



Joachim Krause: *Interdependenz als Waffe. Wirtschaftlicher Druck als Instrument strategischer Einflussnahme Russlands und Chinas.* Baden-Baden: Nomos 2025, 163 pages

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Reviewing this book has taken time. Despite the sober language, the message is frequently so depressing that a pause is required. The topic is Russian and Chinese dominance – in some cases, a monopoly – over key European imports, and how this has been transformed into an efficient tool for political influence.

This is an invitingly brief book. The chapter headings guide the reader to the topics of most immediate relevance. This may seem an odd point to mention in a review, but most of us go on a sort of book picnic, only reading what we consider necessary. Those who do not will be richly rewarded. Dr. Krause's ability to systematise information, summarise long arguments, and condense everything into

a few salient bullet points (e. g. pp. 19-20, 107-108, 128-135) is a bonus to any reader.

Dr. Krause does not restrict his analysis to economic relations alone. He also addresses political networking and, in the case of China, the extensive web of various associations, groups, and language institutes used to convey a party-approved image of the country's politics. This is rarely done.

However, the title is somewhat misleading. This book is less about *interdependence* than about *dependence*. The difference is crucial: the prefix "inter-" implies reciprocity, but in fact it is Europe that is dependent on China and Russia, not the other way around. Admittedly, Russia has relied on Western technology and financial services, a reliance that was turned against the Putin regime when sanctions were introduced first in 2014 and then tightened with greater scope and force in 2022. For China, by contrast, access to the European market is a crucial issue, as exports, roughly speaking, are what is keeping the Chinese economy afloat. Donald Trump and Ursula von der Leyen know this, and both are adept at using market access as a tool to exert Chinese concessions.

Comparisons of how China and Russia use economic dependence are rarely undertaken. At first glance, their differences may make a comparison seem futile. China is infinitely more powerful economically, whereas Russia remains an energy and grain exporter, much as the Soviet Union once was. I would like to emphasise that it is commendable that Russian grain exports are addressed in such detail. The usual focus on Russian gas exports has all too often overshadowed the strategic implications of Russian and Ukrainian wheat. Dr. Krause is an exception.

Not least because Russia and China share the same goal, a comparison is possible. Trade creates dependencies that can be exploited to weaken both economic competitiveness and political resistance. One of the earliest instances of this occurred in 2013, when the then EU Trade Commissioner, Karel De Gucht, sought to punish China for dumping cell phones and solar panels. This was prevented by then-Chancellor Angela Merkel, after the Chinese had hinted that German car exports might face unspecified obstacles. De Gucht was pressed to stop the anti-dumping process – a move that the *Financial Times* described as leaving him "frustrated and outflanked".¹ It should be added that China promised to stop dumping solar panels, a promise that has aged like milk.

¹ Joshua Chaffin: Karel De Gucht. Frustrated and outflanked, *Financial Times*, 30.07.2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/aa79490a-f8f6-11e2-86e1-00144feabdc0>.

In the *introductory chapter*, it is pointed out that economic warfare is nothing new. Dr. Krause rightly highlights the oil crisis of 1973 to illustrate how dependency equals vulnerability, which was all too easily exploited. The next significant event was the Chinese blockade of rare earths to Japan in 2010, threatening to bring the country to a standstill unless Chinese demands were met. They were, and although there was a brief flurry of debate, nothing was done – which is why we are in the middle of a rerun today. European complacency, coated with the belief that increased trade would transform both countries, if not completely, then at least into something much more like us, led to inaction. President George W. Bush's welcoming speech to China upon its entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001 is an embarrassing example of expectations that were never fulfilled.

Western inaction has given China, as well as Russia, ample time to entrench themselves in our economies and political systems. And Dr. Krause should be lauded for never hiding the fact that these are two dictatorships that both regard the West as an opponent to be rendered economically impotent and politically docile.

Chapter 2 analyses how European dependence on both countries grew in the years preceding Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine. For Russia, energy loomed large, not only in exports, but also in the acquisition of national networks and storage capacities. *Nord Stream* is addressed, but, as a non-German, I would have appreciated more attention to the German government's utter lack of willingness to listen to the objections made by other European countries. And if not in the text, a footnote referring to Foreign Minister Heiko Maas' snickering in the United Nations when President Trump chided Germany for being entirely dependent on Russian gas would have been a welcome comic relief.

China's targets were different. A major priority was the purchase of European industrial champions, among them Kuka, the German industrial-robot producer. In the run-up to the Chinese takeover in 2016, the German government had tried to prevent a sale – only to discover it lacked the legal instruments to do so.

The book also explores China's failed attempts to establish itself as a major player in Central Eastern Europe. There are at least two lessons that can be drawn. First, China tries to exploit the vacuum left by others. This was the case at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when the EU was paralysed, and Germany and France prohibited the export of face masks. Then China could and did portray itself as a *deus ex machina*. Second, China uses infrastructure lending as a tool of influence, offering loans that no commercial bank would touch and that often turn into debt traps. The

Bar-Boljare Highway in Montenegro is the most glaring example of how China provides loans that develop into a debt burden. Here, Western banks and the EU were forced to step in with a financial rescue. The possibility that China would demand the port of Bar on the Adriatic, much like it had done in Sri Lanka, was incentive enough for the West to get its act together.

