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China's and Russia's narratives on the war against Ukraine

*Examining the boundaries of political
alignment*

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Executive summary

- This is the third in a series of reports on China-Russia relations since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It explores the content, extent and limits of China's political support for Russia by comparing Russian and Chinese narratives about Russia's war against Ukraine and related topics.
- China's support for Russia has been comprehensive and enduring, but not without limits. Overall, China appears to support Russian narratives if they advance China's long-term strategic interests. Most of these, such as ideas of a "power-hungry" United States, Western "weaponization" of sanctions and criticism of NATO and "bloc-based" confrontation, are tied to the countries' common struggle against perceived US hegemonic power and the so-called US-led liberal world order.
- The clearest red line in China's support for Russia is its distancing from Moscow's threats of use of nuclear weapons. Chinese leaders have spoken out against such threats, although without explicitly pointing the finger at Russia. In addition, unlike Russia, China officially recognizes the sovereignty and legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, although President of China Xi Jinping refused to speak with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, for the first 14 months of the war.
- While both countries portray Europeans as naive followers of the United States, Chinese criticism of Europe has been more subtle. While Russia regards European countries as a political threat, China has been more sympathetic towards Europe, portraying it as a victim of US greed and encouraging it to develop a more autonomous foreign policy.
- China's selective and inconsistent use of criticism highlights its pro-Russia stance. China claims to stand behind the UN Charter and the principle that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states must be respected, on the one hand, while emphasizing that the "legitimate security concerns" of all states must be considered, on the other. The latter is a veiled way of saying that Russia's protests over NATO expansion should have been taken more seriously. While China has repeatedly accused the United States of provoking the invasion by ignoring Russia's concerns, it has never condemned or even criticized Russia for invading a sovereign state in what was a clear violation of the UN Charter.
- The war may have cemented some similarities in the official worldviews of China and Russia. Beijing's pronouncements on "indivisible security" and the idea that the "legitimate security concerns of all countries must be respected" are well aligned with Moscow's perspective. The inclusion of these concepts in China's new framework for international security – the Global Security Initiative – has elevated their status, although Chinese endorsement of them goes back to the early 2000s. In fact, the core tenets that underpin China's rhetorical support for Russia are rooted in concepts that China developed in the 1990s.
- China's support for Russia is likely to remain robust insofar as Beijing continues to view Moscow as an indispensable partner in the struggle against US global hegemony, at least in the short to medium term. The pair's similar views on international security also speak in favour of closer coordination. At the same time, we expect that China will continue to balance its support for Russia against the need to maintain stable relations with the West.

Cover image: Kenzaburo Fukuhara/Pool Photo via AP

Introduction

Just weeks before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia and China hailed their friendship as having “no limits” or “‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation”. In the past 20 months, however, limitations to the friendship have become obvious, as China has had to balance political support for Russia against other considerations, such as its desire to present itself as a neutral peace broker and its need to prevent a complete breakdown in relations with the West. China’s stance has been described as “pro-Russian neutrality”, whereby China supports Russia politically and – to a degree – economically but provides no direct military assistance. While China has moderately increased its energy trade with Russia and continues to trade extensively with the country in other areas, it has been careful not to overtly violate Western sanctions. Nor has it provided weapons or other offensive military equipment to Russia, at least not openly or to a significant extent, although Chinese companies have supplied components for such equipment.

While Chinese trade has helped keep the Russian economy afloat, analysts tend to agree that China’s strongest support for Russia has been political and diplomatic. China’s rhetorical support has facilitated Russia’s war against Ukraine in several respects. Without a belief that its powerful ally would provide at least some political support, Russia might not have launched the invasion in the first place. Chinese support has also undermined Western attempts to isolate Russia in the United Nations, lending a degree of legitimacy to the war. The consequences of this support extend beyond Russia’s war against Ukraine. It has played into existing anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments in countries such as Brazil, India and others in the Global South. Moreover, China’s refusal to denounce Russia’s actions has served as an important signal to the world that it is possible for a major country to invade a sovereign state and annex parts of its territory without suffering universal condemnation and isolation. Lastly, China’s denouncement of Western sanctions fosters legitimacy for other countries to continue to trade with Russia, providing it with an economic lifeline and facilitating its war effort.

