



China's Perceptions of Russia during the Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract: The ongoing Russian military operation in Ukraine since February 2022 has presented significant challenges to China's foreign and security policies, as well as its economic and technological ties with the West. Initially, China refrained from criticizing Russia's military actions and adopted a "neutral" or "independent" stance in response to Western criticism. However, China was taken aback by the protracted nature of the conflict and Russia's inability to successfully conclude its military operation. This raised concerns within China, considering its own situation of potentially reunifying with Taiwan through military means if necessary. While there are distinctions between the situations in Ukraine and Taiwan, the initial speculation of China conducting military operations against Taiwan has gradually diminished, although military pressure on Taiwan remains. The conflict in Ukraine has also caused internal divisions within China and has had an impact on its relations with the West, which are crucial for China's rise on the global stage. This article aims to examine China's interests and positions regarding the ongoing Ukrainian conflict, the implications for its relations with Russia, and the opportunities and challenges that China faces in the current situation. The article employs an inductive approach, analyzing China's predicaments at four levels: perceptions within the decision-making bodies of the Communist Party, the foreign ministry, think-tanks, and the media community. It argues that in conjunction with China's economic contraction resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian military operation has prompted China to seriously contemplate how to safeguard its national interests, particularly with regard to Taiwan and its strategic objectives of attaining a prominent global position. These considerations carry medium to long-term implications for the evolving regional and global orders. In conclusion, the article briefly discusses the implications of these developments on India, shedding light on the broader regional dynamics influenced by China's response to the Ukrainian conflict.

Keywords: China's foreign and security policies, economic and technological ties, military operations, reunification with Taiwan, implications for China-West relations, emerging regional and global orders

China's observers have expressed surprise and concern regarding Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine¹. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which commenced in late February 2022, holds significant implications not only for China but also for numerous countries worldwide. China's carefully constructed narratives surrounding its "peaceful rise," Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), "community of common destiny," and "multipolarity," as well as its regional dominance efforts and relations with the United States, European Union, and other nations, are at stake. The Ukrainian conflict has further highlighted China's vulnerabilities in various domains, exacerbating the challenges it already faces due to the debilitating novel Coronavirus that originated in Wuhan in late 2019 and spread globally (Kondapalli, Das Eds 2020). The conflict in Ukraine has notably impacted China's meticulously constructed narratives on "non-interference," "protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity," and "peaceful rise," among others. Consequently, China's short-term positions and long-term goals appear to be incongruous with these unfolding developments.

The Russian military operations in Ukraine that commenced on February 24 coincided with the conclusion of the Beijing Winter Olympics. It is noteworthy that Russian President Vladimir Putin had attended the opening ceremony on February 4, and the joint statement issued by China and Russia had emphasized the absence of any limits to their strategic partnership and cooperation (Trush 2022)². Furthermore, on June 16, 2022, President Xi Jinping had a telephone conversation with President Putin, during which he reiterated that both "continue supporting each other on their respective core interests concerning sovereignty and security, as well as on their major concerns, deepening their strategic coordination"³. These developments have sparked speculation regarding China's prior knowledge and involvement in Russia's military actions, although Beijing has denied any such involvement⁴. Due to the opaque nature of decision-making processes in both China and Russia, understanding their mutual

¹ China and Russia hold differing assessments of each other, shaped by their respective positions and power dynamics. As China emerges as a growing power, its officials and scholars tend to downplay the possibility of a military alliance with Russia. Instead, they advocate for a strategy of "balancing," as argued by Yan Xuetong, while recognizing the importance of cooperation between the two countries in countering the United States. Conversely, certain Russian scholars emphasize the significance of a long-term partnership with China, with some even suggesting the existence of a "tacit alliance," as argued by Vasily Kashin. These contrasting perspectives reflect the complexities of the China-Russia relationship and the nuances in their strategic outlooks. See for instance, (Fu 2016; Xuetong 2022; Li 2007; Kashin, Lukin 2018; Lukin 2018; Korolev 2020; Yu, Sui 2020; Kirchberger 2022). See also: (Dingli Sh. 2016. Russian cooperation with China is tactical, not strategic. *Global Times*. June 27. URL: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/990867.shtml>; Kashin V. 2019. *Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level*. Moscow Carnegie Center, October 22. URL: <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80136> (accessed 15.04.2023).

² Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development. 2022. *Kremlin*. February 3. URL: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³ Xi talks with Putin over phone. 2022. *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*. June 16. URL: http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2022-06/16/content_78273199.htm (accessed 15.04.2023).

⁴ Fallacies and truths about U.S. slander against China on Ukraine issue. 2023. *Xinhua*. March 27. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2023/0327/c90000-10227332.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

perceptions on this issue, as well as others, poses significant challenges. Nonetheless, a brief overview is provided below of the events surrounding China-Russia relations amidst the Ukrainian crisis.

