



China and the Russia-Ukraine War:

China's Growing Partnership with Russia against the U.S. and Its Limits

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Summary

- China has generally maintained a Russia-leaning stance on the situation in Ukraine. Beijing has been critical of the United States, blaming it as the root cause of the war. China and Russia appear to have a shared understanding on or be cooperating on disinformation activities.
- China's position is anti-U.S. than pro-Russian. Beijing continues to take a Russia-leaning stance, with the main reason being to counter the United States.
 - 1) China regards the United States as the primary cause of the war. The war has become an opportunity for Beijing to reaffirm the danger of U.S. hegemony.
 - 2) China is engaged in disinformation activities regarding the United States.
- In the context of the struggle against the United States, the depth and breadth of the China-Russia partnership is greater than we imagined. In particular, their confrontation with the United States was made ever clearer in their February 4 joint statement.
 - 1) China and Russia's worldviews are aligned in their opposition to color revolutions.
 - 2) They together oppose the pressures of NATO and the Indo-Pacific strategy.
 - 3) China supports President Putin's call for building a new European security architecture.
- Beijing does not necessarily consider its position as internationally isolated. China is strengthening its diplomacy toward emerging powers and making efforts to have more states neutral about the war.
 - 1) China strives to encourage Europe to pursue strategic autonomy.
 - 2) China emphasizes their shared positions with other emerging and developing countries, such as opposition to sanctions and neutrality.
- Conversely, the China-Russia partnership also has limits. China is unlikely to conspicuously provide direct and full support to Russia, at least in the short term.

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, heralding large-scale combat operations. Despite the initial prospect that Russia with its superior forces would score an overwhelming victory, the front lines have settled into a stalemate due to Russia's underestimation of Ukraine and Ukraine's fierce and effective resistance.

China's response to this war has drawn attention from the outset. Whether China will distance itself from Russia or take Moscow's side will be vital for determining the course of the war itself and of the international order.¹

¹ For a concise discussion of China's position and orientation on this war, see Evan A. Feigenbaum, "China Faces Irreconcilable Choices on Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 24, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/02/24/china-faces-irreconcilable-choices-on-ukraine-pub-86515>

What stance has China taken on the war? As Russia's overt invasion isolates it from the international community, observers have repeatedly stated that even China has begun to distance itself from Russia and that the tide has turned. In reality, however, there has been no meaningful change in Chinese policy. China's position has been and continues to be one of neutrality with a lean toward Russia, or tacit support for Moscow.

Why is this the case? The international community unanimously condemns Russia over the invasion. By not joining in, Beijing would fail to gain international support and may become caught up in the economic sanctions on Russia. It is unknown to what extent China and Russia shared information about the invasion in advance. Even if information had been shared to some extent, the way the war subsequently unfolded must have been unforeseen. President Vladimir Putin's hope for a short-term settlement dissipated, the war has become protracted, and human losses are increasing, including civilians.

From a commonsense perspective, we would expect China to further distance itself from Russia. This, however, has not happened. The question is why China is choosing not to distance itself from Russia.

Meanwhile, it is also a fact that there are limits to the China-Russia relationship (contrary to the so-called "friendship with no limits"). What are causing these limits?

This article makes the following points.

The first is about China's distrust of the United States and the deep-rootedness of their confrontation. China regards the United States as the root cause of the current situation and, furthermore, as adding fuel to the fire. Beijing's stance is characterized first and foremost by anti-U.S. sentiment, more than its closeness or distance with Russia.

Second, China and Russia may be working together more closely than we imagine with respect to their U.S. strategies. The deepening of Sino-Russian relations since 2014, and especially since 2019, extends beyond a "marriage of convenience" as they were once described. In particular, the February 2022 joint statement was a key declaration that brought confrontation with the United States to the forefront. In the statement, China and Russia aligned their positions on anti-color revolutions and anti-military alliances, while China supported President Putin's pursuit of reconfiguring the European security order.

Third, China does not consider itself as internationally isolated as we think. With regard to Europe, China sees significant contradictions between the United States and Europe and within Europe, and is encouraging Europe to increase its strategic autonomy. Additionally, it sees other emerging powers in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia as not necessarily amenable to Western arguments and is enhancing diplomacy with these countries.

Fourth, factors that could become centrifugal forces in China-Russia relations, such as relations with Ukraine, contradictions with Chinese principles, and the weakness of the China-Russia relationship, have not manifested a significant effect. That said, the threat of economic sanctions could be deterring China from supporting Russia.

China's

China continues to maintain a generally Russia-leaning stance. Although not supporting the war itself, China has not called Russia's actions an invasion, has not condemned Russia, and expresses opposition to sanctions. Beijing blames the conflict most of all on "deliberate U.S. policies" to expand NATO and encourage color revolutions. China also shares understanding on and propagates Russian disinformation regarding U.S. biological weapons research, among other subject matters. However, China neither considers itself a direct participant in the war, nor is providing direct military or economic support, and must show reasonable concern for humanitarian crises. On the one hand, China has voiced opposition to economic sanctions. On the other hand, it has not outright breached or ignored the sanctions and is complying with them

as of date. Furthermore, although Russia reportedly requested military assistance from China, this has yet to materialize.

To understand where China is coming from, we can refer to the five principles announced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi on February 26, the four points subsequently put forward by President Xi Jinping on March 10, and the six points on humanitarian issues advocated by Foreign Minister Wang on March 7.² Summaries of President Xi and Minister Wang's meetings with heads of state and foreign ministers are also important for understanding how China differentiates its messages depending on the counterpart.

From these principles and statements, we can deduce that China has made remarks on the following ten items related to the situation in Ukraine:

- 1) Principles of the United Nations Charter, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, and their application to Ukraine
- 2) Emphasis on each country's legitimate demands and claims related to security and the principle of indivisible security
- 3) Preventing humanitarian crises
- 4) Dialogue and diplomatic efforts
- 5) A new European security mechanism
- 6) Opposition to unilateral sanctions
- 7) Opposition to actions that add fuel to the fire
- 8) Joint response to the adverse external effects of the Ukrainian crisis
- 9) Opposition to the Cold War mentality that fuels divisiveness
- 10) Autonomous decision-making by each country

Table 1 shows the number of times that the above ten items were mentioned at the 28 meetings which Foreign Minister Wang Yi held with 22 countries since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and which discussed its situation (in-person, telephone, and virtual meetings). As can be seen, China places emphasis on dialogue and diplomatic solutions, a new European security mechanism, and opposition to unilateral sanctions.

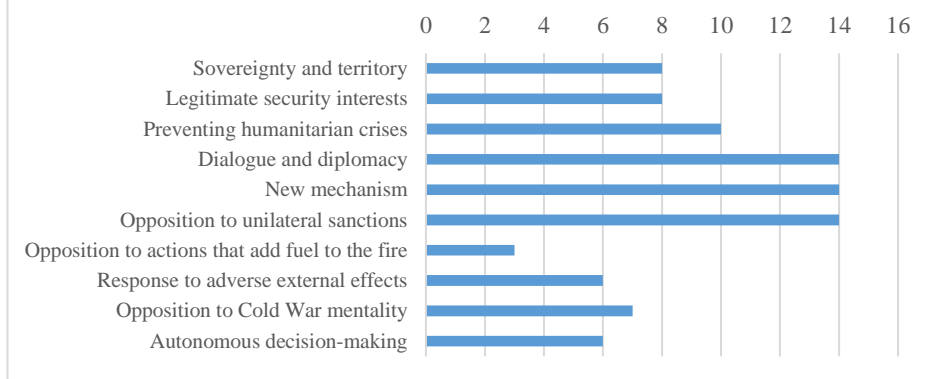
"New European security mechanism" refers to the discussion about creating a new security mechanism in a way that accommodates Russia's concerns and appears to incorporate Russia's argument. "Emphasis on each country's legitimate demands and claims related to security" calls for consideration of Russia's position.

Sovereignty, territorial integrity, and other principles form the foundation of Chinese diplomacy. As it is hard to imagine that China would not mention them, it is conceivable that they are mentioned at every meeting but are not particularly emphasized in the readout.

² "王毅阐述中方对当前乌克兰问题的五点立场 [Wang Yi Expounds China's Five-Point Position on the Current Ukraine Issue]," PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), February 26, 2022.

