International Journal of Technology and Applied Science (IJTAS)

E-ISSN: 2230-9004 ● Website: www.ijtas.com ● Email: editor@ijtas.com

Pragmatic Power: How China's Energy Security Drives Its Foreign Policy Strategy

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Abstract:
China is the world's largest energy consumer, importing approximately 72% of its oil and relying on fossil fuels for over 80% of its primary energy supply. This structural dependency on physical energy resources — coal, oil, natural gas, and an expanding renewable portfolio — creates fundamental vulnerabilities in China's energy security that directly shape its bilateral relationships and geopolitical strategy. This paper examines how China's physical energy demands and supply chain dependencies drive its foreign policy decisions, analysing three bilateral case studies — China's energy relationships with Russia, Iran, and the United States — through a pragmatic energy security framework. The analysis demonstrates that China's engagement with energy suppliers is governed by the logic of resource access over ideological alignment: its non-interference policy, strategic use of the Belt and Road Initiative as an energy infrastructure instrument, and pivot away from the United States are all coherent expressions of an energy-driven foreign policy logic. Drawing on China's Five-Year Plans, renewable energy legislation, and fossil fuel import data, the paper further examines China's managed transition from coal dependency towards renewable energy, and the implications of that transition for its existing energy partnerships. The paper contributes to the scholarly debate on the relationship between physical resource dependency, energy infrastructure, and state behaviour, offering a case-study-grounded argument that energy security has become the organizing principle of China's contemporary geopolitical strategy.

Keywords: oil imports; energy security; fossil fuels; energy infrastructure; renewable energy; Belt and Road Initiative; coal; geopolitics; China foreign policy; supply chain security

Introduction

Oil security in China has become a major geopolitical issue that demands serious attention. As the largest consumer of oil and gas, China is heavily reliant on external sources to meet its growing energy needs. "Twenty-six percent of all of China's energy is imported from other countries" (Meidan, 2014). Because of this, China is compelled to import from as many willing partners as possible to secure the raw materials and energy resources it requires. With that in mind, it is clear that China aligns its energy policy with its foreign policy, driven by energy needs; this alignment depends on supply availability, the nature of bilateral relationships, and China's willingness to engage with states considered unfavorable, such as Russia and Iran, to meet its energy demands.

This study argues that China's energy security needs significantly shape its foreign policy decisions, as evidenced by its strategic alliances with countries such as Russia and Iran. Throughout this paper, I lay out the case to define the correlation between China's energy policy and foreign policy, and how the two are interrelated. I also analyze the relationship between the United States of America and China as a case study. As of early 2025, the two countries are engaged in an escalating trade conflict — one of the most significant in modern interstate history — driven by the tariff and protectionist policies of the Trump administration (2025–present), which has materially altered the energy trade relationship between these two powers.

Chinese oil companies had stakes in more than 200 projects in about 50 countries, and the value of these projects was estimated at more than US $80 billion (Dannreuther, 2011; Kong, 2010). This demonstrates that China's demand outweighs the demands of all other states, making China the world's largest energy-consuming country. Essentially, because of its energy needs and the scale of its supplier relationships, China designs its energy policies in alignment with its foreign policies — a strategic choice driven by pragmatic necessity.

There is also a considerable logic to China's favoring cooperation with other large oil-importing states, such as the United States, Japan, and the European Union, rather than with oil-producing states, such as Russia, Iran, or Venezuela, which tend to promote a revisionist anti-Western foreign policy (Dannreuther, 2011). However, since the writing of Dannreuther (2011), China has moved towards Russia and Iran as energy and trade partners, and has adopted foreign policy positions increasingly at odds with the Western liberal order, including its support for BRICS as an alternative multilateral framework. The original BRICS countries are Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Iran was admitted as an expanded member in 2024, further deepening its alignment with this bloc and with China's broader energy-oriented foreign policy agenda.