Since the onset of the Ukrainian conflict in February 2022, China has maintained a stance of "neutrality"⁵ and "independence."⁶ However, as the conflict escalated and inflicted significant damage, China has found itself increasingly isolated on both regional and global platforms. This situation contrasts with the principles advocated by Deng Xiaoping several decades ago of "*taoguang yanghui*" [maintaining a low profile, focusing on economic development, and fostering relations with all countries]. Beijing has chosen to abstain from participating in discussions and criticisms of Russian actions in Ukraine within the United Nations and its bodies, including the Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council. Instead, China has emphasized the need for dialogue among the conflicting parties, urged the observation of ceasefires, and advocated for the provision of humanitarian relief measures. Throughout this period, China has consistently adopted an "anti-US position,"⁷ aligning itself with Russia's opposition to the expansion efforts of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) following the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

China's official stance on the Ukrainian conflict is characterized as neutral; however, in practice, it aligns more closely with Russia in their "united front" against the United States in the context of multipolarity (Guihai 2022). The influence of the Soviet Union and Russia on China has played a significant role in shaping China's evolving perspectives⁸. The Soviet Union provided ideological and material support not only for the establishment of the Communist Party of China (CCP) but also for its subsequent growth over the course of a century. The CCP was formed with the assistance of the Soviet-backed Communist International in 1921, and Chinese students who had returned from the Soviet Union, such as Wang Ming, exerted control over the party apparatus in the 1930s. Moreover, the Soviet Union aided Lin Biao's military forces in capturing northeast Manchuria from the retreating Japanese in 1945, and provided support during the Korean War, including 156 basic industries to facilitate China's modernization. There was even a period when the Soviet Union aspired to control long-range radar networks in China, including the submarine base at Dalian. In the 1950s, China adopted the Soviet model of development, and individuals who were

⁵ Sheng Y., Xu Y. 2022. China clarifies neutral stance as Russia, Ukraine poised for talks. *Global Times*. February. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1253364.shtml> (accessed 15.04.2023).

⁶ Valeriano B., Garcia-Nieto J. 2022. What 'Zhong Sheng' Says About China's Perceptions of the Ukraine Conflict. *The Diplomat*. June 23. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/what-zhong-sheng-says-about-chinas-perceptions-of-the-ukraine-conflict> (accessed 15.04.2023).

⁷ Kendall-Taylor A. O., Shullman D. 2022. Best and Bosom Friends: Why China-Russia Ties Will Deepen after Russia's War on Ukraine. *Centre for Strategic & International Studies*. June 22. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/best-and-bosom-friends-why-china-russia-ties-will-deepen-after-russias-war-ukraine> (accessed 15.04.2023).

⁸ Lukin A. 2001. Russia's Image of China and Russian-Chinese Relations. *The Brookings Institution*. May 1. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/russias-image-of-china-and-russian-chinese-relations/> (accessed 15.04.2023).

perceived to be closely aligned with Moscow, such as Defense Minister Peng Dehuai, faced dismissal in 1959. Senior Politburo member Liu Shaoqi was accused of being a "Chinese Khrushchev" and subjected to public humiliation, while Zhao Ziyang, the General Secretary of the CCP, was labeled a "Chinese Gorbachev" for supporting the student-led protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The current leaders of the CCP are keenly aware of their ideological dependence on the former Soviet Union and, by extension, on Russia, as successive generations of CCP leaders were educated, trained, and groomed by their Soviet counterparts. Although the Soviet Union disintegrated, the dynamics of this relationship have not fundamentally changed, offering leverage to Russian agencies. While it is now common for the children of CCP leaders to pursue education and training in Western universities, the older generation of leadership, including the recently deceased Jiang Zemin, predominantly received their training in Russia. Notably, Xi Jinping's first foreign visit after assuming the presidency in 2013 was to Moscow, and he repeated this gesture in March 2023 after being re-elected as President for a third term.

The extensive border stretching over 4,000 km, primarily in the eastern region, is another significant factor influencing the relationship between China and Russia. This geographical proximity has a substantial impact on their bilateral dynamics. The border dispute in 1969, which resulted in a large-scale mobilization of armed forces, including nuclear forces, along the Ussuri River, exemplifies the influence of the border issue on their relationship. Although the border skirmishes in 1969 did not lead to significant physical destruction, the border issue continues to significantly influence the bilateral dynamics, despite the resolution of the territorial dispute in the early 2000s. Presently, the border issue encompasses aspects such as border trade, infrastructure development, migration, trade activities, smuggling, and others, which can occasionally evoke negative responses (Humphrey 2018; Xingming 2015; Thornton, Ziegler 2002).

Russia's pervasive influence on China is also evident in the official media coverage of the Ukrainian conflict, where it was characterized as "special military operation." China's media outlets have limited reporting on anti-Russian perspectives, even in social networking sites, reflecting the influence of Russia on China's media landscape.