Despite the far-reaching implications of China’s political support for Russia’s war against Ukraine and beyond, the precise limitations of this support are not well understood. The media has often portrayed China as “embracing” or “echoing” Russian propaganda, as “parroting” Russia’s talking points or as having adopted the Russian narrative but such analyses seem to underestimate the differences. One study argues that Chinese support for Russia is restrained by the countries’ diverging views on a range of issues pertaining to key aspects of their bilateral cooperation, such as Eurasian infrastructure development and China’s engagement in the Arctic. Studies of Chinese domestic narratives have found a surprisingly diverse range of views on Russia and the war, which most Chinese experts view as a “proxy conflict” between the United States and China. Some Western analysts have described Chinese thinking about the war as “ever evolving”. Others highlight the continuity of the core ideas and principles that underpin China’s foreign policy doctrine. These analyses, however, tend to examine the Chinese narratives without systematically comparing them to Russian narratives, making it difficult to discern the subtle yet significant differences. This report analyses the content, extent and limits of China’s political support for Russia by comparing Russian and Chinese narratives about Russia’s war against Ukraine and related topics. A deeper, more precise understanding of the extent of China’s support, as well as of any red lines China has drawn regarding how far it is willing to go in defence of its partner, can serve as a basis for more informed assessments of how Russian-Chinese relations might evolve under different scenarios.

We have analysed official statements and semi-official texts written by actors linked to the Chinese and Russian states from the issuance of the joint statement on 4 February 2022, up to and including October 2023. These include statements by the countries' leaders, foreign ministries and state media, as well as analyses by Russian and Chinese experts. In comparing the Russian and Chinese narratives about the war and related topics, several themes emerged that were selected for closer analysis. The findings are presented below.

The causes of the conflict and NATO's culpability

China and Russia agree on the main causes of the conflict, although there are differences in presentation. Both countries argue that US power politics in Ukraine provoked Russia's actions. Unlike the Russian narrative, however, which blames the entire "Western world" as well as the Ukrainian government, China focuses on the actions of the United States and NATO. Both countries also argue that NATO is dominated by the United States and that NATO expansion threatens Russia and the stability of Europe. Chinese officials now also increasingly portray NATO and "NATO-like organizations" as a serious threat to their own country.

RUSSIA: The fundamental reason for the war is that Western plotting in Ukraine forced Russia to act to protect Russian interests. Russia's rhetoric around the causes of the war is multifaceted and comprises several different elements, but the basic building blocks of the narrative are relatively simple and recurring: the West's aggressive, power-hungry, anti-Russian machinations in Ukraine forced Russia to act to protect fundamental Russian interests. This is the linchpin on which all the Russian representatives' varieties of explanations for the so-called special military operation are based – whether it is about stopping NATO's eastward expansion, eliminating Ukrainian neo-Nazis, drug addicts and Satanists, protecting Russian speakers and Russians in Ukraine or defending the motherland from military, nuclear, biochemical, cultural or demographic threats. This basic narrative can be consistently and frequently found in speeches made since the outbreak of the war by Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and many other Russian representatives.

In the Russian narrative, control of Ukraine is part of the West's goal of achieving global dominance and destroying Russia. Although Russia launched the "special military operation", this was in Russian eyes an inevitable and necessary consequence of and response to the "civilizational war" that the West was already waging against Russia. The goal of this civilizational war is to contain, undermine and ultimately destroy Russia. If Russia had not acted in February 2022, a US-dominated NATO would have continued its campaign to threaten Russia through Ukraine:

It is no secret that the US-led collective West, striving for global domination, unleashed an all-out hybrid war against our Motherland. The enemy is not hiding its goal, which is to [...] significantly weaken or even annihilate the centuries-old national statehood [of Russia]. (Lavrov, October 25, 2022)

CHINA: Like Russia, China has tried to shift the focus from the immediate cause of the war – Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – to what it considers to be its underlying causes. In the week before the Russian invasion, Foreign Minister Wang Yi asked rhetorically, "If NATO continues to expand eastwards... will it contribute to long-term stability in Europe?" A foreign ministry spokesperson went a step further when, on the day before the

invasion, she asked, “As the United States pushed for five rounds of NATO expansion eastward, all the way to Russia’s doorstep, and deployed advanced offensive strategic weapons ... did it ever think about the consequences of pushing a large country up against the wall?” An analysis in *Guangming Daily*, a newspaper controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), noted that “the United States and NATO have constantly used the Ukraine issue to irritate Russia over the past 30 years”. The idea that NATO provoked Russia’s actions has been a consistent theme in China’s rhetoric about the war in Ukraine. On January 30, 2023, it accused the United States of having “instigated” the “Ukraine crisis” and being “the biggest driving force” behind it. By continuing to send heavy weaponry to Ukraine, the US has “prolonged and intensified the conflict”.