China views its energy policies towards Russian oil as a means of securing its energy needs without the diplomatic friction that frequently characterises its energy trade relationship with the United States. China's foreign policy as it pertains to Russia and other countries is not to involve China in domestic geopolitical issues, but rather to extract the resources it needs from those countries by not involving itself in its trading partners' foreign policies (Meidan, 2014). In other words, China does not engage in condemnations of other countries' human rights violations or political issues from its allies or trading partners to protect its energy resources. With that in mind, a further exploration is needed to discuss the relationship between China and Russia and how the relationship with China's energy policies dictates its foreign policies with Russia and other countries alike.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper adopts a pragmatic security framework as its theoretical lens, drawing on the energy security literature within International Relations. Rather than applying a purely realist or liberal framework, I approach China's foreign policy behaviour through the logic of pragmatic statecraft — the idea that states prioritize practical, interest-driven outcomes over ideological consistency when their core security needs are at stake. Energy security, in this context, functions as a primary driver of strategic alignment. This approach is consistent with Dannreuther (2011), who argues that China's external energy behaviour reflects a calculated and flexible engagement strategy rather than a fixed ideological orientation, and with Yergin's (1991) foundational argument that energy security is a central organizing concern of modern state behaviour.

It is worth situating this framework against competing theoretical accounts. A classical realist explanation would predict that China's partnerships are driven by power-balancing against the United States, with energy serving as an instrument rather than the cause of alignment. While there is merit in this view, it fails to explain why these partnerships remain strictly transactional and non-military in character, without the formal alliance commitments that realism would predict (Shambaugh, 2013). A liberal institutionalist account would predict that China would pursue energy security through multilateral frameworks and market mechanisms. Yet China's consistent circumvention of international sanctions regimes and its preference for bilateral engagement outside Western-led institutions contradicts this expectation. The pragmatic security framework resolves this gap: China is neither a power-balancer nor a liberal multilateralist, but a pragmatic resource-seeker that adapts its diplomatic posture to wherever energy is available on acceptable terms (Meidan, 2014; Economy, 2018).

The concept of energy security is understood here in its broadest policy sense: the reliable, affordable, and continuous supply of energy resources necessary to sustain national economic growth and political stability (Leung, 2011). For China, given its scale of consumption and structural dependence on imports,

energy security has become inseparable from national security, which is why it so visibly shapes diplomatic decisions. I argue that this linkage between energy vulnerability and foreign policy pragmatism is the defining feature of China's contemporary geopolitical posture.

Methodologically, this paper is a qualitative policy analysis drawing on secondary literature, academic journal articles, policy documents, and scholarly commentary. Three case studies are examined — China's relationships with Russia, Iran, and the United States — selected because they represent the most consequential bilateral energy relationships in China's current foreign policy portfolio, and because each illustrates a distinct dimension of the pragmatic security thesis: strategic partnership under sanctions pressure (Russia), resource access despite diplomatic isolation (Iran), and decoupling under trade conflict (United States). No primary data were generated or collected; the analysis synthesizes existing scholarship to build an evidence-based argument about the structural relationship between China's energy needs and its foreign policy decisions.

Literature Review

The relationship between energy security and foreign policy has been a growing area of inquiry in International Relations scholarship, particularly as China's rise has reoriented global energy markets. Dannreuther's (2011) foundational work on China and global oil establishes that China's external energy strategy is shaped by a combination of commercial, strategic, and political motivations, and that these motivations often produce foreign policy decisions that prioritize resource access over normative alignment with Western-led institutions. This insight forms a key pillar of the argument I develop throughout this paper.

Leung (2011) provides an important perspective, noting that China's energy security concerns are often overstated, and that domestic coal production has historically buffered China against the worst import vulnerabilities. However, Leung also acknowledges that China's growing dependence on oil imports creates a structural pressure that inevitably shapes diplomatic behaviour. Meidan (2014) builds on this, examining how China's energy import boom has altered its foreign policy calculus, particularly in its willingness to engage with states that are politically contentious from a Western perspective. Together, these works establish the scholarly foundation for understanding China's energy-driven pragmatism.

On the China-Iran relationship, Garver (2006) provides a foundational account of how Beijing has managed the tension between its energy interests in Tehran and its broader relationship with Washington, while Downs and Maloney (2011) offer a detailed analysis of how China navigates sanctions pressure to sustain oil imports from Iran. Their work establishes that China's engagement with Iran is not opportunistic but structural and deliberate. Yellinek's (2022) more recent examination of soft power dynamics in the China-Iran partnership identifies the Strait of Hormuz as a critical strategic variable, complementing Zweig and Jianhai's (2005) earlier argument that China's entire Middle Eastern foreign policy is fundamentally organized around energy access.

