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Russia-China Energy Cooperation After the Ukrainian Crisis

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Abstract

The article demonstrates that the expansion of energy cooperation between Russia and China following the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict in 2022 is primarily the result of agreements initiated since 2014. It claims that a combination of internal factors stemming from differences in Russia's and China's energy policies, and the corporate interests of national oil and gas companies, in the context of United States sanctions, is to blame for the difficulties in concluding new large-scale agreements since February 24, 2022. While an increase in Russia-supplied energy has contributed to China's energy security, further growth is hampered by China's policy of diversifying its energy partners to avoid over-dependence on any given state, unless the conditions are especially favorable. Additionally, Russia successfully replaced oil and coal exports to Europe with shipments to China and India. By looking into the case of negotiations over the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline, the article demonstrates that even in a system of centralized top-down decision-making in the energy sector, as exemplified by Russia and China, market considerations and different interests of state-owned enterprises are powerful enough to preclude the leadership from putting the decisions into practice. It explains how the prevalence of a buyer's market and China's stronger bargaining position are reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding signed in September 2025.

Keywords: Russia-China relations, oil, gas, LNG, Arctic

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Introduction

Collaboration in energy has long been a central pillar of the Russia-China strategic partnership. While the former relies on its abundant fossil fuel reserves as a significant source of income, the latter has demonstrated increasing energy demand to sustain its development model based on expanding manufacturing. As a result, Russia-China economic cooperation has traditionally been centered on the energy sector, with Russia exporting oil, coal, and, increasingly, natural gas and LNG to the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Kashin 2019: 14; Zakharov and Karpova 2022). In the 2010-2020s period, energy accounted for an average of 65-70% of Russia's exports to China (General Administration of Customs 2026). Following the escalation of the conflict over Ukraine in February 2022 and an urgent need for Moscow to find an

alternative to the European Union (EU) market, bilateral energy cooperation with China has been expanding rapidly, with the two countries emerging as each other's chief energy partners.

The existing literature portrays the trend of expanding energy cooperation as a result of political rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing (Lukin 2013) and of China's drive to diversify its energy import sources (Taylor 2014; Chen 2023). It highlights the influence of personalist elements in Russia's energy decision-making towards China (Xu and Reisinger 2018). Experts note that the growing alignment between Russia and China, against the backdrop of strained relations with the West since 2014, has ushered in a qualitatively new stage in energy cooperation. It has predominantly focused on large-scale projects between the state-owned enterprises (SOEs), including the Power of Siberia (POS) natural gas pipeline, a major supplier of Russian gas to the PRC. Simultaneously, Chinese companies have emerged as shareholders in Arctic LNG exploration projects. Together with the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline, constructed in 2011, they are considered key drivers of the upward trend (Kashin 2019; Fadeev et al. 2024). More recent studies emphasize the highest-ever level of energy cooperation after February 2022, as well as the impact of geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West and sanctions (Zakharov and Karpova 2022; Zakharov 2023).

While 2014 indicated a critical juncture for bilateral cooperation, the expansion of energy ties since February 24, 2022, is primarily the result of the projects initiated before the Russia-Ukraine conflict escalated. While the Power of Siberia-2 (POS-2) gas pipeline became the focus of high-level talks starting from 2022, it was only on September 2, 2025, during Putin's visit to Beijing and his discussions with his Chinese and Mongolian counterparts that an agreement was signed. It turned out to be a legally binding memorandum of understanding (MoU) with very few details, and the key terms of the deal were not agreed upon. The article seeks to answer the question that has eluded existing research: why has it been so difficult to conclude a new large-scale agreement despite the top leadership's focus on expanding energy cooperation since 2022? A related question arises: how can we make sense of the MoU for the POS-2, signed in September 2025?

The article draws on a vast body of primary and secondary sources to present the views of Russian experts on energy cooperation with China. The author employs International Political Economy (IPE) (de Graaf et al. 2016) to demonstrate how decisions are made in the energy sector, while accounting for the multitude of actors and different theoretical schools. The article addresses the central questions in the IPE of energy: how much state or market in formulating energy policies (Kuzemko, Lawrence, and Watson 2019: 18) – by highlighting the roles played by the government and national oil companies (NOCs),[1] which are at the same time SOEs tasked with implementing state policies, in centralized hierarchical systems of decision-making, illustrated by Russia and China. There is a consensus in the IPE of energy studies that the governments of both states, especially the top leadership, are the determinants in formulating overall strategies and policies in this strategic sector (Taylor 2014: 4, 151;

1 For the purpose of this study Gazprom is considered a NOC.

Xu and Resinger 2018: 5-7; Chen 2023: 17) and that the ultimate decision-maker President Vladimir Putin exerts direct control over Russian SOEs (Xu and Resinger 2018: 5-6).

At the same time, existing literature differs as to whether Chinese NOCs should be viewed as commercially-oriented "national champions" under the pervasive influence of the central government and the China Communist Party (CCP) (Taylor 2014: 150-151) — or, despite the rule-making role of the state in the market and the overall goal of ensuring energy security, Chinese NOCs are not merely passive policy recipients but rather profit-seeking actors with their own calculations and initiatives, which might differ from those of the state (Chen 2023: 22-24, 209, 319-320). This study contributes to the debate by demonstrating that, even in centralized, top-down decision-making systems in the energy sector, market forces and divergent interests of SOEs stemming from long-term governmental policies are powerful enough to hinder the implementation of top-down decisions, as exemplified by Russia and China.

Additionally, the concept of energy security (Bielecki 2002) is instrumental in showing how China's focus on this notion limits the potential for the further increase of Russia's already large share. Finally, the article supports the claim that in the case of asymmetric economic interdependence, the bargaining options of a weaker power are limited (Öniş and Yılmaz 2015: 74). The analysis of the September 2025 MoU demonstrates that Russia currently needs China as an export market to redirect its natural gas exports much more than vice versa.

The article asserts that a combination of internal factors, such as differences in Russia's and China's energy policies and the corporate interests of the NOCs, as well as external, sanctions-related factors, is to blame for the difficulties in concluding new large-scale projects after February 24, 2022. The first section highlights how IPE helps to explain decision-making in Russia-China energy relations. The second section provides an outline of how Russia-China energy collaboration evolved, substantiating the claim that the upward trend was propelled by the rift in Russia's relations with the West in 2014. The third part analyses developments in bilateral energy cooperation from February 24, 2022, while the fourth explains the difficulties in concluding new large-scale agreements and the significance of the MoU on the POS-2, signed in September 2025.