China has not blamed or condemned Russia, but on the contrary expressed understanding for Russia’s actions. On the day of the Russian invasion, Wang Yi told Sergey Lavrov that China “understands the Russian side’s legitimate concerns regarding security issues”. At the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conference on the same day, a reporter from Bloomberg asked whether China considered Russia’s actions to constitute an invasion and a violation of the UN Charter. The spokesperson responded that the situation had a “complex historical background” and that Russia had announced that its special military operation in eastern Ukraine would not shell cities. Since then, the foreign ministry has avoided using words like “invasion” or “war” to describe Russia’s actions, instead using the term special military operation or referring to the war as the “Ukraine crisis” or the “Russian-Ukrainian conflict”. China’s party- and state-controlled media have also avoided words like “invasion” or “war” in their reporting.

China has been distrustful of military alliances since long before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Opposition to “military blocs” has been an important element of Chinese security policy since the 1990s. In a joint statement in 1997, two years before the accession of Czechia, Hungary and Poland to NATO, China and Russia opposed “attempts to enlarge and strengthen military blocs” because this would “pose a threat to the security of certain countries and exacerbate regional and global tensions”. The accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO forces in 1999, which killed three Chinese citizens and which the Chinese government described as a deliberate “barbarian act”, has also shaped Chinese views of NATO.

Because of its role as a regional transatlantic organization, NATO was until recently an issue of secondary concern for China. It has received significantly more official attention since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, which is described in detail in Hillevi Pårup’s study “China’s view of NATO and Swedish membership”, published by the Swedish National China Centre in July 2022. NATO has become a recurring topic for Chinese representatives who have spoken out more frequently and explained their views on the organization in greater detail. As Pårup points out, this growing interest is also visible in Chinese-language media, where mentions of NATO have increased significantly since February 2022.

Since the release of NATO’s new strategic concept in June 2022, the first NATO planning document to identify China as a security challenge, there has been growing concern in China that NATO will get involved in China’s neighbourhood. In China’s eyes, US ambitions are not restricted to expanding NATO in Europe. It seeks to extend its reach into Asia, transforming NATO from a transatlantic organization into a global

military alliance. In a joint statement in March 2023, China and Russia urged NATO “to abide by its commitment as a regional and defensive organization”, a formulation not found in the joint statement issued in February 2022. The countries also “expressed serious concern over NATO’s continued strengthening of military-security ties with Asia-Pacific countries, which undermines regional peace and stability”. It is seen as particularly worrying that Japan and South Korea, which are portrayed as NATO gateways to the region, have deepened their ties with the organization. In May 2023, the foreign ministry responded to a question about NATO’s plan to set up a liaison office in Japan – a plan that appears to have since been shelved – by stating that NATO “claims to be a regional organization” and “should not extend its geopolitical reach”.

Chinese leaders are also concerned that the United States is forming “NATO-like alliances” in Asia to contain China. Chinese observers have drawn parallels between NATO’s expansion in Europe and what they see as US attempts to form “exclusive” groupings in Asia, such as AUKUS, a security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a security forum for Australia, India, Japan and the United States. Wang Yiwei, a professor at Renmin University, believes that by forming a “NATO-like alliance” in the Asia-Pacific region, the United States is now “target[ing] China [in Asia] just like what it did to Russia in Europe”.

Table 1. Comparison of Russian and Chinese narratives about the war in Ukraine.

	Shared	Differences
<i>The causes of the conflict</i>	Both countries seek to shift the focus from the immediate cause of the war – Russia's invasion of Ukraine – to what they argue is the underlying cause: US power politics in Ukraine and NATO's eastward expansion	Russia blames the entire “West” and Ukraine; China's criticism focuses on the United States and NATO
<i>Legitimate invasion?</i>	China expresses understanding for Russia's actions	Russia argues that its actions are in accordance with international law; China emphasizes that countries' territorial integrity must be respected but so must Russia's “legitimate security concerns”
<i>Indivisible security</i>	The countries use a similar interpretation of “indivisible security”. China has incorporated the concept into its own vision of how peace can be achieved in the world	China contrasts “indivisible” with “absolute” security and accuses the US and NATO of pursuing the latter
<i>Power-hungry United States</i>	There is a shared understanding that the United States is the main rival and the root of Europe's security problems. US desire for power is the main reason for the war	The Chinese narrative portrays Europe as a victim of US greed
<i>Illegal sanctions</i>	Both countries see Western sanctions as illegal and counter-productive	Russia has gone further by likening the sanctions to an act of war
<i>Europe without autonomy?</i>	China and Russia agree that the United States has undue influence over the foreign policy of European countries	China is more sympathetic towards Europe and encourages the EU to develop a more independent foreign policy
<i>Ukraine independent?</i>	No clear similarities	Russia considers the Kyiv government to be a Western-controlled puppet; China recognizes the sovereignty and legitimacy of the Ukrainian government

Russia's invasion: legitimate use of force?