Despite China's dependence on the US and its military allies, such as Japan and South Korea, as well as NATO, for economic and technological assistance in its pursuit of national growth, Beijing has adopted a policy of political opposition to the United States in conjunction with Russia since 2001⁹. This alignment between China and Rus-

⁹ Earlier, China-Russia relations were characterised as a part of "good neighbourhood" policy in the 1990s but changed to "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2001. Later, when Xi Jinping took over in 2012, bilateral relations were characterised as "comprehensive strategic partnership and coordination". Further changes were made in 2016 to this formulation towards "comprehensive strategic partnership of equality, mutual trust, mutual support, common prosperity and long-lasting friendship". Apart from the joint statements, see (Lo 2008; Bekkevold, Eds 2019; Wishnick 2010); see also Trenin D. 2018. Entente is what drives Sino-Russian ties. *China Daily*. September 11. URL:<http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/11/W55b973833a31033b4f4655613.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

sia can be traced back to the late 1990s when Russian Premier Primakov proposed the concept of "multipolarity." China swiftly embraced this idea and formed a united front with Moscow. Both countries have consistently opposed the expansion of NATO, criticized what they perceive as the imposition of a particular set of political values through "colored revolutions," condemned the US strategy of preemptive strikes as a unilateral approach, and denounced military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan as violations of the UN Charter. China has also expressed concerns about the US "pivot" and subsequent "strategic rebalance" towards the Indo-Pacific region, viewing the strengthening of alliances in the region as a significant challenge. Russia has echoed these concerns and has aligned itself with China in rejecting the notion of the "rule of law," instead advocating for the promotion of "global governance."

Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, China has aligned itself with Russia on the issue of NATO expansion.¹⁰ Beijing has recently questioned the very existence of NATO, despite not being directly influenced by the alliance until more recently when NATO expressed concerns about China's rise, viewing it as both an opportunity and a challenge. The NATO's characterization of China as a "systemic rival" aligns with the United States' labeling of Russia and China as "strategic competitors".

China has expressed concerns about NATO declarations in the past. For instance, it raised concerns about NATO's 1999 declaration on intervention in the internal affairs of other countries based on ethnic and religious issues, drawing connections to potential actions in Xinjiang and Tibet. China also took note of NATO's 70th anniversary declaration in London in December 2019, which stated: "[W]e recognize that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an alliance". While NATO primarily focused on challenges emanating from Russia, terrorism, migration, and cyber domains, it acknowledged China's growing influence and international policies as areas that need to be addressed together as an alliance. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized the need to "find ways to encourage China to participate in arms control arrangements." He also said the alliance needed to start taking "into account that China is coming closer to us". He observed: "*We see them in the Arctic, we see them in Africa, we see them investing heavily in European infrastructure and of course investing in cyberspace*". The NATO declaration also highlighted the importance of building secure and resilient telecommunications infrastructure, particularly in light of China's Huawei's involvement in bidding for 5G communications in Europe. Concerns have been raised about certain NATO members, such as Italy and Greece, joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the establishment of the EU-17+1 or "Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries," which pose challenges to the unity of

¹⁰ Wang Xiangsui. 2022. "解读乌克兰危机的双重视角地缘政治与币缘政治的交织" [Interpreting the Ukrainian Crisis from Dual Perspectives - The Intertwining of Geopolitics and Currency Politics] 欧洲研究 [European Studies] March 6, URL: <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/131869.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

European Union members. China's challenges are primarily related to financial investments, technology, securing telecommunications infrastructure, including in the context of 5G, differences over European countries joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the BRI.

In June 2022, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea were invited to the NATO-G7 meetings, signaling a broadening of engagement beyond traditional NATO members. NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg acknowledged that "China poses some challenges to our values, our interests, and our security."¹¹ This statement was viewed by several Chinese analysts as a potential challenge to China in the coming years. In response, China's foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin stated that "NATO has already disrupted stability in Europe. It should not try to do the same to the Asia-Pacific and the whole world".

During the Russian military action in Ukraine, China focused its discourse on the division within NATO caused by the United States and predicted its eventual dissolution. However, this rhetoric did not alleviate concerns among European Union members about China's own actions in the European region. Despite President Xi Jinping's telephonic or virtual conversations with leaders of Germany, France, and other countries, China was surprised by the unity and solidarity exhibited by EU members within NATO.

China's position on the conflict in Ukraine is gradually but noticeably changing, driven by various domestic and external factors that concern the country. One of the primary concerns for China is the potential for the Ukrainian conflict to trigger political factional struggles within the Communist Party. This concern was particularly significant as China held its once-in-five-years Communist Party Congress in October 2022. President Xi Jinping, who assumed his third term at this congress, faced challenges stemming from the Ukraine crisis. However, Xi managed to consolidate decision-making power within his factional leaders, mitigating potential internal divisions.