On the Russia-China energy axis, Gleb et al. (2023–2024) analyze how trade and financial relationships between the two countries have deepened in the post-Ukraine sanctions environment, using a trade gravity model to demonstrate the structural shift in Russia's export orientation towards China. This quantitative evidence supports the qualitative argument advanced in this paper about mutual energy dependency as the foundation of the relationship. On the environmental and geopolitical dimensions, Jiao, Xiao, and Bao (2022) provide empirical evidence linking heightened geopolitical risk with deteriorating environmental sustainability in China's energy sector. Jiang (2018) rounds out the literature by mapping China's projected energy transition, highlighting the tension between short-term security imperatives and long-term sustainability goals — a tension that sits at the heart of the argument advanced in this paper. Economy (2018) and Shambaugh (2013) provide the broader China foreign policy context within which these energy dynamics must be understood.

Historical Context: China's Energy Policy Origins

China relies on coal for most of its energy, which comes from its reserves and regional resources. "China's predominant dependence on coal, albeit the resultant environmental hazards, is strategically helpful in maintaining the country's unusually high degree of energy self-sufficiency" (Leung, 2011). Its overall policy is to be self-sufficient; however, China uses natural gas as its second largest source of energy, which it mostly imports from other countries. Its policy is inclusive of natural gas as it is easier to transport, and the rationale is that "the role of natural gas in the Chinese energy economy is small, and more importantly, Beijing has successfully landed some long-term contracts and the future supplies secured are enough to fill the supply-demand gap in the near future. Natural gas has various substitutes as a fuel for many of its main uses, especially for electricity, which can be generated by coal, renewable energies, or even oil, whereas oil, particularly as a transport fuel, is much less substitutable" (Leung, 2011). This logic leads to China's going-out policy, which allowed China to conduct trade and foreign relations on a global scale; prior to this policy shift, China could not sustain the energy needs of its people, and therefore structural changes in policy became necessary.

Background on China's Energy Policy

a. Overview of China's Energy Demands

As previously stated, China's energy demands are of major significance because China remains one of the most populous countries in the world. As of 2023, India surpassed China to become the world's most populous nation, with China now ranking second at approximately 1.4 billion people. China's one-child policy was implemented to control population growth, but since its relaxation in 2015, families opted to have more than one child, thus increasing China's population further. "With a population of over 1.4 billion people, there is a compelling need for energy security and resources. Currently, China's population is on the decline, as of this writing, and is expected to decrease under a billion by 2070" (United Nations, 2019). China's demand for energy still increases due to its rising industrialization and international trade as well as manufacturing. Because the demand is high, there is a reliance on several types of energy sources.

b. Key Energy Sources

China's key energy resources are coal, oil, renewables, and nuclear energy. For the sake of this paper, only coal and renewables will be touched on in greater detail, as they are the two most used resources (Liu et al., 2023), and their significance is important for policy discussion. In contrast, coal and nuclear energy sources will only have the statistics provided, without a complete analysis.

The percentage of renewables used in China is 31%, making this source the second most used source of energy. It includes hydropower, solar power, and wind power, which are naturally present within the environment, as well as geothermal power. China implemented its policy into a program called the Renewable Energy Law, which came into force in China in 2006; the law effectively promoted the rapid development of renewable energy. The RELAP created a national framework for promoting renewable energy deployment for the first time in China, which includes five mechanisms (Liu et al., 2023). These mechanisms, or rather policy controls, are as follows:

1. The total target mechanism, which is law-based and continues with a 5-year planning period or more (this subject is further discussed in the next section).
2. Mandatory connection and purchase mechanism — grid companies must connect and purchase all renewable power within their coverage area.
3. The feed-in tariffs mechanism, also known as FIT, guarantees a price that the grid company will pay to the renewable generator of power to receive their costs and gain profit.
4. Cost-sharing mechanism — essentially a combination of mechanisms 1 and 3 (Liu et al., 2023). This measurement can be somewhat problematic because it is not a cost-saving method and, therefore, although policy, is not a preferred method of purchasers.

5. Special fund mechanism — this policy supports technological research for the deployment of renewable energy. Special fund mechanisms/policies provide tax incentives in addition to government funding to support programs and/or research to participants (Liu et al., 2023).

