



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

CHINA - A NON-NEUTRAL PARTY IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

MEDEA IVANIADZE

181

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

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ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN

In the Russo-Ukrainian war, we cannot call the position of one of the main challenges of the 21st century, communist China, “neutral”. Beijing’s position was obvious even before the war: it is pro-Russian, clearly anti-Western, and especially anti-American. China does not condemn Russia’s actions in Ukraine, nor does it call it an invasion. At the same time, reports have emerged of the prospect of Beijing providing military assistance to Moscow, and it is not beyond imagination that China will also help Moscow avoid the sanctions.

The course of the war, and time, will show China’s level of support for its strategic partner, Russia. However, despite Moscow’s support and negative attitude towards the West, Beijing will still act according to its long-term strategic goals, and if China distances itself from Russia on specific issues, it will not be because of solidarity with Ukraine, but for its own strategic interests.

China and Russia’s “friendship with no limits”

The friendship between China and Russia is conditioned not only by their aversion to the West, and especially to the United States, but also by the similarities between the regimes of the two countries and their leaders. There are many examples of this. For example, like Russian President Vladimir Putin, in the past, the leader of communist China, Xi Jinping, has made unequivocal statements about the Soviet Union, in which he criticized the collapse of the totalitarian state (Buckley 2013).

Against this background, it is unsurprising that in recent years Russian-Chinese relations have been close in political, economic and military terms. It was further strengthened 20 days before Russia launched its full-scale war in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin, who was invited to the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, and Xi Jinping, declared an unprecedented level of cooperation and coordination. A joint statement issued on February 4 stated that the friendship between the countries has no limits, and there were to be no “forbidden” areas of cooperation.

In that joint statement, Russia and China supported each other’s vision of transforming the international environment into their ideal - the Russian side stressed the “significance” of China’s concept of a “community of common destiny for mankind” and the Chinese side emphasized the efforts of Russia to establish a “multipolar system” of international politics (“Joint

Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development" 2022).

Amid quite serious tensions surrounding Ukraine at the time, in a joint statement, Moscow and Beijing's message to NATO was very particular. In it, they: 1) stated that they opposed NATO's enlargement; 2) called on it to abandon "its ideologized cold war approaches, to respect the sovereignty, security, and interests of other countries, and the diversity of their civilizational, cultural and historical backgrounds".

This joint statement from Russia and China can be perceived as a response to the 'Summit for Democracy' initiated by US President Joe Biden in 2021. Consolidating democracies against authoritarian regimes was considered to be the main idea of the event.

China's green light to Russia?

We may never know what, behind closed doors at the beginning of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping said about the Ukraine issue. While it is likely that Beijing heard from Moscow that it was planning to invade Ukraine, they may not have been informed of the scale. If we assume that China had more or less complete information about Russia's plans, they might have thought that Russia would be able to conduct a "blitzkrieg", for which the West would not have demanded a harsh response from Russia, and ensuring containment of the NATO enlargement.

Before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reports circulated about Russian-Chinese coordination. On March 3, The New York Times reported, citing the intelligence of a Western country, that in early February, Beijing had asked Moscow not to invade Ukraine before the end of the Winter Olympics (Barnes 2022).

In fact, the Olympics in China officially ended on February 20, and the next day Putin delivered a long speech in which he recognized the so-called independence of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk. Soon, he also ordered the entry of Russian troops. This already foreshadowed the beginning of the war (Roth and Borger 2022).

On February 25, The New York Times reported, citing US officials, that for three months, the US had been presenting intelligence to China about

Russia's troop buildup around Ukraine's border, and telling Beijing to persuade Moscow not to invade Ukraine. The Chinese side responded by saying that they did not believe that Russia was going to invade. A few hours before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, officials once again met with the Chinese Ambassador in Washington, but he repeated the same position.

According to the same source, US officials also learned that Beijing had shared US-provided information with Moscow, and told them that the US was trying to sow discord. Beijing also told Moscow that China would not try to impede Russia's plans and actions (Wong 2022).

Moscow's trust in Beijing was also confirmed by Russia's withdrawal of troops against Ukraine from the Eastern Military District, which also borders China.

