



# What the Yi Peng 3 cable-cutting incident reveals about China-Russia relations

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- On 17 and 18 November 2024, a Chinese-flagged vessel is suspected of having deliberately dragged its anchor to sabotage two undersea cables in the Baltic Sea. Given its intentions and pattern of past behaviour, there are good reasons to assume that Russia was also involved.
- In the absence of public evidence to determine who was responsible, this paper explores the implications of four different hypotheses, depending on whether China was involved and whether the sabotage was centrally planned or executed by lower-level actors.
- Each hypothesis, if accurate, would require us to partly reconsider the current state of the Russia-China relationship and its implications for Europe, as well as how to respond in our policy towards China. Active involvement by the Chinese side, especially the participation of the central authorities, would signal adversarial intent from Beijing, and increase Europe's rationale for considering China to be a hostile actor and implementing corresponding policies.

## The incident

On 17 and 18 November 2024, two fibre-optic cables [were severed](#) in Swedish territorial waters in the Baltic Sea. The Chinese-flagged bulk carrier Yi Peng 3 quickly became the prime suspect. The ship anchored in the Kattegat, within Denmark's Exclusive Economic Zone, ignoring requests from the Swedish authorities to return to Swedish territorial waters. A Chinese team arrived in [late December](#) to conduct its own investigation. The Swedish police were allowed onboard to observe, but not to carry out their own investigation. The Yi Peng 3 later [left the area](#).

## Who was behind the sabotage?

The investigation is ongoing and it cannot be ruled out that the incident was accidental. However, several factors suggest intentional sabotage. The Yi Peng 3 reportedly [dragged its anchor](#) along the seafloor for approximately 150 kilometres, which experts say would be

nearly impossible to do unintentionally, particularly given the mild weather conditions at the time. It also exhibited unusual movements while passing over the cables.

Considering the strategic importance of the Baltic Sea for Russia, and the fact that Russia considers itself to be in conflict with the West (both NATO and the EU), as well as the occurrence of recent similar [cable-cutting incidents](#) in the area that did not involve Chinese vessels, we believe that Russia should be considered the prime suspect of intentional sabotage of underwater infrastructure in the region. To create [plausible deniability](#), it would be natural for Russia to avoid using Russian-flagged vessels in such acts of sabotage. Thus, we proceed from the assumptions that the incident was a case of intentional sabotage and that it involved Russia as the main culprit, although none of this is confirmed. Should our assumptions later prove to be incorrect, the following analysis would, of course, need to be reassessed.

We do not deem it likely that the Chinese government sees any intrinsic value in disrupting Baltic Sea infrastructure. It is, however, an open question whether it might assist Russia in such operations. The answer to this question has widely differing implications for Europe's stance on China.

Speculation about the culprit in the mass media often uses terms such as "Russia and China", which assumes that they operate in unison and represent entirely cohesive systems of centralized decision-making and execution. However, it is important to consider the possibility that actors within these systems, acting out of expediency or defiance, may have taken actions that were neither approved nor even known about in advance by the central policy apparatus. Without indulging in too far-reaching speculation about the inner workings of these systems, it is conceivable that, for example, intelligence agencies or elements of national militaries could have carried out such an operation on their own. For the purposes of this analysis, the captain and crew of Yi Peng 3 are not considered to be such lower-level actors, as they might have simply been persuaded, paid or coerced to carry out the alleged sabotage.

### Considering the implications of each hypothesis

At this point, based on open sources, we lack compelling evidence to conclusively support either theory. Since we cannot decisively determine which alternative is more likely, it is more practical to explore what each theory, if true, would imply for our understanding of the China-Russia relationship and its significance for Europe and the West. We are not suggesting that the incident itself necessarily had a major impact; rather, our focus is on what it represents and its broader implications. Table 1 outlines the range of potential possibilities.