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzb_673089/xghd_673097/202202/t20220226_10645790.shtml; "王毅就防止乌克兰出现大规模人道主义危机提出六点倡议 [Wang Yi Puts Forward Six-point Initiative on Preventing a Large-scale Humanitarian Crisis in Ukraine]," PRC MFA, March 7, 2022. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzb_673089/xghd_673097/202203/t20220307_10648854.shtml

Table 1 No. of times mentioned at foreign ministers' meetings (Feb. 24–Apr. 6)



Source: Compiled based on PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

Criticism of the United States

(1) Confrontation at U.S.-China Meetings

China's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war is characterized most of all by Beijing's continued and severe criticism of the United States. China sees the United States as the root cause of the war and as using a variety of means to apply pressure on Russia and China, and is against this.

At meetings with the United States, China did not agree to distance itself from Russia despite U.S. persuasion and exhibited distrust of the United States. On March 14, State Councilor Yang Jiechi held an in-person meeting with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. Although the meeting was originally set up to discuss the Taiwan issue and other outstanding bilateral issues, the situation in Ukraine naturally accounted for a large part of the discussion. The seven-hour meeting became the most intense exchanges held between the United States and China over the Russia-Ukraine war. Yet the talks not only ended in a complete disappointment for the United States; they also made the United States realize the significant rift between the two countries. China strongly criticized the deepening U.S. involvement in Taiwan.³ In criticizing the United States, Yang reiterated the claims that the United States and Ukraine were pursuing a biological weapons development program. This was exactly the type of disinformation Russia touts, and not only its top diplomats but also China's leadership were sympathetic to such claims. Through this meeting, it likely dawned on the United States that China's stance which de facto supported Russia would not change easily.⁴

The meeting was followed by a phone conversation between Xi Jinping and Joseph Biden Jr., but their two-hour meeting did not result in any particular progress. President Biden warned the Chinese not to provide military or economic support to Russia. In response, Xi Jinping simply repeated concerns about the war and opposition to sanctions.⁵ Citing the proverbs, "It takes two hands to clap" and "He who tied the bell to the tiger must take it off," Xi suggested that not only Russia but

³ “杨洁篪同美国总统国家安全事务助理沙利文举行会晤 [Yang Jiechi Meets with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan],” PRC MFA, March 15, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202203/t20220315_10651720.shtml

⁴ “China's Decisive Turning Point: Will It Side with Russia and Divide the World?,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/18/chinas-decisive-turning-point-will-it-side-with-russia-and-divide-the-world>

⁵ “习近平同美国总统拜登视频通话 [President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with US President Joe Biden],” PRC MFA, March 18, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202203/t20220319_10653187.shtml

also Ukraine was responsible for the war, and that the person who should bear the most responsibility was the person who tied the bell, i.e., the United States.

The summary released by China stressed President Biden's commitment that the United States would not seek to change the Chinese political system and that the one-China policy remains unchanged (note that this is not the one-China "principle" as China claims). Xi Jinping requested that the U.S. government abide by Biden's commitment. Beijing may have sought to highlight the outcomes of the meeting by 1) making a distinction between President Biden and the U.S. government and avoiding direct and personal criticism of President Biden and 2) emphasizing the U.S. side's assertions (which do not appear in the U.S. readout) as outcomes.

After this meeting, Wang Yi advocated the importance of dialogue, ceasefire, preventing civilian casualties, and preventing humanitarian crises in the short term, while at the same time, criticizing the United States and NATO on the grounds that it was important to "reject the Cold War mentality, refrain from bloc confrontation, and truly build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture for the region" as a long-term issue.⁶

No further U.S.-China senior officials' meetings have been held regarding the situation in Ukraine. The United States has continued to pressure China to stop short of supporting Russia directly. In response, China has repeatedly criticized the United States.

(2) China's Domestic Discourse

The Chinese domestic discourse generally argues that the United States is the root cause of the Russia-Ukraine war, with some even arguing that the United States intentionally incited Russia to start the war.

From March 29 to April 11, the *People's Daily* published ten commentaries as part of a series titled, "Viewing American Hegemony from the Ukrainian Crisis." They were written under the penname "Zhong Sheng," implying they are important *People's Daily* commentaries on international affairs and were published under the authorization of the Party leadership. These commentaries espouse a strongly conspiratorial view, contending that U.S. hegemony was primarily responsible for the war in Ukraine, that the United States deliberately fueled the crisis, and by lending a hand in the war, exacerbated the situation. The first commentary in the series affirms that the United States attempted to expand U.S. hegemony through NATO expansion, while continuing to unsettle Russia's neighbors through color revolutions, and that the Ukrainian crisis is a global crisis created by the United States.⁷ Furthermore, the commentary asserts that the United States continued to add fuel to the fire, such as by providing weapons and imposing economic sanctions on Russia, and that it has not made active efforts to achieve a ceasefire.⁸

Most of the debate among experts and scholars in China are critical, blaming the United States more directly for deliberately starting the war.

For example, Wang Fan of China Foreign Affairs University views that the crisis was created intentionally by the United States. He says that the United States strives to give the impression of fulfilling its responsibility without being directly involved, and wishes to stir turmoil in Europe and decrease its strategic autonomy but does not seek excessive disruption.

⁶ "王毅：中方的主张客观公允，站在历史正确的一边 [Wang Yi: China's Position is Objective and Fair, and on the Right Side of History]," PRC MFA, March 20, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjzbzd/202203/t20220320_10653530.shtml

⁷ "美国对危机负有不可推卸的责任——从乌克兰危机观美式霸权(1) [The U.S. Has Unshirkable Responsibility for the Crisis: U.S. Hegemony as Seen from the Ukrainian Crisis (1)]," 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], March 29, 2022.

⁸ "拱火浇油是在为政治解决制造障碍（钟声）——从乌克兰危机观美式霸权(2) [Adding Fuel to the Fire Creates Obstacles to a Political Solution (Zhong Sheng): U.S. Hegemony as Seen from the Ukrainian Crisis (2)]," 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], March 30, 2022.

Wang contends that the United States is therefore troubled by the current situation despite being the one that created the crisis.⁹

Wang Yiwei of Renmin University likewise regards that the United States is largely responsible for the situation. He believes that the tension over Ukraine was caused by the United States. He explains the United States needed some tension in Europe because without it Europe and Russia may reconcile and Europe and China may move closer together.¹⁰ Wang observes that the events unfolding in Ukraine are part of a U.S./Western war against Russia, and that public opinion warfare, diplomatic warfare, psychological warfare, cyber warfare, and financial warfare could all be a type of exercise. With the West aiming to defeat Russia with hard decoupling and pressuring China with soft decoupling, Wang worries that the aftermath of the Russia sanctions would extend to China.¹¹

Jin Canrong of Renmin University posits that the war was the result of U.S. incitement, even if Russia and Ukraine were partly to blame, and that the United States bears the greatest responsibility.¹² He contends that stirring tensions allows the United States to stop Russia and Germany from working together strategically and weaken Europe's autonomy. Wang anticipated that European capital would flee to the United States because of instability in Russia and Europe, and that the political crisis would lead to soaring resource prices, enabling the United States to supply resources to Europe instead of Russia.¹³ Jin welcomes Russia's move, both for challenging the Western-led international order for the first time since the end of the Cold War, and for marking the end of the era of the United States as the sole superpower.¹⁴

Zhang Weiwei of Fudan University discusses that the roots of the Ukrainian crisis lie in the United States. Washington had hoped that clashes of some degree would occur in Ukraine so that European capital would flow to the United States, Russia would be weakened, Europe would be splintered, and Europe's dependence on the United States would deepen. He notes that, to this end, the United States kept pressure on Russia through democratic and military alliances. In Zhang's view, President Putin is showing a resolute opposition to such U.S. moves, and its purpose is to destroy the U.S. unipolar hegemonic order.¹⁵

Some in fact argue that China should cut ties with Russia and improve relations with the West. For example, Hu Wei of the Public Policy Research Center of the Counselors' Office of the State Council urged China to sever ties with President Putin as early as possible. However, such articles were banned soon after their publication, and the Xi Jinping regime has effectively prohibited discussion of this issue.

(3) Disinformation

⁹ “王帆：乌克兰危机将是一出连续剧 [Wang Fan: The Ukrainian Crisis Will Likely Make a Drama Series],” 环球时报 [Global Times], February 18, 2022.