In parallel with China's green light, the question arises: In general, did China want to see a full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war? China should not want to see economic damage coming as a result of the war, as, in March, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced a target growth of about 5.5% for 2022, the lowest since 1991 (Ni 2022). In addition, this year, the most important political event for China's ruling elite in this decade - the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party - will be held. China's ruling elite is likely to prefer the event to be held in a quiet environment with minimum internal and external problems.

China's pro-Russian and anti-Western narrative

Double standard on Donbas

Russia's recognition of the independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, occupied territories of Ukraine, has not been condemned by China, which has repeatedly said that "the legitimate security concerns of any country should be respected, and the purposes and principles of the UN Charter should be jointly upheld".

On the Donbas issue, it is noteworthy that the Chinese side did not answer the journalist's question as to whether Russia had violated the Minsk-2 protocol by recognizing Donbas ("Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on February 22, 2022" 2022). For Beijing, taking this position on the Donbas must be uncomfortable, as China often emphasizes the importance of protecting sovereignty and

territorial integrity. Further, it opposes, according to its own estimation, separatism in China, be it the case of Hong Kong, the issue of Xinjiang, Tibet, or Taiwan. Separatism, according to China, is one of the “three evil forces” (三个势力) (the other two are terrorism and extremism). It tries to use the concept of dealing with these “three evil forces” to justify its genocidal policies in the Xinjiang region. Although the case of China’s territorial claims differs from that of the Donbas issue, its position on recognizing the independence of the occupied Donbas weakens its narrative of sovereignty and demonstrates its double standards.

Repeating Russian propaganda and blaming the West

China has to date not condemned Russia’s actions in Ukraine, nor has it called it an “invasion.” Its position before and after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is in line with Russian propaganda, and at the same time, Beijing has repeatedly stressed Russia’s “legitimate and reasonable concern about security guarantees” and called on the West to take this into account.

China often repeats Russia’s propaganda about NATO, and it claims that “Russia’s legitimate security demands should be taken seriously and properly” because of NATO’s eastward expansion. In a March 1 conversation, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba the Russian narrative that “regional security could not be achieved by expanding military blocs” and that “the security of one country should not be achieved at the expense of the security of other countries” (Wang Yi Speaks with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on the Phone” 2022). On March 25, the Chinese Foreign Ministry once again spread propaganda that “born out of the Cold War, NATO serves no other purpose than war” and claimed that “it has never contributed to the peace and security of the world” and would never do so. “All those who truly love peace and are committed to advancing peace will resolutely reject NATO’s continued expansion,” the Chinese Ministry said (“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on March 25, 2022” 2022).

Instead of placing the blame on Russia, China is unjustifiably shifting it to the West. China accuses the United States of “increasing tensions” over the Ukraine-Russia issue, and sees the problem not in Russia’s attack but in the fact that the West supplies arms to Ukraine for defense purposes (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022 2022). In a telephone conversation with the US President, the Chinese leader also cited the Chinese proverb, and with it,

in his vision, emphasized the responsibility of the West and the US in the war - “He who tied the bell to the tiger must take it off” (“President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with US President Joe Biden” 2022).

On March 7, after time had passed since the start of the war, and though Russia’s aggression and war crimes were no longer in doubt, the Chinese Foreign Minister called Russia “China’s most important strategic partner”, and noted that China’s ties with Moscow were “one of the most crucial bilateral relationships in the world” (MORITSUGU 2022). On March 30, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with his Chinese counterpart in Beijing, where Wang Yi said that “China-Russia relations have withstood the new test of the evolving international landscape, remained on the right course, and shown resilient development momentum”. According to him, they were more determined to develop bilateral relations and more confident in advancing cooperation in various fields (“Wang Yi Holds Talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov” 2022).

China’s maneuvering at the UN

Against the background of the Russo-Ukrainian war, China’s position is particularly clear in the United Nations. On February 25, China abstained from the vote in a UN Security Council resolution deploring Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Reuters quoted diplomatic sources as saying that the UN vote was delayed two hours for last-minute negotiations by the United States and others to win China’s abstention (Nichols and Pamuk 2022). On March 2, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution demanding that Russia immediately cease its use of force against Ukraine. China again abstained from the vote (Falk and Reals 2022).