Secondly, another critical factor behind China's evolving stance on the Ukraine crisis is the impact it may have on global energy prices¹². As the world's largest consumer of energy, China is heavily affected by fluctuations in energy costs. Since 1993, China has transitioned into a net importer of energy resources, initially relying on suppliers from West Asia and Africa. However, due to its "strategic partnership" with Russia, geographical proximity to Russia's energy-producing regions in the Far East, and other factors, China has significantly increased its imports of energy resources from Russia. The Ukraine crisis further accelerated this trend, as Russia sought to supply energy resources to China at more competitive prices¹³.

¹¹ Hui Zh., Cui F. 2022. China denounces NATO's Asia reach as 'dangerous' as bloc intensifies anti-China rhetoric ahead of summit. *The Global Times*. June 23. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1268916.shtml> (accessed 15.04.2023).

¹² China's economic recovery no scapegoat for Western energy crunch. 2022. *The People's Daily*. December 6. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0624/c90000-10114232.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

¹³ Chinese vice premier calls for deepening China-Russia energy cooperation. 2022. *The People's Daily*. November 30. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/1130/c90000-10178233.html>; Xi says ready to strengthen China-Russia energy cooperation. *The People's Daily*. November 29, 2022. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/1129/c90000-10177906.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

For example, in 2021, China imported nearly 80 million tons of oil from Russia, accounting for 16 percent of its total oil imports¹⁴. Since the start of the Ukraine conflict, China's oil imports from Russia have increased to nearly 20 percent¹⁵. In the first ten months of 2022, China imported over 72 million tonnes of oil valued at \$49 billion from Russia, making Moscow the second-largest supplier after Saudi Arabia¹⁶. Notably, some of these transactions are conducted in local currencies such as the Russian ruble and the Chinese renminbi, indicating efforts to reduce dependence on the US dollar and promote de-dollarization between the two countries¹⁷.

Recently, there has been a growing focus on Russia's energy exports, as the country is the world's largest oil exporter and the second-largest crude oil exporter after Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Russia is the second largest natural gas supplier globally and was the fourth largest exporter of gold, having exported \$18 billion worth in 2020. This year, the value of Russian exports reached \$46 billion. However, the imposition of sanctions and the duration and intensity of such sanctions may exacerbate the geopolitical situation in Europe. The atmosphere in the region is already strained due to factors such as the US-funded NATO supply of weapon systems to Ukraine and Russia's nuclear deterrence rhetoric, leading to national mobilization and prolonged conflict. President Putin has ordered a nationwide mobilization of over 300,000 reservists, marking the first time such a move has been made in Russia since the Second World War. In a recent address, Putin made a veiled remark stating that Russia had "various weapons of destruction" at its disposal and would use "all the means available," before adding that he was not "bluffing."

China's increasing reliance on energy imports from Russia raises concerns about the long-term sustainability and affordability of its energy supply. China is wary of the potential political implications of depending heavily on Russian energy resources and seeks to diversify its energy needs. This is evidenced by President Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia and the summit meeting¹⁸ with the Gulf Cooperation Council¹⁹ in December 2022, which indicate China's efforts to explore alternative sources of energy.

¹⁴ Jiang Y. 2022. The economic meaning of Russia-Ukraine war for China. *Kina-Bladet*. December 14. URL: <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-economic-meaning-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-china> (accessed 15.04.2023).

¹⁵ Lepic B. 2022. China Increases Crude Oil Imports from Russia. *Rigzone*. September 22. URL: https://www.rigzone.com/news/china_increases_crude_oil_imports_from_russia-22-sep-2022-170449-article (accessed 15.04.2023).

¹⁶ Siqi J. 2022. China's Xi eyes 'closer energy partnership' with Russia as Putin praises their 'evolving' economic cooperation. *South China Morning Post*. November 30. URL: https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3201570/chinas-xi-eyes-closer-energy-partnership-russia-putin-praises-their-evolving-economic-cooperation?utm_source=feedly&utm_medium=email (accessed 15.04.2023).

¹⁷ Evans B. 2022. Russia's Gazprom is planning to sell gas to China in both rubles and yuan to shift away from the euro. *Business Insider*. September 6. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.in/stock-market/news/russias-gazprom-is-planning-to-sell-gas-to-china-in-both-rubles-and-yuan-to-shift-away-from-the-euro/articleshow/94034461.cms> (accessed 15.04.2023).

¹⁸ Wei X. 2022. Xi's visit leads to new era for Mideast ties. *China Daily*. December 12. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/12/12/c90000-10182753.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

¹⁹ Building on Past Achievements and Jointly Creating a Brighter Future of China-GCC Relations. 2022. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China*. December 10. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/202212/t20221210_10988408.html (accessed 15.04.2023).

