations of the phenomenon and concentrate on the economic benefits the partnership entails.

2.3.2. Realism

The literature analysing energy mainly from the perspective of foreign policy and power relations is more robust than the literature incorporating neoliberal frameworks. These studies focus on energy security, tending to see energy through the realist lens as a geopolitical tool used as leverage against other states. According to neorealist scholars, conflict and anarchy are distinct features of the international system in which absolute gains matter the most. Thus, neorealist oriented research is predominantly based on the assumption that Russia aims to retain a prominent role globally through its control of abundant energy resources. Such a realist paradigm has been commonly used in the scholarly debate on the securitisation of EU-Russia energy relations, which gained prominence in the wake of a series of “gas disputes” between Ukraine and Russia responsible for gas cut-offs in Europe. For example, Goldthau and Sitter (2015) see transit pipelines as a risk to the European Union’s energy security, arguing that the political tensions between Ukraine and Russia do not allow for a reliable energy supply to Europe. The authors continue to explain that the Single European Market has become a source of “soft power with a hard edge” for the EU, decreasing the influence of Russia's state energy firms (p. 2). As will be further seen, the loss of power and market share in the EU pushing Russia to diversify energy exports is a commonly occurring argument in the realist-oriented literature, with other interpretations being rare. Consequently, these findings open the floor for further discussion on how Russia has responded to the increasingly challenging conditions in the EU and what implications Russia's energy strategy might have for international relations in Eurasia.

2.3.3. Central Asia

One branch of realist scholars focuses on Central Asia and the Caucasus due to their profound political, economic and historical importance for Russia and China. On the one hand, Moscow sees Central Asia as its "Near Abroad", a region with a history of dependence on Russia and a sphere of Russia's natural interests (Cooley 2012). On the other hand, for resource-hungry China, energy-abundant Central Asia provides an easy way to address its rapidly increasing energy demand, challenging Russia's traditional control over the region. Due to these clashing interests, the realist scholars often frame Central Asia as a geopolitical hotspot where a "great power game" between the neo-imperialist Russia and rising China takes place. Whilst leaning on realist paradigms, these studies diverge in three contested areas: the extent to which cooperation between Russia and China is possible, what the push factors behind the alliance are, and how asymmetrical the Sino-Russian partnership is and whether bilateral rivalry will increase in the future. Some studies suggest that despite ceaseless efforts to maintain influence in Central Asia, Russia's hegemony in the region has been increasingly challenged due to the diversification of gas routes and the Belt and Road Initiative, leading to Russia's foreign policy becoming more assertive (Eder 2013). Freeman's study (2018) corroborates that Central Asia plays a crucial role in both China's and Russia's economic security and foreign policy, suggesting an impending confrontation in the region between the two powers. Drawing upon literature on strategic rivalry, she points out that the exogenous shock that came with the energy price collapse in 2008 compelled the two rivals to seek cooperation.

The fact that both countries are increasingly finding common ground despite their clashing interests in Central Asia has become a research interest for many scholars who mainly focus on the common challenges and threats Russia and China must jointly address. For instance, Yilmaz and Daksueva (2017) argue that energy has become a binding force between Russia and China due to the intensifying geopolitical challenges both face in the international arena. They illustrate that Russia has a deep conflict with the EU and the US over the situation in Ukraine, whereas China finds itself in territorial disputes with the neighbouring nations as well as economic competition with the US, which compels the two to join forces against external threats. Liu and Xu (2021) also demonstrate how a shifting political landscape and domestic agenda-setting ended several years-long disputes between Russia and China over the pricing and routing of the Power of Siberia pipeline. However, they argue that diverse economic, environmental, political, and geopolitical factors influenced the decision on the pipeline, which makes this study's view more holistic.

> "For China, the desire to acquire cheap natural gas was conditioned by deep environmental concerns and urgent domestic needs; for Russia, the desire to ensure satisfying revenues was frustrated by the fear of losing a huge market as well as adverse diplomatic situations" (Liu and Xu 2021, 8).

Although these studies outline the factors that have pushed Russia and China to form a strategic partnership, it is questionable how strong their relationship is. Yilmaz and Daksueva's study (2017) mentions that despite the need for cooperation, several bilateral energy projects, including the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, have been stalled on numerous occasions due to prolonged negotiations and various conflicts, questioning the strength of the energy partnership. Their study corroborates Freeman's theory (2018) that a continuing shift in relative influence between the countries might exacerbate a bilateral rivalry in the near future. More specifically, Freeman argues that with China's growing economic ties to Central Asia due to the Belt and Road Initiative, tensions between Russia and China are bound to increase as Moscow will likely seek to reinforce its economic, military, and political connections in the region. These works suggest that such rivals as China and Russia can cooperate at times when facing unprecedented mutual challenges, but their clashing interests in bordering Central Asia will prevent forming a deeper international partnership.

Furthermore, besides the strength of the partnership, the balance of power between the nations will be of interest to this thesis as the extent to which Russia steps back in China's favour might shed a brighter light on the severity of problems it faces in the EU market. Zachmann (2019) argues that both China and the EU have a mutual interest in reducing Russian rents, which indicates that China might have leverage over Russia. Moreover, while he demonstrates that Russia is concerned about Chinese investments with a hidden political or strategic agenda, he fails to elaborate on how Russia might respond to this situation. Roseth (2017) also finds the Sino-Russian relationship asymmetrical, arguing that Russia is becoming increasingly reliant and vulnerable on China's energy imports, whereas China enjoys having more energy suppliers and making impactful investments in Eurasia as part of the One Belt One Road strategy. In contrast with Zachmann's study (2019), the author explains that Russia's increased dependence on China does not represent such a grave concern for Moscow arguably because expanding Russia's market base beyond the EU is currently its top priority. Downplaying the significance of Central Asia for maintaining

Russia's great power status, this study does not look at the issue through such a rigid realist lens as the previous ones. On the other hand, other scholars exploring the power dynamics in the resource-abundant Central Asia, such as Coburn (2010), have identified Central Asia as key to maintaining Russia's regional hegemony, perceiving Central Asian pipeline infrastructure as a tool to maintaining its political and economic dominance. Nonetheless, the many obstacles Russia faces to expand its market share in the EU emerges as a strong theme in the literature on Sino-Russian relations.

2.4. Research Gaps

What is noticeable about these studies is that they give a minimal agency to Central Asian states, the interests of which are often overlooked. However, conceptualising these states as mere victims of a power-play between Russia and China provides a limited and simplified outlook as such studies fail to recognise that Central Asian governments shape the political and economic landscape of Eurasia. A limited number of studies acknowledge the efforts individual Central Asian states make to maximise their interests. One of the most representative works in this respect is Cooley's Great Games, Local Rules (2012), which challenges the generalisations about foreign competition and international presence in Central Asia. He identifies Central Asian governments as critical agents, demonstrating that they can defend their interests by encouraging competition for resources and political loyalty between China and Russia. This thesis will try to develop a more nuanced understanding of affairs in Eurasia by incorporating the perspectives of some Central Asian states capable of enforcing local rules. This might shed a brighter light on Russia's motives behind the cooperation with China and how Moscow will respond to China's rising power status.