Russia-China Energy Cooperation from the International Political Economy Perspective

IPE studies the interplay between politics and economics, the state and the market at the international level. IPE blurs the distinction between domestic politics, foreign relations, and international economy, analyzing how political and economic agents interact in allocating scarce resources, how the state provides economic structures, and how the actions of those agents are shaped by market forces (Gilpin 2001). The IPE can be instrumental in analyzing "how political structures and interactions shape energy markets" and how decisions are made

in energy policy, accounting for the role of state, NOCs, markets, ideas, etc. Hydrocarbons, especially oil and gas, are considered critical goods, crucial to economic development and national security, motivating governments to exert some control over the sector. The interrelation of state and market in energy policy has been influenced by both external factors (such as dwindling resources) and internal ones connected with "shifting ideological preferences about the appropriate role for government in the economy" (de Graaf et al. 2016: 4, 6, 11, 14, 28-29).

This study follows an interdisciplinary approach that transcends traditional paradigms and is better poised to explain complex energy issues. While realist approaches are better placed to analyze energy policy-making, the role of government, the prominence of NOCs, and statist capitalist models with a stronger role of state involvement, such as in the cases of Russia and China, the liberal position is better equipped to account for the role of market forces. Thus, taking an interdisciplinary perspective to investigate state-market balance looks more appropriate (Kuzemko, Lawrence, and Watson 2019: 15-19). The article also considers the constructivist understanding of energy security as a socially constructed phenomenon, prone to interpretation by the administration in power (de Graaf et al. 2016: 16).

Major oil and gas companies (Rosneft, Transneft, Gazprom, etc.) in Russia are either SOEs or have the state as a controlling shareholder. Gazprom dominates the gas sector (reserves, production, and infrastructure) and has a monopoly on pipeline exports of natural gas. There are also several large private companies, such as LUKOIL (oil) and NOVATEK (natural gas). The impact of governmental regulations on the sector remains significant, representing a state capitalist model (de Graaf et al. 2016: 25). Russian President Vladimir Putin frequently plays a key role in decision-making, while Russian SOEs also have considerable influence, as many of their CEOs enjoy personal ties with the president. Only President Putin himself is believed to hold the capacity to effectively limit the strategies and actions of the NOCs, which aim above all to make a profit (Xu and Reisinger 2018: 5-8). Russia has the 8th-largest oil reserves and the 1st-largest natural gas reserves in the world, ranking 2nd and 1st in global oil and gas exports, respectively (IEA 2023a). Energy export revenues have traditionally been a key source of income for the Russian state budget. According to Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak, in 2024, they accounted for 30% (Novak 2025).

China's energy policy is characterized by a statist approach, which entails the use of top-down party-state authority and control over the sector through state-owned NOCs, the state-controlled banking system, the State Council, etc. The energy sector is one of the strategic sectors in which only, or predominantly, SOEs may operate. NOCs operating in the oil and gas sector include China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China Petrochemical Corporation (Sinopec Group), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), and Sinochem Group (Sinochem) (Taylor 2014: 1, 4, 23). At the same time, while the state's overarching concern is to ensure energy security, another view holds that Chinese NOCs are profit-oriented actors that prioritize competitiveness and are not always subordinate to the government. They may have their own calculations and even oppose governmental policies

when they are supposed to relinquish their commercial interests (Chen 2023: 209, 319-320). Energy projects abroad initiated under the "go out" policy since the late 2000s frequently involve Chinese NOCs participating in the construction and management of infrastructure or purchasing equity stakes, enabling them to influence prices and secure stable supplies. Chinese NOCs enjoy subsidies, extensive preferential financing opportunities, cheap loans, and strong political support (Taylor 2014: 5, 11, 147).

Most of the energy agreements between Russia and China have been concluded between respective SOEs or – in the Russian case – companies with the state as a controlling shareholder, making them dependent on the official policy (Kashin 2019: 8). Judging from the centralized (and personalized in the Russian case) decision-making in the energy sector in both states, one could have expected that the focus of both leaders on expanding energy cooperation since 2022 would translate into new agreements.

Energy security, an essential topic in the IPE of energy studies (de Graaf et al. 2016: 23-24), is broadly defined as the reliable and adequate supply of energy at reasonable prices (Bielecki 2002: 237). Supply security, competitiveness, and sustainability are considered significant energy pillars (Yılmaz and Sever-Mehmetoğlu 2016: 107). External supply of energy resources is considered crucial for energy security, as, unlike the domestic supply, the state has much less control over it. Energy security risks include geopolitical tensions that may cause supply disruptions, technical issues, short-term extreme weather conditions, and long-term resource availability for consumption. The structure of the energy mix is also an essential factor (Bielecki 2002: 237).

States must rebuild their foreign policies to ensure energy security, thereby boosting the spatial aspects of geopolitics to account for energy production, transportation, and consumption. Despite the growing role of renewables, oil and gas are expected to stay relevant in the transition period (Arıboğan and Bilgin 2009: 127-128). Energy security has become a matter of such paramount importance that, in many ways, it drives national strategies for accessing or owning energy sources, thereby determining the need for both importers and exporters to take specific foreign policy steps to establish long-term energy partnerships with other states. Stability in domestic politics and bilateral relations is an essential factor for these strategies to be successful (Yılmaz and Sever-Mehmetoğlu 2016: 107-108).

China's demand for energy has been rapidly increasing alongside its industry-driven economic development: its energy consumption has doubled since 2005, making it the world's largest energy consumer (Taylor 2014: 6-7). Coal, oil, and natural gas constituted 53.2%, 18.2% and 8.8% of energy consumption in 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2025). Coal mostly comes from domestic deposits, with net imports accounting for 9.9% of the total coal supply, thus posing little security risk. By contrast, the share of oil and natural gas imports is quite significant, with net crude oil imports standing at 73.9% and net gas imports at 39%. Of these, oil accounts for about 54% of the PRC's imported energy resources, making a stable supply critical to national energy security. Hence, the preference for long-term contracts

(Taylor 2014: 5, 19). The PRC became a net importer of crude oil in 1993 and, by 2017, the largest globally. In 2021 and from 2023, China became the largest LNG importer in the world (IEA 2023b). Making the energy mix greener, which implies increasing the share of renewable energy sources as well as natural gas, is a vital instrument to achieve the goals of carbon neutrality by 2060 and reach the CO2 emissions peak by 2030 (Chen 2023: 41). China's gas imports are forecasted to grow from today's 180 bcm to somewhere between 290 and 390 bcm in the second half of the 2030th as domestic production is expected to reach its peak between 2035 and 2040 (Vakulenko 2025).