¹⁰ “王义桅：俄美在乌克兰玩战争游戏，双方都想‘一石三鸟’ [Wang Yiwei: In Their War Games in Ukraine, Both Russia and the U.S. Seek to ‘Kill Three Birds with One Stone’],” Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University of China, 易网 [NetEase], February 22, 2022. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/H0Q75J9U0519C6BH.html>

¹¹ “王义桅：最终结局或是乌成为欧亚互联互通分界线，俄无法融入欧洲 [Wang Yiwei: It Is Possible that in the End Ukraine Becomes the Dividing Line of Eurasian Cooperation and Connectivity and Russia Cannot Integrate into Europe],” Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University of China, 易网 [NetEase], March 1, 2022. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/H1CNSBKJ0519C6BH.html>

¹² “金灿荣：美国是俄乌冲突‘第一责任国’，现在造谣抹黑中国是在推卸责任 [Jin Canrong: The U.S. Is the ‘Most Responsible Country’ for the Russia-Ukraine Conflict, the U.S. is Spreading Rumors to Impose Responsibility on China],” 环球网 [Huanqiu Net], March 8, 2022. <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/476y9cfKlgo>

¹³ “美国在乌克兰危机中的角色扮演 [The U.S. Roleplay in the Ukrainian Crisis],” 光明日报 [Guangming Daily], February 15, 2022.

¹⁴ Jin Canrong, “俄乌冲突，美国有些什么得失？ [What Are the U.S. Gains and Losses from the Russia-Ukraine Conflict?],” 观察者 [Guancha], March 25, 2022. https://www.guancha.cn/JinCanRong/2022_03_25_631784.shtml

¹⁵ Zhang Weiwei, “《这就是中国》第 138 期：乌克兰冲突再议 [‘This Is China,’ No. 138: Ukrainian Conflict Revisited],” 搜狐 [Sohu], March 27, 2022.

For reporting about the Russian invasion, China used only the news of official media outlets, such as the *People's Daily* and Xinhua, prohibited independent reporting, and banned information critical of Russia and sympathetic to the West.

Even before the war began, China spread disinformation domestically and globally by republishing Russian reports.¹⁶ For example, the Chinese media repeatedly spreads Russian disinformation that the United States has 300 biological testing labs worldwide, and that biological weapons testing was conducted in labs in Ukraine.¹⁷ The United Nations (UN) and other organizations deny such news as disinformation.¹⁸ However, coinciding with Russia's spread of this information in the aftermath of the invasion, Chinese officials and media began to bring spotlight to biological weapons testing. As noted earlier, Yang Jiechi raised this issue in his meeting with Sullivan and condemned the United States. Furthermore, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian condemned the United States for not responding seriously to the allegations.

The official media, including the *People's Daily*, has repeatedly reported this point, aiming to spread the image that the United States was conducting biological weapons testing.¹⁹ Additionally, China has spread the Russian Defense Ministry's March 10 announcement that the U.S. forces were conducting coronavirus tests in Ukraine using bats. This resonates with China's disinformation that the origin of COVID-19 was biological weapons testing carried out by U.S. forces.

The other distinctive disinformation concerns neo-Nazi forces in Ukraine. In particular, the narrative has spread that Ukrainian neo-Nazi forces were involved in the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. An article published in late 2019, citing Russian reports, describes that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) deployed the Azov Battalion, Ukraine's far-right unit, for the Hong Kong protests. This narrative was not widely spread at this time.²⁰ However, in the latest war, related disinformation spread in China as well, with Russia proclaiming "de-Nazification" as its war aim and hurling neo-Nazi criticism at Ukraine. The story claims that neo-Nazis have been the main force in the color revolutions waged by the United States around the world, and the Azov Battalion, receiving U.S. support for the Ukrainian color revolution, has been sharing its experience in Hong Kong and causing mayhem.²¹ Xinhua Net posted a video explaining how the United States has fostered neo-Nazi forces in Ukraine to put pressure on Russia.²² These videos are reportedly being spread not only on social media in China, but also on Facebook and YouTube targeted at overseas Chinese in Taiwan and various countries.²³

¹⁶ David Bandurski, "China and Russia are Joining Forces to Spread Disinformation," Brookings Institution, March 11, 2022.

<https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/china-and-russia-are-joining-forces-to-spread-disinformation/>

¹⁷ "生物实验室何以遍布全球? 美国, 请回答! [How Did Biological Labs End Up All Over the World? America, Please Answer!]" 人民网 [People's Daily Online], March 17, 2022. <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0317/c1002-32377508.html>

¹⁸ "UN Dismisses Russian Claim of Ukraine-US Biological Weapons Program," United Nations, March 11, 2022.

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220311-un-dismisses-russian-claim-of-ukraine-us-biological-weapons-program>; "Theory about U.S.-Funded Bioweapons Labs in Ukraine is Unfounded," *New York Times*, March 11, 2022.

¹⁹ "‘生物军事帝国’不可能自证清白(钟声)——从乌克兰危机看美式霸权(4) [The 'Bio-Military Empire' Cannot Prove Innocence (Zhong Sheng): U.S. Hegemony as Seen from the Ukrainian Crisis (4)]," 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], April 1, 2022; "特稿: 美国生物实验乱象祸害全球 [Feature Article: The Disorderly Biological Experiments of the U.S. Will Be Harmful to the Entire World]," 新华网 [Xinhua Net], March 27, 2022. http://www.news.cn/world/2022-03/27/c_1128508004.htm; "美国生物实验室的黑箱, 该打开了 [The U.S. Biolab Black Box Must Be Opened]," People's Daily WeChat Account, March 21, 2022.

<https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404749487070642517>

²⁰ "香港暴徒的‘援军’到了: 来自乌克兰的新纳粹分子 [‘Reinforcements’ Arrive for Hong Kong Insurgents: Neo-Nazis from Ukraine]," 环球时报 [*Global Times*], December 4, 2019.

²¹ "乌克兰纳粹组织, 是如何扰乱香港的? [How Did the Ukrainian Nazi Organization Disrupt Hong Kong?]," WeChat public account "Zhengjie Bureau," March 2, 2022; "起底乌克兰‘亚速营’: 谁在纵容扶持这个新纳粹毒瘤 [Ukraine's 'Azov Battalion' Revealed: Who Is Supporting This Neo-Nazi Malignancy?]," 新京报 [*Beijing News*], March 7, 2022; "在乌克兰真有‘纳粹’吗? [Are There Really 'Nazis' in Ukraine?]," 新民晚报 [*Xinmin Evening News*], March 12, 2022.

²² "这营是纳粹营吗? - 新纳粹主义势力和背后的美国霸权主义 [Is This Battalion a Nazi Battalion? Neo-Nazi Forces and Their Underlying U.S. Hegemony]," 新华网 [Xinhua Net], April 9, 2022. http://www.news.cn/video/2022-04/09/c_1211634759.htm

²³ Jerry Yu, "Analysis: How Ukraine Has been Nazified in the Chinese Information Space?" Doublethink Lab, March 31, 2022.

While some say that people in China are the main target of disinformation, this is not necessarily correct. Indeed, the narratives are disseminated domestically, but they are also viewed by quite a number of people overseas. In particular, there are a fair number of people in Japan, the United States, and Europe who believe the disinformation about COVID-19. Moreover, there are some widespread conspiracy theories that lay the blame entirely on the conspiracy of the United States or the Biden family (there is a conspiracy theory in the United States linking Hunter Biden to biological weapons testing).²⁴

Information about the Bucha massacre reported and spread on social media in China is based on the Russian explanation. Accordingly, the story circulated is either that the massacre itself is fake information or that Ukrainian neo-Nazis executed the massacre. Citing Russian reports, the *Global Times* and its website Huanqiu Net have reported that the incident was carried out by Ukraine.²⁵

Although discourse critical of these claims is not wholly absent, it is not mainstream and is not actively conducted. All Chinese domestic social media accounts of Wang Jixian, a Chinese programmer in Odessa who posted about the situation in Ukraine, reportedly vanished on March 18. According to some reports, there have been calls to hold Russia responsible for the Bucha massacre. However, the Russian explanation continues to permeate and dominate domestically, styming lively discussions.

Criticisms have been raised against “U.S. disinformation” as well. China denies that it was informed of the Russian invasion, that it requested Russia to wait until the Olympics were over, and that Russia requested economic and military assistance from China, dismissing them as disinformation.²⁶ Spokesperson Zhao Lijian stated that the United States was the one spreading disinformation, and that the United States, instead of blaming China, should fulfill its responsibility and role in the Ukrainian crisis.

These propaganda efforts appear to be fairly effective domestically. According to a survey by the brand consulting company, Brand Finance, 52% of Chinese respondents said the United States is most responsible for the situation in Ukraine, while only 11% said Russia is most responsible.²⁷

As the above illustrates, China has ratcheted up opposition to the United States during the war.