While much of the aforementioned research focuses on identifying and evaluating either geopolitical or economic factors that have pushed Russia to seek deeper cooperation with China, neither pays attention to the environmental aspects of Sino-Russian relations. Some studies hint that the EU's demand for natural gas will soon reach its peak, therefore possibly making Russia's pivot to China as the world's largest energy importer a strategic move (Zachmann 2019). While there is a strong academic focus on green transitions, the shift away from fossil fuels remains a topic that has been hardly touched upon in Russia's energy relations. However, with the European Green Deal and the Energy Union strategy gradually transforming the EU's energy supply market, the environmental push and pull factors behind Sino-Russian relations are worth exploring. Therefore, this thesis will scrutinise the extent to which the environment figures as a theme in Russian media discourse, agenda-setting, and policies.

Stretching across the adverse environment of sub-Artic Russia, the construction of the Power of Siberia transmission system is Russia's most ambitious energy project, illustrating Russia's turn to resource-hungry China. While the 4000 km long pipeline has become a hot topic in Russian and international media investigating Russia's energy strategy and relations with the EU and China, the topic has not attracted much scholarly attention. When studied, scholars rarely look at pipeline infrastructure connecting Russia and China through the perspective of international relations or security. Some studies do touch upon the pipeline in their analysis of Russia's energy strategy (e.g. Mareš and Laryš 2012); however, they focus on the viability of Russia's energy strategy, addressing the question of whether Russia will be able to meet the energy demand of its new Asian partners.

Other scholars take an even more pragmatic stance on the issue. For instance, Kontorovich et al. (2018) explore opportunities for regional development associated with the implementation of the pipeline. More specifically, they examine the prospects for the creation of gas, petrochemical, oil, and gas transportation, and helium industries in the regions of Russia's East through which the pipeline runs, concluding that such a spill-over economic development will be challenging. Similarly, other studies focus on the risks of the implementation of the project. For example, the study of Sidortsov et al. (2016), which analyses systemic risks arising out of the mega project, concludes that the Russian legal and regulatory regime is inadequate to govern systemic risks due to ambiguity and complexity, proven to be challenging for government energy planners and corporate executives. While this study outlines the obstacles faced when implementing the project and points to the shrewdness of Russia's governance system, it does not focus on the decision to implement the project itself. Therefore, seeing these gaps in the academic literature and acknowledging the wealth of the topic's coverage in the media, this thesis will focus on the Power of Siberia project and use media sources to address the phenomenon of Russia's turn to the East.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter will outline and explain the reasons behind the methods chosen to address the research questions of why Russia is increasingly shifting its focus from the EU to the Chinese energy market and how the shift fits within its energy security and foreign policy objectives. The first section of the chapter will justify why policy and media analysis were chosen to conduct this qualitative study and specify how these analyses were conducted. Next, the news media and official policy documents chosen for the research purposes of this thesis will be specified. For greater transparency and replicability, the sampling section of this chapter will explain why the specific news media and policy documents used in this study were chosen and according to which criteria. Besides justifying the selection of the methods chosen and highlighting the positive contributions to this research, this chapter will also acknowledge the limitations of this study and explain what these limitations mean for the relevance of the dissertation's findings.

3.2. Language

The author chose to analyse untranslated primary sources written in the Russian language due to the many advantages of this approach. Firstly, only a few Russian and Central Asian media platforms publish articles in English; therefore, relying solely on English language media sources would pose significant limitations to this study. More importantly, given that this thesis addresses the phenomenon of Russia's shift of energy exports to China through examining discourse and agenda-setting, it is crucial to preserve all nuances in meaning or framing as they indicate sentiments the author needs to see. Since qualitative research focuses on the meaning and interpretation of a written or spoken language rather than numerical data, the best way to preserve the meaning of a text, and thus be able to sense bias or partiality, is by analysing expressions in the original language in which the text was written or spoken (Polkinghorne 2005). Furthermore, according to Whitehouse (2019), idiomatic phrasing or cultural connotations are often lost in news media translation, potentially leading to information disparities or misinterpretation of the meaning. She elaborates that this is one reason why news media do not rely on translation technologies to reach an international audience. Therefore, analysing news media sources and policy documents in the Russian language will add value to the research as even the construction of the language is indicative of certain Russian sentiments that might be otherwise omitted in the translation.

3.3. Content analysis

The sources will be examined using qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Due to the breadth of the topic, namely the Sino-Russian energy relations, it was anticipated that a large sample of articles would be produced. Therefore, they were narrowed down and categorised to navigate through the data more effectively. Hence, content analysis was employed to categorise the data and quantify its content in predetermined categories and sub-categories. The articles and policy documents were coded in Atlas.ti to identify recurring themes among the news articles, subsequently allowing the author to contextualise and analyse the data in greater depth.

The thesis will also focus on the ways in which Sino-Russian relations surface in media and policy documents. To comprehend Russia’s strategic decisions and agenda-setting with regards to the joint energy project with China, the author searched for a suitable approach that would help gain insights into the ideological basis of discourse in the media and language in policy documents. Therefore, qualitative content analysis was also employed to delve deeper into the nuances in the meaning, motives, and purposes of political action embedded within the texts (Halperin and Heath 2012). This means that besides identifying the reasons for the strengthening of Sino-Russian relations by looking at the general meaning of the text, the author will also look at framing and language nuances to interpret the text and address the research question.

3.4. Media analysis

Media coverage of the Sino-Russian relations will be analysed in order to determine the driving force behind the tightening of Sino-Russian relations and how the cooperation fits within Russia's energy security and foreign policy objectives. This includes coverage of topics such as the Power of Siberia and Power of Siberia 2 pipelines, Russia's energy exports to China, China's imports, Gazprom activities, the Arctics exploration, Belt and Road Initiative, etc. These topics were identified based on their significance, literature review, and attention they have received in the media. Since media communicate political attitudes, media analysis can establish which political messages matter and why (Halperin and Heath 2012). As energy matters are in the hands of the Russian state and all major Russian energy companies are state-owned (e.g., Gazprom), one can obtain critical information and perceptions on energy agenda by analysing state-owned media. Given that most Russian media might reflect the government's sentiments and decision-making, the author expected this novel methodological approach will be useful in tackling the question of what stands behind the strengthening of Sino-Russian relations.

3.4.1. Sampling

The primary sources included nine news media sources in which 30 articles relevant for this research were found. The news media were sampled at the years 2020 and 2021 to provide the most recent information and insights into Russia's energy strategy and because they were likely to cover important milestones. As the Power of Siberia was put into operation in late 2019 and the plans for the construction of its extension have recently commenced, the selected time frame was considered likely to produce crucial information.

Prior to proceeding with data gathering and processing, the media sources were selected based on thorough research of the news agencies and TV networks. According to Lamont (2015), when performing a media analysis, a researcher needs to familiarise with the background of the media sources being used, such as circulation, audience, and ideological influence to filter and interpret data correctly and draw valid conclusions. Thus, several factors were kept in mind when choosing adequate media for analysis, namely 1) popularity, 2) distribution, 3) audience, 4) coverage, and 5) media ownership.