Diversifying the geography of energy imports has been a key element of China's strategy to ensure its energy security, as sourcing from multiple partners across different regions minimizes the risk of supply disruption (Taylor 2014: 10). This policy has been motivated by the desire to overcome the so-called Malacca dilemma. Formulated by President Hu Jintao in 2003, it implies a critical dependence of Chinese maritime trade on the Malacca Strait, a chokepoint between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. About 70% of China's energy imports come from the Middle East and Africa and pass through the Strait, which has raised concern about the possibility of the United States (US) exerting control over the waterway, thereby adversely affecting Chinese energy security (Lanteigne 2008: 143-144).

Pipeline oil and natural gas supplies from Russia and Central Asia provide China with stable and long-term energy imports at a favorable price, are relatively short and not subject to extreme weather conditions or US control (Taylor 2014: 10-11, 147). At the same time, excessive reliance on a single supplier remains undesirable for the PRC. This is illustrated by its policy to import LNG from as many sources as possible (18 out of 20 LNG-exporting countries in 2023) and to construct both gas pipelines and LNG infrastructure with surplus capacity, so that it can shift between them if the need arises (Belogoryev 2024).

The Evolution of Energy Cooperation between Russia and China

Strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing, close political and security ties, and unchanging priorities to expand bilateral cooperation provided fertile ground for collaboration in energy, as envisioned by the theoretical literature (Yılmaz and Sever-Mehmetoğlu 2016: 108). However, it was not without obstacles and took many years to materialize. Russia's share of China's oil imports during 2006-2010 was relatively small, averaging 7-9%. In the mid-2000s, the PRC accounted for only about 4-5% of Russia's oil exports, with Europe as its leading destination. In 2008, the Russia-China Energy Dialogue was initiated and, in 2012, was replaced by the Intergovernmental Russia-China Commission on Energy Cooperation, which played an essential role in facilitating joint energy projects (Lukin 2013: 329-334, 391-394).

In 2003, the Russian government decided to build the "East Siberia-Pacific Ocean" (ESPO) pipeline to the Pacific coast (Kozmino port) and, simultaneously, a spur to China. In 2009, Russian Rosneft and Transneft, and Chinese CNPC, signed an agreement with China Development Bank (CDB) providing a $15 billion credit line to Rosneft and $10 billion to

Rosneft in exchange for annual oil supplies of 15 million tons. Oil deliveries to China started in 2011 at 15 million tons (Lukin 2013: 392-395). The supply capacity was expanded to 20 million tons in 2014 and 30 million tons in 2019. The primary route to Kozmino port was completed in 2012, and in 2019 the pipeline's capacity had been expanded to 50 million tons. The landmark deal provided momentum for bilateral energy cooperation (Zakharov and Karpova 2022). Nevertheless, Chinese companies were essentially unable to invest in Russian oil and gas projects due to informal barriers that made acquisitions impossible (Lukin 2013: 392-396). A notable exception was the only Russian-Chinese joint venture, Udmurtneft, formed by Rosneft (51%-share) and Sinopec (49%-share), which has successfully being operating to the present (Zakharov and Karpova 2022).

Against the background of a deeper political and security alignment, since 2014, Russia-China energy cooperation has entered a new stage: the construction of a large-scale gas pipeline project, expanding trade, and Chinese NOCs serving as strategic investors in the Arctic LNG and petrochemical projects (Kashin 2019: 4-5). It was underpinned by Russia's overarching energy strategy aimed at diversifying export partners and bringing the share of the Asia-Pacific region, with its growing energy demand, on par with that of Europe, with an opportunity to facilitate the development of Eastern Siberia and the Far East (RFE) (Zakharov and Karpova 2022). While China played a key role in this strategy, Moscow hedged its bets by expanding cooperation with Japan and South Korea, thereby strengthening its position vis-à-vis the PRC (Tuğçe 2014).

The sanctions targeting Russia adopted by the US and EU following the Crimea crisis strongly affected Russian NOCs as they prohibited funding and technology transfer for Arctic projects. The EU also announced its decision to reduce its energy dependence on Russian imports, especially natural gas. It put Moscow in a weaker position in bargaining with Beijing, but also created an urgent need to strike large-scale deals. To find alternatives to the European market and secure funding, Moscow eased informal barriers to Chinese investment in the energy sector while not allowing a controlling stake (Kashin 2019: 15).

Russia's President Putin's visit to China and talks with President Xi Jinping in May 2014, following a decade of complex negotiations, brought an agreement on the Power of Siberia gas pipeline. Gazprom and CNPC signed a 30-year contract worth $400 billion to supply 38 bcm of natural gas per year from the Russian region of Yakutia to China. Construction of a 3,000-kilometer-long pipeline, built by Russian contractors and operated by Gazprom, began in 2014 and was completed in December 2019. The price was reported to be somewhat lower than the price for gas exports to Europe (Nezavisimaia gazeta 2014).

For Russia, the project provides a large, long-term contract. It contributes to the development of the RFE by supplying natural gas to the Amursky natural gas processing plant, constructed in 2021. The latter is to supply ethane and liquefied petroleum gas to the Amursky natural gas chemical complex, a joint venture of Russia's largest SIBUR petrochemical company (60%) and China's Sinopec (40%), to be completed in 2027 and projected to be the

world's largest plant for producing base polymers. For the PRC, it contributes to its energy security and energy transition goals, given the projected growth of natural gas consumption (Zakharov 2023: 25-27). Apart from that, Chinese companies have emerged as strategic investors. In December 2015, China's Sinopec acquired a 10% stake in SIBUR. In June 2017, Chinese Beijing Gas Group Company Limited, a top gas supplier to Beijing, acquired a 20% stake in Verhnechonskneftegaz, a part of Rosneft, which operates one of the largest oil and gas deposits in Eastern Siberia, for $1.1 billion (Zakharov and Karpova 2022).