Relations with Russia: Significance of the February 4 Joint Declaration

(1) Deepening Relations with Russia

The relationship between China and Russia is deepening, and the breadth and depth of their cooperation are greater than imagined. This deepening of relations is based on their shared interest: countering the United States. Until the beginning of the 2010s, China and Russia, while having a friendly relationship, did not share any major goals or threat perceptions. It was believed that Sino-Russian relations were a relationship of mutual exploitation when it suited both sides, and not a strategic partnership beyond that. However, following Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014, China-Russia relations

<https://medium.com/doublethinklab/analysis-how-ukraine-has-been-nazified-in-chinese-information-space-81ce236f6a55>

²⁴ “How ‘Ukraine Bioweapons Labs’ Myth Went from QAnon Fringe to Fox News,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2022.

²⁵ “布恰事件 ‘风暴’ 级别攀升，专家：是俄乌舆论战组成部分，未必会阻碍谈判进程 [Bucha Incident’s ‘Storm’ Rank Surged, Expert Says It Is Part of the Russian-Ukrainian Public Opinion Warfare and May Not Necessarily Hinder the Negotiation Process],” 环球时报 [*Global Times*], April 5, 2022; “美军专家称：布恰民众是被乌克兰军队杀害 [U.S. Military Expert: The People of Bucha Were Killed by Ukrainian Forces],” 环球网 [Huanqiu Net], April 7, 2022. <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/47VcDmzG55s>.

²⁶ Qin Gang, “Opinion: Chinese Ambassador: Where We Stand on Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, March 15, 2022.

²⁷ “Russia’s Soft Power Collapses Globally following Invasion, Attitudes towards Ukraine Soar,” Brand Finance, March 14, 2022. <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/russias-soft-power-collapses-globally-following-invasion-attitudes-towards-ukraine-soar>.

gradually began to grow closer and were enshrined as the “China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era” in 2019.²⁸ The bilateral relationship deepened to the level of a quasi-alliance or to the verge of a military alliance.”²⁹

The deepening of China-Russia relations was triggered by two events. One was Russia’s international isolation caused by Western sanctions due to its invasion of Crimea in 2014. The other was the escalation of the U.S.-China confrontation in 2018–19 that elevated China’s need to move closer to Russia.

On the military front, Russia has provided China with s-400 surface-to-air missiles and Su-35 fighters since 2015, and announced Russian assistance for building China’s missile warning system in 2019.³⁰ Joint military exercises have also been conducted actively, with live-fire exercises increasingly carried out. In November 2021, the “Road Map for Military Co-operation for 2021–2025” was concluded. This was the first formal agreement reached since the 1993 agreement on military cooperation.³¹

On the economic front, the two countries have been advancing energy cooperation. For China, Russia is the second largest crude oil supplier after Saudi Arabia, the third largest natural gas supplier, and the second largest coal supplier. Crude oil imports from Russia account for about 16% of China’s crude oil imports, natural gas imports about 10%, and coal imports 15%. An agreement on natural gas supply was reached in May 2014, and the Power of Siberia pipeline opened in 2019. In addition, Power of Siberia 2, which passes through Mongolia, is scheduled for construction.

Furthermore, cooperation on global governance has strengthened in recent years. In December 2019, Xi Jinping stated, “The United States and some other Western countries have increased their interference in the internal affairs of Russia and China, threatened the sovereign security of the two countries, and impeded their economic and social development,” expressing the view that Western interference in internal affairs was a common threat facing China and Russia.³² The declaration on global governance issued by their foreign ministers on March 23, 2021 expressed the two countries’ positions on human rights and democracy that differ from the Western interpretation. The declaration also indicated their joint opposition to imposition of Western standards and Western interference in internal affairs.³³

(2) Joint Statement of February 4, 2022

On February 4, President Putin, who was visiting China to attend the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony, and President Xi signed the “Joint Statement on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.”³⁴ This declaration vowed that the friendship between China and Russia had no limits and there were no

²⁸ Regarding the deepening of China-Russia relations, see Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement*, Medford: Polity, 2018; Alexander Gabuev, “A ‘Soft Alliance’? Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis,” European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2015; Angela Stent, “Russia and China: Axis of Revisionists?” *Global China*, Brookings Institution, February 2020; Kadri Liik, “It’s Complicated: Russia’s Tricky Relationship with China,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2021.

²⁹ Alexander Korolev, “On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation,” *Asian Security*, No.15, Vol.3, pp.233-252. For a similar view, see Nadège Rolland, “A China-Russia Condominium over Eurasia,” *Survival*, Vol.61, No.1, pp.7-22.

³⁰ Vassily Kashin, “Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level,” Carnegie Moscow Center, October 22, 2019. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/80136>

³¹ “China, Russia approve 2021–25 road map to increase military co-operation,” Janes, November 24, 2021. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/china-russia-approve-202125-road-map-to-increase-military-co-operation>

³² Angela Stent, “Russia and China: Axis of Revisionists?”

³³ “中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦外交部长关于当前全球治理若干问题的联合声明 [Joint Statement between the Foreign Ministers of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Some Issues of Current Global Governance],” PRC MFA, March 23, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjzbhd/202103/t20210323_9137040.shtml

³⁴ “中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于新时代国际关系和全球可持续发展的联合声明（全文） [Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development (Full Text)],” PRC MFA, February 4, 2022. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/202202/t20220204_10638953.shtml

forbidden areas of cooperation, marking a new stage in the China-Russia partnership.

The importance of this declaration should not be underestimated. The February 4 statement was, in a word, a declaration that laid bare their feelings of rivalry and hostility toward the United States. Previous China-Russia declarations were structured mainly around practical cooperation. The 2019 joint declaration, for example, listed items for practical cooperation and enshrined cooperation mechanisms. In contrast, the February 4 declaration conveyed the threat perception and worldview of the two countries. A *People's Daily* editorial in fact praises the joint declaration for expressing shared positions on democracy, development, security, and order.³⁵

The declaration first conveys their shared view that the balance of power is changing and, notwithstanding this, the U.S. threat is growing. This is in line with China's recent emphasis on international relations undergoing a once-in-a-century transformation and on threats growing amidst this transformation. In other words, although "the world is going through momentous changes, and humanity is entering a new era of rapid development and profound transformation," some actors "advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues and resort to force; they interfere in the internal affairs of other states, infringing their legitimate rights and interests, and incite contradictions, differences and confrontation."

(i) View of democracy

The joint declaration begins by stating that China and Russia reached a shared view on democracy. The declaration expresses opposition to certain states (the United States) drawing dividing lines based on ideology, imposing their "democratic standards" on other countries, and monopolizing the right to define democracy. In addition, it states, "The sides believe that the advocacy of democracy and human rights must not be used to put pressure on other countries. They oppose the abuse of democratic values and interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the pretext of protecting democracy and human rights, and any attempts to incite divisions and confrontation in the world."

(ii) View of development

The next section on development lists items for economic cooperation. These are mainly focused around the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation in the Arctic, and energy.

(iii) View of security

The third section is security issues. It contains the most notable content in terms of relevance to the current situation. In particular, it is important that China and Russia agreed on three items: criticism of color revolutions; criticism of military alliances; and establishment of a new European security mechanism.

First, the declaration describes that China and Russia have a shared view on countering the imposition of standards by democratic states. The declaration also reveals skepticisms that the United States would create pro-U.S. governments through color revolutions and encroach on the strategic space of China and Russia.³⁶

Such views have increased since the late 2000s, and both Xi and Putin have raised their alarm. From December 2021 to

³⁵ "为中俄关系发展注入更多生机活力（和音） [Inject More Life and Vitality into the Development of China-Russia Relations (He Yin)]," 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], February 5, 2022.

³⁶ Regarding China's view of color revolutions, see Yamaguchi Shinji, "Chugoku shu kinpei seiken no ideogoo wo meguru toso: wahei enpen karaa kakumei e no taiko to kokusaiteki wagoken [The Ideological Struggle of China's Xi Jinping Regime: Opposition to Peace Evolution and Color Revolutions and International Discourse Power]," *Roles Report*, No.17, January 2022. <https://roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp/uploads/publication/file/32/publication.pdf>

January 2022, President Nursultan Nazarbayev began to lose control of the anti-government protests in Kazakhstan. Through the intervention of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), dissidents were swept away, and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was appointed president. China saw this anti-government movement as a plot for a color revolution. When President Tokayev took office, President Xi Jinping made clear in his message that “China firmly opposes any deliberate attempt by external forces to provoke unrest and instigate a ‘color revolution’ in Kazakhstan.”³⁷

For China and Russia, the unrest in Kazakhstan served as a reminder of the threat posed by color revolutions. Beijing and Moscow have a shared understanding that Ukraine’s color revolution set the country on a pro-Western path. Countering this trend became an important shared interest that united Beijing and Moscow.