Thirdly, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict has the potential to disrupt global food supply chains, particularly in terms of wheat and corn imports, which are crucial for China's food security²⁰. While China has created food reserves in Dalian to address potential shortages, the future remains uncertain, especially as inflation is on the rise²¹. The scarcity of staple foods like pork has already led to widespread discontent among millions of Chinese citizens. In February 2022, during President Putin's visit to China, both countries signed an agreement for the import of wheat from Russia, highlighting China's attempts to secure alternative food sources amid the ongoing geopolitical tensions²².

Fourthly, China has been at the forefront of criticizing Western sanctions imposed on Russia following the conflict in Ukraine²³. The Chinese government views these sanctions as a potential threat, considering the previous tariff wars and restrictions imposed by the Trump administration on Chinese telecommunications companies in the US market. Beijing is concerned that if China becomes the next target of Western sanctions, its economy, already impacted by disruptions in the global supply chain due to the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic policies aimed at promoting "common prosperity" and restricting businesses, will experience lower-than-expected growth rates. This situation is further exacerbated by rising unemployment in China, posing challenges to the ruling party-state.

China's concerns regarding Western sanctions have been reflected in its statements in various multilateral organizations. President Xi Jinping, for example, addressed the Bo'ao Forum on April 21, 2022, highlighting that the escalating Ukraine crisis has geopolitical implications that hinder global economic recovery and disrupt the global development agenda, with developing countries being particularly affected.²⁴ In addition, President Xi's remarks at the 14th BRICS business forum emphasized that the Ukraine crisis serves as a warning for humanity.²⁵ However, the joint statement issued by the BRICS countries the following day took a more moderate stance, emphasizing

²⁰ Wong J. 2022. Ukraine Conflict Triggers China's Food Insecurities. *Wall Street Journal*. March 8. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-conflict-triggers-chinas-food-insecurities-11646744329> (accessed 15.04.2023).

²¹ Wong O. 2022. China food security: Premier Li Keqiang warns of 'new challenges' as Ukraine war poses risk to world supply. *South China Morning Post*. March. URL: <https://www.scmp.com/economy/article/3171888/china-food-security-premier-li-keqiang-warns-new-challenges-ukraine-war> (accessed 15.04.2023).

²² Donnellon-May G. Recipe for Disaster? – Implications of Ukraine-Russia War on China's Food Security. *Asia Global Online*. URL: <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/recipe-disaster-implications-ukraine-russia-war-chinas-food-security> (accessed 15.04.2023).

²³ China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis. 2023. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China*. February 24. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html (accessed 15.04.2023).

²⁴ Yin H. 2022. China determined to promote balanced, coordinated and inclusive global development. *People's Daily*. April 25. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0425/c90000-10088738.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

²⁵ Xi addresses BRICS Business Forum. 2022. *China Daily*. June 22. URL: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202206/22/WS-62b2f6f3a310fd2b29e67ee9.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

their support for talks between Russia and Ukraine and expressing concerns about the humanitarian situation in and around Ukraine. The statement also highlighted their support for the efforts of the UN Secretary-General, UN agencies, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in providing humanitarian assistance.²⁶

During the Samarkand summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on September 16, 2022, China's challenges and dilemmas were once again brought to the forefront. The Samarkand Declaration acknowledged that the "global situation is deteriorating alarmingly", referring to the Ukrainian crisis, energy and food shortages, supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic, and other pressing issues. China expressed its reservations regarding the Ukraine conflict during President Xi Jinping's interactions with Russian President Vladimir Putin. In a notable move, President Xi skipped the main banquet and made a swift departure from Samarkand. According to the transcript released by the Russian side, President Putin emphasized the "strategic comprehensive partnership" between Russia and China. He stated that: "We highly appreciate the balanced position of our Chinese friends in connection with the Ukrainian crisis. We understand your questions and concerns in this regard". Putin also said that both countries "*jointly stand for the formation of a just, democratic and multipolar world order based on international law and the central role of the UN*". Putin also reaffirmed Russia's adherence to the "one China" principle and mentioned that during a recent meeting with Li Zhanshu, the third-ranking member of the Communist Party politburo standing committee, the Taiwan issue was further discussed. In response, President Xi emphasized the need for both countries to set an example of being "responsible world power and play a leading role in bringing such a rapidly changing world onto a trajectory of sustainable and positive development".

In the meeting between Xi and Putin at Samarkand, Xi reiterated his readiness "to work with Russia in extending strong support to each other on issues concerning their respective core interests". On the other hand, Putin's remarks on the occasion highlighted that he understood "your questions and concerns". A week earlier to the Xi-Putin meeting, Li Zhanshu visited Russia and reportedly assured China's support to Russia.