It is clear that here, China is refraining from actively supporting Russia, as a result of pressure from the West, but when China has the opportunity, it does not miss a chance to support Russia. For example, on March 23, a Russian-drafted resolution for aid access and civilian protection in Ukraine, that did not mention Moscow’s role, failed at the UN Security Council. Only Russia and China supported the resolution (Nichols 2022). Also, a day later, most UN members demanded aid access and civilian protection in Ukraine and criticized Russia for creating a dire humanitarian situation after Russia invaded Ukraine. China abstained from the vote (Nichols 2022). On March 7, the UN voted to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. China was against the exclusion of Russia (Caldwell et al., n.d.).

Beijing's ostensible neutrality with Ukraine

Despite Beijing's aforementioned pro-Russian moves against Ukraine, rarely, China has said that Ukraine is a sovereign country ("Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022" 2022). Beijing realizes that the war in Ukraine may end with Ukraine's victory and is trying not to burn its bridges. So far, one of China's most outspoken reactions in support of Ukraine during the war has been the allocation of modest humanitarian aid, valued at about \$2.3 million (Tian, Pollard, and Anantharaman 2022).

Ukraine is important for China's Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, it was an acceptable political and important economic partner for China. On January 4, Xi Jinping and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy congratulated each other on the 30th anniversary of the establishment of China-Ukraine diplomatic relations. The Chinese leader noted that he attached great importance to the "China-Ukraine strategic partnership" ("Xi Jinping Exchanges Messages of Congratulations with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on the 30th Anniversary of the Establishment of China-Ukraine Diplomatic Relations" 2022). In addition to pro-Russian messages, Xi Jinping also issued general anti-war and pro-peace calls, and also made general calls for "ceasing hostilities as soon as possible" ("President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with US President Joe Biden" 2022). However, in having such a position, China is still aiming not to harm Russia's interests.

Beijing's February 25 statement is also notable, stating that Ukraine should function as a bridge between the East and West and "not a frontier in big power confrontation" ("Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2022" 2022). With this statement, Beijing weakened Ukraine's status, as if the main confrontation was between "great powers", between the West and Russia, while portraying Ukraine as a country isolated from the Western world. This narrative about Ukraine, suggesting it is a minor country, is not new from Beijing. On March 19, while speaking about Ukraine, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng accused the West of using "small countries" as pawns, and criticized NATO with the argument that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was linked to NATO's possible eastward expansion ("Cherish Peace, Work Together in Unity, and Pursue a Win-Win Future for the Asia-Pacific" 2022).

Pro-Russian Chinese media

While Chinese officials have directly spread disinformation, pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian war, it should come as no surprise that China's tightly controlled state media also repeats this narrative. Unacceptable opinions are soon censored.

According to the China Digital Times, Horizon News, an affiliate of Beijing News, leaked censorship directives telling Chinese media outlets to refrain from publishing "anything unfavorable to Russia, or pro-Western" (Wade 2022).

Another evident example is the Chinese state television's censorship of President of the International Paralympic Committee Andrew Parsons' anti-war speech at the opening ceremony of the Paralympics (The Japan Times 2022).

It is noteworthy that five academics from famous Chinese universities, including Tsinghua and Peking universities, showed unusual courage for the environment created in China by issuing a joint letter opposing the war waged by Russia against Ukraine ("巴丢草 Badiucao, Twitter" 2022). According to Taiwan News, Chinese censors quickly deleted the letter (Gibson 2022).

China needs primarily pro-Russian narrative and censorship in the media for domestic audiences, to prevent the truth from reaching the public and so as the people do not start expressing dissatisfaction with the regime.

Russo-Chinese disinformation and lies about "biological weapons"

From China's disinformation about the Russo-Ukrainian war, the issue of "biological weapons" is particularly noteworthy. From official statements from China to state-controlled media, it seems that there is active coordination between Russia and China in spreading the myth of so-called biological weapons.

Russia and China's spreading of such disinformation is nothing new. For example, the Chinese state media has been spreading disinformation about the Lugar Research Center in Georgia since 2020 ("GFSIS" 2020). In 2020-2021, the Chinese disinformation machine on this issue was launched while Western countries were actively discussing the origins of the pandemic in China and calling on Beijing to investigate. One Chinese

propaganda media outlet even added a section called “Tracing COVID-19 Origins”, which spread disinformation, conspiracy theories, and tried to blame another country for the pandemic, most often the United States (“Tracing COVID-19 Origins”).