Second is opposition to military alliances. It is of note that China and Russia express concern over both NATO and the Indo-Pacific strategy in the statement. Neither NATO nor the Indo-Pacific strategy was mentioned as a common concern of the two countries in previous China-Russia joint statements. The fact that military alliances are explicitly mentioned as a threat facing the two countries demonstrates a more active approach to cooperation than before. Furthermore, concern over AUKUS is also expressed.

With regard to European security, the declaration enshrines that “The Chinese side is sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe.” This refers to such legally binding security guarantees as suspension of NATO enlargement, as advocated by Russia, implying a major transformation of the post-Cold War European international order. China’s expression of support was worded fairly assertively for its part.³⁸ As noted earlier, China has repeatedly referred to a new European security mechanism, and we can see that it was based on this expression of support for Russia in the joint declaration. As Table 1 shows, China has emphasized this item in relation to the current war. Although this point has not been mentioned often, it is a testament of China’s Russia-leaning stance and sheds light on how China is viewing the war. Put bluntly at the risk of being misunderstood, China sees the war as a Russian challenge to the U.S.-centered European order, and in that sense, Beijing is giving tacit support.

(iv) View of order

The fourth section on order discusses the international order that China and Russia should aspire toward. The phrase, “Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation,” is found in this section. It states that China and Russia should aim for an international order that upholds the principles of the UN Charter, advances multipolarity, and promotes the democratization of international relations, which are nothing very new. The inclusion of opposition to power politics and unilateral sanctions is, however, suggestive.

Interestingly, the joint declaration expresses concern over domestic and foreign bioweapons activities by the United States. That is to say, in the joint declaration, China and Russia raise concerns over “domestic and foreign bioweapons activities by the United States and its allies,” and express that these activities “pose a serious threat to the national security of China and the Russian Federation and are detrimental to the security of the respective regions.” As noted above, China

³⁷ “习近平向哈萨克斯坦总统托卡耶夫致口信 [Xi Jinping Sends a Verbal Message to Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev],” PRC MFA, January 7, 2022. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202201/t20220107_10479994.shtml

³⁸ For an opinion that focuses on this point, see Shi Yinhong, “时殷弘：俄罗斯试图重构欧洲安全框架 [Shi Yinhong: Russia’s Attempt to Rebuild the European Security Framework],” Beijing News Think Tank, February 26, 2022. https://www.sohu.com/a/525699727_114988

and Russia disseminate disinformation on this issue, and it can be considered that its seeds were already sown at this meeting.

In fact, linkages between Chinese and Russian disinformation activities have been observed in the current war. Whether the latest China-Russia cooperation is based on a joint plan or on mutual concurrence is unclear. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the two countries have developed cooperative relations to a certain extent. In 2013, the Chinese and Russian governments agreed on sharing news, and news sharing between People's Daily Online and Voice of Russia began. In June 2015, the China-Russia Media Forum was launched, and media cooperation between the two countries began to be discussed. Various agreements have been signed between the major media outlets of the two countries, such as China's *People's Daily* and Xinhua and Russia's RT and Voice of Russia. Mutual news reprinting and quoting, joint interviews, joint planning, joint program production, and local media cooperation are conducted within the framework of the above media cooperation.³⁹ In addition, on July 24, 2020, an agreement was reached between their foreign ministry spokespersons on cooperation on disinformation measures.⁴⁰

In this way, China and Russia have deepened their strategic cooperation against the United States, including reaching shared views on the U.S. threat (color revolutions and military alliances) and China supporting Russia's call for a new European security architecture. This was premised on the United States' waning power and willingness to intervene in conflicts. As they expected, the United States and NATO did not intervene in the war. It is unknown to what extent China was informed in advance of the invasion. However, based on the content of the joint declaration, it seems China would not be greatly surprised if Russia took some form of action. For China and Russia, the miscalculations were probably: 1) the failure of military operations; 2) defeat in information warfare; and 3) economic sanctions beyond their imagination. Despite these miscalculations, China is expected to maintain its Russia-leaning position as long as this war is challenging the U.S.-centered order from China's point of view.

Other Foreign Policies

(1) Stance toward the EU

China's EU policy and U.S./NATO policy are clearly distinct. Beijing does not openly criticize the EU as it does the United States. Foreign Minister Wang Yi has held numerous meetings with EU countries and delivered messages with the following characteristics.

First, they express "grievance" or "regret" over the Ukraine situation and concerns over the humanitarian crisis. At least judging from the Foreign Ministry readouts, such expression of concern is directed mainly at Europe and is often not found in messages to other regions.

³⁹ Jia Lerong and Zhou Nan, "中俄媒体合作：发展阶段、模式、效果与存在的问题 [China-Russia Media Cooperation: Development Stage, Model, Effect and Existing Problem]," 俄罗斯东欧中亚研究 [*Russian, East European & Central Asian Studies*], Vol.237, No.6, 2020, pp.89-102.

⁴⁰ "中国和俄罗斯外交部发言人举行磋商双方同意合作打击虚假信息 [Chinese and Russian Foreign Ministry Spokespersons Held Consultations and Agreed to Cooperate in Combating Disinformation]," PRC MFA, July 25, 2020. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/sjxw_674887/202007/t20200725_7794944.shtml

In a phone conversation on March 7 with Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed regret over the situation in Ukraine.⁴¹ In addition, during a phone conversation held on the same day with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Fontelles, Foreign Minister Wang stated that China was “deeply grieved” over the situation in Ukraine to date.⁴² On March 8, during a video conference with Germany and France, President Xi Jinping stated, “The current situation in Ukraine is worrisome, and the Chinese side is deeply grieved by the outbreak of war again on the European continent.”⁴³ While not condemning Russia, the Chinese side expressed sympathy for the horrors that were taking place. Sometimes the remarks were taken as evidence of China beginning to distance itself from Russia, but in reality, they have not been made to countries other than Europe and the United States.

Secondly, the messages urge the formation of a “new European security architecture.”⁴⁴ As Table 2 shows, this matter has been mentioned at most of the foreign ministers’ meetings, and it suggests that China attaches importance to it. The remark also supports Russia’s assertion as noted earlier. China has supported President Putin’s stance on the new security mechanism, with the February 4 joint statement containing wording that calls for this architecture. The fact that such wording continues to be reiterated indicates China’s unchanging position.

Thirdly, China encourages the EU to adopt an independent foreign policy. At the China-EU summit on April 1, European Commission President Ursula Gertrud von der Leyen 1) confronted China with the realities of the war, including humanitarian crises, 2) appealed to China to uphold its principle of respecting the UN Charter, and 3) emphasized the economic costs of a Russian invasion, hinting also that supporting Russia could lead to sanctions.⁴⁵ President Xi Jinping had little to say in response. He urged instead that the EU form its own perception of China and adopt an independent China policy.⁴⁶ Needless to say, his remarks were intended to encourage alienation between the United States and Europe. Furthermore, at the March 7 meeting with Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjártó, Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on Europe to uphold the spirit of strategic autonomy and play a more proactive role in resolving the current Ukraine crisis and building a European security mechanism.⁴⁷

With Hungary, China not only recommends an independent European foreign policy, but also praises Hungary’s own

⁴¹ “王毅同匈牙利外长西雅尔多通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks with Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto on the Phone],” PRC MFA, March 8, 2022. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202203/t20220308_10649236.shtml

⁴² “王毅同欧盟外交与安全政策高级代表博雷利通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks with High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Fontelles on the Phone],” PRC MFA, March 8, 2022. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202203/t20220308_10649238.shtml

⁴³ “习近平同法国德国领导人举行视频峰会 [President Xi Jinping Holds a Virtual Summit with Leaders of France and Germany],” PRC MFA, March 8, 2022. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202203/t20220308_10649835.shtml

⁴⁴ “王毅同德国外长贝尔伯克通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on the Phone],” PRC MFA, February 27, 2022. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202202/t20220227_10645941.shtml; “王毅同意大利外长迪马约举行视频会晤 [Wang Yi Holds Virtual Meeting with Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Luigi Di Maio],” PRC MFA, March 10, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202203/t20220310_10650621.shtml; “王毅同荷兰副首相兼外交大臣胡克斯特拉通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks with Dutch Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra on the Phone],” PRC MFA, March 16, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202203/t20220316_10652047.shtml; “王毅同瑞士联邦主席兼外长卡西斯通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks with President and Foreign Minister of the Swiss Confederation Ignazio Cassis on the Phone],” PRC MFA, March 29, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202203/t20220329_10657355.shtml

⁴⁵ Noah Barkin, “Watching China in Europe-April 2022,” The German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 6, 2022. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/watching-china-europe-april-2022>