<b>Table 1: Potential scenarios</b>	Russia acted alone	Russia and China acted in collusion
It was authorized at the central government level	I	II
It was independently planned and executed by lower-level government or military actors	III	IV

### **Hypothesis I: The Russian government conducted the sabotage without the involvement of the Chinese state**

*Implications for our understanding of China-Russia relations:* This scenario supports the general assumption that Russian and Chinese interests in Europe diverge significantly. Russia's actions meant that China was compelled to investigate a Chinese vessel and faced considerable suspicion from countries in the region. This suggests that Russia is not reluctant to cause problems for China. The action might even represent an attempt to put pressure on Beijing by cementing the image of Russia and China as a united front in the European mind. This would, in turn, reshape our understanding of the power dynamics in the relationship. While it is widely believed that Russia's growing dependence on China since 24 February 2022 has tilted the balance of power in China's favour, a unilateral action by Russia which so flagrantly implicates China would indicate that Russia by no means feels constrained to always consider Chinese interests.

*Implications for our China policy:* If Russia acted independently of Chinese state involvement, it would mean that Russia poses a liability for China by complicating Beijing's efforts to maintain positive relations with Europe. This situation might lead some Europeans to downplay the threat to Europe posed by China's cooperation with Russia. Rather than excusing China by comparing it favourably with Russia, however, we should emphasize that China's alignment with Russia is the fundamental driver of such issues. Imposing costs is necessary to ensure that Beijing understands that Russia's actions will also have repercussions for China. However, in this scenario, diplomacy is likely to play a larger role than sanctions.

### **Hypothesis II: The Russian and Chinese governments conducted the sabotage together**

*Implications for our understanding of China-Russia relations:* This scenario implies a significant shift in China's policy towards Europe, with Beijing taking a more aggressive approach and treating Europe as an adversary to be undermined, even by illicit and destabilizing actions. In such a case, China's preferences in Europe would align much more closely with Russia's than is commonly assumed.

*Implications for our China policy:* Such a scenario would necessitate a major reassessment of China's actions in Europe, effectively positioning China as an adversary. It would indicate that China is no longer committed to maintaining peaceful relations with Europe, because it perceives Europe as weak, views coercion as necessary to prevent closer European alignment with the United States against China or believes Europe has already aligned with the US-led "containment strategy". This would strengthen the rationale for abandoning the notion of China as a partner for Europe in certain areas and instead adopting a more assertive stance. Measures could include wider sanctions in response to China's support for Russia's war, along with broader actions to counter its influence. It would also prompt the need for improved conventional defensive measures in the Baltic Sea and other domains.

### **Hypothesis III: Russian lower-level actors conducted the sabotage independently, without coordination with the Kremlin or involvement from China**

*Implications for our understanding of China-Russia relations:* If this were the case, it would indicate that lower-level actors within the Russian system could undermine Chinese interests in Europe. In other words, Russia's internal policy incoherence and instability could

heighten Beijing's uncertainty about Russian actions in Europe, potentially causing frustration in Beijing over the ramifications of its relationship with Russia.

*Implications for our China policy:* This scenario could provide Europe with an opportunity to highlight to China that Russia presents a significant problem due to internal weaknesses within the Kremlin. Not only are Russian actors taking actions that harm China's relations with European countries, but the incompetence and vulnerabilities within the Russian leadership are posing broader long-term challenges for Beijing.

#### **Hypothesis IV: Russian and Chinese lower-level actors conducted the sabotage together, without coordination with the Kremlin or Zhongnanhai**

*Implications for our understanding of China-Russia relations:* In this scenario, lower-level Chinese and Russian actors would have conspired to carry out the sabotage without authorization from higher levels. This would indicate that Chinese policy control is less centralized than commonly assumed. Moreover, if lower-level Chinese actors were coordinating with their Russian counterparts in ways not approved by more senior leaders, we would need to reassess the ability of China's top leadership to control the system not only in China, but also in Europe. This would introduce greater uncertainty about what to expect from both China and Russia, and increase the likelihood of further incidents.

*Implications for our China policy:* If this were the case, we should prepare for a higher likelihood of more incidents, and more instability within the Chinese system. Identifying the entities involved would be crucial for implementing targeted sanctions. To deter similar actions involving Chinese vessels, it should be clearly communicated to China that any future attacks, regardless of the seniority of the actors involved, will have consequences.



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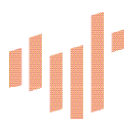


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#### **About Swedish National China Centre**

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