China's sustainability relies on coal production, which is 61% of China's total usage of resources. China is nearly at 100% development of coal production, more specifically 82%, which is produced locally within the country (Yang, 2023). Based on statistics, it is fair to assume that China's domestic policy as it pertains to coal production relies on self-reliance as a domestic strategy.

Coal: Strategic Self-Reliance and the Transition Paradox

This near-total domestic production capacity is strategically significant — unlike oil, coal insulates China from external supply disruptions, making it the bedrock of the energy self-sufficiency that underpins its foreign policy independence (Leung, 2011). China's coal dependence is therefore not merely an environmental or economic issue; it is a national security asset.

However, coal simultaneously represents China's most significant foreign policy liability. China is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and its domestic coal consumption has drawn sustained international criticism, particularly from Western governments and within multilateral climate frameworks. This tension came to a head in September 2021, when President Xi Jinping announced at the United Nations General Assembly that China would no longer build new coal-fired power projects abroad — a direct foreign policy concession driven by international diplomatic pressure (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Prior to this pledge, China had been the single largest public financier of cross-border coal power investment globally, with BRI coal projects accounting for 46% of China's overseas energy investments as recently as 2015 (International Institute of Green Finance, 2021).

The 2021 pledge is analytically significant for this paper's argument in two respects. First, it illustrates that domestic energy priorities — specifically, coal's role in sustaining self-sufficiency — do not translate straightforwardly into overseas investment strategy. When geopolitical costs became sufficiently high, China reversed a policy that had benefited domestic industry for over a decade. Second, the pledge demonstrates that China's foreign policy is not purely reactive to energy needs but can adapt its external posture in response to international normative pressure, particularly when issue linkages in intergovernmental bargaining make concessions strategically advantageous (Zhang & Shen, 2024). This nuances but does not contradict the paper's core thesis: energy pragmatism remains the organizing principle, but its expression is shaped by the diplomatic environment in which it operates.

China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) embedded Xi's overseas coal pledge into formal domestic policy for the first time, alongside binding targets for reducing coal's share of total domestic energy consumption and achieving peak carbon emissions before 2030 (Jiang, 2018). The long-term trajectory is therefore one of managed transition — coal remains dominant in the short term as a security anchor, while renewables are scaled to eventually replace it. Whether this transition proceeds on schedule will have significant consequences for China's relationships with its current energy partners, particularly those whose bilateral ties with Beijing rest substantially on fossil fuel trade.

Nuclear energy accounts for a small percentage of China's total energy use, which is attributable in part to public concern and limited social acceptance following high-profile international incidents such as Fukushima. China's policy response has been to invest in next-generation reactor designs and domestic safety communications Programmes aimed at gradually building public confidence, while simultaneously expanding nuclear capacity as part of its low-carbon transition strategy.

c. Government Policies on Energy Security and Sustainability (5-Year Plans, Belt and Road Initiative)

China's approach to energy security is not improvised; it is systematically embedded in long-term national planning. The most significant institutional mechanism for this is China's Five-Year Plans (FYPs), which

since the 11th Plan (2006–2010) have included explicit energy efficiency targets, renewable deployment goals, and carbon intensity reduction benchmarks. The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) is particularly notable in this regard: it set binding targets for non-fossil fuel energy consumption, mandated a reduction in coal's share of total energy use, and explicitly linked energy policy to China's dual carbon goals — peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 (Jiang, 2018). These targets are not merely aspirational; they carry the weight of state planning authority and are enforced through provincial performance metrics, which means that domestic policy implementation is tied directly to the central government's strategic energy vision.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, represents the international complement to this domestic planning framework. While the BRI is often discussed in the context of trade infrastructure and geopolitical influence, its energy dimension is central and frequently underappreciated. A significant portion of BRI investment has been directed towards energy infrastructure: pipelines, liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, power plants, and electricity grids across Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), for example, includes major investments in power generation capacity that directly serve China's strategic interest in diversifying its energy supply chains and reducing dependence on the Strait of Malacca. Similarly, BRI energy projects in Central Asia have provided China with overland pipeline routes to Russian and Kazakhstani gas fields, bypassing vulnerable maritime chokepoints.