Russia and China hold different views on Russia's use of force against Ukraine. While Russia refers to international law to justify its invasion, China has emphasized its longstanding position that the territorial integrity of all countries must be respected. China has called for a ceasefire and peace negotiations, but at the same time expressed understanding for Russia's actions. While Putin has made clear that Russia intends to use "all available means" to protect Russian territory – including the annexed territories in Ukraine – Xi has spoken out against threats of use of nuclear weapons.

RUSSIA: Russia argues that it, unlike the West and Ukraine, is acting in accordance with international law. An important aspect of the Russian narratives surrounding the conflict is that Russia's actions are completely in line with international law. The special military operation is thereby legitimized in various ways, including by claims that NATO's expansion threatens Russia's legitimate security interests, and that the lives and rights of Russians in eastern Ukraine must be protected, as well as with references to the UN Charter and international principles such as the right to self-determination, and draft resolutions in the UN Security Council. In June 2022, Putin stated that "Russia was forced to go ahead with the special military operation. [...] This was the decision of a sovereign country, which has every unconditional right to maintain its security, which is based on the UN Charter."

This contrasts with the supposedly unlawful actions of the "illegal" Kyiv regime and the Western world. Russia has been quick to point the finger at previous military interventions by the US and NATO in Yugoslavia, Libya and the Middle East:

The United States and its allies, which are directly responsible for numerous violations of human rights and international humanitarian law and are guilty of crimes that killed hundreds of thousands of people in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, once again apply double standards. (Lavrov, March 1, 2022)

Russia claims that China has expressed support for Russia's actions in bilateral talks since Russia launched its invasion. For example, in the Russian transcript of a phone conversation between Xi and Putin on February 25, 2022, Xi is alleged to have said that he respected the actions of the Russian leadership in the ongoing the crisis. Similarly, according to the Russian transcript of the two presidents' phone call on June 15, 2022, "The President of China noted the legitimacy of Russia's actions to protect fundamental national interests in the face of challenges to its security created by external forces".

CHINA: Russia's blatant violation of international law appears to have made the Chinese leadership uncomfortable. At the outbreak of the war, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the "Ukraine issue" as "very complicated" and emphasized that the movement towards the current situation was "not what any of us wanted to see". Just a few days before, on February 19, 2022, Foreign Minister Wang Yi had declared that "The sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and protected", adding that Ukraine was no exception. In addition, he emphasized that the Minsk II agreement, an agreement that includes a provision on restoring the Ukrainian government's control over Ukraine's state borders, was "the only way to resolve the Ukraine issue". In addition, on the day before the invasion, the foreign ministry referred to Russia's repeated assurances that it "does not intend to start a war against Ukraine".

Since Russia's invasion, which is a clear violation of the Minsk agreement, China has called for a ceasefire, although it has consistently emphasized that NATO and the US are to blame for developments. In a telephone conversation with Sergey Lavrov on February 24, 2022, Wang Yi explained that "China always respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries", but at the same time pointed out that China understands Russia's "legitimate concerns regarding security issues". Putin and Xi spoke to each other the next day. According to the Chinese readout, Xi expressed China's support for Russia to resolve its differences with Ukraine "through negotiations" and reiterated China's fundamental position on respect for countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Some Chinese academics have expressed concern about Russia's invasion. Many experts have adopted the official line by expressing support for Russia and criticizing the United States, but there have also been critical voices about Russia's use of force. Open criticism of Russia's actions has been rare, however, and limited by the state. For example, an article written by four Chinese professors that condemned Russia's attack, arguing that it would "destabilize the situation in Europe and the world as a whole", was censored.

Unlike Russia, China does not view nuclear weapons as a legitimate tool of warfare in Ukraine. Throughout the war, Russian representatives have repeatedly made threatening statements concerning the possible use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, Putin and other Russian officials have made it clear that Russia reserves the right to use "all available means" to "protect Russia and [its] people", including the annexed territories of Ukraine – although Putin later claimed that he does not intend to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. In November 2022, in connection with a visit to Beijing by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Xi Jinping took a public stance against both the use and the threat of use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, stating that nuclear weapons "must not be used in the conflict". At an Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in Cambodia later that month, then-Premier Li Keqiang called nuclear threats "irresponsible". Xi Jinping reportedly issued a personal warning to Putin against using nuclear weapons when he visited Moscow in March 2023.

