

## **Dispute about who poses the main existential threat to the collective West**

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### **Change of US foreign policy priorities after February 24, 2022**

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, when the need arose to provide it with military and financial assistance to counter the Russian aggression, a dispute broke out with renewed vigor in the American political establishment about the US foreign policy priorities, especially about whom to consider the main geopolitical adversary and how to distribute resources accordingly to deter the respective threats.

From the very beginning of Joe Biden's presidency, China was considered a major adversary. This position was shared by both the Republicans and many in the Democratic Party, including Biden himself. This position was explained by two factors:

- 1) In economic terms, it was China that became the main competitor of the United States. Given the rapid growth rate of the Chinese economy, it was expected that in several years China would reach an economic power equal to the one of the United States, which, in turn, would allow the Celestial Empire to create a respective military might, which the Americans would find very difficult to contain.
- 2) In its political and ideological attitudes, China opposes and is hostile to the values of liberal democracy. And this mismatch with the West at the value level may sooner or later lead to a direct conflict with it.

However, with Russia having launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, the U.S. foreign policy priorities have undergone significant changes. It turned out to be Putin's Russia that has been rightly perceived now as the main threat to the world order, to the West and to democracy around the world, especially on the European continent. This reset of the U.S. foreign policy was embraced not only by the Democrats in Congress but also by the majority of Republican congressmen, except for a small group of Donald Trump supporters among them.

However, most recently, sentiments have begun to grow in the ranks of the Republicans against the continuation of military assistance to Ukraine in the previous amounts, approved by Congress in 2022. Calls began to be heard more frequently for refocusing again on containing China as the main foreign policy priority of the United States. These sentiments were manifested, in particular, in the

position of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, the second most popular candidate in the Republican party for the presidency after Donald Trump. Although DeSantis was previously known as a supporter of military assistance to Ukraine, on March 14, 2023, he suddenly stated that the protection of Ukraine is no anymore a "vital" national interest for the US.<sup>1</sup> A little later, after criticism from some party members, he corrected himself by calling Vladimir Putin a "war criminal",<sup>2</sup> but still in his opposition to military support for Ukraine, he found support from such an influential media outlet as The Atlantic.<sup>3</sup>

Similar processes are taking place in the ranks of the Democrats, although President Biden himself and his inner circle are still determined to continue supporting Ukraine. As an example of such moods, the quite provocative demarche by the former Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, who visited Taiwan on August 2, 2022, likely without coordinating this with the State Department, was caused, among other things, by her desire to reorient US interest from Russia to China. This visit triggered a sharply negative reaction from Beijing, which threatened to escalate tensions between the two states, which, in turn, would force Washington to switch its main attention to China.<sup>4</sup>

This confusion and vacillation within the ranks of the American political elite prompts us to re-visit a comparison between Putin's Russia and China in terms of the degree of threat each of them poses to the world order, the collective West and democracy around the world.

### **Why China should not be seen as the main threat**

Once again, as was noted above China's growing economic power and its opposition to the values and norms of liberal democracy, without doubt, poses an existential threat to the West and its associates. At the same time, this threat should not be exaggerated.

First of all, China does not yet pose a threat to the world order to the same extent as Putin's Russia, which unleashed a war in Ukraine, and earlier occupied some territories of Georgia and Moldova. It should be remembered that China's foreign policy doctrine was formed by Deng Xiaoping during his rule from 1978 to 1989. According to this doctrine, China's foreign policy politics follows the economy, pursuing primarily the country's economic interests, which, in turn, implies cooperation with the leading economies of the world and following the rules of these economies. According to Deng Xiaoping, China should behave with restraint in the international arena and avoid excessive risks in relations with other states. This policy became known for the following dictum pronounced by Deng Xiaoping: "hide your ambitions and disguise your claws."<sup>5</sup>

Over time, China's foreign policy has become more assertive, especially on the issue of Taiwan, as well as in disputes with neighboring states over the maritime borders in the South China Sea, as well as the jurisdiction over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, whose ownership by Japan is disputed by China. But in no case has China crossed certain red lines in recent decades, preventing it from direct military conflicts with any of these states. The only direct military aggression that China carried out against another state after the era of Mao Zedong took place under the rule of the author of the strategy of China's restrained behavior in foreign policy, that is, Deng Xiaoping. That happened back in 1979 when Chinese troops invaded the territory of Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

With the exception of the dispute over the status of Taiwan and the borders in the South and East China Seas, Beijing is still not inclined to actively confront other sovereign states. Its long-term strategy remains to increase the country's economic capacities. It's notable that by joining international alliances based on the rejection of the values of liberal democracy, and even dominating them, for example, in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China does not

even play a particularly active role there. As a result, the SCO summits have been and remain essentially akin to a club of interests where its members exchange their views on issues of mutual interest, but from the practical point of view, no significant decisions are made. The organization itself remains incapacitated in many ways, and much of that is due to China's rather passive involvement. Especially Beijing, unlike Moscow, does not show any assertiveness to direct the SCO in an anti-Western direction.