More specifically, the aim was to select widely read, nationally distributed media sources likely to represent and reveal a broad national sentiment or agenda-setting. Likewise, given the concentration of gas and oil wells in Siberia and the economic implications the Sino-Russian relations might have for the region, some local media sources were included in the study as well to provide regional perspectives. Due to the potential political and economic implications of Russia's changing energy strategy for the neighbouring countries, such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, some Central Asian media sources were also included in the study to shed new light on Russia's motives. The articles read nationwide, locally, and in Central Asia were subsequently compared in the analysis section in terms of discourse, themes and framing.

State-run media networks were selected to search for articles covering this issue as they were likely to reflect the government's views. This was done to understand what the Kremlin's perspectives on the deepening Sino-Russian energy relations are. Nonetheless, since including only state-owned media could offer limited perspectives on the issue, independent media sources were also included in the analysis and compared to the framing of articles published by state-run media. Following this reasoning, the author was able to gather a diverse pool of media sources providing a rich sample of articles.

In terms of coverage, media focusing on energy, economy, business, international and political affairs were considered most relevant to the research interests of this thesis as they would likely publish articles covering energy topics. Based on these criteria, the following Russian newspapers and TV networks were selected for analysis, providing for a varied yet relevant sample to yield valuable data: 1) Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2) RIA Novosti, 3) Gazeta, 4) RT, 5) Kommersant, 6) Azer News, 7) Sakha News, 8) Musavat, and 9) Komsomolskaya Pravda. The table below summarises the selection:

Table 1: List of media sources selected for data gathering

Media	**Country**	**Ownership**	**Audience**	**Coverage**
Rossiyskaya Gazeta	Russia	government-owned	nation-wide	economy, regional news, foreign affairs
Gazeta	Russia	independent	nation-wide	politics and business
RIA Novosti	Russia	government-owned	nation-wide	foreign policy

Azer News	Azerbaijan	independent	nation-wide	business, energy
Komsomolskaya Pravda	Russia	independent	nation-wide	politics, economy, foreign affairs
RT	Russia	state-controlled	nation-wide, world-wide	business, Russia, USA
Kommersant	Russia	independent	nation-wide	business, politics
Sakha News	Russia	government-owned	local	politics, economy, business
Musavat	Azerbaijan	independent	nation-wide	politics

To explain the selection in greater detail, Rossiyskaya Gazeta is a useful media source due to being state-owned, and therefore likely to reflect the standpoints not only of the state but also state-owned energy companies such as Gazprom. This news site also has rich coverage of political issues and international affairs, thus having some relevant insights regarding the coverage of energy topics. Furthermore, being one of the largest news agencies in Russia and a global media channel projecting the government's foreign policy objectives, RIA Novosti contains many valuable data for analysis. Musavat and Azer News, Azerbaijani newspapers, were included to provide a Central Asian perspective on Sino-Russian relations and validate the findings from the Russian media discourse. As a local newspaper from Yakutia, an eastern region throughout which the Power of Siberia stretches, was selected due to the likelihood to provide some local insights into the benefits of the Power of Siberia project and how China is perceived in the region. Founded by the government to improve Russia's public image abroad, RT is likely to contain propaganda, therefore revealing the Kremlin's agenda, which could be informative about the circumstances compelling Russia to shift its exports eastwards. Kommersant, Komsomolskaya Pravda, and Gazeta were chosen to enrich the sample by independent media sources, each with slightly different topical coverage.

To cover the milestones in the development of Sino-Russian energy relations, and therefore narrow down the search, the time frame for article selections was set to 2020-2021. This time frame allowed the researcher to cover reportage on joint energy projects with China, recent developments in Russia's energy strategy, as well as recent challenges which have pushed Russia and China to cooperate more closely on energy-related matters. The following keywords and phrases were used to filter out relevant articles from the selected news media online pages: Power of Siberia (sila sibiri), gas (gaz), oil (neft), China (Kitaj), People's Democratic Republic of China (Kitayskaya Narodnaya Demokraticheskaya Respublika). The search of these keywords produced a sufficiently broad yet relevant list of recent articles, which were subsequently narrowed down further. The author skimmed through the filtered selection, choosing the most relevant articles to analyse how Sino-Russian energy relations are framed and which themes recur in the articles. When such an option was available on a webpage, the author directly clicked on the following sections: "energy" (energetika) or "gas market" (gazovij-rinok), producing a relevant list of articles. Following this method, a total of 30 relevant articles was identified and subsequently analysed using content and thematic analysis. Below is a table illustrating the number of articles analysed in this thesis along with the media that published those articles.

Table 2: Number of relevant articles filtered out and their source

Media source	**No. of articles**
Gazeta	4
Rossiyskaya Gazeta	2
Sakha News	2
RT	5
RIA Novosti	4
Komsomolskaya Pravda	1
Kommersant	9
Azer News	3
Musavat	1
Total	**30**

3.5. Policy analysis

Documents should be viewed in relation to other documents since they are interlinked and refer to or respond to other documents (Bryman 2012). Therefore, several Russian strategic and policy documents were selected for analysis as they complement one another. President Nixon is renowned for quoting, “security and economic considerations are inevitably linked, and energy cannot be separated from either” (Kuzemko et al. 2016, 8). Thus, given the significance of energy for the economy and security, the following documents published by Russia’s government authorities were chosen for analysis to address the research problem: National Energy Strategy, National Security Strategy, National Economic Security Strategy.

3.6. Limitations

Although these methods were carefully chosen for strategic reasons to carry out the research successfully, one should also pay attention to the limitations of this research design. Although this thesis draws on a variety of publicly available sources which can provide valuable insights into Russia’s strategic thinking and decision-making rationale, as Lamont (2015) highlights, a researcher rarely has full access to documents and official records of an organisation or state. Therefore, as some critical information and factual data might likely go unpublished as the state might have an interest or need to conceal their day-to-day activities, studies or decision-making processes, documents provide only limited access to information. This thesis used media analysis to account for this limitation, being able to provide clues of the Kremlin’s motives and hidden agenda reflected in the framing of state-owned and government-controlled media, which might not be expressed in official state documents.

However, media content and framing depend to a large extent on a researcher's interpretation which might not correspond to the interpretation of other researchers analysing the same data. While qualitative research finds many proponents, some argue that the results of media analysis are "unscientific" as they look at the narrative of a small sample of articles and are subject to a consensus among various researchers on a given topic or interpretation (Halperin and Heath 2012). Furthermore, while the media can shed a brighter light on how energy agenda is constructed in public discourse, articles are often relatively short and dramatized, and therefore might not provide a nuanced and complex understanding of Russia's energy strategy. The researcher also does not have control over the quality of the materials they analyse. Thus, one should be aware that this thesis does not provide a complete picture of why certain Russian policies and projects come to the fore. However, it does provide useful insights into the circumstances that have led Russia to launch new energy ventures with China and how they are perceived in Russia. Given that the thesis focuses on Russia's perceptions only, one should be aware though that the claims in media or policy documents might not be factually correct. When possible, the findings were cross-referenced with policy documents and academic literature to account for some of these weaknesses and validate the findings.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Media analysis

This chapter aims to summarise, present, and discuss the findings of the thesis. This thesis aimed to establish what Russia's motivation for deepening ties with China in the energy domain is by looking at themes and framing of a small sample of articles. Analysing the selected articles, four distinct themes in the coverage of Sino-Russian energy cooperation emerged. These themes subsequently outlined the potential reasons behind the growing Russian Chinese relations, and how the relations fit into Russia's energy security and foreign policy goals. Below is the graphical representation of the occurrence of each theme in the articles. These themes demonstrated the nature of the discourse surrounding the Sino-Russian energy relations, allowing the researcher to make assumptions about the reasons behind its eastward oriented strategy.