Indivisible security

Both Russia and China have accused the United States and NATO of violating the principle of "indivisible security", a concept that emphasizes that a country's security is inseparable from that of other countries in the same region.

RUSSIA: Russia has explained that security is "indivisible", and that the actions of the West have come at the expense of Russia's security. In their justification of its special military operation and their criticism of the West, Russian representatives frequently refer to the concept of indivisible security, which has been found in many official Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) documents since the Helsinki Final Act. In the Russian understanding of the concept, which does not consider its connections to democracy, human rights and the right of all countries to choose their own security alliances, the actions of the West and NATO's expansion violate the principle that countries must not strengthen their own security at the expense of others, forcing Russia to act in Ukraine:

President Vladimir Putin [...] made clear the reasons for us being forced to launch the special military operation, which capped our country's 30-year-long efforts to ensure our own security through talks and agreements that would be legally

binding and guarantee *equal and indivisible security* in our common European space. (Lavrov, July 22, 2022, our emphasis)

CHINA: Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, China had endorsed indivisible security in joint statements with Russia and within the BRICS, the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, but the concept had not featured in any major Chinese political documents. In a joint statement from 2003, China and Russia called for the establishment of a universal security system based on the UN Charter, which, among other things, "conforms to the principle of the indivisibility of international security". In another joint statement issued after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, they agreed to "unswervingly defend the principle of indivisible security in international relations".

Since the build-up to the invasion, however, China has promoted the concept more actively, even incorporating it into Xi Jinping's new framework for how peace can be achieved in the world – the Global Security Initiative. Already on February 23, 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was accusing the United States of failing to respect the "principle of indivisible security" with reference to the Helsinki Final Act. Representatives of the foreign ministry have since repeatedly and in different contexts highlighted that security must not be strengthened at the expense of others. Wang Yi has stated that the EU and Russia need to uphold the "philosophy of indivisible security" to achieve a "balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism". Xi Jinping introduced the Global Security Initiative (GSI) at the annual Boao Forum on April 21, 2022, stating that "humanity lives in an indivisible security community".

The GSI was presented as an alternative to prevailing security arrangements in the world, in particular those offered by the United States and NATO, whose pursuit of "absolute security" is considered to have led to today's war in Europe. On February 21, 2023, China's foreign ministry published a "concept paper" on GSI, one of the points of which highlights the principle of indivisible security.

Although China has only recently adopted indivisible security in official discourse, Beijing has a history of supporting the ideas and principles behind the concept. Since the late 1990s, before they started talking about security as "indivisible", Chinese officials have been criticizing "Cold War mentality" and "bloc politics". Since the early 2000s, they have criticized the pursuit of "absolute security" at the expense of "common security" and argued that countries' "legitimate security concerns" should be recognized. The concept of indivisible security appears to have been integrated into a pre-existing narrative built around concepts with similar meanings, many of which have their origin in China's "New Security Concept" launched in the late 1990s. Following the invasion, Chinese officials have continued to promote this older narrative, often – but not always – with reference to the "indivisibility" of security.

Since Russia's invasion, the narrative has increasingly been used in statements about security in China's own neighbourhood. On March 19, 2022, then-Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng stated that no country should pursue "absolute security" at the expense of others, and that US attempts to form "exclusive groupings" in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific risked leading to a "bloc-based division". US actions were thus as dangerous as NATO's expansion in Europe and could lead to "disastrous consequences". On April 18, 2022, China's then-ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang (China's foreign minister from

December 2022 until his sudden dismissal in July 2023), wrote an article in the US magazine *The National Interest* in which he contrasted Europe's decision after the Cold War to maintain security through "NATO's eastward expansion" with the "new security philosophy" that China, Russia and Central Asian countries were exploring at the same time. The latter was based on principles such as "mutual trust" and "equality" and had contributed to resolving border conflicts between China and the former Soviet republics. Regarding Ukraine it was, according to Qin, "out of the question" that any country or bloc should "have absolute security" while ignoring the security of other countries.

Xi Jinping has tried to mobilize China's partners in various multilateral forums around the concept of indivisible security and the GSI, especially the BRICS, which recently welcomed six new members – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the United Arab Emirates. The Global South has become an important target audience for China's promotion of an alternative security order. At the BRICS summit in June 2022, Xi Jinping stated:

Some countries, in their search for absolute security, seek to expand military alliances and [thereby] stimulate bloc-based confrontation by forcing other countries to choose sides. (Xi Jinping, June 24, 2022)

China has also referred to indivisible security to justify its actions at the United Nations. When China abstained on a resolution condemning Russia's invasion in the UN General Assembly on 2 March 2022, one of the reasons given by the Chinese delegation was that the resolution did not emphasize the principle of indivisible security.