It is also important to recognize that the BRI functions as a diplomatic instrument as much as an economic one. By financing energy infrastructure in developing countries, China builds political goodwill, creates economic interdependence, and secures long-term supply agreements that are difficult for recipient countries to exit without significant cost. This dynamic is particularly evident in Africa and in parts of Southeast Asia, where Chinese energy financing has been accompanied by broader diplomatic alignments. In this sense, the Five-Year Plans and the BRI together form a two-track strategy: the FYPs manage domestic energy transition and sustainability goals, while the BRI extends China's energy security perimeter outwards, embedding it in the infrastructure and economies of partner states. Both tracks ultimately serve the same overarching objective that this paper argues is central to China's foreign policy: the assurance of stable, long-term energy access to sustain economic growth and national stability.

China's Energy Dependence and Global Engagement

China's Dependence on Foreign Oil

With regard to oil production and oil imports, China's policy relies heavily on a diverse portfolio of suppliers. Saudi Arabia and Russia consistently rank as China's largest crude oil suppliers, with Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait also playing significant roles (Meidan, 2014). Iran, while subject to international sanctions, has continued to supply discounted oil to China. The United States, by contrast, is not a primary crude oil supplier to China, though broader trade relations have historically shaped the energy policy environment. China imports approximately 72% of its oil, citing 300 million tons of annual usage. Because of its structural reliance on foreign oil, China's energy policies are necessarily outward-looking, and any political disruption to key supplier relationships creates immediate strategic pressure.

Impact on Foreign Policy Strategies

Geopolitical Alignments: China's energy-driven foreign policy is most visibly expressed through its deliberate strengthening of ties with Russia, Gulf nations, and Central African states — partners selected not primarily on the basis of shared political values, but on the basis of their capacity to provide stable, long-term energy supplies. This pattern of alignment reflects a consistent strategic logic: China engages where energy is available, on terms that avoid political entanglement, and through frameworks that insulate bilateral relationships from external pressure.

China's relationship with Iran represents one of the most consequential and contested dimensions of its energy-driven foreign policy. Since the late 1980s, China has been structurally reliant on Middle Eastern

oil imports to sustain its economic growth, and Iran's geographic position, pricing flexibility under sanctions, and substantial reserves have made it a strategically important supplier (Meidan, 2014; Zweig & Jianhai, 2005). The relationship is not without diplomatic cost: the United States and its allies have consistently pressured China to reduce its engagement with Tehran, particularly in the context of Iran's nuclear programme and the associated international sanctions regimes. China has declined to comply, systematically prioritizing energy access over alignment with Western diplomatic norms (Economy, 2018).

Faced with increasing energy demands and geopolitical complexity, China has deepened its engagement with Iran to secure stable oil imports despite ongoing international sanctions. This pragmatic relationship illustrates China's broader energy security strategy, which prioritizes resource acquisition over ideological alignment or compliance with Western-led sanctions regimes (Downs & Maloney, 2011). The partnership allows China not only to diversify its energy sources but also to consolidate its presence in a geopolitically sensitive region. China's policy of non-interference and its willingness to engage with sanctioned states reflects a deliberate foreign policy choice rooted in energy pragmatism, and one that has increasingly defined its posture in the Middle East more broadly (Garver, 2006).

In readdressing the Russia–China issue, the relationship has strengthened through the creation of BRICS. Recent geopolitical developments have increased the relationship between these two superpowers. During the Russia–Ukraine War, Western sanctions isolated Russia economically, forcing it to deepen its reliance on China for energy exports. China, motivated by both necessity and strategic calculation, capitalized on discounted Russian oil, strengthening a pragmatic partnership rooted in mutual energy dependency. It is because of this alliance that China's dependency on Russia's supply shapes its relationship on foreign policy.

Russia represents a strategically valuable energy partner for China, particularly in the context of Western sanctions and the shifting of global markets. As Russia became increasingly isolated following the Ukraine conflict, China capitalized on discounted oil and gas imports, strengthening a relationship rooted in mutual dependency. This partnership provides China with overland energy routes, reducing reliance on maritime supply chains, and mitigating vulnerabilities such as the "Malacca dilemma." Unlike its relationships with Western states, China's continuous engagement with Russia is driven by pragmatic considerations of energy security rather than ideological alignment, reinforcing its broader strategy of securing stable and diversified energy sources.