Of course, as it builds up its economic power, China's behavior may change over time, but only if its economic superiority over the US and the entire collective West is achieved. But what are the prospects for achieving such superiority?

The calculations below show that this will not happen soon. If we consider not individual countries, but their coalitions, formed based on common values, ideological attitudes and national interests, then we can distinguish the following camps:

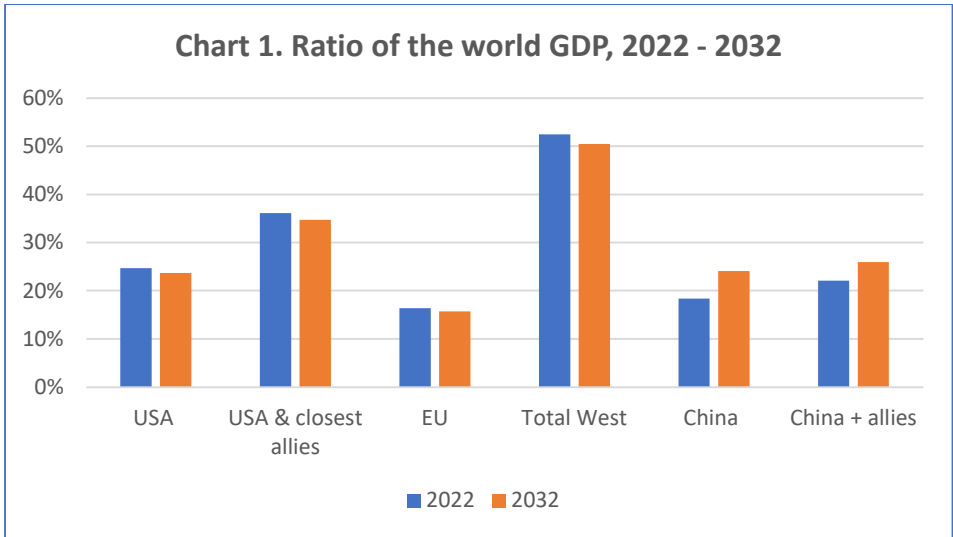
- 1) the United States and its closest allies, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea,
- 2) the European Union, in which Germany and France play a dominant role,
- 3) The entire collective West, uniting groups 1 and 2.
- 4) China and its closest geopolitical allies, including the Russian Federation and Iran.

If we compare the total gross domestic product (GDP) of each of these groups as of 2022, as well as in the ten years perspective, we will see that the ratio of their shares in world GDP does not change very much. At least, as of 2032, the collective West will still as much as twice outperform China and its allies' GDP, as shown in Table 1 and Chart 1.

**Table 1. Shares of countries and coalitions of countries in world GDP in 2022 and 2032<sup>7</sup>**

Countries and their coalitions	2022		2032 <sup>1</sup>	
	Billion US Dollars	Share in world GDP	Billion US Dollars	Share in world GDP
USA	25,035.16	25%	29,342	24%
USA & closest allies	36,702.09	36%	43,016	35%
EU	16,613.06	16%	19,471	16%
Collective West, total	53,315.15	52%	62,487	50%
China	18,321.20	18%	29,843	24%
China + allies	22,428.03	22%	32,085	26%

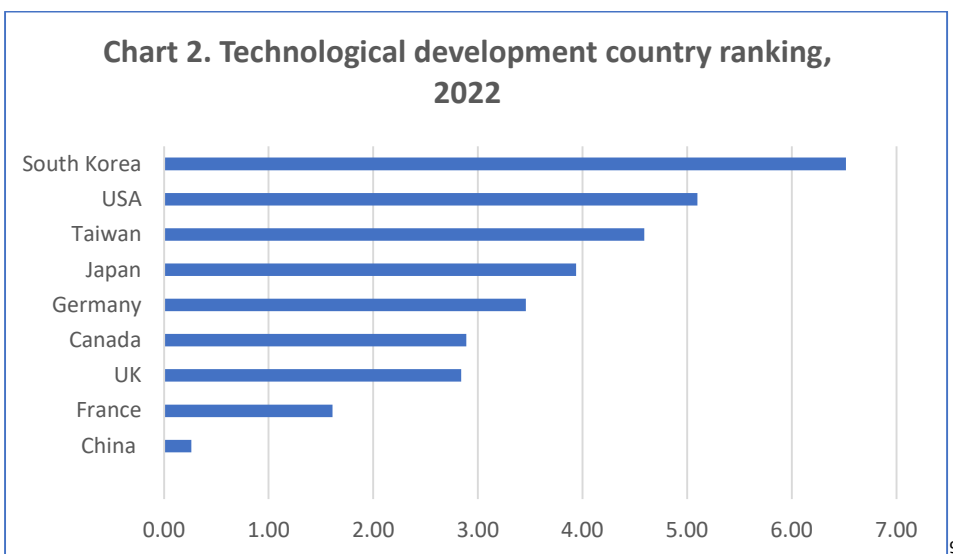
<sup>1</sup> Annual GDP growth for each country in this calculation is based on the following assumption: Western countries – 1.6%; China – 5%; Russian Federation – 0.5%; Iran – 2%, world GDP – 2%. This assumption is roughly consistent with the recent GDP data by countries and IMF's forecast for the period until 2027. Although in the previous decade China's annual GDP growth was more than 5%, in the last 20 years this figure has been steadily declining. The projection for the Russian Federation's GDP takes into account the effect of Western sanctions adopted against it due to its military aggression against Ukraine.