Dr. Krause does not mention this case specifically, but he does focus on Chinese investments in maritime infrastructure. The first success was the takeover of the Greek port of Piraeus in 2016, but since then China has bought parts of several European harbours. The latest was Hamburg, and this happened well after the European Parliament had warned against the security risks associated with a Chinese state-owned enterprise gaining access to critical infrastructure.

Chapter 3 on China's current efforts to leverage dependency to influence European countries is reason enough to get hold of the book. It contains a detailed survey of China's different methods of entrapment, but with a particular emphasis on green technologies "Made in China".

The ability to plan and act strategically has also meant that Western companies and investments have gradually been squeezed out of the Chinese market, in direct contradiction to promises made. It took an inexplicably long time for European governments to point this out, and even longer for the European Commission to begin addressing the worsening market conditions for Western firms. It is a pity that Dr. Krause does not quote Margrethe Vestager, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission (2019-2024), whose repeated, no-nonsense warnings against Chinese ambitions clearly contributed to the change in EU policy. One of these changes was that the Commission no longer waited for a member country to lodge a complaint against Chinese trading practices or theft of intellectual property before taking action. Formally, the Commission had been granted the power to act *ex officio* as early as 2003, but the German government in particular was dead set against the Commission doing anything of the sort, fearing Chinese retaliation against German car exports.

Although many of the issues raised in this chapter will be familiar to readers interested in EU-Chinese relations, Dr. Krause includes some that are rarely addressed. Technical standards are one of these. Why this is important is easily explained: the one who sets the standards has a considerable market advantage. China has gained significant ground internationally through the imposition of Chinese technical norms in Belt and Road projects. Not mentioned in the book is the role played by Western naivety in believing that, by enabling Chinese experts to obtain controlling positions in organisations deciding international technical

standards, they would be guided by general rather than CCP interests.

To sum it up: the book is stringent, well-argued, and easy to use. I have a few points of criticism, all of which are minor and should be taken as a gentle prodding to the author to stay on topic and write more.

The analysis would have benefited if the U.S. had been included even more. American politicians and scholars addressed China's use of trade as a strategic weapon at least a decade before the EU. The European Commission only labelled China a "systemic rival" in 2019² – a mild rebuke when compared with what had been coming out of the White House and Congress. Today, the rhetorical and political gap between the two sides of the Atlantic has diminished. Both the U.S. and the EU are now instituting various protectionist measures to curb Chinese dumping practices and hostile takeovers. These are not covered in the book in any detail. Had this been done, it would have been possible to discuss the efficiency – or rather the lack thereof – of different countermeasures. A case in point is the EU's screening mechanism for Chinese purchases of European firms, introduced around 2017, which has had a dramatic impact. A repeat of China's takeover of Kuka would be impossible today. However, this system is not watertight; much depends on the political leadership in each country. Dr. Krause refers to Huawei's penetration of European communication systems as an example of China gaining access to critical infrastructure. Yet this is more of a German than pan-European problem: several countries have effectively blocked Huawei from their 5G net. Why this has not been the case in Germany would be interesting to know.

Moreover, the introductory *Theoriediskussion* explains little and adds even less. A far easier and more to-the-point solution would have been to focus on different approaches to economic warfare. This could have been achieved, for instance, by incorporating Edward N. Luttwak's seminal article "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce", published in *The National*

Interest in 1990. What Luttwak does there, and he accomplishes this in just about five pages, is explain why commercial warfare has grown in relevance and is undertaken not only to coerce other countries but also to weaken political and economic resistance. The current U.S. and European scramble for strategic minerals proves how right he was. It should be added that much research and profound insights into economic warfare have been an entrenched part of French security studies for decades, yet this is overlooked. One French researcher who has answered the question of how the Chinese go about gaining influence is Dr. Alice Ekman. In 2018, she published a study on how China strategically uses small groups operating locally to gain influence and contacts around the Mediterranean.³ She showed how China has cleverly chosen a bottom-up approach, whereas Russia has generally done the opposite. This means that China is less dependent on "door openers" than Russia. By contrast, it is difficult to imagine that Russian networks would have been able to work so efficiently for long if it had not been for Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's role as door opener and consigliere – although I personally remain astonished that his successor's utter passivity on this issue is rarely addressed. Dr. Krause underlines the need for further work on Russian networks in the form of associations, interest groups, and so on. This, to the best of my knowledge, is already being done in most European countries.

Finally, my objections should not be permitted to overshadow the fact that this is a highly relevant book. The same goes for the *preface*, written by Hera Helena Menon from *Zentrum für Analyse und Forschung* (ZAF) at the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (BfV); if anything, it only underlines the importance of the rest of the book.

Zusatzmaterial: Die Onlineversion bietet als Zusatzmaterial eine deutsche Übersetzung der Besprechung (<https://doi.org/10.1515/sirius-2025-2019>)

² European Commission (2019): *EU-China – A strategic Outlook*, 1, <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

³ Alice Ekman (2018): *La Chine en Méditerranée: une présence émergente*, in: *Notes de l'Ifri*, 22.02.2018, https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/Ekman_Chine_Mediterranee_2018.pdf.