Having long demonstrated interest in the Arctic due to its abundance of natural resources, in 2013, China National Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Corporation (CNODC), a subsidiary of CNPC, procured a 20% share in NOVATEK's Yamal LNG project on the exploration, liquefaction, and export of the LNG located on the Yamal Peninsula in the Arctic. In 2015, the Chinese Silk Road Fund bought an additional 9.9% stake. The project received a $12 billion credit line from the CDB and the Export-Import Bank of China. Chinese PetroChina International, a subsidiary of CNPC, signed a 20-year contract to import 3 million tons of LNG annually. LNG deliveries to China via the Northern Sea Route (NSR) commenced in December 2017 (Fadeev et al 2024).

For Russia, LNG projects are of primary importance for Arctic development, stimulating demand in related industries and turning the NSR into a global trade waterway. Utilizing the NSR provides China with an alternative shipping route to the Middle Eastern one. Beijing is also motivated by its intention to become one of the critical actors in the Arctic, as reflected in its 2018 Arctic strategy (Fadeev et al. 2024). In April 2019, CNODC and CNOOC each bought a 10% share in another NOVATEK project – Arctic LNG-2 on the Gydan Peninsula. It was projected to have three lines, with a full LNG production capacity of 19.8 million tons per year (more than 27 bcm) for LNG exports to the Asia-Pacific. All shareholders had contractual obligations to procure the produced LNG in proportion to their shareholdings. Additionally, China's Shenergy Group and Zhejiang Energy Gas Group signed two long-term contracts to purchase 3 million tons of LNG over 15 years and 1 million tons per year for 15 years, respectively (Fadeev et al. 2024).

As a result of joint projects coming into operation, the importance of Russia and China as energy partners for each other increased substantially (See Tables 1, 2, and 3 in the Appendix). In 2016, for the first time, Russia became China's top oil supplier, subsequently ranking either 1st or 2nd, falling behind only Saudi Arabia. In 2017, China became Russia's largest single export partner. In 2019, Russia's share of China's oil imports rose to about 15%, totaling 80.2 million tons. In 2021, Russia exported about 79.64 million tons of oil, with China accounting for about 30% of Russian oil exports, while Europe's share fell to 47%. Such figures led Novak to claim that a Russia-China energy alliance was forming (Vedomosti 2024). A clear upward trend was also witnessed in the gas sector. The POS gas pipeline delivered about 4.1 bcm of natural gas to China in 2020 and 10.39 bcm in 2021. In 2021, Russia accounted for about 13% of pipeline gas and 5.7% of LNG supplies to China. Coal exports also rose to about 53 million tons in 2021 (23.7% share) (Kommersant 2024c).

On February 4, 2022, Putin's visit to China produced a Declaration stating that there are no limits in Russia-China relations and two large-scale business deals. Rosneft and CNPC agreed to supply 100 million tons of oil to China via Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Gazprom and CNPC signed a contract to supply 10 bcm of natural gas via the Far East, which entails tapping into the Sakhalin-3 shelf gas field and building a short 25-kilometer spur from an already existing gas pipeline "Sakhalin-Khabarovsk-Vladivostok" (Wong and Zhou 2022).

Upward Trend in Energy Cooperation After the Ukrainian Crisis

The breakdown of Russia's relations with the G7 and EU following the start of the Ukrainian crisis has had a direct impact on Russia's energy exports due to the massive sanctions, including the EU's embargo on coal, seaborne crude oil, and petroleum, and the G7 price cap for Russian oil set at 60 dollars per barrel. Europe's share in Russian oil exports fell to 4-5% in 2023, according to Novak (Vedomosti 2024).

Given an urgent need for Moscow to redirect its energy exports, China proved the most favorable option, given the size of its economy, energy demand, geographic proximity, and its "friendly neutrality" – neither endorsing nor criticizing Russia's actions and not supporting any sanctions. President Xi's visit to Russia in March 2023, the first after re-election for a third term, was seen as a symbol of the strategic character of bilateral relations. A plan on the priorities of economic cooperation until 2030 included strengthening the comprehensive energy partnership (President of Russia 2023). Contacts between leaders and top-down decision-making have played an important role in strengthening energy ties since 2022 (Zakharov 2023: 25). Russia increased its oil, pipeline gas, LNG, and coal exports to China, accounting for about one-third of the record turnover of $240 billion in 2023 and $244.8 billion in 2024. Oil exports recorded an 8.3% rise to 86.25 million tons in 2022, +24% in 2023 (107 million tons), +1.3% in 2024 (108.47 million tons) and -7.1% in 2025 (100.7 million tons). Compared with about 80 million tons in 2021, it translates into a 25% increase. However, the value decreased from $62.6 billion in 2024 to $49.8 billion in 2025 due to lower oil prices (General Administration of Customs 2026).

Russia uses three major routes to export oil to China: the ESPO spur to the Chinese port of Mohe (30 million tons), the ESPO main route to the Kozmino oil port (50 million tons), and transit via Kazakhstan's pipeline infrastructure (about 10 million tons). These channels already operate at full capacity. In addition, a small amount of oil is delivered through Russian ports on the Baltic and Black Seas, as well as by rail from Siberia and the Far East to Kozmino port (Expert Online 2024). Most of the increase in oil exports since 2022 presumably stems from reorienting all oil to China via the ESPO main route, away from other partners such as Japan.

Gas supplies through the POS pipeline increased to 15.4 bcm in 2022, 22.7 bcm in 2023, 31 bcm in 2024 (Vedomosti 2025a) and 38.8 bcm in 2025 (Gazprom 2026). The value of pipeline gas exports grew from $6.4 billion to $8 billion in 2024 and $9.4 billion in 2025, which amounts to 44% share in terms of value. LNG exports slightly increased in quantity

(8.3 million tons, +3.3%) but decreased in terms of value (-4%, worth $4.99 billion) in 2024 and saw a further decrease in both quantity (7.6 million tons, -8.5%) and value (-17.8%, worth $4.1 billion) in 2025 (General Administration of Customs 2026). Yamal LNG and Sakhalin-2 projects are the sources of China-imported LNG. Deliveries from US-sanctioned Arctic LNG-2 began in August 2025, demonstrating China's desire to highlight its independence and ability to withstand American pressure amid the ongoing trade war (Vakulenko 2025).