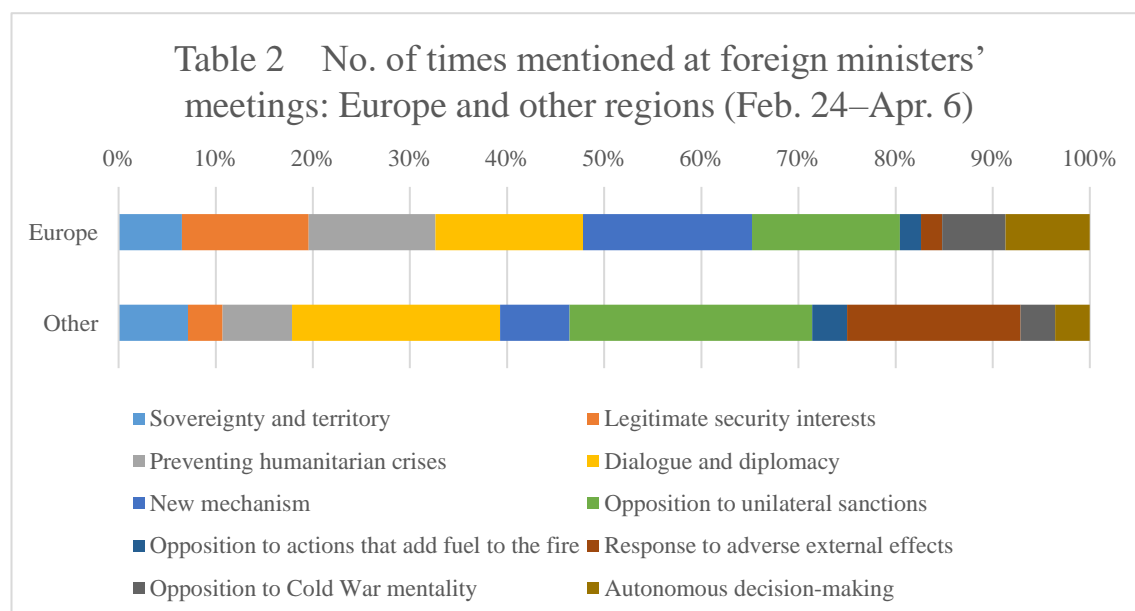
⁴⁶ “习近平会见欧洲理事会主席米歇尔和欧盟委员会主席冯德莱恩 [President Xi Jinping Meets with European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen],” PRC MFA, April 1, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202204/t20220401_10663314.shtml

⁴⁷ “王毅同匈牙利外长西雅尔多通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks with Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto on the Phone],” PRC MFA, March 8, 2022. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202203/t20220308_10649236.shtml

independent foreign policy. Following the Hungarian general election, Foreign Minister Wang Yi conveyed his congratulations on the victory of the ruling party led by Prime Minister Orbán Viktor, and urged Hungary to maintain its independent foreign policy.⁴⁸ Orbán's victory in Hungary was construed as proof that Europe would not be at the mercy of the West.⁴⁹

In advocating a neutral position and peaceful solution and encouraging an independent foreign policy, China may have aimed to alienate Europe from the United States. The reason for China's distinct U.S. and Europe policies may be based on Beijing's perception that significant contradictions exist between the United States and Europe and that China could further widen the contradictions. In reality, however, Europe's view of China has become more severe, and events have not unfolded as China envisioned. At the foreign ministers' meeting on March 30, Foreign Minister Wang Yi was reportedly furious at the EU for refusing a vague agenda with items they could agree upon and for refusing to not take up the Ukrainian crisis.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, as a matter of Chinese foreign policy, the leader's judgment of the situation cannot be easily overturned. Thus, China's assumption of U.S.-Europe contradictions is not expected to change anytime soon.

No. of mentions at foreign ministers' meetings: Europe and other regions (Feb. 24–Apr. 6)



Source: Compiled based on PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

(2) Emphasis on the Closeness of the Positions of China and Emerging Powers

The international community is not entirely united in standing up against Russia's aggression, and China has been taking pains to embrace countries that take a neutral position.

At a joint press conference with Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra, Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted the closeness of the positions of Asian/African countries and China, stating, "I have exchanged views with many foreign

⁴⁸ "王毅同匈牙利外长西雅尔多通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks with Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto on the Phone]," PRC MFA, April 4, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202204/t20220404_10664581.shtml

⁴⁹ "涂东: 欧州 '不同声音' 难以被掩盖 [Tu Dong: It Is Difficult to Drown Out 'Alternate Voices' in Europe]," 环球时报 [Global Times], April 7, 2022.

⁵⁰ Noah Barkin, "Watching China in Europe-April 2022."

ministers of Asian and African countries. I feel that many countries, like China, are following closely the developments of the Ukraine crisis, and share a lot of common language.”

As Table 2 shows, China underscores to emerging powers that it prioritizes a peaceful solution, opposes sanctions, and is against the Ukraine situation having an impact on other regions. This may be an effort to find as much common ground as possible with countries that do not wish to side with either the West or Russia and to increase the number of neutral countries. It can be said that China is indirectly supporting Russia’s position by creating a situation in which the whole world is not united against Russia.

Chinese diplomacy trends following the invasion of Ukraine reveals that Beijing has actively engaged in diplomacy with the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Since the second half of March, Foreign Minister Wang Yi has visited Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Nepal and hosted the Third Foreign Ministers’ Meeting among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan in Tunxi, Anhui Province. China has since shifted its focus to diplomacy with Southeast Asia. Beijing’s priority may be to find as much common ground as possible with these countries and to encourage an anti-sanctions and anti-factional neutral position.

In particular, it is noteworthy that China is moving to improve relations with regimes that do not have international legitimacy, including Afghanistan and Myanmar. Such moves by China may prompt global divisions and intensify competition between political systems.

China has minimal contact with U.S. allies outside of Europe, and has no foreign ministerial level contacts with such countries as Japan and Australia. This is perhaps unsurprising given Beijing’s diplomatic stance to date. The United States and its allies are not considered China’s partners in the current situation. Rather, China has criticized Japan for using the Ukraine situation as a pretext to “play up external threats and seek stronger military forces and capability.”⁵¹

Factors that Would Cause Distancing from Russia

China’s rivalry with the United States and prospect that European countries and other nations would not necessarily be monolithic are factors driving China’s Russia-leaning position. Conversely, there are factors that would cause China to distance itself from Russia. While not as potent as the factors moving China closer to Russia, they nevertheless provide some checks and balances.

(1) Threat of Economic Sanctions

The first is the threat of economic sanctions. The United States and Europe imposed severe economic sanctions on Russia and warned China about the consequences of supporting Russia. This is thought to be deterring China from providing large-scale support for Moscow. China’s behavior patterns suggest that it rarely challenges the West’s imposition of economic sanctions openly while the sanctions are in effect. Having already experienced U.S. sanctions in the trade war, China may have deemed it unwise to be imposed with a second round of sanctions over this issue.

China was likely very receptive to providing military and economic assistance when Russia requested it.⁵² However, it later became noticeably wary of assisting Russia directly, perhaps due to concerns over the U.S. and European warnings.

⁵¹ “2022年3月17日外交部发言人赵立坚主持例行记者会 [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on March 17, 2022],” PRC MFA, March 17, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/qzhs1_673025/202203/t20220317_10652719.shtml

⁵² “Russia Asked China for Military and Economic Aid for Ukraine War, U.S. Officials Say,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2022; “EU Has ‘Very Reliable Evidence’ China is Considering Military Support for Russia,” *Politico*, March 18, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-has-very-reliable-evidence-china-is-considering-military-aid-for-russia/>

Chinese enterprises have been cautious about operating in Russia out of fears of economic sanctions and their impact. Oil and energy companies, for example, are reportedly executing existing contracts but are prudent toward new imports.⁵³ In addition, exporters have become wary, worried about Russian banks becoming subject to the sanctions and the certainty of payments.⁵⁴ In any case, China has no immediate capacity to absorb Russian energy exports. There are eight natural gas pipelines to Europe and one to China, making the capacity ratio 6:1. However, as the pipelines to Europe and China are not connected, exports to Europe cannot be immediately redirected to China.⁵⁵

Technology companies have stayed in Russia but are taking a cautious approach. Didi Chuxing Technology announced its withdrawal from Russia in the latter half of February before the Russian invasion, only to reverse its decision after a wave of criticism on Chinese social media.⁵⁶ Huawei remained in Russia and saw its market share in the country increase dramatically as a result of the withdrawal of Western companies but is gradually turning cautious.⁵⁷

China has long devoted attention to financial sanctions as a plausible scenario (as has Russia, most likely). China is watching to see to what extent Russian measures can ease the sanctions. In response to the regulations of SWIFT, China created the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) to reduce its dependence on SWIFT. However, CIPS payments have yet to become widespread, and there are no prospects of CIPS replacing SWIFT.