Power-hungry United States

Both Russia and China view the United States as their main rival and US hunger for power as the root cause of Europe's security problems. The Chinese narrative also frequently highlights how the United States is profiting economically from the war and depicts Europe as a victim of US greed.

RUSSIA: Moscow holds that the United States is lurking behind the confrontational actions of the West and NATO. Although Russia often talks about the collective West or NATO as its main adversary and the cause of the war in Ukraine, the reasoning is often developed to emphasize that the root of the problem is actually the power-hungry United States, which uses the Western alliance to maintain its own power: "NATO is being used, in effect, as the foreign policy tool of a single country" (Putin, May 16, 2022). The West is "ready to cross every line to preserve the neo-colonial system" and thereby "force all countries to surrender their sovereignty to the United States" (Putin, September 30, 2022). In his August 2022 account of the background that prompted the special military operation, Putin explained that:

The United States and its vassals grossly interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states by staging provocations, organising coups, or inciting civil wars. By threats, blackmail, and pressure, they are trying to force independent states to submit to their will and follow rules that are alien to them. (Putin, August 16, 2022).

CHINA: A recurring idea is that the US, through NATO expansion, has provoked and is now fuelling the conflict to maintain its dominance in Europe. China's foreign ministry has described US goals in the conflict in Ukraine as "controlling Europe", "weakening Russia" and maintaining "its hegemonic power". Washington is said to view Ukrainians as "cannon fodder" whose lives it is willing to sacrifice to "satisfy [its own] great power ambitions and achieve its own geostrategic goals". The foreign ministry has gone so far as to support Russian conspiracy theories that the US is operating laboratories in Ukraine for the purpose of developing biological weapons.

China has also argued that the US is exploiting the war in Ukraine to enrich itself at the expense of Europe. The foreign ministry has promoted the idea that Europe is suffering from food and energy shortages, unemployment and an increasing number of refugees as a result of the war, while the United States is "hiding" on the other side of the Atlantic, earning big money from greatly increased arms exports and sales of oil and gas. The idea that the US is profiting from the war has also been promoted by Chinese scholars. Wang Yiwei, a professor at Renmin University, describes the US as the "biggest winner" when Europe is forced to pay US "military-industrial" companies for weapons. In January 2023, a foreign ministry spokesperson expressed a similar thought, noting that: "If the United States truly wants the crisis to end as soon as possible and really cares about the security of the Ukrainian people, it should stop sending weapons and making 'war money'".

Illegal sanctions

Russia and China are united in their opposition to Western sanctions. Both countries view the sanctions as illegal and counterproductive, although Russian rhetoric goes further by likening them to an "act of war".

RUSSIA: Russian officials view Western sanctions as an act of war, although they mostly hurt the West itself. In March 2022, Lavrov called the sanctions part of a "hybrid war" and "total war" against Russia, and claimed that European leaders want to "destroy, eliminate and stifle the Russian economy and Russia as a whole". Putin has emphasized that the sanctions are a threat not only to Russia but to the whole world. At an economic forum in Vladivostok in September 2022, he stated that the sanctions were destroying the quality of life and socio-economic stability of Europeans and reducing poorer countries' access to food.

CHINA: China has consistently opposed the Western sanctions, criticizing them in strong terms and saying it will not comply with them. Chinese representatives argue that "illegal unilateral sanctions" by the United States and "some other countries" are creating more problems and instability in the world economy. The foreign ministry has likened the sanctions to trying to put out a fire by throwing more wood on it. At the 14th BRICS summit in June 2022, Xi Jinping condemned the use of sanctions as a political and economic tool:

Politicizing, instrumentalizing and weaponizing the world economy and using the dominance of international financial and monetary systems to impose arbitrary sanctions will ultimately only harm yourselves and others and cause disaster for the people of the world. (Xi Jinping, June 22, 2022)

One of the 12 points set out in China's official position paper on the "Ukraine crisis", published on the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion, is devoted to criticizing the use of sanctions in the conflict:

Unilateral sanctions and maximum pressure cannot solve the issue; they only create new problems. [...] Relevant countries should stop abusing unilateral sanctions and "long-arm jurisdiction" against other countries, so as to do their share in deescalating the Ukraine crisis and create conditions for developing countries to grow their economies and better the lives of their people. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 February 2023)

Chinese leaders have long worried about the "weaponization of sanctions" and how they could be used against China to a greater extent. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they worry about how Western sanctions against Russia might impact China's economy. Chinese companies have generally conformed with the Western sanctions to avoid being affected themselves. Wang Yi stated in a telephone conversation with Spain's foreign minister on March 15, 2022 that China is not "an involved party in the crisis" and "does not want to be affected by sanctions".