Table 3: Occurrence of themes in the sample of media articles

Theme	**Number**
Economic recovery, business and development	17
Foreign policy, strategy, and geopolitics	14
Environment and energy transition	5
Asymmetry in Sino-Russian relations	7

These results indicate Russia's energy agenda and highlight which messages the Kremlin deems important to be communicated to Russian citizens via media channels it either directly or indirectly controls, or at least influences. The prevalence of economic and foreign policy themes in the media discourse of the Sino-Russian energy cooperation suggested that the decision for Russia's shift to the East was strategic and reflected the ineffectiveness of its previous policy focused on exports to the EU in terms of geopolitical and energy security aims. The most prevalent theme concerned Russia's economy and the development opportunities the joint energy initiatives might render, being coded for 17 times. This suggests that economic recovery might have been the driving force for Moscow's increasing inclination towards China's growing energy market and that Moscow considers the economy to be the priority when it comes to its new energy strategy. The second most prevalent narrative was geopolitical, appearing a total of 14 times, suggesting that Russia looks at the world through the neorealist lens of a competition for scarce resources in an anarchical system, using alliances and partnerships to enhance its position in the energy system. The environment was a tertiary theme in the news media, with only five occurrences, indicating that decarbonisation does not play a significant role in the joint energy projects with China. An interesting aspect of the graph is the number of times the articles indicated that Russia's position in the Sino-Russian relationship is unfavourable, with the Kremlin having to make concessions to China.

The analysis of over 30 articles covering Russian Chinese joint initiatives and projects revealed that Russia's relations with China were presented as exceptional and strong. There was a noticeable contrast in the coverage of China vs the West, with China being framed positively, even to such an extent that the media evoked the sentiment that Russia looks up to China and its economic growth and aims to benefit from China's developing economy. This illustrates not only the animosity between Russia and the West but also suggests that the EU has exhausted its attractiveness as an export destination for Russia due to the ongoing green energy transition. Most news articles communicated the success stories of Russia's cooperation with China in the energy sector. Further scrutiny of the narrative, tone and framing of the articles revealed more information about the nature of the Russia-China relationship, demonstrating the circumstances which led Russia to pursue closer cooperation with China in greater detail.

4.1.1. Economic development and market diversification

The study found that economic benefits are a common theme when Sino-Russian relations and energy ventures are discussed in the media, suggesting that economic gains play a vital role in Russia's shifting focus on China. Interviews and quotes from experts and authorities discussing the Sino-Russian energy nexus featured in the articles confirm this, providing further reliability of the data. As indicated by the literature review, the media validated that Russia seized the opportunity to supply "the fastest growing gas market in the world" (RT 2021b). This could have made Russia engage in new ambitious energy ventures. The fact that China has almost tripled its gas consumption over the past ten years was frequently mentioned in the articles and referred to as "good news" for Russia (RIA Novosti 2021c). The most significant as well as the most frequently reported achievements the Russian Chinese partnership has yielded were the following joint ventures: 1) the launch of the Power of Siberia pipeline with a capacity of 38 billion cubic meters of gas per year, 2) Russia's liquefied natural gas from the Yamal LNG project entering the Chinese market and investments, and 3) a package of various nuclear projects. Based on the appreciative and nationalistic tone of the articles covering these projects, it can be posited that Moscow highly likely wants China to be perceived as an economic partner and ally. One way to interpret these observations is that Russia simply exploited a market gap in China. It was discovered that Russia knows China does not want to be dependent on Saudi Arabia for oil imports, which was perceived as an opportunity playing in Moscow's favour.

However, the media indicate that the construction of the Power of Siberia pipeline reflects a more complex strategic thinking on Russia's part rather than a mere opportunistic response. The media report that the construction of the Power of Siberia pipeline has been carefully planned to unite

Russia's robust pipeline infrastructure into a single gas supply network by connecting the transmission system of the European part of Russia with the East of the country (RT 2021b). One interesting finding was that the expansion of the pipeline system was framed differently in Russian and Azerbaijani media. While RT framed the interconnected pipelines as providing greater flexibility of the system and security of supply to consumers, Azerbaijani media claimed Russia aims to interconnect the pipelines to control reverse flows of gas, therefore gaining bigger foreign policy leverage (AzerNews 2020). While Russia positioned itself as a good energy provider in the media, Azerbaijani news depicted the Power of Siberia as an ambitious project with a side agenda reminiscent of the neorealist narrative. Although opposing perceptions on the motives behind the Power of Siberia pipeline existed, a commonality surfaced. The project is part of a strategic plan of East Russia's development, which is facilitated through Chinese investments. The assertion that Russia's shifting exports to China and joint projects with China are part of a regional development plan is supported by the media. There was a strong focus on the economic development of the underdeveloped regions of Eastern Russia when covering the Power of Siberia project, with the media reporting expected growth by 10%, job creation and stable cash flow in the long run (Vozdvyzhenskaya 2020). The overemphasis on the ambitious joint energy projects with China, especially the Power of Siberia pipeline, suggests that Russia might be facing serious economic challenges. This is corroborated by the fact that falling oil and gas prices, stagnation of the economy, and sanctions imposed on Russia by the West are frequent issues addressed in the media. For example, the Kommersant reported that Gazprom's revenue decreased by roughly 50% against the background of record low gas prices compared to the previous year (Matveyeva 2020). While the framing of the article indicated that the economic situation in Russia is indeed serious, it also expressed belief in the potential of the Power of Siberia pipeline to overcome these challenges and contribute to economic recovery. It would be, thus, beneficial to further investigate the economic prospects of the pipeline to establish to what extent the overtly positive framing of not only this project but also China as such is justified.

The recent Sino-Russian energy projects are perceived as a continuation of a very successful economic cooperation which has existed between Russia and China since the 1990s. Thus, the energy nexus between Russia and China could be a natural spill over effect from long-lasting economic cooperation in other areas. For example, besides energy, the media boasted about Russia ranking second in the supply of black gold to China after Saudi Arabia. It is interesting that despite the many existing conflicts between China and Russia, which were mentioned in the literature review, the Sino-Russian economic cooperation was presented as perfect in the media. This was the case neither with the EU nor the US, which were framed as aggressors illegitimately imposing sanctions on Russia. The reason for this could be that China is ideologically closer to Russia, and Moscow benefits immensely from Chinese investments. Furthermore, some articles suggested that the joint energy projects are a means to strengthening a “strategic comprehensive cooperation” between China and Russia necessary for “upholding justice in international relations, protecting peace and security” and contributing to “universal development” of the whole Central Asian region (Musavat 2021). Thus, the media tried to convey the message that the strategic partnership with China has a far more profound ideological importance than trade, positioning the two as world powers.