China's Narrative

In line with the aforementioned points, China has made concerted efforts to communicate its position to the international community. Yang Jiechi, a member of the Politburo and former foreign minister, highlighted China's comprehensive approach to the Ukraine crisis. He emphasized that China has clearly articulated its policy stance

²⁶ Full text of 14th BRICS Summit Beijing Declaration. 2022. *People's Daily Online*. June 24. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0624/c312369-10114254.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

based on the merits of the situation, played an independent and constructive role, proposed solutions to resolve the crisis, presented China's initiative to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, and refuted baseless accusations and misleading rhetoric directed at China.²⁷ In response to a statement by the US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, China's foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian reaffirmed China's position on the Ukraine issue, stating that it is "above board, just, objective and beyond reproach"²⁸.

China's foreign minister Wang Yi, in his address to the UN Security Council in September 2022, emphasized the importance of negotiations, de-escalation of the conflict, addressing the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, and finding solutions to the emerging food crisis and other related challenges.

China's narrative regarding the Ukraine crisis has primarily focused on two interconnected aspects: criticizing US policies and expressing concerns about NATO expansion, which is perceived as a potential threat to the Asian region. However, China's position in this regard exhibits contradictions and lacks coherence. On one hand, Beijing has been reliant on the US and its allies for its own economic and geopolitical rise, a relationship that dates back to the interactions between Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter in 1979. On the other hand, China views the US as a hindrance to its ambitions of dominating Asia. Consequently, China engages in a significant critique of the US, despite having maintained warm relations under the G-2 format for an extended period of time. Through its criticism of the US, China indirectly seeks to align itself with Russia in a "united front," primarily aimed at avoiding potential Western sanctions on China.

China directs its criticism towards the United States in the context of the Ukraine crisis. Chinese commentators, such as Zhong Sheng (a pen name used by People's Daily), have portrayed the US as the "initiator" of the conflict in Ukraine while accusing it of not providing refuge to Ukrainian refugees²⁹. Ye Zhu, another commentator, attributes the conflict between Russia and Ukraine to US "instigation."³⁰ The US is also criticized for exacerbating the situation by supplying arms to Ukraine, as noted by one commentator³¹. Gao Ge argues that the Ukraine conflict is a result of US-led NATO

²⁷ Jiechi Y. 2022. Studying and Implementing Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy in a Deep-going Way and Opening up New Horizons in China's External Work. *People's Daily Online*. May 16. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0516/c90000-10096955.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

²⁸ China refutes U.S. official's remarks on Ukraine issue. 2022. *People's Daily Online*. April 23. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0423/c90000-10087921.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

²⁹ Sheng Zh. 2022. U.S. not "guardian" of human rights, but hypocrite. *People's Daily*. April 9. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0409/c90000-10081873.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³⁰ Zhu Y. 2022. True colors of U.S. in Russia-Ukraine conflict: Root cause of divisions between the two countries. *People's Daily*. May 11. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0511/c90000-10095080.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³¹ Zi Ch. 2022. True colors of U.S. in Russia-Ukraine conflict: Ignoring Ukraine's fate constantly adding fuel to fire. *People's Daily*. May 10. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0510/c90000-10094520.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

expansion, which reflects its desire to create "controllable chaos," with the US being portrayed as the primary perpetrator of global turmoil.³² In another commentary Gao castigated the US for profiting from the Ukraine conflict³³.

China's analysts also critique NATO and the European Union (EU) in relation to the Ukraine crisis. Zhang Jian highlights how the conflict has exposed the fragile security system in Europe, predicting that it will be challenging for Europe to cope with the situation, potentially leading to polarization³⁴. In response to criticism from British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss regarding China's role in the crisis, China's foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin questions whether NATO, which has allegedly caused disruption in Europe, is now attempting to do the same in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.³⁵ Zhang Jun, China's permanent representative to the UN, criticizes NATO's adherence to outdated security doctrines and accuses it of provoking confrontations and tensions in Europe, the Asia-Pacific, and the wider world, expressing China's firm opposition to such practices³⁶. Chinese scholars view the potential membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO as further threats to "the stability of Europe".³⁷ Furthermore, China's criticism of the US and NATO is influenced by historical events, notably the Chinese embassy bombing incident in Belgrade in 1999, which continues to resonate in Chinese narratives³⁸.

Opportunities and Challenges

Despite China's overall negative and fragmented approaches to the Ukraine crisis, it also perceives the situation as an opportunity to enhance its "narrative power" and contribute something concrete to the global and regional communities. China's assessment, prompted by Russia's inability to swiftly resolve the matter in Ukraine, is that it needs to strengthen its position by presenting its initiatives. One significant exercise in this regard is the unveiling of China's "Global Security Initiative" in April 2022, during the Bo Ao Forum, by President Xi Jinping.