Now, China is largely helping Russia spread propaganda based on conspiracy theories, suggesting the United States was making biological and/or chemical weapons in Ukraine and other so-called post-Soviet countries. It is noteworthy that before the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the leaders of Russia and China themselves spread disinformation on these issues in their joint statement on February 4. In particular, the statement said that the “bioweapons” activities of the United States and its allies raised serious concerns and questions for the international community regarding their compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention, and it posed a threat to the security of Russia and China and was detrimental “to the security of the respective regions” (“Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development” 2022).

In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has been actively disseminating disinformation about “bio-military” activities in Ukraine, claiming that it was a “concern of the international community” (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on March 8, 2022). On the Russia-spread disinformation, Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, said that “the concerns raised by Russia should be properly addressed” (Zhang 2022). Disinformation based on conspiracy theories is also being widely reported in the Chinese state media (Global Times 2022), (中国日报网 2022).

Will China provide military assistance to Russia?

According to Western officials, China has expressed its willingness to provide military assistance to Russia. Given the interests of communist China, it does not want Putin’s authoritarian regime, which is close to China, to be defeated in this war with democratic and freedom-fighter Ukraine, which would also mean a victory for the West. Thus, it is logical that China would want to provide effective assistance to Russia. The question is whether it can do so.

On March 14, the Financial Times reported, citing US officials, that Russia had asked China for military help (Sevastopulo 2022). The same day, it quoted officials as saying that the US told allies that China signaled its willingness to provide military assistance to Russia (Sevastopulo 2022). On March 18, a senior EU official told Politico on condition of anonymity that EU leaders possessed “very reliable evidence” that China was considering giving military assistance to Russia (Lau 2022). In addition, Reuters quoted a US official as saying that China had also signaled its willingness to provide economic aid to Russia (Shalal 2022).

China has denounced the reports as disinformation (Shalal 2022), while Russia has said that Moscow has not asked Beijing for military assistance (Faulconbridge 2022).

The US informed China that it would face consequences for sanction evasion efforts (Shalal, Martina, and Brunnstrom, 2022). At the same time, a high-ranking EU official said that the EU would impose trade barriers against China because “it is the only language Beijing understands” (Lau, 2022). During a meeting with China’s high-ranking diplomat Yang Jiechi in Rome, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan “raised directly and very clearly” concerns over China’s support for Russia (Pamuk and Lewis, 2022). Also, after the meeting of US and Chinese representatives in Rome, on March 18, Joe Biden had his first telephone conversation with Xi Jinping since November and warned him of the consequences if Beijing gave material support to Russia, which likely implied sanctions (Shalal, Martina, and Woo, 2022).

Shortly before this telephone conversation, a Chinese aircraft carrier sailed through the Taiwan Strait, followed by a US guided-missile destroyer (Lee, 2022). The Chinese Foreign Ministry said that the carrier passage was not related to the telephone conversation but, during the tensions with the West, in the past there had been similar cases where Beijing sought to demonstrate its strength. The active appearance of Chinese military forces near Taiwan often indicates that Beijing is emphasizing its readiness to defend its core interests.

At the same time, according to Reuters, military analysts and diplomats believe that due to Western pressure, Beijing may not risk overtly transferring weapons or munitions to Moscow, but it could offer assistance through spare parts or communication means. It also cited three diplomats as saying that China’s long land border with Russia meant that it could be difficult to trace such transfers (Torode and Pollard, 2022).

To date, it seems that China's desire to provide military assistance to Russia has been deterred by the West under threat of sanctions. On March 22, Jake Sullivan said that he had not seen any evidence of China providing military equipment to Russia (Alper, Renshaw, and Reese, 2022).

Ukraine's cyber security and China

During the Russo-Ukrainian war, reports of China's possible moves against Ukraine's cyber security are also noteworthy. On April 1, The Times reported that China had staged a cyberattack on Ukraine before Russia's full-scale invasion. It quoted a source at the Security Service of Ukraine as saying that the campaign was coordinated by the Chinese government (Boyes, 2022).