Even though China has invested massively in Central Asian states as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, expanding its influence in the region, the BRI was framed positively in the media. With the glamorisation of the joint projects in the media, it would be worth exploring further the dichotomy between the proclaimed economic and development opportunities presented in the media and the reality. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that most of the articles were framed in such a way as to persuade the reader that economic opportunities were the main driver behind Russia's attraction to resource-hungry China. The antagonistic framing of the US and the EU and expressed concerns and outrage over the Western sanctions imposed on Russia and falling gas prices might also be considered contributing factors of the Russian Chinese energy cooperation. In an interview with Kommersant, the head of the Asia-Pacific Region program at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, Alexander Gabuev, shared his opinion on why Russia needs China:

> "The Russian economy is now in recession and has been stagnating since 2013; secondly, we have projects on our territory for which there is not enough money. And the Chinese have this money" (Soloviev 2021).

Therefore, the most apparent reason why Russia is increasingly shifting its exports to China is that Russia needs China, or more specifically Chinese investments, to kickstart Russia's stagnating economic recovery. However, studying the tone and framing of China's coverage in the media, the research also revealed that the relationship between China and Russia is asymmetrical. Contrary to the expectations of neo-realists, most of the articles suggested that Russia no longer presents itself as a world power and has the tendency to look up to China and its economic growth. Therefore, rather than challenging China, which would prove futile, Russia has decided to accept its place and reap the economic benefits cooperation with China entails instead. Amidst the record low prices caused by the pandemic, the media informed that cuts in investments into energy projects are highly likely, requiring a financial injection from China more than ever. Therefore, it seems that Russia's strategy of building strong ties with China through energy ventures is based on the country's urgent need to boost its economy, facing many external challenges it cannot deal with on its own.

4.1.2. Asymmetry in Sino-Russian relations

While the EU and the US were framed negatively in Russian media, China was depicted in a highly positive light despite several indications that the partnership is more advantageous for China. The media has recently reported triumphantly on a video conference dialogue between Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, commenting positively on the extension of the treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between China and Russia. The Sino-Russian relations were framed as an "unprecedented model example of interstate cooperation in the 21st century" (RT 2021a). This framing and choice of factual details suggest that Russia sees itself in a competition of some sort, taking pride in its economic milestones. Putin's Press Secretary was caught calling Russia's relations with China a "model example of interstate cooperation" (RT 2021a). In one article, he condemned the US for "worrying about China's growth", objecting that Russia is unconcerned about China's growth because it does not aspire to be a "hegemon" like the US (RT 2021c). Therefore, one could sense a sort of idealisation, defensiveness, and propaganda regarding the media coverage of Russian Chinese cooperation in the energy sector. All projects undertaken jointly with China were labelled as "the largest" or "unprecedented", for example:

> "Among the goals of the new Chinese five-year plan is the construction of nuclear power plants. Russia and China have already agreed to work together in the field of nuclear energy. Three years ago, the countries signed the largest package of agreements and contracts on various nuclear projects… Power of Siberia is a high-tech project of unprecedented scale" (RIA Novosti 2021c).

Judging by the tone and framing of the articles, the media wanted to give the impression that Sino-Russian relations are exceptional, strong, and beneficial for Russia. Surprisingly, this discourse is contrary to the neorealist assumption that Russia positions itself as a hegemon. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that while Russia might not openly claim such ambitions, it does not necessarily mean Moscow lacks them. Another explanation for the government representatives defending and glamourising China in the media is the urgent need for Russia to establish a market in the East to sustain its economy. Alternatively, it can reflect the intense pressure the international community has put on Russia by imposing sanctions on Moscow. Albeit seemingly unrelated to the topic, the collapse of oil and gas prices in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic is a featuring theme across many different news media sites, indicating serious problems for the Russian economy and security. Thus, although the framing of the text illustrates Russia's goodwill towards China, it is likely due to Russia's existential need to diversify its market quickly. This indicates that Russia is in a disadvantageous position when it comes to setting conditions of cooperation. Although the amount of natural gas China imports from Russia is significant and will substantially increase over the next few years, the natural gas Gazprom supplies to China might not be as profitable for Russia as it appears on the first glance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when the prices of gas fell significantly. Despite all the positive media attention the joint energy ventures with China have received, Russia's Kommersant commented on the fact that the gas supplied by Gazprom to China via the Power of Siberia pipeline is the cheapest on the Chinese market (Kommersant 2020a). One way to interpret this is that Russia made concessions to secure a deal with China, establishing strong ties with China at the cost of accepting the possibility of a lower profit margin. Furthermore, while there are indicators of Russia's adverse situation due to which Moscow must likely showcase goodwill to China, China seems to be in a much better negotiating position, thus giving it bigger leverage in the relationship.

Furthermore, it was observed that China was framed positively in the Azerbaijani media, looking up to Beijing for limiting Russia's power. Several Azerbaijani articles indicated that China has a superior position to Russia in the Sino-Russian relationship. For example, China was endorsed for expressing an interest to invest in Trans-Caspian undersea gas pipelines crossing Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, with this move being seen as China expressing support to Turkey in its endeavour to become the gas hub for the EU. Russia was said to be "sluggish" in the implementation of the BRI, suggesting Turkey is a better partner for China than Russia (AzerNews 2019). This demonstrates that despite the growing ties with Russia, China can express interest in other partnership projects, which might be clashing with Russia's interests. This framing indicates that Azerbaijan is welcoming to the BRI and China's growing influence in the region as it means less dependence on Russia. Thus, Russia's foreign policy strategy seems to be to challenge the West mutually with China rather than challenging it on the former Soviet territory. Experts featured in the articles corroborated themselves that challenging China would be futile, suggesting that cooperation with China is a far more strategic decision for Russia. Alexander Gabuev, the head of the Asia/Pacific Region program at Carnegie Moscow Centre, said: "Chinese economic dominance in Central Asia is inevitable. Russia is reluctantly admitting that economic cooperation with China in Central Asia has been lost without even starting" (Kommersant 2020b). The neorealist explanation could be that instead of focusing on the clashing interests in Central Asia, Russia prioritises economic recovery and challenging the West in the competition for the increasingly scarce energy resources, for which it currently requires an ally. The neorealist premise posits that while Russia is now accommodating to the neighbouring China because of its adverse circumstances, it might overreact in the future when confronted with the reality that the cooperation did not help Russia achieve its strategic objectives.