While Chinese officials have stopped short of labelling the sanctions against Russia an "act of war", the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the CCP, has referred to them as "financial terrorism".

A Europe without autonomy

Both Russia and China argue that the United States has undue influence over the foreign policy of European countries. Although both countries have portrayed Europe as a naive follower of the US, China has been more sympathetic towards Europe and regularly urges the EU to develop a more "autonomous" foreign policy.

RUSSIA: The main enemy is the collective West, but Russia sees Europe as lacking independence from the US. Russian representatives usually refer to the enemy or adversary simply as the West as a whole, "Western elites" or NATO. The US is sometimes mentioned in isolation, sometimes together with "the rest of the West", its "allies" or "partners", and sometimes with its "satellites", "minions" or "vassals": "All its satellites not only humbly and obediently say yes to and parrot it [...] but also imitate its behavior and enthusiastically accept the rules it is offering them" (Putin, February 2022). While the EU or Europe is sometimes treated as an actor with agency in economic contexts – for example in relation to sanctions – its lack of autonomy and independence vis-à-vis the US is quite often highlighted. In June 2022, Putin said that "the European Union has lost its political sovereignty, and its bureaucratic elites are dancing to someone else's tune, doing everything they are told from on high". In September 2022, he stated that "Washington demands more and more sanctions against Russia and the majority of European politicians obediently go along with it".

CHINA: Chinese representatives have generally been more sympathetic towards Europe and the EU and have welcomed European efforts to resolve the conflict. But there is also an idea that the US has a strongly negative influence over Europe, and that European countries do not realize what is in their best interests. On the day of the invasion, for example, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed the mediation of the EU, France

and Germany in the conflict, but also stressed that “The European side should think through what really contributes to maintaining peace and stability”.

There are also hopes in Beijing that the EU, in its quest for “strategic autonomy”, will help to counter what China regards as US hegemonic influence in the region.

On March 7, 2022, Wang Yi described Europe and China as two important actors in world politics, but at the same time emphasized that Europe needed to develop a more “independent” and “objective” view of China. In February 2023, on the eve of the anniversary of the Russian invasion, Wang Yi travelled to Europe to meet with leaders in France, Italy and Hungary, among others, where he again called on Europe to pursue an independent and autonomous foreign policy. He also attended the annual security conference in Munich, where he called on his “European friends” to “think about what kind of efforts [can] be made to stop the war, what kind of structure [can] be built to enable Europe to achieve long-term peace and stability, and what role can enable Europe to achieve strategic autonomy”.

There are signs that China is attempting to downplay the importance of its partnership with Russia to European audiences.

In an interview with the *New York Times* in April 2023, China’s EU ambassador Fu Cong described the “no-limit” friendship as “nothing but rhetoric” and said that China was “not on Russia’s side on the war”. The joint statement issued in connection with Xi’s state visit to Moscow in March 2023 made no reference to the no-limit friendship and Xi Jinping did not mention the term when the two leaders met in Beijing for the Belt and Road Forum in October 2023.

Ukraine: Nazified puppet or independent state?

A key difference between the Russian and Chinese narratives concerns Ukraine’s political status. Russia regards the Kyiv government as an illegitimate and Western-controlled puppet. China views Ukraine as a legitimate and sovereign state with which it wishes to have friendly relations, although it took a full 14 months after the Russian invasion before Xi spoke with President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

RUSSIA: Ukraine is a puppet – and victim – of the West. In Russian rhetoric, Ukraine is not the primary adversary but only a facade for the real enemy. The Ukrainian state is an artificial construct, the illegitimate, criminal Kyiv regime is just a Western instrument, and the Ukrainian population has either been manipulated into hating Russia or is itself a victim of the crimes of the West and the Kyiv government.

CHINA: China has maintained diplomatic relations with Ukraine and portrays it as a sovereign and legitimate state.

On February 24, 2022, the foreign ministry was asked whether Ukraine is an independent country, to which the spokesperson replied: “Of course, Ukraine is an independent country. China and Ukraine conduct friendly cooperation based on mutual respect”. On March 14, China’s ambassador to Ukraine told Ukrainian representatives that China “will always respect your state”. Furthermore, just as it did not officially recognize Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, China has opted not to recognize the Russian-annexed regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhya as Russian territory. (Only North Korea and Syria have recognized these territories as Russian.) Official higher-level contacts have also taken place, such as when Wang Yi spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, on March 2, 2022. Wang then underlined that China was “very concerned” that the civilian population had been harmed.