According to Gazprom, the POS pipeline began operating at full capacity in December 2024, ahead of schedule. Natural gas supplies via the Far Eastern route are planned to start in January 2027 (Kommersant 2024b), with overall gas pipeline supplies reaching 56 bcm per year, given the plans to expand the capacity of both the POS and the Far Eastern route (Kommersant 2025).

As for coal, in 2022 Russia's exports to China increased by 26% to 67 million tons, and in 2023 they rose to an unprecedented 102 million tons (+52%). Coal exports saw a 14.1% decline in volume (from 94 million tons in 2023 to 87 million tons in 2024 and 80.7 million tons in 2025) and a 46.5% decline in price (from $14.4 billion in 2023 to $10.5 billion in 2024 and $7.7 billion in 2025) (General Administration of Customs 2026; Kommersant 2024c).

Industrial cooperation has also gained momentum. In August 2022, the EU sanctions prohibited the export of equipment for liquefying gas to Russia, inhibiting the completion of Arctic LNG-2. US blocking sanctions against the project followed in November 2023. Chinese enterprises Harbin Guanghan Gas Turbine and Wison New Energies reportedly provided alternatives to equipment and turbines not delivered by European, Japanese, and American companies, enabling Russia to complete the first and second technological lines of Arctic LNG-2 in 2023 and 2024 (Neftegaz.RU 2024). Western equipment was also replaced with Chinese equipment at the Amursky gas chemical complex.

Factors Behind the Difficulties in Negotiating New Large-scale Agreements

Existing energy infrastructure is operating at full capacity, and there are several logistical bottlenecks in the Far East. The use of the NSR is hindered by the lack of an Arctic-class tanker fleet, while the logistics route from the Baltic and Black Seas through the Suez Channel is much longer, with higher transport and insurance costs and a greater number of tankers required. This limits further expansion of bilateral energy trade, making it necessary to build new, large-scale, and expensive infrastructure to achieve this goal (Expert online 2024; Kommersant 2024c).

The Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline project was discussed at high-level talks in 2023-2025. Although during his visit to China in May 2024, President Putin expressed no doubt that the NOCs would reach a deal either to advance the POS-2 project or to expand the tanker fleet and LNG deliveries through the NSR, shortly after the visit, it became apparent that

the negotiations had stalled (Kommersant 2024a). Russia's hopes that Chinese shareholders would buy shares in the French and Japanese companies in the Arctic LNG-2 project also never materialized.

On May 2, 2025, after the meeting between the leaders of Russia, China and Mongolia, a legally binding MoU on the POS-2 was signed. According to Gazprom's CEO Miller, -the capacity of the 2.6 thousand-kilometer pipeline is planned to be 50 bcm per year. It is expected to be built and begin operations in five years, the same as the POS, and reach full capacity in the mid-2030s. According to Miller, the price is to be lower than the one for Europe with lower logistics costs due to the geographical proximity. Additionally, Russia and China agreed to increase the capacity of existing pipelines: POS by 6 bcm and the Far Eastern route by 2 bcm (Kommersant 2025).

Experts believe that the US Trump administration's policy of continuing the trade war has been the key driving factor behind China's decision to sign the MoU, as the favorable price of energy imports is crucial to its economic competitiveness (Vedomosti 2025b). Never-ending geopolitical tensions are also described to have contributed to this decision, as the POS-2, unlike seaborne LNG, cannot be stopped by the US (Kommersant 2025; Vakulenko 2025).

However, the key parameters of the POS-2 have not been finalized and will be negotiated in the future: price, financing, contractor, and flexibility, especially regarding take-or-pay obligations (Mitrova 2025; Vakulenko 2025). Experts vary in their assessment of how much time the final contract is going to take: while many Russian experts claim that the agreement is close and will be concluded in 2026, otherwise it wouldn't have been announced (Kommersant 2025; Vedomosti 2025b), others are more skeptical and emphasize the differences in positions (Mitrova 2025; Vakulenko 2025).

Several factors have contributed to the difficulties in striking new large-scale agreements. Firstly, the increase in energy supplies from Russia, which the US cannot block in the event of geopolitical tensions, has already made a significant contribution to China's energy security. Russia is China's number one oil import partner since 2023, accounting for about 19% in 2023 and 20% in 2024 (Vedomosti 2024).

In 2024, Russia ranked 2nd among China's pipeline gas import sources at 38%, lagging behind only Turkmenistan (Table 2). The POS pipeline provides the cheapest gas in China's import portfolio (Mitrova 2025). As for LNG, in 2024, Russia accounted for about 11% of China's imports, coming 3rd after Qatar and Australia (Table 2). Gazprom CEO Alexey Miller stated that after the inauguration of the Far Eastern route in 2027, Russia would become the largest source of gas imports for China (Kommersant 2024b). During his talks with the Chinese President on May 8, 2025, Putin claimed that Russia had become China's top pipeline gas supplier and the third-largest LNG supplier (President of Russia 2025). Russia's share of China's coal imports rose to 23% in 2022 but fell to 18% in 2024 (Kommersant 2024c), placing Russia in second place, according to Putin (President of Russia 2025). World Bank data shows

a larger Russian share accounting for 25% in 2024 (Table 3). China's diversification strategy and reluctance to depend too much on a single source to ensure its energy security make a significant increase in Russia's already largest share further unlikely (Zakharov and Karpova 2022) unless the terms for a new agreement are especially beneficial, as illustrated by the case of negotiations over POS-2 (Vakulenko 2025).

Secondly, Russia successfully made up for what it lost with the EU and Japan in oil and coal without needing to build any new infrastructure. China's share in oil exports from Russia grew from 30% in 2021 to 45-50% in 2023-2024, India's exports share increased from 3% to about 40% (Vedomosti 2024), with India buying about 87.5 million tons in 2024. Russia was successful in reorienting oil exports from Europe and Japan to Asia, with total oil exports reaching 234 million tons in 2023 and 240 million tons in 2024 (Novak 2025), compared with 230 million tons in 2021.