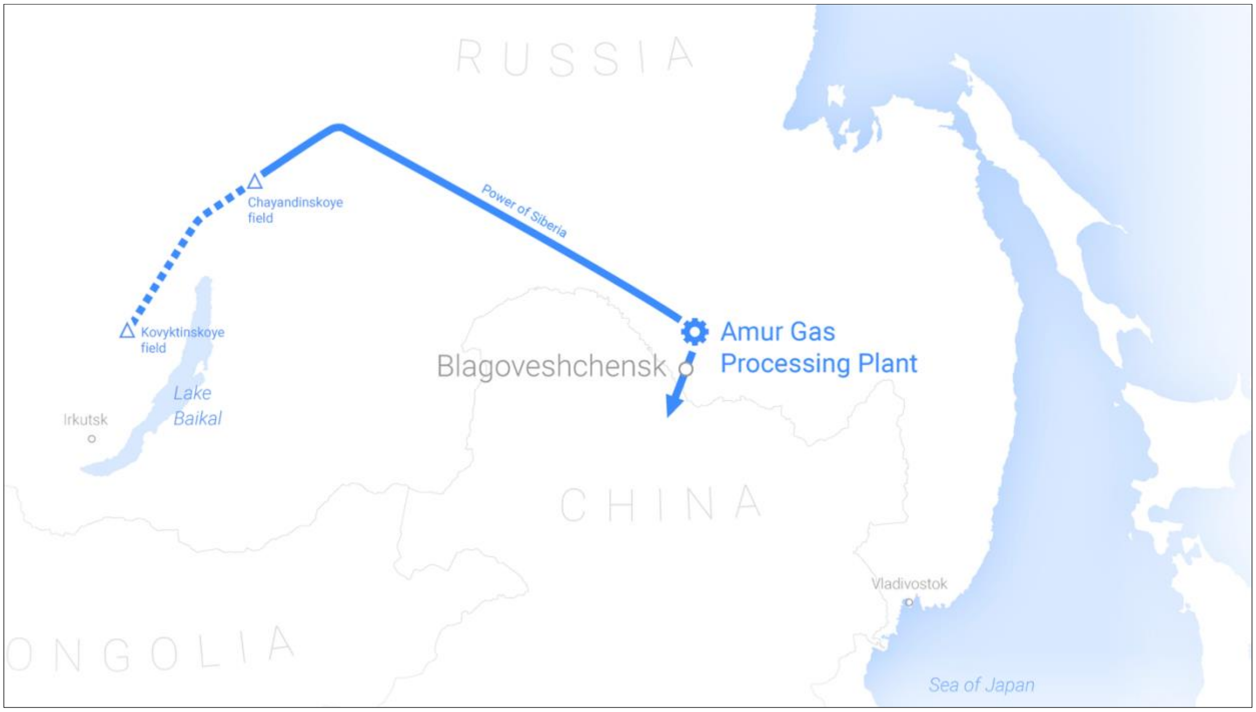
4.1.3. Environmental concerns

Not much attention was paid to the environmental aspect of Sino-Russian relations, with energy transition being a tertiary motive for expanding energy exports to China. This shows that energy is perceived predominantly in economic and geopolitical terms in Russia, indicating that environmentalism plays a minor role in public discourse. Therefore, natural gas was described as an energy source with a role to play in facilitating coal phase-out. Accordingly, Sino-Russian energy projects were framed as an instrument of energy transition, concurring with some scholarly opinions that natural gas might serve as a 'transition fuel'. An article from state-owned media pointed out the abatement potential of expanding gas infrastructure for Russia. Alexey Grivach, Deputy General Director for Gas Issues at the National Energy Security Fund, suggested that the construction of the Soyuz Vostok gas pipeline, the extension of the Power of Siberia pipeline, would help increase gas supplies to remote parts of Eastern Russia, therefore addressing energy poverty and the carbon footprint of coal-burning (RT 2021b). The articles informed about increasing prices of coal mining and its negative effects on the environment borne by the population, therefore hinting that the gasification of eastern Russia will alleviate the burden placed upon locals. The many opportunities of the gasification of eastern parts of Russia were praised when discussing the Power of Siberia pipeline. possibly with the aim to dismantle concerns about the negative environmental impacts of the pipeline's construction. The reason for Russia framing natural gas as a tool of decarbonisation might also be a tactic to increase legitimacy for the unprecedented investments into the gas infrastructure. Both interpretations are plausible, given that any objections to the pipeline's challenging construction or environmental impacts are dismissed in the media.

There is a reason to believe that little genuine concern for environmental degradation exists in Russia. However, there are indications that Moscow is increasingly concerned about what the onset of renewables and constantly increasing carbon prices might mean for its future. Nevertheless, with major fossil fuel projects on the way and positive framing of natural gas in the selected articles, Russia is not ready to give up on fossil fuels so long as they can still generate profit for the next three decades or so. RIA Novosti expressed concerns about Beijing's recently announced commitment to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 and what that means for China's future demand for Russian gas and oil (RIA Novosti 2021c). Nevertheless, with a 30-year warranty of gas supplies to China, the media re-affirm that natural gas will remain a dominant energy source for the time being. To account for the future and mitigate fears, the media sometimes wrote about the potential of Russia to become the world's leader in the production of hydrogen by exploiting its robust gas infrastructure. It was, however, admitted that Russia lacks the technical knowledge and capacity as well as financial resources to make such a massive transition to a hydrogen-based economy. Thus, there are reasons to believe that Russia is attracted to China for its foreign direct investments and technological know-how it can use to its benefit, perhaps strategically deepening cooperation with China in the energy sector as an investment to its future.

Given these obstacles and the abundance of natural gas in Russia, the media generally support the position that natural gas will be a temporary solution to the environmentally degrading and increasingly expensive coal. Therefore, it would also be worth exploring the possible abatement impacts of the gasification of the underdeveloped regions of eastern Russia, especially if the regions are heavily dependent on coal. Sakha News, a local media site from Yakutia, enthusiastically informed that Gazprom plans to produce hydrogen from methane at the Amur Gas Processing Plant (GPP), highlighting the abatement potential Gazprom claims these projects have (SakhaNews 2021a).

Figure 2: Power of Siberia with Amur Gas Processing Plant



Source: Gazprom (2021)

An interesting observation was also the notable emphasis put on the scale and capacity of the project, describing GPP as "one of the largest projects in the world" (SakhaNews 2021a). Framing the Power of Siberia and affiliated projects as Russia's success stories, the media wanted readers to take pride in Russia's advancements in gas technology and infrastructure. There is room to investigate further the role natural gas plays in Russia's nationalism.

4.1.4. Geopolitics & foreign policy

Russia positioned itself as a victim of the expansionist and aggressive US, consequently indicating that Russia views the international system as a battleground. The coverage of the US-Russian relations can be characterised as negative and emotionally strained, with frequently occurring words such as "guilty", "war", "sanctions", "political weapon", and "competition" (Karpov and Medvedeva 2020).

The conflict with the US is a repetitive theme, suggesting that Russia views the US as an enemy. RIA Novosti claimed that China had taken the trade war with the US into consideration when devising its new five-year plan, which is said to have a huge potential for more active development of Russian Chinese relations (RIA Novosti 2021c). Thus, Russia's partnership with China evolved against a backdrop of the Trump administration, which had imposed sanctions on both Russia and China, and boycotted the completion of the Nord Stream II pipeline. The media referred to these sanctions as discriminatory or unfair competition, claiming the US is scheming against Russia to increase its export share to the EU.

China is the largest consumer of energy resources and an important importer for Washington; therefore, with Russia's increasing exports to China, the United States is afraid of losing the Chinese LNG market. Thus, the articles assume that severe competition in the international energy arena exists for capturing markets, falling within the neorealist explanations. An article commenting on a US report analysing the implications of Sino-Russian cooperation in the energy sector for the US also pointed out several concerns the US has for its economy, security, and foreign policy:

> “The US will never play by the rules. You can talk as much as you like about the fact that there is international law, decency or boundaries that cannot be crossed, but they do not exist in America. The United States lives by the principle of a classical empire - "the end justifies the means." I believe they can impose restrictions on Chinese companies that will receive energy from the Power of Siberia. This will be done to supply China with its expensive liquefied gas” (Gureeva and Poletaeva 2020).