According to The Guardian, the UK government confirmed that the National Cyber Security Center was investigating the allegations with international partners (Milmo, 2022). The Security Service of Ukraine stated that it had nothing to do with the information provided by The Times and currently did not have such data ("СБ України", 2022). This response from Ukraine may be due to the fact that despite everything, in difficult circumstances, Ukraine wants or has to maintain good relations with China and thus may refrain from laying blame at its door. Proof of this can be seen in Kuleba's April 4 positive statement following a telephone conversation with his Chinese counterpart (Kuleba, 2022).

During the war, the Chinese company DJI's drone issue has also been noteworthy. Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine Mykhailo Fedorov said that Russian troops were using DJI products to navigate missiles to kill Ukrainian civilians, and called on the company to block products and cut ties with Russia ("Mykhailo Fedorov", 2022). DJI has denied the allegations (Baptista, 2022). Later, the company said it was reassessing "compliance requirements in various jurisdictions" and temporarily suspending business in Russia and Ukraine (Toh 2022).

Reportedly, DJI receives funding from the Chinese government (Cadell, 2022). The US accuses the company of supporting the Chinese government in the surveillance of ethnic and religious minorities in China. The US has imposed several sanctions against the company (Shepardson and Nomiyama 2020) ("Non-SDN Chinese Military-Industrial Complex Companies (NS-CMIC) List Updates; Administrative Updates to the SDN, Consolidated, NS-CMIC, and SSI Lists", 2021).

The issue of sanctions

China strongly opposes the sanctions against Russia. We can assume that it wants to help Russia avoid or mitigate economic sanctions, but has so far refrained from active moves. Yet, this does not rule out the possibility that China will seek Russia's assistance wherever it can.

China opposed the Western threat of sanctions even before Russia launched its full-scale war in Ukraine ("Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on February 15, 2022_Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America", 2022). Beijing often reiterates that sanctions are not an effective means to solve problems. China also questions the effectiveness of previous sanctions against Russia ("Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 23, 2022" 2022).

China's Vice Foreign Minister in particular strongly criticized the sanctions, saying that the sanctions against Russia were "getting more and more outrageous." He also said that Russian citizens were being deprived of overseas assets "for no reason" (Woo and Kerry 2022).

It is clear that China is making these statements out of respect for Russia's interests. At the same time, it is noteworthy that China itself, especially recently, has been actively imposing sanctions on countries which take a position unfavorable to it. Among them, the most obvious are the sanctions imposed by China on Australia after Australia demanded an independent investigation into the origins of Covid-19 and actively began to talk about the human rights issue in China (Bloomfield, 2021). The de facto sanctions imposed on Lithuania by China are also noteworthy. One of the main reasons for sanctions was Lithuania's decision to open an unofficial representative office of Taiwan there (O'Donnell and Sytas, 2021). Therefore, for China, sanctions, as a weapon of pressure, are nothing new. The difference is that while the international community uses sanctions, for example, against the criminal actions of authoritarian Russia, China uses them to defend its own authoritarian and strategic goals against free countries.

It is notable that a few days before Russia launched the war in Ukraine, during a meeting between Putin and Xi within the framework of the Olympics, Beijing lifted restrictions on imports of Russian wheat. Details of that decision were revealed on February 23 ("海关总署公告2022年第21号(关于允许俄罗斯全境小麦进口的公告)" 2022) (He, 2022). During

Putin's visit to Beijing, the Russian and Chinese sides also signed a 30-year contract on China's purchasing of increased volumes of Russian gas (Aizhu 2022).

On February 4, according to Reuters, Putin announced new Russian oil and gas deals with China worth an estimated \$117.5 billion. According to Reuters' calculations, the gas sales alone could generate about \$37.5 billion over 25 years for Russia. Russian oil company Rosneft has signed a deal with Chinese company CNPC to supply 100 million tonnes of oil to China through Kazakhstan over 10 years. Rosneft said the new deal was worth \$80 billion (Soldatkin and Aizhu 2022).