Furthermore, China and Russia are using more yuan for trade settlements to reduce the risk of sanctions. As of 2014, 3.1% of China-Russia trade used the yuan, and by 2021, the percentage was 17%.⁵⁸ In reality, however, Chinese enterprises are cautious, and the Chinese government has not indicated any intention to support Russia economically.

Nevertheless, overall trade between China and Russia is increasing, with bilateral trade in the first quarter of 2022 rising nearly 30% year-on-year to 38.2 billion yuan.⁵⁹ Trade has continued to grow even after the Russian invasion, rising 12% year-on-year in March.⁶⁰ In addition, local governments have shown enthusiasm for border trade. On March 20, Xu Qin, secretary of the Heilongjiang Provincial Party Committee, inspected a natural gas pipeline in Heihe City, Heilongjiang Province along the China-Russia border, and underscored deepening energy cooperation between China and Russia and China's opening up in all directions to Russia.⁶¹ Heihe City seeks to expand cooperation between the companies of the two countries, and as this reveals, cooperation has not waned at the local level.⁶²

The issue is whether sanctions can really be imposed on China if and when it provides aid to Russia in violation of the

⁵³ "China State Refiners Shun New Russian Oil Trades, Teapots Fly under Radar," *Reuters*, April 7, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-china-state-refiners-shun-new-russian-oil-trades-teapots-fly-under-2022-04-06/>

⁵⁴ "Chinese Exporters Warned of Russian Payment Risks," *Asia Times*, March 11, 2022. <https://asiatimes.com/2022/03/chinese-exporters-warned-of-russian-payment-risks/>

⁵⁵ Erica Downs, "Q&A China-Russia Energy Relations: Will New Oil and Natural Gas Deals Help Russia Weather Economic Sanctions?" Center on Global Energy Policy, Columbia University, March 16, 2022. <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/research/qa/qa-china-russia-energy-relations-will-new-oil-and-natural-gas-deals-help-russia-weather-economic>

⁵⁶ "Chinese Brands Stay Put in Russia for Now Despite Western Exodus," *Reuters*, March 7, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/chinese-brands-stay-put-russia-now-despite-western-exodus-2022-03-04/>

⁵⁷ "Huawei Suspends Some Russian Operations, Reports Say, Treading Carefully amid Sanctions Risks as It Weighs Options," *South China Morning Post*, April 12, 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/3173969/huawei-suspends-some-russian-operations-reports-say-treading>

⁵⁸ Kai Wang and Wanyuan Song, "Ukraine War: What Support is China Offering Russia?," *BBC*, April 15, 2020.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253>

⁵⁹ "外交部副部长乐玉成会见俄罗斯驻华大使杰尼索夫 [Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng Meets with Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Ivanovich Denisov]," PRC MFA, April 19, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbxw_new/202204/t20220419_10669545.shtml

⁶⁰ "Ukraine War: What Support is China Offering Russia?" *BBC*.

⁶¹ "许勤：抓好口岸疫情防控深化对俄开放合作 实施沿边开放行动建设富饶美丽边城 [Xu Qin: Engage in Epidemic Border-Control Measures, Open Up to and Collaborate with Russia, Open Up the Border Area, and Create a Prosperous and Beautiful Frontier City]," 人民网 [People's Daily Online], March 20, 2022. <http://hlj.people.com.cn/n2/2022/0320/c220027-35183136.html>

⁶² "中俄携手推介促进企业合作 [China and Russia Join Hands to Encourage and Promote Cooperation between Companies]," 黑河日报 [*Heihe Daily*], April 6, 2022. <http://www.heihe.gov.cn/info/1125/126934.htm>

sanctions. China's economy is incomparably larger than Russia's. Sanctions against China would undoubtedly be crippling to economies worldwide. Even the sanctions against Russia, namely energy-related sanctions, have a large loophole due to Europe's energy dependence on Russia, which has undermined the effectiveness of the sanctions.

Judging from the above, China may be carefully ascertaining the power of the economic sanctions and is taking a wait-and-see approach. At present, China is not actively providing military supplies or economic assistance. While companies appear to be cautious in its activities, China-Russia relations could reasonably deepen in the long term.

(2) Relations with Ukraine

The second factor is whether China can sacrifice its friendly relations with Ukraine. China has friendly relations with both Russia and Ukraine, and some have argued that China should not take sides and damage its relations with the other side.

In reality, however, China has taken an exceptionally cold stance toward Ukraine. China does not appear to be in close communication with Ukraine since before and after the Russian invasion, and a phone conversation between President Xi Jinping and President Volodymyr Zelensky has yet to take place, despite the Ukrainian side's request.⁶³ At the two meetings held between Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, China focused the discussion on cooperation for protecting its nationals and humanitarian issues. Wang Yi also urged Ukraine to make choices independently, implicitly demanding concessions from Ukraine.⁶⁴

China certainly had friendly relations with Ukraine. Ukraine has been China's source of technology and human resources for the military industry. Ukraine's military industry was highly attractive to China following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Beijing has implemented the "Double Introduction Project," acquiring technology and talent from Ukraine, and acquired them at a low cost.⁶⁵ China also had expectations that Ukraine would become a source of grain supplies and was eyeing the country for its nuclear power industry. Moreover, Ukraine was expected to be a node of the Belt and Road initiative.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, it is without a doubt that Ukraine's importance had already peaked out. Relations between China and Ukraine have been ambiguous since 2014. After the invasion of Crimea, Ukraine explored ways to develop closer ties with NATO and the West, while its relationship with China grew awkward as Beijing and Moscow moved closer. Political ties between China and Ukraine had been virtually suspended until 2017. Although relations, mainly economic, have gradually improved since then, China could not dispel its distrust of the Ukrainian government, which has displayed a Western-leaning stance amid deteriorating U.S.-China relations. For China, the post-color revolution Ukraine was not a reliable partner.

This is most clearly illustrated by a Chinese company's moves to take over Motor Sich. Motor Sich is a leading manufacturer of helicopter and airplane engines and has produced engines for the An-225 Mriya, among other engines. China had keen interest in this company. In 2015, an investment and technology transfer agreement was concluded between

⁶³ "Ukraine's President Eyes Talks with China's Xi Jinping," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2022.

⁶⁴ "王毅同乌克兰外长库列巴通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on the Phone]," PRC MFA, April 4, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbxhd/202204/t20220404_10664583.shtml

⁶⁵ Nojima Tsuyoshi, "Heiki kara shokuryo, chugoku no hoshii mono wa ukuraina kara eta: roshia shiji to no itabasami no shu kinpei [From Weapons to Food, China Got What It Wants from Ukraine: Xi Jinping Faces Dilemma with Russian Support]," *Wedge Infinity*, March 17, 2022. <https://wedge.ismedia.jp/articles/-/26075>

⁶⁶ Alla Hurska, "China's Growing Interest in Ukraine: A Window of Opportunity or a Point of Concern?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol.16, Issue 120, September 6, 2019.

Beijing Skyrizon Aviation Industry Investment (Skyrizon) and Motor Sich. In 2016, an agreement for the Beijing Xinwei Technology Group to become a co-owner of Motor Sich was close to being signed but was blocked by the Security Service of Ukraine. Wang Jing, the entrepreneur who owns Skyrizon and the Beijing Xinwei Technology Group, is a figure allegedly with ties to Russia.⁶⁷ In August 2020, Wang Jing began reattempting to take over Motor Sich. Alarmed by these developments, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed concern about the takeover. The U.S. Department of Commerce added Skyrizon to the Military End User list on the grounds that it has ties to the People's Liberation Army.⁶⁸ In response, President Zelensky imposed sanctions on Wang Jing and Skyrizon on January 29, 2021 and nationalized Motor Sich to block the acquisition in March of that year.⁶⁹

Additionally, Ukraine's moves to align itself with the West on human rights issues displeased China. In June 2021, Ukraine expressed its intention to join a proposal calling for China to conduct a UN investigation into human rights violations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In response, China warned that it would halt exports of COVID-19 vaccines, forcing Ukraine to withdraw its co-sponsorship.⁷⁰ Although China was satisfied with Ukraine's response, it was clear that the two countries did not have a highly friendly relationship.⁷¹

(3) Humanitarian Crisis

The third factor is humanitarian crisis. Contrary to China's initial outlook, the war has become protracted and civilian casualties are increasing, which is inevitably a cause for concern for China. Wang Yi had been raising humanitarian issues from the outset, and as the war stalemated, he announced a six-point initiative on humanitarian issues.