The policy of Chinese and Indian NOCs has been motivated by greater discounts: in 2023, the average price of Urals crude was about $62,99 per barrel, whereas Brent was traded at $82,6 (Expert Online 2024). Compared with other import destinations, except Iran, it made buying Russian oil more convenient. Payments in Chinese renminbi rather than US dollars helped mitigate sanctions risks. The PRC has mostly ignored Western sanctions on Russia's seaborne oil exports, with the premium ESPO crude being sold above the price cap and Chinese tankers participating in oil imports from Russia (Zakharov 2023: 26).

China's share in Russia's pipeline gas exports increased substantially from 5% in 2021 to about 31% in 2023 (31 bcm out of the 99.6 bcm of total pipeline gas exports). While China provided a much-needed demand for Russian natural gas exports, Russia's pipeline gas exports in 2023 accounted for only 48% of the 2021 level (206.8 bcm). In 2021, Russia exported about 168 bcm of gas to Europe, including Turkey, but this figure has fallen dramatically since 2022 and has decreased further with the end of transit through Ukraine starting in January 2025. It signifies that China alone cannot compensate for the contraction of the European gas market for Russia (Vedomosti 2025a). In January 2026 Gazprom announced that it exported more natural gas to China than to Europe including Turkey for the first time. Given that the volume of exports to the PRC was 38.8 billion tons, it means a dramatic contraction of exports to Europe (Gazprom 2026). If the POS-2 project is implemented, Russia is to export about 106 bcm to China allowing Gazprom to at least partially compensate for the losses, whereas without POS-2, the figure is expected to amount to only 56 bcm.

In 2021, China accounted for 3.7% (53 million tons) of Russia's total coal exports, and the EU accounted for 22.6% (40.5 million tons). Russia effectively compensated for the loss of the European and Japanese markets by exporting 94 million tons to China, accounting for about 48% of aggregate coal exports, and 25 million tons to India in 2024 (Kommersant 2024c).

Thirdly, the difficulties in reaching an agreement on the second gas pipeline to China can be explained by divergent positions among Russian and Chinese SOEs and by market

factors. In November 2014, a framework agreement was signed between Gazprom and CNPC to construct the POS-2 (Altai) gas pipeline from Western Siberia to Xinjiang, with a capacity of 30 bcm of gas per year. Although the deal was agreed in principle in May 2015, CNPC reportedly later set new terms regarding joint exploration, sales, and participation in pipeline construction and operation. It clearly sought to follow the usual equity stake model within the "go out" policy and partake in the full cycle of energy production as it did in Turkmenistan, which enabled it to influence the price. Gazprom, however, was not interested in an integrated contract as it was perfectly capable of doing all the above by itself and possessed a state monopoly on pipeline gas exports that it did not want to eschew (Vedomosti 2016), representing differences in corporate interests stemming from long-term governmental policies and privileged positions of the NOCs. The project resurfaced in March 2020 with a different route: from Yamal in Western Siberia to China via Mongolia, with lower construction costs. One of the variants reportedly included constructing an oil pipeline with a capacity of about 30 million tons in parallel with a gas pipeline. The construction with a projected full capacity of 50 bcm of gas was planned to start in 2024 and finish after 2029 (Kommersant 2024a).

The thesis that asymmetric interdependence limits the bargaining options of a weaker partner (Öniş and Yılmaz 2015: 74) is clearly substantiated by the analysis of further Russia-China negotiations on POS-2. CNPC reportedly asked for a price close to Russia's domestic market price and a lower volume of gas imports. Such terms cannot accommodate Gazprom because the pipeline construction requires substantial funding, and the project might not be economically viable, especially with a lower capacity. Gazprom would like the POS-2 to follow the POS model, in which the gas price is based on the oil price. Russia is in a weaker bargaining position, as it needs customers for its Yamal gas fields in place of Europe, or it will have to conserve it. For now, the PRC seems to be the only option, which amounts to a monopsony where the buyer determines the deal's terms. For Gazprom, this brings about the risk of unfavorable future changes to the contract. As for China, there is no confidence about the demand for an additional 50 bcm of gas imports in the 2030-2040s and many prospective sources of natural gas, such as Line D of the China-Central Asia gas pipeline or LNG imports (Kommersant 2024a; Belogoryev 2024; Kommersant 2025), so Beijing can maintain a tougher position on price. Recent statements by Gazprom officials showed that it valued its monopoly on gas pipeline exports above all as a critical leverage in POS-2 talks (Interfax 2025).

In November 2024, Novak announced that Russia was considering a new gas export route to China via eastern Kazakhstan, with a full capacity of 45 bcm, of which 10 bcm were intended to help gasify northeastern Kazakhstan and 35 bcm to be exported to the PRC (Vedomosti 2025a). It demonstrated that Gazprom, rather than accepting CNPC's unfavorable terms, preferred possible alternatives to sacrificing its commercial interests. However, the Chinese side took no interest in the new proposal (Vedomosti 2025b). China's stronger bargaining position is reflected in the MoU signed in September 2025: it can indefinitely postpone the supply contract and enjoy the opportunity to tap into discounted Russian gas

at its convenience. Russia, on the other hand, has committed to the project without defined commercial arrangements (Mitrova 2025). Given that it costs about $125 per thousand cubic meters of gas to deliver to the Mongolia-China border, POS-2 gas will be cheaper than any alternative. It is in Russia's interests to negotiate for a long-term contract with minimum flexibility and gas price higher than in the case of POS and akin to the China-Central Asia pipeline. However, China is unsure about either the projected demand for gas after 2040 or potential alternative supply sources, such as Chinese SOE's owned (Vakulenko 2025).

Given its upper hand, China can be expected to bargain for a price lower than the oil-linked formula of POS to ensure its energy security and industrial development at even lower long-term gas import prices. If it is what the two sides agree upon, although the price is supposed to be higher than the domestic one, Gapzom is to get minimal profits (Mitrova 2025). Experts also claim that China might eventually take only about 75-80% of Russia's projected natural gas exports if demand turns out to be lower than projected (Kommersant 2025), which again raises the question of the profitability of POS-2. In this regard, it is crucial whether the contract will include take-or-pay obligations, typical of Gazprom-operated pipelines, and how much flexibility the PRC will have regarding import volume (Mitrova 2025).