This data shows that although in ten years the GDP of the United States and China will equalize with each other, the combined GDP of the United States and its closest allies will still significantly exceed the combined GDP of China and its closest allies (35% vs. 26%). And if we also take into account the aggregate GDP of the collective West, that is of the EU countries plus the US and its closest allies, then the resulting figure would be 50% (compared to 26% of China and its allies' GDP). Of course, this superiority will have the desired effect only if close coordination between the United States and the European Union is preserved. And this, in turn, depends, among other factors, on the outcome of the presidential elections in the United States in 2024. If Donald Trump wins, the US alliance with the European Union will again begin to be eroded.

It should also be borne in mind that the economic superiority of the countries of the collective West over the coalition led by China will be maintained not only in terms of GDP but also according to such important criteria as GDP per capita, as well as the level of innovative-cum-technological development.

Let's compare the data of countries on technological development calculated by The Global Finance magazine on the basis of indicators such as the level of digital development, as well as spending on development (R&D), as shown in Chart 2. As one can see, for the moment China is still significantly behind the leading Western countries according to this indicator.



What conclusion can be drawn from these data? First of all, in ten years China will still be largely behind economically from the collective West, at least in its most advanced economies. Its allies, such as the Russian Federation and Iran, will not make much difference in this regard because of their even greater economic and technological backwardness compared to China. This, in turn, means that China will have no choice but to remain in the role of catching up with the West in the economic sphere and would not afford to enter into a confrontation with it.

China's economic interests will force it to do everything possible to maintain its focus on economic cooperation and trade with the collective West, given the fact that trade with it far exceeds China's trade with its geopolitical allies, Russia and Iran: China's trade turnover with the United States in 2021 was \$758 bn, and with the European Union \$756 bn, while with Russia - only \$146 bn (see Table 2).

**Table 2. China's foreign trade with countries and groups of countries, 2021<sup>10</sup>**

Countries	China's export, billion USD	Share of China's export	China Import, , billion USD	Share of China's import	Total trade, Billion USD	Share of China's foreign trade
USA	577.1	18%	1801.0	7.4%	758.1	12.5%
EU	513.3	16%	242.7	9.9%	756.0	12.5%
Japan	165.8	5.1%	205.5	8.4%	371.3	6.1%
South Korea	148.9	4.5%	213.5	8.8%	362.3	6.0%
Australia	66.4	2.0%	163.7	6.7%	230.1	3.8%
SUBTOTAL	1,471.5	46%	1,006.4	41%	2,477.8	41%
Russian Federation	67.6	2.1%	79.0	3.2%	146.5	2.4%

That said, economic relations with Western countries for China remain several times more important than business ties with Russia and Iran. The loss of even a small part of the current trade turnover with Western countries will have a very painful impact on the Chinese economy. In this case, China will not even see that 5% of annual GDP growth, on the assumption of the above forecast for a period of ten years was made. That is why China is unlikely to be able to afford even an invasion of Taiwan, which is the most painful foreign policy issue for Beijing.

### **Comparing China and Russia in terms of threats they pose to the World**

This state of affairs regarding China's foreign policy stands in stark contrast to the course pursued by Putin's Russia. The latter, unlike China, has adopted a course of confrontation with the collective West, giving it one ultimatum after another and demanding that it recognizes Moscow's special rights to exercise control over the foreign policies of the post-Soviet states, with the exception only of the Baltic countries that have become EU members. These political ambitions of Moscow eventually led to the war it unleashed against Ukraine because of its sovereign desire to approach the European Union and, in general, the West. Even though this war, as well as Western sanctions that have been imposed against Russia, lead to its serious economic losses and international isolation, that has not yet led to a change in the Kremlin's foreign policy. As a result, Russia's geopolitical weakening diminishes its importance as a strategic ally, turning it, to some extent, from an asset to a liability for China. It is unlikely that China in such a situation will want to sacrifice its

economic ties with the West for the sake of allied relations with Russia and the two per cent that the latter together with Iran can add to that 24% of world GDP China can achieve by 2032.