Maritime and Security Concerns: It is important to recognize the relationship between China and the Gulf nations, and Iran is specifically mentioned due to its policies. China's relationship with Iran is deeply influenced by maritime security concerns, particularly those related to securing vital energy supply routes. The relationship between China and Iran is influenced by their energy policies, and much like Russia, the relationship is pragmatic because of energy dependency; the countries are somewhat in a political alliance where they support one another regardless of the securitization speech from other states. Another reason why China looks to Iran as a valuable supplier of energy is because of Iran's geographic position near the Strait of Hormuz. China yields the region's significance as a critical juncture because a massive portion of the world's oil passes through the strait, controlled significantly by Iran (Yellinek, 2022).

During wartime, the supplies are soft targets for terrorism and countries participating in the war. Within the last few years, there have been several attacks on oil tankers within the region and surrounding regions transporting supplies to China and other countries. While this tends to be problematic of late, Iran's location is a key partner for China's energy security. By strengthening ties with Iran, China aims to ensure stable access to Iranian oil and gas resources, mitigating the risks posed by potential disruptions in maritime transport. This partnership helps China address what is often called the "Malacca dilemma," which refers to China's weakness to blockades or interruptions in the Strait of Malacca, a primary shipping lane for its energy imports (Yellinek, 2022).

Challenges and Controversies

Geopolitical risks, particularly those arising from China's complex relations with the United States, India, and other regional actors, play a significant role in shaping its energy policy outcomes and its capacity to manage the transition towards a more sustainable energy mix. With the United States specifically, these risks have intensified into a strategic competition fought partly through trade and economic policy (Sanger, 2024). The Trump administration (2025–present) initiated a series of escalating tariff measures against Chinese goods, generating significant bilateral trade disruption and eroding the predictability that underpins stable energy trade relationships. As a result of this deteriorating relationship, China has concluded that the United States can no longer be considered a reliable long-term trade partner, nor a dependable intermediary for energy resources. Because of this distrust, China has oriented its energy policy towards self-reliance and has shifted, to varying degrees, towards nationalism, protectionism, and economic decoupling. This trajectory increases the risks to China's energy security, as full domestic self-sufficiency in energy supply remains a long-term rather than near-term prospect.

According to Jiao, Xiao, and Bao (2022), empirical evidence demonstrates how geopolitical tensions influence China's ecological footprint and energy production. The research finds that heightened geopolitical risks (GPR) are associated with a deterioration in environmental quality, as measured by the ecological footprint. The environmental risks are broader than initially expected, encompassing elevated air pollutants, noise pollution, destruction of agricultural land, and damage to ocean water supplies. Ocean floor infrastructure where major oil pipelines run is also at risk due to tampering by other states, structural failure, and leaks. These tensions lead to policy uncertainty and reactive economic measures, such as increased reliance on non-renewable energy sources to ensure security in the face of potential trade disruptions. Additionally, strained diplomatic relations with neighboring countries such as India — also a major consumer of foreign energy resources — put both states in competition for the same supply chains, which can trigger shifts in energy output composition and delay the transition to renewables.

The analysis and other econometric models confirmed that both the short- and long-term effects of GPR are detrimental to environmental sustainability (Jiao et al., 2022). The findings suggest that geopolitical frictions do not merely have diplomatic or economic consequences but also contribute indirectly to ecological degradation by altering the national energy strategy. Thus, geopolitical stability emerges as a critical factor not only for economic development but also for promoting a greener and more sustainable energy trajectory in China, which overall changes China's foreign policies towards energy policies and domestic sustainability.

Future Trends and Policy Adaptations

As China's domestic energy landscape evolves, the foreign policy implications of that transformation are becoming increasingly significant. A shift towards energy self-sufficiency — driven by renewable expansion, nuclear development, and domestic technological innovation — would reduce China's dependence on imported oil and gas, with potentially profound consequences for its relationships with current energy partners such as Russia, Iran, and the Gulf states.