Financing and construction contractor issues might also be a part of negotiations. Although Gazprom typically provides its own financing for construction, it is experiencing financial strain due to declining profits from the European market. Miller's comments about discussing financial mechanisms might signify that Gazprom would welcome a Chinese credit line or capital (Mitrova 2025). If the Chinese side does not provide financing or pay for the gas in advance, the company might need stronger governmental support(Kommersant 2025). Experts expect national companies to carry out construction work on their respective territories (Vedomosti 2025b).

Fourthly, American secondary sanctions have negatively affected the prospects of Russia-China energy cooperation in the Arctic, as exemplified by the Arctic LNG-2 project, thereby precluding new investment. In November 2023, the project operator and its contractors were added to the US SDN list, prompting all foreign shareholders, including CNPC and CNOOC, to declare force majeure on their participation in the project, leading to the suspension of long-term LNG offtake contracts. Arctic LNG-2 also declared force majeure concerning LNG deliveries to all partners, including Chinese Shenergy Group and Zhejiang Energy. The situation only got worse in July 2024, when the key foreign technological partner – Chinese Wison New Energies – announced its decision to quit projects in Russia and brought back the new modules produced for the third line of the project due to concerns about US secondary sanctions. There is also a lack of available Arctic-class LNG carriers (Arc7) (Kommersant 2023; Kommersant 2024c). In August 2025, China started procuring LNG from the project, becoming its first and, for now, the only foreign partner (Vakulenko 2025), but Chinese companies are over-cautious about becoming stakeholders in the projects heavily sanctioned by the US, as they value their global competitiveness.

Moreover, sweeping sanctions adopted by the US on January 10, 2025, pose a new challenge for Russia-China maritime oil trade, as they target more than 180 oil tankers, the Sovcomflot fleet operator, dozens of oil traders, and major insurance companies. They caused a surge in freight rates for tankers unaffected by sanctions that were exporting Russian oil, resulting in a reduction in China's imports of Russian crude oil in 2025 (Reuters 2025).

Conclusion

A favorable political climate and growing alignment have created a stable environment conducive to Russia and China emerging as key energy partners. The top-down approach to decision-making, the key role of the state and NOCs, which are predominantly SOEs in the strategic energy sector, both in Russia and China, and the focus of the national leadership have all materialized in policies to expand energy ties. Since 2014, China has become not only an important energy export destination but also a source of financing and investment into the Russian energy sector, exemplified by Chinese NOCs acquiring shares in Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2. With the ESPO oil pipeline reaching full capacity and the construction of the large-scale Power of Siberia gas pipeline, Russia has gradually emerged as one of China's top energy suppliers. Technological cooperation in gas chemistry between SIBUR and Sinopec, as well as Rosneft and Sinopec's joint venture, are examples of downstream and upstream cooperation. Russia's motivation lies in diversifying its energy partners, securing long-term revenues, and safeguarding against Western sanctions. In China's view, long-term contracts at favorable prices and energy import routes not controlled by the US contribute to its energy security. At the same time, the focus has been on the buyer-seller relationship, with few joint projects.

Following the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict on February 24, 2022, Russia and China have dramatically expanded energy ties despite the unprecedented sanctions targeting Russia's energy sector. At the same time, Russia emerging as the PRC's top energy partner in oil and projected to become number one in natural gas is chiefly the result of projects initiated beforehand. With some added trade in oil and – more significantly – coal, this trend was mostly predictable. Despite the increase in trading in fossil fuels, the existing infrastructure, operating at full capacity, imposes limits on further expansion of cooperation, especially in natural gas. The construction of the Power of Siberia-2 pipeline is essential for Russia to at least partially offset losses in the European market. In September 2025, Putin and Xi signed a legally binding MoU on constructing POS-2, with major commercial arrangements still to be negotiated.

The reasons why it has been so difficult to conclude new large-scale projects since February 24, 2022, stem from factors inherent in Russia-China relations and the external environment. Firstly, an increase in energy supplies from Russia, which cannot be blocked by the US in case of geopolitical tensions, has already contributed to China's energy security. Russia has already emerged as the top source of oil imports and is poised to become the largest source of natural gas imports as well. China's strategy to diversify energy partners and avoid

dependence on any given state prevents Russia from increasing its share, unless the conditions are particularly favorable for the Chinese side as demonstrated by the POS-2. Secondly, Russia has managed to re-orient its oil exports shunned by the EU and Japan due to the sanctions over to China and India, and its coal exports predominantly to China. It has therefore been able to largely compensate for the decrease in revenues from the European oil and coal market, providing a lifeline for the Russian economy, given the importance of hydrocarbon revenues to the state. Large losses are only in the natural gas exports which are impossible to redirect due to the absence of the required infrastructure.

Thirdly, differences in the interests of Russian and Chinese SOEs, stemming from long-term governmental and corporate policies, hamper negotiations over the POS-2 pipeline. While Chinese NOCs would prefer the equity stake model, with participating in the construction and operation of the pipeline enabling it to influence the price, Gazprom values its monopoly on the export of pipeline gas above all, as it ensures its privileged position in the Russian gas sector. Its reluctance to compromise its interests on the price and agree to preferential conditions for China demonstrates Russia's unwillingness to subordinate its interests to those of the PRC and the intention to maintain a partnership based on equality. However, the prevalence of a buyer's market and China's stronger bargaining position are reflected in the MoU on POS-2 signed in September 2025 as Beijing has the opportunity but not an obligation to tap into the cheapest source of natural gas in the future. SOE's corporate interests differ in terms of flexibility: Gazprom would prefer a long-term contract with minimal flexibility and pay-or-take obligations, whereas CNPC would seek maximum flexibility, given the uncertainty about China's need for all of the projected 50 bcm of POS-2, especially after the 2040s. Moreover, the PRC has more than enough alternatives and surplus infrastructure capacity allowing it to shift between pipeline gas and LNG.