Regardless of whether these concerns are valid or not, with such framing, Russia positions itself as a fierce competitor to be wary of, which indicates that Russia views the partnership with China as a strategic move to strengthen its own position in the international arena. The US was always framed as an enemy, playing power games with Russia to assert its influence and capture the largest possible portion of the energy market. Here, the wording “supply China with its expensive liquified gas” suggests that Russia believes the American LNG to be overpriced, indicating that Russian resources are better and worth purchasing, which the US prevents with its geopolitical machinations. The media accused the US of protectionism and pushing European countries to “sever centuries-old ties” with Russia and criticised the trade war with China (Turtygina 2020). As a result, there is a reason to believe that Moscow’s energy cooperation with Beijing is a strategic move not only to capture a lucrative market but also to position itself against the US.

A critical sub-topic that emerged was the exploration and militarisation of the Arctic, which is key to Russia’s strategic plans. The media indicated that the partnership with China is essential to the success of Russia in the Arctic exploration due to the competition from the US, encouraging Russia in deepening its ties with China. As the Arctic contains a vast amount of unexplored natural gas reserves, Russia ponders the commencement of several projects to exploit and process the resources. However, the media demonised the US as a rival and aggressor, claiming it perceived Russia’s presence in the Arctic as a threat to its national interests and security. According to Gazeta, an independent news site, “the Arctic region may contain up to a quarter of the world's potential oil and gas resources… therefore, the Arctic is becoming an arena of global competition for transport flows and natural resources of global importance” (Khodarenok 2021). The media communicated the message that the militarisation of the region in partnership with China is necessary to repel any aggression from the US. Since Russia has become the second-largest LNG supplier to China (Kommersant 2020b), supporting Russia’s ambitions in the Arctic would mean easier access to resources for China in the future. Thus, Russia needs an ideologically close ally to position itself against the US in the Arctic, a role China with its military and financial resources can fulfil.

The sharpness of the wording and spiteful tone of these articles indicates that Russia faces a challenging situation in the EU. Therefore, the opportunities the Chinese energy market offers might provide Russia with a degree of certainty and leverage. Thus, the shifted focus on strengthening the relations with China instead of struggling at the EU market appears to be a thoroughly planned move on Russia’s part to become more competitive and have bigger leverage. Russian media communicated the notion that while the EU is turning its back on Russia, under the pressure of the US and partially the green energy transition, China offers numerous opportunities for sustaining Russia's carbon-based economy and finding an ideologically close ally to face common challenges in the competitive, anarchical international system.

4.2. Policy analysis

4.2.1. Energy strategy

Russia's energy strategy for the period 2020-2035 (Russian federation 2020) indicates that Russia's move to strengthen energy relations with China stems from its need to facilitate economic development and energy security, which the EU increasingly fails to guarantee to Moscow. The results of policy analysis generally correspond to the findings of media analysis and elaborate the interpretation of the news articles. The shift to China's energy market provides Russia with much better provisions for energy security than the EU does, especially given China's growing demand for natural gas and other resources. Russia's energy strategy sets the goal for Russia to become a leading player in the markets of Asia-Pacific by 2035. To achieve this aim, Russia considers it crucial to expand the infrastructure for the transportation of energy resources in Eastern Siberia, as well as re-focus on the extraction of oil and gas in the Arctic and Far East zones of Russia. Several reasons might exist for this strategy. With the Green Deal, the EU's demand for fossil fuels will likely decrease while Russia is increasingly facing competition from Turkey and the US, fighting to capture the EU's market. As the demand for resources is shifting from the West to the East, it is sound for Russia to develop infrastructure in Eastern Siberia to supply natural gas to China.

The priorities of the Russian federation set in the energy strategy are as follows:

- the provision of energy security,
- competitiveness in the energy market,
- the satisfaction of domestic demand for products and services in the energy sector, and
- transition to environmentally friendly and resource-saving energy.

Hence, it can be assumed that all these priorities underlie Russia's increased cooperation with China. As communicated in the media, Russia considers the gasification of eastern Russia as a benefit since it allegedly facilitates the phase-out of coal and contributes to economic development. This makes pursuing the strategy of exploring and extracting hard to access resources in the geographically adverse regions of Russia justifiable and publicly acceptable. It can be assumed that any green agenda Russia advocates is likely a smokescreen for Russia's fossil fuel projects. Instead of phasing out coal, which many developed countries firmly commit to, Russia set out several measures in its energy strategy to optimise the extraction of coal and develop the infrastructure for the transportation of coal to supply the markets of the Asia-Pacific, Africa, and the Middle East. Therefore, China's phase-out of coal provides Russia with an opportunity to advance the narrative of natural gas being a low-carbon fuel, gaining legitimacy for investments into gas projects and infrastructure amidst the world pledging to carbon neutrality.

The economic and infrastructure development of Russia's eastern regions is the main aim of Russia's energy policy. Russia's official energy strategy document for 2020-2035 demonstrated that the formation of oil and gas reserves and processing centres, as well as the development of infrastructure for the transportation of resources, is an important goal for Russia. This reflects Russia's effort to meet the increasing demand of Asian countries, especially China, for energy resources. Furthermore, as indicated by the media, China's investments play a crucial role in the implementation of these energy projects. Russia is the largest recipient of China's Belt and Road Initiative investments into gas and oil, with Chinese investments into Russian energy projects amounting to a total of $USD 123.8 billion, out of which the Power of Siberia project constitutes almost half of the investment (Devonshire-Ellis 2020). Given the volume of Chinese investments and the structural importance of the energy projects for Russia, the Sino-Russian energy investment cooperation has massive geo-economic implications. The integration of Russia's and China's interests might translate into the expansion of their economic sphere of influence in Eurasia and the optimisation of international trade in their favour.

4.2.2. National security strategy

The national security strategy (Russian federation 2015) suggests that Russia regards cooperation with China in the energy sector as key for its national security. It is clear from Russia's 2015 national security strategy that energy security is pivotal for Russia's national security. The document is built on neo-realist assumptions reflected in the perceived threats and injustices conveyed in the text. The observed securitisation of energy in the strategic document might be responsible for the frequent occurrence of an emotionally tinted language, which indicates certain power relationships and socio-political realities. For example, Russia's energy security objectives include:

> „the prevention of discrimination against Russian suppliers of energy sources on foreign markets and against Russian extraction companies in the exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits outside the Russian Federation, the countering of attempts by a number of states to regulate markets in energy resources on the basis of political rather than economic expediency, and the development of promising energy-saving technologies and the international exchange of such technologies" (Russian federation 2015, 19-20).

The nature of the language used in the document demonstrates that Russia perceives unfair competition and discrimination from third parties, which can be assumed to be the US, or the EU based on the findings of the media analysis. This suggests that Russia might perceive that it is losing leverage and control, pushing it to seek new partners to ensure greater security. The cooperation with China can, thus, represent Russia's attempt to position itself against the discriminating parties and safeguard the country's security in the long term. With the Power of Siberia being such a high stakes strategic project impacting Russia's economic and technological development, it can be assumed that Russia perceives no such threats coming from China, supporting the Power of Siberia project. On the contrary, it can be posited that any new energy project Russia takes on, such as the Power of Siberia itself, will be at least to a certain degree aligned with its strategic objectives.