According to Jiang Ning in Strategic Trends for Future Energy Policy, he highlights a decisive shift toward cleaner, smarter, and more sustainable systems, stating that a key trend is the accelerated adoption of renewable energy sources — especially solar and wind — driven by China's commitment to peak carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 (Jiang, 2018). He further suggests that technological innovation will play a pivotal role, with investments in smart grids, energy storage, and digital platforms optimizing energy use and distribution (Jiang, 2018).

Since decentralization is also emerging as a prominent trend, China's reliance on foreign oil products has decreased, and distributed energy systems and local energy markets have gained traction, enabling greater flexibility and resilience (Jiang, 2018). Electrification of end-use sectors, including transport and industry, will deepen, particularly with the rapid expansion of electric vehicles and hydrogen fuel technologies. Another critical trend is the policy-driven restructuring of energy markets. China is gradually transitioning

from state-controlled systems to market-oriented mechanisms that promote efficiency and competition (Jiang, 2018). The relevance is significant: while China remains a state-directed economy, its energy policies have increasingly incorporated market mechanisms, including competitive pricing, private sector participation in renewables, and internationally integrated trading schemes. This shift reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the demands of managing a complex modern energy system at scale, rather than an ideological transformation. This includes carbon pricing and emissions trading schemes to internalise environmental costs. Overall, China's future energy landscape will be shaped by sustainability goals, innovation, and policy reforms, positioning the country as a global leader in the energy transition. These trends signal transformative changes that will influence not only domestic energy strategies but also global energy dynamics. Since these policies are constantly moving, diplomacy with other states can be affected due to China's overall long-term goals of domestic energy reliance.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that China's foreign policy cannot be understood in isolation from its energy imperatives. The evidence presented across the case studies of Russia, Iran, and the United States consistently supports a single core argument: China's external relations are structured around the pragmatic pursuit of energy security, and this pursuit overrides ideological alignment, normative pressure, and even the diplomatic costs of engaging with internationally isolated states. This is not merely about meeting demand; it is about managing vulnerability in an increasingly multipolar and politically divided world.

One key example is China's growing relationship with Russia and Iran, both of which are seen as reliable partners in energy trade, particularly oil and natural gas. These relationships have been cultivated not out of ideological alignment but out of pragmatic necessity. China's policy of non-interference in internal affairs allows it to avoid entanglements in issues such as human rights abuses or regional conflicts, which often define Western foreign-policy approaches. By taking this approach, China has maintained access to critical resources without the diplomatic baggage. This is particularly evident in its dealings with Iran, where energy partnerships continue despite global sanctions and Western opposition.

Simultaneously, the relationship between China and the United States illustrates a significant pivot point in global energy diplomacy. While the U.S. was once a major supplier and trade partner, recent years have seen a cooling of relations, due in large part to political shifts under administrations such as Trump's, characterized by protectionism and isolationism. The escalating trade conflict between the two powers — described by Sanger (2024) as emblematic of a new era of great-power competition — has led China to actively explore alternative avenues for securing its energy needs. It has also reinforced China's strategic imperative to reduce dependency on any single state and instead diversify its import portfolio across multiple suppliers and regions.

China's participation in and promotion of BRICS has also played a significant role in shaping its energy-focused foreign policy. With Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa forming a coalition aimed at reshaping the global economic order, energy cooperation is central to this bloc. The shared anti-Western sentiment among some BRICS members makes it easier for China to align its foreign and energy strategies within this group, reinforcing geopolitical solidarity while simultaneously ensuring energy flows.

In terms of specific policy, initiatives such as the Renewable Energy Law and the Belt and Road Initiative show how domestic planning and international engagement work in tandem. China's five-year plans continue to include sustainability targets, but they are also embedded within broader energy security strategies. The Belt and Road Initiative, for example, is not just about trade infrastructure, but also facilitates energy corridor development, securing pipelines and supply chains across Asia, Africa, and even parts of Europe.

China's foreign policy cannot be fully understood without accounting for its energy needs. Whether it is fostering closer ties with resource-rich authoritarian regimes such as Iran or Russia, or avoiding politically charged disputes such as with the United States that could threaten oil supplies, China's approach is guided

by a clear, strategic interest: to maintain economic growth and national stability through a steady, reliable energy supply. This alignment of energy security and foreign policy is not a temporary measure; it is the organizing principle of China's long-term geopolitical strategy.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data were created or analysed in this research.

Disclosure of Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Funding

No funding was received for this work.

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