Fourthly, Chinese companies' concerns about US secondary sanctions against Arctic LNG-2 serve as an obstacle to new Chinese investment in Arctic LNG projects. US sanctions on Russia's seaborne oil exports and on Arctic LNG-2 have strained its oil trade and technological cooperation with China. Even given the difficulties in negotiating the POS-2, the underlying factors behind China's motivation to conclude the supply contract are that it will be the cheapest source of natural gas, cannot be subject to any US control, and will contribute to its energy security. The start of LNG procurement from the US-sanctioned Arctic LNG-2 in August 2025 signifies that the PRC is more than ready to defy the US amid the ongoing trade war and geopolitical escalation. Given the magnitude of Russia's interest in the project, we can expect the deal to be concluded sooner or yani later, especially given the negative effects of 2026 Iran war for China. Further negotiations will focus not only on the price but also on the full array of conditions, including flexibility, financing, and the contractor. It is likely that POS-2 might follow the POS oil-linked price formula, or the price might be somewhere between that and the domestic one. While Gazprom is to insist on constructing and operating the Russian part of the pipeline, access to Chinese financing might also be part of the final bargain, given the company's lack of funds due to the dwindling profits. In any case, the prevalence of a buyer's

market puts Moscow in a position of greater dependence on the PRC in general, and on Chinese governmental and NOC policies and the dynamics of energy consumption in particular.

The article also reaches broader theoretical conclusions for the IPE of energy studies. It highlights the important roles of the market and NOCs' corporate interests discussed above, even in centralized systems with top-down decision-making, where major decisions are supposed to be determined by the national leadership. Market forces at play include the projected demand for natural gas, determined by existing and prospective infrastructure capacity and contracts for the Chinese NOCs, as well as Russia's NOCs' reluctance to build a pipeline that won't generate profit. Chinese NOCs' reluctance to invest in Russian Arctic LNG projects under US sanctions further substantiates the claim that NOCs are commercially-oriented actors that are not always fully subordinate to the government, focused instead on their own competitiveness and privileged status, which may lead to a situation where even the willingness of the top leadership may not bring about the intended results. The article also highlights the limitations of expanding energy cooperation with a state that is keen on diversifying its energy supply sources to ensure energy security, demonstrating that it might be willing to increase its already-largest share of imports only if the conditions for a new project are extremely favorable. It also demonstrates that, rather than following a single school, whether realist or liberal, studies of the IPE of energy benefit from an interdisciplinary approach.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Russia-China Trade in Oil

Year	China's oil imports from Russia (million tons)	Comparison with the previous year (%)	Ranking in China's oil imports	Share of Russia in China's oil imports (%)	Ranking in Russia's oil exports	Share of China in Russia's oil exports (%)
2010	15.240	-0.4	5	6.6	5	5.3
2011	19.724	+29.4	4	7.8	4	9.7
2012	24.329	+23.3	3	11	2	9.3
2013	24.348	+0.7	4	8.6	2	9.7
2014	33.107	+36	3	10.7	2	13.4
2015	42.434	+28.2	2	12.6	2	15.8
2016	52.517	+23.8	1	14.5	1	18.7
2017	59.538	+13.4	1	14.2	1	20.8
2018	71.492	+20.1	1	15.5	1	25.7
2019	77.642	+8.6	2	15.3	1	26.2
2020	83.444	+7.5	2	15.4	1	31.5
2021	79.641	-4.6	2	15.5	1	30.7
2022	86.248	+8.3	2	16.9	n/a	n/a
2023	99.550	+15.4	1	17.9	n/a	n/a
2024	108.469	+8.9	1	19.6	n/a	n/a

Source: World Integrated Trade Solutions. https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en (accessed October 10, 2025). Calculated by the author.

Table 2. Russia-China Trade in Natural Gas

Year	China's natural gas in gaseous state imports from Russia, quantity (thousands tons)	Ranking in China's natural gas in gaseous state imports	Share of Russia in China's natural gas in gaseous state imports (%)	LNG imports from Russia (thousand tons)	Ranking in China's LNG imports	Share of Russia in China's LNG imports (%)	Share of China in Russia's LNG exports (%)	China's aggregate natural gas imports from Russia (thousand tons)	Comparison of China's aggregate natural gas imports from Russia with the previous year (%)	Share of Russia in China's aggregate natural gas imports (%)
2010	0	0	0	380.4	6	4	3	380.4	+50	3.2
2011	0	0	0	251.9	8	2	3.1	251.9	-33.7	1.1
2012	0	0	0	379.1	6	2.6	4	379.1	+51	1.2
2013	0	0	0	65.1	10	3.6	5.5	65.1	-82	0.2
2014	0	0	0	129.7	16	0.6	1.4	129.7	+99.5	0.3
2015	0	0	0	191.1	10	1	0.7	191.1	+48.1	0.4
2016	0	0	0	264.3	8	1	3	264.3	+38.4	0.5
2017	0	0	0	444.9	7	1.2	2.4	444.9	+17	0.6
2018	0	0	0	734.3	8	1.4	4.1	734.3	+65	0.9
2019	0	0	0	2,505.8	6	4.2	6.2	2,505.8	+237	2.4
2020	3,538.5	4	5.8	5,047	5	7.6	10.5	8,585.5	+242.7	6.7
2021	3,931.7	2	13	4,518.1	5	5.7	17.2	8,448.8	-1.6	7.7
2022	2,951.2	2	22.3	6,504.8	4	10.2	n/a	9,456	+11.9	12.3
2023	9,582.4	2	33.1	8,044	3	11.4	n/a	17,626.4	+86.4	17.7
2024	15,935.2	2	38	8,283.5	3	10.8	n/a	24,218.7	+37.4	20.4

Source: World Integrated Trade Solutions. https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en (accessed October 10, 2025). Calculated by the author.

Table 3. Russia-China Trade in Coal

Year	China's aggregate coal imports from Russia (thousand tons)	Comparison with the previous year (%)	Share of Russia in China's aggregate coal imports (%)	Share of China in Russia's aggregate coal exports (%)
2010	11,582.8	-	7	10
2011	10,573.4	-8.7	5.8	9.6
2012	20,181	+90.9	8.6	15.5
2013	27,215.8	+34	10.2	19.6
2014	25,236.6	-7.2	11.1	16.5
2015	15,779.9	-37.5	10.1	10.3
2016	12,628.6	-20	3.5	7.6
2017	25,307	+100.4	13.5	14
2018	26,161.5	+3.4	14	13.1
2019	29,103.1	+11.2	14.8	14.2
2020	33,987.7	+16.8	16.6	17.2
2021	54,621.7	+60.7	26.7	25.9
2022	64,069.1	+17.3	39.4	n/a
2023	69,128	+7.9	34.1	n/a
2024	88,333.7	+27.8	25	n/a

Source: World Integrated Trade Solutions. https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en (accessed October 10, 2025). Calculated by the author.