Despite expressing support for Ukrainian sovereignty, Xi Jinping repeatedly declined meeting requests from his Ukrainian counterpart Zelenskyy after the Russian invasion began. While Xi has met with Putin on multiple occasions since February 24, 2022, even travelling to Moscow for a three-day state visit in March 2023, diplomatic relations between China and Ukraine were limited to meetings between the countries' foreign ministers for the first 14 months of the war. Following publication of China's proposal for a "political solution" to the "Ukraine crisis" in February 2023, Zelenskyy again asked to meet Xi. Xi's reluctance to even speak with Zelenskyy drew criticism from Western countries and undermined China's positioning as a potential mediator in the conflict. In March 2023, Xi Jinping also invited Aleksandr Lukashenko – the authoritarian president of Russia-allied Belarus – to Beijing, which further undermined China's claims of neutrality and impartiality. On April 26, 2023, Xi and Zelenskyy held their first telephone conversation since the invasion. Following the call, China appointed Li Hui – a former Chinese ambassador to Russia for ten years – as "special envoy" to Ukraine and other countries with the aim of "conducting in-depth communication with all parties on the political solution to the Ukraine crisis". No plans have been announced for an in-person meeting between Xi and Zelenskyy.

Chinese state media have supported many Russian narratives about Ukraine, including that the US is supporting Nazi groups in the country. At the same time, the state has set limits on how far criticism of Ukraine is allowed go in the public conversation. Guidelines from the Cyberspace Administration of China leaked in March 2022 urged internet companies to "turn down the temperature" on debates about the war and strictly control "extreme" content in support of either Russia or Ukraine.

Chinese representatives and some Chinese academics argue that Ukraine should serve as a neutral "bridge" between East and West. According to Yao Lu, a professor at Jilin University, it was Ukraine's decision to take sides that turned the country into a place for confrontation between great powers. Decisions by Ukrainian leaders to bring "external forces" into Ukrainian politics eroded the country's independence.

Conclusions

China's political support for Russia has been comprehensive and enduring, but not "without limits". The support has included, but not been limited to: a refusal to condemn or even criticize Russia's invasion, instead blaming the United States and NATO; accusing the United States of prolonging the war by sending weapons to Ukraine; and accusing Western countries of "weaponizing" their control over the global economy. The support has survived Russian setbacks in Ukraine, political turmoil in Russia and Western pressure on China to distance itself from Russia. At the same time, China has sought to mitigate the negative effects of its pro-Russian rhetoric on its relations with Europe by, for example, toning down the significance of the "limitless" partnership with Russia.

There are several restrictions on and "red lines" in China's support, as well as differences and nuances in both narrative content and presentation. Chinese leaders have spoken out against Russian nuclear threats, and China, unlike Russia, recognizes the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government. Both Russia and China portray European countries as naive followers of the United States, but China has been more sympathetic towards Europe, portraying it as a victim of US greed and encouraging it to pursue an independent foreign policy.

Looking forward, China's political support for Russia is likely to remain robust insofar as Beijing continues to view Moscow as an indispensable partner in the struggle against US global hegemony. The pair's similar views on international security also speak in favour of closer coordination. The core ideas and principles that underpin China's support for Russia, such as opposition to economic sanctions, the criticism of "bloc confrontation" and the pursuit of "absolute security" at the expense of "common security", as well as calls for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity to be upheld and the "legitimate security concerns" of countries to be respected, have been part of China's foreign policy discourse for over two decades. Inclusion of the concepts of "indivisible security" and "legitimate security concerns" in the GSI have elevated their status and signals that China aims to be more active in spreading these ideas globally.

At the same time, we expect that China will continue to balance its support for Russia with the need to maintain stable relations with the West. In recent statements, China has dropped references to the "limitlessness" of the relationship, in what seems to be an attempt to minimize the backlash in the West. On the one hand, China wishes to send a signal of Chinese-Russian unity against perceived US hegemony, especially to audiences in the Global South. On the other hand, Beijing wants to avoid being seen as complicit in Russia's war, which could cement Western unity in resisting China's global ambitions.



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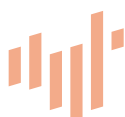
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The Swedish National China Centre was established in 2021 as an independent unit at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). The Centre conducts policy-relevant research and aims to contribute to a long-term improvement in the state of China-related knowledge in Sweden. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Swedish National China Centre or UI.

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