As for China, the main threat it poses is not related to its allied relations with Russia and Iran, but to the influence, it has on the countries of the global South. China has already become a major trading partner for more than 120 countries, including the closest U.S. allies in Asia — Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> This state of affairs will not necessarily translate into the co-optation of these countries as Beijing’s geopolitical allies in the near term. Admittedly, Beijing has not yet even engaged in the systematic practice of dictating political terms to its partner countries in exchange for its investments and trade relations. But in the longer term, China's growing economic ties with the global South may lead to an increase in its political influence over this category of countries. Such a development could, in turn, lead to a complication in the relationship between the collective West and the global South. But again, this cannot yet be compared with the threats to the world order that comes from Moscow's aggressive and completely devoid of reason foreign policy.

Table 3 compares the two countries, China and the Russian Federation, in terms of the degree of threat each poses to the world order, the collective West, and the world of democracy. In this table, I use quantitative measurement in comparing two countries, wherein the higher final score means the stronger threat posed by each of these two countries.

**Table 3. Comparison of China and Russia as Sources of Threats to the World Order**

Evaluations criteria	China	Russia
Rejection of values and norms of liberal democracy	Yes (1)	Yes (1)
Foreign policy confrontational towards the collective West	Overall, no (0.2)	Yes (1)
Current threat to the world order	Overall, no (0.2)	Yes (1)
Aggression against other sovereign states	Overall, no (0.2)	Yes (1)
Priority of politics over economics in foreign policy	No (0)	Yes (1)
Interest in economic ties with the collective West	Strong (0)	Weak (1)
Final score	1.6	6

The final scores in the table show that the Russian Federation in its current state poses a much greater threat to the world than China. How, then, should the United States and the collective West build relations with each of these two countries? With Russia, the situation is more or less clear: the West should continue applying tough economic sanctions against it, allocating military and financial assistance to Ukraine, and bringing members of the Putin regime to account for war crimes they commit in Ukraine. As for China, the situation is still rather uncertain.

## **Proposed strategy to contain China**

On the one hand, the West cannot completely sever economic ties with China to completely isolate it on the world stage. This would be almost impossible to do, given the size of the Chinese economy and without causing serious economic damage to the West itself. At least the European Union will unlikely follow the United States if Washington decides to take a course towards confrontation with Beijing. Nor there will be sufficient legal grounds for such a confrontation, given that China, as noted above, is behaving rather cautiously in the international arena, trying not to violate the norms of international law related to the national sovereignty of other states.

What is possible and necessary to do, however, is to somewhat limit China's access to Western advanced technologies. Unless barriers are created for such access, China will quickly increase its military capacities, which may prompt it to act more aggressively in the international arena. Steps towards this kind of sanctions against China have already begun, but this course will require much more elaboration and coordination, especially in terms of building consensus with the European Union, given its interest in economic cooperation with China. These measures to restrain China's economic and technological development are urgent and would be justified by its position hostile to the values of liberal democracy.

The second wave of economic measures to contain China should be ready to be applied only if it begins to violate the sanctions regime against the Russian Federation, supply it with weapons or dual-use goods, and also if China takes aggressive steps against Taiwan and/or neighboring states in the South and East China Seas. In that case, the West should be ready for measures to reduce trade with China. The painful effect of such sanctions on the West itself will be very difficult to avoid. But, given that China is more dependent on trade with the United States, Europe, Japan, and South Korea than they are on it, these measures will hit China much harder.

Again, these measures will have an effect only if the entire collective West joins them, not just a part of it. That is why the question arises of achieving more effective cooperation and coordination between Western countries, especially between the United States and the European Union, in the Chinese direction, as has already been achieved in connection with Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Thus, the United States should not view China as the number one threat in the near term and should be prepared to act alongside its closest allies and the European Union along the two echelons of measures outlined above to contain China, as the situation requires. Once again, a consensus to be reached between all Western allies would be of key importance.

Accordingly, the collective West should recognize Putin's Russia as its number one threat and not retreat from this line until Russia is completely defeated in the war with Ukraine, and another, the democratic regime is established in it that would completely sever ties with its imperial political legacy. Only in this case will Russia get a chance to reintegrate into the global coalition of democratic states, for which the world order, based on the national sovereignty of all countries and the inviolability of existing borders, remains unshakable.

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