China can help Russia to secure provisions for economic growth and security defined in its strategic documents, which is why Russia is pursuing deeper cooperation with China. In its national security strategy, Russia expressed the need for the development of eastern parts of Russia, which is consistent with the media analysis findings revealing that Russia expects the Power of Siberia project will facilitate the economic development of the poor East Siberian regions. The security strategy puts great emphasis on „the completion of the formation of the basic transportation, energy, information, and military infrastructures, particularly in the Arctic, East Siberia, and the Far East, and the development of the Northern Sea Route and the Baykal-Amur and Trans- Siberian Main Railroads" (Russian federation 2017, 21). The focus of these provisions underscores the changing order in the Asia-Pacific and the growing influence of not only China, but also other Asian countries Russia can trade with. Strengthening the relationship with neighbouring China might also attract the necessary investments Russia needs to complete these plans successfully. China has been a massive investor in the Russian Arctic and the Far East.

Russia is the second largest recipient of the BRI energy investments, having received 19,6 billion USD on fossil fuel projects between 2013 and 2016 (Wang 2021). The Sino-Russian relations are thus developing in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, which might have serious geo-economic implications worth exploring in future studies.

4.2.3. Economic security strategy

The analysis of Russia's economic security strategy (Russian federation 2017) showed that Russia inclines towards China to shield itself against external threats to its economy. Although this document did not contain as many references to energy specifically as initially anticipated, it did contain a valuable takeaway for the purposes of this study. More specifically, Russia deems international cooperation within the framework of the One Belt One Road Initiative crucial in opposing the activities of various blocks and associations that can encroach on Russia's economic interests. In this strategic document, Russia stands in opposition to the others, which can be assumed to be the US and Europe severely criticised in the media and government discourse. The economic security strategy states that Russia needs to stay competitive in exporting of raw materials and gaining access to resources in the Arctic. Therefore, the cooperation with China is likely aimed at helping Russia achieve these strategic objectives. The diversification of energy exports and securing the demand for its abundant energy resources in critical to Russia's economic security in which China will play a big role.

5. Conclusion

The following chapter will present the main findings of the thesis, the implications of the research findings, recommendations, and suggestions for future research. This study aimed to contribute to the research of Sino-Russian energy relations by delving into the logic behind the increasing Russian energy exports to China. The project was undertaken to evaluate the Sino-Russian relationship and explore how it fits within Russia's strategic objectives. The research focused on Russia's perspectives, discourse, and agenda, scrutinised in a novel way using news media articles and three strategic policy documents. The study leaned on the assumptions of both neorealism and neoliberalism, reflecting the complexity of international energy relations. This study laid the groundwork for future research into the economic, geopolitical, and environmental aspects of Russia's energy strategy. Furthermore, scrutinising the perspectives of Russia on international energy relations can be useful for decision-makers and experts to create an appropriate response to Russia's actions.

Based on the conducted media and policy analysis, it can be concluded that Russia prioritises security and stability, which the cooperation with China currently provides. The negative portrayal of the US as an aggressor and unfair competitor on the EU energy market suggested that Russia faces serious challenges in the EU, posing threats to its economic and energy security. It also indicated the deepening rift between Russia and the West, propelling it towards the eastern direction. Judging by the media discourse and the strategic documents, Russia's aims to diversify its energy exports and thus decrease its dependency on EU imports. Therefore, Russia is attracted to the prospective Chinese energy market. Hence, this study shed light on Russia's economic and energy security strategies and the circumstances under which these strategies were formed.

Investments from China will help Russia develop infrastructure to transport energy and raw materials from the underdeveloped East Siberia and Arctic zones not only to China but also across the region. Russia perceives these objectives will help the country achieve greater energy, economic and ultimately national security compared to its current dependence on the EU. However, the study also revealed an asymmetry in the Sino-Russian relations, with Russia being more dependent on China than vice versa. The study has identified the Power of Siberia as the epitome of the Sino-Russian relations and a key project to fulfil Russia's strategic objectives of developing the remote eastern regions of the country and the exploration of the Arctic. Russia deems these goals vital for its energy security, national and economic security. Furthermore, the emphasis on the exploration of the Arctic and the development of transport and military infrastructure in the Arctic zones of Russia suggests the Arctic might become a geopolitical hotspot.

Contrary to what the literature initially suggested, China was not perceived as a problematic partner but depicted as an ideological and strategic ally. Despite the clashing interests in Central Asia, Russia does not openly challenge China. On the contrary, it defended it against the US in the media, indicating that the Russia-China partnership is a strategic move for Russia to assert itself against the Western power. Russia blamed the country's stagnating economy on the US, accusing it of discrimination on the energy market directly in the media and indirectly in its policy documents. On the contrary, Russian media portrayed the Sino-Russian relationship as exceptional and strong, omitting any disputes that objectively preceded the agreements on joint energy projects. It was shown that China's rising energy demand and Belt and Road Initiative investments into joint energy projects represent an opportunity for Russia to facilitate the economic and technological development of eastern and Arctic zones of Russia, objectives defined in its strategic documents. Given the criticism of the West combined with the overly positive perception of China, one can conclude that Russia lacks the power to act as a single player in the international energy system and faces serious challenges preventing it from increasing its power. With China's financial resources and unparalleled demand for energy, Russia's strategy to build a strong relationship with China is consistent with its pursuit of economic development and energy security. This study, thus, confirmed the findings of Roseth (2017) presented in the literature review, arguing that Russia is content with its submissive position in the Sino-Russian relationship as it prioritises economic growth over dependence on China. Nonetheless, it would be worth exploring further the changing power dynamics between Russia and China and what the growing ties between the countries mean for Central Asia.

The study also provided insights into Russia's perceptions on the urgency to act upon climate change. While it was shown that the shift away from the EU market can boost Russia's economy, it can have severe repercussions for the global climate agenda. It was shown that Russia supports the development of ambitious fossil fuel projects and invests massively into them. The priorities for Russia lie in the gasification of its remote eastern parts, the exploration of the Arctic and coal extraction projects. The strategic documents revealed that Russia aims to develop coal and gas infrastructure in East Siberia and the Arctic, framing them positively. The study also revealed that Russia frames natural gas positively as a fuel facilitating coal phase-out, using the green agenda to provide extra legitimacy for its gas infrastructure projects. This comprehensive, multifaceted study appears to be the first one to explore the environmental implications of the Sino-Russian relations. With both China and Russia being heavy polluters, further research is needed to determine how the growing ties between the world's leading energy exporter and the world's largest energy importer will impact international efforts to mitigate climate change and transit to a low-carbon economy. The prospects for transforming Russia's robust gas infrastructure to transport hydrogen is another significant topic scholars should pay attention to, given the high abatement potential of Russia becoming a hydrogen producer. The EU and the US should seek reconciliation with Russia and deepen cooperation with the country in green energy technologies as increasing tensions could further exacerbate Russia's fossil fuel lock-in.

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