³² Ge G. 2022. Role of NATO after end of Cold War: Pawn for U.S. in seeking hegemony. *People's Daily*. April 26. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0426/c90000-10089467.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³³ Ge G. 2022. Profiting from war represents real intention of U.S. *People's Daily*. April 24. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0424/c90000-10088344.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³⁴ Jian Zh. 2022. Enhancing strategic autonomy serves interests of Europe. *People's Daily*. May 10. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0510/c90000-10094388.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³⁵ International rules not defined by certain clique: FM spokesperson. 2022. *People's Daily*. April 29. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0429/c90000-10090809.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³⁶ China opposes NATO's provocation of bloc confrontations around globe. 2022. *People's Daily*. May 6. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0506/c90000-10092947.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³⁷ Han Zh. 2022. NATO northward expansion further threatens Europe, world security as Finland, Sweden on verge of membership bid. *People's Daily*. May 13. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0513/c90000-10096092.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

³⁸ China will never forget NATO's bombing of Chinese embassy: spokesperson. 2022. *People's Daily*. May 7. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0507/c90000-10093385.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

The Global Security Initiative encompasses principles such as promoting common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. It emphasizes the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, upholding non-interference in internal affairs, and recognizing the independent choices made by different countries in terms of development paths and social systems. The initiative also advocates for adherence to the purposes and principles outlined in the UN Charter, rejecting the Cold War mentality, opposing unilateralism, and discouraging group politics and bloc confrontation. China commits to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously and prioritizes peaceful dialogue and consultation as means of resolving differences and disputes.

Furthermore, China has expanded its initiatives beyond security concerns. The Global Development Initiative and Global Civilizational Initiative have been introduced as additional constructs, reflecting China's broader vision and objectives in contributing to global development and promoting cross-cultural exchange.

Despite the existence of contradictions between China's statements and its actions, Chinese leaders have been engaged in efforts to persuade leaders from around the world, particularly European leaders, of China's purported peaceful intentions. China has expressed its willingness to mediate between conflicting states and has engaged in discussions with various leaders to reinforce partnerships and highlight mutual business interests and interdependence. President Xi Jinping, for instance, spoke with the German Chancellor to emphasize their close partnership and to remind them of the economic ties between the two countries.³⁹ Additionally, he engaged with French President Macron, emphasizing both countries' pursuit of independent foreign policies.⁴⁰ As the French have been critical of some American policies, Xi possibly is extending the time-tested "united front" tactics. Foreign minister Wang Yi spoke to his Danish counterpart on the Ukrainian conflict underlining commercial links.

However, China also faces numerous challenges in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. In addition to the challenges previously mentioned, China is carefully considering the adverse impact of the conflict on its global image. Public opinion polls have already indicated negative perceptions of China due to the origin of the Covid-19 virus. Another critical factor is the potential spillover effect of sanctions imposed on China. Liu Kun, China's finance minister, expressed China's opposition to the politicization and weaponization of the global economy during the G-20 meeting⁴¹. It should be

³⁹ China, Germany should enhance cooperation during times of uncertainty. 2022. *People's Daily*. May 12. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0512/c90000-10095613.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

⁴⁰ Xi talks with Macron over phone. 2022. *People's Daily*. May 11. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0511/c90000-10094839.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

⁴¹ US spreads 'Cold War' antagonism into G20 to corner Russia, ups pressure against neutrality of China. *People's Daily*. April 22, 2022. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0422/c90000-10087424.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

noted, however, that China itself has taken actions such as banning rare earth metals exports to Japan and imposing penalties on South Korea in response to the deployment of ballistic missile defense systems. Furthermore, some commentators have argued that the United States, by imposing sanctions on Russia, is engaging in what they describe as "financial terrorism" in Ukraine⁴².

Finally, the Ukraine crisis has had potential consequences domestically within China, possibly resulting in the demotion of Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, a former ambassador to India. Le was reassigned as a deputy overseeing radio and TV broadcasting agencies. It has been reported that he played a key role in establishing the "no limits" partnership with Russia in February. In a think-tank forum meeting on May 7, 2022, Le criticized those who criticized China for its involvement in the developments in Ukraine. He emphasized that the "no limits" statement in the Sino-Russian joint statement is applicable to both present and future scenarios.

It is worth noting that while China has secured Soviet/Russian consent on its core interests such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, Xinjiang, Tibet, and others, Moscow has not always received unequivocal support from Beijing on various issues. The joint statements between China and Russia periodically allude to these differing positions. Notably, China has not fully endorsed Russia's actions in Georgia, South Ossetia, Crimea, or Ukraine. When the Urumqi incident occurred in July 2009, resulting in the death of over 180 people, Russia and other member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) supported China, leading to intensified counter-terrorism campaigns. More recently, on February 4, 2022, the joint statement between Presidents Putin and Xi mentioned Taiwan. Additionally, China and Russia conducted military exercises in the South China Sea, which appeared to support China's stance on these issues.