During Putin's visit to Beijing in February, the parties expressed a desire for trade to reach \$250 billion by 2024. In 2021, trade between China and Russia amounted to \$146.9 billion, an increase of 35.9% since 2020, and 18% of Russia's total trade (Qiu, Chen, and Munroe, 2022). According to China's General Administration of Customs data, in 2021, Russia was the second-largest oil supplier to China, with \$41.1 billion worth of oil exports (an increase of 35.6%), and the third largest supplier of natural gas (\$4.3 billion, which was 70.5% increase) (Global Times, 2022). According to Chinese data, in 2021, Russian exports to China were worth \$79.3 billion, with oil and gas accounting for 56% (Trevelyan, 2022). However, for comparison, if we look at the data from 2022, in February, China's trade with Russia totaled just \$26.4 billion, while with the European Union \$137 billion, and with the US \$123.3 billion (Westbrook and Yao 2022).

Despite everything, for China, Russia may not be worth the deterioration of trade and economic relations with the West. China is the world's second largest economy, 10 times larger than that of Russia ("World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files. GDP (current US\$) - China, Russian Federation.", n.d.).

On March 18, Joe Biden informed Xi Jinping of the impact and consequences China would face if it provided material assistance to Russia ("Readout of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Call with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China" 2022). Then, on March 25, Sullivan said that Washington was ready to widen its net of economic and financial punishment around the world to include "secondary" sanctions (Politi 2022).

There are some reports in Western media about China's cautious actions. For example, on March 25, Reuters quoted sources as saying that China's state-run oil refiner, Sinopec Group, was suspending half-billion dollar

investment projects in Russia. One source said that the Chinese Foreign Ministry urged these and two other companies not to make any rash moves in purchasing Russian assets. It is also noteworthy that the companies set up task forces on Russia-related issues and are also working on contingency plans for business disruptions in case of secondary sanctions (Aizhu, Zhu, and Xu 2022). Late February, Bloomberg reported that two Chinese state-owned banks had, to some extent, restricted financing for Russian commodities (Bloomberg.com, 2022). It is notable as well that, according to a Russian aviation official, China refused to supply Russian airlines with aircraft parts after Boeing and Airbus halted the supply of components (Reuters, 2022).

At the same time, the Chinese Foreign Ministry says that China and Russia will continue normal trade cooperation (“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2022”, 2022). This relationship may go on in a way that China will provide economic assistance to Russia wherever it can.

According to an official WeChat account belonging to the Russian Confucius Culture Association, on March 20, Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui told Chinese businessmen not to waste time and to “fill the void” in the local market. The Ambassador noted that in the “new situation,” the Chinese government was finding ways to adjust to logistics and payment challenges (Murphy and Glamann, 2022).

Also, on March 24, Bloomberg reported anonymously that Chinese oil refiners were quietly buying cheap Russian crude. According to the publication, China’s independent refineries account for a quarter of the country’s processing capacity (Cho, Chen, and Chakraborty, 2022).

According to current information, a large number of Chinese companies remain in Russia (Munroe, Goh, and Mallard, 2022). Shortly before Russia launched its full-scale war in Ukraine, the Chinese company Didi announced plans to cease operations in Russia. It did not give a reason, but after the decision was criticized by Chinese consumers, Didi did an about-turn and chose to stay in Russia. According to the VOA, the decision to pull out had alarmed dozens of Chinese companies, who fear the losses to the Chinese market if they stop operating in Russia (VOA, 2022). TikTok, owned by China’s ByteDance, also remained in Russia, obeying Russia’s new censorship laws (Chen, 2022). It is noteworthy, that recently, the WSJ reported that Chinese tech companies Lenovo and Xiaomi were curtailing the shipments of products in Russia. This information indicates that these

Chinese companies are stopped by the threat of US sanctions. Companies do not make public statements about this, most likely for the above mentioned reason (Strumpf 2022).

According to Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov, Russia has part of its gold and foreign exchange reserves in Chinese currency, yuan – “And we see what pressure is being exerted by Western countries on China in order to limit mutual trade with China... But I think that our partnership with China will still allow us to maintain the cooperation that we have achieved, and not only maintain, but also increase it, in an environment where Western markets are closing” (Trevelyan, 2022). Also, according to Russian media outlet TASS, China’s Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui said that the Central Banks of Russia and China will discuss issues of using and promoting national payment systems, Russia’s Mir and China’s UnionPay in both countries (“Central Banks of Russia and China to discuss use of Mir, UnionPay systems — Ambassador” 2022).