However, even while Beijing acknowledges the humanitarian issue, it has not criticized Russia for causing it. Beijing voted in favor of a UN Security Council resolution on humanitarian issues proposed by Russia. It also co-sponsored a humanitarian resolution that does not mention Russia's responsibility, which was proposed independently by South Africa. As for the Bucha massacre, China was shocked over the humanitarian situation as noted earlier but has not acknowledged Russia's responsibility in the incident.

China has shown concern for humanitarian issues and readiness to provide humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, this does not appear to have changed the Chinese overall stance.

(4) Contradictions with Chinese Principles

The fourth factor is divergence with Chinese principles. Russia's actions are undesirable for China from the perspective of its principles such as secession and sovereignty. Principles are undoubtedly important for China, and there is no doubt that the issue of secession has negative connotations for the Taiwan issue. China still has not formally approved Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, nor is it anticipated to approve the independence of eastern Donetsk and Luhansk.

Yet for China, the principles are criteria that must always be taken into consideration but are not absolute rules of conduct.

⁶⁷ "Inbox: The Battle for 'Motor Sich'," The Center for European Policy Analysis, November 20, 2020. <https://cepa.org/inbox-the-battle-for-motor-sich/>

⁶⁸ "China, Ukraine in Row over An-225 Mriya Engine Maker Motor Sich," *Aerotime*, February 4, 2021. <https://www.aerotime.aero/articles/27173-china-ukraine-in-row-over-an-225-engine-maker-motor-sich>

⁶⁹ "Beichu no kobo wa kysoren de gekika ukuraina no gunju kigyō no kaishu soshi de atsuryoku [U.S.-China Tug-of-War Intensifies in Former Soviet Union: Pressure to Block Takeover of Ukrainian Munitions Firm]," *Mainichi Shimbun*, March 30, 2021.

⁷⁰ "Diplomats Say China Puts Squeeze on Ukraine," *The Associated Press*, June 26, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-china-europe-ukraine-health-a0a5ac8f735b92e39c623e453529cbb9>

⁷¹ "China Welcomes Ukraine U-turn on Xinjiang Human Rights Call," *The South China Morning Post*, June 27, 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3138937/china-welcomes-ukraine-u-turn-xinjiang-human-rights-call>

Especially in recent years, discrepancies between principles and actual actions have increased as China becomes a great power and heightens its influence across the world. This trend is expected to continue as the U.S.-China confrontation deepens. In the ongoing case, China, while mentioning the importance of principles, has gradually shifted its argument to opposition to economic sanctions, opposition to the Cold War mentality, and adverse impacts on other regions, suggesting that it is focused more on practical needs than commitment to principles.

(5) A Thin Bilateral Relationship

Moreover, the China-Russia relationship is not without its challenges. The two countries have developed close relations out of strategic necessity, with the relations being the closest between the top leaders and thinning out as one moves down the ladder. This relationship is often described as “hot government, cold people” or “hot politics, cold economics.”

The bilateral relationship is exceptionally strong between the leaders. As state leaders, Xi and Putin have met 38 times in nine years, making Putin the state leader Xi has had the most meetings with. Both of them consider the struggle with the United States as a top priority, are highly wary of color revolutions, and are stepping up repression at home. This has facilitated the current strengthening of the China-Russia relationship, and is also a potential weakness for the future bilateral relationship. A change in leadership may provide a catalyst to reassess their ties.

To be sure, the Sino-Russian relationship faces a variety of potential challenges in terms of the bilateral agenda. For example, the two countries can never become “equal partners” due to the significant disparity in their economic power, which is something that makes Russia wary. Furthermore, China’s growing presence in the Arctic and Central Asia may be desirable for economic development but is also a source of concern for Russia.⁷² However, while these issues may have a large impact in the long run, they are currently not major elements affecting the relationship.

All of this suggests that, while the bilateral relationship has potential vulnerabilities, they are unlikely to manifest themselves, at least in the short term.

(6) China’s Domestic Politics

The last factor, China’s domestic politics, could be beneficial or detrimental to the relationship. With the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party to be held this fall, many personnel changes are under way behind the scenes. Thus, Beijing may not have much spare energy to focus on external issues. In addition, COVID-19 is spreading, and Shanghai is mired in a difficult situation due to the lockdown. This will likely have a major impact on economic activities, and the regime faces growing uncertainty. Therefore, one can construe that China would not want to become further embroiled in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Conversely, any major policy change could be a risk for Xi Jinping, precisely during this period of domestic instability. Strengthening ties with Russia is a strategic decision that Xi has been pursuing, and at this stage, he cannot make a policy change that would be the equivalent of admitting a policy error on his part. This is also the reason that China insists on a zero-Covid policy and repeatedly imposes authoritarian lockdowns, and is an issue inherent to authoritarian regimes.

In general, domestic politics has been oriented toward maintaining China’s current position, making it difficult for Beijing to distance itself from a Russia-leaning stance as well as initiate economic and military support for Russia.

⁷² Harley Balzer, “Axis of Collusion: The Fragile Putin-Xi Partnership,” Atlantic Council, December 21, 2021.

It can be deemed from the above that the factors that would distance China from Russia have not been strong drivers. That said, the threat of economic sanctions may be keeping China from openly and fully supporting Russia. While Beijing gives reasonable consideration to the humanitarian crisis and the balance with Chinese principles, it has yet to change its Russia-leaning stance. Additionally, China appears to be giving little consideration to its relationship with Ukraine.

Future Outlook

China, while avoiding being at the forefront, has maintained a Russia-leaning stance and continues to criticize the United States. Beijing considers the United States to be the primary cause of the Russia-Ukraine war and has intensified its criticism of Washington through a variety of disinformation activities. The China-Russia partnership has deepened in such areas as anti-color revolutions and anti-military alliances. Furthermore, Beijing views that Russia is aiming to restructure the European security order and is supporting this move. China, for its part, seeks to promote strategic autonomy in Europe assuming significant U.S.-Europe contradictions. Additionally, China is emphasizing its position of neutrality toward Asian and African countries, opposing sanctions and the Cold War mentality, and underscoring their shared positions.

Lastly, this article examines what the future holds.

(1) Short-term Prospects

In the short term, China is expected to maintain its Russia-leaning stance without moving to the forefront. In particular, Beijing will continue to cooperate with Russia on disinformation. This is the most optimal way for China to cooperate with Russia at low cost and to criticize the United States. Diplomatically, China's main tactic will be to call for a ceasefire and expand the circle of neutrality, mainly among emerging powers.

On the other hand, direct military and economic assistance is expected to be limited. The reason is that China does not have the capacity to support Russia and wants to avoid becoming subject to sanctions.

China will have a stronger incentive to further reduce interdependence with the United States in critical technologies and supplies. This could lead to further divisions in the world.

(2) Medium- to Long-Term Scenario

In the medium- to long-term, Russia's dependence on China is anticipated to increase. Even if Russia secures military victory or if a stalemate leads to a compromise, it would be imposed long-term economic sanctions and tread a course of overall decline, jeopardizing its standing as a great power. While this might expand Chinese influence, it may also be a scenario that Beijing wants to avoid as much as possible until it becomes a genuine superpower. A premature fall of Russia would not be in the interest of China.

In this sense, Russia's defeat and the collapse of the Putin regime is a scenario that China wants to avoid, and in order to do so, China may expand its support for Russia or even serve as a mediator.

(3) Can a Wedge Be Driven into the China-Russia Partnership?

Finally, is it possible to drive a wedge into the China-Russia partnership? From the West's perspective, this is a critical question in considering strategic competition in the future. The current war has shown that short-term results are difficult to realize. There is no doubt that China and Russia have a deeper partnership than previously thought.

However, Sino-Russian relations are not monolithic and have some weaknesses. In the medium- to long-term, it will be

important to exploit these weaknesses. First, there is the question of how much China can support Russia and whether China is willing to lend support. As Beijing's standing on the war reveals, it partners with Russia in diplomacy and information warfare, while it is cautious about material support, both military and economic. Russia's dependence on China is likely to deepen going forward and could become a burden for China.

Second, as noted earlier, the relationship between Xi and Putin has contributed to the current China-Russia partnership. But will future leaders sustain this relationship? Changes in leadership could affect the strength of the bilateral relationship, and this tendency is even more true for authoritarian regimes. In the case of China-Soviet relations, Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev deepened their confrontation soon after Stalin's death, while Deng Xiaoping improved relations with Mikhail Gorbachev some time after Mao's death. There is no guarantee that such a swingback will not occur.

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