New Factors

China is deeply concerned about the fallout from the Ukraine crisis, as it has invested heavily in globalization and has reaped significant benefits in terms of trade, investments, advanced technologies, access to markets, and enhanced international status, largely derived from Western countries. China recognizes that its cumulative trade with NATO countries far exceeds that with Russia. However, China has prioritized its relationship with Russia as a "strategic partnership" for the past three decades, working together to promote multipolarity and establish a common front against the influence of the United States.

⁴² Wenzai Zh. 2022. Washington's unbounded financial terrorism. *People's Daily*. April 22. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0422/c90000-10087653.html> (accessed 15.04.2023).

While China welcomes any decline in U.S. influence due to its implications for the global and regional orders, the same does not apply to any weakening of Russia resulting from the Ukraine crisis. China closely monitors any such developments, including Russia's involvement in anti-American campaigns in Syria, opposition to "colored revolutions," and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. China sees opportunities and challenges in these events, recognizing that a major political supporter in the international system could be lost. China has relied on Russia as a political ally while simultaneously benefiting from the economic order led by the United States. The Ukraine conflict has threatened this delicate balance, bringing China's dilemmas to the forefront.

Chinese leaders have engaged in a series of virtual and in-person meetings with their U.S. counterparts. The Xi-Biden virtual meetings and discussions at the Bali G20 Summit have focused not only on bilateral relations and the process of "decoupling," which includes issues such as tariff wars and restrictions on Chinese companies, but also on the U.S.'s "red line" of not providing "material support" to Russia in its actions in Ukraine. Although there have been reports of other countries, such as North Korea and Iran, providing assistance to Russia, evidence of China's involvement in this regard is scarce, except in the energy sector and a few political statements. President Biden himself has stated that there is no evidence of China's involvement in supporting Russia in the Ukraine crisis.

Impact on India

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has significant implications for the global and regional strategic landscape, including its impact on India. The coordination and cooperation between Russia and China in global and regional affairs have had a mixed effect on India's interests. Historically, India has maintained close strategic relations with Russia since the 1970s. However, the growing partnership between China, Russia, and Pakistan has raised concerns in New Delhi.

China's increasing import of advanced military technologies from Russia, including strategic technologies, has raised concerns in India due to the unresolved territorial dispute and tense relationship between India and China. Russia has supplied China with advanced fighter aircraft such as the Su-27, Su-30, and Su-35, as well as S-400 ballistic missile defense systems, some of which India has also acquired. The supply of advanced engines for ballistic missiles and fighter aircraft to China by Russia has also raised concerns in India about their potential use against India or their proliferation to Pakistan.

Although Russia has been able to provide crucial military equipment to India following the September 2020 meeting between the defense ministers of the two countries, which were subsequently deployed by Indian forces along the borders with China, there remains a lingering doubt in India about the future availability of such equipment from Russia.

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Восприятие Китаем России в период украинского конфликта

Шрикант Кондапалли
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Специальная военная операция России на Украине поставила Китай перед сложным выбором сразу в нескольких областях: от внешней политики и политики безопасности до экономических и технологических отношений с Западом. Китай не критикует российскую операцию, на фоне давления со стороны западных стран всё более последовательно выступает с «нейтральных» или «независимых» позиций. Кроме того, продолжительность конфликта повлияла на оценку китайским руководством перспектив применения военной силы для объединения с Тайванем. Даже с учётом всех различий между украинским и тайваньским контекстами, силовое решение становится в Китае менее популярным, хотя военное давление и продолжает оказываться. Более значительными последствиями конфликта на Украине стали возникновение внутренних размежеваний в самом Китае и рост напряжённости в его отношениях с Западом, от которого по-прежнему существенно зависит подъём КНР.

Статья стремится ответить на следующие вопросы: каковы основные интересы Китая в отношении конфликта на Украине? Как они влияют на китайско-российские отношения? Какие вызовы и возможности возникают для Китая в связи с конфликтом? С этой целью анализируется восприятие ситуации на Украине руководящими органами Компартии Китая, Министерством иностранных дел, китайскими аналитическими центрами и СМИ. В сочетании со снижением темпов экономического роста из-за пандемии COVID-19, специальная военная операция России на Украине вызвала в Китае серьёзные дискуссии об оптимальных путях защиты своих национальных интересов как в тайваньском вопросе, так и в отношении более широкого круга стратегических задач. Эти дискуссии могут повлиять на формирование регионального и глобального порядка в среднесрочной и долгосрочной перспективе. В заключение кратко рассматриваются возможные последствия реакции Китая на украинский конфликт для Индии.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика Китая и политика безопасности, экономические и технологические связи, военные операции, воссоединение с Тайванем, последствия для отношений Китая и Запада, формирующиеся региональные и глобальные порядки

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