It doesn’t seem as if China is helping Russia avoid the sanctions right now, but it is unknown whether it will continue so. Secondary sanctions against China may not be severe enough to prevent it from providing at least minimal economic assistance to Russia, which Russia will likely need. It is noteworthy that when sanctions were imposed on Iran and Venezuela, China bought large quantities of discounted crude from them, and, compared to 2020, in 2021, China bought 53% more oil from these countries (Cho and Chen 2022).

The importance and impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war on China

In the West, over the last decade or so, some have formed the opinion that if Russia is one of the biggest challenges and threats to international security in the short term, the main threat, in the long run, is China. It was a fact that became clear many years before the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war, with Russia lacking resources and increasingly seen as a declining power. The free world’s imposed sanctions on Russia after Moscow launched this latest war on Ukraine merely accelerated this process. China is the second largest economy globally, and its political, economic, and military influence has grown consistently over the last half-century.

For many years in the West, an opinion circulated that China’s economic opening would eventually affect its politics, but communist China proved the opposite and instead strengthened its authoritarian rule. The

second largest economy in the world is at the same time a communist, unprecedentedly authoritarian country, setting up 21st century concentration camps for ethnic and other minorities and taking total control of people's lives through surveillance and evaluation technologies. China has a long-term goal of replacing the liberal international order with communist China's agenda and hegemony.

Although China does not want Russia to be weakened, let alone defeat, and Beijing wants to help it, China only cares about its own interests, and its relations with Russia will be determined accordingly. If China considers that some support to Russia, politically, diplomatically or economically, will be beneficial to itself, it will offer it. From the current point of view, China is providing political and diplomatic support to Russia, but economically and militarily, it is largely refraining for the time being due to the threat of damaging sanctions. However, this does not mean that the situation will not change according to the circumstances, as China clearly has the political willingness to offer said support.

China will be paying great attention to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and the West's response to it. And while, even if it all ends badly for Russia, it will not change Beijing's long-term key goals, it will likely affect its strategy, primarily on Taiwan, with which China intends to achieve "peaceful reunification", or invade it by force. The West's reaction to the Russo-Ukrainian war has made the prospect of capturing Taiwan extremely difficult militarily, diplomatically and economically. However, Western consolidation may also be more difficult here, due to trade and economic ties with China, than they achieved in Russia's case.

The West should be prepared for the same and possibly a worse confrontation scenario than it has seen from Russia in its relations with China, and the sooner it enforces a firm policy of containment, the faster and more effectively it will reduce the chances of Chinese aggression.

The Vision for Georgia

We can trust in the fact that China's position on Russia's war in Ukraine also fits Georgia, meaning that for Georgia, it would be no better, as, for communist China, Georgia is a minor country, just like Ukraine.

It is notable that the February 4 statement of Putin and Xi against NATO enlargement also applied to Georgia, as did their joint opposition to so-called color revolutions, democratic revolutions. Beijing and its controlled

media have mentioned this many times in the past. The joint statement of the Chinese and Russian leaders on bioweapons also illustrates the disinformation spread about Georgia.

In parallel with the Russo-Ukrainian war, we have clear examples of Chinese propaganda and disinformation against Georgia. Chinese propaganda media has published content supporting Russian propaganda that suggests NATO enlargement in Georgia poses a “realistic threat” at the doorstep of Russia (GFSIS 2022). Well-known Chinese propagandist and former editor-in-chief of the Chinese propaganda media outlet Global Times, Hu Xijin, also said that Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO was unacceptable to Russia - “this thing is equivalent to bringing NATO’s military boots to Russia’s border, which is unacceptable to Russia” (GFSIS 2022). At the same time, Chinese media spread Russian disinformation about bio laboratories in Georgia, suggesting bio laboratories were working on “biological weapons” here (GFSIS 2022). Chinese media also reported disinformation about the August War of 2008, for example, that Georgia “received Russia’s counter-attack” after “provoking” it (GFSIS 2022).

Therefore, as in the case of Russian aggression, Georgia and Ukraine share the same side in China’s pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation.

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